6. Comparing agenda-settings: the Comparative Agendas Project

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1. INTRODUCTION

Studies of agenda setting have a long tradition within public policy research. Seminal work by Bachrach and Baratz (1962), Cobb and Elder (1983), and Kingdon (1984) has continued to prove its importance over decades. In recent years, this research tradition has taken a new turn and gained considerable momentum, not least because of the establishment of the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) and the research based on the data collected in this project. The CAP is built on the foundational work by Baumgartner and Jones (1993) and their data set on the US, and today, it brings together research groups of 18 different countries in Europe, Asia, and Latin America. The growth of the CAP data set has generated a flourishing literature that has moved the policy agenda-setting tradition forward in several ways, both theoretically and in terms of methods. This has generated a much better understanding of agenda-setting dynamics across time, issues, and countries. Thus, agenda-setting processes around policy issues are in many ways better understood than just ten years ago.

This chapter provides an overview of the development of the policy agenda literature within the last decade focusing on the development of the CAP data sets (available through https://www.comperativeagendas.net). The chapter is structured as follows. The first section discusses previous contributions to the analysis of agenda setting, from the classical insights of policy agenda-setting literature to more recent theoretical developments, and the second section focuses on the punctuated equilibrium theory. The third section offers a general discussion about the contribution of the Comparative Agendas Project databases to the study of agenda setting and describes several indicators used to analyze agenda dynamics (entropy, kurtosis, etc.). The last part of the chapter suggests next steps for future policy agenda-setting research.

2. AGENDA-SETTING MODELS

In its origins, agenda-setting studies focused mainly on the study of issue conflict and power. The so-called "conflict management approach", which was the dominant approach during the 1960s and 1970s, emphasizes the problems associated with the functioning of the democratic system. The main claim of some of the major contributions during this period, such as Schattschneider (1960) or Bachrach and Baratz (1962), was that policy makers were neither paying attention to the issues that directly affected a larger part of the population, such as poverty and social inequality, nor responding to the issues that citizens identify as the most important problems for the nation.

These studies presented a critical voice to the pluralist view of politics. In particular, Bachrach and Baratz (1962) emphasized that power may be, and often is, exercised by confining the scope of decision making to relatively "safe" issues: the problem of the pluralist approach is that most of the time, "the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper class accent" (Schattschneider 1960: 35). Most citizens cannot overcome the powerful barriers of entry that characterize the pressure system. Any political conflict is characterized by the existence of privileged groups, whose main goal is to maintain the status quo, keeping "outsiders" out of the political game, and non-privileged groups, whose goal it is to expand political conflict and enter into the decision-making process.

After Bachrach and Baratz (1962) and Schattschneider (1960), authors such as Cobb and Elder (1983) focus the analysis on policy actors' ability to transform the values and beliefs about the nature of policy problems and/or policy solutions. Persuasion and argumentation together with the use of material resources increase the chances of policy actors – including both advocates of policy change and defendants of the status quo – to fulfill their goals. Following Schattschneider's (1960) observation about issue conflict expansion, Cobb and Elder (1971) highlight that issues arise out of group conflict and reach decision-makers when the issue is expanded through persuasion and argumentation in terms of its scope, potency, and proximity. Issues that are broader in scope – that is, more ambiguous, less technical, of higher social significance, and of longer temporal relevance – are more likely to reach the agenda than others.

In contrast to the conflict management perspective, John Kingdon (1984) developed the multiple stream model of agenda setting by adopting elements from organizational theory and evolutionary biology. As John et al. (2013) emphasize, Kingdon's model rejects the idea of agenda setting as a linear process in which a policy maker identifies a problem to solve, the bureaucracy produces a range of possible solutions, and the policy maker selects the best choice. Rather, Kingdon uses the metaphor of three separate "streams" to describe the gap between policy makers' attention to a problem and their adoption of a meaningful solution.

Kingdon's policy window model suggests that policy changes are a result of a complex interaction of unrelated streams – problem, policy, and political streams – that come together quite unpredictably. A policy window opens either by the appearance of compelling problems or by happenings in the political stream. Policy entrepreneurs play a key role to couple the separate streams together: "They keep their proposal ready, waiting for one of two things: a problem that might float by to which they can attach their solution or a development in the political stream, such as a change of administration that provides a receptive climate for their proposal" (Kingdon 1984: 195).

In a different vein, Baumgartner and Jones' punctuation equilibrium theory (PET) also emphasizes agenda setting as a non-linear process (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Jones and Baumgartner 2005). The PET suggests that political processes are most of the time characterized by long periods of stability, or at least only incremental changes. In times of "normal" policy making, things do not change very much. However, sudden large-scale changes do happen, often within a short time span. Hence, PET explains both long time periods with stability – or at least only marginal change – and periods of sudden and significant changes, which are labeled "punctuations".[1]

The punctuations reflect that policy makers process information disproportionally. Following Simon's (1951) bounded rationality theory, the PET model suggests that issue attention is never proportional to the severity of problems. Most of the time, policy makers

tend to ignore any signal from the environment about a need to change policy. These periods of policy stability are interrupted by dramatic increases in issue attention, in which policy makers tend to overact, paying disproportionate attention to an issue. The arguments behind PET were completely at odds with the incrementalism model of policy change developed by Lindblom (1959) and, later, Wildavsky (1964) for budgetary change, according to which policy makers adopt decisions step by step, following incremental changes from existing policies. Stability is governed by what Baumgartner and Jones (1993) identify as a "policy monopoly":

> Every interest, every group, every policy entrepreneur has a primary interest in establishing a monopoly – a monopoly on political understanding concerning the policy of interest, and an institutional arrangement that reinforces that understanding … Participation in a policy monopoly is structured by two things: the formal or informal rules of access discourage the participation of outsiders, and the prevalent understanding of the policy are so positive that they evoke only indifference by those not involved (thereby insuring their continued noninvolvement). (Baumgartner and Jones 1993: 7)

The policy monopoly works to maintain an equilibrium around a given policy question and to counterbalance any changes in the principles and values behind existing policies (what they call policy image) coming in from the environment.

