

WHEN A STONE BREAKS THE SURFACE: THE MECHANISM OF FOCUSING EVENTS IN TRIGGERING RESPONSE-ORIENTED AGENDA SETTING

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Abstract

During the economic and social growth transition, the Chinese government must promptly address and resolve various significant and unexpected social challenges, prioritizing social matters and establishing a response-oriented agenda-setting model. A qualitative comparative analysis method was employed within the response-oriented agenda-setting triggering framework, incorporating aspects of advocacy coalition theory. This analysis utilized 45 focusing events from 2018 to 2023 to delineate four response-oriented agenda-setting triggering modes: clear-pointing, government-society interaction, event-triggered, and composite mode. Diverse focusing events initiated internal oscillations within the policy subsystem, while high-level government attention allocation prioritized events on the policy agenda, resulting in interactions between primary and secondary coalitions and response-oriented agenda setting influenced by policy learning.

Keywords: response-oriented agenda-setting, focusing events, qualitative comparative analysis, advocacy coalition, trigger mechanisms.

1. Introduction

Swiftly and efficiently addressing public requests while establishing a scientifically grounded and rational policy agenda are essential objectives of public policy practice. Under China's comprehensive deepening reform, the study of public policy practice emphasizes refining the democratic principles of public policy agenda setting, amalgamating information needs from diverse social entities, and augmenting the government's capacity to govern and address societal issues. The advent of focusing events necessitates the immediate innovation of processes and internal mechanisms for addressing public demands, prioritizing social issues, and formulating legalized policies expeditiously to address public concerns and fulfill societal objectives. The response-oriented agenda-setting model, tailored to local Chinese characteristics, signifies a novel endeavor to transform governmental governance in the contemporary era while offering robust theoretical support for the government to promptly and effectively address public needs (Zhao and Xue, 2017).

Various elements influence the response-oriented agenda-setting model. In the context of the swift advancement of the network society, varied interests have progressively established a stable and dynamic platform for participation and activity, articulating their needs. Concurrently, this evolution has led to the transformation of specific focusing events into a regular mechanism for agenda-setting (Wang, 2008). Sudden and dramatic focusing events serve as a crucial mechanism for triggering the policy agenda, as they can consolidate social pressure and catalyze the formulation of public policies, thereby expediting the inclusion of policy issues on the agenda (Birkland, 1998; Cobb and Elder, 1971; Jones and Baumgartner, 2005). The influence of focusing events, precisely their capacity to capture the attention of the public and politicians about the significant harms they inflict, can disrupt the policy equilibrium of the 'inward importation' model and is a crucial element in policy agenda-setting (Zhou and Yan, 2015).

In the context of public policy practice in China, the intense political party and state capacity facilitate a process in which policy promulgation involves gradual promotion by the government across all societal sectors and at the national level. This process occurs after carefully considering the adjustment of various interest patterns, with the successful establishment of the policy agenda largely reliant on the government as the primary actor. The Chinese government plays a crucial role in response-oriented agenda-setting, necessitating attention to the variable of government. Factors that initiate response-oriented agenda-setting for a focusing event can be characterized by multiple concurrency and asymmetry. It is essential to examine the influence of each factor on triggering response-oriented agenda setting through the lens of the aggregation relationship from a grouping perspective. This paper develops a response-oriented agenda-setting trigger framework informed by key components of the advocacy coalition framework, including external system events, advocacy coalitions, and policy learning. It selects 45 focusing events from 2018 to 2023 as case samples and employs qualitative comparative analysis to examine the conditions and mechanisms through which these focusing events initiate response-oriented agenda-setting. This

aims to enhance the efficiency and quality of government decision-making and improve the governing capacity.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1. Literature review

The response-oriented agenda-setting paradigm involves governments integrating public demands with democratic decision-making to more effectively address the needs of the populace within the framework of establishing a service-oriented government. In the response-oriented agenda-setting approach, the inherent significance of the policy issue is frequently overshadowed by the magnitude and evolution of the focusing event, leading the government to streamline or condense the integration of social issues into the legitimization of the matter (Zhao and Xue, 2017). This model exhibits four characteristics: the agenda is influenced by a focusing event, a limited number of policy elites prefer to intervene in the policy agenda, the policy agenda serves as a tool, and the policy is highly responsive.

Multiple approaches exist to examine how focusing events influence policy agenda-setting. The initial path highlights the enhancement of the focusing event. Potential social issues will be emphasized through the impact of focusing events (Liu, Lindquist and Vedlitz, 2011). Policymakers' adjustments to policy agenda-setting will primarily stem from the influence of public opinion. Additionally, the scale and intensity of focusing events significantly affect policymakers' problem definitions and policy directions (Alexandrova, 2015; Valentinavičius, 2022; Váně and Kalvas, 2013). Some scholars contend that focusing events do not constitute a singular trigger for the policy agenda; rather, they must be integrated with other factors. For instance, the advancement of policy entrepreneurs, the convergence of various focusing events, the influence of interest groups and government policymakers, and the dissemination and effective mobilization of public opinion facilitated by new media in the digital age (Corbin, 2010; Eckersley and Lakoma, 2022; Zhang and Ding, 2017), has led to numerous studies integrating focusing events into Kingdon's multiple streams theory, examining their role in the issue flow (Liu *et al.*, 2010; Wood, 2006). The third pathway emphasizes that in the context of Chinese governance, decision-makers' attention plays a crucial role in activating focusing events. Behaviors such as 'leaders' instructions' and 'making a fuss' with Chinese characteristics influence the allocation of decision-makers' attention, thereby disrupting the information monopoly of the bureaucracy and prompting it to address issues. This shift directs the limited attention of decision-makers towards prioritizing and concentrating on frequently occurring problems (Han, 2019; Pang, 2019). The inclusion of policy issues on the agenda is contingent upon the clarity of policy demands, the rationality of policy option selection, and the feasibility of specific technical means; otherwise, a state of 'policy idling' may occur. The concepts of 'policy idling' and 'symbolic implementation' hinder the effective formulation and

execution of policies (Li, 2012). The characteristics of focusing events influence policy-makers' decision-making, leading them to prioritize issues with significant social impact while neglecting or postponing more sensitive political matters (Wang and Wu, 2019).

