



Facts versus words: the influence of issues in the process of shaping the public agenda


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ENG Abstract. This paper tries to show how the characteristics of a topic can affect the cycle of attention that citizens pay to it. Starting from different theories on the formation of the public agenda and resorting to multiple triangulation, it analyzes the evolution of the priorities given by the Spanish to the issues of housing, banking, and evictions. The independent variables examined are: the cultural context and the economic and political situation; the real conditions of the problems and public policies; the behaviors of the actors; and the interests and values of individuals. The results obtained show how the influence of these factors was different in each topic: while in some the determining factors are the policies and the evolution of the real conditions of the problem, in others, it is the presidential rhetoric, the attention of the media and the narrative of social movements. The context and the interests and values of individuals also influence, introducing specific biases in each topic, but with moderate intensity. Whether facts (policies and the evolution of the problem) or words (presidential rhetoric, the narrative of advocacy coalitions, and media attention) influence the public agenda more, depends on the issue and, in particular, on whether citizens know it or not through their own experience and that of the groups with which they relate.

Keywords: citizens, public agenda, public policy, and housing.

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1. Introduction

One of the most valuable series in the database of the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS) (like those of other public opinion institutes around the world) the three main problems in Spain. This series makes it possible to reconstruct what they call *the public agenda*¹. However, interpreting these data is not an easy task, as it requires a good theory and a rigorous analysis method. In this sense, this paper attempts to answer the question of what factors influence the formation of the public agenda and, above all, how to explain the changes in the evolution of the priorities that citizens attribute to a specific issue over time.

In order to answer these questions, we can rely on different theories from different branches of the social sciences, each of which explains the reasons why citizens focus their attention on certain issues at a given time. Some emphasize the competition between topics for public attention; others emphasize the role of media communication; some stress the influence of institutional agendas; others, in turn, show the weight of cultural change, of the evolution of the real conditions of problems, or of the interests and individual values.

This multiplicity of arguments reflects the fact that agenda formation is a multi-causal process so that the different theories taken together provide us with a broad account of factors that influence the formation of the agenda. However, there is no single theory that, with very few elements, can explain the priorities given to different issues. It cannot be even said that there is one main determinant of agenda formation that is valid for any of the issues that comprise it. The common belief is that it is the media that determines the public agenda. This is sometimes true, but it is far from explaining the evolution of numerous issues.

As will be seen throughout this article, the topic matters. In fact, the weight of each factor that influences the formation of the agenda varies from one topic to another. Consequently, analyzes have to be carried out on an issue-by-issue basis, and in order to interpret citizens' opinions, the analysts have to simultaneously contrast several theories and identify which one or ones are most useful in each case.

In line with the above, to analyze an item on the agenda, it is convenient to resort to the multiple triangulation. Specially, it requires the use of different methods, data, and theories. By operating in this way, the results obtained will not only be more robust, but will also allow drawing a more complete and balanced picture of the formation of the agenda, and, above all, it will be possible to highlight the different theories about a specific issue.

Moreover, by analyzing various issues, it will be shown how the nature of the issues conditions the agenda formation process. The central hypothesis of this paper is that when citizens obtain information about the state of public problems through their own experience – or from the people with whom they interact – what predominates in the formation of the public agenda are the real conditions of the problems and the policies that affect those real conditions. In the absence of such direct information, the discourses of government authorities and actors (including the media) will tend to predominate. In the former case, it is "facts" that are the main determinant in the formation of the public agenda, while in the latter it is "words". All other factors, in particular the environment and the interests and values of individuals, influence all topics, but only marginally in comparison to the other two factors mentioned above².

¹ According to the definition of Cobb, Ross and Ross (1976), the public agenda would be made up of all those issues that "are the subject of a extensive attention or, at least, knowledge; require action from the point of view of a considerable proportion of the public; and are perceived by community members as issues that fall within the competence of some governmental authority". Note that this is a different concept from the agenda political or formal, institutional or governmental agenda. About the different types of agendas and theories on the formation of the agenda see Casar and Maldonado (2010).

² The hypothesis that is handled is close to that of Zucker on the familiarity and closeness of the topics --obtrusiveness-- . According to this author (1978: 227) "the less the direct experience of the individual on a given topic, the greater their dependence on the media of communication for their knowledge and interpretation...". However, our hypothesis considers a set of independent variables broader than those of the media - we take into consideration the speeches of the actors including government authorities - and the real conditions of the problems- also granting a relevant role to public policies themselves. Our approach is also close to the work of Soroka (2002) who underlines the importance of the topic to explain the differential weight of the different factors that influence the formation of the agenda, but we do not share either its typology of topics or the way in which it is applied to concrete cases. On the other hand, the methods of analysis suggested in this work, based on triangulation, deviate significantly from both authors and, in general, from most studies on the public agenda.

To illustrate this hypothesis and the relevance of multiple triangulation in the analysis of topics of the agenda will resort to the study of the cases of housing, banking, and evictions in Spain, issues that have concentrated the attention of Spaniards and whose position in the agenda has varied remarkably over time, and through them, we can observe the influence of the different factors that have influenced the formation of the agenda and their differential weight in each issue. The channels through which citizens accessed the information are different in the three cases and with them the variables that influenced the cycle of attention that citizens devoted to each one of them³.

In addition to this introduction, the article includes a section devoted to setting out the foundations of the theoretical underpinnings of the research, where an attempt will be made to outline an integrated theory on the formation of the public agenda focused on topics that allows guiding the conduct of case studies; another in which the use of multiple triangulation as an agenda research method becomes operational for the topics studied. The following section analyzes the cases, describing the evolution of the priority given to the topics over an extended period (1985-2015) and identifying the factors that have most influenced Spaniards to focus their attention on these topics. Finally, a section of conclusions is presented.

2. Moving towards an issue-centred theory of public agenda formation.

For the study of the public agenda, we have two main theories: that of the cycle of attention to public issues (Downs, 1972), which is barely sketched but very influential; and the agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shawn, 1977), being undoubtedly the theory that has undergone the most notable theoretical and empirical development.

There are also other theories whose object of research is not the public agenda itself, but that have devoted attention to this issue as part of larger research projects. This is the case of Cobb & Elder (1972) on the construction of the agenda, where the fundamental concern is the formal or institutional agenda and not both. Along the same lines, we could include the studies based on Kingdon's (1984) theory of multiple streams. We also have the theory of the interrupted equilibrium (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993) and in particular the analysis of the dynamics of the agendas, where a reference is made to public opinion as an element in consideration to understand the policy transformation processes⁴.

Finally, we have the studies on cultural change, particularly on post-materialism (Inglehart, 1977) and the influence exerted by values on the priorities of citizens and with them on the composition of the political agendas of the parties. However, we do not have a theory that integrates these contributions to interpret the formation of the public agenda and, in particular, the attention cycles of citizens towards specific issues.

From our point of view, in order to analyze the formation of the public agenda, the influence exerted by several factors must be taken into account: the cultural economic, and political contexts; the behaviour of the actors involved in public policy; the interests and values of individuals; and the nature of the issue and the policies themselves.

The context influences the set of policies and issues on the public agenda. In the case of *cultural context*, it promotes long-term, silent, gradual changes in the priorities of the citizens. Inglehart's above-mentioned studies on post-materialism have provided an account of this, distinguishing between the old and the new political agenda. Along the same lines, it is worth mentioning the theory of cognitive mobilization (Dalton, 1996), which points out how in more

³ It could be objected that the selected topics belong to the same area of public policy, at least in the case of housing and evictions, and partly in the case of banking, as the financial crisis has been linked to the housing bubble. However, although the issues belong to the same area, the way in which the citizens have access to information is different, since we all have experience of the evolution of housing prices, but only a minority of the population come into direct contact with evictions.