Occasionally, however, some issues come to the forefront, and major political actors begin discussing them. At these times, policies can change very rapidly. Rapid policy change occurs as a result of two main processes: mimicking and attention shifting. The first operates when people observe the behavior of others and act accordingly. The second operates because people, in the words of Herbert Simon, are serial information processors. They attend to only limited parts of the world at any given time. Since one cannot possibly simultaneously be attuned to all elements of the world around one, people use various informational "short-cuts" in order to make reasonable decisions (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). Most people tend to focus on one or just a few dimensions in making their choices. Yet, once new dimensions gain importance in the political debate, people may shift their attention towards these new dimensions of the issue, following a quite unpredictable change in their behavior.

3.   METHODOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Despite the long theoretical history outlined above, it was not until the work of Baumgartner and Jones (1993) that quantitative research on policy agendas began to develop. In *Agendas and Instability in American Politics* (1993), Baumgartner and Jones tracked attention to a number of specific policy questions such as pesticides, smoking, alcohol, and nuclear power. Attention to these policy questions was tracked by keyword search using several sources: the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* and *New York Times* to measure the public agenda, and Congressional hearings to measure the political agenda. What was unique about the data used by Baumgartner and Jones in *Agendas and Instability* was that they allowed for a focus on long-term attention dynamics. Thus, the times series began right after World War II or even earlier.

The data sets that Baumgartner and Jones developed for the 1993 book were the forerunner of the CAP project. There are, however, some fundamental differences between the data sets that Baumgartner and Jones developed and the CAP data sets. First, the CAP project databases are developed according to a predefined coding scheme, not on keyword searches for specific

policy questions (see Appendix). This is a relevant methodological advance mainly because keyword search is difficult to apply over long time periods when the language used to discuss a policy question can change dramatically.

Second, CAP project data sets cover the policy agenda in a comprehensive manner, describing its entire development rather than only focusing on specific issues or policy questions such as nuclear power or pesticides. This is a major contribution to the study of agenda setting, allowing to go beyond case studies and to trace the evolution of issue attention across time and countries. Finally, CAP data sets provide information not only about the final coding but also about the actual political activities that have been coded. This is a major methodological contribution to the study of agenda setting, which allows researchers to go further in the analysis of important theoretical questions. For example, the CAP coding scheme codes attention only, leaving aside the tone relating to the policy questions. Coding tone for each policy question would be a gigantic task. However, to obtain information about the tone, researchers can use the CAP data sets by identifying the issues that respond to their theoretical goals and then use the detailed information for each agenda item to code the tone. A number of additional points about the CAP coding scheme are worth highlighting:

All coding items (hearings, bills, etc.) are assigned to both a major code and a subtopic code. This structure in reality implies that coding is carried out at the level of the subtopics, and afterwards, any researcher can combine the subtopics in whatever ways suits a particular research question. Thus, the major topics are largely a way of providing an overview of the subtopics. However, each major topic also has a "general code" (00) to cover general questions. An example could be a politician stating that "societies need to focus on education". Each major topic also has an "other category" (99) to deal with very specific questions, concerning, for instance, the environment, that do not fit a specific subcategory.

One decision made by Baumgartner and Jones (1993) that has stayed with the coding scheme ever since is the decision to code each coding item into one subtopic only. This is not to argue that there are not cases in which a coding item could be coded in multiple subtopics, such as a hearing on energy saving and climate change. The price for this would, however, be to add considerable additional complexity to the coding: What if a coding item touches upon more than two subtopics, and what if they are not equally present? Thus, coding each item into only one category is a simple coding rule that focuses on the major content of an item rather than capturing all aspects. Further, in case multiple subtopics are equally relevant, items are coded in the "general" category" (00) of a major category.

When looking at the CAP scheme, one should be aware that the scheme is supposed to measure the *policy* content of various political agendas. The major topics are classic policy issues such as transportation, the environment, the labor market, and so on. The coding thus tries to capture the policy content or the policy measures included in the items coded. This is logical given that the scheme was developed with policy agenda-setting theory as the guiding theory and a focus on explaining policy change. This focus on policy means or policy content clearly differentiates the CAP scheme from, for instance, the coding scheme used by the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) (cf. Green-Pedersen 2019). The CMP coding scheme was developed to capture party ideology in order to place political parties on a left–right scale. Focus in the coding was thus on the ideological aims of a given item rather than the policy content.

From the outset, the structure of the CAP coding scheme has been 19 major topics and around 225 subtopics. A relevant question is what the underlying idea of this structure is. For

instance, why have 19 major topics as the organizational structure rather than 18 or 20? There is no definite answer to this. However, the idea of major topics is close to the idea of "policy issues", which play an important role in the organization of politics in most countries. Standing committees in legislatures are typically organized around policy issues such as education, labor market, health care, or the environment. Ministerial portfolios also resemble policy issues such as the minister of education, agriculture, or defense. Political parties also typically have spokespersons for particular policy issues. Thus, policy issues are an organizational structure of politics – it is not an invention of the CAP coding scheme but a phenomenon of politics in the real world.

