

# **The Sociopolitical Construction of National Policy Domains\***

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## **The Sociopolitical Construction of National Policy Domains**

More than a year after the 9/11/01 terrorist attacks that destroyed the World Trade Center and damaged the Pentagon, the United States Congress finally passed a law to create a new Department of Homeland Security to coordinate intelligence about terrorism. The Bush Administration had steadfastly resisted the bill, sponsored by Democratic Senator Joseph Lieberman, as an unwarranted bureaucratic expansion. But, on June 6, 2002, just days after a Congressional committee heard a Federal Bureau of Investigation field agent testify that FBI Washington bureaucrats had mishandled warnings of potential attacks, President Bush abruptly reversed his public position. Passage was further delayed by a bitter fight as federal labor unions and their Democratic allies tried unsuccessfully to prevent Republicans from scaling back employee civil service protections and from adding last-minute pro-business provisions to the bill. In the most massive federal government reorganization since the founding of the Department of Defense after World War II, the DHS relocated 22 agencies (including the Coast Guard, Customs Service, Board Patrol, Secret Service, Federal Emergency Management Administration, and Immigration & Naturalization Service), with an combined annual budget of \$38 billion and nearly 170,000 employees, under the authority of a single Cabinet secretary. President George W. Bush touted this vast institutional reshuffling as an efficient rationalization of sprawling bureaucracies that would be “better able to respond to any future attacks, to reduce our vulnerability and, most important, prevent the terrorists from taking innocent American lives” (Stevenson 2002:A1). However, key intelligence and law enforcement agencies--particularly the FBI, Central Intelligence Agency, and Defense Intelligence Agency--remained outside the DHS umbrella. Full implementation of the new institution, which critics charged was woefully underfunded, might take several years to complete. And restructuring would certainly generate unforeseen consequences for the finely tuned balance of political power among the 61 Congressional committees and subcommittees charged with some oversight aspects of U.S. domestic security policymaking.

The dramatic birth of the Department of Homeland Security was an exceptional instance of an external shock that rapidly transformed the formal structure of a national policy domain.

Research scholars presently know far more about the routine policy influence processes occurring within mature public policy arenas than about the macrodynamic origins and subsequent expansions of these important political subsystems. Sociologists and political scientists should give serious attention to formulating testable theories about the historical emergence of distinct policymaking arenas. Both evolutionary and revolutionary changes are enmeshed in innovative efforts by political entrepreneurs to identify emergent substantive policy problems, redefine collective interests in those issues, and redraw the boundaries of institutions that formulate and implement proposed policy solutions. The sociopolitical (re)construction of policy domains potentially transforms shared cultural meanings, taken-for-granted assumptions, normative understandings, classificatory schemas, and tacit knowledge. New domains produce distinct legislative actions, administrative regulations, judicial rulings, bureaucratic practices, and, of course, numerous unanticipated consequences.

Weaving those disparate threads into a coherent fabric is a formidable task that I cannot complete here. As an initial step, I propose some core concepts that seem indispensable for building a theory capable of explaining both the renovation of old national policy domains and the formation of new arenas. Following a section defining policy domains, I discuss and exemplify six relevant theoretical elements: focusing events, technological innovations, political entrepreneurs, issue framing, policy networks, and institutionalization. I conclude with a speculative model for research on the key relationships among these components and a brief consideration of research designs for empirically investigating the social construction of national policy domains.

## **DEFINING POLICY DOMAINS**

Paul Burstein defined a *policy domain* as “a component of the political system organized around substantive issues” (Burstein 1991:328). He argued that analysts typically emphasize three sets of domain characteristics: inherent substantive or functional criteria, organizational participants, and cultural constructs. In developing their organizational state model of policymaking, Edwards O. Laumann and David Knoke conceptualized the *national policy domain* as the fundamental unit of analysis whose internal structures and processes must be explained (Knoke 1998). It is a relatively self-contained political arena consisting of a core set

of organizations that pay close attention to important substantive policy issues and problems: “More formally, a policy domain is a subsystem identified by specifying a substantively defined criterion of mutual relevance or common orientation among a set of consequential actors concerned with formulating, advocating, and selecting courses of action (that is, policy options) that are intended to resolve the delimited substantive problems in question” (Knoke and Laumann 1982:256). They stressed that the subjective identification by domain organizations of important policy issues and their possible solutions entails “a collective social construction of reality, so we argue that the recognition of conditions as policy problems is a continuously constructed social phenomenon, as, indeed, is the entire policy process” (Laumann and Knoke 1987:15). Their perspective complements the realist strategy in network boundary specification, which views any social system as a shared awareness held collectively by the participants themselves, rather than as a nominalist classification imposed by outside observers (Laumann, Marsden and Prensky 1982; Pappi 1984).

