

1 Governments and legislative agenda setting

An introduction

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Traditionally, political science has been built on a series of institutional dichotomies. Regimes have been classified into presidential and parliamentary (Verney 1959, Linz 1992, 1994, Horowitz 1996, Stepan and Skach 1993) as well as semi-presidential ones (Duverger 1980); party systems are divided into two- and multi-party systems; parliaments are divided into unicameral and bicameral; parties are divided into strong (or disciplined) and weak (or undisciplined). Lijphart (1999) provides the definitions for these distinctions and organizes them on the basis of his consociational analysis.

More recent analyses focus on the issue of agenda setting and consider agenda setting a major determinant of policy outcomes (McKelvey 1976, Romer and Rosenthal 1978, Shepsle and Weingast 1984, Tsebelis 1994, Franchino and Høyland 2009, Döring and Hallerberg 2004). Even more, for some formal analyses agenda setting determines regime type as well. Diermeier and Feddersen (1998) argue that in parliamentary systems, the parties in government share agenda setting power, excluding the opposition, because of the confidence vote. As a result, party and government cohesion and discipline are higher in parliamentary than in presidential regimes. Along the same lines, Persson and Tabellini (2000) argue that there is more competition among parties in presidential than in parliamentary regimes because coalitions are stable in the latter but not in the former. Tsebelis (2002) argues that in presidential regimes the legislative agenda is controlled by the parliament, while in parliamentary regimes control is held by the government (the opposite of what the names suggest), but argues that further study of legislative details is necessary in order to classify different systems in a continuum. Similarly, Cheibub and Limongi (2002: 176) argue:

The reality of both parliamentary and presidential regimes is more complex than what it would be if we were to derive these systems' entire behavior from their first principles. So, what explains the difference? We suspect that the main difference between the two regimes is due to the way the decision-making process is organized.

This book focuses on the agenda setting powers of different (mostly parliamentary) governments. It is part of a series of attempts to focus on the agenda

setting process in a more empirically accurate and systematic way. Our argument is that agenda setting power depends not only on the institutional features of a political system (e.g., who can ask questions and who is prevented from doing so), but also on the ideological positions and the cohesion of different actors. The main point we make in this introduction and throughout the book is that an approach that combines the institutional characteristics of a political system with the positions of different actors enables the researcher to understand new policy positions the political system may adopt.

This introduction is organized into four parts. The first part identifies the institutional mechanisms that determine agenda setting in different political systems. The second part studies agenda setting in general and identifies likely outcomes as a function of the existing veto players, the status quo, and the identity and location of the agenda setter. The third part studies implications of the institutional differences across political systems. The final section introduces the country chapters of the volume.

Dimensions of agenda setting

Empirical research on legislative outcomes comparing different countries has mainly focused on the institutions regulating the interaction between the legislature and the executive (Shugart and Carey 1992, Döring 1995a, b, 2001, Tsebelis and Aleman 2005, Tsebelis and Rizova 2007). We argue that this information is not sufficient for understanding the influence of different actors in the legislative process – we also need information about the ideological location of these actors. More specifically, we argue that in the absence of a stable single party majority (where government and parliament are identical in terms of policy preferences and there is no difference in expected outcomes regardless of which actor controls the agenda), agenda setting is of paramount importance in politics, because the agenda setter selects among the many possible alternatives the one that (s)he prefers the most. Whether this proposal will go to an up or down vote, or whether it will be modified, and by how much, determines the policy outcomes that will prevail in a political system.

In this book we concentrate on three different ways that governments can shape legislative outcomes. The first method is *institutional*: a series of provisions in constitutions or in parliamentary rules of procedure give the government the ability to restrain parliamentary amendment activities. The second method is *partisan*: by controlling a majority of seats in parliament governments can impose their will (provided their majority is cohesive). Most legislative decisions are reached by a simple majority of votes and a cohesive government majority obviously outnumbers the opposition parties. The challenges are quite different in situations with minority governments, which are not as uncommon as previously believed (Strøm 1990), where the opposition constitutes a (non-cohesive) majority. The third method is *positional*: by being located in the middle of the political space governments can select the final outcomes of parliamentary debates even if they do not have institutional

advantages or stable majorities. Here we elaborate on the institutional dimension and two positional features: the dispersion of veto players, which inversely affects the power of the agenda setter, and the question of the centrality of the agenda setter.

The institutional dimension of agenda setting in theoretical and empirical studies

The institutional dimension of agenda setting is the most studied in the literature and the principal goal of this book. Here we review the literature and enumerate the specific provisions of agenda setting. Political writers knew the importance of first move advantage very early. Livy, in his *History of Rome* (6.37), has made the following argument:

The tribunes of the plebs were now objects of contempt since their power was shattering itself by their own veto. There could be no fair or just administration as long as the executive power was in the hands of the other party, while they had only the right of protesting by their veto; nor would the plebs ever have an equal share in the government till the executive authority was thrown open to them.