⁴ The theory of the interrupted equilibrium has also had remarkable development, however, its primary concern is not so much the public agenda and changes in public policies. In fact, the way in which many of these studies deal with the information on the public agenda is through very broad groupings of topics, or the content analysis of the media that they carry out, which only takes into consideration the front pages of newspapers. This way of proceeding is very useful for analyzing the policy change from a comparative perspective, but inadequate for analyzing the specific issues on the agendas of a unique political community. For the Spanish case, see Chaqués Bonafont et al. (2015).

developed societies, public opinion is increasingly sophisticated due to the higher levels of information provided to the population by the different media and by the citizens' own experience, given the extent of the welfare state to which they are exposed; and also due to the greater capacity of the public to process this information thanks to the increase in the level of education. What is relevant is that the sophistication of public opinions means that the actual conditions of the problems and of the policies themselves influence the priorities given to the different issues by citizens (Page & Shapiro, 1992).

In regard to the *economic context*, cycles also influence priorities, increasing or decreasing the demands on different topics depending on whether one is in an upward or a downturn phase of the economy. Thus, in the most acute moments of a crisis, economic and employment issues take on a higher priority, as do those related to the political process. In contrast, those related to the area of welfare and the topics associated with post-materialistic values decline. In the early stages, citizens seem to be willing to make sacrifices on the welfare side if this contributes to economic growth and employment. On the other hand, when recovery begins, demands grow for a public intervention that compensates for the previous losses. When the cycle is already expansive, economic concerns lose priority in favor of welfare concerns, with attention shifting back to the new agenda associated with post-materialist values.

Regarding the political environment, the *policy context* must be addressed first. The competition between topics described by Downs (1972) must be taken into consideration since the ability of citizens to focus attention is limited to a small number of problems. The priority given to one issue will depend, in part, on the priorities given to other issues on the public agenda. Second, with regard to the political context, it is important to take into account the levels of support for the political regime itself, the institutions, and the authorities that run those institutions. To the extent that any of these components enjoys low levels of support, attention to the substantive aspects of the policies will decrease, granting greater relevance to topics related to the political process. The very life cycle of governments, with its correlative generation of coalitions of discontents, will gradually make policy issues more relevant. But if there are wider issues that cannot be solved solely by "throwing out the knaves" out of the government through elections, this will influence criticism of the political class in general and even concern over issues related to the regime and its institutions, which will result in giving greater priority to topics related to the constituent policies.

In addition to analyzing the context, *the behavior of the actors* involved in the policies must be taken into account, either by the attention they devote to the issues or by the rhetoric they use around the issues and public policies, whether through the development of sophisticated arguments or more simplified narratives to assert the priority of their issues and policy positions. Agenda dynamic theory has emphasized the influence of presidential rhetoric and the impact on public opinion of the agenda of public authorities, particularly executives and to an ever greater extent, presidents (Cohen 1995). Agenda-setting theory, as we have seen, has insisted on the role attributed to the media, both for setting the public agenda and for the interpretative frameworks of public issues that they develop, or at least, contribute to disseminating (McCombs, 2005). Finally, the policy of advocacy coalitions (Sabatier & Weible, 2007) and in particular, the policy narrative approach (Jones et al., 2014) informs us about the construction of narratives that help advocacy coalitions to promote issues and policies. Ultimately, actors through their rhetoric, and in the case of public authorities through their policies, have the ability to influence the public agenda.

Finally, the *interest and values of individuals* also affect agenda formation. Social class, position before collective consumption of public goods and services of the location to various values (left-right axis, scale of religiosity, materialism, post-materialism) will influence the priorities of individuals. Cognitive mobilization theory indicates the existence of thematic publics (Dalton, 1996), and underlines to which extent the interests and values of individuals affect their public policy priorities.

So far we have referred to different factors that influence the agenda formation process, trying to integrate the contributions of different theoretical traditions. However, this does not inform us about the influence exerted by the nature of issues on the priorities given to a particular topic. As we pointed out above, the influence of these factors is different depending on the topics, either in terms of the type of bias they introduce by strengthening or weakening a topic, or because of the weight of each factor.

In those issues associated with the cultural, economic, and political context, the question to be answered lies in discriminating before each subject if the transformations of the cultural, economic cycle, or political context they favor the increase or decrease of the priority of an issue. Thus, by selecting extreme cases, in a post-materialistic society, in an expansive economic cycle, with a newly elected government, the issues related to social welfare politics, gender equality, or the environment will have more opportunities to focus the public's attention. In a materialistic society, amid an economic crisis, with an unpopular government where the regime and the institutions are also questioned, there will be little room left for discussion of welfare policies or other issues on the new agenda since the bulk of attention will be focused on the economy, the employment and the political process itself.

The other issue to be considered (and this is the most important one) is whether the topic allows individuals to have information about it, either through their own direct experience or through the experience provided by the social groups to which they belong and/or the people with whom they are in contact with; or whether, on the contrary, it is an issue or policy in which, in order to form an opinion, the majority of a population has to resort to the media, the speeches of the incumbent authorities and the narratives organized by the coalitions promoting themes and policies.

In the first scenario, what will influence policy the most will be the real conditions of the problem and public policy. In these cases, the priorities of the agenda will vary with the objective indicators of the problem and with the resources (regulatory output, employment, and public spending) directed to produce programmes associated with public policy, as long as that mobilization of resources manages to have an impact on the problem. In the second scenario, it will be the actors (depending on the attention and the discursive treatment they make of the problem and politics) who will influence the priority given to issues by citizens. The media agenda and the framing of the news, the presidential rhetoric and the argumentation of policies practiced by the public authorities, as well as the position and reports of the coalition promoters (which may include opposition parties, pressure groups, social movements, etc.), will be what influences the priority granted to the problem the most.

In both scenarios, the interests and values of individuals will have an influence, albeit in a moderate way since, regardless of the group they belong to, all citizens end up being exposed to the same real facts, information, and speeches. Consequently, the reality of public problems and policies, discourses, interests, and values of individuals influence all the topics on the agenda, but the weight of each factor varies from one issue to another.

In short, in order to explain the priority given to an issue by citizens, we need to know the public policy area in which it falls, determine the impact of the context on that problem, identify the biases derived from the interests and values of individuals and, above all, to establish the main way in which citizens access the information, either through their own experience (or that of their social relations environment) or through the speeches of the actors involved in politics.

3. Methodology

As noted above, a methodology based on multiple triangulation has been chosen. One of the modalities of triangulation is the theoretical one (which is the most important one for our purposes) which consists of contrasting various theories to interpret the same phenomenon: the priorities that citizens give to the items on the agenda. On the other hand, in order to analyze the influence of the nature of their own issues on the formation of the agenda, it is necessary to contrast theories on at least two different items on the agenda. In this case, three issues were analyzed: housing, banks, and evictions⁵.

The main source of the research has been the series on the three most important problems that prepare the CIS, based on the answers offered to the question *"What is, in your opinion, the main problem that currently exists in Spain? And the second? And the third?"*. This socio-topical question is generally accompanied by another egocentric one: *"And which is the problem that, in your opinion, affects you personally the most? And the second? And the third?"*

⁵ Under the topic of "housing" the CIS coders collect "everything related to housing, rents, housing shortages, high prices, quality of housing, etc.". However, the main concern about housing is the price (whether for sale or rent) and this is the attribute that stands above others.

". Both questions are open-ended and allow us to know the list of topics that make up the agenda, as well as the relative priority given to each of them⁶. Based on these questions, the percentages of responses for each of the topics were selected from 1985 to 2015, thus obtaining the time series with the priorities of each topic.

To analyze the influence of interests and values on citizens' priorities, we calculated and compared the time series of the priorities given to housing by each segment of the population using the classification variables used by the CIS in its questionnaires.

The study of the influence exerted by housing policies on perceptions has been approached by taking into consideration various instruments of public policy: public expenditure on housing, tax deductions for housing, and price regulation through the promotion and classification of subsidized housing.

In order to investigate the influence of the actual conditions of the problem on the agenda, market developments are analyzed, specifically housing prices and mortgage interest rates. With regard to the problems of evictions, data has been collected on foreclosures and evictions.

To determine the influence of presidential rhetoric, we have examined the composition of the agenda of the executive from the space dedicated by presidents to each topic in their investiture speeches and of the state of the nation.

