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Interest groups and agenda-setting styles

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Introduction

Scholars have a well-developed literature that captures the way policy makers deploy sets of policy instruments or tools to 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 implementation (Howlett 2019, p. 8). The same may be said for the concept of policy styles, where authors have recently sought to recast discussion from system-level styles to styles that might be defined at each stage of the policy process (see Howlett *et al.* 2009).

One notable area of renewed emphasis concerns the agenda-setting phase which key scholars claim has been subject to relatively little attention (Howlett 1997; Howlett and Shivakoti 2014). 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 pays attention to and subsequently has to address (in terms of both volume and content) (see Howlett and Shivakoti 2014).

Yet, equally, scholars need an appreciation for how the other side of the policy equation – organised interests or interest groups – approach agenda setting. Just as government and related institutions have a policy agenda to manage and deploy agenda-setting processes to winnow out unwanted distraction and manage finite resources, groups engage in the same tasks. This facet of intra-organisational life has not featured strongly in interest group scholarship. However, an exciting recent stream of work has begun to provide insights into what internal and external factors drives processes of agenda setting, as well as the structure and carrying capacity of group agendas. These publications provide a solid basis to start considering interest group agenda-setting styles (see Barakso 2004; Goss 2010; Fraussen 2014; Halpin 2014; Heaney 2004; Scott 2013; Strolovitch 2007).

This chapter connects the discussion of governmental agenda-setting styles with insights from the interest group literature around how they themselves agenda set. For scholars of organised interests this debate holds particular relevance, given that groups are one of the primary agents charged with making policy demands. This chapter probes agenda setting from the interest group perspective. It first unpacks four dimensions of interest group agendas, and ultimately

identifies ideal-type agenda-setting styles. Second, it points to the range of drivers that shape decisions by groups to prioritise issues onto their lobbying agendas.

Conceptualising interest group agenda-setting styles?

Is it possible to speak of group agenda-setting styles? Here we offer one possible way to conceptualise variations in the way group agendas are set. In so doing, we tentatively argue that the way groups agenda set *within* their organisation shapes how likely it is that they are able to fit into prevailing governmental or institutional policy styles (whether at the issue, domain, or system levels). Partly building upon Halpin and Fraussen (2019), group agenda-setting styles are conceptualised along four dimensions: (i) structure, (ii) carrying capacity, (iii) policy process, and (iv) posture. We explain each next.

(i) Structure: It has been argued that group agendas can be conceptualised as composing of three distinct, yet related, layers: (a) 'interests', (b) 'priorities', and (c) 'actions' (Halpin 2015) (see Table 18.1).

First, groups have a broad sense of what policy space they are 'interested' in. Research on Washington lobbying has long pointed out that the observed lobbying activity of groups belies a broad policy remit. These discussions get to the basic foundational layer, if you will, of a group's policy agenda: how broad and diverse is the set of issues it has a general interest in? Or, more colloquially, what is its natural 'policy terrain'?

Second, while what the policy terrain groups have an 'interest' in is likely to be relatively broad, at any one time groups then 'prioritise' a subset of this broad policy space for concerted effort (see Halpin *et al.* 2018, and earlier discussion). The claim that groups engage in a conscious process of prioritisation, and that it is a conceptually distinct layer in a groups' agenda, resonates with uncontroversial general rules of thumb discussed in the literature. Research in the US notes that most groups have a propensity to 'monitor' well outside areas they are active on (Baumgartner and Leech 1998, p. 161). A classic US study noted, "numerous interest groups monitor any given policy question and consider taking a more active role in the debate" (Heinz *et al.* 1993, p. 380). In his work, Nownes (2006, p. 85) argues, "the typical public policy lobbyist spends between 20 and 40 percent of his or her time on policy monitoring and compliance monitoring". In short, the assumption is that against the very broad foundational layer of a group's interests – all the things they might be reasonably considered to have an interest in – they then need to settle on a subset of things to start to actively work on, not least develop viable policy positions on.

