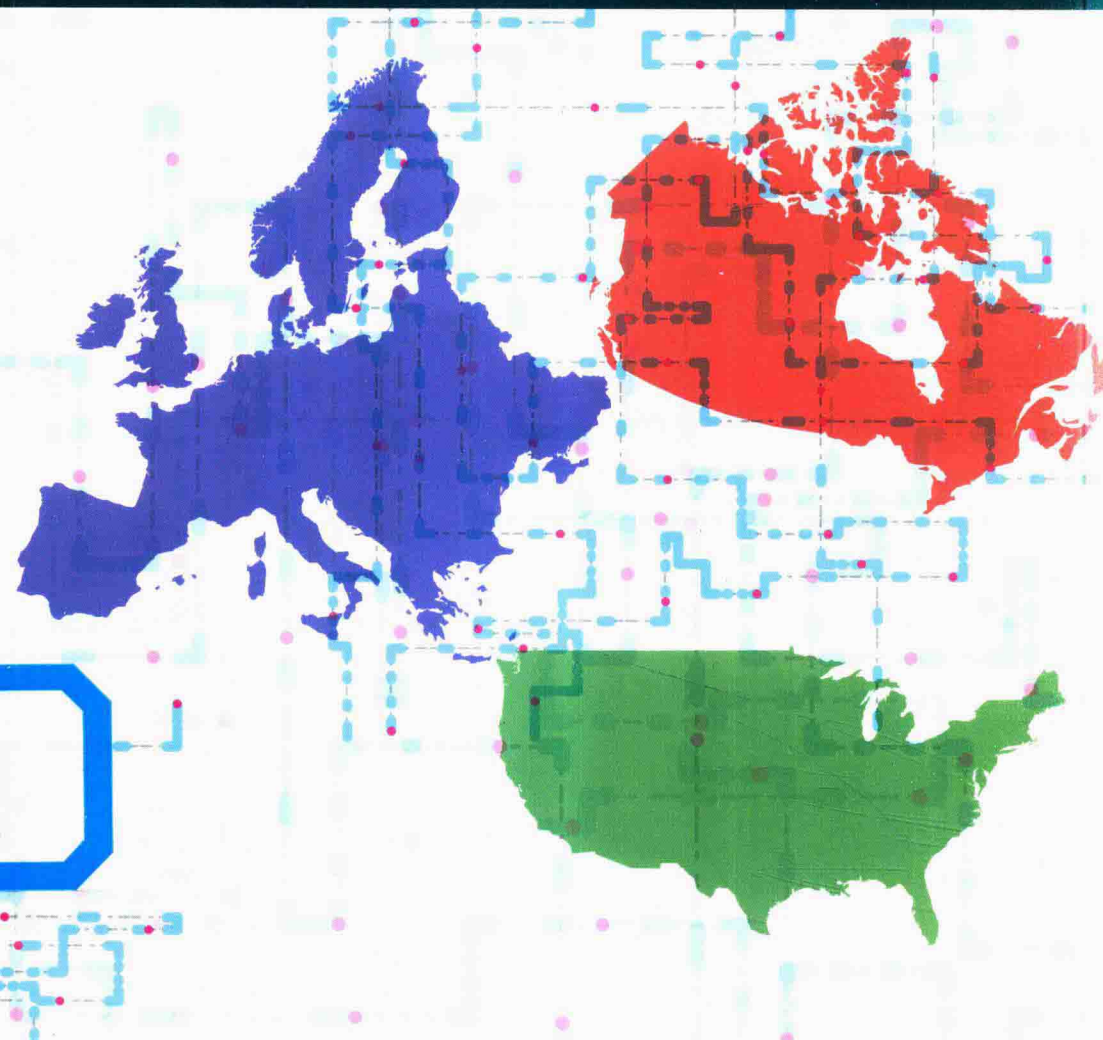# Agenda Setting, Policies, and Political Systems

A Comparative Approach

EDITED BY

Christoffer Green-Pedersen
and
Stefaan Walgrave

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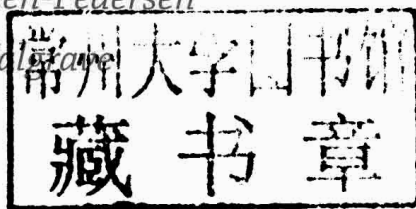*and Stefaan Walgrave*

