

Handbook of Public Policy Agenda Setting

Edited by

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HANDBOOKS OF RESEARCH ON PUBLIC POLICY



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24. Discursive institutionalism, problem definition, and the consequences of crisis for agenda setting

Stella Ladi

Problem definition delineates the way a public issue will be tackled by subsequent public policies. Different actors propose definitions and attempt to highlight different aspects of the problem in order to have an impact upon its prioritization in the governmental agenda but also in the design of the policy that will tackle it. The discourse and timing within which this exercise takes place is of particular importance since it affects the urgency and the nuances of the problem. It has been argued that during crises the discussion of the problem is directed more towards the accountability issue rather than the possible solutions (Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell, 2009). Policy actors are more anxious to shift the blame than to analyze the parameters of the problem in view of a viable solution.

In this chapter, a link between discursive institutionalism and the concept of critical junctures is proposed in order to capture the importance of both the timing (critical juncture) and the discourse (coordinative and communicative discourse) for problem definition and agenda setting. The ongoing economic, political and social crisis in Greece is an illustrative example of how a critical juncture, especially in the form of a crisis, affects problem definition and thus agenda setting. The existing populist coordinative and communicative discourse has been amplified by the crisis and it has been affecting problem definition and agenda setting in its heart. The example of youth unemployment will be discussed in more detail. Although youth unemployment is high in the communicative discourse and in the governmental agenda, the definition of the problem is still unclear and a path towards a policy is still to be found.

DISCURSIVE INSTITUTIONALISM, CRITICAL JUNCTURES AND PROBLEM DEFINITION

In this section I introduce the proposed theoretical framework for analyzing problem definition during periods of crisis. A discursive institutionalist (DI) approach reinforced by a concrete linkage with the critical juncture

concept has been selected. Discursive institutionalism sheds light the way coordinative and communicative discourse frames problems and thus affects their prioritization and nuances. This has a direct impact on the way problems enter the governmental agenda. The concept of critical junctures brings into the fore 'time', which – particularly during crises – affects discourse and can help us better understand the way problems are defined.

The analysis of critical junctures has been developed in the historical institutionalist strand of neo-institutionalism. In this chapter, it is claimed that it is a concept that can also be useful for discursive institutionalism and that it can lead us to interesting hypotheses and findings about agenda setting. Critical junctures when combined with discursive institutionalism's focus on agency become much more than unexplainable moments in time when change is triggered (see Schmidt, 2008). 'Critical junctures' is a concept that has inspired numerous and diverse studies but it has often been criticized for being too general and problematic in its linkage with concepts such as path dependence and policy change, which are the heart of agenda setting. What exactly is a critical juncture and when does it break a path and lead to policy change? Other terms that have been used in the literature with a similar meaning are 'turning points', 'crisis', and 'unsettled times' (Capoccia and Kelemen, 2007). 'Critical moments' are specifically differentiated from 'critical junctures' (Bulmer and Burch, 1998), but I will not address this issue in this chapter.

'Critical junctures' is a useful concept in order to understand when a problem definition is more likely to occur or to change and under what conditions. Collier and Collier (1991, p.29) in their classic study define critical juncture as 'a period of significant change, which typically occurs in distinct ways in different countries (or in other units of analysis) and which is hypothesized to produce distinct legacies'. For them, critical junctures are defined as change that leads to new legacies. Capoccia and Keleman (2007) rightly observe that critical junctures should refer to relatively shorter periods of time than the path dependent processes they instigate. They understand critical junctures as rare events in the development of institutions, since institutions are normally stable or change slowly (*ibid.*). Following Capoccia and Keleman (2007), in this chapter critical junctures are seen as temporal interruptions, which may lead to policy change because they are the moments in time when problem definition takes place – or, indeed, changes.

