

Why Are Some Policy Agendas Larger than Others?

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Most research on policy agendas is based on the assumption that space on the agenda is fixed and, hence, focuses on how problems compete for this limited agenda space. This article holds that policy agendas may be limited but not fixed, meaning that problems may not always be traded off but confronted through a larger policy agenda. Based on an extensive collection of local council agendas from 98 Danish municipalities over time, this article investigates variations in agenda size across local governments and examines the extent to which this reflects the local problem environment. The analysis reveals that a large council agenda arises in response to an unfriendly problem environment, particularly if there are many committees to channel problems onto the agenda and, to a lesser extent, if center-left parties hold office.

KEY WORDS: problems, agendas, institutions, local politics

Policy agendas are important. As Schattschneider (1960, p. 68) noted, the definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power. Some issues are defined into politics while others are defined out of politics. From this fundamental observation stems a rich literature on policy agenda setting (see Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Cobb & Elder, 1983; Green-Pedersen & Walgrave, 2014; John, Bertelli, Jennings, & Bevan, 2013; Kingdon, 1984). Common to this literature is an assumption of agenda scarcity; that policymakers can only juggle a limited number of problems at a time. Such a limited agenda is often explained with references to the cognitive limitations of the decision makers and/or the fact that all actors and organizations are constrained by time, energy, personnel, motivation, money, and expertise.

While the room for issues on the policy agenda, i.e., its size, may be limited, it is not fixed. This important aspect of policy agendas has been observed in policy agenda studies (Baumgartner & Jones, 2015; Breeman et al., 2009; Green-Pedersen, 2007) but has received little scholarly attention. Furthermore, to the extent that the agenda-setting literature has addressed the question about the size of policy agendas, it has focused exclusively on temporal changes within a political system, ignoring the more fundamental question about why the size of policy agendas varies across political systems.

In response to this research deficit, the article in hand examines why the size of policy agendas varies across political decision-making systems. To be able to initiate

a systematic examination of this question, this article hones in on the effect of three central concepts in the study of agenda setting: the effect of the societal problems facing the policy makers, the party color of the policymakers, and the institutional structure of the policy process. More particularly, we claim that severe socioeconomic problems are reflected in larger policy agendas, but more so if the political leader represents a left-wing party and the number of political committees is relatively large.

Investigating this assertion empirically requires an innovative approach to agenda-setting research. Given the small number of comparable cases, national policy agendas are not well suited to examine the question. Instead, inspired by the recent surge in local government agenda-setting research (e.g., Breeman, Scholten, & Timmermans, 2015; Jun & Musso, 2013; Liu, Lindquist, Vedlitz, & Vincent, 2010), this article utilizes the numerosity of local government units and examines the research question in a large-*n* comparison of the council agendas of the 98 municipalities in Denmark from 2007 to 2013. The Danish municipalities are governed by a local council of directly elected politicians representing different political parties. The municipalities are comparable, but they are not identical and on many policy issues they have a large degree of political and economic autonomy (Blom-Hansen, Houlberg, & Serritzlew, 2014).

The empirical puzzle then becomes why the size of local council agendas varies across these 98 political units. With a council meeting approximately each month, this dataset amounts to more than 6,000 council dockets (the document which presents the agenda for the meeting), which are then coupled with high-quality data on the societal problems facing the individual municipality as well as data on the local mayor's party color and the political organization of the local government.

What We (Do Not) Know About the Size of Policy Agendas

Traditionally, research on agenda setting has focused on the rise or decline in salience of a given issue. How do social problems such as child abuse get on the policy agenda (Nelson, 1984)? Why do coal miners, in the face of obvious abuse, oppression, and exploitation, not rebel (Gaventa, 1980)? Why does air pollution become an issue in one city but not in another (Crenson, 1971)?

The seminal work by Jones and Baumgartner (2005) marked a shift in agenda-setting research from case studies of single issues to system-level analyses of change and stability in the relative salience of issues (see also Adler & Wilkerson, 2012; Baumgartner & Jones, 2015; John et al., 2013). The foundation of this redirection of research focusing on agenda setting was the development of comprehensive agenda datasets covering the full policy space of all policy issues (see Baumgartner, Jones, & Wilkerson, 2002). In other words, the major methodological contribution of Baumgartner, Jones, and their colleagues was the development of quantitative indicators of the relative salience of policy issues—measures that are now implemented in several West European countries (see www.comparativeagendas.info).

Even though this progression of agenda-setting research sparked a much improved understanding of the rise and decline of the salience of policy issues over time, it also cemented the classic perspective of agenda setting as a process characterized by severe trade-offs in which different political issues compete for space on a limited policy agenda. If attention to defense and the economy increases, for instance, then the attention to other issues such as health and environmental problems fades (e.g., Jennings et al., 2011).

