

*The Policy Agendas Project: a Review*

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*Abstract*

This paper reviews the Policy Agendas Project, which involves the application of a coding scheme to the content of policy documents, and is used by several of the contributors to this volume. The review describes the evolution and application of the coding frame, which can classify the content of policy documents, and has been used to analyse agenda change in the United States of America. It then examines more recent work that extends the codeframe to European countries and other institutions. After assessing the challenges of applying the method in the comparative context, it concludes that a research programme is underway, which involves a reliable and valid procedure for describing and analysing the content of public policies as they change over time.

Key words: agendas, policy, comparative, coding, USA, research programme

As the introduction to this volume indicates, the comparative study of agendas links to broad political science concerns, such as power, representation, and party organisation. The comparative lens may give more analytical edge to those who desire more systematic research to help answer the classic questions of the discipline. In that sense, there is little difference in theoretical concern and method of the comparative study of policy agendas from other branches of comparative politics, and the contributions in this volume are a good representation of countries and deploy a range of familiar tools and methods to understand the cases. Even with these similarities in mind, it would also be fair to say that, in contrast to the study of elections, parties and political institutions, public policy has tended to lack integrated research programmes, with common theories, questions, data, methods and applications outside the experience of one country, and where the extensive use of the same data allows the acquisition of evidence to be cumulative. Not that political science has ever had dominant or unchanging paradigms, even in the 1960s; but public policy has not yet produced one like the comparative study of electoral systems, for example, where scholars have created comparable data sources and work closely in teams across countries. The typical mode of study owes much to the nature of policy-making itself, which encompasses a diverse set of activities, and where the boundaries between policy formulation, decision-making and implementation are unclear. The sheer difficulty of defining exactly what is public policy can act as bar to systematic study and place obstacles to the reliable collection of data and the development of common measures, especially quantitative ones. Public policy tends to be often specific to country contexts, dependent on the sets of institutions and practices in place; but it is often not as well defined as the classic units of political behaviour, such as voting and

participation. These features encourage specialisation and detailed case studies. Students of public policy are also a varied group of scholars ranging from sectoral specialists, practitioners of different disciplines and country experts, which encourages a pleasing diversity, but again can limit common frameworks. Particularist methodologies, such as ethnomethodology, have been supportive of research into the detail and contexts rather than the investigation of common patterns. So too the post-positivists, popular since the early 1990s, encourage rejection of more science-like research activities.

Of course, there are examples of the quantitative measurement of policy. One is the coding of party manifestos according to their content (Budge et al 2001). Though this exercise is an impressive data collection exercise and analytical achievement, it speaks to the literature on party competition rather than decision-making and implementation, though that need not be the case (e.g. Budge and Hofferbert 1990, Hofferbert and Budge 1992). Then there has been an extensive study of policy outcomes across nations (Wilensky 2002). The study of policy advocacy coalitions has also generated large datasets, mainly on in the USA (e.g. Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). Budgets is a perennial topic, which is analysed according to function (Rose and Davies 1993, Soroka and Wlezien 2005). But such studies usually depend on classification of budgets within national systems.

Since the mid-1990s, a more ambitious research programme has gathered momentum. It seeks to correct for the lack of detailed information about the content of policy agendas in the United States of America. Researchers in the Policy Agendas Project have coded the

content of the US policy process since 1900 according to a common scheme (see [www.policyagendas.org](http://www.policyagendas.org)). The research exercise extends beyond the usual aim to generate information for a single project, where the datasets are rarely used again once the research has finished. It has created a massive publicly-available accessible dataset, with a long enough time series that can satisfy most statisticians' need for larger numbers. The next stage in this research programme is the application of the coding system to other nation states and arenas, such as the European Union or state and local governments. And several of the contributors to this volume are representative of studies that use the method.