Social constructionist activities accompany the routine encounters among the individual agents who represent and act on behalf of domain organizations, such as corporate lobbyists, interest group representatives, and government decision makers. These agents’ collective judgments and evaluations demarcate two basic domain membership sets that jointly identify a domain’s boundaries: the relevant policy issues for consideration and the organizations possessing sufficient political power to participate in policymaking activities. Because both problem recognition and organizational reputation are continuously revised in consequence of particular policy event outcomes, domain boundaries remain neither immutable nor impermeable. Rather, national policy domains are susceptible to reconceptualization as opposing organizations struggle to formulate, decide, and implement their preferred alternative policy proposals for dealing with domain issues and problems.

Empirical analyses of national policy domains using social constructionist methods to identify policy issues and organizations included the U.S. health and energy domains (Laumann and Knoke 1987) and the U.S., German, and Japanese labor policy domains (Pappi, König and Knoke 1995; Knoke, Pappi, Broadbent and Tsujinaka 1996). Unfortunately, those investigators paid far greater attention to the routine social structures and political actions within mature policy domains than to examining the origins and transformations of those domains. The

following section seeks to rectify that imbalance by specifying several key elements for building theoretical explanations of the sociopolitical construction of national policy domains.

## **KEY ELEMENTS**

In his comprehensive review of policy domain theory and research, Burstein (1991:345) focused exclusively on changes that occur *within* domains, which he concluded “are to a considerable extent social constructions, created through interactions among organizations and given meaning by culture.” Unfortunately, he neglected to consider how changing sociopolitical conditions generate new policy domains or transform existing arenas. Constructing a theoretical explanation of the historical origins and development of domains connects to the core obsession of the nineteenth century classical sociologists--from Comte and Marx to Tönnies and Durkheim--over incessant processes of differentiation and integration in complex industrializing and urbanizing societies. Across the broad historical sweep of two centuries, the successive emergence and refinement of increasingly specialized national policy domains involves an intricate dance between the proliferation within civil society of increasingly fragmented sociopolitical interests and the responsive efforts by democratic states to confine organized interest group conflicts within narrow governmental institutions. To be useful in guiding empirical research, details of this dynamic interaction must be fleshed out. In the following subsections, I discuss six theoretical elements--focusing events, technological innovations, political entrepreneurs, issue framing, policy networks, and policy domain institutionalization--that seem crucial to explaining the formation and transformation of national policy domain.

### **Focusing events**

The 9/11/01 terror attacks were an archetype of the focusing event, a rare, sudden, and harmful event with high media visibility that draws intense attention to a sociopolitical problem and may subsequently induce public policy changes (Birkland 1997, 1998; Kingdon 1984). Other notorious focusing events include Japan’s surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, which abruptly overturned America’s isolationist foreign policy during World War II, and the Vietcong’s 1968 Tet offensive, which convinced the Johnson and Nixon Administrations to begin withdrawing

U.S. combat forces. The student massacre at Columbine High School and similar shootings at English, Australian, and German schools galvanized efforts to change handgun control policies. Similarly, the ecological havoc wreaked by major oil tanker spills, such as the *Exxon Valdez* and *Prestige*, periodically rouses attempts to reform marine transportation policies. These seemingly random shocks focused the attention mass publics and stimulated the responses of policy elites.

If a focusing event so drastically disrupts conventional beliefs and routine practices that it alters fundamental social cognitions about causal relations and perceived risks, it may trigger major structural transformations of a policy domain. For example, when the Soviet Union achieved ballistic missile and nuclear parity with the U.S. in the 1950s, Cold War military doctrine shifted to deterrence through reciprocal vulnerability (MAD: mutual assured destruction). This policy has been superseded by recent American efforts to construct a national missile defense shield, a.k.a. “Son of Star Wars” (Gaddis 1982). Focusing events are obviously much easier to identify in hindsight than to anticipate or to predict their probable impacts on policy domains. John Kingdon argued that crises, disasters, and similar disruptions cannot produce policy change without other predispositions: “They need to be accompanied by something else. ...they reinforce some pre-existing perception of a problem, focus attention on a problem that was already ‘in the back of people’s minds’” (Kingdon 1984:98). Focusing events merely open a “policy window,” creating a momentary opportunity for policy advocates “push their pet solutions, or to push attention to their special problems” (165). Whether a new or transformed policy domain emerges through an open window depends on other factors.