This perspective is also reflected in the dominant methodological approach, according to which any difference in the size of the policy agenda is concealed by the use of relative scores. For instance, attention to issue i in a given year t is typically calculated as

$$p_{it} = \frac{x_{it}}{\sum_{i=1}^m x_{it}} \times 100$$

where x_{it} is the absolute attention to issue i in year t , m is the number of issue categories, and p_{it} is the percentage of attention devoted to issue i in year t . As a consequence of this relative measure of attention, any absolute difference or change in the size of the policy agenda is hidden. It might be, for instance, that attention to issue i increases more than attention to issue j ; in absolute terms, however, issue j may receive the same—or perhaps even more—political attention. The same is true when comparing relative measures of attention across political systems.

A few studies deviate from this characterization of agenda-setting research. Bree-man et al. (2009) have shown how the government agenda in the Netherlands expanded during the 1980s, and Green-Pedersen (2007) has documented similar enlargements over time of government agendas in Denmark. Furthermore, based on a systematic coding of congressional hearings, Baumgartner and Jones (2015) show how the U.S. policy agenda expanded markedly in the 1970s.

Documenting that the policy agenda is not fixed obviously represents an important first step toward examining differences in the size of policy agendas. The next step is to explain why the size of policy agendas varies.

Explaining the Size of Policy Agendas

Most agenda-setting research has focused on describing how policy agendas evolve over time (e.g., Baumgartner & Jones, 1993, 2015; John & Jennings, 2010; John et al., 2013). Much less attention has been devoted to the question about the non-dynamic differences in policy agendas between policymaking systems. A policymaking system may have a very volatile but generally small policy agenda in contrast to a policymaking system with a sticky but large policy agenda. To understand such cross-level differences in the size of policy agendas, we must consider the slow-moving forces shaping the policy agenda. In the following, we concentrate on the predominantly slow-changing key aspects of a policymaking system: its problem environment, its actor preferences, and its institutions.

The Effect of Societal Problems

The relationship between the indicators of real-world problems and policy agendas has received some attention within the agenda-setting literature, but few studies actually take indicators of real-world problems into account. These studies appear to show that objective conditions do matter, but the exact form and strength of the relationship between problems and policy agendas vary across years and issues (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005, chap. 8; Green-Pedersen & Wilkerson, 2006; Soroka, 2002).

At the system level, a recent analysis by Baumgartner and Jones (2015) indicates that, in the United States, the growth of the policy agenda has to some extent been driven by the recognition of new societal problems. While Baumgartner and Jones do not address the causal relationship between real-world problem indicators and the policy agenda, their work does suggest that the capacity of the agenda may adjust in response to shifts in societal problems.

Moving to the question concerning cross-system differences, some political systems may face environments characterized by more—and more severe—societal problems than others. Countries deal with very different economic conditions, for example, but variations in wealth, industrial structures, human resources, unemployment levels, health conditions of the population, and so forth are also found within countries; conditions that can normally be measured and compared between states and municipalities.

The question pursued in this article is the extent to which such variation in the measurable problem environment influences the size of the policy agenda. Is the policy agenda able to expand to accommodate the level of societal problems or is it unaffected by such problems? The latter supports the notion of policy agenda setting being a rather closed process, determined mainly by characteristics of the political system and the decision makers rather than by characteristics of the surrounding problem environment. Based on the evidence of problem responsiveness found in issue-level studies (e.g., Bakenova, 2008; Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Green-Pedersen & Wilkerson, 2006; True, 2002), however, we do expect to see societal problems reflected in the size of policy agendas, as stated in hypothesis 1:

Hypothesis 1: On average, policymaking systems facing more severe societal problems have larger policy agendas.

Adding Party Ideology

Even the most objective and stubborn facts may not be perceived in the same manner by all decision makers, and the access of problems to the policy agenda may, therefore, differ accordingly. Policymakers generally disagree not only about the right solution to a problem but also about whether it is a problem at all (Rocheffort & Cobb, 1994; Stone, 1989). Such disagreement can often be traced back to conflicts in ideologies, implying a systematic bias in how policymakers respond to real-

world problems. Take the political reactions to the financial crisis, for example: some countries have proven far more reluctant to react than others (Armingeon, 2012). Such variations are not only found at the national level; in Danish municipalities, for instance, political decisions to cut back on local welfare services and benefits in response to dire economic conditions have varied widely. We argue that this variation was not only due to decision makers struggling to understand the problem and devise a reply; policymakers also responded differently because of their beliefs and ideologies.

To identify the direction of bias, we draw on the “politics matters” literature. A familiar assumption within this literature is that center-left parties favor a larger, stronger government than center-right parties because of their traditional support for a large welfare state and the government regulation of markets (see Hibbs, 1977; Hicks & Swank, 1992). Blais, Blake, and Dion (1993, p. 143) sum up these assumptions about the different impacts of right- and left-wing governments: “. . . the more leftist a government, the greater the size of government.”

This expectation has normally been investigated in output studies of, for instance, law-making activities and, not least, budgets and public spending (e.g., Jakobsen & Mortensen, 2015; Klingemann, Hofferbert, & Budge, 1994). For a center-right government that aims to shrink the size of government, however, focusing on limiting the access of problems to the agenda-setting stage of public policymaking might be a much more effective strategy than influencing the choice of a solution in the output stage (see also Mortensen et al., 2011). Once an issue is on the agenda, it may be difficult to avoid taking action on it, and such actions often imply new government initiatives (see Jakobsen & Mortensen, 2015). Hence, a more effective way to reduce the size of the government may be to limit the access of problems to the policy agenda. Based on these insights from the “politics matters” literature, we expect parties to bias the road for problems onto the agenda, as formulated in hypothesis 2:

Hypothesis 2: Societal problems have a larger impact on the size of the policy agenda in political units with center-left governments.

