Public Policy Process. Problem Recognition & Problem Delimitation

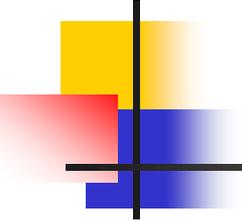Courses

JSM518 "Public Policy"

JSD009 „Public Policy"

JSM699 „Theory of Public Policy"
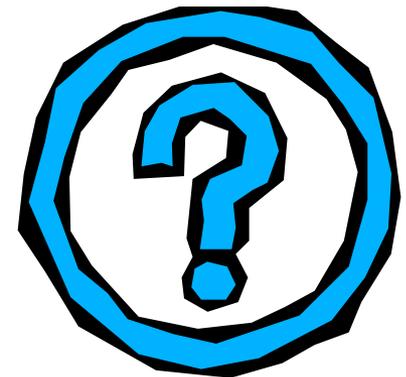
Martin Potůček
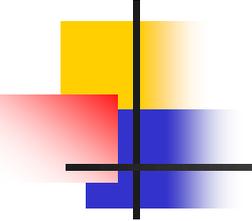
What the lecture is about

➢ Public policy as a process

➢ A stage model of the policy cycle

➢ Stage 1: problem delimitation & recognition

    ➢ What is a problem?

    ➢ What is a social problem?

    ➢ What is a policy problem?

    ➢ Problem delimitation in public policy

   ➢ Problem recognition in public policy

➢ The theory of agenda setting
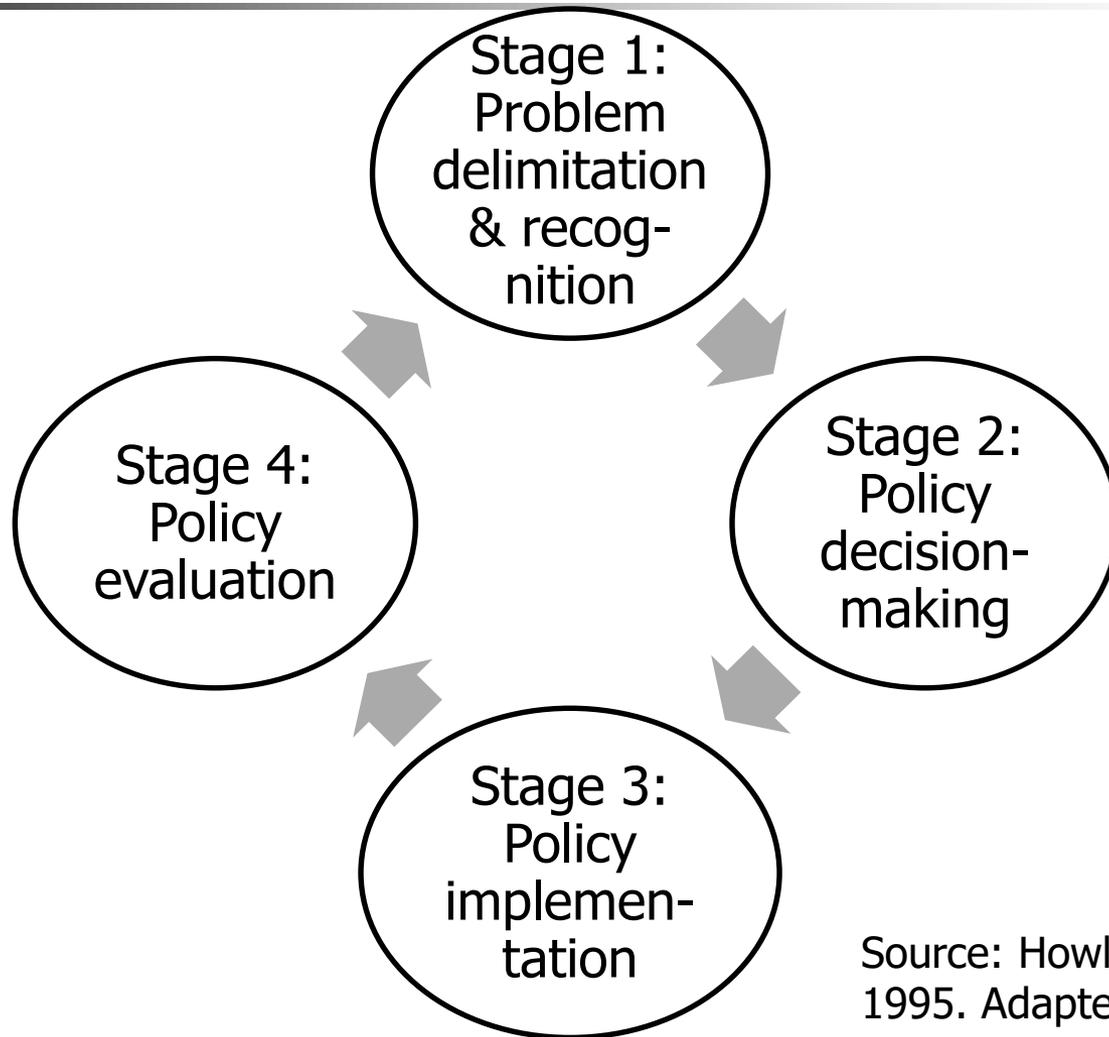
Public policy as a process

