



Analyzing Patterns of Government Attention and What Drives Them: The Comparative Agendas Project

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Information intrusion and pressure on policy agendas

Political agenda-setting is central to governments of all stripes and colors. It is the process by which electoral promises, political deals between parties, and the adjustments to these arrangements as governments take concrete policy decisions. Policy agendas can serve as a planning mechanism to commit parties in office. They direct expectations and are meant to reduce uncertainty as well as mistrust among new incumbents who must share government power. In modern times, the administrative processing of policy agendas involves large-scale organization. Government is unthinkable without departmental structures that deal with old and new information simultaneously. Much of the daily business in policy domains is routine, addressed in specialized policy communities and 'sub-systems' that operate below the level where the political agenda is set (Baumgartner and Jones 1993).

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But in the real political world of agenda-setting, policy planning is just half the story – and at particularly turbulent times it even may be less. At any moment during a term in office, governments can receive policy relevant information that is not anticipated. The inconvenience of such information may lead governments and their administrative apparatus to filter or ignore signals in order to stay on course. Often, however, this kind of selective interpretation of news can be sustained only temporarily. The social and political environment of governments can cause so much pressure that agenda control is simply not possible. Governments may be pushed to shift attention and reset their priorities. Bottlenecks in the institutional and political machinery of governments set limits to responses to social or political alarm; attention can be focused on just one or a few issues with urgency status at a time (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). This type of dynamics appears less sensitive to institutional calendars such as scheduled elections and legislative or budgetary cycles than leaders in government would prefer. Information intrusion and increasing feedback pressure often leads governments to shift attention and priorities mid term. A consequence of the vulnerability of the policy agenda can be that the government itself becomes confused, unable to address unanticipated shifts in urgency, and falls prone to collapse. Thus, political agenda dynamics involves both policy production and government survival.

Policy agendas over time and across space

For almost 10 years now, a still expanding group of scholars from both sides of the Atlantic is collaborating in the analysis of the dynamics of attention to problems and the way in which policy agendas evolve. By ‘policy agendas’ we mean the full range of activities within a given institution of government or politics. And we are interested in a quite diverse range of venues where attention to public policy problems may become manifest. Thus the analysis includes not only policy agendas set within political institutions such as executives, legislatures and political parties with their electoral platforms, but also the media and public opinion. It

also encompasses policy output such as laws and budgets. For these types of agendas containing attention to problems and often more or less concrete intentions on them, large-scale datasets have been constructed, and new data continue to be collected. Each dataset consists of a record of each action (for example, a law enacted, a bill introduced, an oral question posed), showing the topic on which it was focused. This simple process then allows a comprehensive assessment of the topics of governmental action over time. At present, the Comparative Agendas Project (<www.comparativeagendas.org>) consists of more than 80 scholars representing 10 European countries, the United States, and Canada. The country teams study national policy agendas back in time for at least 30 years, often considerably further back in the political history of the respective countries. Also, one international team studies the policy agendas of institutions of the European Union (Timmermans and Alexandrova 2011).

The long-term perspective is important because it allows analysts to observe the patterns of attention within government institutions of all types. The central theoretical point of departure is the idea that changes in attention and in policy choices that may follow are not only incremental but also display larger shifts. This is the theory of punctuated equilibrium, analogous to geological processes of continental drift, and first applied by Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones in their comprehensive work on the US (1993; 2005). As political parties and other actors in office or engaged in influencing the policy agenda almost always disagree over which matters to prioritize, information and new issues intruding into the scope of these actors fuels the politics of attention to problems.

The comparative perspective that is applied increasingly as datasets become available for a broader range of countries allows critical assessment of theoretical expectations on the occurrence of punctuated equilibrium, and of the relevance of institutional design to the development of policy agendas. Such comparative work looks at the way in which events experienced widely across

national borders intrude in similar ways onto the agenda, or appear to lead to rather different responses (and sometimes non-response). The international credit crunch, for example, shows how national executives all rapidly went into bailouts, despite their differences in ideological affiliation and party composition. But problems do not all get the same response, or indeed, they are not all similarly recognized by national executives or parliaments, nor do they get the same level of attention in the media and in public opinion. What conditions such attention? Consider the diversity in the level of salience of European integration in the media and in national election campaigns in countries of the EU in the past few years. Problems are not just portrayed on the basis of 'objective' criteria, and political and social actors show a broad range of creativity and strategies in how they dramatize issues or take a rather technical definition to avoid a loss of control over them. Problems can be more or less local, but simply because they have global features does not mean they acquire priority status in all countries at the same time. And local (or national) problems *can* show convergence in the level of attention and prioritization, and in the occurrence of policy change.

While properties of political systems and the policymaking institutions within them do not in themselves determine attention or policy change rates, they do channel the processes in which choices about attention, priorities, and policy change take place. In a systems perspective, institutions digest all kinds of inputs, and possible (and observed) variation in policy outputs may be explained by rules and procedures typical to specific institutions. A comparative approach to policy agendas research thus may help us to better understand how similar kinds of input to policymaking institutions may lead to different output decisions due to variation

in rules and procedures. This does not mean that such policy choices all follow from policy agendas set by governments in the 'planning' mode. They also may occur by way of reaction to events and new information not at all foreseen. In fact, comparing the development of policy agendas across countries may show under what conditions governments are able to respond in proportion to such events and news, appear incapable of timely response, or even collapse.

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Common indicators and data collection approach

For the analysis of policy agendas in a long term and comparative perspective, it is key that indicators on input, output and the political process that connects them be valid and systematic. Given the number of countries and the variation in institutions, not all indicators of policy agendas are common to all countries. The research teams in the Comparative Agendas Project deal with this by selecting indicators and data sources for retrieving them that are, as much as possible, functional equivalents across countries. Thus despite obvious differences in formal setting and format, congressional hearings in the US and parliamentary questions in European parliamentary systems are considered indicators for the same basic type of activity: parliamentary control of the executive. When comparing bills and budgets, variation in national legacies of legislative production, in functional types of bills, and in the way in which national spending domains are distinguished are all important to take into account. Likewise, some countries have single-party governments setting out for their term in office on the basis of the winning party's election program, while other countries have multi-deal agreements between parties forming a coalition. This also means that some specific types of executive or legislative policy agendas are available for some countries, and not

for others. Finally, the time periods covered in datasets can vary for historical and institutional reasons. For Spain, for example, data collection goes back to the entrance of the country in the EU, shortly after the democratic transition in the country was finished. Some data on the UK and the US go back to the very beginning of the twentieth century or even further back in time. Clearly, democratic transition or fundamental institutional re-design of a national political system can have major implications for the availability or continuity of specific kinds of data on policy agendas.

The country teams use a comprehensive codingscheme for topic classification, which consists of 19 major topics and more than 230 subtopics. Major topics are, for example, macroeconomics, health, education, and government structures and operations. This coding scheme was developed originally in the US by Baumgartner, Jones, and associates in what was the first and pioneering work on policy agendas (1993; 2005), and it has been adapted on minor points by national teams to historical and institutional characteristics that are specific to their country. Likewise, an EU agendas codebook was developed with some modifications to capture the properties of the EU institutional and legal framework. For example, the EU codebook contains a specific subcode for enlargement, and also one for coding attention to the creation of the single market. Overall, national codebooks are highly compatible, with more than 90 percent of all subtopics completely similar across all countries involved in the comparative project. A master codebook is used for overview and for tracking where nationally based subtopics exist. This allows the teams to ensure the comparability of data.

This joint data approach allows the systematic mapping of attention and testing theoretical propositions on the dynamics of political agenda development. The Comparative Agendas Project, however, also includes studies that zoom into specific agendas, policy problems and the way the definition of these single problems or issues has evolved. Examples are the work on the death penalty in the US (Baumgartner, De Boeuf, and Boydstun 2008), environmental and health

policy in the EU (Princen 2009), and morality issues such as same-sex marriage and embryo research that may or may not divide political parties within countries in addressing them (Engeli et al. 2012). Central questions in such work are comparative or take us into following policy trajectories over time as topics rise and fall and may become linked or disconnected from other issues. A multi-level perspective adds institutional context to such analysis, as political agenda-setting involves venue shopping. Such work is particularly useful for analyzing agenda-setting in the EU, where problems and solutions travel up and down from EU institutions to policy venues within member states.

Results and the *so what*-question

The broadening Comparative Agendas Project in the past few years resulted in a volume of cumulated data on problem attention, which now is close to 2 million observations. This increasing pool of policy agendas data has helped to empirically inform comparative work on varying types of democratic systems, indicating that periods of minor change in the policy agenda are interrupted by large attention shifts in all these different systems (Baumgartner, Green-Pedersen, and Jones 2006; Baumgartner et al. 2009; Baumgartner, Jones, and Wilkerson 2011). Analysis of specific agendas shows that change becomes more punctuated, that is, infrequent but intense when it occurs, as the policy process moves from input to output. Legislative outputs and budgets appear more sensitive to punctuations than agendas at the input side of the system, such as media stories or parliamentary questions. Drastically altering government outputs involve higher political and institutional costs compared with, for example, the agenda of parliamentary questions or congressional hearings. These appear to follow the streams of events and information on specific topics more in proportion to their ups and downs (Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2011; Jones and Baumgartner 2005).

Beyond the scientific goals of mapping and explaining patterns of attention to problems, the

Comparative Agenda Project also has relevance for normative questions of responsiveness, legitimacy, and evaluation of institutional design. These are major questions that most Western democracies face, and the sense of urgency surrounding these questions has become quite strong. This also applies to the European Union, which is experiencing major challenges to its functioning and representative performance in addressing economic and monetary issues within member states. Recent developments show remedies of centralization, such as, for example, on the tightening of control over budget deficits in member states of the Eurozone, while critics contend that such remedies are technocratic and further undermine the democratic legitimacy of the EU among the national publics in member states. Likewise, at the sub-national level, political agenda-setting shows increasing attention to matters of identity. The recent developments in Catalunya in Spain, in Scotland and in Belgium after local elections fuelling the debate on splitting the country testify of the significance of attention at different levels of government. In short, at times when matters of national or regional interest and identity are so visibly at stake, the importance of a better understanding of the dynamics in attention and its consequences can hardly be overestimated.

Contributions to this mini-forum

This mini-forum consists of a selection of recent and ongoing studies within the Comparative Agendas Project. While this is a sample of such ongoing work, we believe it covers the variation of types of work that are within the present scope of the project. There are comparative analyses and contributions that deal with a hitherto underexplored aspect of political agenda development, introducing new research questions and presenting new findings.

A first set of articles considers how types of policymaking institutions within a political system deal with problems over a long time period. These articles are on political systems where agenda-setting is multi-level, with a formally federal institutional design, as in Canada, Spain, and the United States, or where the institutional

architecture itself is a topic of attention, as in the European Union. In their comparative analysis of Canada and Spain, Laura Chaques, Éric Montpetit, Anna Palau, and Luz Muñoz find that the dynamics of attention and policymaking across sub-national governments follow different patterns. In Canada, intergovernmental dynamics generate increasing similarities in executive agendas, which is due in large part to the symmetric division of policy responsibilities. In contrast, Spain displays a different pattern of priorities to problems, which stems from open and asymmetric arrangements. In this context, party politics and the type of government play a greater part, and recent developments in Catalunya show how politicized the constant negotiation of policy responsibilities between the central and regional level can become.

In dealing with the expansion and contraction of the political agenda in the US, another federal system, Bryan Jones redirects scholarly attention to the historical dimension in studies of the policy process. He shows how the political agenda expanded once issues passed the 'legitimacy barrier' and government absorbed them for making public policies. Jones presents empirical data showing a large and aggressive agenda expansion between the early 1950s and late 1970s. All venues of attention show such expansion. While since the 1980s the legislative agenda started to contract, Congressional attention to the consequences of legislative policy remained extensive. This involved a change to a politics of attention allocation, in which institutional capacities and bottlenecks for information processing play an important part.

Marcello Carammia, Arco Timmermans, Sebastiaan Princen, and Petya Alexandrova present the EU policy agendas project, with first systematic data on the European Council since this institution became operative in 1975. While the European Council is unique in its composition and *modus operandi*, the policy agenda set within it contains topics of central concern to the EU. The authors show that the policy agenda of this institution is volatile and is set to show responsiveness to major concerns and events within the EU and its

member states – it is a venue for ‘high politics’. The contribution also shows how institutional flexibility is used to address rising issues. One part of these issues is about the institutional design of the EU itself, in which the European Council takes a leading role.

A second set of papers consider a particular type of agenda or a specific topic. Anke Tresch, Pascal Sciarini, and Frédéric Varone use the case of Switzerland to demonstrate the mediatization of politics and indicate how this occurs. The authors find that attention to issues is more concentrated in the media than in policymaking arenas, and that is also the case for news items addressing politics. Media attention to specific cases of policymaking is more spread out, and it also appears in their analysis of the Swiss case that over time, the agenda of the media and that of political institutions drift further apart. They conclude their analysis with a discussion of the consequences of this process, and argue that this is a tendency that may also occur in other European countries.

In their analysis of budgets in countries in Europe and in the US, Christian Breunig and Peter Mortensen show that changes in budget allocation become more punctuated and spiked as institutions in countries include more points of veto and arrangements for checks and balances. Thus they show the significance of institutional arrangements in posing thresholds for change in annual spending. Another important finding is that allocational spending on such matters as education, welfare, and health follows more a pattern of small incremental change than spending in other domains, such as infrastructure and defense. The authors argue that legislative rules pertaining to these different domains of spending set conditions favorable to adaptation, and the density of actors with constant attention to these areas is another factor conducive to careful and deliberate budgetary change. These conditions appear even more important than country variation in institutional structure.

Next, Isabelle Engeli, Christoffer Green-Pedersen, and Lars Thorup Larsen compare morality issues in four European countries that vary in the

salience of the religious-secular cleavage within their party system. In what they call ‘the religious world’, with Spain and the Netherlands as examples, issues enter into macro-politics in the form of party competition, and the color of government then appears a key determinant of policy development. In the secular world, represented by Denmark and the UK, these issues are far from macro-politics and are driven by issue-specific dynamics. While policy is not more restrictive in countries belonging to the religious world, the policymaking processes is found to be different. The broader aim of their study is to link the policy agenda-setting approach to studies of politics and policy choices on problems with varying levels of controversy and competition between political parties and other actors.

The final two contributions are on aspects of political agenda-setting and the development of policy agendas that affect the space and leeway for governments during their term in office: how the opposition in legislative chambers enters the scene, and how the reputation of competence of incumbent parties is influenced, and often damaged, as matters on the policy agenda appear hard to tackle. Christoffer Green-Pedersen, Peter Mortensen, Henrik Seeberg, and Gunnar Thesen build on work on party competition and turn this work more explicitly toward a relatively ignored element: how does opposition influence the government agenda? They show how the opposition in the Danish legislature takes up news stories and turns them into political issues to challenge the government, place it in a position of defense, and address matters it otherwise would have neglected for political reasons. The authors conclude their contribution with an outlook on other countries, where the structural situation of government versus opposition is different, and point to further work on what may drive the selection of specific topics in opposition strategies.

Finally, Jane Green and Will Jennings present an analysis of competence, in majoritarian systems, with recent data on the UK. Their central argument is that public confidence about political parties increases or decreases on all policy issues alike: a major policy failure in one policy area not

only influences perceptions on that policy but also affects public trust in a party on unrelated issues. If a party improves its reputation on one issue it will also be trusted on a range of other policies. Party competence also has a significant effect on the executive and legislative agendas of governing parties, for which the authors find evidence from the US and the UK. The perceived competence of governing parties to handle problems is crucial at a time of economic uncertainty and news headlines in all countries reporting widespread

public dissatisfaction with austerity programs and pressure on levels of trust in political institutions.

These contributions together indicate points on the 'front line' of the Comparative Agendas Project, and each of them also shows connections to other work on politics and policy making in Western democracies. As said, this work not only has scientific relevance but also allows us to draw lessons about how priorities are set within governments and other policy making institutions, and how responsive these institutions are.

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Divergence and Convergence of Policy Priorities among Sub-National Units in Federal Systems: The Cases of Canada and Spain

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Introduction

The study of policy dynamics at the sub-national level in federal systems is getting growing attention by scholars of comparative politics and agenda-setting. These studies analyze to what extent the political agendas of regional governments are converging or diverging over time, focusing on: institutional factors (e.g., formal rules defining issue jurisdiction, type of government, intergovernmental arrangements), preferences (mostly of political parties), and agenda capacity (Hooghe et al. 2008). This constitutes an important change from previous analysis on comparative federalism, which traditionally focused on institutions as explanatory variable, providing a static outlook on the vertical distribution of authority between levels of government (Wibbels 2003). It also constitutes an important change in relation to another set of studies (Filippov et al. 2004; Wibbels 2006; Aldrich 1995) that pay attention to party politics and policy preferences, but still deal mainly with the relationship between the national and regional governments as a whole (e.g., Constantelos 2010). Finally, analyses of issue prioritization at the sub-national level (and the relations with the national and supranational level of governance) also make a contribution to the policy

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dynamics approach (Jones and Baumgartner 2005, Baumgartner et al. 2011). Thus far, this approach has centered on the national level (Adler and Wilkerson 2012; Breunig 2011) and, more recently, the European level (Timmermans and Alexandrova 2011; Alexandrova et al. 2012).