The comparative expansion of the research programme suggests a reflection and stock-take are appropriate, both addressing the achievements of the project so far and examining its more recent foray into the comparative arena. In both looking backwards and forwards, the question remains whether the nature of public policy permits valid generalisations across many sets of activities and national contexts. The reward for such an endeavour would be that the valid application of a common categorisation of the content of policies and the measurement of the frequency of their occurrence in policy documents allow for rigorous comparisons across time, sector and across nation states, which covers the three main kinds of variations in public policy outputs. Moreover, expansion of data comparatively leads the research questions away from concerns about the nature of US politics to more universal themes in public policy. On the other hand, the question remains whether particularist character of the policy process may defy schemes of universal classification, disguising the contingent and protean nature of public decision-

making. Moreover, can a system of classification exist independently of the context that created it? As the Policy Agendas Project system of classifying public policy originates from the US, does it carry its assumptions, institutional practices and norms, making descriptions and data from other national systems potential misrepresentations of their actual policy content? On the other hand, do modifications to the scheme to allow it to reflect different institutional systems undermine the validity of the comparative exercise? Can the policy agendas project complement or even foster qualitative and other studies of the agenda setting process, such as the some of the studies represented here, such as by Pralle, and Timmermanns and Scholten? To try to answer these questions, this review starts from the beginning and traces the evolution of the project to its current state.

*The Origins: Agendas and Instability in American Politics*

Baumgartner and Jones's *Agendas and Instability in American Politics* is the starting place for the Policy Agendas Project. This book – a classic of political science and public policy – seeks to answer one of the most important questions about public policy in the USA – is the political system characterised by a stifling stability of decision-making or is there the potential for policy change and the intrusion of new groups and public opinion? By examining the character of agendas in various policy sectors, such as urban policy and nuclear power, the authors find that the policy process is indeed characterised both by stability and change. The art of the policy analyst is to understand the dynamics, in particular the interaction between forces for agenda change and

institutional constraints acting upon it. The novelty of the book is the claim that the very institutions that slow down agenda change can at certain times accelerate it also.

Baumgartner and Jones collected longitudinal data according to policy topic, such as numbers of regulations, the frequency and tone of congressional hearings, articles in the print media, and opinion polls. They used each data source to map out the agenda and the key relationships in the selected policy sector, which form the core chapters of the book. These procedures were the first steps on a systematic and comprehensive data collection exercise. Even though each topic made different demands on the data (1993: 254), there were similar coding procedures for their policy areas - pesticides, smoking and tobacco, alcohol, drugs, urban affairs, nuclear power, automobile transportation policy and child abuse.

After *Agendas and Instability in American Politics*, and related papers (Jones and Baumgartner 1991, Jones et al 1993), the authors ‘thought the ideas that we initially developed there could be expanded into a more robust understanding of decision-making ... Our initial efforts to assess policy change quantitatively were crude, but we knew that in theory at least they surpassed the then-current focus on budget outlays or counts of enforcement activities’ (Baumgartner and Jones 2002, vii). With a National Science Foundation grant, supplemented by local sources of funding, and helped by an army of coders, PhD students and academic collaborators, they started on their ambitious project of coding the agenda of US government according to topic, covering Congressional budgets, Congressional hearings, Congressional Quarterly (CQ) Almanac Stories, Presidential executive orders, the New York Times, public opinion, and public laws. The

researchers developed the Topic Codebook (<http://www.policyagendas.org/codebooks/topicindex.html>), which enabled them to allocate 19 major codes on major aspects of public policy, such as the economy, education and so on, and sub-codes within these categories, which now reach 225. They expended considerable effort to make the data set reliable, which involved extensive supervision of the coders and cross-checking of their work. There are numerous problems that had to be resolved, such as ensuring that budget categories remain consistent over time; but what allowed the research to proceed was the flexibility in the way in which codes could be added and modified (see Baumgartner et al 1998 for a full account of the methodological issues). It is a truly massive dataset, for example containing 70,000 Congressional hearings and 400,000 bills coded according to policy content. It is a major resource for scholars, students and practitioners. It is still developing as new years appear and the researchers agree refinements to the codebook, the last one occurring in April 2005.

