

Agenda Democracy

Daniel Carpenter

Department of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA;
email: dcarpenter@gov.harvard.edu

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Abstract

The study of agenda setting has become curiously disconnected from democratic theory and democratization. Following Schattschneider, Dahl, and recent developments in political theory, I call for its reintegration in theoretical and empirical realms. The concept of agenda democracy allows for better understanding of contests over institutions, significant historical-institutional transformations, the study of inequality and its mechanisms of generation and maintenance, and the building and undermining of democracy. Agenda democracy requires a broad understanding of agendas (beyond a mere menu of final policy choices), recognizes that many democratic regimes have institutions that systematically render agendas nondemocratic, and compels us to look at the interstices of institutions and society (party transformation, petition and grievance mechanisms, advocacy campaigns, initiatives to expand what I call the shortlist of the possible) for moments of significant change. Agenda democracy compels the examination of democratizing agenda restrictions, the study of conservative organizations in politics, and the consideration of decomposing the term “movement.”

The demos must have the exclusive opportunity to decide how matters are to be placed on the agenda of matters that are to be decided by means of the democratic process.

(Dahl 1989, p. 113)

The definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power; the antagonists can rarely agree on what the issues are because power is involved in the definition. He who determines what politics is runs the country, because the definition of alternatives is the choice of conflicts, and the choice of conflicts allocates power.

[Schattschneider 1975 (1960), p. 66, emphasis in original]

INTRODUCTION

Democracies embody the rule of a people considered sovereign, where popular sovereignty is understood to encompass ultimate decision-making power over public matters. In democratic republics where the people rule through representatives of their choosing, the matters subject to public power are shaped by many a force, including the people themselves. Yet, as Robert Dahl recognized in 1989, the “agenda of matters that are to be decided by means of the democratic process” is a critical phenomenon (Dahl 1989, p. 113), and how that agenda is shaped can be as much a threat to institutional democracy as an accompaniment. Dahl and others saw agenda control as a major impediment to democracy in New Haven, Connecticut, and other cities (Dahl 1961). It is, moreover, far from coincidental that Schattschneider [1975 (1960)] wrote of the people as “semisovereign” at the same time that he advanced core insights on the centrality of agendas and the scope of conflict.

Few concepts are more central to contemporary political science than “agenda” and “democracy,” yet the scholarship explicitly linking the two remains thin and underdeveloped. Empirical scholars examining the formation of agendas usually focus upon how the agenda will be limited and restricted, often by elites or collective attention dynamics (Romer & Rosenthal 1978, Kingdon 1984, Baumgartner & Jones 1993). Those who consider the democratic nature of political systems and cultures usually focus on other patterns and variables, such as elections and parties, participation, deliberation, social welfare regimes, rights and liberties, and systems of education (Pateman 1970, Dahl 1989, Macedo 2000, Shapiro 2003, Gutmann & Thompson 2004, Pettit 2012, Allen 2016).

The idea of agenda democracy is necessary for studies of agenda setting and democratic theory alike. In this article, I take up the call of Dahl and address the matter explicitly. I discuss concepts of agendas in political science, review why agendas might not be democratic even in political systems that are plausibly characterized as democratic, and discuss recent research emphasizing nonelectoral and nonpartisan mechanisms by which agendas are reshaped in democratic regimes (and possibly some nondemocratic regimes). In so doing, I join a set of political theorists (Barber 1984, p. 267; Urbinati 2006; Disch 2011; Woodly 2015, 2021; Mansbridge 2018; Forrester 2022) and empirical and historical scholars (Lee 2002, Schickler 2016, Gillion 2020, Carpenter 2021, Gause 2022) whose work points to the democratic necessity of local political intermediaries, protest campaigns, social organizations, advocacy campaigns, grievance mechanisms, and other agenda-democratizing processes and institutions.

In elaborating this argument, I advance several claims.

1. The notion of agenda must be considered in its broadest signification. Institutional political science often works with an operative understanding of agenda as a menu of final choices, which needs to be expanded to include Schattschneider’s [1975 (1960)] insistence that agendas constitute “what politics is” or what Woodly (2015) calls “common sense.”

2. Empirically, we should *expect* agenda politics in democracies to be tightly controlled and, in a way, to be nondemocratic and perhaps antidemocratic.
3. The role of agenda-democratizing processes and institutions is thus critical to the study of democracy. These include petitions, protests, advocacy campaigns, organized political collectives (such as labor unions), and nonelectoral elite interventions such as court decisions. Many patterns of grievance expression and advocacy campaigns begin as attempts to address issues of nondemocracy in agenda matters.
4. Evaluations of the success of these campaigns should consider not merely whether they changed policy or laws in the short run, but whether they shifted agendas and discourse in the longer run.
5. The full range of these phenomena should be considered, including by means of intensive study of advocacy and issue campaigns by illiberal, conservative, or even antidemocratic campaigns.
6. Focusing on agenda democracy may require the partial decomposition, though not the abandonment, of the term “social movement.” Many patterns of activism that do not rise to the level/status of a “movement” nonetheless may be consequential in shaping agendas.

For political theorists studying democracy, but usually not with agendas explicitly in mind, agenda democracy is critical because the centrality of the agenda to politics (deliberation, outcomes, decisions) is a fact that must be recognized. Theory must continue to be built and rebuilt upon and around this fact. For empiricists studying agendas, better linkage to democratic theory beckons us to look beyond first-order correspondence of public attitudes and government actions. This includes considerations of political equality in agenda-setting chances (Barber 1984, Dahl 1989), what democratic agenda restriction might look like, what renders agenda setting democratic or nondemocratic, and how agendas might be democratized by nonelectoral means.

WHY CONNECT AGENDAS TO DEMOCRATIC POLITICS?