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Agenda Setting, Policies, and Political Systems

Preface

This volume is the result of a lengthy collaborative effort on the part of several research teams in different countries. A group of European and American teams has been collaborating under the common banner of the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP; see www.comparativeagendas.info), which operates as an open network of scholars interested in political agenda-setting processes. The CAP has no formal leaders, no proper institutional structure, and no structural funding. Most teams acquired funding from their national agencies; others (Switzerland, Spain, the UK, Belgium) were funded through the European Science Foundation (ESF). This book would probably not have been produced without this generous support from the ESF.

The CAP has no rules, nor does it have a unified theory. What unites the participants is the simple idea that political attention to issues is a crucial process in politics, that this attention is scarce, and that it is consequential. Drawing on this straightforward core idea, the CAP country teams all gather similar data on political attention to issues in their own countries. The institutions whose issue attention is coded—the coded "agendas" in each country—vary according to the interest of the local research team and the available data (some code media, others demonstrations, still others government decisions, budgets, party manifestos, or parliamentary debates; all teams code bills and passed legislation). The covered periods also vary by country. Some agendas in some of the countries are coded as far back as to the period before World War II; other agendas are only coded for the last ten years or so. The variation is reflected in the country chapters, which cover widely different agendas and periods.

The core of the CAP's collaboration consists of a common coding scheme—basically a structured list of issues with a definition of each issue—and a few rules of how to issue-code political content (each record can get only a single issue code). Another CAP feature is a readiness to share data and a willingness to collaborate.

The CAP's research agenda is thus both very focused in its data gathering and very broad in its application to political-science puzzles. It is highly focused because it analyzes politics in terms of how attention to various policy

issues is allocated; at the same time, it is very broad because it uses this lens to analyze many different aspects of politics. The chapters testify to that.

The CAP network is strongly inspired by Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones's early work on U.S. agendas, and the national projects owe much to Frank and Bryan in terms of intellectual support in starting the projects. However, the CAP has developed into much more than a comparative test of the ideas presented in their work. For instance, testing the punctuated-equilibrium model is only one among many research questions addressed by CAP scholars. In this volume, it is not addressed at all.

The CAP network has generally moved much more in the direction of the traditional comparative-politics literature, which focuses on political parties, elections, and the workings of political institutions. The primary aim of this book is precisely to show the added value of addressing mainstream comparative politics questions by using a policy agenda–setting lens.

At the CAP network's regular meetings, coding problems are discussed, papers are presented, and plans for future collaboration or meeting venues are made. The idea for this book originated at the third yearly CAP meeting in The Hague in 2009, which was supported by Campus The Hague of Leiden University. The first versions of the chapters were discussed at the 2010 Seattle meeting and some final versions in 2011 in Catania. The book would not have been possible without those great yearly meetings among friendly colleagues and excellent scholars.

Not all CAPs were able to participate in this book; one that was excluded is a CAP on the EU (see www.policyagendas.eu). Furthermore, not all individual CAP members have contributed to the chapters in this book. In many countries other, "invisible" collaborators made contributions in the form of data gathering. We want to thank them for their help. Special thanks also to Frank Baumgartner for his help on this project and to Annette Andersen for excellent secretarial assistance. Thanks also to Rodney Powell and John Tryneski from the University of Chicago Press for their help throughout the process.

