

## **MEDIA AND DEMOCRATIC AGENDA SETTING**

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## Introduction

Who defines the problems that are subject to societal problem solving? Several theories deal with this question. The theory of public choice maintains that political parties attune their policies to the voters' preferences to get re-elected, because voters evaluate the consequences of government policy. A process of *bottom-up or democratic agenda setting* is assumed. Bottom-up agenda setting occurs when party platforms follow the public agenda. The parties' knowledge of the public agenda may be derived from various sources, for example from the mass media. Although media are important both as transmitters of political information to the public and as transmitters of the public's preferences to politicians, media are almost absent in the public choice literature.

Mass communication theory suggests *top-down agenda setting*. News selection studies have purported the hypothesis that media coverage of societal problems very often is influenced by the political elites. Media, in turn, play an autonomous role in the public's definition and perception of national problems (the agenda setting effect of the media) and set the standards to which the government is evaluated (the priming effect of the media). Top-down agenda setting implies that the political agenda acts as a bandwagon for the public debate, which gives politicians to some respect the opportunity to induce their own support and adopt a benign neglect policy toward national problems.

In *mediacracy theory*, finally, the central tenet is the proposition that the media are in power in a democracy; that the media agenda shapes both the public agenda and the political agenda. According to mediacracy theory, it's the media who decide on the problems to be tackled by the government.

This paper presents research to assess the validity of these three scenario's - from now on they will be labelled as models - for the case of the Netherlands in the period 1980 - 1986. A longitudinal comparison of content analysis data of party manifestoes and media coverage to economic indicators and public opinion data, will be used to estimate the relative strength of the reciprocal relationships between the political (party) agenda, the media agenda, the public agenda and real world events, with respect to several economic issues (pooled, cross-sectional and time-series design).

## Models of agenda setting

The term "agenda" may refer to different concepts. In this paper "public agenda" denotes an aggregate measure for individuals' perceptions of and involvement with (economic) problems. The "political agenda" can be understood as the relative attention paid to different economic problems in party manifestoes. "Media agenda" alludes to the relative importance of (economic) issues in media coverage. It is important to note here that the indicators for the media agenda used in this paper do not include the party agenda according to the media. Quotes or paraphrases of politicians in the media might have an autonomous effect on the public agenda (Page et.al, 1987), which will be tested separately.

Real world cues play an important role in agenda setting theory. The analysis presented in this paper is focussed on real world *economic* cues. The choice for *economic* cues is prompted by both a theoretical and a pragmatic argument. The theoretical reason being that economic issues are crucial to the theory of public choice (Mueller, 1990; Norpoth c.s., 1991). However, a pragmatic and even more compelling argument for restricting the analyses to economic issues is given by the availability of data with which the three models can be tested.

*General model of societal agenda setting*

Figure 1 shows a general model of societal agenda setting with every possible relationship between the political agenda, the media agenda the public agenda and economic developments. The relationships between the agenda's, represented as arrows, should be interpreted in terms of influence. The model may be used to describe possible roles of media, political parties and the public in a democracy.

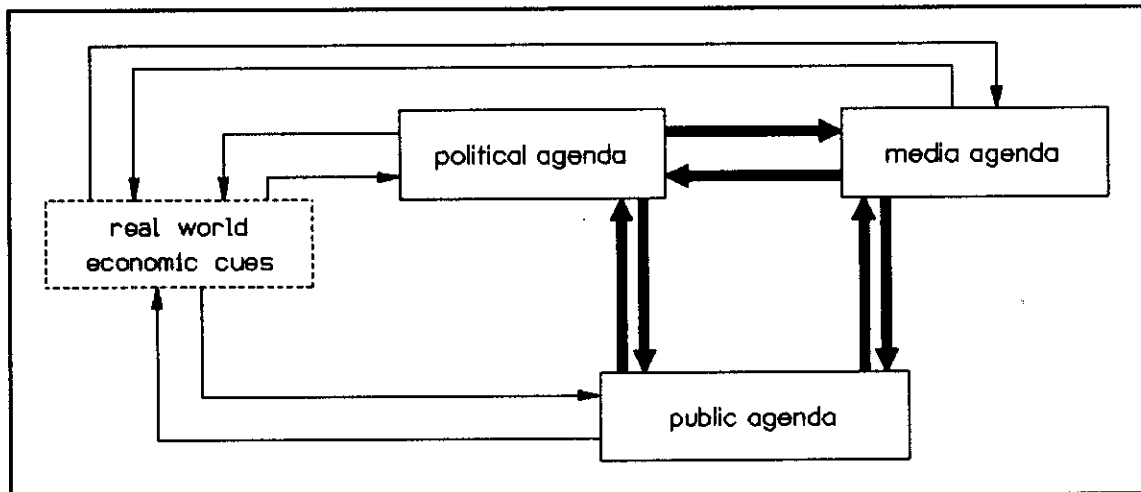


Figure 1 General model of societal agenda setting

It should be recognized that the existence of relationships between agenda's is in principle constrained by the responsiveness of media, citizens and parties to real world cues. If, for example, the public reacts more quickly to an increase in inflation than the media, it will be impossible for the media to influence public concern with inflation. The shape of the *issue attention cycles* may be one of the main determinants of the model of societal agenda setting. (Downs, 1972; Neuman, 1990).

Furthermore, agenda setting studies have shown that the obtrusiveness of issues can account for the co-orientation of agenda's (Zucker, 1978; MacKuen, 1981; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Although the term obtrusiveness is generally used, it is poorly defined. It usually implicitly refers to the perception of facts (events or issues) *without* the intervention of some specific medium. We define facts to be *obtrusive in relation to a medium*, if they in fact *can* be perceived relatively easily and also *obtrude* themselves on the perceiver without the intervention of that medium<sup>1</sup>. The Gulf war, for example, was highly unobtrusive in relation to CNN. In this paper, as in mass communication theory,

the term obtrusiveness is used in relation to *mass media*. The economic situation of a country is said to be relatively obtrusive in relation to coverage of the economy in the mass media. One can be aware of, for example, a sharp increase in inflation or unemployment, without being notified by a newspaper, television or radio broadcast.

In the case of relatively obtrusive issues, the correspondence of one agenda to another can be due to spurious correlation: if two agenda's are equally responsive to obtrusive real world events, they independently move into the same direction. As a result of this, the effect of the media agenda on the public agenda, for example, (generally referred to as the agenda setting function of the media) may be absent in case of obtrusive issues. MacKuen and Coombs, for example, found that when objective economic conditions (in our terminology, real world economic cues) were also incorporated in their model, the effect of the media agenda on the public agenda vanished: "This impression is substantiated by a joint estimation of the media and environmental inputs (unemployment, inflation and energy prices). We find that the power of the media model evaporates into thin air. (...) The appearance of mediated consciousness reveals itself to be a mirage only dimly reflecting the actual moving force here, the objective life conditions" (MacKuen & Coombs, 1981: 92)

The three models distinguished in the outset, i.e. public choice theory, top-down agenda setting and mediocracy, can be considered to be special instances of the general model of societal agenda setting. After a description of these models, a test will be conducted to find out which of the models provides the most accurate description of the case of The Netherlands in the early eighties.

