Editorial

Attention and Water Governance: An Agenda-Setting Perspective

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Abstract: The concept of agenda-setting has resulted in vibrant research in political science. The aim of this Special Issue is to advance the state of research on water governance by alluding to the possibilities for applying this particular theoretical perspective to water issues. Agenda-setting concerns how and when issues enter the public debate (discussion agenda) or are taken into account by policymakers with a view to proposing policies (decision agenda). Simply put, agenda-setting is about the process of drawing or paying attention to certain issues. Despite the intuitiveness of this concept, the underlying political and societal processes related to water governance are complex and require careful research designs in order to realize the full potential of agenda-setting research. The contributions to this Special Issue combine theoretically convincing research on agenda-setting with research on issues in water governance.

Keywords: agenda-setting; contestation; decision agenda; discussion agenda; framing; policy change; water governance

1. Introduction

Although the public spotlight is normally on governments and members of parliament as they debate levels of regulation, consequential policy decisions are made at a much earlier stage in the political process, namely when the so-called agenda is being set. Agenda-setting concerns which issues enter the public debate (discussion agenda) or are taken into account by policymakers with a view to proposing public policy (decision agenda).

The discussion agenda is strongly associated with the news media—both new and conventional media—and how they portray an issue, which is also known as 'framing' [1]. An example of media framing and how it affects the discussion agenda is provided by Olsen and Osmundsen, who investigate agenda-setting related to aquaculture in Norway, which represents an important economic sector of the country [2]. The analysis reveals that the news media establish a link between aquaculture and the negative environmental impacts of this activity. Such framing, in this case of aquaculture, can result in a negative public opinion and induce citizen groups to mobilize against these issues in order to demand changes to the existing regulatory regime [3].

The political agenda refers to items that are up for serious consideration by governments [4], ministries [5], or parliaments [6]. Research has shown that the executive agenda, i.e., the agenda of the government, tends to be remarkably stable: the scope of the agenda tends to remain the same over time, but there are alternations in its issue composition, which reflects shifts in the respective government's issue priorities [7].

Bureaucracies are responsible for 'routine' policymaking, and in response to a crisis such as a natural disaster, 'exceptional' policymaking [8]. The role of bureaucracies such as ministries in agenda-setting is interesting since on the one hand, they react to the agenda-setting efforts of their political masters, which is predominantly the government; on the other hand, ministries themselves can place issues on the political agenda [9].

Compared to executive and bureaucratic agenda-setting, legislative agenda-setting is broader in the sense that it comprises a wider range of themes and does not necessarily result in the adoption of a new policy or in changes to existing policies [10]. The interesting feature of legislative agenda-setting is that it is characterized by the competition of the government and opposition parties over certain issues [11]. Legislative agenda-setting is more related to parliamentary debates and to signaling to the electorate that the members of parliament are aware of the issues that their voters consider worthy of addressing through policymaking.

Some research also integrates the discussion agenda as set by the news media, with a focus on how it affects the decision agenda [12]. An interesting finding in this context is that politicians overestimate the effect the media has on the decision agenda. Politicians attribute a greater agenda-setting power to the media than to other politicians or to events [13]. This perception can result in politicians placing issues on the decision agenda not because they consider these issues important (to their voters) but in reaction to the coverage in the media.

While the research on agenda-setting is extensive and addresses a wide range of themes, all contributions to this literature agree that policymaking is not possible without agenda-setting [14–18]. The principal focus of agenda-setting research in comparative public policy has been to explain the causes and patterns of policy change [19]. In this regard, the possibility of placing issues on the political agenda has been regarded as a source of power [18]. Likewise, Bachrach and Baratz argue that excluding issues from the political agenda is equally a source of power [20].

Considering the number of actors involved in water governance and the number of institutional venues in which the related political processes take place, it appears an ideal policy domain for investigating agenda-setting processes. Consequently, this Special Issue combines the study of water governance with the theoretical perspective of agenda-setting, and in so doing strives to provide novel insights that can advance both research on agenda-setting and on water governance.

Each contribution addresses one of the following research questions, to which we will turn in the concluding section of this editorial note:

- When do water issues receive attention? When does the attention to water issues fade?
- What are the characteristics of the water-related narratives in the discussion agenda?
- What are the consequences of agenda-setting regarding the regulation of water issues?

