

Project Title: Causes and Policy Consequences of Agenda Setting (CAPCAS)

Résumé

This project investigates why societal problems gain or lose attention on the political agenda and how this agenda setting process matters for policy decisions. It is well-described in the agenda-setting literature how political systems tend to ignore even very serious problems for prolonged periods of time. The objective of this project is to develop and test a new theory about how the political agenda and policy decisions are shaped by the interaction of problems, preferences of the policymakers, and the institutional design of the policymaking process. Focusing on the effect of one variable at the time – problems, preferences, or institutions – might be justifiable if they were just additive components of a general model of public policymaking. The contention of this project, however, is that they work *in combination*, which implies that the combined effects of problems, institutions, and preferences deserve far more scholarly attention than they have typically received.

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1. Objective and Motivation

This project investigates *why societal problems gain or lose attention on the political agenda* and *how this agenda-setting process matters for policy decisions*. The political agenda is the set of issues that are the subject of decision making and debate within a given political system.

It is well-described in the agenda-setting literature how political systems tend to ignore even very serious problems for prolonged periods of time: from global warming through underperforming schools to child poverty (Baumgartner & Jones 1993; Kingdon 1995; Jones & Baumgartner 2005; Green-Pedersen & Wilkerson 2006; John & Jennings 2010; Mortensen et al. 2011). Agenda-setting models such as Kingdon's (1995) multiple streams model and Baumgartner and Jones' (1993) punctuated equilibrium model have been remarkably successful at *describing* the process of agenda-setting and policy change.

What we need to know much more about is: 1) *why* some problems are kept off the political agenda at certain points in time, and 2) *why* problems that do get on the political agenda only sometimes cause public policy responses.

In response to this research deficit the project makes two innovative contributions:

1. It develops an explanatory model of (1) political agenda-setting and (2) the link between the political agenda and policy decisions.
2. It collects a comprehensive new data set on the political agenda and public policy in 98 Danish municipalities, allowing a systematic multivariate test of the explanatory model.

Regarding the first contribution, the core idea of this project is that standards of political importance vary systematically as a consequence of the interaction between: a) *problem characteristics*, b) *preferences of the policymakers*, and c) *the institutional design of the policymaking process*.

Current agenda-setting literature overwhelmingly focuses on the cognitive limitations of policy makers as the cause of the mismatch between societal problems, political agendas, and policies (see Jones & Baumgartner 2005; Baumgartner et al. 2009; Jones et al. 2009; Walgrave & Nuytemans 2009). Inspired by Simon's (1983; 1997) seminal work on bounded rationality, this literature stresses how various cognitive limitations of human decision-making – such as “the bottleneck of

attention” – influence how decision-makers detect, filter, and prioritize information about their environment and how this matters for the decisions they make.

However, studying how policymakers struggle to respond to the flow of changes in their problem environments is not sufficient to understand policymaking. As stressed by the pioneers of agenda-setting research (Schattschneider 1960; Bachrach & Baratz 1962; Crenson 1971; Gaventa 1980) policymakers also pursue individual goals, and sometimes they purposefully distort information about problems and design institutions intended to bias the process and outcome of policymaking. Adherents of the cognitive focused problem-solving approach would probably not deny this (see e.g. Baumgartner et al. 2011, 948), but it seems fair to conclude that the preferences of policymakers have not been specified and integrated in theoretical and empirical applications of this approach.

The contention of this project is that the linkages between problems, institutions, and preferences deserve far more scholarly attention than they have typically received and based on this idea section 2 outlines a novel theoretical explanation of political agenda-setting and the link between the political agenda and policy decisions – the first contribution of the project.

Based on the theoretical framework, the subsequent section describes the research design, including the details on the construction of the new dataset – the second contribution of the project. The dataset will consist of a detailed coding of the agenda of all Danish municipality councils as well as a coding of the agenda of each permanent committee within each council. A total of some 500,000 agenda points will be coded. In addition, data on public policies in the municipalities will be coded as well allowing the first systematic test of the link between the political agenda and public policy responses. In combination with the existing data on the Danish municipalities, which are extremely well-documented statistically compared to most other political entities, an unprecedented analysis of the causes and consequences of agenda-setting can be carried out.