Existing studies have examined the pathways and mechanisms of policy agenda-setting initiated by focusing events from various perspectives, demonstrating significant practical implications and theoretical insights. Compared to international research on analogous subjects, domestic investigations into policy agenda-setting influenced by focusing events exhibit shortcomings in theoretical frameworks and analytical tools. The current studies are relatively fragmented and lack a cohesive theoretical system, indicating potential for enhancement in China's socio-economic environment. This study examines the path combination of focusing event-triggered response-oriented agenda-setting, considering theoretical and practical needs. This study examines the inherent mechanisms and theoretical rationale of response-oriented agenda-setting, integrating elements of the advocacy coalition framework (ACF) and the context of China's national conditions to deepen the understanding of potential advances in this domain.

2.2. Theoretical framework

The advocacy coalition framework (ACF), introduced by Sabatier (Sabatier, 1987), has been extensively utilized by researchers both domestically and internationally to analyze the public policy process (Hudon and Floricel, 2023; Mastroianni, 2024; Osei-Kojo, Ingold and Weible, 2022; Wiley, Searing and Young, 2021). The composition of ACF includes key elements such as stable parameters external to the system, triggers of external systemic events, various advocacy coalitions within policy subsystems, and their corresponding belief systems. Stable parameters refer to external factors within the policy subsystem that remain constant and resist change, including cultural values. External systemic events serve as catalysts for policy change, including shifts in socioeconomic conditions that induce internal shocks within the policy subsystem. Internal shocks typically redistribute essential political resources and alter the equilibrium among policy actors. Internal and external factors within the policy subsystem affect policy learning, with the aim of achieving or modifying policy objectives, often across coalition communities and within a single coalition. Policy learning occurs intermittently among various coalition communities and within individual coalitions. The policy subsystem is essential for policy change, with external events and knowledge acquisition regarding policy preferences influencing shifts in the belief system. This process involves a distinct interaction and integration between the belief system and the associated interests. This paper analyzes the composition of public policy advocacy coalitions in China, considering the significant differences in national conditions and public policy-making processes compared to Western countries. It emphasizes the uniqueness of China's public policy-making process. The response-oriented agenda-setting trigger framework is developed by integrating the components of ACF, as illustrated in Figure 1.

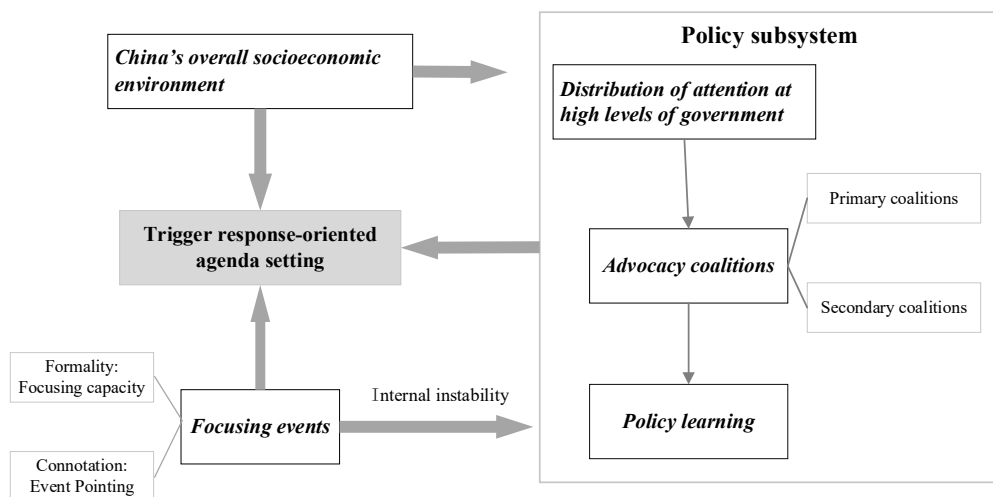


Figure 1: Response-oriented agenda-setting trigger framework

Source: Authors' own conceptualization

2.2.1. Outside the policy subsystem

2.2.1.1. The comprehensive socioeconomic environment of China

The 'relatively stable parameters' refer to external factors within the policy subsystem that exhibit stability and resistance to change. These include the fundamental characteristics and distribution of natural resources in the relevant areas, as well as the cultural values, social composition, and constitutional framework that underpin society (Jenkins-Smith, St. Clair and Woods, 1991; Sabatier, 1987). ACF is situated within a localized discourse, emphasizing the overall social environment influencing the development and transformation of public policies in China (Li *et al.*, 2024; Li and Weible, 2021; Li and Wong, 2020). China is undergoing a significant phase of economic transformation and social structural change, characterized by overall stability in external conditions alongside a degree of variability. China's socioeconomic lifestyle has undergone significant transformation through several changes, establishing a solid foundation for future sustainable development. The diversification of values and behaviors among the populace has prompted substantial adjustments in the government's management model, facilitating the emergence and development of response-oriented agenda-setting.

2.2.1.2. Focusing events external to the subsystem

The external events of the subsystem are shaped by alterations in the socioeconomic environment, public opinion, and internal alliances. During critical economic and social development phases, the frequency and intensity of external system events hold considerable significance, with focusing events frequently eliciting strong public opinion resonance (Guo, 2023; Schmid, Sewerin and Schmidt, 2020). The regular occurrence of focusing

events induces internal shocks within the policy subsystem, creating opportunities for issues to enter the policy agenda and be effectively established (Liu, Lindquist and Vedlitz, 2011). The external catalytic effect of focusing events is intricately connected to policy subsystems, reflecting the interrelation of economic development and livelihood issues, while also exerting significant impacts on society (Cobb, Ross and Ross, 1976). In this study, the focusing event signifies the subsystem external event, characterized by its alignment with the external event. This alignment reflects alterations in the socioeconomic environment and evident public opinion trends, resulting in an internal disruption within the policy subsystem. Consequently, this prompts modifications in the communication strategies of the advocacy coalition and serves a crucial triggering function. The focusing event's distinctive focusing capability, public attention, and superimposed effects play a critical role in initiating response-oriented agenda-setting. Consequently, these factors have emerged as significant criteria for assessing the impact of the focusing event. The directional connotation of the focusing event affects the issue's prioritization among policymakers.

2.2.2. Within the policy subsystem

2.2.2.1. Attention allocation by high-level governments

Policy choices made by policymakers can have significant implications for the overall agenda, potentially diverting attention from other issues or hastening policy changes in interconnected domains. The distribution of policymakers' attention, characterized by differing political focus on the agenda, enables specific issues to be prioritized while others are excluded (Jennings *et al.*, 2011). China possesses significant state capacity, enabling the transformation of structural interactions of interests and values into practical policy outputs primarily through government action. The government's response, acceptance, and attention are pivotal, as it is the primary entity in this process and the key decision-maker in balancing diverse interests and values (Wu and Guo, 2018). The government's behavioral choices primarily stem from variations in the allocation of attention, where the degree of focus and backing from leaders significantly affect the execution of policies and projects (Chen and Meng, 2016).

