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Anthony Downs, "Up and Down with Ecology: The 'Issue-Attention' Cycle"

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The Oxford Handbook of Classics in Public Policy and Administration

Edited by Martin Lodge, Edward C. Page, and Steven J. Balla

Print Publication Date: Mar 2015

Subject: Political Science, Political Economy, Comparative Politics

Online Publication Date: Jul 2016 DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199646135.013.34

Abstract and Keywords

This chapter comments on Anthony Downs's 1972 seminal paper "Up and Down with Ecology: The 'Issue-Attention' Cycle," which tackles the concept of "public" or "issue" attention. Focusing on domestic policy, particularly environmental policy in the United States, Downs describes a process called "issue-attention cycle," by which the public gains and loses interest in a particular issue over time. This chapter summarizes studies that directly put Downs's propositions to the test, laying emphasis on research that probes the existence of and interrelationships among the public attention cycle, media attention cycle, and government attention cycle. It then reviews the main arguments put forward by Downs before concluding with a discussion of promising avenues for future research as well as important theoretical and methodological questions that need further elucidation.

Keywords: Anthony Downs, environmental policy, United States, issue-attention cycle, public attention cycle, media attention cycle, government attention cycle, domestic policy

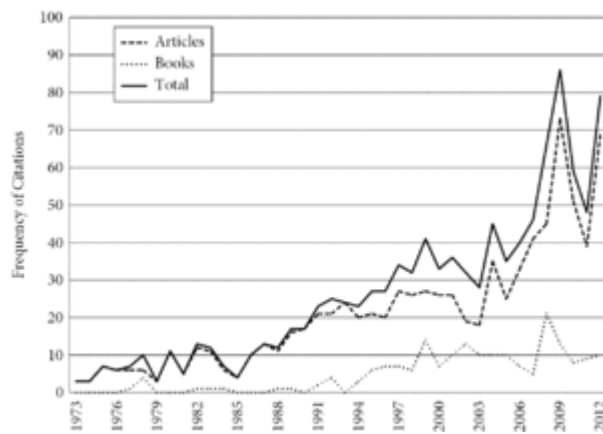
SCHOLARS have studied public opinion for decades, seeking answers to questions such as: does public opinion lead or follow that of elites? How does public opinion affect electoral outcomes? Does public opinion influence the evolution of public policy? In fact, the very notion of democratic governance is incomplete without taking into account the significance of public opinion. In his seminal 1972 article titled "Up and Down with Ecology: The 'Issue-Attention' Cycle," Anthony Downs focused on a similar yet more nuanced concept called "public" or "issue" *attention*. While opinion denotes the structure of beliefs, attitudes, and preferences that are brought to bear on an issue, public attention reflects the relative priority and weight given to a specific issue among the universe of issues that might be considered. Attention is reflected by the allocation of time and energy that an individual spends thinking about an issue (Newig 2004: 153). For

instance, an individual might believe that global warming is anthropogenic and harmful to the environment, but not expend much time and effort actively thinking or discussing this opinion.

This distinction was made clear in Downs’s article, where he sketched a succinct and influential model of the cyclical process by which the public gains and loses interest in a particular issue over time. Concentrating on domestic policy (specifically environmental policy in the US), he argued that policy issues go through an “attention-cycle” with distinct stages in which public attention to a problem bolts from “pre-problem” latency to alarmed discovery and enthusiasm, followed by growing recognition of the costs of addressing the issue, through a gradual decline of interest to a “post-problem” stage in which other issues and problems eclipse attention. This cycle is important because it (among other things) helps to explain why some issues attract the finite and often ephemeral attention of policy-makers whereas other issues do not.

(p. 317) The model that Downs proposes in this article has been cited by numerous scholars associated with a variety of disciplines, ranging from international relations, American politics, and public policy to mass communication and public relations. A cursory analysis of these citations—using Google Scholar from 1973 through 2012—shows a sustained growth in reference to his article (Figure 22.1).¹ The article has primarily been cited in peer-reviewed journal articles, though a modest growth in references in books and book chapters is also evident. Over the 1973–2012 period, our analysis indicates that the article was cited 1,049 times in books and articles.² This total does not include a robust reference among “gray literature” sources—unpublished dissertations, theses, papers, and reports—that accounts for roughly 30 percent of all references over the last decade of this analysis. Clearly, then, Downs’s characterization of the issue attention cycle has received sustained (and growing) attention in the scholarly literature.