The study of political agenda setting addresses a core question within political science, and the many recent publications in top political science journals testify to the importance of the subject and to the scope and vibrancy of the research field (see, e.g., Baumgartner et al. 2009; Jones et al. 2009; Walgrave & Nuytemans 2009; Jennings & John 2009; Robinson et al. 2007; Cashore & Howlett 2007). Developing and testing a theory about the causes and policy consequences of agenda setting would therefore be a valuable contribution to the major research fields on agenda setting and public policy.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this section, we introduce the theoretical framework guiding the project. The section is structured around the three central explanatory variables in the model: Problems, preferences, and institutions.

2.1. Problems

Problems may be characterized by two criteria: 1) To what extent agreed-upon, simple problem indicators are available, and 2) If such indicators are available, what information they contain about the severity of the problem (Wood & Vedlitz 2007; Jones & Baumgartner 2005, Chapter 8).

With respect to the first criteria, the starting point is that the availability of simple and unambiguous problem indicators varies across the range of issues facing policymakers. On the one hand, for many of the issues facing policymakers, there are no readily available problem indicators. For instance, what indicators may be used to characterize the need for business promotion and regulation, and what simple, agreed-upon indicators describe problems of public elder care, day care, environment, or police services? (see also Wood & Vedlitz 2007, 553; Jones & Baumgartner 2005, 208)

On the other hand, many problems come to the attention of policymakers because some more or less systematic indicator simply shows that there is a problem out there. As noted by Kingdon (1995, 90), such indicators abound in the political world because governmental and nongovernmental agencies routinely monitor various activities and events. Examples are unemployment statistics, measures of economic conditions, crime statistics, statistics on educational performance, various indicators of the health of the population compared across regions or countries, etc.

We do not argue that only agreed-upon, measurable problems prompt government to act. In fact, there may be much political debate and much government activity in the absence of a simple indicator of the severity of the problem. What we do argue – as implied by the second criteria used to characterize problems – is that when simple, quantitative problem indicators exist, we need to take the content of this information into account to explain agenda setting and policy decisions. In such cases, political strategies and reactions are constrained by the content of the information provided by the available problem indicators. For instance, in a local community, a statistic saying that the local schools perform worse than all other schools in the country is much more difficult to ignore by the policymakers than if the performance was reported to be just below average.

The central theoretical challenge is to specify how these problem characteristics may influence the thresholds of agenda-setting and policy responsiveness in combination with the preferences of the policymakers and the institutional design of the policymaking process.

2.2. The Role of Preferences

Inspired by the literature on political parties' issue competition, we assume that political parties will try to shape the political agenda in order to advance strategic, political interests (see, e.g., Robertson 1976; Budge & Farlie 1983; Simon 2002; Green-Pedersen & Mortensen 2010). If the political

agenda is, for instance, dominated by welfare related issues, this may advance both policy objectives and re-election objectives of left-wing parties because a majority of the electorate tends to consider these parties most competent in handling such issues. From a similar “issue-ownership” logic, centre-right parties, on the other hand, may have a clear interest in placing issues of taxation or “big government” high on the political agenda (Petrocik 1996).

What previous research has ignored – at least in empirical applications of the issue competition perspective – is that political actors are constrained in these efforts by the supply of real-world problems. For the set of issues where simple, quantitative problem indicators are not available, the problem environment does not impose hard constraints on policymakers’ issue strategies. Whether such problems require political attention is first and foremost a matter of interpretation and political conviction. However, when simple quantitative problem indicators are available, the room for selective issue emphasis strategies is constrained by the problem environment. Take indicators of unemployment levels as an example: Being a centre-left party leader, for instance, one might see a clear interest (out of ideology and/or electoral incentives) in elevating the issue of unemployment on the political agenda, but drawing political attention to this issue may be almost impossible if there is virtually no unemployment. On the other hand, if unemployment is massive, policymakers across the political spectrum most probably have to pay serious attention to this problem and take steps to combat the problem.

Hence, if the problem is both measurable and very severe, governments will have to attend and respond to the problem as implied by the model of issue competition developed by Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2010). The model stresses the importance of *policy responsibility*, implying that citizens expect incumbent policymakers to deliver solutions to visible policy problems.

