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Focusing Events, Mobilization, and Agenda Setting[1]

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ABSTRACT

The policy literature often mentions the agenda-setting influence of focusing events, but few policy studies systematically examine the dynamics of these events. This article closes this gap by examining focusing events, group mobilization and agenda-setting. Using natural disasters and industrial accidents as examples, most focusing events change the dominant issues on the agenda in a policy domain, they can lead to interest group mobilization, and groups often actively seek to expand or contain issues after a focusing event. I explain how differences in the composition of policy communities and the nature of the events themselves influence group and agenda dynamics. The organization of policy communities is an important factor in agenda setting, but agenda setting and group politics vary considerably with the type of event and the nature of the policy community.

Many social scientists have cited the importance of sudden, attention-grabbing events, known as focusing events, in advancing issues on the agenda and as potential triggers for policy change (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Cobb and Elder 1983; Kingdon 1995; Light 1982; Walker 1977). While dramatic events are commonly understood to attract increased attention to public problems, few studies of the policy process have empirically studied the influence of these events on the agenda generally, or on group activity in particular.

This article builds on existing theories of the policy process to explain the dynamics and importance of focusing events. This is accomplished

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by applying evidence of post-event policy making in four event-prone policy domains: earthquakes, hurricanes, oil spills, and nuclear power plant accidents. While there are several ways of looking at the social and political influences of focusing events, this article concentrates on interest group mobilization after focusing events, with particular attention to four elements of post-event mobilization: change in the dominant issues on the agenda; change in the dominant issues in a policy domain; evidence of event-driven group mobilization; and evidence of group attempts to expand or contain issues in the wake of these events.

It is important to test theories of the dynamics of post-event politics, both to explain the dynamics of focusing events and to narrow gaps in policy studies. Journalists often claim that focusing events concentrate attention on previously dormant issues. Such a claim seems sensible, but reveals little about the agenda and group dynamics that follow these events. The literature hints at these dynamics, but has never subjected these ideas to testing. Thus, this study is inspired by the need to avoid proliferating policy theories that are difficult or impossible to test (Greenberg et al. 1977; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). Narrowing this gap in our understanding of the policy process is important, for dramatic events are not politically neutral. Focusing events serve as important opportunities for politically disadvantaged groups to champion messages that had been effectively suppressed by dominant groups and advocacy coalitions. Such events can therefore be an important tool for groups seeking policy change.

A focusing event is an event that is sudden; relatively uncommon; can be reasonably defined as harmful or revealing the possibility of potentially greater future harms; has harms that are concentrated in a particular geographical area or community of interest; and that is known to policy makers and the public simultaneously (Birkland 1997; Kingdon 1995, 94–100). Defining focusing events in this way guides the researcher in selecting the appropriate domains for studying focusing events, and helps us to understand more clearly why some events are more intensely ''focal'' than others.

Focusing events gain attention more suddenly and rapidly than problems such as crime or disease that longer-term analysis of statistical evidence seeks to understand. The immediately obvious harms done by focusing events highlight problems to which government or other institutions might respond. These harms are usually concentrated in a particular geographical area, so that evidence of the harms done by an event is more obvious than when the harms are distributed throughout a region or nation. However, communities of interest are as important as geographically defined communities. An oil spill in Alaska, for example, will be of particular interest to people who live in coastal

Washington State or even coastal Europe. Seemingly ''local'' events can gain national and world attention, and new groups and coalitions are formed within a policy domain to address problems that could affect other communities.

While focusing events are ''focal'' because they do obvious damage, the harms done by other events are sometimes subtle, contested, and difficult to visualize, and are less likely to be focal. For example, many observers considered the 1979 Three Mile Island (TMI) nuclear accident to be very serious. However, its influence on the agenda may not be as great as might be expected, because its harms – if any – were unclear and relatively hard to detect and understand. Almost twenty years after TMI, debate persists over the extent of any harms done to people from possible radiation leaks. By contrast, the harms done by natural disasters and oil spills appear more obvious, illustrated in compelling images of destroyed buildings, or dead wildlife, which have considerable power to expand the agenda. This is a central reason for the differences between politics of oil spills and nuclear power plant accidents discussed in this article.

Group Mobilization and Issue Expansion

Focusing events can lead interest groups, government leaders, policy entrepreneurs, the news media, or members of the public to identify new problems, or to pay greater attention to existing but dormant problems, potentially leading to a search for solutions in the wake of apparent policy failure. At the heart of this activity is the constant search by interest groups for opportunities to advocate policy change based as much on advocacy opportunities as on technically superior analysis (Kingdon 1995; Majone 1989). Claims of policy failure are therefore made by pro-change groups in an attempt to expand an issue to a broader audience. These event-triggered issue expansion efforts should be clearly evident in post-event policy making, as groups seek to move their preferred ideas from the systemic agenda (the collection of all possible policy ideas) to the institutional agenda (the list of possible policies up for active consideration) (Cobb and Elder 1983).

Group efforts to expand issues are important because they increase the likelihood of more influential and powerful actors entering the conflict on the side of policy change (Schattschneider 1960/1975). This increased attention can further tilt the balance of debate in favor of pro-change groups. Baumgartner and Jones (1993) find that greater attention to a problem usually leads to more negative assessments of current policy, thereby creating pressure on the dominant policy community or policy monopoly to open up policy making and accept change,

regardless of efforts by dominant members of the policy community to contain conflict and to deflect attention from the problem. This increased, more negative attention thereby expands attention to issues and can lead to more claims of policy failure and a more active search for solutions, leading to a greater likelihood of policy change (Baumgartner and Jones 1993).

