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Abstract

At the beginning of each parliamentary session, almost all European governments give a speech in which they present the government's policy priorities and legislative agenda for the year ahead. Despite the body of literature on governments in European parliamentary democracies, systematic research on these executive policy agendas is surprisingly limited. In this article the authors study the executive policy agendas—measured through the policy content of annual government speeches—over the past 50 years in three

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Western European countries: the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Denmark. Contrary to the expectations derived from the well-established “politics matters” approach, the analyses show that elections and change in partisan color have little effect on the executive issue agendas, except to a limited extent for the United Kingdom. In contrast, the authors demonstrate empirically how the policy agenda of governments responds to changes in public problems, and this affects how political parties define these problems as political issues. In other words, policy responsibility that follows from having government power seems much more important for governments’ issue agendas than the partisan and institutional characteristics of governments.

Keywords

executive speeches, issue agendas, elections, politics matters

Each year almost all heads of governments give a speech (the king’s, queen’s, or prime minister’s speech, state of the union address) in which they present the government’s policy goals, priorities, and legislative program for the year to come. Despite the body of literature on governments in the advanced industrial countries, systematic research on such executive policy agendas is surprisingly limited. The literature on “politics matters,” for instance, has investigated the policy impact—often measured through budgets—of parties when they hold government power (Blais, Blake, & Dion, 1993; Imbeau, Petry, & Lamari, 2001; Schmidt, 1996). But governments’ policy agendas have not been addressed by this literature. Only a handful of studies have actually looked at the dynamics of government policy agendas (Breeman et al., 2009; Jennings & John, 2009; John & Jennings, 2010), and very few have taken a comparative perspective (e.g., Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008).

However, prioritizing problems and setting policy goals is a crucial aspect of the work of a government, and understanding the causes behind these agendas deserves considerably more attention than it has received until now. Think about President Obama. His party color and the policy preferences stemming from that may be central to understanding his solutions and policy position on a given issue, but what are the policy issues he is focusing his attention on? How does he prioritize attention among the economy, climate change, the war in Afghanistan, and health care? And how is this prioritization of issues to attend to different from his predecessor’s? In any democratic political system, these are fundamental questions with clear implications for the study of change and stability in government policies. Therefore, a study of the dynamics of governments’ policy agendas is a strong case for

analyzing the general theoretical questions about the relationship among elections, institutions, and information raised in this special issue.

The primary aim of this article is to test the effect of elections on governments' policy agendas. The most widespread approach to government and policy priorities is to look at the color of the government. This is the core of the "politics matters" approach (Imbeau et al., 2001; Schmidt, 1996). In most cases, the party color of the government changes because of elections, so from this perspective, elections would be the major source of change in the government issue agendas. In other words, the replacement of a Labour government with a Conservative government, for instance, would be expected to cause a change in the executive issue agenda.

To this aim, we compare executive policy agendas—measured through the policy content of annual government speeches in three Western European countries, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Denmark, over the past 50 years. The article finds that elections do not explain much change in executive policy agendas. The comparison of three countries with relatively different parliamentary systems also allows us to make inferences about the role of political institutions. Though the effects in the United Kingdom appear slightly stronger than those in Denmark and the Netherlands, the overall conclusion is that different political institutions do not have a large effect on the impact of parties in these three cases.

In response to the lack of effect of elections and party government, the article draws on a policy agendas perspective to make a judgment about why agendas change. The article concludes with an illustration of how changes in a government's policy agenda reflect more long-term changes in policy problems, that is, information flows, and how political elites—in this case political parties—define policy problems as political issues. The implication of this is that the responsibility to address policy problems is incumbent on a government party of whatever color and limits changes in policies in line with party priorities.

The Effect of Parties and Elections on Governments' Issue Agendas

Governments' issue agendas have generally not received much scholarly attention. However, there is an extensive literature on the question of whether political parties and partisan rule in government have a systematic impact on public policy (for a review, see Imbeau et al., 2001; Schmidt, 1996). This "politics matters" approach developed as a reaction to socioeconomic perspectives such as Cutright's (1965), which explained cross-national variation in government policies by socioeconomic development. The politics matters

(or parties matter) literature instead focused on the partisan color of the government as the main explanatory variable behind its policy priorities. The policy preferences of different parties are derived from their ideology, and elections become the crucial mechanism of policy change, when elections result in a change in the ideological color of the government (see, e.g., Blais et al., 1993, Castles & Mckinlay, 1979; Hibbs, 1977). Translated to public expenditure decisions, a key hypothesis is that left-wing governments result in higher total expenditures than right-wing governments (Sharpe & Newton, 1984, p. 13). At the program level, the basic proposition is that there is a difference between what kind of programs benefit from a left-wing government and what programs benefit from a right-wing government (Sharpe & Newton, 1984, p. 209).

Despite an impressive amount of empirical studies within the politics matters research tradition, the empirical status of the central hypotheses is still intensively debated. This is most clearly illustrated by the fact that the two most extensive and systematic reviews of the literature have reached entirely opposite conclusions. Although Schmidt (1996, p. 157) concludes that differences in the party composition of government, in general, do matter for public policy, Imbeau et al. (2001, p. 1), based on a statistical meta-analysis of more than 40 studies, find no evidence of such a general relationship.

In this article, we apply the politics matters hypothesis to the development of executive government agendas across three different countries and across 19 major policy categories covering more than 50 years. Compared to the many studies that have focused on partisan effects on public expenditures, governments' issue agendas measured based on the governments' annual opening speeches in parliament offer a more likely test of partisan effects and hence stronger evidence if the hypotheses are rejected (as they are in the following tests). Although public expenditures are notoriously stable and reflect an incremental pattern of decision making (Wildavsky & Caiden, 2003), being mostly inherited from the past (Rose & Davies, 1994) and generally constrained by a plethora of other factors, the government is largely free to weight and prioritize the issues it wants to emphasize in the annual opening speeches.