### **Technological Innovations**

Theorists of technological determinism, such as McLuhan (1965), Winner (1978), and possibly the young Karl Marx (“The windmill gives you society with the feudal lord: the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist.” Marx 1967:480), assert that autonomously developing technologies are primary causes of sociopolitical change in the modern world (see also the essays in Smith and Marx 1994). Without embracing such one-sided claims, policy domain theorists should still acknowledge that technological innovations importantly affect public policy debates. Applications of basic scientific principles to develop commercial products periodically give birth to entirely new industries that eventually seek political solutions to their economic problems.

Spectacular examples include aviation, computer, and biomedical technologies, whose publicly visible achievements overshadow countless advances in such arcane technologies as encryption, synthetic resins, and sonography. Following World War II, the industrial democracies created national innovation systems to coordinate their vastly increased R&D investments (Nelson 1993; Leoncini 1998). Some analysts detected the emergence of a “triple helix,” a vast innovation network connecting industry, university, and governmental organizations with global economic implications (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff 2000).

Proliferating innovations generate numerous specialized policy niches for colonization by corporations, interest groups, bureaucrats, and politicians seeking competitive advantages. For example, the early twentieth century commercialization of the radio spectrum led the U.S. Congress to pass the Communication Act of 1934, creating the Federal Communications Commission with a mandate to license and regulate radio broadcasting and wire (telephone) services “with adequate facilities at reasonable charges” (Temin 1987:11). The subsequent invention and convergence among television, cable, wireless, satellite, Internet, multimedia, and digital technologies, with their irresistible creative destruction of antecedent industries, vastly expanded the boundaries of the telecommunication policy domain. By the end of the twentieth century, a hodge-podge of federal and state legislation, regulations, and judicial rulings had cobbled together such an unwieldy bricolage that the Clinton Administration pushed for a sweeping overhaul of the archaic 1934 Communication Act. Numerous producer, consumer, political, and civil liberties interest groups lobbied for provisions to guarantee universal customer access to the “information superhighway” at low prices; protect oligopolistic owners of radio and TV stations; remove major barriers to integrating wireline and wireless network technologies; increase market competition in local and long-distance telephony and cable systems; control consumer rates; restrict the transmission of violent and sexually explicit material; and assure free speech while protecting privacy rights. A protracted struggle to reconcile these conflicting goals eventually produced a 113-page Telecommunications Act of 1996 containing something for everyone. Although the Act may eventually benefit consumers and small carriers by promoting new forms of telecom competition, its initial consequences included skyrocketing phone and cable TV rates; accelerating mergers among phone, media, and computer companies; and intensified court suits and rule-making disputes between the FCC, Justice Department, and corporate giants “unlike anything we’ve experienced to date” (Toth 1996).

The radical transformation of the U.S. telecommunication policy domain illustrates how cumulative technological innovations can produce necessary conditions for change, whose specific sociopolitical construction is shaped by the collective actions of organized interest groups. As a general principle, science and technology are primarily driving forces behind the emergence of policy issues, but by themselves seldom create compelling conditions for change. As demonstrated in studies of policymaking on dioxin and radon pollution (Harrison and Hoberg 1991) and greenhouse gases (Hart and Victor 1993), the impact of science and technology on public policies may depend on such factors as mass media, civic culture, and political entrepreneurs.

### **Political Entrepreneurs**

Political entrepreneurs, who advocate substantially innovative policy proposals from inside or outside the government, significantly shape the sociopolitical construction of national policy domains. These ambitious individuals may be elected or appointed officials, agency bureaucrats, social movement activists, interest group lobbyists, academic or think-tank experts and consultants, even an occasional crusading journalist. Entrepreneurs are “constantly involved in the policy community because of their technical expertise in their field, because of their political expertise and ability to broker deals that lead to new programs and policies” (Birkland 1997:18). They promote streams of policy ideas that “can significantly raise the probability of legislative consideration and approval of policy innovation” (Mintrom 1997:738; Mintrom and Vergari 1996). Policy brokers operate routinely within conventionally defined domains, mediating and negotiating deals among partisans holding conflicting policy preferences, without seriously challenging current arrangements. In contrast, political entrepreneurs typically express strong ideological commitment to the innovative ideas that they champion. Consequently, their proposals may encounter intense resistance from actors with equally intense vested interests in protecting their political advantages within an existing policy domain structure. In such contentious circumstances, policy brokers might initially agree to modify their innovative proposals to fit more closely into current domain boundaries. But, if an accommodation strategy proves unsuccessful in winning acceptance from defenders of the status quo, entrepreneurs instead seek to construct distinct new arenas more receptive to their policy ideas.

