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Agenda-setting instruments: means and strategies for the management of policy demands

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ABSTRACT

Students of public policy have spent considerable effort setting out the types of policy instruments or tools available to policymakers in different stages of the policy process. A nascent strand of this important work concerns the agend-asetting phase, where scholars aim to understand the instruments – procedural and substantive – that government uses to shape the issues that it has to address. There is however limited engagement between scholarship on interest groups and this ongoing discussion around agenda-setting tools. This paper aims to fill this gap by identifying different types of agenda-setting tools deployed by government which are used to shape engagement from organised interests. These tools are classified as those which governments use to routinise demands, regularise demands, generate demands, and impose issues onto the agenda. The paper refocuses attention of policy scholars onto the means and strategies that policymakers deploy to manage government agendas, a process which has clear implications for what becomes a policy problem and thereafter potentially subject to governmental action.

Introduction

Scholars have a well-developed literature that captures the way policymakers deploy sets of policy instruments or tools to make or develop public policy. While policy instruments (or tools) are crucial for all parts of the policy process, the literature has tended to focus disproportionately on the implementation stage (Howlett, 2019, p. 8). The same may be said for the concept of policy styles, where authors have sought to recast discussion from system level styles to styles that might be defined at each stage of the policy process (see e.g. Howlett & Tosun, 2021). Again, there is conceptual work to be done here with respect to what policy styles might look like at different policy phases.

One notable area of renewed emphasis concerns the agenda-setting phase which scholars claim has been subject to relatively little attention (Howlett, 1997; Howlett & Shivakoti, 2014). Political scientists have been reminded – since perhaps Schattschneider (1975) that power and influence over deciding which problems come to constitute public issues, and are thus subject to government attention, is a critical focus for scholarly inquiry. Thus, a concrete understanding of the means – or various 'techniques' – by which governments

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go about managing this agenda-setting processg is no doubt a useful development of the policy instruments literature. A particular concern for the agenda-setting tools or instruments literature is how policymakers manage the passage of an issue from the broad universe of *potential* issues – the 'agenda universe' – to the smaller subset of issues that make it onto the government issue agenda – the 'institutional agenda' (Cobb & Elder, 1983). Within this nascent strand of the policy instruments literature, scholars aim to understand the instruments – predominantly *procedural* – that government uses to shape the issues that it has to address (in terms of both volume and content) (see Howlett & Shivakoti, 2014).

One important facet of managing agenda-setting is dealing with policy demands from organised interests. We know that organised interests or interest groups spend some considerable time deciding what *they* would see as desirable policy priorities and outcomes. And, a recent stream of work has begun to provide insights into what drives processes of agenda-setting, the size or carrying capacities of group agendas (see Barakso, 2004; Fraussen, 2014; Goss, 2010; Halpin, 2014; Heaney, 2004; Scott, 2013; Strolovitch, 2007). Once we recognise that government is under pressure from external interests when setting its agenda, the question arises as to how they might seek to manage it? This paper focuses on the tools available to government to manage these demands.

This paper makes several modest contributions to this evolving field of research on policy tools. First, it offers one possible way to typologise agenda-setting instruments deployed by government to manage external demands (we do not attempt to catalogue the instruments or strategies that groups might use to shape the agenda, or to avoid or evade these governmental tools). It is argued that they might be understood as falling into types that seek to *routinise* demands (such as consultations and stakeholder events), *regularise* demands (such as legislative sunset clauses and scheduled reviews), and *generate* demands (such as funding 'policy publics'). These are all consistent with an *anticipatory* and *consensus* based governmental agenda-setting style. In addition, they are contrasted with tools that impose agendas, which – unsurprisingly – sit comfortably within a *reactive* and *impositional* governmental policy agenda style (see for e.g. Howlett & Tosun, 2021).

Second, the present discussion of governmental agenda-setting instruments is connected with insights from broader public policy with respect to the engagement with interest groups around agenda-setting. This latter contribution seems particularly salient given that the policy styles concept is at its core about characterising the way government's approach problem-solving, and the relationship between government and 'societal actors' (see discussion in Howlett & Josun, 2018, p. 6). Lastly, the typology presented in this paper contributes to the efforts in this special issue to advance scholarship on procedural policy tools and the role they play in the policy process – an area that has received limited theoretical and empirical attention in contemporary design studies (Bali et al, 2021; Capano & Howlett, 2020).