The subtopics of the CAP coding scheme mostly resemble what can be labeled "policy questions". These are the type of questions that Baumgartner and Jones focused on in their 1993 book concerning, for instance, nuclear power and tobacco. They resemble what politicians deal with when implementing policy reforms or striking larger policy deals. Politicians rarely make policy reforms that cover an entire policy issue, such as education. They typically focus on specific policy question such as primary schools or universities.

To sum up, the exact number of policy issues and their content are not something that can be deduced theoretically, but are a pragmatic consideration of how many and which categories are useful in terms of describing the policy content of an agenda. However, the idea of approaching politics through major topics and subtopics resembles how real-world politics is organized.

The CAP coding scheme was developed for a US context, but within the last decades, similar data sets have been developed for a large number of countries, in particular in Western Europe, but also countries such as Australia, Brazil, Canada, Hong Kong, Israel, New Zealand, Russia, South Korea, and Turkey (see Baumgartner, Breunig, and Grossman 2019). This shows that the CAP methodology and the PET framework are applicable also outside liberal democracies as long as the political systems disclose their activities in parliament, such as executive orders, debates, and speeches. The fact that new countries are constantly added to the CAP community is a testimony to its success as a framework to analyze public policy. CAP data have further been developed for the American states of Florida and Pennsylvania, the European Union, and the 98 Danish municipalities. The development of CAP data for all these countries has implied coding of data sources that were not part of the original US project. This includes sources such as party manifestos, coalition agreements, cabinet agenda meetings, local council meeting agendas, and parliamentary control instruments such as questions to the minister and various forms of motions and interpellations. A number of data sources are also similar to the ones coded for the US, such as speeches by the head of governments, bills, high court decisions, media data (typically newspaper articles), and, more recently, social media.

The expansion of the CAP data to such a broad range of countries and also to new data sources has been a tough test for the coding scheme originally developed for the US federal level and, especially, the US Congress. The guiding principle for all the countries has been to use the original CAP coding scheme as the starting point and, then, to carry out necessary national adaptations to secure that the coding scheme captured important national trends in policy agendas. Such adjustments could be of different kinds with different implications for the cross-national comparability of the data. When new subtopics are developed by splitting particular subtopics into two or more new subtopics, this is unproblematic. The subtopics can just be merged again when comparing with other countries. What is more problematic is when new subtopics are created with a content belonging to different subtopics across different

Table 6.1 *Major topics, Comparative Agendas Project coding system*

Code	Description	Code	Description
1	Macroeconomic issues	14	Housing and Community Development
2	Rights	15	Commerce and Banking
3	Health	16	Defense
4	Agriculture	17	R&D and communication
5	Labor	18	Foreign trade
6	Education	19	Foreign affairs
7	Environment	20	Governmental issues
8	Energy	21	Public lands
9	Immigration and Refugee	23	Culture
10	Transport		
12	Crime and Justice		
13	Social Policy		

major categories. In that case, the new subtopic cannot just be merged into a subtopic in the original CAP coding scheme.

None of the countries have carried out fundamental revisions to the original CAP coding scheme when applying it, but at the same time, the changes made were in some cases more than marginal. This raised an issue of cross-national comparability of the data. Given that each country has made its own version of the codebook, a cross-national realignment of the data sets was necessary. This process was organized by Shaun Bevan (see Bevan 2018) and led to a new version of the CAP coding scheme, known as the CAP master codebook (see http://www.sbevan.com/cap-master-codebook.html). This codebook has 21 major topics and 213 sub-topics (see Table 6.1). The two new major topics added are immigration and cultural policy. Compared to the original US codebook, the master codebook reflects two types of changes. One is adjustments due to the application of the original CAP scheme in a much wider comparative context. Cultural policy might be a minor policy question in the US Congress but an important policy issue in many countries, including ministries and parliamentary standing committees for cultural policy. The other is adjustments due to the emergence of new policy questions that also apply to the US. For instance, a subtopic was added to the master codebook to capture domestic responses to terrorism.

The aim of the master codebook was to have a codebook that would "bridge" all the national data sets. Thus, the national data sets can be recoded to match the master codebook. This goal has not been accomplished in every detail, but the result comes close, and through the development of the master codebook, the CAP data make it possible to track policy agendas over long time periods and in great detail in the countries covered and also to compare with a wide range of other countries.

4.   POLITICAL AGENDAS

In general, we refer to the political agenda as the list of issues to which political institutions are paying some serious attention at any given time (Dearing and Rogers 1996). However, there is not a unique definition of the political agenda. Cobb and Elder made the distinction between the systemic agenda, defined as a general set of political controversies that will be viewed as

falling within the range of legitimate concerns meriting the attention of the polity, and the institutional agenda, defined as a set of concrete items scheduled for active and serious consideration by a particular institutional decision-making body (Cobb and Elder 1983). Kingdon (1984) distinguishes between the governmental agenda, defined as the list of issues a government is paying attention to, and the decision agenda, which includes the issues a government is ready to take a formal decision upon (see Zahariadis 2016 for a review).