### *Democratic agenda setting*

The responsiveness of the government to citizens' preferences is a central concern in both normative and empirical democratic theory (Dahl, 1956; 1991). Under various assumptions about the availability of information and the preferences and the behavior of both voters and politicians, empirical democratic theory, such as the theory of public choice, predicts a high degree of responsiveness of the government to its citizens. Figure 2 models the idea of democracy through responsiveness as bottom-up agenda setting.

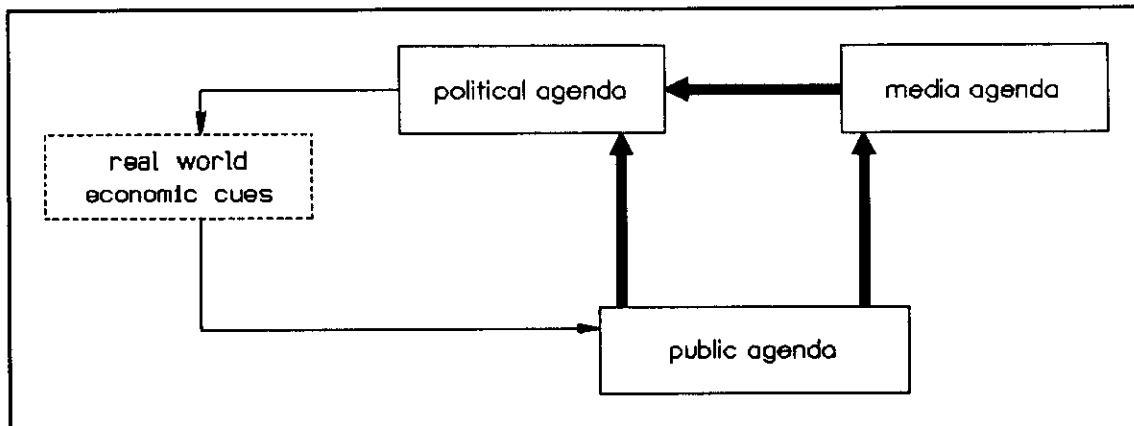


Figure 2 Bottom-up or democratic agenda setting

In this model the media may serve as an information channel which allows politicians to become aware of the public agenda. This is represented by the indirect relationship from the public agenda to the political agenda via the media agenda. If this indirect relationship exists, the media agenda, besides party images in the media, function as a proxy measure for the public agenda.

A first hypothesis in the public choice model is that the government solves problems, i.e. steers the economy, as to win the elections. By adapting their manifestoes and their policies to the preferences of the voters, parties try to gain public support for the next elections<sup>2</sup>. It is assumed that parties are aware of the public's preferences, that governments are capable of setting the economy to their standards and that governments can in fact induce cyclical patterns in the economy. There is some evidence for relationships between party mandates and policy output (Budge & Hofferbert, 1990), but only little evidence, if any, for the existence of cyclical patterns in economic variables in accordance with election periods (Williams, 1990). Evidence on the bottom-up relation between the public preferences and government policy is contradictory. The criticism and skepticism toward political representation, put forward by authors like C. Wright Mills (1956), seems to be confirmed by research on the prerequisites for the functioning of a representative democracy: there's hardly any evidence for a well informed, sophisticated public of voters (Berelson c.s., 1954; Converse, 1970; Neuman, 1986; Thomassen, 1991). On the other hand Page and Shapiro (1983) demonstrate bottom-up agenda setting in their analyses of the relationship between public opinion and policy in the U.S. with respect to several issues over the period 1935 - 1979. Government policy appeared to be, to some extent, congruent to public opinion with a time lag of one year. This bottom-up pattern is most apparent in the case of salient issues (Shapiro & Jacobs, 1989). Frey and Schneider also underpin the bottom-up hypotheses: "every type of government will undertake taxing and spending policies that maximize the chance of being reelected. The concrete fiscal policy will depend on voters' evaluation of government's economic performance." (Schneider, 1985: 24). The seemingly contradictory findings that we have evidence for bottom-up agenda setting, although this is not likely to have been generated through institutional arrangements since voters are not well informed and sophisticated enough, is sometimes referred to as the *paradox of mass politics*. Neuman (1986) attempts to solve the paradox from the perspective of several theories, but neither of them provides a satisfactory explanation for the existence of the paradox; contradictory evidence

remains.

A second hypothesis of the public choice model is that voters use information on real world cues to evaluate government policy, which in turn influences the vote decision. Apparently, different groups of voters are struck by different economic problems: people with an income below average are always in favor of less unemployment, even though this would co-occur with inflation, whereas the higher income groups are more inflation averse than unemployment averse (Hibbs, 1982; Alt, 1984). From studies of several countries it appears that the actual economic situation, particularly unemployment, inflation and GNP growth, do matter for the popularity of government (Mueller, 1990; Norpoth c.s, 1991). Election studies have provided evidence of both *retrospective* voting, guided by evaluations of the incumbent administration to the standards of it's economic performance in the past and *prospective* voting, guided by expectations about the state of the economy (MacKuen et al., 1992). The macro-level relationship between the state of the economy and political evaluations may be explained by the finding that for government popularity and voting, instead of *personal* financial well-being, perceptions of *national* problems are of crucial importance. The proposition by Kinder and Kiewiet (1981), that people are to a considerable degree *sociotropic* voters instead of *pocketbook* voters, still holds. Yet, the mechanisms at work on the individual level are very hard to grasp: Suzuki (1992) finds evidence for the existence of political business cycles in individuals' expectations of economic conditions, whether or not preceded by cyclical patterns in the economy; with respect to the perception of national problems Feldman and Conley (1991) conclude that "even among people who admit to seeing no influence of government policy on economic conditions, there is a strong relationship between the assessments of the national economy and evaluations of Reagan".

Both empirical and theoretical considerations limit our expectations regarding democratic agenda setting. First, bottom-up agenda setting seems to be dependent on many contingent factors, which may be apparent on aggregate levels of analysis, but very hard to specify on the individual (voter) level. Voters seem to take just a few salient issues into account, but only when overall evaluations of candidates and parties do not provide a clear-cut decision (Herstein, 1981; Krosnick, 1988). Second, the cycle of politics as described by the theory of public choice will only occur when all the specified mechanisms jointly take place: the voters influence the political parties, the parties influence the economy and the economy influences voters. Third, public choice theory assumes rational behavior and full information, whereas empirical research provides evidence that politicians are not aware of the distribution of the public's preferences (Dekker & Ester, 1988). But even when rational behavior is assumed, it will be irrational for parties to try to manipulate rational voters through the economy, since rational voters will know that the government tries to fool them. Finally, in the literature on public choice, the mass media are hardly taken into account (Mueller, 1990; Van Mierlo, 1989; Van den Doel & Velthoven, 1989). Even if one recognizes that media are important both as transmitters of information from the political parties to the voters and vice versa, it wouldn't be necessary to account for media content in the analyses of relationships between the political- and the public agenda, if the media are assumed to be neutral information transmitters. As noted before, bottom-up agenda setting might take place via the media if media content (apart from party agenda's according to the media) reflects the public agenda and if the media agenda in turn is being viewed by the political parties as a proxy measure for the public agenda. However, when party platforms are not correctly

presented by the media and public opinion can't be traced back from information in the media, the assumptions of neutrality and objectivity are violated. An overwhelmingly body of empirical research suggests that mass media are not at all providing neutral and complete information.