Our reading of this literature (the articles that cite Downs 1972) indicates that the most enduring contribution of this article has been to the literature on public attention and issue volatility. While, as indicated by Figure 22.1, there has been a great deal of research stimulated by this piece, this chapter aims to provide a coherent summary of the studies that directly test the propositions put forth by Downs. Specifically, we focus on clusters of studies that examine the existence of and linkages among three different attention cycles—public attention cycle, media attention cycle, and government attention cycle. With that in mind, the next section briefly summarizes the main arguments from the article, following which we highlight the various studies that have tested the issue–attention cycle in some form or another. Finally, we discuss promising avenues for future research and important theoretical and methodological questions that remain to be answered.



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Fig. 22.1 Downs's citations by year

(p. 318) The “Issue-Attention Cycle”

Downs (1972) presented a “systematic” model explaining when and for how long the public pays attention to a particular societal problem. The article was published in the midst of rising concern among the American public about environmental issues (it was published soon after the celebration of the first “Earth Day”). Simply put, Downs argued that “public perception of most ‘crises’ in American domestic life does not reflect changes in real conditions as much as it reflects the operation of a systematic cycle of heightening public interest and then increasing boredom with major issues” (p. 39).

Expanding upon this statement, Downs developed an issue-attention model that rests upon three sets of propositions. His first—and most recognized—set of propositions maintain that public attention to a given issue (like ecology) cycles according to a set of five relatively predictable stages: the (1) pre-problem stage, (2) alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm, (3) a period marked by a growing realization of the cost of significant progress, (4) gradual decline of public interest, and (5) the post-problem stage. In the first stage public awareness and concern about the problem is dormant. The issue exists as a societal condition, but it is not widely recognized as an urgent problem. At this stage, the issue exists in the background and, while a few individuals might be paying attention to it, it is largely absent from the public eye. In the second stage, the issue gains mass attention, usually as a result of a big event (or a series of big events). These events bring the issue to the forefront, forcing people to grapple with the problem and look for solutions. The third stage brings with it the weight of realizing how costly solving societal problems can be. This directly leads into the fourth stage of the attention cycle, where much—to the frustration of the affected groups—of the public gets bored and loses interest in the issue. Finally, the issue enters the post-problem stage, wherein it returns to a dormant state, but—because governing institutions and political interests have both been affected (or perhaps “conditioned”) by its prior passage through the cycle—can be awakened (recycled) with relative ease.

Anthony Downs, "Up and Down with Ecology: The 'Issue-Attention' Cycle"

In his second set of propositions, Downs introduced three characteristics that predispose an issue towards issue-attention cycles. Those characteristics include: (1) the issue does not affect the majority of the public *as much as* it impinges upon a minority; (2) the situation, arrangement, or behaviors that result from the issue provide significant benefits to the majority or a powerful minority of the population; and (3) the issue is not intrinsically exciting enough to sustain popular interest for prolonged periods of time. In other words, Downs argued that a given issue is likely to move through the issue-attention cycle if the relative benefits of addressing the issue are low (because relatively few are impacted by the problem), the costs of addressing the problem are high (because the arrangements associated with the issue benefit a large and/or powerful portion of the population), and the issue is not dramatic or entertaining enough to capture and sustain public attention, which is a scarce yet sought after commodity.

(p. 319) The third and perhaps most implicit set of propositions Downs offered in this article concern the complex relationship between media attention, public attention, and governmental attention. With respect to the former, his model suggests that the media play an important role in stimulating public attention to a given problem. Some amount of media coverage (in tandem with a dramatic series of events), Downs argued, can spark the interest necessary to push an issue from the dormant stage to the alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm stage. Too much coverage, on the other hand, may bore the public, causing them to lose interest in the issue and stop consuming the media's product. If and when this happens, the media realizes it and they (like the public) will shift their focus to a "new" problem. In other words, media attention is an important driver of public attention, but there is a feedback loop wherein public attention (or lack thereof) guides media attention. With respect to the latter, Downs argued that public attention orients governmental action by putting pressure on elected officials to "do something" about issues that have gone from dormant to highly salient in the minds of the American public. If and when the government attempts to do something, however, the public will realize that the problem is complicated and costly to solve. Thus, public attention drives government attention, but (again) there is a feedback loop wherein government attention may cause disillusion and ultimately a decline in public attention.