In order to gauge the impact of the media on the public agenda, the media agenda was reconstructed by calculating the amount of published news about housing and evictions. However, it is necessary to specify all these relationships through models and hypotheses that can be empirically tested. Thus, to observe the association between the presidential agenda and the public agenda, we have resorted to an autoregression analysis⁷, correlating the time series of housing issues in the socio-anthropic agenda with that of the President's agenda, with the latter acting as a predictive factor from the first.

Specifically, the model used is:

$$P_t = a + b \cdot AG_t + e_t$$

Where P_t = % of people mentioning the housing issue at time t , AG_t = % space devoted by the president in the inauguration speeches and state of national debates to housing at time t ; a and b are the parameters to be calculated; e_t = error at time t .

The behavior predicted by the theory is that the President's agenda influences the public agenda, so that the greater the attention the president devotes to housing in his speeches, the greater the public's interest in the same issue.

In order to analyze the influence of public spending on the agenda, the following model has been applied using annual series:

$$P_t = a + b \cdot GP_t + e_t$$

Where GP_t = % of public expenditure relative to GDP devoted to housing at time t .

The hypothesis, in this case, is that public expenditures influence the agenda: specifically, the higher the volume of resources allocated by the public sector to lower housing will be the interest of the public on that same thing and vice versa. That is, the citizens would operate as a kind of thermostat towards public spending, increasing its demands when it decreases, and reducing them when it grows (Wlezien, 1995).

The model used to analyze the influence of media is:

$$P_t = a + b \cdot AM_t + e_t$$

6 Note that it is the priority and not the definition of the problems that is of interest here. Two people can consider the same topic as priority and maintain different definitions of that problem.

7 Note that all the models used are based on autoregression, as is usual in public agenda studies, and not on regression.

Where AM_t = a number of news items dedicated to the topic of housing at time t . In this case, monthly series.

The behavior predicted by the theory is that the media agenda influences the public agenda, in the sense that the greater the volume of news published by the media. On housing, citizens give this same issue greater priority. Finally, two other models have been calculated, one through monthly series and another quarterly (the distinction is due to the periodicity with which data is available from existing sources) that put in relation to the agenda with the real conditions of the problem and with public policies.

Finally, two other models have been calculated, one through monthly series and another quarterly (the distinction is due to the periodicity with which data is available from existing sources) that put in relation to the agenda with the real conditions of the problem and with public policies.

$$P_t = a + b \cdot Pre_t + c \cdot Tip_t + d \cdot Vpro_t + e_t$$

$$P_t = a + b \cdot Pre_t + c \cdot Fis_t + e_t$$

Where Pre_t is housing prices; Tip_t is interest rate; $Vpro_t$ is % of subsidized housing dwellings out of the total number of initial housing; Fis_t is tax deductions.

This theory predicts that both the actual conditions of the problems and public policies will influence the public agenda. Thus, the higher prices and mortgage interest rates, the greater the concern about the problem will be. The greater the weight of subsidized housing and the greater the tax relief available to taxpayers, the lower the priority given to the problem.

4. Results: the housing bubble and problems in the public agenda.

4.1 The evolution of the issues on the public agenda.

Before analyzing the factors that influence Spaniards' concern about the issues studied, it is worth describing their evolution over time. To this end, a typology of issues has been considered based on how long they have been on the agenda, distinguishing between chronic, intermittent, and crisis issues and/or reactions to government policies. Other complementary criteria have also been taken into account in order to qualify them, such as the distinction between issues and events (Rogers and Dearing 1988) and the degree of notoriety that public issues achieve (Eaton 1989).

The housing problem could be seen as a topic, not an event, as it is a long-term problem that receives continuous media coverage. Events, on the other hand, are characterized by their rapid onset, take place over a short period and attract a very intense and brief media attention (Rogers and Dearing 1988).

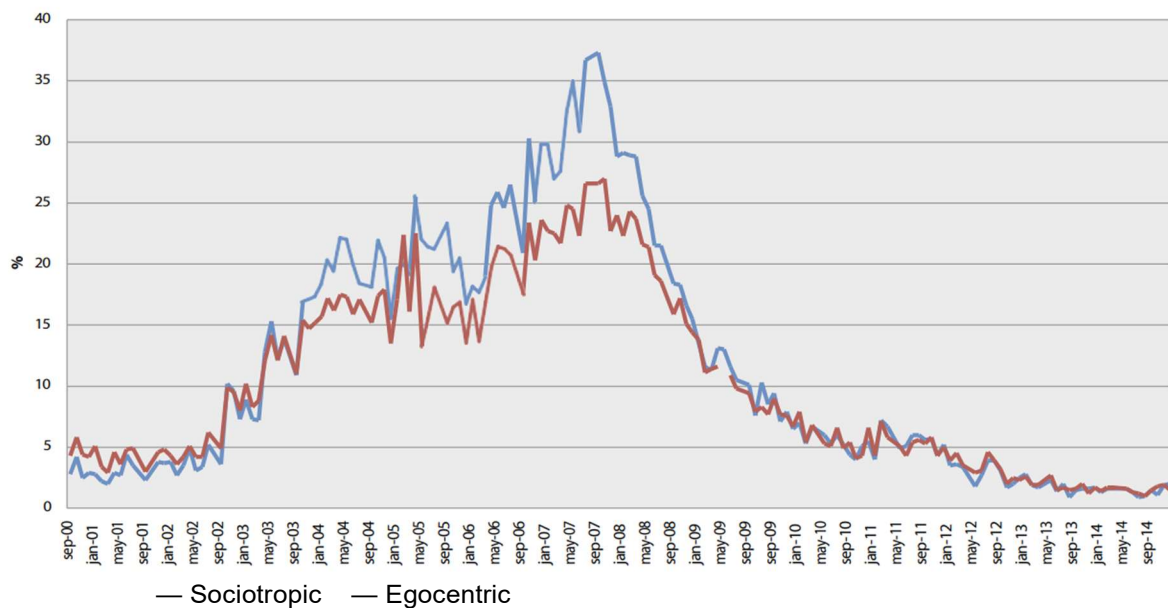
4.1.1. The housing issue.

Housing can be classified as an intermittent issue due to its degree of permanence on the agenda. Most of the topics that make up the agenda belong to this type. These are topics that have been on the agenda for a long time, but whose presence is discontinuous, i.e., they enter and leave the agenda over time and/or alternate periods in which they are above and below 5% of notoriety. Even though it is an intermittent topic, it is long-lasting, i.e., it has been on the agenda for a long time (Zucker, 1978), at least since the CIS started its series. This is relevant, because the longer an issue has been on the agenda, the more likely it is that the public has formed an opinion about it, which diminishes the media's ability to influence the public's opinion (Soroka, 2002). It is also a familiar or close subject. Zucker (1978) pointed out that "the less an individual's direct experience of a given subject, the greater his or her dependence on the media for knowledge and interpretation." In contrast, in the case of topics known and personally experienced, media influence tends to be less.

Regarding its notoriety, currently, it is a subject of low notoriety: that is, less than 10% of citizens mention it as one of the three most important problems of the country. However, the place housing currently occupies on the agenda has little to do with the place it occupied in the past (reaching over 37% in September 2007) being able to distinguish three stages in the evolution. The first stage would cover from 1985 (the first year for which data is available) up to 2002. During this period, the housing issue behaved as an intermittent issue of low notoriety. This was on the agenda at first, then disappeared in 1994, only to reappear again in the year 2000, generally exceeding 10% of attention. The second stage would comprise from April 2003 until September 2009, in which it achieved high notoriety, exceeding 10% of attention every month. After its return to the agenda, it gradually climbed up positions until the bursting of the housing bubble and the economic crisis in 2007, when it began to decline, even at an accelerated rate, dropping below the 10% threshold in 2009, without having recovered it to the present day. Since then, it has remained a low-profile, unresolved issue that remains latent waiting to recapture the attention of the public at another time.

It is noteworthy that the evolution of the housing issue on the egocentric agenda follows the same pattern as in the sociotropic agenda. Only, it is worth mentioning that during the peak period of the housing bubble, the distance between the two was greater, a sign of the concern for the issues regardless of whether or not it affected them personally (see figure 1), which made the issue of housing strongly enter the area of impact (thus is, the space in which sociotropic and egocentric agendas coincide (Bouza, 2004)), making this subject one of the most relevant ones for the purposes of political communication, to which all political parties had to dedicate attention, in particular, those who have social support based that are especially sensitive to this issue.

