COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY

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Personal Agenda–Public Agenda Congruency: A Contingent Condition for Agenda-setting Effects

Abstract[*]

This paper focuses on the concept of the impact area as the intersection between the common issues of the personal agenda and the public agenda. Expanding the concept of agenda-setting effects, which focuses mainly on the relation between the public and media agendas, we have examined the congruity of the public agenda and the personal agenda as a contingent condition for the strength of these effects. The concept also distinguishes between the top-priority issues of the public and personal agendas, setting out that the general public's search for information about these top-priority issues highlights the need for orientation. We used data from Spain to focus on the national elections (2011, 2015 and 2019), plus the beginning of the pandemic (2020). The study includes a content analysis of the *El País* daily newspaper for the four periods and a variety of surveys and representative electoral barometers. To those data we have added an analysis of the main search topics on Google Trends for each of the four years. The results reveal that variations in the relationship between the public and personal agendas are linked to the strength of the agenda-setting effect between the media and public agendas.

Keywords
Agenda setting, elections, public opinion, Covid, pandemic, Google Trends.

1. Introduction

As agenda-setting moves past the half-century mark, the legacy of the Chapel Hill study is very evident. Across the past half century, hundreds of studies have been published documenting the agenda-setting effects of news coverage on the public's issue agenda for a broad scope of public issues in countries on every continent (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McCombs, 2014; McCombs & Valenzuela, 2021; Perloff, 2022). The 1972 agenda-setting presidential election study also is the benchmark for a second legacy, explication of theoretical concepts of contingent conditions, psychological concepts that enhance or constrain the strength of agenda-setting effects among members of the public. These contingent conditions, the circumstances under which agenda-setting effects are strong, moderate or weak, enhance the precision of the theory.

[*] This article is a tribute to Professor Fermín Bouza Álvarez. His contribution in the area of political communication with the impact area marked the genesis in the search for new keys in the communication processes where the perception of that which is public and public-personal offer answers to the researchers based on the cognitive frameworks and how we understand the world around us.

The inaugural contingent condition for agenda-setting effects was David Weaver's (1977) concept of need for orientation, which is defined by the lower-order concepts of relevance and uncertainty. These are psychological concepts about individual differences, the perceived personal and social importance of an issue and how much information individuals possess and desire about an issue.

Contingent condition concepts introduced in subsequent years are:

Harold Zucker's (1978) distinction between obtrusive and unobtrusive issues. Individuals have significant personal experience with some issues, such as inflation, an unobtrusive issue. Individuals have little or no personal experience with other issues, such as the Ukraine war, an obtrusive issue. Across the continuum defined by obtrusive and unobtrusive, there are widespread individual differences regarding many issues, such as unemployment, and widespread differences in the strength of agenda-setting effects.

Salma Ghanem's (1996, 1997) concept of compelling arguments spotlights which specific attributes of an issue on the media agenda resonate with members of the public in such a way that these attributes become especially compelling arguments for the salience of the issue. These attributes are as strong or stronger predictors of issue salience than the total media agenda, the traditional predictor. This concept adds a new link to agenda-setting theory, the impact of media attribute salience (level 2) on issue salience (level 1).

The most recent contingent condition for agenda-setting effects also introduces a new relationship to the theory, the link between the public agenda and the personal agenda. The exploration of that contingent condition is the focus of this paper. We begin with a review of the literature on the public agenda and the personal agenda before introducing Fermín Bouza's (2004) employment of these two variables as a contingent condition of the strength of agenda-setting effects.

2. Literature review

2.1. *Public and personal agendas*

The public agenda is a core concept of agenda-setting theory, the dependent variable in the measurement of agenda-setting effects. The seminal Chapel Hill study based its measure of the public agenda on a question originated in the late 1930s by the Gallup Poll: "What is the most important problem facing the country today?" (Smith, 1980, 1985) That question or close paraphrases have become standard measures of the public agenda in agenda-setting research. The responses elicited by these questions are essentially a civic agenda, that is, societal level issues –"problems" in the wording of the Gallup question about issues that confront the nation. This perspective is appropriate since agenda-setting theory is situated in the academic arena of political communication, and more specifically in its early years almost entirely in election studies.

On the other hand, the concept of a personal agenda had no explicit theoretical link to agenda setting until recently. One consequence of the personal agenda as a free-floating concept rather than a theoretical concept is the lack of a standard nomenclature where the personal agenda is variously labeled as intrapersonal, personal relevance, and personal salience. The personal agenda was studied primarily in the 1970s as an alternative to the civic agenda in the seminal Chapel Hill study.

McCombs (1974) asked Syracuse University undergraduates to rank the issues of the day in an intrapersonal context ("Which of these problems is the most important personally?") and in an interpersonal context ("Which of these problems have you talked about most frequently in the last month?"). For intrapersonal items, TV and newspapers dominate as the most influential media. In the interpersonal context, TV dominated all but one issue.

Greenberg *et al.* (1974) did not find agenda-setting effects by local media on the personal issue agenda during a non-election year. McClure and Patterson (1974) found agenda-setting

effects during the 1972 national election of the newspaper issue agenda on the personal agenda, but no agenda-setting effects of the television issue agenda on the personal agenda.

