

**To what extent can the multiple streams model be used to explain
policy-making at the EU level?**

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Abstract

This essay discusses the multiple streams (MS) model of agenda-setting in the policy process and seeks to determine its explanatory utility for the European Union. Developed in relation to the federal government in the United States, the framework has hitherto been limitedly applied to the EU level. The present paper aims to contribute towards filling this gap in the literature by investigating the rise of a particular policy sector – vocational education and training (VET) - on the EU's 2000 Lisbon Agenda. The investigation focuses on identifying the five elements of the model and on comparing the findings with other policy analysis tools in order to assess its suitability under the circumstances. It concludes that that the MS approach can indeed be useful for understanding the emergence of some policy areas in the Union (like VET), but it does not have explanatory value for EU policy-making in general.

1. Introduction

The multiple streams (MS) model, which puts forward a compelling explanation of how agendas are set in public policy, has been mostly underused in European Union studies. The purpose of this essay is to address this gap in the academic literature by providing empirical insights from a relatively new EU policy sector – vocational education and training (VET) – which emerged with the 2000 Lisbon Agenda. It argues that although the MS framework is appreciably useful for understanding the rise of VET policies in the European Union (in comparison to other policy analysis tools), it fails short in explaining factors relating to the agenda-setting stage at the EU level more generally. This occurs due to a necessary precondition of the MS approach – ambiguity of the policy process (Zahariadis, 2007, p. 65) – which does not characterise all policy areas in the EU.

Owing to its unique institutional structure, the European Union has attracted the attention of numerous policy analysis (PA) scholars. For a long time, the dominant paradigm has been the policy network/policy community approach, praised for its capacity to describe the large number of public and private actors involved in EU policy-making (Richardson, 2006, p. 4). Nevertheless, some authors consider that these models succeed in describing *how* but not that much *why* policies are made (John, 1998, p. 86), especially in the “fluid” context characterising the EU (Kassim, 1994, pp. 20-22). In opposition, the MS ‘lens’ can encompass the “fluidity” and complexity of the EU’s institutional nature.

Moreover, VET is a policy area inexistent at EU level before the 2000 Lisbon European Council and the Union only has supporting competence over it (although it has been given a legal basis since the 1957 Treaty of Rome). Additionally, it is considered a success story for the implementation of the Open Method of Coordination, a ‘soft’ policy instrument indicating the emergence of ‘new governance’ tools (Warleigh-Lack & Drachenberg, 2010, p. 219). Illustrating the traditional contention between the national and the supranational level in the EU, VET can be an indicative field for policy-making in the Union at large.

To demonstrate the argument, the main body focuses on explaining the MS framework and assessing its applicability for the case study selected. Accordingly, the first part makes a critical review of the model and its hitherto application to the European Union. The second part puts forward the analysis on VET, identifying the three streams, the windows of opportunity and the entrepreneurs for this specific policy field. The third part provides an evaluation of the MS usefulness for the given case (by comparison to other PA models) and the EU at large. The conclusion outlines the findings of the paper, its limitations and future prospects for MS studies in the European Union.

2. The MS approach and the EU

Applying a theoretical framework from the PA toolkit to any policy sector requires a comprehensive understanding of the given framework *ex ante*, as well as the reasoning why it is the most appropriate choice for that particular field. The present section addresses both these issues. On the one hand, it looks into the main characteristics of the MS approach, its analytical purchase and some of the academic criticism levelled at it throughout time. On the other hand, it considers MS usefulness in relation to the European Union, by reviewing previous scholarship on the topic and assessing its merits and limitations. Therefore, it sets the stage for the actual application of the framework to an EU policy sector, which is done in a subsequent section.

A. Understanding the multiple streams – a critical perspective

The origins of the MS model in the realm of public policy can be traced back to a 1984 book by John Kingdon - *Agendas, alternatives and public policies* - considered a ‘modern classic’ in the field of political science and an extensively cited academic work in general (Pollitt, 2008, p. 127). Although not an innovation in terms of theory – but a development of the 1972 garbage can model of organizational choice authored by Cohen, March and Olsen – the book has enjoyed worldwide success due to its contribution to the conceptualisation of agenda-setting in the policy process (Parsons, 1995, p. 192) and of the contingency this stage entails (Jann & Wegrich, 2007, p. 47); its emphasis on “individual agents, ideas, institutions and external processes” (John, 1998, p. 173) and its sound empirical basis, acknowledged even by the tough critics of the garbage can model - Bendor, Moe and Shotts (2001, p. 186).