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. The subsequent section presents an overview of the tools approach to public policy, and situates the contribution of this paper to the special issue. The following section presents the typology of agenda-setting styles and instruments and provides examples of different types of tools used to manage policy demands. The concluding discussion speaks to the strengths of the proposed typology, and to points an agenda on advancing the scholarship on agenda-setting tools.

The tools approach in contemporary policy sciences

Policy tools or instruments – 'a set of techniques by which governmental authorities wield power in attempting to support and effect change' (Vedung, 1997) are central to the policy sciences. Most of the early work on policy tools focussed on the number and types of tools (see Hood, 1986; Kirschen et al., 1964; Lowi, 1966; Schneider & Ingram, 1990) with the aim to develop taxonomies and frameworks for describing how governments pursue policy goals in different policy sectors (Hood, 2007; Howlett, 2000; Salamon, 2002). Recent research in this vein has focused not only on the choice of individual tools (see e.g. Capano & Lippi, 2017) but also how they are assembled as 'policy mixes' or 'portfolios' to attain specific policy goals (Howlett, Mukherjee, & Woo, 2015). More recently, scholars have focussed on identifying conditions that can improve the effectiveness or likely success of policy tools to anticipate and accommodate policy shocks (Bali, Howlett, & Ramesh, 2021; Bali & Ramesh, 2018; Capano & Woo, 2018; Mukherjee, Coban, & Bali, 2021).

Despite these advances there are two major gaps in the literature. First, as briefly mentioned in the introduction, most of these tools are focussed on the implementation stage of the policy process. There is inadequate theoretical and empirical attention paid to the role of policy tools in other stages of the policymaking especially in managing policy demands (Howlett, 2019).

The second relates to the focus of this special issue, i.e. the distinction between *substantive* and *procedural* policy tools. Substantive tools are understood to alter how goods and services are produced, consumed or distributed. Given their large economic impact, most of the literature has focused on substantive tools, how they are designed and ultimately deployed (Capano & Howlett, 2020). Procedural tools, however, do not directly affect production of goods and services, but affect how policy is formulated and/or implemented. This includes the use of, for example, the use of advisory commissions, public inquiries, and citizen juries to inform policy deliberation; and the use of networks and partnerships in delivering public services, etc. Despite their critical role in shaping policy outcomes, procedural tools are under studied in the tools literature. The central focus on this paper is engage with this gap in the literature by analysing the instruments, mostly procedural, that governments rely on in managing policy demands.

Governmental agenda setting-styles and instruments: a possible typology

From a *policy-making* perspective, the agenda-setting phase is crucial. For policymakers, it is a process to effectively control or manage what issues gain government attention (and thereafter may be subject to government action). From this stand point, in part, it might be conceived of as managing what Cobb and Ross (1997, p. 25) refer to as 'agenda conflict': the situation where initiators seek to have a new issue on the agenda while others wish to keep the same issue off the agenda (either because they oppose it, or because it would dislodge their own issue from the agenda).

It is useful to place this discussion within the broader discussion of *policy styles*. Specifically, the contrast drawn between an impositional or reactive styles – where government electoral mandates and such inform dominant policy agendas – and a consensus/anticipatory style – where government seeks to consult and gain consent

with key stakeholders when setting policy agendas (see Richardson, Gustafsson, & Jordan, 1982). While comparativists see the former as associated with pluralist and the latter corporatist systems (see Lijphart, 1999), others have argued that both styles of policymaking operate in all liberal democratic countries irrespective of system-level or institutional differences (Atkinson & Coleman, 1989; Cairney, 2018). Accounts of policy styles, and this distinction between types, is probably most associated with conceptions of formulation and implementation. Yet, it is equally applicable, we argue, to agenda-setting. These diverse styles are, at heart, about the origin or impulse for what governments will consider. Do they come from outside government – through networks and communities of policymakers and stakeholders – or do they come from within government – via clear electoral mandates and party manifestos? Thus, it makes sense to account for how this process of agenda-setting – and the tools *policymakers* use to manage agenda-setting – against these two broad styles.

