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## MULTIPLE STREAMS APPROACH AND PUNCTUATED EQUILIBRIUM THEORY: COMPARED AND CONTRASTED

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### Abstract

*Kingdon's Multiple Streams Approach (MSA) and Jones and Baumgartner's Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET) are public policy frameworks that have existed for many years. Given their long-term popularity, it is important for readers to have a strong working knowledge on how said frameworks function, and be able to compare and contrast them. It has also been put forth that PET only serves as an updated version of MSA, but this paper argues that said assertion is inaccurate, as PET is a useful framework in its own right. By inspecting this paper, readers will learn about MSA, PET, how they are similar and different, how they can be operationalized or used in real life circumstances, how they have been tested, and it is ultimately concluded that PET is not just a reworking of MSA.*

**Keywords:** *Public Policy, Multiple Streams Approach, Punctuate Equilibrium Theory, Institutional Arrangements, Operationalized*

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### 1. Introduction

Kingdon's Multiple Streams Approach (MSA) and Jones and Baumgartner's Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET) are research programs in policy sciences. I will describe MSA and PET and compare and contrast these theories. My comparison will focus on the role that individual actors and institutional arrangements play in the explanations presented by each theory and how authors operationalized and tested their theory. I will ultimately conclude that PET is an alternative explanation to MSA.

### 2. Multiple Streams Approach

Kingdon's (2014) MSA, which takes inspiration from Cohen, March, and Olsen's (1972) Garbage Can Model, involves the problems, policies, and political streams uniting to form a policy window for prospective policy change (p. 86-89). The problems stream

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encompasses perceptions of various issues or focusing events and governmental action to attempt to resolve them, the policy stream includes the feedback of professionals in producing solutions to problems, and the political stream may be influenced by various elements, including the wills of administrators, interest groups, or the national mood.

When a policy window is opened, the streams "come together and are coupled at these times," leading to potential policy change. Kingdon felt that policy entrepreneurs "play a major part in the coupling at the open policy window" (p. 165-166). The main tenets of MSA include the three streams, policy windows, and policy entrepreneurs.

### **3. Punctuated Equilibrium Theory**

Jones and Baumgartner's (2009) PET asserts that the policy process may be described via "periods of stability and incremental drift punctuated by large-scale policy change" (p. xviii). Punctuated change is precipitated by various elements, such as policy images, policy venues, and how policy venues are shopped (p. 25; p. 31). Other happenings, such as focusing events, may contribute to punctuations in the policy process. Punctuations may lead to policy change.

Jones and Baumgartner (2009, 2012) identified PET as underpinned by bounded rationality, in respect to the challenges of human beings regarding disproportionate information processing or interpretations of policy images (p. xxiii; p. 3). PET also strongly emphasizes the power of institutional arrangements, such as policy monopolies, policy venues, and policy communities, in the policy process.

The main tenets of PET include, policy images, policy venues, venue shopping, policy monopolies, punctuations, and bounded rationality.

### **4. Roles of Individual Actors in MSA**

Kingdon discussed individual actors involved in the policy process. Per my interpretation of 'individual actors,' this section will identify some of the many individual actors that Kingdon referenced in his literature and their affects on MSA.

Kingdon believed that the president has an enhanced capacity to set agendas in multiple policy areas and the president may affect the policy process by using institutional resources (p. 23-26). Since the president has various abilities to affect the agenda set in the policy process and legislations which may manifest, the president has an effect on each stream.

Kingdon noted that researchers have an impact on the public policy, as their ideas are discussed by administrators. Kingdon referenced Houthakker, who influenced the policy stream via the economic deregulation of the air and truck industry (p. 54).

Kingdon highlighted policy entrepreneurs as a key part of MSA by noting that "they play a central role in coupling the streams at the window" and "without the presence of an entrepreneur, the linking of the streams may not take place" (p. 181-182). Kingdon even identified policy entrepreneurs, including Ellwood and Mader (p. 180). These

identifications showcase Kingdon's belief that policy entrepreneurs are important because he had to invest time into ensuring that these individuals fit his policy entrepreneur criteria (p. 180-181).