At the same time, status quo-oriented groups (such as business interests) seek to *prevent* the promotion of issues that they find detrimental to their interests. Groups and advocacy coalitions that have traditionally struggled to gain a hearing or see their preferences translated into policy must overcome the sometimes aggressive blocking action of their political opponents (Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Gaventa 1980). Because they are sudden, dramatic and often harmful, focusing events give pro-change groups significant advantages in overcoming these barriers.

Apart from group efforts to expand issues, major events often reach the agenda without group promotion through media propagation of news and symbols of the event. This coverage occupies enough of a finite agenda (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988) that it cannot be ignored by the attentive public, nor is it easily contained by the policy monopoly. This media propagation of symbols gives less powerful groups another advantage in policy debates. Pro-changed groups are relieved of the obligation to create and interpret powerful images and symbols of the problem. Rather, groups only need repeat the already existing symbols that the media have seized upon as the most important in the current crisis. These obvious symbols are likely to carry more emotional weight than industry or governmental assurances that policy usually works well. Media-generated symbols of environmental catastrophes are therefore often used by groups as an important recruiting tool – thereby expanding the issue – and as a form of evidence of the need for policy change.

The suddenness of focusing events also gives less powerful groups significant advantages in their debates. The public and policy makers learn of focusing events virtually simultaneously, which diminishes advantages that policy elites have in framing the nature and substance of public problems before broader public participation is possible. All participants in the debates that follow an event must start their comprehension and depiction of the nature of the event nearly simultaneously. This does not presume that the lay public will know just as much about a problem as experts in a particular policy domain, or that the lay public receives unmediated information about events. Rather, the suddenness of an event means that politically disadvantaged groups gain a strategic advantage from the event itself, which illustrates the

very problem they seek to address, while the members of the policy monopoly are placed in the position of managing negative publicity and defending the status quo in a highly charged, politically embarrassing environment.

Group mobilization

With event-induced attention to the problem, pro-change groups will mobilize in a number of ways, including membership drives and appeals for donations based on the need to react to the event and the failed policies that allowed it to happen. Groups will urge their members to write letters to business and political leaders, join boycotts, and participate in other forms of mass protest. Indeed, after the *Exxon Valdez* spill, some Alaskan environmental groups began to receive unsolicited donations of money and expressions of support for their opposition to oil interests. And, most visibly, many groups will move to lobby Congress to press for policy change.

While out-of-power groups can and often do take advantage of focusing events to advance their policy preferences, more powerful groups must carefully plan how they will respond to focusing events. If an event threatens to reduce the power of advantaged groups to control the agenda, these groups are likely to respond defensively to focusing events. They may argue that an event is not as important as claimed by opposing groups, that existing policy is able to deal with any problems, or that, if new policy is needed, the policy proposed by the contending groups would be ineffective or counterproductive. More powerful groups will work to downplay an event's significance by providing officials and the public with alternative explanations of the meaning and significance of the event, as I show in the qualitative analysis of policy making after oil spills and nuclear accidents.

The Importance of Policy Communities

Studies of agenda setting are best considered in the context of policy communities or subsystems ''because of the impact of the nature of the policy community on the policy process'' (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 43). In this study, the most active groups in a policy community are therefore considered as representative of the most prominent interests in the community. When such groups coalesce to form alliances based on mutual interests and values, they are known as advocacy coalitions (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). The presence, absence, or relative cohesiveness of certain types of advocacy coalitions can influence the policy community's reaction to events.

A key assumption of the selection of domains in this article is that policy communities that deal with similar sorts of events would be similarly constituted. Thus, earthquakes and hurricanes are similar sorts of events – natural disasters – as are oil spills and nuclear accidents, both environmentally damaging industrial accidents. There are considerable overlaps between persons concerned with earthquake and hurricane hazards, particularly among the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Army Corps of Engineers, and the engineering community. These are also similar because the resulting damage can be blamed on ''acts of God,'' not human failings, thereby creating a ''causal story'' that making it difficult to fix blame for a disaster on a person or organization (Stone 1989).

The oil spill and nuclear policy communities also share some surface similarities. They involve complex technical processes in transforming raw materials into useful energy. Mistakes that are made in oil and nuclear transportation or transformation can do profound damage to the natural environment, to human health, or both. This complexity is enhanced by the social organization of the extraction and exploitation of these resources. Both of these forms of energy are extracted or generated by very large firms, supported by government policy, all with a large financial or political stake in ensuring that the production of these energy sources remains profitable while providing needed energy. Due to the financial and technological risks involved, these industries seek to cultivate images of technical competence and concern for the environment that reduce the risks, because they realize that they are particularly vulnerable to claims that accidents in the transport of oil or the management of nuclear power are most likely attributed to human and corporate malfeasance than to acts of God (Stone 1989). We might therefore suspect that the predominant interests in oil and nuclear power will be defensive about threats to their safety claims and, in particular, about the meaning and importance of such accidents.