Figure 1. Sociotropic and egocentric agenda. Housing (everything related to housing, rents, housing shortages, high prices, quality of housing, etc.)



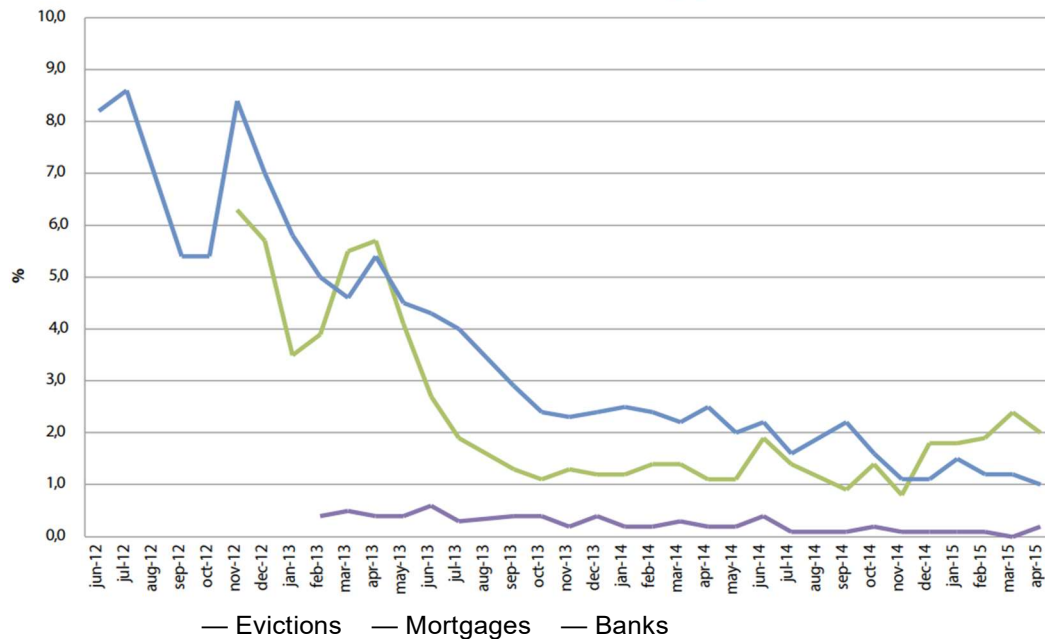
4.1.2. Bank issues and evictions.

In mid 2012, three new topics related to the effects of the new issues related to the most direct effects of the bursting of the real estate bubble: specifically, the reactions they provoked in the public opinion, the large amounts of aid received by the saving banks after the bailout, the problem of evictions, which, prior to that of the banks, will only appear on the agenda a few months after the aid to the financial institutions; and similarly, the concern for mortgages, which will also appear on the agenda after the bailout.

The shape of the curves of attention to these issues is typical of crises and reactions of government policies, so that once the crisis breaks out or a policy is set in motion, the public reacts by expressing concern about the problem, and then, little by little, the issue gradually

drops in priority (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. In your opinion, what is the main problem that currently exists in Spain? And the second? And the third? The banks. Evictions. Mortgages.



The evolution of these issues responds to the pattern described by Downs (1972) in his theory of the attention cycle of the topics, according to which "a problem suddenly emerges, stands out, draws attention for a brief period and then (often without having a solution) gradually disappears from the public's attention", to add later that "any major problem that ever captured the interest of the public is capable of recapturing it sporadically".

4.2. Interests and values: the public on the subject of housing.

Analyses of the public agenda are incomplete if *thematic audiences* are not taken into account. Citizens, heterogeneous in terms of their interests and values, focus their attention on a few areas so that each individual belongs to one or more thematic publics, being relatively well informed about the area of interest, which they follow more or less closely as regards the actions of governments' and parties' with respect to it (Dalton, 1996). In this sense, a relevant question is to investigate the weight that the interest and values of individuals exert on their choice of priority issues.

When analyzing interests, the critical variable is *the position occupied in relation to the consumption of public goods and services*. Many of the territorial and sociodemographic variables actually express different positions regarding public-private consumption. Thus, in the case of housing, territorial variables are very important, as there are urban-rural differences which means that it is in urban areas where the greatest concern for housing is found, growing as the number of people living in urban areas increases. Age is another important variable, with greater demand for public intervention. Among young people than among older people, reaching its maximum intensity among those who are in the process of emancipating or have just emancipated. Likewise, concern about housing is greater among those who are in a situation of employment instability. It is not only young people who demand housing intervention, other important groups are the divorced and separated. Likewise, the home tenure regime also affects this issue, with greater demands among those who do not own a home and, to a lesser extent, among those who are currently paying for it.

Interests are also expressed through the *social class*. In this sense, they are the most favored sectors, i.e. the most enlightened social groups, those with higher levels of income, white-collar workers, the upper-middle classes, and the new middle classes, who are more concerned about the topic of housing.

Not only do interests matter in the formation of the agenda, but so do the values, in particular the position it occupies on the *left-right axis* and in the *post-materialist materialist* axis. In this regard, it is worth noting the following: the further a person is on the left, the greater the concern for housing; likewise, the more post-materialistic a person is, the greater demand for public intervention in housing. In line with this, it is not surprising that there are also strong associations between electoral behavior and the priority given to housing on the agenda, being more intense among voters who recall having voted for left-wing parties than among those who voted for the right-wing.

However, although individual variable can be identified as having an impact on housing concerns, it is important to underline that the influence of interests and values are limited by other external variables, which have an equal impact on all groups, which raises or lowers the concern for housing so that the “shifts” in priorities that are observed in the population as a whole reproduce in all social segments. It is not specific to the housing case, since, as Paige and Sapiro (1992) have pointed out, it is possible to identify *parallel publics*, i.e. various demographic groups that respond in their opinions in a similar way to changing circumstances. This suggests that citizens, regardless of the group they belong to, are interpreting information in the same way and using common judgment standards. Much of this information is conveyed by the media and some come from personal experience. Such behaviors have led these and other authors to consider that public opinion on public policies and affairs of current societies in the most developed countries can be considered as a relatively sophisticated public opinion that sensibly responds to new information (Glynn et al., 2015).

In fact, in the case at hand, “the shifts” in the citizen priorities on the issue of housing are reproduced across all socio-demographic and ideological groups. As we will see below, these are factors other than interests and values (such as policies developed by governments, the actual conditions of the problem itself, or the media attention devoted to issues such as evictions) the ones who wield the greatest influence on the trends that follow the concerns of the citizens.

As a sample, between 2000 and 2010, several segments of the population were observed and classified by the main variables that influence the priority given to housing: habitat, age, educational level, social class, and recall of voting in general elections (see figures from 3 to 7). In all of them, some biases affect priorities, however, the shifts are homogeneous across all the groups and describe the curve of the development of the housing bubble. The level of the studies is particularly significant, insofar as this variable may be associated with the degree of access to information and the processing capacity of that information. All groups, from the most educated to those with the lowest level of formal education, evolve in terms of their preferences in line with the pace imposed by housing market conditions.

Figure 3. Prioritization of the housing issue depending on whether or not it belongs to a metropolitan area.