Recent research (Chaqués-Bonafont and Palau 2011; Montpetit 2012) on policy dynamics at the sub-national level uses extensive databases developed according to the methodology of the Comparative Agendas Project. This allows us to go beyond case studies, and provides a comprehensive analysis about the pattern of issue prioritization across sub-national governments and countries' policy sub-systems over time. Our preliminary results already illustrate that agenda dynamics at the sub-national level are shaped by a mix of factors, including party politics and institutions. For example, the constitutional distribution of competencies in a federation imposes important constraints on the capacity of sub-national governments to pursue their policy goals and define their priorities independently over time. Differences in fiscal autonomy between the Basque Country and Navarra, on the one hand, and the other regional governments of Spain partly explain the divergence in patterns of prioritization of issues between these two sets of *comunidades autónomas* (CCAA). The gap between the revenues and formal responsibilities of the Catalan government, combined with the investment deficit of the Spanish government in public infrastructures, has dominated the Catalan agenda throughout the past few decades. In contrast, these issues have occupied only a minor position on the agenda of the Basque government, which benefits from fiscal powers to set base rates and collect taxes, out of which only a share is sent to the Spanish government.

A comparable asymmetry in the constitutional division of policy responsibilities does not exist in Canada. The Canadian constitution

defines the same sets of competencies for all 10 provinces. Likewise, all provinces enjoy similar fiscal powers and equally benefit from federal transfers. In addition, the constitution requires that the federal government equalizes the revenues across provinces, so that less-wealthy provinces can afford to offer services similar to those offered by wealthy provinces. In other words, as policy competencies and revenues are distributed relatively equally across provinces in Canada, nothing in the Canadian federal arrangement prevents provinces from having similar priorities, just as nothing incites them to pay attention to different issues, such as in Spain.

Nevertheless, institutional arrangements do not offer a full explanation of the strength of convergence in Canada in comparison with Spain. In fact, neither convergence – strong or weaker – nor divergence can fully capture the Canadian and Spanish situation over a long period. Examples of divergence can be found in Canada and examples of strong convergence can be found in Spain. In the case of Spain, part of the explanation relies on party preferences and type of governments. Our results indicate that legislative agendas are more similar when the same political party is governing in different CCAA. Likewise, we show that legislative agendas at the national and regional levels are more similar under minority governments. In contrast, in the case of Canada, results indicate that provincial agendas are converging over time, and this is mainly related to intergovernmental dynamics.

In this contribution we present some of the evidence generated by the Comparative Agendas Project in Spain and Canada. We rely on large and comprehensive databases on laws from 1980 to 2007 in Spain and executive speeches from 1960 to 2010 in Canada. The agendas in the two countries were systematically coded following the methodology of the Comparative Agendas

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Project. At the current stage of our research, the data are not fully compatible, as they pertain to the legislative agenda in Spain and the executive agenda in Canada. We must be cautious in making direct comparisons between these different types of agendas. Nevertheless, the preliminary analysis suggests that we can learn much about policy dynamics from data on the Canadian and Spanish agendas.

Policy dynamics in Canada and Spain

In Spain, the analysis of legislative agendas in Andalusia, Catalonia, Galicia and the Basque Country indicates that regional policymakers are paying attention to similar issues but with important variations over time. Table 1 presents correlations of agenda priorities for each pair of Spanish regional governments for the period 1980–2007. With a mean correlation of 0.32 and most coefficients being statistically significant, we can conclude that a modest level of correspondence exists in the priorities of sub-national governments. In comparison, the mean correlation of interprovincial priorities in Canada is 0.43 for the period 1985–2010, indicating stronger correlations of priorities.

The Spanish regional law agendas are linked to each other, and this was especially the case in the 1980s, when regional governments had to accomplish two crucial goals: the construction of their basic political institutions and the development of the welfare state. But correlations

across the regional law agendas decreased gradually, falling under 0.2 between 2003 and 2007. Figure 1 shows important annual variations and a clear downward trend starting in 2001. In addition, figure 1 indicates that interregional correlations are not systematically higher or lower than regional-state correlations.

In sharp contrast, correlations of policy priorities across provinces have steadily increased since the 1970–1974 period in Canada, as shown in figure 2. Although federal-provincial correlations go up and down in a cycle, interprovincial correlations are systematically above federal-provincial ones. Beginning in the 1990s, legislative agendas in Spain were increasingly diverse, and this is explained not only by the institutional factors mentioned in the introduction, but also by party preferences (Chaqués and Palau 2011). The Spanish Constitution and the *Estatutos de Autonomía* impose important constraints on the legislative agenda of regional policymakers. The asymmetric and open character of the Spanish quasi-federal state help explain why Catalonia and the Basque Country have more jurisdiction over the civil code in contrast to other CCAA (and why attention to economic issues has increased since the late 1990s in some CCAA such as Catalonia, after the fiscal reform of 1997. The formal distribution of authority constrains or enables given structures of priorities, but its relative static nature cannot account for important variations over time. Our results indicate that party preferences matter. Regional legislative agendas have become similar

Table 1. Pearson correlations between the national and regional legislative agendas

	Catalonia	Basque Country	Galicia	Andalusia	State
Catalonia	1	.247**	.335**	.364**	.340**
Basque Country	.247**	1	.333**	.301**	.378**
Galicia	.335**	.333**	1	.343**	.366**
Andalusia	.364**	.301**	.343**	1	.379**
State	.340**	.378**	.366**	.379**	1

**** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).**

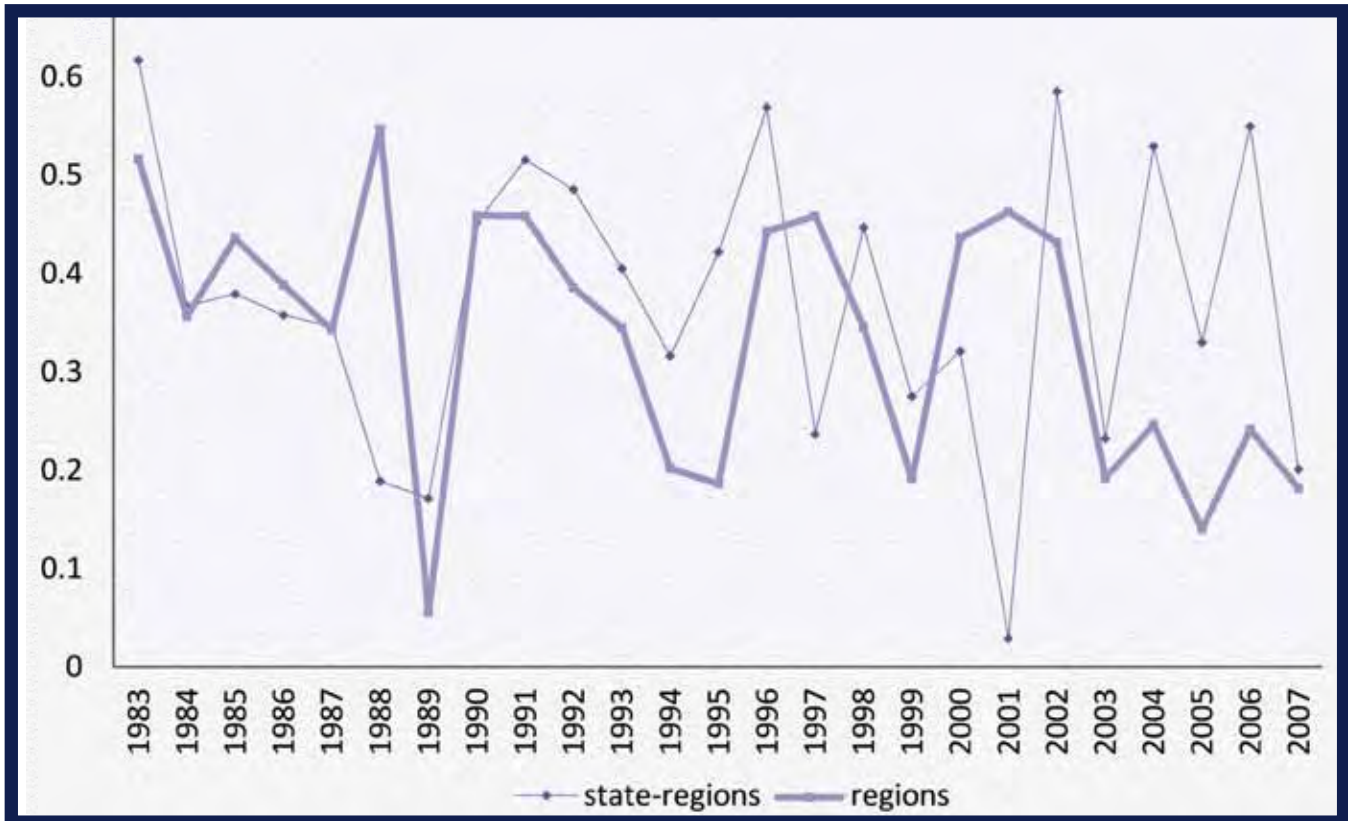
in regions governed by the same political party, while the legislative agendas of regions governed by competing parties diverge. When the socialists govern in Andalusia and Catalonia,¹ the legislative agendas tended to converge, and the same is true when conservative-nationalist political parties (CIU and PNV) are governing in Catalonia and the Basque Country. When different parties govern these regions, different priorities appear.

Party preferences are also important to explain differences in issue attention across levels of government. As figure 1 illustrates, annual correlation between legislative agendas increases when the PSOE is governing in Madrid and the PSC is governing in Catalonia (2004–2007). Our results

1 The Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya has been governing in coalition with Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC) and Iniciativa per Catalunya-Esquerra Unida (IC-EU) since 2003. In this analysis we consider that the two regional governments are governed by the same political party, or a party of the same federation (such as PSOE, the socialist party in Spain, and PSC, the socialist party of Catalonia).

further show that similarities and/or differences depend in part on the type of government. The Spanish and regional agendas are more similar when the Spanish government depends on the support of regional political parties in government formation. The annual correlation between the Spanish and Catalan legislative agendas increases when the CIU is pivotal in the formation of the national government (1993–2000) and when the CIU depends on the support of the PP (*Partido Popular*) for the formation of government in Catalonia (1999–2003). Similarly, annual correlations between the Basque and the Spanish law agendas increase when the PNV is pivotal at the national level and when the PNV depends on the support of the socialist party (PSE) for the formation of government in the Basque Country. The opposite occurs when the Spanish government has the majority of seats in the Spanish parliament. The current political situation in Spain supports these observations. The rising of the independence movements in Catalonia and the Basque Country

Figure 1. Mean annual correlation between regional and national legislative agendas in Spain (1983–2007)



(two of the three regions – with Andalusia being the third – not governed by the PP) stresses the confrontation between the Spanish government and the regions, most specifically after the PP won the elections by absolute majority in 2011.

Political parties do not have an equal propensity to generate divergence and convergence in Canada. Part of the explanation has to do with the absence of national party federations. In comparison with Spain, the Canadian federation is highly decentralized, to a point where federal and provincial parties are entirely autonomous from each other, organizationally as much as ideologically. For example, the Liberal Party of Canada, a federal party, does not share any organizational capacity with the Liberal Party of British Columbia (the BC Liberals). In addition, the ideology of the BC Liberals has become closer to the ideology of the federal Conservative Party over the years. Therefore, party labels in Canada are poor predictors of priority convergence or divergence. In recent years, there were notorious fights between conservatives (the

federal and Newfoundland conservatives, for example), as well as counterintuitive alliances. An example is the rapprochement between the Conservative Harris government in Ontario and the social democrats independentist government of Bouchard in Quebec, which analysts puzzled over at the end of the 1990s.

There is no doubt that the Canadian constitution, which treats all provinces equally, enables a great deal of convergence of provincial priorities. But as in Spain, the Canadian constitution constrains and enables, but fails to drive policy priorities. In fact, the decentralization of the federation enables provinces to set their own priorities in a much larger number of issue areas than in Spain. This maneuvering space makes the importance of interprovincial convergence even more puzzling, although it might contribute to the explanation of the weakness of the convergence between federal and provincial priorities. Studies find that convergence is related to interprovincial relations dominated by civil servants motivated

Figure 2. Difference between federal-provincial and interprovincial correlations

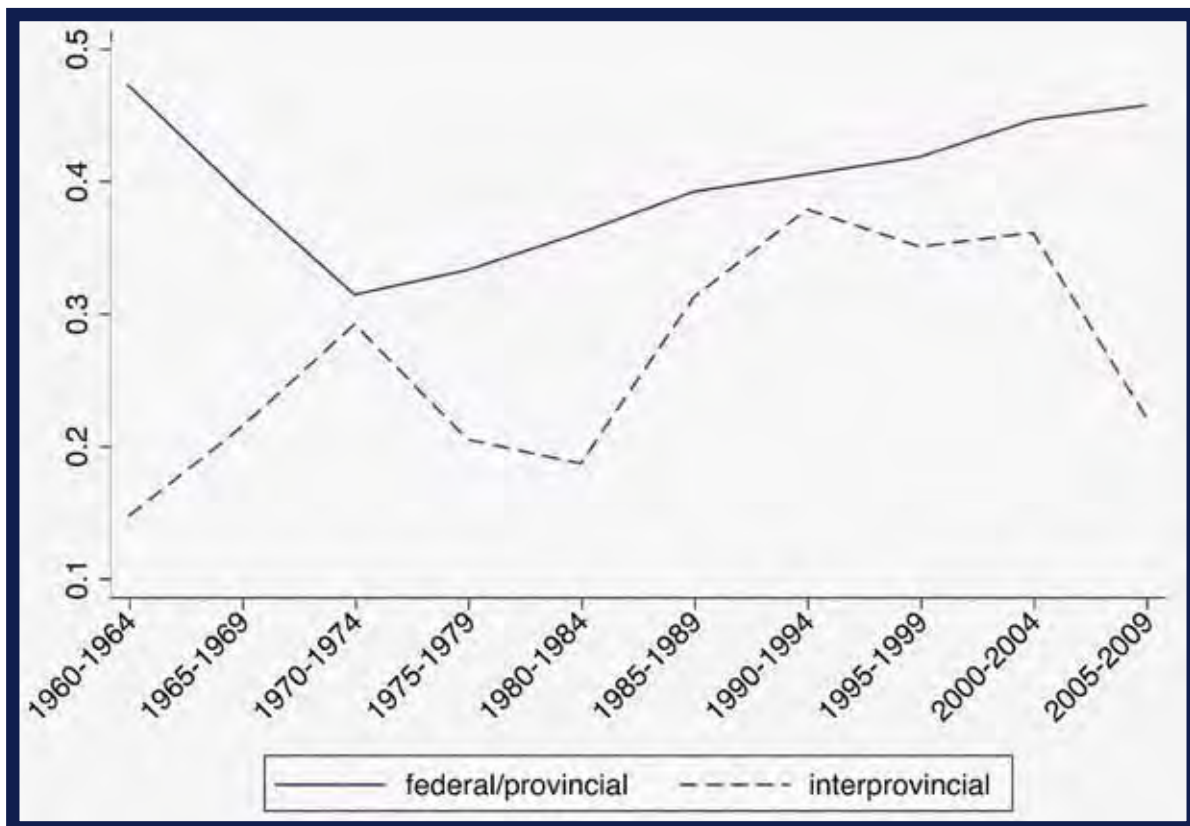
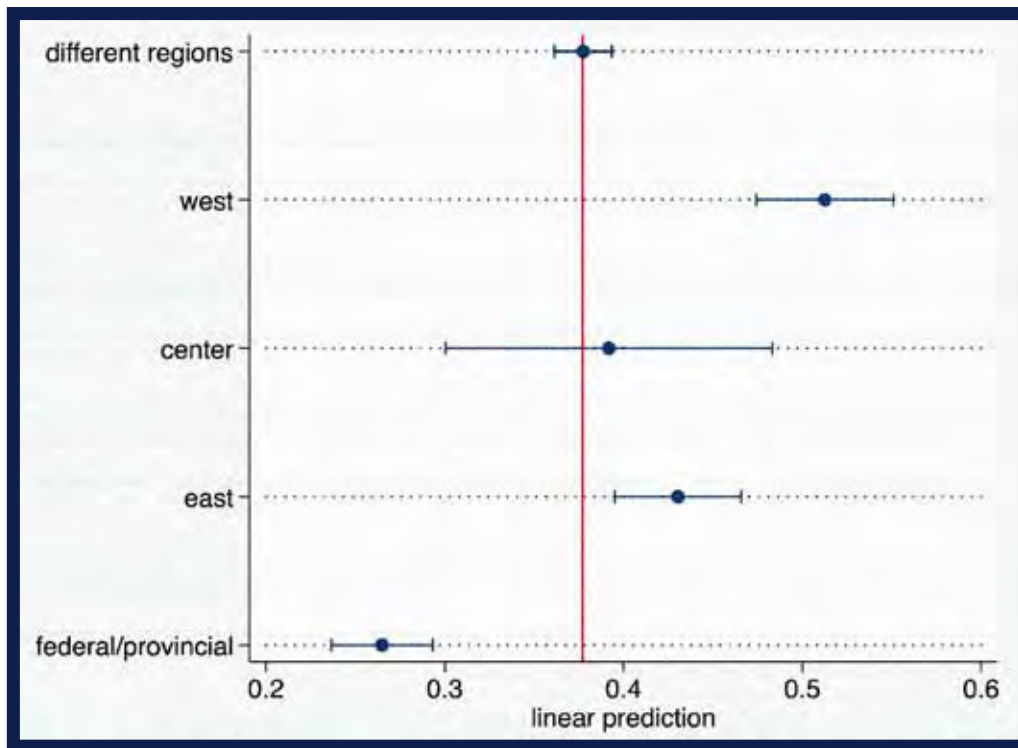


Figure 3. Intensity of interprovincial relations by region

by problem-solving (Inwood, Johns and O'Reilly 2011; Montpetit and Foucault 2012). Facing similar problems, provincial officials interact a great deal to find solutions. And in turn their interactions further encourage their respective governments to prioritize the same issues (Montpetit 2012). In contrast, in Spain, existing analysis shows the lack of this type of interaction and cooperation across regional governments (Subirats and Gallego 2002).