Interestingly enough though, a political science student is bound to observe that the overview of the MS model provided by Zahariadis (2007) in Sabatier's famous *Theories of the policy process* is more 'scientific' than Kingdon's original piece, which employs a literary-like language accessible to the average reader. By more 'scientific', I mean more systematic, conceptually clearer, analytically more useful (because it points out limitations and prospects) and academically better phrased. However, Kingdon remains the primary source for understanding the MS framework.

According to him, in the process of setting the agenda - i.e. establishing which issue becomes the next governmental priority – one has to distinguish between the governmental agenda (including all the themes that are given attention from governments during a period of time) and the decision agenda (limited to those topics which are actually attended to). The paramount research question under the circumstances is: “why do some subjects rise on the agenda while others are neglected?” (Kingdon, 2003, p. 197). This is where the author recycles the garbage can theory - according to which “a decision is an outcome or interpretation of several relatively independent streams within an organization” (Cohen *et al*, 1972, pp. 2-3) - problems, solutions, participants and choice opportunities. Kingdon adapts this line of argument to public policy-making, arguing that certain issues are placed on governments' decision agenda if what he identifies as the problems, the political and the policy streams are 'coupled' by clever policy entrepreneurs during 'fleeting' moments of opportunity, called policy windows.

Each of the five elements of the framework can be expanded upon. First, the problem stream encompasses all those conditions that governmental officials define as problems in the moment they decide to do something about them (Kingdon, 2003, p. 198). Such conditions may be signalled by indicators (statistical or otherwise), focusing events (disasters, crisis etc.) or feedback (from existing programmes). Second, the policy stream refers to all the policy

alternatives available for a particular field, metaphorically floating in ‘the policy primeval soup’. Third, the political stream includes what Kingdon calls the ‘national mood’ (essentially the public opinion on a given issue) and election turnovers (bringing ideological shifts). The main criteria for selecting policies are their technical feasibility, their normative acceptance by the community and their future constraints. However, the three streams alone have no explanatory value in the absence of policy windows and policy entrepreneurs. If the former explains the ‘when’ (the right, passing moment in time when issues can raise on the agenda), the latter explains ‘by whom’ are alternatives pushed forward.

As all powerful theoretical models, the MS approach has not been without its share of criticism in the specialised literature. Probably the most apt critique comes from Sabatier (1999), who points out the impossibility to falsify Kingdon’s model (as a ‘good’ theory should), as well as its lack of rationality, unlike his advocacy coalition framework (ACF). Radaelli (2000, p. 132) claims that Sabatier has been “somewhat ungenerous” in assessing the MS model, since it leaves aside several authors (Mucciaroni 1992; Radaelli 1995) who have written to the falsifiability end. Ridde (2009) can be added to that list. With respect to the other point, it is interesting how some years earlier, Sabatier applauded the MS framework for its “praiseworthy features”, including the acknowledgement of serendipity in the policy process (1991, p. 151). Contradictory at first glance, these views can be understood if one considers Sabatier’s interest to promote the ACF as the best theory of policy-making. However, one last remark from Sabatier deserves attention. He criticises Kingdon’s lack of interest to develop a research program that would test his model in settings other than federal US. This is a perfectly valid observation. If Kingdon had had half of Sabatier’s energy in promoting and exporting his framework outside the US, the current scholarship on the topic would have been not only richer but also more theoretically and empirically valuable.

Moreover, the independence of the streams has been heatedly debated, as some authors believe that problems and policies do not exist on their own, they are always attached to the people involved in their creation (Muciaronni, 1992; Bendor, Moe & Shotts, 2001). Although this perspective cannot be contested - since both problems and policies are ultimately social constructions - this paper shares the view of Zahariadis (2007, pp. 81-82), who argues that the independence of the streams is merely a conceptual device meant to enable the “uncovering” of rationality rather than its beforehand assumption.