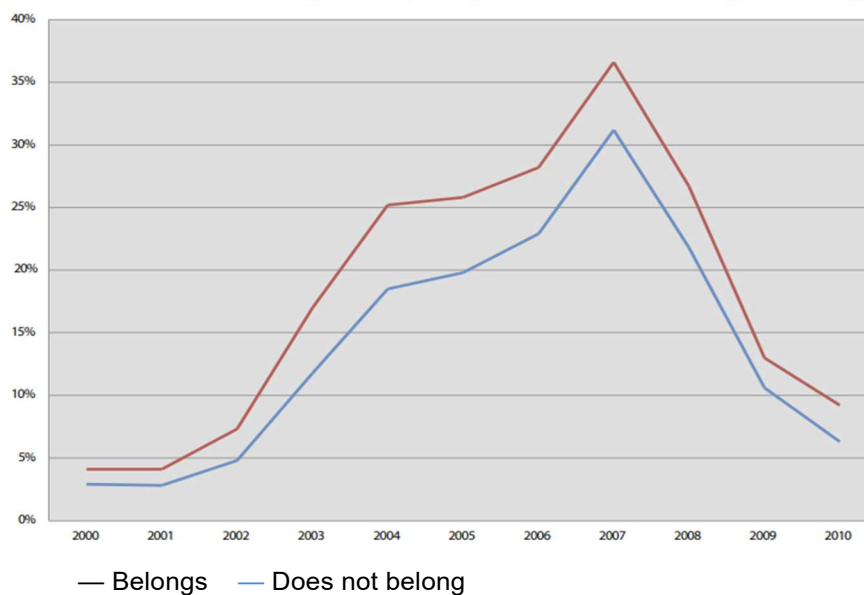


Figure 4. Prioritization of the housing issue according to age.

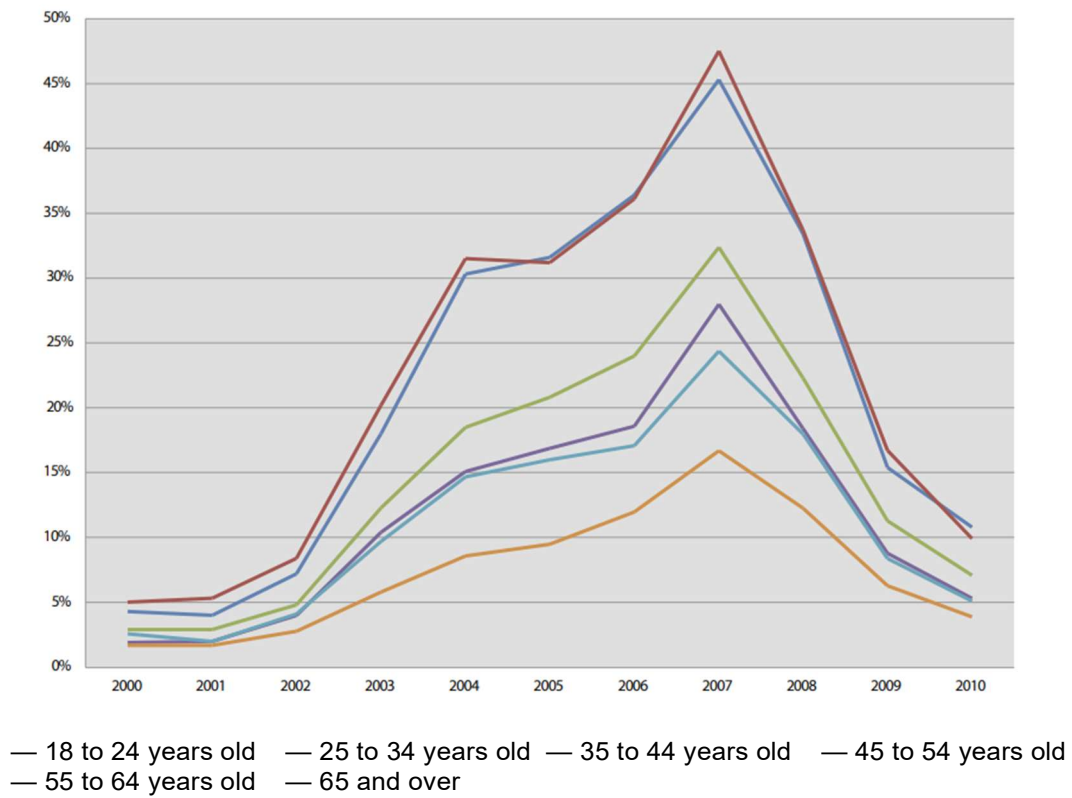


Figure 5. Prioritization of the housing based on voting memory.

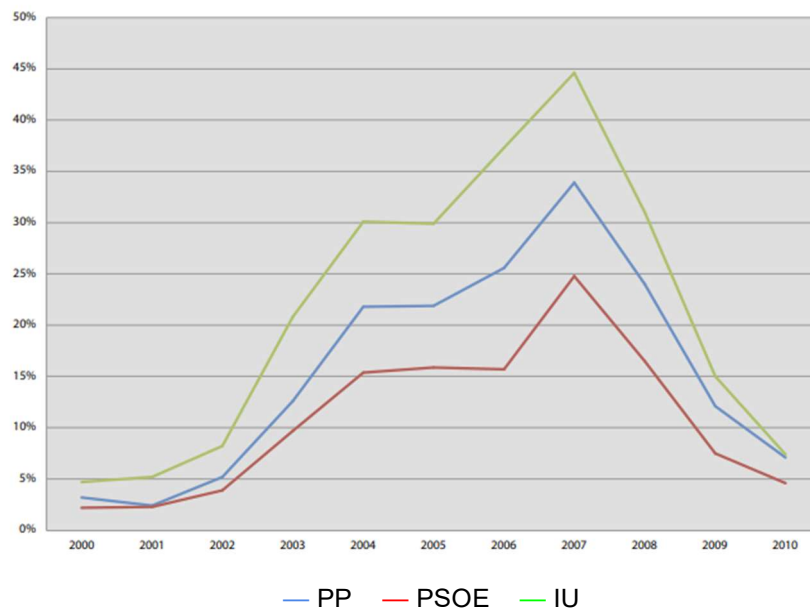


Figure 6. Prioritization of the housing issue according to studies level.

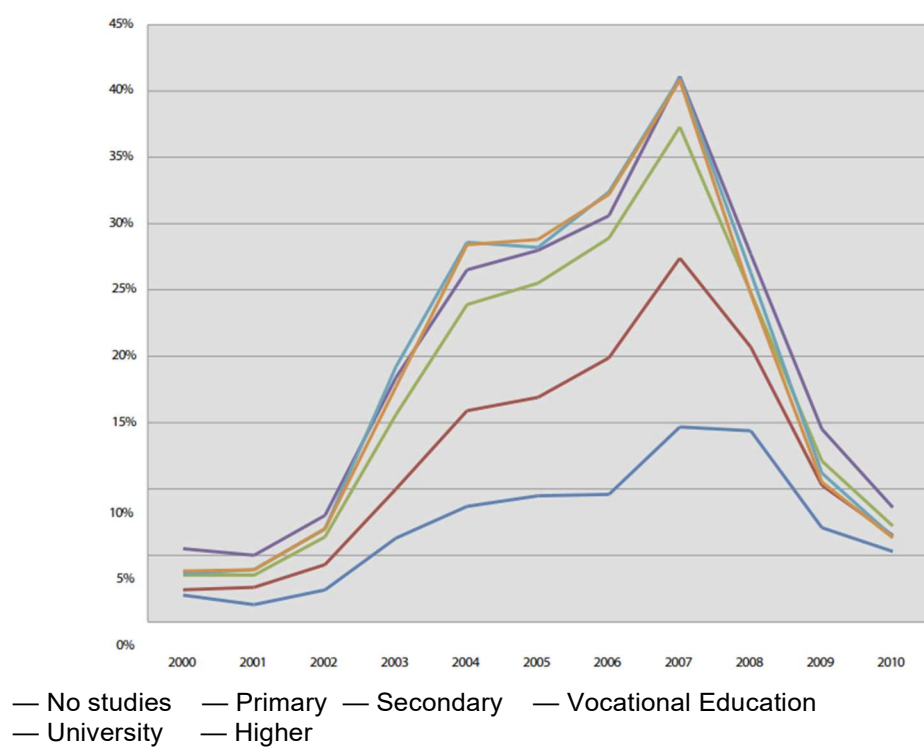
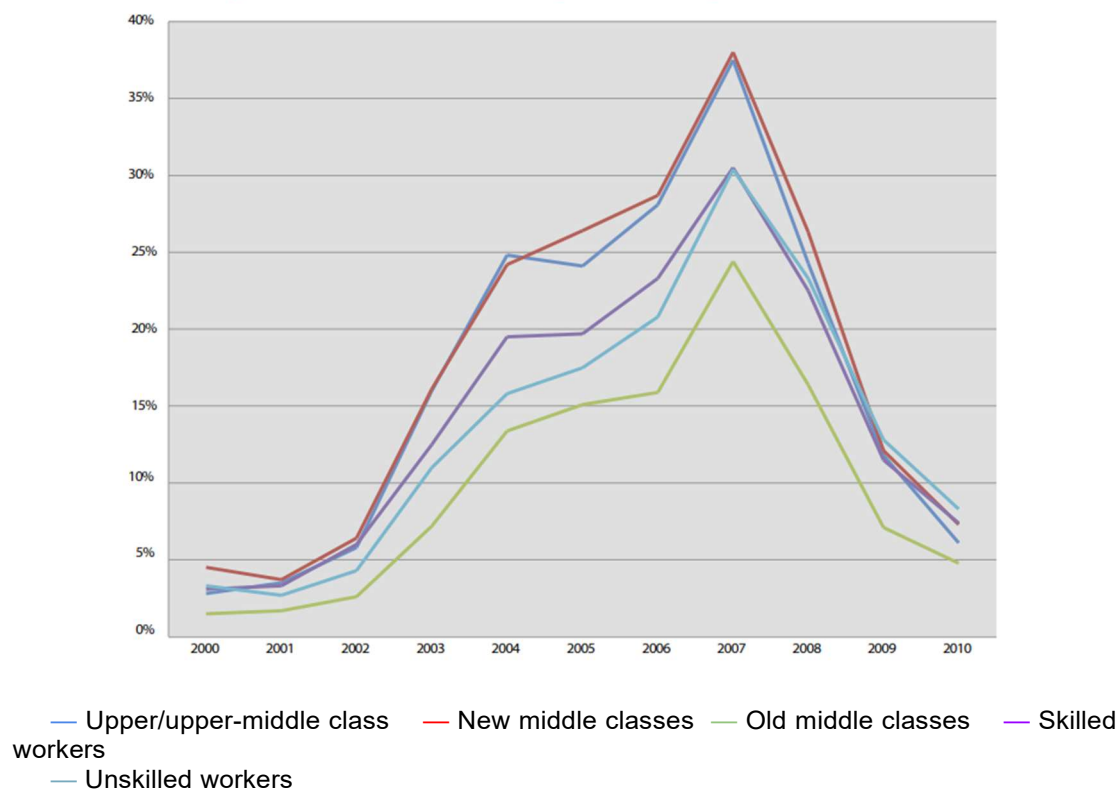