### **5. Roles of Individual Actors in PET**

Jones and Baumgartner (2009) did not discuss individual actors as much as Kingdon, likely because PET is more concerned with institutional arrangements and policy images. However, they noted that policy entrepreneurs "may achieve rapid success in altering public policy arrangements, even if these arrangements have been in place for decades." They additionally stated that policy entrepreneurs "quickly move to ensure a quick assignment by government officials to an encouraged institutional venue," and "every policy entrepreneur has a primary interest in establishing a (policy) monopoly" (p. 4; p. 85; p. 6).

Jones and Baumgartner (2009) discussed people in regards to how influenced they are by alterations in policy images. For example, images associated with nuclear energy used to be positive via their association with atoms of peace, but for many years, nuclear energy has harbored a negative image, associated with government secrecy or genetic mutation. People have recognized this negative image and it has contributed to the decline of the nuclear industry (p. 65).

### **6. Compare and Contrast**

MSA and PET both acknowledge policy entrepreneurs, but the difference in these identifications draws back to the important point that PET is concerned with institutional arrangements. Kingdon's text on policy entrepreneurs shows he viewed them as central to uniting the streams and sparking policy alterations. He also discussed policy entrepreneurs more in terms of individual entities, offering their individual names over providing considerable detail on the institutional arrangements they may have formed (p. 180). Jones and Baumgartner (2009) also recognized that policy entrepreneurs may contribute to the policy process and adjust policy arrangements that have been in place for years. However, they underscored policy entrepreneurs' power much more in regards to institutional arrangements, as evident by noting that they can achieve policy change by moving swiftly to an "encouraged institutional venue" and even noting they all wish to establish "a (policy) monopoly" (p. 85; p. 6).

Kingdon noted that in the policy process ideas can come from anyone, providing the example of Houthakker's feedback being used in this process (p. 54). Jones and Baumgartner dwelled much more on how policy images, policy venues, and policy monopolies have a strong influence over people and the policy process. This suggests that they saw the process and people as more susceptible to these elements and reinforces the key point that PET views institutional arrangements, such as policy monopolies, as very influential.

## **7. Role of Institutional Arrangements in MSA**

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## **8. Role of Institutional Arrangements in PET**

Jones and Baumgartner (2009) felt that media often ignores important political questions for years, but during select periods, almost every outlet features similar stories. They deemed the media to be a key part of the targeting process of reinforcing the differences in receptivity of the various venues of policymaking (p. 20; p. 108).

Jones and Baumgartner (2009) identified monopolies as "political understandings concerning the policy of interest, and an institutional arrangement that reinforces that understanding" and believed that policy monopolies are responsible for policy making and limit the access of other players in the policy process (p. 6-7).

Jones and Baumgartner (2009) defined policy images as the ways in which policies must be understood and discussed and identified policy venues as institutions or groups in society that have the authority to make decisions regarding policy images (p. 31).

Jones and Baumgartner (2009) noted that policy subsystems, policy communities, and interest groups have an effect on the agenda setting or policy process, but that the landscape has become crowded and they must stay united to retain power (p. 43; p. 191).

## **9. Compare and Contrast**

Kingdon and Jones and Baumgartner aligned in their views that media is a powerful entity in the policy process. However, Kingdon noted that stories discontinue from the

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media essentially due to a loss in interest, while Jones and Baumgartner noted that all media outlets cover the same story simultaneously, such as 9/11/2001, when punctuations or rapid change occur. The targeting process that Jones and Baumgartner referred to may include the media's influence on policy images.

Kingdon discussed certain institutional arrangements, such as political parties, and felt that they can affect the policy agenda. Jones and Baumgartner placed heavy focus on institutional arrangements, such as policy monopolies, policy venues, and various subsystems. I offered their direct text or closely paraphrased in all instances to make it very clear that PET believes that institutional arrangements harbor intense power. Jones and Baumgartner felt that policy monopolies are "responsible for policy making" and that their "structure limits access to the policy process" (p. 7). This means that not only do policy monopolies have a considerable influence on the policy process, but they actually restrict other entities from their full process participation (p 7). Policy venues actually have the latitude to conduct decisions regarding policy images and other policy subsystems are powerful.