Studying Focusing Events

This study's data were compiled by reviewing and coding witness testimony before Congressional hearings held on earthquakes and hurricanes from 1960 to 1990, oil spills from 1968 to 1990, and nuclear power plant accidents from 1977 to 1990. Studying long time periods ensures that broad trends of agenda-setting and policy-making activity are considered (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993) and that sufficient numbers of events and witnesses are included to perform meaningful statistical analyses. The shorter time range in the nuclear domain is

due to poor reporting systems on nuclear accidents before 1977, when Congress required that the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) provide ''Quarterly Reports on Abnormal Occurrences.'' Listings of all important events and their attributers were gathered from government sources, media accounts, and some privately compiled materials. These sources proved to be quite accurate, as no event mentioned in congressional hearings failed to appear in my database.

The Congress is a good institutional venue to study, as its activities are consistently well documented and because at least some of its hundreds of members, motivated by desires to make good policy or by constituency pressure, are likely to react to focusing events. Specifically, congressional testimony is an appropriate indicator of group activity because it is among the most popular lobbying techniques employed by interest groups (Davidson and Oleszek 1994, 298), and because, in particular, less-powerful pro-change groups seek to gain access to the institutional agenda, which is in large part set by the legislature. Group testimony is also an excellent measure of agenda activity because congressional activity is particularly well documented through hearings, committee reports, bills, and the like.

Hearings were isolated by using the Congressional Information Service (CIS) Congressional Metafile on CD-ROM. This product allows researchers to isolate hearings on particular topics using a keyword search. This method is fruitfully used by Baumgartner and Jones (1993) in their study of long-term agenda dynamics of several policy domains. However, my unit of analysis is the individual witness before each hearing, while Baumgartner and Jones, valuing breadth of data over a long period of time, used the hearings as units of analysis. Appropriations hearings were not coded because these tend to cover routine budget matters and hear from a very limited range of witnesses compared with other legislative and oversight hearings.

Once hearings were isolated, they were included in a database listing each hearing and witness. Each witness's testimony was coded for the tone of their testimony, their group affiliation, the substantive subject of their testimony, and whether the testimony specifically mentioned a particular event in the domain. A passing mention of an event is less important than the specific mention of an event. Tone measures a witness's attitude towards current policy; +1 is supportive of existing policy, −1 is negative, and 0 is neutral. The witness's group affiliations were then categorized by group type (industry, government, interest group, and the like) to understand how broad categories of groups behaved in the wake of focusing events. These group types were characterized as pro-change or anti-change by assessing the mean value of

the tone of group representatives' testimony over time; a historically negative tone indicates a consistently pro-change attitude, while positive tone indicates a pro-status quo orientation.

Congressional testimony does have some shortcomings as a measure of issue importance. The nature and number of witnesses can be influenced by the partisan balance of the Congress or a committee chair's political preferences. Nor is Congress the only area of group activity or conflict. Mass protest and pressure through the media are but two other ways in which interest groups influence the course of policy making. Still, focusing events can be reasonably expected to generate greater congressional testimony from groups that seek change as a result of the event. The size of the event may be so large that it could be politically dangerous for the leadership of a committee and its allies in the policy monopoly (should one exist) to exclude pro-change groups from hearings in the wake of an obvious policy failure. Indeed, from the perspective of more powerful groups, some benefit may come from letting group representatives and individual actors vent their frustration at hearings, so as to prevent this frustration from boiling over into other forms of political expression and resulting policy change (Molotch 1970). In essence, allowing groups access to the congressional agenda may serve as a form of issue containment in some cases.

Another issue in the use of congressional testimony is the question of partisan control of the legislative branch, and its concomitant influences on the choices of witnesses allowed to testify. However, the Republican party controlled just one chamber, the Senate, between 1980 and 1986. Controlling for party would therefore introduce unnecessary complexity into the analysis for a relatively small potential payoff in analytic precision. Indeed, even if partnership were more important, it is much less important than is interevent apathy and postevent orientations toward disaster relief, in the case of the natural disasters, or the dominance of local industrial and political interests, as in the oil and nuclear domains. To the extent that partisanship matters, it can reasonably be assumed to be part of the ''error term'' of any model of focusing event dynamics. Ultimately, focusing events are of such magnitude and occupy so much space in the public agenda that Congress, regardless of the party in power, may ignore the events at its peril.

Dynamics of Focusing Events

Both intuition and the policy process literature suggest that focusing events influence the absolute growth of the agenda: the domain, in essence, gets busier after these events (Baumgartner and Jones 1993,

TABLE 1: *Dominant Topic on the Agenda*

	Testimony on Specific Event	All Other Testimony	All Testimony
Earthquake	Disaster Relief	NEHRP	Disaster Relief
Hurricane	Disaster Relief	Disaster Relief	Disaster Relief
Oil Spill	Spill Cleanup and Costs	Liability, Compensation and Costs	Liability, Compensation and Costs
Nuclear Power	Cleanup	Licensing	Licensing

46; Cobb and Elder 1983, 83; Kingdon 1995, 94–96). And, indeed, there are considerable ''spikes'' of testimony and media coverage of particular earthquakes, hurricanes, oil spills and nuclear power plant accidents. While this greater attention to problems is important and problematic for defenders of the status quo, sheer growth of the agenda is somewhat less important than change in the substance of that agenda. Substantive change is important because change in the agenda without change in the dominant topic may lead to short term interest but little change in the course of policy making.

