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Abstract

This study tests the generalizability of agenda-setting theory in less developed democracies by analyzing data on public opinion, television news coverage, presidential policy, and real-world indicators from Chile between 2000 and 2005. After tracking attention to five different issues—crime, unemployment, health, poverty, and education—we estimate both average and issue-specific agenda-setting effects using time-series, cross-sectional ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions. The results show that there are multidirectional influences between the public, television news, and the president. Both the public and the president appeared responsive to prior news coverage, and while news coverage was not influenced by public attention, it was affected by presidential rhetoric. While these processes differed from one issue to another, overall there was a top-down pattern of agenda adoption: Policy preferences are “negotiated” between the president and the news media, with no noticeable input from the public. From a comparative perspective, the evidence shows that television news in Chile are considerably powerful and that citizens’ priorities are basically ignored by the elites, although their maneuvering is still constrained by objective conditions.

Keywords

agenda setting, public opinion, South America, policymaking, media effects

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A pillar of representative democracy is the linkage between the policy preferences of the public and the preferences of elected officials (Dahl 1989, 1999). Elections—arguably the most visible manifestation of democracy—allow voters to choose politicians who are supposed to deliver what they want in policymaking (Wlezien and Soroka 2007). With the mediatization of the political process, the correspondence between public opinion and public policy depends both on electoral results and media coverage (Cook 1998; Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999). After all, it is through the media that most people learn about governmental activity (B. Cohen 1963; Delli-Carpini and Keeter 1996; Lippmann 1922). Politics in democratic countries can thus be characterized as the process by which public opinion, media, and policymakers communicate their issue priorities, or agendas, to each other. When agendas match, the legitimacy of the political system improves; conversely, when agendas do not match, the incongruity between public preferences and policy responsiveness can undermine citizens' support for regime institutions (Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Walgrave et al. 2008). Studying this process is the aim of agenda-setting research, to which this article seeks to contribute by analyzing the public-media-policy linkages in Chile, a country that has been lauded for its successful democratic transition and impressive economic growth but, nevertheless, is experiencing a growing mass dissatisfaction with, and lack of support for, the political system.¹

An empirical assessment of policy responsiveness to public opinion and the agenda-setting process in general can provide a glimpse into one of the possible causes for the declining support for the political regime in Chile.² By focusing in a less developed democracy, we also aim to extend the generalizability of agenda-setting theory. Countries with higher levels of economic and personal insecurity, centralized political systems, and less diverse mass media such as Chile can provide a novel test for a research paradigm that has been mostly studied from a North American or Western European perspective. Lastly, this article tests the moderating role played by issue attributes in the agenda-setting process. The existing literature shows that policymakers are responsive to public opinion on some issues, while on others there is no such responsiveness (see, e.g., Miller and Stokes 1963). Likewise, it has been found that the media can influence public preferences and political agendas, though not always (e.g., Wanta et al. 1989).³ Thus, we test the utility of Soroka's (2002a, 2002b) issue attributes typology, which subsumes previous issue classifications (e.g., Bartels 1996; Carmines and Stimson 1989; Yagade and Dozier 1990; Zucker 1978) into a single, comprehensive framework and, supposedly, can be applied to "any issue in any democracy" (Soroka 2002b: 265).

To examine all these propositions, we analyze data on public opinion, news coverage, presidential policy, and real-world indicators from Chile between 2000 and 2005, during President Ricardo Lagos's six years in office. Specifically, we measure attention to five different issues—crime, unemployment, health, poverty and education—in the president's annual message to Congress, in the public, and in television news broadcasts and control for objective phenomena using several indicators such as

unemployment rates, crime victimization surveys, and the percentage of people living in poverty.

In the following section, we provide an overview of public opinion trends, news media characteristics, and the political system in Chile between 2000 and 2005. In the next section, we review the existing literature on agenda-setting dynamics and describe Soroka's typology of prominent, sensational, and governmental issues as applied to this study. We then posit specific hypotheses about the directions of influence between presidential policy, news coverage, public preferences, and real-world factors that we test using time-series regression analysis. The last section summarizes and discusses our findings in the context of comparative research on agenda-setting dynamics.

The Chilean Political and Media Systems

Ever since Chile returned to a democratic regime in 1990, following General Augusto Pinochet's seventeen-year dictatorship, it has been portrayed as the "poster child" for democracy in Latin America (Siavelis 2008: 4). High levels of economic growth, successful social policies, low levels of corruption, and a prudent management of the political and macroeconomic processes have led the country to become the region's big success story (Mainwaring and Scully 2008). Somewhat ironically, the center-left Concertación coalition, which won all presidential elections between 1989 and 2006, produced these achievements under the institutional and economic policies bequeathed by Pinochet. As a consequence, to date Chile has one of the strongest presidential systems in Latin America. The executive has exclusive legislative initiative on most policy areas, has a highly hierarchical control of the budget process, and has an array of urgency and veto options over Congress.

Under such a system of "exaggerated presidentialism" (Siavelis 2002), the president is the "*de facto* agenda setter" (Aninat et al. 2006: 6). For instance, the constitution grants the executive sole authority to initiate legislation that requires budget increases or allocation of new funds, giving the president exclusive power over the policy agenda. Although there is evidence of growing congressional influence over presidential policy through informal practices (see Ferraro 2008), the fact remains that the Chilean executive enjoys considerable leeway to define national issue priorities.

In addition to establishing a new institutional framework, Pinochet's dictatorship also transformed the Chilean media system. The wave of free-market policies adopted in the 1970s and 1980s terminated with the traditional links that had existed between the political parties and the press. As Tironi and Sunkel (2000) noted, the media system became subordinated to the dynamics of the market, expanding privatization and internationalization processes. Television became the central medium of information, while the two main newspapers, *El Mercurio* and *La Tercera*, reinforced their dominance over the news industry.

