Comparative Studies of Policy Agendas

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Abstract:

Studying agenda setting and policy dynamics is a well-established research tradition dating back to the work of Bachrach and Baratz and Schattschneider. The research tradition provides considerable insights into how changes in agendas and political attention affect public policy. However, the research tradition has been strongly dominated by studies of the US and has suffered from a lack of comparative studies. This paper discusses the different ways in which such comparative studies can be conducted as well as the potential insights which can be gained from them.

Key words: Agenda setting, policy change, comparative politics, punctuated equilibrium, attention-shifting.

At one time, the prevailing thinking in political science was that policymaking elites devote slavish attention to issues they intend to do nothing about—they are symbols for the masses, signifying nothing. Modern empirical studies refute that position; increases in attention to an issue by government signals the likelihood of serious policy change. Yet the serious study of the rise and fall of issues, and the consequences for policy change, are only now being explored in a comparative perspective. In this essay we sketch the fundamentals of an emerging new comparative analysis of agenda change, and in this volume we have assembled state-of-the-art studies that are beginning to fulfill the promise of a systematic field of inquiry centering on comparative policy dynamics.

Studies of policy agendas trace levels of attention to issues within government over time. These studies typically follow the history and development of policies over long periods, seeking to explain the causes and/or the consequences of their rises or falls on the governmental agenda. For example, Baumgartner and Jones (1993) found that dramatic policy changes were generally associated with heightened governmental attention to an issue, or increased attention within a policymaking venue that had previously not been involved. Kingdon (1995) noted that policies were often created or changed in major ways during relatively short "windows of opportunity" during which conditions were temporarily ripe for increased attention and action. Moreover, as attention rises, issues often change their meaning as groups struggle to contain the issue or expand it to attract more participants. In one of the earliest studies of agenda-setting within political science, Schattschneider (1960) contended that the "scope of conflict", which is intimately bound up with issue definition, was the "supreme instrument of power". Issues rarely rise or fall on the agenda without significant changes in how they are understood or what policies

the government considers, so studies of the policy agenda are almost always concerned with issue-definition and policy change.

Studies of policy agendas fall within a broader literature on agenda-setting. This broader literature has several important strands, including media studies, public opinion, and other fields. (The term agenda-setting is also used for a completely distinct field of analysis: The study of voting procedures within parliamentary settings where the leader may be able to control the sequence of votes, thereby affecting social choices through this "agenda-setting" power.) Studies of agenda-setting in the media have a long history within mass communications and journalism studies, and some of the earliest theoretical work was done in this area. It was, after all, McCombs who famously wrote that the media did not have the power to tell the people what to think, but it did have the power to tell the people what to think about (see McCombs and Shaw 1972 and McCombs 2004). Since that early work, journalism studies have followed up on the "agenda-setting power" of the media and a vibrant literature remains in place in that field (see Dearing and Rogers 1996). Political scientists have been involved in these studies since the classic works of Schattschneider (1960), Bachrach & Baratz (1962), and Cobb and Elder (1983). The power to control the agenda was one of the major points of contention in the early "community power" studies of the 1950s and 1960s (see Hunter 1953; Mills 1956; Dahl 1961; Polsby 1963). After Schattschneider's assertions about he importance of the scope of conflict itself in determining the outcome of an political dispute, and Bachrach and Baratz' contention that there were "two faces of power" based on the ability to structure what alternatives were considered in the first place, it was clear that political science would always be concerned in one way or another with issues of agenda-setting. The more recent works of Kingdon (1995,

originally published in 1984) and Baumgartner and Jones (1993) followed up on these early classics.

The common core of policy agenda research is attention to the dynamics of how new ideas, new policy proposals, and new understandings of problems may or may not be accepted in the political system. The literature is equally concerned with the forces reinforcing the status quo, resisting the emergence of new issues or the incorporation of new actors, as well as those circumstances that allow occasional dramatic changes. New issues or ideas may well meet resistance from the prevailing political arrangements, but they sometimes break through to create dramatic policy changes. From the earliest studies, scholars focused on the status-quo biases of political institutions and the associated distribution of power favoring established interests. But they simultaneously explored the possibilities for those lacking a voice to gain it through the mechanics of issue-definition, framing, and the mobilization of support. Thus the literature continues to address fundamental issues such as those raised by Schattschneider and in the earlier community power studies.