If media were neutral, they would provide complete and unbiased information about policies advocated by political parties. This claim is at odds with Gans' finding (1979), that journalists tend to give a nation-state centered picture of reality, guided by the perspectives of the political elites. Kleinnijenhuis (1990) showed that newspapers tend to simplify the game of politics by supplying a balanced picture of the world. Some issues and some parties are underexposed, especially parties on the extreme positions (Scholten, 1982; Van Praag, 1986). To a certain extent journalists create political discourse by eliciting political statements from politicians, about items that are considered important in the media circuit in particular (Jarren, 1988; Staab, 1990). Media give short shrift to valence issues and overemphasize the relevance of position issues or clear-cut issues (Patterson, 1981). Kleinnijenhuis (1990) found that, for the period 1968 - 1984, the images of the cabinets regarding the levelling of incomes and retrenchment policy, as presented in the Dutch newspapers, were incorrect. The Social democrat cabinet "Den Uyl", characterizing itself as a leveller of incomes, was portrayed as such, although Den Uyl in fact hardly levelled any incomes at all. Similarly, the first cabinet "Lubbers", dominated by the Christian Democrats, was portrayed by the media as a cabinet that cut government spending, although there was an increase in the budget deficit during their period of government.

Information in the media about the actual state of the economy and the effectiveness of government policy is also often distorted. Media respond quickly to sensational issues to the detriment of enduring societal issues, which tend to develop slowly and unobtrusively (Funkhouser, 1973). Therefore, media indicators may not reflect long term developments adequately. Counter examples are also present: the coverage of the American economy by CBS reflected the actual situation quite correct. CBS was especially sensitive for changes in unemployment and energy prices; whereas inflation only attained attention on the media agenda when fluctuations in price levels were large (Behr & Iyengar, 1985).

Media are said not to unbiased and complete information about the public's perception of national problems. Most journalists attach only minor importance to the preferences of their audience (Kaiser, 1985), which is confirmed with Behr and Iyengar's (1985) finding that the media agenda is not influenced by the public agenda. However, Smith (1987) shows that for several issues, the media agenda of the *Louisville Times* and public concern in the community of Louisville mutually influenced each other in the period 1974 - 1981.

These considerations lead one to expect the media to play an autonomous role in the process of societal agenda setting. Two scenario's can be derived from the literature: top-down agenda setting and mediacracy.

### *Top-down agenda setting*

Top-down agenda setting is the result of two mechanisms. First, the agenda building function of the political parties: politicians determine what's on the media agenda.

Research in the field of news selection suggests a mainly unidirectional relationship between the political agenda and the media agenda. Journalists tend to give a nation-state centered picture of reality, guided by the perspectives of the political elites (Gans 1979; Weaver and Elliot '85). This could explain why media coverage very often does not reflect 'real world developments' (Kleinnijenhuis, 1990; Funkhouser, 1973).

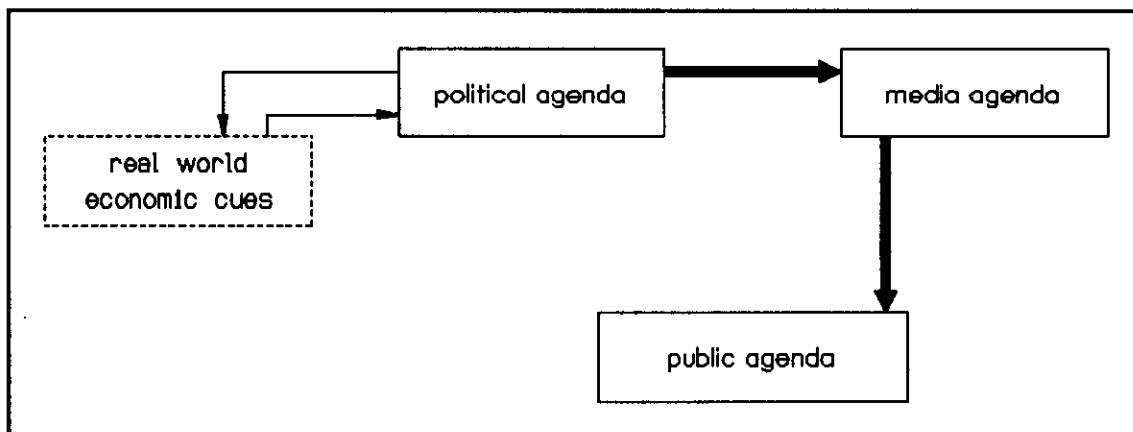


Figure 3 Top-down agenda setting

Second, top-down agenda setting assumes the media agenda to influence the public agenda. The agenda setting hypotheses, originally formulated by Lippman (1922) and reintroduced by Cohen (1963), maintained that media do not determine what we think, but what we think about. The meaning of the term agenda setting has slightly shifted to the contemporary interpretation: a process in which media determine what is perceived by the public as the most important problem facing the nation. At first, research findings, were rather contradictory (McCoombs & Shaw, 1972; Becker, McCoombs and McCleod, 1975; Patterson and McClure, 1976; Erbring, Goldenberg and Miller, 1980), but in the vanguard of the borrowing of methodology from econometrics and psychology, the existence of the agenda setting function of the media is convincingly demonstrated with both time series of survey data and experimental designs (MacKuen & Coombs, 1981; Iyengar, Kinder & Peters, 1982; Rogers & Dearing, 1988). This does not imply that the relationship between the media agenda and the public agenda is unidirectional; as described above, the hypotheses of a reciprocal relationship is both confirmed (Smith, 1987) and falsified (Behr & Iyengar, 1985).

Several contingent, intervening and interacting variables appear to be particularly relevant in the process of agenda setting by the media, a few of which will be mentioned here. Individuals are framed for, i.e. becoming more sensitive to, media content when they speak about topics within their social networks (Erbring, Goldenberg & Miller, 1980). As noted earlier, the obtrusiveness of the issues at stake limits the agenda setting effects (Funkhouser, 1973; Zucker, 1978). Furthermore media coverage may frame an individual's perception, so that he becomes more responsive to changes in the nation's economic situation (MacKuen 1981: 98), or vice versa, victims of an economic crisis may be extra sensitive for explanations and attributions given in the media (Iyengar, 1987).

The two mechanisms constituting the top-down pattern, are combined in figure 3. One specific manner in which a dominant top-down pattern can be established, is the particularly strong agenda setting effect of quotes of (popular) presidents as reported by

Page, Shapiro and Dempsey (1987).

### *Mediocracy*

The mediocracy model imputes a central, powerful role on the media in the process of societal agenda setting and societal problem solving. According to mediocracy theory, the media create *pseudo events* and consequently they shape our cognitions about the real world (Jarren, 1988). Both politicians and citizens are to some extent dependent upon information from the media. Thus, media have become the dominant power in democracies, as they influence both the public agenda and political decision making. If this theory holds, the dominant pattern of societal agenda setting would be the one described in figure 4. The correspondence between public preferences and party platforms, i.e. between the public agenda and political agenda, is not the result of democratic institutional arrangements, but a spurious correlation induced by the influence that media exert on all segments of society.