Somewhat surprisingly, neither the commercialization of the media system nor the restoration of democracy translated into a more pluralist, investigative press. Analysts have offered a variety of explanations for this paradox, including the conservative bias

of Chilean advertisers, the lack of financial support for independent journalistic organizations, the close ties between the corporate media and the political elite—particularly *El Mercurio*'s support for center-right parties and the public broadcaster's (TVN) ties with the Concertación administrations—and an environment that sought political consensus above other considerations, such as transparency and accountability (Bresnahan 2003; Dermota 2003; Hughes 2007). From a purely economical perspective, investigative journalism is an expensive endeavor, perhaps too much for a relatively small, market-oriented journalism industry such as Chile's. While all these remain plausible explanations, the notable trend is that Chile has had a mostly passive, "journalistically correct" culture among news professionals (Alves 2005; Otano and Sunkel 2003). Moreover, Chile exhibits a high level of homogeneity in news coverage and an exaggerated dependence on official sources, a common trend among other developing countries and even in the United States and most European countries (e.g., Riffe et al. 1986; Sigal 1973). For instance, a comprehensive content analysis of news stories published by the four main newspapers and the four main news broadcasts between 2000 and 2005 found a rank-order correlation of +.83 in the topics covered across all media (Valenzuela and Arriagada 2009).

The concentration and uniformity of the Chilean media restricts the possibilities for the existence of a mediated public sphere based on political accountability of government (Waisbord 2009). Most importantly, it means that the population is exposed to the same news agenda, increasing the power of the media to influence people's judgments about which topics are of national importance. Empirical evidence of this trend was provided by Dussailant (2005), who found that the mean correlation between the public and media agendas during the 1999 Chilean presidential election was between +.71 and +.97. These figures are well above the average of +.53 found by Wanta and Ghanem (2006) in their meta-analysis of agenda-setting studies conducted in North America, Europe, and Asia (see also Valenzuela and Correa 2009).

Agenda-Setting Theory

The study of agenda setting can be defined as the study of how media, policymakers, and public opinion come to define which topics are worth attending to at any given moment. Due to psychological, material, and time constraints, individuals and institutions cannot pay attention to all issues all the time, but only to a minority of them—usually those that are most salient (McCombs 2004). Thus, three concepts are central to agenda-setting theory: issues, salience, and agendas. Simply put, an issue is "whatever is in contention among a relevant public" (Lang and Lang 1981: 451). It implies that a series of related events have generated a significant amount of concern or discussion. In fact, some observers have noted that within the agenda-setting tradition, issues have an affective component, in that they generally refer to problems or negative aspects of topics (Sheafer 2007; Wlezien 2005). Salience is the level of prominence that an issue has at any given moment in individuals' minds, and therefore, different issues have different levels of salience. When issues are ranked by

their level of salience or relative importance, we can identify an actor's agenda (Dearing 1989: 310).

Existing research shows that agenda-setting theory provides a useful framework to analyze the interactions between citizens, news media, and political actors at the aggregate level. The seminal work by McCombs and colleagues (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Shaw and McCombs 1977; Weaver et al. 1981) and Iyengar and Kinder (1987) firmly established a causal, unidirectional connection between the media agenda and the public agenda. In other words, media coverage provides the public with cues about what are the important issues of the day facing the nation.

This does not mean, however, that the media are equally successful at defining how people think about those issues. There are limits to the power of the media to influence people's perceptions of the political system. In the presence of an officialistic, passive news media such as Chile's, the public may well follow media cues on the salience of the president's issues but nevertheless ignore the favorable coverage ascribed to those issues. This means that the president may be successful at getting the media to cover, say, the government's anticrime policies and have citizens thinking about crime as a key priority. This does not necessarily imply that people will support the president's policies on crime. They may well base their judgments on personal experience (e.g., being mugged while walking in the streets of their neighborhood) and, consequently, rate poorly the government's performance in this area. Over time, citizens may lose their confidence on the government's ability to tackle crime concerns, especially if personal experience contradicts media coverage.

Compared to the media-public nexus, the relationship between the policy agenda and both the public and media agendas has proven to be far more complex (cf. Bartels 1996; J. E. Cohen 1995; Edwards and Wood 1999; Hill 1998; Jennings and John 2009; Peake and Eshbaugh-Soha 2008; Protess et al. 1991). A typical example of the inconclusiveness of research on the media-policy relationship—or policy-agenda setting—is Wanta and colleagues' (1989) examination of the effect of the State of the Union address on the subsequent agenda of the American press. These scholars analyzed several U.S. presidents' official speeches to Congress, including Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, and Ronald Reagan, and found that in two of four instances the media seem to have influenced, rather than followed, the president's agenda. Only in one case—Richard Nixon's 1970 State of the Union address—did the president's agenda of issues correlate more highly with postaddress coverage than with preaddress coverage in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the evening news broadcasts of the three national television networks.

Likewise, the literature about the direction of influence between the public and policy agendas—or collective policy representation research—also finds evidence of a circular pattern. A good example is the thermostatic model of public opinion and policymaking (Wlezien 1995), which formally proposes a dynamic relationship where the public adjusts its preferences for more or less governmental action in response to what policymakers do. When government policies on a given issue increase, public preferences for more policies on that issue decrease; by the same

token, when policies decrease, public preferences for more policies increase. A useful aspect of this model is that it can accommodate for temporal inconsistencies between mass opinion and governmental policy, for which substantial evidence has been collected in Western democracies (e.g., Brooks 1985, 1990), within a framework of long-term congruence.

What model of agenda-setting dynamics could be expected for a country like Chile? Contrary to most of the U.S.-dominated literature, we expect that the pattern of agenda adoption should follow a strict top-down logic, in which presidential policy leads, rather than follows, the media agenda, while the public appears extremely responsive to issue salience cues of the media. This linear, hierarchical model is the exact opposite of the so-called mobilization model (Protest et al. 1991), which assumes an influence and change of public opinion as a necessary step toward public policy reform. At the same time, it is more straightforward than the agenda-building model suggested by the Langs (1981), in which media, government, and citizens reciprocally influence one another.