The literature on policy agendas has been largely developed in the US context, and some have questioned the degree to which the ideas developed in this context may be applied in other political settings, as will be evident below and in the contributions that follow. This volume brings together a range of studies designed to assess and demonstrate the value of a large-scale *comparative* approach to the study of policy dynamics and policy agendas. Are the processes by which new ideas and interests are incorporated into the political system generally similar in the US and in other democracies? Or are we forever consigned to treating "American exceptionalism" as an unexplained residual? Studying policy dynamics rather than making static comparisons among systems may well lead to the discovery of similarities in processes. The

articles in this volume demonstrate the tremendous potential of expanding the theoretical and empirical scope of agenda-setting studies from their traditional American focus to a more comprehensive and comparative view.

A primary finding from agenda-setting studies is the reactive nature of policymaking, resulting in a disjoint and episodic trace of policy activities across time. As new participants with fresh ideas break into the inner circle of policymaking, the system is jolted; there is nothing smooth about the process of adjustment in democratic societies. For instance, Baumgartner and Jones (1993) showed how policy stability is fostered by a general lack of attention to an issue, but long periods of inattention is sometimes supplanted by periods of heightened attention and dramatic shifts in policy outcomes due to shifts in framing, venue control, and social mobilization. Similarly Kingdon argued that major policy change happens when the three streams—problems, proposals, and politics—come together in a "window of opportunity" that focuses collective attention on problem and a solution simultaneously. This also results in a policy discontinuity. These are important ideas that may have broad applicability across many systems, yet the literature has developed with an overwhelming focus on just a single system—the peculiarly pluralistic and open US one. The studies brought together in this volume assess the degree to which these ideas are applicable in a diversity of settings outside the US.

Punctuated Equilibrium

It has become clear that rapid, destabilizing change is possible even in those policy systems which have been stable for decades. Institutional and cultural procedures or structures may enhance and reinforce stability, and these structures may remain stable. Change is not inevitable, by any means. However, even the most apparently stable policy subsystem may be upended when the institutional supports that keep it in place are themselves revised. While major policy

changes can be initiated following the election of a new party coalition, this is not always the case. One common source of structural change is leadership change through elections in democratic systems. Changes often come about when new proposals are put forward by the governing party coalition in an attempt to incorporate new policy ideas or new groups of voters. In a study of major laws in the US from 1947 through 1998, Jones and Baumgartner (2005) found that more than half were passed in the absence of any party change. Elections are one source of change but there are many others.

Baumgartner and Jones (1993) set forth their *punctuated equilibrium* thesis to capture this tendency of political systems to drift incrementally most of the time, only to be roused to major action when collective attention became galvanized around an issue. The authors developed punctuated equilibrium as an analysis of the pluralistic and open American political system, but a number of scholars in Europe and elsewhere have found the approach applicable to parliamentary systems. (It has not always been clear, however, whether a theory prominently featuring venue-shopping could possibly apply in political systems featuring neither federalism nor separation of powers, a point to which we return below). The model sees most policies as lodged in a set of policy subsystems that assemble affected actors in and out of government. These policy subsystems change only incrementally, and operate out of the limelight of public scrutiny. Occasionally, however, policies come to the forefront and major political actors begin discussing them; at these times, policies can change very rapidly.

The ability of political systems to initiate major policy changes is related to how political systems process information (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). After all, society is not static, and we should not expect political systems to be so, even in the absence of changes in the preferences of major players. But there can be great friction in the reaction of political systems. When this

friction is overcome, the system virtually leaps forward, but if the forces pushing for change are too weak, gridlock dominated by "veto players" results. This friction can stem from the unwillingness of major power-holders to recognize the need for change because of commitment to ideology or group benefits (termed *cognitive friction)* or from the resistance of institutions (termed *institutional friction*). Democratic political systems are not locked in some sort of invariant path dependency forever, but are adaptable and capable of responding to new challenges, even if that responsiveness is characterized by a great deal of resistance, friction, and inefficiency.

