



# FACES OF POWER

STEVEN LUKES

T H E A G E N D A  
S E T T I N G F A C E

## What is the agenda setting face of power?

It could be argued that power can be viewed as the ability to set the political [agenda](#). Major political parties and powerful groups have the ability to express interests or call for a specific idea or policy to be discussed or implemented. Major political parties also have the ability to keep some issues off the political table which can lead to the issue not being discussed or implemented.

This is a [subtle](#) face of power because power is not simply about making decisions, it is also about setting the agenda that leads to decisions. This feels like a more secretive form of power because the agenda setting is likely to happen behind closed doors. According to Lukes, the people or groups with the real power are those that have the ability to set the agenda. This is because of the high level of control of what is and is not discussed. Choices may be reduced which means that that people can find themselves unable to exercise scrutiny or participate in a transparent political decision-making process.

## Example

[Nicola Sturgeon](#), the Scottish National Party leader and Scotland's First Minister, wrote to UK Prime Minister and leader of the UK Conservative Party, [Boris Johnson](#) on 19 December 2020 to request the powers to legally stage another [referendum](#) under [Section 30](#) of the [1998 Scotland Act](#). Sturgeon also called for the [Scottish Parliament](#) to be given permanent powers to hold [subsequent](#) referendums on independence from the UK.

# Steven Lukes' Agenda Setting Face of Power

In January 2020, Boris Johnson wrote to Nicola Sturgeon to formally reject her request for the transfer of powers necessary to hold a second referendum on Scottish independence. Johnson's response is shown in his letter to Sturgeon below:



10 DOWNING STREET  
LONDON SW1A 2AA

THE PRIME MINISTER

14 January 2020

Dear Nicola,

Thank you for your correspondence of 19 December 2019.

I have carefully considered and noted the arguments set out for a transfer of power from the UK Parliament to the Scottish Parliament to allow for further independence referendums.

You and your predecessor made a personal promise that the 2014 Independence Referendum was a "once in a generation" vote. The people of Scotland voted decisively on that promise to keep our United Kingdom together, a result which both the Scottish and UK Governments committed to respect in the Edinburgh Agreement.

The UK Government will continue to uphold the democratic decision of the Scottish people and the promise that you made to them. For that reason, I cannot agree to any request for a transfer of power that would lead to further independence referendums.

Another independence referendum would continue the political stagnation that Scotland has seen for the last decade, with Scottish schools, hospitals and jobs again left behind because of a campaign to separate the UK.

It is time that we all worked to bring the whole of the United Kingdom together and unleash the potential of this great country.

The Right Honourable Nicola Sturgeon MSP

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On receiving the letter, Sturgeon commented that, “The [Westminster](#) union (with Scotland) cannot be [sustained](#) without consent. [Democracy](#) will prevail.”



What this example shows is that Johnson was able to set the political agenda relating to [devolved powers](#) by refusing to consider the transfer of greater power to the devolved Scottish Parliament. Sturgeon believes that this political agenda setting by Johnson stands in the way of the “right of the people of Scotland to decide their own future”. Sturgeon believes that the SNP has a [democratic mandate](#) for another independence referendum given the fact that the SNP has controlled the Scottish Parliament (as both [minority](#) and [majority](#) governments) since 2007.

In the *elitist theory* a main power elite dominates the entire agenda setting process to serve their own interests. These interests hold the power in all the **arenas** and they tend to win every election. In order to retain power and control, the main elite works at keeping key issues off the agenda. This **suppression** of issues threatens **democracy**.

### **Is the agenda setting face relevant today?**

It could be argued that political parties try to get onto the political agenda issues that they believe could **resonate** with voters. They may do this to ensure that they get voted into power or **retain** power. This could be said to be politically pragmatic.

It could also be argued that political parties' agenda setting is driven by **ideological** concerns. For example, the Conservative Party might be driven by a traditional view (associated with traditional conservative political theorist, **Edmund Burke**) that political power is wielded by those who are 'born to rule'. In contrast, political representatives in the Conservative Party may believe in individual freedom and a reduction in dependency culture (associated with New Right conservative thinkers such as **Ayn Rand**). These political ideas may drive and influence political agenda setting.

Agenda setting may also be carried out in the interests of **public health** and **national security**. Consider the UK Government's actions during the Covid-19 pandemic and the way in which **national lockdowns** were organised and initiatives such as 'Eat Out to Help Out' were rolled out. Consider the agenda behind such political agenda setting. The UK economy was arguably was at the centre of this political agenda setting. Critics that believed that public health should have driven political decision making during the pandemic with national lockdowns and **border closures** being rolled out much sooner than they were.

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The political decision making of countries such as [Jordan](#) are interesting to compare to that of the UK. In Jordan, leaving home for anything other than strictly defined reasons was punishable by up to 1 year in jail. At the time that the UK imposed its lockdown, Jordan had arrested and detained over 800 people for lockdown [breaches](#).



When something unexpected happens, it can force the political agenda to change immediately. For example, the Covid-19 pandemic, [Hurricane Katrina](#) or the [World Trade Centre attacks](#) occurred they were unexpected but priority changing events. When big world events (i.e. disasters/tragedies) occur they are often followed by a policy response as well, and so what issues and ideas reach the political agenda are sometimes changed simply due to what happened in the world.

# In conclusion....



The political agenda is most often shaped by political and policy elites, but can also be influenced by activist groups, private sector lobbyists, think tanks, courts, and world events. Media coverage has also been linked to the success of the rise of political parties and their ability to get their ideas on the agenda. Although the media does often have an effect on the political agenda, these results are not always immediate, which can produce a lag in the political agenda.