Livy here differentiates between the simple veto power, which some players dispose, and the “executive power” or “executive authority,” which provides the real ability to make choices (influence outcomes, select options, etc.).

However, the theoretical argument for the importance of agenda setting in multidimensional policy spaces was first presented by McKelvey (1976) in his famous “chaos theorem.” McKelvey demonstrated that because majority preferences in Euclidean spaces cycle if an agenda setter can introduce multiple questions he can get his most favored outcome to prevail (no matter what his preferences are). In fact, McKelvey demonstrates that majority rule can lead literally anywhere in space. If the agenda setter can ask the question only once (which is the case in real legislatures), even if his ideal point cannot be obtained, he can improve significantly (from his point of view) the outcome of the political process.

McKelvey’s argument also applies in single dimensional spaces: the agenda setter has significant impact over the final outcome. The paper that made the consequences of this proposition understood was Romer and Rosenthal (1978) that demonstrated that whoever controls the agenda of a referendum can have a decisive influence on the referendum outcome. In their classic setter-model, amendments were not allowed and the power of the agenda setter was based on an exclusive right to make “take-it-or-leave-it” offers.

Once the importance of agenda setting was established, multiple studies of the phenomenon appeared in different areas of political science. In the U.S. House of Representatives committees were responsible for setting the agenda because they could operate under closed rule (that is, not accept any amendments

to their proposal), while the corresponding assumption for the Senate was that debates in this chamber take place under open rule (Shepsle and Weingast 1981, 1984, 1987, Cox and McCubbins 2005). Referendums were classified in different categories on the basis of who can ask the voters questions and who can trigger referendums (Hug and Tsebelis 2002). Committee composition and chairs (in Congress), and rapporteurs (MPs who propose bills for consideration in front of European parliaments), or ministers, became the object of numerous studies: Shepsle (1978), Krehbiel (1990), Londregan and Snyder (1994) and Groseclose (1994) among others for the U.S. Congress; Tsebelis (1994, 1997), Bowler and Farrell (1995) and Kreppel (2002) for the European Parliament; Laver and Shepsle (1994, 1996) for ministers in European governments and Mattson and Strøm (1995) for committees in European parliaments; Londregan (2000) for Chile's Senate; finally, Shugart and Carey (1992) for presidential and semi-presidential systems, and Döring (1995a, b, c) for parliamentary systems subsequently studied comparatively and in detail for specific institutional provisions defining agenda setting.

The agenda setting literature places different regimes in a continuum, so that comparativists – instead of speaking of presidential and parliamentary systems by contrasting them – can move further and identify similarities as well as differences in many dimensions. Lijphart (1984b, 1999) made a first step by creating a measure of “executive dominance” as one of the dimensions that differentiates majoritarian from consensus democracies. However, he assessed the scores of different countries either on the basis of government duration (most parliamentary systems), or (for presidential systems) on impressionistic grounds (for example Colombia receives 3, while the US and Costa Rica 1, and the UK 5.52 in his scale). Tsebelis (2002) has argued that an index generated on the basis of agenda setting in parliamentary systems correlates highly with Lijphart’s “executive dominance” scale. In his argument he uses the institutional details described by Shugart and Carey (1992) for presidential systems and Döring (1995b) for parliamentary ones.

Shugart and Carey (1992) develop a system of scoring the powers of presidents in 44 constitutions. They estimate the relative strengths of popularly elected presidents based on two dimensions of presidential power: legislative (exclusive introduction, veto, decree, budget prerogatives, and referendum) and non-legislative powers (authority over the cabinet and the possibility that the president can dissolve the Assembly and call unanticipated elections). They argue that the most powerful presidencies also tend to be the most problematic and caution about the stability of such regimes. In their view

dual democratic legitimacies decried by critics of presidentialism – the claim that no democratic principle exist to resolve conflicts over who better can claim to represent the “will” of the electorate – are minimized to the extent that an assembly is accorded a more powerful role in legislation than is the president.

(Shugart and Carey 1992: 197)

Döring (1995b) argues that time in the legislative process is a scarce resource and that the government, through agenda setting devices, can exert control over the passage of legislation. With a focus on the cross-national procedures affecting the control over the time allotted for discussion and the selection of proposals that arise for a vote, he classifies agenda setting powers in 18 Western European countries. The results show that where the government is able to control the plenary agenda (issues that come up for debate in the order of the day), it is also able to assert its will concerning the committee's timetable. In his conclusion to a more recent paper on policy consequences of agenda setting, Döring (2001: 162) argues:

It is now obvious that there exist a great deal of variation in agenda-setting devices among the parliamentary systems of Western Europe. This surprising variety is far larger than one would have expected from the traditional distinction between parliamentary and presidential systems.