2. The Agenda-Setting Perspective and Its Fits with the Research Agenda of Water Governance

This Special Issue seeks to motivate researchers of water governance to adopt the perspective of agenda-setting. While agenda-setting research is clearly rooted in political science, it includes components derived from other disciplines. Most notably, since agenda-setting concerns the role of the news media, it is linked to communication and media sciences. Another aspect of agenda-setting research relates to the mechanisms expected to bring about either incremental changes to existing policies or large-scale changes, which resonate with concepts used in psychology or organizational science. For example, Baumgartner and Jones [19] argue that policy stability results from the acceptance within a policy sub-system of a single policy image, which refers to the way in which an issue is framed and understood, and the discourse constructed around it [21]. Consequently, attempts to facilitate policy change need to transform this policy image, which requires a re-framing of the issue concerned and its related discourse; this re-framing is best understood when applying theories from psychology. Another element of the theory concerns the institutional locations where decision-making takes place and the possibility of shifting policy venues [19]. Whether venue-shifting is possible and what venues

are feasible given constitutional constraints are questions that would benefit from cooperation with law scholars. Therefore, the theoretical perspective as such offers several options of connection with other disciplines, and in combination with a focus on water issues, the research possibilities become even greater and more intriguing.

In light of its specific characteristics, agenda-setting research is well positioned to facilitate interdisciplinary research on water governance. The study of water governance has already provided numerous insights into the management of water resources in differing (country) contexts. However, as outlined by Tortajada [22], some topics still exist that warrant enhanced attention in the future:

- Reforms in the water sector;
- Urban water governance;
- Holistic water governance;
- Institutional arrangements; and
- Tariffs and subsidies.

The water sector must undergo reform if it is to safeguard the quantity and quality of its water services and of water resources in general. Similarly, reform is necessary in order to mitigate water-related impacts on other sectors, such as agriculture or energy [23,24], and accommodate for developments such as urbanization, globalization, and climate change [25]. Another issue relates to new types of pollutants that require significant investment in wastewater treatment, such as pharmaceutical residues in surface water and other types of micro-pollutants [26,27]. Regardless of the specific challenge, the agenda-setting perspective is suitable for explaining whether policy change comes about and the degree to which it changes (incremental versus radical).

Tortajada [22] identifies urban water governance as an area particularly in need of scholarly attention. It is true that cities are facing an increasing number of water-related challenges, such as aging water infrastructure or urban floods induced or amplified by climate change [28]. Likewise, cities are also the venue where some innovative policy solutions to urban water challenges are invented [29]. The concept of institutional venue shifts, which is part of the agenda-setting theory [19], can be used to explain whether water issues are handled by cities because they reside there or because they have moved down from the state's or region's political agenda to that of the local level.

Holistic water governance contends that the governance of water resources does not concern this sector only but requires coordination and collaboration with other sectors and the actors who are based in these [22]. The need for cross-sectoral policymaking is discussed under various headings in the literature, including the nexus approach [24] or policy integration [30]. The concept of policy images and whether they are stable or become contested by new actors entering policymaking makes the agenda-setting perspective well equipped to study holistic water governance and its outcomes [31].

As discussed in the previous section, institutional arrangements are a central element of the agenda-setting perspective. For one, institutional rules define how easily an issue can reach the political agenda [6]. However, institutional arrangements also matter in the sense that these are associated with actors and depend on the actors' perceptions of policy issues, which in turn can have an impact on whether policy change is feasible or not. For example, research showed that Californian water management benefitted from a shift to a new institutional venue where producer groups were less powerful than in the previous venue [32].

The last item on the research agenda put forth by Tortajada [22] concerns tariffs and subsidies, which can be connected to the agenda-setting perspective by means of feedback processes [19]. If decisions are perceived negatively by their target group, this will produce negative feedback, which can start a reform process, and this in turn often leads to incremental changes. However, "the opening of a window of opportunity can start a bandwagon or 'cascade' effect that provides *positive feedback* for new initiatives [. . .], sometimes resulting in major policy punctuations" [21]. Indeed, coming up with an adequate design for water tariffs has proven to be a politically difficult task in many countries (e.g., Spain [33]), and applying the agenda-setting perspective to cases where

water tariffs have changed and to those where they have remained unchanged could provide some interesting insights. Likewise, one of the reasons why the privatization of water services is contested by the public is the anticipation of an increase in water tariffs [34,35].

In summary, the agenda-setting perspective holds considerable promise for the study of water governance, and the following overview of contributions to this Special Issue will show that it facilitates a diverse set of research despite a parsimonious theoretical underpinning.

3. Overview of Contributions

This Special Issue contains eight articles that discuss various aspects of agenda-setting in water governance by addressing one of the three questions outlined above.