Figure 3 provides evidence of this dynamic. In comparison with Spain, Canada is a very large country, some 6,000 kilometers wide and spanning four time zones. Eastern, central, and western economies significantly differ from each other and therefore the problems facing the east, the center, and the west of Canada are quite different. Logically then, if interprovincial relations are motivated by problem-solving, correlations of priorities should be even stronger within regional blocs. This is exactly what figure 3 shows. The figure features predicted margins, produced from simulations flowing from a regression analysis. Correlations for pairs of provinces from different regions serve as the baseline (the vertical line).

Confirming that overall interprovincial correlations are higher than federal-provincial ones, figure 3 also indicates that western provinces, on the one hand, and eastern provinces on the other have statistically distinct and higher correlations than provinces from different regions. More research is needed, but this pattern is consistent with the willingness of provincial administrations to address concrete problems. In contrast, federal-provincial relations are more frequently plagued by all kinds of dispute, including jurisdictional struggles, which encouraged a differentiation of priorities between the federal capital Ottawa and the provinces. The constitutional disputes of the 1980s and 1990s pushed the federal government and provincial governments in different directions, encouraging the election of the Conservative Party at the federal level in 2006. This party openly promotes a federal agenda limited to policy domains falling under federal jurisdictions.

Conclusion

Policy dynamics across sub-national governments follow different patterns in Canada

and Spain. Intergovernmental dynamics generate increasing similarities in executive agendas in Canada, while in Spain, similarities between legislative agendas are more linked to party politics and type of government. We have argued that institutional features in the two federal arrangements contribute to the explanation of differences in the patterns of prioritization of policy issues in the two countries over time. Canada's stable and symmetric division of policy responsibilities encourages interprovincial convergence, while Spain's open and asymmetric division of issue jurisdiction generates a process of permanent negotiation about political autonomy between the Spanish government and the regions. The current extremely tense political situation in Spain illustrates the implications of this institutional arrangement. Legislative agendas are more similar depending on which political party is governing and under what circumstances (minority or majority governments). In Canada, such dynamics do not

occur, leaving interprovincial relations mostly in the hands of civil servants concerned with concrete policy problems. As a consequence, government priorities develop in the same direction.

From here, our goal is to go further in the comparison of policy dynamics in federal systems of governance (Chaqués, Palau, and Baumgartner 2013). This means expanding existing datasets about the executive (speeches, executive orders) and legislative agenda (parliamentary bills, laws) in view of comparing policy dynamics, taking into account the institutional characteristics of each political system. This also means further steps in the definition of common hypotheses and theoretical explanations of the way in which regional governments prioritize policy problems over time. With this line of research, we seek to establish a closer link between the policy agendas approach and existing analysis of policy convergence and comparative federalism.

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The Dynamics of Agenda Expansion and Contraction in the U.S.

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One of the great advantages of the Comparative Policy Agendas Projects is the ability to examine policy dynamics over extended periods of time.¹ Most of the research generated by this important comparative research infrastructure initiative has focused on general forces responsible for policy change, because the data from the collaboration allow systematic and quantitative measures of policy change. A recent special issue of *Comparative Political Studies* reports some of the most important research stemming from this approach (Baumgartner et al. 2011). In line with this, scholars using the US Policy Agendas datasets have focused on isolating policy dynamics and putting them on a plane with traditional political explanations (Jones and Baumgartner 2012).

This has been an exceptionally important development in the study of comparative politics, but it has neglected the impact of these dynamics on history. In this paper I return to addressing historical contingency in the

¹ This paper relies on work done for a book project with Frank Baumgartner, *The Paradox of Search: Information and the Course of Public Policy in Post-War America*, and many of the ideas here were developed jointly. The arguments presented here are developed in more detail there.

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manner of the evolutionary approach of *Agendas and Instability*, in which Frank Baumgartner and I studied both policy dynamics and historical contingency. I take advantage of the US Policy Agendas datasets to study changes in the incorporation of new issues into American politics. Using a measure of issue expansion based on the number of Policy Agendas subtopics in which an activity occurred, I show that a period of aggressive agenda expansion occurred in the US from the 1950s until 1978. In its lawmaking activities, Congress studied problems and enacted laws in more and more areas previously left to civil society. The expansionary period in lawmaking peaked and a period of contraction occurred through the end of the period of study in 2008. However, we may detect a clear residue of the expansionary period in agenda measures that are not directly related to laws; congressional hearings on non-legislative matters (either on problem detection or oversight of the bureaucracy) and in roll-call votes (as major laws are adjusted and amended) stabilize but do not decline.

The expansion of government

Since the end of the Second World War, the intrusion of scores of new issues transformed the agenda of American politics. New issues are those not previously seriously addressed by government. These issues did not enter the system incrementally; rather in a historically short period of two decades these new issues transformed the political space. They did so by intruding into areas of civil society in a manner that obliterated the distinction between the public and the private sphere, and resulted in a powerful and successful conservative counter-reaction. The successful counter-reaction led to the end of the period of agenda expansion, but the residues of the expansion continue today.

Many observers have noted that government activity in the US rose in the 1950s or early 1960s and peaked in the late 1970s, after

Since the end of the Second World War, the intrusion of scores of new issues transformed the agenda of American politics.

which decline set in. Arthur Schlesinger (1986) and Samuel Huntington (1981) both point to the rise and decline of a more progressive and aggressive government between the late 1950s and mid-1970s. Huntington points to a “horseshoe” of political (especially protest) activity. Hacker and Pierson (2010, 99) write “1977 and 1978 marked the rapid demise of the liberal era and the emergence of something radically different.” They offer a list of failures by the huge Democratic majorities in Congress and a Democratic

president to enact major reforms in that year as crucial pieces of the evidence. Similarly, Grossman (2011), based on his analyses of secondary accounts of policy development, refers to the period of the 1960s and 1970s as the “Long Great Society.”

Missing from these analyses is the connection between agenda politics and government growth. There is a big difference between the ‘thickening’ of government, in which previously established government functions expand, and the ‘broadening’ of government, in which government moves into new areas previously reserved for civil society. Thickening is far less controversial than broadening. While thickening implies bigger government within a policy area, government may be no more intrusive than before. If government spends more on education or transportation, where it has traditionally been the key actor, it does not necessarily crowd out previously private activity. But if it moves into environmental protection, it has entered a realm previously relegated to the private sphere.

The legitimacy barrier

In a classic essay, James Q. Wilson (1979, 41) wrote, “Once politics was about only a few things, now it is about nearly everything.” Wilson argued that a “legitimacy barrier” deterred government from intruding in civil society, but when that barrier was breached, it did not reemerge in political discussions. Rather, arguments changed

from whether the proposed policy action was a legitimate activity for the federal government to one of the cost/benefits of further action in the area. It is Wilson's legitimacy barrier that separates the broadening of government from its thickening.

Clearly, when government addresses new issues it is engaged in a type of agenda politics that involves the fundamental decision of whether government activity is appropriate, or whether it should be left to the private sphere (Cobb and Elder 1972; Kingdon 1984; Baumgartner and Jones 1993). Here, Wilson's legitimacy barrier is critically involved. We cannot directly observe this legitimacy barrier, but it seems clear that the measure of agenda expansion I use here directly assesses it.

Today, agenda politics has taken a different turn. Instead of centering on breaking the legitimacy barrier, or what amounts to the same thing, deciding when a social problem is a political issue, most issues have already broken the legitimacy barrier. Government is already involved in the issue, and agenda fights are based on the

allocation of attention to the topic (Jones and Baumgartner 2005).

Measuring agenda expansion

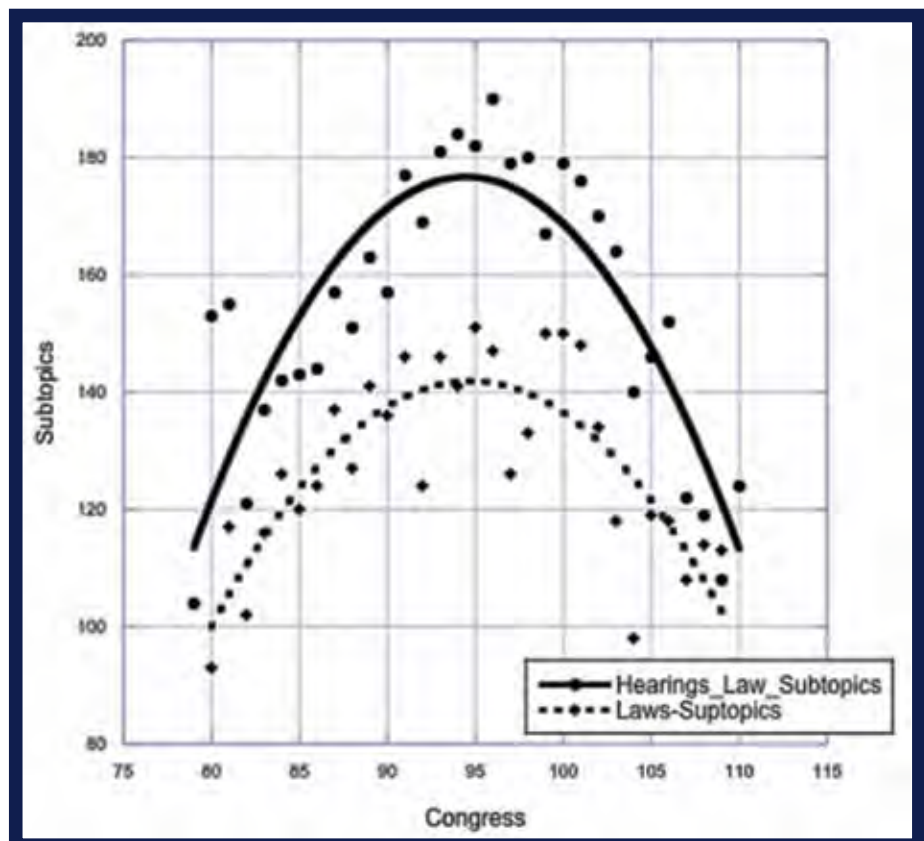
The US Policy Agendas Project's policy content coding system includes 19 major topics; each of these 19 major topics is subdivided into several more precise subtopics, for a total of 226 different subtopics of governmental activity. The system includes policy content assessments of congressional hearings, public laws, roll-call votes, Supreme Court decisions, and Congressional Quarterly stories (a periodical concentrating on legislative activity), among others. By tabulating how many subtopics include at least some activity (for example, the number of subtopics on which Congress held at least one hearing), we are able to assess directly agenda expansion.²

Traces of agenda politics through time

Figure 1 graphs the agenda expansion

² See Baumgartner and Jones 2012 for further justification and analysis.

Figure 1. Agenda Expansion: Number of subtopics with at least one occurrence, hearings on legislation and laws



measure throughout the postwar period for two measures. The first is the number of subtopics on which Congress held at least one hearing; the second is the number of subtopics on which Congress enacted at least one law. The two curves in the graph are least squares estimates of a quadratic, which traces an arc through the period. The estimates are very good, as indicated by the fit equations in the appendix. Data are tabulated by Congress, which is two one-year congressional sessions, and demarcate the period between elections for the House of Representatives. The dataset covers hearings and legislative activity from the 79th to the end of the 110th Congress, the period 1945–2008.

Figure 1 provides good evidence that government expanded through broadening during the third quarter of the twentieth century. Importantly, it shows that the standard story of government expansion starting in the Kennedy-Johnson years is incorrect, or at least incomplete. The process predated that period, although there is clear evidence that Congress passed more landmark statutes during the Johnson Administration (1964–1969) than at any other time in the postwar period (Mayhew 1991). A look at the full policymaking agenda, however, indicates that the Kennedy-Johnson years were a part, albeit an important part, of the systematic breaking down of the legitimacy barrier as more and more social issues became fodder for political discussion and action.

Second, partisan composition means little in the process of agenda expansion and contraction. There are no disjoint breaks between administrations or Congresses; the process peaks in the unified Democratic government under Carter. Moreover, the decline continued in the early Clinton years (1993–1995), when a strong Democratic Congress existed.

It is likely that many of the ideas promulgated during the period of agenda expansion were generating an increasingly strong conservative counter-reaction over time. Hacker and Pierson (2010, chapter 4) speak of an “Unseen Revolution of the 1970s.” Few legitimacy barriers

remained to be broken, and the spirited fights during the later period of Democratic governments centered on policies within established areas and the reduction of the expansive agenda, particularly in deregulation and tax policy.

The expansionary agenda was exhausted by 1978 and the conservative counter-reaction had set in. The ‘Reagan Revolution’ pre-dated Reagan. The collapse of the expansionary agenda may be traced on the down side of the arc of figure 1, through the Clinton years and into the G. W. Bush presidency.

Residues of the expansion

State-building includes breaking the legitimacy barrier through the establishment of new programs, agencies and procedures, and the building of new policy sub-systems composed of congressional committees, executive branch agencies, and organized interests. These new institutions require continuous oversight and facilitating the adjustment among interests, including those of executive agencies. As a consequence, we expect the period of aggressive issue expansion to have a presence through time, even as the lawmaking agenda contracts. Figure 2 graphs this presence by using our subtopic measure for non-legislative hearings and House roll-call votes (the Senate displays a similar pattern). Both measures peak in the 96th Congress (1979–1981), but fail to contract in the same manner as the lawmaking measures do. Instead, they both continue in a more or less linear pattern after the 96th Congress throughout the period of study, with a downturn at the end of the period.

Non-legislative hearings are those involved in oversight of executive agencies and in detecting new problems. The continued involvement of Congress in a large number of policy matters in its non-legislative hearings seems a clear consequence of the state-building enterprise of the previous 25 years. Similarly, the number of subtopics in which roll-call votes were taken remained steady even as the number of laws and the number of subtopics addressed by those laws declined. The House of Representatives took more roll-calls on

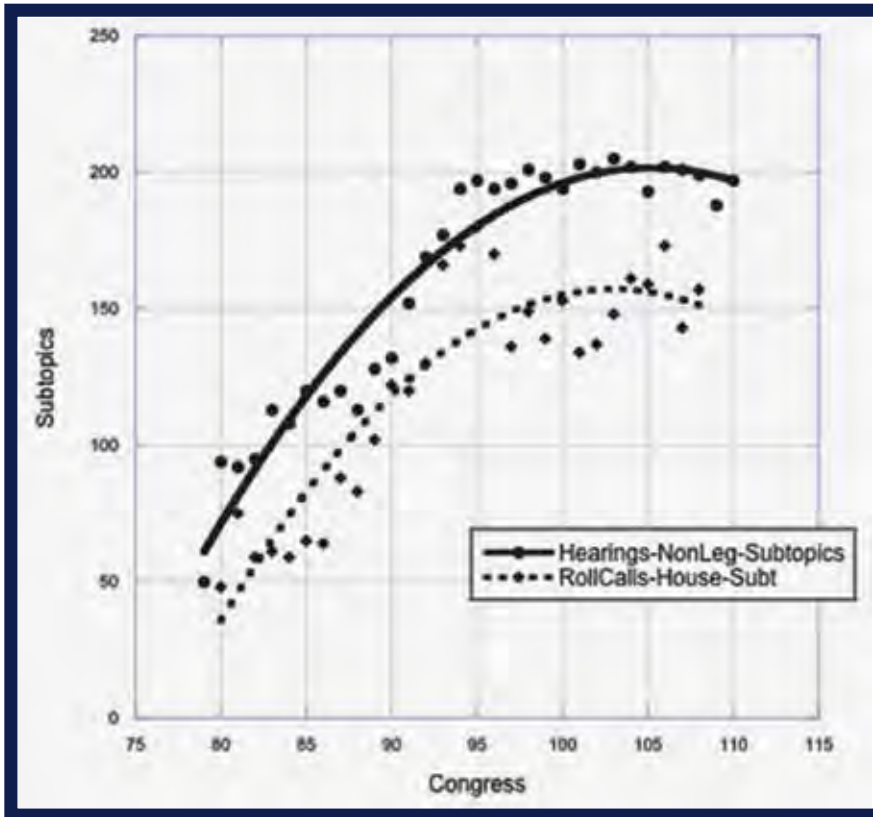


Figure 2. Agenda Residues: Number of subtopics with at least one occurrence, non-legislative hearings and House of Representatives roll-call votes²

each law being considered because each law was becoming more complex as the corpus of law itself became more complex (Whyman and Jones 2012). Increasing law complexity was a consequence of the state-building exercise that had brought government into so many areas of modern American life.