The governance model with Chinese characteristics highlights the allocation of attention by high leaders as a distinctive feature. This scarce resource plays a significant role in the policy agenda system and directly impacts the design and implementation of policy work (Lü and Gu, 2024). Governments impose mandatory requirements on institutions across various levels through established hierarchical relationships and a structured hierarchy of officials, utilizing the legal powers conferred by the system. The hierarchical authority and coercive power of higher government levels generate political pressure that can elevate specific events in the short term, potentially overshadowing the significance of others (Andersen and Jakobsen, 2018).

2.2.2.2. Advocacy coalitions

According to the advocacy coalition framework, policy actors or small groups with varying policy beliefs are classified into specific advocacy coalitions (Kukkonen, Ylä-Anttila and Broadbent, 2017). The number of these coalitions typically varies between two and five, and they can be classified into major and minor coalitions according to their impact within the policy domain. Primary coalitions aim to uphold policy stability and coherence, whereas secondary coalitions strive to advocate for moderate policy adjustments that align with their specific policy beliefs. China, under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC), emphasizes the central role of the government, favoring state-centrism, where government departments possess authoritative power in public policy formulation. Conversely, experts, scholars, social organizations, mass media, and public coalitions represent non-authoritative advocacy groups, exerting relatively limited influence (Yu and Yao, 2013). This paper's framework positions the authoritative advocacy coalition of government departments as the primary coalition, while the non-authoritative power advocacy coalition serves as the secondary coalition. The secondary coalition includes Internet celebrities from Sina Weibo, who serve as an emerging entity within the advocacy alliance. They exert significant influence on public opinion and contribute to the policy agenda-setting initiated by focusing events, which is a notable characteristic of the evolution of China's information network society.

3. Methods

3.1. Research methodology and sample selection

Charles Ragin, an American sociologist, introduced Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) in 1987. This method, oriented towards case studies, integrates Boolean algebra, set theory, and quantitative analysis of cases (Charles, 2008). This paper employed a crisp-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (csQCA), using response-oriented agenda-setting as the outcome variable. The selection of antecedents was primarily based on the elements of the response-oriented agenda-setting trigger framework, examining the methods and mechanisms by which the focusing event initiates response-oriented agenda-setting.

This study gathered relevant case information through multiple channels, including existing academic literature, trending topics on Weibo, Baidu index data, public database releases, and news reports from mass media, in accordance with the QCA method's requirements for case selection and quantity to ensure the credibility and validity of the selected cases. This paper examined 45 focusing events from 2018 to 2023, encompassing social and legal systems, culture and education, public health, and social security, to maximize the comprehensiveness of the cases presented (Table 1).

Table 1: Focusing event cases

ID	Type	Year	Case
1	Cultural education	2018	The Sexual Harassment Case Involving Chen Xiaowu, a Changjiang Scholar
2	Legal incident	2018	The Hongmao Medicinal Wine Controversy
3	Legal incident	2018	The ‘Jiejieliang’ Incident Involving Derogatory Remarks Against China
4	Public safety	2018	The Murder of a Flight Attendant in Zhengzhou
5	Public health	2018	Controversial Event in I’m Not a Drug God
6	Public health	2018	The Changchun Changsheng Vaccine Incident
7	Public safety	2018	Incident of Unauthorized Occupation of Seats on High-Speed Rail
8	Legal incident	2018	Fan Bingbing’s Tax Evasion Scandal
9	Cultural education	2019	Zhai Tianlin’s Academic Misconduct Incident
10	Legal incident	2019	Mercedes-Benz Vehicle Owner’s Rights Defense Incident
11	Public safety	2019	Fatal Incident Involving a 10-Year-Old Boy Throwing a Fire Extinguisher from a High-Rise in Guiyang
12	Legal incident	2019	Security Bag Checks at Shanghai Disneyland
13	Public safety	2019	Homicide Incident at Civil Aviation General Hospital
14	Public health	2019	Outbreak of the COVID-19 Pandemic
15	Emergency management	2020	Collapse of the Quanzhou Xinjia Hotel
16	Legal incident	2020	Child Abuse Incident
17	Entertainment	2020	Case of a Three-Year-Old Girl Force-Fed to 35kg for Online Broadcasts
18	Cultural education	2020	The Impersonation Incident Involving Gou Jing in Shandong
19	Legal incident	2020	The Disappearance of a Woman in Hangzhou
20	Emergency management	2020	The Anshun Bus Accident in Guizhou
21	Legal incident	2020	Ram incident
22	Food safety	2020	The Edible Bird’s Nest Scandal Involving Influencer Xinba
23	Entertainment	2021	The Surrogacy Controversy Involving Zheng Shuang
24	Legal incident	2021	The Changsha Woman Jumping from a Vehicle Incident
25	Emergency management	2021	The Yellow River Stone Forest Mountain Marathon Hundred-Kilometer Cyclo Cross Incident
26	Entertainment	2021	The Fan Vote Scandal Involving Milk Dumping
27	Legal incident	2021	The Case of Wu Yifan
28	Legal incident	2021	The Gender Bias in Recruitment by Qiongsan Women’s Federation in Haikou
29	Entertainment	2021	Short-Form Video Copyright Infringement Incidents
30	Legal incident	2021	The Tax Evasion Case Involving Influencer Viya
31	Public health	2022	The Xi’an Incident Involving a Miscarriage Due to Delayed Medical Treatment
32	Legal incident	2022	The Feng County Case of a Woman with Eight Children
33	Emergency management	2022	The Crash of China Eastern Airlines Flight MU5735

ID	Type	Year	Case
34	Cultural education	2022	The Controversy Over Illustrations in People's Education Press Mathematics Textbooks
35	Legal incident	2022	The Tangshan Assault Case (violence against women in a barbecue restaurant)
36	Emergency management	2022	The Sanli Highway Bus Rollover Accident
37	Public health	2022	The Mass Exodus from Foxconn in Zhengzhou
38	Emergency management	2022	The Fatal Gas Poisoning Incident of a Child in Lanzhou
39	Emergency management	2022	The Fatal Fall of a Female Resident in Hohhot
40	Emergency management	2022	The Residential Building Fire Accident in Urumqi
41	Legal incident	2023	The Case of a Male Student at Suzhou University Fabricating and Disseminating Defamatory Content
42	Public opinion	2023	The Controversy Involving a State-Owned Enterprise Executive in an Inappropriate Relationship
43	Emergency management	2023	The Rainstorm-Induced Disaster in Hebei Province
44	Ecological protection	2023	Japan's Discharge of Nuclear-Contaminated Water into the Ocean
45	Public health	2023	The Epidemic Spread of <i>Mycoplasma pneumoniae</i> Infections