What is democracy and how is it lived? A generation of scholars asked this question in the wake of World War II, the rise and fall of fascism, the persistence of communism, and the fragile alternative paths of liberal democracy. At the same time, a generation of postwar thinkers began to focus on the fundamentals of politics in any regime: choice-making and power. These scholars concluded that much of political power rests in what Simon (1976) called “the premises of decision-making” (see also Jones 1999): information, agendas, attention, and other factors often outside the scope of immediate or conscious consideration. Bachrach & Baratz’s (1962, p. 948) famous critique of Dahl focused in part upon the scope of politics:

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.

The “scope” to which Bachrach and Baratz refer was famously studied by Schattschneider [1975 (1960)] in his classic volume *The Semisovereign People*. Schattschneider understood the definition of alternatives in the broadest sense, including the definition of what is “public” versus what is “private” (p. 7). And he saw issues of democracy and popular sovereignty deeply involved in the restriction of the scope of conflict. Anticipating recent scholarship on authoritarian enclaves in the South (Mickey 2015), Schattschneider [1975 (1960), pp. 8–9] saw the Jim Crow South as a regime that restricted the agenda of the people, removing race relations from politics. Political systems that restricted the scope of conflict, he recognized, often did so by scaring citizens

away from raising issues in the first place. “People are not likely to start a fight if they are certain they are going to be severely penalized for their efforts. In this situation, repression may assume the guise of a false unanimity” [Schattschneider 1975 (1960), p. 8; see also Chan & Zhao 2015]. Schattschneider advanced these observations in what he self-consciously called “a realist’s view of democracy in America.” The limitation of the scope of conflict, Schattschneider implied, limited American democracy.

Schattschneider’s linkage between agendas and democratic forms reflects thinking that extends back centuries if not millennia. Cicero (1928, p. 67) argued that a popular form of government (one that served the *res publica* or “public asset”) needed to include the people in the deliberation of issues (*De Re Publica* I, 43): “But in kingships the subjects have too small a share in the administration of justice and in deliberation; and in aristocracies the masses can hardly have their share of liberty, since they are entirely excluded from deliberation for the common weal and from power.”

In the Roman Republic that Cicero championed, this inclusive and deliberative role was played by the Senate and its proximity to the people. Titus Livy (1949, pp. 107–11) recounts how the visible abuse of a debtor led to widespread public complaint, which induced the Senate to convene (*History of Rome* VIII, 28, 7–8). Popular complaint arose, a measure calling for the end of debt imprisonment was introduced, and this reform passed (see also VIII, 33, 10). Montesquieu [1951 (1734)] saw the Roman Senate as the venue where, more than any other place, the people could take their complaints and requests, and where Roman citizens could feel that their questions were being heard by peers.¹ Classical historians have supported the plausibility of these accounts (Millar 2002).

Modern political theorists ranging from Harrington, Rousseau, and Kant to Sieyès, Paine, and Condorcet all wrestled with what we today call agendas (Urbinati 2006). Harrington in his *Oceana* and Rousseau in his *Contrat social*, in different ways, each designed ideal republics where the power of proposal was vested in something other than the demos that voted upon those same propositions (Putterman 2005). However, Rousseau also lamented that the voice of the people did not have enough agenda-setting power in tyrannical governments, at least when it came to their grievances; the people’s voice, which carries the “voice of God,” is “always weak in human affairs beside the clamor of power; the complaint of oppressed innocence is breathed out in groans which tyranny treats with scorn” [Rousseau, *Lettres de la Montagne* (VIII, 862), quoted by Putterman 2005, p. 461].

As scholarship by Urbinati (2006) and Mansbridge (2018) has clarified, agendas in the broadest sense figure centrally in representative democracy. Urbinati insists that representative democracy requires not only Athenian *isonomia* (equality in lawmaking) but also *isēgoria* (equality in deliberation and voice). Contemporary democracy, she argues, falls short of this Athenian ideal (Urbinati 2006). Mansbridge (2018), similarly inspired by Rousseau’s idea that the actions of the *législateur* be as close as possible to the will of the people, as if they themselves were writing the law, argues for a back-and-forth conception of representation and legislation. Barber (1984, p. 267) thought that high agenda restriction weakened democracy: “rarely are [citizens of western democracies] provided the opportunity to create their own agendas through permanent public discourse.” Dahl’s (1989, p. 113) statement that democracy requires the control of agendas by the demos reflects the clearest statement by any political theorist that democratic theory and agenda setting must be squarely and directly connected.

¹On the Senate as “exhausted without end by the complaints and demands of the people,” see Montesquieu [1951 (1734), p. 72]; this inclusive and equalizing nature of the Senate’s complaint-hearing function also appears in *The Spirit of the Laws*, Book V, Chapter 7, “Other Means of Favoring the Principle of Democracy” [Montesquieu 1951 (1748)].

Despite these occasional references to agendas and related concepts, direct, sustained analysis of agenda setting in works of democratic theory remains sparse. On the empirical side, meanwhile, the consideration of agendas began in the 1970s to migrate from studies of power to studies of decision making. There was nothing wrong-headed about this. Confronting new findings in economics and psychology, and under the influence of the magisterial Herbert Simon (the first of two political scientists to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences), political scientists examined agendas as powerful factors shaping choice and, in an extension especially pushed by formal theorists, an important dimension of strategy. What emerged was a vast body of scholarship and a related theoretical and empirical apparatus—as distinctive a contribution of academic political science as exists—in two threads, one linked to the bounded rationality school and the notion of policy agendas, the other linked to rational choice theory and game-theoretic notions of agenda control.

