

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



Agendas and instability in American local politics: A study of the Austin City Council Agenda 1900–2020

Peter B. Mortensen¹ | Brooke Nicole Shannon²

¹Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark

²University of Memphis, Memphis, Tennessee, USA

Correspondence

Peter B. Mortensen, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark.

Email: peter@ps.au.dk

Abstract

The 1993 publication of *Agendas and Instability in American Politics* transformed the study of policymaking in American politics, by systematically tracing stability and change in issue attention over time. The underlying data collection effort is essential to understanding its importance; thousands of measures of the policy agenda were collected and content coded to examine trends in policy outputs from various American political institutions. In this study, we apply a similar coding scheme at the local level to study stability and change in policy agendas at the local level. Using a 120-year sample of all items from city council meeting minutes in Austin, Texas, content coded to the subtopic level, we identify long-term trends in the local policy agenda and explores how the local policy agenda is influenced by the national policy agenda, by local population growth and by reforms of local political institutions.

KEYWORDS

agenda setting, urban politics

INTRODUCTION

Thirty years ago, in 1993, the seminal publication *Agendas and Instability in American Politics* (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993) transformed the understanding of change and stability in American politics, and introduced a new and systematic approach to the study of policy agendas. The key in the new approach was to collect, content code, and compare thousands of policy agenda measures over several decades to trace the rise and fall of issues on the policy agenda. Based on this approach, we have learned much since 1993 about the dynamics of the federal level policy agendas in the U.S. (e.g., Baumgartner & Jones, 2015; Jones et al., 2019; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005), as well as the dynamics of national policy agendas across a very large number of countries (e.g., Chaqués-Bonafont et al., 2015; Green-Pedersen & Walgrave, 2014; Grossman & Guinaudeau, 2021; John et al., 2013; Mortensen et al., 2011).

However, the proliferation and accumulation of national level policy agenda research has not been mirrored in research on local politics. A review of urban policy research on agenda setting concludes that there is a "...paucity of research in agenda setting in U.S. and comparative politics" and that local government research as a result has had very little to say about change in local politics (Sapotichne & Jones, 2012, 444; see also Eissler, Mortensen, and Russell 2016). This lack of local policy agendas

research is unfortunate. Many essential decisions that influence and shape our lives as citizens are made at the local level of government, and studying the local policy agenda, the list of issues to which local representatives devote their attention, is a way to trace the priorities of local governments.

In this paper, we present the first century-long analysis of change and stability in urban policy agendas. When systematically studying the development of a local policy agenda over more than a century, we get a unique picture of how local issue priorities change over time. More particularly, we have collected and systematically issue coded the local council agendas of the city of Austin from 1900 to 2020. We utilize a unique digitalized archive of local council agenda meetings going back to before 1900 publicly available at the website of the city of Austin.¹ Each item considered by the city council throughout this 120-years period was collected and coded, which resulted in a dataset of 228,437 items. Austin offers a favorable case to study how the local policy agenda has developed in a city, which in the same period has seen a massive transformation from being a small city of 22,000 inhabitants at the dawn of the 20th century to a modern, vibrant, major city of nearly 1 million inhabitants in 2020, where our data series ends.

The century long perspective comes with both advantages and disadvantages. It provides a unique opportunity to study the long-term development of a local policy agenda. The large dataset of Austin's local agendas allows us to systematically study how the scope, content, and complexity of the Austin city council agendas have evolved from 1900 to 2020. Furthermore, by including systematic and comparable measures of the national level policy agenda we compare if major trends in the local Austin city agenda mirrors major trends in the federal U.S. policy agenda. Availability of Austin population data also allows us to trace the link between population expansion and agenda expansion. Finally, the extended time perspective offers the opportunity to explore both short- and long-term agenda effects of reforms of local political institutions. The disadvantages, on the other hand, are the lack of measures of variables that have gained much attention in national level policy agendas research such as media coverage and interest group configurations. Such measures are not available over the time period we focus on in this paper, and in the concluding section we return to a discussion of the potential consequences of this choice of focus.

THEORETICAL BEGINNINGS

From national to local policy agendas research

Agenda setting research began as an examination of local political conditions (Crenson, 1971; Dahl, 1961; Hunter, 1953; Stone, 1976). This research was closely integrated with the broader question of “who governs”, and local politics research, more generally, was closely integrated with the broader discipline of political science. In fact, the broader discipline embraced the questions and ideas dominating local government research (Eissler, Mortensen, and Russell 2016, 298). Early agenda setting literature largely applied general questions tested at the local level. For instance, Dahl's *Who Governs?* examines pluralism and power of interest groups through local citizens groups in New Haven, CT, and Crenson's *The Un-Politics of Air Pollution* explores “non-decision,” or the disregard of issues on the policy agenda of many cities plagued by high levels of air pollution, although the issue is well within the purview of local government. Crenson's (1971) work in particular demonstrates that local government has distinct priorities, which affect the substance of the agenda. Importantly, federalism sets parameters of which policy areas are obtainable for local governments, and which policy areas are handled by state and national government (Eissler et al., 2014). Much of the work on federalism and its impacts on subnational agendas has been at the state level, however (Erikson et al., 1993; Grumbach, 2022; Heidbreder, 2012).

As argued and shown by Sapotichne et al. (Sapotichne et al., 2007, 76–77), U.S. local government research gradually got disconnected from developments and conceptual interests in other main subfields. That is certainly true with respect to policy agendas research. Baumgartner and Jones' (1993) book on *Agendas and Instabilities in American Politics* sparked a massive surge in national level agenda studies, both

in the U.S. and in many other countries, but it did not inspire new local level policy agendas research (see Baumgartner et al., 2023).ⁱⁱ The lack of scholarly interest in local policy agendas is unfortunate, because studying the local policy agenda—the list of issues to which local political decision-makers devote their attention—is of crucial importance if we want to understand how local political systems work and function.

Every political system, as noted by Dearing and Rogers (1996, 1), must have an agenda if it is to prioritize the problems facing it. A few scholars have found distinct policy agendas between the national and state levels of government with little bottom-up impacts (Heidbreder, 2012; Lowery et al., 2011), but more policy scholarship on local agendas is needed to examine these relationships. The contention of this paper is that also this interplay between national and local policy agendas can fruitfully be examined within the framework proposed by Baumgartner and Jones, which focuses on change and stability in issue attention.

Change and stability

Baumgartner and Jones (1993) showed the important insights that are achieved by tracing the rise and fall of issues on the national policy agenda. More particularly, they demonstrated how systematic longitudinal descriptions of attention to issues challenge the then dominant perspectives on American politics. According to Baumgartner and Jones' (1993) study, incrementalism, iron triangles and gridlock were inadequate as descriptions of American politics over the long run, but this could only be realized by the careful tracing of attention to issues in Congress over time. Attention to issues does change, and such change reflected new issue understandings, mobilization of interests, and often real policy change (see also Baumgartner et al., 2000; Jones et al., 1993; Sheingate, 2006).

These questions of change and stability in the policy agenda are also important at the local level. Much local government research has been focusing on influence and power in local decision-making processes. Worth special mentioning is Stone's (1989) seminal work on regime theory, which in the spirit of Dahl's classic investigation of "Who Governs" studied interests and influence in the city of Atlanta. Our approach is different. We look for trends and changes in local policy agendas over time. Where Stone (1989) explored the influence of private and business interests in the local government of Atlanta, we look to the local government's agenda to find patterns of change and development. No doubt that biased power and representation may be a factor behind such trends like Stone asserts, but agenda change is a strong argument against iron triangles and vested interests. As mentioned above, that was one of the claims forcefully asserted in Baumgartner and Jones' (1993) book on agendas and instability in national U.S. politics. If there is change and dynamics in the issue priorities of the political system then this is an indicator that the system is open to change, and that the agenda is not controlled by only a few, powerful agenda setters. Instead of analyzing the members of a policy subsystem that undergirds political systems or policymaking on a particular issue, longer-term perspectives that consider the system or agenda as a whole allow for an investigation of trends in increasing and decreasing attention, and shifting priorities to match newly salient problems (Baumgartner et al., 2002; Baumgartner & Jones, 1993).