Testing Propositions from the Issue-Attention Cycle

Having outlined Downs's contribution, this section discusses a select group of studies that have tested various components of his model. More specifically, we highlight studies that systematically analyze the "cyclical" nature of public attention and/or the relationship between media attention, public attention, and governmental attention. In other words, we focus on studies that have attempted (in some way or another) to test the first and third sets of propositions described above. The studies listed in the section are not meant to provide an exhaustive list; the citation analysis presented earlier makes it obvious that Downs's article has had a widespread impact over long periods of time (1,420 cites by the end of 2012, by our count) spanning a variety of fields. Rather, our goal is to provide a window into a few studies that have directly tested the propositions associated with the issue-attention model. Before we do so, however, it is important to note that Downs's characterizations of these processes were conceptual in nature. He was notably vague in his definitions of key concepts and he did not provide a methodological path for operationalizing and measuring them. Nonetheless, the seminal nature of his article has inspired a host of scholars to look for and study issue-attention cycles and provided them with an opportunity to improvise and innovate.

(p. 320) The first group of studies that we highlight attempt to test Downs's first set of propositions associated with issue-attention cycles: do public attention cycles actually exist? If yes, what factors account for these cyclical patterns? For example, McCombs and Zhu (1995) examined long-term trends of the American public's issue agenda, with a particular interest in issue volatility (the average duration of public attention to a given issue). In so doing, they found a great deal of volatility, which corroborates Downs's basic proposition that public attention is cyclical and short-lived. Moreover, they found that issue volatility and issue diversity (the number of issues competing for public attention at a given point in time) have increased over time, which has created a competitive zero-sum process, wherein limitations in public capacity mean that increased attention to one issue comes at the cost of others. In other words, issue-attention cycles exist because a large number of issues compete for public attention at any given point in time and the public is not able to pay attention to every issue at once. To cope with this, they cycle from "old" to "new" issues in relatively short periods of time.

In subsequent studies, researchers like Newig (2004) have confirmed the existence of issue-attention cycles and have moved on to focus on the question of causation—if we know that the public has a short attention span and that issue diversity is growing, what explains why some issues spark the public's interest whereas others remain dormant? In his preliminary attempt to answer this question, Newig pointed to three "external" factors that make a problem more likely to garner attention: the severity of the problem, the visibility (accessibility of the problem), and the availability of problem-solving resources, and two "internal" factors—the existence of other issues and the issue's

previous history. Thus, in addition to verifying the presence of issue-attention cycles, Newig documented tentative support for Downs’s proposition that issues that have already traversed the issue-attention cycle (and remain unresolved) are more likely to recapture the public’s attention in the future than issues that have not gone through the cycle.

Adding to this work, a second group of studies inspired by Downs (1972) focus on the role that the media plays in setting the public agenda. Following in the footsteps of McCombs and Shaw (1972), early studies of this type show that media coverage is (on average) positively correlated with public attention—the issues that receive coverage in the media are on average similar to the issues that the public is attentive to (Benton and Frazier 1976). This strand of literature also put forth a hypothesis about “mirror-image” media effects. The studies that tested this hypothesis found evidence for the overall correlation between the frequency of media coverage of an issue, and its corresponding salience for the public. In other words, the more coverage any given issue receives in the media, the more public attention it gets (McLeod et al. 1974). At face value, this correlation confirms Downs’s implicit proposition that the media are partly responsible for pushing issues from dormancy to euphoria in the minds of the public. As this line of research expanded, scholars have built upon Downs’s model to address more nuanced questions, like does varying public sensitivity to social issues make media attention more influential for some issues and not others? Alternatively, is the relationship between media and public attention spurious—do “real world events” represent a (p. 321) third variable that explains media *and* public attention? And how rapidly does public attention rise and fall in response to different media cues and real-world crises?