What this move left behind was a richer conception of democracy. Democratic theory proceeded apace, developing in deliberative democracy, feminism, neo-republican thought and other domains (Pateman 1970, Shapiro 2003, Gutmann & Thompson 2004, Pettit 2012). Yet aside from a robust literature on representation and policy punctuations (Jones et al. 2009, 2019b), the literature linking agenda politics to questions of democratic theory and democratization grew thin and remains so. In a comparative context, the fresh set of questions raised by Cobb & Elder (1971) and their collaborators on the democratic nature of agendas is “a research agenda that remains unfilled to the present day” (Zahariadis 2016, p. 11; but see Jones et al. 2019a). From a long-term historical standpoint, agenda concepts have been little integrated into studies of historical institutionalism or democratization (for partial and quite recent exceptions see Francis 2019, Jones et al. 2019b, Carpenter 2021, Schnee et al. 2022). Finally, democratic theory points to particular concepts to which empirical analysts should pay more attention when thinking about agendas. These include political equality in voice (Urbinati 2006, McKinley 2018), general values of inclusion (Gutmann & Thompson 2004, Allen 2016), the educative function of politics (Urbinati 2006, Allen 2016), freedom as nondomination (Pettit 2012), and political contestability (Rosenvallon 2006, Pettit 2012). The existing study of agendas pays far less attention to these dimensions than to (a) the exercise of power and (b) correspondence of popular agendas and institutional agendas.

Because of these developments, we have lost at least four things, discussed below.

We Have Missed the Normative and Equity Dimensions of Some of the Important Developments We Study

Consider Riker’s (1986) famous study of the art of political manipulation, a set of strategies he combined into the practice of *heresthetic*. When New York Senator Chauncey Depew blunted momentum for a constitutional amendment mandating popular election of US senators (eventually the Seventeenth Amendment) by bundling the measure with a proposal aimed at federal voting rights enforcement that Southern senators could not stomach, he was effectively practicing the art of political manipulation, it is true. If Depew was sincere, then he was advancing a kind of agenda democracy by adding race to the set of things to be discussed. Yet if Depew was, in a more realistic interpretation (namely, Riker’s), behaving in a purely strategic fashion, he was limiting agenda democracy by removing an option on which much of the public would have wanted a simple vote. Would his constituents, or would millions of constituents nationwide, have wished for the same agenda manipulation? Empirically, this may seem irrelevant. But if we peek back into the early twentieth century and imagine women wanting to vote, African-Americans wanting an end to Jim Crow, Native Americans wanting suffrage and spatial protection, and farmer and labor interests wanting to escape what they considered the tyranny of legislative elites, then how, in a world run by “herestheticians” like Chauncey Depew, would these minorities ever get their issues on the agenda? Issues of democracy were also involved.

We Have Ignored Fundamental Mechanisms of Transformational Change in Institutions and Policies

Consider two of the most dramatic institutional transformations in democratic regimes of the past two centuries: the abolition of slavery and the post-Depression Atlantic turn to social democracy (in the United States, the New Deal). Both involved the widening of agendas.

There are few institutions and practices as incompatible with democratic (or republican) practices and institutions as slavery. Yet a number of the West's early parliamentary regimes and democratic republics tended to permit and even legitimate slavery. Abolition of slavery required first a set of voices that raised the possibility that it could and should be politically regulated, even abolished (Brown 2006, Sinha 2016). In Britain, in the British West Indies, and in the United States, antislavery organization relied upon petitioning campaigns that asked legislatures to take up the issue; much previous debate had been limited by the assumption that they could not or should not (Carpenter 2021). The Republican Party that emerged in the 1850s was a coalition of forces taking different stances, but on a set of issues that antislavery forces had brought to the table and that the Second Party System had excluded from debate (Foner 1970, Gienapp 1987).

The dramatic expansion of social insurance regimes and state power over economies in the wake of the Great Depression took different forms in Europe and the United States. Yet in both cases, the political transformations of the 1930s through 1950s rested upon policy solutions that had been placed on a broader agenda of conversation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—the single tax, antitrust measures, the macroeconomic management ideas of Keynes. In his landmark book *Atlantic Crossings*, Rodgers (1998, p. 6), who explicitly cites Kingdon (1984), discusses the exchange of ideas between Europe and the United States at this time (see also Hall 1993). The American New Deal, as Rodgers notes, implemented many of these Progressive ideas (see also Katznelson 2013). Many of these ideas had popular, agrarian origins (Sanders 1999), and some of the social insurance ideas originated from women's advocacy at a time when most women lacked suffrage rights (Skocpol 1992). For this reason, if one sees in the movements of the populists and Progressives of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries merely a failure, then one is misreading the way they changed the conversation—the agenda of the possible and considerable—in Congress and national politics (Banaszak 1996, McConaughy 2013).

We Have Excluded Central Processes in the Generation and Maintenance of Political and Economic Inequality

While the entrenched patterns of inequality in responsiveness of policies to mass preferences have been widely documented in political science, especially in the United States (Bartels 2008, Hacker & Pierson 2011, Gilens 2012), the mechanisms underlying these relationships remain obscure. Only very recently have political scientists begun to identify agenda bias—in Congress (Witko et al. 2021) as well as in state legislatures (Hertel-Fernandez 2019)—as a prime culprit in the production and maintenance of political and economic inequality. Yet the links of these recent studies to democratic theory, as well as portraits of what more democratized agendas might look like, remain inchoate in the literature.

We Have Excluded Critical Processes, Concepts, and Analytic Tools from the Study of Democratization

Agenda democracy can enrich studies of comparative and historical democratization. Studies of democratization rightly emphasize elites and how elites respond to pressures and calls for democratization (Acemoglu & Robinson 2006, Ziblatt 2017). But our literature offers little examination

of pressure from nonelites to place new issues and new conceptions of equality, politics, and government on the table (Wilentz 2003, Mickey 2015, Carpenter 2021). We must ask: Why was the matter of democratization posed to, or considered by, elites when it was? Advocacy movements, popular politics, and collective grievance cannot be excluded from the story.

AGENDAS, THEIR BREADTH, AND AGENDA DEMOCRACY

What is an agenda? And how might the process of shaping one be considered democratic or undemocratic? Following pioneering work in formal theory (Romer & Rosenthal 1978), agenda setting is often considered to be the power to initiate a proposal upon which others (an assembly, the people, a committee) will vote. The other dominant meaning of agenda follows from the work of Kingdon (1984), who defined an agenda as a set of streams in problems, ideas, and solutions upon which decision makers could act.