Thus, from this perspective a long-term study of change and stability in a local city agenda has merit. Showing a local policy agenda that changes from year-to-year and/or decade to decade provides strong empirical evidence of the system's openness to new impulses and interests. Baumgartner & Jones (1993) and Jones & Baumgartner (2005) point to the use of longitudinal data over one-shot case studies to capture periods of rapid change and long periods of stability in policy areas, which can be missed with process studies or cross-sectional study: "Policies can look chaotic and conflictual or stable and consensual at a single time point, whereas longer-run policy development may incorporate both features" (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993, 39).

We utilize the opportunity to compare the development of the local policy agenda up against the development in three potential drivers of changes in the local policy agenda. One is the national level policy agenda, the others are local institutional reforms and population growth.

The federal and the local policy agenda

At the national level of politics, many scholars have studied the interplay between different national level agendas (Baumgartner et al., 2019; Jennings & Wlezien, 2015; Mortensen et al., 2011; Vliegthart et al., 2016). Only few, however, have given attention to the relationship between national and local level policy agendas (see Mortensen et al., 2022). Yet, in the U.S. history there is well-known examples of how urban issues periodically impact the national government's agenda. In the 1960s and 1970s, for instance, multifaceted issues with local implications, such as housing, and social issues such as crime and poverty, rose to salience and were assembled under the new 1965 Housing and Urban Development agency at the US cabinet level. These issues were on the national agenda until the 1980s, when policymaking responsibility for urban issues became perceived as a state and local issue (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Herzik & Brown, 1991).

More generally, Jones et al. (2019) show how the national U.S. policy agenda broadened dramatically in the period from the 1950s to the 1970s. This broadening reflects a period where the U.S. experienced a vast expansion in national policymaking. It was also during this period when the federal government increased its engagement in policy areas previously left to civil society or state and local governments. National level activity particularly ramped up between 1967 and 1977, coinciding with the myriad Great Society social programs, which broadened federal government in the social policy areas of racial discrimination, public housing, and Medicaid. Interestingly, they find a horseshoe pattern, where the agenda expansion at the federal level in the third quarter of the 20th century was followed by a counter mobilization that caused a contraction of the federal level policy agenda from late 1970s continuing to the first decade of the 2000s (Jones et al., 2019).

We expect local policy agendas to be affected by such changes in the national agenda, but it is a priori not obvious how they are affected. First, though national politics certainly influences local politics, influence may also travel in the other direction, from local to national politics, and it is an interesting empirical question if the local policy agenda started to change before the national agenda. Second, since the federal level extended its scope into local policy arenas, the result may not necessarily be a corresponding expansion of local government activity. We would expect spillover effects in the sense that the policy agendas at both the local and federal level expanded during the Great Society period, but it could also be the case that the changes at the federal level were markedly more dramatic than the changes in cities like Austin, located in a southern state far away from Washington. Our analysis will provide an empirical answer to these questions.

Institutional reform, local growth, and the policy agenda

Another potential driver candidate of change in the local policy agenda is changes to local governing institutions. Although national level studies have found weak agenda effects from institutional conditions (Baumgartner et al., 2011; Green-Pedersen & Walgrave, 2014, 223), the study of the Austin policy agenda offers the opportunity to examine how institutional changes may lead to either short or long term changes in the policy agenda at the local level. Institutions possibly influence how problems appear on the policy agenda (e.g., Hammond 1993).

Austin's governmental reforms reflected national trends, particularly during the early 20th century. For instance, commissions were chosen in 1908, inspired by the new system created following the devastating 1901 hurricane in nearby Galveston (Burnet 2017; Thomas & Murray, 1991). In a commission, each representative is elected at-large and is also head of a local agency. Commissions were, however, short-lived in Austin and city leaders subsequently introduced a suite of progressive reforms, including a new at-large city council system and City Manager in 1924, and nonpartisan elections in 1928 (Tretter, 2016). The at-large council was replaced by 10 districts in 2015 (Shannon, 2021). There were minor changes to the city council structure throughout the 20th century such as council size and how

the mayor was elected, but overall, Austin's local governing institutions have been characterized by a high degree of stability.

If changes in the policy agenda are closely intertwined with changes in the governing institutions, then we should, based on the institutional stability of the Austin city government, expect a high degree of stability in the local policy agenda of Austin, perhaps interrupted around the few times of local, institutional reforms. This also implies that it will be particularly noteworthy if we find that much policy agenda change can take place within a largely stable institutional structure. In that perspective, Austin offers a critical case of how important institutional change is for change in the policy agenda.

Finally, we compare the development of the local policy agenda to the growth of the local population. One of the oldest debates in politics is how population size matters to politics (see e.g., Almond & Verba, 1963; Dahl & Tufte, 1984; Deters et al., 2014; Gerring and Veenendaal 2020). The consequences on the policy agenda have not been in focus in this research, but a few scholars have speculated about this aspect of jurisdiction size and politics. Dahl (1967), for instance, in his APSA presidential address from 1967, argued that one advantage of larger units is their ability to juggle a larger set of issues of relevance to their citizens. Similarly, Newton (1982) has argued that the political agenda in larger units often contains a more diverse and engaging set of topics than in smaller units. We know from a recent European study of municipality amalgamations that the policy agenda is indeed larger and more diverse in large jurisdictions compared to smaller jurisdictions, and we also know that merging two or more municipalities affects the policy agenda of the amalgamated municipality (Mortensen et al., 2022). Yet, we do not know how gradual long term changes in population size may influence changes in local policy agendas, and it is the latter relationship, we examine with the Austin city council agendas data.

DATA AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The Austin agendas project

Local policy agendas can be measured in different ways. Others have utilized mayoral “state of the city” addresses (Hopkins, 2008), budgets (Jones et al., 2009; Jordan, 2003; Peterson, 1981), and city council minutes to examine procedure and participation at the local level (Einstein et al., 2019; Karpowitz & Mansbridge, 2005). We use city council minutes to study stability and change in the issue priorities of a local city council. A major advantage of these data is that they allow a systematic year-to-year comparison of issue priorities over a period of more than 100 years, not possible with local budgets.

The Austin Agendas Project is a subsidiary of the Policy Agendas Project (PAP), housed at the University of Texas at Austin. With the help of several undergraduates over 5 years, each item from every meeting of the Austin City Council from 1900 to 2020 has been collected and content coded. All minutes were coded according to a codebook modified from the PAP coding scheme, including the original 21 major topics such as macroeconomics, utilities, and transportation policy, in addition to a major topic for cultural items that contains subtopics on museums, theaters, and general cultural events. Nested within the 21 major topics are 220 more fine-grained subtopics offering a very detailed registration of the issue priorities of the city council of Austin.

All coding for the Austin Agendas Project was done by trained human coders, many of whom were undergraduate research assistants. These students participated in a month-long training period as they learned the codebook, with the target being at least 90% reliability between two coders for each set. Coders were trained with an attentive eye to evolving language and vocabulary over the century-long dataset, in which items that were about the same substantive topic appeared differently due to changes in how council talked about them. For example, coders were given a variety of items on road paving (code 1002). In the early 20th century, roads were paved with packed dirt, then wooden planks. In 1911, Bitulithic pavement was introduced, and decades later asphalt finally became the norm. This evolving technology presented a challenge for coders reading antiquated items, so we ensured a variety of training codes to minimize confusion.

