

Agenda-setting in Comparative Perspective

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Theoretical and empirical studies of agenda-setting have developed into a rich literature since the classic works of Schattschneider (1960), Bachrach & Baratz (1962), and Cobb and Elder (1972), with Kingdon (1995) and Baumgartner & Jones (1993) as the most recent landmarks within the tradition. Fundamental to all studies of agenda-setting is a focus on the dynamics by which new ideas, new policy proposals, and new understandings of problems meet resistance from the prevailing political arrangements but sometimes break through to create dramatic policy changes. From the earliest studies, scholars have focused both on the status-quo orientation of political institutions, and the distribution of power that favors established interests, but also simultaneously have explored the possibilities and mechanics by which those lacking a voice gain it through issue-definition, framing, and the mobilization of support. With this volume we hope to point to the tremendous promise that stems from the expansion of the empirical scope of agenda-setting studies from what has traditionally been an American focus to a more comprehensive and comparative view.

The agenda-setting tradition has provided considerable insights into crucial aspects of the policy process and the functioning of political system more generally. One of the primary findings from this tradition is the reactive nature of policymaking, resulting in a disjoint and episodic trace of policy activities across time. For instance, Baumgartner and Jones showed how stability in political attention to a certain issue is followed by periods of increased attention and dramatic shifts in policy outcomes through shifts in framing, venue control, and social mobilization. These “attention driven” changes in political dynamics are related to significant policy changes. 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.

Another important merit of this research tradition has been its focus on the temporal dynamics of politics. Baumgartner & Jones showed that a long time perspective on policy areas is necessary to reveal the fundamental dynamics of stability and punctuations. 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. These ideas also have potentially universal applicability.

The Promise of a Comparative Approach to Agenda-Setting

The literature on agenda-setting clearly 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. Therefore 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 draw attention to questions of agenda-setting, focusing instead on important questions such as government composition,

¹ There are of course a few examples of comparative agenda studies. Baumgartner 1989a and b & Studlar 1993 offer cross-national studies whereas Considine 1998 is a study of Australia. Cobb, Ross and Ross 1976 offer theoretical considerations about agenda-setting across political systems. This literature is growing but had traditionally not been a large focus. Our bibliography and those of the articles in this issue offer additional, more recent, examples.

welfare state development, social inequalities, party-system development, and other topics. The articles brought together here will show a number of ways in which the agenda-setting approach can be helpful in studying diverse political systems, but also how the comparative approach can be helpful in 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. This question is particularly pressing because of the US background of the agenda-setting tradition. The US political system with its extensive separation of powers, bicameralism, and federal dynamics differs significantly from most other 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. Another example is the concept of venue-shopping which is clearly 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 for instance 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. The 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 of 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. 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 articles in this issue by Breunig and by Baumgartner, François & Foucault indeed follow this approach and find similar patterns in the overall distribution of budgetary changes over time as found in the US. 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. Baumgartner, François & Foucault look at a range of institutional designs in French constitutional systems since 1815 and find few impacts on the overall shape of budgetary change over time, suggesting that even quite substantial institutional design questions, such as the strength of the legislature compared to the executive branch, do little to overcome the general cognitive limitations of all governments in dealing with the tremendously complex range of issues that governments do.

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. Political parties play a much less central in American politics than in many other countries and this is clearly reflected in the agenda-setting literature which has paid limited attention to 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 here in the articles by Walgrave et al. and John as well as by Breunig. 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 power and shape 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 and 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). 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. The weak US party system was a constant in all the literature on agenda-setting based on that system, as most of the literature was until recently. Expanding our focus to systems with diverse party systems can only help make 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 because non-decisions are so difficult to observe. Indeed, very few empirical studies have followed up directly on these ideas (but see Crenson 1971). The investigation of why some issues are the object of considerable debate within one political system but are ignored in another may take on a new feasibility when there are substantial and comprehensive databases documenting what are, indeed, the objects of policy action and political debate in many countries across many decades. Green-Pederson and Wilkerson's investigation of health-care politics in the US and Denmark included in this volume is based on such a comparison. Similarly the Penner, Blidook, and Soroka paper on the objects of attention in the Canadian parliament offers an approach that could, in the future, help document what items are on the agenda in various settings. The accumulation of national databases on policy activities and political debates offers great promise in this fundamental area.

Finally, moving agenda-setting studies outside a national context, as done by Princen and Rhinard in this volume, offers some new possibilities as well. Agenda setting in the EU as studied by Princen and Rhinard is particularly interesting because the EU political system offers extremely limited space for direct public involvement, as compared to the various national political systems. 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 in this volume 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. 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 centers 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 paper by Christoffer Green-Pederson and John Wilkerson in this volume 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-centered analysis focusing on information processing dynamics) suggests an entirely new way of doing policy comparisons (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 volumes 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 articles 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 article by Green-Pedersen and Wilkerson in this volume shows that this statement can be given further theoretic development through comparative agenda-setting studies. One way through which policy may determine politics is that certain issues tend to attract significant political attention across different countries, which can be 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.

Another example of the broader value of comparative agenda-setting relates to comparative perspectives on representation. Jones and Baumgartner (2004) used an agenda-setting perspective to study representation in a US context and in this volume Penner, Blidook, and Soroka also use an agenda-setting perspective on representation in Canada.

Finally, another merit 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, however, show how the both types of research provide indispensable insight into agenda-setting processes. For instance, the

detailed case studies by Pralle and the statistical large N analysis by Breunig and Baumgartner, François and Foucault both 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 is qualitative or quantitative, we end up with comparative statics rather than the comparative dynamics that is required to move forward intellectually.

Concluding Comments

The papers 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. Paul 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 would be 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 intend to 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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