Following Schmidt (2008, p. 305), discourse has ideas about policies, programs, and philosophies as its substance but is not confined by them. Discourse as developed in discursive institutionalism describes the substantive content of ideas but also the interactive process by which ideas

are spread. Discourse is not just about ideas or 'text' but also about the context in which the ideas are developed and promoted. Schmidt (2008) distinguishes between the coordinative and communicative discourse. The coordinative discourse refers to the 'creation, elaboration, and justification of policy and programmatic ideas' by policy actors and the way they exchange views and persuade each other. It is concerned with the formation of a common language on the part of policy groups in their attempt to construct a coherent policy program (Schmidt, 2008, p. 171). The coordinative discourse is central in understanding how policy problems are actually defined. The communicative discourse, on the other hand, is concerned with the relationship between policymakers and the public. It refers to 'the presentation, deliberation, and legitimation of political ideas to the general public' (Schmidt, 2008, p. 310). The communicative discourse is thus central in analyzing how a policy problem is actually presented. Schmidt and Radaelli (2004, p. 193), in their article about discourse and policy change, clarify that the study of discourse should coexist with the awareness that interests also matter – as well as the material conditions and the hard economic variables – but should not only be reduced to that. Discourse in this sense is the glue between structure and agency. Empirically, what is interesting is first to shed light on the way discourse shapes problem definition and second to explore why, although during critical junctures these newly defined problems can be pushed in the agenda, their tackling remains largely symbolic.

The way in which crisis affects agenda setting and enables dormant policy issues to be transformed into central policy problems is not a new issue (Cobb and Elder, 1971). Shattschneider (1960) argues that low participation in liberal democracies reinforces biases in agenda setting. Cobb and Elder (1971, pp. 901–3) make four crucial observations regarding agenda setting. First, influence and access in any system is biased and thus the system will operate in favor of some groups and to the disadvantage of other groups. Second, only a restricted number of issues will be considered by a system, which means that some policy issues won't make it to the agenda. Third, the system's inertia will determine which alternatives may enter the agenda. Fourth, 'pre-decisional processes are often of the most critical importance in determining which issues and alternatives are to be considered by the polity and which choices will probably be made'. These observations are important because they remind us that the impact of critical junctures in agenda setting should not be overestimated. Disadvantaged groups remain disadvantaged during critical junctures and they often become even more deprived, meaning that their access into the system will linger. At the same time, inertia in most polities is more

likely than policy change, which means that even if problems are redefined during crisis, the policy agenda will not necessarily change significantly.

Crisis has been used in the literature interchangeably with critical junctures and it is a time when the development of coordinative and communicative discourse that directly affects problem definition can be best observed. In their article on crisis exploitation, Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell (2009) argue that once it has been accepted that a crisis has erupted, the centre of attention turns to the causes of the crisis. The 'exogenization' of the crisis serves policymakers who would try to avoid the blame. Frames that 'exogenize' accountability often refer to forces of nature, 'outgroups', or uncontrollable events such as economic recession. Taking this argument further, it is claimed that this 'exogenization' of the crisis means that policy problems are defined and redefined, taking into account blame shift and not problem solutions. Such types of policy problem definition may help problems to enter the agenda but are expected to have a direct impact on the quality of the policies designed. This claim can be further illustrated by a discussion of the way youth unemployment has been defined during the Greek crisis and the way it has entered the policy agenda.

PROBLEM DEFINITION DURING THE GREEK CRISIS (2010–2015): COORDINATIVE AND COMMUNICATIVE DISCOURSE

The Eurozone crisis, which started in 2009 as a result of the 2008 financial crisis, and more specifically its impact upon Greece is a telling case study for the illustration of the way in which crisis and critical junctures affect problem definition and agenda setting via the production of new coordinative and communicative discourse in response to the new material and economic facts. In this section, a brief description of the changing situation in Greece is presented. What is of particular interest is the observation of the attempts to use this new discourse in order to exogenize the accountability for the crisis and to frame it as a result of the international economic recession and/or the failure of the Eurozone. Although coordinative discourse is about forced political compromises, avoiding default and the Greek exit from the Eurozone (Grexit) and saving the country from the crisis, the communicative discourse is mainly about the exogenous causes of the problem. If anything, as far as the endogenous causes are concerned, it is the 'old' political establishment that is blamed. The problem is thus defined as mainly international and/or European and less as an endogenous Greek problem.