Third, groups actively engage in policy work to further their agenda on specific issues: the agenda is 'actioned'. It is this component of group policy agendas that has attracted the overwhelming attention of group scholars: mostly because of a concern with assessing policy influence.

Table 18.1 Components of interest group policy agenda structures

Components	Description
(a) Policy interests	Broad policy remit of a group
(b) Policy priorities	Set of issues that group has consciously decided to develop positions on and focus its attention
(c) Policy actions	Set of issues that a group is actively engaging in lobbying on

Source: Derived from Halpin (2015)

While on their own each has been subject to some modicum of analysis, these have not (to our knowledge) been taken as a set of related propositions. Yet, we can say that the group literature is heavily invested in the idea that advocacy organisations have what we have called a pyramid structure: they typically have rather general *policy interests* and set broad *issue agendas*, also *monitor* relatively broadly, yet *lobby* narrowly (see Baumgartner and Leech 2001; Baumgartner *et al.* 2011). The structure of the agenda would approximate a pyramid shape, with broad monitoring at the base, tapering to a small tip of observable policy advocacy.

This orthodoxy has rarely been empirically explored and certainly not via systematic scrutiny of how a set of groups sequentially resolve each of these questions. Recent work has shown that in fact there is considerable variation in the structure of agendas, with survey research indicating that just 29 percent of the Australian groups has a pure version of this pyramid structure (Halpin and Fraussen 2019).

The argument here is that there are three models of agenda setting among the interest group system (see Figure 18.1). The first is the pyramid model, whereby a group decides a broad-based set of policy interests, prioritises a subset of those for concerted attention, and then lobbies on an even smaller number of these policy issues. The third is the inverted model, whereby group leaders identify a broad policy perspective or ideology (e.g. progressive politics), against which it solicits a large number of relevant issues, which are refined based on constituency feedback. In between these is an intermediate or 'narrow-cast' model, where a group focuses on a very narrow set of issues and only devotes monitoring attention to the issue-set it advocates on, and vice versa.

What has this to do with public policy making and agenda setting? There are some reasons for arguing that groups that manifest a *pyramid*-shaped agenda structure generate value for policy making. There is value in the active lobbying of groups being underpinned by a broad investment in monitoring and position formation. Groups that spread their policy attention more broadly are best able to contribute to democratic character of policy making by counteracting the niche seeking that is likely to undermine the pluralistic competition that scholars see as crucial to the democratic contribution of groups (Schlozman *et al.* 2012). Groups monitoring broadly are also more likely to be important in linking policy communities (Browne 1990) and are closer to what neo-corporatists saw as valuable 'encompassing' groups (Schmitter and Streeck 1999). In addition, broad monitoring could facilitate interventions from groups that are timely and better aligned with the perspectives and priorities of policy makers, as such groups will possess a more fine-tuned understanding of the political agenda. This is crucial to ensure a valuable contribution of groups to the policy process, but without this pyramid structure they are less likely to be aware of these important contextual factors.
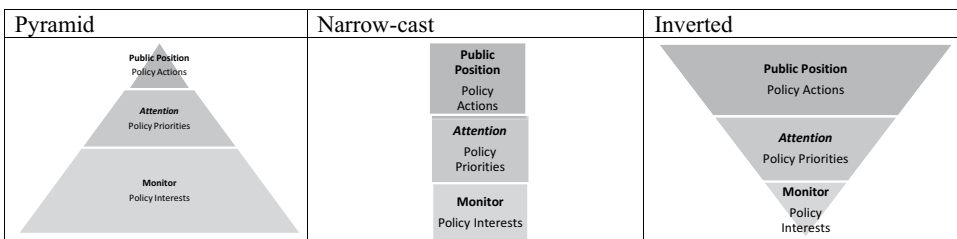

Figure 18.1   Ideal-type interest group agenda-setting structures
Source: Adapted from Halpin and Fraussen (2019)