Adding Institutions

Institutions possibly also influence how problems appear on the policy agenda. Broadly conceived, institutions may involve any structural aspect of politics (see Ostrom, 1986), but this article focuses on the effect of the institutional specialization of the policymaking process. We focus on the role of committee structure, which is a phenomenon that has been studied extensively in research on the U.S. Congress (Groseclose, 1994; Shepsle & Weingast, 1987; Sprague, 2008) as well as other non-U.S. political systems, including the Danish municipalities (e.g., Bækgaard, 2010, 2011). Nevertheless, as argued by Sheingate (2006), the question about how the

committee structure shapes political attention to new problems has received little scholarly attention.

A basic insight from the committee literature is that the committee structure induces a bias in the policymaking process. One source of bias may stem from committees constraining how their members experience problems and, in particular, how committee members prioritize problems within and outside the jurisdiction of their committees (March & Olsen, 1996, p. 252; Scully, 2002).

Sheingate's (2006) empirical study of congressional attention regarding the issue of biotechnology offers important insight of relevance to the research question in this article. The more complex the committee jurisdiction, the easier it is to promote a new issue. Complexity creates greater room for actors to shift from one policy venue to another and can generate competition between committees for winning new issues.

A simple way of comprehending institutional complexity is to count the number of institutional units, because the opportunities to push issues through the system increase with the number of committees. Moreover, as the jurisdiction of each committee narrows when the number of committees increases, the fight to define and reshape jurisdictions, *ceteris paribus*, intensifies, causing greater complexity in the processing of problems onto the policy agenda.

This implies that the threshold for access to the agenda declines with the number of committees in a given political system. The impact of societal problems is, therefore, expected to be larger in political units with many committees than in those with few committees, as proposed in hypothesis 3:

Hypothesis 3: The impact of societal problems on the size of the policy agenda increases with the number of committees in the policymaking system.

Data and Research Design

Examining our hypotheses empirically is demanding. First, it requires standardized measures of the policy agenda, societal problems, party preferences, and the committee structure across a broad range of political decision-making units. Second, it requires theoretically relevant variation in the explanatory variables. These requirements are impossible to meet at the country level of comparison, where the number of relevant variables is excessive and the units of analysis inadequate. Furthermore, the comparability of relevant measures is often low between countries.

Consequently, this study employs a large-*n* research design based on the 98 Danish municipalities instead.² A major advantage of this choice of research unit is the high comparability of units across time and space, which enables the control for a range of potentially relevant alternative explanations. The 98 Danish municipalities are potent political systems with directly elected politicians and considerable autonomy, which renders them ideal for generating insights into the workings of political decision-making systems. Denmark may be characterized as a unitary

Table 1. Key Facts About Danish Local Governments

Key Facts	Mean ^d
Council members ^a	25
Parties in Council ^a	6 ^w
Turnout ^a	71.9%
Council members average working hours/week ^b	18.3
Pct. of revenue from local taxes ^c	75%
Share of public employees at local level ^d	65% (500,000 employees)
Share of GDP spent at local level ^d	20%

Note:

^aAverage across municipalities at 2013 election.

^wApart from the parties also represented in the national parliament, representatives from “local party lists” are typically elected together with independents (see also footnote 3).

Source:

^aDanmarks Radio.

^bKORA.

^cThe Danish Ministry of Finance.

^dLocal Government Denmark (*Kommunernes Landsforening*) and Statistics Denmark.

parliamentary state but has substantially more local autonomy than we usually find in a unitary state (see Boadway & Shah, 2009, p. 5).

The 98 Danish municipalities are multipurpose political units with substantial autonomy to prioritize among a large number of tasks within areas such as public elder care, child care, primary and lower secondary education, adult education, environmental control, specialized social services, and the maintenance and construction of local roads and parks. Part of municipal financing consists of block grants from the central government, but the municipalities also impose local taxes on their residents. The local representatives are organized in multiple parties—generally local branches of the national-level parties—which contest in highly competitive elections (Bækgaard & Jensen, 2012) with a high voter turnout and form durable coalitions in the council (Serritzlew, Blom-Hansen, & Skjæveland, 2010). Table 1 provides key facts on the municipalities.

Although the focus on local governments in one country renders broad generalizations more difficult, it enables a rather precise, fine-grained investigation of the hypotheses derived above. In particular, the choice of research unit implies that we can obtain relevant information and variation on all of the variables of interest, thereby moving the study of policy agendas into the realm of multivariate, explanatory research. The question about generalizability is discussed in the conclusion.