Conflict-expansion and issue-redefinition processes were evident in a study of jurisdictional turf fights among U.S. Congressional committees involved in drug abuse, nuclear power, pesticide, and smoking policymaking from 1945 to 1986 (Talbert, Jones and Baumgartner 1995). Both legislative and nonlegislative hearings revealed “attempts made by legislative entrepreneurs to encroach on the established jurisdictions of other committees.” In bids to wrest politically valuable territory away from rival politicians, entrepreneurs on a committee can introduce bills that fit ambiguously within their committee’s established mandate. Failing those attempts, they can then staking claims to entirely new issues (King 1997). In the absence of any central authority able to rationalize competing claims, domain boundaries become increasingly malleable and porous as jurisdictions diffuse among Congress committees and subcommittees. The resulting fragmentation opens numerous opportunities for activists both inside and outside government to push their preferred policy solutions in more sympathetic policy arenas.

Political entrepreneurs are also influential in offering novel interpretations of focusing events as necessitating the radical restructuring of an existing policy domain. Major disasters and crises can trigger a two-stage sequence in which the collapse of a current policy schema is followed by the consolidation of an alternative. “Collapse involves societal actors reaching an agreement that the old orthodoxy is inadequate. Consolidation requires social coordination on a replacement set of ideas” (Legro 2000:419). For example, seven months before 9/11/02, the U.S. Commission on National Security, appointed by President Bill Clinton and headed by former Senators Warren Rudman and Gary Hart, recommended forming a new Cabinet-level agency with responsibility for defending the nation against increased domestic terrorist threats. The commission leaders’ persistent public advocacy after the tragedy prodded President Bush to switch from opposing to supporting creation of the new Department of Homeland Security (Rudman and Hart 2002). This incident also underscores the importance of issue framing processes in the sociopolitical construction of national policy domains.

## **Issue Framing**

In reasoning that the policy domain concept overly idealizes the structural divisions within governments, William Browne (1998:217) argued that “very few organized interests are

participants in only a single policy domain, or even at only a single moment in time. Nor, necessarily, are their issues at play in just those places.” Although such rigid partitioning of issues and organizations is impossibly restrictive, Browne’s observations remind us that neat conceptual pigeonholes rarely fit real-world conditions. Actual policy domains exhibit messy overlaps among issues, proposals, and actors that blur the precise boundaries between contemporaneously adjacent and temporally antecedent domains and subdomains. Given this inherent fragmentation and fuzziness, the routine communications among policy domain actors engaged in problem recognition, identity formation, and sensemaking activities inevitably involve classifying and interpreting the meanings of policy issues. These dynamic discourses generate collective perceptions of issues and participants migrating across the porous borders between proximate policy domains, and, at times, significantly reshaping the terrain.

The frame alignment perspective in cultural institutionalism and social movement mobilization (Benford and Snow 2000) provides some concepts relevant to the transformation of policy domains. Frames are complex cognitive schemas that “enable individuals to locate, perceive, identify and label occurrences” (Snow, Rochford, Worden and Benford 1986:464), for example, interpreting particular social conditions as shared grievances to be eradicated by mobilizing for political change. Framing processes explain how collective action emerges from interactions among individual cognitive frames, resulting in socially constructed structural and cognitive boundaries between movement participants and sympathizers. Frame alignment analysts investigate how a social movement intentionally tries to recruit new participants by enlarging the boundaries of its primary or master framework to portray the movement’s goals and actions as congruent and complementary with the interests, beliefs, and values of potential adherents. Four fundamental framing processes include bridging (drawing connections among similar frames related to a specific grievance); amplification (elaborating and deepening an existing frame); extension (widening a frame to appeal to the values and interests of potential adherents); and transformation (replacing an existing frame with a radical new perspective).