As government change is more or less always a result of elections, the politics matters literature is in effect a perspective stressing the role of general elections as drivers of change in government policy priorities. More generally, this elections perspective draws on an "actor preference" perspective. Besides having different policy positions on the same issues, actors with different preferences can also be expected to have different priorities of issues, and government policy priorities thus change because actors with different issue priorities gain government power. This reasoning is consistent with the idea of

issue competition, that is, that political parties compete by emphasizing the issues they would prefer to see dominate politics (Budge & Farlie, 1983). And the issues that will be considered beneficial to a right-wing government are probably not the same issues that are beneficial to a left-wing government because different parties typically “own” different issues in the eyes of the public (see Petrocik, 1996). In sum, though the politics matters literature has not previously been applied to the question about change and stability in executive government agendas, it seems fair to derive the following “partisan shift hypothesis” from the politics matters perspective:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): A shift in party government results in a shift in the government’s issue agenda.

Another version of the election perspective on change in governments’ issue priorities is “party mandate” theory (Budge & Hofferbert, 1990; Klingemann, Hofferbert, & Budge, 1994). According to this view, the classic politics matters approach has overlooked important party effects by treating interparty differences as static and each party’s policy priorities as intrinsically time-invariant (see Klingeman et al., 1994, 14). Utilizing party manifestos to measure political parties’ issue priorities over time, several studies within this literature demonstrate that such issue priorities vary from election to election (see Bara, 2005; Budge & Hofferbert, 1990; Hofferbert & Budge, 1992; McDonald & Budge, 2005). Hence, rather than representing long-term ideological commitments, these manifestos represent the parties’ current priorities of policy issues and in Hofferbert, Budge, and colleagues’ analyses the manifestoes generally show a better relation with public expenditure changes than the time-invariant ideological position of the incumbent parties. Although this analysis of the correspondence between what a party announces before an election and what it does after an election certainly represents an important modification of the politics matters approach, it still suggests that elections are a general driver of changes in governments agendas—even when the election does not result in a partisan shift of government. Related to this argument is the literature on mandate perceptions in Congress (Grossback, Peterson, & Stimson, 2005). In this view, elections can provide new information, bring in new legislators, and first of all change the perception of the issue priorities of the electorate. Furthermore, since mandate effects eventually dissipate as the election becomes ever more distant over time, mandate effects are exclusively a 1st-year phenomenon. Hence, based on the idea that elections constitute a major source of change in governments’ issue agendas, the following “mandate hypothesis” can be derived:

Hypothesis 2 (H2): More change in governments' issue agenda in the year after elections than in other years between elections.

Finally, a comparative hypothesis can be developed by incorporating the effects of political institution on election and partisan effects. Schmidt (1996), for instance, argues that politics matter only under certain institutional conditions, that is, a political system that puts only few constraints on governments' room to maneuver. The most likely place to find such effects is thus majoritarian political systems like the British political system. A similar logic has been advanced with regard to the effect of electoral mandates (Klingemann et al., 1994, pp. 17-19). Effects of election mandates and partisan shift ought to be stronger in majority systems than in multiparty coalition systems where the governing parties need to show regard for the coalitional partners. This implies the following "institutional hypothesis":

Hypothesis 3 (H3): The effects of partisan shifts and electoral mandates are stronger the more the political system concentrates power in a single government party.

Data

The traditional approach to analyzing government's policy priorities is through studies of the development of public spending figures (see, e.g., Blais et al., 1993; Hofferbert & Budge, 1992; Imbeau et al., 2001; Rose & Davies, 1994). The attractive features of public spending include that it is a unified and standardized measure of public policy and certainly a central aspect of many activities in the political system. However, as an over-time cross-national measure of *all* policy domains of government priorities, public spending data have a number of limitations. Problems of cross-national and over-time comparability because of changes and differences in budgetary principles are well known, but more fundamentally public spending is not necessarily a valid indicator of government priorities in relation to many issues.¹ Regulatory policies, for instance, are not important for what they cost but for what they do, and in terms of regulatory policies, very different policy alternatives may be almost indistinguishable in terms of costs. Furthermore, many other factors than government priorities affect budgetary developments, making public budgets a somewhat indirect measure of governments' issue priorities.

As an alternative measure, executive speeches have exactly the advantages of cross-issue, cross-country, and over-time comparability and of being

a rather direct measure of government policy priorities. Furthermore, the public and high-profile nature of annual executive speeches implies that governments are very easily held accountable for the policy priorities laid out in the speeches, making it highly likely that the policy priorities presented will also in fact become policy (also see Breeman et al., 2009; John & Jennings, 2010), a fact that also takes the sting out of the potential objection against speeches representing words not actions. A government has to fulfill the pledges made in speeches by for instance initiating new legislation and regulation. However, compared to budgets and public spending measures, the executive speeches are much less constrained and much more directly shaped by the government, and the speeches therefore represent a much more likely case for identifying effects of partisan color and electoral mandate than government spending or budgets.

More particularly, this article analyzes government priorities by comparing annual executive speeches over more than 50 years in three countries: the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Denmark. This choice of countries ensures relevant institutional variation across the countries. The United Kingdom is the typical Westminster two-party system. Denmark and the Netherlands are both multiparty systems but differ with regard to government type. In Denmark, minority governments, often coalitions, are typical, whereas the Netherlands is a country of majority governments that are always coalitions. Thus, we would expect the strongest election effects in the United Kingdom and stronger effects in the Netherlands compared to Denmark.