Tipton *et al.* (1975) obtained similar results in local elections in Kentucky –newspaper agenda-setting effects on the personal issue agenda, but no television effects. Williams and Larsen's (1977) off-election year study found agenda-setting effects for the local newspaper on both local issue and national issue personal agenda. The impact of television was limited to specific sub-groups.

None of these studies compared the personal agendas to the civic agendas. The initial look at these two perspectives on public issue agendas was the serendipitous outcome of an investigation of eight different issues ranging from global warming to personal health that used a set of thirteen bipolar semantic differential scales to also explore the dimensions of those public issues (Evatt & Ghanem, 2001). Factor analysis of the data revealed three underlying dimensions:

- Personal relevance –measured by such scales as matters to me/doesn't matter to me; of no concern to me/of concern to me;
- Social relevance –e.g., irrelevant/relevant and unimportant/important;
- Emotional relevance –e.g., boring/interesting; exciting/unexciting.

Zhang *et al.* (2012, p. 664) made an explicit "distinction between agenda issues that might be personally salient compared with issues thought to be socially salient, we refer to these as one's personal agenda and one's social agenda." The analysis compared the agenda-setting effects of the two agendas as well as the degree of correlation between the agendas. Their study was based on a random sample telephone survey of Shanghai residents (n=351) and a content analysis of 6406 news stories in the three major newspapers in Shanghai in the six months before and extending through the public survey.

The media agenda had a strong correlation with the social agenda (Spearman's rho = 0.79), but a non-significant correlation with the personal agenda (Spearman's rho = 0.54). The correlation between the social agenda and the personal agenda (Spearman's rho = 0.53) also was non-significant.

Zhang *et al.* (2012, p. 665) note that this non-significant correlation between the social and personal agendas contradicts other studies of these two agendas. Other social scientists find that audiences distinguish between items on the media agenda in terms of personal salience and societal salience and that the media agenda is more able to influence the public agenda when the audience perceived the news stories as personally relevant (Boninger *et al.*, 1995; Miller, 2007).

Whereas the studies of the 1970s regarded the public civic agenda and the personal agenda as alternative dependent variables, the two studies in this century just reviewed compared the two agendas. A third perspective, a separate major theoretical line of research in its own right, agenda melding, also is focused on the public agenda and the personal agenda. Shaw and his colleagues (2006, 2019) describe the agenda melding process in terms of vertical mainstream media (civic agendas) that reach across society to find an audience melding with horizontal media that find an audience among a particular stratum of society (personal agendas). Personal values and experiences provide the magnets that attract and hold the pieces together.

Here we investigate a fourth perspective on personal agendas and public agendas, conceptualized as a tandem relationship, which is a contingent condition for agenda-setting effects.

2.2. *The Impact Area*

Examination of the impact of the public and personal agendas in tandem, was introduced by Bouza's (2004) concept of an impact area. This is the theoretical site where the two agendas exist in tandem (see Figure 1). In the language of agenda-setting theory and in line with the

logic of contingent conditions, these two agendas residing in the impact area specify the circumstances that enhance or constrain the strength of agenda-setting effects among members of the public. Contingent conditions, such as the inaugural need for orientation, or the concept of an impact area examined in this paper are parsimonious concepts defined by one or at most two variables, and the strength of the variable or pair of variables define the impact of the contingent condition on the agenda-setting relationship between the media agenda and the public agenda.

Figure 1. Impact area (intersection of public and personal agendas).
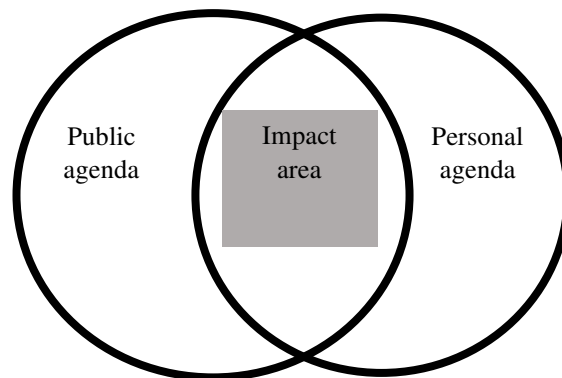
Source: Own elaboration.

Specifically, in terms of the impact area, the greater the convergence between the *major* issue rankings on the personal and public agendas, the greater the strength of the agenda-setting effects of the media agenda on the public agenda. That is, strong agenda-setting correlations are found when there is a high convergence between the top issues of the public agenda and the top issues of personal agenda. Conversely, weak agenda-setting correlations are found when there is a low degree of convergence between these agendas.

Note that in the specification of these two variables as the components of the contingent condition, the impact is on the core agenda-setting relationship between the media agenda and the civic agenda of the public. The personal agenda is an auxiliary variable, a theoretical catalyst that affects the strength of the relationship.

Hypotheses

Based on the two-variable theoretical structure of the impact area, and in line with the generic logic of agenda-setting contingent conditions, the following hypothesis is presented:

H1. The strength of the agenda-setting effect –the impact of the media agenda on the public agenda– is enhanced or reduced in line with the strength of the impact area.

A strong association between the public and personal agendas will result in a strong agenda-setting effect. A modest or weak association between the public and personal agendas will result in a weak agenda-setting effect.