Tracing attention and government action to particular policies over long periods of time, we term *policy dynamics.* This often provides a different perspective than studies that emphasize cross-sectional comparisons or analyses of shorter periods of time. A reasonably long time perspective is necessary to reveal the fundamental dynamics of stability and punctuations, as Baumgartner and Jones (1993) argued. A short time perspective would only have captured one of these aspects, most likely reaching a conclusion that policies are incremental, as they are most of the time. Kingdon's model stresses how the temporal configuration of different factors is crucial in producing policy change, and his notion of "softening up" suggests the necessity of examining the development of policy proposals across extended periods of time. Policy dynamics, in a comparative sense, involves following policies over long periods in more than one political system, or for more than one issue. This makes it possible to trace the development of the same issue in different institutional or cultural settings, or to see the development of more than one issue over time. Much of the literature on agenda-setting and policy dynamics has focused on just one issue, or one issue at a time in any case (for a recent counter-example, see Jones and Baumgartner 2005). There is much to learn from attempting to find the general

properties of policy dynamics across many issues; what applies in one case may or may not apply in the next, so we need to be careful about generalizing from case studies. The literature on policy dynamics is certainly developing across many policy areas. However, it has been virtually devoid of comparative studies in more than one political system until now. Such comparative studies of policy dynamics stand in start contrast to most studies in comparative public policy, which can be termed studies of comparative policy statics. Policy dynamics is the most common way to study the development of policies within single countries, and that literature is increasingly based on analyses of more many issues. Not until now have there been comparative studies of this type, however; we hope to promote such an approach in the future. There is much to learn.

The Promise of Comparative Studies of Policy Dynamics

The literature on agenda-setting has American roots, but it stands to gain tremendously from a comparative perspective, and comparativists can gain from incorporating the approach as well. Many of the ideas most prominently associated with the agenda-setting tradition, particularly venue-shopping, may appear to be peculiarly American.[1] Unitary and parliamentary systems would seem to provide few opportunities for such things, although the European Union has opened new opportunities for actors to exploit different policy venues. Nevertheless it is worth questioning whether the agenda-setting approach has much to offer those studying systems outside the US. Indeed, the comparative literature has been slow to gravitate toward questions of agenda-setting, focusing instead on important questions such as government composition, welfare state development, social inequalities, party-system development, and other topics. The

[1] There are of course a few examples of comparative agenda studies. Baumgartner 1989a and b, Albæk et al. 2006, Green-Pedersen forthcoming and Studlar 1993 offer cross-national studies whereas Considine 1998 is a study of Australia. Cobb et al. 1976 offer theoretical considerations about agenda-setting across political systems. This literature is growing but this has traditionally not been a large focus. Our bibliography and those of the articles in this issue offer additional more recent, examples. See also True et al. (in press).

articles assembled here show a number of ways in which the agenda-setting approach can be helpful in studying diverse political systems, and also how the comparative approach can facilitate the study of agenda-setting.

The first and most obvious question stemming from a comparative perspective on agenda-setting is to what extent the findings of the agenda-setting tradition can be generalized from their US base. The US political system with its extensive separation of powers, bicameralism, and federal dynamics differs significantly from other democratic political systems. Thus, one may argue that the picture of long-time stability interrupted by short periods of sweeping changes is a consequence of the structure of the US political system. The concept of venue-shopping was developed with the US federal separation of power system in mind. Are similar processes even possible within a parliamentary system? Earlier studies by Pralle (2003), Sheingate (2000), and Daubjerg and Studsgaard (2005) would suggest this, but more research is needed.