Change in the Dominant Topic

In most policy domains that are prone to sudden, dramatic events, there are two discernible dominant topics: those that dominate inter-event periods, when focusing events are often dim memories, and periods in which an issue dominates the agenda as a direct consequence of a recent event. The extent to which focusing events change the predominant topics of discussion on the agenda is summarized in Table 1, which shows the predominant topic of testimony offered to congressional committees when a witness mentions a particular event and when no particular event is on the agenda.

To assess event-related change in the dominant topic, I coded the primary topic of the witness' testimony. These terms were designed so that parallels could be drawn among the four domains: the term ''disaster relief,'' for example, is roughly analogous to the term ''clean up'' in the industrial domains because they both involve the immediate response to a disaster or accident. I also coded whether a witness was testifying about a particular event or about the broader problem area without direct reference to a particular event.

In all but the hurricane domains the dominant issue on the agenda changes when an event is specifically mentioned. This suggests some difference in the nature of the events in the hurricane domain, or the nature of the policy community that deals with these events, or both. In the other domains, the existence of an event on the agenda influences the actual substance of discussion in the domain.

In the other three domains, event-centered testimony tends to concentrate on immediate post-event concerns, such as providing disaster relief, or cleaning up oil spills or the nuclear accidents. When big events are less prominent, participants in policy making concentrate on regulatory or programmatic issues, presumably to prevent or mitigate disasters, but make fewer references to specific events. To sustain such discussions between events, there must be a coherent, organized and ongoing policy community that deals with these issues even without a fresh disaster on the agenda. The absence of a coherent hurricane policy community differentiates this domain from earthquakes, and explains differences in policies addressing earthquakes and hurricanes.

Focusing events and the stimulation of critical voices

Greater attention to problems, argue Baumgartner and Jones (1993, 51), is accompanied by more negative assessments of policies designed to ameliorate the problem. To assess the extent to which events trigger criticism of existing policy, Table 2 shows the mean attitudes of witnesses and the absolute levels of witness mobilization, categorized by whether the witness was traditionally a member of a pro-change or pro-status quo group, and whether events are specifically mentioned.

Group types were assigned as testimony was reviewed and coded; the categories were designed to be consistent across both domains so that comparisons could be made, and included environmental groups, state and local government, various federal agencies, oil companies and related groups, nuclear interests and their allies, and scientists and academics. Each group type was then coded as pro-change or pro-status-quo based on the mean tone of the testimony offered by that group before Congress over the entire period under study. Pro-change groups were consistently negative in their assessment of policy, while pro-status groups are consistently supportive of current policy. The neutral category shows the small number of groups that had too few representatives from which to derive a pro-change or pro-status quo-rating, or that were historically neutral or near-neutral in their testimony. For all four domains, a difference of means test compares attitudes toward event-centered and more general testimony. From this we can understand whether there is a broad, event-related shift in attitudes toward policy, and can also see whether pro-change groups give a disproportionate amount of their testimony on particular focusing events, reflecting event-related mobilization, and whether pro-status-quo groups provide more generic testimony that does not concentrate on any particular event, reflecting efforts at issue containment.

TABLE 2: *Group Mobilization*

Group Orientation		Testimony on Specificv Event	All Other Testimony	Total	*p*
	Earthquakes				
Change	N of witnesses	218	110	328	
	Mean Tone[a]	*–0.76*	*–0.55*	*–0.69*	*0.00*
Neutral	N of witnesses	10	15	25	
	Mean Tone	*0.00*	*–0.07*	*–0.04*	*0.38*
Status Quo	N of witnesses	81	134	215	
	Mean Tone	*0.43*	*0.34*	*0.38*	*0.23*
Total N of witnesses	309	259	568		
Total Mean Tone		–0.42	–0.06	–0.26	0.00
	Hurricane				
Change	N of witnesses	258	155	413	
	Mean Tone	*–0.55*	*–0.46*	*–0.51*	*0.11*
Neutral	N of witnesses	17	23	40	
	Mean Tone	*0.18*	*–0.13*	*0.00*	*0.08*
Status Quo	N of witnesses	80	59	139	
	Mean Tone	0.55	0.34	0.46	0.15
Total N of witnesses		355	237	592	
Total Mean Tone		*–0.26*	*–0.23*	*–0.25*	*0.32*
	Oil Spills				
Change	N of witnesses	396	470	866	
	Mean Tone	*–0.67*	*–0.49*	*–0.57*	*0.00*
Neutral	N of witnesses	16	16	32	
	Mean Tone	*0.0625*	*–0.06*	*0.00*	*0.25*
Status Quo	N of witnesses	68	253	321	
	Mean Tone	*0.62*	*0.74*	*0.71*	*0.08*
Total N of witnesses		480	739	1219	
Total Mean Tone		–0.46	–0.06	–0.22	0.00
	Nuclear Power				
Change	N of witnesses	78	463	541	
	Mean Tone	*–0.51*	*–0.66*	*–0.64*	*0.06*
Neutral	N of witnesses	5	59	64	
	Mean Tone	*–0.20*	*0.02*	*0.00*	*0.30*
Status Quo	N of witnesses	153	632	785	
	Mean Tone	*0.33*	*0.49*	*0.46*	*0.01*
Total N of witnesses		236	1154	1390	
Total Mean Tone		*0.04*	*0.00*	*0.01*	*0.25*

[a]Tone is a measure of attitude toward existing policy, where +1 is supportive, –1 is opposed or critical, and 0 is neutral.