Jones, Baumgartner and other scholars used the data from the project to test the punctuated equilibrium model, first on budgets (e.g. Jones et al 1997, 1998). In time, these budgets and the rest of the data were deployed for the main test of punctuations, the analysis of frequency distribution of bands of per cent changes in policy interest or activity, which has informed a series of publications (Baumgartner 2006, Jones 1996, Jones et al 2003, Jones and Baumgartner 2005a b). To create a law-like proposition, the test needs the large number of cases, which the project provides. In addition to this important seam of work, the Policy Agendas Project has generated more general

information and tests about the workings of US politics, about how agendas are shaped and are linked to punctuations, such as Jones et al's (2000) study of the evolution of Congressional jurisdictions. Most of all, the chapters in Baumgartner and Jones' (2002) edited volume showcase the project, with essays on telecommunications (MacLeod 2002), immigration (Hunt 2002), health care (Hardin 2002), science and technology (Feeley 2002), national security (True 2002); general surveys of the policy agenda (Talbert and Potoski 2002), the use of omnibus legislation (Krutz 2002), detailed studies of Congressional committees (Adler 2002), policy windows in health care policy (Wilkerson et al 2002), the agendas of Congress and the Supreme court (Baumgartner and Gold 2002). The publications using the dataset continue to grow in number, such as Sulkin's (2005) analysis of 'issue uptake' in Congress, looking at the link between the content of Congressional campaigns and the policy agenda; Jones and Baumgartner's (2004) study of representation, the link between public opinion and the content of policies; and Sheingate's study of biology technology policy. There are a number of book manuscripts in progress and papers under review. Then there is the computer coded content analysis of policy and legislative documents, which take the Policy Agendas Projects code scheme as their baseline, such as the Congressional Bills Project ([www.congressionalbills.org](http://www.congressionalbills.org), Purpura and Hillard 2006), but offer time savings through automated coding procedures. Reducing hand coding would be a major advantage because of the length of time it takes to code and to cross-check documents over long time periods. It also requires the training of a field force of usually graduate students, who need to be motivated and managed. Another investigation that has Policy Agendas

Project as a baseline uses advanced software to code words in Congressional legislation (Monroe et al 2006).

### *The Comparative Challenge*

There is no doubt that the Policy Agendas Project is a research programme, if still at a youthful stage, particularly outside the USA. There is basic agreement on the methodology and measures, and scholars want to use the data to solve a range of substantive problems. One natural extension is to examine the content of policies outside the US to generate hypotheses about the nature of policy-making in different institutional and cultural contexts. At first, US ideas influenced research on policy punctuations applied to existing categories of data, such as the functional categories of budgets in the UK (John and Margetts 2003) and local budgets in Denmark (Mortenson 2005). While these studies have reliable categories of budget heads, and verify the punctuated equilibrium model, they do not permit comparative analysis of the content of the policies. So the next stage became the coding of non-USA policy arenas with the topics codeframe, projects that have started at various times (see [http://polisci.la.psu.edu/faculty/Baumgartner/Comp\\_Agendas\\_Files/Comparative\\_Agendas\\_Projects.htm](http://polisci.la.psu.edu/faculty/Baumgartner/Comp_Agendas_Files/Comparative_Agendas_Projects.htm) for a summary). Many of these researchers gathered at a conference in Aarhus in July 2005, and some of their papers appear in this edited volume. The introduction and the chapters themselves are the best place to read about their work; what is of interest here is in the validity of the coding scheme when applied outside the USA.

In addition, it is important to discuss what kinds of institutional arenas in which to study policy agendas, and whether there are functional equivalents operating in each country.

In the main comparative researchers seek to carry out a straight application of the topics codeframe to a national system, which the scholars in France, Canada and Denmark have been coming to terms with.<sup>1</sup> Thus the researcher can find a code and subcode that corresponds to the US one, and either apply it directly or create a new codebook, which has the same structure, but contains different examples. In the main, researchers find that the codeframe works, but they have to acknowledge there are certain aspects of the USA institutional system have no parallel in other countries. The legislative system is nowhere as near as developed as it is in the USA, so certain procedures defined as legislative in the USA appear in executive policy making elsewhere. There are also sets of institutional categories, which exist only in non-US countries, such as Queen's speeches, parliamentary questions, minutes of cabinet meetings, for example, though many of these are functionally equivalent, they have particular institutional roles. Thus Queen's speeches in the UK and State of the Union addresses in the USA do have the same function of setting out the legislative agenda, but they differ because the President of the United States uses the occasion as political and rhetorical event whereas the speeches are more of a list of proposed measures (John et al 2006). The difference does not rule out comparison, but it means that comparativists need to exercise caution and be sensitive to context when analysing different policy-making arenas. Another major difference for policy is the different set of state activities across the USA and Europe, reflecting less well-developed US welfare state, which means that some codes are

incomprehensible to a non-US audience. For example, countries that have universal welfare systems have no need of the sub code on comprehensive health reform, because their policy-makers would be seeking to change health systems already in existence; but there is no code for matters that pertain to a nationalised health care system. In practice, coders tend to create new categories for their own system, such the Danish National Church and fisheries because it is of particular salience in Denmark.