Conservative big government

The conservative counter-reaction used the language of limited government and the distinction between private and public life, but in policy terms it accepted the results of the agenda expansion period. Today most of the ideational rhetoric from conservatives emphasizes the intrusiveness of government in civic life, as has traditionally been the case. When it comes to practical programs, however, most political battles today center on the mechanism used for the delivery of government services, with conservatives pressing for vouchers and contracting out to private providers. Moreover, Republicans have been more than willing to expand the state using these mechanisms. For instance, the

G. W. Bush administration's Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act of 2003 added a prescription drug benefit to Medicare using market mechanisms. More generally, the Bush administration engineered a major expansion in government intrusiveness via its policies on counterterrorism, somewhat of a second wave in expansion. These activities are not hard to detect using the Policy Agendas datasets, but they are mostly the politics of attention to existing issues, not the politics of new issues. Government had occupied the area of health care for the elderly since 1965, and counterterrorism since the Cold War.³

Comparative perspectives

When did agenda politics transform from a politics centering on breaking the legitimacy barrier

³ The Policy Agendas Project is very conservative on adding new subtopics because of its emphasis on reliability and 'backward compatibility' – making sure that the topics mean the same across time. So, agenda expansions can be underestimated in cases such as the Bush administration's activities.

to one centering on the allocation of attention? Did other Western democracies experience similar patterns? In particular, can this process be measured in Europe as clearly as it can in the US? Fortunately we are moving rapidly toward a position where we will be able to make these critical comparisons because of the European Policy Agendas Projects as described in the contribution to this special issue by Timmermans and Baumgartner (see also Baumgartner et al. 2011).

European societies experienced major expansions in government after the Second World War, as did the US, but these political systems started from a higher base than did the US. One might expect a quicker move toward the politics of attention than in the US. Whatever occurred can be traced by using the number of subtopics used to code the policy activities of government (see, for example, John and Bevan 2012).

Conclusions

Agenda politics can be divided into two distinct phases: the politics of agenda expansion and the politics of attention. In the first, government enters into areas previously reserved for civic society to address problems. In the second, government has intervened in most of the major

areas of civic life to a greater or lesser extent, and politics centers on how much attention to devote to the area. As Hacker and Pierson (2010) show, being inattentive to an area may lead to great policy changes through the mechanism of “policy drift.” Policy actors may exploit whatever policies are in place to yield surprising outcomes. And the legitimacy barrier may be re-imposed, at least rhetorically, to aid in the resistance to directing more attention to the policy area. I have shown here how the US lawmaking agenda contracted through a conservative engineering of a withdrawal from many previously occupied policy areas. Obviously that does not change the importance of the dynamic shift from a politics of agenda expansion to one of attention allocation. Once government has occupied an area, the question becomes ‘how much?’ and ‘with what impact?’ rather than ‘should this be done?’

The country teams in the Comparative Agendas Project are beginning to make comparisons of differences across countries and through time that will allow the core issue of the agenda expansion and its policy effects to be studied in a truly comparative context. Indeed, in my opinion this is the next step toward building a systematic comparative body of knowledge on public policy.

Appendix: Fit Equations

Fit Equations for Figure 1:

$$\text{Legislative Hearings Subtopics} = -2176 + 49.79(\text{Congress}) - 0.264(\text{Congress}^2)$$

$$R = .863$$

$$\text{Law Subtopics} = -1589 + 36.55(\text{Congress}) - 0.193(\text{Congress}^2)$$

$$R = .806$$

Fit Equations for Figure 2:

$$\text{Non-Legislative Hearings Subtopics} = -2280 + 47.33(\text{Congress}) - 0.230(\text{Congress}^2)$$

$$R = .904$$

$$\text{House Roll-Call Subtopics} = -2071 + 43.22(\text{Congress}) - 0.205(\text{Congress}^2)$$

$$R = .968$$

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Media, Politics, and Policymaking: Lessons from Switzerland

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Media, politics, and policymaking from the perspective of 'mediatization'

Throughout the past few years, scholarly interest in the relationship between media and political agendas has grown significantly. Although they have mainly developed separately from each other, the growing literatures on the 'political agenda-setting power' of the media (e.g., Walgrave and van Aelst 2006) and on the 'mediatization of politics' (e.g., Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999) have both focused on how mass media influence politics and policymaking. Whereas the agenda-setting perspective has mainly analyzed to what extent and under which circumstances the media – by devoting attention to some issues and downplaying others – assign political relevance to social problems and force them on political agendas, the mediatization of politics perspective goes beyond the agenda-setting function of the media and stresses how 'media logic' (Altheide and Snow 1979) – the specific contents and formats that the media privilege to be competitive and to capture people's attention (Strömbäck 2008, 233–4) – affects the media-politics relationship. In the era of 'mediatized politics', thus, the media essentially act as commercial enterprises that serve the "wants and needs of their audiences" (Strömbäck 2008, 234). This increased audience or market orientation can be expected to have at least three implications for the relationship between media and political agendas: First and most basically, the

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media are likely to pay more attention to ‘politics’ as compared with ‘policymaking’ over time; second, they should become ever more selective and cover only the most newsworthy or interesting issues, resulting in a stronger concentration on a more limited number of issues, as compared with political agendas; and – as a consequence of the first two expected trends – third, the correlation between the distribution of attention across issues in the media and on political agendas is likely to weaken over the years.

In what follows, we first describe our data and we then present some simple empirical tests of each of these three general assumptions in the Swiss case.

Data: Media and political agendas in Switzerland (1996–2003)¹

To empirically study the relationships between media, politics, and policymaking,² we rely on a large dataset measuring the media agenda and different political agendas in Switzerland for the period 1996–2003. We have applied the classification system of the *Comparative Agendas Project* to measure issue attention on five political agendas that capture the policymaking process in Switzerland: parliamentary and cantonal initiatives and motions (agenda-setting stage), government messages and consultation procedures (pre-parliamentary stage), legislative acts (parliamentary stage), and direct-democratic votes (referendum stage). Overall, the database contains 4,368 cases.

For the media agenda, we used the same topic system to measure issue attention in the leading quality paper in Switzerland (*Neue Zürcher Zeitung*). We coded on every other day all front-

page articles, all news articles on the first page of the national news section, as well as the main article(s) in the economy section referred to on the front page. We distinguished policy-related news coverage from politics-related stories. During the 1996–2003 period, 1,606 national news articles concerned the policymaking process, and 1,936 dealt with ‘politics’ in the broad sense – that is, events such as electoral campaigns, political scandals, inter- and intra-party conflicts, and public debates that were not clearly tied to policymaking (e.g., discussions about Switzerland’s attitude during World War II).

Level of media attention to politics and policymaking

With the ongoing ‘mediatization’ and growing market-orientation of commercialized media, the media are often accused of portraying politics as a strategic game between opposing actors instead of focusing on social problems and their solutions (e.g., Binderkrantz and Green-Pedersen 2009; Cappella and Jamieson 1996). In a similar way, we expect to see a growing focus of news coverage on ‘politics’ as compared with ‘policymaking’ over time.

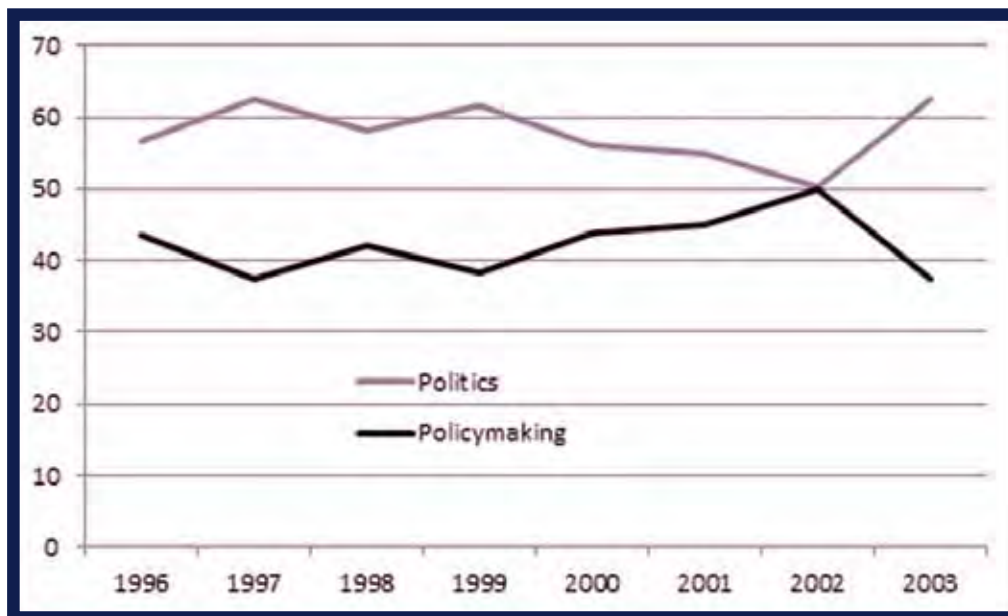
The results presented in figure 1 do not confirm this expectation. The relative share of media coverage of politics and policymaking is fairly stable over time, and we do not witness any clear increase of politics-related stories. To the contrary, our data show a slight decrease of the share of articles dealing with politics from 1999 to 2002. However, in 2003 articles on politics are again much more frequent than articles on policymaking processes. A closer look at the data shows that national elections account for the peak of politics-related articles in 2003 and – to a lesser extent – in 1999.³ This suggests that in Switzerland, media attention to politics does not follow a linear, upward trend but is rather sensitive to the electoral cycle.

One explanation for the absence of a

¹ We acknowledge financial support by the NCCR Democracy (project “Mediatization of political decision-making”) and the Swiss National Science Foundation (project “Agenda-Setting in Switzerland,” ref. 105511–119245/1). We also thank our six student coders, and especially Roy Gava and Dominik Gerber, for their most appreciated research assistance.

² We concentrate on political agendas pertaining to the agenda-setting and formulation stages of the policy cycle, and do not consider the policy implementation and policy evaluation stages. Furthermore, we also leave aside media articles covering international negotiations.

³ Among articles dealing with politics there is a stark increase of the sub-issue topic ‘political activities’ in the two years where national elections took place, i.e., 1999 and 2003.

Figure 1. Level of media attention to politics and policymaking over time (in percent)

general increase in politics-related media coverage might be the consensus-orientation of the Swiss democracy: With its long-lasting tradition of integration and amicable agreements among parties Switzerland is one of the countries that are least prone to confrontational politics. This may obviously influence the content of media coverage. Another reason might be that our focus on a quality newspaper with a strong emphasis on substantial issues may also play a role. However, given the profound changes of the Swiss party system since the mid-1990s as a result of the steep rise of the Swiss people's party and a strong increase of competition and polarization among political parties (Kriesi and Trechsel 2008), it is nevertheless surprising that the level of politics-related media coverage remained fairly stable during the same period.

Distribution of issue attention

Second, the ongoing mediatization process is also likely to have several implications for the diversity of media attention across issues. Given that policymakers have an imperative of problem-solving and need to address the full range of societal, 'politically relevant' problems, whereas the media have a greater need, but are also more liberty to filter and select information, they can generally be

expected to attend to a smaller number of issues as compared with political agendas. In times of 'mediatized politics', the media should become even more selective over time and concentrate their attention on the issues that are most relevant or appealing for their audiences while ignoring issues that are more complex, technical or remote from the everyday experiences of ordinary citizens. This increasing concentration on a smaller number of issues over time should be especially marked for media coverage of politics. The reason is a growing propensity of political parties to focus on a selected number of issues and to emphasize issues that they 'own' – that is, issues where they are seen as being more competent and able than their rivals (e.g., Petrocik 1996). As a matter of fact, the above-mentioned rise of the Swiss people's party since the mid-1990s went hand-in-hand with a growing focus on issues related to immigration, law and order, and foreign policy; this also forced the other parties to address these issues, and to pay less attention to their own issues (Varone et al. 2011). Hence, this behavior of political parties should also show up in politics-related media coverage. Given the result above regarding the sensitivity of media coverage on the electoral cycle, we assume that the general trend toward a stronger concentration of attention in politics-related media coverage is

reinforced in election years, when parties try to set the agenda as part of their strategy to attract voters.

To test these assumptions and assess the overall diversity of attention across our 21 policy issues, we rely on entropy scores (Shannon's H)⁴ for the media and political agendas.

First, figure 2 confirms our assumption that issue attention is generally more concentrated in the media than in the political agenda. With an entropy score of 2.91 for the whole period, the political agenda is the most diverse, followed by media coverage of policymaking, which also exhibits a fairly high level of issue dispersion (2.83). Furthermore, there is some correspondence between the issue attention ordering in the political agenda and in media coverage of policymaking. The three policy issues that rank on the top of the political agenda (i.e., government operations, with

8 per cent of relative issue attention; health, with 7.9 percent; and transportation, with 7.8 per cent) are also among the four most reported issues in the media. However, the correspondence between the two agendas is not perfect. The top issue in policy-related media coverage (i.e., macroeconomics, with 12.2 percent) ranks only sixth in the political agenda. In comparison, politics-related media coverage is more concentrated (entropy score of 2.65) on a smaller number of issues (i.e., political activities, with 21.5 percent of relative issue attention; government operations, with 10.3 percent; and foreign policy, with 8.7 percent).

Second, with regard to the impact of the increasing 'mediatization of politics' on the diversity of media attention across issues, we see that politics-related coverage tends to become less diverse over time, and concentrate on a smaller number of issues. Most importantly, though, we observe a sudden decline in issue diversity in the two election years covered in our data: In both 1999 and 2003 concentration increases strongly (by roughly 20 percent) as compared with the previous year. In election years, thus, the media concentrate more on the relations between and within parties and the consequences of elections, but pay less attention to public debates on substantive policy

⁴ Shannon's H is calculated as

$$H = (-1) * \sum_{i=1}^n p(x_i) * \ln(p(x_i))$$

where x_i represents a dimension (that is, one of the 21 issue categories), $p(x_i)$ is the proportion of total attention the dimension receives, and $\ln p(x_i)$ is the natural log of the proportion of attention the dimension receives, using the total number of possible dimensions. The higher the H-score, the more disperse the agenda.

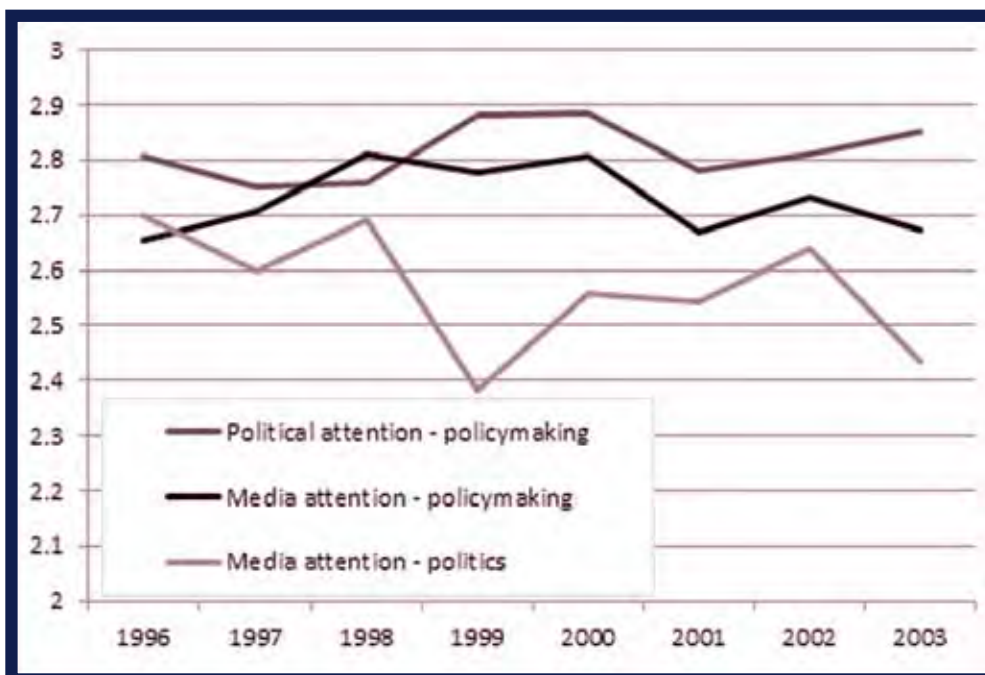


Figure 2. Dispersion (entropy scores) for the media and political agendas over time

issues that are not directly linked to policymaking (and are therefore treated as 'politics' in the broad sense here). With regard to media coverage of policymaking, by contrast, we do not observe the expected increase of concentration in issue attention over time.

Correspondence between the media and political agendas

Finally, with the growing 'mediatization', the media are expected to become more autonomous and independent from political actors. Hence, the correlation between the distribution of attention across issues in the media and on political agendas is likely to weaken over the years.