Source: Authors' own conceptualization

3.2. Variables design and coding instructions

3.2.1. Outcome variables

Response-oriented agenda-setting included the government's discursive exchanges and informal responses, along with decision-making adjustments and adaptive behaviors in response to public demand (Zhao and Xue, 2017). This paper established guidelines for evaluating the success of responsive policy agenda-setting by clarifying the criteria for assigning values to the outcome variables. When a focusing event occurred, a government was deemed to have successfully established a responsive policy agenda if it could promptly revise existing policies or create and implement new ones, resulting in a coding of 1. If the focusing event failed to elicit any responsive agenda-setting or resulted in a minimal response, such as the government issuing a bulletin regarding a specific event, it was categorized as 0.

3.2.2. Antecedent condition variables

The response-oriented agenda-setting trigger framework outlined in the previous section emphasized the selection of antecedent conditions, which primarily revolve around three key elements: focusing events, attention allocation by high-level governments, and advocacy alliances for variable setting. The focusing event pertained to the ability to concentrate on form, encompassing both the intensity of the event and the superposition effect. Additionally, the connotation concerned the directionality of focusing events, including the alignment of public power and the articulation of interest demands. Attention allocation by high-level governments is centered on the support and focus provided by

provincial and higher-level governments for an event. The advocacy coalition consisted of a primary coalition formed by government departments and a secondary coalition comprising non-political entities.

3.2.2.1. Heat of focusing events

The Internet's efficient integration and diffusion capabilities elevated specific social issues, creating a focusing point that encourages profound interaction and resonance between online public opinion and the media (Chen *et al.*, 2023). This interaction enhanced the social attention received by focusing events, making it more intuitive, enduring, and comprehensive. Additionally, it significantly increased the likelihood of activating the policy agenda's response mechanism through cohesion and diffusion. Public opinion regarding focusing events tended to attract greater attention from both the public and the media, thereby creating a pronounced focusing effect. This effect underscored the event's significance and immediacy, while encouraging the government and other societal sectors to engage more proactively in addressing the issue. Baidu Index, a service launched by Baidu, aggregates weighted search volumes for specific keywords, providing a validated metric for analyzing netizen behavior (Li, Yang and Li, 2021). Empirical studies demonstrate that search indices effectively capture shifts in public attention (Wang and Jiang, 2025). Accordingly, this study employs Baidu Index to quantify event salience, recognized for its widespread adoption and authority within China. Adopting the established threshold of 10,000 from prior research, we analyze a 15-day window corresponding to peak public attention during the growth and maturation phases of focusing events (Huang *et al.*, 2019). Events with a mean Baidu Index value $\geq 10,000$ within this 15-day period are classified as high-salience events (coded as 1), as they exhibit greater potential to elicit governmental responses and to activate response-oriented agenda-setting. Conversely, events failing to meet this threshold are coded as 0.

3.2.2.2. Superposition effect of focusing events

The superposition effect, or amplification effect, indicated that successive events can produce additional effects, whether beneficial or detrimental. A single focusing event was typically viewed as an isolated occurrence; however, it generated a more pronounced focusing effect when it was connected and integrated with other similar events. This could encourage policymakers to reassess and reinterpret the issue from a novel perspective. Consequently, a focusing event that recurred and exhibited a cumulative effect is more likely to facilitate responsive policy agenda-setting (Wang and Wu, 2019). Information transmission, reception, and diffusion methods are increasingly diverse in the contemporary landscape of new media development. A series of cumulative focusing events would likely reactivate the public's collective memory, bringing social issues to the forefront of attention. This paper evaluates the superposition effect of focusing events by analyzing the occurrence of similar or identical focusing events in the three years preceding and following the focusing event. If a focusing event occurs similarly within this time frame, we

would code this situation as 1 to indicate the presence of a superimposed effect. If no similar focusing event occurs during this period, it would be coded as 0 to signify the absence of a superimposed effect.

3.2.2.3. Pointing of public power in focusing events

The primary motivation for the government's significant focus on issues was to sustain and improve its public image. The government's image and credibility reflected its authority and legitimacy, and were closely linked to the public's political identity. Matters directly involving government officials or the exercise of public authority were more likely to attract policymakers' attention. The government's ability to respond effectively to various issues was essential for maintaining its image and credibility, thereby securing public trust and support. The relationship between government image and credibility was intricately linked to individuals' political identity. The rise of online participation has introduced new demands for sustaining government credibility. Events that directly implicated government officials or public authority were more likely to elicit responsive policy agendas; thus, these occurrences were assigned a code of 1, while others received a code of 0.

3.2.2.4. Points of interest in focusing events

In this study, of the 45 selected focusing events, those capable of initiating a responsive policy agenda predominantly pertained to social law, public health, and social security. Notably, there was a heightened emphasis on specific interests related to the social, legal system, and emergency management, whereas the representation of focusing events concerning social emotions and political issues was comparatively lower. This phenomenon may arise from two factors: first, the prevailing ideology and formal authority of the government did not address these issues; second, policymakers perceive that an ethical approach was more appropriate for addressing abstract claims than legal or administrative methods. Consequently, focusing events that presented explicit interest claims did not influence governmental authority or prevailing ideology, and were more readily accepted by decision-makers. Abstract politico-emotional claims frequently presented intricate conflicts of political values and ideologies, complicating decision-makers' acceptance, while the associated interest claims remained ambiguous. This paper categorized events with explicit interest claims as 1 and events with ambiguous interest claims as 0.

3.2.2.5. Support from high-level governments

The attention and support of leaders indicated the preferences and orientations of the highest levels of government regarding specific issues, serving as a visual representation of attitudes and behaviors within the political system. The approval of leaders indicated their focus on an event and communicated essential requirements across all organizational levels via established hierarchical structures and the legal authority conferred by the system. The extent of high-level leadership support for a focusing event could be assessed by the public statements, urgings, orders, or internal instructions issued by a government department

or leader at the provincial level or higher. These actions served as indicators of attention allocation within high-level governments (Wang and Wu, 2019; Wen and Huang, 2016). Support from the high-level government was coded 1, and the absence of such support was coded 0.