All three countries have an annual executive speech tradition. Despite differences in the exact character of the executive speeches institutions, the institutions in the three countries serve the same basic political purpose, which makes them suitable for comparison: In all three countries, the primary purpose of the annual executive speech is to lay out in public the government's priorities for the next session of parliament. They contain announcements of executive priorities, new legislative projects and the policy focus of the government. In all three countries the governing cabinet is accountable for its contents, although the speeches in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands are read by the Queen (see Breeman et al., 2009; Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010; John & Jennings, 2010).²

In sum, decisions about the content of the executive speeches are an important and high-profile component of the political cycle in all three countries. The issues mentioned in the speeches provide a signal, at a particular point in time, of the priorities of the core executives. Because of the limited amount of legislative time available, the executive has to prioritize its agenda for the forthcoming session, including topics and problems that it considers to be urgent. Some elements of the legislative agenda might be included in response

to specific crises, media coverage, or spikes in the level of public attention, whereas others might entail routine business and gradual implementation of manifesto commitments through the speeches that occur over the lifetime of a government. Hence, the executive speeches are not merely symbolic but address policy priorities and policy changes. In all cases, the executive speech is followed by a debate between government and parliament.

For the U.K. and the Dutch cases, we analyze the speeches from 1945 until 2006. In the Danish case, data are available from 1953 and until 2006. For the Danish case, 1953 constitutes a natural starting because of a major constitutional reform involving the abolition of the second chamber.

More particularly, in each of the three countries the policy content of speeches is coded based on the coding scheme developed by the Comparative Policy Agendas Project and presented in the introduction to this special issue (also see Baumgartner, Jones, & Wilkerson, 2002). Using this coding scheme provides a measure of government priorities coded across 19 major topics and covering up to the past 60 years (see Table A1 in the appendix). Where many budget or agenda-setting studies have focused on only a few issues, this data set thus covers the entire policy space. Based on this common coding scheme, each executive speech was coded using sentences or quasi-sentences as coding units.³ Since all speeches contain a number of symbolic or very general statements with no policy content, a special category was created for such sentences. The percentage of sentences coded in this category is approximately 8% for Denmark, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. Thus, clearly the speeches in all three countries contain substantial policy content that can be compared across both time and countries.

How to Measure Change and Stability in Executive Speeches

To analyze whether elections and shifts of government change governments' policy agendas, we need a measure of agenda stability across successive government speeches. To that end we use a measure of agenda stability inspired by the issue overlap measure developed by Sigelman and Buell (2004). First, the government's relative issue emphasis is calculated by dividing, for each year and each speech, the number of sentences devoted to an issue by the total number of sentences in the executive speech. These numbers are then combined into a single measure of agenda stability across successive government speeches. To understand the logic of this measure, consider a case with two successive executive speeches and three potential issues to address and where attention to the three issues is distributed as in Table 1.

Table 1. Hypothetical Example of Agenda Stability

	Issue 1 (%)	Issue 2 (%)	Issue 3 (%)	Total (%)
Government speech Time 1	40	15	45	100
Government speech Time 2	50	20	30	100

In this case, the absolute differences between the two government speeches would sum to 30 ($|40 - 50| + |15 - 20| + |45 - 30|$). Since a value of 0 represents perfect agenda stability and a value of 200 represents perfect agenda instability, this hypothetical example would be a case of relatively strong agenda stability between Time 1 and Time 2. Standardizing this measure to range between 0 and 100 and subtracting from 100 to convert it into a measure of stability rather than instability, the agenda stability (AS) measure can be expressed as:

$$AS_t = 100 - (\sum_{i=1}^n |GS_t - GS_{t-1}|) / 2 \tag{1}$$

where GS_t and GS_{t-1} is the percentage of the total government speech devoted to a particular issue at Time t and Time $t-1$, and the absolute differences between them are summed over all n of the potential issues on the agendas. Hence, if AS_t equals 100, the issue composition of the government agenda in year t is identical to the issue composition of the government agenda in year $t-1$. On the other hand, if AS_t equals 0, the two successive government agendas have been focused on entirely different issues. A score of, say, 70 for at given year would indicate a 70% overlap between that year’s government agenda and the previous year’s agenda.

An objection to using a coding scheme with 19 issues might be that agenda stability is driven by the zeros in the data set and hence by the inferior but not the important issues. However, as shown in Table A2 in the appendix, one of the qualities of the agenda stability measure defined above is that it is unaffected by the addition of zero-attention observations. Table A2 also offers a concrete illustration of the calculation of the agenda stability measure.

To increase confidence in the conclusions we also report the results when using two other measures of government agenda stability. One is focusing on numerical average year-to-year percentage change in each issue’s share of the government agenda, and the other is based on the statistical correlation between subsequent speeches (see Breeman et al., 2009). In combination, we

believe these measures provide a solid investigation of the central question about whether partisan shifts and/or elections are systematically reflected in governments' issue priorities.

Findings

The first question is to what extent successive governments assign their attention to the same issues. According to the lower part of Table 2, the answer is that in every country the average score is above 70 on the 0 to 100 scale of year-to-year agenda stability. With scores clustering between 75 (Denmark) and 77 (the Netherlands), Table 2 indicates that, on average, the priorities of successive governments were about three quarters of the way toward perfect agenda stability. This also implies that, on average, about 25% of the government priorities in year t would have had to be reallocated to result in a perfect match with the issue priorities of the government in year $t-1$.

Thus, on a year-to-year basis, these scores of agenda stability are relatively high. It is important to note, however, that Table 2 by no means displays a picture of invariant order and stability across time and in all countries. A closer look at the results reveals marked over-time variation in the minimum and maximum scores of agenda stability. In some years the scores approach 90, which implies extreme agenda stability, but they also drop to around 50 in other years. The central question is whether these fluctuations around generally high year-to-year agenda stability are systematically linked to postelection years or to years with new partisan governments.

