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Agendas: Political

The political agenda is the set of issues that are the subject of decision making and debate within a given political system at any one time. Significant research specifically on the topic of agenda setting, as opposed to decision making, dates mostly from the 1960s. Early studies of agenda setting were quite controversial because they were often presented as critiques of the pluralist studies of the 1950s and 1960s. Truman (1951) mostly ignored the issue of who set the agenda of political debate. Dahl (1956) discusses the matter in mentioning that ensuring that no group have control over the range of alternatives discussed within the political system is a requisite for democracy. In his study of New Haven he explicitly raises the question of agenda setting, noting that with a permeable political system virtually all significant issues would likely come to the attention of the elites. 'Because of the ease with which the political stratum can be penetrated, whenever dissatisfaction builds up in some segment of the electorate party politicians will probably learn of the discontent and calculate whether it might be converted into a political issue with an electoral pay-off' (Dahl 1961, p. 93). In Dahl's view, then, any issue with a significant potential following in the public would likely find an elite-level champion, though he also notes that issues with no large-scale electoral pay-off might never enter the agenda.

1. Conflict Expansion

E. E. Schattschneider (1960) focused attention on how political debates often grow from the conflict of two actors, the more disadvantaged of whom may have an incentive to 'socialize' the conflict to a broader political arena. Of course, the more advantaged disputant strives to 'privatize' the conflict. Schattschneider was one of the first to note that the composition of the political agenda was itself a fundamental part of the political process, and he was the first to give it a prominent role in his view of the political system. By around 1960, then, scholars had firmly noted the importance of the study of the political agenda as an important area of research.

After the critique of Schattschneider (1960), scholars were less willing to take the composition of the agenda for granted. Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz (1962) provided one of the most telling critiques of pluralism when they noted that studies of decision-making, power, and influence were misleading. Their aptly titled article, 'The two faces of power,' noted that the 'first face' of power, the authority to choose between alternatives, may be less important than the 'second face' of power, the ability to control what alternatives are under discussion in the first place. Whereas Dahl and others saw this as a relatively open process, where any social group with a legitimate problem that could potentially be converted into votes in an election could gain access to the political agenda, others saw the process in a decidedly more negative light. Following Bachrach and Baratz, many scholars attempted to study not just governmental decision making, as the pluralists had done, but also non-decisions, or agenda control, as well. For example, Matthew Crenson (1971) noted that air pollution was rarely discussed in public or government in one city despite a very serious pollution problem. In another similar city with much less pollution, however, public and governmental leaders discussed it often and took steps to combat it. The reason behind the difference in the behavior between the two cities appeared to be the ability of powerful economic interests to control the agenda. John Gaventa (1980) followed this study with an analysis of poverty-stricken Appalachian towns and the 'quiescence' characterizing the demobilized populations there. These agenda theorists argued that power was most evident when objective conditions of suffering were not the subject of debate. Bachrach and Baratz (1962), Crenson (1971), and Gaventa (1980) raised important issues and directly challenged the relatively optimistic views of the pluralists but did not convince, all because of the difficulty of discerning exactly what would be a neutral political agenda. In other words, it was hard to know what findings would demonstrate elite control and what findings would demonstrate democratic openness; in this situation two scholars looking at the same findings could disagree forever (and they did; see Baumgartner and Leech 1998, chap. 3, for a discussion of these issues relating to the community power studies of the 1950s and 1960s; see also Polsby's (1980) treatment of these methodological issues).

2. The Development of a Literature

Roger Cobb and Charles Elder (1972), in the first book-length treatment of the political agenda, noted the difference between the systemic agenda, defined as the group of issues that were under discussion in society, and the institutional agenda, or the set of issues being discussed in a particular government institution (see also Cobb et al. 1976). Since then, scholars have variously written about the public agenda, the media agenda, the legislative agenda, and any number of other agendas as they have focused on different political institutions.

More recent studies of agenda setting have moved away from the concepts of nondecisions and power because of the difficulties inherent in designing rigorous research on the topic. Instead, scholars have

focused on the rise and fall of issues on the public or institutional agendas and how decision making during high salience periods differs from the more routine decision making that takes place when an issue is low on an agenda. Jack Walker (1977) provided one of the first statistically based studies in the area with his analysis of the US Senate's agenda. He noted that issues often rose on the Senate's agenda following heightened levels of discussion within professional communities.

