

Abstract

Agenda-setting dynamics are widely acknowledged as a combination of issue definitions and venues. Although venues have been receiving significant scholarly attention, the concept of issue definition is poorly developed and lacks operationalization. This PhD thesis therefore offers an analytical framework for issue definition encompassing three attributes (substance, salience, and framing), drawing on the interdisciplinary agenda-setting literature and interconnecting the debate of issue definitions with issue hierarchization. The proposed framework aims to contribute to the punctuated equilibrium theory by identifying what issues are defined through negative feedback (self-corrective mechanisms) and what issues are through positive feedback (shifts). The agenda of the European Council from 2014 to 2022 (the last two constellations of the European Union) is analyzed by applying the qualitative methodological approach. The findings show that the effect of positive feedback determines primary issues, i.e., the most salient issues on the agenda, and that negative feedback is connected to issues at all positions within the issue hierarchization, i.e., the negative feedback also generates primary issues. The research exposes that the feedback determining issue definitions influences which issues are on the agenda and how they are discussed.