On the other hand, if the content of the problem indicator implies that there is virtually no problem, then the possibilities of drawing political attention to the issue is actually lower than if the problem had been very ambiguous and nobody could tell from systematic information whether the problem existed or not. As Kingdon (1995, 115) cites one of his respondents from the U.S. Congress: “Of course the indicators of cost are used in the argument. You wouldn’t start a cost containment program if the indicators were going down. You’d be laughed out of court”.

These examples do not imply that preferences of dominant policymakers do not matter when simple problem indicators are available and monitored. Rather, as illustrated by the unemployment example above, when problem indicators exist, the relationship is expected to be \cap -shaped in the sense that the room for strategic, political influence on policy agenda setting is most limited when information about the problem is very certain and the severity of the problem is either very low or very high.

Yet, once issues move further down the policy process to policy decisions, preferences of the incumbent government may matter too. If the signal from the problem environment is weak or ambiguous, outside attention to the issue may shift quickly to other issues, providing the government substantial room to either obstruct or promote new policies based on their interest in the issue.

If the problem signal is strong, obstruction may not be an option, but still, the policy preferences of the ruling government may shape the choice of policy solutions significantly. For example, knowing that President Obama is from the Democratic Party is obviously a central factor in understanding U.S. health care reform in terms of policy content. However, as argued in Mortensen et al. (2011, 993): "...this becomes relevant in the case only when the issue of health care reform has attracted substantial government attention in the first place, and traditional studies of government have hardly addressed what one might term the first order attention question at all."

2.3. The Role of Institutions

The link between problems, the political agenda, and public policy is not only moderated by the preferences of the political actors. The institutional design of the policymaking process may also embody different thresholds for agenda setting and policymaking. Broadly conceived, institutions may involve any structural aspect of politics (see Ostrom 1986), but in this project, we focus on the effect of institutional specialization on the policymaking process.

Particularly, we focus on the role of committee structure, which is a phenomenon that has been studied extensively in research on the U.S. Congress (Shepsle & Weingast 1987; Groseclose 1994; Sprague 2008), but recently also in other non-U.S. political systems (see, e.g., Bækgaard 2010; 2011). Certainly, committees play a more significant role in some political systems than in others. Yet, the general point about how the institutional specialization of politics shapes reactions to public problems is of more general relevance given that all political systems involve substantial specialization in order to be able to process issues in parallel (Simon 1977; 1983; 1985).

As argued by Sheingate (2006), the question about how the committee structure shapes political attention to new problems has received little scholarly attention. Sheingate's (2006) empirical study of congressional attention to the issue of biotechnology offers two important insights of relevance to this project. First, the closer a committee's jurisdiction fits a given issue, the more likely the issue receives attention. Put differently, issues that do not fit naturally into the committee structure will tend to become neglected. Second, the more complex the committee jurisdiction, the easier it is to promote a new issue. Complexity creates a greater room for actors to shift from one policy venue to another and can generate competition between committees for winning new issues.

The questions not addressed by Sheingate are how these aspects of the committee structure interact with the character of the problem environment and how it may shape the link between the political agenda and real policy decisions. Elaborating on Sheingate's (2006) idea about the *opportunity structure* provided by the design of committee jurisdictions, we argue that policymaking systems where the central assembly is supplemented by many committees, each watching for changes in real-world problems within their rather narrow jurisdictions, may be faster in responding to such changes, but slower to converge on a response in the central assembly because of inter-institutional turf fights between members of the different committees. On the contrary, political systems with few but broad committees may be slower to detect and prioritize changes in real-world problems but, once the agenda is set, much faster in devising a policy solution (for a case study that seems to support this reasoning, see Green-Pedersen & Wolfe 2009).

Consistent with the basic contention of the project, these institutional effects are expected to interact with the character and severity of the problems. If problems are rather ambiguous, and if simple, quantitative problem indicators are not available, we may learn much about the composition of the political agenda in the assembly simply by looking at the issue structure of the committees as well as the preferences of the policymakers. On the other hand, if simple, quantitative problem indicators are available, the influence of the committee structure depends on the message contained in the problem indicator. In this case, the effect of the committee structure interacts with the information carried by the problem indicators, and the effect is therefore expected to be \cap -shaped in the sense that the influence of the committee structure is expected to be most evident when problem severity is neither very low nor very high.