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Christoffer and Stefaan
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1 Political Agenda Setting: An Approach to Studying Political Systems

Christoffer Green-Pedersen and Stefaan Walgrave

T HE IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING POLITICAL AGENDAS—THE LIST of issues to which political actors devote their attention—was first argued by Bachrach and Baratz (1962) in their article on power and by Schattschneider (1960) in his book on American politics. The core idea uniting these two seminal pieces is that defining the locus of conflict, or winning the conflict of conflicts, is the key "second face" of power, which precedes the actual decision-making process (the "first face" of power). In other words, the authors argue that defining which issues should be at the center of political attention—the process of political agenda setting—is one of the most central processes in any political system. Political elites struggle to gain control over the political agenda, because this allows them to define the locus of political conflicts. What politics is about—the issues that enter the political agenda—not only directly (dis)advantages certain political actors compared to others (who can or cannot satisfy their constituencies), it also determines the scope of the conflict (which groups are involved), because it defines in what venues binding decisions are to be taken (and which actors are allowed to participate in the decision-making process). In other words, the issues that are included on the political agenda and those that are excluded, and the study of the process that leads to their inclusion or exclusion, are related to the core of political science. If political science is the study of who gets what when, and why, then the agenda-setting approach can contribute to the discipline because it studies issues' (what) rise and fall (when) to distinguish powerful from nonpowerful actors (who), and because it addresses the mechanisms through which issues gain or lose traction (why).

The idea of politics as a struggle for control over the political agenda raises a series of questions about the conditionality, mechanisms, and consequences of the process: How is the agenda-setting struggle affected by the character of political systems? What role do various actors such as political parties and interest groups play in the process? What is the effect of the size and urgency of real-world problems? And how does elites' ability to define

the locus of conflict affect a society's overall conflict structure? Thus, looking at the process of political agenda setting potentially forms the theoretical starting point for a whole research program on political systems. If defining the locus of conflict is a key process in any political system, and we think it is, studying this process would be a natural way to learn how political systems function and change over time. For example, if a country introduced a federal structure, studying how political agendas change would be an obvious way to study the consequences of devolution. Or, when new parties enter the party system, one could assess their influence by testing whether their presence changed the political agenda at all. The importance of studying the second face of power is widely recognized in political science. The article by Bachrach and Baratz (1962) is the most frequently cited article in the *American Political Science Review* ever (Stone 2006). Nevertheless, a research program on the role of political institutions, actors, and issues in agenda setting did not emerge out of the early agenda-setting literature.

What did emerge was a tradition of agenda research that focused on the role of agendas in policy-making (see, e.g., Cobb and Elder 1983; Kingdon 1995). The core of this policy-agenda tradition consists of case studies showing that an understanding of agenda dynamics is crucial for understanding how and why policy decisions are made. The tradition has provided immense insight into the dynamics of policy decision making and has had a long-lasting impact. Most central is the fact that real-world problems, policy-attention dynamics, and public policy are strongly linked. "Attention" is attention to something, and "something" means problems and solutions, that is, public policy. So, early agenda scholars' focus on policy decisions was not accidental; it was logical when one started to think about attention and its role in politics. A debate that started with Cobb and Elder (1983) is thus about the extent to which characteristics of specific policy issues matter for the policy process (Grossmann 2013). Early policy agenda scholarship also left an important conceptual legacy. Kingdon's (1995) concept of window of opportunities, for instance, is almost universally applied by policy scholars.

However, studies within this tradition have rarely touched upon the broader questions about the role of actors and institutions in political agenda setting. The focus on agendas was tied to specific policies and did not develop into a general framework for asking questions about political systems and political actors and how they relate to the struggle for attention. The object of the focus was policy processes, not politics. Therefore, this volume's first

aim is to show that examining the distribution over time of political attention to issues offers a potent framework within which to study politics in general, not only policy.

In fact, inspired by Baumgartner and Jones (1993 and 2009), agenda scholars have gradually started to move away from the policy focus and back toward broader questions about politics that were raised by Schattschneider and by Bachrach and Baratz. Typical policy questions were not abolished, and policy has not disappeared—studies of budgetary developments, for instance, still play an important role (Jones, Baumgartner, et al. 2009; Mortensen 2009). However, the literature has increasingly moved toward questions related to the politics of attention (Jones and Baumgartner 2005), beyond attention to policy. Agenda scholars have started to tackle the questions about political institutions and political actors that follow from the classic work of Schattschneider and Bachrach and Baratz but that until now have hardly been pursued by political science.

This does not imply that policy is forgotten in the shift of focus from policy to politics. "Attention" in this context means attention to specific issues; political actors are thus trying to address real-world problems connected with policy issues. This has implications for how political actors should be studied. Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (20010), Green-Pedersen and Stubager (2010), and Thesen (2013) show that the fact that governments are blamed by the media for whatever policy problems emerge means that governments are often forced to respond to issues raised by other political actors, such as opposition parties.