3.2.2.6. *Participation of primary coalitions*

The discussion of a focusing event by a broad community of advocacy coalitions, including the expression of relevant discursive opinions and the formation of preliminary policy recommendations, was crucial for agenda-setting (Weible and Ingold, 2018). China’s centralized governance, led by the CPC, maintained the government’s primary role, with the authoritative community established by the government serving as the principal coalition in policy decision-making and agenda-setting (Li *et al.*, 2024). Primary coalitions, defined as government departments with authoritative power, were assigned a code of 1 for events involving two or more departments expressing their views; a code of 0 was assigned when only one department or no department participated in the discourse.

3.2.2.7. *Participation of secondary coalitions*

Organizations and policy communities external to government departments, including mass media, social organizations, expert think tanks, and public groups, constitute non-authoritative secondary coalitions. Despite lacking the influence of opinion leaders, their significant numbers and robust communication capabilities amplified public opinion

Table 2: Antecedent condition variable description and assignment coding

Antecedent conditions	Variables	Variable description	Assignment coding
Focusing event’s focusing ability	Heat of focusing events	Having focusing event heat	1
		No focusing event heat	0
	Superposition effect of focusing events	Having the superposition effect of focusing events	1
		No superposition effect of focusing events	0
Pointing of focusing events	Pointing of public power	Events point to the public power	1
		Events do not point to the public power	0
	Pointing of interest claims	Having a clear pointing of interest claims	1
		No clear pointing of interest claims	0
Attention allocation by high-level governments	Support from high-level governments	Having support from high-level governments	1
		No support from high-level governments	0
Advocacy coalition participation	Primary coalitions	Two or more government departments voice	1
		Single or no government departments voice	0
	Secondary coalitions	Two or more secondary coalitions voice	1
		Single or no secondary coalitions voice	0

Source: Authors’ own conceptualization

pressure, rendering their policy recommendations difficult to dismiss. The influence of major and minor coalitions on response-oriented agenda-setting yielded varying effects. Secondary coalitions, defined as non-authoritative advocacy coalitions, include groups of experts and scholars, social organizations, mass media, entrepreneurs, Internet celebrities on Sina Weibo, and the general public. Events featuring a unified voice from two or more secondary coalitions were assigned a code of 1. In contrast, events with a single secondary coalition, solely objective news coverage, or the absence of a secondary coalition voice were coded as 0.

4. Results

4.1. *Individual conditional necessity analysis*

Before examining the conditions necessary for a focusing event to activate a responsive policy agenda, a detailed necessity analysis for each of the seven antecedent conditioning variables using QCA software was performed. Consistency and coverage serve as two core indicators that jointly establish an operational framework for testing the individual conditional necessity (Charles, 2008). Consistency measures the degree to which a condition supports the outcome. It is calculated based on Boolean algebra principles by taking the weighted average of the probability of the outcome's occurrence across cases where the condition is present. A condition is generally considered necessary when the consistency value exceeds the threshold of 0.9. Coverage, on the other hand, reflects the explanatory scope of the condition. It indicates the extent to which a necessary condition is applicable, computed as the proportion of outcome cases where the condition is present relative to all outcome cases. A higher coverage value suggests that the condition plays a role in a larger number of outcome instances. If consistency exceeds 0.9 and coverage exceeds 0.5, the condition is regarded as a necessary condition.

Table 3 indicates that the requirement for each antecedent in successful responsive policy agenda setting did not surpass 0.9. The antecedent requirement for ineffective responsive policy agenda setting, 'the event is not directed to public power', was 0.952, with coverage exceeding 0.5. Further analysis of the XYPLOT graph revealed that the scatter points were uniformly distributed on either side of the diagonal line, suggesting the absence of this necessary condition. The successful establishment of a response-oriented policy agenda was influenced by the interaction of multiple antecedent condition variables rather than being dominated by a single variable. Consequently, it was essential to analyze the combination of each antecedent condition variable.

4.2. *Sufficiency analysis of conditional groupings*

According to csQCA, the analytical process began with a necessary condition analysis, followed by the construction of a truth table that captured the configurations of explanatory variables and the outcome variables, thereby facilitating subsequent combinatorial analysis of conditions. This study established the thresholds for the truth table,

Table 3: Necessity condition detection for individual conditions

Antecedent condition variables	Responsive policy agenda setting successfully		No responsive policy agenda setting	
	Consistency	Coverage	Consistency	Coverage
Having focusing event heat	0.333	0.533	0.333	0.467
No focusing event heat	0.667	0.533	0.667	0.467
Having superposition effect of focusing events	0.583	0.667	0.333	0.333
No superposition effect of focusing events	0.417	0.417	0.667	0.583
Events point to the public power	0.375	0.900	0.048	0.100
Events do not point to the public power	0.625	0.429	0.952	0.571
Having a clear pointing of interest claims	0.750	0.621	0.524	0.379
No clear pointing of interest claims	0.250	0.375	0.476	0.625
Having support from high-level governments	0.458	0.611	0.333	0.389
No support from high-level governments	0.542	0.481	0.667	0.519
Two or more primary coalitions voice	0.292	0.412	0.476	0.588
Single or no primary coalition voice	0.708	0.607	0.524	0.393
Two or more secondary coalitions voice	0.708	0.531	0.714	0.469
Single or no secondary coalitions voice	0.292	0.538	0.286	0.462

Source: Authors' own conceptualization

excluding cases that did not meet the specified conditions. Schneider and Wagemann (2012) suggested that the consistency level for the truth table should not fall below 0.75. For small-to-medium-sized samples, the frequency threshold should be set to 1, while for larger samples, a higher frequency threshold is recommended. As this study involved a small-to-medium sample size, the consistency threshold for the truth table was set at 0.80, and the frequency threshold was maintained at 1. Table 4 presents the configurational schemes for successfully establishing responsive agendas derived from the criterion analyses, encompassing complex, intermediate, and parsimonious solutions. This study selected the intermediate solution to effectively illustrate the combinatorial relationships among antecedent conditions and exclude counterfactual paths. The intermediate solution indicated that the consistency of all conditional groupings exceeded 0.8, signifying that all 15 types of conditional groupings constituted sufficient conditions for successfully establishing responsive policy agendas and demonstrated strong explanatory power for the 45 selected cases. The coverage of the 15 path combination solutions was 0.792, indicating that they accounted for 79.2% of the instances of successful responsive policy agenda-setting. The grouping analyses in Table 4 indicated the relative importance of the individual antecedent conditions (Ragin and Fiss, 2008).