For purposes of this review, I define an agenda as that subset, among a set of items, to which public institutional action and/or public political activity is restricted.² The items can be voting options, public problems, solutions, methodologies, and vocabularies of politics. Institutional action includes deliberation, proposal consideration, and decision making in vessels of government authority. Public political activity can be voting, deliberating, imagination, contestation, or argumentation. Restriction can occur mechanically or probabilistically. In American political development, for instance, neither the congressional agenda on slavery in the early nineteenth century nor the congressional agenda on civil rights in the early twentieth century reflected popular political activity at the time [Black newspapers in the Jim Crow era (Schickler 2016); antislavery petitions in the antebellum period (Sinha 2016, Carpenter 2021)]. Beyond this, even the agenda of public political activity outside of governing institutions can be limited by constraints in social organization, lack of contestation over concepts, or constraints on common sense (Woodly 2015) or the horizon (Forrester 2022).

These ideas correspond to three questions that can be asked of any agenda-setting process: (a) What are the elements of an agenda and what is the larger set of which it represents a constraint or subset? (b) What activities are restricted or constrained by the setting of this agenda? (c) How does the constraint occur—through explicit restriction or through diversion of attention? Mechanically or probabilistically?

Restriction is fundamental to the idea of agenda. An agenda cannot include everything, and an empirically realistic notion of agendas will likely rely upon notions of bounded rationality. Citizens and elites cannot keep all issues in their heads (individual, organizational) at a single time (Jones 1999, Jones & Baumgartner 2011), and/or relevant decision makers and deliberators cannot assign probabilities or weights to all issues in the way that a specified mathematical model would require (Dietrich & List 2017).

²A formal definition can be constructed using the technology of Dietrich & List (2017). Let Ω be a nonempty set of possible political questions. A question Q is a subset of Ω ; its complement (“negation,” which in this case means all other questions) is denoted $Q^c := \Omega \setminus Q$. Define the agenda A as a nonempty set of questions which is closed under complementation. This definition of agenda means that for any finite series of questions $\{Q\} = Q_1, Q_2, \dots, Q_N$, there exists at least one $Q_i \in A$. The idea of a restricted agenda means, in turn, that there exists at least one $Q_{\sim i} \notin A$.

If the series $\{Q\}$ is converted into an ordered continuum $q \in \mathfrak{R}$ (with possible minimum q_{\min} and maximum q_{\max}), then a range of well-known agenda-setting models (e.g., Lupia 1992) become special cases of this framework. In cases where the agenda setter in a voting model sets an alternative q_a to the status quo q_0 , then the agenda is set by q_a ($q_a, q_0 \in A$), and the continua of points q_{\min} to q_0 , q_0 to q_a and q_a to q_{\max} are “outside” the agenda.

Table 1 The many incarnations of “agenda”

Concept of “agenda”	Associated literature or disciplines
1. Menu from which final choice is made	Literature in American democracy, formal theory and bounded rationality. Schattschneider [1975 (1960)], Kingdon (1984), Romer & Rosenthal (1978)
1a. binary voting option (or single alternative to status quo) controlled by a proposer ^a	Romer & Rosenthal (1978), Lupia (1992)
1b. denumerable set of items that can be considered by a decision maker (individual or collective) ^a	Kingdon (1984), Dietrich & List (2017)
2. Most important problem	Problem stream. Kingdon (1984), especially Baumgartner & Jones (1993), and ensuing literature
3. Shortlist of the possible	Solution stream; “horizon-setting” (Forrester 2022)
4. Common sense	What is “acceptable” (Woodly 2015)
5. The set of things that are public	The set of things delegated neither to markets nor to the private realm (families, churches in republican regimes, other private institutions); the set of things that are not “merely” private and individual. Schattschneider [1975 (1960)], Mettler (2011), Thurston (2018), Forrester (2022); studies in republicanism, Marxism, socialism, feminism
6. The set of things that are political	The set of things subject to public contestation. Feminism and feminist political theory. Schattschneider [1975 (1960)], MacKinnon (1989), Forrester (2022)
7. Heuristics available to interpret problems	The dominant or acceptable/legitimate ways of thinking about a problem. Woodly (2015), Brown (2015)
8. The persons giving voice to agenda items, when these are partially or wholly inseparable from the ideas they express	Descriptive versus substantive representation; who appears in legislative or administrative processes. Hansen (1991), Krawiec (2013), Thurston (2018), Libgober (2020), Carpenter (2021)

^aDepending upon interpretation, 1b might include 1a as a special case, but these are considered separately in analytical models.

If agenda setting in democratic politics is to be studied properly, the very agenda of what “agenda” might mean must be broadened. In **Table 1**, I present a range of notions of agenda that have been used, explicitly or implicitly, in political science and cognate disciplines. These begin with choice menu notions that are common to informal theory as represented by Kingdon (1984) and his successors as well as singular alternatives to the status quo that characterize agenda-setting models in formal theory.

As valuable as these notions are, however, it is worth reflecting on just what Schattschneider [1975 (1960), pp. 3–4, 66] saw as constitutive of “the scope of political conflict.” The definition of alternatives was, he thought, the “definition of politics” and also, the “choice of conflicts.” The older feminist saying that “the personal is political” has much in common with Schattschneider’s observation here. As Forrester (2022, p. 1278) writes of movement demands, they can “disclose social conditions,” they can “build constituencies,” and they can “set the horizon of the world which the social movement seeks to build.”

Once we turn to what is political, we can begin to ask how things are excluded from being seen as political, or eligible for political disputation and problem solving, by asking how problems or issues get shunted to other venues and domains. For example, the statement that a carbon tax is not politically possible may or may not be empirically true, but it surely limits the agenda of near-term actionable items. Once we consider declaring something impossible or impracticable

as a mode of agenda restriction, then we must enrich the notion of agenda accordingly. I call this notion of the agenda *the shortlist of the possible*. Limitation of the “solution stream” agenda also results in limitation of thinking about the options immediately before us, as their benefits, costs, effects—a range of counterfactuals—can only be known when setting them in the context of other solutions.