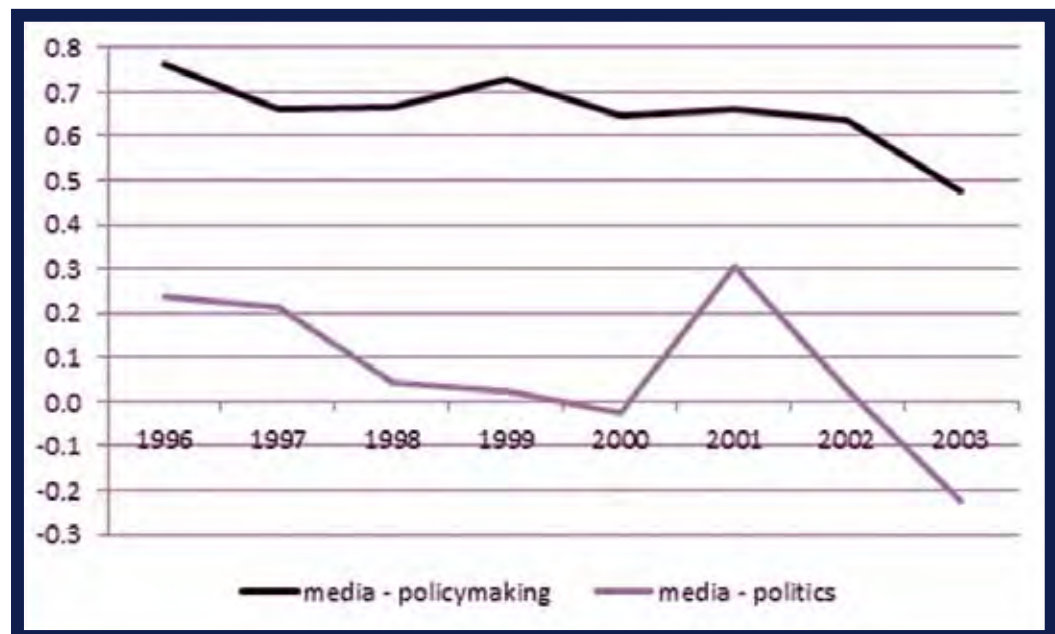
As a general comment, note that figure 3 shows that the yearly correlations between issue attention in the political and media agendas are lower for media coverage of politics than for media coverage of policymaking processes. This suggests, once again, that issue attention in news stories on politics follows its own rules – e.g., focusing very much on political activities – and is therefore fully different from issue attention in the political arena. By contrast, correlations are fairly high for policy-related articles, a finding which confirms the close relationships existing between the political agenda and media coverage of policymaking.

Second, and more importantly, figure 3 displays the expected downward trend of congruence in issue attention between the political agenda and the two media agendas. Even if the time period under investigation is short, this result supports our claim that, in the age of mediatization, issue attention in the media tends to depart from the political realm. The fact that we find such a clear trend for a quality newspaper such as the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, which is presumably a 'hard case' as far as the impact of mediatization of politics is concerned, can only reinforce our result.

Conclusion

In an era of 'mediatized politics', the media are said to predominantly respond to a 'media logic' when they deal with politics, and to select stories with the highest newsworthiness and the strongest appeal for their audience. In so doing they maximize their own, commercial interests. Several empirical findings tend to demonstrate that mediatization of politics shows up in Switzerland. We witnessed (1) a higher concentration of issue attention in media coverage than in the political realm, and (2) a higher concentration for media coverage of politics than for media coverage of policymaking. Furthermore, we observed (3) a slight increase of concentration over time for the media. Finally, (4) the congruence

Figure 3. Pearson correlation between issue attention in the political and media agendas



in the distribution of attention between the media and political agendas is low for articles related to politics, and it decreases over time for both articles dealing with politics and articles dealing with policymaking – but especially for the former.

Given both the long-lasting tradition of consensus politics in Switzerland and the characteristics of the newspaper on which our analysis rests, our case study can be seen as a test case with respect to the impact of mediatization.

The fact that our results are overall in line with our expectations leads us to believe that similar trends are also at work in other European countries. Finally, it should be noted that mediatization as a process is more encompassing than what we have studied in this paper. Most importantly, mediatization also refers to the way in which information is presented, i.e., on format, whereas we have focused here on the content of media coverage, and more specifically on the allocation of issue attention.

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Budget Dynamics

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Introduction

Budget dynamics may sound as a contradiction in terms to scholars familiar with Wildavsky and colleagues' seminal work on public budgeting (Wildavsky 1964). As stated by Davis, Dempster, and Wildavsky (1966, 529): "This year's budget is based on last year's budget, with special attention given to a narrow range of increases or decreases."

For some years this simple model was considered something of an empirical law of public budgets. However, already in the 1970s several scholars started to question the empirical validity of Wildavsky's claim. John F. Padgett (1980) argued that the linear assumptions in normal regression statistics were too resistant to non-linear variation in data. In addition to this methodological criticism, rigorous theoretical criticism has claimed that the concept of incrementalism has never been clearly defined (Dempster and Wildavsky 1979; Berry 1990).

But perhaps the most serious problem is that the incrementalism description of stable public budgets simply does not seem to find support in empirical observations. Most studies find periods of stability, but they also find significant and large changes that cannot be accounted for using the incremental approach (Natchez and Bupp 1973). Although the reputation of incrementalism as a very static model of public budgeting may be a little unfair, the approach is definitely not well suited to account for large changes in public spending. Nevertheless, alternative explanations of this pattern of both stability and changes have been

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few, and for many years, as True (2000, 4) puts it: “we have been left with incrementalism by default.” In the past decade, however, the interest in stability and change in public budgeting has been revitalized and in this article we highlight some of the main findings and insights of this research agenda.

A rise in political attention and political reprioritization creates large-scale budget changes, whereas political inattentiveness creates stability in spending.

A renewed interest in stability and change in public budgets

The prologue of the renewed scholarly interest in budget dynamics is Baumgartner and Jones’ (1993) book, *Agendas and Instability in American Politics*. The book does not contain public spending data but presents a range of long-time series and shows how political attention in the US is characterized by long periods of stability interrupted by short periods of attention shifts and major policy changes.

Up through the 1990s, Baumgartner, Jones, and True collected time series data on public spending and found in these data a similar pattern of year-to-year stability now and then interrupted by major changes in the budget from one year to the next (Jones, Baumgartner, and True 1998; True 2002). To account for this pattern of stability and change in measures of both political attention and public spending, Baumgartner and Jones (1993) initially developed the punctuated equilibrium theory, which later got a more general expression with the model of disproportionate information processing (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). It is worth noting that this model relies on many of the same assumptions about boundedly rational policymakers as did Wildavsky’s theory of incrementalism. However, whereas Davis, Dempster, and Wildavsky (1974) ascribed major spending changes to special events in the surroundings of the political system – so-called exogenous events – Jones and Baumgartner argue that such major changes are a function of the same basic characteristics of the political decision-making process that causes great stability.

According to the model of disproportionate information processing, the selective attention of policy-makers implies that most of the time they ignore most information signals from their environment. This is consistent with classic, incremental decision-making.

What incrementalism and most other classic theories with focus on the bounded rationality of decision makers ignore, however, is the ‘serial shift’ in the attention of policy makers. The serial processing capacities of the decision makers, which in periods of stability serve to prevent policy change, also leads to increased focus on new issues to the exclusion of others once the agenda shifts. From this perspective, incrementalism is a special case of the more generalized model of disproportionate information processing (see Jones and Baumgartner 2005).

A (new) general empirical law of public budgets

In a seminal paper John Padgett (1980) developed a decision-making model called the serial judgment model, where decision makers prioritize some budget items in a series of rounds and compare them on a one-by-one basis. Jones and colleagues (Jones et al. 2003; Jones and Baumgartner 2005) adopted this line of inquiry when studying budget changes in the US. They linked the punctuated equilibrium model, which claims that policy change is episodic, and they argued that year-to-year changes in public budgets mostly are small but disrupted by large-scale changes. Visually, the distribution of changes should display fat tails (i.e., some very large changes), sharp central peaks (i.e., an abundance of small changes), and ‘weak shoulders’ (i.e., few moderate changes). This pattern is represented in the top right graph in figure 1. We can map this distribution onto the logic of disproportionate information processing. A rise in political attention and political reprioritization creates large-scale budget changes, whereas political inattentiveness creates stability in spending. We

can describe the shape of such a distribution by a summary statistic called kurtosis. The more a distribution shows both such small increments and also large shifts, the more 'leptokurtic' it is. The theory of disproportionate information processing implies that budgetary change is leptokurtic.

Research since the mid-2000s finds leptokurtic distributions in a variety of institutional settings. Indeed, these distributional characteristics approach a general empirical law of public budgets (Jones et al. 2009). The bottom row of figure

1 gives two examples and provides some basic evidence. The bottom left displays more than 3,000 annual percent changes in national budget functions from several European countries (Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom). The bottom right shows the distribution of more than 15,000 annual budget changes in Danish local budgets. It appears that long periods of stasis are interrupted by massive and transformative budgetary changes (100 percent increases or sometimes even much more). Hence, both figures

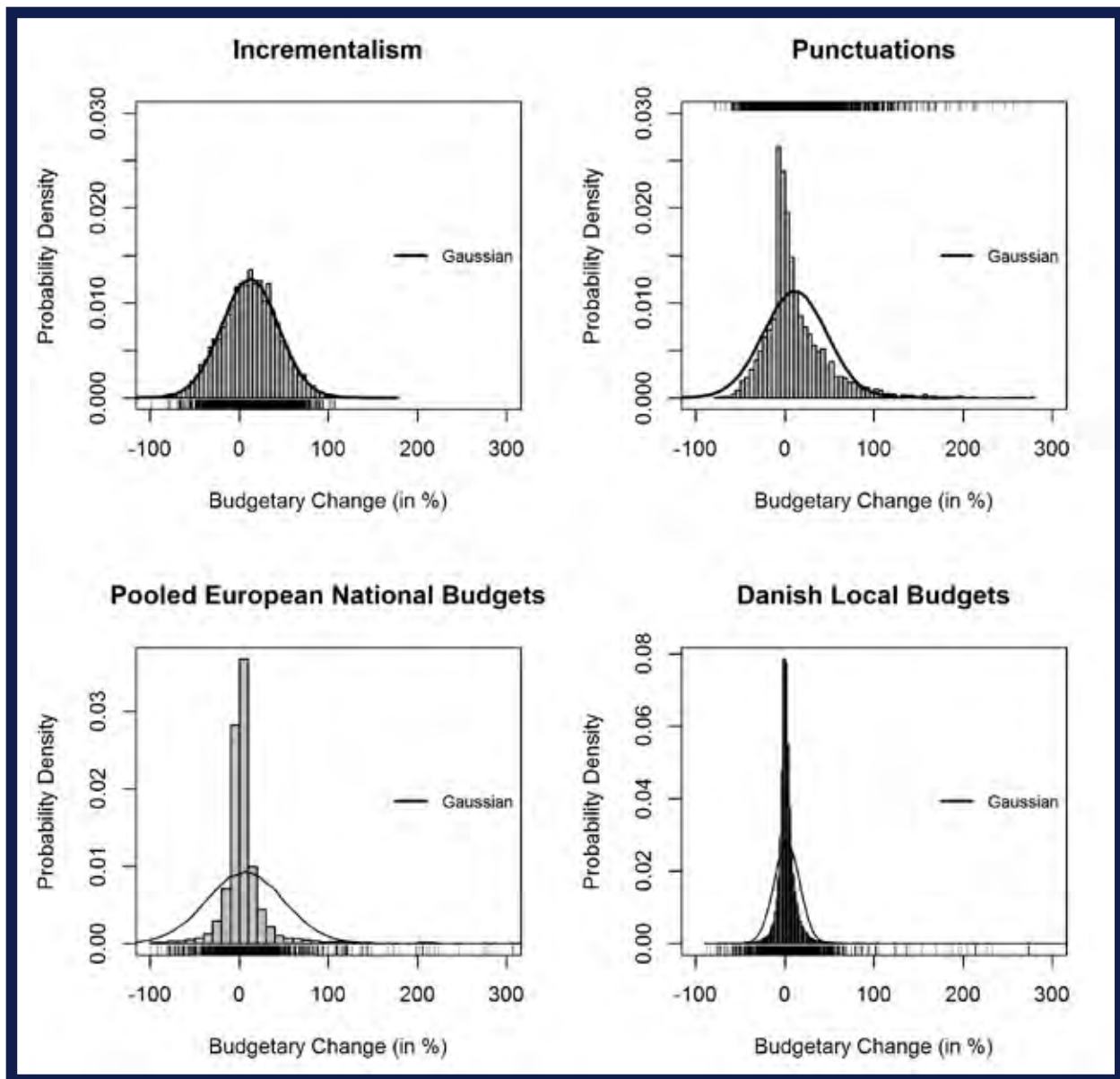


Figure 1. The top row of the figure displays what incrementalism and punctuations look like in theoretical distributions. The bottom row displays pooled budget functions from Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, and the UK, as well as Danish local budgets. The data are from Jones et al. (2009).

at the bottom of figure 1 lend support for the generalized disproportionate information-processing model of public policymaking.

Variation in budget dynamics

While budgetary change appears to be well represented by the disproportionate information model and well characterized by a leptokurtic distribution, with its sharp peak and large outliers, more recent research detected and theorized about the variation that may occur in budgetary dynamics. To find out more about the mechanisms driving these empirical patterns, a major research topic is to explore conditions leading to more or less leptokurtosis. Do institutional arrangements matter, or are there perhaps other forces at work? In particular, two empirical regularities and related theoretical points stand out. First, the degree of punctuation in budgetary outcomes varies across countries. Second, gradations of leptokurtosis also emerge across policy issues (or, more precisely, budgetary categories such as health care, defense, and education).

Research on national variation in the degree of budget punctuations builds on a vast literature in comparative politics and political economy that assigns institutions core explanatory power. The basic idea holds that variation in the institutional structure of policymaking can be linked to the distribution of policy and budgetary outcomes. Researchers found that increasing institutional friction leads to more leptokurtic policy outcomes. Friction is resistance to policy change built into institutions and can be seen as the costs of making and implementing political choices.

Three findings about how institutional friction works stand out. First, Baumgartner et al. (2009) examine policy processes in Belgium, Denmark, and the United States and find that, regardless of country, policy processes that impose higher decision-making costs show a higher level of kurtosis. They identify budgeting as the process with the most institutional friction. This is visible in the most leptokurtic outcomes when compared with other elements in the policy process, such as parliamentary questions or the introduction of bills.

Second, Jones et al. (2009) show that budgets, regardless of the level of government or type of political system, are highly static and are only occasionally disrupted by large changes. They then contend that differences in the magnitude of kurtosis can be attributed to country- and institution-specific features such as executive dominance, single-party government, bicameralism, and decentralization.

Third, Breunig (2011) focuses on the role of institutional friction in budgeting in Denmark, Germany, the UK and the US. He identifies two sources of friction: the number of veto points in the political system and the role of the finance ministry in cobbling a budget together. It is shown that, in particular, increases in decision-making costs due to high numbers of veto points do not just stabilize public budgets. Instead, high institutional barriers prevent policymakers from adapting to exogenous changes. This constraint then forces decision makers to respond more extremely at a later point in time. Again, this dynamics contributes to a leptokurtic pattern of budget changes.

In addition to distinctive cross-national patterns in the magnitude of budget punctuations, researchers also detected variation across different policy issues. One of the first articles that engaged with the variation across budgetary domains was John and Margetts's (2003) study of British expenditures. They propose several rationales for differences across policy domains, including the size of the budget, the centrality of particular budget items for the government, and ministerial incentives. Mortensen (2005) substantiates this claim in a study of Danish municipal budgets. He shows that areas such as road and library expenditures are more punctuated than school and child-care expenditures. A potential explanation for this difference is that strong and unified interest groups with concentrated benefits are able to continuously increase spending, whereas the lack of interest group involvement makes budgets more malleable and therefore more prone to punctuations.

Breunig and Koski (2012) similarly argue that allocational expenditures (i.e., spending on education, public welfare, or public health) are

more likely to produce incremental changes within budgets than non-allocational ones. This might be the case for two reasons. First, spending on welfare and education is often mandatory and requires a legislative change in entitlements, while non-allocational spending can be adjusted annually in the budget. Second, large entitlement programs receive a constant and multifaceted stream of attention by legislators, lobbyists, and the public, which enables more careful and deliberate budgetary change.

Finally, Breunig, Koski, and Mortensen (2011) show that despite similar levels of punctuations at the aggregate level, differences across issues remain and that these issue-based differences are systematic. By comparing categorical spending in the United States and Denmark, they show that, at all levels of magnitude, budget categories display a similar tendency for punctuation. Regardless of country, agriculture and health-care spending are more punctuated than the domains of justice, health, and education.

Such domain-specific dynamics does not rule out the importance of more universal explanations, but arguments about bounded rationality and information processing alone cannot explain these patterns. Instead, they advocate increased focus on factors operating at the level of budget sub-functions. It is an exciting prospect to understand these domain-specific dynamics better in the future.

Conclusion

We conclude this essay with a few reflections on how this revitalized research agenda on stability and change in public budgets may also improve our understanding of current budget dynamics across Europe. Knowing that when pooling together hundreds of thousands of budget changes, a leptokurtic distribution will be obtained is one thing. Another question is whether the theoretical ideas underpinning these studies can also improve

our understanding of how governments respond to the international economic crisis.

We believe that many of the presented theoretical ideas are consistent with central features of government responses. First, a central assumption of the disproportionate information processing model is that aggregate attention (the whole agenda) of political systems is limited. Issues must be prioritized for action. If policymakers are focused on addressing waiting lists in the hospital sector they are liable to ignore signals of economic imbalances.

In addition to this 'bottleneck of attention', various sources of institutional friction in the process of information processing – resources used in gathering, analyzing, and using information but also costs of decision-making in terms of deliberation and converging on a common agreement – imply that the task of prioritizing and acting on new information presents a major challenge for policymakers. In sum, a complex set of institutions and policymaking arrangements filters, blocks, and occasionally amplifies those signals from the environment.

Hence, the central question is not whether political systems respond smoothly or not to the incoming signals of a crisis, but how far out of kilter with the social and political environment the agenda has drifted before the system attended to the changes and responded by correcting existing policies and by changing budgets?

At least in hindsight, it seems that central policymakers across European countries ignored many of the signals of a forthcoming economic crisis. Once they started to attend to the crisis, the issue of economics quickly conquered almost all of the political agenda. This is a characteristic move from ignorance to overshooting that is consistent with the recent models of budget dynamics, and which shows that reality works differently than the classic incrementalism models described.