- Public policy is a process of intentional intervention in societal environment.

    - Yet the environment is influenced by different actors with varying goals. The actors as well as the researcher possess insufficient knowledge of the environment, and different social phenomena have different degrees of susceptibility to foresight and manipulation.

- Public policy offers many theories to grasp different aspects of these societal processes in their relevant contexts.

- There is no single all-explaining and all-embracing theory. Ideally, different theories are complementary; but they may also contradict one another.

A stage model of the policy cycle
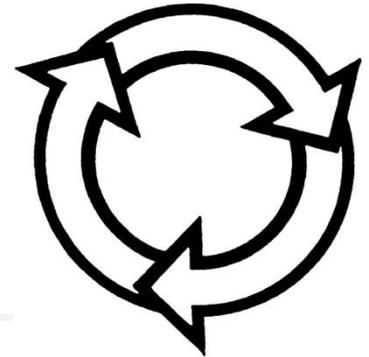
- One of the oldest and most frequently used cognitive frameworks.

- The process of public policy is divided into several stages (Lasswell 1956).
  - The boundaries between them are somewhat blurred: *"Policy making is a complexly interactive process without beginning or end."* (Lindblom, Woodhouse 1993, p. 11)

- Nowadays, the model is often criticized for its "textbook-like" nature (Nakamura 1987).
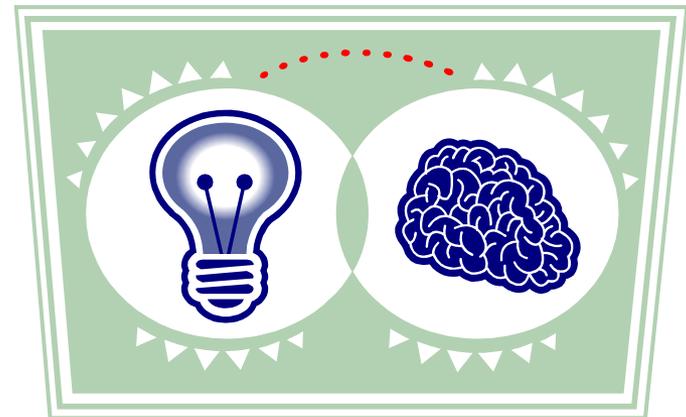
A stage model
of the policy cycle

Stage 1: Problem delimitation & recog-nition

Stage 2: Policy decision-making

Stage 3: Policy implemen-tation

Stage 4: Policy evaluation
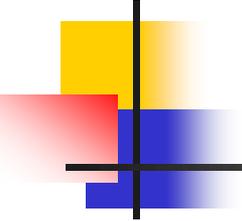
Source: Howlett, M., Ramesh, M. 1995. Adapted.

Critical Thinking Question

- **Why is *the stage model* of the policy cycle still used?**
  - **What are its *strengths* and *weaknesses*?**

Stage 1: problem delimitation & recognition

- Before you start solving a problem, make sure it is well delimited.

