

Gestión y Análisis de Políticas Públicas, número 33, noviembre de 2023
Sección: RECENSIONES
Recibido: 24-07-2023
Aceptado: 24-07-2023
Publicado: 03-11-2023
ISSN: 1989-8991 – DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24965/gapp.11248>
Páginas: 123-125



Referencia: Palau Roque, A. M. (2023). Edoardo Guaschino: Regulators as Agenda-Setters: How National Agencies Shape Public Issues. *Gestión y Análisis de Políticas Públicas*, 33, 123-125. <https://doi.org/10.24965/gapp.11248>

Edoardo Guaschino: Regulators as Agenda-Setters: How National Agencies Shape Public Issues

Palau Roque, Anna M.

Universitat de Barcelona. Departamento de Ciencia Política (España – Spain)

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3473-1114>

apalau@ub.edu

NOTA BIOGRÁFICA

Anna M. Palau es doctora en Ciencia Política, Profesora agregada Serra Húnter en la Universitat de Barcelona (Departamento de Ciencia Política) y miembro del grupo de investigación Q-Dem (www.q-dem.com). Su investigación se centra en el análisis del comportamiento parlamentario y las políticas públicas, en concreto el proceso de establecimiento de la agenda política.

RESUMEN

Recensión del libro de Edoardo Guaschino, *Regulators as Agenda-Setters: How National Agencies Shape Public Issues*, Routledge, 2022, 176 pp.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Establecimiento de la agenda; priorización de problemas; agendas reguladoras.

ABSTRACT

Review of the book from Edoardo Guaschino, *Regulators as Agenda-Setters: How National Agencies Shape Public Issues*, Routledge, 2022, 176 pp.

KEYWORDS

Agenda setting; issue attention; regulatory agencies.

Edoardo Guaschino is postdoctoral researcher in political science at the University of Lausanne (Switzerland) and coordinator of the Tigre (Trust in Governance and Regulation in Europe) project. He obtained his PhD also at the University of Lausanne. His research interests and journal publications include issues related to regulatory agencies and framing.

In *Regulators as Agenda-Setters: How National Agencies Shape Public Issues* Guaschino provides a new, fresh perspective to agenda setting research. It looks at the agenda-setting role of increasingly relevant political actors –regulatory agencies– that have been almost ignored by previous research on the topic. Even though agencies have gained substantial amount of power in most countries in recent decades, being part of an important process of change in the modes of governance, the agenda-setting literature still focus disproportionately on the analysis of governments, parliaments and the media. With the goal of covering this research gap, the book addresses three main questions. First, it wants to explain the agenda setting capacity of these agencies, namely the mechanisms and strategies through which they influence the entry of issues into the political and the definition of policy problems. Second, it looks at the conditions under which these agencies behave as policy entrepreneurs in order to ensure that they preferences are considered along the

decisions making process. Third, it wants to illustrate which knowledges do agencies mobilize and how do they use evidence to justify policy choices.

To address these questions the book merges two different types of literatures, one related to regulatory agencies and the other on agenda setting. Methodologically it relies on mixed-methods strategy and on a cross national and cross sectorial approach. To guarantee the robustness and validity of results, the analysis relies on different data sources and levels of analysis. The author administered a questionnaire to 35 agencies in the OECD countries in two sectors: food safety and environmental policy. The case selection is based on the characteristics of these issues: low salient and highly technical. A key element of the book then, is to explore how decisions are taken regarding «discreet arenas». An original contribution is the development of a new index to measure the involvement of agencies in agenda setting based on the information collected through this questionnaire. Departing from this data, the meso-level analysis is based on a fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA). The micro-level analysis is oriented to provide a more detailed analysis following a qualitative approach and the analysis of three selected agencies (the Italian Institute for Environmental Research, the French Agency for Food, Environmental and Occupational Health and Safety, and the Food and Standard Administration in the UK). The goal is to validate the pertinence of conditions previously tested with the fsQCA, consider additional variables that could not be included in this analysis, and to further illustrate the institutional strategies that these agencies use to influence the political agenda. The author collected also additional data through semi-structured interviews, direct observation and agency reports. The author's rigor in the application of qualitative techniques is impressive. For this reason, the methodological part of the book, which to me works almost as a best practice guide in the field, should be read by anyone interested in this type of methodology (or in the combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques).