Kingdon felt that interest groups have power in the policy process, but interest groups raising an issue does not necessarily equate to them influencing the process. Jones and Baumgartner believed policy subsystem affect the agenda.

## **10. MSA Operationalized**

Kingdon's research concentrated exclusively on the areas of health and transportation in the American federal government (p. 4). Béland and Howlett (2016) and Zahariadis (2007) pointed out that MSA's exclusive focus on America can be a prospective issue for universal operationalism (p. 221; p. 80). Béland and Howlett (2016) even called America "somewhat idiosyncratic" (p. 221). Kingdon (1999) himself concurred with Béland and Howlett, and noted that "America is fundamentally different from other industrialized countries in many ways" and "the shape of our (America's) public policies, and the place of government in our economy and society are most unusual, even peculiar" (p. ix). Thus, MSA is based on limited sectors in a region that is considered an irregularity.

Additional MSA operationalization problems are that it is built on "shaky foundations" and is confused (Cairney, 2018, p. 199). Zahariadis (1998) pointed out that MSA is often described as "messy" (p. 444). I interpret words such as "messy" or confused to mean that MSA lacks complete clarity, and there are further points which strengthen these insights. For instance, Kingdon used a glaring amount of metaphors in his work, such as noting that a policy has to "soften up" before it can be implemented and comparing the policy process to a "policy primeval soup" (p. 128; p. 116). As Cairney (2018) stated, Kingdon failed to describe what he meant by his metaphors (p. 199, p. 206). Kingdon noted that the political stream may have a connection to the national mood, which may come from a change in public opinion, yet Kingdon never described exactly what the national mood entailed (p. 146). Cairney (2018) felt that Kingdon's multiple streams metaphor is "rather confusing" and outside of noting that "without the presence of a (policy) entrepreneur the linking of the streams may not take place," it is unclear what

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unites the streams or cause a policy window to open (p. 202; Kingdon, 2014, p. 181-182).

Since policy entrepreneurs are a main tenet of Kingdon's MSA, after inspecting his literature one should be able to operationalize or start the process of moving toward policy entrepreneurship, but I do not fully feel this is the case. Kingdon noted that policy entrepreneurs just "lie in wait-for a window to open," but this statement may not always be accurate (p. 165). Mintrom (2000) contested Kingdon on his diction, believing that policy entrepreneurs actually make deliberate efforts to draw the attention of decision makers to problems and often force agenda change (p. 45). Mintrom (2000) provided an illustration in Joe Nathan to strengthen his point (p. 5). Nathan collaborated with the Citizens League for school choice reform in Minnesota in the 1980s, and "together they pushed for legislative changes that would permit school change." Nathan "pushed" or was very proactive and forceful in this effort, overcoming multiple obstacles and resistance from some administrators. Legislation was passed in 1987 when the Minnesota School District Enrollment Options program was authorized. By Kingdon's logic, Nathan may still be "lying in wait" or may never have successfully pushed for this reform.

## **11. PET Operationalized**

A critique of PET is that it displays a lack of predictability, which would make it challenging to operationalize. Robinson, Caver, Meier, and O'Toole (2007) felt that PET fails to predict when punctuations will occur or when equilibriums will manifest subsequent to a punctuation and Weimer (2008) believed that PET does not provide an understanding of the policy process beyond narrowly focused models (p. 141; p. 491). True, Jones, and Baumgartner (2007) combated these critiques via their assertion that a "complete model will not be locally predictable, since we cannot foresee the timing or the outcomes of the punctuations" (p. 179). I still believe these critiques deserve further attention.

Smith and Larimer (2017) asserted that there are psychological elements which are critical to PET, and human psychology is imperfectly understood (p. 106). Jones and Baumgartner (2009) felt that "policy images are always a mixture of empirical information and emotive appeals" and they may be subject to manipulation (p. 26). Volz and Hertwig (2015) asserted that emotions are challenging to comprehend (p. 104). Therefore, PET involves imprecise matters, and it is thus difficult to fully operationalize.