Politicians regularly use issue framing techniques in developing persuasive arguments to attract potential backers to their policy proposals. They use bridging strategies in pointing to similarities of their preferred policy solutions to the proposals advocated by potential allies, and extension strategies by incorporating compatible elements into their own proposals. They amplify issues by identifying likely causes of social problems and the consequences of

implementing alternative policy decisions. In typical routine agenda-setting situations (Kingdon 1984; Baumgartner and Jones 1993), politicians agree on compromises necessary to attain sufficient support to pass their legislative or regulatory proposals. But, ideologically committed political entrepreneurs are more disposed to frame their issues in transformative language that breaks from entrenched cognitive structures. They assemble ideas, beliefs, and symbols from diverse sources and blend them in novel combinations that jettison conventional thinking about policymaking. In rare instances when political entrepreneurs convince enough supporters to follow their vision, frame transformations may lead to the construction of radically new policy domains or the major restructuring of existing arenas. Classic cases of domain transformation through cognitive reframing of policy issues include the early twentieth century invention of juvenile delinquency as a discrete arena within the American justice system (Platt 1972) and the decades long struggle to win recognition of occupational safety and health problems as a workplace issue amenable to political treatment (Rosner and Markowitz 1987).

## **Policy Networks**

Policy networks comprise the multiple sets of relations connecting governmental and private-sector actors with common interests in a national policy domain. “The linkages between the actors serve as channels for communication and for the exchange of information, expertise, trust and other policy resources” (Kenis and Schneider 1991:25). Domain network structures emerge as participants purposefully attempt to influence public policy decisions. In more metaphorical treatments of policy network, researchers describe how actors’ interests shape their formation of network ties and the mobilization of resources for collective political actions aimed at influencing policy decisions. More analytically rigorous social choice approaches explain policy outcomes as the result of network structural constraints on resource exchange processes that affect “both the social system and the capacity to produce binding decisions for a well defined set of actions” (Pappi and Henning 1998:554). These dynamic effects are revealed by modeling how networks constrain the inter-actor exchanges that affect authoritative decisions across a large number of policy events occurring over time within a bounded policy domain.

Empirical investigations taking a social choice perspective mostly conceptualize national policymaking as a process conducted by formal organizations, with individual persons acting as

agents on behalf of their organizational principals. Key players are distributed across such broad public- and private-sector categories as labor unions, business associations, corporations, public interest groups, state and local government associations, executive agencies and ministries, and legislative committees. The organizational state model developed by Laumann, Knoke, Pappi, and their colleagues emphasized how interorganizational communication networks shaped collective action campaigns by these organized interest groups in the U.S. national energy, health, agriculture, and labor policy domains (Laumann and Knoke 1987; Heinz, Laumann, Nelson and Salisbury 1993), and in a comparison of the U.S., German, and Japanese labor policy domains (Knoke et al. 1996). In every policy domain, some organizations may be involved in dozens of policy issues and scores of legislative, executive, and judicial policy events. Given these divergent organizational interests and fragmented attention spans, no leading organizations can dominate domain policymaking. Rather, most policy struggles involve short-term, shifting coalitions assembled to fight collectively to influence the formulation and outcome of authoritative policy decisions. The communication and resource exchange structures enable domain organizations to identify potential collaborators and opponents of a policy event. Typically, opposing action sets, consisting of subsets of domain organizations sharing common policy preferences, pool their political resources and pressure governmental decisionmakers to choose a policy outcome favorable to their interests. Once the policy decision occurs, these coalitions break apart as subsequent events give rise to new constellations of organized interest groups. The resulting policy network structure is fluid and continually changing rather than rigid and monolithic.

Organizational state researchers investigated routine policy events occurring within relative mature and stable domains. Antecedent to the formation of specific action sets are broader issue publics, consisting of “all organizations expressing similar interests in all policy domain issues. Because issues are not framed in terms of particular policy proposals, an issue public is very likely to encompass many organizations that take opposing sides on specific policy proposals relevant to the issues in which they are interested” (Knoke et al. 1996:21). Thus, organizations participating in an issue public share common concerns about the substantive contents of policies and are likely exchange high volumes of information related to those interests. Thus, its members are more susceptible “to activation whenever policy events strike at the heart of their interests” than are the organizations occupying other issue publics (Laumann

and Knoke 1987:125). In network analytic terms, an issue public is a jointly occupied position within a multidimensional issue space. The distance between publics depends on the extent of overlap among the organizations expressing interests in the set of issues that define a public. For example, the U.S., German, and Japanese national labor policy domains were polarized between two sets of subfields identified by organizational interests: traditional labor-relations (collective bargaining, participation in management, and internal governance) and social-welfare (disadvantaged populations and discrimination) (Knoke et al. 1996:84-90).