The Dependent Variable

Policy agendas have been operationalized and measured in many ways. At the national level of policymaking, prime ministers’ speeches, congressional hearings, parliamentary debates, legislative activity, and budgets have all been used as indicators of the policy agenda. A distinction is normally drawn between the systemic agenda and the governmental agenda (see Cobb & Elder, 1983; Walker, 1977). The systemic agenda includes all of the issues that are commonly perceived by members

Table 2. Summary Statistics

Variable	Mean	Std.	Min	Max
Agenda points (council meetings)	275	93	94	686
Socioeconomic index	0.95	0.24	0.45	1.81
Committees	5.8	1.7	2	14
Mayor (left-of-center = 1)	0.5	0.5	0	1
Election year (2009, 2013 = 1)	0.29	0.45	0	1
Merger (= 1)	0.67	0.47	0	1
Population size (10,000s)	5.64	6.29	0.18	55.94

Note: $N = 98$ (municipalities) $\times 7$ (years) = 686 observations.

of the political community as meriting public attention, whereas the governmental agenda is more narrowly defined as the set of items explicitly up for decision makers' active and serious consideration (Cobb & Elder, 1983, p. 86; Walker, 1977).

The council agendas utilized in this study come very close to what we would call a *local governmental agenda*. It includes only those issues that are up for the active and serious consideration at local council meetings. Furthermore, it is important to note that the local council agendas are not set by any kind of nationally defined institutional rules; it is entirely up to each local council to put together their agenda, determining the content and length. Examples of council agenda items are provided in Table A1 in the Appendix.

We conjecture that the size of the agenda indicates the capacity of the local council to carry numerous individual problems simultaneously. Does the municipality simultaneously debate local business development, childcare shortages, and sewage renewal? From the homepages of each municipality, we count the number of points on the docket for local council meetings. We have done so for all of the council meetings each year and for each municipality in the years 2007 to 2013.³ The average size of the council agendas is 275 agenda points per year. The size of the council agendas varies across municipalities from a minimum of 94 points to a maximum of 686 points with a standard deviation of 93 (see also Table 2). Thus, there is substantial variation, especially between the municipalities, but also variation over time within each municipality.

Underlying this tallying of agenda items is the assumption that each new item on the agenda brings up another facet of a problem or an entirely separate problem. To justify this assumption, we content-coded the full council agendas from four municipalities—two with long council agendas and two with short council agendas. This coding was based on the coding scheme of the policy agendas project (www.comparativeagendas.org), slightly adapted to fit the local level of Danish government. The procedure and results of the content coding are detailed in the Appendix. As seen in Table A2 in the Appendix, longer council agendas indeed also have more issues up for discussion and decision. We take this as evidence that our simple count of items does capture real features of the size of the council agendas.

Explanatory Variables

To obtain a broad, system-level measure of societal problems, we rely on the socioeconomic index compiled by the Danish Ministry of the Interior and Social

Policy to distribute annual government block grants. It reflects how the socioeconomic composition of residents varies across municipalities. The index consists of 14 indicators, including the proportion without employment, with low education, with low income, and the proportion of elderly, children, psychiatry patients, and people with handicaps or of foreign origin. The same criteria and same index construction are used throughout the period of analysis. In this way, the index measures the relative general severity of socioeconomic problems facing a municipality. If a municipality scores above (below) one, its socioeconomic problems are above (below) average. The index taps into general characteristics of the municipal residents that typically affect its expenditures and tax revenue. As Table 2 illustrates, the socioeconomic pressures change over the years for each municipality, but variation is mostly found between municipalities.

As a marker of the ideology of the ruling coalition, we use the mayor's party "color." Formally, the mayor of a Danish municipality is not very powerful, but former studies have shown that in reality the mayor is often a very dominant and powerful local government leader (see Berg & Kjær, 2005). In other local government systems, other indicators of center-left government may be more useful, but in the Danish context the party color of the mayor is a simple but strong indicator of the dominant party ideology of the local council (see also Blom-Hansen, Monkerud, & Sørensen, 2006). Using a simple dummy variable, we distinguish the mayors from the Social Democrats, Socialist People's Party, and Social Liberals from the rest (i.e., mayors mostly from center-right parties).⁴

To examine the effect of the committee structure, we use the number of permanent committees (made available by Martin Bækgaard). These are the committees that each new council agrees on forming after the election for the coming term and do not include the mandatory committee for economic affairs. For observations 2007–09 and 2010–13, respectively, the same score is used for each municipality.⁵

As Table 2 reveals, there is substantial variation in the number of permanent committees. Some municipalities have more than 10 permanent political committees, including areas such as child care, schools, 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 2010–13, for instance, the number of permanent committees varies between 2 and 14, with a mean of 6 and a standard deviation of 2.

Control Variables

As we study council agendas in the aftermath of a major reform in 2007 that merged small neighboring municipalities and reduced the number of municipalities from 271 to 98, a process of uneven adjustment may explain some of the temporal and spatial variation in agenda sizes in the subsequent years. We, therefore, distinguish between the 32 municipalities (dummy = 0) that were left untouched by the reform (because they already had the intended size) and the remaining 66 new, amalgamated municipalities (dummy = 1). The major reform leading up to 2007 did

imply an increase in municipality tasks and responsibilities, but after January 1, 2007, the transfer of tasks to the municipalities has been rather limited. This makes it less likely that this aspect causes the variation in council agendas observed below.