Figure 7. Prioritization of the housing issue according to socioeconomic status.



4.3 The real conditions of the problem: the influence of policies.

The government action itself, by influencing the public issues through its policies, influences the composition of the agenda. It can do so in various ways: through public statements (also known as the influence of presidential rhetoric), or through the use of several public policy instruments, being relevant in the specific cases of public spending on housing, tax breaks, and market regulation through social housing. We will return later on presidential rhetoric.

As far as public spending is concerned, without a doubt, this affects the agenda. When spending increases, citizens' concern decreases and when the spending goes down, worry increases. Thus, the correlation between public spending on "housing and community welfare" and concern about housing is 0.371 and is significant at the level below 0.05. The problem is that spending on this matter followed a downward pattern, which far from helping to lower the priority of the topic, it increased it.

Something similar can be said about social housing. The greater the weight of subsidized housing has over the set of homes that are built, regardless of whether they are publicly or privately financed, the lesser the concern for the housing problem. The fact is that the bulk of the growth of the real estate stock occurred through free housing, leaving the protected ones in a marginal and increasingly low position; which only regained weight in comparative terms when housing construction collapsed.

Finally, tax deductions from home purchases, far from lessening the concern about the problem, helped to increase it, possibly due to their influence on the rise of prices. However, in order to appreciate the effects of housing and tax deductions, it is necessary to take into account the effect of the prices, which is the most important determinant of all those analyzed.

4.4. The real conditions of the problem: influence of housing prices.

In order to analyze the influence of the actual conditions of the problem on the socio-tropic and egocentric public agenda, two models have been calculated; one with monthly data and another with quarterly information. The different time frames adopted, respond to the availability of the statistical series.

In the first of them (see Table 1), it can be verified as the variable that most influences the priority given to the issue is the housing place. Interest rates also do so, but their weight is less important. Naturally, the higher the price of the house and the higher the interest rates, the more concern there will be about the topic of housing.

The construction of subsidized housing, although not as relevant as price, has a substantial impact on the perception of the problem. So that the higher the proportion of subsidized housing that is built over the total number of housing starts, the lower the concern about the housing issue. In fact, as noted above, the subsidized housing has been in decline and what the data is reflecting is a growth in the housing stock based on free housing: this led to an increase in housing concern because, among other reasons, subsidized housing, given its low weight, contributed very little to the moderation of housing prices.

Table 1. The influence of house prices, interest rates, and social housing construction on the priority of housing on the socio-tropic and egocentric agenda.

	Socio-tropic agenda	Self-centred agenda
R	0.968	0,973
R ²	0.937	0,947
Constant	-32,530	-25,408
Beta Second-hand house price (euros m) ²	0,738**	0,760**
Beta Weighted average reference interest rate set of financial institutions (%)	0,072*	0,084*
Beta % of subsidised housing as a percentage of total housing starts	-0,340**	-0,301**

* Significant at the 0.05 level.

** Significant at level 0.01

Source: for independent variables, Bank of Spain Biset database. Monthly series January 2005 to January 2015. Prepared by the authors.

In the quarterly series, which covers the whole of the most recent housing bubble cycle it is observed the incidence of the price is alongside with the tax deductions. What is striking is that tax deductions, far from lessening housing worries, have increased them. This is possibly due to the effect of tax deductions in the rise of prices, thus increasing the concern of citizens for this matter (see Table 2).

Table 2. The influence of housing prices and tax deductions on the priority of the housing issue in the sociotropic and egocentric agendas.

	Socio-tropic agenda	Self-centred agenda
R	0.892	0,881
R ²	0.795	0,777
Constant	-32,949	-25,609
Beta Price in euros free housing (index base 2005)	0,582*	0,473*
Beta Annual theoretical effort for house purchase obtained by tax deductions (%)	0,507*	0,635*

* Significant at the 0.0 level.

Source: for independent variables, Bank of Spain Biset database. Quarterly series from the third quarter of 2000 to the fourth quarter of 2014. Prepared by the authors.

4.5 The influence of actors: presidential rhetoric.

The impact on the agenda of presidential rhetoric can be very different. Thus, in some cases, they provoke immediate reactions in the public's opinion that gradually lose intensity. Such was the case with the issue of bailing out financial institutions: when the Spanish government requested financial aid from Europe for its banking system in June 2012, followed by the immediate appearance of the President of the Government and the Minister of Economy to report on it, also in the same month, the banking issue appeared on the agenda for the first time, and it did so with a high level of notoriety, 8.2%, which rose to 8.6% the following month and later it fell. The topic followed the typical pattern of a crisis or reaction to a policy of the government (see Figure 2).

On the housing issue itself, presidential rhetoric seems to have a moderate influence. When presidents talk about housing, far from diminishing the population's concern, they seem to increase it, since their interventions are reactive rather than proactive, and are often associated with belated responses to problems linked to access to housing, to the difficulties and risks associated with the construction sector or to the consequences of the bursting of the real estate bubble. The correlation between the importance given to the issue of housing in the speeches of investiture and the state of the nation on the public agenda is 0.389 and is significant at a level of less than 0.05. Possibly it is the public agenda that should have influenced the presidents' speeches and not the other way around.

As far as evictions are concerned, the president's influence was null. By the time he incorporated the issue into his speeches, the matter was practically no longer on the public agenda and, consequently, had no impact on public opinion.

4.6. The influence of the actors: the media and the interest groups' narrative.

The agenda setting theory gives the media a decisive role in the shaping of the public agenda. In order to check the validity of this theory in the case in question, the evolution of the number of news items published by the newspaper *El País* on housing has been related to the priority given by citizens to this issue. As can be seen, the attention devoted to housing tends to vary in a similar way to the public agenda. The correlations between the public agenda and that of this newspaper are far from perfect, but they are significant, irrespective of the time span over which the information is collected (see first column of Table 3).