On the other hand one may also argue that the picture of long-term stability interrupted by sweeping change does not so much stem from the structure of the American political system but from the way political actors in any political system must behave. No system can attend to all issues all of the time, so that disjoint shifts in attention allocation is possible in all political systems. This picture fits nicely with the findings of bounded rationality and serial information processing (Jones 2001), which may be a general characteristic of complex human systems everywhere. Even a unitary state with limited separation of powers remains tremendously complex with multiple opportunities for agenda-setting dynamics to play important roles, even if the particular mechanisms of this may differ by institutional setting.

One strategy for testing whether the punctuated-equilibrium (PE) results common in the US literature are caused by the structural design of the American political system or are a universal phenomenon rooted in the nature of human decision making is to look at the distribution of policy changes across time. The idea is to take measures of public policy change, for example, budget allocations to policy categories, and prepare a table of year-to-year percentage changes. Then a single frequency distribution can be prepared of all the percentage changes. If incremental changes characterize the system, then this frequency distribution will look approximately like the classic bell-shaped Normal curve. If punctuated equilibrium is the rule, however, the frequency distribution will have a very slender central peak but dominant and very long tails, and will not strike an observer as Normal at all. Figure 1 is a reproduction of the classic *leptokurtic* budget change distribution first found by Jones, Baumgartner and James True (see Jones and Baumgartner 2005). The central peak indicates that most of the time there is very little policy change, white the fat tails document the occasional punctuations. This distribution is the characteristic signature of policy punctuations.

(Insert Figure 1 about here)

This strategy was applied to US data by Jones, Sulkin and Larsen (2003) and Jones and Baumgartner (2005) but can easily be adopted for use in any system. The contributions of Breunig (2006) and by Baumgartner, Foucault and François (2006) follow this approach and find similar patterns in the overall distribution of budgetary changes over time as that shown in Figure 1. These findings would indicate that the specific nature of the American political system is not the main cause of the picture of long-term stability and short-term change. On the other hand, Breunig finds considerable variation in this “punctuation picture” caused by differences in party politics pointing to the fact that political system related variables still have important role

to play in understanding policy change, particularly the extensiveness of the punctuations. Baumgartner, Foucault and François look at a range of institutional design changes in French constitutional systems since 1815 and find few impacts on the overall shape of budgetary change over time. This suggests that even quite substantial institutional design changes, such as shifts in the relative strengths of the legislative and executive branches, do little to overcome the general cognitive and decision-making limitations of political leaders in addressing the tremendously complex range of issues that governments must juggle.

Breunig's finding about partisan variation leads directly to an important question in relation to the applicability of American based agenda-setting theory in a comparative context. This is the role of political parties. The less-central role political parties play in American politics is clearly reflected in the tendency of the American agenda-setting literature to emphasize interest groups, think tanks, and policy entrepreneurs rather than political parties. When one moves to parliamentary systems, the role of political parties becomes more obviously important, and many comparative scholars have been skeptical of the agenda-setting literature because, following the American tradition, studies have not emphasized the roles of parties as much as would be expected in a Parliamentary context. This concern is directly addressed by Walgrave et al. (2006) and John (2006a) as well as by Breunig (2006). The findings are, however, somewhat contradictory. Walgrave et al. point clearly to the central role of political parties in Belgian policy making, whereas John does not find political parties to have played a significant role in British urban policy. However, the exact understanding of how political parties affect policy change is different in the two studies. Walgrave et al. focus on the effects of coalition politics whereas John looks at the role of a change in the left-right position of the government—the classic "does politics matter" question. The different ways of approaching the role of political

parties in policy change in two articles are easy to understand given the differences in party systems between the British Westminster two-party system and the Belgian multi-party system with a tradition of center-oriented coalition governments. The studies in any case present models of how we can incorporate parties into an agenda-setting framework. Students of parties stand to gain from understanding the ability of parties to affect the overall agenda, and the literature on agenda-setting gains important insights about the impact of voting, elections, and party ideology on these processes by moving out of the US context to areas where there is greater variation in the roles of parties and party systems.