There are solid reasons for expecting a hierarchical logic of agenda adoption. First, the hierarchical structure of the political system means that whatever the president does or says is extremely newsworthy. This is related to the fact that the news media in Chile seldom take the initiative in deciding what to report and opt to favor the viewpoints of government (Gronemeyer 2002; Puente and Mujica 2006). Second, there is a growing schism between the political elite and the electorate. While this gap is not unique to Chile (see, e.g., Norris 1999), the proportion of people who believe that public officials are not responsive at all to their preferences is truly astounding, reaching close to 80 percent (ICSO-UDP 2008). Lastly, the homogeneity of the media agenda, coupled with the public's dependence on television for news, should lead to a strong influence of the national networks on focusing issue attention. In hypothesis form, our expectations are the following:

Hypothesis 1: The presidential agenda will have a greater effect on the TV agenda than on the public agenda.

Hypothesis 2: The TV agenda will have a greater effect on the public agenda than on the presidential agenda.

Issue Attributes as a Contingent Factor

Predicting that, on average, the agenda-setting process in Chile follows a top-down logic does not preclude the possibility of finding deviations from this pattern. As a consequence of the mixed findings on the media-policy link, several scholars have focused their efforts in mapping the contingent conditions for agenda setting (e.g., Walgrave and Van Aelst 2006). Chief among these moderating influences is the nature of the issues on the agenda.

Several studies have shown that different issues lead to different agenda-setting dynamics (e.g., Bartels 1996; Yagade and Dozier 1990; Zucker 1978). While several

issue typologies have been advanced, Soroka's (2002a) typology of prominent, sensational, and governmental issues has proven to be particularly useful in recent agenda-setting research (e.g., Walgrave et al. 2008). Prominent issues are real-world-driven and have concrete effects on individuals. An example of a prominent issue is inflation; citizens can experience this issue directly, without media information, and politicians have less control over the salience of it. Sensational issues, in contrast, are more removed from daily experience but still have tangible effects for most of the population. Dramatic events that garner substantial media attention, such as school shootings, would fall under this category because they can mobilize policymakers to respond. Lastly, governmental issues are topics that are also unobtrusive but do not have the drama or concrete impact of sensational issues (e.g., electoral reforms and budgetary policy). In this sense, governmental issues are fundamentally policy-driven, rather than media- or real-world-driven.

While Soroka's (2002a) issue typology is comprehensive, it is not without shortcomings. For one thing, the issue types are not mutually exclusive. Crime certainly is a sensational issue when conceived as a crime wave, but it would be a governmental issue when referring to policymakers discussing, say, the salaries of law enforcement agents. In reality, the overlapping of categories is endemic to issue typologies, which by their very nature try to reduce complexity by grouping a vast number of topics and events into few categories. Limitations notwithstanding, we see two strengths in Soroka's typology that make its use desirable in the current study: (1) It subsumes other popular issue types in agenda-setting research, such as Zucker's (1978) categorization of obtrusive and unobtrusive issues; and (2) it has been demonstrated to have predictive power when analyzing the dynamics of public, policy, and media agendas simultaneously (see Soroka 2002a, 2002b; Walgrave et al. 2008).

Consequently, the five issues analyzed in this study have been allocated into one of the three broad categories described by Soroka (2002a) to derive concrete predictions on the direction of influence between presidential policy, media coverage, and public preferences. The issues are the following:

1. *Crime*: Studies in the United States and elsewhere have identified crime as a sensational issue, one that is less directly observable by the population and political elites but still drives substantial attention. We believe this should also hold true for the Chilean case. Our rationale is based on the fact that Chile is one of the safest countries in Latin America (the 2009 Global Peace Index, for instance, ranked the country in the top 20 of safest nations out of 144),⁴ and yet crime garners substantial media attention and has been a leading concern among the public for decades. For instance, one out of five stories aired by the evening news broadcasts between 2000 and 2005 related to law and order issues (Valenzuela and Arriagada 2009), while national surveys have consistently put crime as one of the top three most important problems facing the country (Dammert and Malone 2003).

2. *Unemployment*: As with other economic concerns, unemployment is a typical prominent issue, and we have no reason to suspect that this is otherwise in Chile. Individuals can experience unemployment on a daily basis directly or through interpersonal channels and do not necessarily need policymakers or the media to alert them about it. Moreover, it is a fundamental issue of economic survival and thus has very concrete and tangible consequences. Unemployment was one of the key problems during the period under study and drew substantial attention from the administration led by then-President Ricardo Lagos. The average annual unemployment rate in this period was close to 10 percent. Not surprisingly, public opinion polls showed that unemployment displaced crime as the most important problem for most of the Lagos administration.
3. *Health*: We consider the issue of health to be sensational. The public health sector is a major source for news in Chile and, consequently, receives substantial media attention (particularly in winter periods, when hospitals in the capital city become overwhelmed with patients). The main problem that affects the public health system is the scarcity of resources to improve the quality of attention (Holst et al. 2004). Union activism of medical workers is strong, and every year since the return of democracy there have been massive protests across the country to obtain pay raises and better working conditions in the public system. In 2005, the Lagos administration launched a health care reform, which was strongly resisted initially by both the public and the private sector. The fact that polls showed that this issue gained traction in the public agenda, becoming the third most important concern for Chileans between 2000 and 2005, provides some basis to suspect strong media influence in this issue.
4. *Poverty*: We characterize this topic as a governmental issue. For most Chileans, poverty is an unobtrusive issue; between 2000 and 2006, poverty levels diminished from 20 to 14 percent of the population (Ministerio de Planificación de Chile 2007). While it is barely covered by the national media, it is an important topic for the political elite and has been central during most presidential campaigns. The complex nature of this domain, however, reinforces our notion that poverty should be policy-driven.
5. *Education*: Another governmental issue that, at least in the period under study, should be policy-driven is education. The Chilean public educational system has had complex problems, including pervasive inequalities in educational performance along socioeconomic lines and lack of adequate school funding and infrastructure (Matear 2006; Torche 2005). Despite several reforms, none of the democratic administrations that followed the military regime have been able to resolve these issues. At the same time, education policy does not seem to have immediate, direct consequences on the population, as evidenced by the lack of salience in public opinion polls.