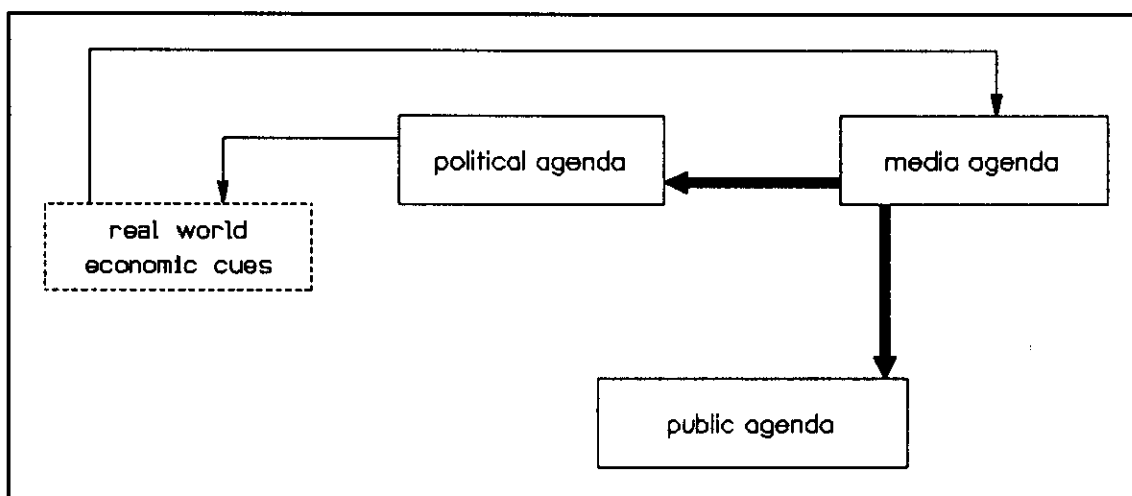


Figure 4 Mediocracy

### Data, operationalisation, unit of analysis and method

The *data*, which will be used here to present a preliminary test of the agenda setting models, will be extracted from previous research by bits and pieces. Fortunately, others have compiled sufficient information to make testing the models possible for a limited space-time domain, i.e. agenda setting with respect to economic affairs in The Netherlands during the period 1980-1986.<sup>3</sup>

For the case of The Netherlands, several authors have collected content analysis data with respect to party platforms (e.g. Keizer, 1981; Budge, Robertson & Hearl, 1987; Van Mierlo, 1989) and media coverage (e.g. Scholten, 1982; Van Praag, 1986; Kleinnijenhuis, 1990). A rich body of survey data on public opinion is available also (e.g. national election surveys). The highest common factor of the available datasets is nevertheless

remarkably small. Most public opinion surveys fail to serve our purpose because of their omission to record both party preference and media choice. Incommensurability of the available datasets is further due to different time periods and disparate issues. The highest common factor of available datasets with respect to parties, media and publics in The Netherlands that we found consisted of economic issues in the period 1980-1986. Even for this limited period the data on parties, media and the public do not match perfectly.

Data with respect to the party platforms of the three parties with the largest vote will be borrowed from the European Manifesto Research Project (Volkens & Hearl, 1990). The parties with the largest number of votes are the *PvdA* (labor), *CDA* (christian democrats) and *VVD* (conservative right wing liberals). Three general elections were held during this period, in 1981, 1982 and 1986. Data with respect to the news coverage of economic affairs and economic policy (1980,1982,1984) will be extracted from earlier news selection research (Kleinnijenhuis, 1990). These data describe the news coverage of economic affairs in *de Volkskrant* (left wing), *NRC Handelsblad* (centre) and *De Telegraaf* (right wing). Data on public concern with economic issues are available from 1981 onwards. These data stem from surveys which were held three times a year by *NSS Marktonderzoek* (Westendorp, 1989).

The Manifesto data were collected on the basis of the assumption that every statement in a party platform can be grouped uniquely to one of the categories which were distinguished by the researchers. Thus, the score on a category consists of the percentage of party platform text which was classified as belonging to that category (cf. Volkens & Hearl, 1990). For five categories from the Party Manifesto data, labeled 'incentives', 'Keynesian demand management', 'productivity', 'economic orthodoxy' and 'social security' respectively, counterparts could be found in the media agenda and public agenda data. Regrettably, the available data do not allow for a comparison on the issue of unemployment, although this issue is deemed to be very important in public choice theory (Mueller, 1990). Table 1 presents an overview of the operationalisation.

The items in the media data and the public opinion data do not match perfectly the categories being used to analyze the Party Manifestos. For media and publics the rather broad issue areas of 'incentives' will be splitted up in two issues, (less) 'taxes' and (less) 'levelling of incomes'. Concerns in party manifestos with regard to the government's ability to steer the effective demand according to the theory of John Maynard Keynes will be matched by public concerns about consumer purchasing power and wages. Concerns about economic productivity in party manifestos will be matched by public concerns about the economy in general and by media coverage about both economic growth and labor productivity. Since inflation is a typical benchmark to judge whether economic orthodoxy has prevailed, concerns about economic orthodoxy in party platforms will be matched by concerns about inflation.

The media data are based on a content analysis of economic news in three newspapers (*NRC Handelsblad*, *De Telegraaf*, and *de Volkskrant*) during the months september and october of 1980, 1982, and 1984 (Kleinnijenhuis, 1990). Central to the applied method is the description of text content in terms of relations between objects which are subject to investigation. (Van Cuilenburg et.al., 1986; Kleinnijenhuis & Rietberg, 1991). Sentences were splitted up in so-called 'nuclear sentences', each of them consisting of a predicate which describes the relationship between an 'x-object' and an 'y-object'. Each nuclear sentence is attributed to a source, the default being the author of the text (e.g. a party or a newspaper). In this study both political actors and economic

variables are distinguished as objects. Economic variables such as 'productivity', 'employment', 'inflation', and political actors like parties, governments, labor unions, were distinguished. In order to match the attention categories which were used in the Manifesto-data, the relational data not attributed to a political source by the newspaper were aggregated so as to obtain simple percentages of reporting an economic issue either as an *x*-object or as an *y*-object. To obtain an equivalent of "productivity" in the Party Manifestos, the percentages of "GNP, economic growth" and "labor productivity" were added. "Consumer purchasing power" and "wages" were combined to operationalise "Keynesian demand management".

party agenda (Budge, Robertson and Hearl, 1987)	public agenda (NSS Marktonderzoek; Westendorp, 1989)	media agenda (Kleinnijenhuis, 1990)
"incentives"	taxes; levelling of incomes	taxes levelling of incomes
"keynesian demand"	wages	consumer purchasing power + nominal wages
"productivity"	economy in general	GNP, economic growth + labor productivity
"orthodoxy"	inflation	inflation
"social security"	social security	social security

**Table 1: Operationalisation of agenda's**

The public opinion data will be extracted from longitudinal survey research of NSS Marktonderzoek (Westendorp, 1989). The surveys were grouped into three time periods so as to allow for a comparison of the public agenda with party manifestos and media coverage (until November 16th, 1981 (start cabinet without PvdA; until October 1st, 1983 (midpoint between measurements of media content; until May 1986 (elections 1986)). Respondents were asked to answer questions with regard to knowledge, information gathering, public concern, emotional involvement and action disposition with respect to a variety of issues. The issues which interest us here are 'taxes', 'levelling of incomes', 'wages', 'the Dutch economy in general', 'inflation' and 'social security'. For every respondent and every issue an additive scale was constructed.<sup>4</sup> In order to obtain indicators of the public concern within a given time period for a given issue of voters for the same party who read the same newspaper, scores of respondents who vote for the same party and read the same newspaper will be averaged.