Other things may be assumed outside of political consideration because of a belief (consensual or not) that society has delegated them to other actors or other spheres. Beliefs that certain domains of policy are better left to the market or better solved by experts may be scientifically or ethically defensible, but they nonetheless constitute an agenda restriction (Brown 2015, Vauchez & France 2021). From a feminist standpoint, MacKinnon (1989) offers a similar critique of liberal objectivity and its patterns of enforcement by the liberal state.

What issues mean or how they are interpreted might also function as a question of agenda setting. Should environmental issues be considered as efficiency questions, as questions of the common good, or as matters of justice? Agendas also encompass what Woodly (2015) calls common sense, that is, the meaning that the community in common attaches to problems, issues, and the like. An important question raised in environmental policy in the United States—much if not most of which is made in administrative rulemaking—is whether issues of environmental justice are discussed, much less explicitly addressed. As Judge-Lord (2021) shows, environmental justice advocates appear to be successful at getting justice frames addressed in changes to administrative rules.

A final sense of the agenda might concern the set of persons whose voices are included in deliberation, especially where it is plausibly argued that ideas and perspectives are not wholly separable from the persons expressing them. In democratic republics with representative assemblies, representation of voices has long occurred in personal appearances before a congress or one of its committees, as with agricultural interests (Hansen 1991) or women’s initial appearances before American legislatures (Carpenter 2021). But this raises broader questions. Would we call an agenda-setting process democratic if the persons deliberating on abortion or sexual harassment were all men? Would we not rightly raise questions if the group debating the rights of LGBTQ persons were composed entirely of self-identified heterosexual men and women, or if the set of persons deliberating upon religious liberty were, to a tee, avowed atheists? Would we not think that some perspective, idea, or alternative might be missing from a deliberative community starkly limited in its representation, in probability if not in actuality? Even regimes that explicitly defined hierarchical orders of humanity, such as estates systems in European monarchies, explicitly assigned a place for some of those orders in a representative scheme.

Does this expansive understanding of the word agenda push it too far toward what Lukes (1974) has described as the third face of power? I think not, for two reasons. First, none of the senses of agenda I have described involve changing core preferences, understood as preference orderings for well-informed human agents under certainty or certainty equivalents. Second, none of the mechanisms require false consciousness in the Lukesian sense, which does not apply to the situation, for instance, of a citizen unaware that the confinement of financial matters to so-called experts is an agenda restriction.

The word agenda has long meant more than merely a final menu of options among which a decision maker chooses. As a Latin word, *agenda* originally meant the set of things to be done (such as the divine office or duties) and was differentiated in late medieval and early modern Christianity from *credenda* (the set of things to be believed). By the nineteenth century, however, and more than a century before it became central to the study of positivist and empirical political science,

“agenda” had come to mean a set of items for deliberation and discussion, not necessarily linked to an immediate decision.³

Having sketched notions of the agenda, I define agenda democracy as the degree to which the operative agenda in any polity corresponds to that of the people and whether the people in their plurality can contest and/or change it. [If there are plural operative agendas—for example, in different institutions (legislature, executive, administrative state)—then the definition can be amended to specify the degree to which the operative agendas in a polity correspond to those of the people and whether the people in their plurality can contest and/or change them.] By definition, any agenda-setting process narrows debate, choice, and focus to a subset of possible issues. Mere restriction of the agenda is not antidemocratic, counter-democratic or nondemocratic. Indeed, it might be more democratic that some issues are not on the public agenda, as the public interest is better served by focusing on others, given constraints.

The concept of agenda democracy can be addressed empirically by asking the following questions of any regime, institution, or organization:

1. How far is the operative agenda from the one that the people desire? In thinking of the people here, it is relevant to distinguish the people in their plurality and in their majority. In their majority, the people can express their view by aggregating preferences or votes across many important issues or solutions. To consider the plurality of the people is to recognize that subsets of people have different interests, needs, and perspectives (Madison’s *Federalist* 10 relied upon this plurality), and to ask whether a minority significant in its number or its threatened interests and rights is capable of raising its issues to the agenda.
2. Does the agenda reflect the underlying equality of people in their prospects of placing an item upon it [Urbinati’s (2006) emphasis on *isēgoria*]? Put differently, can those excluded or disfavored by the existing agenda effectively contest it? Agenda democracy thus links to the idea of contestatory democracy (Rosenvallon 2006, Pettit 2012) as well as Galbraith’s (1952) idea of countervailing powers.
3. Are deviations of the operative agenda from the people’s agenda temporary or durable? As Chan & Zhao (2015) and Jones et al. (2019a) show, authoritarian institutions durably confine attention to known problems whose discussion is not threatening to the regime’s interests.

Agenda democracy exists on a continuum. It is a telic concept (Calhoun et al. 2022), analyzed not as an object either present or absent, but rather as an ideal approached to some extent. Whether a system’s agenda politics reflects democracy is nonetheless vital for at least two reasons. First, political scientists know that if the agenda does not reflect the people’s concerns, final outcomes are unlikely to reflect them either. Second, the very idea and reality of democracy require not only *isonomia* (equal participation in lawmaking) but also *isēgoria* (equal voice) (Urbinati 2006). Put differently, political process is essential, not only as contributing to the final choice outcome but also as constituting a form of social and political good in and of itself.

THE UN-DEMOCRACY OF AGENDAS IN ELECTORAL DEMOCRACIES

If democracy is defined in part by the existence of free, fair, and open elections with a competitive party system and a representative legislature making policy, then political science has provided many reasons to think a democratic regime will *not* have a democratically shaped agenda. The dynamics include the following.

³According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, modern meanings of “agenda” include “a list of items to be discussed at a formal meeting, typically circulated to attendees in advance” and “a (notional) list of things to be done, problems to be addressed, or events likely to happen.”