Bouza (2004, pp. 250-251) further argued that:

> The impact area would be that subject area –topic or topics– most sensitive to public communication in general and to political communication in particular because it is the area in which the individual feels a clear coincidence between the country and himself: a mixed agenda that has the strength of what is general and what is specific. Because of this, this seems to be the agenda that the individual feels most inclined to exercise pressure to achieve, while at the same time the individual is most receptive to any communication made about this block of mixed subjects.

H2. The greater the convergence between the public agenda and the personal agenda in the impact area, the greater the amount of information-seeking by the public regarding the issues of the day.

The focus of this paper is the relationship between the impact area and the strength of agenda-setting effects. We test this relationship in four separate and independent settings: three national elections in Spain and, to add variation to the settings, the 2020 outbreak of the covid pandemic in Spain. National survey data collected by the Centre for Sociological Research-Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS), an independent public entity assigned to the Ministry of the Spanish Presidency, was used to measure the public agenda and the personal agenda during these four time periods. For the media agenda, a content analysis measured the national issues covered during the 20 days before the surveys on the front pages of *El País*, the most read online newspaper in Spain.

The concept of an impact area expands the explication of the process of agenda setting through a union of the concepts of a public agenda (Smith, 1980; McCombs & Valenzuela, 2021), the most frequent dependent variable in agenda setting, and the lesser researched personal agenda (Valenzuela, 2011). The impact area is, in effect, a measure of the *macro-salience* of an issue.

3. Spanish context

In the next paragraphs we explain the context of the four periods chosen for this research. The tests of Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 across four time periods represent eventful moments across a decade of Spanish political communication, thus making them ideal for further analysis of the role of the impact area in agenda setting.

3.1. *2011 General Elections*

Until the elections of November, 2011, the political system in Spain was characterized by a two-party system in which the two main parties, the conservative Popular Party (PP) and the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), accounted for the lion's share of the votes, governing either on their own or in coalition with other minor parties in four-year terms of office.

The socialist party's 2008-2011 term had taken its political toll on the party with an economic crisis, soaring unemployment, plus there was the general public's overall disillusionment with the political class, all paving the way for the arrival of a new system of parties (Anduiza *et al.,* 2014; García-Viñuela *et al.,* 2018; Llera, 2011). The 2011 elections were held in exceptional circumstances, not only because of the problems which had sprung up beforehand, but because that year witnessed the appearance of the "15 M" or "Indignant" movement defining itself as a civil society seeking political change. Diverse collectives carried out peaceful demonstrations demanding a more inclusive democracy, far removed from the PP-PSOE two-party system, at the same time denouncing the abusive actions of banks and other organizations. It was a time when fierce criticism was directed at politicians, especially towards the party in power (PSOE).

In that sense, the 2011 elections were a harbinger of change of direction –the PSOE, which had been in power since 2004, lost the 2011 elections, and the Partido Popular, took overpower with an absolute majority, led by Mariano Rajoy. However, a major third element had appeared on the political landscape.

3.2. *December 2015 General Elections*[1]

The elections of December 2015 also broke away from the traditional two-party system as two new groups, Podemos and Ciudadanos, competed against PSOE and PP with serious

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[1] Regarding the criteria of need for orientation, we chose the General Elections of December 2015 and not the repeat in 2016, in the same way as those of April 2019 and November 2019, since the issues on the public agenda lost part of

aspirations of reaching power (Hernández *et al.,* 2020). Expectations were at their highest with the new parties taking on the public's initiatives for political regeneration which favored negotiation and where the media –both conventional and social networks– had an important role in political communication (Ortega, 2011).

The Partido Popular received the most votes in 2015, however, it did not reach the necessary agreements to allow it to come into power. In a second negotiation, PSOE was similarly unsuccessful in its attempt to strike a deal with the new parties. Politics became an important issue on the agenda, joining unemployment, corruption, and the economy (Torres-Albero, 2015; Jaráiz *et al.,* 2020; Rodríguez-Díaz & Castromil, 2020). That led to new elections in June of 2016 when the Partido Popular won by a simple majority, with Mariano Rajoy becoming president, but with a problem-stricken coalition government facing two of the main issues on the agenda: Catalonian independence and corruption scandals within his own party. That scenario triggered a vote of no confidence in 2018 and led to Pedro Sánchez, leader of the PSOE, being named the new president of the government.

3.3. *April 2019 General Elections*

Elections were held in April, 2019, and were won by the PSOE, although the dialogue which took place between four opposition parties (PP, Podemos, Ciudadanos and the far-right Vox) made the necessary understanding to form government alliances impossible –an understanding which, in the previous term, the new groups had defended as the beginning of democratic regeneration (Mendes & Dennison, 2021; Vampa, 2020). Among other issues, the debate over the process towards sovereignty was introduced –a lack of agreement among politicians when it came to tackling Catalan independence led to yet another repetition of elections in November 2019 (Cazorla *et al.,* 2022; Orriols & León, 2020; Castromil *et al.,* 2020).

This situation of disagreements between politicians when attempting to reach alliances, occupying the front pages of the press daily, revealed a way of doing politics that discredited parties and leaders with confrontations, disputes and insults. As a result, Spanish public opinion considers its politicians to be one of the most important problems in the country, as expressed by the CIS barometers in recent years.

