

COVID-19 through the concepts, theories, and frameworks discussed in the Birkland Textbook

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COVID-19 has emerged as one of the most severe public health epidemics in modern history, claiming the lives of almost 2 million people globally (Brigham et al., 2021). Unsurprisingly, a chorus of famous observers has dubbed it a "focusing event" capable of bringing about widespread social and political transformation in almost every aspect of society (Reville, 2020; Olshan, 2020). A crisis like COVID-19, according to social scientists, is a focal event that re-balances public policy and societal practices (Baumgartner & Jones, 2010). Two of these kinds of focusing events in the United States were the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and Hurricane Katrina in 2005, which both drew sustained media awareness and provided evidence of previous policy failure; the policy windows they presented enabled the restructuring of emergency management and hazard mitigation policy in the United States (Birkland, 2019).

The virus provides a focal point for politicians and government officials to understand what occurred, why it occurred, who is accountable, and how it might be prevented. Focusing on events, such as crises and natural disasters, gives a chance for political reform, learning, and assessing government performance. This essay summarizes the fundamental concepts, theories, and frameworks discussed in the Birkland textbook and how the Covid-19 pandemic as a focus event might affect policy and agenda change.

John Kingdon invented the phrase focusing event in his 1984 work *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policy*, which serves as the cornerstone of the Multiple Stream Framework (MSF) of agenda creation and policy reform (Kingdon, 1984). According to the MSF, the policy process involves three streams of activity that, when combined, give "windows of opportunity" for policy change advocates to push their preferred concerns onto the overloaded government agenda

(Kingdon, 1995;1984; Birkland, 2019). Policies provided as answers to major societal concerns are included in the policy stream, and the politics stream discusses the partisan makeup of governments, interest-group preferences, and the national mood, which relates to how elected officials interpret popular preferences. Finally, the problem stream discusses the numerous topics competing for policymaker attention.

Indicators, feedback, and focusing events are essential to the problem stream. Statistics and other measures that document changes in a problem are known as indicators. Feedback includes data derived from evaluations of existing government programs. However, as these aspects of policy problems are frequently insufficient to elicit attention, Kingdon contends that pushes take the form of a "crisis or disaster that comes along to call attention to the problem, a powerful symbol that catches on, or a policymaker's personal experience"(2003, pp. 94-95).

Kingdon's notion of focusing events is hazy, discursive, and inductive. Potential focusing events, according to Birkland, are "sudden, relatively infrequent incidents that may legitimately be described as detrimental or indicating the possibility of future damages, that are concentrated on a specific geographical region or community of interest, and that are known to policymakers and the public nearly immediately" (Birkland, 1997, p.22). This refinement allows us to quantify the aspects of an event that make it "focal," notably the event's suddenness, damages (e.g., injuries, fatalities, property destruction), and catastrophic scale. Birkland's emphasis on a prospective event indicates that predicting whether an event will have a sizeable focal power is difficult (1997, p.22).

By refining and clarifying the concept of a focusing event, Birkland's theory provides a more quantitative but slightly narrower grasp than competitor theories' definitions. According to the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), external shocks include not just catastrophes but also other sorts of events, such as swings in public opinion or even deteriorating socioeconomic

situations (e.g., a recession) (Sabatier, 1998; Weible et al., 2012). Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET) has allowed a relatively broad understanding of focal events or external shocks (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009), one that covers disasters as well as significant social and institutional developments, such as considerable court judgment (Wood, 2006).

The following paragraph assesses the extent to which the current COVID-19 crisis meets Birkland's (1997) definition of a focusing event as (1) sudden and relatively rare; (2) harmful or revealing potential future harms; (3) constrained to a geographical area; and (4) known to policymakers and the public at the same time.

First, while COVID-19 is undeniably significant, it cannot be described as abrupt, at least from the standpoint of US officials. After the disease was detected in China, the United States reported its first case of COVID-19 (Holshue et al. 2020). In late February 2020, the first known incidents of community spread in the United States occurred (CDC COVID-19 Response Team et al., 2020). It was not as abrupt or unexpected as a storm (which provides just a few days' notice for preparedness) or an earthquake or aircraft crash, which occurred without warning.

Second, the virus is not restricted to a single geographical location. COVID-19 has caused considerable disease and has suffocated the world economy, making it a very different form of catastrophe than the natural and manufactured occurrences investigated in the focused events literature. Although the impacts of the new coronavirus are dispersed unevenly throughout different geographical regions of the world and the United States, the consequences are most severe for members of vulnerable populations, namely Black Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, and older adults (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2020).

Third, neither politicians nor the general public were aware of COVID-19 at the same time. The public health experts were only aware of the infection for at least a week before the general population. Because widespread media coverage of the virus did not start until February and March, most Americans were likely unconcerned about the infection until then. Recent reports indicate President Donald Trump downplayed the virus's severity, emphasizing the knowledge gap between elites and the ordinary populace (Hatcher, 2020).

The one component of the crisis that corresponds to Birkland's description of a focusing event is how it discloses harm (1997). COVID-19 indicates the risk of infection; as the epidemic develops, it reveals new dangers. Indeed, as previously said, COVID-19 constitutes one of the most severe public health disasters in contemporary history. States nationwide have implemented various policy changes in response to the COVID-19 epidemic, ranging from social distancing and mask mandates to additions of social safety net programs and eviction freezes (Raifman et al., 2020).

President Biden signed the American Rescue Plan into law on March 11, 2021, providing another wave of coronavirus relief at \$1,844 billion (about 8.8 percent of 2020 GDP). The strategy prioritizes investing in public health response and delivering time-limited support to families, communities, and businesses. It extends unemployment benefits (including supplemental unemployment benefits), offers direct stimulus payments of \$1,400 to eligible individuals, gives direct help to state and local governments, improves financing for school reopening, and adds resources to the immunization program.

Paycheck Protection Program and Health Care Enhancement Act, which is accountable to the CARES ACT, costs USD 483 billion. The legislation includes (i) US \$ 321 billion for supplemental forgivable Small Business Administration loans and guarantees to assist small

businesses in retaining workers; (ii) US \$ 62 billion for the Small Business Administration to provide grants and loans to assist small businesses; (iii) US \$ 75 billion for hospitals; and (iv) US \$ 25 billion for virus testing expansion.

Middle-Class Health Benefits Tax Repeal Act, which was introduced in 2018 (Lee & Bivens), was renamed and signed into Bill after amendments were made into the Corona virus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act ("CARES Act") which costs an estimated \$2.3 trillion (about 10% of GDP) (Kambhampati, 2020). The Act includes: (i) US \$ 293 billion in one-time tax rebates for individuals; (ii) US \$ 268 billion to expand unemployment benefits; (iii) US \$ 25 billion to provide a food safety net for the most vulnerable; (iv) US \$ 510 billion to prevent corporate bankruptcy by providing loans, guarantees, and backstopping the Federal Reserve 13(3) program; and (v) US \$ 349 billion in forgivable Small Business Administration loans and guarantees to help small businesses that retain workers; (vi) US \$ 100 billion for hospitals, (vii) US \$ 150 billion in transfers to state and local governments and (viii) US \$ 49.9 billion for international assistance.

Finally, Disasters, whether tornadoes, earthquakes, or disease outbreaks, can focus attention on issues and create agendas, but change is never assured (Birkland, 1997). Although COVID-19 is unlike any public disaster in decades, Congress will revamp the nation's public health system once the pandemic has passed. These shifts could lead to higher spending on public health preparedness and response capabilities, as well as a rethinking of the duties of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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