Accompanying the gradual change from policy to politics, other transformations testify to the broadening of the range of agenda research. To begin with, the scope of the research has increased. Not only were typical policy "output" agendas at the end of the policy cycle (e.g., budgetary and legislative) included, but gradually "input" agendas such as mass media coverage, party manifestos, and parliamentary questions or bills were scrutinized from an agenda perspective. At the same time, political-agenda scholars now increasingly focus on how political agendas interact with and influence each other.

Baumgartner and Jones's original work (1993) mainly assessed patterns of change and stability in attention and policies in relation to specific policy issues or policy questions such as those concerning tobacco, nuclear power, or pesticide use. These studies led to the formulation of the theory of punctu-

ated equilibrium, that is, the idea that in the development of policy there are long periods of stability followed by short periods of large changes before the return to a new, stable equilibrium. This idea, which originated in studies of American politics, has been tested comparatively (see Baumgartner, Breunig, et al. 2009; Jones, Baumgartner, et al. 2009) but is not part of this volume. None of the chapters addresses punctuatedness. Agenda work, also in this volume, has shifted toward the impact of political agendas on one another. How does issue attention "jump" from one agenda to the other, and how do agendas interact? This focus on the mechanisms of agenda change was of course present in the original work of Baumgartner and Jones. But with the explicit and direct focus on how agendas impact each other—for example, how media coverage leads to legislative activity—a gradual shift in focus from agendas to agenda setting has become manifest. The emphasis is on the process, the setting of the given agenda, rather than on the distribution of attention on a given agenda, and its change over time.

This captures the book's second aim, namely to scrutinize the mechanism of agenda setting, not just agenda evolution, and thus attempt to understand the process. Many chapters directly study the process by which issues gain and lose traction by examining how agendas influence each other. Other chapters examine structural breaks or institutional change and their impact on the distribution of attention. In a sense, all chapters follow a causal logic, focus on the process of agenda setting, and try to explain why specific issues rise and fall.

The present volume differs from and contributes to the agenda literature and to political science in a third way. We explained above that early policy-agenda work quite narrowly focused on policy decision making; slowly the emphasis shifted to general politics and to the mechanisms of political agenda setting. In this volume, and we believe it is a first, we employ the political agenda–setting approach to political systems as a whole. As we argue below, we use the agenda lens not to understand why a specific decision has been taken or to examine the power of a specific actor, but rather to measure and understand critical features of each of the political systems under study. Agenda-setting processes are present in the entire political process, and by zooming in on these processes we can assess the streams of influence within a political system. By looking at agenda dynamics we attempt to get a better grasp on how a political system works. In other words, our real units of analysis are eleven political systems—not their issues, agendas, or decisions.

This focus on the system level further broadens the scope of political agenda setting considerably and gears it up to make it a more general perspective on politics. The focus of this volume is much more in line with Baumgartner and Jones's (2013) work after 2000, which examines the entire policy agenda and how it is related to political institutions and the development of political systems.

Finally, the volume goes beyond the quite narrow focus on the United States that has been so typical for early agenda work. All of the above-cited foundational authors examined the United States. The dispersion of the agenda-setting approach outside the United States has contributed to the current boom in agenda studies. This volume testifies to the fact that an agenda approach—examining shifts in political attention over time as they are caused by the agendas of other actors, by institutional changes, and by events—fares well outside the United States. This comparative angle is the fourth characteristic of the essays collected in this volume.

In what follows, we do three things. First, we outline how the classic insights into the importance of agenda setting have developed into a theoretically coherent research program. Obviously there is quite a gap between Bachrach and Baratz's (1962) argument about the second face of power or Schattschneider's (1960) idea about the conflict of conflicts and empirical research on agenda setting, which tackles the functioning of entire political systems. This may explain why research on political systems based on agenda-setting ideas has been slow to emerge. Scholars of agenda setting have tried to bridge this gap theoretically, and we lay out the steps.