In hypothesis form, the nature of the issues under study should lead to the following pattern of agenda-setting effects:

Hypothesis 3: The presidential agenda will lead the agenda-setting process on governmental issues (poverty and education), will have less impact on sensational issues (crime and health), and will have the least impact in prominent issues (unemployment).

Method

The data used in the study covers the years 2000 to 2005, when Ricardo Lagos, a Social Democrat and founder of the Concertación coalition, was president. By covering the Lagos administration only, we hold constant the agenda-setting power of particular presidents. This is important because previous research has demonstrated that who is in charge of the executive power makes a difference in terms of media and public agenda setting (Johnson et al. 2004; Wanta et al. 1989). Certainly, this comes at the cost of making less generalizable the dynamics we document in this study. Nevertheless, it enables us to back up our inferences based solely on the variables contained in the model. On the other hand, we are also constrained by the availability of data on media content. While earlier (and subsequent) public opinion polls and presidential speeches are available, television news content is not. There is no repository equivalent to the Vanderbilt TV News Archives in Chile. We could have relied on newspapers, which are available from libraries across the country, but television news is the most used source of news for 80 percent of the Chilean public (Cordero and Marín 2005). Consequently, our only alternative was to rely on a publicly available governmental database of television news content covering the period 2000 to 2005 (the data for 2006 to date has not been made available yet).

The Public Agenda

To measure the public's policy preferences, we used public opinion surveys conducted by the Center of Public Studies (or CEP), a nonpartisan, nonprofit academic foundation associated to the International Social Survey Program that conducts the most comprehensive surveys in Chile.⁵ All surveys included a national sample of 1,505 adult respondents interviewed face to face, with an average response rate of 83 percent and a sampling error of plus or minus 2.7 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level.⁶ The surveys used in the analysis were those that most closely preceded and followed each annual presidential address to Congress covering the period 2000 to 2005 (for a similar methodological choice, see J. E. Cohen 1995; Hill 1998).

Most agenda-setting research has operationalized the public agenda by aggregating individual responses to the "most important problem" (MIP) question: "What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?" However, CEP asks the MIP question in a way that most directly addresses governmental policy concerns

by asking the following close-ended question: “¿Cuáles son los tres problemas a los que debería dedicar el mayor esfuerzo en solucionar el gobierno?” (“Which are the three problems which government should work hardest to solve?”). There were fifteen response choices during the period under study, including, of course, our five focal issues: crime, unemployment, health, poverty, and education.⁷ The responses were combined to create a pre- and post-presidential speech measure of the proportion of respondents naming a particular issue.⁸ Taken together, the five issues under scrutiny were the most frequently mentioned by respondents over the period 2000 to 2005 and concentrated 68 percent of the public agenda (crime = 16 percent, unemployment = 17 percent, health = 13 percent, poverty = 13 percent, and education = 9 percent).

The News Media Agenda

The Chilean media system is highly concentrated, both geographically and economically (Bresnahan 2003; Sunkel and Geoffroy 2001). Four television networks based in the capital city, Santiago, dominate the market and constitute the main source of news for the population (Jiménez et al. 2007). While political elites rely mostly on newspapers, a poll conducted among officials in the executive and legislative branches of government indicated that two-thirds of them would choose television as their “ideal” channel to communicate with citizens (ICSO-UDP 2004: 8). Consequently, our analysis relies on television news content.

The Chilean government’s Communications Secretariat (Secom) content analyzed on a daily basis the prime-time news broadcasts of the four main networks (TVN, Canal 13, Megavisión, and Chilevisión) aired between January 1, 2000, and December 31, 2005.⁹ For this study, we used the Secom data collected daily in the month before and the month after the annual presidential speech to Congress (from April 20 to May 20 and May 22 to June 22 of each year, respectively). The choice of a one-month window was based on previous research, which indicates that the median time span for the appearance of agenda-setting effects is four weeks (McCombs 2004: 46–47; Wanta and Hu 1994).

The unit of measurement was the individual news story. Secom classified each story into one of thirty-nine issue categories. The categories that covered different aspects of our five focal issues were aggregated into the same category. Considering that previous research has found that the issue agendas of the four networks are highly correlated (see Valenzuela and Arriagada, 2009), we aggregated the stories of each network by topic to produce a single television agenda. The total sample size was 10,719 aired network news (crime = 5,483, unemployment = 1,501, health = 2,157, poverty = 587, and education = 991).

The Presidential Policy Agenda

While the public and the media agendas are relatively straightforward in their measurement, finding a unique measure of the policy agenda is considerably trickier.

Researchers distinguish between symbolic and substantive agendas, that is, between issues that require rhetorical effort (e.g., speeches and hearings) and issues that require action and reallocation of resources (e.g., legislation and government spending) (Edelman 1964; Pritchard 1992). Evidence from the United States and Europe suggests that the symbolic agenda is more responsive to public opinion and media than the substantive agenda (e.g., Edwards and Wood 1999; Pritchard and Berkowitz 1993; Walgrave et al. 2008).

Considering that we are interested in assessing the role of public opinion and media in setting the national issue agenda, we focused on the symbolic aspect of the presidential agenda as represented by the annual statement of the government's legislative priorities, read at the beginning of a new session of Congress. Known in Chile as "Mensaje Presidencial del 21 de Mayo" ("Presidential Message of May 21"), it is partly a shopping list of the issue priorities that the president wants Congress to address and partly an account of the administration's policy achievements. Most importantly, it is closely followed by the media, which use it as a statement of policy intentions upon which to evaluate the objectives and performance of government. There is an agreement between the association of broadcasters, Anatel, and the office of the presidency, Segpres, to transmit the speech in a voluntary simulcast over the main television networks. Several radios also join the simulcast. The metropolitan newspapers usually include a transcript of the speech and display the main presidential announcements in their front page. The hype surrounding the speech also manifests itself in public opinion polls sponsored by media organizations, both before the speech (to provide a guide on the topics people want the president to address) as well as after it (to report on citizens' reactions to the announcements). For that matter, it is the Chilean equivalent of the State of the Union Address in the United States, the Throne Speech in Canada, and the Queen's Speech in the United Kingdom—all widely employed surrogates of governmental policy in agenda-setting research (e.g., Gilberg et al. 1980; Hill 1998; Soroka 2002a; Wanta et al. 1989).