Second, we control for election cycles. Election cycles are widely studied in the literature (Kiewiet, 2000; Paldam, 1997; Tufte, 1978), and a general surge in political activity often occurs immediately before and after elections. Accordingly, the agenda might include more items in election years. Local elections are held simultaneously in all municipalities every fourth year. A dummy is, therefore, included that takes the value one in 2009 and 2013 for the two elections years in our time period.

Third, we control for the sheer size of a municipality, which may be an underlying factor affecting both the number of societal problems, the number of committees, and the ideological profile of the local government. We use the number of inhabitants to measure the size of the municipality.

Statistical Estimation

To investigate the model, we specify what has become known as a hybrid model (Allison, 2009; Bell & Jones, 2014; Rabe-Hesketh & Skrondal, 2008). Essentially, a hybrid model has a multilevel structure. In our case, council agendas across the year (the lower level) are nested in municipalities (the higher level), and our explanatory variables are, therefore, related to the size of the agenda at two levels (or through two processes). At the higher level, some municipalities are expected to persistently exhibit larger council agendas simply because they face major socioeconomic problems. At the lower level, council agendas may change in size over time because of changes in socioeconomic problems (e.g., in the aftermath of the financial crisis)—a change over time common to all municipalities regardless of the average level of problem pressure. As the former focuses on time-invariant differences between municipalities, it is referred to as “the between effect.” The latter focuses on dynamics over time common to all municipalities and is referred to as “the within effect.”

Because of the nature of our data—more cross-section variation than cross-time variation—we are primarily interested in between effects. As X and Y vary at both levels and are most likely related at both levels, however, the two separate processes should be modeled in order to evaluate our hypotheses thoroughly. This cannot be done with conventional, fixed effects, or random effects estimates. Whereas a fixed effects model automatically eliminates the higher-level process, a random effects model collapses the two processes into one term (see Bell & Jones, 2014). A hybrid model explicitly models both processes by transforming each explanatory variable into a within effect and a between effect. More formally, a hybrid model is expressed as follows:

$$Y_{ij} = \alpha + \beta_1(X_{ij} - X_{\text{mean},j}) + \beta_2 X_{\text{mean},j} + u_i + e_i,$$

for each year (i) and each municipality (j).

In the equation, the between effect, β_2 , is simply the mean of the explanatory variable over time for each municipality. It indicates the general level on the

explanatory variable of interest. If it has a statistically significant effect on the size of the council agenda (Y_{ij}), it is because of a general tendency for municipalities with a certain level on the explanatory variable to generally have a certain council agenda size. The within effect, β_1 , is estimated by demeaning (i.e., isolating the deviation of each observation from the mean; or mean centering) the explanatory variable. If the effect of this demeaned variable has a statistically significant effect on the council agenda size, it is because a change in the agenda size for a municipality tends to follow a change in the explanatory variable of interest.

Whereas transforming our continuously scaled problem-indicator and committee-measure is straightforward, it is less meaningful with the party dummy variable, where this approach would require splitting up the dataset. We, therefore, use the party dummy in an untransformed form in the main analysis but provide additional split-sample analysis subsequently.

Due to the relatively short time series of this study ($T < 8$), we avoid a lagged dependent variable in order to avoid biased and inconsistent estimates of the explanatory variables.⁶ Below, after the main analyses, we explore the dynamic aspects of the models in greater detail.

Findings

Table 3 presents our main findings. The stepwise introduction of the models reflects the order of the hypotheses in the sense that model 1 examines the basic relationship between socioeconomic problems and the local council agendas. Models 2 and 3 evaluate the conditional effects; first, by adding party ideology to model 2 and, second, by adding committee structure to model 3. The sensitivity of the results to the introduction of control variables is examined in model 4.⁷

The results reported in model 1 in Table 3 support the basic idea that the size of the council agenda varies with the degree of socioeconomic problems facing the municipality. Furthermore, as one would expect, this effect is driven by the between-system effect (B) and not by marginal changes over time (A), indicating that previous agenda-setting research, with its focus on time-series dynamics, may overlook important between-systems variations.⁸ The consequences of socioeconomic problems for the size of the council agenda are not trivial. Moving from the municipality with the lowest average socioeconomic problem pressure (0.45) to the municipality with the highest average (1.81), the council agenda is expected to expand by 38 percent (from 239 to 331 items a year). Including all other variables to the model only marginally reduces the effect of the problem pressure on the size of the council agenda (not reported).