The CAP follows a broader definition of the political agenda, as the list of issues that actors in and around the political system pay attention to over time. This includes actors in a wide variety of political institutions such as parliaments, governments, public administrations, and judiciaries. It also includes non-governmental actors such as interest organizations which could be non-governmental organizations, business groups, professional organizations, trade unions, and think tanks. These operate across different levels of governance – supranational, national, and sub-national. Prime ministers, members of parliament, political parties, and/or interest groups have their own agenda and pay attention to issues in a different fashion, taking into account flows of information, policy preferences, and the limits and opportunities of the institutional setting in which they operate. Further, this focus on particular agendas makes it possible to study the interaction between different agendas, as several authors do (Alexandrova 2017; Chaqués Bonafont, Palau, and Baumgartner 2015; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010; Green-Pedersen and Stubager 2010; Jennings and John 2009, 2011; Vliegenthart et al. 2016; Walgrave, Soroka, and Nuytemans 2008).

However, agendas also differ because of differences in the actors generating the agenda and their interaction. For instance, Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2010) have introduced the concept of a "party system agenda" to understand how parties compete to decide which issues they should pay attention to. Their argument is that at any point in time, a handful of issues are the subject of political parties' attention, and no party can ignore these issues. At the same time, parties constantly compete to influence the issues of tomorrow. Therefore, what characterizes the party system agenda is that it is generated by a limited number of actors. Party systems typically consist of five to ten parties, which are at the same time competitors. Political parties compete for votes, office, and policy influence and behave strategically towards each other. The media or news agenda is also generated by a relatively limited number of news media that interact with each other. Although they are also competitors for readers/viewers, their interactions are also driven by journalistic norms about news value and critical journalism (McCombs 2004: 98–102). One can speak of the media agenda as the agenda of the "news institution" (Cook 1998).

The public agenda is a quite different agenda. The public, that is, the voters, are not a limited group of strategic actors, but a large number of individuals for whom politics is mostly a marginal aspect of their everyday life. The public agenda is typically measured through an MIP ("Most Important Problem") question (Jennings and John 2009, 2011). Most voters will not spend much time on thinking about this question unless it occurs in a survey, and they are unlikely to act strategically to influence the answer given by other members of the public. In other words, the public agenda emerges when the public is asked about it, not because of the continuous interaction of professional and strategic actors such as political parties and news media. This difference between the public agenda and other agendas has implications for how one theorizes its relation to other agendas. While political parties might strategically try to influence both the party system agenda and other agendas, the public agenda is primarily

responsive to other agendas (Soroka 2002). How can one imagine the public becoming concerned with an issue without this happening through news stories?

5.   MEASURES OF THE AGENDA

The starting point in describing and analyzing policy agendas is that attention is scarce. The agenda may grow or contract somewhat in the long run in terms of the number of items or subtopics on the agenda, but in the short to medium term, the question is not how large the agenda is but which issue is on the agenda at the expense of other issues (Baumgartner, Jones, and Wilkerson 2011). Therefore, the attention to an issue is usually measured in relative terms (in percentages) instead of absolute terms, and most analyses are focused on developments in the allocation of attention across issues over time (see, e.g., Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Green-Pedersen and Walgrave 2014; John et al. 2013). A number of measures have been developed and applied to describe and analyze variation in the composition of the political agenda.

5.1   Measure of Policy Change – Leptokurtosis

To describe to what extent an agenda is characterized by longer periods of stasis and shorter periods of bursts – what is often referred to as punctuated equilibrium – a measure of leptokurtosis, "the LK score", has been introduced by Baumgartner and Jones (Baumgartner et al. 2009b; Baumgartner, Jones, and Mortensen 2017). It has become a key measure in much subsequent research (Breunig and Jones 2011; Walgrave and Nuytemans 2009).

   Leptokurtosis describes the distribution of changes to the agenda across issues in a given period. Say, attention to education increases by 2%, attention to health drops by 7%, and attention to the military rises by 22%. These percentage changes are summarized in a simple frequency distribution. Leptokurtosis calculates the shape of the distribution and more specifically indicates how far the distribution deviates from a normal distribution in terms of its tails, its peak, and its shoulders (in between the peak and each tail). Quite narrow tails usually characterize a normal distribution whereas a kurtosis distribution has fat tails (huge changes), a taller and narrower central peak (many small changes), and weaker shoulders (few moderate changes). In other words, changes to attention in a kurtosis distribution are either minor in the tall center of the distribution and there are a lot of them – the stasis or long periods of equilibrium – or the changes are rare but huge in the fat tails – the episodic bursts or punctuations. Figure 6.1 graphs the difference between a normal distribution – the black bell-shaped line – and a leptokurtosic distribution marked by the bars.

