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The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative: Cleaning Up Punctuated Equilibrium

Lindsey Juszczak

Nearly 30 million people rely on the Great Lakes for everyday needs like drinking water, along with conducting business in and around the Great Lakes (“Threats” 2010). The Great Lakes Restoration Initiative has a wide variety of projects that help improve the Great Lakes for people living in the area; one could also argue that maintaining the health of the Great Lakes is a national obligation, because the lakes are very unique to the United States. To see how this policy has progressed, the punctuated equilibrium model is explained and evaluated, using examples from newspapers and scholarly journals. Not every policy can have a perfect outcome, so that is why critiquing models, particularly the punctuated equilibrium model, is important to the creators of these models.

An executive order, the Great Lakes Interagency Task Force, was created by George Bush in 2004. President Bush’s executive order stated that the Great Lakes region was a “national treasure” that needed to be protected. Over 140 federal programs were put in place by Bush to alleviate the environmental and resource management issues occurring in the Great Lakes region. The federal government has to make sure that the agencies working on this policy should have appropriate funding (“Great Lakes Interagency Task Force” 2012). In 2005, the Great Lakes Regional Collaboration Strategy was established, which gave recommendations for where the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative should focus and prioritize projects. Of the members involved with the GLRI, a variety of backgrounds from employees brought several outlooks on how to implement the policy in locations near the Great Lakes region (“GLRI History” 2011). With the newly elected president, Obama gave the GLRI \$475 million from the budget in 2009, letting the policy expand more. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife service, also known

as USFWS, received \$65 million to help with the GLRI in 2010. In the same year, a plan running through 2014 was released (“GLRI History” 2011).

From the beginning, the GLRI’s primary goals were to clean up toxins in the Great Lakes, along with the streams, rivers, and lakes that emptied into the Great Lakes, as well as finding a way to prevent the run-offs from continually being polluted. The GLRI is also responsible for overseeing all projects and educating individuals who are employed in any agency that will work on projects provided by the GLRI (“Priorities”). Improving sewage treatment and reviving wetlands are a couple of other goals that the GLRI wishes to seek (“Threats” 2010). However, it was not until recently that the GLRI responded to combating invasive species, particularly the giant Asian carp (“Priorities”).

Goals of the GLRI are effects of punctuations, distinct stopping points, from the punctuation equilibrium model to describe how the policy is carried out by various members of Congress, President Obama and his cabinet members, and the public, who can be passionate about protecting the Great Lakes. Policies are usually broken down into steps or increments that occur very slowly over several years. The punctuated equilibrium model has distinct stopping points, also known as punctuations, such as new technology, new issues, elections, and crises that can cause a significant change in policies (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). Causal stories can be related to punctuated equilibrium, because defining starting and stopping points that affect a policy can be falsified or interpreted in various ways by stories from politicians, reporters, and individuals in the public. A series of small, baby steps occur to shape policies based on the punctuation provided. For example, during even years, elections can change how a policy is implemented; a politician’s ultimate goal is reelection, so becoming very liberal on environmental issues is not helpful for being reelected. At that point, politicians can refuse to

vote on budgets regarding environmental policies, which effect the fulfillment of policies, otherwise known as a punctuation. National disasters, like Hurricane Sandy, are punctuations that can refocus the policy makers' ideas on establishing and executing climate change policies from the evaluation from scientists, politicians, and the public. The research and concern for climate change are stopping points, punctuations, in this particular scenario that will define and shape climate change policy in the coming years. Three striking punctuations shaped the GLRI into the way projects are presented and conducted: an ambitious president elected in 2008, money in the federal budget, and new concerns in the Great Lakes.

Newly-elected, ambitious president

President Obama wanted several agencies to link together to solve the environmental issues continuing in the Great Lakes region. Goals of the GLRI at this point in time are concerned about the health of the environment, the United States population, and the economy. Cleaning shorelines, removing toxins, and decreasing the pollution in rivers and creeks connected to the Great Lakes are the highest priority for the GLRI (Landers 2010: 26). The amount of funding from 2005 to 2009 increased immensely, allowing the agencies to experiment with different means to clean and protect the Great Lakes region. All goals are set in place for the year 2014, such as cleaner drinking water, resource management, reducing sediments within the Great Lakes, and reducing the population of invasive species (Landers 2010: 27).

