

Legislative Productivity in Comparative Perspective:

An Introduction to the Comparative Agendas Project

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Abstract

We introduce an ambitious comparative politics research program, the Comparative Agendas Project, which brings together scholars from many nations who share an interest in developing systematic indicators of issue attention and policy outputs within their nations' political systems, and advances collaborative, comparative policy research by applying the same set of attention and output indicators to each political system. In this paper, we introduce this project by focusing on one form of activity, *the production of laws*. Our goals are to introduce our approach and data, discuss some of the methodological challenges involved, and begin to apply three general methods that may prove valuable for systematically comparing policymaking patterns across nations as our project moves forward.

Introduction

In this paper, we introduce an ambitious comparative politics research program. The Comparative Agendas Project has two main purposes. The first is to bring together scholars from many nations who share an interest in developing systematic indicators of issue attention and policy outputs within their nations' political systems. The second is to advance collaborative, comparative policy research by applying the same set of attention and output indicators to every political system. Constructing a policy topic system that effectively captures changing issue attention within a country over many years is challenging enough. The Comparative Agendas Project seeks to develop a single topic system that effectively captures the range of issues addressed across most advanced industrialized democracies.

For the first time, scholars will be able reliably to compare the attention that one country's government devotes to an issue to the attention that issue receives in other countries. Existing studies have dealt with issues in terms of 'policy distance', using theories of party competition and spatial models with median legislators. The main focus was to predict government composition, payoffs and general government performance. These studies have analyzed party manifestoes and government programmes as well as government output comparatively (Budge et al 1987; Keman and Budge 1990; Laver and Budge 1992; Klingemann et al 1994; Laver et al 2003; McDonald and Budge 2005).

In our approach, the analytical emphasis is on which issues are addressed – at different points in time, some issues win the attention battle and others lose. We seek to analyze policy agendas all through the policy production cycle, from multiple sources of input to government output. This measure of activity can then be used to test longstanding questions about agenda setting, institutional design, and policy diffusion, among others.

The starting point is the Policy Agendas Project originally developed by Baumgartner and Jones for the U.S. (www.policyagendas.org). This system assigns a single label to each event at two levels of discrimination for a total of 19 major topics and 224 subtopics. In the U.S., this topic coding system has been applied to legislative, judicial, executive, and media activities from the Second World War to the present, encompassing nearly one million events in all. Other individual country projects such as that of Denmark are also now well developed and are generating papers and publications that shed new light on the evolution of politics within particular countries, as well as allowing for the study of broader political science questions (John & Margetts, 2003; Breunig, Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2005; Baumgartner, Green-Pedersen, and Jones 2006).

This paper uses this new system to compare issue attention across six countries. We focus on just one form of activity, *the production of laws*, during a limited time period, 1990-2003. The so-called law agenda is defined as the set of issues upon which statutes are enacted; it consists of a database of all laws, consistently coded by topic. Our goal is to introduce our approach and preliminary data and begin investigating some of the comparative questions that these data generate, discuss methodological challenges and introduce three methods for comparing policymaking patterns across countries. We discuss preliminary findings and relate them to institutional and other variables that may help explaining observed patterns across countries. As the data collection processes that we describe are still very much in progress, we refrain at this point from reaching any strong conclusions and formal theory testing, though as our progress progresses we expect to be able to be much more certain on many points. As we will

show, before we use our data to support strong conclusions about comparative policymaking processes, we need both to cover more years but also to assess the degree to which seemingly similar processes really are comparable in each system.

It is worth stressing from the outset how a policy agenda-setting view on political institutions differs from the perspective of traditional legislative studies. From the latter perspective, institutions structure decision making process, for instance by creating veto-players (Tsebelis 2002; Döring 1995). From this perspective, a check and balance system like the US one will often be characterized by gridlock and policy stalemate. From an agenda-setting perspective political institutions are also opportunity structures. They constitute different venues which political actors can use to generate attention and thus policy change (Baumgartner & Jones 1993). Thus, a political system like the US one is also sometimes characterized by rapid policy change. It is exactly this mixture of stability and change that a policy agenda-setting, unlike a traditional legislative approach can explain. In fact, because of the different approaches in the diverse research traditions, many questions are completely unexplored. We hope with our new data tools to begin exploring the policymaking implications of various institutional design features of Parliamentary government from a new perspective.

Studying Government Issue Agendas

The central question driving the Comparative Agendas Project is this: *How can we study the changing policy priorities of different governments in a comparable way?*

Addressing this central question requires a policy topic classification system with several characteristics. It must be *comprehensive*, capturing the full span of issues addressed across many countries. To allow for the study of changes in attention to different issues, the topics must also be *discriminating* and *mutually exclusive*. Finally, this topic system must also be *applied reliably* across time and from country to country. Otherwise, it would not be possible to know whether variations from one year to the next were caused by changes in the agenda or changes in how events were assigned to different topics.

Elsewhere, some of us have written about why coding systems based on keyword searches, or many off-the-shelf indexing systems, cannot be used to reliably study policy attention across time (Baumgartner, Jones and Wilkerson 2002). In the Comparative Agendas Project, we meet the above requirements by relying on trained human annotators who assign each event to one (and only one) topic, based on a general set of coding guidelines. Every event of government finds a place in our topic system (it is comprehensive) and each event finds a place in just one of these categories (it is discriminating and mutually exclusive). And we pay careful attention to ensuring that coders follow the same rules, and that the rules are applied across the entire historical period studied (therefore it is reliable). Table 1 lists the 19 major topic areas used.

Table 1. Major Topics of the Comparative Agendas Project

- 1 Macroeconomics
 - 2 Civil Rights, Minority Issues, Civil Liberties
 - 3 Health
 - 4 Agriculture
 - 5 Labor, Employment, and Immigration
 - 6 Education
 - 7 Environment
 - 8 Energy
 - 10 Transportation
 - 12 Law, Crime, and Family Issues
 - 13 Social Welfare
 - 14 Community Development and Housing Issues
 - 15 Banking, Finance, Domestic Commerce
 - 16 Defense
 - 17 Space, Science, Technology, Communications
 - 18 Foreign Trade
 - 19 International Affairs and Foreign Aid
 - 20 Government Operations
 - 21 Public Lands and Water Management
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How well does a single coding system work for different countries? The short answer is – quite well. The system was first developed, of course, for the U.S., so its application in other systems was not obvious. This was first attempted in Denmark, where a limited number of adjustments were required. For example, there is no subtopic for ‘fishing industry’ in the U.S. and the Danish team deemed this to be sufficiently important industry to warrant its own subtopic. Other country teams in Europe have tended to adopt the changes developed for Denmark, along with a few of their own relatively minor adjustments. For general comparative investigations at the major topic level, the system seems well suited for immediate application. In fact, across the more detailed 224 subtopics, the vast majority apply seamlessly across countries. Water pollution abatement, interest rates, unemployment, alcohol abuse, building highways, housing, and poverty reduction are examples where there are typically few problems in establishing even relatively specific topic classifications that are applicable in all countries so far investigated. However, less than 10 percent of the subtopics so far examined require some local adjustments, as in the fishing industry example mentioned above. Other examples of distinct national approaches include state relations with organized religion, the direct provision of health care and welfare services v. insurance regulation, questions dealing with exceptionally governed territories such as national capitals or autonomous regions, national-specific priorities such as Northern Ireland or the Basque area, international relations where different countries have more interaction with certain regions, or with the European Union, than others, and immigration and citizenship issues. In these areas we are working towards a system that will give us a nationally based system of classification that is also useful in comparative perspective. In any case, for this paper we limit ourselves to the 19 major topics and at this level of aggregation there are few problems of comparability.

An Example: The Production of Laws

Each country project is at a different stage. The U.S. and Danish projects are the most fully developed, having coded hundreds of thousands of government activities for topic, and

including many different types of government actions. For this paper, we asked each country team to focus its coding efforts on a common activity so that we might initiate our first fully comparative study. Thus, the results presented in this paper are based on the law agendas of 6 countries over approximately 14 years (table 2).

Table 2. Number of Laws by Country, 1990-2003

Country	Total number of laws
USA	3,346
France	1,273
UK	698
Spain	871
NL	2,260
DK	2,986

Each team has coded their country's laws (based on title or description) according to the Policy Agendas topic system. Figure 1 shows the allocation of attention in each country across the 19 topic areas, consistently defined.