Data with respect to real world developments with respect to the six issues (cf. table 1) have been published by the Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (CBS) and the Centraal Planburo (CPB). Data for the period 1976 - 1986 were used. How these data about real world economic cues can be integrated in the models, as indicators of the "severity" or "gravity" of the economic situation will be explained below, in the method section.

### *Unit of analysis*

The *unit of analysis* in this study is the issue - time period -party (choice) - medium (choice) combination.

The data allow us to test the models separately for six issues (cf. table 1) but in order to arrive at general conclusions with regard to the models, the issues will be pooled. Data with respect to party manifestos and media coverage are available for three time periods. Since the models predict not only the possibility of instantaneous relationships between agenda's of the public, the media and the parties, but also the possibility of long term interrelationships, a time lag of one period will be assumed.

This study focusses on influence relationships between the public, the media and political parties. Therefore, respondents will be distinguished only with regard to their party adherence and newspaper readership. In order not to obscure the main strand of the models under examination, no further distinctions will be made with respect to the influenceability of several socio-demographic categories of respondents (e.g. differential agenda setting power of media regarding higher educated and lower educated citizens). For every combination of issue, time period, party choice (Pvda, CDA, VVD) and newspaper choice (de Volkskrant, NRC Handelsblad, De Telegraaf) scores of respondents will be aggregated.

Thus, 108 units of analysis are available to test the models (6 issues, three time periods minus one time-lag, 3 parties and 3 media). The 108 scores for the public are unique. The scores for media are not unique, since every segment of the public which reads a given newspaper obtains the same score, regardless which party is preferred. The scores for parties are not unique either, since every segment of the public which prefers a given party obtains the same score, regardless which newspaper is preferred. Nor are the scores on real world cues, since every segment of the public in a given time period obtains the same score, regardless of party and media choice.

### *Method*

Each of the models to be tested (cf. figure 1 to 4) consists of a series of (presumably) linear equations between real world cues, the party agenda, the media agenda and the public agenda. Although ordinary least squares regression is a perfect tool to test some of these models, Covariance Structure Modelling (CSM) with the LISREL-program (Maximum Likelihood estimation) will be preferred since it allows for a simultaneous Likelihood-ratio-test of a complete model.

The point of departure to test the models is the rather minimal concept of *Granger-causality* (Maddala, 1989: 325-331). A minimal condition which must be fulfilled if a causal relation between  $x_{t-1}$  and  $y_t$  exists, is covariation between  $x_{t-1}$  and the residual of  $y_t$  that is not due to variation in  $y_{t-1}$  (nor to other variables). The essence of testing for Granger-causality is thus testing against the alternative hypothesis of autoregression. In order to apply the concept of Granger-causality, it must be assumed that the time that it takes to influence an agenda equals roughly the time lag in our data of roughly two years. To put it differently, the test results presented here refer to *long term influence* (more than one year), but not necessarily to short term influence (within a week) or middle range influence (within a few months). Abstracting from real world cues

for the moment, the general model with interrelations between every separate agenda (figure 1), is easily transformed into a system of equations:

$$\begin{aligned}
 \text{party agenda}_t &= \gamma_{11} \text{ party agenda}_{t-1} &+ \gamma_{12} \text{ media agenda}_{t-1} &+ \gamma_{13} \text{ public agenda}_{t-1} &+ \xi_{11} \\
 \text{media agenda}_t &= \gamma_{21} \text{ party agenda}_{t-1} &+ \gamma_{22} \text{ media agenda}_{t-1} &+ \gamma_{23} \text{ public agenda}_{t-1} &+ \xi_{22} \\
 \text{public agenda}_t &= \gamma_{31} \text{ party agenda}_{t-1} &+ \gamma_{32} \text{ media agenda}_{t-1} &+ \gamma_{33} \text{ public agenda}_{t-1} &+ \xi_{33}
 \end{aligned}$$

If every agenda influences every other agenda, then not only the autoregression coefficients  $\gamma_{11}$ ,  $\gamma_{22}$  and  $\gamma_{33}$  will differ significantly from zero, but also the coefficients  $\gamma_{12}$ ,  $\gamma_{13}$ ,  $\gamma_{21}$ ,  $\gamma_{23}$ ,  $\gamma_{31}$  and  $\gamma_{32}$ . Real world cues will give rise to correlations between the agenda's not accounted for by the agenda's themselves. Thus, if agendas respond independently to real world cues, the error terms  $\xi_{11}$ ,  $\xi_{22}$  and  $\xi_{33}$  will be positively correlated. The models of interest: top down agenda setting, bottom up agenda setting and mediacracy, are instances of the general model with particular restrictions on the parameters. Table 2 specifies these restrictions.

model 1:	unrestricted model (all $\gamma$ -parameters $> 0$ , all $\xi$ -parameters $> 0$ )
model 2:	public choice, cycle of politics, bottom-up agenda setting public $\rightarrow$ media $\rightarrow$ media and/or public $\rightarrow$ parties restrictions: $\gamma_{21}=0, \gamma_{31}=0, \gamma_{32}=0,$ $\xi_{12}=0, \xi_{13}=0, \xi_{23}=0$
model 3:	top-down agenda setting parties $\rightarrow$ media $\rightarrow$ public restrictions: $\gamma_{12}=0, \gamma_{13}=0, \gamma_{23}=0, \gamma_{31}=0,$ $\xi_{12}=0, \xi_{13}=0, \xi_{23}=0$
model 4:	mediacracy (media $\rightarrow$ public; media $\rightarrow$ parties) restrictions: $\gamma_{13}=0, \gamma_{21}=0, \gamma_{23}=0, \gamma_{31}=0,$ $\xi_{12}=0, \xi_{13}=0, \xi_{23}=0$

Table 2 Agenda setting models as different restrictions on parameters

The influence of real world cues might also be modeled explicitly:

$$\begin{aligned}
 \text{party agenda}_t &= \gamma_{11} \text{ party agenda}_{t-1} &+ \gamma_{12} \text{ media agenda}_{t-1} &+ \gamma_{13} \text{ public agenda}_{t-1} &+ \gamma_{14} \text{ real} \\
 & & & & \text{world cues}_t &+ \xi_{11} \\
 \text{media agenda}_t &= \gamma_{21} \text{ party agenda}_{t-1} &+ \gamma_{22} \text{ media agenda}_{t-1} &+ \gamma_{23} \text{ public agenda}_{t-1} &+ \gamma_{24} \text{ real} \\
 & & & & \text{world cues}_t &+ \xi_{22} \\
 \text{public agenda}_t &= \gamma_{31} \text{ party agenda}_{t-1} &+ \gamma_{32} \text{ media agenda}_{t-1} &+ \gamma_{33} \text{ public agenda}_{t-1} &+ \gamma_{34} \text{ real} \\
 & & & & \text{world cues}_t &+ \xi_{33}
 \end{aligned}$$

If the influence of *real world cues*<sub>t</sub> on the separate agenda's<sub>t-1</sub> is taken into account explicitly, then the positive correlations between the error terms may vanish, since real world cues are considered one of the possible causes of these positive correlations.