Nuclear power is the standout domain here: the overwhelming majority (1154 witnesses, or 83 percent of all witnesses) of testimony offered on nuclear power is not related to any one particular accident. Indeed, pro-change testimony not centered on an event (N=463, 85%) appears at roughly the same rate as all non-event testimony and, more interestingly, at nearly the same rate as non-event testimony

from the pro-nuclear, pro-status quo forces (N=632, 81%). At least in terms of congressional testimony, then, nuclear power is therefore not an event-driven domain, although the Three Mile Island accident damaged the credibility of the nuclear industry, which the nuclear industry aggressively moved to defend (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Joppke 1993; Perrow 1984).

In the oil spill and earthquake domains, a disproportionate amount of pro-change testimony is offered when a particular event is mentioned by witnesses, suggesting event-related mobilization. At the same time, the activity of pro-status-quo groups is concentrated during more quiet periods in which particular events are not prominent on the agenda. We can therefore conclude that there is a mobilizing effect in the earthquake and oil spill domains. Such a mobilizing effect is not as pronounced in the hurricane domain, as pro change and pro-status-quo groups tend to testify on specific hurricanes at similar rates, even though assessments of policy in the wake of earthquakes and hurricanes become more negative. In the discussion that follows, the reason for these differences are discussed in more detail.

Focusing Events and Differences in Policy Communities

Thus far we know that focusing events often lead to changes in the dominant topic of discussion and changes in attitudes toward policy. Understanding these outcomes requires qualitative analysis of group composition and the nature of the issues being discussed in the domain.

The earthquake community is dominated by a single advocacy coalition composed of scientists, academics, and government officials who coalesced around a shared commitment to help make better policy to address the earthquake hazard. The earthquake advocacy coalition mobilizes after large earthquakes to press for greater federal efforts to mitigate the hazard, rather than simply press for more disaster relief delivered more rapidly. This coalition is built around a shared commitment to deal proactively with the earthquake hazard by promoting research, improved engineering, and application of disaster experience to mitigate damage from future disasters. The earthquake advocacy coalition was instrumental in drafting and enacting the National Earthquake Hazard Reduction Act of 1977 (NEHRA), which in turn has given the earthquake policy community the cohesion that the hurricane community lacks. This cohesion is also promoted by the Earthquake Engineering Research Institute, which serves as a central organization for coordinating scientific, technical and professional activities related to the earthquake hazard. No such organization exists in the hurricane domain, nor is there a single comprehensive federal program with the

NEHRA's prestige and statutory mandate that promotes improved hurricane policies (Sheets 1995).

Since at least the San Fernando earthquake of 1971, and in some ways dating to the 1964 Alaska earthquake, professional critiques of earthquake policy have been triggered by particular earthquakes, and are reflected in the significantly more negative tone of testimony when specific earthquakes are mentioned. Events thus change the domain's agenda from a pre-event mode, in which more abstract or general issues are discussed, to a more event oriented discussion of what should be done to mitigate the most recent event or to prevent a similar recurrence.

Policy domains containing only one advocacy coalition – of which the earthquake domain is a classic example – may find events used by members of the coalition as part of an internal mobilization strategy that relies on expert opinion, often employed by government agencies, to generate broad public support for policy change (Cobb, Ross, and Ross 1976). These efforts are most likely greeted with public indifference, which poses the same challenges to improved policy as outright group opposition to new policy (Alsech and Petak 1986; Rossi, Wright, and Weber-Burdin 1982).

The dominant issue in the hurricane domain – disaster relief – remains constant because there is no obvious advocacy coalition in the hurricane domain. Instead, the hurricane domain contains a very loose community of policy makers, dominated by local governmental interests, that state their preferences for disaster relief and engineered solutions to hurricanes over nonstructural mitigation techniques such as stricter enforcement of flood plain regulation or coastal development. The lack of a coherent advocacy coalition means that there are few voices available to testify before Congress in favor of better programs to deal with the hazard itself, not simply the delivery of relief after the damage has been done.

The contrast between earthquakes and hurricanes is starkly illustrated by differences in the venues in which testimony on these phenomena occur. The most active communities in hurricane policy were the House and Senate public works committees, which heard 63.8 percent of the testimony delivered on this issue. The two most active ''earthquake committees,'' the House Sciences, Space and Technology Committee and the Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, heard 38.6 percent of the testimony on earthquakes. These patterns reflect the reasons for the near-exclusive orientation toward disaster relief in the hurricane domain, on the one hand, and the mixed hazard-reduction and disaster-relief agendas in the earthquake domain. The application of scientific and technical knowledge to hurricane

mitigation is subordinate to local distributive spending on disaster relief and public works projects. These tendencies are reinforced by the Army Corps of Engineers' project-oriented culture, and because construction of these projects is more popular in hurricane prone communities than are restrictions on land use.