Models 2 and 3 in Table 3 suggest that the political and institutional characteristics of the municipalities moderate the agenda effect of the socioeconomic problem environment. To evaluate these results, the marginal impacts of these interaction effects are spelled out in Figures 1 and 2.⁹ Figure 1 reports how the mayor's party color influences the impact of socioeconomic problems on the size of the council agenda. The interaction effect becomes evident from the different slopes of the curves. The effect is not particularly strong ($p = 0.09$), but the steeper curve in the

Table 3. Determinants of Agenda Size Across Danish Municipalities 2007–13

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Main Effects				
Problem indicator:				
A. Socioeconomic index (within) _{ij}	2.85 (61.22)	9.88 (61.63)	12.51 (61.64)	−8.08 (62.44)
B. Socioeconomic index (between) _j	86.46* (39.19)	43.77 (40.14)	−173.83* (77.32)	−180.06* (81.02)
Political variable:				
C. Mayor (left-of-center = 1) _{ij}		−58.89† (31.27)		−50.06 (30.79)
Institutional variable:				
D. Number of committees (within) _{ij}			7.27 (4.93)	6.78 (4.98)
E. Number of committees (between) _j			−25.95† (15.32)	−24.45† (14.58)
Interaction Effects				
B × C		64.73† (33.03)		52.74† (31.92)
B × E			47.33** (16.98)	37.86* (15.67)
Controls				
Merged (= 1) _j				11.36 (17.02)
Election year (2009, 2013 = 1) _i				19.61** (4.32)
Number of inhabitants (10,000s) _{ij}				6.42** (1.06)
Constant	193.23** (33.77)	230.32** (34.82)	328.56** (68.18)	327.16** (70.96)
N	686	686	686	686
Years (i)/clusters (j)	7/98	7/98	7/98	7/98
R ²	0.05	0.05	0.16	0.37
Chi-squared	4.96†	7.35†	28.33**	118.99**

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; † $p < 0.10$.

Note: Cluster corrected standard errors in parentheses. Dependent variable: Number of agenda points per year per municipality.

figure to the left indicates that the problem environment is more immediately reflected in the size of the council agenda among center-left-governed municipalities.

Figure 2 shows how the effect of socioeconomic problems increases with the number of committees in the municipality. This importance of committees is only systematic when there are more than five committees; that is, approximately the mean number of committees. Each time an additional committee is present, approximately 47 additional council agenda items per year are expected (from the estimate “B × E” in model 3) when moving to a municipality with a one-unit larger score on the socioeconomic index (which ranges from 0.45–1.8 with a standard deviation of 0.24).

The size of the estimated effects of main interest shrinks when the control variables are added in model 4 in Table 3, but the direction and the level of the statistical significance of the coefficients remain. Furthermore, model 4 shows a strong effect of the election year dummy, indicating that the number of agenda council items

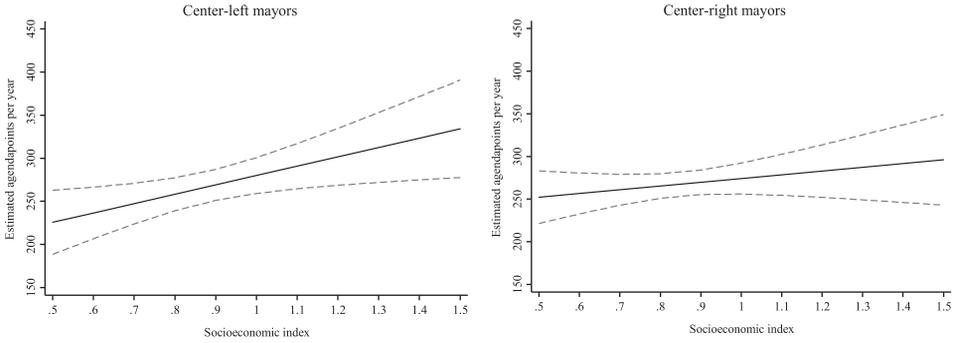


Figure 1. Predicted Effects of Socioeconomic Problems on Policy Agenda Size in Municipalities With Center-Left and Center-Right Mayors.
Note: The figure is based on the estimates of model 2 in Table 3.

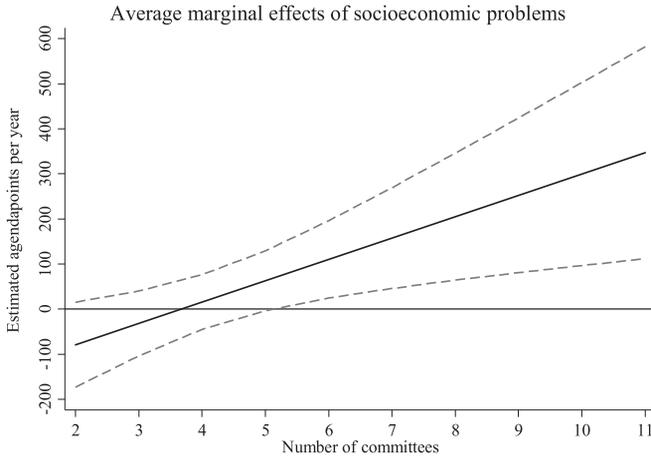


Figure 2. Average Marginal Effects of Socioeconomic Problems as the Number of Committees Increases.
Note: The figure is based on the estimates of model 3 in Table 3.

increases on average by 19 agenda points in an election year. Also, the council agenda tends to be larger in larger municipalities, whereas there is no systematic difference between merged and nonmerged municipalities.