3.4. *COVID Pandemic*

The appearance of Covid 19 paralyzed virtually all activity in March 2020, not only in Spain, but worldwide. From that point on, the search for information which could guide the general public became of the utmost importance, with the media being the platforms where governments gave "instructions" to the population. On the 14th of March, the Spanish government declared a state of alarm with a nationwide lockdown and restricted the movement of individuals. The press became the point of contact with that second-hand reality as suggested by Lippmann (1922) in which citizens –now, more than ever, the audiences– found out what was happening in the outside world thanks to the press and their dependence upon it.

At that time, PSOE was the party in power with the responsibility for managing the health crisis (Casino, 2022; Castillo-Esparcia *et al.,* 2020; Fernández-Torres *et al.,* 2021). From the point of view of political communication, COVID became the number one problem for Spanish people, relegating economic issues, which had been top priority in every agenda for many years, to lower positions. In that sense, the impact area of political communication which we examine in this paper revealed a change of position of the issues, with COVID reaching first place on both the personal agenda and the public agenda, in record time.

The decade from 2011 to 2019 was a tumultuous period in Spanish politics, an ideal time to test the link between the impact area and agenda-setting effects. We selected three elections that reflect high points in that tumultuous and shifting period. In addition, for

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their genuine initial value, being tainted by the tension of political parties. Both repetitions were necessary due to the absence of political consensus.

variation in the settings where Bouza's impact area is tested, we examined the beginning of the covid pandemic in March 2020. Neither the concept of an impact area or Hypothesis 1 is limited to elections. They are about the formation of public opinion. Inclusion of the pandemic extends the case studies beyond elections.

4. Methodology

4.1. *Measuring the public agenda and the personal agenda*

For the corpus of the sample, four moments were chosen in which individuals were most sensitive to the need for orientation, as generally occurs during elections and election campaigns. Consequently, we considered the three general elections prior to the carrying out of this piece of research, together with the beginning of the COVID pandemic to be periods for contrasting the hypotheses set out.

National survey data collected by the Centre for Sociological Research (CIS), an independent public entity assigned to the Ministry of the Spanish Presidency, was used to measure the public agenda and the personal agenda during these four time periods. In Appendix A are included the public and personal agenda tables for the four periods. These surveys have representative samples of the Spanish population numbering more than 2,400 individuals in each survey with confidence levels over 95% (two sigma) and margins of error of ±2.0%.

The public agenda was established by asking: "What, in your opinion, are the main problems faced by Spain?" The set of answers with the highest percentages are the main issues of the public agenda for each of the periods studied. To ascertain the personal agenda where the individual distances herself/himself from the altruistic perspective of the public agenda, the CIS asked: "What are the problems which most affect you personally?"

The four top issues on the two agendas during each of the four time periods are displayed in the left-hand column Table 1. The Spearman's rank-order correlations (rho) between the agendas are reported in the middle column of Table 1. Testing both Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 involves these correlations.

Bouza's (2004) definition of the impact area emphasized the *major* issues on the personal and public agendas. In the early exploratory research, this was the top three issues. Subsequent research had agendas varying from one to six issues (Rodríguez & Bouza, 2007, 2008). For the new research reported here, we settled on agendas defined by four issues.

To test Hypothesis 2, we also carried out searches in Google Trends to identify the five most searched for words or issues on the Internet for Spain, in each of the years. Chykina and Crabtree (2018), Tourangeau *et al.* (2014), and Hester and Gibson (2007) use Google Trends for measuring the relevant issues of a population over a specific period.

The possibilities offered by the digital press are numerous since, with multi-level communication, where there is a proliferation of media, it makes it easier to adapt to personal consumption (Thomson Foundation, 2020). In addition to Google Trends, data from the post-election CIS surveys were used to determine which media were used most by the Spanish population in each of those election years. For the 2020, we used the first CIS barometer, which covered the pandemic period (March, 2020) and examined how the Spanish population obtained information. Similarly, we also incorporated the *Digital News Report* of the Reuters Institute (2020) to find out which media were most used by the Spanish general public in April 2020.

The decisions taken by individuals when they distinguish between the set of problems faced by the country (public agenda) and those which affect them more personally (personal agenda) define the concept of the impact area. It is common for studies along those lines (Rodríguez & Bouza, 2007, 2008; González & Bouza, 2009; Bouza, 2013; Bouza & Rodríguez-Díaz, 2017), to reveal that the personal agenda is much more stable than the public agenda.

4.2. *Media agenda*

For the media agenda, we carried out a content analysis of the topics linked to national issues that were present in news items published on the front pages of *El País*, a national newspaper of reference in Spain with high rankings across the years from analysis of both *Estudio General de Medios* and the *Web Global Rank* (Rodríguez *et al.*, 2019).

El País is one of the Spanish newspapers of reference, part of Hallin and Mancini's (2004) model of polarized pluralism, which is characteristic of the media systems in Mediterranean countries. Among other aspects, one of the features of this model is the presence of a printed press aimed at the political and cultural elite. It carries out a leadership function in the creation of public opinion, despite having a lower level of audience compared to other media, such as television (González & Novo, 2011; González *et al.*, 2010).