The diverse findings concerning the roles of parties in the articles by Breunig, Walgrave et al. and John underscore the various roles of parties in different party systems. Whereas it may be true that European parliamentary systems all differ from the US in that their parties tend to be more cohesive an potentially important than in the US, there is great diversity across the different systems. Further, there are different theoretical perspectives on party politics. The "does politics matter" question is one perspective and the structure of coalition politics another. The structures and functions of parties are clearly different in two-party systems rather than in the coalition governments that result from complex multi-party systems (though these findings may be complex: note that John found limited impact in Britain but Walgrave et al. posit a more positive role for parties in Belgium). As a third example, Green-Pedersen's (2006) study of the politicization of the issue of euthanasia in Denmark, the Netherlands and Belgium shows how the possibilities of linking issues such as euthanasia to pre-existing conflicts in party systems determine whether such issues become political which again has significant policy consequences. Thus, there is clearly much to learn about the impacts of parties on agenda-setting processes and

the early evidence is that these effects may not be as some have imagined. Even in a majority position, parties do not necessarily follow systematically different agendas than their rivals.

In any case, the general point is simple: With a broader empirical perspective covering more political systems, the comparative approach offers the promise of considerable refinement and improvement in the literature on agenda-setting, making variables out of what were once treated as constants. Expanding our focus to systems with diverse party systems can only help forge important insights into their impact on the policy process.

This points to another way in which a comparative perspective on agenda-setting may be helpful. Critics of agenda-setting studies have often argued that agenda-setting studies were describing rather than explaining processes of policy change. In a comparative framework, the effects of variables such as party differences, political systems, interest-group influence or focusing events can be studied much more systematically. Across the studies included in this volume we see considerable variation in each of these factors, whereas in the US-based literature these had effectively been held constant. While the few studies included here do not answer these questions definitively, the comparative approach which they exemplify offers a powerful research strategy for the future.

One of the earliest articles that got scholars interested in the importance of the political agenda was Bachrach and Baratz' classic "Two Faces of Power" article (1962). Indeed, this article was recently recognized as the single most heavily cited piece in the history of the *American Political Science Review* (Sigelman forthcoming). Ironically, the provocative ideas laid forth there about the power of non-decision have proven very difficult to investigate. Indeed, very few empirical studies have followed up directly on these ideas (but see Crenson 1971). The reason is probably that non-decisions are so difficult to observe, but comparative studies offer a

way to study non-decisions, i.e. one can compare countries where certain decisions are made and not made.

Finally, moving agenda-setting studies outside a national context offers some new possibilities as well. Agenda-setting in the EU as studied by Princen and Rhinard (2006) is particularly interesting because the EU political system offers extremely limited space for direct public involvement, as compared to the various national political systems (see also Peters 2001). There is no European-wide media system and the types of interest groups and political parties capable of mobilizing citizen interest are typically organized on the national scale, not at the European level; there is no substantial European "public space." They show that in such a system two types of agenda-setting avenues emerge. One is through the political elite and the other is through experts. Interestingly the studies of both Pralle and Timmermans and van Scholten (2006) show that experts and the scientific community are important actors in agenda-setting processes. Their importance in the EU does thus not seem to be a consequence of the lack of a public agenda in connection with the EU. In any case, the EU political system operates at a different level from any national system but it has important interactions with each of the national political systems that form a part of it. And it is abundantly clear that agenda-dynamics are important elements of how that process works, both within the EU and between the EU and its member states (Princen, forthcoming). However, these processes do not involve the broad public. We are a long way from E.E. Schattschneider's original discussion of the role of agenda-setting in expanding the scope of conflict, i.e. bringing the public into a political conflict. The public is, clearly, only one of many potential audiences to which a conflict may be expanded, as these studies make clear.