With a new president in office, President Obama has different goals than the previous president. The shift of parties, Republican to Democratic, can really increase or decrease the chances of the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative to succeed. Environmental issues were on the agenda for President Obama at the beginning of his presidency; he was hopeful for solving environmental problems that link to a unique region in the United States. Obama's hopefulness

of the future allowed policy makers and the public to make that step toward having cleaner and safer Great Lakes. It is clear that the current President has an incremental or punctuated effect on environmental policy, especially when it comes to the GLRI, because he is thinking about the future of the Great Lakes. Future projects of the GLRI must be taken in steps to receive the ultimate rewards in protecting the Great Lakes. A president may have influence when it comes to initiating and implementing policy, but the budget is just as important. It's more important that there is consensus between the two political parties, especially on environmental policy.

President's budget has money to support GLRI

In 2012, Obama doctored \$300 million for the GLRI, and planned to give this program just as much or more money in the next few years as president. Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin have benefited and improved the areas surrounding the Great Lakes in the past few years to a \$1 billion program. Even in difficult times, President Obama has tried his hardest to find the means to fund such a large restoration program. The investment in cleaner and safer lakes will save money over time; finding a short-term solution will only set back the high priority of protecting the Great Lakes under the GLRI (Lubetkin 2012).

President Obama's new budget and plan have clear starting or stopping points that will shape the GLRI in years to come. It is a slow process of gaining support from all Congressmen and Congresswomen, but in the long-term advantages, the country is saving money by investing in cleaning the Great Lakes for future generations. A new budget, laying out a plan for the federal government is one step closer to actually fixing the Great Lakes environmental and resource management problems. It is also important to see that money pumped into the GLRI has worked, since it has improved conditions in eight different Great Lake states; this shows that a

punctuation of adding more money to the system is beneficial. This one increment could shape how policymakers decide on what to do when it comes to the GLRI, as well as how the public will react to changes.

Research shows there are more stressors to the Greats Lakes

Some stressors that wear out the Great Lakes are development, climate change, pollution, and hostile species. In this study, scientists put together a map of the Great Lakes, indicating which sections of the lakes had higher levels of stressors, showing that these stressors cause environmental issues. The research concluded that Lake Erie is affected most by stressors in the environment compare to the rest of the lakes. Lake Erie has roughly 20 more stressors due to run-off pollution, polluted sentiments, and harmful species (Williams 2012).

Mapping out the problem gives policymakers and agencies the information they need to fine-tune the processes they use to restore the Great Lakes, which is a clear stopping point for the policy. With the research presented, agencies know where the problem areas are located, making those regions the first targets for improvement. Also, the agenda of the GLRI would be adjusted to fit the needs of the Great Lakes. This is just one step that is taking the policy to the next level, to hopefully reach the ultimate goal of a restoring and protecting the Great Lakes.

The examples presented fit the punctuated equilibrium fairly well, but not as easily as they should have. Punctuated equilibrium is more like causal stories than anticipated; it depends on what types of sources are used to fit the model, and what stories are presented in the source. Also, finding stories online that are unbiased is a major feat. In the first example discussed, the author says that President Obama was going to take a “huge leap forward” (Landers 2010: 28). A biased opinion is evident in this case. This example was hard to fit into the policy model for this reason, since punctuated equilibrium is based on instrumentalism. A huge leap forward is not the

same as baby steps, which is what punctuated equilibrium requires. Maybe the authors, Baumgartner and Jones, should think about revamping their policy model, so it can fit all situations better. A newer, updated definition of what an increment and punctuation is be considered by Baumgartner and Jones. Yet, people will continue to have their own definitions of instrumentalism and punctuation; it just depends on the person. Overall, the model works well, but it just needs to be reconstructed to fit all scenarios.

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