Subsequently, coders were given weekly feedback on reliability. Each week, coding would be evaluated by the percentage of “unreliable” codes, the items with differing subtopic codes between the two coders. Every student improved weekly, and intercoder reliability scores were consistently above 90% reliable, from sets that were routinely over 500 items.

Austin was chosen due to its unique digitalized archive of council meeting minutes going back to 1869. The quality and format of the council minutes before 1900 makes these early years particularly difficult to content code, and consequently we begin our time series in 1900. In the Austin Agendas dataset, an item is each thing considered or discussed on the agenda. There are many different types of items considered by local governments; ordinances are local policy outputs, but city councils also regularly issue commemorative proclamations, resolutions to make statements without the weight of an official policy, and hear communications from residents of Austin to the city council during their meetings. Agenda item examples from 1903, 1963, and 2013 give a glimpse into the dataset's evolution as the city developed and incorporated new technologies like typewriters and later, computers. The three examples are shown in [Figure 1](#).

After removing items devoid of policy content and matters of process, such as the weekly item approving the previous week's meeting minutes, a total of 228,437 items were considered in 5170 council meetings over 120 years.

Measures of the city council agenda

To get a solid examination of the long-term development of the city agenda of Austin, we calculate three standard measures of the size and complexity of a given policy agenda. First, we measure agenda size by simply counting the total number of agenda items addressed by the city council over the course of a year. This measure can inform us if the agenda is contracting or expanding over time (McCombs & Zhu, 1995), and it is an indicator of how the issue handling capacity of the city council has evolved over the 20th century. Changes to the policy agenda may not just materialize as relative changes in the issue priorities, but also as a general expansion of the policy agenda in order to accommodate new and demanding issues.

Second, we are of course particularly interested in how the issue content of the local policy agenda may have changed over time, and therefore we add a measure of the number of subtopics on the local council agenda. We construct this measure by calculating for each year the number of subtopics appearing at least once on the city council agenda over the course of the year. This is also the agenda measure utilized in the study of “the broadening” of the federal level policy agenda in the U.S. (Jones, Theriault, and Whyman 2019).

Third, we calculate a standard measure of agenda complexity, namely the entropy score based on Shannon's H . The number of subtopics on the agenda per year is intuitive and therefore attractive as a measure, but it does not inform us how the local council allocated attention among them. We use an entropy score called Shannon's H to systematically measure the diversity in attention to different issues on the agenda (Boydston et al., 2014). This allows us to measure how concentrated attention is across the agenda's many subtopics. While there are several ways to calculate the entropy score, we follow Boydston et al.'s (2014) in using Shannon's H . This entropy score is most useful for our analysis because there are over 200 subtopics in our codebook, and Shannon's H considers the proportion of each. This is valuable because the score increases as attention becomes more diffuse and stays low with a more concentrated agenda (Boydston et al., 2014). When city council pays attention to more issues, the Shannon's H score increases. The score is calculated by multiplying the proportion of items each subtopic receives by the natural log of that proportion, then taking the negative sum of all subtopics combined:

$$H = - \sum_i p(x_i) \ln(p(x_i)).$$

February 16, 1903

Alderman West for the Cemetery Committee to whom was referred the report of the City Engineer for the month of January, 1903, presented a report stating that same had been examined and found correct. The report was adopted.
Unfinished business
The chair laid before the Council an ordinance appropriating the sum of \$250. for the purpose of grading King and other streets. The ordinance was read the second time and passed under suspension of the rule by the following vote:
Yeas Aldermen Broken Davis Low Madday Nitochle Cadd
Nayes Aldermen Shelley Shumate Shumpf West 11
Ways none.

February 14, 1963

Councilman Shanks offered the following resolution and moved its adoption
(RESOLUTION)

A RESOLUTION DECLARING A POLICY OF EQUAL
OPPORTUNITY IN HOUSING FOR PROJECT NO.
TEXAS R-20, KEALING, OF THE CITY COUNCIL
OF THE CITY OF AUSTIN

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF AUSTIN:

That the City Council of the City of Austin, Texas, is fully aware of the conditions imposed by the President's executive order on equal opportunity in housing and the related policies of the Urban Renewal Administration prohibiting discrimination because of race, color, creed or national origin and believes that such conditions will not prevent the further planning and expeditious approval and execution of the proposed project.

The motion, seconded by Councilman Perry, carried by the following vote:
Ayes: Councilmen Armstrong, Perry, Shanks, White, Mayor Palmer
Noes: None

February 14, 2013

49. Approve a resolution to accept the recommendations of the Music Commission and directing the City Manager to bring forward any code changes necessary to enact those recommendations. (Notes: SPONSOR: Council Member Mike Martinez CO 1: Council Member William Spelman CO 2: Mayor Lee Leffingwell)
Resolution No. 20130214-049 was approved on consent on Council Member Spelman's motion, Council Member Morrison's second on a 7-0 vote.
50. Approve a resolution directing the City Manager to report on solutions to improve Austin Police Department forensic lab test report turn-around times. (Notes: SPONSOR: Mayor Lee Leffingwell CO 1: Council Member Mike Martinez)
This item was withdrawn on consent on Council Member Spelman's motion, Council Member Morrison's second on a 7-0 vote.

FIGURE 1 Three examples from Austin City Council minutes.

Here, x_i represents subtopic i , and $p(x_i)$ is the proportion of the total attention the item receives, and $\ln(p(x_i))$ is the natural log of the proportion of attention the item receives. If only one subtopic receives the entirety of city council's attention for the year, the Shannon's H score is 0 and increases as more subtopics come onto the agenda, or as the spread of attention across all topics becomes more equal (Boydston et al., 2014; Chaqués-Bonafont et al., 2020). Thus, a higher entropy score indicates a more

complex agenda—that is, one that allocates attention more evenly over the different issues appearing on the agenda.

Like *Agendas and Instabilities* (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; see also Jones et al., 2019), our main analysis consists of time series graphs of the central indicators covering the period from 1900 to 2020. We look for changes that are marked and observable, not marginal year-to-year variation, and we look for patterns of change, when observing the full time-series.

Other indicators

Several measures of the U.S. federal policy agenda are available from the Comparative Agendas Project. In this paper, we include a measure based on all U.S. House and Senate hearings from 1900 to 2020.ⁱⁱⁱ All hearings have been coded based on the coding system that has also been applied to code the Austin city council agendas. This provides a solid basis for evaluating if there is an interplay between the national and the local policy agenda.

The measure of Austin city population comes from the city's archives at the Austin History Center.^{iv} From 1900 to 1960, numbers were generated every 5 years, and after 1960 they are updated on an annual basis.^v Finally, we include in the analysis more qualitative information about the institutional reforms of the council government in Austin that have been implemented over the years.