Figure 1 here

Figure 1 presents the topics of laws between 1990 and 2003 in our 6 countries. At the first glance, some outliers appear. First, the international affairs are clearly over-represented in the French law agenda. Despite the presidential power in this area, the Parliament has to ratify international agreements and dedicates a substantial part of its law agenda (38%) to this task. Second, the part of the US law agenda devoted to « Government Operation » (26%) and « Public Lands and Water Management » (21%) departs from the other countries of our sample. Third, Spain (18%), Denmark (14%) and UK (14%) give more place to the « Macroeconomic Policy » topics in their law agenda than any other countries. Finally, « Labor » in Denmark and « Security and Justice » in UK and at a lesser level in Netherlands and Spain seems to reach highest level in the comparative distribution of attention amongst the law agendas. The content of the law agenda varies across countries but also substantially over time in each country. Most importantly, the data show that parliamentary effort is different by topic area. Some of these are true differences in priorities, whereas others may be related to the different tasks that parliamentary systems take on, as is seen by the large percentage of US laws devoted to relatively routine government operations matters; in other countries these may be left to executive branch discretion.

Figure 2 here

Figure 2 shows the allocation of attention over time in each country across the 19 topic areas, consistently defined. Each part of Figure 2 shows the same information, consistently formatted, for each country. Reading from the bottom of any Figure to the top, the topic areas are presented in the order listed in Table 1. Glancing at Part A, for example, it is clear that the US Congress allocates tremendous proportion of its law-making effort towards the two topics listed at the top of the Figure, Public Lands and Water Management, and Government Operations. In some years these two categories alone account for over half of legislative actions, in fact. In any case, a first look at the law-making agendas of six countries shows that attention can be allocated to different issues in different countries, that it may be volatile or

consistent over time, and that there are indeed important differences across the six political systems studied here. The figure about France, for example, shows a clear increasing pattern of the number of laws dedicated to international affairs between 1990 and 2003. In Spain, the proportion of laws about macro-economic policy dramatically varies from around 5% in 1999 to more than 30% in 1993. A similar variation may be distinguished about security & justice in UK. Conversely, in Netherlands, the allocation of laws per topics seems to be more stable across time.

Are the laws of different countries comparable?

The previous section introduces our project and provides some examples of the types of questions we are able to investigate for the first time. However, before we go too far in this direction, there are some methodological issues to consider that apply equally to any project attempting to compare similar activities across systems.

Suppose that we discovered that 15% of all French laws focused on defense issues, compared to just 6% of all laws in the U.S. Would it be appropriate to conclude that France devotes more lawmaking attention to defense issues than the U.S.? The assumption that ‘percentage of laws’ equals ‘percentage of attention’ may be problematic for a number of reasons. Within a single country, laws may vary in importance. For example, in the U.S., the public hears about important laws such as the U.S.A. Patriot Act. But many of the laws passed every year do much less important things such as naming buildings, or transferring small pieces of land from the federal to state or local governments. Thus, failing to control for a law’s importance may lead to different conclusions about government priorities. In some countries such things are done by law, but in others they may be done by executive order or decree. Spain, for example, includes many types of laws: organic laws, which require a super-majority, ordinary laws, decree laws, and legislative decrees. All countries include annual budget laws, but these may be in a single Act or they may be divided into separate laws by policy sector. In sum, we know that not all laws are equal, but in different countries this variability is greater than in others.

The same concerns apply to a comparative investigation of laws. If the U.S. tends to pass just one or two ‘omnibus’ defense laws every year, while France tends to divide its defense agenda into many more smaller laws, then it might be a mistake to conclude that the greater number of laws passed in France indicates greater attention.

The procedures by which laws are passed also vary across systems and these differences may have consequences for the validity of cross national comparisons. In the U.S., for example, 70% of all laws pass in the second year of each two year Congress. The resulting pattern is a very predictable (dramatic) increase in issue attention every second year, followed by a very predictable (dramatic) decline. In a comparative study, the same institutionally driven ebb and flow might appear to indicate that issue attention in the U.S. is more variable than in other countries. Figure 3 shows the number of laws passed in each country over the period of this study. While the US data show a saw-tooth pattern associated with the rhythm of a two-year election cycle, and France also shows clear peaks that come and go within one or two years, the other countries show different patterns that often involve more years in ups and downs in law production. Further, the absolute numbers are strikingly different, as can be seen by noting the widely varying scales of the different figures.

Figure 3 here

In sum, there is reason to be cautious in interpreting any analyses based on simple counts of laws. On the other hand, without a comprehensive assessment of legislative activity in a range of countries, we know little about how these processes differ. In itself, it is worth knowing the issue content of the law agendas: on what topics are the laws adopted and how often? And, of course, scholars *do* compare dissimilar legislative processes whenever they compare laws across countries. One of the most important goals of the Comparative Policy Agendas Project is therefore to establish comprehensive and comparable databases so that we can make reasoned decisions about exactly how to compare legislative activities across countries, from topic to topic, and over time. In this empirically oriented work, we of course do take institutional variation into account, not only to build datasets that are as comparable as possible, but also to explain differences in patterns of legislative attention. We discuss institutional and other explanatory variables relevant to law production further below, we now first turn to the ways in which issue attention across countries may be assessed empirically.

Comparing Issue Agendas across Nations

Method 1. Assessing Issue Attention Correspondence through Correlations

How similar are the policy agendas of countries? This question is not easy to answer by visually comparing graphs such as Figures 1 and 2 above. Statistically, we can ask whether the attention that a country gives to each topic over time is correlated with what occurs in other countries. Such investigation may be focused on comparing two countries, but in a study of more than two countries, we might also be interested in knowing whether some countries' agendas are more similar than others. For example, is issue attention in Denmark and the Netherlands more similar than issue attention in France and the U.S.?

Figure 4 shows an example of looking at a single issue over time, presenting in order the percentage of laws on the topics of health, environment, energy, and defense.

Figure 4 here

Looking over longer periods as we plan to do will certainly reveal the arrival of new issues on the agendas of parliaments across many western countries. In the meantime, even the relatively short time-series presented in this paper can reveal significant differences in the proportion of attention that different issues garner in each country.

We can also look at the correlations across countries in attention to specific issues. Table 3 shows the correlations among the percentage of laws over time in each country for the series presented in Figure 3, as well as the overall correlation across all 19 topics of attention. If there are international patterns of diffusion, or if one country's legislature or political agenda is closely linked to that of another, such correlations should be substantial.

Table 3 here

Table 3 shows that there are a few instances where the legislative agendas of some of the countries in our sample are related to others, but on average the correlations are low. Similarly, we can see that some countries are more closely linked to certain partners than they are to others. Such analyses may be a useful way of looking, systematically and across all policy topics, to investigate patterns of diffusion of policy attention. Variation may be

significant from issue to issue, as some topics may more closely follow common patterns of attention (in response, for example, to international events), whereas others may be more idiosyncratic (Chaques et al. 2008). Of course, the development of the European Union suggests the hypothesis that the legislative agendas of the member states may have become more highly connected over recent decades. With a longer time series, we would expect to test such a hypothesis directly. Of course, the other set of patterns that we can observe is the degree to which a particular country is tightly linked to others or is relatively autonomous in setting its policy agenda.

Method 2. Studying Agenda Complexity through Entropy

Simple correlations allow us to begin to test similarities in overall policy focus. However we might also be interested in studying developments over time. For example, McCombs and Shaw (1972) have argued that societal developments such as education have increased the complexity of the public agenda, which should also be reflected in increasingly complex governmental agendas. Although this is a general argument about developments in advanced democracies, it has not been tested comparatively.

One way to begin to explore this question is to ask whether the range of subjects being addressed in each country of this study has become more fragmented over time. Entropy is a measure of competition among issues. It gives information about the degree of fragmentation of the agenda over time. Formally, entropy (H) is defined as

$$H = -\sum [p(x_i) \log(p(x_i))] \equiv -\sum [p(x_i) \log(p(x_i))],$$

where x_i represents an issue, and $p(x_i)$ is the proportion of total attention the issue receives in a given time period. The higher the entropy scores the more fragmentation of the agenda. If all the attention were concentrated in just a single topic area, then H would be equal to zero. The maximum entropy value would be in the case where attention was evenly divided across all policy topics. As we have 19 topics, the maximum possible value of H in our case is 2.94 ($\log 19$).¹

Figure 5 shows the level of fragmentation of the policy agenda in each country over time, and Table 4 shows the correlations across the six countries on this value.