Differences in policies addressing earthquakes and hurricanes are particularly striking because hurricane damage can be at least as costly as earthquake damage. Robert Sheets, former chief of the National Hurricane Center, argues that policy differences can also be attributed to the superior organization of those pressing for funding to deal with earthquakes. National hurricane policy suffers as a result of this poor organization (Sheets 1995). However, neither Sheets nor I argue that there are no professionals or concerned policy makers that deal with hurricanes. Indeed, prominent researchers and officials (Kaufman and Pilkey 1983; Pilkey and Neal 1980; Pilkey et al. 1984; Sheets 1995) have consistently sounded warnings that the nation needs improved policies to deal with coastal and hurricane hazards. Indeed, Sheets (1995) explicitly calls for a hurricane program parallel to the National Earthquake Hazards Program (NEHRP). But, in contrast to the history of earthquake policy, hurricanes have not activated a coalition that presses for improved federal policy to deal with hurricanes in *testimony before the Congress*. This is reflected in the emphasis in this domain on disaster relief, not longer-term mitigation strategies. When the (very loosely defined) hurricane policy community is active, discussion centers on the adequacy of federal disaster relief efforts. Thus, while there is some sort of mobilization of *witnesses* after a hurricane, this mobilization concentrates on disaster relief policy. The tone of testimony remains remarkably constant over time, because the predominant issue on this community's agenda is uniformly disaster relief, and because disaster relief is treated uniformly critically by participants in hearings dealing with hurricanes. When the memory of the most recent hurricane fades, the policy community disperses until another hurricane provides another opportunity for examining and criticizing disaster relief policy.

In short, there is no advocacy coalition similar to the earthquake advocacy coalition that addresses hurricane policy. Indeed, there is no discernible advocacy coalition of any sort in the hurricane domain; rather, the involvement of many actors is episodic and focused on expediating disaster relief (a form of distributive spending) to their home jurisdictions.

In large part because of the lack of mobilization for policy change, the prospects for improved hurricane policy are dim. Congress showed

no interest in a comprehensive hurricane program from 1960 to 1990, and while Hurricane Andrew (1992) may have served to induce movement toward a hurricane program (Sheet 1995), the primary result of Andrew was President Clinton's appointment of more effective leadership to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). On its own initiative, FEMA also created a small Hurricane Program that is dwarfed by the earthquake program.

The lesson here is that the nature of the organization of policy community influences postevent policy making. Focusing events are much more likely to be important where the policy community that reacts to the event is relatively well organized and is able to use focusing events to dramatize the need for improved policy. Where communities are less well organized, the ability to use events to improve policy is reduced, even if policy making appears to be event-driven.

Event-driven policy is characterized by stop-gap measures and reflexive reactions to the immediate event, and is therefore not the same as policy making in which events are used to advance group positions on how to improve existing policy. Policy communities in which there is little group competition are so organized because the issues they deal with are lower-status issues that only gain fleeting attention of non-expert policy makers in an emergent situation, as after a natural disaster. In such a case, non-experts' primary interest is in providing disaster relief, rebuilding and then moving on to other, more pressing problems. The more mundane, pre-disaster planning is left to experts, who must again compete with other problems for the attention of local officials (Rossi, Wright, and Weber-Burdin 1982). May (1990) calls such policy domains ''policies without publics'' because these kinds of policies are advanced by technical experts acting on their sense of the public interest, not by interest groups or elected officials acting on behalf of public demands for improved policy.

Harm Visibility and Issue Containment

Unlike natural disasters, which can be portrayed as acts of God, industrial accidents or disasters are dramatic events for which blame can be assigned to large corporate interests, possibly resulting in anti-industry mobilization. While all concerned citizens, as well as industry and its critics, would rather avoid accidents, some of these mishaps may be ''normal accidents'' (Perrow 1984) that, regardless of industry's best efforts, are the inevitable consequence of very complex systems. Even if this is true, groups seeking to curb the power of industry will tell the causal story of a disaster as being the result of human negligence

rather than unforseeable complexity (Stone 1989). They will therefore argue that the event is evidence that a policy, its implementation, or both have to some degree failed.

Table 2 shows that neither the oil spill nor the nuclear domains are particularly event driven, but the oil spill domain is over twice as ''event-driven'' as the nuclear domain. 39 percent of oil spill testimony is event-centered, versus 17 percent of nuclear testimony. This difference suggests that there is some sort of difference on the mobilizing effects of oil spills and nuclear plant accidents.

To identify the extent to which there is a difference in the mobilization effects of oil spills and nuclear power plant accidents, Table 3 lists the 15 most active group categories that testified in hearings about these events, ranked in descending order of the likelihood that members of the group category would testify about a particular event. These groups account for 64 percent and 80 percent of all testimony in the oil spill and nuclear power domains, respectively. Groups in roman type are pro-industry (pro-status-quo) groups, while group types in italics are anti-industry (pro-change) groups.

In the oil spill domain, only representatives of particular oil companies were more likely than the mean witness to discuss particular events. In all other cases, pro industry witnesses – and, in particular, representatives of oil and gas trade groups – are less than *half* as likely to mention particular events as are average groups. Most notably, except for oil companies, pro-industry witnesses rank at the bottom of the top fifteen groups in terms of their likelihood to testify on particular events. This appears to have been Exxon's corporate strategy after the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, in which the highest-level officials of the firm failed to visit the spill site or spend considerable time discussing the spill, in an apparent attempt to politically contain the event (Williams and Treadaway 1992).