   A normal distribution has a leptokurtosis score of 0.12, and Baumgartner and Jones show that every policy output series in the US, such as hearings, bills, statues, laws, and budgets are non-normally distributed with high leptokurtosis scores (Jones and Baumgartner 2005: 171–83). Baumgartner et al. (2009b) extend this finding to European countries and show that the distribution of changes to attention across issues in various political activities across these countries ranges from .23 to .64, that is, highly leptokurtosic or non-normally distributed. As one moves further into the policy process, the distribution of attention deviates more, and the distribution is more leptokurtosic the more friction the political institutions exhibit. Importantly, Baumgartner et al. (2009b) report that all distributions in the US, Belgium, and
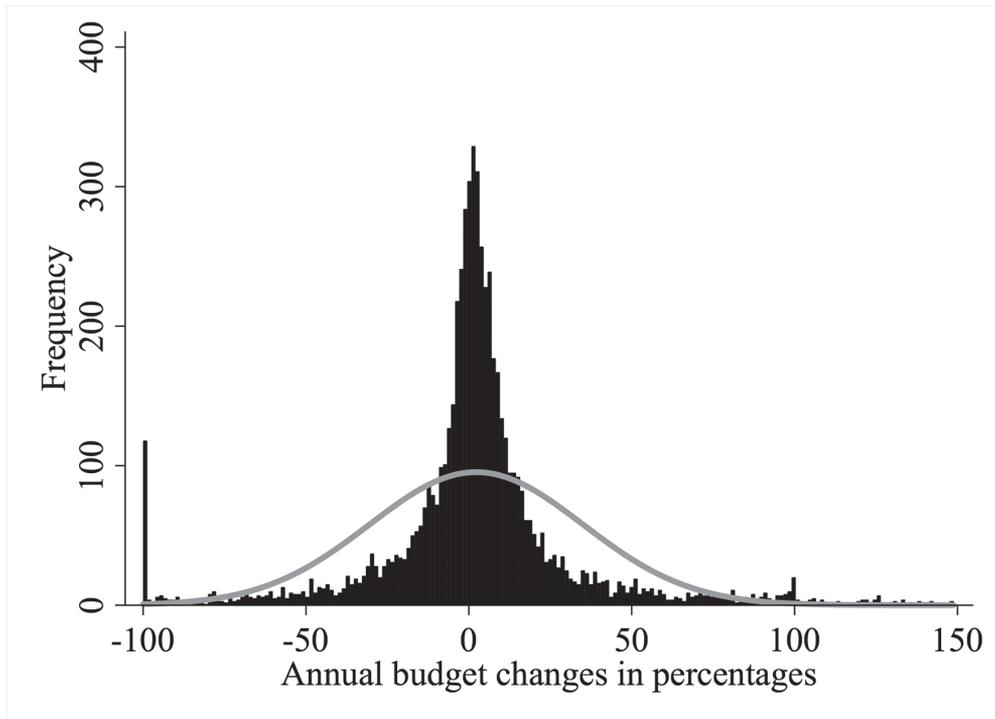
Figure 6.1   Pooled frequency distribution of annual percentage changes in the US
Congressional Budget Authority, Fy 1947–2017, in constant 2009 million
dollars

Denmark for attention changes in political activities are leptokurtosic. Based on these findings, the authors conclude that PET applies broadly across political systems.

5.2   Measures of Agenda Size – Contraction or Expansion?

To measure if the agenda is contracting or expanding over time, measures of capacity and complexity are relevant (e.g. McCombs and Zhu 1995). Capacity measures the number of items on the agenda, regardless of the number of subtopics in which these items have been categorized. Complexity is concerned with the number of subtopics on the agenda at any given point in time. The more subtopics, the more complexity. Hence, complexity is measured as the number of subtopics from the CAP codebook that are used to code the agenda. As an example, a local council agenda concerned with 18 subtopics might include 27 items, which the council will be discussing on a meeting, that is, about 1.5 items per subtopic. This implies an agenda with a high complexity, but a low capacity in contrast, to say, an agenda with only 13 subtopics but 52 items. Capacity can also be measured simply as the length of, for instance, party manifestos or minutes from parliamentary debates.

Several authors (e.g. Baumgartner and Jones 2015; Green-Pedersen 2007) use these capacity and complexity measures to characterize the development of the political agendas since World War II in Western countries. Across countries, Green-Pedersen (2007) finds that, generally, the agenda has gradually expanded in terms of its capacity and complexity. A main part of this expansion is that new issues such as the environment, crime, and immigration increasingly receive attention in addition to more classic issues such as social policy and the economy. Using the same topics codes, Baumgartner and Jones (2015: chapter 6) identify a "great issue expansion" in the US in the 1960s–1970s, peaking in the 1980s, followed by a sizeable contraction in the 1990s and 2000s. In the 1950s, Congress attended to about 100 different topics annually. At its apex in the mid-1980s, this was closer to 200 topics, that is, almost the entire CAP codebook. In 2010, the Congress was back at its 1950s level. Hence, the US federal government first grew considerably more complex by covering still more policy areas and then reacted to that acceleration.

5.3   Measures of Fragmentation – Entropy

Some agendas are concentrated on a few issues, and some are more spread out. The entropy measure, developed in communication research, reveals this diversity of the agenda. The entropy score is used in an increasing number of studies to understand the allocation of attention (Baekgaard, Mortensen, and Seeberg 2018; Baumgartner and Jones 2015; Boydstun 2013; Jennings et al. 2011). There are several ways to calculate the entropy score, and Boydstun, Bevan, and Thomas (2014) argue that the Shannon's H is most appropriate. The Shannon's H is calculated by multiplying the proportion of the agenda that each item receives by the natural log of that proportion, then taking the negative sum of those products: $-i{=}1n(p(x_i)){\cdot}\ln p(x_i)$, where x_i represents an item, $p(x_i)$ is the proportion of the total attention the item receives, and $\ln(x_i)$ is the natural log of the proportion of attention the item receives. If one issue receives all the attention, the Shannon's H takes the value zero, and the score increases as the spread of attention across all topics becomes more equal (Boydstun, Bevan, and Thomas 2014).

An important point in relation to the entropy measure: the score does not change if two issues change position on the agenda. If macroeconomic policy receives 50% of the attention last year and only 25% this year and the opposite happens for crime, then the overall distribution of attention is unchanged and therefore also the entropy score. Hence, the entropy score is useful to characterize the agenda, but it also has a black spot (which the volatility measure below covers).