FINDINGS

Figure 2 shows the development of the sheer size as well as the issue diversity of the local policy agenda of Austin from 1900 to 2020. It is a pattern of stability until the end of WWII followed by a marked expansion of the local agenda, both when measured in number of items and in number of subtopics

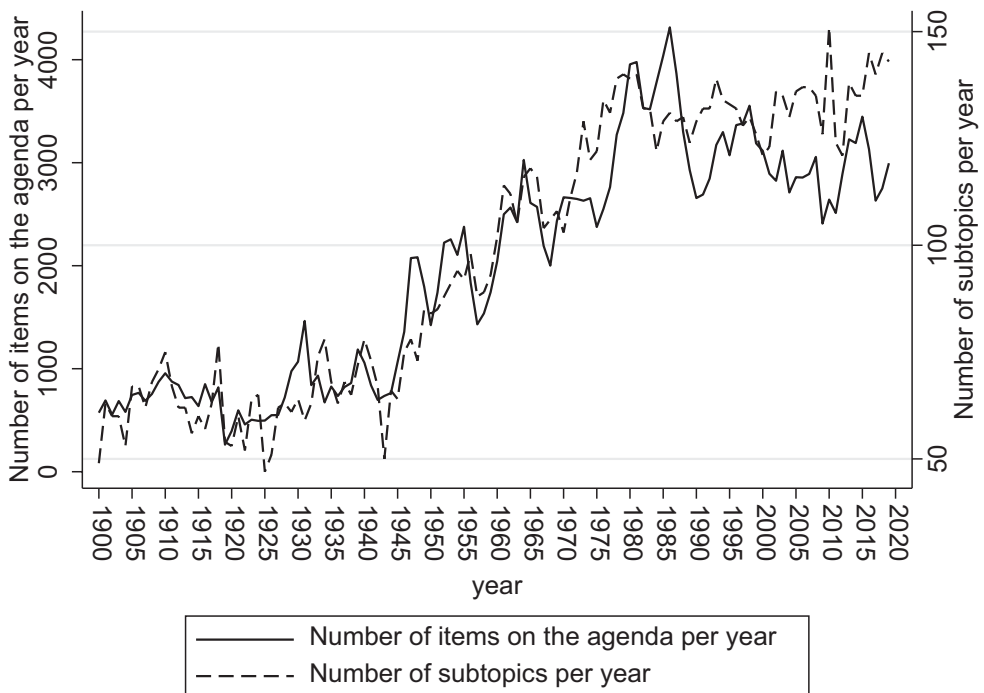


FIGURE 2 Number of items and topics on the Austin City Agenda, 1900–2020.

covered on the agenda. In terms of items covered in council meetings over the course of a year, the number increased from an average of 753 between 1900 and 1945, to more than 4000 items when it peaked in 1985. Since then, it has stabilized on an average of 2990 items per year in the period from 1990 to 2020.

In the first two decades of the 20th century, meetings were largely ad hoc as city council was the only governing body without a robust administrative state, so they met as issues arose. There were no professionalized police or fire departments, therefore the city council approved each fine remittance, traffic ticket, driver's license, and officer appointed to the informal public safety departments.

Figure 2 alludes to several trends in the first half of the 20th century. For example, the compounded crises of the influenza pandemic and World War I had drastic impacts on the city. Figure 2 shows the drop in number of items and subtopics in 1919. The pandemic greatly affected the city council's meeting schedule; in 1918 the government met only 51 times, about once a week. In 1919, they met 81 times, hearing reports from public health officials and to commemorate the dead abroad and at home. In 1919, the city council had only 253 items on the agenda covering 54 subtopics. Just six subtopics appeared more than 10 times: utilities like gas and oil, public transportation and road paving, police and fire, property taxes, and monthly reports from various department heads are on the agenda, reflecting the essential nature of these issues.

The 1910s and 1920s were critical decades for the city; Progressive Era reformers gained traction in 1916 with the hiring of a city manager, breaking with the city's early tradition of wards and aldermen leading policy, and the commission-style system that was adopted in 1908. Adoption of a city manager was a big step toward professionalization of the city's bureaucracy, and Austin was the first city of its size to do so (Tretter, 2016).

This era is bookmarked by two world wars; national and international trends had clear local impacts as well. In the 1920s as the country recovered from the first war and influenza pandemic, the city council's agenda continued to be dominated by connectivity, utilities, and housing. Figure 2 shows that in 1925, the number of subtopics on the agenda declines sharply to 46, while number of items did not. In addition to the topics consistently on the agenda, administrative tasks also appear heavily. For example, bids for contracts and appropriations to the City Hospital appear regularly, as do assorted civil service items on leaves, resignations, and nominations to office. The City Manager and other department heads would later assume bureaucratic duties of "hiring and firing," but the city council continued to organize the local administration at this time. The council was also creating local rules for a variety of policy areas, including construction and the local election that year. As the city government began to modernize that decade, the council's agenda contracted and expanded year to year.

The Great Depression and sprawling New Deal policies had indelible impacts on American politics. Items on the local agenda increased throughout the period from 1929 to 1939 in items, but there was a divergence between growth of agenda size and the issues council prioritized. City council addressed issues like children's health and labor, regulating tobacco use, food cooperatives, workman's compensation, aid for disabled people, and homelessness appeared for the first time during this era, reflecting the sharp rise in need. Although items on public works and food assistance to the needy had appeared on the agenda previously, items associated with President Roosevelt's Public Works Administration both directly and indirectly increased in prominence as need grew. Changes in local priorities shifted as the Great Depression altered life in general for most Americans throughout the 1930s.

Finally, Figure 2 alludes to how the second world war affected local governmental attention. In 1943, at the height of wartime, there were only 49 subtopics on the annual agenda. Items on the local military base and personnel were beginning to appear, they remain in low numbers. However, the agenda contracted to focus on the most essential subtopics in the local jurisdiction: public transit, street paving, and river navigation, property taxes, construction, and purchasing land, and finally, the local economy. These seven policy areas were the only subtopics that appeared more than 10 times on the 1943 agenda, as the city continued to brace for wartime impact.

The size of the local agenda, in items and subtopics, began its upward trajectory after the war's end into the second half of the 20th century. From 1900 to 1945, the average number of topics on the agenda

was 63. The agenda's size increased steadily over the next 35 years to a high of 140 subtopics in 1981. Since then, an average of 132 subtopics have been addressed in the council meetings each year, and the number has fluctuated only little from year to year. Overall, [Figure 2](#) shows a dramatic change over time in the local policy agenda of Austin. It is also noteworthy that the change has not been distributed evenly over the century but has been driven by almost 40 years of expansion beginning in the years after World War II.

The timing and pattern of this change process shows similarities with “the great broadening” of the agenda identified at the federal level of politics (see Jones, Theriault, and Whyman 2019). To get closer at these similarities, [Figure 3](#) adds federal level measures of annual number of agenda subtopics to the local level measure of subtopics in the Austin city council agenda. In [Figure 3](#), we observe a parallel rise in all three time-series during these pivotal eras for American politics, demonstrating the importance of agenda broadening at all levels of government in the mid-twentieth century. In the early 1900s, the local agenda was actually larger than the US Congress, as measured by the number of subtopics considered. However, hearings at the national level increase steadily throughout the 20th century, until the marked growth in the Great Broadening. City council's attention remained stable in the first half of the 20th century, until the local agenda broadened as well following World War II.

In the post-war period, we certainly see similar trends of agenda expansion at the local and national level as government at all levels increased the number of issues it considered, and largely continued making policy in these areas for several decades. The interplay between the national and the local level of politics is a classic research topic in political science, but this is the first time the topic has been systematically addressed within policy agendas research.

