DOI: 10.1590/1984-9230713

Agenda-setting policy: strategies and agenda denial mechanisms

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Abstract

This paper focuses on an aspect overlooked in literature on policy formulation: agenda denial, the political process by which issues are kept from policymakers' consideration and deliberation. The theoretical study of agenda-setting has been successful in pointing out the reasons why some issues achieve meaningful consideration by political institutions. However, there are several issues that fail to gain serious consideration for a variety of reasons, including specific tools and strategies that opponents employ in order to deny the access of an issue to the agenda. The power to keep an issue off the agenda is exercised through non- recognition or denial of the problem, discrediting the issue itself or the group directly related to it, the co-optation of leaders or the group's symbols, postponement and formal denial, among other mechanisms. This study aims to explore these actions, seeking to contribute to research on public policy and further study on setting governmental agendas.

Key words: Public policy, agenda-setting, agenda denial, policy formulation.

A construção da agenda governamental: estratégias e mecanismos de bloqueio

Resumo

Este artigo pretende examinar uma dinâmica pouco investigada nos estudos sobre formulação de políticas públicas: o bloqueio da agenda (agenda denial), processo pelo qual questões são mantidas fora da consideração e deliberação governamentais. A pesquisa em agenda-setting tem sido bem sucedida em apontar os motivos pelos quais algumas questões obtêm atenção do governo, passando a integrar sua agenda. Há, no entanto, diversas questões para as quais diferentes ferramentas e estratégias são empregadas de forma a bloquear seu acesso à agenda. O poder de manter uma questão fora da agenda é exercido por meio da negação de um problema, descrédito na própria questão ou no grupo diretamente relacionado a ela, ações de cooptação, adiamento, bloqueio formal, entre outros mecanismos. O presente estudo tem como objetivo explorar essas ações, buscando contribuir para as pesquisas em políticas públicas e para o aprofundamento das investigações sobre o processo de formação das agendas governamentais.

Palavras-chave: Políticas públicas, agenda governamental, formação da agenda.

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Introduction

Why are some issues considered by the government, possibly leading to the development of public policies, while others are ignored? Studies on agenda-setting deal directly with this question, i.e. the factors and mechanisms that cause some themes to be recognised by the government as important and requiring its contribution. The process of agenda-setting is thus a critical moment in the production of public policies, as it has great impact on its development and the results to be achieved. It is also a question of power, because it involves defining subjects that will be the focus of policymakers' attention, as well as affecting the choices that will be made later throughout the decision-making process.

Research on the process of agenda-setting has been successful in pointing out the reasons why some issues gain government attention and become part of the agenda. But there is another dimension of agenda studies receiving little investigation: agenda denial, the process by which issues are kept from government consideration and deliberation. Many issues are deliberately kept out of consideration by policy formulators, a process that involves the use of different tools and strategies in the interest of agenda denial. The power to keep an issue off the agenda can be manifested in mechanisms denying the problem ("there is no crisis!"). Further mechanisms may include discrediting the issue itself ("there are no elements proving a crisis; they are only rumours!") or directly to the group related to the issue ("groups who spread rumours about the crisis have bad intentions and use the issue to apply political pressure"). The set of resources used in the agenda denial process may include: co-optation actions, postponements, and formal denial, among other mechanisms. This paper aims to explore these actions. It will contribute to studies on public policies and for further research on the process of formulating governmental agendas.

The text is organised in three sections. Firstly, we present a brief discussion on the debates that came before the emergence of agenda-setting analyses. In the 1960s we see the development of political science studies on the expansion of conflict, and in the beginning of the 1970s, hitherto unexplored dimensions of power that directly influenced studies on governmental agenda-setting. Then we highlight some ways in which the latest literature developed around setting the governmental agenda. In the 1990s, studies in the field of public policy produced theoretical models capable of explaining a large part of the agenda-construction process. Less emphasis has been given to the process by which issues are kept systematically away from an agenda. In the third section, we seek to exploit this facet, highlighting key strategies and mechanisms keeping issues from the agenda presented in specialised literature. Finally, some final considerations are presented.

Conflict and power: the origin of agenda studies

In the field of political science, the first studies to consider agenda-setting as a fundamental part of the political process date back to the 1970s and initially develop as an offshoot of analyses that sought to reveal the limits of a pluralist approach developed in the 1950s and 1960s. Generally speaking, the pluralistic approach ignored the process by which certain issues arose in political debates, ignoring the emergence of issues in the decision-making process. Dahl (1957) takes up this discussion by confirming that one of the requirements for democracy comprised the absence of a dominant group in control of the alternatives under discussion in a democratic political system. In a later study (1996), he suggests that any question could pique the elites' attention.

For Schattschneider (1960), however, not all issues have access to the agenda. The author argues that conflict is the basis of political activity. Every conflict, when exploited by political organisations, can expand and become a political issue, while others tend to be suppressed by these same organisations. Expansion of the conflict develops through what the author termed "mobilization of bias". All conflict is initially

established between two groups: the first consists of a few individuals directly engaged in the conflict, and the second by a large number of spectators. The end result of all conflict, confirms Schattschneider, depends on how involved the audience is. Thus, those interested in keeping a conflict on the agenda will mobilise popular support, making the conflict, in the author's words, "contagious," seeking to make it increasingly politicised through mobilising and engaging those who were not initially involved. As the conflict expands, its nature, the actors involved, and the definitions of issues change. The notion that "politics is the socialisation of conflict"(Schattschneider 1960: p. 38) reflects the transformation of a "private" matter into a political alignment, by means of public involvement. In the author's words:

> "All forms of political organisation have a bias in favour of the exploitation of some kinds of conflict and the suppression of others because *organization is the mobilization of bias*. Some issues are organised into politics, while others are organised out "(Schattschneider 1960: p. 71)[1]