"Policy analysts fail more often because they formulate the wrong problem than because they choose the wrong solution."
(Dunn 1988, p. 720)

*A good problem definition is half the solution.*

What is a problem?

- **A problem** as:
  - a gap between the existing state and the desired state
    (MacCrimmon & Taylor 1976).

  - an unacceptable gap between normative ideals or aspiration levels and present/future conditions   (Hoppe 2002, p. 38).

An actual problem arises if **three additional conditions** are met. The gap must:
  - be perceived as important enough to get onto the "agenda of problems" and motivate thinking about possible solutions;
  - be difficult to overcome;
  - be manageable – to avoid mere "wishful thinking"
    (Veselý 2014).
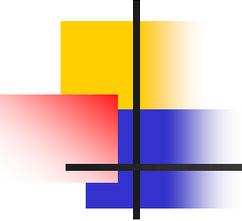
What is a social problem?

Two basic approaches:
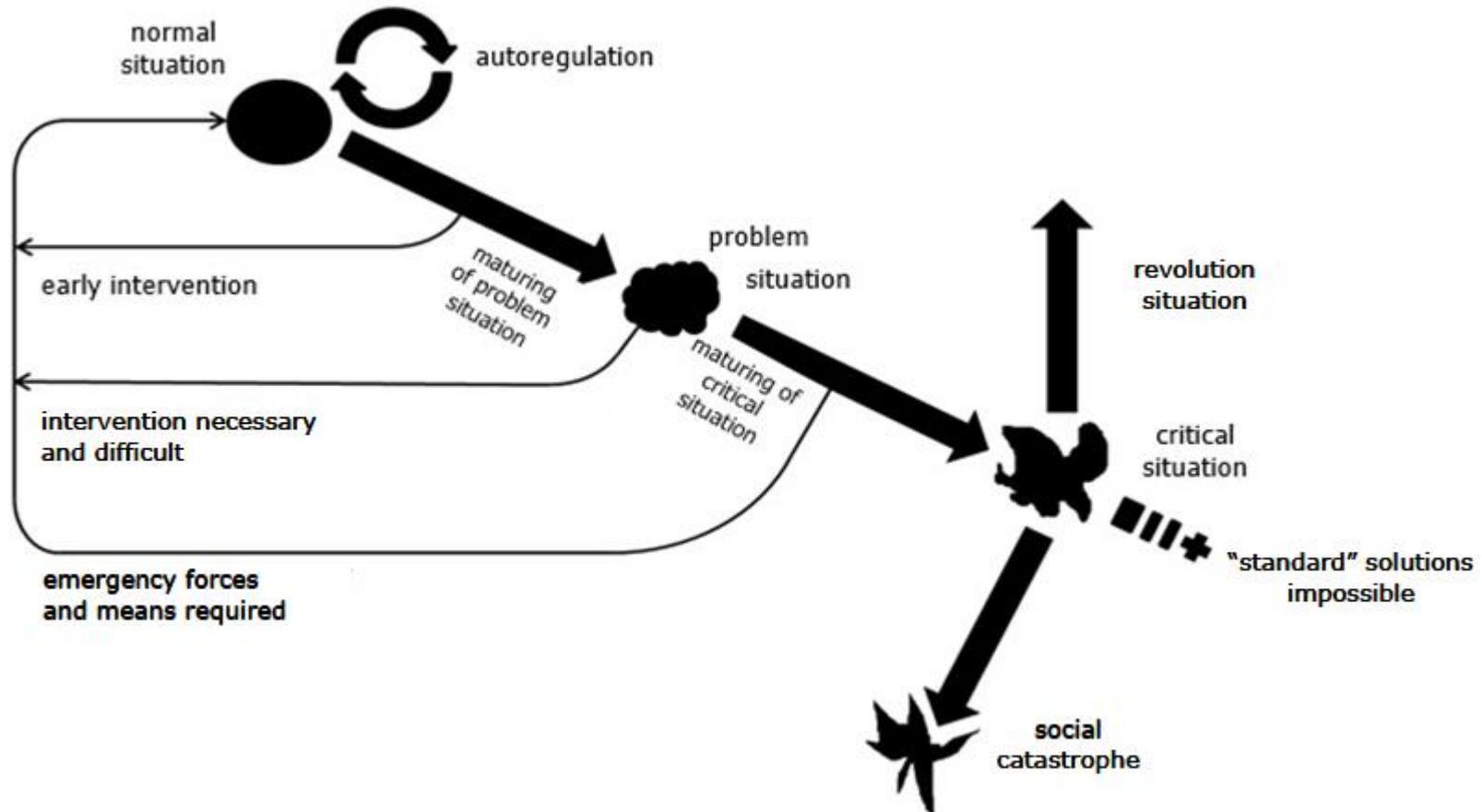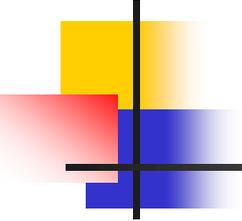
Traditional sociology