Table 3. The correlation coefficient between the number of news items on housing published by *El País* and the priority of the housing issue on the socio-tropic public agenda.

	R without controlling for the effect of house prices	Partial R controlling for house price effect
Annual series	0,654*	
Quarterly series	0,414*	-0,082
Monthly series	0,323*	-0,058

* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level. Source: *El País* newspaper archive. Own elaboration.

This could lead one to believe that the media exercised a significant influence on citizens' priorities. However, drawing this conclusion would be a mistake because if no one controls the effect of price developments, the media's impact disappears (see the second column of Table 3). This is largely because the media reflect in their news the stories emitted by the real world, giving more attention to the issue of housing during the development of the real estate bubble and less in periods where the prices were lower. The influence of the press on the agenda, in this case, is null or very small since the housing problem is a reality that citizens are aware their own experience, and the media's ability to influence their priorities is very limited.

The situation is quite different in the case of evictions where the press did play a critical role. Mortgage foreclosures started to grow in the fourth quarter of 2007 and reached their peak in the first quarter of 2010. Launches also started to grow from 2007 and reached their peak in the second quarter of 2012 (see figure 8). The media, particularly the newspapers *El País* and *El Periódico*, began to highlight this issue in the first quarter of 2011, a year after foreclosures peaked; but it would not be until the third quarter of 2012 when dedicated attention by the media to this issue will achieve its peak. This was due to a series of unfortunate events - cases of suicides of people affected by evictions at the end of October and the beginning of November 2012 - which attracted the attention of the media and provoked numerous reactions from political and social actors, generating a high number of news items that had an impact on public opinion, reflected in the composition of the agenda public of the moment. Subsequently, the attention of the media's focus on this issue dropped and with it the priority of the issue on the agenda, although neither the number of foreclosures nor launches had been significantly reduced, i.e. despite the fact that the problem has not changed substantially (see figure 9).

Figure 8: Evolution of the number of foreclosures and launches between 2007 and 2014

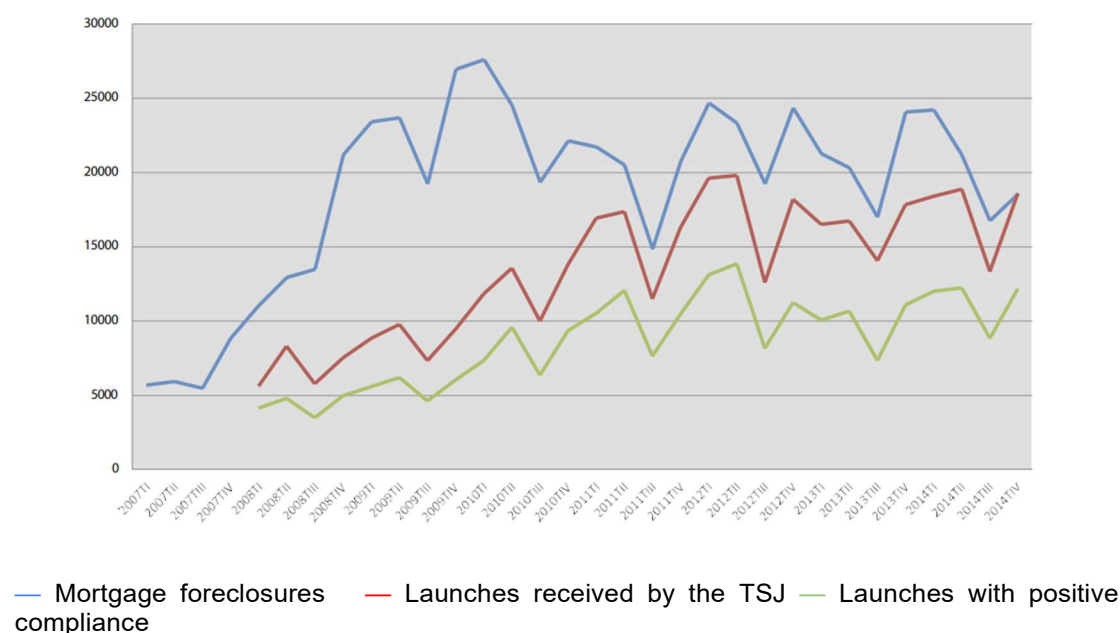
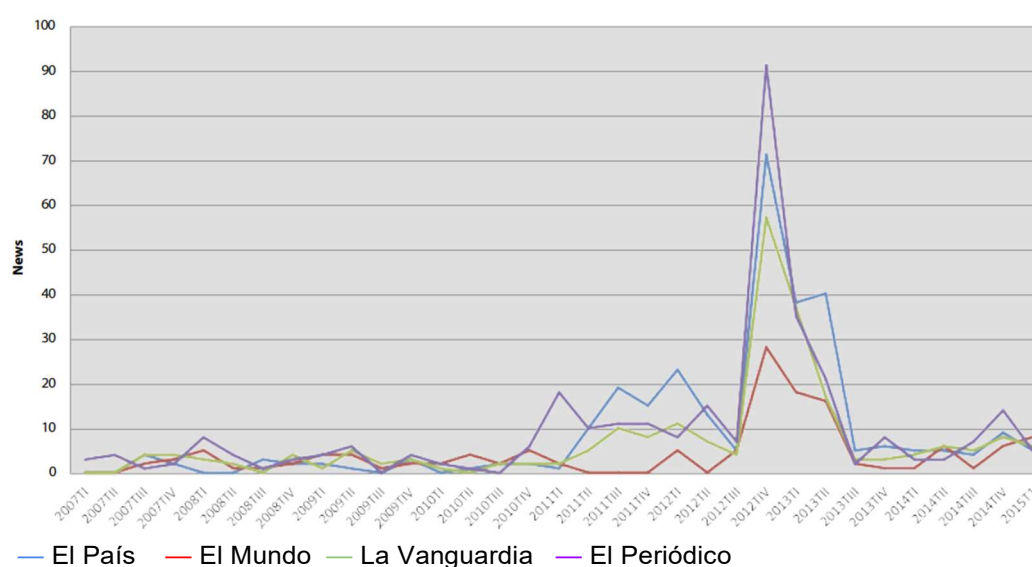


Figure 9: The evolution of the number of news items on the subject of evictions in the different media



In contrast to the housing issue, where the impact of the actual conditions of the problem was relevant for the formation of the agenda (with the media being marginal), in the case of evictions it was the media and not the evolution of reality itself that had the greatest impact on the agenda. This is due, among other factors, to the fact that the vast majority of the population is not directly affected by evictions, and their knowledge is not obtained through their own experience but depends on the information they obtain through the media and the speeches of the actors. A good example of this is the high correlation coefficients that exist between the number of news items on evictions published by the media and the priority acquired by the issue on the public agenda. Note that, regardless of the higher or lower priority given by each medium to the issue, their agendas are highly correlated one to the other, regardless of their editorial line (see table 4).

Table 4: Coefficient correlation between the number of news items on evictions published by various media and the priority of the evictions issue on the socio-tropic public agenda.

	Socio-tropic agenda	Europa Press	El País	The World	La Vanguardia	El Periódico
Socotropic agenda	1,000					
Europa Press	0,798*	1,000				
El País	0,803*	0,868*	1,000			
The World	0,799*	0,766*	0,813*	1,000		
La Vanguardia	0,749*	0,840*	0,893*	0,787*	1,000	
El Periódico	0,745*	0,795*	0,858*	0,786*	0,902*	1,000

* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

In short, it is the first-level effects –the ones that help to focus public attention on issues– (López-Escobar et al. 1998) and not the second level– which present the topics to the public from certain framings, highlighting some attributes and not others, etc.– (Weaver, 2007; McCombs et al., 2000; Rodríguez 2004; Takeshita 2006) that are truly relevant when it comes to setting the public agenda in the case of evictions.