Through mobilisation, conflicts are socialised and become routine and/or institutionalised in the political system. Since many other conflicts also have the potential to go the same way, the author shows that political actors seek to take forward their conflicts in order to prevent others from mobilising attention and gaining public commitment. Moreover, the author understands that the conflict fundamentally establishes itself through defining alternative questions, problems and solutions. For the author, political systems fail to set all possible alternatives to any potential problems that emerge for consideration at any given time. There will always be a selection mechanism by which issues become prominent for the attention of those in authority to make decisions within the government. These individuals who make decisions are united around a conflict over defining alternatives, considered by Schattschneider (1960: p. 66) as the "supreme instrument of power." A small group of policymakers are directly involved in this conflict, while a larger group of individuals, often external to the government, makes up the audience. In the author's view, mobilising these individuals on the alternatives proposed by policymakers is essential for policy formulation. Schattschneider understands that those who set the terms of reference for a debate will gain the attention of the public and decision-makers, positioning themselves ahead of the others, "whoever decides what the game is about decides also who can get into the game" (Schattschneider 1960: p. 102). Schattschneider's study inaugurates the focus on constructing agendas, which starts to be considered a fundamental part of analyses on political process developed in the 1960s and 1970s.

Bachrach and Baratz (1962), for example, take the idea of Schattschneider's "mobilization of bias" to analyse processes in which conflicts are suppressed and issues are blocked from accessing the political system. For the authors, power would have "two faces": one, noticeable at the level of open conflict, which manifests itself in the decision-making process and behaviour; the other inconspicuous and directed to suppressing conflicts. For the authors:

> "Of course power is exercised when A participates in the making of decisions that affect B. But power is also exercised when A devotes his energies to creating or reinforcing social and political values and institutional practices that limit the scope of the political process to public consideration of only those issues which are comparatively innocuous to A. To the extent that A succeeds in doing this, B is prevented, for all practical purposes, from bringing to the fore any issues that might in their resolution be seriously detrimental do A's set of preferences." (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962: p. 948).

Criticism of the authors is directed to the concept of power presented by Dahl (1957: pp. 202-203), in which the author states that "A has power over B to the extent that it can get B to do something B would not otherwise do." Power, in this perspective would be relational, or involve a relationship between political actors (individuals, groups, governments and States, etc.). These actors have different preferences and those whose preferences predominate in a conflict situation would be precisely the actors who exert power in a political system. Study on political power should therefore focus on the decisions made by actors in search of implementing their preferences.

Bachrach and Baratz point out that the analysis of power proposed by Dahl is a partial view of the phenomenon, since it would be necessary to investigate not only the decisions taken by the actors but also those not taken, allowing an understanding of how the "mobilization of bias" operates to limit the spread of debate. The authors define "non-decision" as limiting the decision-making process to "safe" issues, by way of manipulation of community values and myths, and political institutions and procedures (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962). In another study, the authors define "non-decision" in the following way:

> "Non-decision-making is a means by which demands for change in the existing allocation of benefits and privileges in the community can be suffocated before they are voiced, or kept covert; or killed before they gain access to the relevant decision-making arena; or, failing all of these things, maimed or destroyed in the decision-implementing stage of the policy process"(Bachrach and Baratz, 1970: p. 45).

The "second aspect" of power, therefore, would be the ability to control the alternatives submitted for discussion, an aspect overlooked by Dahl and the pluralists, and essential for the understanding of political power in the authors' view[2]. Bachrach and Baratz do not position themselves against the notion that power is manifested in the decision-making process; the authors argue that power can also be seen in the "non-decision," that is, the creation of barriers to the emergence of conflicts.

Bachrach and Baratz influenced other authors to consider not only the government decision-making process, but also the "non-decisions" and control of access to the agenda, including Crenson (1971). The author argues that scholars, by concentrating their attention on observable actions and decisions, take the same point of view as the community they investigate, with the same blind spots and distortions. From this perspective, the analyses do not question why some subjects do not transform into issues. The "non-issues" were rarely faced as important political phenomena. The study conducted by the author, focusing on the issue of environmental pollution in US municipalities, sought to show that inaction is a fairly common way of exercising power.

Crenson analysed the "non-politics" of air pollution in two North American cities that produce steel in the state of Indiana (Gary and East Chicago). In Gary, the pollution levels were significant and there was no specific legislation on the matter. The pollution issue was not even discussed by public opinion or the government. On the other hand, in East Chicago, although pollution levels were lower, the issue was widely-debated and the government took concrete actions to address the problem. In the author's analysis, the difference in the ways the two cities addressed the issue of pollution could be explained by the agenda control exerted by interest groups linked to steel production. In Gary, a single company dominated steel production and, according to the author, its economic power was so decisive that the city feared the introduction of pollution-control measures could contribute to the company moving to another municipality, adversely affecting the local economy. However, in East Chicago, different companies worked at the same time, diluting the fear of confrontation and promoting the adoption of pollution-control measures. Through these case analyses, the author concludes that power is more than the ability to influence local policy decisions; it is also the ability to prevent some topics from being converted into major issues and, similarly, the ability to block the expansion of emerging issues. Moreover, the author shows that power need not be exercised effectively to provoke developments: the simple reputation attributed to an actor by the community may be sufficient enough to narrow the scope of choices made at the local level.

Another author who contributed to the discussion is Lukes (1974), who broadened the debate around how to study power from a theoretical and empirical point of view, highlighting a "third face" for investigation. The "first face" of power, as defined by Dahl (1957) focuses on observable conflict in the decision-making process, in which power involves political resources (votes, positions and influence) that will be used in the bargaining process. Lukes (1974) argues that this vision of power is one-dimensional because it highlights only behaviour observable in the decision-making process on debated issues in noticeable conflict situations, when in fact power is not only reflected in concrete decisions. Power also consists of the ability to limit the decision-making

process to non-controversial issues, in a less visible procedure. In the "second face" of power, the notion of "mobilization of bias", put forward by Schattschneider (1960) and developed by Bachrach and Baratz (1962) contributes to highlight that the exercise of power can also develop covertly through "non-decision" mechanisms or agenda control (and not necessarily only within the domain of the decision-making process). For Lukes (1974), this approach with respect to power, points to a two dimensional perspective that maintains certain one-dimensional characteristics for analysis, while adding new elements. The two-dimensional perspective is also criticised by the author for focusing its analysis on observable conflicts (whether they are open or covert) and not effectively distancing itself from the pluralist approach, in addition to taking power as an agenda denial in the decision-making process. For the author, power would be exercised in preventing the emergence of issues through manipulating perceptions and preferences that would ensure acceptance of the status quo, either because the current situation seems to be the only alternative, because it is seen as natural and immutable, or because it generates benefits. The author then proposes a "third face", or three-dimensional approach of power.