The problem with taking into account real world cues explicitly, however, is that unlike agenda's with respect to these cues, these cues themselves have not been measured with the same units of measurement. The question is whether various levels of inflation, various levels of taxes, and so on, can be expressed in units of "severity" or "gravity".

Every answer to this question presupposes a political standpoint. Nevertheless, the question does not seem totally unanswerable. From an economic point of view, it is possible to defend that problems arise when taxes would rise, wages would decrease, economic growth would decrease, inflation would rise, and the social security level would fall. It is a little bit dubious however whether levelling of incomes is always problematic. The next question is how problematic 'high' inflation is as compared to 'high' taxes. An answer to this question presupposes political weights for the various issues. In this article it is assumed that all issues bear the same weight. The last question is how 'high' degrees of inflation in the period 1980-1986 actually were. The latter question might be solved by expressing inflation rates in the period 1980-1986, as well as tax rates, and so on, in standard deviations from their mean. Both standard deviations and the mean should be computed over a longer time period, so as to allow for the conclusion that in the period 1980-1986 inflation was 'higher' than, for example, economic growth. The data used, are ranging from 1976, when the economy was still flourishing, to 1986, the end of the period of investigation, when the economy had overcome the crisis. Furthermore a decision has to be made whether a high score on the standardised issue-scales coincides with a high or a low degree of gravity. In this paper a higher score on the issues "wages" and "GNP", corresponds to a lower level of gravity; a higher score on the issues 1,2,5 and 6, corresponds to a higher level of gravity.

Thus, taking into account real world cues explicitly in a pooled-issue design involves some rather arbitrary steps. Therefore, a two-step procedure will be used to present the test results. First, real world cues will be dealt with implicitly. Next, real world cues will be included explicitly in the model. In the former case, correlations among the error-terms of the separate agenda's may occur. In the latter case, correlations among the error-terms may vanish.

## Results

The theoretical models of societal agenda setting will be tested to assess the relative strength of the relationships between the agenda's. For one agenda to influence another, to cause changes in another agenda, the concept of Granger-causality is adopted. According to Granger's criterion for the existence of causal relationships, a dependent variable (agenda) is influenced by an independent variable (agenda) when the *lagged* independent variable explains some amount of variance of the dependent *controlling for the autocorrelation* in the dependent variable. In other words, when the lagged independent adds explanatory power to the model over and above the explanation of the dependent from its own past - and other relevant independent variables - , the conclusion will be that the independent has influenced the dependent.

### *Models without real world cues*

A two step procedure has been used to test the alternative hypotheses. In the first step the relationships between the agenda's were examined without taking real world cues directly

into account, because this involves some arbitrary steps. Nevertheless, testing the agenda setting models without real world cues conclusions about the role of real world cues can be drawn indirectly. When people, politicians and journalists are obtruded by economic problems, data will show a *co-orientation of agenda's*. Co-orientation of agenda's refers to the fact that agenda's change together at the same time, in the same direction, which results in positive correlations between the disturbance terms in the Lisrel-model (cf. figure 5). Interpreting these correlations between the disturbances, the obtrusiveness of real world cues will be dealt with as one of the possible explanations for the co-orientation of agenda's. It should be noted that we won't be able to test whether there has been societal problem solving until we incorporate real world cues in the model.

Neither of the three agenda setting models (cf. figure 2 to 4) provides a sufficient description of the economic discourse in the Netherlands in the eighties. The  $\chi^2$ -test for the models, i.c. bottom-up, top-down and mediacracy, is unsatisfactory ( $p < 0.05$ ), which means that these models are not likely to have produced the data.

The general model of figure 1, in which all possible relationships are empirically specified, contains too many insignificant relationships ( $t < 1.96$ ). Fixing the most insignificant relationships at zero until a minimal fitting model remains ( $\chi^2 = 6.75$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p = 0.15$ , adj. GOF-index = 0.89) results in figure 5. It is a model in which all parameters of the *top-down model* are present, supplemented with elements from the other approaches.

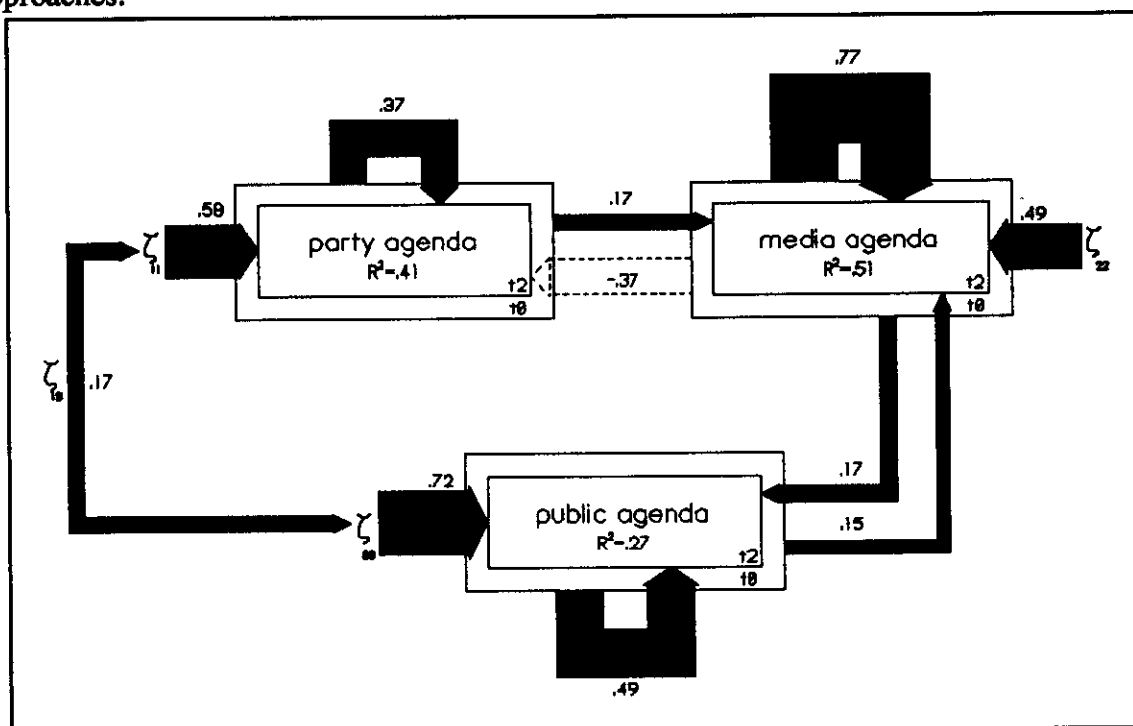


Figure 5 No real world cues: top-down agenda setting with co-orientation

There appears not to be a direct relationship between the public agenda and the political agenda. Parties do not directly follow their voters, nor do voters directly follow the parties they vote for. The second route through which bottom-up agenda setting can take place, the indirect route via the media, is cut off by the strong negative relationship from the media agenda to the political agenda. For this relationship being negative,

several explanations may apply: the media may not get their points accepted by the parties, alternatively, somehow the parties may not consider the media agenda as a proxy measure for the public agenda, or, finally, if parties do consider the media agenda to reflect the public agenda, they do not consider it a relevant directive for their policies. In any case, as a consequence of this negative relationship, the mediocracy model does not provide a correct description societal discourse about the Dutch economy in the early eighties.