Whether it is Lijphart, who classifies presidential systems as “weak” on executive dominance or other researchers who have identified a “paradox” of weak presidencies, most of the literature agrees that, in general, presidents are weaker than prime ministers.¹

Tsebelis and Aleman (2005) and Aleman and Tsebelis (2005) study presidential systems in Latin America, and identify one significant power of some Latin American presidents: some of them can introduce an “amendatory observation” in legislation. If they exercise this option, the amendment that they introduce in a bill has to be debated and voted in Congress. The default solution varies by country: in some cases the amendment is considered adopted unless Congress rejects it (sometimes qualified majority is required for such a rejection). Other times, a simple majority in Congress in favor of the amendatory observation is required for this amendment to enter into effect. The authors make the argument that these systems are located in an intermediate position between presidential and parliamentary systems. Tsebelis and Rizova (2007) have replicated these studies for ex-communist countries and identify the same mechanisms of agenda control as in Latin American countries.

In practice, governments may have several mechanisms at their disposal to control the parliamentary agenda and affect policy outcomes. We only mention the mechanisms here, but they are discussed in detail in the various country chapters in this book where they are relevant. Basically, agenda setting rules determine which issues are permitted, the set of proposals to be considered, and how the issue finally is decided on the floor. The power of an agenda setter may be of a positive (*ensure* consideration of proposals) or a negative (*prevent* consideration of proposals) type (Cox 2006); some actors – such as most governments in parliamentary systems – combine both positive and negative instruments of agenda setting.

Time constraints. In order for a bill to pass, formal motions, with few exceptions, have to be debated and voted upon in a plenary session. Plenary time is

scarce, at least in modern assemblies (Cox 2006). Then it becomes important who fixes the parliamentary timetables and makes it possible to prioritize certain proposals. Is it the government who controls the plenary agenda or the chamber itself? According to Döring (1995b: 225), the United Kingdom and the Netherlands are placed on the opposite ends of the scale in this respect. Government bills may have priority over parliamentary ones in countries like the United Kingdom; in addition it may be possible for governments to restrict time for discussion to a level that hinders or prohibits the introduction of amendments.

Closed and restrictive rules. Parliaments always have the possibility to turn down government bills. But as Romer and Rosenthal (1978) demonstrated, veto power of this kind might be rather weak if it is not combined with the power to amend; it was in this seminal piece that the importance of closed rules was first demonstrated. If no amendments (closed rules) or very few amendments (restrictive rules) to proposals from the government are allowed, it will be hard for the parliament to assert itself.

Expansive rules and sequencing rules. Expansive rules permit the government to make amendments that are prohibited to other actors or to make amendments at times when other amendments are not permitted. One example of a powerful provision of the latter type is the last-offer authority discussed in Heller (2001). He argues that by being granted the authority to offer amendments late in the process, governments are protected from losing control of the content of their bills. Elements of government amendment authority are found in many parliamentary countries, but it varies with regard to how strong and useful the last offer provisions are.

Gatekeeping rules. In parliamentary systems, governments introduce almost all legislation and therefore often enjoy close to a de facto monopoly of policy initiation. Even if MPs may have extensive proposal rights, they do not necessarily have the resources and capacity to draft viable legislation. It is of course also possible for the government to refuse to make a proposal, and in that way hold the issue away from consideration by the parliament. By keeping the gates closed and not making a proposal, the status quo is kept (Crombez *et al.* 2006). Thus, a gatekeeping rule is “essentially a veto without an override provision” (Krehbiel 2004: 116).

Vote-counting and voting order rules. Parliaments provide rules for adoption of proposals on the floor. Voting procedures consist of a balloting method (e.g., how votes are cast) and rules specifying how votes are aggregated (Rasch 1995, 2000). This includes both a dominance relation defining the requirements for winning (such as simple majority or absolute majority) and rules determining the voting sequence in the event that more than one ballot is required to reach a decision (Miller 1995). In some cases votes in favor or against government proposals are counted differently than other proposals. Also, the governmental bill (rather than the proposal from the committee) may gain a privileged position in the order of voting. This is made possible by the fact that the voting procedures used in parliaments are very agenda-sensitive. Two agendas may produce different outcomes even though preferences are held constant.

Exclusive government jurisdiction. Executive decrees can be offered to the government by the constitution, a general act of parliament, or by specific parliamentary votes. In all of these cases, the government is the only actor that matters in terms of legislation. Obviously, the more we move from a specific delegation of powers to a more general rule to a rule included in the constitution (France), the more powerful the government.

Positional discretion

Agenda setters have to make successful proposals. That is, they need to have their proposals accepted by a majority of legislators. Positional discretion refers to actor's preferences over the set of proposals that can defeat the status quo under closed rule. Under closed rule the other legislators have to accept or veto the agenda setter's proposal. If the existing veto players are individuals or cohesive parties, then the winset of the status quo is the intersection of all winsets of the different veto players. If, however, some veto players are non-cohesive, (say a parliament with undisciplined parties) then the winset of the status quo becomes more difficult to identify. Tsebelis (2002) has proposed an approximation that can locate the winset of the status quo for both individual and collective veto players relatively simply. So, most of the time in the exposition that follows we will assume that veto players are individual ones (like cohesive parties), but we should keep in mind that the same arguments hold qualitatively even for collective veto players (e.g., non-cohesive parties).