To Lukes, the "third face" of power involves both the decision-making process and control over the agenda: issues and "non-issues"; the real and subjective interests at stake; the observable (open or covert) and latent conflicts. The latent conflict, a fundamental ingredient of Lukes' three-dimensional point of view, is related to exercising power to shape preferences, in order to prevent the emergence of conflict (open or covert). According to the author, latent conflict, "consists of a contradiction between the interests of those exercising power and the real interests of those they exclude "(LUKES 1974: p. 28). The conflict is latent in the sense that tension is established, based on the preferential difference between those that exercise power and those submitted to power, if they are aware or could express their own interests. Thus, the third dimension, that can be summarised into the idea of "power by way of domination", is the author's contribution to a "radical vision of power" exercised not only in the first two dimensions (the decision-making process and agenda construction) but at a much less visible level.[3]

Critics noted Lukes' focus on this less visible level of power as a factor that would compromise the three dimensional approach, since this focus brings serious restrictions to empirical analysis. When relating to and developing Lukes' three faces the power, Gaventa (1980), in his study on poverty in the central Appalachian region, contributes with the proposal of analytical tools to enable analysis of "latent conflict". In his analysis, Gaventa seeks to understand the relationship between power and political participation, by analysing the configuration of power exercised by a coal company and other local economic political forces over a group of miners and their families, subjected to a situation of oppression. The author tries to understand why, in a social situation of extreme inequality, a group that is at a distinct disadvantage remains quiescent, not even trying to exercise influence – albeit limited – to reverse the situation. The author shows that the conventional explanations for demobilisation consider poverty or lack of education as factors that tend to preserve the status quo and limit political participation. Such explanations were deemed insufficient by the author, who highlights the three dimensions of power as mechanisms that structure relationships between miners and the company; and lead to alienation and apathy in the long term. This domination is reproduced on account of a combination of factors involving cultural barriers, corruption, intimidation and fear by the group of being identified as disloyal to the company and the surrounding community. Highlighting the importance of the region's historical and social context in which the three dimensions of power operate, Gaventa shows that from these, combined, it is possible that one can analyse a situation in which groups of systematically oppressed people do not oppose the ruling elite – and are often allied with their oppressors. Thus, for the author, the three dimensions are integrated and complementary: "The total impact of a power relationship is more than the sum of its parts. Power serves to create power. Powerless serves to reinforce powerless. Power relationships, once established, are self-sustaining (Gaventa, 1980: p. 256)[4].

The authors and concepts herein presented are important for our study since they help us to understand the access policy to the governmental agenda and how the systematic denial of some issues takes place. Although they have roots in the studies discussed in this section, the most recent analyses on agenda-setting distance themselves from discussions on the theories of power. In the next section we will see how these analyses deal with the rise and fall of issues on the governmental agenda.

Studies on the public policy agenda

Although the discussion of power has developed around the debate between elitists and pluralists, as we saw briefly in the previous section, this debate has directly contributed to the initial development of studies directed towards understanding the governmental agenda.

The analyses of Roger Cobb and Charles Elder on agenda-setting, developed in the early 1970s, highlight the fundamental importance of pre-decision-making processes to understand the choices and alternatives to be considered by decision-makers, especially incorporating Schattschneider and Bachrach and Baratz's studies. For these authors, the research on agenda-construction consists of an alternative to discussions on classical democratic theory (and the issues of influence, equality, freedom, participation) and modern democratic theory (and discussions on stability of the democratic system, the decision-making process and characteristics of the elites, etc.) (COBB and ELDER, 1971). The limitations of the classical perspective and the efforts made by political scientists to reconcile theory and practice resulted in the democratic elitism approach that, for the authors, fails to analyse political participation. Cobb and Elder argued that the essence of the political conflict lies in the scope for participation: for any issue, there will always be more disinterested people than those willing to be directly involved. Returning to Schattschneider's ideas, the authors argue that individuals or groups in a political dispute seek to broaden the scope of the conflict, attracting other previously uninterested groups. Cobb and Elder develop this line of argument, analysing in detail the mechanisms by which groups seek to expand the conflict, extending the sphere of political participation. According to the authors, by focusing on the notion of the agenda it would be possible to develop a theoretical perspective that could explain how groups articulate their demands and turn them into issues that acquire visibility and require government action, the process fundamental to democracy. Thus, for the authors:

> "We are raising the basic question of where public-policy issues come from. We are concerned with how issues are created and why some controversies or incipient issues come to command the attention and concern of decision-makers, while others fail. In other words, we are asking what determines the agenda for political controversy within a community. How is an agenda built (i.e., how is an issue Placed on it) and who participates in the process of building it?" (COBB and ELDER, 1971: p. 905).

Setting off from this questioning on who participates and how the agenda is built, the authors conducted the first systematic studies on setting the governmental agenda in the field of political science, based on a distinction between a systemic and institutional agenda (COBB and ELDER, 1972)[5]. For the authors, the systemic agenda comprises the set of issues that receive society's attention and are seen as matters under government authorities' responsibility. The issues manifest themselves on the systemic agenda when they arouse the attention of public opinion or when a considerable part of the public demands some kind of concrete action with respect to a particular concern. Some of these issues on the systemic agenda will be the focus of the government's attention and move on to the second type of agenda identified by the authors: the governmental agenda (institutional or formal). The government agenda comprises the issues considered by decision-makers, whether at local, state or federal level.

