

Bjorn Erik Rasch and George Tsebelis (eds.): The role of governments in legislative agenda setting

London: Routledge, 2011. x + 282 pages. USD 125.00 (cloth)

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Accepted: 30 October 2011 / Published online: 22 November 2011
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As the public choice revolution matured and a new analysis of legislatures commenced, investigation into these bodies increased dramatically, and in many directions. Theories of rent-seeking, regulation, logrolling, and congressional dominance emerged, and were but a few of the outcomes of applying a rational choice framework to the public sector.

Agenda setting certainly belongs on this list as well. Given the cyclical nature of voting systems (Arrow 1963 and McKelvey 1976) along with voting systems in general necessarily being susceptible to strategy (Gibbard 1973 and Satterthwaite 1975), it is only natural to suspect that the self-interested agenda setter(s) manipulate the voting process so as to put himself in a better position.

Rasch and Tsebelis, however, take us down the path of exactly how nuanced the agenda setting phenomenon turns out to be in practice. The editors identify three important factors. First, institutional features certainly play a large role. To what extent do constitutional or parliamentary rules influence the ability of other branches of government to constrain the legislature's activity? While it could be argued that the nature of agenda setting within a legislature may be fairly uniform (though nonetheless subject to legislature-specific rules), the outcomes from said agenda setting can vary widely depending on the ability of the remainder of the government to temper legislative outcomes. If we are interested in the ultimate political and economic outcomes of agenda setting, this factor cannot be overlooked.

The second factor is partisan in nature. Clearly, in a legislature where a simple majority is required for decision making and a cohesive majority in fact exists, minorities, to a certain extent, have their hands tied. However, the scenario changes markedly when minority governments face non-cohesive majorities. Indeed, agenda setting differs across these two broad scenarios. The final factor is position. Positional influences come from the location and strength of potential veto holders, as well as the position on the political spectrum of the agenda setter(s).

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The volume then endeavors to shed an empirical light on the nature of agenda setting—a light that should be well received, especially concerning legislatures outside of the United States and Britain. To this end, Rasch and Tsebelis collected fourteen country-specific analyses that look to answer empirically a handful of broad theoretical hypotheses concerning the nature of agenda setting, such as the relationship between amendments to bills and agenda setting rules and the influence of positional constraints in light of agenda setting power. The country-specific chapters provide the rich detail on the unique circumstances required for an appropriate in-depth investigation; they all include parliamentary governments and while the majority of the studies focus on Western Europe, chapters on Hungary, Greece, Russia, and Japan expand the analysis in a fruitful direction.

While the book's aim is to shed a unified light on the institutional features of agenda setting, that goal is not the only one achieved. Indeed, the greatest strength of this volume may be the importance of understanding local, country-specific circumstances when performing a cross-country meta-analysis.

Russia provides a perfect example of this dynamic, as highlighted by the authors of this particular case study, Iulia Shevchenko and Grigorii V. Golosov. The executive branch achieves effective agenda control by wielding substantial power over the legislative branch (the Duma) in every one of the three areas described above—institutional, partisan and positional. But the story does not—indeed, cannot—end there. The Duma, while admittedly secondary in determining policy outcomes to the powerful Russian executive, nonetheless finds itself in a more favorable position in lawmaking and the budgetary process. But even taking the makeup of Russian politics at face value today must be done with a grain of salt; roughly twenty years old in its current incarnation, the Russian government is still in its formative stages—even something as fundamental as the Duma's rules of procedure (“Reglament”) have been amended numerous times since first passed in 1994. Insofar that the Russian agenda control experience can be added to the tapestry of world agenda control outcomes, so too must the unique history of Russia be considered alongside the observed political outcomes in order to properly assess the scenario. And this history matters—in black-and-white terms, both Russia and the United Kingdom share an executive branch utilizing institutional advantages to place themselves in a powerful position of agenda control. An argument concerning the similarities in British and Russian political outcomes, though, cannot go so far as to paint London as Moscow. Further, Germany's executive achieves a similar strength of control, but due to partisan advantages, not institutional ones—in fact, the Bundestag has a distinct institutional advantage but cannot translate it into agenda control. History and circumstance matter across the board so as to construct a full picture.

The above realities nonetheless reveal an inevitable hurdle. A unified theory of agenda control would be a remarkable addition to the literature on political economy; perhaps Rasch and Tsebelis have made a significant step in that exact direction. Institutional arrangements appear to explain the majority of agenda control outcomes that we witness in parliamentary arrangements—at least amongst the fourteen case studies offered in this volume. Further, partisan and positional factors cannot be neglected, and, in certain circumstances, are necessary to explain the observed political outcomes. But the ability to translate these results into a single model by which to predict future legislative outcomes—say, of nascent South Sudan—simply does not exist. A full understanding of South Sudan would come not only with its institutional structure, the partisan nature of its government and the position of the crucial players, but also historical and cultural factors that helped frame how South Sudan got to where it is today.

That aside, Rasch and Tsebelis have ultimately assembled a valuable collection of fourteen examples of national-level agenda control, how they have emerged and what factors have help contribute to their current states.

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