3.1. When do Water Issues Receive Attention? When does the Attention to Water Issues Fade?

In May 2016, a severe flash flood in the municipality of Braunsbach in the German State of Baden-Württemberg attracted media attention and was on the political agenda because of the extensive damage caused by the disaster. Using a network analysis and a focus-group discussion, Witting et al. [36] investigate the flow of knowledge through the reported interactions between governmental, private, and academic actors in the period following the event. The authors reveal that the extreme event motivated scientists to assess the hazard, who then highlighted that certain aspects of flood risk were overlooked during earlier assessments conducted by the municipality, such as sediment transport. While it is through this process of scientific scrutiny that sediment transport has become an integral part of flood-risk management in Baden-Württemberg, with its impact on the measures implemented already evident, the impact of morphological changes has not been factored into the risk assessment as of yet. These variations in how scientific scrutiny has impacted the assessment can be explained by decision biases that can occur when decision makers are under pressure to tackle vulnerabilities and thus lack the time to deliberate in a manner that considers all the available evidence.

With its 17 Sustainable Development Goals, the 2030 Agenda has an ambitious vision for human development in times of global environmental change [28,37]. Taking the case of Mexico, Breuer and Oswald Spring [38] investigate the potential of the 2030 Agenda to act as an agenda-setting or focusing event for the transformation of water governance. Building on data from 33 expert interviews and the findings of a Social Network Analysis of communications between water stakeholders from different sectors in the Cuautla River Basin, the authors identified several challenges that hinder adequate implementation of the 2030 Agenda's guiding principles. They conclude that major paradigm shifts in water governance in Mexico are thus far more attributable to domestic focusing events and windows of opportunity than to the impact of globally set goals. The Mexican case also illustrates that the implementation of the 2030 Agenda strongly depends on political will at the highest level. Hence, the continuity of its implementation across administrations will only be assured if the Sustainable Development Goals can be mainstreamed and anchored into the sectorial strategies that determine activities at the lower working level of government.

The climate change factor (CCF) is a precautionary instrument for technical flood protection that was introduced in Southern Germany in the early 2000s. Pelaez Jara [39] applied the instrument of choice framework [40] to investigate the policy change and agenda-setting processes in the case of the CCF. By drawing on 26 semi-structured interviews, Pelaez Jara shows that after introduction of the CCF as a new technical instrument, policymakers, politicians, and the public quickly accepted it. It was (and continues to be) discursively linked to the precautionary principle as a well-known, approved principle of German environmental policymaking in the context of great uncertainty. However, according to interviewees, the CCF has neither been systematically evaluated nor has its impact or outreach been measured. The author concludes that the perceived innovativeness of this instrument faded once the overarching sectoral paradigm shifted from technical flood protection to more comprehensive flood risk management.

3.2. What are the Characteristics of the Water-Related Narratives in the Discussion Agenda?

Daus et al. [41] investigate the different stakeholder-based discourses on the Franconian Lake District, which is a large reservoir system in Germany built to transfer water from the Danube basin to the comparably drier Rhine-Main basin. Following the construction of artificial lakes, tourism grew strongly, subjecting the formerly agricultural region to major structural change. In order to better understand how stakeholder involvement results in the emphasis of certain topics and thus influences the discussion agenda, the authors conducted interviews with experts and analyzed articles in the local newspaper. On the basis of this research, they were able to show that discourses on the Franconian Lake District are mainly determined by economic factors. Discussions on management issues are dominated by the topic of cyanobacteria, which can pose a health risk, thereby impeding recreational use of the lakes and consequently leading to economic losses and image problems for the region.

Extreme droughts, such as the one experienced in 2018 by several European countries, are so-called focusing events [42], as they may influence agenda-setting processes and trigger policy change. Since agriculture is considered one of the most vulnerable sectors to droughts, farmers have an important role in politicizing drought and calling for corresponding responses in policy [3]. The contribution by Müller [43] analyzes how droughts are framed by comparing the coverage in journals on the German farming sector of four severe drought periods in order to better understand how politicization has changed over time. Droughts used to be framed as threats to food and water security, but the food security frame shifted to a yield security frame after 2003. Additionally, from 2003, farmers framed droughts in the context of climate change, which led in turn to the conclusion that climate change adaptation is necessary. The author concludes that farmers frame droughts as a matter of justice and assert their perceived right to subsidies, compensation, farmer-friendly tax policies, and state market regulations. Therefore, drought politicization within the agricultural sector does not prioritize water issues but ensures incomes for farmers.

The Sustainable Development Goals include the implementation of the Integrated Water Resources Management framework at all levels by 2030 [28,37]. Arfan et al. [44] analyze the water policy narrative in Pakistan in the context of global agenda-setting by scrutinizing the National Water Policy 2018 and the reforms introduced by the Participatory Irrigation Management. The authors critically evaluated the policy documents of the National Water Policy, newspaper articles, and the social media communications of civil society players and conducted semi-structured interviews with key institutional players within the water sector in Pakistan. The overall analysis reveals that the engineering narrative is dominant in policy circles and the construction of large-scale infrastructure is seen as an exceptional measure for overcoming the current loss of storage potential in reservoirs due to sedimentation. On the other hand, the adoption of the Integrated Water Resources Management framework reflects the desire of state institutions to imbue water policy reforms with international credibility in order to appease international financing institutions and donors. The authors conclude that the global agenda-setting of water, in the shape of Integrated Water Resources Management, is a re-packaging of existing activities and prevents alternative thinking in the setting of water priorities according to developmental needs.