For the authors, these issues essentially involve conflict: "An issue is a conflict between two or more identifiable groups over procedural or substantive matters relating to the distributions of positions or resources "(COBB and ELDER, 1972: p. 82). Based on the notion of "mobilizing opinion" (Schattschneider), the authors argue that the issues typically emerge in small groups, and they are concerned with promoting (or preventing) expansion of the issue. During the expansion process, the issue can be redefined, as other groups become involved. In this process, many advocates of an issue may no longer support it, because they think the redefinition somehow brings ideas very distant from the original understanding of the problem. Additionally, while groups and individuals opposed to an issue seek to limits its expansion process, proponents seek to involve other groups, attempting to defeat the apathy and inertia of those who were previously demobilised (COBB, ROSS and ROSS, 1976).

Transition of issues on the systemic agenda to the governmental agenda can be achieved in three different ways (COBB, ROSS and ROSS, 1976). The first (outside initiative model) involves processes in which issues emerge in groups outside of the government and are expanded to first reach the systemic agenda, and then the governmental agenda. In this case, the demands are articulated in general terms, to later be translated into more specific demands, in the pursuit of establishing alliances between different groups on common questions, placing the debate on the systemic agenda. The groups then seek policymakers' attention, either through extending the issue to other social groups or connecting it to other existing ones. This expansion is essential for the success of an issue on the governmental agenda but, on the other hand, it is also a crucial moment for the proposing group, as the more groups that enter into the conflict, the greater the chance of the initial group losing control over the issue.

The second form of connection between the systemic and governmental agendas analysed by the authors (mobilisation model) locates the origin of an issue within government bureaucracy. An example of this would be launching a new programme for a public policy on health care or education, for example, and does not originate from incorporating a demand publicly acknowledged by the government. In this case, expansion of the issue is aimed at obtaining support from the public: once the issue is placed on the governmental agenda, the bureaucracy begins to mobilise a systemic agenda, in search of society's support and acceptance. Government leaders often seek to mobilise popular support for their decisions, in order to increase the chances of success in the implementation phase (COBB, ROSS and ROSS, 1976).

The third relationship between systemic and governmental agendas identified by Cobb, Ross and Ross (1976) (the inside initiation model) also originates within the government but, unlike the previous model, does not follow on to the systemic agenda. In this case, issues emerge in government agencies or influential groups, with access to decision-makers, without any effort by the proponents to expand the issue with the public. Whether for technical or political issues (e.g. programmes related to economics or the military), public participation is excluded and the proponents try to prevent the issue from reaching the systemic agenda.

To the authors, each of these agenda-setting models is related to the specific characteristics of the political system in which agenda construction is developed. In liberal democracies, the first form of articulation (from the systemic to governmental agenda) would be more likely, whereas the second (from the government to systemic agenda) would be typical of hierarchical societies where leaders have large amounts of power. Authoritarian-bureaucratic regimes with a high concentration of wealth and status tend to build their agendas following this third explanation.

Subsequent to Cobb and Elder's initial studies, different authors have continued research on the agenda-setting process. More recently, these analyses have moved away from concepts such as that of "non-decision" conflict and power, and focused on the entry and exit mechanisms for issues on the governmental agenda.

John Kingdon (2003) advances the agenda concept, to propose a differentiation between the concept of the governmental agenda, as defined originally by Cobb and

Elder (1972) and the notion of a decision agenda. For Kingdon, an issue becomes part of the governmental agenda when it attracts policymakers' attention and interests. However, given the complexity and the volume of issues presented to decision-makers, only some will be seriously considered within the governmental agenda at any given moment. These issues make up the decision agenda: a subset of the governmental agenda, which considers issues ready for decision-making by policy formulators, or are about to become public policy. For the author, "we should also distinguish between the *governmental* agenda, the list of subjects that are getting attention, and the *decision* agenda, the list of subjects within governmental agenda that are up for an active decision" (KINGDON, 2003: p. 04)[6]. According to the author, this differentiation is necessary because both agendas are affected by different processes. The author argues that changes to the decision agenda are the result of a combination of three factors: the way a problem is perceived (problem stream), the set of available alternatives (policy stream) and changes in political dynamics and public opinion (political stream). Changes to the governmental agenda require only two of the three aforementioned factors: one clearly perceived problem and a favourable political situation (problem and political streams). Thus, a public policy only begins if an issue reaches the decision-making agenda, having passed through the governmental agenda.

The Kingdon analysis (2003) on agenda-construction also moves away from Cobb and Elder's (1972) original proposition, explaining policy production as a relatively ordered process, in which the time to define the agenda follows the decision-making process and then implementation. The agenda-setting model developed by Kingdon (2003) breaks with the logic of policy production stages, proposing a more fluid explanatory model, organised around flows.

For Kingdon, each of the three streams is developed relatively independent of the others. Issues recognised as problems are in the first stream and therefore come to the government's attention. Some mechanisms, such as systematically produced indicators (monitoring government programmes and performance reports) and especially major events (disasters, catastrophes and major accidents), contribute to attracting attention on an issue. However, these mechanisms do not automatically transform the issues into problems. The interpretation of these events and their understanding, as problems requiring government action, is what determines the success of an issue on the agenda. In the second stream are ideas related to solutions and alternatives, developed by experts (researchers, congressional aides, academics, civil servants and analysts belonging to interest groups, etc.). These alternatives are not necessarily related to understanding specific problems, they circulate through communities of experts and while some are discarded, others survive and are considered by government actors. Finally, the third stream comprises the dimension of public opinion (general understanding of certain issues), organised political forces (positioning of interest groups in relation to a question, for example) and the government itself (moving people in strategic positions within the governmental structure, management changes and in the composition of Congress, among other factors).

In certain circumstances, these three streams converge, creating a possibility for change on the agenda. With these opportunities (policy window), a problem is recognised, a solution is available and political conditions make it a propitious time for change, allowing integration of the three streams and enabling issues to rise up the agenda. When these "windows of political opportunity" open up, political entrepreneurs come on to the scene. These are individuals willing to invest in an idea and may be part of the government (in the Executive Authority, occupying high positions or in bureaucratic roles; in Congress, as congressmen or aides), or otherwise (taking part in interest groups, the academic community or the media, for example). These individuals recognise the opportunity, its transient nature, and act to "tie up" the three streams, facilitating access of an issue to the agenda.