John Kingdon's (1984) treatment of the public agenda set the stage for much of our current understanding of where issues come from. He emphasized the separate sources of policy problems from the solutions that may be offered to them. Government programs, he noted, come about when a given solution is attached to a particular problem, and his analysis of health care and transportation policies in the USA showed just how unpredictable these couplings can be. Political actors' search for popular issues, windows of opportunity open and close, stochastic events such as natural disasters or airplane crashes momentarily focus public attention on an issue. The confluence of many unrelated factors, often serendipitous, helps explain why a given policy is adopted, according to his study. Kingdon's (1984) was the first major book-length study on the topic since Cobb and Elder's (1972), and it was based on hundreds of interviews with government and other policymakers in the 1970s and 1980s. (Polsby 1984 also reached many of these conclusion in a book appearing in the same year as Kingdon's.)

Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones (1993) provided the next major treatment of political agendas in their analysis of nine different policy areas over a 40-year period. Utilizing publicly available sources such as media indices and records of congressional hearings, they noted how particular issues rose and fell on the agenda over the entire post-World War II period. They developed a punctuated equilibrium model of policy change in which episodic periods of high agenda status typically were related to dramatic and long-lasting policy changes. During these high-salience periods, institutional procedures were often created or altered. The subsequent ebbing of the issue from the public agenda enabled the newly empowered political institutions and policymakers to settle into stable routines of behavior persisting for decades at a time. Agenda setting was related to dramatic changes, often upsetting long-standing routines of behavior and power by replacing them with new ones.

3. Issue Definition

Studies of agenda setting have often focused on the question of issue definition. Echoing a major theme in Baumgartner and Jones (1993), David Rochefort and Roger Cobb (1994) brought together a number of essays showing how public understanding and media discussion of a given issue can change over time, often quite dramatically. Deborah Stone (1988) also discussed this in her analysis of 'causal stories.' Policy entrepreneurs frame issues by explaining the causes of a given problem with a narrative justifying a particular governmental response. Book-length studies of the issues of child abuse (Nelson 1984), pesticides (Bosso 1987), health care reform (Hacker 1997), and various natural and human-made disasters (Birkland 1997) have shown the impact of changing issue definitions and of focusing events in pushing an issue on to the public agenda. Roger Cobb and Marc Howard Ross (1997) brought together a series of essays on the rarely studied topic of 'agenda denial,' whereby political actors keep threatening issues off the agenda.

William Riker (1986, 1988, 1993, 1996) showed the importance of two related issues: the ability of strategically minded politicians to alter the terms of debate by skillfully manipulating issue definitions, and the power of formal agenda control. A voluminous literature in formal and game theory suggests that the controller of a formal agenda can affect the outcomes in a voting situation by altering the order in which alternatives are considered. Riker used game theory to illustrate how formal agenda control can affect such things as votes in a parliamentary setting, and case studies and historical illustrations to show how political leadership could be even more powerful through the means of altering issue definitions. Political leaders can utilize a combination of formal agenda control and informal debating skills to achieve their ends, according to Riker.

4. Social Movements and the Media

A number of scholars have noted that social movements have often successfully brought new issues onto the public agenda. Thomas Rochon's (1998) analysis of the peace movement in various Western countries fits in this tradition, as does the work of Douglas McAdam (1988), whose study of the Mississippi Freedom Summer documented the success of civil rights activists in putting the issue of racial equality on the national political agenda during the mid-1960s.

Studies of the media agenda have been legion, largely following from the early work of Max McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972); for a review of this literature, see Rogers and Dearing (1988). Bernard Cohen (1963) noted famously that while the media cannot tell the public what to think, they can have a great impact on what the public think about. Within political science, several authors have picked up on the issue of media effects on public opinion (Iyengar 1991, Iyengar and Kinder 1987). James Stimson (1991) noted the changes in a broadly measured national mood based on public opinion surveys; John Kingdon (1984) also put considerable emphasis on the national mood in his study of agenda setting in government. As

policymakers consider what issues to spend their time on, Kingdon (1984) noted they often make reference to the idea of a national mood.