For the content analysis we included the main issues of the public agenda for each period in the codebook, along with the other issues which appeared on the news coverage of each moment. The news stories which were closely related to the elections were discarded since they were not issues in themselves but, rather, the results of polls, statements of political leaders, etc. Following that, each of the front-page issues of the newspaper related to nationwide content were counted and a frequency and ranking were established, based on the number of appearances, like many agenda-setting studies (Ardèvol-Abreu *et al.,* 2020; Camponez *et al.,* 2020). For a better understanding of the analysis, and Appendix B has been included featuring the main issues of the media agenda.

These four content analyses counted the most important issues in the 20 days leading up to the end of each CIS barometer:

1) 2011 elections, from the 20th October to the 9th November, 2011, linking it to the issues from the CIS barometer nº 2917.

2) December 2015 elections, from the 21st November to the 10th December, linking it to the issues from the CIS barometer nº 3121.

3) April 2019 elections, from the 4th to the 23rd of April, linking it to the CIS barometer nº 3245.

4) Pandemic March 2020, from the 19th March to the 7th April, linking it to the agenda issues from the CIS barometer nº 3279.

The results of these content analyses were used to calculate the strength of the agenda-setting effect at each time period. Following the established precedent for calculating agenda-setting effects, the issue agendas of *El País* included issues with more modest constituencies and were not limited to the top four issues. Bouza (2004) theorized that the impact area, defined by the *major* issues of the day, that is, an attenuated personal and public agenda, was a contingent condition for the strength of agenda-setting effects. These agenda-setting effects are based on an elaborated, not attenuated, media agenda and public agenda.

The content analysis found that the most important issues on the media agenda for each period were (in rank order-see Appendix B):

1) In 2011: economic problems, politicians, unemployment, terrorism – ETA, corruption, environment and transportation.

2) In 2015: politicians, economic problems, nationalism, corruption, unemployment, environment and education.

3) In 2019: nationalism, politicians, corruption, economic problems, public health, unemployment, environment and crime.

4) In 2020: covid, economic problems, public health, politicians, unemployment, pandemic lockdown, government and social problems.

5. Results

Hypothesis 1 states that the strength of agenda-setting effects is contingent on the degree of convergence between the personal agenda and public agenda.

Table 1 displays (from left to right) the variables pertinent to the testing of this hypothesis across four time periods (for further information about the agenda issues see Appendix A and Appendix B):

- The impact area, operationally defined by the top four issues on the public agenda and personal agenda.
- The degree of convergence in the impact area measured in two ways –quantitatively by Spearman's rho and qualitatively.
- The agenda-setting effects of the media agenda on the public agenda.

The first election displayed in the table, November 2011, shows strong support for Hypothesis 1. There was perfect convergence between the public and personal agendas, not only on what were the top four issues, but also on the ranking of these issues. The correlation between the agendas is +1.00. The outcome of this perfect convergence in the impact area is a strong agenda-setting effect, +.729. This is very strong support for the hypothesis.

An even stronger agenda-setting correlation, +.743, occurred in March 2020. That month there was a high, but not perfect, level of convergence between the public and personal agendas –agreement on three of the top four issues. Spearman's rho for the impact area is +.900. This also is strong support for Hypothesis 1.

In December 2015, the agenda-setting correlation was very weak, +.214 despite a moderate level of convergence between the public and personal agendas –agreement on three of the top four issues. Spearman's rho for the impact area is +.500. These findings are contrary evidence for Hypothesis 1. These mixed results likely reflect the chaotic political landscape where the search for a consensus failed due to the lack of agreements among the parties needed to form a government. That led to new elections in 2016.

In April 2019, the agenda-setting correlation was –.486, and the convergence between the public and personal agendas was low. There was agreement on only two of the four top issues, and Spearman's rho for the impact area was +.029. This finding also strongly supports Hypothesis 1. The negative agenda-setting effect in 2019 seems likely to be linked to independence in Catalonia, which was one of the most important political issues in 2019, albeit far from the top positions in the public and personal agendas. The content analysis of the newspaper, *El País*, shows that the most important issue on the media agenda was nationalism. This topic had not held such a relevant position in the public agenda until then and occupied a far less prominent position in the ranking of the personal agenda. As such, this issue does not help correlate and would, in part, account for this fall in the effect of agenda-setting, with something similar happening in the 2015 elections.

Overall, three of the four comparisons displayed in Table 1 support the hypothesis that the strength of agenda-setting effects is contingent on the degree of convergence between the personal agenda and public agenda. In two cases where the agenda-setting correlations are strong, there also is a strong convergence between the public and personal agendas. November 2011 is a perfect example. Not only is there agreement on the top four issues, but also on the exact ranking of these issues. This evidence is complemented by the negative agenda-setting correlation in April 2019, where the convergence of the public and personal agendas is low.

Table 1. Comparing the strength of agenda-setting effects with the level of convergence in the impact area.