Table 4: Configurational analysis of successful responsive policy agenda-setting

Conditional Configuration	Clear-pointing model			Government-society interaction model		Event-triggered model			Composite model						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
Heat of focusing events	⊗	⊗	⊗	⊗	⊗	●	●	●	⊗	⊗		●	●	●	⊗
Superposition effect of focusing events		⊗	⊗	⊗	⊗	⊗	⊗	●	●	●	●	⊗	⊗	⊗	●
Pointing of public power	⊗		⊗	⊗	●	●	⊗	●	●	⊗	●	⊗	●	●	
Pointing of interest claims	●	●	●	⊗	⊗	⊗	●	●	●		●	⊗	⊗	●	●
Support from high-level governments	⊗	⊗	●	●	●	⊗	⊗	⊗	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Primary coalitions	⊗	⊗		●	⊗	⊗	⊗	⊗		⊗	●	●	●	⊗	⊗
Secondary coalitions	⊗	⊗	⊗	●	●	●	●	⊗	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Consistency	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Raw coverage	0.167	0.083	0.083	0.042	0.042	0.042	0.042	0.042	0.083	0.083	0.083	0.042	0.042	0.042	0.083
Unique coverage	0.125	0.042	0.042	0.042	0.042	0.042	0.042	0.042	0	0.042	0.042	0.042	0.042	0.042	0
Solution consistency	1														
Solution coverage	0.792														

Note: A ● indicated the presence of the condition and ⊗ indicated the absence of the condition. A large ● or ⊗ indicated a core condition, a small ● or ⊗ indicated a peripheral condition and a 'blank' meant that the condition may or may not exist.

Source: Authors' own conceptualization

4.3. Conditional portfolio analysis

Among the 15 path configurations presented in Table 4, the frequency of occurrence for each conditional variable, in descending order, was as follows: Secondary coalitions (11 times) > Support from high-level governments (10 times) > Pointing of interest claims (9 times) > Pointing of public power (7 times) > Heat of focusing events (6 times) = Superposition effect of focusing events (6 times) > Primary coalitions (4 times). This indicated that attention and support from high-level government bodies were the most critical factors and were most likely to form core conditions. Pointing of public power, which functioned as part of the same belief system, also played a significant role in response-oriented agenda setting. In contrast, the involvement of the Primary coalitions did not constitute a core condition in any of the 15 configurations, suggesting its influence on policy agenda-setting remains limited. A plausible explanation was that although the primary coalitions involved two or more government departments, they often operated in a reactive manner, responding to focusing events after they occurred, rather than providing the proactive, top-down support characteristic of high-level government engagement.

By grouping condition configurations that share similar core and peripheral conditions, and based on their distribution patterns, we categorized them according to the elements of the response-oriented agenda-setting trigger framework. This process led to the identification of four distinct models: clear-pointing, government-society interaction, event-triggered, and composite models. In the path representation, ‘*’ signifies the ‘and’ relationship, while ‘~’ indicates the absence or reversal of the condition (Du and Jia, 2017).

4.3.1. Clear-pointing model

~Heat of focusing events * ~pointing of public power * pointing of interest claims * ~support from high-level governments * ~primary alliances * ~secondary alliances. According to this equation, the clear-pointing model lacked heat of focusing events, pointing of public power, support from high-level governments, primary alliances, and secondary alliances. It just contained only one condition: clear pointing of interest claims. In other words, the model’s integration of three condition types was primarily influenced by the explicit indication of interest claims, serving as a central factor for facilitating response-oriented agenda setting, while the other conditions had a minimal impact. The murder of a flight attendant in Zhengzhou, homicide incident at Civil Aviation General Hospital, child abuse incident, and Ram incident exemplified this combination of causes. Subsequent analysis revealed that these typical cases were all criminal, engaging the social legal system and eliciting significant public concern. The interests involved were specific and clear, facilitating the application of institutionalized legal mechanisms for reasonable resolution.

For instance, the murder of a flight attendant in Zhengzhou highlighted a pattern of similar violent incidents. The public had expressed a desire for relevant authorities to enhance regulation of online car-hailing platforms through legal measures, overseeing the entire car-hailing service process to ensure the safety of users’ personal and property rights. To prevent the recurrence of such focusing events, the Ministry of Transport of the People’s Republic of China has issued The Notice on Strengthening and Standardizing the Management of the List of Subjects of Joint Disciplinary Action for Breach of Trust in the Taxi Industry (Exposure Draft). This document addresses public concerns and mandates that online car-hailing platforms should investigate their operations comprehensively. This incident pertained to the social and legal system category, with the key points of interest being relatively straightforward. The necessity to regulate the online car service process and establish relevant regulations for passenger safety could be addressed without significantly affecting governmental ideology. The specific interests could be effectively managed through legal or administrative approaches, making the corresponding policy agenda more likely to gain governmental acceptance and agreement. This strategy aimed to circumvent ideological conflicts, thereby facilitating successful agenda-setting.

4.3.2. Government-society interaction model

~ Heat of focusing events * ~ superposition effect of focusing events * pointing of public power * ~pointing of interest claims * support from high-level governments * ~ primary

coalitions * secondary coalitions. According to this equation, the government-society interaction model did not incorporate the heat of focusing events, the superposition effect of focusing events, the pointing of interest claims, and the primary coalitions. Instead, it comprised only three conditional variables: the pointing of public power, support from high-level governments, and secondary coalitions. This combination included the two essential conditions of secondary coalition participation and the support of high-level government attention, supplemented by the explicit direction of public authority. Secondary coalitions encompassed diverse societal forces that, along with the focus of high-level government, influenced the interactions between the government and the public, thereby aiding in the establishment of a responsive policy agenda.

The controversy over illustrations in People's Education Press mathematics textbooks exemplified a causal combination that integrates cultural and educational dimensions, aiming to capture significant governmental attention. Analysis of the textbook illustrations revealed that the characters possess abnormal eyes, exhibiting notable differences and inconsistencies compared to illustrations from other textbook versions. The incident's focus had garnered significant attention from the news media, alongside various experts and scholars who had provided joint commentary. As a prominent governmental body, the Ministry of Education prioritized the issue of textbook illustrations and promptly established an investigation team to conduct a comprehensive inquiry. This incident highlighted the need for public authority, necessitating that the government implement effective supervision and rectification measures. This process fostered a collaborative relationship between the government and society, ultimately facilitating the establishment of a responsive policy agenda.