The first argument is intuitively straightforward and stems from the discretion that the agenda setter has to select the outcome that he prefers among the set of potential outcomes. The larger this set, the more discretion the agenda setter has. Conversely, if the winset of the status quo is small, then who is the agenda setter is not going to matter very much because there are only limited changes that can be made to the policy. In the limit case when the winset of the status quo is empty, it does not matter at all who the agenda setter is.

Consequently, *the larger the winset of the status quo, the larger the discretion of the agenda setter*. The implication of this statement is that in political systems with high policy stability agenda setting will not be of great importance (Tsebelis 2002).

Centrality of the agenda setter

While veto players become more influential as they become more extreme, the opposite is true with agenda setters. Indeed, for a given position of the status quo, if the agenda setter is closer to all other veto players than the status quo, he can propose and have accepted his own ideal point. Conversely, if the status quo is located closer to some particular veto player than the agenda setter, the latter cannot achieve his own ideal point. [Figure 1.1](#) demonstrates the argument.

Consider first the set of two veto players A and X, and the status quo SQ. The winset of the status quo is light grey and if X is the agenda setter he will select

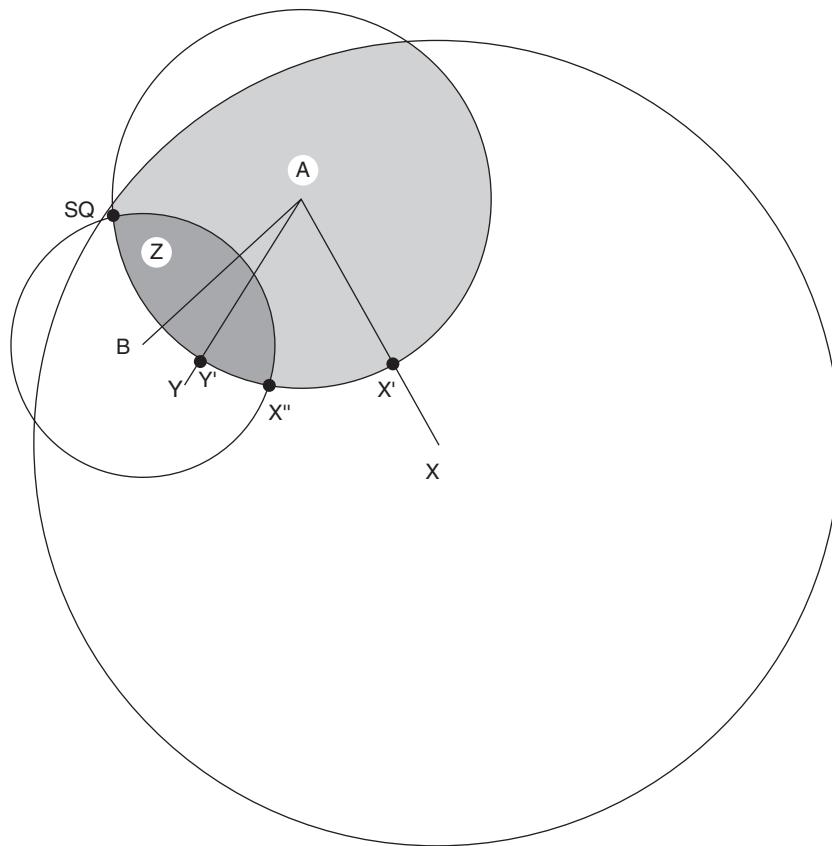


Figure 1.1 Importance of agenda setting.

the point X' that is as close to his ideal point as possible. Now add B as another veto player in the system. The winset of the status quo shrinks (the dark grey area), and if X continues to be the agenda setter, he has to select the point that he prefers inside this smaller winset. It is clear that the new outcome X'' will be *at least* as far away from X as point X' was.²

The power of the agenda setter depends also on his location with respect to other veto players. In Figure 1.1 the agenda setter X was further away from both A and B than the status quo, that is why he had to make the proposal X'' which was far away from his ideal point. If the agenda setter is Y instead of X he has to be concerned only with veto player A and make the proposal Y' (since he is already close to B's ideal point). Finally, if the agenda setter is Z (inside the winset of the status quo) he can propose his own ideal point. Think now of the location of the status quo changing; in this case, an agenda setter will have more power the more centrally located among the veto players he is, because then he has higher probability of being located frequently inside the winset of the status quo.

Consequences of agenda setting rules

Throughout this introduction we have argued that the agenda setter has significant impact on the policy outcomes. The stronger the agenda setting institutions, the less other actors are able to affect outcomes. As a result, one would expect less significant amendments to government bills in countries with strong agenda setting rules. The empirical test of this expectation would be that significant amendments will not be proposed, or, if proposed they would fail in countries with strong agenda setting rules. This is the major contribution of this book. It provides a systematic way of forming expectations about policy outcomes in different countries as a function of the preferences of the government.