Table 4 and Figure 5 here

Jones and Baumgartner (2005) showed how the US federal government grew increasingly diverse in its topics of attention across the post-war period, with particularly great increases in fragmentation occurring in the 1940s, 50s and 60s as the welfare state was established and a greater diversity of government activities consistently demanded congressional attention. Figure 5 suggests that by the 1990s this process was already complete and that there is no general trend toward increased fragmentation over time. Agendas may move in the direction of greater concentration or toward more fragmentation. Similarly, the degree of concentration of the agenda may be closely linked to what occurs in other countries, as Table 5 shows for several examples or it may move independently as the Table shows to be the case for the

¹ An alternative measure, which gives similar results, is the Herfindahl index which is based on the sums of squares instead of the value times the log of the value as here. The Herfindahl is often used by economists to measure market share in industries.

Netherlands in particular. Some countries as Netherlands and Denmark also appear to be associated with specific levels of fragmentation across time.

Table 5 here

Another perspective on the same issue is to compute the level of policy fragmentation for each country. In this way we have a single indicator of the law-making agenda for each country. The table shows that France and the US have the most highly concentrated legislative agendas, reflecting high proportion of laws in only one or two topic areas in those countries as we saw in Figure 2. Conversely, Denmark and Netherlands have high levels of fragmentation, also consistent with the pattern shown in the Figure 2. The entropy score allows us to discriminate among countries by the diversity of the law agendas.

Method 3. Studying Issue Volatility through Kurtosis

Earlier we asked the simple question of whether the issues emphasized in laws were similar across nations and time. The correlations indicated that this was generally the case, although there were differences among countries and almost certainly across issues as well (though we only explored this for four issues). Here we begin to investigate another important comparative research question that our dataset makes possible: the dynamics of attention change.

The General Punctuation Hypothesis put forward by Baumgartner & Jones (2005) in their study of the U.S. proposes that policymaking across a wide range of systems exhibits the same pattern: “extreme allegiance to the status quo coupled with great numbers of extreme outliers” (Baumgartner & Jones 2005, p.277-278). According to Baumgartner and Jones, “the interaction between the scarcity of attention and the operation of institutional rules” explains why attention to issues within governments is punctuated (Baumgartner & Jones 2005, p.278).

For both of these reasons we would expect to observe different patterns across political systems. In terms of attention scarcity, there appear to be fewer lawmaking opportunities in some countries. The number of laws passed over 14 years varies from less than 700 in the U.K. to more than 3,300 in the U.S. (see Table 2). *Institutional friction* refers to how decision-making procedures affect policy change. For example, the U.S. separation of powers system requires a broader consensus to implement a change in law than is true in many parliamentary systems, where governmental majorities formally or more informally establish a degree of legislative agenda control. How might we begin to explore empirically whether the dynamics of change in attention in lawmaking also varies across countries?

Baumgartner and Jones (2005) recommend kurtosis, a statistical score widely used to measure the properties of distributions. Moments characterize probability distributions. Commonly, political science research employs the first, second, or third moment of a distribution, which are the mean, variance, and skewness, respectively. Kurtosis is the fourth moment around the mean and assesses the “peakedness” of a distribution. The classic definition is:

$$k = \frac{E(X - \mu)^4}{\left(E(X - \mu)^2\right)^2} = \frac{\mu_4}{\sigma^4},$$

where E is the expectation operator, μ is the mean, μ_4 is the fourth moment about the mean, and σ the standard deviation. The starting point for a kurtosis analysis is the normal distribution, which has a kurtosis value of 3. Kurtosis values above 3 indicate distributions

that are more punctuated. That is, they possess more very small changes, fewer moderate changes, and more large changes than what is observed in a normal distribution. A distribution characterized by high peakedness, light shoulders and fat tails is *leptokurtic*.

Because kurtosis is sensitive to extreme values (Groneveld, 1998), we will also consider a second measure, L-Kurtosis, that is to be less sensitive to “extreme cases and reliably computed for a relatively small number of cases” (Breunig & Jones, 2007). L-kurtosis relies on the use of ordered statistics and is computed as the fourth L-moments of a distribution (Hosking 1990). L-moments are the expected values of linear combinations of order statistics $X_{i:n}$ multiplied by scalar constants.

If $F(x)$ is a distribution function of a random variable X and $X_{1:n} \leq X_{2:n} \leq \dots \leq X_{n:n}$ are the order statistics associated with the distribution F , then L-moments $L_r(F)$, $r = 1, 2, \dots$ are defined as

$$L_r(F) = \frac{1}{r} \sum_{j=0}^{r-1} (-1)^j \binom{r-1}{j} E(X_{r-j:r}).$$

The fourth moment (L-kurtosis) is obtained by normalizing $L_4(F)$ by $L_2(F)$. Thus, the L-moment ratio $\tau_4 = \frac{L_4(F)}{L_2(F)}$ measures the kurtosis of a distribution. Given the L-Kurtosis of a normal distribution is .123, values above .123 indicate punctuated activity for L-kurtosis. L-K scores vary between 0 and 1, where K values have no upper bound.

We are interested in kurtosis and l-kurtosis because they may allow us to test for differences in lawmaking patterns across countries. As mentioned, political systems characterized by greater institutional friction should exhibit greater resistance to policy change (higher kurtosis) and greater change when it occurs. Table 5 presents L-kurtosis results for the 6 countries. Compared to the normal distribution’s L-kurtosis value of .123, every country’s distribution is punctuated and some are more punctuated than others.

Table 6. Comparing the Kurtosis of Lawmaking

Country	US	FR	SP	UK	NL	DK
N	345	318	299	304	317	311
Start	1986	1986	1986	1986	1990	1986
End	2004	2006	2006	2006	2007	2003
L-Kurtosis	0.246	0.174	0.212	0.209	0.242	0.252

Table 6 makes clear that each country shows the pattern of high kurtosis indicative of friction and institutional costs that Jones and Baumgartner found for the US. Figure 5 shows similar data. The Figure shows the annual change in the *number* of laws on each policy topic. Figures based on the *percentage* of laws in each year underlie the results in Table 5. We use the *count-count* method in Figure 5 to show the robustness of the results and because the percentage calculations are heavily affected by cases with zero or very few laws in a given time period. Because of low base-values, the calculations of the percentage change is either impossible (if the base is zero) or highly unstable (if the percentage change is calculated off a very low base). These results suggest that the precise measurement of the degree of friction associated with each country’s legislative process will require more analysis, as we have

found only limited robustness in our findings when we have looked at percentage-percentage calculations and have excluded or included cases with lower than a certain (low) threshold of laws per year.

Figure 5 here

Figure 5 (and similar data, not shown for reasons of space, based on the percentage-percentage method) makes clear that the countries differ from each other, that all (with the possible exception of the United Kingdom) show high kurtosis values. Each country shows a high central peak in the distribution corresponding to the tendency to do in each year something similar to what it did in the previous year: pass approximately the same number of laws in a given issue-area as before. However, the wide tails of the distributions suggest that countries do indeed shift abruptly into new issue-areas (or out of established ones, as reflected in the large left-tails). More sensitive tests will be needed before we are confident enough in these findings to investigate systematically how different types of friction relate to institutional variables from the literature. We expect to study these issues systematically in the future. Another perspective will be to investigate the relationships between the relative size and fragmentation of the law agendas and the level of punctuation or friction associated with the processes.

Future research will also allow us to compare the kurtosis of law-making with other political activities like parliamentary questions. Jones et al. (2003) have shown how kurtosis increases down the policy process with from societal inputs like elections to policy output like budgets. Extending this question to other countries (cf. Breunig et al. 2007) will allow us to systematically investigate how differences in institutional rules affect policy process through the friction they create in policy processes. In other words, we can look not just at cross-national differences in law-making process, but also in similarities in law making process. Compared to other policy activities, law making process may be quite similar despite the differences in political institutions which have traditional been at the center of attention in legislative studies. Of course, many hypotheses about veto-players, bicameralism, executive agenda-control, party discipline, and the role of judicial actors suggest systematic variance in levels of friction across different parliamentary bodies, and we look forward to investigating these when we have a longer time series and after we revise our measures of friction to ensure that we have reliable indicators of it.

Discussion

We have introduced the Comparative Agendas Project by conducting an initial comparative investigation of the *production of laws* in six countries over 14 years. Our goals were to introduce our approach and data, discuss some of the methodological challenges involved, introduce three general methods that may prove valuable for systematically comparing policymaking patterns, and indicate how institutional variables may play a part in explaining findings across nations as our project moves forward.