The agenda-setting approach introduces an entirely different perspective on the study of comparative public policy. Much comparative work centres on levels of policy differences among nations; this approach characterizes much of the welfare state literature. Even where policy levels are very different, an analysis based in comparative policy *statics* (comparing differences in levels of policy provision) is not the most effective way of studying the causes of these differences, since these develop independently within each nation over time. As the study by Green-Pedersen and Wilkerson (2006) suggests, comparisons based in policy *dynamics* (comparing differences in the time paths of policy development among nations) is a more effective way to study the causes of national differences. Recent work in the US points to using a problem-centred analysis focusing on information processing dynamics) suggests an entirely new way of comparing public policies (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). Rather than start with differences in the levels of policy (as the welfare-state work does), one can start with policy changes and link them to flows of information from the policymaking environment such as changes in demographics, attention to important events, changes in political coalitions. One wants to know both the level of policy differences among nations and the dynamics over time that may alter these levels in the future. In any case, a new approach such as laid out in this volume allows studies both of policy statics (e.g., cross-national comparisons at one point in time) as well as policy dynamics.

The above would by itself justify the investigation of agenda-setting and policy change in a comparative perspective. However, the potential insights to gain from studying agenda-setting comparatively are broader than only the ones outlined above. Comparative perspectives on agenda-setting may provide insights to more general issues both in policy research but also in relation to central issues within political science. The reason for this potential comes from the

focus which the agenda-setting tradition puts on how attention is allocated in political systems (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). This focus on allocation of attention gives a novel view on some old questions. One clear example of this is how the concept of venue-shopping may add to the theoretical understanding of political institutions. Where different political institutions are traditionally treated as "veto points" or "veto players" in comparative policy studies (Immergut 1992, Tsebelis 2002), they are treated as opportunity structures from an agenda-setting perspective. This difference has significant consequences as more institutional venues are seen as prohibiting change from the first perspective but as facilitating change from the other perspective. The opportunities for directly testing these diverse hypotheses are obvious.

Institutional design has long been a staple of political science and public administration studies for decades, and yet scholars of institutional design have paid little attention to agenda-setting processes as discussed here. How different institutional structures are able to handle increasingly complex work-loads over decades as governments have grown more complex is a completely open research area, and yet one that will have many implications for future analysis.

The contributions in this volume provide further examples of the broader relevance of comparative agenda-setting studies: That "policy determines politics" is a classical formulation, but the work of Green-Pedersen and Wilkerson shows that this statement can be given further theoretic development through a comparative dynamics approach. One way through which policy may determine politics is that certain issues tend to attract significant political attention across different countries, which can explained through their agenda-setting attributes. The Green-Pedersen and Wilkerson piece for instance argues that health care attracts a lot of political interest partly because it is about life and death, an issue that easily draws media attention in any country. So there may be important limits to the impact of institutional design, limits imposed

by the substance of the policy itself. Thus, even with different institutional structures, they show important similarities in health care policy dynamics in the two systems. Of course, institutional differences are also important. The point is that we can only assess how each one affects policy outcomes with an approach that incorporates comparative policy dynamics.

Another example of the broader value of comparative agenda-setting relates to comparative perspectives on representation. How does representation affect the issue-attention process in government (as opposed to the more standard question of its effects on policy outcomes)? Jones and Baumgartner (2004) used an agenda-setting perspective to study representation in a US context and Penner, Blidook, and Soroka (2006) also use an agenda-setting perspective on representation in Canada.

A final advantage of a comparative agenda-setting research as it emerges in this volume is the strong integration of qualitative and quantitative studies. Almost everyone would agree that political science and policy studies need both, but in reality research traditions tend to be clearly dominated by one or the other. The articles included here show how both types of research provide indispensable insights into agenda-setting processes. Both the detailed case studies such as Pralle's and the statistical large N analysis by Breunig and Baumgartner, Foucault & François address issues about the functioning of political systems. Further, the data analytic methods developed in the US and essentially demanded by the policy dynamics approach are useful in studying policy change beyond the US *regardless of the applicability of the agenda-setting perspective.* Without proper across-time data, whether that data is qualitative or quantitative, we end up with comparative statics rather than the comparative dynamics that are required to move forward intellectually. The quantitative data also facilitate the qualitative work and our theories

are best informed by a mix of statistical tests as well as observations of the behaviors of individual policymakers—something that the large-scale databases alone cannot provide.