Here we will demonstrate one more consequence of agenda setting rules. It has to do with the composition of governments in different countries. Think of a party without a parliamentary majority (say the formateur of a parliamentary government) who has to select or not partners for a coalition. [Figure 1.2](#) presents a five party parliament with parties of relatively equal strength (a majority requires three of them) and explains why it is more reasonable that the formateur will be selected in the center of the political spectrum (party G) and will select other parties as a function of the agenda setting powers available.

Any one of the peripheral parties will require forming a stable three party majority. In order for this majority to include party G (like ABG or BCG) the formateur party will have to offer G more policy advantages than it could get by itself (otherwise G would not be willing to participate in government), and if it does not include G (like ADC or BCD) they will have to be able to make proposals that will get a majority despite the lack of support by G. In all cases,

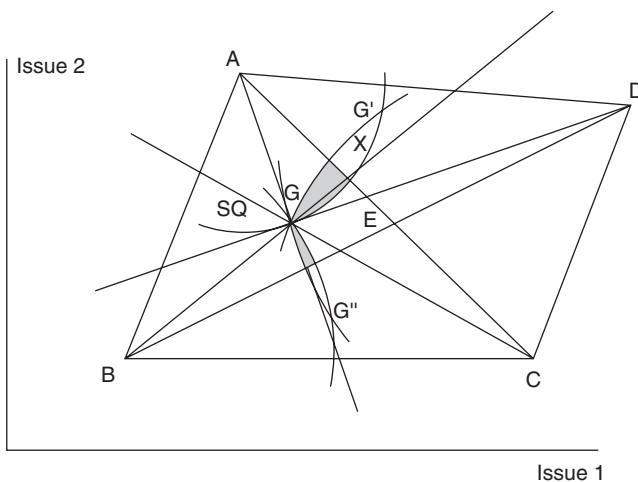


Figure 1.2 Effect of centrality of formateur.

the analysis would have to include what G is able to do by itself in terms of policy.

The entire policy space can be divided into three mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive subsets: the points preferred to G by majority (the interior of two lenses called GG' and GG" in the figure), the points for which a majority is indifferent to G (the border of the two lenses), and the points that are defeated by G by a majority (the rest of the plane).

As a result G will be a very expensive partner to be included in a coalition, and a coalition without it has very little chance of policy success. But will G accept to form a government if it is in a minority?

We will examine the policy advantages that G has if it forms a minority government under different agenda setting rules. This argument will present the relation between institutional and positional advantages. More precisely, following Tsebelis and Ha (2010), we will demonstrate that the institutional agenda setting advantages to the government, while always welcome, are more important for an extremist agenda government than for a centrist one. We will consider three different rules that we have studied in this book: first, we consider a closed rule (the government can bring a “take it or leave it” proposal on the floor of the parliament). Then we will consider agenda setting rules that include the ability of the government to make the last amendment on the floor of the parliament (think that the corresponding minister can offer the last amendment, or an MP who belongs to party G). This rule is what Weingast (1989, 1992) has called “fighting fire with fire” (also see Heller 2001). Out of the countries covered in this book variants of such a rule exist for example in France, Italy, Greece, Spain, and Portugal. Finally, we will consider an open rule according to which members of parliament can modify the government’s proposal any way they want.

- 1 Under closed rule, G can have its own preference voted by a majority in parliament as long as the status quo (SQ) is not included in the lenses GG' or GG". From [Figure 1.2](#) it is obvious that as G approaches the intersection E of the two diagonal lines connecting the four extreme parties the size of these lenses shrinks. If the status quo is located inside the shaded part of the lenses, the government cannot guarantee itself of a better outcome, so it will probably leave the status quo as is. If it is in the non-shaded part of the lenses, it can propose something inside the shaded area that will prevail (the symmetric of SQ with respect to the corresponding diagonal gets a majority).
- 2 Under “fire by fire” rule, the only amendments that can defeat G are inside the two lenses. If such an amendment is proposed in the shaded areas the government will let it stand; if it is in the non-shaded areas of the lenses, the government will counter propose another amendment inside the shaded part of the corresponding lens and this amendment will be the final outcome.
- 3 Under open rule, when the government proposes its own ideal point, anything inside the lenses GG' and GG" can be proposed on the floor, and it will defeat G.

In conclusion, a minority government of G has the ability to get outcomes inside the shaded area of the two lenses under closed rule or fire by fire rule, and inside the whole lenses under open rule. The area of the final outcome shrinks as the government moves to the center of parliament. In other words, we go full circle to the initial argument in this book. There are positional, partisan, and institutional dimensions of agenda setting as explained in this introduction.