This concentration on agenda-setting instruments and styles holds particular salience for interest groups scholars, not least because the literature typically considers organized interests as one of *the* key agents in initiating policy demands. Moreover, the policy styles literature is, at its core, about characterising the way government's approach problem-solving, and the relationship between government and 'societal actors' (see Howlett & Josun, 2018; Howlett & Tosun, 2021; Richardson et al., 1982).

From the perspective of engaging with interest groups, and thus a consultative or consensus policy style, we might usefully divide agenda-setting instruments into types that seek to (a) routinise demands (such as consultations and stakeholder events), (b) regularise demands (such as legislative sunset clauses and scheduled reviews), or (c) generate demands (such as funding 'policy publics').

Of course, this typology is not perfect. One can imagine using parliamentary inquiries to foster new demands – especially if they are committees chaired by opposition parties. Yet, these seem to square quite well with the various guises that groups appear in the context of agenda-setting. In fact, the typology takes the view of *policymakers* – consistent with the policy instruments literature – and asks what tools can they deploy to get control of their agenda, or to steer it in ways that they see fit. Thus, the emphasis is on what policymakers can deploy.

However, when government is operating in an impositional policy style, these instruments may be less useful. Instead, a straightforward fourth set of instruments designed to impose an agenda can be considered. These might be about denial of space to issues, removing or dislodging existing issues from the agenda or issue acquiescence whereby an issue is argued to fail the test of a 'public' problem (see discussion in Cobb & Ross, 1997; Hilgartner & Bosk, 1981).

Following Howlett (2019, Figure 4.2), in Table 1, we outline each of these four styles in turn, making an effort to connect each with a strategy to manage policy demands, the governing resources that they draw on, and illustrative examples of policy tools. In terms of governing resources, we use Hood's four-fold classification of the types of resources governments use to effect change: *nodality* (understood as information and knowledge), *authority* (the sovereign right to effect compliance), *treasure* (the use of fiscal transfers), and *organisation* (the use of public ownership and agency). The larger point made in Table 1 is that tools used to manage policy demands primarily rely on one of these four types of resources for their effectiveness. This has implications as governments and

Table 1. Proposed typology of agenda-setting instruments.

Policy Style	Strategies	Aim	Illustrative Examples of Tools Used
Consensus	Routinise (Nodality)	Managing the demands making it onto the governmental agenda	Establishing working groups, set-piece policy consultations on discussion papers, parliamentary inquiries, taskforces taking submissions
Consensus	Regularise (Organization)	Permitting issues (back) on the governmental agenda at set intervals	Sunset clauses in legislation; Statutory Reviews
Consensus	Generate (Treasure)	Fostering policy demands to help proactively shape governmental agenda	Funding of (or procuring research from) think tanks, interest groups, consultants to foster demands
Imposition	Impose (Authority)	Unilaterally install government issue priority onto the agenda in absence of consultation (especially after change of government, focussing event or crisis)	Policy statements by the Executive, Exclusive Summits, Govt. public relations/comms strategies

Source: Authors own suggestions

government agencies have differing capabilities to deploy these resources (see e.g. Bali, Howlett and Ramesh., 2021). In discussing illustrative examples of policy tools used to manage demands, following Capano and Howlett (2019), we also briefly comment on the mechanisms that underpin these four strategies.

Routinise: Perhaps the most common 'family' of instruments are those that seek to move somewhat ill-structured or chaotic patterns of engagement with organized interests into more routinised forms. These tools conform to the basic logic set out by Jordan and Richardson, which is that policymakers seek to consult to generate consent. Examples of these are tools such as consultations, working groups or consultative committees. From a government perspective, these tools provide a way to build consensus as to what the policy problem is, and the range of solutions that seem credible. The principal mechanisms that give effect to building consensus is *acknowledgement* and *engagement*. Tools that routinise policy demands allow policymakers to acknowledge and engage with a spectrum of actors, and design strategies to meet these demands. For instance, through governmental shepherding of these processes – such as posing the questions to be 'consulted' upon – it is possible for them to shape demands in least-worst directions. These strategies amount to what scholars refer to as 'issue containment', where the aim is to 'limit or restrict what is considered to the narrowest grounds possible' (Cobb & Ross, 1997, p. 19). A less cynical view would argue that this early exchange between policymakers and organised interests provides a foundation for more optimal outcomes in latter stages of the policy process – such as implementation.