Each line of the six presidential speeches given between 2000 and 2005 was assigned to one of the fifteen issue categories employed to measure the public agenda.¹⁰ Because the length of the messages changed from year to year, the proportion of lines dedicated to each focal topic was divided by the total number of lines of the text.¹¹ In total, 5,278 lines were coded, 45 percent of which mentioned at least one of the five issue domains (crime = 5 percent, unemployment = 19 percent, health = 6 percent, poverty = 4 percent, and education = 10 percent). The remainder portion of the speeches was dedicated to other policy issues and symbolic content such as mentions to national identity, historical events, and moral appeals to citizens.

Real-World Factors

The relationships between media, public, and policy agendas are affected by real-world circumstances. Consequently, studies on agenda-setting dynamics need to take into account objective conditions (Behr and Iyengar 1985; Soroka 2002b). For some

issues, real-world indicators are relatively straightforward. Unemployment was gauged with the monthly unemployment rate, corrected for seasonal variations, as calculated by the Chilean Central Bank.¹² The crime phenomena was assessed using national victimization surveys, which are better indicators of criminal activity than police reports (Jones and Baumgartner 2005: 218). For the period under study, these surveys were conducted every other quarter by Paz Ciudadana, a private, nonpartisan organization.¹³ Poverty is another issue with a relatively straightforward indicator. The Chilean government conducts extensive surveys every other year to measure the population living under the poverty line, and we used these data in the statistical analyses.

For the other issues, however, finding a simple, readily available indicator is more complicated. In the Chilean case, several public opinion surveys show that most people relate the issue of health to administrative problems in the public health sector (e.g., attention waiting times), rather than to mortality trends or diseases (CEP 2002). However, indicators of health system performance are directly affected by public spending, which means that indicators such as the number of doctors per capita are endogenous with the policy agenda. Hence, we opted for the annual mortality rate,¹⁴ which is a widely used proxy to assess the level of health in a country, although we acknowledge that it may not be the most sensible indicator for an agenda-setting study. We encountered a similar problem with education, a complex domain for which a variety of real-world indicators exist. Considering that the quality of primary and secondary education has been a contentious issue in the public agenda for the past decade, we decided to employ an indicator that measured students' academic attainment. Specifically, we relied on the results of the SIMCE, a standardized test used in Chilean primary and secondary schools that measures language, math, and science.¹⁵

To accommodate the fact that our real-world indicators had different units of measurement, each of them was first standardized into a 0 to 100 scale by dividing each observation by the single highest score attained by each issue in the time series. For instance, crime victimization was highest for 2004, so that the figure of real-world for crime is 100 for 2004. For 2001, in turn, that figure is 76, because that year crime victimization was 24 percent lower than in 2004 (for a similar process, see Jones and Baumgartner 2005). The standardization also allowed us incorporate real-world cues as a single variable, an important consideration when working with small samples such as ours. The time-dependent nature of the analysis obliged us to choose measurements at two different time points, one that most closely preceded the presidential speech and another that most closely followed the presidential speech (again, this methodological choice was borrowed from J. E. Cohen [1995] and Hill [1998]).

Statistical Analysis

We estimated different variations of a basic time-series model in which the salience of an issue in a particular agenda is explained—where possible—by its lagged values as well as by the lagged values of issue salience in the other agendas.¹⁶ Although

previous longitudinal agenda-setting studies (e.g., Gonzenbach and McGavin 1997) have employed more sophisticated time-series techniques, including Autoregressive Integrated Moving Average (ARIMA), Vector Autoregression (VAR), and Error Correction (ECM) models, the reduced number of time points and the relatively large number of independent variables obliged us to rely on OLS regressions. Specifically, we pooled the data for each issue to form a panel and then ran time-series, cross-sectional OLS (fixed-effects models) with panel-corrected standard errors (Beck 2001; Beck and Katz 1995).

The coefficients of our first set of estimations indicate the average effect of each agenda on another and, thus, provide a general pattern of agenda-setting dynamics, as predicted by Hypotheses 1 and 2. To explore differences across issues, the substance of Hypothesis 3, we conducted a second set of estimations that include an interaction between each independent variable and a dummy variable representing each of the five issues. In this case, there is a unique coefficient for the effects of each agenda on crime, unemployment, health, poverty, and education (for a similar statistical setup, see Walgrave et al. [2008: 828]). Diagnostic tests for serial correlation were also performed to ensure that our model did not violate the assumptions of OLS regression. All the data were analyzed with GRETL (version 1.8.0), a free, open-source software for econometric and time-series analysis.¹⁷

Results

Figure 1 illustrates the evolution in the attention that each the five issues under study garnered from the media, the public, and the president's annual speech to Congress between 2000 and 2005. Here, we have standardized all the observations into Z-scores to show the different agendas within the same graphs. As can be seen from the panels tracking the issues of crime and poverty, both the television news agenda and presidential agenda followed each other somewhat closely. In the case of unemployment, real-world figures and public attention also matched, as could be expected. In the issue of education, the news agenda showed some correlation with the public agenda. For health, however, it is hard to discern an underlying structure in the movement of the series.

