

The Policy Agenda

From All Possible Issues to the Shortlist for Action

POSC 315 • Dr. David P. Adams

What Is an Agenda?

- **Agenda:** The list of things being discussed and sometimes acted upon by a political body, the news media, or the public at large.
- Not every issue makes it—most never get close.

Other Ways to Define "Agenda"

1. An **underlying ideological plan** (what someone *really* wants).
2. A **collection of public problems** that come to the attention of the public and officials—includes causes, symbols, solutions.
3. A **concrete list** of bills before a legislature.

Agenda as Shared Beliefs

- A **series of beliefs** about what problems exist and how they should be addressed (government, private, nonprofit, joint action).
- **Hidden agendas:** Distrust in government—"what's their real goal?"
- **Overt agendas:** The stated goals and policy positions.

The Four Levels of the Agenda

1. **Agenda Universe:** The collection of all possible issues.
2. **Systemic Agenda:** Issues the public, media, and government see as meriting attention/action.
3. **Institutional Agenda:** Issues up for serious consideration by a governmental body.
4. **Decision Agenda:** The (very) short list of issues actually acted upon.

Visualizing the Four Levels

- Agenda Universe: *Everything imaginable—climate change, Bigfoot, school lunches, asteroid defense.*
- Systemic Agenda: *The stuff on the public radar—news stories, protests, campaign promises.*
- Institutional Agenda: *What's actually on legislative calendars, agency meetings, city council dockets.*
- Decision Agenda: *What's up for a vote or final action.*

Gatekeeping and Boundaries

- The **boundary** between Systemic Agenda and Agenda Universe is the result of **gatekeeping** by media, politicians, and other actors.
- What's "acceptable" for government to act on changes over time.
- Boundaries are **not static**—they shift with culture, events, scandals, or leadership changes.

Agenda Competition: The Hunger Games

- **There are too many possible problems and too many potential solutions.**
- No society or government can address them all.
- **Competition for attention is fierce.**
- *Substantial competition for limited agenda space.*

Defining Problems: Not for the Faint of Heart

- Getting on the agenda means overcoming:
 - Difficulty and complexity
 - **Competition** from other groups (everyone wants a piece)
 - Controversy and outright conflict

Attention as a Resource

- We live in a world of **imperfect and costly information**.
- Those who can **persuade** and use their power to get attention can shape the agenda.
- **Attention bottlenecks:** There's only so much public/elite focus to go around.

Shifting Attention: Bottlenecks and Priorities

- Major events often shift what gets attention.
- Priorities determine where attention is placed (sometimes overnight).
- The *loudest* or most *symbolically charged* issues rise—others fall away.

Next: Political Power, Groups, and Policy Change

Up next—Who wins the battle for the agenda? How do groups use power, and what does it mean to win or lose in this game?