There is substantial fluidity for public servants to handle in this process. For instance, research has shown that a small minority of all government consultations attract the majority of the group responses, with most being replied to by fewer than 10 actors (Baumgartner & Leech, 2001; Halpin, 2011). Similar work shows that not all groups follow the invitations of policymakers to respond. Analysis of 25-year Scottish public consultations revealed that just 32% of those invited to engage in a given consultation do, in fact, participate. When we consider the number of consultation responses, 77% came from invited organizations, which means that 23% of responses came from organizations that were not directly invited to do so (Halpin, 2011).

Regularise: In his work on agenda-setting in the US Congress, Walker (1977) noted that 'periodically recurring' agenda items – such as budget appropriations, small amendments to Acts, mandated statutory reviews – comprise the majority of what members of Congress attend to. His message is that the room for members of Congress to champion their own 'discretionary agenda' is limited. A similar statement is made by Cobb and Ross (1997, p. 17) who observe that '. . . most of the time, officials are risk averse: issue avoidance is the norm'. Of course, new administrations come in with their specific mandated agendas, but this is, they argue, short lived and limited. Moreover, Cobb & Ross (1997, p. 906) refer to the tendency for 'older items' to stick on the agenda, and the difficulty in displacing them. These specific points can be mapped more generally onto the way government might approach managing its agenda. Before there is space to consider a proactive – or even reforming – agenda, the space is easily populated by existing, and recurring, items. For example, non-discretionary spending of the federal government in the United States has increased from 26% in 1969 to about 70% in recent years (Congressional Budget Office, 2020). Thus, it is reasonable to expect that many instruments will be directed to managing these recurring items. So, in this view, tools such as these are a curse to government, bogging it down in recurring issues and not allowing it space for new ideas.

It also allows governments to exploit the routine and traditions of existing political institutions – what Hilgartner and Bosk (1981) refer to as 'institutional rhythm' – which dictate the recurrence of an issue onto the agenda at regular intervals. They say 'Each public arena has a characteristic rhythm of organizational life that influences the timing of its interactions with social problems, thus affecting [issue] selection' (ibid). Policymakers can purposefully enact such routines to ensure this rhythm prevails on given issues (Peters, 2021). Examples of this include fixed annual budgetary and fiscal calendars, and statutory requirements for public engagement and consultation.

Of course, this tool can also be pressed into service to *lock in* agendas. For instance, a government may seek to lock in regular reviews on statutory authorities – with representation from key client groups – in order to ensure their favoured issue agenda remains entrenched (even after they leave government). This also serves to create path dependency by pinning down future governments with the agenda of previous ones by creating, or at the minimum reduce the leeway or degrees of freedom that future governments may have in managing *new* policy demands. As is well observed in the literature, there is a status quo bias to policy making, which means that groups seeking to reproduce existing advantages typically have an easier time than challengers (Baumgartner, Berry, Hojnacki, Kimball, & Leech, 2009).

Finally, it might also be the case that this set of tools is deployed to, over time, bring sporadic agenda items into a more regularised mode of policy making. As Richardson (2018) has recently re-stated, governments do not always ask nicely and seek consensus for change, they may simply impose preferred options. Yet, imposition is often swiftly followed up by efforts at (re)building policy communities anew (Halpin, 2002). In that context, creating regular systems of policy review can help to build new communities around the imposed agenda.