Second, the chapter explains that agenda setting is not only a theoretical account but also entails a specific empirical perspective and a distinct methodology for tackling questions about the politics of attention. The core of the approach is a strong focus on issues and on the shifts over time in attention to issues.

Third, we discuss how the approach to studying political systems from an agenda-setting perspective differs from the way political science more broadly has examined the functioning of political systems. The dynamics of political systems and the functioning of political institutions are core issues in political science and have been widely researched based on other theoretical approaches. The contribution of the agenda-setting approach to studying political systems can thus be specified by showing how it differs from these other approaches.

Political Attention Is Scarce and Consequential

The key starting point of agenda setting is twofold: political attention is scarce, and it is consequential. That political attention is consequential means, at the most reductive level, that it is a precondition for political change. The idea that attention is a scarce resource may seem trivial at first sight, but it has many implications. Political actors and their agendas are bound by their carrying capacity. One can thus talk about a "bottleneck of attention" (Jones and Baumgartner 2005, 15–17). The ability of any actor or institution to address issues is constrained. The time, energy, personnel, motivation, money, expertise, logistics, and the like available for attending to issues are limited. But the number of issues or problems begging for political attention is practically infinite. In any society, an endless array of problems, accidents, events, solutions, and so on beg for political attention. This mismatch between an "endless" society and a "limited" political system turns the political prioritization of issues—the choice to attend to an issue at the expense of other possible issues—into a key political process.

The selection of issues that deserve political attention determines all further steps in the political process. When issues are not noticed, political actors do not develop preferences to deal with them, the public does not care about them, interest groups do not bother with them, solutions to the problems are not formulated, political pressure does not mount, and no decision regarding the issue will be taken. In short, without political attention the status quo is extended. (Naturally, the status quo can also prevail even when attention to an issue is raised.) This is why political attention is not only a scarce resource, but also is consequential and a precondition for political action. Both elements are intimately related; attention is scarce because it is a precondition for political action, and vice versa. In short, attention is the gate to politics.

Consequently, the prioritization of attention is a central effect of political institutions and a central goal of political actors. This is basically what Schattschneider (1960) meant when he focused on the scope of conflict and what is implied in Bachrach and Baratz's (1962) second face of power. For instance, if an issue moves from attracting limited attention to being a key political issue, new actors (with other preferences) become involved, electoral concerns (and the preferences expressed through them) become increasingly important for political parties, the media become more interested, and so on. Agenda setting is about how political institutions and the

political elites that inhabit those institutions turn societal conditions into political problems.

The main question, then, becomes why political actors devote attention to some issues and ignore others. This is the underlying question all political agenda-setting work addresses one way or another. The answer most agenda-setting scholars have given is tied to the concept of *information* (Jones and Baumgartner 2005, 55–85; Baumgartner, Jones, and Wilkerson 2011; Baumgartner and Jones 2013). Political actors get continuous and unlimited information about all kinds of problems that exist in the real world, and these actors are supposed to attend to these problems and solve them (after all, this is what politics is expected to do). It is impossible, students of agenda setting hold, to understand what is going on in politics without taking into account what happens in society. Politics reacts to the real world and to incoming information about the state of affairs in the real world. Politics is about problems—not in the sense of being a matter of rational responses to objective problems, but in the sense of how conditions become political problems to which politicians try to deliver solutions. Thus the nature and development of the policy problems themselves are important for politics. How can one, for instance, understand the Obama presidency by just focusing on his preferences and the American political system without paying attention to such real-world challenges as the financial crisis, the war in Afghanistan, climate change, or the BP oil spill? Since information on problems in the real world is in principle endless, actors and institutions filter incoming information in order not to get swamped. Political actors are either constantly fighting *against* "issue intrusion" as these new issues threaten to overthrow their present priorities or are fighting *for* issue intrusion as they attempt to garner attention for other issues. As we explained, agenda-setting studies have moved away from policy change as the dependent variable toward studying political attention dynamics, but this does not imply that public policy no longer plays a role in many agenda-setting studies. Attention is attention to policy issues; this is a crucial premise (Baumgartner et al. 2006; Baumgartner and Jones 2013).