Of course, not all groups will conform closely to this normative ideal. We can, for instance, identify groups for whom 'ambulance chasing' is the clear instinct when it comes to issue agenda setting – they spend little time on monitoring and prioritising and simply follow the issue agenda of the day (see Karpf 2012; Fraussen and Halpin 2018). This might be conceptualised as an inverted structure. Somewhere in between these two types would be a narrow-cast agenda structure. Here, groups engage in all layers of agenda setting, yet do so on a very small issue-set at one time. Single-issue campaign groups might be a good example of this case. We argue that the inverted model prioritises tactical nimbleness and outsider strategies, while the pyramid model values insider strategies including sustained interaction with policy insiders, combined with an implicit promise to cover a specific and more or less agreed-upon issue territory.

(ii) Carrying capacity: Groups, like all institutions and organisations, face clear limits of time and financial/human resources which shape the carrying capacity of their agendas (if not the specific issues they take on or avoid). In a survey of Australian groups Halpin and Fraussen (2019) asked respondents to indicate, during a typical 12-month period, the *number of issues monitored (those issues that you generally pay attention to or see as relevant)*, the *number of issues that receive serious attention (those issues that you allocate staff time to)*, and the *number of issues upon which this organisation takes a public position (those issues you send out a press release on, make a statement on, or release a policy paper on)*. During a typical 12-month period, the median group monitors about eight issues, devotes serious attention to five issues, and develops a public position on three issues. Thus, we can see that there are clear limits on how many issues a given group can 'carry' – with many more issues subject to monitoring actions and fewer to formal public position taking. But, as is clear, there is substantial variation with respect to how many issues a group takes onto its agenda at any one time. From a normative perspective, we might prefer that groups have a large carrying capacity. Why? Groups that can actively process many issues simultaneously are better placed to assist government in anticipating policy changes, better prepared to move into new areas, and able to draw links between policy niches.

(iii) Policy process: Groups might have broad interests that shape the issues they are concerned with, but the precise position that they form on that issue is by no automatic. Some groups have established and well thought out policy platforms, while others make it up on the run. The work on governance and public policy has emphasised the importance of groups to be able to deliver the "commitment of members" to the policy table (Peters 2005, p. 80). This means policy makers can see evidence of – and factor in – a set of policy positions that a constituency has 'agreed' on. For groups, being known for possessing a well-established policy platform, which is signalled and predictable, reduces substantially the uncertainty for policy makers in doing their policy work (see discussion in Kollman 1998). Arguably, this allows policy makers to factor in the likely positions of groups in advance, and for groups, means that they can maximise their ability to exercise indirect power.

In work on Australian national interest groups (Halpin and Fraussen 2019), it was found that many citizen and business groups had extensive internal apparatuses, which enable them to crystallise and anchor their policy positions. These included annual conferences, elaborate policy committees, and the development of research-based policy positions. Among campaign-style groups, such internal structures that create path dependence were often absent; instead the use of real-time online testing of messaging directed efforts (and these lobbying efforts often shifted frequently) (see also Fraussen and Halpin 2018). These differences in internal structures might also explain why diffuse citizen groups often have less difficulty in establishing their policy position, compared to business groups (see De Bruycker *et al.* 2019; Halpin 2006).

(iv) Posture: While somewhat intangible, the attitude of groups to the policy environment is also a salient component of their agenda-setting style. There is a strong thread that argues that

Table 18.2 Ideal-type interest group agenda-setting styles

Agenda-setting features	Agenda-setting style	
	Style 1 – Orthodox	*Style 2 – Alternative*
Structure	Pyramid structure	Inverted structure
Carrying capacity	High capacity	Low capacity
Policy processes	Strongly institutionalised.	Weakly institutionalised and shallow into org.
Posture	Anticipatory	Reactionary