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Analyzing the Policy Agenda of the European Council

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Introduction

In recent times, the influence of the European Union (EU) on policy decisions within member states has become more visible and contested than many years before in its political history. In dealing with the financial crisis, the symbol of monetary integration, priorities set in EU institutions are crucial to domestic policies. Member states belonging to the Eurozone in particular face hard choices on their budgets as a consequence of agreements set within the European Council and rules enforced by the Commission. Some critics even contend that the EU 'dictates' the policy agendas of its member states.

Within the EU, the European Council has increasingly gained prominence as the institution that sets the parameters for EU policies and makes the most important decisions. Although it has been fuelled by the financial crisis, this pre-eminent role is the outcome of a longer process in which the European Council has steadily gained political power and has come to be seen as the apex of the EU's political system. The preeminence of this body manifests itself in its two distinct roles. To begin with, the European Council has become the focal point for

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setting the EU's overall agenda and taking the key decisions in important areas. In that vein, the institution effectively determines the EU budget and, for instance, takes all the crucial decisions regarding the financial crisis. In addition, the European Council is the final arbiter for issues stalemated within the Council of Ministers, forging compromises that the last subsequently adopts in a formal sense. As a result, understanding what issues the European Council deals with and how it sets its priorities is crucial for understanding EU politics.

For the European Council, agenda-setting is a particularly pressing issue, since attention to major problems is subjected to strong forces of competition. This has become highly visible in economic crisis management recently. As problems rise and expand in salience and drama, they often are processed one by one. This also means that other problems must wait for their turn. In this regard, the European Council is like any top political institution in domestic political systems, such as full cabinets or prime ministers in parliamentary systems or the president in (semi-)presidential systems. The role at the top of the political pyramid means that only the most urgent issues come onto the agenda of such institutions, while they delegate or leave more routine matters to the plethora of policymaking bodies that operate at lower political levels.

We read about policy and budget proposals of the Commission and about European summit meetings in the news headlines. But we are still at the beginning of understanding the dynamics of agenda-setting and policy change, and their consequences for the way the European Council and EU politics in general work. In this article, we present some of the research on the European Council agenda that we have undertaken throughout the past few years. To introduce our findings, we will first take a closer look at the debate on whether the EU is comparable to other political systems and the challenges this presents for studying agenda setting in the EU. Then, we will highlight three key conclusions that can be drawn from our analyses so far, showing how and why the European Council operates like top political institutions in national

polities and where its agenda dynamics are different.

The EU as 'an N of 1'?

One feature of the EU is that, similar to federal polities, it provides a variety of access points for policy actors aiming to initiate or alter the course of public policy. This is a more specific meaning of what Marks et al. (1996) have called a system of multilevel governance. Political or social actors that want to put an issue onto the EU agenda can target multiple venues – including single general directorates in the European Commission or the Council of the EU, committees and members of the European Parliament, influential non-governmental organizations and interest groups, representatives of member state governments, and so forth. In this constellation, policy actors from member states can direct their attempts to set the agenda 'upward' whenever this helps them to overcome domestic opposition, as Guiraudon (2000) described for the case of internal security and migration-control policies in the 1980s. A recent experience of this is how Northern member states of the Eurozone successfully tried to empower the European Commission to enforce national budget discipline – and thus keep Southern Eurozone countries under control. As Princen (2009) shows, actors with stakes in major policy issues also use one of the 'horizontal' routes within the EU. This happens with issues on which formal EU jurisdictions are already well established, but this venue shopping also may involve new issues and jurisdictional territory.

A theoretical point made just over a decade ago by Peters is that, with all these venues for policy initiative, the EU is still struggling to find its own 'policy equilibrium' in most domains where it has moved to develop initiatives. The EU in this view is a recently emerged institutional setting where, unlike in national political systems, the pattern is one of 'rapidly shifting policy agendas' (Peters 2001, 85). Princen (2009) points to an important feature of the EU that may affect agenda-setting and the extent to which it is, as Peters argues, in constant policy agenda movement and tinkering about the

boundaries of jurisdictions. This feature is the rather indirect link between decision makers and public opinion and the weakness of a 'European public sphere'. Most importantly, agenda-setting in the EU involves a 'scale dimension': it is not sufficient to show that an issue is relevant to the EU; there also must be strong testimony for EU policy initiative rather than national activity. This rationale bears on the effectiveness and legitimacy of EU instruments (Princen 2009, 36–43).

These and other ideas about the institutional design of the EU and its consequences for policymaking often led analysts to stress the 'unique' nature of the Union; from a comparative perspective it has been called 'an N of 1' (Caporaso et al. 1997). While there is no doubt that the historical and institutional legacy of the EU is quite unlike those of traditional nation-states, it is an empirical question whether the way in which this political system allocates attention to problems and seeks stability in its policy choices is really different from political decision making within countries. The work on political agendas of different states has shown that 'equilibrium', that is, stability in attention to problems on the agenda and mostly incremental changes in policy are interrupted by large shifts, punctuations (Baumgartner et al. 2009). Thus, one central question here is whether the EU displays a similar pattern or a different path of agenda development.

Given the high level of institutional complexity of the EU, John (2006, 982) has called the EU "the toughest test for the Policy Agendas Project." To embark on this test, the EU Agendas Project applies the concepts and methods of the Comparative Agendas Project in order to systematically analyze EU policy agendas and obtain a better understanding of their dynamics. A modified version of the coding scheme was developed to account for some distinctive features of the EU, such as the establishment of the single market, cohesion policy, and enlargement. Using this coding scheme,

we can trace attention for (sets of) issues in the EU institutions across time, and compare this with the patterns found in other political systems.

Agenda dynamics in the European Council

The European Council project was the first large-scale data collection on EU policy agendas. The European Council consists of the heads of state or government of the EU member states, and it meets between some three and six times per year. In the European integration process, it has been characterized as 'unstoppable' (Werts 2008). Until the Lisbon Treaty went into force at the end of 2009, the formal presidency of this institution rotated each semester between member states. At summit meetings, so-called Conclusions are produced that contain the main points on the agenda and the headlines of policy story behind them. Conclusions contain expressions of concern and many instances of attention to matters to be delegated to other policymaking institutions within the EU. Following the EU agendas codebook, we content-coded all Conclusions produced between 1975 and 2011, resulting in a dataset of some 42,000 observations.

The results of our first analyses suggest that agenda-setting processes within the European Council have some EU-specific features, while at the same time a comparative perspective tells us that the emerging pattern resembles that observed in national political institutions where 'high politics' are expressed. Three main findings regarding the European Council's agenda need to be stressed:

First, this agenda shows that some topics are, to paraphrase George Orwell, 'more equal' in obtaining attention than other ones. International affairs, the economy, and matters of structure and governance of the EU together cover a large part of the European Council agenda most of the time, and they condition the space for all other topics (Alexandrova, Carammia, and Timmermans 2012,

Given the high level of institutional complexity of the EU, Peter John has called the EU "the toughest test for the Policy Agendas Project."

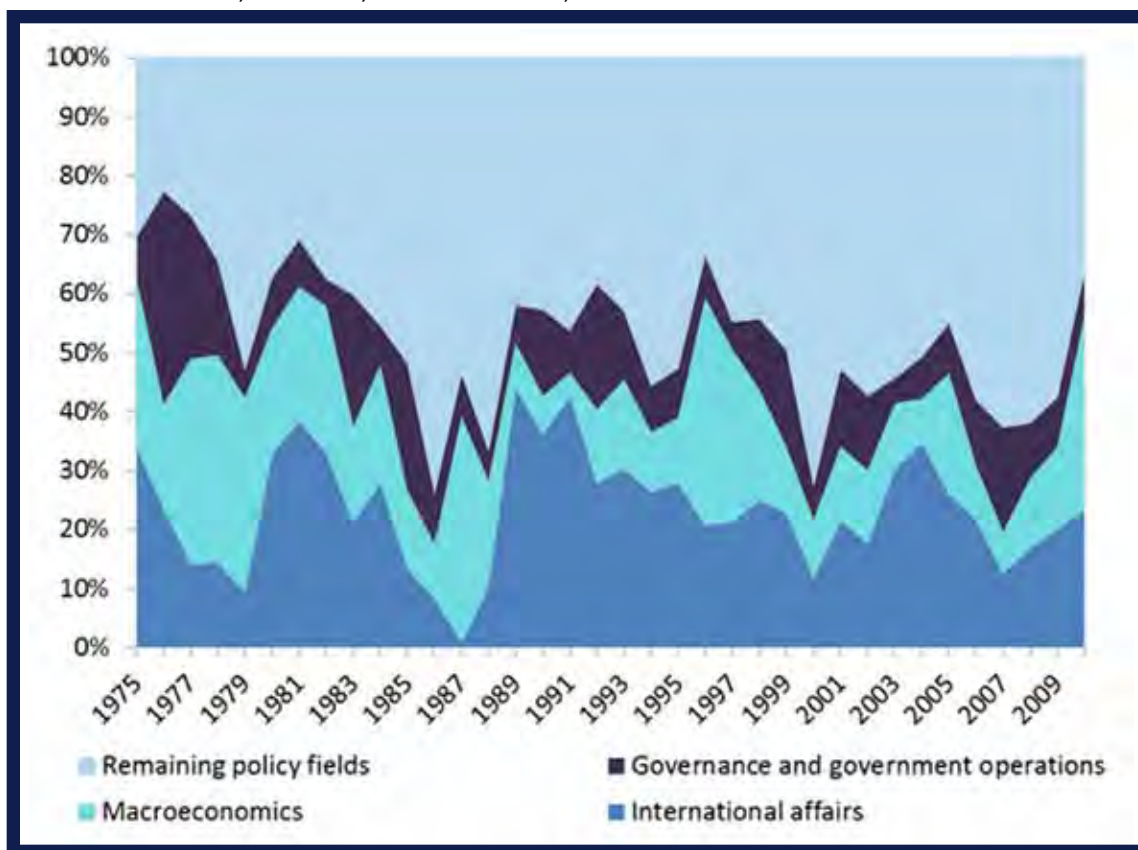
82–83). As a result, the European Council agenda is highly skewed toward a limited set of issues.

This pattern is similar to what has been found in a comparative analysis of executive agendas in six countries, including the US (Jennings et al. 2011). If political systems, despite their institutional variation, display similarity in the process of allocating attention to some categories of problems versus others, this points to general core issues of government. As the formal policy jurisdictions of the EU are quite dissimilar to institutional arrangements within countries, whether federal or unitary states, this is a striking finding. It suggests that there is a basic set of matters that not only is addressed in all political systems, but also takes prevalence over other policy problems whenever the chips are down.

A second key finding is that the agenda of the European Council shows a punctuated pattern of attention change: small, incremental changes in attention to problems are frequent, but large shifts also occur. Indeed, the European Council agenda

appears to be quite volatile, with issues that previously obtained summit attention being dropped entirely (Alexandrova, Carammia, and Timmermans 2012, 76–79). However, compared with other political agendas mapped so far, the European Council shows a higher tendency to sacrifice attention to some problems in order to highlight others. The degree to which topics completely disappear from the agenda, be it often temporarily, is not found in analyses of national executives that also are venues of expressive high politics. In the UK and the Netherlands, for example, it is more rare to see individual policy topics disappear from the annual agenda presented in the Queen's Speech (John and Jennings 2010; Breeman et al. 2009). Intuitively, this pattern of small and larger shifts in which matters on the agenda are replaced may be connected to the institutional properties of the European Council. Heads of State and Government within this institution often form coalitions on individual policy issues, and while some of these can be stable, coalitional realignments are made

Source: Alexandrova, Carammia, and Timmermans, 2012.



as members of the European Council change, and topics move up and down in priority.

A third finding sheds some light on the factors influencing the setting of the agenda. There does not appear to be a clear effect of the presidency in determining the prioritization of issues in the European Council. The rotation of this office until December 2009 from one country to another had little effect on the overall composition of the policy agenda, irrespective of which member state was presiding over the European Council (Alexandrova and Timmermans, forthcoming).

As a consequence, there are more indications that attention volatility is an effect of the location of the European Council within the institutional architecture of the EU. Through its composition, the institution is exposed to multiple pressures and demands from member states, and as the arena for expressing high politics it also must respond to issues from the broader international environment. With so much stress on processing diverse matters, the agenda becomes more volatile. Further, as more issues intrude the agenda, the European Council uses its institutional flexibility to adapt and schedule more summit meetings. Thus, issues disappear, but they may re-appear as political coalitions within the institution are reshaped and matters become more urgent. Moreover, low-key attention or disappearance from the European Council agenda does not mean an issue is ignored in European policymaking. Indeed, low attention may actually indicate that an issue has been delegated successfully to other policymaking arenas where policy output is in production.

Conclusions

The EU is becoming increasingly central to the politics and policy of European member states, while at the same time its democratic legitimacy is widely at stake. The policy agendas perspective provides an analytical view informed by theory and applied in large-scale empirical inquiry that can help to obtain a better understanding of the way

priorities are set in the EU. The European Council Project – of which some findings are presented in this contribution – is one example, with other projects in the other EU institutions being underway. A similar data-coding approach is conducted for the European Commission and the European Parliament, which all will be presented on the EU agendas project website (<www.policyagendas.eu>). These are not ‘just’ data collection enterprises. The projects are meant to cast a better long-term view on the dynamics of issue attention within EU institutions. And they are meant to be related, in order to show how agendas of different bodies may vary together, or follow different rhythms. These processes are induced by characteristics of single institutions, but also by the logic of interaction between them, a central object of debate on the EU, of which our understanding is still limited. Thus, in this way, we are able to track problems over time, determine the conditions under which they acquire urgency status or drop off the political radar screen, and see how problems ‘travel’ across policymaking arenas until they are turned into output or left undecided and shelved until a new upsurge of attention to them occurs.

Further research within the EU Agendas Project will also focus on specific major policy topics, analyzing not only waves of attention to them but also tracking how portraits and definitions of issues in the relevant domain evolve. This type of analysis complements the initial mapping of attention in order to show how the mobilization of bias – that central concept in political science – actually works, and how such mobilization happens for different types of problems. The context of these processes is that attention to problems is always contingent and priorities are relative and often temporary. This inherently political nature of attention and agenda-setting also applies to the EU. Mapping and explaining this process is not just important from an academic point of view, but also for understanding international institutions that play increasingly central roles in European politics.

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The Politics of Competence

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A reputation for policy performance and competence is an important ingredient for electoral success, with evaluations of parties' and candidates' handling of issues forming a key battleground at election time. In his seminal work, Donald Stokes (1963) argued that on certain issues – known as 'valence issues' – where there is broad consensus with regard to objectives that are considered to be desirable, vote choice would be based on the ability of candidates or parties to deliver on those issues, i.e., on competence. Valence issues refer to policy areas such as economic growth or crime, where voters are in broad agreement, almost always preferring more growth to less, and less crime to more. This model of electoral calculus is influential. Fiorina (1981, 608) argued that, "In making his voting decisions the citizen looks at the incumbent's performance, the alternative platforms of the incumbent and challenger and (perhaps) imagines a hypothetical past performance term for the previous challenger." Valence, and issue handling, is now increasingly viewed as important to understanding vote choice (e.g., Clarke et al. 2004; 2009; Green and Hobolt 2008; Be-

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langer and Meguid 2008).

Issue competence reputations influence the strategic behavior of political parties (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996). A party with a long-standing commitment to an issue, and a record of delivery on it, will tend to possess an association with that issue, i.e., 'ownership' (Petrocik 1996). Because of this, parties have strong incentives to emphasize and prime issues in the mind of voters when they hold a positive reputation for competence and delivery on those issues. A party's ratings on one issue relative to other issues and relative to other parties are often quite stable (e.g., in Britain, the Labour Party tends to be rated higher on healthcare than crime, while its rating on immigration tends to be consistently lower than that for the Conservative Party). This leads parties to be associated with certain issues in the public mind. We are increasingly, however, coming to understand issue ownership as a dynamic construct (Green and Jennings 2012a, 2012b).

In our ESRC-funded project about the politics of competence, we argue that alongside these long-term stabilities of relative ownership, reputations for issue competence vary both due to domain-specific information on policy performance and also due to the transfer of evaluations across issues and the accumulation of negative information over time. Domain-specific evaluations are often responsive to policy outputs; publics update their evaluations of the governing party according to exogenous information about policy performance. In addition, voters use information on the handling of one issue – and important cues from political events – to re-evaluate parties across a wide set of seemingly unrelated policy areas. We observe competency 'costs of governing', as incumbents lose their reputation for policy competence on issues spanning the policy domain. These mechanisms give rise to a generalized evaluation of party competence across the issue

agenda: a prevailing 'mood' in public opinion, or 'macro-competence' (a concept that draws heavily on the work of Stimson 1991). We expect (and observe) a high degree of common movement in party competence ratings over time, akin to the idea of 'parallel publics' (Page and Shapiro 1992). To elaborate, our theory suggests three specific mechanisms through which this common movement occurs:

Issue transfer: Voters use informational shortcuts or heuristics in making political judgments, especially on issues where they lack information. In such circumstances, it is rational for voters to link a party's handling of issues on which information is available to those subject to uncertainty. Because of this, high-salience issues provide a cue to voters about the competence of parties across a range of issues. The economy is an obvious policy issue that can lead to improvement or deterioration of the reputation for competence of a party in government across a wide range of issues. It is difficult for voters to evaluate the policy competence of parties in opposition, meaning it is possible for competence evaluations to be transferred between parties as well as across issues.