Having examined the three hypotheses, we will now explore the dynamic aspects of the model in greater detail. Unsurprisingly, a panel data test for serial correlation indicates the existence of autocorrelation in the model residuals. Serial autocorrelation is often removed either by differencing or by including a lagged dependent variable (Beck & Katz, 2011). Both of these options focus on within effects and remove the between effects, however, which are of central interest to this article. In this case, the remedy might, therefore, be worse than the disease. Furthermore, the separation of between effects and within effects in the hybrid estimate of the committee effects already addresses the issue of serial correlation given that the estimation of between effects eliminates time and, thus, autocorrelation. This implies

Table 4. Further Explorations of the Party Color Effect

	(1)	(2)
A. Socioeconomic index (between) _{ij}	54.79 (75.90)	
B. Socioeconomic index (within) _{ij}		31.62 (69.84)
C. Mayor (left-of-center = 1) (between) _{ij}	-1.28 (91.21)	
D. Mayor (left-of-center = 1) (within) _{ij}		-68.20 (48.67)
A × C	24.78 (94.01)	
B × D		73.18 ^a (52.61)
Constant	212.31** (67.44)	243.50** (64.66)
Observations ^b	66	64

** $p < 0.01$.

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

^a $p = 0.16$. In model 1, municipalities with left-of-center mayors in the entire period are compared to municipalities with right-of-center mayors in the entire period. In model 2, the effect of a change in the mayor at the 2009-election is estimated.

^bThe 98 municipalities are either in model 1 or 2; in model 1, there are 32 municipalities observed twice (64 obs. in total); in model 2, the remaining 66 municipalities are observed once.

that we can focus on re-examining the effect of the mayor's party color, which in Table 3 was estimated as a mix of both between and within effects.

More particularly, we reassess the effect of party color in two ways. First, we compare the mean number of council agenda points in municipalities which have been either dominated by a center-left or center-right mayor in the entire time period (model 1 in Table 4). Note that this can be interpreted as a between-effect estimation, but we lose all of the observations where the mayor's party changed side. With this reservation, the effect of socioeconomic problems does not systematically differ between center-left and center-right municipalities—the interaction effect remains positive and quite substantial in size, but clearly statistically insignificant.

Second, model 2 in Table 4 reports the estimated change in the mean number of agenda points in municipalities that change from center-left to center-right (or vice versa) at the mid-way election in 2009. Although time is not entirely eliminated in this estimation, the serial autocorrelation problem is significantly reduced in this dynamic estimation of party effects. Again, we have to drop a large number of observations to estimate these within effects. The results in model 2 in Table 4 show that when a center-left mayor replaces a center-right mayor, the effect of socioeconomic problems tends to increase, but the estimate barely reaches statistical significance at conventional levels ($p = 0.164$). In line with classic arguments in the "politics matter" literature (e.g., Anckar & Ståhlberg, 1980), the additional investigations suggest that the effect of the political variables is more dynamic, and hence may be stronger if the processes could be observed in longer time series. Thus, the conditioning effect of the political variables certainly warrant further examination, but we take the results presented in Tables 3 and 4 as preliminary evidence in support of hypothesis 2.

Conclusion

The results reported above provide the basis for the following conclusions. First, the data presented in this article clearly shows that the size of the council agenda is not fixed across municipalities. Although many agenda-setting scholars do not explicitly claim that the size of agendas is fixed, it seems fair to conclude that this aspect of policy agendas has largely been ignored in the literature on agenda setting. Furthermore, the variation in agenda size is a particularly intriguing observation given that the Danish municipalities are so similar in many aspects. Despite these similarities, some municipalities are managed with fewer than 100 dockets on the council agendas a year, whereas the council agendas in other municipalities sum to almost 700 dockets a year.

Second, the statistical analyses showed that much of the variation in council agenda size can be explained by the problem environment facing the local council in combination with the political and institutional characteristics of the municipality. The size of the council agenda responds to measures of socioeconomic problems, which may, more generally, indicate that to understand the functioning of the local governments, one must take the problem environment facing them into account. Again, although many agenda-setting scholars would probably be receptive to this conclusion, extremely few agenda-setting studies integrate this aspect into the analyses. The analysis in this article shows that not only is the problem environment important; the agenda effect of classic political and institutional variables also shows up in combination with the problem environment.

Obviously, it is important to reflect on the generalizability of the results presented in this article as political systems at the local level are not identical to those found at the national level. However, when it comes to the main explanatory variable, socioeconomic problems, there is no reason for this variable not to be relevant for the national level of policy agendas. In fact, the Danish municipalities could be claimed to constitute a conservative test of this effect given how the differences between Danish municipalities with respect to socioeconomic problems are relatively small compared to the differences between local governments in other countries and between nations. The significant economic redistribution between Danish municipalities based on socioeconomic problem indicators probably further reduces the impact of this problem indicator compared to systems with less redistribution among local government units. Additionally, it is a subject for future studies to investigate the effect of other problem indicators.

Second, the system of permanent committees is well known from many other political systems. Furthermore, as shown in several publications by Bækgaard (2010, 2011), the committee system in the Danish municipalities can be utilized to test theories about the committee structure that is based on the U.S. congressional committee system. This should reduce potential suspicion of a very peculiar local government committee system. Committees might obviously operate differently in, for instance, a national parliamentary system with strong ministries. Hence, in such a parliamentary system, committees may not be the best operationalization of institutional specialization. Nevertheless, the more generic argument about how the institutional specialization of politics shapes reactions to public problems may still apply.