Greece has been under austerity programs since 2010, following the

announcement by its then Prime Minister George Papandreou in October 2009 that Greek deficit figures had been understated. Greece's ability to borrow from the financial markets seriously deteriorated after that and Greece became the epicenter of the Eurozone debt crisis. Three bail-out programs (in 2010, 2012, and 2015) of a total of 326 billion euros were negotiated with the ominously named Troika, consisting of the European Commission, the European Central Bank (ECB), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (to which, in 2015, the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) was added). The conditions included harsh austerity measures, notably deep budget cuts, tax increases, privatizations, public administration reforms, a wide range of structural reforms, and a demand for the curbing of tax evasion. By 2014, Greek GDP had fallen by almost 26 percent and unemployment rates had risen to almost 27 percent, with youth unemployment at times reaching 50 percent. Some structural reforms and a modest surplus were achieved in both 2013 and 2014, when the Greek Government managed to access the markets for the first time. Nevertheless, by 2014 the public debt-to-GDP ratio was 177 percent (European Commission, 2015). Voices inside and outside the country were pointing to both the unsustainability of the Greek debt and the ineffectiveness of the austerity measures (for example for a series of articles see Stiglitz, 2016).

Reform fatigue and a domestic political deadlock led to the snap January 2015 parliamentary elections, which paved the way for the fall of the Samaras Premiership. A Syriza-led government came into power (Ladi, 2014). The political system of Greece has effectively been in turmoil since 2010. Internally, what Greece has seen in the last five years is the end of what has been called the 'old' political system and the emergence of new parties, coalitions, and dynamics. Three main changes have taken place. First, the two major political parties that dominated Greece's politics since the transition to democracy in 1974 have lost ground. PASOK, the socialist party governing when the crisis initially erupted, fell from approximately 44 percent of the vote in 2009 to 4.7 percent in the January 2015 elections. The conservative New Democracy (ND) fell from 33.5 percent in 2009 to 27.8 percent in January 2015. The big winner of the crisis was the radical left Syriza, which from 4.6 percent of the vote in 2009 came first in the January 2015 elections with 36.3 percent, of the vote, and repeated its victory with a 35.46 percent in the September 2015 elections. Syriza managed to draw votes from all parties of the old-party system but mainly from PASOK. New parties such as the centrist Potami (the River) have made their way into the Parliament and marginal parties such as the fascist Golden Dawn have been strengthened. Golden Dawn became the third party in the January 2015 elections, gathering 6.9 percent of the vote (Hellenic Ministry

of Interior, 2015). The results of the September 2015 election, which took place after a turbulent summer of a referendum (July 2015) and of the adoption of a third memorandum (August 2015), did not present any major changes. The question remains whether these dramatic changes in the political system have also changed the ability of disadvantaged groups to access the political system and thus their influence over the agenda. In order to explore this question, one of the biggest problems of the crisis – youth unemployment – will be discussed in the next section.

Second, one-party governments that used to be the norm in Greek politics no longer exist and coalition governments have replaced them. The government in power right now – for the second time in 2015 – is a coalition between Syriza and the right-wing populist party, Independent Greeks. The previous governing coalition was that of PASOK, ND and the pro-European left-wing DIMAR (the latter subsequently left). Coalition governments have proved to be more fragile than one-party governments and they invariably do not last full four-year terms. What is interesting though is that the necessity to form a government has forced political parties to use a more consensual communicative discourse – at least while they are searching for a partner. Old enemies such as PASOK and New Democracy have been in government together linked by a communicative discourse based on the urgent need to rescue the country and to avoid default. Parties on the opposites of the political spectrum, such as Syriza and the Independent Greeks, have also formed a coalition based on a communicative discourse – again of the urgency of rescuing the country, this time from the memoranda rather than the crisis. The communicative discourse of Syriza and Independent Greeks builds more on the need to do something for the ‘people’ and to stop what they have called the ‘humanitarian crisis’. This new communicative discourse affects the definition of the youth unemployment problem and thus agenda setting in relation to this problem.