To assess the general patterns of agenda-setting dynamics in Chile in a more formal fashion than mere eyeballing, Table 1 provides the results of our first set of estimations using pooled data. First, we see that the regression models do a good job at explaining variance of each agenda and do not suffer from serial autocorrelation problems. These findings are not terribly surprising, considering the relatively small sample size and the inclusion of lagged values of the dependent variables. The only exception to this trend is the model predicting presidential attention, which has the lowest *R*-squared and exhibits some positive autocorrelation. While we cannot rule out alternative explanations, it is likely that this model is underspecified due to the lack of control for alternative sources of presidential policy (e.g., ideology, budgetary conditions, etc.). There are two additional noteworthy patterns: (1) Real-world factors had a significant

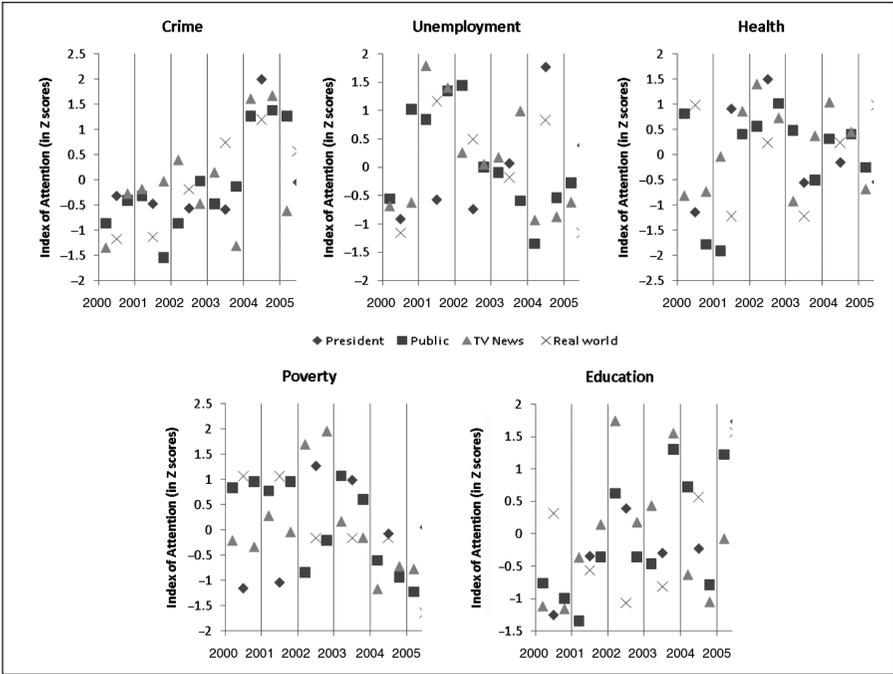


Figure 1. Issue salience by agenda (Chile, 2000-2005)

effect on both the media and public opinion, confirming the necessity of incorporating objective conditions into the agenda-setting equation; and (2) the public’s policy preferences do not seem to have had any effect on either the media or the presidential agenda—hinting at our expectation that the agenda-setting process in Chile follows a hierarchical, top-down pattern.

We now turn to Hypothesis 1, which predicted that presidential attention to policy issues would have a greater impact on the media agenda than on the public agenda. The results in Table 1 provide limited support to this hypothesis. As we anticipated, the annual presidential address to Congress influenced subsequent television content, but it did not have a significant effect on public opinion. However, against our expectations, we also found that the presidential agenda was responsive to prior television coverage. Furthermore, the reciprocal-influence process between the news media and the president was not symmetrical: The relationship between presidential attention and subsequent television content was far weaker than the relationship between prior television content and subsequent presidential attention. As can be gleaned from the regression coefficients, one hundred additional news stories about the five focal issues in the month preceding the speech led to an average increase of 1 percent in the president’s attention to these issues. On the other hand, a 1 percent increase in presidential

Table 1. General Agenda-Setting Dynamics in Chile (2000-2005)

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables				
	Prespeech Public Agenda	Prespeech TV News Agenda	Presidential Speech	Postspeech Public Agenda	Postspeech TV News Agenda
Real-world indicators	0.19*** (0.05)	5.29*** (1.73)	-0.070 (0.07)	0.10* (0.06)	-0.71 (2.00)
Prespeech public agenda	—	—	-0.05 (0.20)	0.08 (0.17)	6.28 (6.52)
Prespeech TV news agenda	—	—	0.01*** (0.00)	0.02** (0.01)	0.50*** (0.12)
Presidential speech	—	—	—	0.11 (0.14)	13.75*** (4.88)
R ² /Adjusted R ²	.89/.86	.89/.87	.45/.27	.90/.86	.94/.92
DW statistic	1.85	2.19	1.55	1.45	1.75

N = 30. Cell entries are unstandardized regression coefficients from time-series, cross-sectional ordinary least squares (OLS; fixed-effects models) with panel-corrected standard errors in parentheses.

p* < .10. *p* < .05. ****p* < .01 (one-tailed).

attention to these issues led to an average increase of fourteen stories aired in the subsequent month about the same topics.

These results also mean that Hypothesis 2, predicting that the television agenda would have a greater effect on the public than on the president, received qualified support only. On one hand, we anticipated and found that the mass public was quite responsive to television news and, in a lesser degree, to objective events. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, the networks seemed to be quite successful at setting the agenda of the president's annual speech to Congress. One possible interpretation for this finding is that only the "symbolic" agenda of the president was included, not the more substantive agenda of budgetary policy, which is more resilient to media influence. Another possibility is that media influence is extremely large in a particular issue only, while the president remains as the main agenda-setter in other issue domains. Examining this latter question is the purpose of Hypothesis 3, which considers systematic variations in the agenda-setting process across issues.

More specifically, we expected that presidential emphasis would have the greatest influence in focusing attention to poverty and education (governmental issues), have less influence in crime and health (sensational issues), and have the least influence in unemployment (a type of prominent issue). The results in Table 2 are not clear-cut but provide some support to this hypothesis. Compared to the other issues, presidential impact was biggest in poverty and much weaker in health and unemployment, as expected. Media attention to health issues had a significant effect on public opinion, consistent with our expectation that in Chile this topic has a more "sensational" connotation than in the

Table 2. Agenda-Setting Dynamics in Chile by Issue (2000-2005)

Issues	IV: Prespeech TV News Agenda / DV: Public Agenda	IV: Prespeech TV News Agenda / DV: Presidential Speech	IV: Presidential Speech / DV: Postspeech TV News Agenda
Crime	-0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	35.68** (15.21)
Unemployment	0.01 (0.01)	0.02*** (0.00)	9.60 (11.80)
Health	0.02** (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	19.34 (17.55)
Poverty	0.00 (0.01)	0.04* (0.03)	8.66* (5.58)
Education	0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.03)	7.68 (7.29)
Real-world indicators	0.12** (0.06)	-0.06 (0.08)	-1.16 (1.71)
Prespeech public agenda	0.11 (0.16)	-0.11 (0.20)	5.78 (6.40)
Prespeech TV news agenda	—	—	0.55*** (0.13)
Presidential speech	0.15 (0.14)	—	—
R ² /Adjusted R ²	.91/.85	.51/.21	.95/.91
DW statistic	1.51	1.31	1.78

N = 30. Cell entries are unstandardized regression coefficients from time-series, cross-sectional ordinary least squares (OLS; fixed-effects models) with panel-corrected standard errors in parentheses.