[Figure 1.2](#) has the unusual feature that if G is located in the intersection of the two diagonals, it is the multidimensional median in the (two dimensional) policy space. However, the argument we made above is more general than the five parties and two dimensions presented in [Figure 1.2](#). If the number of parties and policy dimensions increase, instead of focusing on the intersection of the two dimensions, one would have to see the distance of the government party or coalition from the center of the yolk (Ferejohn *et al.* 1984; Tsebelis 2002) of the party system. As this distance increases, the positional advantage of the government decreases.

The institutional and positional dimensions of agenda setting are not attributed to a government at the same time. The institutional advantage is pre-existing, inscribed in the institutional rules of agenda setting as we explained in the introduction. The positional advantage is generated with the coalition formation process. A government without institutional or positional agenda setting advantages cannot have its policy proposals accepted. As a result, the positional advantage will be more worthwhile in policy-making terms the lower the level of agenda setting privileges that a government has. Governments with lots of agenda setting powers will not care very much about positional advantages, while governments with low agenda setting powers will be as effective as their positional advantages permit. *So, in the absence of institutional advantages centrality of the formateur and small ideological distances among coalition partners will be necessary.* Tsebelis and Ha (2010) have investigated this relationship and found strong corroborating empirical evidence.

Understanding how coalitions form has been an important intellectual enterprise (with which political science has been wrestling for some 50 years), as well as an important substantive task (precisely because governments control the agenda, and as a result promote their own preferences in policy making).

This analysis leads to some significant big picture implications for multiparty systems. So far the literature has considered multiparty systems with one of two different lenses: one by Sartori (1976), the other by Lijphart (1984a).

Sartori (1976) was inspired by his own country (Italy)³ and classified countries with many parties as “polarized” and examples of “extreme” pluralism.⁴ Polarized pluralism is characterized by the existence of parties that occupy the ideological center, sending other parties to extreme (and sometimes anti-system) positions. Sartori considers different cutoff points between moderate and extreme pluralism and concludes that the difference is somewhere between five and six parties, consequently a party system with more than six parties qualifies as a polarized and extreme pluralist one.

On the other hand, Lijphart was inspired by his own country (the Netherlands) and identified some countries as consociational ones where multiple parties participate in the government. Unlike Sartori's single number of parties' criterion, there are multiple characteristics of consociationalism: proportional electoral system, multiparty system, coalition governments, lack of executive dominance.

What is interesting to note is that on the basis of Liphart's criteria, Italy would be a consociational country (like the Netherlands), while on the basis of Sartori's criteria the Netherlands would be an extreme pluralist society (like Italy).⁵ Many Italian political scientists would not agree with Lijphart's classification because of the way it describes their country, and we are sure that people in the Netherlands would not agree with Sartori's scheme. Yet, both countries have had centrist governments, and both of them are characterized by low agenda setting powers of the government (as shown in the chapters by Zucchini and by Timmermans).

In conclusion, agenda setting powers do not only affect policy outcomes as most of the literature implies but also structural features of different countries, like the composition of their government.

Case studies

This volume comprises 14 country studies. Almost all of the chapters deal with (pure) parliamentary systems (e.g., Germany, the United Kingdom, and Italy) or semi-presidential systems (e.g., France). Switzerland is an exception: the government originates from the parliament, but does not need confidence from the majority in its day-to-day proceedings. A number of third-wave democracies are included (Portugal, Spain, Greece, and Hungary), as well as two non-European systems (Japan and Russia). The democratic credentials of Russia are disputed, but no president or prime minister can completely disregard the procedures of agenda setting and the preferences of members of the Duma. Each chapter covers the institutional features of agenda setting in the same manner, but tackle partisan and positional aspects in a variety of ways – partly depending on what kind of behavioral data that have been available.

In the next chapter, Christoph Hönnige and Ulrich Sieberer argue that the German government cannot dominate parliamentary business by relying on institutional agenda setting rights. They show that both the voting agenda and the parliamentary timetable are controlled almost exclusively from within the *Bundestag*. Furthermore, the power of the parliamentary majority is severely limited by a number of minority rights which grant the opposition parties access to the agenda. Even the vote of confidence as a potentially strong instrument of government agenda control is a rather unattractive option for the government, especially in comparative perspective. Given this weak position of the government and the high dispersion of veto players in the German consensus democracy, agenda setting plays only a minor role in explaining policy outputs. Instead, the success of governments in passing their legislative program is explained by

stable majority coalitions and high party unity. This constellation allows the majority to defeat opposition initiatives in floor voting rather than via agenda setting, but also enables deputies from the governing parties to extract concessions from the government.

Parliament is usually described as “impotent” during the fifth French Republic. The executive dominance in legislative agenda setting is one the main explanations. In [Chapter 3](#), Sylvain Brouard investigates which instruments of agenda control exist in France and accurately describes their different forms: time constraints, restrictive rules, expansive rules, sequencing rules, vote-counting rules, gatekeeping rules, and exclusive government jurisdiction all serve to explain the relative weakness of the French parliament during this period. Data about the frequencies of their use are presented and investigated. The analysis shows that there is a systematic institutional advantage toward the government in French lawmaking. In the second part of the chapter Brouard analyzes amendment activity in the French parliament and includes a discussion of the agenda setting implications of recent constitutional changes.