A country's law production is influenced by internal and external policy demands, and processes that affect how demands are translated into outputs. Each country has unique politics that affect its priorities. For example, the September 11th 2001 terrorist attacks dramatically shifted policymaking attention in the U.S. At the same time, many issues, such as health care developments, cut across national boundaries (Green-Pedersen and Wilkerson 2006). Institutional changes, such as the EU developments or NAFTA, should also affect the

agendas of multiple nations. Our preliminary results using new measures such entropy hint at how the effects of international developments of this kind on the internal politics of nations might be profitably studied.

We also introduced kurtosis as one possible method for comparing the effects of different political processes on policymaking. However, the use of such measures must proceed with care because each country's political process may also differ in ways that are not related to the question of interest (and that are not as problematic in a single country study). As discussed, a simple procedural difference such as the two year legislative cycle in the U.S. can create the impression of high issue volatility. Institutional arrangements can have such effects, and they may differ between countries.

While findings thus are preliminary, we found differences across the six countries. Some countries show significant issue correlations between them, others do not. In some countries, the level of entropy was higher than in other countries (as Figures 4 and 5 suggest). And though for each country our data suggest kurtosis in legislative attention change, also here the levels vary, as Table 6 makes clear. In our future work on law production and other types of policy agendas studied crossnationally we will consider variables that may help explain these differences.

The comparative politics literature based on historical institutionalism (Thelen et al. 1993; Weaver & Rockman 1993, etc.) or institutional rational choice (Tsebelis 2002) has tended to focus on conditions conducive to stability and preventing change, and compare these across countries. But given our preliminary finding that in six countries, changes in substantive law topics display a leptokurtic pattern associated with punctuation, we need a more dynamic account of processes of political agenda setting. Instead of explaining stability *or* change, initial findings from comparative longitudinal analysis strongly suggest we need to explain both. Systems may produce different levels of *friction*, not purely status-quo or change oriented policies.

This theoretical ambition requires that we move beyond approaches focusing on specific institutional design features, and instead consider the level of centralization or decentralization of different types of policy arenas. Further, we will consider, for these arenas, the nature of rules of the game that may either restrict or promote the development of policy initiatives. Such institutional rules pertaining to costs of decisions and transactions may be common features of several countries, but they also may be more idiosyncratic. The two year election cycle in the U.S. referred to above when presenting the saw-tooth pattern in the annual laws output is an example. In the same perspective, the frequency of alternation and their scope may be related to the level of punctuation in the law agendas. A characteristic of 'rationalized parliamentarism' in France (Huber 1996; Brouard 2008) is the executive mastering the parliamentary time table. Also rules of package voting in this country may prevent filibustering on the floor and create more possibilities to adjust attention over issues. In Britain, the Prime Minister is formally in charge of the parliamentary time table. In contrast, in Spain, the Netherlands, Denmark and the U.S., the legislature takes formal control of the legislative agenda, but these countries vary in their levels of decentralization. Formal time table control is decentralized in the Danish Parliament (Jensen 1995; Klemmensen 2008) as well as in the Netherlands (Timmermans 2008) and in the U.S., whereas in Spain, the Directive Board fixes the calendar of activities of Plenary and Committee meetings (Ajenjo & Molina 2008). These decentralized formal time table rules are institutional conditions increasing friction. They are likely to produce a temporary topic stability in the laws that

emerge, interrupted by clear shifts in legislative attention. In contrast, time table control by the executive is an indicator of centralization, creates less friction, and thus facilitates swifter attention changes as cabinet ministers feel like altering the legislative agenda. These are some examples of the possible impact of institutional rules, and they seem connected to our findings in line with what would be expected.

But in the legislative game or in agenda setting more generally, not all is said and done with formal rules. Also informal rules have emerged that may increase or decrease friction in the advocacy of attention change. Rules of coalition governance for example are used multiparty systems, mostly in situations of majority government (the Netherlands, in France to some extent) but also in cases of minority government (Denmark) (Müller & Strøm, eds. 2000), and in Spain in situations when the government party had no majority. Policy agreements negotiated during government formation and discipline to secure enforcement of these agreements have become informal but important mechanisms in legislative activity. In the Netherlands, for example, coalition agreements contain key parts of the legislative agenda, set before the government is sworn in (Timmermans 2006). In Denmark, policy deals are made also on specific topics with opposition parties whose support is needed for a majority during the legislative term (Strøm 1990). Such agreements and enforcement mechanisms to secure discipline produce a rather inflexible legislative agenda. Another consequence of minority government or multiparty government is that the diverse agents involved in lawmaking push attention towards a higher level of issue variety (higher H-score). Heterogeneity of the legislative majority thus may increase complexity of the law agenda.

These mechanisms of containment and control have developed in order to cope with situations of partisan heterogeneity within the legislative majority. Difficulties in changing legislative attention associated with multi-partism are absent in cases of a single party majority government, where the legislative majority can react more directly to changes in political inputs. But this requires intraparty discipline: if a single party government is an arena of rival wings or factions, priorities for legislative attention may become as much a matter of partisan friction as in heterogeneous coalitions. In the presidential system of the U.S., intraparty discipline increased since the beginning of the 1970s, but still it is relatively low compared to most parliamentary systems. In short, if partisan sources of friction do not exist between parties, they may still occur within them, and both retard changes in legislative attention.

The different factors discussed underscore that the complexity of the explanations of the politics of law attention. This complexity mirrors the two faces of responsiveness in contemporary political systems. Lawmaking may be an expression of responsiveness in two different ways: by changing its focus according to the relative saliency of different issues, or by allowing attention to a wide range of issues. Institutional and partisan conditions as mentioned above channel the choices – and trajectories that are more path dependent – for issue attention. One possible hypothesis we may examine in future work is that the factors inducing a decrease in friction also increase the concentration of the law agendas and vice versa; when change in attention is more difficult, political actors may resort to distributing attention more equally. From this perspective, attention allocation in lawmaking is a new and fruitful way of investigating the democratic dilemmas that many Western political systems are facing.

These theoretical possibilities require that we also expand our time frame in analyzing patterns of attention change. The preliminary results presented in this paper were limited by the short time frame of 15 years. In future studies where we ask questions that only can be

answered by comparing annual activity (as we have done here) will require more years of data. All of our country teams are in the process of assembling and coding more years of laws data. They also are collecting additional data that make it possible to investigate a broad range of questions, and relate them to the sources of friction to make theoretical sense of our findings. For example, each country team is coding bills, executive speeches, media stories, and parliamentary questions (among others). Having so many different sources of information about national priorities introduces a form of robustness to our project not possible in studies of a single form of policymaking activity. We anticipate that this project will not only shed light on policy priorities and change across many countries, but will also lead to innovations in how these activities are measured, compared, and explained.

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Table 3. Correlations Across Six Countries in Areas of Law-Making

Overall	US	FR	SP	UK	NL	DL
US	1.00					
FR	0.17	1.00				
SP	0.15	0.13	1.00			
UK	0.18	0.11	0.51	1.00		
NL	0.19	0.03	0.44	0.49	1.00	
DK	-0.13	-0.16	0.39	0.29	0.31	1.00

Health	US	FR	SP	UK	NL	DL
US	1.00					
FR	0.53	1.00				
SP	-0.31	-0.43	1.00			
UK	-0.14	-0.47	-0.08	1.00		
NL	-0.49	-0.03	0.06	-0.22	1.00	
DK	-0.43	-0.50	0.12	0.31	0.36	1.00

Environment	US	FR	SP	UK	NL	DL
US	1.00					
FR	0.18	1.00				
SP	0.03	-0.30	1.00			
UK	-0.26	0.04	-0.58	1.00		
NL	0.01	0.36	-0.35	0.11	1.00	
DK	-0.53	0.15	-0.11	0.13	0.37	1.00

Energy	US	FR	SP	UK	NL	DL
US	1.00					
FR	-0.01	1.00				
SP	-0.19	0.12	1.00			
UK	0.07	0.09	0.09	1.00		
NL	0.02	-0.14	-0.17	0.62	1.00	
DK	0.07	-0.17	0.51	0.16	0.41	1.00

Defense	US	FR	SP	UK	NL	DL
US	1.00					
FR	0.38	1.00				
SP	-0.06	-0.01	1.00			
UK	-0.09	-0.14	0.22	1.00		
NL	0.53	0.41	-0.02	0.24	1.00	
DK	0.16	0.23	-0.21	-0.20	0.26	1.00

Table 4. Correlations in Policy Fragmentation Across Six Countries

	US	FR	SP	UK	NL	DL
US	1.00					
FR	0.62	1.00				
SP	-0.29	-0.19	1.00			
UK	0.51	0.14	-0.41	1.00		
NL	0.04	0.10	-0.01	0.18	1.00	
DK	0.41	0.43	0.34	-0.46	0.03	1.00

Note: The table shows Pearson's correlations for the measure of entropy or policy fragmentation shown in Figure 4.