The findings shown in Table 2 do not suggest that (often election induced) shifts in governments matter much to the allocation of attention in executive speeches to the various issues and problems facing a given government. The differences in average agenda stability scores are minor across the various comparisons in Table 2, and none of the differences in scores come close to statistical significance at conventional levels ($p < .05$). For instance, the first executive speech after a shift from a left-dominated (right-dominated) government to a right-dominated (left-dominated) government show, on average, a 73.6 overlap with the last speech given by the previous government, which is only slightly less agenda stability than the average score of 75.2 found within the group of continuing governments. Similar patterns occur when comparing the sample of postelection speeches to the sample of other speeches. We also tested the effect of a change in the prime minister and the effect of a new government—regardless of whether an election has been held or not, but these additional findings (not shown) clearly corroborate the non-effect findings. Furthermore, the fact that the findings across the three

Table 2. Agenda Stability, Elections, and Left–Right Change in Government Color

	Average value of agenda stability measures			
	New government, left–right change (A)	Continuing government (B)	Difference (A – B)	t-value
All three countries	73.6	76.0	–2.4	–1.57
Denmark	71.7	75.2	–3.5	–1.23
Netherlands	76.1	76.8	–0.7	–0.32
United Kingdom	71.3	76.0	–4.7	–1.62
	First speech after election (A)	Nonelection (B)	Difference (A – B)	t-value
All three countries	75.0	76.0	–1.0	–0.81
Denmark	75.2	74.3	0.9	0.42
Netherlands	75.7	77.1	–1.4	–0.65
United Kingdom	73.6	76.1	–2.5	–1.24
	Overall mean value	Overall max value	Overall min value	
Denmark	75	88	54	
Netherlands	77	90	40	
United Kingdom	76	85	53	

countries are very similar indicates that the differences in political institutions across the three countries do not have much effect on the role of elections in shaping the dynamics of executive agendas.

These conclusions gain further support when disaggregating the results to the topic level using a measure of numerical average year-to-year percentage change in topic attention.⁴ According to Table 3, across-countries and within-countries average numerical changes in the government agenda are slightly higher in years where a new government succeeded a government of a different partisan observation, but none of the effects are strong enough to yield statistical significance at the conventional level of $p < .05$, though the United Kingdom is close at $t = 1.92$. Similarly, disaggregating

Table 3. The Effect of Elections on Government Issue Priorities

	Numerical average year-to-year percentage change in topic attention							
	New government, left-right change (A)	Continuing government (B)	Difference (A - B)	t-value	First speech after election (C)	Nonelection (D)	Difference (C - D)	t-value
All three countries	2.77	2.52	0.25	1.85	2.64	2.53	0.11	0.96
Denmark	2.98	2.61	0.37	1.39	2.61	2.71	-0.10	-0.48
Netherlands	2.52	2.44	0.008	0.38	2.55	2.41	0.14	0.78
United Kingdom	3.02	2.53	0.50	1.92	2.78	2.51	0.27	1.48
Topics								
Macroeconomics	7.17	4.95	2.22*	2.01	6.44	4.81	-1.63	1.84
Civil rights, minority issues, and civil liberties	2.44	2.29	0.15	0.30	2.27	2.33	-0.06	-0.14
Health	1.34	1.80	-0.46	-1.19	1.67	1.75	-0.08	-0.25
Agriculture	2.23	1.77	0.45	1.18	2.12	1.73	0.39	1.28
Labor, employment, and immigration	4.16	3.19	0.97	1.59	3.57	3.25	0.32	0.65
Education	3.60	2.80	0.80	1.68	3.14	2.84	0.30	0.78
Environment	1.52	1.47	0.05	0.15	1.56	1.44	0.12	0.43
Energy	1.87	1.48	0.39	0.96	1.49	1.56	-0.07	-0.21
Transportation	1.78	1.95	-0.17	-0.47	1.92	1.93	-0.01	-0.05
Law, crime and family issues	2.33	2.79	-0.46	-0.76	2.17	2.96	-0.79	-1.65

(continued)

Table 3. (continued)

	Numerical average year-to-year percentage change in topic attention						
	New government, left-right change (A)	Continuing government (B)	Difference (A - B)	First speech after election (C)	Nonelection (D)	Difference (C - D)	t-value
Social welfare	2.60	2.45	0.15	2.44	2.48	-0.04	-0.12
Housing and urban development	2.17	2.08	0.09	2.23	2.03	0.20	0.62
Banking, finance, and domestic commerce	2.35	2.34	0.01	2.19	2.41	-0.22	-0.75
Defense	3.03	2.53	0.50	2.75	2.55	0.20	0.39
Space, science, technology and communications	1.17	1.21	-0.04	0.98	1.30	-0.32	-1.42
Foreign trade	2.42	2.28	0.14	2.16	2.37	-0.21	-0.55
International affairs and foreign aid	4.86	5.21	-0.35	5.10	5.18	-0.08	-0.10
Government operations	3.40	3.19	0.21	3.83	2.96	0.87	1.73
Public lands and water management	2.26	2.13	0.13	2.04	2.19	-0.15	0.52

* $p \leq .05$. Two-tailed difference of proportion tests.

the results to the level of individual topics, we find that in 14 out of 19 topics changes are actually higher in years with a left–right change of government, but only with respect to macroeconomics is the difference statistically significant. Furthermore, when subdividing the results by country we find a statistically significant difference in only 2 out of 19 topics for the United Kingdom and in 1 out of 19 topics for Denmark and the Netherlands, respectively.⁵ When looking at pure election effects, the right part of Table 3 shows that such effects are even weaker.⁶ In addition, we have examined the hypotheses using average values of year-to-year Pearson correlations (see Breeman et al., 2009). Again, these analyses support the null findings reported above.⁷

Thus, there is no evidence that elections, change in government colors, or change in prime ministers systematically affect the level of change and stability in government agendas, a finding that corresponds with studies of agenda setting in France (Baumgartner, Grossman, & Brouard, 2009), the United States (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005, pp. 84–85), and the United Kingdom (John & Jennings, 2010), though John and Jennings (2010) in the latter case report some limited support for party effects.