Overall, the groups that were least likely to testify in direct response to particular oil spills are dominated by private sector interests with ties to the oil industry, such as shipping trade groups, insurance companies, and shipbuilding companies. No proindustry group gave more than 44 percent of its testimony in response to a particular oil spill. At the same time, pro-change groups mention a particular oil spill at over *twice* the rate of their industry counterparts. As the tone of testimony changes after an event for both factions, it appears that focusing events tend to harden the positions of the contenders toward existing policy.

Group mobilization after oil spills is aided by the symbolic richness of these events. After the Santa Barbara and *Exxon Valdez* spills, the news media transmitted easily understood and vivid images of oiled

TABLE 3: *Patterns of Group Activity, Nuclear Power and Oil Spills*

Group Type	Proportion of testimony on a particular event	Group type's proportion all testimony	Ratio group's event-centred testimony to mean group's event-centred testimony	Group Mean Tone
Nuclear Power				
Securities Dealers	64%	2%	3.7	0.36
Public Utility Commissions	*42*	*2*	*2.5*	*–0.04*
Private Utilities	30	8	1.8	0.82
Local Governments	*25*	*3*	*1.5*	*–1.70*
Public Utilities	24	2	1.4	0.12
Federal Legislators	*20*	*4*	*1.2*	*–0.36*
Local Citizens' Groups	*18*	*2*	*1.0*	*–0.94*
Nuclear Power Industry	16	7	1.0	0.92
Federal Nuclear Agencies	16	25	0.9	0.09
Federal Energy Agencies	14	3	0.8	0.83
Nuclear Contracting	14	5	0.8	0.90
Nuclear Engineering	11	1	0.7	0.00
Environmental and Energy Groups	*9*	*9*	*0.5*	*–0.78*
Public Interest Groups	*6*	*2*	*0.3*	*–0.94*
Private Citizens	*2*	*4*	*0.1*	*–0.69*
Total for entire domain	17%	100%		0.01
Oil Spills				
Citizen's Groups	*90%*	*2%*	*2.3*	*–0.95*
Private Citizens	*61*	*2*	*1.5*	*–0.65*
Federal Legislators	*57*	*7*	*1.5*	*–0.93*
Fishing Groups	*56*	*3*	*1.4*	*–0.81*
State Environmental Agencies	*53*	*5*	*1.3*	*–0.75*
Oil companies	50	4	1.3	0.83
Federal scientific agencies	*41*	*3*	*1.0*	*–0.03*
Federal Environmental Agencies	*38*	*6*	*1.0*	*–0.10*
Environmental Groups	*37*	*12*	*0.9*	*–0.90*
Coast Guard	*31*	*8*	*0.8*	*–0.04*
Federal Transportation Agencies	*23*	*2*	*0.6*	*–0.36*
Oil and Gas Industry Groups	17	4	0.4	0.91
Shipping Companies	11	3	0.3	0.82
Merchant Shipping Companies	8	2	0.2	0.58
Insurance Companies	0	2	0.0	0.83
Total for entire domain	39%	100%		–0.22

shorelines and oiled wildlife. The imagery following the most serious nuclear accident, TMI, is more ambiguous. For many people TMI's very prominent cooling towers symbolized the event and fears of nuclear power, but the TMI accident had little to do with the cooling towers themselves. The damage to the TMI reactor (contained within a relatively small reactor building) was invisible and contained, and the harms were more often expressed in terms of *probabilities* rather than images, and the arguments over what went wrong with TMI were quite technical and symbol-poor. Thus, the TMI accident did not have the

dramatic group mobilization effect that the more dramatic Santa Barbara and *Exxon Valdez* oil spills had.

Because the harms of nuclear accidents are ambiguous, the differences in tone between event-centered and more general testimony are small, and industry champions are slightly *more* likely to mention a specific mishap than are their opponents. This is due in large part to the extreme polarization of opinion in the nuclear domain, which tends to be split into strongly entrenched, ideologically based positions (Del Sesto 1980). This polarization drives a near constant political struggle over nuclear power that is not fueled by particular accidents.

This is true even considering the Three Mile Island (TMI) accident, by far the dominant event in the nuclear power domain, because the nuclear power community was very well defined, and the debate begun, well before TMI. This activity was a product of interest group action and scientific skepticism, not because of a particular event. The nuclear industry, on the defensive for years, could not nor need not let any event simply ''blow-over.'' Pro-nuclear forces could take a higher profile because the harms done by nuclear power plant accidents have been far less visible than the very obvious aesthetic effects of oil spills. TMI's visibility was due largely to the new regulatory climate. In particular, the replacement of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) had a lot to do with the decline of the nuclear power policy monopoly (Temples 1980). The sociopolitical climate in 1979 – including the release of the film *The China Syndrome* and public protect over the Seabrook and Shoreham nuclear plants – made the political containment of the accident difficult. On the other hand, the rather more closed nuclear policy monopoly during the 1960s successfully contained the 1967 accident at the Fermi reactor, near Detroit. This accident was potentially far more dangerous than TMI, yet the political influence of the accident was easily contained (Perrow 1984).

Even with widespread knowledge of the TMI accident and the somewhat anti-nuclear political climate in which it occurred, some degree of issue containment was possible because the industry was able to provide plausible alternative explanations for the accident that blunted the argument of antinuclear partisans because the available antinuclear imagery related directly to TMI was relatively weak.