November, 2011

Impact Area		Impact Area Strength	Agenda-setting effect
Public Agenda	Personal Agenda		Media agenda & public agenda
Unemployment	Unemployment	Level of convergence between	+.729
Economy	Economy	Public & Personal Agendas: HIGH	
Politicians	Politicians		
Public health	Public health	Public/Personal Agenda	
		Spearman's rho = +1.00	

December, 2015

Impact Area		Impact Area Strength	Agenda-setting effect
Public Agenda	Personal Agenda		Media agenda & public agenda
Unemployment	Unemployment	Level of convergence between	+.214
Corruption	Economy	Public & Personal Agendas: MODERATE	
Economy	Public health		
Politicians	Corruption	Public/Personal Agenda	
		Spearman's rho = +.500	

April, 2019

Impact Area		Impact Area Strength	Agenda-setting effect
Public Agenda	Personal Agenda		Media agenda & public agenda
Unemployment	Unemployment	Level of convergence between	-.486
Corruption	Economy	Public & Personal Agendas: LOW	
Politicians	Quality employment		
Economy	Public health	Public/Personal Agenda	
		Spearman's rho = +.029	

March, 2020

Impact Area		Impact Area Analysis	Agenda-setting effect
Public Agenda	Personal Agenda		Media agenda & public agenda
Covid	Covid	Level of convergence between	+.743
Economy	Economy	Public & Personal Agendas: HIGH	
Unemployment	Unemployment		
Politicians	Public health	Public/Personal Agenda	
		Spearman's rho = +.900	

Source: Own elaboration.

Hypothesis 2 states that the greater the convergence between the public agenda and the personal agenda in the impact area, the greater the amount of information-seeking by the public regarding the election. In all four time periods, the election was among the top five topics searched on Google Trends. More specific to the testing of Hypothesis 2, there are variations in the rankings of the election searches across the four periods. Table 2 shows that election searches ranked #1 during 2011 when the convergence of the public agenda and personal agenda were perfect (+1.00). In 2020, election searches ranked #2 when the convergence in the impact area also was high (+900). These findings are strong support for Hypothesis 2.

The 2015 election offers additional support. Election searches ranked #4 that year, and the convergence of the public agenda and personal agenda in the impact area was a moderate +.500. In contrast, 2019 offers no support for the hypothesis. Elections searches ranked #1 (and Local elections, #4), but convergence in the impact area was very weak (+.029). Perhaps the turbulent dialogue among the new political parties and the issue of Catalan independence stimulated extensive information–seeking despite weak convergence in the impact area.

Table 2. Comparing the rank-order of information-seeking on the election (2011, 2015, 2019) and covid (2020) by the public (Google Trends) with convergence in the impact area.

	2011	2015	2019	2020
Rank-order of election searches	**#1**	**#4**	**#1**	**#2**
			#4 Local elections	
Convergence in the impact-area	**+1.00**	**+.500**	**+.029**	**+.900**

Source: Own elaboration.

Overall, there is support for Hypothesis 2 in three of the four time periods. Additional evidence relevant to Hypothesis 2 is found in Table 3, which displays the levels of media use for newspapers, TV and radio during the 2011, 2015 and 2019 elections in Spain. Parallel data are not available for the Covid 2020 period. In the data about media use, newspapers are not the media with the highest use in Spain as is the case with other media system in Mediterranean countries, as reflected in the polarized pluralism model of Hallin & Macini (2004). Despite this, they are shown as references because they are considered leaders in the creation of public opinion, especially with political issues.

Focusing on regular use of news media two or three days a week or more –newspaper readership was highest (36.4%) during the 2011 election when there was perfect convergence between the public and personal agendas on the top four issues. In the 2015 and 2019 elections when the convergence was weaker –agreement on only two of the top four issues–, newspaper readership was lower –in 2015, 33.5%, and in 2019, 31.6%. These data for newspaper readership support Hypothesis 2.

This pattern is not replicated for TV viewing. The range across the three elections is 75.3% to 76.1%. And the data for radio also shows little divergence across the three elections –a range of 26.5% to 28.8%. These findings are contrary to Hypothesis 2.

Table 3. During this electoral campaign, how regularly did you follow political and electoral information in the media?[2].

Post Elect. - Nov 2011[3]

	Newspapers (%)	Tv (%)	Radio (%)
Every day or almost every day	22.5	56.6	18.6
Four or five days per week	6.1	10.1	3.9
Two or three days per week	7.8	8.6	4.0
Only at the weekend	4.1	1.5	1.1
From time to time	10.5	9.7	8.2
Never, or almost never	48.7	13.2	63.0
N/A	.5	.3	1.3
(N)	(6.082)	(6.082)	(6.082)

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[2] Absolute percentages by category.
[3] Barometer CIS Nº 2920, postelectoral November 2011.

Post Elect. - Dec 2015[4]

	Newspapers (%)	Tv (%)	Radio (%)
Every day or almost every day	23,0	58,3	19,6
Four or five days per week	4,4	10,1	3,4
Two or three days per week	6,1	7,7	3,9
Only at the weekend	3,3	1,6	0,9
From time to time	8,5	9,2	7,5
Never, or almost never	54,2	12,9	63,7
N.A.	0,5	0,3	1,0
(N)	(6.242)	(6.242)	(6.242)

Post Elect. - April 2019[5]

	Newspapers (%)	Tv (%)	Radio (%)	Social Media/Internet (%)
Every day or almost every day	19,9	55,3	19,6	28,5
Four or five days per week	4,7	10,6	4,5	4,9
Two or three days per week	7,0	9,8	4,7	5,7
One day per week	3,6	3,4	2,0	2,3
Less than one day a week	1,6	2,0	1,5	1,5
Never, or almost never	61,8	18,6	65,9	55,1
N.A.	1,3	0,4	1,9	1,9
(N)	(5.943)	(5.943)	(5.943)	(5.943)

Source: Own elaboration.