3. Data and Research strategy

Empirically examining the expectations derived from the theoretical model in terms of data and research design is demanding. First, it requires *standardized measures* of: 1) the political agenda 2) policy decisions, 3) policy preferences, 4) the committee structure, and 5) problem indicators over time and across a broad range of issues and political decision-making units. Second, it requires theoretically relevant *variation* in problem characteristics, policy preferences, and institutions.

These requirements are impossible to meet at the level of country comparisons, where the number of relevant variables are too many and the units of analysis too few to examine the non-linear and conditional propositions within an explanatory, multivariate research setup. Furthermore, comparability of relevant measures is often rather low across countries.

Consequently, to move beyond state-of-the-art and to take seriously the challenges involved in studying how the political agenda and policy decisions are shaped by the interaction of problems, preferences, and institutions, we employ a dynamic, cross-sectional large- n research design based

on the 98 Danish municipalities. Besides being multi-purpose potent political systems with substantial autonomy to prioritize among a large number of major issues (see Boadway and Shaw 2009, 5), a major advantage of this choice of research units is the high reliability and comparability of information across time and space as well as the unique Danish Civil Registration System that enables control for a range of potentially relevant alternative explanations (see Andersen & Mortensen 2010).

Although the focus on local governments within one country renders broad generalizations more difficult, it also enables a more fine-grained investigation of the propositions derived from our theoretical model. The path-breaking potential of the choice of research units is that we can obtain relevant information and variation on all variables of interest and thereby actually move the study of agenda-setting and public policymaking into the realm of multivariate, explanatory research.

3.1. Coding Local Government Agendas

The empirical strategy is centered on the creation of a unique, new dataset based on a systematic coding of the political agendas from 98 municipalities as well as a coding of the agenda of each permanent committee within each council. For all 98 municipalities, these agendas will be measured on a monthly basis from 2007 to 2013, and for several municipalities, we trace the political agenda back to the 1990s in order to increase our ability to assess temporal dynamics. Based on a sample of council and committee agendas, we estimate that these data sum up to a total of approximately 500,000 agenda points. A survey reveals that 95 per cent of all municipalities record and make public the agenda for each committee as well as the local assembly since 2009 (the figure is 75 per cent since 2007). We should be able to improve on this since most of the municipalities which have not published their memos indicate on their webpage that the memos are available upon request.

In coding these agendas, the project adapts the coding strategies applied to national political agendas, which have also proven the value of quantifying political agendas and the feasibility of coding large numbers of agendas (see Baumgartner et al. 2011).

To give an idea of how the research question can be investigated, we have selected two municipalities for a pilot study: Solrød (M1) with 57,000 inhabitants, 2 permanent committees, and a centre-right mayor; and Høje-Taastrup (M2) with 48,000 inhabitants, 8 permanent committees, and a centre-right mayor. The entire agenda for each council meeting in the two municipalities from 2007 to 2011 has been coded on a monthly basis into issue categories (such as health care, day care, schools, elderly care). With a meeting every month (and sometimes an additional appended meeting in the same month) except for July, we have 55 monthly observations.

The many different issue domains offer some unique opportunities to compare agenda-setting and policymaking across different characteristics of the problem environment, across different issue preferences of local government leaders, and across different local committee structures.

The main lesson of the pilot study is that coding these agendas in a meaningful way is indeed feasible. Furthermore, the coding of the agenda in two municipalities reveals significant variation between the two agendas: Whereas the agenda in M1 consisted of on average 18 discussion-points, this number was much larger (33) for M2. Just as divergent is the variation within each agenda among the issues and over time. Most of the issues move up and down the political agenda over the period as revealed by the quite substantial standard deviations (about 6 for M1 and less than 5 for M2) for the average attention across the possible issues. The variation is evident also on the issue-level:

1. “Schools” receives almost 12pct of the attention in M1, but only 6pct in M2.
2. “Elderly” attracts 4pct of the attention in M1 compared to 8pct in M2.
3. “Social” issues get scarce attention (1pct) in M1 compared to M2 (5pct).
4. “Unemployment” receives almost 4pct of the attention in M2, but less than 2pct in M1.