Last, but not least, the criticism concerning the applicability of the MS framework only in pluralistic, federal democratic states is still quite prominent (Howlett & Ramesh, 1995; Demers & Lemieux 1998). While it is obvious the MS model has no analytical purchase in a non-democratic state, where agendas are simply dictated by the leader[ship], its utility across countries has not been established definitively. Zahariadis has been involved in proving this extensively (1995; 2008). In every situation though, the model was adapted to fit ‘local’ conditions. This seems to confirm Pollitt’s opinion, who argued that “the further one travels from the US—and especially from the distinctive characteristics and procedures of the American legislature—the more Kingdon’s analysis may require adaptation” (2008, p. 127).

All things considered, the MS framework remains one of the most influential theoretical explanations of the agenda-setting stage in the policy process. In order to accommodate its main criticisms, one has to be more specific and assert that the MS model succeeds in explaining how policies are made only “under the conditions of ambiguity” (Zaharidis, 2007, p. 65). The European Union seems to correspond to the description, and it is the focus of attention in the next pages.

B. The European Union – a place for MS?

Two major authors have suggested the utility of the MS model in relation to the EU's agenda-setting process: Peters (1994) and Richardson (2001). Both emphasise the uniqueness of the Union's institutional arrangements, which make it a perfect candidate for the framework. The EU is characterised by openness - "the existence of a number of points of access, a large number of influential policy advocates, and a wide range of policy options that have been legitimated in one or more of the constituent countries" (Peters, 1994, p. 11) - and uncertainty - "the total 'system' is large and amorphous, with numbers of part-time participants and a range of ideas floating around in an ethereal fashion" (Richardson, 2001, p. 13). Conversely, the latter warns that it is important to acknowledge the utility of other theoretical models in explaining the EU policy process: policy/issue networks, epistemic/policy communities or the ACF. MS is just one explanatory tool for policy analysts - it is neither a panacea, nor applicable to the entire policy arena.

Despite Peters and Richardson's praises of the garbage can/MS model for investigating agenda-setting at EU level, there has not been a lot of writing on the topic, either from a theoretical or an empirical point of view. This intriguing fact can be understood if one considers the widespread citation of the MS model as opposed to its application (Zahariadis, 2007, p. 79), as well as the ever-changing, overlapping nature of the EU - which discourages a researcher with little access to its institutional structures from taking such a Sisyphean task. Some notable exceptions are Zahariadis (2008) and Ackrill and Kay (2011), though they obviously are not the only ones. While the former discusses the EU case in general terms, the latter focuses on a specific case study - the 2005 sugar reform. A feature common to both pieces is their mentioning of ambiguity, fluidity and complexity as describing the EU policy process, as well as the need to adapt the MS framework in order to fit its specific context.

Taking all these into consideration, it is sensible to assert that agenda-setting studies on the European Union using the MS model are in their early beginnings. Though definite judgements about the framework's utility cannot yet be made, its precondition of 'messiness' in the course of policy change seems appropriate for the Union's multi-level arena, where the usual 'complexity' of the policy process can easily turn into 'complexities'.

To recapitulate, this section has critically reviewed the MS approach and the current stage of its application to the European Union. It was imperative to provide such an analysis before moving to the next stage, of identifying the streams in a specific case study and assessing its explanatory value for understanding the Union's agenda-setting stage in general.

3. Vocational education and training in the Lisbon Agenda – a case study on MS

The following pages present a summary of the five elements in the MS framework on a selected EU policy sector: vocational education and training (VET). Due to its status as an area for which the Union only has supporting competence - limiting its influence to the organisation of exchange programmes up to the late 1990s (Warleigh-Lack & Drachenberg, 2010, p. 219) - but also owing to its historical development from a weakly defined treaty base in 1957 to its prominence in the 2000 Lisbon Agenda (Ertl, 2006), VET makes for a fascinating case study in the application of the MS model.