As previously noted, there is not parallel media use data for 2020. However, Table 4 does provide some supplementary data for that year. Part A of the table shows that extensive use was made of the arguably two most accessible channels, TV news and the Internet. The level of interpersonal communication was very similar to the use of more traditional media, newspapers and radio. This pattern is replicated in Part B, which shows heavy use of TV and the Internet and much lower (and similar) use of newspapers and radio.

Table 4. Media use during March, 2020.

A. First Covid -Barometer CIS March, 2020

Those who have heard of Covid, followed information from:

TV news programmes	88,4
News in the written press	21,4
Radio news programmes	23,3
Internet (Twitter, online newspapers...)	42,1
What they have heard or spoken about regarding the issue	18,3
The workplace	0,7
Others	0,5
N/A	0,1

Source: Barometer CIS Nº 3277, March 2020. (N = 3.646)

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[4] Barometer CIS Nº 3126, postelectoral December 2015.
[5] Barometer CIS Nº 3248, postelectoral April 2019.

**B. Which, if any, of the following have you used in the last week (April 2020)
as a source of news? (Reuters Institute, 2020)**

	Print (incl. mags)	Tv	Radio	Social Media/Internet
Spain	28%	71%	24%	83%
(N)	(1.018)	(1.018)	(1.018)	(1.018)

Source: Own elaboration.

6. Summary and discussion

The primary goal of this paper was to establish that the strength of the impact area has a robust relationship with the strength of the agenda-setting correlation, the same relationship established for other contingent conditions. The focus of this paper is the most recent of these contingent conditions, Bouza's (2004) concept of an impact area where the degree of convergence between the personal agenda and the public agenda is a contingent condition for the strength of agenda-setting effects.

This relationship was tested in four time periods: three recent national elections (2011, 2015 and 2019), plus the beginning of the pandemic (2020). In three of the time periods there was strong evidence supporting the concept of an impact area as a contingent condition for agenda-setting effects.

In November 2011, there was perfect convergence between the public and personal agendas, not only on what were the top four issues, but also on the ranking of these issues. The outcome of this perfect convergence in the impact area (+1.00) is a strong agenda-setting effect, +.729. In March 2020, the beginning of the COVID pandemic, there was a high, but not perfect, level of convergence between the public and personal agendas (+.900). The agenda-setting correlation was a strong +.743.

These were two moments of particular uncertainty: November 2011 with the change of party in government and the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020. These data, combined with those gathered in the results, not only confirm Hypothesis 1, but also reveal the usefulness of the impact area as a concept for studying the personal and perceived social problems of the general public and linking them to the agenda-setting effect itself.

Likewise, the result in April 2019 supports the concept of the impact area as a contingent condition for agenda-setting effects. The negative agenda-setting correlation (-.486) and the low convergence (+.029) between the public and personal agendas. It is justified, in part, by the Catalan nationalist conflict very present in the media agenda because it was a very important political issue but far from the first problems of the public agenda and the personal agenda.

The findings are contrary evidence for the impact area as a contingent condition in the December, 2015 elections with a very weak (+.214) agenda-setting correlation despite a moderate level of convergence between the public and personal agendas (+.500). The Spanish political situation during the 2015 elections reflects, as mentioned in the section dedicated to the Spanish context, that the emergence of new political parties and the failure of negotiations between them show a scenario of conflict.

In a connected world, Google Trends has shown that, for each of the years studied, the term "elections" appeared in a high position, if not the highest, as was the case in 2011 and 2019. In support of Hypothesis 2, this indicates that elections are a moment when there is a strong need for orientation when the general public looks for information to help personal decision-making.

This opening gambit establishes a foothold in agenda-setting theory for Bouza's concept of the impact area as a contingent condition, but the scope of the evidence is limited, notably

to one country in Western Europe. The basic concepts of agenda-setting theory have been strongly supported by research across the world. Replications of the impact area from North and South America, East Asia, and the Middle East would firmly establish the concept.

In addition to providing preliminary empirical evidence that the strength of the impact area impacts the strength of the agenda-setting relationship, this research has identified two promising lines of theoretical research that further explicate the concept of the impact area. These are grounded in agenda-setting's concept of need for orientation (Weaver, 1977) and in the detailed analysis of the causal links among the personal agenda, public agenda, media agenda, and agenda-setting effects. The necessary measures for empirically examining these relationship were not available in the national survey used in the research reported here.