Table 5. Policy Fragmentation Across Six Countries

Countries	Entropy score
USA	2,43
France	2,29
UK	2,65
Spain	2,64
NL	2,77
DK	2,71

Figure 1. The Proportion of Laws by Topic Area by Country

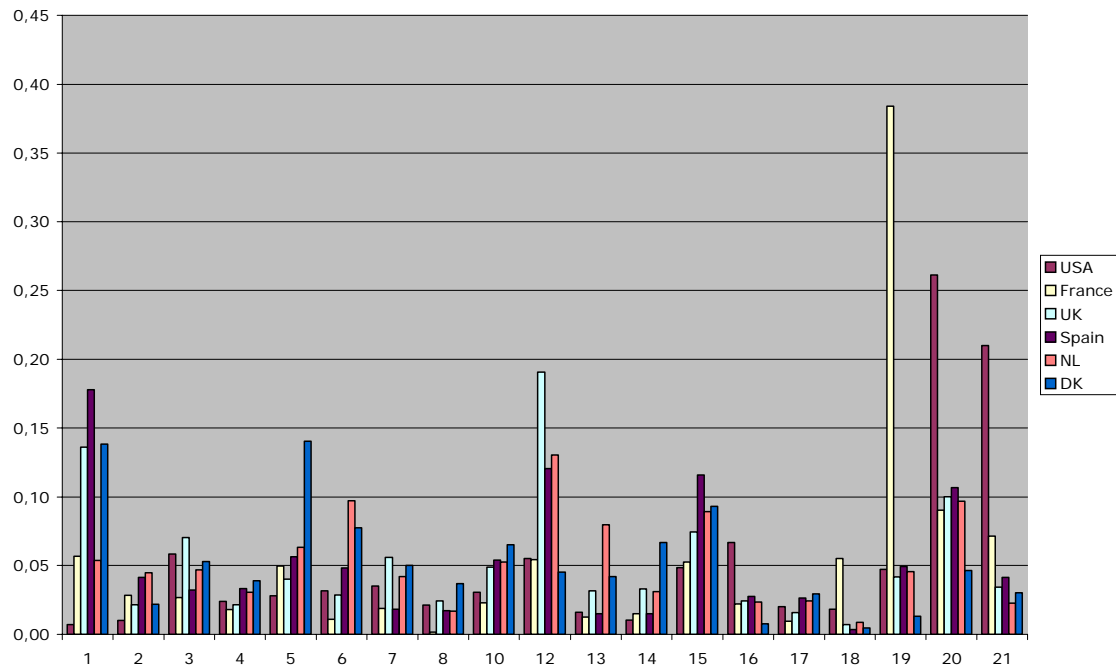
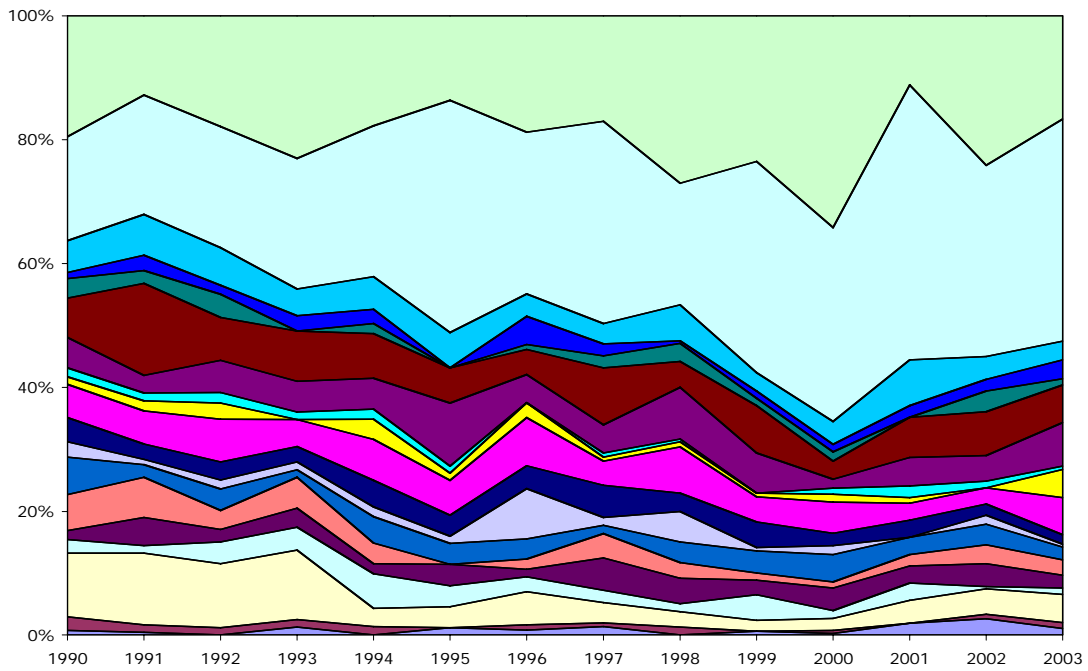
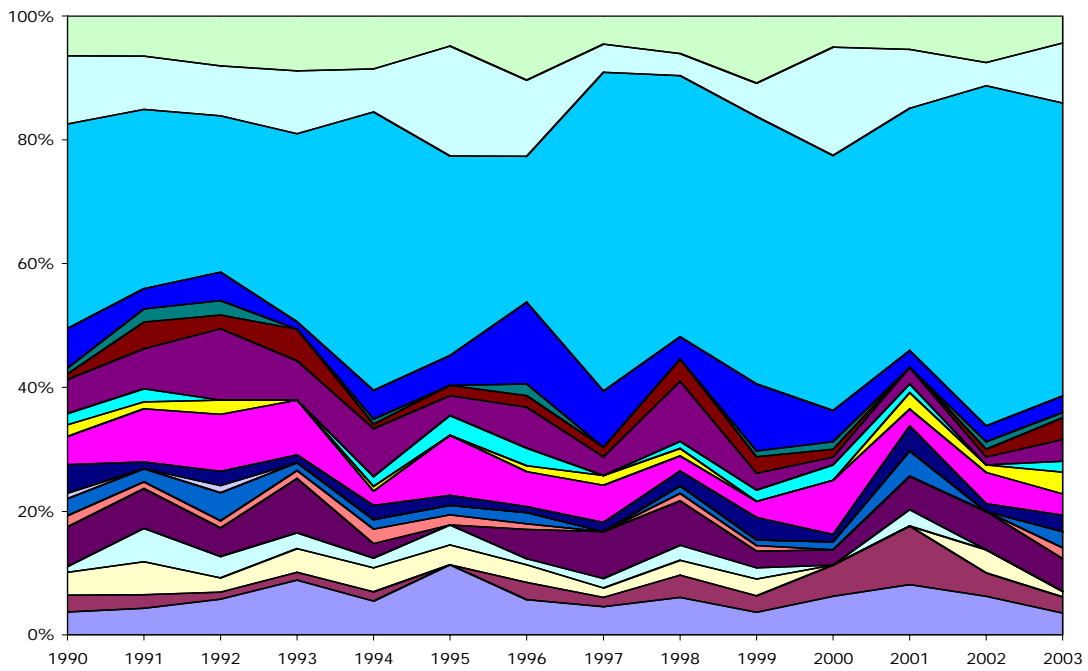


Figure 2. The Proportion of Laws by Topic Area.