The conservative backlash that began in the 1980s solidified a flattening of government activity and policymaking across the national policy agenda, accounting for and leading to the precipitous drop in subtopics on both the House and Senate agendas beginning in the 1990s (Jones, Theriault, and Whyman 2019). The decline in attention across policy subtopics did not occur at the local level,

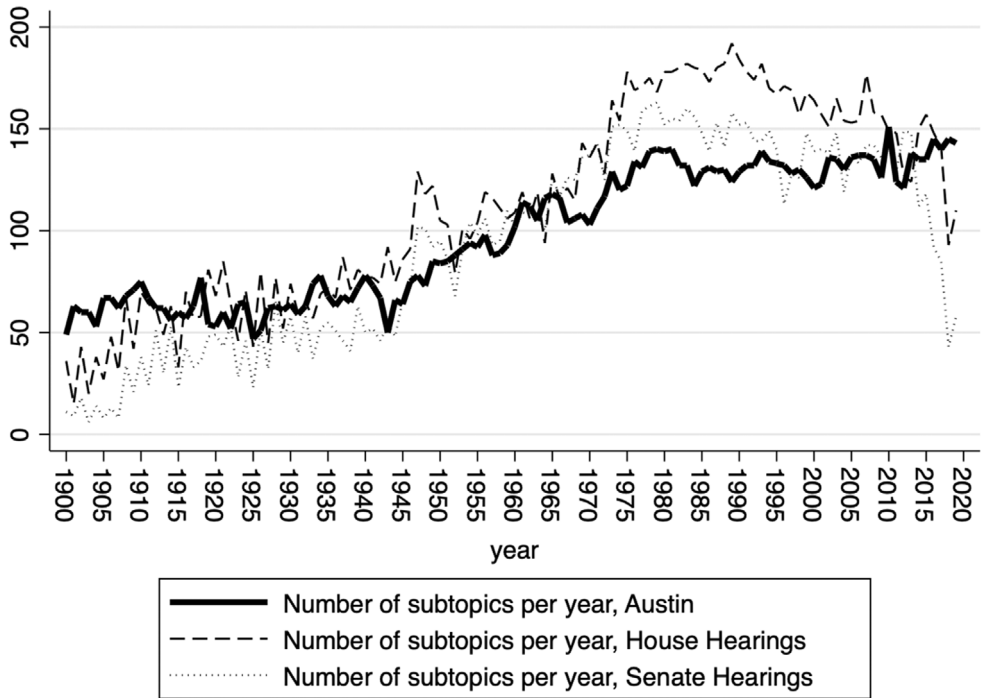


FIGURE 3 House and Senate Hearings and the Austin City Council Agenda.

however. Instead, the increasing trend in attention to 130 (or so) subtopics stays stable following the broadening of the local agenda that occurred in the 1970s.^{vi}

The backlash observed in the local Austin agenda is not as dramatic as at the national level in the late 20th century. One reason may be related to the downstream nature of American federalism; local governments can only do so much due to preemption and running into the jurisdiction of a broadened national government, which policies take precedence over lower levels (Anderson, 2010; Villazor, 2009). An additional explanation for the endurance of the lower scope of Congress since the 1980s is a shift from lawmaking to oversight in hearings (Jones, Theriault, and Whyman 2019). The substantive purpose of the local policy agenda appears more stable and continuous throughout the end of the 20th century.

Turning to the impact of local institutional reforms, the patterns of stability and change in the Austin city council agendas do not suggest that local institutional reforms have been an important driver of change. As mentioned above, Austin has adopted larger reforms in the governing system in 1908, 1924 (effective in 1926), and in 2012 (effective 2014). Based on the long-term trends we observe in Figures 2 and 3, there is no indication that the major changes in the local agenda of Austin have had any connection to these three larger institutional reforms. This adds to national level studies showing agenda change without institutional change (Baumgartner et al., 2011; Green-Pedersen & Walgrave, 2014, 223). Furthermore, the fact that the Austin city council agenda did develop markedly since WWII also shows that institutional stability is not a hindrance for policy agenda change, since the 1924 at-large reforms were remarkably stable, enduring for nearly 90 years.

Comparing agendas at the local and national levels of government continues by examining their levels of diversity in policy attention. Figure 4 shows entropy scores in U.S. House and Senate and Austin City Council. Not surprisingly, the trend in agenda diversity is quite similar to the measure of the annual number of topics addressed by the council, i.e., an increase in agenda complexity in the decades following WWII. Yet, as also recognized in other policy agendas studies, the entropy score is less sensitive to changes (e.g., Mortensen et al., 2022), and the changes in entropy are less dramatic than the changes in

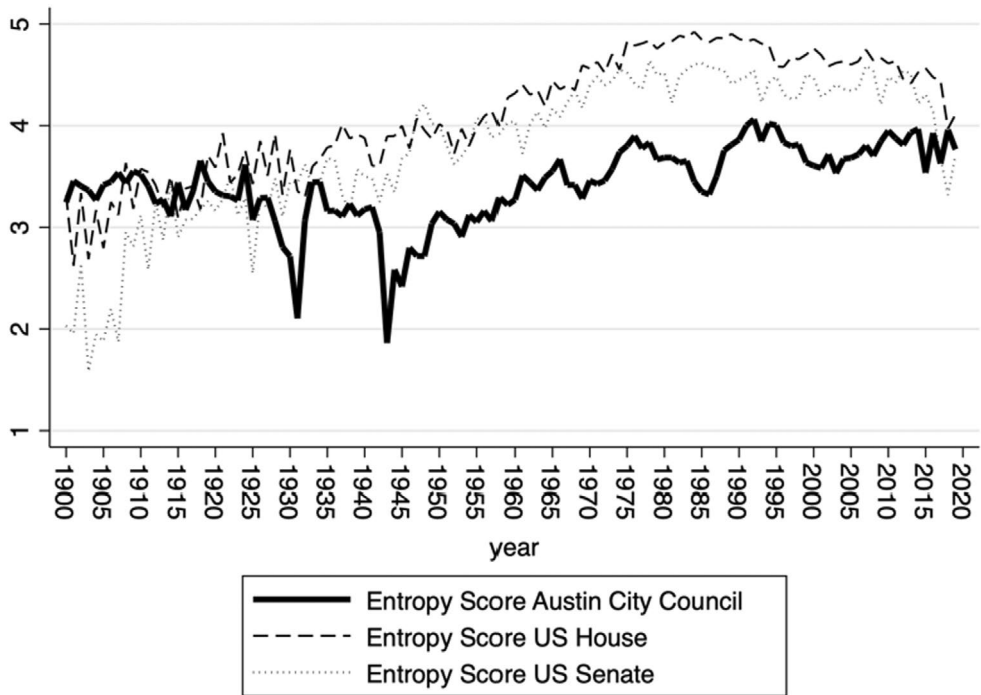


FIGURE 4 Entropy Scores in U.S. House and Senate and Austin City Council.

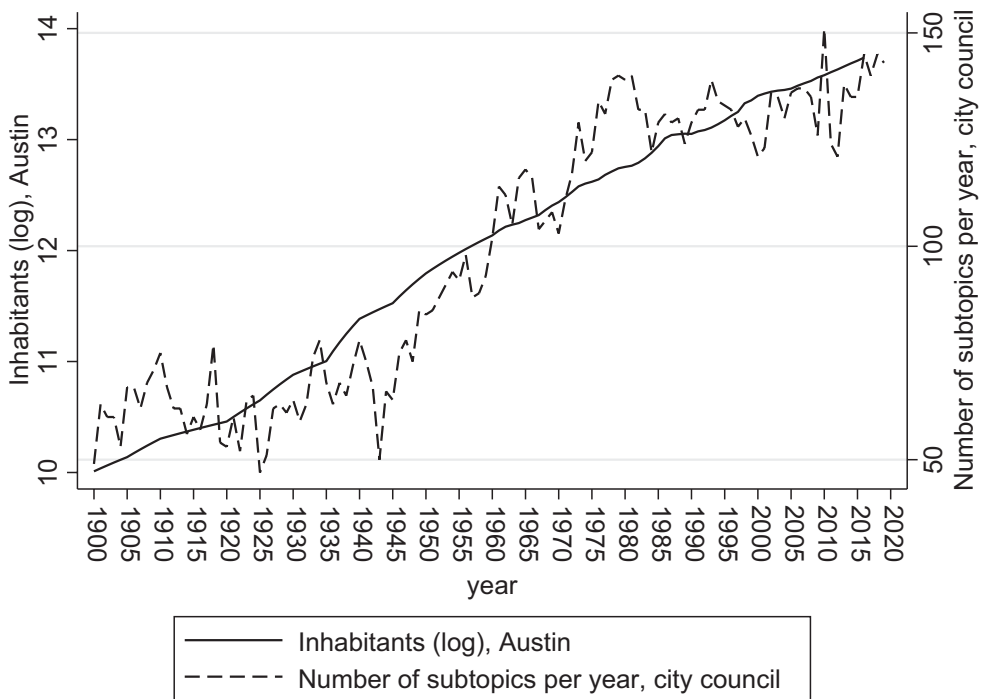


FIGURE 5 Population growth and agenda expansion.