How to Pursue Comparative Studies of Policy Dynamics

As Peter John spells out in his review essay of the policy agendas project, one of the reasons why Baumgartner and Jones (1993) has become a landmark within the policy agenda research tradition is that it was based on indicators of policy agenda which made it possible to systematically trace policy attention across times and issues. Until then agenda setting studies had largely been case studies. It is important if we are to compare policies across time and countries that the policies being compared are in fact identical. The Policy Agendas Project (http://www.policyagendas.org/), under the direction of Baumgartner, Jones, and Wilkerson, has developed a policy content coding system that covers the range of US national policies in a systematic manner.

One of the challenges of developing comparative studies of policy agendas is thus to extend the work of the policy agendas project to other countries. The potential benefits of doing so are considerable. Having substantial and comprehensive databases documenting the objects of policy action and political debate in many countries across many decades offers entirely new possibilities of understanding why some issues are the object of considerable debate within one political system but are ignored in another. We can also understand why some issues attract considerable attention across countries despite considerable differences in political systems and previous policy histories. If policies have consequences and often reflect the inheritance of previous policy choices, a comparative study of policy dynamics should reveal how strong these are. Green-Pederson has adapted the US-based system to Denmark with only minor comparability problems (Green-Pedersen 2005). His paper with John Wilkerson in this volume,

which investigates health-care politics in the US and Denmark, is the first example of the systematic agenda comparisons which expanding the policy agendas approach make possible. Their study of the rise of health-care attention in both countries also shows how the comprehensive databases make it possible to study policy dynamics across decades and comparatively.

Expanding the policy agendas project comparatively involves two particular challenges. The first is to determine which indicators of government activity are most relevant. For example, the US system started with an analysis of congressional hearings, but these are a peculiarly American institution for which there is often no equivalent in many countries. On the other hand, legislation is used in each country, executive orders may be present in the same manner, and certainly media coverage is a relevant input in all countries. Similarly, budgetary data are universally relevant although they may vary in the detail and historical consistency to which they are available. In addition to a number of indicators that should be universally relevant such as laws, budgets, executive decrees or orders, and the budget, there may be various indicators available for different countries. For example, preliminary research in France suggests that the weekly cabinet meetings, consistently held every Wednesday for over 50 years, result in a short published agenda mentioning the policy topics that were discussed. Different countries will have different indicators.

In the studies included in this volume, a wide range of parliamentary activities were coded successfully. Green-Pedersen, focusing on Denmark, included questions to the minister, interpellation and proposals for parliamentary decisions, as well as laws and parliamentary accounts. Results indicate that the effort has been almost completely successful. In the Belgian project Walgrave and colleagues coded similar activities at the Parliamentary level (see

http://www.ua.ac.be/main.aspx?c=m2p). For the case of Canada, Soroka and colleagues coded questions in parliamentary question time, again with success. There are some issues with over-reliance on parliamentary activities outside the US context, however. Besides the question of whether parliamentary interpellations reflect the same political activity as congressional hearings, a major challenge involved in extending the policy agendas project comparatively is that most of the parliamentary activities accessible for coding have a clear opposition bias. In many countries, questions to the minister or interpellations are mainly opposition activities and may do a better job of measuring the opposition's agenda rather than the more general political agenda emerging from the interaction between government and opposition. When turning to the EU, this questions of what to code, of course takes a new direction, not least because of the fragmentation of the EU political system. The EU project conducted by Princen thus codes both written questions from the European parliament and preparatory documents from the EU commission (Princen 2005). In any case, there are important considerations of what to code in each governmental system. The goal is to have comparable, but also comprehensive and relevant, indicators of the range of activities by the various important institutions.

A second issue is to make a topic coding system that is as comparable to the US system as possible so that the results can be compared, but which also corresponds to the different types of activities that are undertaken in various countries. For example, the US topic coding system contains some elements, such as dealing with American Indian tribes, extensive and complicated systems of managing housing policies through secondary mortgage markets, or managing and irrigating the public lands in the West, which have no equivalent in Europe; similarly many European systems include review of national health-care systems that have no equivalent in the US. In preliminary work we have found that the vast majority of the topic codes developed in

the US have direct analogues in other systems, but some adjustments are needed. These issues are taken up by Peter John in his review essay (2006b).

