THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENTS IN LEGISLATIVE AGENDA SETTING
WORKSHOP PROPOSAL FOR THE GRENA DA ECPR-MEETING, APRIL 2005

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The proposal aims at investigating in detail the mechanisms by which governments in different
countries of Europe (both of the West and of the East) determine the agendas of their
Corresponding parliaments. It is located in the intersection of two different literatures. The first
is new institutionalism of the rational choice variety. The second is the literature on the decline
of parliaments.

The whole purpose of the new institutionalist literature is to demonstrate that institutions
"matter", that is, that they affect outcomes in predictable ways. One particular institution that
has had a determinant role in the development of the rational choice component of new
institutionalism, was agenda setting: Indeed, since the discovery by McKelvey (1976) and
Schofield (1978) that simple majority rule can generate cycles among alternatives covering the
whole policy space, political scientists have tried to understand why there was a discrepancy
between the "chaos" predicted by theories and the actual stability of policy results in most
polities (including parliamentary and presidential systems). The general answer provided by the
theoretical literature is that we do not observe chaos (alternatives being upset all the times by
cycling) because of particular institutional structures as well because of the fact that political
actors are strategic (Shepsle (1979), Shepsle and Weingast (1984), Krehbiel (1991), Baron and
Ferejohn (1989) etc.). In fact in each theoretical piece of this literature an additional institution,
or combination of institutions is pointed out that accounts for some particular result.

While this theoretical literature is very well developed, it is fair to say that there is a lack of
investigation of McKelvey's intuition: McKelvey (1976) interpreted his cycling results as an
indication of the quasi-dictatorial powers of the agenda setter. However, to our knowledge, this
intuition has not been developed further: What are the means by which different agenda setters
establish and enlarge their powers? The explanation for this lack of empirical development may
be quite simple. In the United States agenda setting is divided among different institutions (for
example the speaker of the house, the rules committee, and the committee with jurisdiction over
a bill).

The decline of parliaments literature often takes normative tones and laments the decline of
Parliaments, without pinpointing the specific areas where this decline has occurred (Bryce 1921,
Wheare 1963, Beer 1966). Originally, the development of disciplined party groups, as well as
the growing practice of delegating legislative power to the executive bureaucracy, were seen as features undermining representative assemblies. However, a detailed comparison of parliamentary functions from the beginning of the twentieth century until today reveals that it is not primarily the vote of laws or the control of governments that has declined over time, but the control of the parliamentary agenda has shifted into the hands of the government.

The methods that governments may use to control parliamentary agendas may take several different forms:

**TIME CONSTRAINTS:** Government proposals may have priority over parliamentary ones; in addition it may be possible for governments to restrict time for discussion to a level that hinders or prohibits the introduction of amendments.

**CLOSED RULES:** No amendments to government proposals are accepted; proposals from the government, under this regime, have to be either accepted or rejected without any revisions by members of parliament.

**RESTRICTIVE RULES:** Few amendments accepted (for example, introduction of germaneness requirements, or restriction to amendments that increase spending or reduce revenues).

**EXPANSIVE RULES («LAST-OFFER AUTHORITY»):** Permitting the government to make amendments that are prohibited to other parties.

**SEQUENCING RULES:** Permitting the government to make amendments at times when other amendments are not permitted, like the Italian Government can make amendments right before the final vote.

**VOTING ORDER RULES:** The governmental bill (rather than the proposal from the committee) gain a privileged position in the order of voting (and also in the deliberative process before voting takes place).

**VOTE-COUNTING:** Votes in favor or against government proposals are counted differently than other proposals.

**GATEKEEPING RULES:** It is possible for the government to close the gates and thereby to hold an issue away from consideration by the parliament.

**ATTRIBUTION OF EXCLUSIVE JURISDICTION TO THE GOVERNMENT:** Executive decrees can be offered to the government by the constitution (France) by a general act of Parliament (Italy) or by specific votes in parliament each time that the government requests it.

We want papers to investigate which ones of the instruments of agenda control exist in a country. In addition papers should report interesting stories concerning how and why these rules were accepted, or how they were applied in a creative way by different governments. Participants will preferably be nationals of each country we cover. Only if nationals of one country are absent will we accept coverage by nationals from another country. The workshop may lead to the publication of a volume with the same title.
Likely participants would be scholars interested in legislative studies and executive-legislative relations. We also welcome papers applying rational choice models.

The workshop has been endorsed by the ECPR Standing Group on Parliament as well as the Analytical Politics and Public Choice Standing Group.

REFERENCES


Biographical note:

**George Tsebelis,** Professor, Department of Political Science, University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). He is the author of numerous articles on political institutions. His articles has appeared in professional Journals as *American Political Science Review, British Journal of Political Science, Rationality and Society* and *Journal of Theoretical Politics.* He is the author of "*Nested Games: Rational Choice in Comparative Politics*" (University of California Press, 1990), *Bicameralism* (with Jeanette Money; Cambridge University Press, 1997), and *Veto Players* (Princeton University Press, 2002).

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