Source: Adapted from Halpin and Fraussen (2019)

the capacity for government to resolve pressing policy questions requires a long-term strategic view, which is in part enabled by the potential for groups and other non-state actors such as firms to take *proactive policy stances* (Craft and Howlett 2012; Peters 2015, see also Kim and Darnall 2016). In their classic analysis of the prospects for states to engage in 'anticipatory' policy making, Atkinson and Coleman (1989) note the requirement that groups are able to be "capable of looking to the longer term" (p. 63). Put simply, groups that know what they want – and are well prepared and have been on the scene for some time – might be considered best placed to identify and communicate to elites the legislative opportunities available and to respond to those windows as they open. Yet, not all groups adopt such an approach. Recent work tested the extent to which groups are proactive or reactive, in their own estimation (Halpin and Fraussen 2019). The results of a survey of national Australian interest groups found that when asked to indicate what proportion of issues they dealt with in the last 12 months were 'long-standing issues' versus those that 'popped up' unexpectedly, a majority of groups indicated that at least 60 percent of issues that they are typically dealing with are long-standing issues – with the balance being something that emerged unexpectedly. Only a very small proportion of groups indicated that their agenda was dominated by issues that 'popped up' unexpectedly.

Summary: On the basis of these dimensions we can identify what we refer to as the 'orthodox' style of agenda setting, addressing its four critical components: a proactive or even anticipatory policy posture, institutionalised procedures to establish policy platforms, a high carrying capacity, and a pyramid-like agenda structure (Halpin and Fraussen 2019). We contrast this with the reverse of this type, what we call an alternative agenda-setting style. This style is characterised by weakly institutionalised and reactionary agenda-setting procedures and a policy agenda that has an inverted structure and a low carrying capacity.

What drivers guide agenda setting within interest groups?

Organised interests are central agents in transmitting grievances, problems, or policy demands to government. Yet, like governing institutions and organisations, they too have to prioritise issues and decide what issue agenda to advance. But what do we know about how they settle on issues they seek to advance onto the policy-making agenda of government and related institutions?

The agenda of any institution – be it the media, parliament, judiciary, or broader public – is simply the list of things subject to discussion and perhaps even acted upon. Agenda setting is thus the *process* through which such institutions go about sifting and sorting which issues will make it onto their agenda and thus gain attention. Organisations like parties or interest groups also have agendas and thus engage in processes of agenda setting. But what considerations shape this process within groups?

In a recent contribution, Halpin *et al.* (2018) set out the drivers that shape the selection of an issue to be subject to advocacy by a given interest group. They identify five distinct drivers that shape group decisions to lobby: internal responsiveness, policy capacities, niche dynamics, political opportunity structure, and issue salience. These are worth reviewing in turn (and are summarised in Table 18.3).

First, the obvious reason that might lead a group to pursue one set of issues over another is pressure from members: that is, *internal responsiveness*. After all, groups are by definition voluntary organisations that exist predominantly to pursue the interests of members (Jordan *et al.* 2004). Indeed, the basic premise for group formation in pluralist theory is the pursuit of a set of objective interests (Truman 1951). It follows that these interests expressed by members would direct group effort. Such a proposition is no doubt the resting assumption of much of early group theory and associated normative accounts of groups in representative democracies. In practice, the precise nature of whom group leaders should be responsive to is varied. For instance, many groups are financed by large donors, philanthropic foundations, or institutional contributions (e.g. government), which may well shape decisions over which issues to prioritise (see Walker 1991). More broadly, groups might have an organisational mission which informs what issues are 'important' or 'talismanic', and as such need to be pursued (see discussion by Minkoff and Powell 2006).