Generate: There is a large and growing literature documenting how group populations are effectively 'seeded' by national governmental institutions – and some

supranational and international organizations (like the EU and UN) – in order to create policy partners. The establishment of these groups can be incredibly important. Work has shown how the absence of policy 'publics' creates difficulties for policy-makers in sustaining a clear – or coherent – policy agenda in a sector (Jordan & Halpin, 2006; May, Jones, Beem, Neff-Sharum, & Poague, 2005). Put simply, governments can create groups that generate the policy demand for their preferred policy programs (see Béland, 2010 on policy feedback). That is, governments can fund think tanks and research institutes (or programs within these institutions) which are then called to aid policy deliberation. This instrument can be partial. For instance, governments will regularly underwrite the capacity of groups via placing staff on secondment in group secretariat's or providing project funding for specific tasks. In their work on agenda-setting, Cobb and Elder (1983) explain that political elites will sometimes mobilize publics in order to generate support for their own preferred agendas – so-called internal mobilization. Thus, the principal mechanism relied on to generate policy demands is *mobilisation*. That is, the use of largely treasure resources to generate demand across stakeholders for preferred policy options.

Impose: It is important to note that the first three tools in Table 1 do not deal with the governmental policy style of 'imposition' – where government simply imposes its policy outcomes on existing policy communities (see Richardson, 2018). We might expect this to occur after an election that brings with it a change of government, or in areas where their manifesto pledges are critical to re-election. For example, we have seen governments unilaterally expand social policy benefits or entitlements in response to perceived electoral threats, or in the wake of heightened electoral competition (Haggard & Kaufman, 2008; Ramesh & Asher, 2000). Outside the political cycle, we might expect to see this around crisis or other focussing events (like natural disasters or scandals). The tools applied might include communication campaigns aimed at explaining why some issues are not 'problems' for government (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1981; Stone, 1988); or consultations or summits that exclude key groups with incongruent demands (see Heaney, 2004).

Regardless of the synchronicity with political cycles, the dominant mechanism this family of instruments relies on to impose policy demands is *legitimation*. That is, the government's (often coercive) use of political legitimacy to advance preferred agendas while dismissing the need for public consultation or engagement.

It might be fair to say that the three first three types of tools outlined in Table 1 apply a *policy style* more closely associated with the 'logic of negotiation' (Jordan & Richardson, 1982), whereby groups and policymakers exchange access for input against the backdrop of receiving *some* of what they want *much* of the time. Yet, consistent with the recent observations (see Cairney, 2018), these are not essentially at loggerheads, but in fact can be two styles that co-exist within the same system, or even the same issue space at different times. For instance, Halpin (2002) notes, often after imposing an agenda, government swiftly moves to a set of instruments that routinise a (revised) community around the new policy settings. We know that events may well propel an issue onto the agenda, and, again, we can expect instruments to be deployed to bring these into a manageable mode.

Caveats about managing group demand

First, in this paper we are concerned primarily with the efforts by *policymakers* to actively shape the boundaries of policy agenda space mostly involving other members of the policy community. The vast literature on social problems, policy problems, and so on, have emphasised (rightly) that policymakers – like all political agents – will use language, storytelling and framing strategies to direct the attention of those with whom they engage (Baumgartner & Jones, 1991; Kingdon, 1984). For instance, defining a problem in a particular way, and attributing blame to particular agents or processes, is a central mechanism through which policymakers set the scope for a consultation, taskforce or inquiry. Recent work has gone as far to designate narrative as policy tools (Crow & James, 2018), yet this work specifically concerns explaining variation in how the public consumes (and believes) some messages and not others.

Second, the above discussion assumes a constant – even overwhelming – supply of policy grievances which government needs to constantly manage. However, research systematically enumerating the engagement of organised interests across a large number of policy issues in the UK and US demonstrates highly skewed patterns of mobilisation (Baumgartner & Leech, 2001; Halpin 2011): most issues have very little engagement, with most engagement concentrated on a handful of contentious issues. In addition, while organised interests are (rightly) considered the chief purveyors of policy demands, not all – or even most such organizations – are dedicated to policy advocacy. In fact, most are, at best, intermittent participants in public policy between fulfilling other tasks (such as service delivery). This suggests that government efforts at managing agenda-setting are not contending with a highly skilled cadre of interest groups, but often a gaggle of the temporarily mobilised. In the UK, such organizations have been referred to in the literature as 'sporadic interventionists' (Dowse & Hughes, 1977) and as "policy amateurs" (Halpin 2011). In the US Anderson, Newmark, Gray, and Lowery (2004) contrast 'mayflies' that engage once and disappear, with 'old bulls' that are ever present in policy advocacy. In fact, drumming up responses from key stakeholder groups might be as much a problem as trying to filter out excessive demands. The broad point here is that policy input from 'civil society' is tightly bound with our understanding of the flows of non (and partially) policy-dedicated actors into – and then out of – lobbying populations. Such dynamics are important to appreciate when conceptualising the way policy instruments might be deployed by those policymakers seeking to manage governmental or institutional policy agendas.

