

Advancing Group Interests through Agenda-Setting and Coalition-Building¹

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Agenda-setting as an organizational management tool is central to understanding the ways in which individual groups and the institutions that they form emerge, thrive and die. Determining the terms of debate and conversation within individual groups – and by extension across potential coalition partners – seems to be very operational but is in fact foundational and constitutive:

1. Agenda-setting processes directly impact interest articulation, which influences group coalescence and solidarity development.
 1. Issue framing, membership boundary setting and the movement's (intended or expected) practical impact are all tied up in agenda-setting
2. Products from agenda-setting activities often key bargaining tools.

Critical decisions for groups considering collective action

The emergence of cooperation must involve a number of antecedent steps that are grounded in each individual group's understanding of self.

3. Determining the problem to be solved
 1. By individual group action – what are OUR goals?
 2. By the coalition – how is cooperation with others likely to move us toward those goals
 3. Two central assumptions must be true for coalitions to emerge:
 - 3.i. Cooperation is *possible* because each individual potential partner shares some galvanizing/overlapping interest
 - 3.ii. Cooperation is *necessary* because each individual potential partner has insufficient ability to make good on its willingness to achieve some goal related to that interest
4. Therefore, it seems preferable to start with a set of goals and work backwards to strategies for achieving them.

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4. Determining who to work with (solving collaboration problems)

1. Who is likely to be most effective at contributing resources to the commission of the strategies most likely to be effective at promoting progress towards or achievement of our goals?
 - 1.i. Effectiveness and resources will be defined by the nature of the individuals contemplating cooperation (back to the ‘What do we want?’ question again)

5. Determining how to work together (solving coordination problems)

1. The best case scenario would produce terms of cooperation that are reflective of the goals of each interested party
 - 1.i. In practice, this will vary with the agenda-setting power of each party
 - 1.i.1. Mutual acceptability does not always = equity; preferences will interact with ability to set the terms
 - 1.ii. Fearon (1998) suggests that interested (state) cooperators should only form the relationships that they can be sure will sustain

Who has agenda-setting power? Who *should* have agenda setting power?

The second and third considerations above imply that power distributions are central to understanding how agendas are set and what they look like. This is important because those who control the agenda setting process are able not only to ensure that their preferred policy choice will be the proposed policy choice, but also to use their institutional leverage to greatest effect for defending that choice against corruption (Doering 1995, 2001).

Tension over who can/does and who should set agendas has been evident in many movements/SMOs over time (e.g.: Frances Willard v Ida B. Wells re: women’s suffrage; Angela Davis, Jane Alpert and the situation of women’s liberation movement within and adjacent to the Black nationalist/late Civil Rights movement; cis v trans women in the 2000s radical environmentalist movement; etc.). This is not new and can exert significant centrifugal pressures.

The literatures on collective action, institutional bargaining and social movements suggest a couple of answers to the questions of who has and who should have agenda-setting power:

6. Tsebelis (2002, 2011) – veto players

1. Power comes from their ability to unilaterally block progress/resolution
2. Therefore, strong need for coalition partners to determine who these individuals are, on the basis of power distributions and ideological distances
 - 2.i. Must be clear about power differentials and positions in order to determine this
 - 2.ii. Concerns about predation and ideological commitment to *coalition's* goals may be strong however
7. McCarthy and Zald (1977) – beneficiary constituents
 1. Power comes from their ideological commitment to the cause and their “skin in the game”
 - 1.i. Outcomes may be more likely to reflect the needs and concerns of those who will be directly impacted by success, but concerns about weak leverage are real.
 2. Therefore, strong need for coalition partners (individually and collectively) to determine to whom the benefits of success are likely to accrue
 - 2.i. Must be clear about who is being served to do this
 - 2.ii. Without doing so, there is no way to identify/understand the reference category, which maps onto the potential ally population (hopefully made up of Oberschall's (1973) conscience constituents rather than just adherents)

Intersectionality and coalition-building

Weak actors can and do often vary in their weakness (identity-based distinctions usually highlight this), but to successfully form coalitions must recall that overcoming their shared position will be beneficial for all.

Piven and Cloward's (1979) research on poor people's movements and Snow, et al.'s (e.g., 2005) work on homeless protest highlight cases where 'powerless' individuals have been able to rethink the nature of their resource endowments in such a way that they are able to redefine success, and encourage mobilization.

8. Interesting counterpoint to the veto players approach – weak actors can be strong in unconventional or unexpected ways
9. Suggests that a rethinking about the resources of “diverse” actors can lead to new areas for coalition impact

1. E.g., differential points of access, frames, action options

Using this information to form effective coalitions

10. Focus on coalescence at the movement level before looking to cultivate external allies
 1. This need not be a linear process – as groups relevant to the coalition define themselves, the nature of overlapping memberships can strengthen and refine ally participation in a rolling fashion.
 2. Allies should not participate in the development of group strategies, in order to ensure that the voices of beneficiary constituents are elevated and prioritized
 - 2.i. Avoiding “homing” *on behalf of...* (Sjoberg 2015)
 - 2.ii. Product: determining who the beneficiaries are and what the benefits of success will be
11. Clear explication of the groups at the table – this is why it is important to define diversity
 1. Not always a degenerative/divisive process -- Many social movement coalitions have been forged incrementally (and almost by accident) through overlapping group memberships
 2. Who will you work with is directly related to how the problem is framed and who the beneficiaries are expected to be.
12. Acknowledging ideological distances in order to minimize AND/OR exploit them to unexpected advantages
 1. Acknowledging intersectionality does not mean ignoring the separate causes of oppression; it instead involves acknowledging the areas where separate aggrieved groups can find common ground and thus become stronger than they would be divided.
 - 1.i. While understanding that Pareto optimality is difficult to achieve – justice for one group may be at odds with justice for others
 2. We all have overlapping memberships that can be used to generate coalitions. This may be one benefit of having a multi-organizational field that allows folks to take advantage of a variety of ally populations.

13. Choosing agenda items that reflect the operational bounds and opportunities of the community in action.

1. Is the coalition/action meant to be reformative (incremental change within existing institutions) or transformative (wholesale replacement of existing system [academia? Certain types of universities? Departments?])?
 - 1.i. Prioritizing problems
 - 1.ii. Product: series of demand/action-options

14. Designing relationships that are flexible yet bounded by core principles, so that defection can be understood but pressures to defect can be accommodated and neutralized.

1. Trust is central to this process (Axelrod 1984), but it is important to remember that the specific design features of individual groups and their collaborative arrangements (rules and penalties for defection) can stand in for inter-personal or inter-group trust (Bond 2010, n.d.).

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