Analysing different empirical cases, based on the Kingdon model, (ZAHARIADIS, 2003 and 2014) two important adjustments have been put forward to the initial proposals. The first adjustment concerns entrepreneurs' role in the model. For Kingdon, all of the actors involved in policy production have problematic preferences. Zahariadis

shows that, in fact, one particular actor has clear and consistent objectives: the entrepreneurs (ZAHARIADIS, 2003). The author highlights that the Kingdon model understands 'ambiguity' as a central element of the policy production process or, that is, it involves fluid participation, problematic preferences and uncertain technology[7]. Allowing a different understanding of the issue, the ambiguity may be strategically manipulated to serve different purposes. This is one of the entrepreneur's most important roles: managing ambiguity, trying to make sense and create meanings on the issues for other actors who have problematic preferences. Therefore, considering that in the Kingdon model access of an issue to the agenda is related to the three flows described above, Zahariadis' analyses contribute to highlighting the entrepreneur's fundamental role as the only actor who has clear preferences and whose action is geared towards manipulating other players, especially the decision-makers.

The second adjustment proposed by Zahariadis is related to opportunities for change. To Kingdon, opportunities for change are processed independently from all other elements of the political system. Applying Kingdon's model in parliamentary democracies, Zahariadis shows that there is a possibility to create deliberate opportunities for change, as in the cases of dissolution of parliament and calling elections. In this case, the "windows of opportunity" may be manipulated to create more favourable environments for some actors: if entrepreneurs can change the context, this can increase their chances of success – or block the chances of others (ZAHARIADIS, 2003).

Besides these two adjustments to the model, Zahariadis (2003, 2014) proposes some important amplifications of the original Kingdon model. The first points to the possibility of using the model to understand the more general process of policymaking. In part, this means breaking with the perspective of the policy cycle, already widely criticised by theorists in the field of public policies[8]. On the other hand, this also points towards possibilities of applying the model to research specific moments, such as implementation, which contributes to revealing the connections between politics (formulation) and administration (implementation) (ZAHARIADIS, 2014, p. 45). Another important application of the model is related to the way Kingdon reconciles two factors in the political world: ideas and interests. The model does not eliminate the idea of self-interest and, at the same time, highlights the role of ideas in developing problems and solutions (ZAHARIADIS, 2003, 2014). An extension of the model for foreign policy issues is also highlighted by the author as a possibility, allowing an analysis of the interactions between domestic actors on issues arising in the external environment (ZAHARIADIS, 2003).

An alternative explanation for the agenda-setting process was developed by Baumgartner and Jones (1993), who drew up the "Punctuated Equilibrium Model." The authors understand that, unlike Cobb and Elder's (1972) observations, who highlight the difficulty that new issues have of being added to an agenda and break away from the status quo, given the conservative nature of the political system there are periods of stability on the agenda, marked by incremental logic but also times which favour rapid and unexpected changes. For the authors, the change in agenda occurs when the perception of a policy is changed, mobilising actors who were previously removed from the decision-making process. The authors use the idea of "policy monopoly" to designate a set of understandings about a specific issue that becomes dominant and from which actors gain the ability to control the interpretation of a problem and the way it is perceived and discussed. Monopolies are reinforced by institutional arrangements that keep the decision-making process limited to a small group of actors, restricting access by others. These monopolies are responsible for maintaining stability in the production of public policies and restricting new issues on the governmental agenda.

While a shared vision of symbols, problems, solutions and causal relationships prevail for a particular policy – i.e. while a policy image is dominant, restricting access to the decision-making process of those actors who do not agree with this image. There is, then, a prevalence of slow, gradual and incremental changes, configuring a balance in the production of public policy. However, at times, new players gain access to monopolies, creating instability and opportunity for change on the agenda.

According to the authors, this takes place because of changes in the way a question is understood, or through changes in policy image. Changes in perception of the issues, events that attract the government's attention and alterations in public opinion, for example, can contribute to altering a policy's image, allowing access of different groups to the decision-making process and thus favouring access of this issue to the governmental agenda. When an issue rises up to the agenda, the monopoly ceases to exist and the system becomes prone to change, since the attention of government leaders and the public can lead to the introduction of new ideas and new actors. New ideas and institutions tend to remain over time (policy legacy), creating a new state of balance in the political system that, after a period, tends to return to this stability. Thus, in the model proposed by the authors, stability results from two key elements: the predominance of an image and creating institutional arrangements able to support it, limiting access from other groups. On the other hand, a change in public policies is the result of unsuccessful mobilisation strategies, restraint or even blocking other groups, leading to destruction of the monopoly and, consequently, the promotion of new images.

After this initial effort of theorising about the stability process and policy change, explained by the dynamics of the agenda, the authors performed a series of studies to test the punctuated equilibrium model, investigating telecommunications policies, immigration, health, science and technology, security and others (BAUMGARTNER and JONES, 2002). These studies led authors to see a direct relationship between agenda-setting processes and the allocation of government attention. Considering the multiplicity of issues presented to policymakers on a daily basis and the complexity of the problems, attention – a resource considered by the authors as scarce – becomes crucial to explain how governments prioritise certain problems (JONES and BAUMGARTNER, 2005). The authors focus on the dynamics of processing information in the context of producing public policies, seeking to understand how allocating attention is processed in government institutions. They demonstrate that the dynamics of changing agendas is related to government attention and setting priorities. More recently, the authors highlighted the importance of information in the problem definition process, furthering studies on the relationship between processing information in individual and collective dimensions (BAUMGARTNER and JONES, 2015).

Designed to explain stability and changes in agendas in the US context, the punctuated equilibrium model has been applied in different national contexts (BAUMGARTNER, JONES and MORTENSEN, 2014). Seeking to understand how focusing the government's attention by governments produces policy changes, researchers were able to demonstrate the model's success to explain agenda changes in different national contexts. Moreover, these studies allowed not only the opportunity to test the punctuation hypothesis but also to carry out comparative analyses between agenda changes in different countries, such as Canada, Belgium, Denmark, England, Germany, France, the Netherlands, and the United States (BAUMGARTNER, GREEN-PEDERSEN and JONES, 2006; JOHN, 2006).