IV = independent variable; DV = dependent variable. Issues = interaction between each independent variable and a dummy variable representing each of the five focal issues.

p* < .10. *p* < .05. ****p* < .01 (one-tailed).

United States and Canada. But contrary to what we had anticipated, the effect of presidential attention to crime was rather large, while its influence in education was negligible.

Most importantly, news coverage of unemployment preceded attention to this issue by the president, perhaps as a consequence of the media being able to grasp first the unemployment figures that are usually made available at the beginning of each month. Because of the large size of this coefficient ($p < .01$), it could be that it was news coverage of this issue that explains the asymmetrical, reciprocal relationship between the president and television news. To formally test for this possibility, we rerun the analysis reported in Table 1, this time excluding the issue of unemployment. What we found was that the results remained basically unchanged, that is, media effects were larger than we initially expected, even after controlling for the particularities of each issue. This conclusion is bolstered by another piece of evidence included in Table 2: The prespeech news agenda was highly predictive of the postspeech news agenda. This suggests that there was a strong inertia in television content; what television news crews covered one month was more influenced by what they covered the month before than by what the president said or emphasized in between.

In conclusion, using Soroka's typology of governmental, prominent, and sensational issues, we correctly anticipated who led and who followed the agenda on two issues only: poverty and unemployment. As a governmental issue, attention on poverty was led by the president. For a prominent issue such as unemployment, the

president did not influence the media; nor did the media have a noticeable impact on the public. For health, there was evidence that it behaved as a sensational issue, in which the news agenda exerted a strong influence on the public, but the expected effects on presidential policy were not significant. Crime and education, if anything, showed the opposite effects of those anticipated.

Discussion

Summary of Findings

This study set out to provide an initial assessment of the dynamics between public opinion, television news, and presidential policy in Chile, controlling for real-world circumstances. Our purpose was threefold: (1) to test the utility of an agenda-setting framework outside the well-known cases of the United States and Western European countries, (2) to measure empirically the level of policy responsiveness to public opinion and media content, and (3) to test the moderating role of issue characteristics in the overall process of agenda adoption.

Based on the exaggerated form of presidentialism that characterizes the Chilean political system, coupled with the weak governmental accountability exercised by the news media and the public's strong dependence on television for information, we had expected a straightforward, top-down logic of agenda adoption: In general, the president sets the media agenda of national issue priorities, which, in turn, influences the public agenda. The results provide support for this pattern but with an important modification: The media, oftentimes, leads the presidential agenda.

We can think of several possible explanations for this finding. One is that the president uses the news media as a surrogate for the public agenda, an idea advanced in the United States by Sigal (1973) and others. Thus, the president seeks to be responsive to public opinion by following the lead of the media agenda. Another possibility is that the president deliberately succeeds at sparking media interest in certain issues before the annual speech to Congress to create momentum for the legislative priorities. If that were the case, then what appears as a media effect on presidential policy would be, in truth, an artifact created by presidential policy. Conversely, the media may appear to lead policy simply because they have correctly anticipated changes in the president's priorities from year to year, rather than causing these changes. In this sense, the time-series nature of the data does not allow us to fully sort out this quandary. A third cause for the asymmetrical relationship between television news and presidential attention could be related to the time frame of analysis. Perhaps six years is too short of a period for a comprehensive analysis of policy responsiveness. Unfortunately, the lack of archived media content in Chile severely constrained the alternative of using pre-2000 data. Lastly, we focused exclusively on the symbolic or rhetorical presidential agenda, rather than on the more substantive agenda contained in official decrees, budgetary proposals, and other legal decisions. It is likely that on these substantive areas of policymaking, media influence is less noticeable.

Compared to the reciprocal causation between the media and the policy agendas, the lack of noticeable impact exerted by the Chilean public opinion is striking. The results of the study suggest that policy preferences seem to be “negotiated” between the president and the media, with no noticeable input from the public. Although their maneuvering is still constrained by objective conditions, from a comparative perspective the media in Chile are quite powerful. Contrary to the mobilization model of agenda setting, here we see that collective preferences do not guide media coverage or presidential attention. In our view, this pattern of politics without citizens has troublesome normative implications. Strong democracies require some level of consistency between the policy concerns of the public and the attention provided to those concerns by both government and media. The malaise against the political system the several polls in the past few years have shown among the Chilean electorate could well be an effect of this missing link between the agendas of political elites and the public.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

All studies are constrained by the data and methods employed, and ours is no exception. While we would have also liked to run a more fine-grained analysis, including additional observations, we were constrained by the paucity of data tracking the Chilean presidential policy agenda. Contrary to the United States and its Public Papers of the President database, for the period under study there is no publicly available repository of presidential activity. Alternatively, we could have used the content analysis to track presidential activity, but that would have created a problem of endogeneity between the media agenda and the presidential agenda. Under these circumstances, our best course of action was to rely on the annual address to Congress, which is completely dominated by the president but, obviously, occurs only once a year.

Certainly, we could have used additional polls and media content data to model traditional agenda-setting effects, but that would have excluded from the analysis the presidential agenda, the lowest-frequency available data. In our view, this would have implied throwing the baby out with the bath water: To increase sample size and use more sophisticated time-series analysis, we would have eliminated the president’s speeches to Congress—a key ingredient of the media-public-influence model. One solution to this problem could be to extrapolate the policy agenda annual data into shorter time spans (monthly or quarterly), as Rogers and colleagues did (1991), but this would create worse problems, such as producing a highly autocorrelated series. All this is to say that some of the results reported in this study should be interpreted as exploratory and that replicating and extending these findings is a necessary step for future research.