- **A social problem** exists when there is a large gap between society's ideals and actual outcomes.

Modern constructivism

- **A social problem** exists when a significant number of people believe that a certain condition is in fact a problem (Kerbo, Coleman 2006, p. 363)

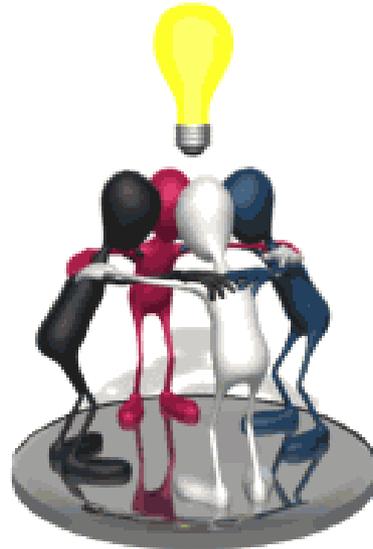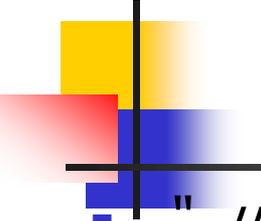# Natural history and solution of social problems

Exercise

- *When does a social problem turn into a policy problem? Give an example.*
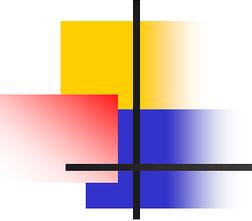
What are policy problems?

- *"...unrealized needs, values, or opportunities for improvement that may be pursued through public action"* (Dunn 2003, p. 72)

Relationship between perceived urgency of a social problem and agenda setting in public policy:

		As a social problem, the issue...	
		...is not perceived as urgent by the public	**...is perceived as urgent by the public**
As a policy problem, the issue...	**...is not on the agenda**	No problem	Growing social/political tension, may result in a crisis
	...is on the agenda	Low political legitimacy because tabled top-down; difficult to solve	The social problem can be solved by public policy if demo-cratic institutions of interest representation are functional

Source: Author.

What is a policy problem?

- **A social problem becomes a policy problem if it can be pursued through public policy instruments.**

Example:

As long as polio could not be treated, it continued to be an important health and social problem. However, it did not become a policy problem until an efficient vaccine was developed, making the disease preventable. Mandatory inoculation of all children in a given population became the main instrument of a newly introduced public policy.

(adapted from Birkland 2006, p. 71, and Veselý 2009, p. 79)