This brings us to the second driver of issue prioritization, namely political actors' *preferences*. Arguably, most agenda-setting work has incorporated political actors' preferences much less than issue information. Because information is limitless, actors select the issues they let through their attention gates. Part of this selection process is nondeliberate and unconscious— actors simply have physical and cognitive limits to the attention they can

yield—but another part of the selection process is deliberate and based on issue preferences. Actors' preferences are important because they are interested in the allocation of attention to certain issues rather than others: their ideology encourages them to attend to an issue, their supporters care about an issue, they can improve their standing by increased attention to an issue, or they can weaken their competitors when they can generate political attention to a certain issue. Yet, no actor controls the entire agenda-setting process. Further, actors' preferences interact with incoming information: new information may lead to preference updates or to the activation of latent preferences, while preferences filter the information that is let through the gates (Vliegenthart, Walgrave, and Zicha 2013; Baumgartner and Jones 2013). Increasing attention to an issue may even lead to the emergence of new political actors that embody distinct preferences linked to the new issue. The increasing attention to the environment, for example, has resulted in the emergence of green parties in many party systems.

The third factor determining what issues will be attended to is the *institutions* in a political system. Institutions impose rules of collaboration and competition. Political actors are embedded in institutions whose rules constrain the attention actors can extend to issues within those institutions. Institutions create free attention space that begs to be filled with attention, just as they limit the amount of attention that can be spent in a given institution. For example, the weekly question time in many parliamentary institutions creates both an institutional and a regular opportunity for issue attention, but it also restricts this space to a few hours of deliberation time and, consequently, to a limited number of questions to be tabled by each party or MP. Institutions are the venues where preferences and information clash. They constitute different arenas for generating attention to issues. This leads to questions about how different political systems are more or less open in terms of the number of venues they offer for actors to generate attention to issues. At the same time, venues are not neutral. Courts are, for instance, a different political venue from a Parliament or an executive; entry rules, the available space, and the consequences of juridical action differ from those in Parliament or the executive branch.

Summing up, the core of agenda-setting theory is that political attention is scarce and consequential. This makes investigating political attention crucial for understanding politics. In trying to understand why actors devote attention to certain issues, agenda setting puts forward several determinants: information about real-world problems in society, the issue preferences of

political actors, and the institutional venues that allow or constrain political attention.

Issues as "Tracer Liquid": Tracking Attention to Issues through Time to Learn about Political Systems

The next question is how these broad theoretical ideas can be translated into specific empirical designs that can provide insights into the dynamics of political systems. Agenda-setting theory comes with a distinct methodological approach. We argue that this typical design makes it possible to learn about political systems, their institutions, and the role of specific actors.

The main feature of the typical political agenda-setting design is its dedicated focus on attention to issues. The agenda-setting approach analyzes political systems through the lens of issues. The idea is that we can learn about political systems by systematically focusing on how they process issues. The basic unit of analysis of almost all agenda-setting studies is the issue(s). This issue focus is the logical consequence of the assumption that politics somehow reacts to incoming information from society about real-world problems. By following how issues flow through the system—how issue attention by one actor or institution is followed by and leads to issue attention by another actor or institution—agenda setting enables us to measure streams of influence and locate power within political systems. Focusing on issues in politics is comparable to, in the medical world, injecting a tracer liquid into a living body to measure the circulation of fluids and determine any deficiencies therein. Zooming in on issues allows us to lay bare the interactions and dynamics between different institutions and actors—how they are linked, affect each other, ignore each other, and catch up later. In other words, focusing on issues allows us to study agenda setting, the crucial process of winnowing the number of potential issues to a workable amount of issues.

Naturally, the scope of the approach remains confined to issue attention; it does not deal with which decisions are taken or which solutions are adopted. Yet, precisely by limiting its scope to issue attention only, agenda setting yields the analytical rigor needed to incorporate many different political actors' behavior and many different types of behavior into a single analytical framework. Agenda setting allows us to investigate relations of influence between very different types of actions, such as demonstrating, budgeting, legislating, asking questions, covering news events, drafting bills, negotiating agreements, and the like. By focusing on issues, the approach not