1. Parties and the procedural cartel. Modern legislative parties often function as agenda-restricting devices, limiting the set of questions deliberated or voted upon to permit the solution of collective action problems and to preserve power over the opposition (Cox & McCubbins 2005). Many critical issues have, from slavery during the Second Party System to civil rights during the mid-twentieth century, been restricted this way (Katznelson 2013, Bateman et al. 2018, Caughey 2018).
2. Nonpartisan legislative agenda bias. Some notions of committee power function to restrict agendas, such as the influence of lobbyists in buying time (Hall & Wayman 1990, Hall & Deardorff 2006), which in theory shifts not the votes or preferences of legislators but the issues on which they spend scarce resources. Business and wealthier interests are particularly adept at “hijacking the agenda” in these ways (Witko et al. 2021), and sheer agenda influence helps explain an appreciable portion of the vast policy advantages of the wealthy in the United States (Bartels 2008, Gilens 2012).
3. Exploitation of constitutional protections to protect antidemocratic patterns. Many regimes contain express provisions permitting a dominant region or class of people to hold a veto over the entrance of an item onto the agenda. In the *longue durée* of US history, Southern US legislators were able to band together as a regional coalition in the US Congress and to restrict the agenda of slavery (Weingast 1998, Carpenter 2021) and other questions of racial inclusion and equality (Lieberman 1998, Katznelson 2013, Mickey 2015, Schickler 2016, Bateman et al. 2018), using either the Senate or committee power to keep issues off agendas. These agendas often concerned American democratization itself (Mickey 2015). More generally, constitutional hurdles create veto points that remove the agenda-setting and lawmaking function from the median voter (Krehbiel 1998).
4. Administrative elites—the state and state power. Much of administrative power in wealthier democracies is exercised through rulemaking. Here too the issues are not merely policy choices but also agenda setting. Should cost–benefit analysis consider questions of racial inequality? Should citizen debtors appear in the making of financial policy with the regularity that bank-holding companies and their lawyers do (Krawiec 2013, Libgober 2020)? Recent studies of policy making in France (Vauchez & France 2021) show that many alternative approaches are removed from the agenda this way.
5. Hierarchies of class, gender, and race. Even in democratic regimes that contemporary observers would describe as marked by equality, many issues never rise to consideration because cultural, ideological, and institutional forces combine to keep them from discussion. Whether the people’s agenda would include the question of paid housework for women (Forrester 2022) is not clear, but the hypothesis that including it represents a more democratic agenda is clearly plausible. These exclusions highlight the second face of power, going back to Bachrach & Baratz (1962), and show how it may be connected to cognitive mechanisms.

This list of agenda-restricting mechanisms is short and incomplete, but it recapitulates a vast literature suggesting that even in electoral democracies, there are structural reasons to expect that the people’s agenda will not be reflected on a stable basis in the agendas of governing and law-making bodies. The question then becomes: How can agendas be democratized by nonelectoral means?

MECHANISMS OF AGENDA DEMOCRATIZATION

In part because democratic regimes embed agenda bias, the democratization of agendas is an essential process of contestation (Pettit 2012). The mechanisms of agenda democratization can be

Table 2 Mechanisms of agenda democratization

Mechanism	Examples and associated literature
Party transformation and electoral competition	Structural differentiation (Kitschelt 1993) Adoption of challengers' proposals (Sulkin 2005) Movement incorporation into parties (Ansell 2001, Schlozman 2015) Decentralized party transformation (Schickler 2016)
Liminal claims-making (including grievances); understood as occurring at apertures of the regime	Petitioning (Zaeske 2003; Carpenter 2016, 2021; McKinley 2018; Blackhawk et al. 2021) Complaint-making vis-à-vis the state [Thurston 2018, Krus-Wisner 2021 (<i>Jan Sunwai</i> program), Ahmed 2021] Collective judicial action (Arrington 2019) in civil law jurisdictions; class-action litigation in the United States
External public demonstration and organization; understood as coming from outside the system	Movement demands (Sanders 1999; Htun & Weldon 2012; Woodly 2015, 2022; Sinha 2016; Thurston 2018; Forrester 2022; Tarrow 2022) Protest (Gillion 2020, Gause 2022) Nonpartisan civic organizations (Skocpol 2006) Marches, riots (Wilentz 2003, Sinha 2015)
Venue shifting	Chappell (2002), Pralle (2003), Thurston (2018, p. 23), Howarth & James (2020)
Agenda democratization by limitation, bargaining	Labor organization in industrial democracies (Greenstone 1969, Cornfield & Fletcher 1998, Levi 2003, Thelen 2004)
Institutional/elite decisions	Court decisions (Minow 2010)

considered as electoral/partisan, popular/organizational, and elite/institutional. **Table 2** offers a summary (far from exhaustive) of mechanisms.

Elections and parties themselves contain some mechanisms for democratizing agendas (Kitschelt 1993, Sulkin 2005). The evolution of France's Third Republic (1781–1940) was heavily shaped by the transformation of agendas in socialist and syndicalist organizations and their incorporation into emergent left parties (Ansell 2001). In a landmark study of the twentieth-century United States, Schickler (2016) shows how the local politicians functioned as intermediaries in shifting the ideology, preferences, and agendas of the Democratic Party from the New Deal to the early 1960s. A racial realignment that eventually transformed the Democratic Party “began with mass and midlevel party actors, and. . . was rooted in state and local politics rather than in Washington, D.C.” (Schickler 2016, p. 3). In Schickler's narrative, the decentralized nature of American party structures permitted a shift that would not have occurred in a more centralized system. In particular, “Locally rooted politicians played a crucial role as intermediaries between constituency-based pressures and elite decision-making arenas in the civil rights realignment” (p. 5). Schickler's evidence for these transformations includes the divergence of African-American public opinion in the late 1940s—not just on issues of civil rights but also on issues of economic liberalism (pp. 142–46)—and, most relevant to agenda democratization, the topical divergence of state-level party platforms during the 1940s (pp. 156–68).