Third – and probably most importantly for the argument put forward in this chapter – is that the internal political debate and communicative discourse has been reduced to a memorandum/anti-memorandum cleavage, which (after the Tsipras government’s shift to adopting the third Memorandum of Understanding) was succeeded by a euro versus ‘return to a national currency’ cleavage. The discourse of the governing coalition is populist, and the crisis in Greece has been increasingly framed as a ‘war’ with European partners – especially the Germans, as the ‘enemy’ or the ‘occupying force’ (in the most extreme versions of this discourse) (for example, Lowen, 2015). The agreement reached on the 13 July that halted a race towards default has been presented as a ‘coup’ against the government (ekathimerini.com, 2015). This ultra-populist twist in the

communicative discourse of the government (and often of the opposition parties) is not surprising since it follows a pattern present in Greek politics since the 1980s. Pappas (2014) has described Greece as a populist democracy with three main characteristics: first, a single division between the good 'people' and the evil 'establishment' is dominant; second, conflict and polarization rather than consensus and moderation are preferred by all parties; and third, it is personal authority that counts more than impersonal institutions and the rule of law. A content analysis of the first years of the crisis reaffirms the populist communicative discourse of all the parties in the Parliament with an emphasis on blame-shifting (Vasilopoulou, Halikiopoulou and Exadaktylos, 2014). What is interesting in relation to youth unemployment is that populism may be reflected in problem definition but this does not necessarily mean more access for the disadvantaged groups – and thus different agenda setting.

Problems during the crisis are not defined with the aim to be solved via the introduction of reforms, but rather in order to find somebody to blame for the problem – and thus the crisis. Blaming internally the 'old' party system and externally the failures of global capitalism and the Eurozone has been the most prominent discourse. What should be analyzed further is the type of public policy problem definitions that result from these circumstances. To be sure, none of the governments seemed very willing to undertake the 'ownership' of the reforms spelled out in the memoranda. It is in these memoranda that many of the current policy problems are actually defined. Research has already shown that reforms are much more difficult to implement if a government does not take ownership of the program (for example, Ladi, 2014). In the next section, the problem of youth unemployment in Greece during the crisis is discussed in more detail in order to further develop the argument.

DEFINING AND SETTING THE AGENDA FOR COMBATING YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

There is consensus among Greek political parties and the Troika that youth unemployment is one of the biggest problems that Greece is facing due to the crisis. Kretsos (2014) notes that the disadvantage of youth in entering the job market is not new. Nonetheless, it has never been a priority among political parties. Even before the crisis, youth unemployment in Greece reached 23 percent. The youth labor market was already characterized by high rates of young people Not in Education, Employment and Training (NEET), labor law violations, and precarious employment conditions. Family and social networks played a supportive role during periods of

unemployment as well as providing a mechanism of assistance and provision of contacts during job hunting. In this section, what is explored is the way in which the problem of youth unemployment was defined during the crisis (that is, after 2010) and whether it obtained priority in the agenda.

Youth unemployment in Greece has boomed since 2010 reaching 53.1 percent in 2014, which is the highest rate within the EU (Eurostat, 2010). The conventional definition of 'youth' refers to the age group 16 to 24. Yet most scholars agree that in Greece the same problems are faced by people aged 25 to 29, which means that the target group for policy initiatives should be wider (Bell and Blanchflower, 2015; Mitrakos, Tsakloglou, and Cholezas, 2010). Some other interesting facts regarding youth unemployment in Greece include that female unemployment rates are significantly higher than those for males, and that the NEET rate is the highest in Europe. Those employed are often underemployed, meaning that they are in temporary jobs and work fewer hours than they would like. Those unemployed are very often continuously out of work for at least one year. The percentage of young people living in their parental home is high and has increased during the crisis. The total number of young people in the country is declining due to a combination of low birth rates and increased emigration. On a positive note, the most educated are usually unemployed for a shorter period of time (Bell and Blanchflower, 2015).