Problems

An indicator triggered the problems stream for vocational education and training at EU level and an event focused attention to the problem. Ever since the 1980s, the European Community has been concerned with the prospect of falling behind the economies of US and

East Asia. Room *et al.* explain how the rise of new information technologies has exacerbated that concern, leaving the EU with no apparent place between the US takeover of the ‘new’ knowledge-based economy and China’s monopoly of the manufacturing industry, characterising the ‘old’ economy (2005, p. 11). In addition, the historically awaited Eastern Enlargement, expected to take place in the mid-2000s, added pressure to the situation owing to the massive post-communist workforce it was going to bring (Commission, 2006, pp. 155-6). The Lisbon Agenda has been developed precisely to meet these concerns, aiming to transform the EU into “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion” (Council, 2000, p. 3). Human capital and skills – part of the VET sector - came to occupy a central role in this context, being closely linked to employment policies.

Policies

For a long time, the so-called ‘Community Method’ of initiating policies by legislation was the sole mechanism of policy-making in the European Community (Jordan & Schout, 2006, p. 251), in line with its complex institutional structure. Nevertheless, taking into consideration the developments of the Maastricht Treaty – which increased interdependency between sectors, institutions and ultimately member states - there was a need for what Scharpf (1994, p. 41) termed “coordination without hierarchy”. The Open Method of Coordination (OMC) offered that and much more: it was different from traditional inter-state cooperation to the extent that the Commission still played the initiator’s role - identifying goals and prescribing ways to achieve them in any given field - while the task of implementation belonged exclusively to member states (Nugent, 2010, p. 284). Under the circumstances, it fulfilled the MS criteria of technical feasibility (its objectives and benchmarks were straightforward to be put into practice), value acceptability and future constraints (since its emphasis on the voluntary dimension did not infringe upon national

sovereignty). In the realm of VET, the OMC meant the establishment of a European Framework of Qualifications for Lifelong Learning (EQF), the introduction of a common format for European CVs, the creation of a credit transfer system with the Copenhagen Declaration (ECVET), standard setting and periodic reviews of progress as major tasks of the EU bodies involved (Ertl, 2006, p. 17).

Politics

This is undoubtedly the most ‘sensitive’ stream of the MS model when it comes to the EU, not only vocational education and training. Kingdon’s components of the dimension - the national mood and the election turnover – are not evident in the Union’s multi-level arena. On the one hand, searching for elements of the “national mood” contradicts the very nature of the EU, which is made of 27 nation-states, each with its own VET policy (Wollschläger & Guggenheim, 2004) and consequently with its own public opinion regarding it. On the other hand, election turnovers and the subsequent influence of party politics are even more difficult to identify. Taking into consideration the technocratic character of the Commission and the limited role of the European Parliament in the field - which only had to be informed of decisions (Warleigh-Lack & Drachenberg, 2010, p. 220) - political influences at the supranational level appear to have little importance. The opposite is valid for the intergovernmental facet of the EU, manifested in the European Council and the Council of Ministers. Ultimately, it is well-known that large-scale initiatives and strategies are created in the European Council (Bache *et al*, 2011, p. 354) – which is exactly where the Lisbon Agenda was born (see Lisbon Presidency Conclusions). As a result, the political will of member states played a key part [if not the key part] in actually setting the EU agenda with regard to VET. Zahariadis (2008) considers this is also the extent to which the existence/absence of a European mood can be discussed. However, it was not member states

that brought VET on the EU agenda in the first place – they only decided on it once the issue had been raised. This very important clarification must be borne in mind when considering in which of the streams the window of opportunity opened.

Windows

The mid to late 1990s can be considered a ‘favourable’ period for the rise of full-fledged VET policies on the EU agenda for several reasons. First, as mentioned by the problems stream, they were a response to globalisation, new information technologies and the incoming enlargement. Second, the creation of the Single Market set the stage for an extensive spill-over in multiple policy domains, this alone being an instance when new issues are placed on the agenda (Bache *et al*, 2011, p. 352). Third, VET was a fine candidate for the EU’s newest inventions in terms of policy instruments - the Open Method of Coordination - which allowed for cooperation in areas previously ‘off limits’, such as education systems. Fourth, the theoretical core of the Lisbon strategy was in agreement with Schumpeter’s idea on innovation and his emphasis on “communities of practice” (Room *et al.*, 2005, p. 77), very popular at the time and influencing the ‘thinkers’ of the Lisbon Agenda, like Maria João Rodrigues (Rodrigues, 2009). One can therefore argue that in the case of VET, a policy window opened in the problems stream, allowing for an idea ‘whose time had come’ to be ‘coupled’ with an existent policy solution.