Second, *group capacity* matters. By policy capacities we mean the skill set and range of potential policy actions available to a group at a point in time (Daugbjerg *et al. 2018*; Wu *et al.* 2015). It is reasonable to expect that groups will take on issues where and when they have the skills and expertise to make a credible contribution. Most groups could be expected to have in-house staff who can operate well in their 'core' policy niche, yet they may struggle to offer such input in more peripheral areas. Of course, like all institutions and organisations, groups face clear limits of time and financial/human resources which shape the carrying capacity of their agendas (if not the specific issues they take on or avoid). Halpin and Binderkrantz (2011) show, based on survey data, that breadth of engagement varies; some stick to narrow issue agendas – in relation to topic/domain – and others span many. This variation is in part explicable owing to variation in group type and resources. Simply, if groups do not have sufficient money and staff, their scope for working on issues is limited (or else, the depth of their engagement in an issue portfolio will be more superficial).

Third, we would expect groups to seek out *policy niches* where they have a competitive advantage. Aggregate-level analysis of organised interest systems in the UK, Europe, and the US demonstrates that there is substantial variation in the breadth of policy domains that groups engage in. There are those who keep to narrow and predictable policy niches and those that seek to encompass a broader terrain (Browne 1990; Halpin and Binderkrantz 2011; Heaney

Table 18.3 Drivers of issue prioritization

Drivers	Key question posed . . .
Member preferences	Does the issue align with member preferences?
Organisational capacity	Does the group possess the resources and skills to progress the issue?
Niche seeking	Is the issue one other groups are neglecting?
Political opportunity	Are political conditions favourable to advancing the issue?
Issue salience	Is this an issue that others – like government or public – are also attentive to?

Source: Adapted from Halpin *et al.* (2018)

2004). There is a well-established literature which suggests that groups will – all things being equal – seek out policy terrain on which they can specialise (Gray and Lowery 2000). It follows that we would expect to see a group prioritise issues where it fits into an existing policy niche that the group views as its 'own' and where it reduces conflict with similar groups over either policy access or for potential membership resources.

It has been a strong expectation that as the overall size of organised interest systems in liberal democracies grow, it would lead to the fragmentation of the system. Yet, contrary to expectations of growing fragmentation and hollow cores (Heinz *et al.* 1993), work has also shown that as organised interest systems grow in size, there is little discernible evidence of more specialisation or niche building – there is a steady state of policy core and peripheral actors (Halpin and Thomas 2012). Irrespective of growth in the organised interest system, a core of generalist groups will always develop.

Fourth, we expect *political opportunity structure* to matter. The public policy literature has extensively highlighted how windows of opportunity may open, offering specific sets of interests that are ideal junctures for achieving their policy goals (Kingdon 1984). Where the policy environment is positive, groups are expected to prioritise the issue, and when they sour they are expected to hold it in abeyance. Opportunity structures might often be shaped by which party is in government, but the concept is multifaceted. For instance, groups are shown to be more likely to mobilise where the likelihood of victory is high (Baumgartner *et al.* 2009) and when they perceive government to be an ally. Of course, groups may also mobilise where conditions are not optimal, but others have started to pay attention to an issue that matters to them, and they need to 'counteract' or block initiatives (Austen-Smith and Wright 1994, 1996). Finally, groups might engage in 'negative lobbying', which is alerting government or policy makers to the potential costs of taking a certain course of action (McKay 2012).

Finally the *salience of the issue* is relevant. The issues that groups prioritise are likely to be shaped by what other institutions are focusing on and paying attention to. Research has established at the aggregate level that as government shifts its attention from one issue area to another, groups follow (Leech *et al.* 2005; Baumgartner *et al.* 2011). This also seems to hold for media attention (Danelian and Page 1994; Kollman 1998; Binderkrantz *et al.* 2017) and public opinion (Rasmussen *et al.* 2014). This may also work if we think about policy failures or focusing events that disturb equilibriums and reshuffle public priorities (Birkland 1998; Cobb and Elder 1983; Kingdon 1984). Such events might be expected to lead groups to reconsider whether to move on one issue versus another.

The survey work demonstrated that each of these five factors was in fact recognised as simultaneously important by groups. However, the more internally focused factors – like responsiveness to members and group capacity – were somewhat more strongly rated as important compared to the more external environmental factors.

Bringing it all together: the 'fit' of group agenda-setting styles with prevailing policy styles?