Third, this article has most likely presented a conservative test of the “politics matter”-inspired hypothesis. There is a relatively high degree of political consensus in local governments, including Danish municipalities (Serritzlew, Skjæveland, & Blom-Hansen, 2008). This consensus materializes, for instance, in broad coalitions behind the local mayor, making it difficult to clearly distinguish between government and opposition at the local level. Therefore, we would expect stronger effects of the political variables if hypothesis 2 is applied to a (national level) system with more intense competition between two (blocks of) parties.

Although the results reported in this article support the hypotheses, we obviously cannot completely rule out reverse causality or omitted variable bias. It does not seem likely that the size of the council agenda explains the level of socioeconomic problems in the municipality, and the specification of interaction effects makes it more difficult to come up with plausible alternative explanations. Nevertheless, more research covering more years and more political decision-making systems would of course further strengthen the results. Furthermore, future research should seek to provide more insights into the content of local government agendas in order to begin bridging the classic issue-based agenda-setting research with the system-level approach advocated in this article.

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Notes

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1. Other recent examples of scholars utilizing the local level of government to examine general agenda-setting questions are Breeman et al. (2015), Liu et al. (2010), and Jun and Musso (2013).
2. A major structural reform prevents an extension of the time series back in time.
3. Mayors from local party lists occupy eight municipalities in one of the sessions. These lists typically arise in reaction to established parties and, therefore, have no clear ideological affiliation. To avoid excluding them or assigning them a special status, they score zero on the mayor dummy together with the center-right mayors. The same goes for the two independent mayors in the data.
4. On top of the permanent committees, various temporary, ad hoc committees may be appointed; because of their unknown status, however, they are not included.
5. As noted by Wawro (2002, p. 29), the bias of including a lagged dependent variable is of order $1/T$.
6. Note that the correlation matrix in Table A3 in the Appendix shows that correlations across the explanatory variables are generally rather low.
7. We will not examine the within effect further because its impact is statistically insignificant; if assessed in a framework with a long time series, however, the within effects would possibly appear along with the between effects, the latter being the focus of this analysis.
8. We have also explored interaction terms based on within effects, but these are clearly statistically insignificant. See also note 7.

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Appendix

Table A1. Examples of Agenda Item Texts in Danish Municipalities

Municipality (Date)	Agenda Item Text
Rødovre (October 2007)	Objectives and framework for use of student plans in the schools in Rødovre Municipality
Høje-Taastrup (December 2007)	Green Policy 2006 Høje-Taastrup Municipality
Aalborg (August 2013)	Distribution of refugees 2014
Sorø (May 2010)	Revision of Sorø Municipality's Traffic Safety Plan
Høje-Taastrup (October 2004)	Quality standards for home care—Adjustment of care packages
Struer (February 2007)	General plan for renovation of the municipality's daycare institutions
Faxe (December 2007)	Investment plan for waste water area for 2008–15
Esbjerg (April 2010)	Renovation and addition, Dental Clinic Hjerting School
Copenhagen (October 2007)	Drafting of a gay rights policy for Copenhagen Municipality
Aalborg (November 2013)	Expropriation for sewer lines along Karlfeldts Alle, Sdr. Tranders

Table A2. Agenda Points and the Subcategories Used to Content Code the Agenda Points in Four Danish Municipalities, 2007–12

Length of Council Agendas	Municipality	Year	Agenda Points	Subcategories Used, Counts
Short	Herlev	2011	108	37
	Lyngby-Taarbæk	2012	173	44
Long	Horsens	2007	506	84
	Kolding	2009	571	97

Table A2 is constructed using a modified version of the codebook of the comparative agendas project (see www.comparativeagendas.info). The modified codebook consists of 21 major topics and 186 subtopics. Each subtopic refers to a policy issue such as waste disposal (code 703), primary schools (code 610), or the training of doctors and nurses (code 325). As demonstrated in the data collection across multiple countries and agenda-activities, the codebook allows coding an agenda item into one of these subcategories (and only one). We used the codebook to code each agenda point for each council meeting into one of these 186 subtopics for four different municipalities in four different years—these were sampled from our coding of the size of the agenda in Danish municipalities. The number of agenda points we were unable to code was below 5 percent.

Table A3. Correlation Matrix

	Socioeconomic Index (Within)	Socioeconomic Index (Between)	Number of Committees (Within)	Number of Committees (Between)	Mayor	Merged Municipality	Election Year	Inhabitants
Socioeconomic index (within)	1.00							
Socioeconomic index (between)	-0.00	1.00						
Number of committees (within)	-0.06	0.00	1.00					
Number of committees (between)	0.00	0.06	-0.00	1.0000				
Mayor	0.01	0.28	-0.01	0.08	1.00			
Merged municipality	-0.00	-0.27	0.00	0.27	0.02	1.00		
Election year	0.13	0.00	0.02	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00	1.00	
Inhabitants	-0.01	0.19	-0.00	0.25	0.18	-0.08	0.00	1.00