Network structural concepts and principles can also contribute to understanding the evolution of new national policy domains and reformations of existing domains. A proliferation of specialized policy issues leads to progressive differentiation among a domain's issue publics. Organizational inability to pay serious attention to an expanding array of policy issues results in the domain policy network fragmenting into increasingly isolated subsets of organizations with very specialized concerns but disinterest in issues of greater importance to other issue publics. Communication links become more tenuous as the participants of distant publics discover that they have less to say to one another and fewer reasons to join in collective political actions. As a public acquires more interests in extra-domain issues, for example, through persuasive communications from actors currently outside the domain, its member organizations drift increasingly toward marginal locations at the borders of the original domain. Sociopolitical mitosis, an amoeba-like splitting of a new domain from an old one, occurs when some participants in an existing issue public collectively reformulate a distinctive policy agenda, adopt a new communal identity, coalesce with break-away publics from adjacent policy domains, and draw previously uninvolved organizations into their orbit. Their separation leaves the remaining original domain members to reorganize and consolidate around a smaller, more coherent set of shared policy issues.

### **Policy Domain Institutionalization**

Institutionalization is an ultimate outcome of sociopolitical construction processes within a national policy domain. Although domains reflect fundamental collective social cognitions that filter political perceptions and behaviors, they also display concrete manifestations as sets of legitimate procedures or rules for playing the policy game. At the national level, these

institutions are primarily the legislative bodies that enact policy laws and the executive agencies that administer and regulate those legislative decisions. Judicial institutions play a less central role, mainly by requiring that any institutional rearrangements must conform to constitutional constraints. Many policy institutions probably arose as informal customs and practices that evolved into the decentralized plethora of named legislative committees and executive bureaucracies with explicit mandates in narrowly define policy domains. For example, the U.S. Manual currently lists 13 executive offices of the Presidency, 15 Cabinet departments (including the newest, Homeland Security), 55 independent establishments and government corporations, 54 boards, commissions, committees, and four “quasi-official agencies.” The Congress has approximately 44 standing committees and a changing assortment of more than 150 subcommittees with legislative jurisdiction over the thousands of policy proposals submitted annually in specific areas.

Policy domain theorists and researchers have yet to incorporate analytic explanations of the emergence or disappearance of governmental institutions. However, historical case studies of individual organizations offer a wealth of data on their origins and development. For example, the 1977 creation of the U.S. Energy Department resulted from the convergence of complex technologies with a politically explosive focusing event, the energy shortages and rising prices of the mid-1970s. President Jimmy Carter reacted by merging the federal government’s scattered nonnuclear energy programs with its secretive and centralized military research on atomic weaponry (Fehner and Holl 1994). Incompatibilities between these strange political bedfellows were a continuing source of energy policymaking conflicts over the ensuing decades. Other federal reorganizations exemplifying the institutionalization of national policy domains include the 1966 creation of the Department of Transportation (Whitnah 1998), the 1979 separation of the Department of Education from Health and Human Services (Hawley and Radin 1988; Stallings 2002) and the 1988 elevation of Veterans’ Affairs to Cabinet status. The Library of Congress compiled detailed historical data on the name changes and jurisdictional adjustments of U.S. Senate and House of Representative committees spanning more than two centuries (Vincent 1995).

## **A MODEL FOR RESEARCH**

Figure 1 displays my schematic model of hypothesized relationships among the six key elements discussed in the preceding section. Both focusing events and technological innovations are exogenous shocks, which the model does not try to predict. These disruptions draw the attention of political entrepreneurs, inside and outside the government, who recognize exceptional these shocks as generating momentary opportunities for developing innovative policy initiatives to deal with the problems created by changed circumstances. As political entrepreneurs formulate proposed responses to focusing events and technological innovations, they may conclude that the current policy domain arrangements are inadequate for coping effectively with the new situation. Consequently, they frame the issues as requiring either major restructuring of an existing domain or the creating a new domain with enough participants, resources, and institutions to deal with its problems. At the same time, policy entrepreneurs mobilize their organizational contacts within the domain's policy network, seeking to persuade potential allies to endorse their alternative visions for the domain. If an issue public comprised of powerful interest groups and political authorities experiences cognitive conversion, this coalition attempts either to reform or abandon the current policy domain. The ultimate outcome is a new institutional configuration of actors, programs, and procedures for conducting routine policymaking on the reframed substantive issues.