Italian governance has gone through a political and institutional upheaval in the last 16 years. At present, Francesco Zucchini argues in [Chapter 4](#), Italian governments seem to play a stronger role in legislative agenda setting than they used to. Zucchini first investigates the main changes that have occurred in the last decades, summarizing information about earlier and current methods used by the Italian government to control the legislative agenda. Second, he puts forward a plausible hypothesis to explain the evolution of legislative agenda setting in Italy: the allocation of legislative agenda setting power has been changing because of the increasing responsiveness of government formation and behavior toward electoral results. Whilst the level of party fragmentation remains unaltered or increases, the party system has changed from the pivotal to the alternational type. By affecting the relative status quo position, government alternation influences the distribution of the legislative agenda setting power and the party government cohesion.

Institutional advantages are hugely important in the British parliament as well, Mads Qvortrup emphasizes in [Chapter 5](#). The exceptionally strong role of the cabinet (and the prime minister) is mainly a result of parliamentary rules (e.g., the guillotine), which enable the government to curtail the debate. Despite several reforms aimed at strengthening parliament, the government has maintained – and in some cases strengthened – its institutional position since the election of Tony Blair’s Labour Party in 1997. Qvortrup shows that parliament has also changed significantly in other ways since the mid 1990s.

[Chapter 6](#), written by Gabriella Ilonszki and Krisztina Jáger, deals with the varying strength of the parliament in Hungary. The stability of written rules and constitutional regulations would not explain changing government advantages. In institutional terms it is first of all the requirement of two-thirds majority legislation that remains a fundamental safeguard against the attempts of governments to dominate legislative agenda setting excessively. Overall, party consolidation and their organizational development explain

differences between governments' performance. As parties consolidated, the agenda setting capacity of governments increased and the framework of a dominant executive was formed. Still there are challenges to the agenda setting power of governments. Feeble party cohesion, coalition policy incoherence, mushrooming amendments and strict time constraints are among them. Due to bipolarization and block politics the governments are not centrally located actors, which further diminish their legislative agenda setting opportunities.

A look at the role of governments in legislative agenda setting in the Netherlands requires a non-formal perspective, Arco Timmermans argues in [Chapter 7](#). Formal institutional rules are limited and, in practice, legislative agenda setting is embedded in the broader mechanisms of coalition governance that have emerged since the 1960s. While this coalition governance is an institutional regime, it is barely formal – instead it is based on partisan and positional properties of the relationship between the legislature and the executive. These properties may change from one government to the next, but this change is mostly incremental. Thus far, coalition governance has appeared to be a fairly stable regime, despite increasing turbulence in the political and electoral environment. A consequence of this is a paradox in legislative agenda setting: while the parliamentary parties involved in making a new government take the lead in directing attention to key policy issues, parliamentary control of legislative agenda setting tends to slip away as the government takes office. This is referred to as a politics of strategic lock-in, from which parliamentary parties find it difficult to escape. Timmermans deals with this phenomenon, while also addressing recent attempts by parliamentary leaders to find keys for unlocking. The structural conditions for this capture still seem strong, however, despite a siren call for a change from “old” to “new” politics.

Daniel Schwarz, André Bächtiger and George Lutz analyze the non-parliamentary system of Switzerland. They note that scholars are divided as to whether the parliament in Switzerland is strong or weak toward the government. Focusing on the formal rules in the legislative process – such as agenda setting, decision making or veto power – the Swiss government turns out to be a weak player from a comparative perspective. However, focusing on the entire policy-making process, the position of the government turns out to be rather strong due to governmental control of the pre- and post-legislative process. This is reinforced by the fact that the Swiss parliament also lacks resources to control or bypass governmental proposal power efficiently.

Aris Alexopoulos discusses executive–legislative relations and legislative functions in the Third Greek Republic (1974 to date). In the Greek political system, as is the case in many parliamentary systems, the government is the dominant player in the legislative process. The executive ascendancy is based both on institutional arrangements and partisan elements of the Greek political system. However, this dominance is attributed primarily to the partisan and, secondarily, to the institutional characteristics of the legislative process. The major

institutional weapon in the hands of Greek governments is the control of the parliament's timetable. To a smaller extent, the executive domination could be attributed to the low degree of specialization of Greek MPs and the committee system.