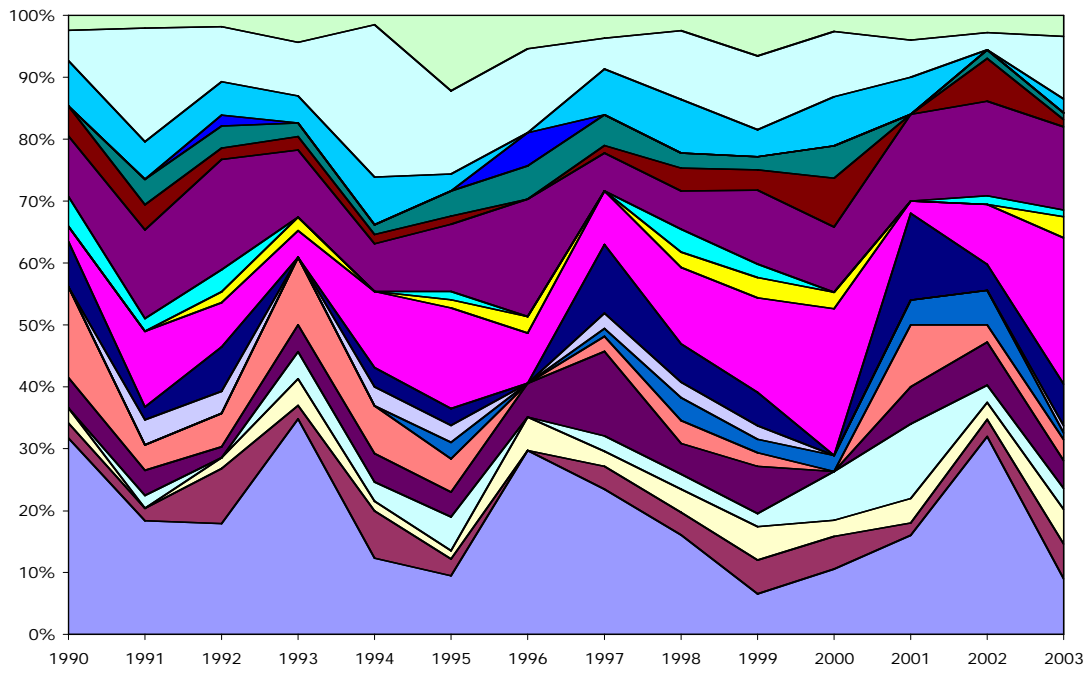
A. United States



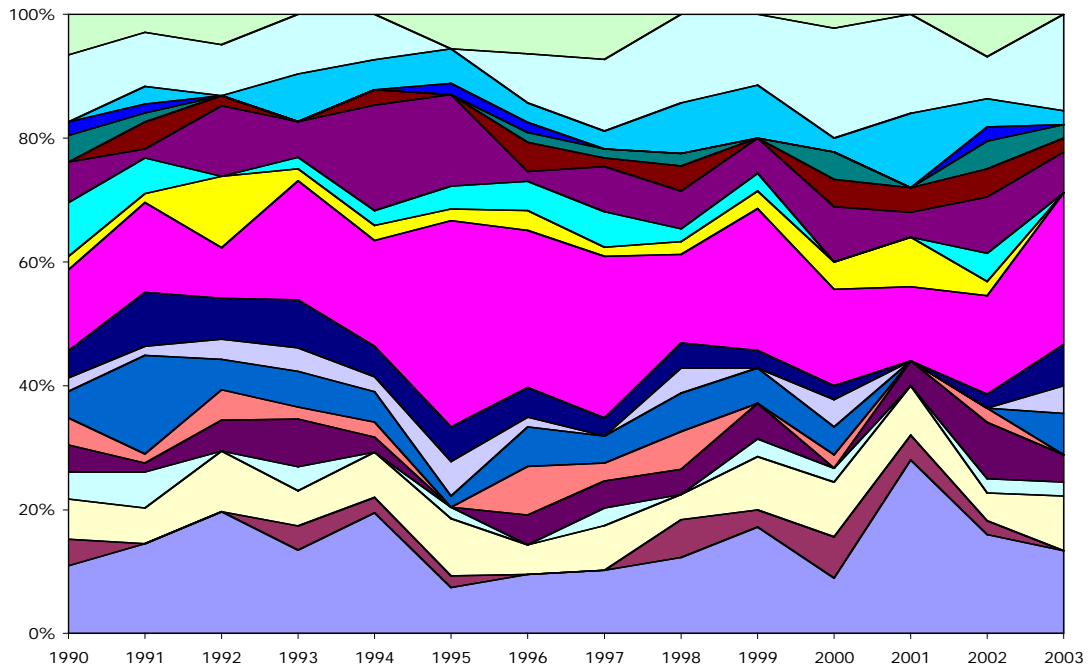
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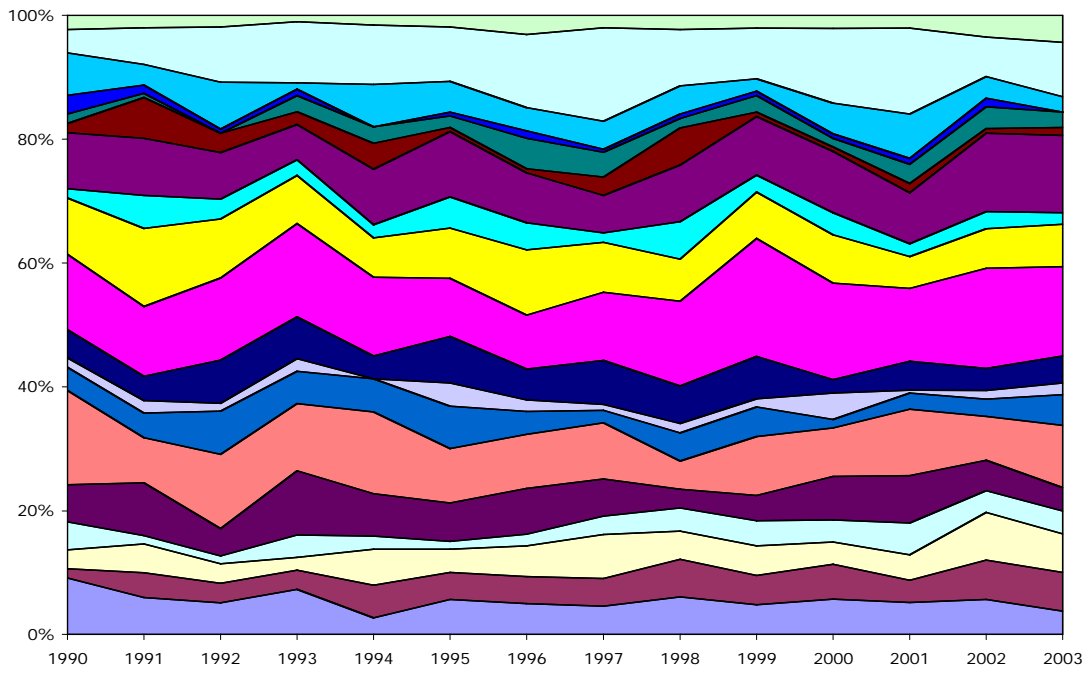
C. Spain