Thus, literature on agenda-setting has developed in political science since the 1970s, under strong influence of the debate related to conflict and power issues. More recently, studies have developed in the area of public policies and, while retaining many of the original concerns, they expand these analyses, incorporating important new concepts and approaches to understand agenda-setting. However, these studies do not focus on one important dimension in the agenda-setting process: access-denial to issues on the agenda, the topic that we will develop in the next section.

Agenda denial strategies and mechanisms

As we have seen, studies on agenda-setting investigate how an issue turns into a problem that captures the decision-makers' attention. One facet little analysed by literature, however, is the process by which issues fail to reach the governmental agenda. Far from being an automatic process, the success or failure of an issue on

the agenda involves a series of factors: the connection between problems, solutions and the political context, as highlighted by Kingdon (2003), or the change in policy image and mobilising new actors in the process, as put forward by Baumgartner and Jones (1993), or even the three mechanisms analysed by Cobb and Elder (1972). In this section, we seek to explore the main explanations for issues being systematically absent from the governmental agenda in agenda-setting literature.

Cobb and Ross' (1997) study on agenda denial is one of the few reflections developed on the subject. The authors define "agenda denial" as "the political process by which issues that one would expect to get meaningful consideration from the political institutions in a society fail to get taken seriously "(COBB and ROSS, 1997: xi). For the authors, conflict surrounding the agenda develops on two different levels. Firstly, the conflict is processed around consideration or otherwise of the issued placed for decision-makers by the government. Kingdon's (2003: p. 04) differentiation between the governmental agenda (a set issues that attract attention) and decision agenda (a set of issues ready for a decision) only partially explains this type of conflict, as not all of the issues that reach the governmental agenda are forwarded on to the decision-making agenda[9]. The second conflict emerges in the competition to interpret the issues and worldviews underlying these interpretations or, in other words, what problems will become the subject of government action. This is essentially a symbolic process in which the conflicting actors' material interests are related to defining the issues: "in all agenda conflicts, we suggest, the material interests are invariably linked to symbolic definition, as each side seeks to widen support" (COBB and ROSS, 1997: p. 14). The relationship between interests and symbolic definition is highlighted both in Kingdon's and Baumgartner and Jones' model. In the latter, the concept of policy image composed both by empirical data and emotional appeals, precisely reflects the relationship between interests and how a policy is discussed.

For Cobb and Ross (1997), it is possible to observe two opposing sides in any of these types of conflicts: the proponents, seeking to draw attention to an issue and gain access to the governmental agenda for several reasons, and opponents who seek to restrict an issue from accessing the agenda. To explain how issues emerge, more recent studies on agenda-setting focus their analysis on the proponents, while the opponents' activities receive little investigation. Thus, to understand agenda denial, the authors transfer the analysis to the role of the opponents who are identified in two groups by the authors.

The first group of opponents or, in other words, actors engaged in suppressing new issues on the agenda, is within the government itself. For Cobb and Ross (1997), the individuals formally responsible for decision-making, such as bureaucrats belonging to the executive authority, individuals in commissioned positions, politicians and members of the legislative and judicial branches are the main opponents in the confrontational agenda-setting process. For the authors, these individuals do not always act as opponents, since they can also appear as proponents of an issue, seeking space on the agenda. Kingdon points to the "visible participants" – those put forward by Cobb and Ross – as the actors who have a higher ability to take an issue to the governmental agenda (but not necessarily to the decision-making agenda). However, for Cobb and Ross, the most common position for these individuals is avoiding risk and opposing change processes for a number of reasons, including ideology and information, among others. In the Kingdon model, such individuals may support an issue in favourable periods of the political cycle, such as times when people in key positions are changing (political stream). Following this period, change on the governmental agenda is less likely. Baumgartner and Jones show that changes on the agenda are processed in short periods, and are followed by sub-system policy, characterised by stability, in which the policy monopoly is closed to new issues, blocking the access of new groups and ideas onto the agenda.

The second group of potential opponents to agenda-change are actors negatively affected by altering an issue's status. In situations where agenda-change represents a benefit for a particular group, due to losses imposed on another group, the conflict between proponents and opponents is established in a relatively open way. The dispute

over control of an issue is one of the central features of opposition between groups. In some pubic policies, some groups are seen to have legitimacy over an issue and it becomes difficult for an opponent to defend, or present different views on it.

Therefore, the dispute over agenda-setting involves proponents whose performance is analysed by agenda-setting theories, and opponents, whose behaviour Cobb and Ross (1997) try to explain. For this, they set off from the principle that opponents will seek to achieve their objectives at the lowest possible cost. When they face limitations in their strategies to block access of an issue to the agenda, they increasingly seek alternatives that involve higher costs. We will now analyse the different strategies adopted by opponents, according to the approach developed by the authors.

The first strategy: avoidance

To Cobb and Ross (1997), low-cost strategies are characterised as involving the lowest possible amount of financial resources, people and time. In these denial strategies, opponents avoid direct confrontation with the proponents. One typically characteristic tactic is to ignore a problem that exists. Ignoring a problem means that an issue has little chance of gaining access to the agenda because no government action is required. Ignoring a problem, however, is not always a viable tactic: another low-cost alternative is admitting the existence of an issue but then blocking it, preventing conditions from being defined as problems, in Kingdon's terms. This means that opponents seek to deny that a situation presents a problem. One clear example is the treatment cities often receive when there are major floods: public officials cannot simply ignore the issue with the media and public opinion. In this case, the issue is dealt with as an isolated incident, seeking to avoid any possibility of standardisation: an unexpected inundation of rain and the confluence of different factors on one exceptional occasion, etc. This is precisely the action, unlike those which, in the Kingdon model, seek to use the indicators to show a pattern of events and thus attract the decision-makers' attention. Opponents may also seek to show that the issue is exaggerated or misunderstood. A variation of this strategy is to assign responsibility for the event to "natural causes" outside the reach of human action, establishing a causal relationship between, for example, a problem and the "forces of nature". A third tactic does not involve ignoring the issue or limiting its effects, but rather in disqualifying the group that puts the problem forward. In this case, the issue is disassociated from the group that defends it and the alternative to agenda denial comprises questioning the legitimacy of the applicant group and the issue it defends.