Although there is an agreement in the academic literature about the definition of youth unemployment in Greece, its main characteristics, and its exacerbation during the crisis, the policy response and the way it has re-entered the agenda is patchy. The communicative discourse is strong and EU and Greek politicians alike, as well as the media, talk about a 'lost generation' (for example, Dorning, 2015). – a label that young people themselves often adopt (for example, Papanagnou, 2011). Nevertheless, the issue has not entered the agenda as a problem distinct from high unemployment among the general population, and initiatives that directly target young people are rare. The problem is seen as urgent, but – although the crisis is considered to be a critical juncture for a whole generation – the youth unemployment problem definition in relation to agenda setting remains relatively stable. A search in the documents of the two Economic Adjustment Programmes for Greece (European Commission, 2010, 2012) and the third Memorandum of Understanding (2015) reveals that the word 'youth' only appears in the second program – and this is in relation to the adoption of a subminimum wage for persons under the age of 25.

In order to explore the way the youth unemployment problem has entered the agenda during the crisis, reference is made to four interrelated policy areas that would be expected to include measures to confront it: economic policy, growth policy, employment policy, and educational

policy (Petrounakou, 2015). Interestingly, there is no government document explicitly stating that actions are required in all these four policy areas in order to combat youth unemployment. Economic policy has drawn most of the attention since it has been characterized by harsh austerity measures mainly aiming to drastically reduce public spending to put in order the ever-growing public debt. Austerity policies have had a direct impact on employment possibilities for young people since they have led to the closure of industries and enterprises and the general shrinking of the economy. Unemployment rates have grown year after year under austerity. Additionally, family capacity to support the young unemployed is diminishing, pushing young people into more severe economic deprivation than before (Kretsos, 2014). The impact of austerity on growth has been dramatic; the Greek economy only shown weak signs of recovery in 2014, when a small positive growth was recorded, and dropped back to recession after the January 2015 elections. Although an assessment of the economic adjustment programs for Greece is not in the scope of this chapter, the lack of a national growth policy running alongside these programs is evident. Greece was expected to take advantage of austerity in order to increase productivity and efficiency in both public and private sectors, leading to increased exports and thus job creation. Despite all the reforms that have taken place, the exports have not improved spectacularly and there has been very little job creation for the young (Petrounakou, 2015).

Employment policy has been part of all three programs, including a number of reforms that have been resisted for a long time by Greek politicians and trade unions alike. By and large, economic policy did not pay special attention to the specificities of youth unemployment. Some of the changes included a reform of the employment protection legislation, meaning a reduction of severance payments, a rise of the minimum threshold for activating rules on collective dismissals, and a reduction of minimum wage and overtime pay. At the same time, the Manpower Employment Organization (OAED) has been reorganized and a mechanism to identify labor market needs has been established (ERGANI). The main aims have been to increase labor market flexibility, lower labor costs and reduce administrative burdens for job creation (Ladi and Graziano, 2014). Only a few measures have directly targeted young people. A controversial special employment regime has been established, characterized by a lower minimum wage for young people under 25 and significant cuts to unemployment benefits (European Commission, 2012). The launch of the EU's Youth Guarantee Scheme in 2013 'ensures that *all young people under 25* – whether registered with employment services or not – get a good-quality, concrete offer within 4 months of them leaving formal education or becoming unemployed' (European Commission, 2013;

emphasis in original). This is an ambitious plan; the European Social Fund (Youth Employment Initiative) partially funds it (with 6 billion euros) but it also relies heavily on national budgets, which are required to prioritize youth unemployment. Greece produced an implementation plan in 2014 saying that 517 million euros were going to be allocated in order to benefit 350,000 young people via temporary hiring programs for the unemployed and a voucher program to support occasional training and internships. Extra support is planned for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in order to increase youth employment opportunities (Ministry of Labour, Security and Welfare, 2014). Although it is still early days, it is doubtful that these measures will significantly alter the employment situation of young people in Greece without a broader recovery of the economy, which would allow the absorption of the retrained and experienced beneficiaries.