With respect to the former two questions, Erbring et al. (1980) analyzed a series of “most important problem” (MIP) polls from the 1974 National Election Study and respondent data on newspaper content as well as “real-world” conditions to study the link between media attention and public attention. In an effort to move beyond media effects and understand the nuanced impact of “audience sensitivity,” the authors postulate and find support that any impact of media attention on public attentiveness is a result of the audience’s pre-existing connections to those issues. Additionally, they theorize and find preliminary support for the real-world environment as a statistically significant determinant of issue salience among the public *and* the media.

With respect to the third question, Neuman (1990) proposed a “responsiveness” model to help develop and refine the somewhat deterministic model of media effects. He questioned whether the public’s response to certain issues is more drastic than others. Is the public more likely to be attentive to some issues than others? If Neuman’s hypothesis is correct, it would mean that public responsiveness varies according to the type of issue at hand. He argues that this typology of cases also affects the impact media attention has on public attention. To test this proposition, he systematically analyzed MIP time series and found that crisis issues covered by the media garner the most distinct response from the public, as compared to symbolic crises that receive a much lower response rate. In

other words, real-world cues mediate the relationship between media attention and public attention. Again, all of these findings align rather neatly with Downs’s conjecture that real-world events drive issues onto the public agenda and start the attention cycle.

A final group of studies evaluate Downs’s implicit propositions concerning public attention and governmental action. In one of the first such studies Peters and Hogwood (1985) explored the relationship between fluctuations in public attention to a given problem and corresponding changes in how the government addresses that problem (i.e. the initiation, supersession, or termination of an organization charged with addressing the problem). Upon doing so, they found that peaks in organizational activity tend, as conjectured by Downs, to occur during or after peak periods of public attention.

Howlett (1997) provides a similar test of the relationship between public attention and government attention by examining the extent to which upswings in public interest are followed by changes in government attention, before the issue fades into public oblivion. Using media mentions as a surrogate for public attention and floor debates/committee reports to measure government attention, Howlett was unable to discern a relationship between public and government attention to two different issues—nuclear energy and acid rain. These results led Howlett to question Downs’s proposition and suggest that future scholarship focus on the role that institutions might play in mediating the relationship between public and governmental attention. Perhaps, he concludes, the parliamentary structure of Canadian governance accounts for some of the variation between his findings and Downs’s model?

(p. 322) As a partial test of Howlett’s proposition, Jones and Baumgartner (2004) reanalyzed the relationship between public and government attention in the US, by systematically comparing public attention (as indicated by MIP polls) to governmental activity—as indicated by hearing activity and public laws. Consistent with Downs and contrary to Howlett, their analysis revealed an “impressive congruence” between public attention, the priorities of Congress, and federal law-making. In other words, issue attention appears to elicit government activity—in the US context. This finding was reconfirmed in Jones et al. (2009), which (again) found a high degree of correspondence between public and governmental attention, especially in areas where “institutional friction” is low. This finding may shed partial light on Howlett’s suggestion that Downs’s model is in some way tied to the institutional configuration of the US government which may, on average, provide less “friction” than governments in other countries around the world, like Canada.

Conclusions and Directions for Future Research

Downs’s conceptual model of the issue-attention cycle has received substantial attention in the scholarly literature. While in many cases the pieces that refer to his model use it to make tangential references to rising issue concerns, a number of efforts have been made to directly test Downs’s propositions about the cyclic nature of issue-attention. We have described several of those efforts here, especially those that test the existence of attention cycles in three different yet interconnected realms of public attention, media attention, and government attention. Judging from a majority of the results summarized, it is clear that Downs’s model of issue-attention cycle has fared positively. Most studies have found tentative support for the propositions that he put forth, but more importantly, his seminal work has inspired many scholars to build on his model in innovative ways. It is also impressive to look at the numerous directions his model has been taken, and the various subfields it has been applied to. Nonetheless, important questions still remain—what are the causal linkages between public attention, media attention, and government attention? While we have learnt a lot about these relationships from the studies done so far, questions about the nature of feedback loops from these attention cycles remain largely unanswered. Based on our reading of the literature, several directions for future elaboration and testing of models of the issue attention cycle research seem evident to us. Two in particular stand out: one is that scholars will need a more valid and reliable measure of public attention. The second is that policy scholars can gain more theoretical traction by integrating conceptions of public attention with more general models of policy process and change.