Another feature of figure 5 is the significant co-orientation between the parties and voters ( $\xi_{13}=.17$ ). Somehow at the same time both voters and parties stress the same problems. Again there are several possible explanations. First, as noted earlier, the responsiveness of both politicians and citizens to changes in the economy may account for this co-orientation. If co-orientation is due to real world cues, the media agenda does not correspond to these real world cues; in that case changes in the Dutch economy in the early eighties are not correctly covered by the three main national newspapers ( $\xi_{12}=0$ ,  $\xi_{23}=0$ ). Note that the similar response to economic problems of both politicians and the public may be due to politicians anticipating to public opinion, which is in line with public choice theory. Second, the finding of co-orientation of voters and parties may be a result of the operationalisation. The model describes long term effects: the chosen time periods have the considerable length of two years, consequently, there may have been interactions within the chosen periods. A short term mediation between the public and the politicians by the journalists seems unlikely<sup>5</sup>.

The role of the media fits best in the top-down model. The results show that the media do allow for top-down agenda setting, as predicted by news selection studies, since the media agenda is influenced by the political agenda ( $\gamma_{21}=.17$ ) and the media in turn shape their readers cognitions about the economy ( $\gamma_{32}=.17$ ). The negative relationship from the media to the political agenda ( $\gamma_{12}=-.37$ ) does not allow for bottom-up agenda setting. The media agenda, in which party images are not included, provides to some extent a description of the public agenda ( $\gamma_{23}=.17$ ): newspapers seem to fulfill their expression function (Van Cuilenburg, Scholten en Noomen, 1991) quite well.

The stability of the several agenda's is indicated by the autocorrelation parameters. The political agenda withers the most ( $\gamma_{11}=.37$ ). The media agenda is the most constant over time ( $\gamma_{22}=.77$ ). When the co-orientation between parties and public is due to their responsiveness to real world developments, the pieces of the puzzle fall into their places: the media may have responded relatively slowly to changes in the economy. This explanation is tested below.

The amount of unexplained variance ( $R^2=.41$ ,  $R^2=.51$ ,  $R^2=.27$ ) leads us to conclude that there is more to the changes in agenda's, than the variables in the model can account for. Especially the public agenda is very volatile.

### *Robustness of the model*

Do the results apply to all three distinguished parties, all three distinguished newspapers and all six issues separately? Both for the different newspapers and for the different parties the model holds. However, figure 6 cannot be considered a correct description of societal agenda setting concerning every single issue<sup>6</sup>. Consequently, the results must be interpreted as describing inter-issue agenda setting rather than intra-issue agenda setting.

The results provide a description of the relationships between the *relative* importance of issues on agenda's instead of the *absolute* importance. Unfortunately, to test hypotheses about the absolute importance the number of cases is too small ( $108/6=18$ ).

### *The role of quotes in media coverage*

Page, Shapiro and Dempsey (1987) showed for the American situation that quotes of (popular) presidents exert particularly strong influence on the public agenda. In this paper, a similar hypotheses is tested: agenda setting effects of quotes and paraphrases of political parties, may be particularly strong. The strength of this effect can be estimated by adding an extra variable to the lisrel-model: the party agenda according to quotes in the media.

From analyses of an unrestricted Lisrel-model, with all possible relationships between the four agenda's, it follows that, contrary to the findings of Page, Shapiro and Dempsey, the party agenda as apparent in quotes in the media has had no significant effect on the public agenda. Furthermore, the party images are, as expected, influenced by both the media agenda (0.29) and the political agenda (0.14), while the reciprocal effects are insignificant. The evidence does not lend much credit to the idea that quotes in the media play an independent role in the process of societal agenda setting in The Netherlands in the early eighties.

### *Accounting for real world cues*

In the second step of our analyses real world developments in the Dutch economy will be incorporated in the model. We would like to emphasize again that linking indicators of real world developments to agenda's contains some arbitrary steps. The real-world-cues variable was added to the minimal fitting model resulting from the first step of the analyses. The insignificant relationships were fixed at zero, until a minimum fitting model at 0.05 probability level remained. Although a well fitting model resulted ( $\chi^2=3.07$ ,  $df=6$ ,  $p=0.80$ , adj. GOF-index=.963), we altered it, since there appeared to be a significant negative relationship between real world cues and the media agenda. Because of the theoretical uninterpretability of this relationship being *negative*, we fixed it at zero. This resulted in a model with a satisfactory fit, which is almost significant at the 0.05 level ( $\chi^2=15.37$ ,  $df=7$ ,  $p=0.032$ , adj. GOF-index=.849), graphically represented in figure 6.

Real world economic cues explain a considerable amount of variance in the public agenda. Conform the findings of MacKuen and Coombs (1981), objective conditions even make the effect of public agenda setting by the media disappear, not as a consequence of spurious correlation between the media agenda and the public agenda, but while there somehow remains too little non-stochastic variance in the public agenda. None of the distinguished models (bottom-up, top-down, mediocracy) applies to our data. One might speak of a disconnection of political top and basis. However, both the public and the political parties responded to real world economic cues. As a result, the correlation between the disturbances of political agenda and the public agenda vanishes completely, which confirms the interpretation in the section above that the co-orientation is caused by

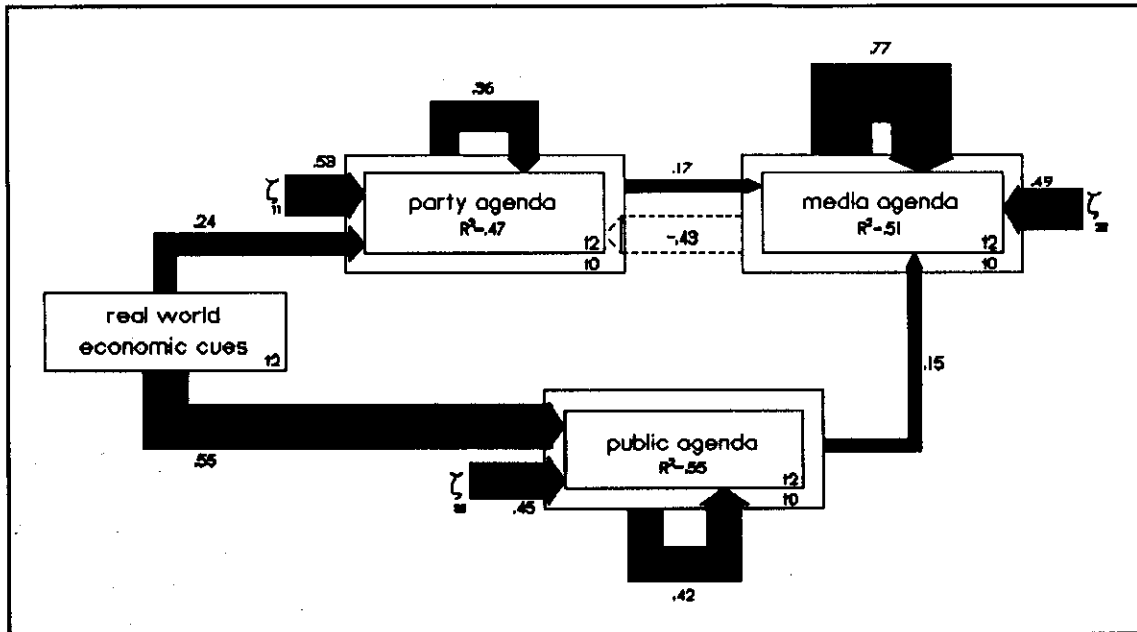


Figure 6 Real world cues: coorientation between political- and public agenda

the reaction of both politicians and citizens to real world economic cues. The absence of a positive relationship between real world cues and the media illustrates that the media agenda did not correspond very well to the quickly changing Dutch economy of the early eighties.