Although the findings do not offer much support for the three hypotheses (H1–H3) focusing on election as a source of change in executive agendas, the clustering around 75% of agenda stability implies that new governments to a large extent inherit the problems and priorities of old governments, and these obligations also shape the new governments' agenda. However, this does not imply that governments' issue agendas do not change significantly over time. An average agenda stability score of 75 implies that, on average, around 25% of government attention has been reallocated between topics from one year to another. If this yearly variation in government attention has a stable direction over some years, such changes accumulate into substantial changes in executive agendas, not from year to year but over a number of years. Hence, a growth of government attention to some issues over a number of years and the steady decline of others over the same period would in the longer run amount to a substantial change in government agendas. And since the focus on elections and government turnover derived from the politics matters approach does not explain significant change in government agendas, the question then is what the role is (if any) of political parties and electoral competition in understanding change and stability in government agendas. We can provide no definitive answer to this question, but inspired by policy agenda-setting theory, we conclude the analysis with an illustration and discussion of some long-term developments in government agendas overlooked by the traditional focus on the effect of parties and elections. Governments'

issue agendas do change substantially over time; the question is what drives this change if not elections.

A Second Look at Changes and Stability in Executive Agendas

Policy agenda-setting theory (Baumgartner, Green-Pedersen, & Jones, 2006; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005) suggests a different view of what drives changes in government executive agendas. From this perspective, the partisan color of the government is less important in terms of the driver of change. Rather, *policy responsibility* is the main mechanism driving the policy priorities of governments because voters tend to see government parties as responsible for policy developments even if they did not have any substantial influence on these developments (also see Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010). It is for instance well documented that governments tend to be punished by the electorate for poor economic developments, whether or not they have had any direct control of these developments (Achen & Bartels, 2004; Lewis-Beck & Paldam, 2000; Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2007). When the financial sector breaks down, waiting lists in the health care sector increase, or the effects of climate change become visible, governments—regardless of color or political institutional structure—have to deliver policy solutions. If one, for instance, wants to understand President Obama’s prioritization of policy problems, knowing his party color is one thing, but the policy problems facing the president—such as the economic crisis, the war in Afghanistan, and global warming—are probably much more important for understanding his issue agenda.

According to this perspective, democratic political systems may ignore new problems and may resist change for years, but eventually governments do respond to new information and/or to new understandings of existing problems. Recent examples of the role of new information—or rather a reweighting of available information—are new research on climate change, the financial breakdown in 2008, and focusing events such as September 11, 2001. The important point is that governments from this perspective not only address inherited problems but also respond to new and previously ignored problems (see Jones & Baumgartner, 2005).

With respect to election mandates, the policy agendas perspective does not preclude election effects, but elections are considered neither a necessary nor a main driver of change in governments’ issue priorities. A model of governments must incorporate more than the party color of the government; it must take account of changing circumstances—that is, it must incorporate response to information flows (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005, p. 103). And since new

information can flow into the system independent of elections, there is no reason to expect that major changes in governments' issue priorities will be confined to election mandates (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005, pp. 84-85).

To illustrate empirically the potential of a policy agenda-setting approach, we trace more closely selected policy topics' development on the government agenda over time and across the three countries. We do not claim to give a full account of the development at the level of individual issues. The choice of individual issue for further analysis is central from a policy agenda-setting perspective. Only at this level is it possible to discuss the role of policy problems and parties' competition around them. Thus, we aim to qualify the above analyses with a closer look at some of the long-term increasing or decreasing trends in government attention to particular issues. To focus the discussion on more recent trends and to facilitate the presentation, 1980 is chosen as starting point.⁸ Furthermore, we focus on trends that are similar across the three countries. This is a deliberate choice to be able to exemplify the role of policy problems and problem definition for governments' policy agendas rather than an argument that the governments' policy agendas at the issue level have developed similarly across the three countries.

The Economy

In all three countries, as is evident from Figure 1, the economy was the major policy issue for governments in the early 1980s. This was the culmination of governments struggling with the economic crisis through the 1970s. The economic problems were increasingly defined as an economic *crisis* (Damgaard, Gerlich, & Richardsson, 1989; Scharpf, 1991), and this crisis definition was the major policy platform for the Thatcher government in the United Kingdom, the Lubbers government in the Netherlands, and the Schlüter governments in Denmark (Breeman et al., 2008; Green-Pedersen, 2002; Jennings & John, 2009). However, such a strong government prioritization requires exactly a widespread perception of "crisis," and since the 1980s the economy has declined steadily on government policy agendas in the Netherlands, Denmark, and the United Kingdom.

In accordance with the quantitative analyses presented above, this decline of government attention to economic issues does not seem to be closely related to the ideological profile of the governments. For instance, if one compares the right-wing government taking office in Denmark in 1982 to the right-wing government taking office in 2001, it is striking how much they differ in their prioritization of the economy. In 1982, it was the main issue for the new government, taking up one third of the entire speech. In 2002, when the first speech from the new government took place, the economy was just one among many important issues.