The book is organized in five chapters. Following the introduction, chapter 2 provides an excellent literature review on agenda-setting, with special emphasis on the process of issue definition and the role of policy entrepreneurs. Even though not oriented to provide a comprehensive literature review, the author makes an excellent use of references and summarizes brightly the main concepts and ideas behind agenda setting research. This chapter also explains the role of regulatory agencies in the policy-making process identifying some of the research gaps that the book is oriented to address, such as the conditions under which agencies are likely to get involved in the process of agenda setting. Chapter 3 goes into the empirical analysis (based on data from the questionnaire and fsQCA) to test the five first hypotheses of the book. It starts by analyzing the characteristics of the issues under analysis, and by proposing a new conceptualization on which to develop a new measure of agencies' role in agenda setting. To me this is the most original part of the book and one of its main contributions. The author argues that the role of agencies in the agenda setting process can be captured along 4 dimensions: cognitive (capacity to identify problems), initiative («first mover» in manipulating issues definitions to control policy), leadership (ability to appropriate or delegate tasks) and instrumental (capacity to create tools, indicators or monitoring activities through which represent issues). Next it provides a very systematic operationalization of these 4 dimensions and present the main results, which can be summarized as following. First, the meso analysis corroborates that agencies are extensively involved in influencing the agenda setting process (H1). Second, being party of the European Union leads environmental regulatory agencies to be highly involved in agenda setting at national levels (yet the hypothesis is not confirmed for food safety agencies) (H2). Third, a lower risk of venue shifting leads regulatory agencies in both sectors to be more involved in agenda setting process (H3). Fourth, smaller agencies that benefit from clearer policy goals are more influential in setting the agenda (H4). Fifth, older agencies, that benefit from their organizational reputation, are more involved in agenda setting (H5).

Chapter 4 tests these same hypotheses again based on the micro-analysis and hypotheses 6 and 7. The chapter provides a more refined analysis of the influence of venue shifting, confirming previous findings. Yet, it highlights the importance of improving the operationalization of the concept including other potential competitive venues and the multi-sectorial and single sectorial character of agencies. Results do not find support regarding the importance of issue salience (H6) but confirm the importance of considering agencies' informal independence as explanatory variable. The higher the independence the more influential are agencies in the agenda setting process (H7). Chapter 5 summarizes the main findings and identifies three main implications of the role of agencies in agenda dynamics. First, it highlights the importance of considering coordination between different levels of governance (if greater coordination is required the agenda capacity is reduced), the involvement of a number of stakeholders (they can reduce the capacity of agencies to allocate attention to issues), and the difference between agencies' goals (can accentuate the role of agencies in making networks and coordination effective to gain agenda influence). The second implication is that results challenge the

idea in the globalization literature, that the majority of issues are constructed at the global level, turning the focus to national institutions. The book dialogues also with public administration literature, arguing that NPM and more recent paradigms should be considered complementarily. A third implication relates to the role of bureaucrats, who are able to shape organization and individual preferences influencing the political agenda, and produce knowledge even without a formal request from parent ministers.

Overall, the book provides both an empirical and theoretical contribution that sheds important light on the role of regulatory agencies as agenda-setters. Yet, as the author himself recognizes one of its main limitations relates to the generalization of results. Even though methodologically the book is very systematic, and combines different types of data and levels of analysis to guarantee the validity and robustness of results, the research design we don't know whether results can be generalized to other agencies. In addition, the analysis reflects the moment in which the survey (and other type of data) was collected so it does not provide insights regarding variations in issue attention or changes in framing over time. The book could also benefit from a clearer discussion regarding why previous approaches within agenda setting research cannot be satisfactorily applied to the analysis of regulatory agencies. Previous literature has already considered that institutional change (which includes the rise of new regulatory agencies) is a fundamental part of agenda setting and policy change. Then the question is what makes these agencies so different from other institutions that it is necessary a specific theoretical framework (and hypotheses) to explore their role as agenda setters? Some of the variables considered in the analysis, such as the involvement of the EU, the size and age of agencies, or the influence of venue shopping could well be also applied to explain the agenda setting capacity of other institutions. More emphasis could have been added to the variables that are specific to regulatory agencies. There is already in the book one hypothesis related to their independence but other aspects, like the role of knowledge creation, while present along the book is far less systematized in the analysis. Yet, the book is an important reference for anyone interested in agenda setting literature and regulatory agencies. Policymakers, students, bureaucrats, think tanks and researchers from public policy, public administration and regulation seeking to understand more comprehensively the role of regulatory agencies in the policy process will find in this book an essential reference.

REFERENCIAS BIBLIOGRÁFICAS

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