Events and economic shocks: As an extension of this, major events or economic shocks can provide informational signals to voters, providing a heuristic through which to evaluate the competence of a party on a wider spectrum of issues. Economic crises can do long-term damage to the reputation of governments, as can unpopular military conflicts, such as Iraq or Vietnam. Critical failures in the management of key public services can also damage the reputation of governing parties.

Costs of governing: Lastly, parties in government suffer from accumulation of performance information over time, which reinforce these heuristics. The 'costs of governing' lead to a decline in competence as negative information accumulates,

Major events or economic shocks can provide informational signals to voters, providing a heuristic through which to evaluate the competence of a party on a wider spectrum of issues.

whereas gains are discounted, consistent with the idea of negativity bias in political judgments (Lau 1985). This build-up of bad news and policy failures exerts a permanent drag on the reputation of a party after its honeymoon in office is over.

From micro theories to macro measures: Mood in policy competence

If there is parallel movement of party competence across the issue agenda, it follows that handling evaluations should load onto an underlying dimension of public opinion. This should explain much of the variation in evaluations of party competence, representing our construct of ‘macro-competence’. Our research uses Stimson’s (1991) dyad ratios algorithm method to extract the common underlying dimension of survey items on party competence over time. The method is especially useful because it allows us to construct a continuous and reliable index of party competence in circumstances where there is a great deal of irregular and missing data (i.e., polls on competence are asked infrequently, and are subject to variation in question wording or the issue evaluated). We can therefore estimate new issue and general competence time series, and have done so for four countries to date: Australia, Canada, the UK and the US. Some of the series span over seven decades.

Data on policy competence

Our ESRC-funded project, “The Politics of Competence: Longitudinal and Comparative Analysis,”¹ has gathered thousands² of survey items about party competence in Britain, the United States, Australia and Canada, dating as far back as 1939.³ Polling organizations in these countries have historically fielded a number of questions relating to issue handling, competence, performance, effectiveness, trust, and delivery. Searches of archives of opinion polls and survey datasets

identified a large number of survey items relating to competence, using terms such as ‘handle’, ‘better job’, ‘manage’, and ‘trust’. A standard question format in the US asks respondents, “...Who do you trust to do a better job of handling the economy: the Democrats or the Republicans?” In Britain the wording tends to be somewhat different: two common variants are, “If Britain were in economic difficulties, which party do you think could handle the problem best – the Conservatives or Labour?” and, “I am going to read out a list of problems facing the country. Could you tell me for each of them which political party you personally think would handle the problem best? Crime...” (with responses being recorded for each of the main parties, i.e., the Conservatives, Labour or the Liberal Democrats). These questions ask about issues ranging from the economy and taxation to public services and the environment. We therefore have a large amount of information about competence evaluations of parties, but often discontinuous data, with questions either sometimes being asked just a few times or at irregular intervals. In the UK, this totals some 4,190 survey items and in the US 2,512. The data are drawn from commercial pollsters such as Gallup and national election studies, such as the American National Election Studies and the British Election Studies.

Measuring policy competence

Stimson’s (1991) dyad ratios algorithm generates an estimation of longitudinal co-variation in competence ratings for each party, capturing the underlying latent construct for all issues (see Stimson 1991 and Jennings and Green 2012b for details of the method). In this respect, the algorithm extracts the central tendency of survey items relating to policy competence, analogous to a principal components approach. This measure is comparable over time, indicating when a party holds a reputation for competence and when it does not. Data (and supporting documentation) from the project are available at: <<http://competence-politics.co.uk/data>>.

We extract the first dimension of party competence in both the US and the UK that explains at

¹ Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), award number ES/J001678/1.

² At last count it has collected 7,582 survey items.

³ Because of the sparseness of data during the war years (and the problematic nature of sampling during that period) our party competence measures start after 1945.

least 50 percent of variation in public evaluations of party competence (see table 1).⁴ In the US, this figure is equal to 63 percent for the Democratic Party and 53 percent for the Republican Party. The figures are not much different in the UK, with 64 percent of shared variation for evaluations of the Conservative Party, 57 percent for the Labour Party, and 69 percent for the Liberal Democrats. Overall, the findings reveal a dominant underlying first dimension in competence evaluations, which exhibit a substantial degree of common movement. These findings are consistent with the mechanisms outlined earlier. They are also substantively high: Stimson's (1991) measure of "public policy mood" finds that the first dimension accounts for 27 percent variation in preferences.

An analysis of macro-competence and the vote in Britain

The measure of macro-competence enables us to understand how parties gain and lose reputations for policy competence, how competence ratings decline during a period of government, and how policy competence ratings change with other performance indicators, for example, partisanship, leader ratings, events, and economic outcomes. It is also possible to test its implications for vote choice. Here, we summarize findings on the drivers of macro-competence and its effect on party support in Britain (see Green and Jennings 2012b for more detailed analysis). First we plot macro-competence for the Conservatives and Labour from 1950 to 2012, and then we discuss findings from time-series analysis of these and other measures (restricted to shorter time periods, due to availability of other co-variables).

What drives macro-competence?

As noted in the discussion of the dynamic

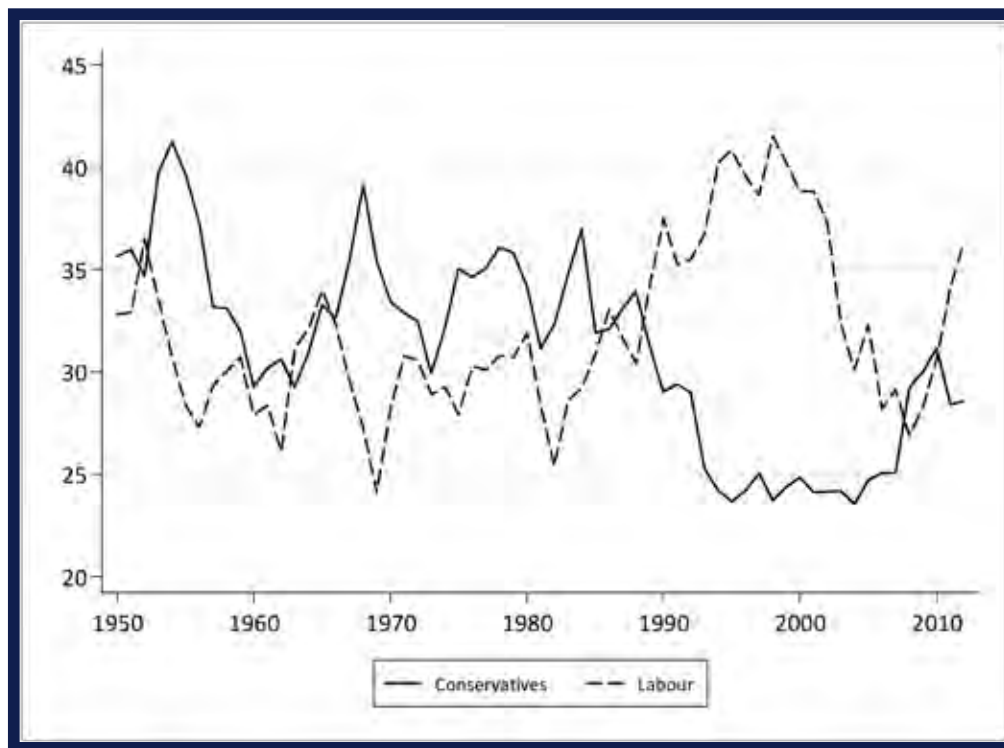
⁴ The algorithm also extracts a second dimension, but this is less easy to interpret (Stimson 2012) and accounts for much less variation.

Table 1. 'Mood' in party competence

Country/Parties	Percentage of variance explained	
	First dimension	Second dimension
United States, 1939-2011		
Democrat	63%	12%
Republican	53%	11%
United Kingdom, 1945-2012		
Conservative	64%	11%
Labour	57%	16%
Liberal Democrat	69%	12%

properties of party competence, a build-up of performance information over time is expected to contribute to a downward trend in handling ratings over time. Consistent with this, we find that time in government has a negative effect on party competence between 1950 and 2008. Parties in government tend to lose around 0.5 percent a year of their mean level of macro-competence, which amounts to a 2.5 percent drop over the course of a full five-year parliament.

Political and economic events also provide information signals about performance, which influence party competence. Through a fine-grained analysis of the period between 1979 and 2008, we find that a few major events had lasting effects on the reputations of parties for competence across the issue agenda. The Falklands War in 1982 led to an increase of 3 percent in the competence rating of the Conservative Party (interestingly, the Labour Party did not experience a symmetrical fall in its ratings). In contrast, the Exchange Rate Mechanism Crisis of 1992 (also known as Black Wednesday) led to a drop of almost 3 percent in competence ratings across the board. Another economic crisis, the run on Northern Rock bank in 2007, led to an increase in the perceived competence of the Conservative opposition. At the same time, we find that leader ratings and personal economic expectations are significantly related to macro-competence (Green and Jennings 2012b, 328–35). Importantly, too, party competence exhibits a high degree of

Figure 1. Party competence in Britain, 1950–2012

persistence, consistent with the idea of memory in competence evaluations over time. Shocks to competence can persist far into the future.

Competence and the vote

In other work we demonstrated the significant effect of issue competence on party support when compared against other predictors of vote choice, such as partisanship, government approval, prime ministerial approval, national economic retrospections, and personal economic expectations (Green and Jennings 2012a). Through an analysis of the period between 1979 and 2008, we find that macro-competence has a positive and significant effect on vote choice, with a 1-point increase in competence translating into a 0.3-point increase in party support. The additional variance that is explained by inclusion of competence in the model is around 4 percent. Party competence is therefore an important component of vote choice at the macro-level.

Competence and governing party agendas

Party competence also matters for the be-

havior of parties in government. Building on theories of issue ownership, we argue that a party's reputation for competence on a given issue might be expected to be translated into attention to that issue in the policy agenda of government. These effects of issue ownership are expected to be increased when parties are unpopular, where parties lacking in public support will tend to rely on emphasizing their few policy strengths/advantages. Additionally, the scarcity of attention in government requires decision makers to prioritize between an abundance of policy problems and public concerns (e.g., Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Jennings and John 2009). Parties in government do not always have the luxury of attending to their favored issues, and must often deal with the issues of the day to demonstrate competence and policy handling. In our analysis of policy agendas in the US and UK between 1947 and 2007, we find some evidence of the effect of issue competence on the policy agenda of government, and of the mediating role of issue salience (i.e., public concern about the 'most important problem') and of party popularity.

To summarize, our research analyzes the

way in which the public rates political parties for their competence on issues such as the economy, health care, education, crime, and the environment. The media often reports public ratings of parties on individual issues, and political parties take notice of whether the public rate them positively or negatively on different policy concerns. We show that public confidence about political parties increases or decreases on all policy issues alike: a major policy failure in one policy area doesn't just influence perceptions on that policy; it can taint the public's trust in a party on unrelated issues. Therefore, if a party improves its reputation on one issue it will also be trusted on a range of other policies. Party competence also has a significant effect on the executive and legislative agendas of governing parties, as we find in the US and the UK.

Impact and relevance for practice

The perceived competence of political parties – and particularly governing parties – to handle problems is crucial at a time of economic uncertainty, with the aftershocks of the global fi-

nancial crisis and the continued Eurozone crisis, widespread public dissatisfaction with austerity programs in some countries and an erosion of trust in political institutions in others. It is important to reconcile this dynamic construct of mood in public opinion with responsiveness of policy performance in specific domains. For delivery to matter, the public must be able to detect changes in performance and outcomes, rather than just the rhetoric of government. Ours is an ongoing project that will have implications for governments at local, national and transnational levels. We will increasingly undertake cross-national comparisons as data allow, and as it becomes possible to assess the role of political institutions in the public evaluation of performance and the attribution of responsibility for good or bad government. We hope to add new countries to our analysis, building up a large dataset on party handling of policy domains outside these four countries. We are currently compiling data in several other countries, for use by us and the wider community of researchers.

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The Power of the Opposition

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Being in government automatically means having the power to influence public policy. Therefore, governments and what they do have always been a core focus within political science. For instance, does the party color of the government matter for public policy? Under the heading “do politics matter,” this question has been the subject of an extensive literature (for reviews, see Schmidt 1996; Imbeau et al. 2001). Another question is how the support for the government is affected by how the economy develops. Do voters, for instance, punish government when unemployment rises? Such questions have also been researched intensively (e.g., Lewis-Beck and Paldam 2000; Anderson 2007).

For good reasons the opposition has received much less scholarly interest. As noted by Klingemann et al. (1994, 28), the opposition only has its words, whereas governments can act. When parties are in government they typically command a majority in parliament or are sup-

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ported by one. Further, government power implies control over an extensive bureaucracy that may assist in formulating as well as implementing a wide range of public policies.

But is government really so powerful and the opposition really so weak? The downside of focusing so strongly on the government is that we know very little about the extent of the opposition's influence on public policy and the mechanisms through which the opposition may influence public policy. What if opposition parties are capable of forcing government to address political issues they would otherwise have ignored? And what if this makes governments implement policies they would otherwise not have implemented? Exactly because governments hold power, governments are also likely to act on an issue when they start talking about it in public. With power also comes an expectation from the public that governments are capable of solving problems. So for governments, talking will not always be enough, as the public expects actions.

Studying the relationship between government and opposition parties from an agenda-setting perspective is thus a new way to address the otherwise neglected question of opposition influence. The following presents the findings from a number of recent agenda-setting studies dealing with the relationship between opposition and government. Together they illustrate how the opposition may take up news stories and turn these stories into political issues, which governments then have to address, and they show how this may force governments to implement policies they would otherwise not have implemented.

Government and opposition from an agenda-setting perspective

The starting point for researching government and opposition from an agenda setting perspective is the idea of policy responsibility (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010). The government holds power, but power is often followed by an expectation that the government is capable of addressing almost any societal problem. Regardless of whether solutions are actually at hand or not,

the government is to blame for the problem in the first place. This has important implications for how governments behave in public debate. Public debate is mostly about societal problems, like what do we do about climate change, the financial crisis, rising unemployment, wait-lists for health-care treatments, etc. If a government does not respond to such issues, it is automatically accused of being in trouble and of being unable to deliver the expected policy solutions. Hence, ignoring issues on the public agenda is almost impossible for government parties. Governments find themselves in a situation where they are expected to respond to societal problems, and response means policy measures.

Opposition parties are in a different position. Unlike government parties, they are not held responsible to the same extent for policy solutions. Instead, they can focus on criticizing the government on whatever issues they deem advantageous. The opposition has the freedom to choose which of the various policy problems that are raised in the public debate it wishes to focus on, i.e., it has the freedom to choose which societal problems it wants to turn into politics by following up with public attacks on the government.

This basic understanding of the role of government and opposition in agenda-setting has been pivotal in a number of studies, primarily based on data from the Danish policy agendas project (www.agenda-setting.dk). In the next sections, we summarize the main findings of these studies structured around three questions: 1) When does the opposition attack the government?; 2) Does the opposition agenda influence the government agenda?; and 3) Does the opposition agenda influence government policies?

When does the opposition attack the government?

From an agenda-setting perspective, news stories are an important source of information in politics because it is through news that information on societal problems enters politics (Soroka 2012), either because the media document otherwise neglected societal problems or because they report

on statistics, reports etc., that document the development of societal problems. One important question is thus which news stories opposition parties respond to.

Green-Pedersen and Stubager (2010) investigate this question by looking at opposition responses to news stories. Empirically, the article is based on a time-series study of the effects of mass-media attention (measured by radio news) on opposition party attention (measured by questions to the minister) in Denmark covering the entire policy agenda from 1984 to 2003. Furthermore, the news agenda and the opposition agenda are divided into issue groups such environment, welfare, justice, economic conditions, business, foreign affairs, culture, and religion.

The study shows that whether an issue group is 'owned' by the opposition or not is a key variable in understanding opposition response to news stories. The logic of issue ownership is that voters consider one party alternative better at handling certain problems (Petrocik 1996). During the 1980s, when the opposition in Denmark was Social Democratic, opposition parties responded primarily to issues like environment and welfare, but after 1993 when the opposition became center-right, the opposition responded to news on issues like law and order and immigration. Thus, with the exception of foreign affairs, mass-media attention only generates opposition-party attention when it is about issues owned by the opposition. When the opposition parties change, so do the issues in which mass-media attention generates party attention.

This study has been expanded upon by Thesen (forthcoming), who investigates both opposition and government responses to news stories. Unlike Green-Pedersen and Stubager (2010), who focus on issue ownership, Thesen focuses on the tone of the news as the key variable influenc-

ing both opposition and government responses. Thesen argues that ownership is only part of the picture and that government policy responsibility, together with news tone, constitutes a stronger explanation of news politicization. Opposition parties respond to bad news because they reflect negative developments in societal problems for which the government could be held responsible. The government, on the other hand, responds to good news that reflects positive developments in societal problems because this could politicize policy success. The government, however, is also forced to react when news explicitly addresses government responsibility and thereby threatens its image as responsive and competent.

The arguments are tested on a large-N sample of radio news stories from Denmark (2003–2004). Opposition response is measured through parliamentary questions spurred by the news stories, while government response is indicated by references to these stories in the prime minister's weekly press meeting. Thesen's results generally confirm the expectations, suggesting that parties care more about the tone of news stories and the type of attention they might produce than about what type of issues they could serve to politicize. Furthermore, it is shown that news tone and policy responsibility condition the incentive to politicize owned issues from the media agenda. Thus, opposition parties will not politicize owned issues when news is good because this could draw attention to government success, while government is unable and unwilling to prioritize owned issues when news is bad and instead is likely to make use of its ownership strengths when news is good.