It is also true that certain topics exist because of particular aspects of the US: the large tracts of open spaces and native populations, such as species and forest protection so the major topic code given to Public Lands and Water Management, though this is more a question of degree of attention, and researchers may be interested in seeing how much attention there is to generic policy issues with ones that come from country particularities. Another issue is that the codes have developed and specialised because of the attention they get in the USA. Thus the definition of foreign affairs is in terms of relationships that are important for the United States, but which are less important elsewhere, so Latin America get its sub-code as does the Panama and other canals, whereas Western Europe and the 'Common Market' only get one. Then the District of Columbia gets a separate code. In practice, because of the flexibility of the system, the researcher can usually allocate a code, seeking to locate the functional equivalent for policies and institutions, which is an indication of the universal nature of many policy problems in western countries. If all the researchers had started from scratch, it might have been better to have started from a more non-USA focused starting point, but the coding scheme in existence does not cause problems in most cases. Thus in the Danish

case, represented by Green-Pederson in this volume, there were relatively few adjustments to the coding frame.

However, by being flexible, the coding scheme may open up another problem, that it may be creating sets of data that are not strictly comparable, by being particular to the country content, which reintroduces institutional particularism. For this is reason, the UK project on Queen's and King's speeches used the US codeframe without any modification in the first phase of the project, because the aim to compare UK declaration with US State of the Union Addresses (John, Larsen and Liu 2006). The reasoning is that if projects need to make comparison across countries, then the same topic code book should be used. In practice, however, most comparisons are based on the major topic codes, which are not modified in different countries, and where they are represented as percentages of the total number of items in a document. Minor modifications to the subcodes do not undermine the validity of the exercise because most of the analysis rests on the immutable major topic codes.

One potentially troubling issue comes from the process of placing something new on the agenda into the policy codes. An example is the ministerial initiative in the UK of anti-social behaviour, involving Anti Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) as a control device, which is about not strictly criminal, but unattractive and intimidating behaviour. There is no place for it in the scheme, so it gets coded under 'other'; but there is a temptation to put it into Juvenile Crime and the Juvenile Justice System sub-code even though adults receive ASBOs too. New codes can be found, but of course too many would undermine

the simplicity of the scheme. So it is possible that the coding scheme works against picking up subtle changes in the policy agenda? If this were true, it would be ironic outcomes as one of the routes of agenda change is through the redefinition and expansion of policy agendas. Thus a method designed to study policy change may in fact not detect these changes fully when they involve the reclassification and recombination of policy categories. It may also be the case that the redefinition of policy fields has expanded in recent years, such as the re-classification of issues as environmental, such as energy and agriculture, as global environmental problems increase. The topics codebook may find it hard to capture the multidimensional character of many modern policy issues. This can be guarded against by making notes about coding difficulties and coding sentences or subjects according to several codes. Also qualitative work, using case studies of agenda redefinition and venue changes, can pick up on the subtlety of public decision-making that the coding process may not fully capture

Some of these issues appear when there is not such a straightforward mapping of the coding scheme. The Belgian project (see Walgrave et al this issue and <http://www.ua.ac.be/main.aspx?c=m2p>) emerged independently out of an interest in the media and politics. Their coding scheme was different, with fewer categories, which involved a considerable re-gigging of the codes to make them compatible with the US ones, and much of the data cannot be made comparable. At one level, that there cannot be an exact read across in terms of the codes does not matter as the researchers can still ask interesting questions, such as dynamics of change and the spread of attention across topics.

The Belgian case raises the more general issue as to whether the coding schemes reflect random differences between researchers: would the Belgians have created their scheme in the US and what would have Baumgartner and Jones have done had they started in Belgium? The flexibility in the creation of the codes leads to a natural diversity - no two teams, without prior information, would code policy documents in the same way. There are indeed different ways of chopping up the policy space; but these are limited because of the more frequently occurring policy topics that appear in each country, such as agriculture, energy and so on. To an extent – and this is a constructivist point – what gets defined as a particular policy topic may be to do with a dominant value system, e.g. a productivist one that defined food issues in an agricultural ministry for example, and it may be the case that the Policy Agenda Project scheme does not pick up on these subtleties, which points to the use of complementary single case studies to explore these definitions.