the number of items or topics (see Figures 2 and 3). It is also worth noting that the amount of entropy in the Austin City Council agendas is comparable to the entropy score (typically between 3 and 4) that previous studies find for the spread of attention on national policy agendas (Boydston et al., 2014; Jennings et al., 2011). This corroborates the impression of a local policy agenda characterized by political attention to many different issues (see Table A1 in appendix).

Figure 4 shows that agendas in the U.S. House and Senate became more diverse in the first few decades of the 20th century, before again increasing in the mid-20th century. The national government incorporated many new issues onto its agenda during this period, and its increasing entropy score reflects that expansion. Although the local government experienced a similar trajectory, the rate of increased entropy was smaller. Figure 4 displays two particular drops in the entropy scores of the city council agenda. One during the great depression in the beginning of the 1930s, and one during WWII reflecting the narrowing of the local agenda in Austin in those years (see above), and this suggests that local policy agendas narrow more than national policy agendas in times of severe crises.

In Figure 5, we compare the development of the Austin city agenda with the development of the number of citizens in Austin. As mentioned above, over the span of the century the numbers of inhabitants in Austin grew from around 20,000 in 1900 to almost 1 million inhabitants in 2020. The increase in population matters for the increase in the size of the local policy agenda. Many local agenda issues are about infrastructure, housing and city planning, and these issues comprise the top major topics on the local agenda generally. When the population expands, such issues need to be addressed to accommodate them.

Figure 5 indicates a long-term relationship between population growth and the expansion of the city council agenda, but there is much fluctuation in the local agenda that is not tightly aligned with the steady population growth.^{vii} Furthermore, the expansion of the agenda from WWII to the 1980s is more dramatic than the increase in the number of Austinites in that period. Similarly, while the expansion of the population intensifies after 1990, the expansion of the policy agenda ends around 1980, and since

then the number of topics addressed by the city council of Austin has fluctuated around a relatively stable number of subtopics on the agenda.

We conclude the analysis with a regression analysis. As pointed out in the theoretical section, we expect and look for parallel developments in the main time-series, and we do not make strong claims about immediate and direct causal effects. Thus, the regression analysis first and foremost functions as an extra check on the conclusions derived above based on the visual interpretations of the time-series. More particularly, the coefficients shown in [Table 1](#) stem from an error correction model, which is useful to separate short- and long-term relationships between our variables of interest and to handle trending variables (De Boef & Keele, 2008). Note that in the error correction model the dependent variable—number of subtopics per year on the city council agenda—is measured in first differences while the explanatory variables are included in both level and first difference forms.

The analysis reported in [Table 1](#) corroborates the conclusions drawn based on the visual inspections of the time series figures shown above. Model 1 in [Table 1](#) is estimated based on the full time series from 1900 to 2020 and it shows a clear positive correlation between the (log of) inhabitants and the number of subtopics on the city council agenda. This estimate becomes slightly stronger in Model 2 in [Table 1](#), which is based on the years from 1950 to 2020 only. Whereas there is no short-term effect of year-to-year population changes on agenda changes, there is a clear enduring long-term effect of the population size on the local council agenda.

[Table 1](#) also provides support for the impression of a stronger relationship between the national level agenda and the local agenda in the period from 1950 and onwards. For the full time series, we see no statistically significant estimate of the House Hearings variable (see Model 1), but this estimate increases after 1950 and becomes statistically significant at the $p < 0.10$ level. Finally, [Table 1](#) corroborates the conclusion that local institutional reforms have not systematically influenced the number of topics on the local policy agenda. The analyses reported in [Table 1](#) have been re-run using different lags and different

TABLE 1 Regression analysis of the local policy agenda of Austin.

	Model 1	Model 2
	Δ Number of subtopics per year, city council agenda 1990–2020	Δ Number of subtopics per year, city council agenda 1950–2020
Number of subtopics per year, city council agenda, t-1	−0.34*** (0.08)	−0.51*** (0.13)
Inhabitants in Austin (log), t-1	7.01*** (2.06)	8.50*** (2.80)
Δ Inhabitants in Austin (log), t-1	−19.78 (46.00)	−11.86 (62.58)
Number of subtopics per year, House Hearings, t-1	0.04 (0.05)	0.10* (0.06)
Δ Number of subtopics per year, House Hearings, t-1	0.00 (0.05)	0.08 (0.08)
Year dummies for local institutional reforms		
1908	9.19 (7.82)	
1924	1.68 (7.68)	
2012	−8.16 (7.89)	−7.68 (7.51)
2014	−2.75 (7.99)	−2.13 (7.77)
Constant	−54.68*** (18.30)	−61.11** (27.88)
Years	1900–2020	1950–2020
Observations	116	66
Durbin-Watson	2.17	2.10
R ²	0.174	0.247

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

specifications of the local institutional reform years, but these additional explorations do not change the conclusions based on Table 1.^{viii}

CONCLUSION

In the spirit of Baumgartner and Jones' (1993) seminal research on national level policy agendas, this paper has traced the local policy agenda of Austin over a very long period from 1900 to 2020. Our focus has been on some general features of the development of the local policy agenda, not on individual issues. The analysis reveals a local policy agenda, which until the end of WWII was quite narrow and very stable. After WWII, however, began a dramatic expansion of the size and issue complexity of the local policy agenda. That expansion lasted until around 1980, where the agenda stabilized at a level of capacity and complexity much higher than before the expansion sat in. This pattern shows a striking parallel to the broadening of the federal level agenda. Furthermore, it parallels increases in the population of Austin, but is not tightly linked to the few local institutional reforms that have been implemented in Austin during the observed period. The latter observation is in line with national level policy agendas studies that also find change in policy agendas without corresponding changes in political institutions.

This is the first century long study of a local policy agenda, and we certainly do hope it will inspire more local policy agenda studies. Local policy agendas research has lacked behind national level research on policy agendas (Baumgartner et al., 2023), but there is a strong case for revitalizing research in local policy agendas. First, local government is important to citizens. They make decisions and prioritize issues of central importance to the local public. Whereas research on local politics in Europe has been quite steady (see Panara & Varney, 2013), the intensity of US research on local politics has been more variable over time (Pierre, 2014, 868). Yet, much seminal research has been driven by a genuine interest in local-level policy-making (e.g., Peterson, 1981; Stone, 1989; Tiebout, 1956). Studying issue attention by the tools adopted from the national level policy agendas research is comparable to, in the medical world, "...injecting a tracer liquid into a living body to measure the circulation of fluids and determine any deficiencies therein" (Green-Pedersen & Walgrave, 2014, 9).