Nonelectoral mechanisms for shaping government agendas have existed for as long as recorded history. One of them, existing for centuries before mass elections, was the petition, combined with the norm of response (Zaret 2000; Zaeske 2003; Krotoszynski 2012; Carpenter 2016, 2021; Blackhawk et al. 2021). At various times in the eighteenth century, more than half of the legislation passed by the Virginia House of Burgesses started as petitions, and similar patterns hold for the Virginia House of Delegates in the early national period (Bailey 1979, Carpenter 2021). Petitions were also consequential in inducing legislators to create committees and adjust

jurisdictions (Schneer et al. 2022), as well as administrative agencies (McKinley 2018), meaning that the very organization of bias studied by political scientists (Hall & Wayman 1990, Hall & Deardorff 2006) has been subject to more democratic forces. Some of this responsiveness came from the phenomenon of private bills, but when civic organizations and networks harnessed the petition in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Canada, Mexico, and the United States to build fledgling political movements, they were able to place matters on the legislative calendar for debate and possible action on issues ranging from debt imprisonment to legislative power to manorial land tenure to women's rights (Zaeske 2003; Carpenter & Brossard 2019; Carpenter 2020, 2021). For indigenous North Americans in particular, petitioning and related activities outside the electoral sphere were a means of agenda shaping that allowed many populations to survive (Vizenor 2008, Blackhawk et al. 2021, Carpenter 2021).

Organized social activity (sometimes rising to the status of a movement) has also been observed to shape policy agendas. In a striking and innovative study, Thurston (2018) shows how US fair housing activists not only put new issues on the table but also transformed the understanding of homeownership by rendering it a public issue. Features of housing policy were, in the United States more than in other Western democracies, removed from public consideration by being delegated to the private sphere. This arrangement dismissed many housing issues from the public agenda, “submerging” their politics (Mettler 2011) and excluding debtors and racial minorities from housing politics. Beginning in the 1940s and continuing through the 1990s, “the drivers of policy change were citizens’ groups whose constituents had found themselves excluded from access” (Thurston 2018, p. 4). These organizations performed multidimensional work, but almost every aspect included reshaping the broad meanings of agenda as I have defined them here. Specifically, citizens’ groups “engaged in activities to reveal precisely how complex and opaque government policies. . .also operated to exclude” (Thurston 2018, p. 4; also p. 17); drew attention to the fact “that exclusion was not solely the result of the workings of an impartial market mechanism” (p. 4); reinterpreted “independent problems as collective grievances” (p. 19); aggregated “individual experiences [such that] an organized group was able to redefine the problem from an issue of individual credit denial to articulate a much broader—and suspect—pattern” (p. 20); and finally, “built a case that the federal government not only had the authority to intervene. . .but also had an obligation to ensure that private providers it partnered with for provision did the same” (p. 4). The actors in Thurston’s narrative do much of this agenda democratizing work, using petitions, complaints to administrative bodies, and collective litigation (2018, pp. 22–23, 40, 128–36, 174–82, 183–87).

Patterns of institutionalized complaint making also appear in Asian regimes. In India, as Kruks-Wisner (2018a,b; 2021) has shown, people employ strategies and practices of complaint making (“active citizenship”) to represent interests before bodies that are not formally electoral. But this strategy depends in part upon institutions created for the literal accountability of administrative office holders. In Madhya Pradesh in north-central India, the government has created an institution known as *Jan Sunwai*, or a regular appearance of administrative officials before the public at hearings (*sunwai*) where the public can register complaints. In Rajasthan (Kruks-Wisner 2018b), citizens who experience more interstitial politics (who cross lines of caste, gender, religion, and region) are more likely to make claims upon the state, and in many cases are able to successfully introduce a distributive politics agenda to locales where there was not one (or a weaker one) before (Kruks-Wisner 2018b, pp. 140–41).

Comparing Japan and Korea, Arrington (2019) shows how Japanese litigants use collective litigation to change agendas and to organize. Privacy protections for Japanese litigants who were harmed by hepatitis-C-infected blood products allowed citizens to participate in a collective mobilization process with “pseudonymity,” while the lack of similar protections in Korea meant that

a similar mobilization did not arise. Japanese litigant-activists successfully placed the issue of compensation on the agenda through legal mobilization, and in January 2008, the Diet unanimously passed a compensation measure into law (Arrington 2019, p. 332).

The set of phenomena we call social movements also shapes agendas in the broadest sense. As Woodly (2015, 2021) has argued of the gay marriage movement, the movement for a minimum wage, and the Movement for Black Lives, these constellations of organizations and activism re-shape what citizens regard as acceptable. As Woodly shows, such movements change not merely policy but “common sense.” Given that what is considered acceptable often functions implicitly if not explicitly as an agenda limitation, the link of these movement dynamics to agenda democracy is clear. Relatedly, Gause (2022) shows that an “advantage of disadvantage” may arise for groups that engage in costly protest precisely because their signals are more credible to lawmakers, the media, and other audiences (see also Arrington 2019, Gillion 2020).

Feminism as a constellation of campaigns, political and intellectual networks, and social movements has taken different forms around the globe. Yet, as Forrester (2022) has detailed, its legacies must be considered in the longer term as well as the short run. The demands that movements make—Forrester focuses upon remuneration for housework—“can reveal hidden dimensions of social reality and build constituencies while also indicating a new world to be built that exceeds agendas for immediate reform” (Forrester 2022, p. 1278). This “horizon-setting” function of movement demands is, I wish to claim, a way of expanding the agenda, reminding audiences that other items are not yet being addressed, that other solutions are possible, and that agenda contestation is a continual process.

Labor organizations have been in decline throughout the world, but a brief look at their history in comparative and American politics (Greenstone 1969, Levi 2003, Thelen 2004, Schlozman 2015) suggests that they often shifted agendas through their economic bargaining power and, where they were incorporated in political parties of entire regimes (as with corporatism), they could potentially democratize an agenda by limiting the presence of elite-serving agenda items or by brandishing their power outside as well as within the political sphere.

