Editorial Board

General Editors

Bertrand Badie
Institut d'études politiques (Sciences Po)
Paris, France

Dirk Berg-Schlosser
Philipps-Universität Marburg
Marburg, Germany

Leonardo Morlino
LUISS Guido Carli
Rome, Italy

Associate Editors

Nathaniel Beck
New York University
New York City, New York, United States

Walter Carlsnaes
Uppsala University
Uppsala, Sweden

Takashi Inoguchi
University of Niigata Prefecture
Tokyo, Japan

B. Guy Peters
University of Pittsburgh
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, United States

Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC

SAGE | reference

Developed in partnership with the International Political Science Association.
Contents
Agenda Setting

For any decisions to be made in the political system, an issue must be placed on the active agenda of government. In political science, agenda setting is an important topic for the analysis of collective choice, an issue must be placed on the active agenda for resolution, as discussed extensively by Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones. This portion of the literature discussing agenda setting considers the political and social mechanisms through which problems are identified and then politicized. This literature reflects the strong political role of agendas in making policy.

The agenda-setting literature also has pointed to the varieties of different agendas that exist in the public sector and the manner in which issues are moved on and off these agendas. The systemic agenda represents all those issues that are deemed appropriate for the public sector to take into account, whether or not they are being actively considered. The institutional agendas are those that are being acted on, or at least actively considered, at any point of time. Furthermore, there are important political considerations concerning which institutions constitute the foci for the political activity around any issue. Some political systems, for example, federal systems and those with active court systems, provide would-be agenda setters greater opportunities than do those with fewer points of access.

For an issue to become public policy, it must pass through several different institutions. In most democratic systems, issues must go through the legislature, and often committees within the legislature, although the source of the issue may have been the bureaucracy or the political executive, or perhaps interest groups. Then the issue, once acted on, will have to go to the bureaucracy for implementation and then perhaps to the courts for adjudication. These movements may occur as a normal part of political life but generally require some forms of political impetus for them to occur.

The agenda-setting literature has also focused on the roles of policy entrepreneurs in the process of making policy. Issues do not move on and off agendas on their own but require individual actors who foster their development and their adoption. These entrepreneurs have to be prepared when “windows of opportunity” open that permit issues that might otherwise be excluded to come to the active political agenda.

Analytic Models of Agenda Setting and Agenda Control

The second approach to agendas and agenda setting has focused on the influence that agendas and the manipulation of agendas have on the outcomes of deliberative processes. Traditionally, agendas and agenda formation have played a prominent role since the 20th century in analytical political science, which investigates the power of agenda setters in the collective decision-making process. For democratic governance, agenda-setting power can undermine the democratic process when the agenda setter has dictatorial power in manipulating the aggregation of individual preferences to collective outcomes. According to the social choice and legislative analysis literatures, a major preclusion for this threat of dictatorial agenda-setting power is the instability of collective outcomes under specific democratic voting rules, which may allow an agenda setter to manipulate (or hinder from manipulating) them. Irrespective of the instability of collective outcomes, bargaining theories and logrolling approaches also emphasize the importance of agenda setting when it creates a bargaining advantage for the first mover. In other words, actors who can make the first moves in bargaining are often the ones who are able to shape the final outcomes of the process.

According to Kenneth Joseph Arrow (1951), most theoretical work on agenda-setting power originates in social choice theory that focuses on the (in)stability of collective outcomes in democratic systems, which results from the aggregation of actors’ individual preferences under specific democratic voting rules. With regard to the paradox of voting, Duncan Black (1948) and others, such as William Riker, have found that collective outcomes result from the interaction preferences of the actors involved in decision making and the structure of the agenda, that is, how policy alternatives are ordered in the decision-making process of democracies. This has important implications for the democratic nature of collective outcomes and the power of the agenda setter who controls the decision-making process and the voting sequence of the actors involved. Under majority rule, this power is restricted only when a median voter guarantees the stability of collective outcomes in the aggregation of actors’ individual preferences.

In many decision-making situations, however, the median voter hardly exists. The existence of a median voter requires that actors with single-peaked preferences vote sincerely on an ordered single dimension. Put differently, the existence of a median voter is unlikely when preferences are not single peaked, when more than one dimension exists, or when actors vote strategically. From these restrictive conditions, under which alone the median voter theorem holds, early studies such as Black (1948) show that an agenda setter is able to achieve any outcome under majority rule. This insight on the dictatorial power of agenda setters applies more generally to all minimally democratic voting rules. Another insight from research on the (in)stability of collective outcomes is that—in policy spaces with more than one dimension—outcomes are almost always influenced by the characteristics of the decision-making processes. When instability of the collective outcome is common among the participants, democratic governance is highly threatened by dictatorial agenda setting.

This skeptical view on democratic governance has stimulated further discussion and research on the power of the agenda setters in collective decision making. More specifically, the crucial question has turned toward the extent to which an agenda setter can select and perhaps manipulate the decision-making process and, if so, what implications follow from this manipulation for collective outcomes. Some of the most influential developments

C. Politik & C. Talbot (Eds.), Unbounded government: A critical analysis of the global trend to agencies, quangos and contractualisation (pp. 3–21). London: Routledge.


Agenda Setting 49
in this vein of research come from studies of decision making in democratic legislatures. In these analyses, the focus is on who is able to draft and to amend legislative proposals that are finally adopted. On the most general level, this literature distinguishes between different legislative procedures by the level of institutional restrictions that define the power relationship between an agenda setter and the floor. More precisely, they find that two provisions often restrict the power of an agenda setter in democratic legislatures, the competitive right to initiate proposals and the amendment right on the floor of the legislature. In many democratic legislatures, every (individual, collective, or corporate) legislator has the right to draft a proposal, which can be adopted by the floor under either closed or open rule, the latter allowing for making amendments.