A second motivation for expanding research on local policy agendas is to use the local laboratory of government to study questions of general relevance that are hard to study at the national level of politics. We see a strong potential for supplementing the study of the local policy agenda of Austin with similar studies of other U.S. cities. Have these cities seen a similar broadening of the local policy agenda after WWII, and did other issues come to dominate these local policy agendas? Furthermore, it would give a new perspective on local government autonomy to examine similarity and differences across local policy agendas from different cities. In that sense, "the numerosity" (John, 2009, 22) of local government units offers some unique opportunities for comparative and/or large N research designs that are often hard to pursue in national level policy agendas research. Pursuing this research agenda may also allow attention to potentially important variables left out of the study reported in this paper. Most importantly shorter time series and a larger number of cities or municipalities invite more attention to the role of local media agendas, local interest groups and more generally, local political processes.

ORCID

Peter B. Mortensen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5809-3260>

Brooke Nicole Shannon  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3993-1502>

Endnotes

ⁱ https://www.austintexas.gov/department/city-council/council/council_meeting_info_center.htm.

ⁱⁱ One exception to this conclusion is a recent local policy agendas research project in Denmark (see e.g. Mortensen and Seeberg 2016; Baekgaard et al. 2018; Mortensen et al., 2022).

- ⁱⁱⁱ See Table A1 in the Appendix for source information for the U.S. House and Senate Hearings data.
- ^{iv} Austin History Center. <https://ahc.access.preservica.com/>.
- ^v For the analysis, we interpolate population numbers to get yearly numbers for the full period.
- ^{vi} The sharp drop in congressional hearing subtopics 2019–2020 is a result of covid lags in processing data. The Policy Agendas Project relies on Congressional Information Service (CIS) and the ProQuest online database to collect hearings, including titles and descriptions provided by congressional committees. The project collects and codes items from the previous congress year, therefore the 2019 hearings reflect the lack of current information and processing from multiple sources. At the time of writing, the congressional hearings dataset on comparativeagendas.net, the PAP's website, were updated through 2020.
- ^{vii} The measure of inhabitants has been log-transformed to assist the visualization and to compensate for a very skewed distribution of the variable.
- ^{viii} Since the correlation between the House Hearings and Senate Hearings time-series is extremely high (Pearson correlation = 0.95), we only include the House Hearings variable in the regression analysis.

REFERENCES

- Almond, Gabriel A., and Sidney Verba. 1963. *The civic culture: Political attitudes and democracy in five nations*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Anderson, Ben. 2010. "Preemption, precaution, preparedness: anticipatory action and future geographies." *Progress in Human Geography* 34(6): 777–98. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132510362600>.
- Baekgaard, Martin, Peter B. Mortensen, and Henrik Bech Seeberg. 2018. "The Bureaucracy and the Policy Agenda." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 28(2): 239–53.
- Baumgartner, Frank R., Christian Breunig, and Emiliano Grossman, eds. 2019. *Comparative Policy Agendas: Theory, Tools, Data*, First ed. Oxford; New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Baumgartner, Frank R., and Bryan D. Jones. 1993. *Agendas and Instability in American Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Baumgartner, Frank R., and Bryan D. Jones. 2015. *The Politics of Information: Problem Definition and the Course of Public Policy in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Baumgartner, Frank R., Bryan D. Jones, and Michael C. MacLeod. 2000. "The evolution of legislative jurisdictions." *The Journal of Politics* 62(2): 321–49. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0022-3816.00015>.
- Baumgartner, Frank R., Bryan D. Jones, and Peter B. Mortensen. 2023. "Punctuated Equilibrium Theory: Explaining Stability and Change in Public Policymaking." In *Theories Of The Policy Process*. New York, N.Y.: Westview Press.
- Baumgartner, Frank R., Bryan D. Jones, and John Wilkerson. 2011. "Comparative studies of policy dynamics." *Comparative Political Studies* 44(8): 947–72. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414011405160>.
- Baumgartner, Frank R., Bryan D. Jones, and John D. Wilkerson. 2002. "Studying Policy Dynamics." In *Policy Dynamics*, edited by I. L. Chicago, 29–46. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Boydston, Amber E., Shaun Bevan, and Herschel F. Thomas. 2014. "The importance of attention diversity and how to measure it." *Policy Studies Journal* 42(2): 173–96. <https://doi.org/10.1111/psj.12055>.
- Chaqués-Bonafont, Laura, Frank R. Baumgartner, and Anna M. Palau. 2015. *Agenda Dynamics in Spain*. Basingstoke: Springer International Publishing.
- Chaqués-Bonafont, Laura, Christoffer Green-Pedersen, and Henrik Bech Seeberg. 2020. "Comparing Agenda-Settings: The Comparative Agendas Project." In *Handbook of Research Methods and Applications in Comparative Policy Analysis*. Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Crenson, Matthew A. 1971. *The Un-Politics of Air Pollution: A Study of Non-Decisionmaking in the Cities*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press.
- Dahl, Robert. 1961. In *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City*, 2nd ed., edited by New Haven. London: Yale University Press.
- Dahl, Robert A. 1967. "The city in the future of democracy." *American Political Science Review* 61(4): 953–70. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1953398>.
- Dahl, Robert A., and Edward R. Tufte. 1984. *Size and Democracy*. Stanford Ca: Stanford University Press.
- De Boef, S., and L. Keele. 2008. "Taking Time Seriously." *American Journal of Political Science* 52(1): 184–200.
- Dearing, James W., and Everett M. Rogers. 1996. *Agenda-Setting*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Denters, Bas, Michael A. Goldsmith, Andres Ladner, Poul Erik Mouritzen, and Lawrence E. Rose. 2014. *Size and Local Democracy*. London: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Einstein, Katherine Levine, Maxwell Palmer, and David M. Glick. 2019. "Who participates in local government? evidence from meeting minutes." *Perspectives on Politics* 17(1): 28–46. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S153759271800213X>.
- Eissler, Rebecca, Peter B. Mortensen, and Annelise Russell. 2016. "Local Government Agenda Setting." In *Handbook of Public Policy Agenda Setting*, edited by Nikolaos Zahariadis, 297–313. London: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Eissler, Rebecca, Annelise Russell, and Bryan D. Jones. 2014. "New avenues for the study of agenda setting." *Policy Studies Journal* 42(1): 71–86.