Entrepreneurs

On the road to the Lisbon Agenda, a significant step was taken with the 1993 *White Paper on growth, competitiveness and employment*, considered “one of the most complete and most ambitious of the discussion papers which the Commission had produced to date” (Commission, 2006, p. 157). Providing a comprehensive analysis of the state of VET policies

throughout the Union, the document emphasised their importance “in the emergence of a new development model in the Community’ (European Commission, 1993, p. 133). The new Santer Commission, which took office in 1995, continued the work of Delors and elaborated a new White Paper, entitled *Teaching and learning - towards the learning society* (1995). At the same time, it facilitated the creation of a study group made of 25 high-level experts from all member states, independently selected “on the basis of their experience and their scientific and/or political authority in the field” (Commission, 2006, p. 160). Their final report – *Accomplishing Europe through Education and Training* - contained priorities to be pursued by the year 2000, which were taken up in the Lisbon Agenda. Altogether, these aspects make evident the active entrepreneurship of the Commission in raising policy issues, corresponding to what Majone (1992, cited in Cram, 2005, p. 36) termed the ‘softening up process’. For the MS model, this entailed the Commission being the major entrepreneur to benefit from the opening up of a window of opportunity.

Bearing all these in mind, one could infer the utility of the MS approach for understanding the emergence of VET in the Lisbon Agenda. This argument is discussed at length in the next section by comparison to other PA models. Simultaneously, the question whether VET is an illustrative domain for the Union’s policy-making process in general is addressed, since there are other factors which require careful consideration before such a generalisation could be made.

4. **Evaluation**

The case study presented in this paper indicates that the MS model is indeed useful for explaining the rise of VET on the EU agenda, since all the five elements in the framework can be identified in one way or another. Vocational education and training became an issue

for the Union when its importance was stressed by an indicator (lack of competitiveness in a globalised world) and a focusing event (the upcoming enlargement), which opened a window of opportunity in the problems stream. Furthermore, the favourable context provided by the 1990s economic integration drew together the policy and the politics streams. On the one side, the invention of the Open Method of Coordination put the policy solution on the table, although it was not initially devised to the VET end. In fact, the OMC originated from the Maastricht's Treaty efforts to coordinate national economic policies under EMU (Bache *et al*, 2011, p. 186), which is why it can be said - using Kingdon's metaphor - that the OMC was a solution in search for a problem. On the other side, the presence of a political will in the European Council - which asked "the Council (Education) to undertake a general reflection on the concrete future objectives of education systems" (Council, 2000) - enabled the emergence of VET in the Lisbon Agenda. Finally and most importantly, the Commission played the leading part in advancing VET policies throughout the period, initiating discussion papers and establishing research groups in order to involve a large number of state and non-state actors in the policy-making process.

While all these points are perfectly valid, one has to consider the utility of other PA tools - such as policy networks or epistemic communities – to reveal how VET came to be discussed at EU level (for more background on these models, see Rhodes, 2006; and Haas, 1992 respectively). Undoubtedly, there is a European policy network in VET which shares resources in the field and wants to push forward certain issues on the agenda. At the same time, they share specialised knowledge about the policy, so they can be considered an epistemic community. The most important EU bodies for VET are the Directorate-General for Education and Culture, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) and the European Training Foundation. Nonetheless, following John's (1998, p. 86) line of thought, these models are more descriptive of how policy-making occurs than

explanatory of why it occurs. In opposition, the MS framework allows a pertinent answer to the question: why are certain policies pursued at a certain moment in time?

In this respect, Sabatier's ACF can have more analytical purchase (for a comprehensive overview of the framework, see Weible *et al.*, 2009). Apart from emphasising the importance of policy subsystems - like the two mentioned above - the ACF is able to explain policy change either by learning from past experiences or by external shocks. However, the exchange programmes developed by the European Community up to the Lisbon Agenda can barely be considered a policy in itself (Warleigh-Lack & Drachenberg, 2010), thus having little value as experience-based learning, whereas globalisation and the enlargement can hardly be viewed as a "shock" capable of transforming the area. As a result, the MS framework – with its windows of opportunity and entrepreneurs - is more suitable for explaining policy-making in this particular field.