In a recent book on *The Politics of Information*, Baumgartner and Jones (2015: chapter 5) look at the issue-based structure of the US committee system in order to understand how the US Congress processes information. The authors are interested in the extent to which one committee has monopoly on an issue (a low "issue entropy") or if committee jurisdictions are overlapping, hence allowing hearings on the same issue in many different committees (a high "issue entropy") and, conversely, if a committee is focused on a few issues (a low "committee entropy") or involved in many issues (a high "committee entropy"). Looking over time, Baumgartner and Jones find that entropy, that is, diversity, increased considerably in the 1960s–1980s, so that committees became involved in still more issues, and issues were covered in a more diverse set of committees. In the 2010s, this complexity tapered off somewhat.

Table 6.2   *Hypothetical example of agenda stability*

	Issues (%)			
	A	B	C	Total (%)
Political agenda at t1	40	15	45	100
Political agenda at t2	50	20	30	100

5.4   Measure of Volatility and Issue Overlap

To describe how stable the agenda is, the volatility measure indicates the extent to which the agenda changes its issue content between two periods. The volatility measure can also be used to assess the overlap of two agendas at the same point in time, that is, the agenda of two political parties. Then, the measure is a measure of issue overlap for which it was originally developed by Sigelman and Buell (2004). To understand the logic of this measure, consider a case with two successive executive speeches and three potential issues to address and in which attention to the three issues is distributed as in Table 6.2 (see Mortensen et al. 2011).

In this case, the absolute differences between the two government speeches in terms of issue attention would sum up to 30 ($|40 - 50| + |15 - 20| + |45 - 30|$). Since a value of zero represents perfect agenda stability and a value of 200 represents perfect agenda instability, this hypothetical example would be a case of relatively strong agenda stability between t1 and t2. Standardizing this measure to range between zero and 100 and subtracting from 100 to convert it into a measure of stability rather than instability, the agenda stability (AS) measure can be expressed as

$$Agenda\ Stability_t = 100 - \frac{(\sum_{i=1}^{n}|GS_t - GS_{t-1}|)}{2}$$

where GS_t and GS_{t-1} is the percentage of the total government speech devoted to a particular issue at Time t and Time $t-1$, and the absolute differences between them are summed over all n of the potential issues on the agendas. Hence, if AS_t equals 100, the issue composition of the government agenda in year t is identical to the issue composition of the government agenda in year $t-1$. On the other hand, if AS_t equals zero, the two successive government agendas have been focused on entirely different issues. A score of, say, 70 for a given year would indicate a 70% overlap between that year's government agenda and the previous year's agenda.

Mortensen et al. (2011) have used the volatility measure to understand to what extent the executive agendas in Denmark, the Netherlands, and Britain from the 1950s until recently change when a new party enters office. They find a large degree of overlap. About three-fourths of the issue content of the agenda does not change despite a change to the incumbents. Hence, regardless of the party of the executive, the same issues need attention. Chaqués Bonafont, Palau, and Baumgartner (2015) arrive at a similar conclusion for the case of Spain, and the same occurs for the case of the UK (John et al. 2013).

6.   FUTURE DIRECTION OF POLICY AGENDA RESEARCH

Research on the policy agenda has developed tremendously in recent years because of collaborative work and the open source data policy of CAP allowing scholars from diverse backgrounds to use the data. The collection and categorization of millions of agenda items are a major achievement of the CAP community. Yet, one may rightly ask, why be so fascinated with data? The idea is that with high quality data, which allow comparisons across issues and countries over time, it is possible to test general propositions about the functioning of democracy. Agenda scarcity and information processing is a basic feature of politics, and this means that agenda-setting data are used in a wide range of research agendas. The agenda-setting approach is applied to analyze a wide variety of political actors and institutions. Examples are legislatures (e.g. Adler and Wilkerson 2013; Chaqués Bonafont and Palau 2011), committees (e.g. Jones, Baumgartner, and Talbert 1993), executives (e.g. Mortensen et al. 2011; Seeberg 2017), government departments (Mortensen and Green-Pedersen 2015), the bureaucracy (e.g. Baekgaard, Mortensen, and Seeberg 2018; Workman 2015), parties (e.g. Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010; Thesen 2013), interest groups (e.g. Baumgartner et al. 2009a; Chaqués Bonafont and Muñoz Márquez 2016), the media (e.g. Baumgartner and Chaqués Bonafont 2015; Vliegenthart et al. 2016; Walgrave, Soroka, and Nuytemans 2008), and voters (e.g. Jennings and John 2009).

   This proliferation of agenda-based research not only brings new insights on how the political agenda is formed but also provides new perspectives on the actors and institutions in and around the political system. Moreover, the data allow more encompassing analysis of a political system, including Spain (Chaqués Bonafont, Palau, and Baumgartner 2015), the UK (John et al. 2013), the US (Baumgartner and Jones 2015), the EU (Alexandrova, Rasmussen, and Toshkov 2016; Alexandrova and Timmermans 2013), and other countries (Green-Pedersen and Walgrave 2014: 201). A key part of the research agenda using policy agendas data also focuses on one particular issue over time, possibly also across countries, including the death penalty (Baumgartner, De Boef, and Boydstun 2008), morality issues (Engeli, Green-Pedersen, and Larsen 2012), health care (Green-Pedersen and Wilkerson 2006), pharmaceuticals and food safety (Chaqués Bonafont and Palau 2009), immigration (Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008), euthanasia (Green-Pedersen 2007), crime (Seeberg 2013), and the environment (Seeberg 2016). Hence, the CAP data sets allow researchers to go further in the analysis of research questions that have traditionally been underdeveloped. We conclude by pointing to some of the most interesting research questions for future agenda-setting research.