None of this is meant to suggest that the political outcomes of the TMI accident were entirely contained, or that future nuclear power plant accidents on the scale of TMI can be shrugged off by the nuclear industry. Rather, it simply means that the relatively weak symbols and images associated with nuclear power accidents in the United States, coupled with the technical and probabilistic nature of these harms,

make these events less ''focal'' than large oil spills. With industry being able to plausibly claim that the TMI accident was not the near-disaster some claimed it to be, and since Congress was to a great extent willing to entertain that argument, the most obvious outlet for additional group mobilization after TMI was in mass protest, not in congressional hearings, in which the battle had already been fully joined years before by pro- and anti-nuclear activists.

This runs counter to popular belief that TMI was responsible for the collapse of nuclear power. However, by the time of the TMI accident, the decline of the civilian nuclear power industry was becoming a collapse, and TMI served as an emphatic punctuation of that trend, but not as the beginning of this decline. But the collapse of the nuclear policy monopoly throughout the 1970s was due in some part to the efforts of *local* groups that intervened in the licensing process at plants such as Seabrook and Shoreham before they were even started or produced power. No particular event mobilized these groups; rather, these groups were mobilized by local concerns and growing fears of the potential dangers of nuclear power. Meanwhile, these safety concerns, combined with increasing costs and government oversight of nuclear plants, eroded the power of the nuclear policy monopoly well before TMI (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Temples 1980).

In summary, oil spill policy making is dominated by industry events, with environmental groups serving as a brake on rapid pro-industry policy change, but generally not enjoying easy access to the institutional agenda until an oil spill changes the balance of political power. Visible events provide pro-change advocates with a set of symbols and images that shift presumption in favor of policy change. In the case of the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, environmental groups mobilized and pressed claims of policy failure in congressional hearings, which led to the resolution of a fourteen-year deadlock over improved oil spill policy and the passage of the Oil Pollution Act of 1990. Industry representatives were considerably less active in congressional testimony after the spill, again adopting a defensive strategy in hopes that the event would be quietly addressed and quickly forgotten.

Conclusions

The policy process literature has made substantive progress in helping us to understand the dynamics of policy making. Considerable gaps remain in our knowledge of the policy process, and even with the progress made in the past two decades, many of the theoretical perspectives employed in this article raise more questions than answers. This article addresses one of those questions. How, and to what extent, do

focusing events and group politics interact to influence the policy agenda? Focusing events do have many of the influences on agenda setting suggested by broader-scale theories, which tend to mention these events in passing. Focusing events appear to change dominant issues on the agenda in reasonably well organized policy domains. Without any sort of policy community or advocacy coalition, as in the hurricane case, there is no one to take advantage of an event and use it as one of the many rhetorical tools available to groups that seek change. Such domains are likely to be relatively rare, however, and we might expect any domain to have at least one organized coalition that can make use of focusing events to expand issues and pursue policy change.

Focusing events also mobilize groups, where groups are available for mobilization. The nature of this mobilization varies with the type of domain. In earthquake policy – and presumably, other types of hazards with an organized professional community – events lead to the mobilization of those already involved in policy making, who seek to induce elected officials and the public to support improved policy. After oil spills and nuclear power accidents, groups that purport to represent a broad range of citizens mobilize to press for policies that would seek to prevent future such events and to ameliorate the immediate disaster or accident. Even then, responses to calls for change will vary with the visibility and tangibility of the harms done by the event and the nature of the policy communities that deal with the events. Events such as nuclear power plant accidents, high-technology problems (such as widespread shutdowns of computer networks, or biotechnology gone awry) are more easily containable as long as the events are invisible and the harms ambiguous, while oil spills are more difficult to contain, both physically and politically.

While adding to our understanding of event-related politics, this research also reinforces the importance of group politics in setting the agenda and advancing new policy ideas. An event is more likely to be focal if an interest group or groups are available to exploit the event in their quest for policy change. Focusing events will also stimulate some institutional attention to an issue if there is only one advocacy coalition that actively seeks change. If no advocacy coalitions react, events will gain little more than passing attention. When two well-matched advocacy coalitions exist, an event is unlikely to change the relative balance between the two coalitions if the harms supposedly revealed by the event are ambiguous and therefore hard to summarily define. While in some ways the four domains I study here are similar, the analysis also shows them to be sufficiently dissimilar that we can begin to generalize from these domains and this research to assert that the nature of a policy community matters in long-term policy making.

As a result, the most important contribution to our understanding of focusing events – and the policy process more broadly – is that the politics of focusing events vary from domain to domain, even when seemingly similar domains are compared. This has important implications for policy studies: the nature of policies *and* the communities in which such policies are made influence the nature and outcomes of the policy process. Where public interest in an issue is low, expansion of the issue is largely left to professionals inside and outside government who seek to induce other actors to change policy. In other domains, where public interest is relatively high or easily mobilized, a focusing event can trigger extensive interest group mobilization, but can also be followed by aggressive efforts at ocuntermobilization. This process is most likely when the nature of the event and its harms are most ambiguous. In other words, the less clear the nature and harms done by the event, the less the issue will expand, and therefore the lesser the detectable influence on the institutional agenda.

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