Educational policy is the fourth and final pillar in which reform would be expected in order to combat youth unemployment. Mitrakos, Tsakoglou, and Cholezas (2010) showed that young people with a higher education degree are more likely to get a job and that more attention should be given to the problem of transition from education to the labor market. Although Greece has been implementing training programs and apprenticeship schemes funded by structural funds for years, their success is rather limited. Vocational training is still considered a less attractive option and no major reforms have taken place (Petroneakou, 2015). In 2011, a new Higher Education Bill was voted in that aimed to internationalize and depoliticize Greek universities (Hellenic Republic, 2011), but its subsequent amendments and budget cuts linked to the austerity programs have undermined its potential. The possibility of introducing private universities in order to enhance competition, educational choices, students' skills, and research and development opportunities still remains taboo, since a Constitutional amendment is required and the political parties severely disagree. All in all, it could be argued that the crisis has changed neither the definition of nor the agenda regarding youth unemployment and that related policies remain fragmented.

CONCLUSION

The Greek crisis, and especially the youth unemployment problem definition and related changes in agenda setting during this period, provide interesting findings about the consequences of crisis for agenda setting. The most important observation is that although crises that produce critical junctures are instinctively viewed as an opportunity for change in the

literature, and are often presented as such in the communicative discourse, they do not always produce the expected radical policy shift. Three main reasons for this can be identified. The first is that, when a crisis erupts, blame-shifting is the priority, meaning that even if a problem is redefined the parameters emphasized are those that shift the accountability away from the political elite (Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell, 2009). This exogenization of the crisis means that longstanding endogenous causes of the problem are undermined. The case of youth unemployment in Greece is telling since, although the problem of youth unemployment was not new, the way it was framed during the crisis emphasized its austerity-induced exacerbation and blame was shifted to the Troika. Longstanding endogenous parameters of the problem, such as the lack of a growth strategy or the introverted higher education system, were silenced.

The second reason is that, during crises, disadvantaged groups remain disadvantaged – and they often become even more deprived. This means that their access to the system and their influence on agenda setting remains limited (Cobb and Elder, 1971). It can be argued that this was the case with young people during the crisis in Greece. Although the communicative discourse of most political parties – and especially of Syriza – made emotional references to the problem of youth unemployment, the way it entered the agenda remained rather limited. Very few policy actions directly targeted the problem of youth unemployment; the only reference to young people in the three programs can be found in the second program in relation to a subminimum wage for the under-25s. The third reason is that, because of the system's inertia, not all policy issues will make it onto the agenda even during crisis (Cobb and Elder, 1971). This chapter has further shown that complex issues such as youth unemployment, which require actions in multiple policy areas, are even less likely to effectively make it onto the agenda given the urgency of the crisis. In the case of youth unemployment, actions were required in economic, growth, employment, and educational policies, which produced a rather complex task for a government already under pressure.

It can be further argued that discourse is more important than time in relation to problem definition and agenda setting. Although critical junctures are expected to change the way problems are defined, the urgency that crises produce in combination with the three reasons presented here (blame shifting, access to the system by disadvantaged groups, and inertia) limits the impact of time and of critical junctures. Instead, crisis can exacerbate a populist communicative discourse, which puts emphasis on emotions and on shifting the blame to an exogenous 'enemy'. Such a discourse is likely to undermine problem definition and to squash the opportunities for meaningful agenda setting and viable solutions.

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