In regard to the impact area, Bouza (2004) argued that the issues defining the public and personal agendas would be of the greatest interest to voters because they combine what has the strength of what is general and what is specific. This observation is linked to agenda setting theory's concept of need for orientation (NFO), which explains both an individual's level of information-seeking regarding an issue or topic and the subsequent level of agenda-setting effects. An individual's level of NFO depends upon the perceived personal relevance of the topic and the level of uncertainty (level of desired knowledge). The full theoretical model of NFO (see Figure 2) introduced by Weaver (1977) is:

Figure 2. Theoretical model of Need For Orientation (NFO).
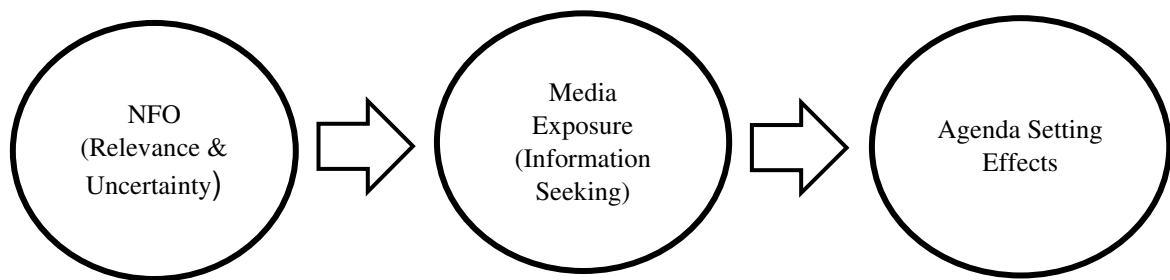
Source: Own elaboration.

That is, the stronger the NFO, the greater amount of information seeking, and the stronger the agenda-setting effects. If the impact area identifies a high level of macro-salience and concomitantly a high level of relevance, then we should expect to find an accelerated level of information seeking. Adding the variables of relevance and uncertainty to measures of the impact area offers a promising line of research.

A second line of research further explicating the impact area concept is mapping the causal links among the personal agenda, public agenda, media agenda, and agenda-setting effects. We know from experimental studies that the media agenda has a causal impact on the public agenda (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987) and on the personal agenda (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002). We also know from the literature review in this paper that the public and personal agendas frequently are highly correlated (Bazaga *et al.*, 2022). But there is no explicit evidence for causality. As with other contingent conditions, the link between the impact area and the agenda-setting effect is determined qualitatively. And there is no causal measure of the link between the media agenda and the tandem agenda of the impact area. The next step is a research design that maps the sequence of these four variables over time. The impact area shows considerable promise as an addition to agenda setting.

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Appendix A

Table 1. Public and personal agendas during the General Elections of November 2011 (CIS).

Issues Nov11	Public agenda rank - Nov11	Personal agenda rank - Nov11
Unemployment	1	1
Economic Prob	2	2
Politicians	3	3
Public Health	4	4
Immigration	5	
Housing	6	6
Crime	7	
Education	8	7
Pensions		5
Quality Employment		8

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 2. Public and personal agendas during the General Elections of December 2015 (CIS).

Issues Dec15	Public agenda rank - Dec15	Personal agenda rank - Dec15
Unemployment	1	1
Corruption	2	4
Economic Prob.	3	2
Politicians	4	
Public Health	5	3
Social Problems	6	7
Education	7	5
Terrorism	8	0
Pensions		6

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 3. Public and personal agendas during the General Elections of April 2019 (CIS).

Issues April19	Public agenda rank - April19	Personal agenda rank - April19
Unemployment	1	1
Corruption	2	8
Politicians	3	6
Economic Prob	4	2
Public Health	5	4
Quality Employment	6	3
Nationalism	7	
Social Problems	8	
Pensions		5
Education		7

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 4. Public and personal agendas during outbreak of Covid - March 2020 (CIS).

Issues March 2020	Public agenda rank Mar.20	Personal agenda rank Mar.20
Covid	1	1
Economic Prob	2	2
Unemployment	3	3
Politicians	4	12
Public Health	5	4
Social Problems	6	
Government	7	
Quality Employment	8	
Education		7
Lockdown		5
Personal Problems		6

Source: Own elaboration.

Appendix B

Table 1. Media agenda during the General Elections of November 2011 (*El País*).

Issues Nov11	Number of news stories - Nov11	Media agenda rank - Nov11
Economic Prob	15	1
Politicians	7	2
Unemployment	5	3
Terrorism, ETA	4	4
Environment	3	5,5
Corruption	3	5,5
Transport	2	7
Education	1	8

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 2. Media agenda during the General Elections of December 2015 (*El País*).

Issues Dec15	Number of news stories - Dec15	Media agenda rank - Dec15
Politicians	14	1
Economic Prob.	8	2
Nationalism	6	3
Corruption	5	4
Environment	2	6
Unemployment	2	6
Education	2	6

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 3. Media agenda during the General Elections of April 2019 (*El País*).

Issues April19	Number of news stories - April19	Media agenda rank - April19
Nationalism	12	1
Politicians	11	2
Corruption	9	3
Economic Prob	8	4
Public Health	6	5
Unemployment	5	6
Environment	3	7,5
Crime	3	7,5
Social Problems	2	10
Education	2	10
Gender Violence	2	10
Terrorism, ETA	1	12

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 4. Media agenda during Outbreak of Covid - March 2020 (*El País*).

Issues	Number of news stories - March20	Media agenda rank - March20
Covid	20	1
Economic Prob	15	2,5
Public Health	15	2,5
Unemployment	11	4,5
Politicians	11	4,5
Lockdown	8	6
Government	4	7,5
Personal stories	4	7,5
Social Problems	2	9,5
Education	2	9,5

Source: Own elaboration.