Jones and Baumgartner (2009, 2012) stated that PET is not only underpinned by bounded rationality, but "PET rests solidly on a microfoundation: a model of decision makers based on bounded rationality" (xxiii; p. 3). Simon (1997) noted that bounded rationality leads to administrators treating situations as only loosely connected or that "one can leave out of account those aspects of reality-and that means *most* aspects-that appear irrelevant at a given time. Administrators (and everyone else, for that matter) take into account just a few of the factors of the situation regarded as most relevant and critical" (p. 119). If anyone can leave out key aspects of a situation that "appear" but

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may not actually be irrelevant, flaws are practically inevitable to occur per the imperfect human mind. Jones and Baumgartner (2015) agreed via their assertion that "bounded rationality leads to disproportionate information processing" (p. 17). Therefore, due to bounded rationality, operationalization of PET is challenging.

Jones and Baumgartner (2009, 2005) felt that positive feedback is akin to "escalation" "bandwagons" and occurs in markets when a price rise causes a further price rise (p. 16; p. 140). True, Jones, and Baumgartner (2007) believed positive feedback occurs when an alteration causes future adjustments to be amplified (p. 160). Positive feedback displays a challenge to operationalizing PET because a policy may not be produced for the reason that one would perceive. For example, President Johnson's Safe Streets Act was passed in 1968, not exclusively due to an increase in crime, as most would likely speculate, but also very much due to increased press coverage on crime stories and congressional hearings on justice (160-161).

## 12. Compare and Contrast

MSA and PET actually both harbor case studies exclusively from the USA, but MSA seems to be more criticized, likely because its tenets, such as the streams, are based on the USA's administrative system, while PET's tenets, including policy images and policy venues, are more versatile. Despite critiques, scholars have been able to operationalize MSA and PET in various world regions, displayed by Béland and Marier (2020) regarding MSA on long-term elder care in Canada and Walgrave and Varone (2008) regarding PET on Belgium's Dutroux Crisis.

Cairney's (2018) MSA critique is that it is confusing, which is somewhat similar to scholars deeming PET as unpredictable, and this connection extends into PET's positive feedback challenges. The major difference is that PET's operationalizing issues are based more on psychological elements. Bounded rationality can even be considered to embody psychological or mental elements because it addresses the deficiencies of the human mind to process information.

Real-world cases clarify my insights. Mintrom and True (2022) discussed MSA regarding violence against females. Sparked by the COVID-19 focusing event, the problems stream of domestic violence due to stay-at-home restrictions, the politics stream encompassing UN World Health Organization and administrators speaking out against domestic violence, and the policies stream of tenuous laws to combat domestic violence united to form a policy window for change. Policy entrepreneur Phumzile and others took action against domestic violence, and 135 countries implemented COVID-19 measures accounting for domestic violence.

Honig (2020) discussed how PET related to America's counterterrorism policy. "Before 9/11, changes in U.S. counterterrorism politics were incremental," but sparked by 9/11/2001 focusing event, "media attention to it was nonstop." I believe being aware of bounded rationality regarding information processing or overload would have been particularly helpful during this period. This nonstop media attention was due to a

9/11/2001 punctuation, which aligns with Jones and Baumgardner's insights on media. "The entire image which counterterrorism policy had been viewed with (perhaps as a suspicious one) was transformed," as "objection to activities such as eavesdropping and domestic spying now became unpatriotic" and security was a top priority. "Bin Laden became a symbol of everything which America stood against," and this all lead to a new punctuation, in which politicians and various institutional arrangements advocated for legislations for counterterrorism policy, a contrast from feelings prior to 9/11/2001, in which "interest groups and politicians pushed against counterterrorism policies which may have infringed on personal rights." Honig specifically discussed institutional arrangements because, as continually stated, PET emphasizes institutional arrangements and their powers. This punctuation culminated with the USA Patriot Act, passed October 2001 (p. 3-5).

### **13. MSA Tested**

Kingdon formulated MSA by conducting 247 interviews in the health and transportation industry (p. 4). Cairney (2018) and Zahariadis (1998) noted that MSA may not be testable on an empirical level (p. 199; p. 444). Kingdon (2014) himself commented "I find it reassuring on that point (empirical testability) to note that there are a number of plausible alternative models in the scholarly literature, each with intelligent and energetic adherents." Kingdon further asserted that other models do not have the same properties as the Garbage Can Model, the very model that MSA is based upon (p. 225). It is my opinion that if Kingdon believed that MSA was empirically testable, he would have stated so and perhaps even said how it can be tested. This strengthens Cairney and Zahariadis' critiques.