6.1   **Theorizing Issue Characteristics**

The CAP data sets allow to identify which issues reach the political agenda. However, we know little about the importance of issue characteristics (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). A few sets of studies have already shown that some issues are just more prone to make it to the political agenda (e.g. Jennings et al. 2011), but so far, it has proven difficult to disentangle issue characteristics in a systematic way. Whereas most recent comparative agenda-setting research aims to show that the agenda-setting theory is fundamental to the political system and therefore applies on diverse issues and across countries (e.g. Baumgartner et al. 2009b), some studies touch on the role of issue idiosyncrasies (see Green-Pedersen and Wilkerson 2006; Soroka 2002).

6.2   Studying Non-Decisions

The CAP data sets are also an important starting point to study non-decisions. From its origins, one of the key motivations to study political agendas is that some issues do not make it to the agenda because some actors "block the door". This is detrimental because such agenda power means that a policy most likely will not change. However, despite half a century's research, since the pioneering work of Bachrach and Baratz (1962), systematically studying non-decisions still proves difficult. The challenge for future research is to come up with a credible counterfactual that an issue that did not reach the agenda would have made it to the agenda had the right conditions been present.

6.3   Coding Tone of the Attention

The CAP has collected and topic coded a gigantic number of political activities in recent years. This data collection reveals which issues are on the agenda. The next step is to know how these issues are debated, for instance, whether agriculture is debated as an important export industry or as a source of water pollution. In this vein, an increasing body of research on framing (Baumgartner, De Boef, and Boydstun 2008; Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell 2009; Rose and Baumgartner 2013) and problem definition (Euchner et al. 2013; Fifer and Orr 2013; Huff and Kertzer 2017) shows that the content of the issue attention decides if attention spurs legislative change and which type of change. Moreover, in their 1993 book, Baumgartner and Jones coded the tone on each issue, that is, whether news items and political activities were positive or negative to the industry, and showed how the balance between positive and negative had to change before the legislation could change. Although it is a major task to systematically code the frame of each political activity at a large scale across countries and back in time, such frame coding of the issues in the existing data has great analytical potential. The challenge is that it already requires quite some local knowledge to just topic code a political activity. To identify the framing requires even more knowledge. However, in terms of understanding attention dynamics, it would be a quantum leap to code this systematically.

6.4   Strengthening the Link between Agenda Setting and Actual Policy Decision

The motivation to investigate agenda setting is that it matters for policy decisions. Decision-makers have to attend to an issue in order to legislate. However, research shows that far-reaching legislation is sometimes enacted quietly or without much prior debate (Culpepper 2010; Hacker 2004). Meanwhile, some issues receive considerable attention, such as the gun shootings in the US without legislative change. As agenda-setting research is often more concerned with the causes of attention rather than the consequences, the link between attention and legislation or budgets offers a fertile ground for future research.

Summing up, taking the next step in agenda-setting research essentially involves taking a step back to carry out more research on the basics of agenda-setting dynamics, namely, non-decisions, issue characteristics, and when attention begets policy change.

NOTE

1. To describe this pattern, Baumgartner and Jones borrowed a term from evolutionary biology: "punctuated equilibrium", originally coined by Eldredge and Gould (1972) to explain relatively rapid changes in biological species.

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APPENDIX

List of Subtopics

1. **Macroeconomic issues**
    100. General
    101. Inflation and interest rates
    103. Unemployment
    104. Monetary policy, the Bank of Spain, monetary reserve discount rate
    105. Budgets and spending budget law
    107. Taxes, tax policy and tax reform
    108. Industrial policy
    110. Control and stabilization of prices
    199. Others

2. **Rights, liberties and issues related to minorities**
    200. General
    201. Ethnic minorities and racial discrimination
    202. Gender discrimination and rights
    204. Age discrimination
    205. Discrimination of people with illnesses or disabilities
    206. Voting rights, political participation and representation
    207. Freedom of speech and religion. Equal rights in general. Abortion
    208. Right to privacy and access to information
    209. Activities against the state
    299. Others

3. **Health**
    300. General
    301. General reforms of the National Health System (NHS)
    302. General questions about the coverage of the NHS
    321. Regulation of the pharmaceutical industry, medical devices and clinical labs
    322. Sanitary facilities, hospitals, construction in the health system
    323. Agreements between the NHS and private companies
    324. Medical malpractice, fraud, abuse and compensation systems
    325. Human resources, education and training. Health manpower
    331. Disease prevention and health promotion
    332. Child health
    333. Mental diseases
    334. Long-term treatment, rehabilitation services, hospice and aging
    335. Pharmaceutical expenditure, government consumption and drug prices
    341. Tobacco
    342. Alcohol, control of illegal drugs

398. Research and development in health
399. Others

4. Agriculture
    400. Agriculture: General
    401. Agricultural Trade
    402. Subsidies and agricultural regulation
    403. Food inspection and safety
    404. Agricultural marketing and promotion
    405. Animal and crop disease and pest control
    408. Fishing and hunting policy
    498. Research on agriculture and livestock
    499. Other

5. Labor
    500. General
    501. Working conditions, work accidents and compensation schemes
    502. Employment training and workforce development
    503. Pensions and early retirement. Employee benefits
    504. Labor unions and employee relations
    505. Employment policy and collective negotiation
    506. Youth and child employment
    529. Labor and immigration
    599. Others