- Erikson, Robert S., Gerald C. Wright, and John P. McIver. 1993. *Statehouse Democracy: Public Opinion and Policy in the American States*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gerring, John. 2020. *The Impact of Scale. Population and Politics*. The Cambridge University Press.
- Green-Pedersen, Christoffer, and Steffan Walgrave. 2014. *Agenda Setting, Policies, and Political Systems: A Comparative Approach* 1–16. In *Political Agenda Setting: An Approach to Studying Political Systems*.
- Grossman, Emiliano, and Isabelle Guinaudeau. 2021. *Do Elections (Still) Matter? Mandates, Institutions, and Policies in Western Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Grumbach, Jacob M. 2022. *Laboratories Against Democracy: How National Parties Transformed State Politics*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Hammond, Thomas H. 1993. "Toward A General Theory of Hierarchy: Books, Bureaucrats, Basketball Tournaments, and the Administrative Structure of the Nation-State." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 3(1): 120–45.
- Heidbreder, Brianne. 2012. "Agenda setting in the states: how politics and policy needs shape gubernatorial agendas." *Politics & Policy* 40(2): 296–319. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-1346.2012.00345.x>.
- Herzik, Eric B., and Brent W. Brown, eds. 1991. *Gubernatorial Leadership and State Policy*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Hopkins, Daniel. 2008. *The Origins of the Urban Political Agenda*. MA: In Boston.
- Hunter, Floyd. 1953. *Community Power Structure: A Study of Decision Makers*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Jennings, Will, Shaun Bevan, Arco Timmermans, Gerard Breeman, Sylvain Brouard, Laura Chaqués-Bonafont, Christoffer Green-Pedersen, Peter John, Peter B. Mortensen, and Anna M. Palau. 2011. "Effects of the core functions of government on the diversity of executive agendas." *Comparative Political Studies* 44(8): 1001–30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414011405165>.
- Jennings, Will, and Christopher Wlezien. 2015. "Preferences, Problems and Representation." *Political Science Research and Methods* 3(3): 659–81. <https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2015.3>.
- John, Peter. 2009. "Why Study Urban Politics?" In *Why Study Urban Politics? in Theories of Urban Politics*. Jonathan S. Davies and David L. Imbroscio: SAGE Publications.
- John, Peter, Anthony Bertelli, Will Jennings, and Shaun Bevan. 2013. *The Policy Agenda and British Politics*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Jones, Bryan D., and Frank R. Baumgartner. 2005. *The Politics of Attention: How Government Prioritizes Problems*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Jones, Bryan D., Frank R. Baumgartner, Christian Breunig, Christopher Wlezien, Stuart N. Soroka, Martial Foucault, Abel François, et al. 2009. "A general empirical law of public budgets: A comparative analysis." *American Journal of Political Science* 53(4): 855–73. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2009.00405.x>.
- Jones, Bryan D., Frank R. Baumgartner, and Jeffrey C. Talbert. 1993. "The destruction of issue monopolies in Congress." *American Political Science Review* 87(3): 657–71.
- Jones, Bryan D., Sean M. Theriault, and Michelle C. Whyman. 2019. *The Great Broadening: How The Vast Expansion Of The Policymaking Agenda Transformed American Politics*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Jordan, Meagan M. 2003. "Punctuations and agendas: A new look at local government budget expenditures." *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 22(3): 345–60. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.10136>.
- Karpowitz, Christopher F., and Jane Mansbridge. 2005. "Disagreement and consensus: The need for dynamic updating in public deliberation." *Journal of Public Deliberation* 1(1): 347–64.
- Lowery, David, Virginia Gray, and Frank R. Baumgartner. 2011. "Policy attention in state and nation: is anyone listening to the laboratories of democracy?" *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 41(2): 286–310. <https://doi.org/10.1093/publius/pjq039>.
- Mccombs, M., and J.-H. Zhu. 1995. "Capacity, diversity, and volatility of the public agenda: Trends from 1954-1994." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 59(4): 495–525.
- Mortensen, Peter B., Christoffer Green-Pedersen, Gerard Breeman, Laura Chaqués-Bonafont, Will Jennings, Peter John, Anna M. Palau, and Arco Timmermans. 2011. "Comparing government agendas: Executive speeches in the Netherlands, United Kingdom, and Denmark." *Comparative Political Studies* 44(8): 973–1000.
- Mortensen, Peter B., and Henrik B. Seeberg. 2016. "Why Are Some Policy Agendas Larger Than Others?" *Policy Studies Journal* 44(2): 156–75.
- Mortensen, Peter B., Matt W. Loftis, and Henrik B. Seeberg. 2022. *Explaining Local Policy Agendas: Institutions, Elections, Actors and Problems*. Basingstoke: Springer International Publishing.
- Newton, K. 1982. "Is small really so beautiful? is big really so ugly? size, effectiveness, and democracy in local government." *Political Studies* 30(2): 190–206.
- Panara, Carlo, and Michael R. Varney, eds. 2013. "Local Government in Europe: The "Fourth Level"." In *In the EU Multi-Layered System of Governance*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Peterson, Paul E. 1981. *City Limits*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Pierre, Jon. 2014. "Can urban regimes travel in time and space? urban regime theory, urban governance theory, and comparative urban politics." *Urban Affairs Review* 50(6): 864–89. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1078087413518175>.
- Sapotichne, Joshua, and Bryan D. Jones. 2012. "Setting City Agendas: Power and Policy Change." In *Oxford Handbook of Urban Politics*, edited by Karen Mossberger, Susan E. Clarke, and Peter John, 442–67. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Sapotichne, Joshua, Bryan D. Jones, and Michelle Wolfe. 2007. "Is urban politics a black hole? analyzing the boundary between political science and urban politics." *Urban Affairs Review* 43: 76–106. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1078087407302901>.
- Shannon, Brooke Nicole. 2021. "Can Institutional reform have a lasting impact on the policy agenda? evidence from the 10-1 in austin, TX." *Urban Affairs Review* 58(6): 1689–1718. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10780874211038285>.
- Sheingate, Adam D. 2006. "Structure and opportunity: committee jurisdiction and issue attention in congress." *American Journal of Political Science* 50(4): 844–59. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2006.00219.x>.
- Stone, Clarence N. 1976. *Economic Growth and Neighborhood Discontent: System Bias in the Urban Renewal Program of Atlanta*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Stone, Clarence N. 1989. *Regime Politics: Governing Atlanta, 1946–1988*, Vol 96 788–90. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press.
- Burnet, J.. 2017. "We Knew There Was A Storm Coming, But We Had No Idea", *Morning Edition*. <https://www.npr.org/2017/11/30/566950355/the-tempest-at-galveston-we-knew-there-was-a-storm-coming-but-we-had-no-idea#:~:text=The%20Gre%20Galveston%20Storm%20came,advanced%20city%20was%20nearly%20destroyed>
- Thomas, Robert D., and Richard W. Murray. 1991. *Progrowth Politics: Change and Governance in Houston*. Berkeley, CA: IGS Press: Institute of Government Studies, University of California at Berkeley.
- Tiebout, Charles M. 1956. "A pure theory of local expenditures." *Journal of Political Economy* 64(5): 416–24. <https://doi.org/10.1086/257839>.
- Tretter, Eliot. 2016. *Shadows of a Sunbelt City: The Environment, Racism, and the Knowledge Economy in Austin*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press.
- Villazor, Rose Cuison. 2009. "Sanctuary Cities and Local Citizenship." *Fordham Urban Law Journal* 37(2): 574–98. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2007.54.1.23>.
- Vliegenthart, Rens, Stefaan Walgrave, Frank R. Baumgartner, Shaun Bevan, Christian Breunig, Sylvain Brouard, Laura Chaqués Bonafont, et al. 2016. "Do the Media Set the Parliamentary Agenda? A Comparative Study in Seven Countries." *European Journal of Political Research* 55(2): 283–301. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12134>.

How to cite this article: Mortensen, Peter B. and Brooke Nicole Shannon. 2025. "Agendas and Instability in American Local Politics: A Study of the Austin City Council Agenda 1900–2020." *Policy Studies Journal* 00(0): 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1111/psj.12587>.

APPENDIX

TABLE A1 National Policy Agenda Data Sources.

Dataset	Source	Years	Observations	Total Obs. 1900–2020
U.S. House Hearings	https://www.comparativeagendas.net/us	1946–2020	59,060	
U.S. House Hearings	Policy Agendas Project, data available upon request	1900–1945	12,326	71,386
U.S. Senate Hearings	https://www.comparativeagendas.net/us	1946–2020	40,446	
U.S. Senate Hearings	Policy Agendas Project, data available upon request	1900–1945	6110	46,556

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Peter B. Mortensen is full professor at the Department of Political Science, Aarhus University. His research interests include public policy and local and national agenda setting.

Brooke Nicole Shannon is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Memphis. Her research explores the policy agenda of city councils, American political development at the local level, policy process theory, and local institutions such as city councils, mayors, and law enforcement departments.