Third, our approach adopts a version of institutionalised politics where organised interests seek to engage government. Thus, we do not touch on an obvious case whereby external interests simply take on an antagonistic indirect strategy in engaging with government (see Binderkrantz, 2005). In this scenario, organised interests might set out to mobilise the public on a given issue, rather than engage directly with government at all. The literature has identified that groups may well pursue such an approach when they are denied inside access, lack standing or status with policymakers, or hold views or purposes which policymakers simply cannot abide (see discussion in Maloney, Jordan, & McLaughlin, 1994). In such cases, governments may adopt one or a mix of our above strategies, yet containment of these outside forms of mobilisation may well prove challenging.

Conclusion: Advancing Research on Agenda-Setting Instruments

Agenda-setting is a vital element of the study of public policy. Since Schattschneider's observation that whomever controls what is admitted as a policy issue exercises substantial power, a myriad of social scientists have explored what propels an issue onto the public agenda, the life-cycles of issues, and why some issues make it, and others do not. Extending the policy instruments approach to agenda-setting is a worthy endeavour, which creates additional opportunities for developing systematic insights into the way government goes about managing demands to recognise issues as 'public', and thereafter to give them attention. The modest contribution here has been to think of ways that the vast array of practices deployed by government to 'manage' policy demands – assuming that limited time, resources and attention, mean that they will ideally seek to filter out some demands – might be systematically organized. And in turn, that this will guide the formation of hypothesis about their deployment – and effects – and thus render them easier to empirically investigate. There are three broad avenues where this typology could be taken further.

The first is to consider arena-based agenda-setting instruments – contrasting those in the administrative, legislative, and public arenas. Another way to expand on the typology of agenda-setting instruments is to link it to the discussion of high versus low-cost strategies, developed by Cobb and Ross (1997). Here, they suggest that policymakers would opt for their desired outcome 'at the lowest possible cost but progressively turn to high-cost strategies (or terminate its opposition) in face of lack of success' (ibid, 25). Do governments pursue multiple strategies simultaneously? What would this look like for policymakers deploying sets of agenda-setting instruments in specific policy contexts?

The second, consistent with recent design studies that suggest that governments have come to rely on a mix or portfolio of policy tools rather than single instruments (see e.g. Mukherjee et al., 2021), is to consider the types of policy mixes deployed in advancing strategies presented in Table 1. That is, what combination of specific instruments are deployed to *routinise* or *regularise* demands? What determines this choice? Is the decision fostered by certain path dependencies or an overarching policy style to managing demands (Halpin & Fraussen, 2021)? Engaging with such themes would engender a more sophisticated understanding on the efficacy of specific types of instruments (e.g. the use of sunset clauses vis-à-vis statutory reviews) and has implications on how governments elect to manage policy demands. A related question focuses on the capacities of governments (see e.g. Wu, Ramesh, & Howlett, 2015), and importantly public managers, to effectively utilise these strategies. It is a reasonable assumption to make that tools to manage policy demands vary in their complexity (e.g. *citizen juries* versus *task forces considering submissions*), and design work required (Bali, Capano, & Ramesh, 2019).

The third possibility is to use the typology as a basis to develop propositions and hypothesis which can foster more empirical work and theoretical treatment of the role of procedural policy tools in the agenda-setting phase of the policy process. That is, for example, to consider under what specific conditions do governments rely on an imposition rather than a consensus-based approach to managing policy demands. What are the institutional prerequisites need to pursue strategies presented in Table 1? Do these vary across policy sectors? In this respect, the mechanisms that underpin each of the four strategies presented offer a starting point for more rigorous investigations in policy tools.

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