4.3.3. Event-triggered model

Heat of focusing events * superposition effect of focusing events * pointing of public power * pointing of interest claims * ~support from high-level governments * ~ primary coalitions * ~ secondary coalitions. The meaning of this equation was that the event-triggered model integrates three conditions: the intensity of the focusing event, the direction of public authority, and the orientation of interest claims, augmented by the condition of the superposition effect. The effect of support from high-level governments, primary coalitions, and secondary coalitions was not significant. The focus was on reflecting the characteristics that triggered the focusing event, which collectively initiated response-oriented agenda setting through the formal focusing ability of focusing events and the connotative implications of the event.

The impersonation incident involving Gou Jing in Shandong exemplified this combination of conditions. The average Baidu index value for this event within 15 days post-incident was 43,301, significantly exceeding the threshold of 10,000 established for antecedent conditions, indicating a high level of event engagement. Prior to the revelation of this focusing event, numerous analogous instances of school impersonation had occurred, predominantly involving rural candidates. The combined effects of high focusing event

heat and the superposition effect have resulted in a notable enhancement in the focusing capability of focusing events. This type of cultural and educational event illustrated the misuse of public authority by impostors, who exploited familial and interpersonal connections to engage in illegal and irregular activities, thereby highlighting the clear implications of public power. This focusing event highlighted the public sector's response to legal violations in education and the associated constraints related to specific claims. Historically, impostors in university settings frequently remained inconspicuous. To address widespread social concern and ensure educational fairness, the draft amendment to the Education Law was submitted for deliberation to the 25th meeting of the Standing Committee of the 13th National People's Congress (NPC) on January 20, 2021. The proposed amendment seeks to enhance the provisions for legal responsibility, intensify efforts against fraudulent college practices, uphold educational equity, and preserve societal order.

4.3.4. Compound model

Heat of focusing events * pointing of public power * pointing of interest claims * support from high-level governments * primary coalitions * secondary coalitions. This equation stated that the compound model included heat of focusing events, pointing of public power, pointing of interest claims, support from high-level governments, primary coalitions, and secondary coalitions. The composite model integrates conditions such as the ability to focus, the point of focusing events, the allocation of attention by high-level governments, and the participation of advocacy coalitions, thereby establishing a composite response-oriented agenda-setting trigger model. The incident surrounding 'I Am Not the God of Medicine' exemplified this model within public health, with the explicit identification of public power serving as a fundamental condition in this context.

The film 'I Am Not the God of Medicine' was based on the true story of Lu Yong, a chronic leukemia patient. Due to the high cost of Gleevec, a powerful Swiss medication, Lu Yong assisted his friends in purchasing a 200 RMB box of generic drugs from India, earning him the title of 'Drug Warrior' among his peers. Following a detention period of 117 days, he was ultimately released under a petition. The film's success brought the 'Lu Yong incident' to public attention, prompting discussions regarding China's policies on managing major or chronic diseases and reimbursing effective medications within the medical insurance framework. This event highlighted the components of the response-oriented agenda-setting trigger framework. The form and content of the focusing event were influenced by the elevated Baidu index, which enhanced its focus capability. The event necessitated reforms and updates within China's health sector, specifically targeting the medical and social security domains, while outlining a clear direction for public authority and addressing specific interests. This event garnered the attention of former Premier Li Keqiang, who issued a series of significant directives, indicating strong support from high-level government officials. After the incident, multiple pertinent government departments formed a primary alliance. At the same time, various authoritative media outlets, experts, and scholars constituted a secondary alliance, including entities such as People's

Daily, micro-blog vloggers, and renowned medical professionals. This collective effort led to increased advocacy for revising the Pharmaceutical Administration Law of the People's Republic of China and establishing the Vaccine Administration Law of the People's Republic of China.

5. Discussions

5.1. Policy subsystem internal instability triggered by focusing events

Focusing events in the external policy environment significantly influence the government's agenda setting in response-oriented contexts. Responsive government highlights the necessity of interaction between the government and the public, requiring timely responses to pressing public concerns, particularly those issues that garner significant public attention and demand more intensive engagement. These pressing issues attract public and media attention, strengthening the agenda's focus. The intertwining and superimposition of a singular focusing event with other related events generates a reinforcing effect, significantly enhancing the agenda's focusing ability. The overlapping effect offers policymakers a comprehensive perspective, facilitating the reassessment and redefinition of key problem points, thereby enhancing the likelihood of responsive policy agenda-setting.

The development of responsive policy agendas is frequently influenced by prominent events, significantly affecting problem-solving trajectories and programmatic decisions. The absence of a definitive solution strategy in certain government departments has notably intensified the emphasis on policy issues amid complex challenges. During agenda-setting, focusing events typically prompt a consensus-seeking process among policy participants, where various stakeholders collaborate to establish agreement on the institutional framework and order through negotiation and dialogue. The capacity to concentrate on focusing events, including the social attention they elicit and the cumulative impact of analogous events, alongside the association of the focusing event with public authority and explicit interest claims, facilitates the emergence of diverse focusing events that can induce internal oscillations within the policy subsystem. This process enables the issue to enter the policy agenda, positioning it for potential success.

5.2. Interaction between governmental and non-governmental coalitions of actors

In the policy subsystem, various coalition communities interact to achieve outcomes that impact the decisions of government departments. Primary coalitions established by government departments, along with non-authoritative secondary coalitions, will create coalition communities to utilize their collective power. Coalition communities exhibit shared objectives and collaborate, fostering a unity of purpose that enhances member cohesion. To advance policy agenda-setting, coalition community members will reach consensus on a social issue requiring inclusion in the policy agenda and develop suitable public policies to address it. Forming a coalition community entails the mutual supplementation of resources among its members. Each member will leverage its advantageous resources to

enhance the influence of the coalition community (Kukkonen, Ylä-Anttila and Broadbent, 2017; Schmid, Sewerin and Schmidt, 2020; Weible and Ingold, 2018). The crucial factor is the response, acceptance, and recognition of the government as a subject, which leads to the predominance of the belief system held by the main advocacy coalition.