Critical Thinking Question

- *Why is it often **difficult** to **agree** on what is a policy problem?*
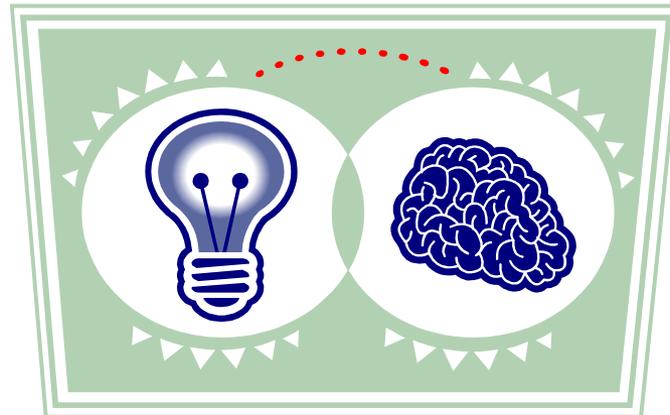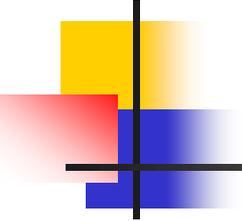
Problem delimitation in public policy

"*...intentional or unintentional **process of naming**, **specifying** and **systemizing** hitherto incoherent, diffuse or vaguely defined problem situations into statements about the existence of a problem that calls for a solution. Thus, problem delimitation* (author's note: in public policy) *is a process of **creating and constructing problems** based on **objective evidence** as well as **subjective interpretations thereof**.*"

(Veselý 2009, p. 65)
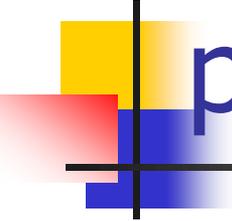
Problem delimitation in public policy: structuring the problem

- In the process of problem delimitation, policy analysts also engage in problem **structuring**, mapping the different aspects of an area and the perspectives from which it can be seen.

- Policy alternatives and instruments are often touched upon as well.

- Problem structuring is always highly **subjective,** reflecting the ways reality is seen by different actors (Veselý 2005).

How structured are different policy problems?

		Consensus on relevant norms and values	
		Yes	**No**
Certainty about relevant knowledge	**Yes**	Well-structured problem (e.g., road maintenance)	Moderately structured problem (ends; e.g., abortion, euthanasia, migrant voting rights)
	No	Moderately structured problem (means; e.g., traffic safety)	Unstructured problem (e.g., car mobility)

Source: Veselý (2007) based on Hisschemöller & Hoppe 2001, adapted.

Problem recognition in public policy

- There is no easy or direct avenue from knowledge about a policy problem to recognition thereof.

- Politicians often focus on less urgent agendas, while neglecting or ignoring policy problems that are perceived as more important (by the public or experts).

- Why? Answers are given, *inter alia*, by the **theory of agenda setting.**
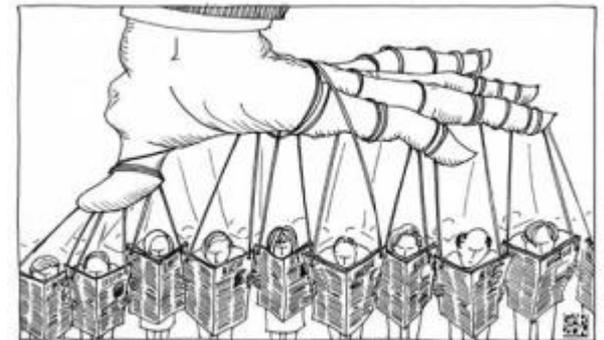
The theory of agenda setting

- An issue will move on to the agenda if:
    - it is backed by the legal system and the bureaucracy;
    - there are adequate organizational structures in public administration;
    - advocacy coalitions exist;
    - it has enough conflict potential to be adopted by an influential actor.

    (Theodoulou 1995, p. 88)

- Three subsystems are distinguished by the theory:
    - **public, policymakers & media**.
    - Connected by a dense network of bonds, the three subsystems may respond to the slightest movement in the network