3.3. What are the Consequences of Agenda-Setting Concerning the Regulation of Water Issues?

Tosun and Triebskorn [34] examined how political parties in Germany reacted to a rise in public attention to the issue of liberalizing and privatizing water services. This study was prompted by the exceptionally high support of German citizens for the European Citizens' Initiative Right2Water, which asked for guaranteed water quality and quantity all over Europe and demanded that water services remain in the hands of public entities. Thus, in this particular case, Right2Water placed the issue of water services not only on the political agenda of the European Union but also on the political agendas of its member states. The authors offer an in-depth analysis of the election manifestos of the main political parties, which were published for the federal elections in 2005, 2009, 2013, and 2017, as well as of those published for the elections to the European Parliament in 2004, 2009, 2014, and 2019. Since Right2Water was organized by public service trade unions and pursued an anti-liberalization

agenda, the authors expected left-wing parties to have laid a greater emphasis on this issue than right-wing parties. The findings show that parties do respond to civil society initiatives such as Right2Water and that a left–right division exists among the parties with regard to the attention they paid to this issue as well as to how they positioned themselves.

Water is a key sustainability issue in the cotton sector. In recent years, organic and fair-trade campaigns have increasingly brought this topic onto public agendas. For example, the German company Armedangels advertises its cotton textiles by arguing that their production requires only 10% of the water required in conventional production. Kemper and Partzsch [45] studied the ambitions of such corporate agenda-setters and assessed six international certification standards by focusing on the social and environmental dimensions of water sustainability, including Naturland, the European Union Organic Regulation, the Fairtrade Labeling Organization, the Fair for Life standard, the Better Cotton Initiative, and the Cotton made in Africa standard. The results indicate that the schemes have different aspects of water governance on their agendas. Standards that evolved from early fair-trade movements draw attention to social aspects, while standards that are linked to organic movements or include non-governmental organizations focus on environmental sustainability. The authors conclude that organic and fair-trade companies rightly present themselves as water policy entrepreneurs and assume a role that is usually associated with non-governmental organizations. However, certified companies only bring some aspects of water sustainability forward, and crucial aspects remain hidden. In particular, a gap exists between the agendas focusing on environmental aspects and the urgent social water problems in the Global South.

4. Conclusions

The contributions by Witting et al. [36], Breuer and Oswald Spring [38], and to some extent also the contribution by Arfan et al. [44] show how issues are placed on discussion or decision agendas. One possibility is through the occurrence of a natural disaster, as was the case with the flood in Braunsbach [36]. However, international organizations and their policy agendas, such as most prominently the Sustainable Development Goals, are also influential in placing issues related to water governance on the national decision agendas [38,44]. The article by Peleaz Jara [39] complements this group of studies, as the author shows that the attention paid to specific policy instruments can also fade, especially when the overarching policy paradigm changes.

Despite having very different research subjects, the studies by Daus et al. [41], Müller [43], and Arfan et al. [44] all demonstrate the dominance of one specific policy image in the narratives used for agenda-setting. In the case of the Franconian Lake District, the news coverage consistently emphasized the economic aspect of the reservoir system [41]. With the droughts, the needs of farmers in terms of how to deal with such events in order to secure their income dominated [43]. Likewise, the Pakistani Integrated Water Resources Management framework advanced an image of this issue corresponding to an engineering perspective only [44]. These three studies raise the question of why these policy images dominate the agenda-setting process and how these affect the corresponding policy decisions.

Tosun and Triebskorn [34] address this question to some extent by offering an analysis of the German political parties' positions on the privatization of water and sanitation services. Interestingly, this study finds that political parties have indeed reacted to the agenda-setting efforts of the promoters of the Right2Water initiative. Kemper and Partzsch [45] provide complementary insights as they focus on the reactions of companies to the placement of sustainability issues on the discussion agenda. In the future, this research line can be developed further by paying more attention to the interaction between public and private actors in response to agenda-setting processes.

To conclude, as the contributions have shown, the agenda-setting perspective represents a promising theoretical approach for the study of various issues in water governance. It is a parsimonious framework that facilitates interdisciplinary research and is flexible enough to be applied to the study of single cases as well as to carry out comparative analyses.

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