### Societal Problem Solving

The absence of a significant negative relationship, either in the same period or with a lag of one period, from the political agenda, indicating the *perceived* gravity of the economic situation, to real world cues, indicating the *real* gravity of the economic situation, suggests that there hasn't been successful economic problem solving by the political parties. However, we should not commit ourselves to the conclusion that party mandates are not relevant for policy outputs. We did not reckon with the possibility of governments consisting of different coalitions of parties. Next, the analyses only covers three time periods, which does not give the government much time to react to the economic crisis. Finally, the crisis was mainly due to the international economic downturn, by which especially open economies, such as the Dutch economy, are struck.

### Summary and conclusions

"I assume that a key characteristic of a democracy is the continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals." Using this concept of democracy, formulated by Robert Dahl (1971: 1), as a norm to judge the

working of democracy, one may wonder, do we see a bottom-up flow of opinions and ideas? We try to answer this question for the case of economic policy in the Netherlands in the period 1980 - 1986. The idea of a bottom-up or democratic agenda setting, subject of investigation in the theory of public choice, is tested against alternative scenarios, derived from mass communication theory, where the media play an autonomous role in societal agenda setting, i.e. top-down agenda setting -the political agenda influences the media agenda, which, in turn, influences the public agenda- and mediocracy -the media agenda influences both the political agenda and the public agenda-. The study reveals only long term effects with a considerable time lag of approximately two years and is limited to studying relationships between agendas.

Secondary analyses of party manifestoes, newspaper content and public opinion with respect to economic affairs and economic policy is performed in two steps. In the first step no account is made of real world economic cues. The analyses leads us to reject both the models of bottom-up agenda setting and mediocracy, but lends credit to the top-down model. In the second step data on the economic issues relevant for the analyses are transformed into indicators of gravity. The results from this analyses lead us to also reject the top-down model. Although the media-agenda is shaped by the political agenda, media effects on the public agenda are absent. However, there appears to be a significant co-orientation of the political agenda and the public agenda. Both politicians and citizens simultaneously perceived the economic problems of the country in accordance to real changes in the economy. Bottom-up agenda setting did not take place since on the one hand media coverage of economic events followed the public agenda, but on the other hand the political agenda moved away from the media agenda. Mediocracy is fully rejected: the media did not induce, but follow changes in both the public agenda and the political agenda. As a result of this, the reaction of the media (newspapers) to the changing Dutch economy was not very accurate. Furthermore, we do not find evidence for successful societal problem solving. According to our data, it's the economy that shapes agendas, instead of agendas that shape the economy.

What could have generated these patterns in our data? The following scenario may underlie our findings. The crisis in the Dutch economy was one which loomed large. It was obvious for the citizens that the country was in trouble, mindless of any media message. Being so suddenly confronted with new and unfamiliar economic problems, journalists kept on writing about older Keynesian topics: levelling of incomes, the welfare state, wages, whereas they neglected the sharp increase of unemployment, which led to an increase in expenditure on social security and consequently a sharp rise in the budget deficit. The government was forced to quickly change their policy, resulting in the covariance of the public agenda and the political agenda. Of course these speculations will have to be investigated by an analyses of the dynamics of the separate agendas for separate issues, parties and newspapers in combination with a more careful look at the economic situation.

Have the Dutch political parties been responsive to citizens' concerns with economic problems? The absence of a direct relationship between the public and parties suggests that they have not, but the similar reaction of both politicians and citizens to the state of the economy, may have been the result the anticipation of parties to changes in the public agenda. In any case, the media seem not to have played an autonomous role in the process of societal agenda setting.

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## Notes

1. Almost all facts (events or issues) are mediated in some respect. For information about GNP growth we depend on a bureau of statistics, for information about the price of butter we depend on the information at hand in the supermarket, i.e. the price label attached to it. Nevertheless, given that facts are already mediated, for our information we may still depend on another medium. One can get hold on information about butter prices without reading a newspaper, but it's much more difficult to be informed about crime rates without reading a newspaper. The butter price is said to be less *obtrusive* than the crime rates, with respect to newspapers.
2. Ahmad (1983) proposes that governments react to economic problems directly, whether their re-election is at stake or not. Schneider (1985) claims to have shown that for the United States his politico-economic model, based on the idea that when their re-election is in danger, governments will undertake an expansionary policy to increase personal income and decrease unemployment, provided better explanations for government behavior than Ahmad's model.
3. An integrated data-set with respect to agenda's and opinions of parties, media and the public for a longer time period is not yet available. Our current research aims at constructing such a data-set with respect to economic issues in The Netherlands over a period of ten years (1981-1990).
4. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  indicates that the five items which underscore the scales are reasonably unidimensional, albeit not perfect (taxes  $\alpha=.67$ ; levelling of incomes  $\alpha=.65$ ; wages  $\alpha=.66$ ; productivity  $\alpha=.65$ ; inflation  $\alpha=.63$ ; social security  $\alpha=.66$ ). In the case of one issue Cronbach's  $\alpha$  would be raised to  $\alpha=.68$  by dropping 'action disposition' as an indicator of the public agenda, but this small increase does not outweigh the advantage of a uniform measurement instrument of the public agenda for every issue.
5. This alternative hypotheses boils down to the prediction of a path between the dependent variables: *party agenda*, and *public agenda*, via the *media-agenda*, (in Lisrel-terminology: 2 significant  $\beta$ -parameters). All three possible versions of these hypotheses (spurious correlation, bottom-up, top-down), are rejected.
6. Testing hypotheses of similarity of parameter estimates in the LISREL-models for subsets of the population:  
parties:  $\chi^2=53.8$ ,  $df=37$ ,  $p=0.04$ ; similarity hypotheses rejected;  
idem, with different autoregressions per party: PvdA ( $\gamma_{11}=.13$ ), CDA ( $\gamma_{22}=.78$ ) and VVD ( $\gamma_{33}=.29$ ):  $\chi^2=29.75$ ,  $df=35$ ,  $p=0.72$ ; hypotheses of similarity confirmed  
media:  $\chi^2=26.7$ ,  $df=37$ ,  $p=0.89$ ; hypotheses confirmed  
issues:  $\chi^2=196.3$ ,  $df=82$ ,  $p=0.00$ ; hypotheses rejected