D. Britain



E. Netherlands



F. Denmark

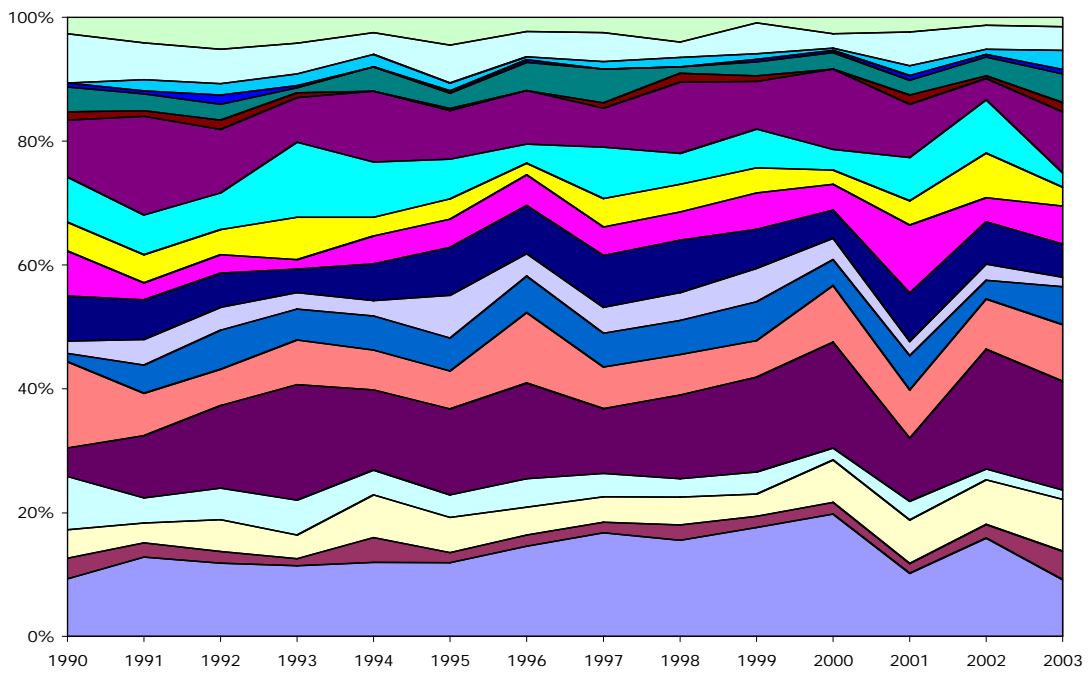
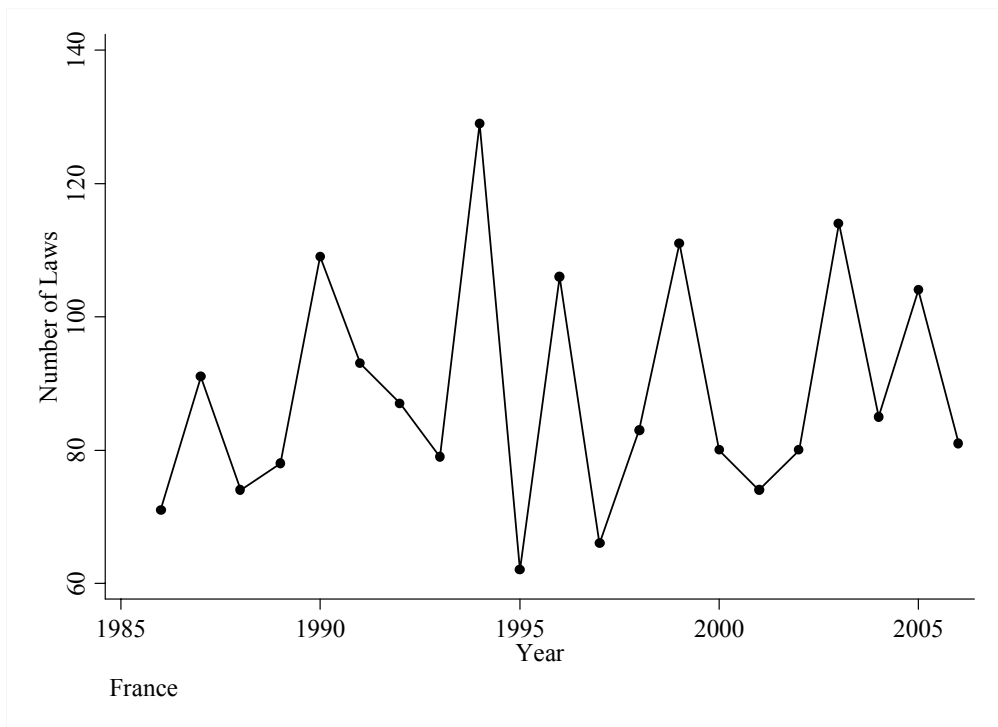
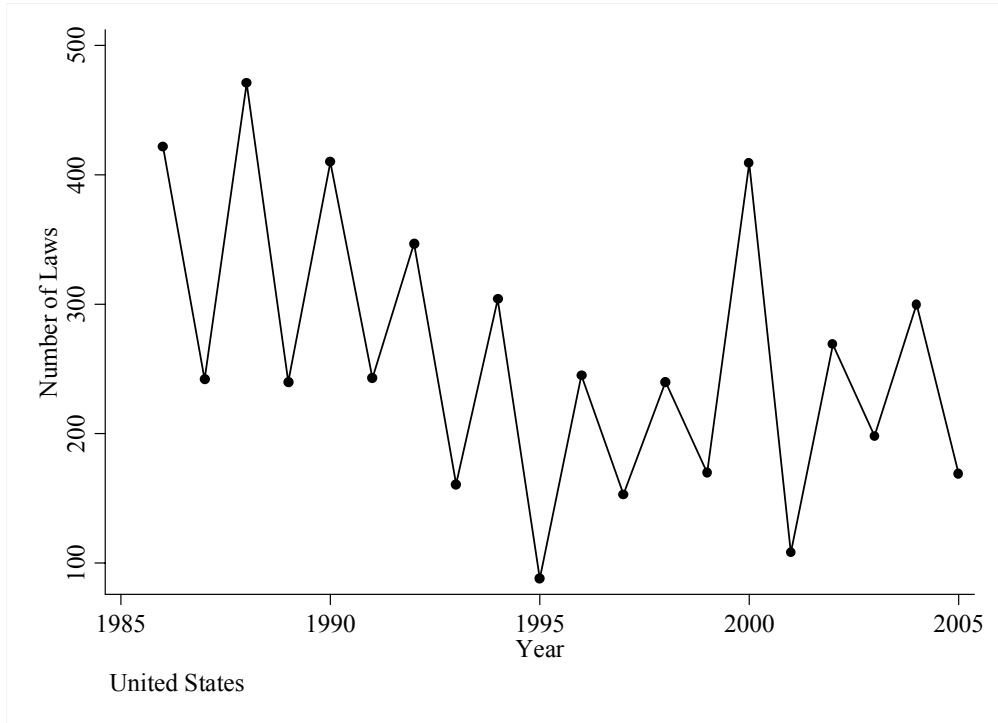
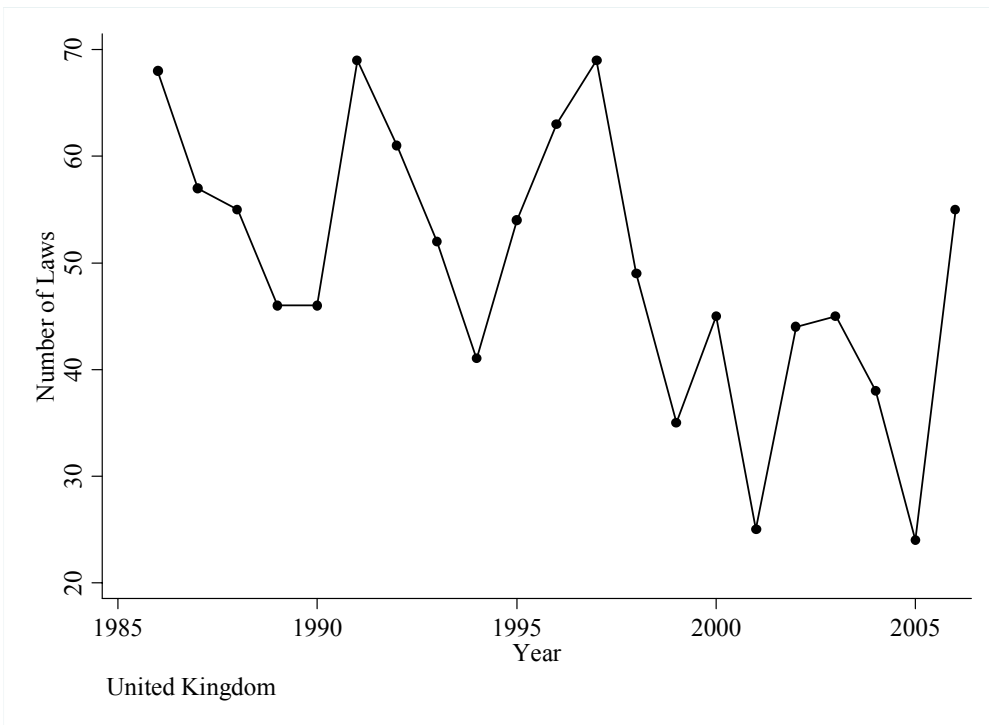
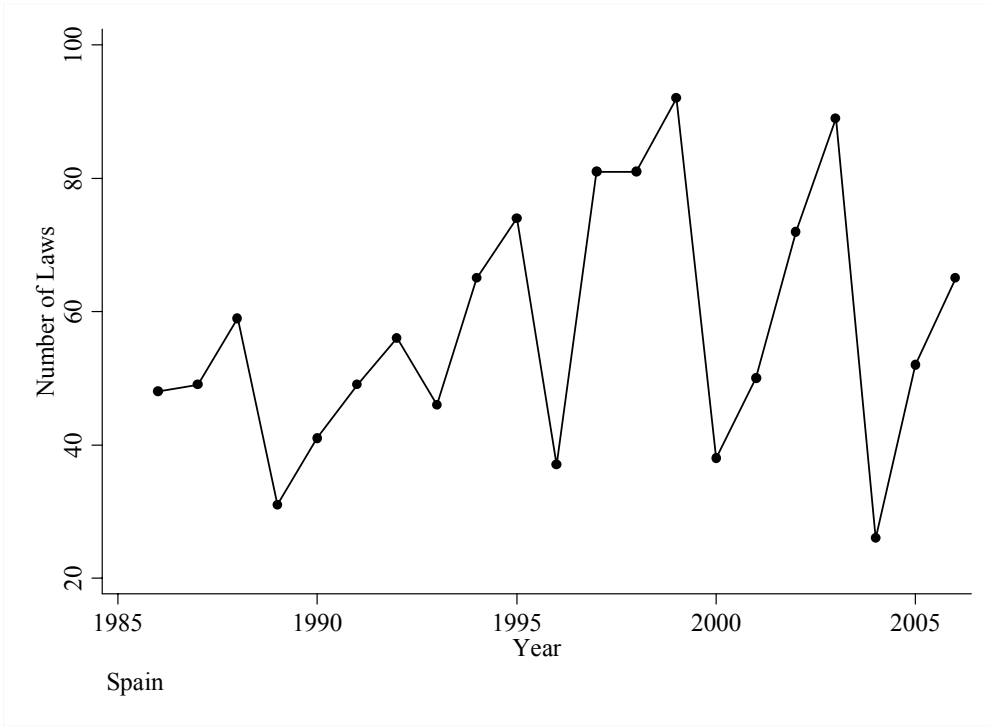