Limitations notwithstanding, the study has several contributions to the existing literature on the media-public-policy link. Previous research in the United States and elsewhere has found similar patterns of agenda adoption as those reported here, namely, the media and the executive codetermine the national agenda. In this regard, the contribution of this study lies in providing further evidence that the news media

can also exert a unique, independent influence on the national political agenda in emerging democracies. This is remarkable, considering the hierarchical nature of the media-policy connection in Chile, where media professionals are often regarded as mere stenographers of the powers that be. Future research needs to explore the consequences of top-down logics of agenda setting for citizens' attitudes and behaviors towards the political system. Certainly, the causes of political cynicism and lack of support for regime performance are not endemic to Chile and can be traced to several nonpolitical factors, such as economic performance. However, the lack of responsiveness of the president to the public's policy preferences is one potential candidate that could explain the growing dissatisfaction with the political system.

A second contribution of this study lies in providing a comprehensive test of the moderating role of issue attributes using Soroka's typology. Here, again, the evidence partially supported our expectations. As we anticipated, presidential impact was biggest for poverty, a governmental issue, while media attention was greatest for health, a sensational issue. News coverage also led the agenda-setting process of unemployment, a prominent issue that is real-world-driven. However, the other two issues—crime and education—did not follow our expectations. Particularly surprising was the fact that crime appeared to be policy-driven, a finding for which we cannot readily find an explanation. In any case, the limited success in the application of Soroka's issue typology should still be a cause of optimism for those interested in reaching a more parsimonious account of the moderating role of issue types on the agenda-setting process. This article presents additional evidence that such a typology needs to be refined to make it more useful.

In sum, this study finds that an agenda-setting framework can successfully map public-media-policy links in less advanced democracies, shows a strong inconsistency between the issues priorities of the mass public with those of the political and media elites, and suggests that general patterns of agenda building are affected by the nature of the issues at hand.

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Notes

1. According to the 2007 Latinobarómetro poll, only 46 percent of the population in Chile was highly supportive of democracy, while the figures for Costa Rica and Uruguay—countries that are usually grouped with Chile as the most successful democracies of Latin America—were 83 and 75 percent, respectively.
2. We decided to focus on one country to control for cross-national differences in media systems, institutional arrangements, and cultural values, all of which are known to affect agenda-setting processes (Walgrave et al. 2008; Walgrave and Van Aelst 2006). However, we try to adopt a comparative perspective by contrasting our results with the existing literature from advanced democratic systems.
3. Perhaps the best example is the Lewinsky scandal during the U.S. presidency of Bill Clinton; despite news coverage that has been described as “all Monica, all the time” (Williams and Delli Carpini 2004: 1221), the public did not regard the scandal as an important issue when evaluating Clinton (Kiousis 2003; Shah et al. 2002; Zaller 1998).
4. <http://www.visionofhumanity.org/gpi/results/chile/2009/>.
5. By relying on the surveys of the same organization, we avoid the problem of combining items with different question wordings, which may or may not affect the internal validity of the measurements. On the other hand, to our knowledge, the Center of Public Studies (CEP) is the only polling organization in Chile that makes its data freely available to researchers.
6. Details about sampling procedures, questionnaires, documentation, and other data are available at www.cepchile.cl.
7. The other issues were inflation, corruption, human rights, environment, drugs, salaries, infrastructure (e.g., transportation, roads, and bridges), housing, judicial system, and constitutional reforms. Although inflation and salaries could have been added to employment to create a category of economic issues, it is a well-known economic fact that concerns about unemployment are inversely proportional to concerns about rising prices. In addition, inflation and salaries were not nearly as mentioned as a problem of governmental concern compared to employment, which suggests that Chileans identify the economic issue most closely with jobs and employment. The average frequency of the five most mentioned topics not included in the study was as follows: salaries = 8 percent, drugs = 6 percent, housing = 4 percent, inflation = 3 percent, corruption = 3 percent, and other topics = 7 percent.
8. Because respondents could mention up to three responses, the percentages of responses for each issue were added and then divided by three, to create a normalized measure ranging from 0 to 100.
9. There were no data available for Chilevisión before June 1, 2000. To check if the missing data affected our ability to estimate media effects on the public and policy agendas, we conducted a correlational analysis between the four networks for the remaining period and found that the agendas of each network were highly correlated ($r > .80$). Thus, we are confident that the television agenda for the year 2000 would not differ substantially had we included the missing news stories from Chilevisión.

10. When a single line mentioned more than one issue, we allocated the topics using a proportional method. For instance, if a line mentioned unemployment only, this topic was counted as 1. If it mentioned unemployment and crime, then each topic was counted as .5. And if it mentioned three topics, each of them was counted as .33.
11. To ensure the comparability of the speeches, we first downloaded the texts from the Chilean Library of Congress (http://www.bcn.cl/susparlamentarios/mensajes_presidenciales) and then converted each of them into an MS Word document with 1-inch margins, typeset in 12-point size and Times New Roman font.
12. Data available from http://si2.bcentral.cl/Basededatoseconomicos/951_455.asp?f=M&s=T_DES_N_DES_INE.
13. Data available from <http://www.pazciudadana.cl/pubs.php?show=AEC>.
14. Data available from http://deis.minsal.cl/deis/ev/mortalidad_general/series/consulta04.asp.
15. Data available from http://www.simce.cl/index.php?id=262&no_cache=1.
16. Concurrent values of issue salience are not included in the models. This was done on purpose because a basic requirement of causality is that the cause has to precede in time the effect, which in this case suggests that an agenda has to precede in time another agenda to determine if it had an independent effect on it. However, we acknowledge that it is more than likely that contemporaneous or very short-term associations between agendas exist. To the extent that we miss concurrent relationships, then, our statistical tests are conservative and biased against finding significant effects.
17. Program and documentation can be downloaded from <http://gret1.sourceforge.net/>.

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