Thesen's study utilizes the idea of policy responsibility to develop a detailed model of how opposition and government respond to news. Both have their preferences in the sense that the op-

Mass-media attention only generates opposition-party attention when it is about issues owned by the opposition. When the opposition parties change, so do the issues in which mass-media attention generates party attention.

position would like to focus on negative news and the government on good news, but the opposition has better opportunities to keep its preferred issue focus. Hence, the opposition is less constrained than the government in choosing what issues in the news it prefers to emphasize and politicize. The next question is whether the opposition's issue emphasis influences the government's issue agenda.

Opposition agenda and government agenda

To understand the issue interaction of opposition and government parties, Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2010) outline a new model of issue competition and agenda-setting. Unlike previous studies of issue competition between political parties, the model makes it possible to answer questions such as why some parties have greater success than others in forcing other parties to address unpleasant issues. In line with the research referred to above, one of the central implications of the model is that opposition parties are freer to continually focus on issues that are advantageous to themselves, whereas government parties more often are forced to respond to issues brought up on the party system agenda.

Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2010) evaluate the issue competition model using data-mapping issue competition in Denmark over a period of 25 years. The dataset comprises approximately 100,000 observations of parliamentary activities (questions to the minister, debates, sentences in prime ministers' speeches, etc.), thus providing a unique opportunity to study issue competition in politics. While the existing literature primarily consists of studies of election campaigns, this study broadens the perspective to the continuing interaction among political parties outside election campaign periods.

Using time series analyses the findings generally corroborate the idea that the opposition is less responsive to changes in the party-system agenda, but rather influential in setting that agenda. Furthermore, the analyses show that government parties are generally more responsive to changes in the party-system agenda than the opposition, but less powerful in setting that agenda.

According to these findings, parties actually affect each other in a complex but understandable manner when issue competition is modeled as a set of reciprocal relationships between the opposition, the government and the party-system agenda.

An example of how this dynamic has been evident in Danish politics is the issue of immigration during the period of left-wing governments from 1993 to 2001 (see Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008). For the right-wing opposition, drawing attention to the issue was electorally advantageous, as these parties had clear issue ownership in this area, whereas the government – also due to internal disagreements – preferred but was unable to avoid the issue. The opposition consistently focused on the issue – for instance, when the mass media brought up stories about problems related to integrating young immigrants into Danish society (see Green-Pedersen and Stubager 2010). The government responded with a series of policy measures, but none could prevent the issue from constantly popping up on the party-system agenda, in the end forcing the government parties to pay attention to the issue, for instance in the Prime Minister's opening speeches. That this case might illustrate a more general mechanism is suggested by Estrada's (2004, 438) conclusion on his study of the politicization of the issue of crime across a range of Western countries: "Crime is a social problem that is primarily placed on the political agenda by conservatives when social democratic governments are in power."

The opposition's policy influence through issue politicization

The opposition may force the government to talk about unpleasant issues in public addresses, but does it matter for real policy decisions? A recent study by Seeberg (forthcoming) follows up on Estrada's conclusion and shows that opposition may exert substantial influence on government policy initiatives by successful politicization of an issue. More particularly, in a quantitative study using unique Danish quarterly data across two decades, Seeberg's analysis addresses the center-right opposition's opportunities to influ-

ence policy on crime during the Danish left-wing government in the 1990s. Contrary to the government's policy position when it took office in 1993, the left-wing government repeatedly adopted severe restrictions to penal policy. The policy position of the right-wing opposition and its vehement and persistent criticism of the government provide an explanation, the article argues. Taking media coverage, public opinion, violence statistics, and the government's performance into account, the analysis shows that opposition criticism spurred the penal policy restrictions. Hence, by incorporating a policy agenda perspective, Seeberg's study encourages a broadening of the perspective on parties' policy influence. The question "do politics matter," i.e., do parties matter for public policy, cannot be reduced to simply a question of the color of the government. In particular, the opposition's opportunities to politicize issues and hereby influence public policy must be taken into account.

Conclusion

The studies conducted in relation to government and opposition are examples of how an agenda-setting perspective can offer new perspectives on a basic relationship in politics, namely that between government and opposition. The traditional focus on who holds government power implicitly comes to portray the opposition as power-

less, or at least it presents no mechanism through which the opposition should be able to influence the government. An agenda-setting perspective does exactly this, and the studies discussed here show initial empirical support for this. Thus the relationship between government and opposition deserves more attention and raises a series of questions for further research.

One question is whether opposition influence is stronger in some systems than in others. The studies conducted so far are mainly based on Danish material, i.e., a multiparty bloc system. Would the same finding come out in a British two-party system? Or what about systems like the Netherlands and Belgium, which are dominated by broad centrist majority governments where a complete change of government parties rarely happens? In such systems, the opposition knows that it will have to cooperate with some of the current government parties to win power. Another question relates to issue variation. If the opposition uses bad news stories as its main artillery, will it be more influential on issues where such stories are more likely? And what about development over time? It is broadly accepted that politics has been medialized and the media is known to have a "negativity bias" (Soroka 2012). Does this imply that over time the opposition has gained increased opportunities to attack the government?

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The Politics of Morality in Western Europe

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Introduction

Aside from core topics on political agendas such as economic affairs, welfare state reforms, or environmental issues, a growing set of atypical issues from time to time find their way into political agendas across Western Europe: the so-called morality issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage and stem cell research. Such issues relate to fundamental questions about societal organization: Who has the right to make decisions about the beginning of life? Does one have the right to choose one's own time of death? Sometimes morality issues rank among top political issues on political agendas. In the Netherlands, questions relating to euthanasia constituted a major obstacle to the formation of the coalition government with the Christian Democrats in the 1980s. In Spain, 1 million people gathered in a massive protest against liberalization of abortion in Madrid in 2009. In contrast, morality issues have always been considered a non-political issue in Denmark and the United Kingdom and have never assumed a prominent position in party competition. The

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question is why, how, and under which conditions morality issues become politicized and integrated in party competition and when are they left outside political struggles. Further, what are the policy implications of such differences? Does politicization lead to more permissive policies such as legalizing euthanasia?

This short article presents the core findings of a comparative research project on morality politics in Western Europe, which investigates the dynamics of the political conflict over abortion, reproductive technology, stem cell research, euthanasia, and same-sex marriage in five Western European countries – Denmark, Spain, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom (UK) (Engeli et al. 2012; Engeli et al. 2013). We argue that to understand why and how morality issues rise on and drop off political agendas, we need to focus on the conflict definition of morality issues. Based on the policy agenda-setting theory (Baumgartner et al. 2006), the concept of conflict definition is an attempt to offer a more operational understanding of the extent to which morality issues receive attention from political actors. Equally important are the configuration of actors involved in the political conflict concerning morality issues and the distribution of positions across the political spectrum. This research project on morality issues thus also represents an attempt to develop ideas from policy agenda-setting theory into a comparative framework explaining comparative differences in issue conflicts and their effects on public policy.

The two worlds of morality politics

We analyze the politics of morality issues through a typology with “two worlds of morality politics” (Engeli et al. 2012) – what we label the religious and the secular world. The two worlds do not refer to a specific level of secularization in a society or the preeminence of one religious confession over others. In other terms, the distinction between the religious and the secular world is thus not the same as between Roman Catholic and Protestant countries. The notion of the religious vs. the secular world refers to whether or not a conflict between religiously based and secular politi-

cal parties exists in the party system. The religious world comprises countries where the party system embodies a significant conflict between secular and confessional parties – either Christian Democratic or Conservative parties with a confessional orientation. In the religious world, morality issues often play a significant role in party competition; they become politicized and receive considerable political attention. Examples are euthanasia in the Netherlands and abortion in Spain. In the religious world, politics thus matters for morality issues in the sense that permissive regulation may be passed when confessional parties are not in government, whereas this is unlikely to happen when they are in government. Furthermore, the varying degrees of secularization can explain cross-national differences in permissiveness here, since it provides secular parties with electoral support for increasingly permissive regulation.

In the secular world, there is no important conflict in the party system between religious and secular parties, and the conflict definition concerning morality issues is characterized by the fact that these issues only receive very little political attention. As there is no significant religious conflict in the party system, morality issues cannot be framed in the usual political conflict lines and are thus often seen as being essentially non-political or ethical questions that do not belong in the realm of politics. In turn, the composition of parties in government is not central for understanding policy decisions on morality issues, which depend on issue-specific coalitions with no unifying tendency toward permissive regulation across all issues.

Among our cases, the Netherlands and Spain exemplify the religious world due to the significant conflict between secular and confessional parties in their respective party systems. Switzerland also exemplifies the religious world, but is more complicated due to its political system and is therefore left out of this presentation. Denmark and the UK both exemplify the secular world because there is no religious base underneath party conflicts, and morality issues have never played an important role in party competition.

The religious world: Spain and the Netherlands

The Netherlands and Spain are examples of countries belonging to the religious world where there is a conflict in the party system between religious and secular parties. In the Netherlands, the conflict in the party system between Christian Democratic parties, primarily the CDA, and secular parties (PvdA (Social Democrats), VVD (Liberals), and D66 (Social Liberals)) is well established (Andeweg and Irwin 2009). In Spain, the Conservative Party has a strong historical association with the Catholic Church, and the party competition between the Socialist Party

(PSOE) and the Conservative Party (PP) represents the conflict between secular and confessional (Chaqués and Roqué 2012). Since both the Dutch and the Spanish party systems harbor a conflict between confessional and secular parties, we expect morality issues to be subject to party competition, which is indeed the case. In the Netherlands, morality issues have attracted substantial party attention in party manifestoes and in parliamentary activities, and both abortion and euthanasia have been central issues in negotiations over Dutch government coalitions (Timmermans and Breeman 2012). In Spain, abortion has been a central political issue since the 1980s, and after 2000 other issues like same-sex marriage, assisted reproductive technology (ART), and, to a lesser extent, euthanasia have attracted attention in party competition (Chaqués and Roqué 2012).

In the Netherlands, the women's movement and secular political parties, especially PvdA, started lobbying for a more permissive regulation of abortion already in the late 1960s (Outshoorn 2001). However, the Christian Democrats participated in all Dutch coalition governments through the 1970s, most often in coalition with VVD, and systematically tried to avoid a government decision, for example by setting up a commission to investigate the issue. In the end, the CDA and VVD

compromised on a permissive abortion law in 1981 (Timmermans and Breeman 2012). After the abortion conflict settled, the religious-secular conflict on morality issues did not end – it simply shifted to euthanasia, which had attracted public attention via court cases in the 1970s, and now made its way into party politics. For the CDA and its secular coalition partners, the

VVD until 1989 and PvdA until 1994, euthanasia became a precarious issue. The secular parties supported more permissive legislation, as they did on abortion, whereas the CDA was strongly opposed and managed to avoid a decision on the issue until

1994 (Green-Pedersen 2007). Same-sex marriage resembles euthanasia with growing pressure from the secular parties, including PvdA in government after 1989, for permissive legislation. The CDA accepted the introduction of a same-sex union in 1994, but not same-sex marriage, and 1994 saw the first government coalition without the CDA, more or less since 1918, which consisted of PvdA, VVD, and D66. It seized on morality issues and implemented permissive legislation on euthanasia in 2000, same-sex marriage in 1997, and a relatively permissive embryo act in 2002. The regulation of ART was not changed, as the regulation from 1991 was already quite permissive (Timmermans and Breeman 2012).

In Spain, the political debate on morality issues only started in the 1980s due to the late democratization. The Social Democratic government taking office in 1982 only introduced minor permissive changes on abortion due to a skeptical public opinion (Chaqués and Roqué 2012). This had all changed radically when the social democrats regained office in 2004 led by Zapatero, who dedicated a great deal of attention to morality issues during the campaign in order to profile the party as the 'modern' party in Spanish politics. Once in power, the government first introduced same-sex marriage in 2005 (Platero 2007) and then a per-

The Netherlands and Spain are examples of countries belonging to the religious world where there is a conflict in the party system between religious and secular parties.

missive abortion law in 2010. These laws were met with fierce resistance from the Conservative party and the Roman Catholic Church, but had the support of the majority of the Spanish population (Chagues and Roqué 2012). Policies on ART and stem cells have been subject to much of the same party political battles, although were first seen as strictly medical issues. The first policies introduced in the 1980s and 1990s were thus relatively permissive, but were later restricted by the Conservative government in 2003. The PSOE government from 2004 turned these policies back in a permissive direction. Finally, euthanasia is slowly emerging as a political issue, but remains restrictively regulated.

The secular world: Denmark and the UK

Denmark and the UK have no conflict between confessional parties in their party systems, and politics is strongly dominated by traditional left-right competition. Morality issues are most often seen as non-partisan and outside of normal party competition, and they rarely find their way into party manifestoes or parliamentary activities like interpellations in Denmark or Prime Minister's Questions in the UK. Instead, decisions on these issues typically depend on the activities of interest groups and individual MPs, and the color of government has little impact on the success of these activities (Albæk et al. 2012; Larsen et al. 2012; Cowley 2001).

In Denmark, abortion reached the political decision-making process in the late 1960s and early 1970s due to pressure from women's organizations and individual left-wing MPs. The proposal met with some reluctance, but no strong resistance from any political parties. First, a broad majority of the parties agreed on having a commission investigate the issue, which led to a more permissive regulation in 1971 under a right-wing government and then the very permissive law in 1973 under a left-wing government. When this law was passed, the parties allowed their MPs to vote freely on the issue with strong internal divisions within the major right-wing parties and, to some extent, the Social Democrats (Albæk et al. 2012). The early settlement of the abortion issue did not have

much impact on other morality issues in Denmark. In fact, they did not receive any political attention until the mid-1980s when a debate about same-sex marriage emerged due to pressure from gay rights interest groups and individual MPs from the Social Liberals who seized on the issue to appear more progressive than the right-wing government (which included the very small Christian Democratic Party). In 1989, Denmark was the first country in the world to introduce same-sex unions with several legal rights for homosexuals (Albæk 2003). ART started to emerge as a political issue from the mid-1980s, mainly pushed by left-wing politicians who called for very restrictive legislation in opposition to medical and economic interests. Parliament passed a very restrictive moratorium on embryo research in 1987 with partial liberalizations in 1992 and 1997 (Albæk et al. 2012). The policy processes were often quite chaotic because parties allowed free votes and thereby cancelled the normal party-based structure of decision-making. Although relatively permissive, the 1997 law excluded lesbians and singles from ART, based on an amendment proposal from three Social Democratic MPs (Albæk 2003). Stem cell research was partially liberalized in 2003 with broad support. The major gay rights organizations pressured for lifting the exclusion of homosexuals from ART and adoption rights, which reached the decision agenda in the late 2000s by way of a new small libertarian party that managed to get MPs from the right-wing government parties to break rank and support the bills. The government tolerated this because of the non-political understanding of the question. Same-sex marriage was finally introduced in 2012 after having been stalled in many years of discussion within the national Church, and a broad majority in Parliament supported it. Finally, there has been no political debate in Denmark about allowing euthanasia, which remains restrictively regulated (Green-Pedersen 2007).

The policy process concerning morality issues in the UK resembles that of Denmark in many respects. The UK was an early mover in terms of abortion when a permissive law was passed in 1967. Like in Denmark, this law was not the re-

sult of party politics but of pressure from interest groups that had support from individual MPs like the Liberals' MP David Steel, who introduced the private member bill that ultimately passed. The Labour government allowed the bill to come to a vote, but the Labour party never moved the issue into party competition (Lovenduski 1986; Larsen et al. 2012). Like in Denmark, the early passing of an abortion law did not lead to pressure for more permissive regulation of morality issues. The next issue to gain political attention was ART in the late 1980s. The Conservative government was reluctant to introduce regulation, partly because of internal conflict, but in the end introduced a quite permissive regulation in 1990. Since then, Labour governments have introduced several further steps in a more permissive direction and the UK is the most permissive of all countries on ART and stem cell regulation due to a lack of party conflict and a focus on the economic growth potential of these new technologies (Larsen et al. 2012). The issue of same-sex marriage and further rights for homosexual couples was not raised until under the Labour government in the 2000s, which introduced same-sex unions, adoption rights, and ART for homosexuals. These questions were more actively promoted as partisan questions by Labour, although no real partisan conflict emerged, as the Conservatives had no clear party position on the question and allowed free votes (Larsen et al. 2012). Like in

Denmark, replacing same-sex union with same-sex marriage is currently still on the table. Finally, euthanasia remains firmly outside party competition and there is no sign that the UK is moving away from a restrictive regulation.

Conclusion

In this short article, we present the argument that dividing countries into a religious and a secular world depending on whether or not they have a conflict between confessional and secular parties in their party system provides the key to understanding differences in the politics and policy on morality issues. In the religious world, this brings these issues into 'macro-politics' in the form of party competition and makes the color of government a key determinant of policy development. In the secular world, these issues are far from macro-politics and are driven by issue-specific dynamics. We do not find that policies in general are more permissive in countries belonging to one of the worlds, but the policy processes are clearly different. The presence of Christian Democratic/confessional parties in government in the religious world clearly matters. In a broader perspective the projects represents an attempt to develop the policy agenda-setting approach into a framework for comparing politics and policy choices on problems that involve more or less controversy between political parties and other actors.

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