How can we engage our initial review of agenda-setting policy instruments and policy styles pursued by government and policy makers with this latter investigation into the agenda-setting styles of groups?

As Howlett and Tosun (2018) explain, one of the limits of the policy styles approach is linking it to the normative pursuit of a more anticipatory policy-making style. They remark, "while a government may wish to develop an anticipatory policy style, it may not be equipped to do so – or will only partially achieve this goal if it lacks the capacity pre-requisites required of such

a style" (Howlett and Tosun 2018, p. 392). A key element of this capacity derives from that of the organised interest system it works with (Daugbjerg *et al.* 2018). Our work strives to develop a systematic understanding of this capacity through conceptualising an interest group agenda-setting style. In this regard, empirical work demonstrates that there is substantial variation with respect to the orientation groups take to agenda setting (see Halpin 2015; Halpin and Fraussen 2019). Some seek to lead the government agenda, others simply follow, but most juggle both instincts. Moreover, the agenda size of many groups is small, meaning that they can only attend to a small number of issues at any one time. The public policy literature has tended to see the larger broad and encompassing groups as more useful from a governance perspective, but only a small number of groups in fact invest in developing policy platforms and seeking to work on these with government. Many react to a moving governmental agenda, while others pursue one issue at a time and are thus not well prepared to pivot to new terrains. And, importantly, the agendas they pursue are not straightforward transmission belts for social grievances but rather subject to a vast array of internal prioritisation processes that filter, sift, and winnow the universe of all issues to those that are subject to concerted action.

Conclusion

Agenda setting is a vital element of the study of public policy. Since Schattschneider's observation that whoever 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 contribution we make are three-fold.

First, we develop a framework to describe and analyse interest group agenda-setting styles. After elaborating four dimensions through which it is possible to characterise group agenda-setting styles, we pull these together into a typology of two ideal types. This approach is one possible way in which to summarise the styles that groups adopt when agenda setting. As is reported, this broad approach has been applied to the Australian context to a limited degree, using quantitative survey responses. As such, there are certainly more nuanced options to be explored in terms of operationalising these styles – both within single systems and comparatively. Why do some policy sectors, or national systems, foster one or other group agenda-setting styles? Do groups develop or switch styles over their life-course? These questions are posed by the kind of framework we have offered here.

Second, we convey insights from the literature on interest groups that might inform our assumptions about the policy demands made on government: namely what guides group decisions to advocate on an issue, or not? The contribution here has been to clarify and elaborate drivers of *issue prioritisation*. In this way we can better organise the undoubted complexity and generate a better understanding of what broad types of considerations drive issue prioritisation. Earlier we undertook a comprehensive review of the interest group literature and identified five broad themes. The outcome of this process provides the field with a useful palette of theoretically informed expectations against which to assess empirical findings and construct future research projects on the question of issue prioritisation, or the policy agendas of interest groups more generally. Of course, not all nuances within the literature can be captured in a list of items such as ours. In that regard, future work might better seek to capture how prioritisation is shaped by potential high costs versus potential high gains (Godwin *et al.* 2008).

Certainly trade-offs between these drivers on specific issues is one way to move forward. It is also important to be mindful that prioritisation might be motivated by organisational maintenance issues that may (or may not) coincide with imperatives of policy influence (Lowery 2007). We can only capture these maintenance issues in an indirect manner in the current setup, where we presume that groups are looking for strategies to pursue issue-based policy preferences.

Finally, we attempt to tie this all together by positing that certain agenda-setting styles have a better 'fit' with certain policy styles. Specifically, we argue that 'orthodox' agenda styles fit best with anticipatory/consensus policy styles, while 'limited' agenda styles fit best in an environment dominated by a reactive/impositional policy style.

Note

1 We wish to acknowledge that this chapter draws heavily from work co-authored with close colleagues Herschel Thomas (University of West Virginia) and Anthony Nownes (University of Tennessee).

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