Strategic activists may also see one venue that is closed to new agenda items (as problems or as solutions) and then find another venue where their concerns can be better aired. In some ways, this venue shifting helps to explain the long-term power of media organizations in agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw 1972); media organizations were not constrained by the same set of agenda-constraining elites as were, say, legislatures with nonmajoritarian provisions and institutions. Studies of Australian and Canadian politics (Chappell 2002, Pralle 2003) show how feminists and environmentalists have used venue shopping to change and expand the scope of conflict, especially in administrative realms. Howarth & James (2020) show that the delegation of bank reform to an independent commission (a form of venue shifting) in the United Kingdom resulted in “conflict expansion” relative to the agenda-constricting institutionalization of these issues in France and Germany.

Finally, the *Brown v. Board of Education* case from the United States reminds us that certain judicial or nonelectoral elite interventions in a political stream can themselves open up new possibilities, change acceptable vocabularies and methodologies, and thrust new issues upon the table. There is far more to be written about agenda setting by judicial decision, but it is a fair hypothesis—given considerable empirical and legal support by Minow (2010)—that *Brown* democratized the political, social, and other agendas in the United States.

Before I conclude, two caveats are in order. First, all of the mechanisms listed here are *possible* modes of agenda democratization. None of them is a sure-fire way of democratizing the agenda of any given regime, organization, institution, or venue. Put differently, in no case does the observation of one of these processes—the alliance of a movement and a party, the launch of a petitioning

or claims-making campaign, or the development of mass protest activity—qualify as agenda democratizing, absent further analysis. Exploring whether these mechanisms do, in a particular case, serve to democratize agendas is the necessary work of institutional political science.

Second, it is important not to reduce nonelectoral and nonpartisan mechanisms of shaping agendas to what McAdam et al. (2001) have called “contentious politics.” Many of the strategies for agenda democratization combine mechanisms that exist at the interstices of state and society [petitioning, complaint making, hearings and *sunwai* (Kruks-Wisner 2021)], while others involve phenomena properly considered “external” to the state.

EXTENSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS: CONSERVATIVE ADVOCACY, DEMOCRATIZING AGENDA RESTRICTION, AND THE PROBLEM WITH MOVEMENTS

Inspired by Schattschneider’s [1975 (1960)] teachings that the definition of alternatives was the definition of politics, that these shaping activities were the supreme instrument of power, and that essential contestation lay in the scope of conflict, a series of scholars began to connect democracy to agenda setting in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet the study of agenda setting and the study of democracy then began to split and have never been properly wedded. A rich set of empirical and theoretical opportunities exists at the intersection of democratic theory and the study of agenda setting and related processes. This is in part because “agenda” has a broader meaning than often realized; because many democratic political systems have sharply restricted, even nondemocratic agendas; and because agenda democratization forces us to look beyond electoral politics to processes that operate in the social and economic realms and in the interstices of these domains and the state.

First, the vast majority of agenda democratizing represented in empirical and theoretical studies reflects activities on the political left, or more liberalizing tendencies in politics. Exceptions include recent attention to the Tea Party in the United States (Skocpol & Williamson 2012; Woody 2015, pp. 210–13), studies of conservative Christians in the United States (Shields 2009, Schlozman 2015), temperance and prohibition campaigns in nineteenth-century North America (Szymanski 2003, Carpenter 2021) and antitolerance campaigns among conservative Mexican Catholic women (Carpenter 2021). To the extent that gun control and weapons control can be conceived as illiberal or nonliberal programs, these campaigns might also be added to the analysis. Without presuming that these illiberal movements always serve democratizing ends, political science needs to study them more. Our focus on liberal democracy often results in the assumed equation of liberalizing moments with democratizing ones. As harsh critiques of neoliberalism (Brown 2015, Vauchez & France 2021) and thoughtful studies of conservative movements (Shields 2009) remind us, this equation is not sacrosanct.

The possibility of antiliberal agenda democratization raises difficult questions, however. When nativists wish to expand the agenda to advance restrictions upon immigration or curtailment of immigrants’ rights, or when cultural conservatives seek to roll back the acknowledged rights of those with different gender identities, does the idea of agenda democracy always celebrate the advancement of and public discourse on these proposals? The full consideration of these issues is beyond this review, but I would point to the idea of “the plurality of the people,” discussed above. The idea that subsets of people have different interests, needs, perspectives, and rights raises the possibility that a popular but strongly minority-oppressive agenda item might be limited in an equilibrium of democratic agenda setting. Perhaps a healthy sense of social shame or democratic republican virtue (Allen 2004, 2016) might exclude some of these items from an agenda out of concern for the welfare and liberty of others.

Second, the study of agenda democratization occasionally reminds us that “movement” is a catch-call term whose use in analysis needs to be examined and perhaps constrained. Calling

something a movement often assumes what we seek to explain about that entity—assumes a level of cohesion whose incidence should itself be the subject of inquiry—and aggregates a set of activities that should be, in part, disaggregated (Amenta et al. 2010). A series of protests, a petitioning campaign, a slew of public writings dedicated to a new problem or proposition, the founding of new political and social organizations—all of these can shape an agenda, but whether such congeries of activities rise to the level of “movement” requires explanation, not assumption. We should not abandon the term movement, but analysis often requires that we decompose whatever we call a movement and look at its constituent organizations, its campaigns, and its technologies of grievance and protest, reserving the term movement for select combinations of these activities.

Third, the power of labor organizations to restrict agendas in a democratic fashion points to the need to think about what democratic agenda restriction might look like. The debate over neoliberalism (Brown 2015, Vauchez & France 2021) points to one possibility. Recent empirical studies suggest that the congressional agenda of financial deregulation seems to be driven more by campaign contributions than by dialogue between constituent and representative (Witko et al. 2021). Would a more democratic agenda-setting process reduce the weight or frequency of such issues in legislative and administrative deliberation? How would that occur, given the well-known resources and advantages of those forces seeking to place these issues on the agenda?

Whatever its particulars, analysis of agenda democracy as a concept or measure—whether present or absent—breaks down the state/society binary. It connects the institutions of government to the networks and aspirations of citizens, as well as to intermediary institutions such as political movements, civic organizations, labor unions, movements, and petition and complaint institutions. It incorporates society into systematic political analysis without reducing society to a body of voters.

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