In [Chapter 10](#) Natalia Ajenjo and Ignacio Molina discuss three pieces of evidence regarding the Spanish government's control of legislative decision making. First, they pay attention to the institutional agenda setting mechanisms advantaging the executive. Second, Ajenjo and Molina examine the rules curtailing the capabilities of the legislature. Finally, they analyze empirical data of lawmaking for the period 1989–2004. Two relevant patterns are found. First, while governmental dominance of the agenda is a clear pattern regarding the output side of the decision-making process, high legitimacy for the policy process derived from sustained cooperation between the executive and legislative branches is found. Further, the relevant transactional exchange of support to the government agenda occurs along the lines of regional distributive policies. Overall, the Spanish legislature is compliant and a systematic confrontational behavior of opposition does not occur because these parties suffer from coordination failures.

Research on the agenda setting power of the Portuguese parliament is still in its early stages. Up to now, the majority of studies focus upon the period from 1976 to 1985 in great detail and present an image of the Portuguese parliament as a powerless assembly. The objective of Eugénia da Conceição-Heldt's chapter is to investigate the legislative performance of the Portuguese parliament from 1976 to 2005 by specifically analyzing how the agenda setting power is shared between the executive and the legislature. She argues that the image of the parliament as a "hollow shell" no longer corresponds with political reality. Most importantly, the Portuguese parliament increasingly plays a very active and influential role in the presentation of bill drafts independent of the type of government. This occurs in particular because the constitution endows the parliament with extensive legislative rights and even the exclusive right to legislate on a wide range of issues.

In [Chapter 12](#), Iulia Shevchenko and Grigorii Golosov investigate various instruments of agenda control that have developed in Russia's nascent national legislature, the Duma. It is shown that, at present, the executive branch plays the leading role in the policy-making process. Restraining the ability of the legislature to make a policy difference, the executive uses various methods of agenda control – institutional, partisan, and positional – although the efficacy of these different methods varies. The government imposes its will on the Duma by controlling a stable and disciplined legislative majority. The executive also controls agenda setting by altering the institutional arrangements regulating the Duma's operation, although to take full advantage of these reforms a strong parliamentary backing is required. Currently, the Russian executive does not resort to positional maneuvers to achieve desirable outcomes. While many governmental proposals can be located in the center of the ideological spectrum, the executive avoids bargaining and tends to neglect the interests of Duma minorities.

In Chapter 13, the institutional, partisan, and positional bases of the agenda setting powers of Danish governments are discussed by Robert Klemmensen. He argues that Danish governments are weak since they have few institutional instruments at their disposal. Their partisan agenda setting powers are also limited compared to other systems, mainly because governments do not control the parliamentary committee system. So, despite the high levels of party discipline in the Danish legislature, governments are unlikely to have their policies protected from changes during committee readings. The Danish governments are not much better off positionally, since they quite often do not include the median party.

Norway also has institutionally weak governments, Bjørn Erik Rasch argues in Chapter 14. The government introduces almost all bills and few if any of them are rejected by the parliament. Bills that are introduced by MPs almost never are accepted, not even under minority governments. Still it is not possible to disregard the parliament in the legislative processes. An important mechanism by which the parliament influences policy is anticipated reactions: governments typically draft bills after obtaining information on the preferences of parliamentary party groups, and formulate proposals in such a way that they can gain majority support in the relevant parliamentary committee and on the floor. Rasch proceeds by analyzing several decades of amendment activity. As expected, the parliament is more inclined to amend government bills the fewer seats the government controls; the distinction between minority and majority governments is important in explaining amendment activity. The parliament also tends to rewrite government bills more often as the next general election gets closer.

The final country chapter is on Japan. Silke Köster-Riemann shows that the Japanese government loses almost all power over a draft bill once it is introduced in parliament. Institutional advantages concerning legislative agenda setting are severely restricted. The government's agenda setting power is mainly assured by its stable majority in parliament (partisan advantage). Nevertheless, the long rule by the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan poses restrictions to the cabinet's ability to enact legislation independently from the party organs. In a recent move (2005) the cabinet tried to increase its own agenda setting power by circumventing the system of party approval of government bills. The consequence was a lack of party discipline which prompted the cabinet to use its right to dissolve the House of Representatives in order to enact the pending legislation (Postal Service Reform Bills) after an election. The example shows that in Japan the right to dissolve the House of Representatives can be used to address the partisan disadvantages of the cabinet and, therefore, has to be considered as a form of institutional agenda setting.

Notes

¹ Lijphart's classification of presidential systems range around 1 or 2 in his index with the exception of Colombia, while parliamentary systems range from 1.14 (Italy) to 5.52 (UK and two others).

- 2 In an empirical study of German bicameralism, Bräuninger and König (1999) find that the agenda setting powers of the German government decline when legislation has to be approved by the upper chamber (Bundesrat).
- 3 Here we are referring to the textbook *Italy* (from the end of the war until 1990); we will address contemporary Italy in a moment.
- 4 He starts with multiple criteria, like existence of anti-system parties, bilateral oppositions etc., but at the end he reduces his distinction to the number of parties.
- 5 Sartori himself classifies the Netherlands as a moderate pluralism country, but he restricts the study of this country to 1967 when it had only five parties. Since then, the number of parties in the Netherlands has significantly increased.

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