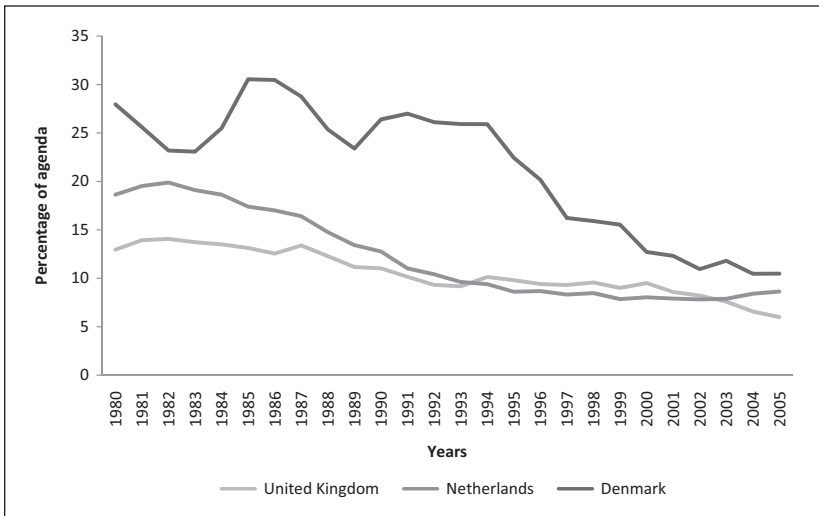


Figure 1. Attention to macroeconomics

Of course, the recent financial crisis and its severe consequences have caused a renewed increase in government prioritization of the economy. However, from a policy agendas perspective the amount of government attention devoted to the economy will probably be more dependent on the prevailing definition of the problem—including the severity, frequency, and proximity of the consequences—than on the color of the government parties and the political institutional structures of the country.

Health

The decline of the economy as a government priority provided agenda space for other issues. The perhaps clearest example of an elevated issue is health care. As Figure 2 shows, attention to the health care issue increased dramatically in the first part of the 1990s and has remained at a relatively high level ever since. Health is furthermore a very illustrative example of how the interplay between problem development and problem definition generates substantial attention from governments no matter their party color. As argued by Green-Pedersen and Wilkerson (2006), the policy responsibility for governments in the health care area is becoming increasingly difficult to handle because of rapid medical technological development. This development offers many new opportunities of diagnoses and treatments but at the same time makes cost control increasingly difficult (Freeman, 2000; Moran, 1999). Furthermore,

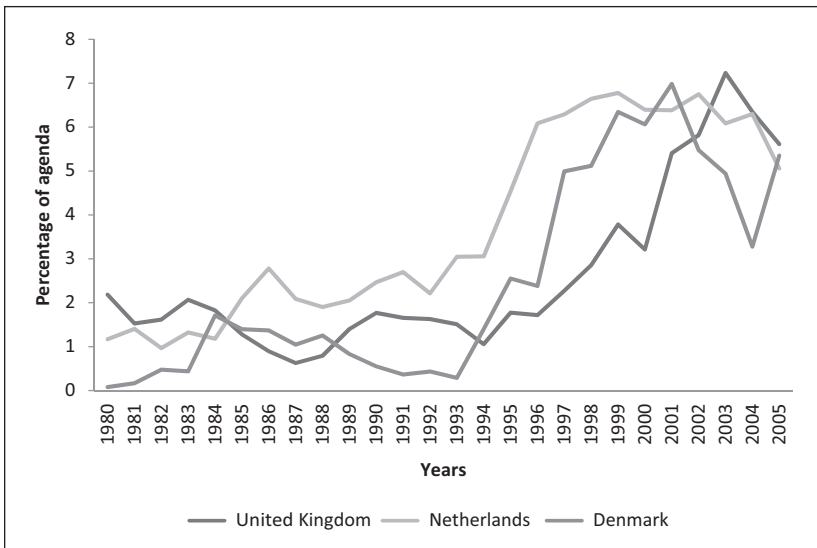


Figure 2. Attention to health care

there are several characteristics of health care as a policy issue, which makes policy responsibility a challenging task for governments when prioritization becomes increasingly necessary. Health care is often about life and death and is relevant for the entire population, and this makes cost control arguments difficult for governments. In other words, health care is thus increasingly becoming a policy issue, where blame avoidance is a central element of having the responsibility, no matter the exact organization of the health care system (Blank & Burau, 2004). As is evident from Figure 2, this forces governments, no matter a U.K. Labour government or a Danish right-wing government, to try to document their policy competence through policy initiatives as they present them in executive speeches.

Law and Order

Another characteristic example of an elevated policy issue is law and order. Crime and law and order are hardly new issues and are not influenced by technological developments like health care is. Furthermore, the increase in attention to this issue has not been closely linked to a parallel increase in crime trends (Estrada, 2004). Behind this increased prioritization is rather a redefinition of the issue into a question of being “tough on crime,” which