The initiation of response-oriented agenda-setting is contingent, leading to potential deficiencies in the government's prior judgment, research, and analysis of policy issues. This situation necessitates support from various entities within the secondary coalition and interaction with the government. The findings from the conditional grouping in the preceding section indicate that the attention support from the secondary coalition and the high-level government creates a top-down synergy, facilitating the effective establishment of a responsive policy agenda. Collaboration among experts, scholars, mass media, and internet influencers enhances the policy process by incorporating scientific interpretation and guidance from public opinion. This approach ensures the process is more open and engages the general public, fostering social cohesion and synergy. Governments at a high level recognize the significance and immediacy of the relevant issues, integrating their resources and authoritative communication frameworks to facilitate top-down transmission, thereby establishing coalition interactions and initiating response-oriented agenda-setting.

5.3. Government-led recognition and response

Response-oriented agenda-setting emphasizes the efficient response to social issues and the alleviation of social pressures, aiming to establish a government with a capacity for rapid response. The response-oriented agenda-setting model is characterized by greater flexibility and speed than the traditional rational agenda-setting process. The rapid progression from the initial stage of issue identification to the stage of agenda legitimization frequently overlooks comprehensive analysis and thorough discussion of social demand issues. Without established mechanisms for public participation, it is frequently challenging for the public to remain adequately informed during the initial phases of agenda-setting. It is essential to facilitate the effective execution of the agenda legitimization session, as it is a prerequisite for promoting openness and transparency in the policy-making process and increasing public participation.

The government employs agenda-setting to promptly address focusing events, satisfy public demands, and mitigate governmental pressures, ensuring timely and flexible policy-making. The effectiveness of response-oriented agenda setting is contingent upon the alignment between the government's response speed and the public's needs. The response-oriented agenda-setting model induces changes and innovations in governmental operations, necessitating increased responsiveness and efficiency from the government. Issues closely aligned with the government's core beliefs present more significant challenges due to their complexity and sensitivity, necessitating increased energy and resource allocation from the government (Nowlin, 2024). These issues are frequently resistant to change, and there is often a lack of consensus between the government and the public. Effective execution of this critical aspect of agenda-setting enables the government to address social

needs better, alleviate social pressure, and establish a responsive administration that aligns more closely with public opinion and functions efficiently. The social and legal system case involves specific tools and demands, exhibiting low relevance and no direct conflict with the government's core values, thereby facilitating acceptance by the government. To enhance governmental effectiveness and governance capacity, the government will prioritize these issues and actively pursue solutions.

5.4. The enabling role of policy learning

To address intricate policy agenda-setting processes, it is essential to enhance the comprehension and mastery of potential uncertainties within the decision-making system through policy learning mechanisms. Policy-oriented learning encompasses both intra-coalition and inter-coalition learning, aiming to attain or modify policy objectives. Intercoalitional policy learning, both among major and minor coalitions as well as between the government and the public, is crucial for augmenting the decision-making capabilities of individuals and organizations (Haar and Pierce, 2021). Continuous learning enhances the efficacy of addressing social difficulties, assuring the accurate attainment of policy objectives and augmenting the overall effectiveness of public services (Grimm and Jimenez, 2022). In the context of localization practices in China, policy learning facilitates the modification of the two belief structures within the policy subsystem, aside from the core belief system, thereby enhancing governmental receptivity to policy matters and simultaneously ensuring the enduring robustness and consistent stability of the prevailing ideology and political values (Pierce, Peterson and Hicks, 2020).

When confronted with pressing societal concerns like Not-In-My-Back-Yard events, local governments do not evade or merely react; instead, they engage with these challenges to enhance their decision-making processes. Local governments have facilitated public comprehension and involvement in policy-making by enhancing the procedure of posting consultation catalogues for significant decisions in advance. Simultaneously, they have prioritized gathering public ideas and comments to ensure that policy formulation accurately reflects the needs and concerns of the populace. Furthermore, the Government has intensified its focus on irrational emotional evaluation before policy formulation to prevent errors in policy-making attributable to emotional influences. Message boards and opinion collection platforms on government websites facilitate public expression of requests and proposals, while also serving as a means for the government to gather public opinion and enhance its decision-making processes. The execution of these projects demonstrates the outcomes of policy learning and fosters the development of a responsive and service-oriented government at the macro level.

Through policy learning, the government progressively acknowledges the significance of public demands and endeavors to incorporate them into policy development. Nonetheless, although policy learning has facilitated alterations in fundamental policy concepts within the belief system and enhanced governmental acceptance, its influence on the core belief system remains comparatively minimal, with mainstream ideology and

political values shaped by socio-historical conditions and the political framework, maintaining relative stability. The negative link between issue features and their consensual nature is crucial in studying political issues. However, the intensity of this relationship varies over time (Mastroianni, 2024). The gradual enhancement of policy learning and adaptation indicates a diminishing negative connection, suggesting an increase in the government's acceptance and inclusivity of diverse public demands. This alteration not only embodies the scientific and democratic essence of policy formulation but also indicates a more synergistic trajectory of government-public engagement moving forward.

6. Conclusions

This paper concentrated on response-oriented agenda-setting by integrating elements of the advocacy coalition framework. It examined the roles of advocacy coalition subjects with Chinese characteristics, constructed a response-oriented agenda triggering framework, and elucidated how focusing events initiate response-oriented agenda-setting. The findings offered innovative insights for the localized application of public policies. The study identified 45 focusing events from 2018 to 2023, analyzing antecedent conditions through three components: the form and content of the focusing event, the attention allocation by high-level governments, and the participation of advocacy coalitions. We identified 15 pathways of focusing events that trigger response-oriented agenda setting using the QCA method. The variations in core conditions led to the classification of these path combinations into four modes: clear-pointing, government-society interaction, event-triggered, and composite models. This classification facilitated the summarization of the mechanism by which focusing events initiate response-oriented agenda-setting.

This paper assesses the success of responsive policy agenda-setting by evaluating whether the government can promptly revise existing policies or create and implement new ones. If the focusing event does not elicit any governmental response, or if the government's response is minimal, aimed only at informing and explaining the event without implementing substantive policy actions, the response-oriented agenda will not be established. Despite the apparent dysfunction in response-oriented agenda-setting, various activities were undertaken by the government and the policy coalition community. These activities, however, remain difficult to observe or measure effectively and exhibit a lack of rigor. Future research should involve collecting and analyzing content related to focusing events and utilizing diverse channels to obtain case resources. A deeper examination of the mechanisms by which focusing events trigger response-oriented agenda-setting is warranted. Additionally, empirical analysis results can be validated by concentrating on detailed descriptions of individual or representative cases.

Disclosure statement: The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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