The second strategy: attack and dissipating conflict

Another group of strategies involves direct attack on the issue and/or applicant group. The choice between opposing the issue or group (or both) fundamentally depends on this group's characteristics. If the group proposing change is recognised as being legitimate, it is respected and has credibility in the community, denial is not usually directed towards the group and tends to be restricted to the issue proposed. On the other hand, there are strategies that avoid attack and do not seek to block the issue or the applicant group (placation strategy). In this case, opponents seek to demonstrate concern over the issue on a symbolic level and, instead of attacking the group or issue, they provide a visible but not necessarily significant solution, blocking the proponents' action and dissipating the conflict. Both strategies (attack and placation) involve a higher volume of resources and establish a broader level of conflict than in the previously analysed strategies. If, within this avoidance alternative, the opponents do not directly confront the proponents, strategies to attack communication between the two groups are clearly established, with the opponents having the initial goal of negatively characterising the applicant group or the issue it has raised.

Blocking the issue may initially take the form analysed in the previous topic, preventing its recognition as a problem. Questioning the premises on which the proponents seek to construct the problem is an additional tactic: criticism of the accuracy of data used and questioning causal relationships adopted are ways to put the problem represented by the proponents under suspicion. If indicators alone (historical patterns, evaluation results and activity monitoring, etc.) do not represent facts and do not determine the existence of a problem (KINGDON, 2003), then they need to be strategically represented (STONE, 2002), so that the decision-makers are convinced of their existence – or, in the case of agenda denial, of their inexistence or lack of importance. Just as numbers can draw attention to an issue, they can also remove concern when they are characterised as fragile or represented so as to minimise a problem. Another way of disqualifying an issue is to portray it unfavourably, raising suspicion within public opinion. Opponents can employ tactics based on arguments that exploit ambiguity and uncertainty around the issue and that gives rise to fear of possible changes, arising from the issue appearing on the agenda, highlighting, for example, negative impacts, hidden costs that could make the situation worse and unpredictable future problems, among others. On developing the concept of policy image, Baumgartner and Jones (1993: p. 26) show that you can set a tone (positive or negative) on an issue, this being a crucial activity to develop the issue from the standpoint of mobilising support. In the case of agenda restriction, therefore, the opponents emphasise the negative aspects of an issue, while the proponents seek to represent it positively, in order to mobilise support.

The first attack-tactic is directed towards the issued proposed. The second form of blocking is direct confrontation with applicant groups and not the issue itself, used especially when the groups proposing an issue are new and not well-known, with a low level of legitimacy. In this case, the opponents seek to destroy the proponents' credibility, transferring to a defensive position, making efforts to protect themselves, instead of continuing in defence of the issue they support. An extremely common tactic is to connect the applicant group with one known to be unpopular. Another tactic is to hold certain groups responsible for their own problems, trying to characterise a public issue as a private matter, limited to the individuals involved, thereby decreasing pressure for government action. The third tactic blocking groups and their issues from the agenda consists of exploiting the idea of a victim. One of the appeals frequently used by proponents is to demonstrate that the group is the victim of a situation (social, racial, economic, ethnic, and physical, etc.). In this case, the opponents seek to block the group and neutralise the idea of a victim in some way. Lastly, the tactic of "role reversal" can be used: the opponents pass themselves off as the proponents' victims.

Another attack tactic consists of fraud, spreading false rumours, lies, and slander, as a way of blocking groups from the decision-making process. Therefore, the media can be an important vehicle for disseminating inaccurate information, or whose veracity is questionable about a group. It is also important to remember that the opponents' attacks on proponents could focus on the entire group or individuals and sub-groups within it. This is the case, for example, when a confrontation is directed at the group leader, negatively investigating his behaviour and motivations.

Thus, a first group of average cost strategies comprises attacking the issue or group that proposes it. Another alternative is dissipating the conflict, or what the authors refer to as "symbolic placation", a commonly-used strategy when the issue has strong public appeal, not being possible to ignore or combat it and when the applicant group has great legitimacy, limiting the opponents' tactics to disqualify the proponents. The former have shown that they are engaged in developing the issue and are willing to yield to the applicant group's demands. However, the opponents' actions do not resolve the problem (the way it is advocated by the proponents), but is intended to dissipate the conflict. This strategy is usually employed by public officials formally entrusted with decision-making and involves some tactics analysed by Bachrach and Baratz (1962) with respect to blocking issues from the decision-making process. Cobb and Ross (1997) mention four actions to exemplify this type of strategy. The first is establishing a committee to discuss and analyse the issue presented by the

proponents. Establishing a discussion forum eases the conflict, delays the decision process, may weaken the applicant group over time and represents a way for the opponents to deal with the problem without too much effort. Another way of diluting the conflict is to create a symbolic experience from which the opponents point out a small part of the problem, in order to demonstrate their commitment to the issue. For example, focusing on positive results attained by a project executed, and extending this positive evaluation to a programme as a whole (or the policy itself) may be a form of symbolic action. Highlighting actions taken in the past, with the promise of intensifying the pace of actions in the present also allows opponents to signal that the government is dealing with the problem. As noted by March and Olsen (1989: p. 90), analysing the North American government's reform policies, it is often unacceptable for leaders not to show that they are up to the challenge ("confessions of impotence are not acceptable; leaders are expected to act," say the authors). March and Olsen argue that reforms and any modernisation process constitute examples of symbolic action.

The co-optation of applicant members in the proponent group is the third tactic of symbolic placation. In addition to the practice of offering jobs and positions to individuals, Cobb and Ross (1997) highlight "symbolic co-optation": co-optation of symbols used by the applicant group. The authors indicate the environmental sector as a fertile example of this type of tactic: symbols associated with the environment are seen positively by public opinion and even groups that would potentially enter into conflicts with environmental protection groups take on the conservation discourse (co-opting language) using symbols which, in theory, would be contrary to their interests. Finally, postponement is another symbolic action tactic, in which opponents agree that the issue raised by the proponents is valid, but impossible to deal with. In this case, the limited nature of available resources is emphasised – financial and technical constraints and restricted time or personnel, among others – to resolve particular problems. Together with postponement, another frequently used tactic is to emphasise measures already adopted in the past related to the issue, as a kind of "guarantee" for the promise of future action.