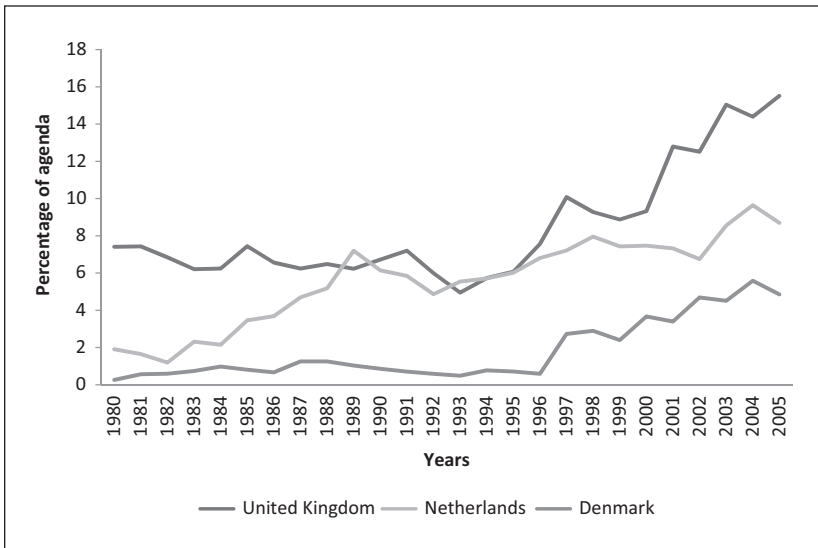


Figure 3. Attention to law and order

has driven policy initiatives such as longer sentences (see Balvig, 2005). Furthermore, though the crime issue is generally owned by the Conservatives, a closer look at the trends in crime policies shows that attention to crime has increased the most in times of Labour or social democratic governments. As concluded by Estrada (2004), “Crime is a social problem that is primarily placed on the political agenda by conservatives when social democratic governments are in power” (p. 438). This is also reflected in Figure 3, where attention to the crime issue increased during the U.K. Labour governments and the Danish social-democratic governments in the 1990s. This finding is consistent with a more general pattern of the opposition being a rather powerful agenda setter compared to the government (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010).

In combination with the rise and decline of other issues, the constant or slightly upward trending crime statistics certainly represent politicization opportunities for the conservative oppositions, but again the law and order issue demonstrates the important interplay between problems and problem definitions. Hence, politics matters with respect to government attention to the law and order issue, but in a more dynamic and complex way than traditionally argued by proponents of the role of elections and party governments. And these dynamics, we argue based on the comprehensive empirical evidence reported in this article, are better identified using a policy agendas perspective than a more conventional focus on elections and parties.

In sum, year-to-year change in governments' policy agendas may be only moderate, but when the prioritization of different issues is viewed from a long-term perspective, substantial changes in Western European countries become visible. Across countries, increasing prioritization of issues such as health care and law and order at the expense of the economy is thus visible. The core claim of a policy agenda-setting perspective is that if we want to understand government agendas we need to take issues and policy problems related to them as our starting point. The question is then how party competition turns these problems into politics. Elections by themselves do not play a central role, but that does not mean that party politics is not central.

Conclusion

This article is the first comparative study of the executive policy agendas in three Western European countries. Understanding how modern governments prioritize attention to different policy issues is a crucial question but one that has received surprisingly limited attention despite the literature on government policy making. The aim of the article has been to advance our understanding of governments' issue priorities in two related ways.

First, the article provided a comprehensive test of the role of elections in change and stability in executive government agendas. Elections often change the party color of the government, and having a government of a different color and thus different issue preferences would offer an explanation of the dynamics of governments' issue priorities very much in line with how the policy actions of government are most typically studied in political science, be it the politics matters approach or party mandate theory. However, empirically there was little support to the hypotheses that stress elections as an important cause of change in governments' issue priorities.

Second, in response to this rejection of the politics matters hypothesis, the article introduced a policy agendas perspective on government's issue prioritization. Many aspects of this perspective need further development and elaboration to represent a fully developed and rigorously theoretical alternative, but it does emphasize some important aspects of modern governments overlooked by traditional models of elections and parties' issue competition. To understand governments' prioritization of attention to different issues, such a perspective is necessary. Problem development and problem redefinition of individual policy issues are important drivers of governments' issue agendas, and this becomes clear when studying the long-term development of government agendas.

To conclude the article, it is worth highlighting some of the implications of studying executive government agendas from a policy agenda-setting

perspective. One question regards the underlying theory of governments as political actors. The traditional political science approach is the one embedded in the politics matters approach, namely that the most important characteristic of a government is its party color. The “issue intrusion” idea central to the agenda-setting perspective (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005) points to a different aspect of governments. It stresses the importance of government being expected by citizens to deliver solutions to a wide range of complicated policy problems for which no real solution might exist. How do you solve, for instance, the problem of securing costs containment within health care while satisfying the demands for “world-class” health care from citizens? Thus, despite the fact that annual executive speeches provide governments with a unique opportunity to focus on their preferred issues, the major driver of the agenda of governments is their attempt to present credible solutions to the wide range of policy problems facing modern societies (also see Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010). Simply being the government seems to have much more significant implications for the executive agenda than the varying political and institutional characteristics of governments.

However, once issues move further down the policy process to policy decisions factors such as the color of the government and the political institutions are likely to become increasingly important. For instance, the U.S. political system and President Obama being from the Democratic Party are obviously central factors in understanding U.S. health care reform in terms of policy content and the decision-making process. However, this becomes relevant in the case only when the issue of health care reform has attracted substantial government attention in the first place, and traditional studies of government have hardly addressed what one might term the first order attention question at all.

This article does not imply that political parties do not try to draw attention to preferable issues and redefine them in ways the parties find attractive. Issue competition among political parties is obviously important, such as in the right-wing redefinition of law and order. The aim of the article is rather to argue two things with regard to such competition. First, our understanding of such issue competition needs to integrate a focus on parties’ issue strategies with an understanding that issues mean policy problems and that the development of policy problems and their redefinition is the substance of issue attention. To attract attention to issues, political parties need policy problems defined in a favorable way. Furthermore, whether or not parties find themselves in government and opposition is a crucial variable in understanding issue strategies because policy responsibility is a central factor shaping governments’ prioritization of issue attention (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010). A clear illustration of this point is

the elevation of the law and order issue during times of conservatives in opposition.

Second, there is little reason to focus on elections when understanding the timing of major changes in government agendas. Government and opposition fight constantly over issue attention as policy problem developments are independent of elections. Thus, the argument of this article is not that party competition is irrelevant in understanding what issues government come to prioritize but rather that we learn little about the timing of such processes if we focus on elections.