Most of the work so far has been at the national level, but there is no analytical reason why the coding scheme cannot apply to any institutions charged with making policies across a wide range of functional fields. Thus state and local government are charged with many policy-making tasks, where interest and activity may be coded according to the scheme. And this is underway at the US state level in as the Pennsylvania Policy Agendas research ([http://www.temple.edu/ipa/Research/Policy\\_Agendas.asp](http://www.temple.edu/ipa/Research/Policy_Agendas.asp)).

Then there is the application to supranational policy-making systems, which are very different to the national level. The European Union is defined by its limited formal policy competencies, which means that there is disproportionate amount of effort directed to a few policy areas, such as agriculture and regional policy. But at the same time the very attention of the European Union to particular topics means that it must disguise its more general policy activity under the cover of these powers, which enhances the multidimensional nature of policy-making. For this reason the European Union is the toughest test for the Policy Agendas Project. Prince's (2005) project on EU environmental and health policy found a way through these difficulties to produce a valid revision to the codeframe. He coded prominent textbooks on EU policy, then revised the topic codes to cope with the special features of EU policy, deciding not to code for some issues (like the single market), and then added more coding rules to promote caution when coding for the core topics. However, relating to the earlier point above, making extensive modifications to the code scheme reduces the potential for comparison.

Whether the Policy Agendas Project it can survive further expansions, such as to international organizations, such as the United Nations, or to other countries outside the highly specialised and expert policy world of mature developed countries, is a matter for empirical investigation. It may be the case that comparison is only possible in the developed and complex policy systems of Western Europe and North America.

Naturally, the research endeavour so far has been the extension of the code scheme to other contexts, which raises a series of practical problems. But the analysis of such

datasets do not stand apart from other accounts of the policy process, also studying agendas, but using qualitative methods, such as the intensive case study as in Pralle's account here. As discussed when dealing with some of the difficulties of allocating codes, qualitative work is important as more in depth accounts of policy change and stability. Given the importance of the punctuations of policy agenda, qualitative studies can offer insights and information about the causal processes at work in these periods of policy change as well as suggest new hypotheses to test. It is also possible to use both qualitative insights and data from the policy agendas coding in the same article in ways that complement each other, such as Sheingate's (2000) account of European agricultural policy, which was the original approach in the *Agendas and Instability in American Politics*. Given the interest in agenda change, such as the many studies using framing as their operating concept (e.g. Bacchi 2001), there may be opportunities for cross-fertilisation of information and insights into the decision-making and agenda-setting processes.

### *Conclusion*

The Policy Agendas Project is a research programme, which applies to the core problems in comparative public politics and policy. Given the large size of the datasets, this is a major achievement in the study of US public policy, and which has the potential to develop into a major resource and source of research across European and North American political systems. This review has mapped out the background and

development of the project, with the aim of commenting on the validity of the coding exercise, and on the comparability of the arenas being studied. It was important to invoke the incubus of particularism – in the form of the social construction of policy ideas and the alleged pre-dominance of contextual understandings – because it is an important dimension to the more general study of public policy. It is a natural criticism many policy scholars may like to make that the category codes themselves are not neutral and reflect value positions, such as of the USA political system, where it was created. The argument of this review is that, while the topic codes have examples and categories that identify it with US policy-making and its institutional framework, that is merely an accident of history (like the 1 for the US in international telephone dialing codes or lack of a country suffix in e-mail addresses). The coding system, with some modifications, is applicable to any arena that makes policy, and can be a measure that allows scholars to compare countries. With a greater understanding of the differences as well as the similarities across nation states, researchers can start to answer the central questions in comparative politics: why are political solutions and outcomes different in countries that share many background problems, and what is the impact of different political institutions on policy choices? With answers to these questions and more tests of the impact of institutions on policy punctuations, the Policy Agendas Project is on the way to becoming an integrated research programme.

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<sup>1</sup>. Their application is also the central feature of the author's project, 'The Policy Priorities of UK Governments: a Content Analysis of King's and Queen's speeches, 1945-2005', funded by the British Academy.

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