There are certainly challenges involved in extending the policy agendas project comparatively, and only future comparative studies based on such data can show the extent to which these challenges have been overcome. However, the potential benefits of being able to compare systematically policy agendas across countries, time, and issues are substantial. This is an important opportunity to move forward the comparative study of public policy.

Concluding Comments

The studies included in this volume illustrate a range of themes and provide a number of new research findings, extending the study of agenda-setting in nine different political systems. However, they only scratch the surface of what we believe can be done with a large-scale effort to trace policy processes comprehensively over long periods of time, as is now increasingly feasible. We hope this volume will serve as a call to action for political scientists in Europe, the US, and around the world to turn more attention to comparative dynamics. Regardless of the utility of the agenda-setting perspective (and in the spirit of full disclosure, we are convinced of its utility), political science is being stymied by a failure to examine dynamic processes comparatively. Pierson (2004) has excited comparative scholars with his work on path dependency, and we are sympathetic to his approach. In the end, however, we can't find a satisfactory mechanism in path dependency to account for the dynamic changes we observe in European polities as well as in the United States; policies do not remain forever on a given path. The empirical papers that are incorporated in this volume document these dynamics. Resolving agenda-setting perspectives with path dependency is part of the new agenda of comparative

public policy that we introduce here. But this is only one of many ways in which a formerly parochial literature may benefit from a comparative perspective, with benefits for all concerned.

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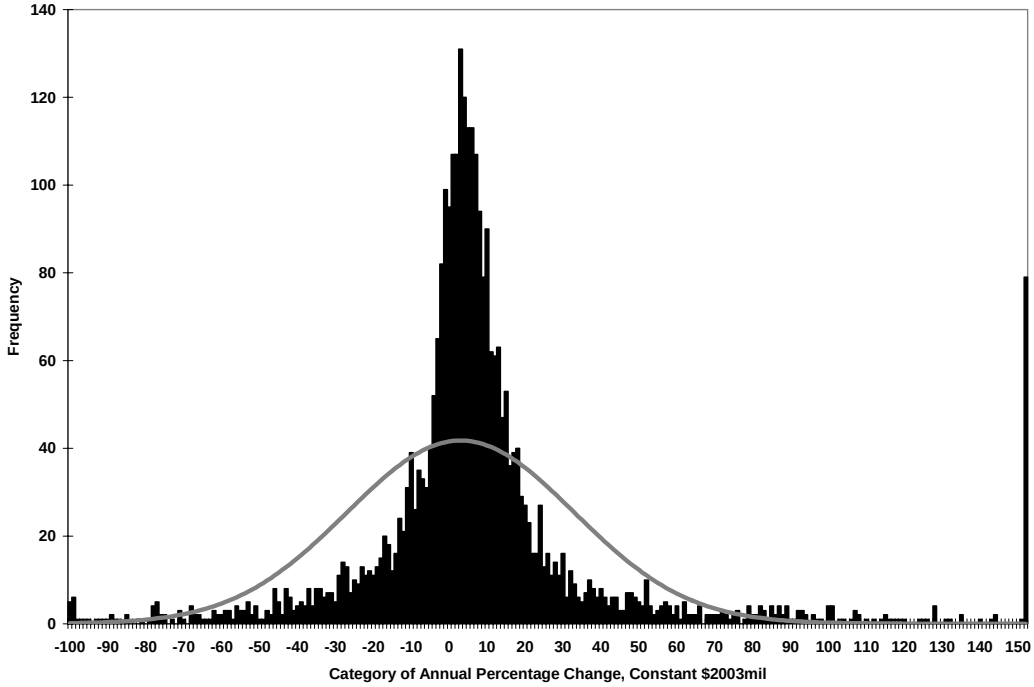
Figure 1: Pooled Frequency Distribution of Annual Percentage Changes in US Congressional Budget Authority, Fy1947-2003, in Constant 2003 Million Dollars.



Source: See Jones and Baumgartner 2005, figure 4.14.