With regard to the findings in social choice theory, the power of the agenda setter is highest in legislatures without the competitive right of initiation, henceforth referred to as operating under closed rule. Under this condition, the agenda setter has complete control over drafting legislative proposals, and generally, there are limited options for amendments. However, in some legislatures, the right of initiative is indeed in the hands of a single legislator, and the agenda setter can produce any collective outcome. As Björn Rasch (2000) notes, theoretically, a large number of sequences are hardly observed in legislatures.

Another feature of the amendment process is that legislators often face the problem of selecting among several amendments. As Björn Rasch (2000) notes, theoretically, a large number of voting procedures exist for selecting among several amendments, but legislatures conventionally use two procedures: the successive procedure and the elimination procedure. In the successive procedure, legislators vote on each amendment separately and decide whether or not it should be adopted. If an amendment is adopted, the process ends; if it is rejected, the legislators vote on the next amendment in the specified order. In the elimination procedure, the legislators pairwisely compare and vote on amendments. The rejected amendment is dropped, and the remaining is matched against the next amendment for a vote, and so on. Under both procedures, legislators can make amendments, but the sequence of voting (and the control thereof) can highly influence the collective outcome. As under closed rule, an agenda setter can manipulate the collective outcome by determining the voting sequence when legislators vote sincerely. In general, amendments can make amendments unlikely. To the extent that the agenda setter can produce any collective outcome when legislators vote sincerely, the scope of manipulation is often restricted when extreme outcomes are much more difficult to achieve. A major reason for this difficulty is that the voting sequence usually becomes very long and complicated when collective outcomes hardly match with the preferences of the legislative majority. In practice, as Rasch (2000) notes, such complicated sequences are hardly observed in legislatures.

Another argument against the importance of the instability of collective outcomes and the resulting dictatorial power of the agenda setter criticizes the different level of behavioral assumptions that are made for the agenda setter and the legislators, that is, when the former is assumed to behave strategically while the latter is expected to vote sincerely. When the same behavioral assumption is made and legislators also behave strategically, they can anticipate an outcome from the decision-making process, which means that agenda manipulation becomes much more difficult. Under these conditions, collective outcomes are located in the uncovered set, which generally corresponds to the preferences of legislators more closely.

According to Rasch (2000), in most (democratic) legislatures, the agenda setter can manipulate the sequence of voting that are controlled by a single actor. The responsibility for formulating the agenda is often delegated to the government of the day or to the speaker, but proposals can usually be amended by the parliament or the floor. Hence, when agenda formation is de facto made under open rules, the power of the agenda setter shrinks, and the set of feasible outcomes is restricted to the uncovered set. Given that result, most empirical analyses rarely support the skeptical view on the democratic nature of legislatures: The dictatorial power of the agenda setter is only derived from an inherent instability of outcomes: Cases in which such manipulations have been observed are exceptionally rare in the real world.

Another way to study agenda setting under open rules is to analyze the bargaining process. In this approach, the implications of open rules often follow the idea that legislators make alternating offers to each other and decide whether they should accept a proposal for a final vote on the floor or whether they should attempt to amend it. In this bargaining process, the legislators are commonly assumed to behave strategically and to make proposals that they believe are acceptable to others involved in the process. They still would, however, only make proposals that would maximize their
own benefit. A key feature of these bargaining models is that they assume that time is costly; that is, the benefits from reaching an early agreement are higher than those derived from reaching the same decision later. Hence, whenever an actor drafts a new proposal, the benefit is assumed to be lower than that derived from adopting the proposal of the earlier round, and so on. As a consequence, actors do not waste their time in infinite sequences of offers and counteroffers. This assumption is often sufficient to identify a solution from the agenda-setting process; that is, when no actor has an incentive to amend a proposal, then some generally acceptable solution has been reached.

This assumption about the process implies, however, that actors can benefit from making early proposals in decision-making situations. For the same reason, this also favors patient actors, who can better afford to make counterproposals in the long run. As David Baron and John Pefruehn (1989) note, under majority rule, first movers have an additional advantage in shaping their agenda because their proposal can affect the winning coalition that results from the negotiations. Irrespective of the instability of collective outcomes, bargaining theories also support the view on the importance of agenda setting in collective decision making. Apart from institutional features, these theories demonstrate that actor-specific characteristics, such as the impatience of legislators, have an important impact on which proposals come to a vote and who shapes the final outcome in the negotiations.

These insights into agenda setting are derived from fixed policy spaces, while another line of research addresses the question on how issue linkage or package dealing can change the decision-making process. According to Elmer Schattschneider (1960), from a strategic perspective, the de-agrarianization of particular issues in order to maximize their influence on collective outcomes. With regard to agenda setting, this maximization strategy can comprise several means: First, an agenda setter may bring issues to a vote on which he or she has a winning position, creating a "bandwagon" effect. Another strategy might be to introduce new issues into a policy space that others do not sufficiently address. Hence, issues may strategically be added or removed from the agenda by the agenda setter to reshuffle majorities in collective decisions. Following this idea, issues become prominent when the agenda setter is interested in their awareness.

Conclusion

These analyses of the literature on agendas suggest that analytical political science and political communication research can come together for a future common research agenda. The communication literature emphasizes the role of entrepreneurs and their contribution in shaping agendas. The analytic perspective adds an even more strategic sense and examines how the agenda setter can manipulate the political process to produce desired policy outcomes. These two perspectives are largely complementary but too infrequently are brought together in a more comprehensive analysis of the setting and manipulation of political agendas.

Thomas König and Dirk Jürge
University of Mannheim
Mannheim, Germany

See also Decision Making; Policy Process; Models of

Further Readings