6. Education and culture
    600. General
    601. Higher education
    602. Elementary and secondary education
    603. Education of students with difficulties
    604. Vocational education. Professional training
    606. Special education for disabled students
    607. Education excellence
    698. Research on education
    699. Others

7. Environment
    700. General
    701. Water quality, pollution and conservation of the coast
    703. Waste disposal
    704. Hazardous and toxic waste
    705. Air pollution, global warming and noise pollution

707. Recycling
708. Indoor environmental hazards
709. Species and forest protection
711. Land and water conservation
798. Research and development
799. Others

8. Energy
800. General
801. Nuclear energy
802. Electricity and Hydroelectricity
803. Natural gas and oil (including offshore oil and gas)
805. Coal and mining
806. Alternative and renewable energy
807. Energy conservation
898. Research and development
899. Other

9. Immigration and refugee issues
900. Immigration and refugee issues

10. Transport
1000. General
1001. Mass transportation and safety
1002. Highway and roads construction, maintenance, and safety
1003. Airports, air traffic control and safety
1005. Railroad transportation and safety
1007. Maritime issues and naval industry
1010. Public works (infrastructure development)
1098. Research and development in transportation
1099. Other

12. Crime and justice
1200. General
1201. Police and crime fighting authorities
1202. Organized crime & financial related crime. Tax fraud. White collar crime
1203. Illegal drug production, trafficking, and control
1204. Judiciary system and court administration
1205. Prisons
1206. Youth crime
1207. Child abuse and child pornography
1208. Domestic violence, gender violence and family issues

1210. Criminal and civil code
1211. Crime prevention, riots
1227. Terrorism and counter-terrorism
1299. Other

13. Social policy
1300. General
1302. Poverty and assistance for low-income families
1303. Elderly issues and elderly assistance programs
1304. Assistance to the disabled and handicapped
1305. Social services and volunteer associations
1308. Work–life balance and child care
1399. Other

14. Housing issues and community development
1400. General
1401. Housing and community development
1403. Urban economic development and general urban issues
1404. Housing policy in rural areas
1405. Rural economic development and general urban issues
1406. Public housing programs
1408. Elderly and handicapped housing
1409. Housing assistance for homeless and homeless issues
1499. Other

15. Commerce and banking
1500. General
1501. Banking system and financial institution regulation
1502. Securities and commodities regulation
1504. Mortgages, credit cards and other services of the credit market
1505. Insurances regulations
1507. Bankruptcy
1520. Antitrust regulation and corporate management
1521. Small and medium enterprises issues
1522. Copyrights and patents
1523. Domestic disaster relief (natural disasters and accidents)
1524. Tourism
1525. Consumer safety, consumer fraud and data protection
1526. Sports, lottery and gambling
1599. Others

16. Defense
    1600. General
    1602. NATO and other defense alliances
    1603. Military intelligence, CIA, espionage
    1604. Military readiness and capabilities
    1605. Arms control and nuclear nonproliferation
    1606. Military aid and weapons sales to other countries
    1608. Human resources and military personnel
    1610. Military procurement and weapons system acquisitions
    1611. Military installations, properties and building construction
    1614. Military environmental compliance
    1615. Civil protection services and armed forces
    1616. Civilian personnel and employment by the defense industry
    1617. Defense contracts
    1619. Direct war related issues
    1620. Human rights' violations in war. Relief of claims against military forces
    1698. Research and development on military issues
    1699. Other

17. Research, technology and communication
    1700. General
    1701. Space missions and research
    1704. Satellites and other space technology with commercial use
    1705. Science technology transfer and scientific international cooperation
    1706. Telecommunication and telephone services
    1707. Media
    1708. Weather forecasting and geologic issues
    1709. Computer industry and computer security
    1798. Research and development
    1799. Other

18. Foreign trade
    1800. General
    1802. Trade agreements, disputes and regulation
    1803. Export promotion and regulation
    1804. Overseas private investment and Spanish investments abroad
    1806. Productivity and competitiveness. Spain balance of payments
    1807. Imports and regulation of imports
    1808. Exchange rates and Forex
    1899. Other

19. Foreign affairs
    1900. General

1901. Foreign aid
1902. International agreements on environmental issues
1905. Developing countries issues
1906. International finance system and economic development organizations
1910. Western Europe and Common Market issues
1921 Specific country/region
1925. Human rights
1926. International organizations & international NGOs
1927. International terrorism
1929. Diplomacy
1999. Others

20. Governmental issues
2000. General
2001. Intergovernmental relations and local government
2002. Public administration efficacy. Bureaucracy oversight
2003. Postal service
2004. Civil Service, government employee benefits
2005. Appointments and nominations
2006. Awards and public honors. Medals
2007. Government procurement, contracts and corruption
2008. Privatization of public sector. Government property management
2009. Central tax administration
2011. Government branch relations, Parliament and Constitution
2012. Regulation of political activities, elections and election campaigns
2015. Claims against the government
2030. National holidays
2099. Others

21. Public lands
2100. General
2101. Natural parks and historic sites
2103. Natural resources, forest managements and public lands
2104. Water and sea resources: development, public works and harbors
2199. Others

23. Culture
2300. General
2301. Cinema, theatre, music and dance
2302. Publication of books and literary works in general
2399. Others

27. Climate (Only media coding)
   2700. General

29. Sports (Only media coding)
   2900. General

30. Death notices (Only media coding)
   3001. Natural death
   3002. Violent death
   3099. Others