In this second dimension of the framing of the problem is where the social movements were key, in particular the various groups that emerged around evictions, who articulated an integrated and robust narrative that presented the problem from a simple perspective: housing as an indisputable social right (use value) that institutions must guarantee at all costs. The diagnosis from this perspective falls under its own weight: evictions are the epiphenomenon of a housing policy that ignores the problems of the most vulnerable people, that ignores the constitutional mandate to ensure access to decent and adequate housing, which promotes real estate bubble and the big mortgage business, and when the market crashes, it socializes the losses, bailing out savings banks, and the losses, rescuing ruined savings banks and acquiring unsaleable housing and land with public funds, and still has time to take advantage of the last spoils by selling off thousands of social housing units to vulture funds.

The antithesis between use value and exchange value dominates the whole scenario. The abandonment of the institutions and the disinterest of the traditional parties in this issue forces us to intervene from below, to confront evictions directly and forcefully in order to protect families, children and the elderly who, after a life of sacrifice, find themselves on the street with nothing. The most dramatic side of the issue is chosen and conveniently illustrated by the media convened for this purpose. The villains are few but strong: the banks, the savings banks, the "bad bank" (SAREB), the investment funds, and on the ground, the bank office manager, the court official who administers the eviction, the policeman who evicts the occupants from their homes, etc. The activists who paralyze the evictions, the outraged neighbors and the affected families are the heroes of the story and, of course, the grassroots social movements that channel their demands to the institutions. The moral of the story can be easily summed up: stop all evictions as a first step, to achieve an immediate housing solution for all the evicted and, in the medium term, dation in payment, a new mortgage regulation that ensures a second chance for those in debt and the right to enjoy decent and adequate housing. This narrative had considerable media and social acceptance, was incorporated into political discourses and was successfully used in the electoral campaign for the local elections in May 2015⁸.

4.7. Context.

As far as the context is concerned, long-term value shifts in a post-materialist sense work in favor of welfare policies and, in that sense, it is logical that the cultural shift would work in favor of housing concerns. However, as housing refers to a good, it is a policy that has both use and exchange value, it is not only interpreted from the social equity, but also in its component of patrimonial investment, especially in a country of homeowners. The issue of evictions, however,

⁸ Jones et al. (2014) points out the importance of narrative in promoting policy, winning support and overcoming resistance. The narrative as a product has a structure that allows it to establish the general framework of interpretation of reality or "scenario", the rationale for intervention on the issues and the critical path or "plot" that intervention on the issues and the critical path or "plot" that orders the intervention, -good and bad- who operate in the political field of forces and, finally, the "moral", i.e. the solution, the public policy alternative, the solution, the public policy alternative that emerges from all of the above. all of the above.

may well fall within the scope of equity concerns, as it severely affects a small part of the population. seriously affects a small part of the population towards which social solidarity is expressed.

The upward economic cycle must have helped to increase concern about housing and decrease attention to this issue in the recession stages. The political context after the bursting of the bubble shows particularly negative opinions towards the leaders of the executives who have managed the crisis, coupled with dissatisfaction towards the political elites as a whole, and even questioning of some essential institutions and key aspects of the political regime, all of which means that issues related to the political process attract considerable attention that takes away some from substantive policies. Ultimately, the competition between issues over the economic and political crisis works against the concern for housing.

5. Conclusions.

If we look together at the contributions of all the theories that dealt either directly or indirectly with the public agenda, we can obtain a broad list of factors that influence its formation: cultural change in a post-materialist sense; economic cycles; the political context and levels of support for the regime, institutions and authorities in office; competition between issues for public attention; the real conditions of the problems and policies; presidential rhetoric and institutional agendas of public powers; stories from policy advocacy coalitions; attention to the issues and the treatment offered to them by the media communication; thematic audiences and biases in preferences derived from interests and values of individuals. Based on the cases studied, this paper has offered results that show how effectively these factors can influence the citizens' priorities.

However, the study of these same cases also shows that:

There is no single theory that can describe the evolution of all the issues on the agenda. For example, the evolution of the evictions issue may be in line with the evolution of the public cycle of public issues, but it's not like that in the housing issue.

Nor do we have a theory that with a few elements can reasonably describe all the issues on the agenda. The most complete theory, that of agenda-setting theory, is not able to interpret all the issues.

We do not even have one factor that is more influential than the others in all issues. The media agenda, which is the one on which most research in the field has insisted, is not a good determinant on many issues, including some as high profile as housing.

Not all the factors identified by the theory influence all the issues analyzed. The policies and market conditions explain housing concerns well, but the actual conditions of evictions do not interpret the evolution of citizens' housing priorities for this topic.

It seems clear, therefore, that the issue matters. The interpretation of each issue requires a contingent approach. We are aware of the influence of several factors, but the weight of these factors varies with each issue. Consequently, for the analysis of an issue, it is necessary to have different theories and see which ones apply in each case and to what extent they are applicable.

Thus, in order to interpret the evolution of citizens' concerns about housing, what matters most are market conditions, particularly the price of housing. The evolution cycle of the problem perfectly reflects the boom and bust of the housing bubble. Public policies also influenced perceptions, adding fuel to the fire through inadequate levels of public spending, the reduction in the weight of subsidized housing as opposed to free housing in new construction and unfortunate tax breaks, all of which, far from moderating the bubble, stimulated it. The interests and values of individuals also play a role, and it has been possible to identify the specific biases of the housing thematic audience. However, their weight is moderate and in fact, the impact of the evolution of the bubble can be observed in all segments. The cultural, economic and political context influenced both the rise and fall of concern on the topic, but their contribution in explaining the evolution is also moderate. Possibly, the economic and political crisis contributed to the underestimation of the concern in the final period that is studied, but it is the fall in prices

that best explains the levels of concern about the issue. The presidential rhetoric, the media and the actors' speeches are irrelevant. At best, they lag behind citizens' concerns, and these are driven by market conditions and by the influence that housing policies exert on prices.

The remaining topics analyzed are different. In the case of banks, the appearance of the Minister of Economy and the President informing with wide media coverage of the request to rescue the savings banks suddenly gathered the public's attention on this problem, only to gradually disappear from the agenda. The issue predates that statement and is still unresolved, the media had reported before and continued to do so afterward, without any impact on public concerns.

On the issue of evictions, the media has been very influential in gathering public attention, at least as far as it is known as the first level effects. Actors for their part, have probably influenced discourses, at the so-called second level. The actual conditions and the rhetoric of the executive have been irrelevant.

If issues matter, you will need to develop an analytical framework for the study of the topics that allows to collect information and compare them with each other. An outline of integrated theory has been presented here for the analysis of the themes that distinguishes the effects of cultural, economic, and political contexts: the real conditions of the problem and public policies; those of the behaviors of the actors, including the presidential rhetoric, the coalitions.

promoters and the media; and those of the interests and values of individuals.

Leaving aside both the factors of the context (which will always have to be analyzed based on their incidence on the problem, either by increasing or decreasing its priority) such as the biases of the interests and values (which will have to be determined before each policy), in the rest of the factors the tension seems to concentrate between facts and words: between the facts of the evolution of policies and the real conditions of the problems, and the words of the speeches, arguments and stories of the actors, aired through the media. The more elitist visions of politics tend to attribute to actors, including the media, a decisive role in shaping the public agenda. From the perspective defended here, the greater weight of the facts or of the words will have to be researched for each topic.

Our conclusion, in short, is that in societies with sophisticated public opinion, elucidating whether facts or words weigh more depends on the ways in which citizens access information on each topic. When citizens get information about the state of public problems through their own experience (or the people with whom they interact) what predominates are the real conditions of the problems and the policies that affect those real conditions. In the event that this direct information is not possible, the actors – including the media – will tend to predominate. If the agenda is reviewed it will be seen as the bulk of public attention is focused on issues and public policies that enter within the first category: unemployment, economic situation, citizen security, immigration, etc. However, there will always be issues such as banks or evictions for which the speeches and/or treatment by the media are central.

Ultimately the nature of the subject and the policies matter in the formation of the agenda, and the access routes to information are those that mark the difference in increasingly sophisticated societies where actors, including the media, each time they have less scope to influence the cycles evolution of a large part of the issues that make up the public agenda.

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