Studies of the political agenda have been remarkable in political science for their integrative character: rather than focusing on any particular institution of government, scholars have traced the sources of agenda setting in the public, in the roles of interest groups and social movements, by noting the roles of policy entrepreneurs, and by looking at the government in very broad terms. Of course this does not mean that political leaders play an insignificant role. From the work of Richard Neustadt (1960) onwards students of the US Presidency have noted the need for presidents to focus their energy on a few issues (see Light 1982; for a similar study of congressional leadership see Bader 1996). Studies of the Supreme Court have noted the extremely tight control that the Court maintains over its agenda, as well as the characteristics of the cases that it is most likely to take. The Court, of course, is unusual among political institutions in that its agenda is reactive rather than proactive. Congress or the President can reach out to discuss whatever issues appeal to them; the Court can only choose from the issues that are presented for its decision (see Perry 1984, Caldeira and Wright 1988).

5. Conclusion

In sharp contrast to two generations ago, research on political agendas is vibrant and promising today. Though much of the work has been done within the context of US politics, comparative studies have become more common (see Hogwood 1987, Baumgartner 1989, Reich 1991, Zahariadis 1995, John 1998). New sources of quantitative data on public attitudes, government archives, and media coverage promise more systematic studies covering a greater range of issues over a longer time period than was typically possible in the past. Studies of political agendas are now firmly established as an important part of the field of political science now some 40 years after the concept was first discussed.

See also: Community Power Structure; Issue Evolution in Political Science; Power: Political; Utility and Subjective Probability: Empirical Studies

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Aggregation: Methodology

Aggregation is a technique that is utilized in various disciplines in the social sciences. A basic definition of aggregation is combining data from members or subordinate units of a larger, superordinate category in order to describe the superordinate category. In the social sciences aggregation typically involves obtaining data from or about individuals and combining these data into a summary statistic that would serve to characterize a larger, well-defined, socially meaningful unit that contains a large number of individuals. This summary statistic may then be used as a data point in a data set consisting of larger units for comparative purposes. Common examples of larger units with multiple members involve a social group, an organization, or geographical or administrative units—a census tract, a county, a school district, a city, or a country. Information collected from individuals is called 'individual-level' data; when these data are aggregated statistically to describe the superordinate category, the resulting data are at the 'superordinate-level' or 'aggregate-level' and called 'aggregate data' or 'aggregated data.'

When individuals are nested (i.e., located) under intact and meaningful units, a 'nested structure' is obtained. A nested structure may involve multiple levels: individuals may be nested in classrooms and classrooms may be nested under schools, schools may be nested under school districts, and so on. When there are multiple levels and the nesting is clear and hierarchical, a 'hierarchical multi-level model' is obtained.

A typical example for the process and significance of aggregation is the census where often detailed information is collected from individuals and households, and this information is used to describe census tracts, counties, zones, cities, regions, and so on. Such information is clearly important—that is why so much money and effort are put into conducting censuses all around the world—and important social policy decisions are often based on such aggregated data. More funding may be provided, for instance, for job opportunity programs in cities where unemployment rates are high.

However, census data are also a good example to illustrate the basic limitations of aggregated data. For multiple reasons, particularly for protecting privacy, census data about individuals and households are never disclosed. Instead, data about city blocks or census tracts (defined by the US Census Bureau as a group of city blocks having a total population of more than 4,000 people) are made available to the public. Statements about average household size (e.g., a household has 4.5 members on average), average number of children (e.g., an average family has 1.5 children), average number of cars, average number of jobs worked in a calendar year, etc. are clearly not about an actual household (a household cannot have 4.5 members) or an actual family (a family cannot have 1.5 children). Aggregated data describe average households or families—the typical patterns in a given census unit—but never an actual household or family. With aggregation information about actual households and the heterogeneity they may present is lost. Aggregation is often useful to characterize superordinate categories—that is, working upwards from individuals to larger social units. The reverse, however, is not true: working backwards from aggregated data to subordinate units can be very misleading.

1. The Technique

Aggregation is a technique that cuts across disciplines, but is most commonly utilized in disciplines that deal with collective systems, such as groups, neighborhoods, schools, markets, or organizations. Aggregation is less common in disciplines that focus on individual human beings. Aggregation is particularly important in disciplines that deal with issues where individual-level data cannot be disclosed, as in voting behavior or in household income, and data are collected or made available to the public at the aggregate level. In other cases, collecting individual-level data may be particularly difficult, time-consuming or even impossible. For instance, in criminal justice research, a researcher may have data reported by the