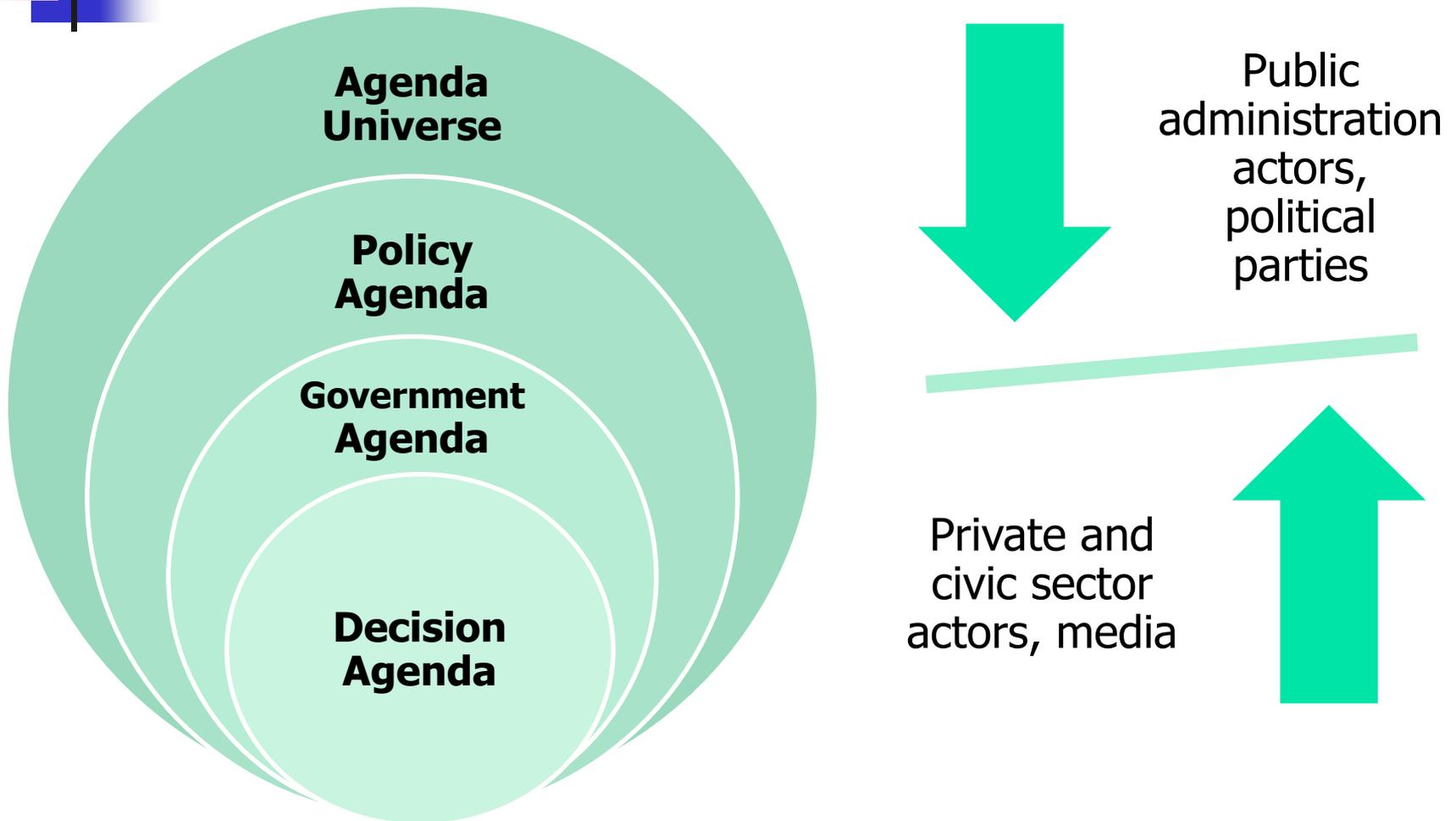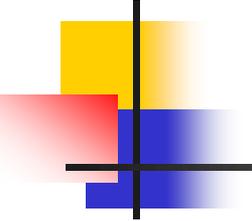   (Dearing, Rogers 1996).

The theory of agenda setting

Figure adapted from *Birkland 2006.*

Literature in English

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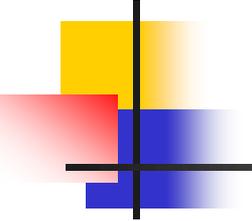
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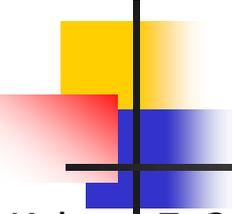
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