Appendix

Speeches Traditions in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Denmark

United Kingdom. The Speech from the Throne is a permanent fixture of the political calendar in Westminster, occurring at the start of the parliamentary session. Since 1928, the parliamentary year has begun in October or November except after an election, when the first act of business for an incoming government is the opening of parliament with a Speech from the Throne (John & Jennings, 2010).

The Netherlands. In the Netherlands, the queen addresses both houses of Parliament at the beginning of each parliamentary year, on Prinsjesdag, traditionally the third Tuesday of September. As in Britain, this speech is known as the queen's speech, and it is written by the prime minister on behalf of the whole government. The formal presentation is surrounded by ceremony, and the speech contains symbols and a pacifying language, but most of its content is substantive policy intentions. Together with the queen's speech, the government presents the annual budget, which is a separate set of formal documents. The queen's speeches are generally considered an important set of policy statements in the Dutch system (see Breeman et al., 2009).

Denmark. In Denmark, the prime minister gives an annual speech each year at the opening of parliament, the first Tuesday in October. The speech is the central element in the opening ceremony of parliament with the presence of the royal family. The prime minister has free hands to prioritize the content of this speech. It always receives considerable press coverage and is thus a unique opportunity for the government to present its policy focus to the public (also see Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010).

Table A1. Executive Speeches

	United Kingdom		Netherlands		Denmark	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Macroeconomics	10.0	4.1	15.7	7.9	20.8	9.5
2. Civil rights, minority issues, and civil liberties ^a	2.3	2.7	3.6	2.5	2.8	3.9
3. Health	2.3	2.4	2.8	2.6	1.6	2.6
4. Agriculture	3.4	2.1	3.0	2.4	2.1	2.3
5. Labor, employment, and immigration	2.9	2.6	8.0	4.7	9.1	5.9
6. Education	4.2	3.0	5.6	3.1	5.1	3.1
7. Environment	2.0	1.6	2.2	2.2	2.8	2.3
8. Energy	1.6	2.0	1.4	2.4	1.6	2.5
10. Transportation	3.2	2.5	3.4	2.5	1.6	2.0
12. Law, crime, and family issues	6.4	4.8	4.0	3.9	1.6	2.9
13. Social welfare	2.7	2.4	6.6	3.3	3.9	2.9
14. Housing and urban development	3.4	2.7	4.3	3.0	2.9	2.6
15. Banking, finance, and domestic commerce	2.8	2.2	2.9	2.4	3.5	2.7
16. Defense	9.1	6.1	5.0	2.6	5.0	3.6
17. Space, science, technology and communications	0.7	1.2	1.8	1.7	1.3	1.8
18. Foreign trade	3.9	3.1	2.7	2.8	5.7	3.5
19. International affairs and foreign aid	24.3	7.0	18.1	7.6	17.3	8.2
20. Government operations	5.0	4.0	6.9	4.0	6.9	4.5
21. Public lands and water management	9.9	3.3	2.0	1.4	4.4	2.7
Years	1945-2005		1945-2007		1953-2006	

Cells contain means (percentages) with standard deviations.

a. In the European context immigration is dominantly a rights or nationality issue, and accordingly the 530 code is incorporated in Topic 2 under the 230 subtopic.

Table A2. Hypothetical Example of Agenda Stability (With and Without Zeros)

	Government speech, t	Government speech, t-1		Government speech, t	Government speech t-1
10 most important issues					
Issue 1	15	5	Issue 1	15	5
Issue 2	5	20	Issue 2	5	20
Issue 3	10	10	Issue 3	10	10
Issue 4	25	5	Issue 4	25	5
Issue 5	5	25	Issue 5	5	25
Issue 6	10	15	Issue 6	10	15
Issue 7	15	5	Issue 7	15	5
Issue 8	5	5	Issue 8	5	5
Issue 9	5	5	Issue 9	5	5
Issue 10	5	5	Issue 10	5	5
9 unimportant issues					
			Issue 11	0	0
			Issue 12	0	0
			Issue 13	0	0
			Issue 14	0	0
			Issue 15	0	0
			Issue 16	0	0
			Issue 17	0	0
			Issue 18	0	0
			Issue 19	0	0
Agenda stability (AS*)	60		Agenda stability	60	

Agenda stability is calculated using Equation 1. That is, $AS^* = 100 - (|15 - 5| + |5 - 20| + |10 - 10| + |25 - 5| + |5 - 25| + |10 - 15| + |15 - 5| + |5 - 5| + |5 - 5| + |5 - 5|) / 2 = 60$.

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Notes

1. For good discussions of the pro and cons of using budgets as indicators of public policies, see Hogwood (1992).
2. For a more detailed description of the traditions, see the appendix.
3. The Danish speeches have been coded using natural sentences as coding unit. The Dutch and British data have been coded using “quasi-sentences.” A quasi-sentence (or policy statement) constitutes an expression of a single policy idea or issue, while not necessarily a complete sentence. Generally this unit of analysis is identifiable from the use of punctuation and conjunctions. For a further discussion of the identification of quasi-sentences in executive speeches, see Jennings et al. (2011). In the United Kingdom and the Netherlands the reliability of manual coders was on average around 80% in the identification of quasi-sentences and for all three countries around 85% in coding of the policy content at the major level.
4. Numerical changes are used to avoid positive and negative changes canceling each other out.
5. These results are not shown but are available from the authors on request.
6. Additional analyses show that a similar conclusion applies to the effect of a shift in prime minister and/or a non-election-based shift in government.
7. Results are available from the authors on request.
8. To aid the interpretation of long-term trends, the graphs shown in Figures 1, 2, and 3 represent moving averages. Particularly, we apply exponential moving averages where the weighting for each older data point decreases exponentially, giving much more importance to recent observations while still not discarding older observations entirely.

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