The second item that would be challenging to test is if the streams are independent. Mintrom (2000) questioned whether the streams are independent and Sabatier (1991) felt that the concept of creating windows in MSA via the joining of the streams needed further analysis (p. 45; p. 151). Zahariadis (2007) also believed that MSA and the streams joining would be challenging to empirically test (p. 82). Kingdon never fully explained if the streams are independent or exactly what unites them.

### **14. PET Tested**

Jones and Baumgarnder (2009) studied seven policy subsystems and paid attention to quantitative measurements of policy changes (p. xix, xxiii). I will address their work on nuclear power, as this case is often discussed as their cornerstone study. Jones and Baumgartner (2009) pointed out that nuclear power used to harbor a positive image which included ideas of atoms for peace and low-cost energy, but the image altered at the beginning of the nuclear era to entail the destruction of nuclear weapons and genetic mutations. The reasons for this may have included a shift in media attention, Three Mile Island incident (focusing event), and other factors. As a result, there were punctuations in regulations and adverse nuclear energy reactions in the late 1970s, which they attributed to the aforementioned factors (p. 64-80).



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While Kern and Rogge (2018) noted that it was possible to empirically test PET, Cairney (2007) suggested that a contention to PET is that it is challenging to discern if the dominate policy image is actually what causes an alteration in a policy or enterprise (p. 10; p. 59).

### **15. Compare and Contrast**

Testing MSA and PET are similar in that Kingdon and Jones and Baumgartner and other scholars have provided feedback and run tests on their frameworks. No framework is optimal, so it is unsurprising that critiques emerged.

The major difference is that upon its original conception, many scholars questioned if MSA could be empirically tested, so much so that Kingdon ultimately addressed this shortcoming. PET's ability to be empirically tested did not seem to be focused upon as much as other elements.

### **16. PET as an Alternative Framework**

There are similarities between MSA and PET, such as both accounting for focusing events and a more non-incremental approach to policy change. Regardless, I would diagnose a framework as being an alternative explanation when there are multiple differences regarding main tenets. It would be challenging to provide an exact number of differences to deem a framework as an alternative explanation, but the following points will display many varying tenets to show that PET is an alternative explanation from MSA.

I quoted from Jones and Baumgartner and Kingdon on policy entrepreneurs, with the takeaway being that Kingdon highlighted policy entrepreneurs in a more individual fashion, while Baumgartner and Jones discussed how they can harbor the most power when closely affiliated with institutional arrangements.

Jones and Baumgartner (2009, 2012) highlighted bounded rationality as a main tenet in PET in respect to the challenges of humans to process information and via their interpretations of policy images (xxiii; p. 3.). Kingdon does not present bounded rationality as a main tenant of MSA.

PET's institutional arrangements, such as policy monopolies, policy venues, policy communities, and even interest groups garnered attention in this paper and in case studies because PET focuses very heavily on the powers that such entities hold. I used Jones and Baumgartner's text on institutional arrangements and Honig's (2020) 9/11/01 example to make this clear. MSA's individual actors harbored more depth in this paper because they came from Kingdon work, work that focused on how these entities can affect the streams. Kingdon still acknowledged the influence of institutional entities, such as interest groups.

PET focuses significantly more on how policy images, policy venues, and venue shopping affect the policy process. PET viewed the policy process or policy change as very susceptible and affected by alterations in the aforementioned tenets. This is best

exemplified in the relationship between adjustments in policy images leading to policy change, which were evident in Honig (2020) and virtually all of Jones and Baumgartner's cases. This extends into PET's relationship to media, as PET focused more on how the media presents issues, such as nuclear power, and how this affects their policy images. MSA barely references policy images.

## 17. Discussion, and Conclusions

While starting with a brief explanation of MSA and PET, this paper ultimately provided intricacies and comparisons on aspects of both frameworks, and based on those comparisons, I concluded that PET is an alternative explanation to MSA.

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