The third strategy: threats

The third type of strategy put forward by the authors is less frequent because it involves high costs for the proponents and opponents. Cobb and Ross (1997) describe tactics involving political, economic or legal threats against applicant groups, as examples of such actions.

The case studies analysed and collated in Cobb and Ross' (1997) book show how North American federal administration agencies worked to keep issues off the governmental agenda. The cases analysed by different authors, involving agencies such as the Securities and Exchange Commission, Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and also case studies on health policy suggest the use of average cost strategies as the most frequent form of opposition response to the proponents' demands. The occurrence of high-cost strategies was not recorded in any of the cases analysed.

Final considerations

This study aimed to present and discuss, albeit in an introductory way, the politics of governmental agenda access, an issue that, despite its importance, has not has been sufficiently considered by specialised literature. Research on the pre-decision-making phase of the public policy process that involves defining issues that will be considered later on in the decision-making process – or those that will be kept away from it – is one of the most critical issues to understand the production of public policies and democracy itself. Agenda studies were initially developed from a dialogue extremely close to democratic theory, as put forward by Cobb and Elder (1971; 1972). This connection is less evident in more recent literature, although the agenda-setting

process is a vital issue for theory and practising democracy. Understanding both sides of the agenda – how a question is placed on the agenda and others are systematically denied – may contribute to narrow the interface between agenda-setting models and democratic theory.

Throughout this study, we saw that the power of keeping a subject off the agenda or that is, denying access of an issue is as important as the power of placing it on the agenda. This is an aspect that has been neglected in literature on agenda-setting. Specific efforts, such as Cobb and Ross' (1997) analysis help to understand the logic of blocking issues from the agenda, but are still limited. The authors do not place the strategies within the institutional and historical context, where groups fight for access to the agenda, restricting the scope of the proposed explanations. Baumgartner and Jones' (1993) understanding of policy monopolies could be useful in order to contextualise the strategies presented by the authors. In this case, with monopolies as the unit of analysis, it would be possible to investigate how the groups that interact with these monopolies impede the process of change on the agenda for strategies, using the strategies presented by Cobb and Ross, especially with regard to the mechanics of production and disseminating images (defining and redefining issues). Parallel to theoretical development on the subject, an empirical analysis is necessary to further understand the means employed by governments in developing both construction strategies and agenda denial.

The issue definition process seems to be the key element for both agenda setting and denial. Schattschneider (1960) is the starting point for discussion on defining and redefining issues, since the conflict expansion and mobilisation process is developed through issues. More recent literature has discussed how policy image is set and maintained (BAUMGARTNER and JONES, 1993; TRUE, BAUMGARTNER and JONES, 1999); transforming conditions into problems (KINGDON, 2003); the strategic representation of issues (STONE, 2002) and the process of rhetoric and persuasion in constructing a policy (MAJONE 1989). Performing further study on these topics will certainly throw light on agenda access policy, as we have seen, and also on the more far-reaching process of producing public policies.

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(Endnotes)

1 Italics in the original text.

2 For a critical analysis of Bachrach and Baratz's proposal, see: Merelman, R. "On the Neoelitist Critique of Community Power ". American Political Science Review, Vol. 62, No. 2, June 1968 (pp. 451-460); Polsby, N. W. "Community: the Study of Community Power". In D. Sills (ed), International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences. New York: Macmillan and Free Press, 1968; Wolfinger, R. E. "Non-decisions and the Study of Local Politics". American Political Science Review, Vol. 65, n. 4, Dec., 1971 (pp. 1063-1080).

3 For a discussion of Lukes' proposals, their limits and challenges (theoretical and empirical), see Shapiro, I. "On the Second Edition of Luke's Third Face". Political Studies Review, 2006, vol 4, 2006 (pp. 146,155).

4 For a preliminary discussion on the Gaventa study, see Reid, H.G. "Review of John Gaventa, Power and Powerless: Quiescence and Rebellion in the Appalachian Valley". Journal of Politics, vol. 43 n. 4, Nov. 1981 (pp. 1270-1273).

5 The differentiation presented by the authors allowed for the development of studies on the governmental agenda (also called "institutional" or "formal") in political science. Until then, studies on agenda-setting turned their attention to the relationship between public opinion and the media, being developed in the field of communication. The origin of the term agenda-setting is attributed to Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw's pioneering study, published in 1972 and established the relationship between the media and public opinion agenda in the field of communication. For an analysis of these studies, see: Azevedo, Fernando A. F." Agendamento da Política" and RUBIM, Antonio A.C. (org). Political Communication: concepts and approaches. Sao Paulo, Ed Unesp, 2004 (pp. 4172).

6 Italics in the original text.

7 These three characteristics are related to the garbage can model, developed by Cohen, March and Olsen (1972), used by Kingdon as the basis for his explanation of agenda-setting. In the context of the garbage can approach, organisations are considered "organised anarchies," operating in conditions of great uncertainty and ambiguity in which participation in the decision-making process is developed erratically and with a high turnover (fluid participation); the participants' preferences are inconsistent and ill-defined (problematic preferences) and organisational processes and procedures are unclear and generally misunderstood by participants (uncertain technology).

8 For a critical perspective to the policy cycle, see (SABATIER, 1999).

9 To Kingdon (2003, p. 202), an issue reaches the decision agenda only when the streams of problems, solutions and political context are gathered together. However, the governmental agenda is established by the partial junction of two specific streams: policy and problems. In any event, in the multiple stream model, an issue should be on the governmental agenda to access the decision-making agenda. This is this first aspect that Cobb and Ross take into consideration.

SUBMISSION DATE: 03/09/2015
APPROVAL DATE: 06/18/2015