My schematic model is a linear simplification of undoubtedly complex dialectical processes. I intend it only as a provisional framework to initiate empirical research on the sociopolitical construction of national policy domains. Given the relative rarity of such incidents, the most effective investigatory method would be multiple historical case studies of both successful and failed domain transformation. Systematic content analyses of legislative proposals, hearing testimonies, and agency documents would uncover the central actors, interests, events, and interpretations involved in efforts to change existing institutional arrangements. To ensure rigorous comparisons, these elements must be coded and analyzed consistently over time and across domains, while remaining sensitive to possible shifting meanings in the language and symbols with which the debates were framed. Although my examples above were drawn from American cases, theoretical advances will only be possible if serious inquiry includes both cross-national and transnational instances of the sociopolitical construction of national policy domains.

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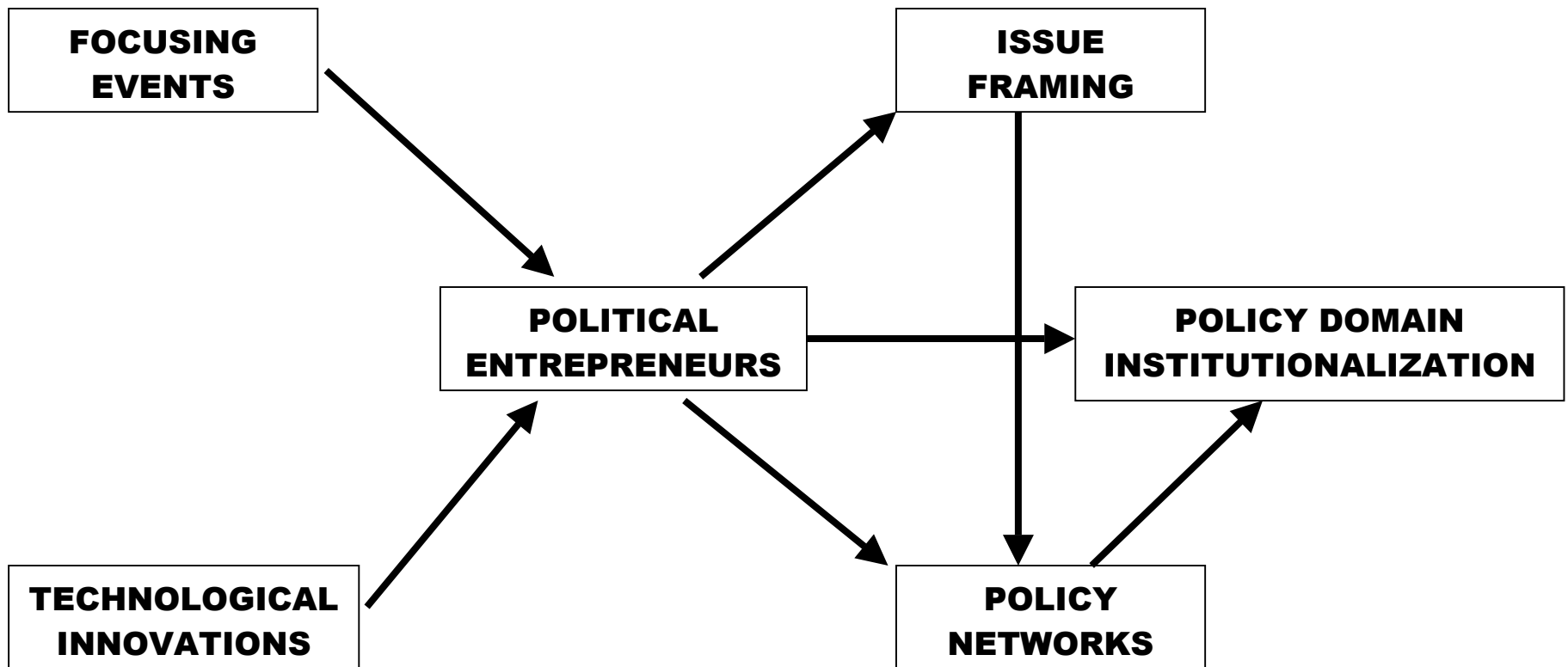


FIGURE 1. A Model of the Sociopolitical Construction of National Policy Domains