(p. 323) Measuring Public Attention

In the studies summarized, Downs’s issue-attention cycle has been tested using proxy measures of public attention. This is because the field is still struggling to find good measures for how the public thinks and what it is thinking about. Studies of public opinion have used (and continue to use) a wide variety of methods to measure public attention—nationwide MIP polls, media coverage, and inputs and outputs of governmental organizations. The studies testing Downs’s framework have followed the same path, in addition to using measures for tracking governmental activity on a particular issue. However, there are major theoretical and methodological issues with these most commonly used measurement techniques. For instance, MIP polls and other survey data used as a proxy of public attentiveness to an issue do not fully account for the dynamic nature of the attention cycle (Ripberger 2011). Surveys also artificially constrain the kinds of issues from which people are able choose to identify salience (McCombs and Zhu 1995; Newig 2004). Similarly, using media attention as a proxy for public attention presents theoretical challenges, such as conflating the media’s agenda with the public’s interests and concerns. Furthermore, it is not always clear which way the causal arrow points: does media attention drive public attention or vice versa? In an effort to avoid some of these pitfalls, new measures of public attentiveness should be considered.

Measures such as internet search trends (Google Trends) and social media outlets such as Twitter and Facebook may provide a closer and perhaps more realistic look at what and how much people are searching for a particular social issue online (Ripberger 2011). These kinds of measures will permit evaluation of issue attention change on a continuous basis, rather than periodic or sporadic measures. Real progress in hypothesis testing, we believe, will require utilization of such measures.

Integration with Broader Models of the Policy Process

Some of the most important theoretical developments in public policy and related fields have focused more broadly on policy change, in which public attention is but one (albeit important) variable explaining policy change. When broadly articulated, these models also provide insights into how variation in issue attention is related to other key variables in the social and policy context. Theoretical elaboration, and innovations in model definition and testing, can be accomplished by assessing whether the issue-attention cycle can be coupled with these more general models.

For example, scholars in the fields of communication and psychology have developed a useful framework for study of the “social amplification of risk” in which certain kinds of issues (those involving a potential threats that evoke high perceived risks) can be subject to very rapid escalation in issue attention because the potential threat has key psychological properties; because media attention is drawn to issues involving dire threats; and because interest groups concerned with such issues are primed to take advantage of events that activate high perceived risks among the public (Kasperson et al. 1988, 2000). This model places emphasis on the nature of the issue (and its perceived risk content) and the surrounding media and policy milieu in explaining rapid changes in the amplification (or dampening) of public attention. Other models, such as the advocacy coalition framework (ACF), place emphasis on the array of actors within subsystems who regularly follow and seek to change policies in accord with their enduring policy beliefs (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). Within these competing coalitions, mobilization of public interest and concern is a key variable in the struggle to shape policy. Perhaps the most ambitious and well-developed of the policy process theories, with respect to public attention, is the policy agendas project led by Baumgartner and Jones (1993, 2009). In that framework, the role of public attention has been conceptualized alongside policy “images,” both of which can be and are manipulated by policy actors seeking policy change. In all of these cases (and others) the question is of the *pattern* within which changing public attention can be explored as part of a larger system of related components in the public policy process. That approach provides issue-attention scholars with a rich fabric of concepts, relations, and operationalizations with which to work.

In sum, while Anthony Downs’s article on the issue-attention cycle has garnered substantial lasting attention among scholars, we believe there is ample room for continued theoretical and empirical development. In our view, the most promising

avenues involve better measures and better integration of the concept of issue-attention cycles with larger theories of public policy.

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Notes:

(1.) The analysis was based on citations in Google Scholar, which permits a year-by-year compilation of works citing a particular article. For each year, the listed works were sorted into articles, books/book chapters, and a "grey literature" consisting primarily of unpublished papers, reports, dissertations, and theses. Citations from the grey literature are not shown in Figure 22.1.

(2.) Note that the number of citations identified varies depending on the completeness of the descriptor in the Google Scholar search frame. In general, the more complete the descriptor, the smaller the returned number of listed citations. Our search term, derived after considerable experimentation, was specified as follows: A. Downs "Up and Down with ecology: the issue attention cycle".

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