Moreover, the emergence of VET in the Lisbon Agenda can also be understood by means of a rational institutionalist account. Member states, after taking the decision to delegate more authority to EU bodies in the process of establishing the Single Market, have empowered the Commission to take action in other areas – in this case, vocational education and training - in line with the spill-over effect and the Commission's natural preference for further integration (Pollack, 2003). Additionally, upon evaluating the voluntary dimension of the OMC, member states rationally decided to participate in some (or all) of the proposed intergovernmental agreements relating to VET. While the logic behind this line of thought is surely persuasive, the MS model contains a fundamental feature which rationalist institutionalism lacks: in the words of Zahariadis' (2007, p. 66), this would be 'ambiguity'. In the European Union, preferences are not always specified in advance, participation is by all means fluid and the technology (how things can get done) is opaque. To prove this point, Dehousse (2004) uses the example of the OMC as being both an instrument and a goal in

itself (cited in Kassim & Le Galés, 2010). For VET, this means it would be wrong to assume that member states intended to increase cooperation in the field and the rise of VET on the EU policy agenda was the consequence. Instead, the Commission's entrepreneurship provided the right policy at the right time, while member states' political forces acted as an impetus, not a constraint (John, 1998, p. 174).

The necessary precondition of ambiguity for VET warns about the dangers of generalising the MS model at EU level. This point is extremely important and leads to the conclusion of the present paper. To clarify: in those sectors where the Union has exclusive competence, such as customs union, competition rules, monetary policy in the *Eurozone*, the common commercial policy etc. (TFEU, Part One, Title I, Art. 3), ambiguity may no longer be the case, since the Commission already has extensive powers over agenda-setting. An issue can therefore be brought forward if the relevant Directorate is convinced of its importance. In this case, the ACF may provide more convincing explanations. Conversely, in areas where the Union has shared or supporting competence and member states maintain explicit preferences, such as the delicate foreign policy, it is unlikely for the MS approach to say anything meaningful about the policy-making process. Most times, policy outputs in this field would be the result of a principal-agent interaction, like rational institutionalists suggest (Pollack, 2003).

For these reasons, it can ultimately be argued that the MS model can be very useful for explaining policy-making at EU level in some areas, but fails short in explaining the factors characterising its policy process more generally. Each policy sector in the EU is so fundamentally different and it is approached accordingly depending on a wide range of variables, the most prominent of which being the influence and roles of member state versus supranational institutions across that policy sector (Pollack, 2005, p. 46).

5. Conclusions

This paper analysed the multiple streams framework and evaluated its usefulness for agenda-setting studies in the European Union. Starting from the strengths and weaknesses of the model and the current stage of its application to the EU, it discovered the MS utility for explaining the emergence of vocational education and training on the 2000 Lisbon Agenda, by comparison to other PA tools. Moreover, the ambiguity of the policy process was underlined as the necessary precondition for the approach to have explanatory value at the EU level. This entailed a significant limitation of the framework, as generalisations regarding its usefulness for the EU at large are dependent upon the existence in a given policy sector of ‘ambiguity’, which is determined by the Union’s area of competence and the explicit preferences of member states in that field.

Nevertheless, the validity of the case study is limited by two things. First, the predominant use of secondary sources for identifying the five elements of the framework is insufficient for the thorough assessment of its utility. There is a need for the insiders’ perspective, which could be obtained by means of interviewing elites involved in VET at the EU level. Second, even if the MS model proved useful for explaining the inclusion of VET policies in the Lisbon Agenda, it is unclear whether generalisations can be made for the all the EU policy fields in which a degree of ‘ambiguity’ is found. This is because every policy area in the EU varies fundamentally according to the extent of integration it has achieved (Princen, 2009, p. 5); therefore, a study on the MS approach across sectors would be more indicative for EU policy-making in general.

On the whole, the present paper has added value to the application of the multiple streams model in the European Union by investigating a field hitherto understudied from the PA point of view. The research could go further not only in terms of a stronger empirical

basis and a wider policy arena under scrutiny, but also in terms of theoretical developments. Zahariadis (2008) and Ackrill & Kay (2011) made the first steps towards adapting the MS framework to the European Union; their efforts could lead in the future to the emergence of a proper sub-discipline looking into agenda-setting at the EU level using the MS approach.

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