Such differences in the political agenda across two otherwise rather similar municipalities call for explanations – but they also call for more observations in order to reduce the influence of more idiosyncratic factors.

3.2. Policy Indicators

A key innovation of the project is to systematically analyze the policy implications of political agenda dynamics. The study of Danish municipalities provides rich and comparable output data not only on spending but on other dimensions of policy decisions as well. Furthermore, the agenda material also contains the decision agenda after each meeting in the council or committee, which makes it possible to trace policy decisions at a monthly frequency similar to the measures of political agendas – a significant advantage compared to national studies of agenda-setting, which often have to rely on annual measures of agendas and policies. An important intermediary aim of the project is to combine these various policy indicators into standardized measures that match the timing and issue categories of the political agendas.

3.3. Variation in Preferences

With respect to the preferences of the policy makers, each municipality is governed by politicians elected every fourth year in direct and open elections, the last one in 2009. Divergences across the 98 municipalities in the party of the mayor as well as marked variation in the share of centre-left mandates in the councils allow us to investigate how party color matters in reactions to real-world

problems. In addition, we have access to two large surveys collected in 2008 and 2012 on local politicians' policy preferences on 14 different issues that match our agenda issue categories quite closely. These preferences are measured systematically across a representative sample of local politicians from all 98 municipalities. In both cases, the survey was conducted by Martin Bækgaard – one of the team members of this project.

3.4. Variation in Committee Structure

As argued in the theoretical section, the basic idea is that the composition of committees influences how much political attention different problems receive. The municipalities offer strong opportunities to pursue this question further. Some municipalities have up to nine permanent political committees – for instance, for child care, schools, income support, and elderly care. Others place the policy areas within a partly or fully common jurisdiction to have only as few as two permanent committees. In the election period 2010-2013, for instance, the number of permanent committees varies between two and nine with a mean of 5.7 and a standard deviation of 1.5. In the comparison above, Municipality 1 only has two standing committees while Municipality 2 has eight, thus making the difference in committee structures one potential explanation of the different agendas in the two municipalities.

3.5. Problem Environment

Finally, the focus on 98 Danish municipalities offers a rare opportunity to actually evaluate agenda-setting and policy reactions against the supply of information on changes in real-world problems. For instance, we may be able to evaluate local political attention to and decisions on local schools against standardized and highly reliable measures of the (relative) performance of local schools; to evaluate attention and policies directed at fighting local unemployment against reliable measures of local unemployment; to examine attention to local road maintenance and construction against comparable measures of the quality of local roads, etc. On the other hand, as implied by the theoretical framework, in some issue domains, we only have very ambiguous indicators of real-world problems because measures of the quality of, for instance, child care or elder care do not exist. Furthermore, the gradual introduction of systematic performance information (often based on large-scale surveys of the welfare consumers) across municipalities for a subset of issues provide important temporal inter-issue variation. Finally, we may be able to split some of the broader issue domains into one part where problem indicators do exist and another part where they do not exist in order to control for characteristics attached to the broader issue domain. Altogether, such variation offers novel opportunities to examine empirically how and when problem characteristics influence the political agenda and policy decisions.

3.6. Analytical Strategy

Given the demanding task of examining our theoretical propositions, methodological triangulation is required. The large-*n* analyses of the project can inform us about general tendencies and interactions between problems, preferences, and institutions. Estimation techniques will be variants of panel and/or multi-level statistical analyses that: 1) utilize the relevant empirical variation both over time and across municipalities and issue domains, and 2) handle most of the challenges involved in analyzing hierarchically structured data.

In-depth case studies will be used in two stages of the project for two distinct analytical purposes. First, the research team will produce four case studies at the very beginning of the project in order to explore the relevance and robustness of the theoretical framework. Based on the findings of these case studies, the theoretical framework will be refined in the first year of the project.

Second, in the third and fourth year after the quantitative data collection and analyses, four case studies will be conducted with the purpose of exploring the causal mechanisms implied by the theoretical framework. We will select two cases that fit the quantitative results well and two cases that the quantitative results are less good at predicting. By comparing two well-predicted cases with two deviant cases, it becomes possible to acquire a thorough understanding of the causal mechanism at play.

All eight case studies will contain interviews with key policymakers, archival investigations, and a particularly detailed coding of the political agenda and policy decisions.

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