Figure 3. Number of Laws per Year.





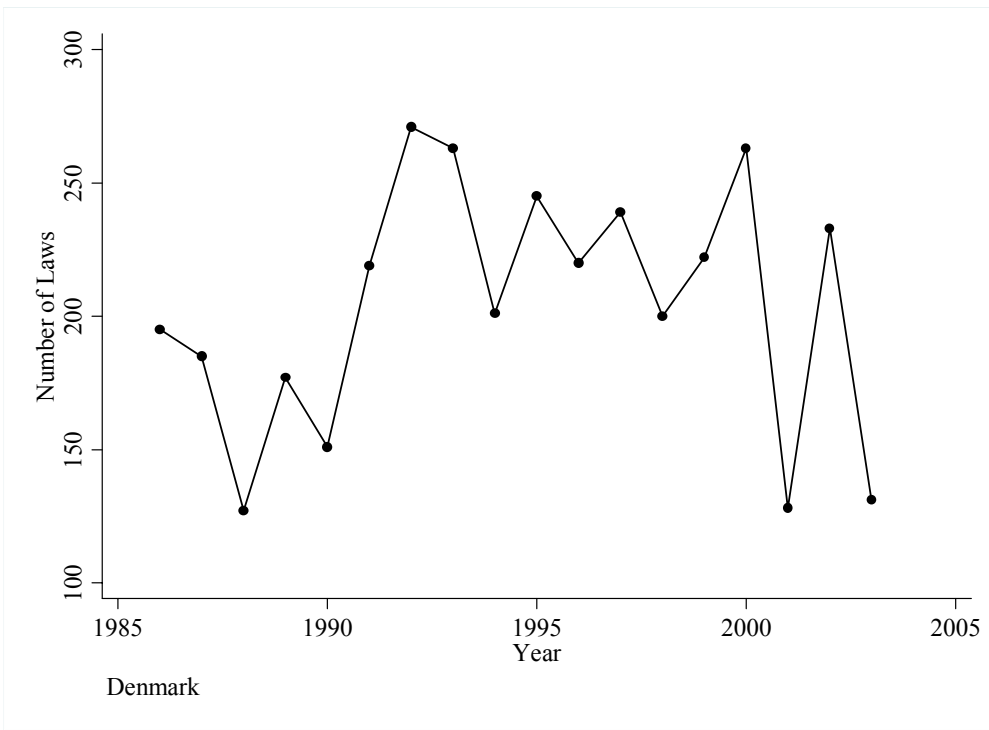
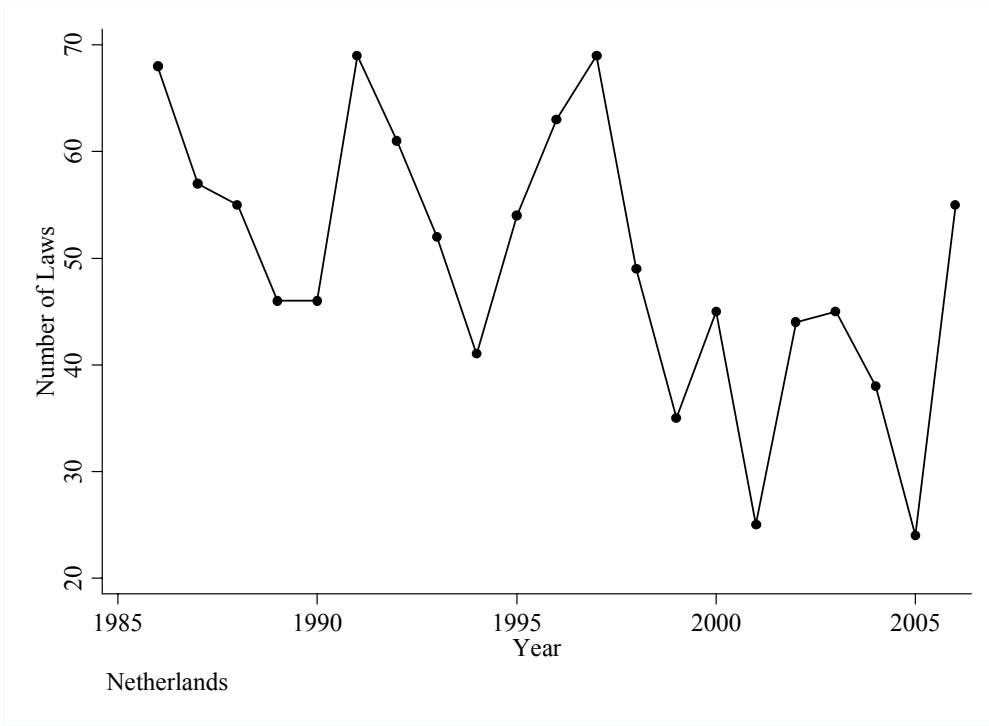
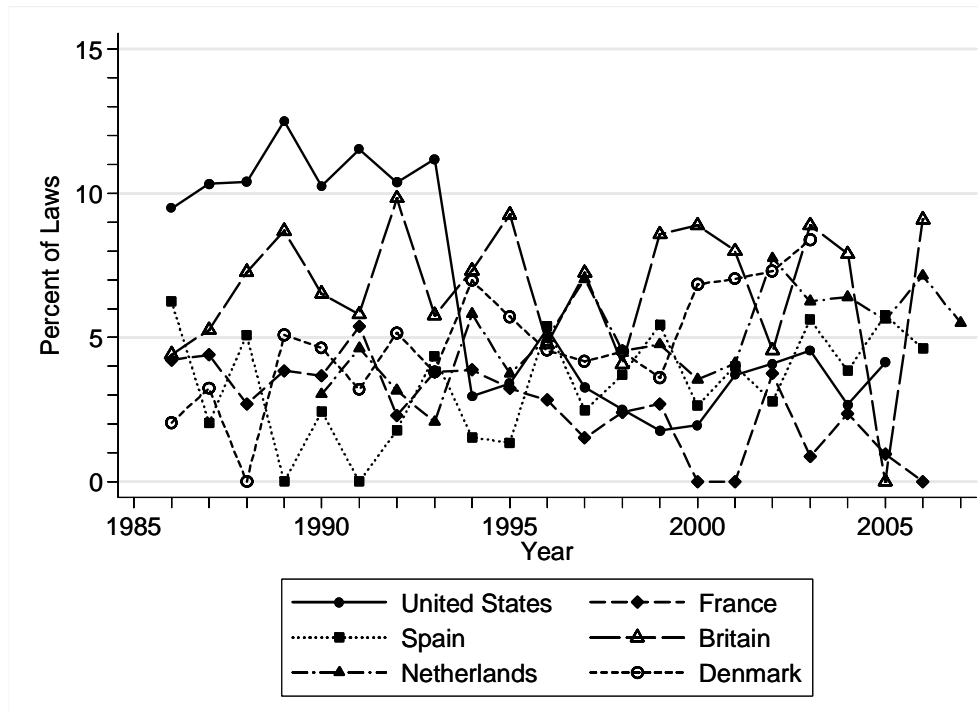
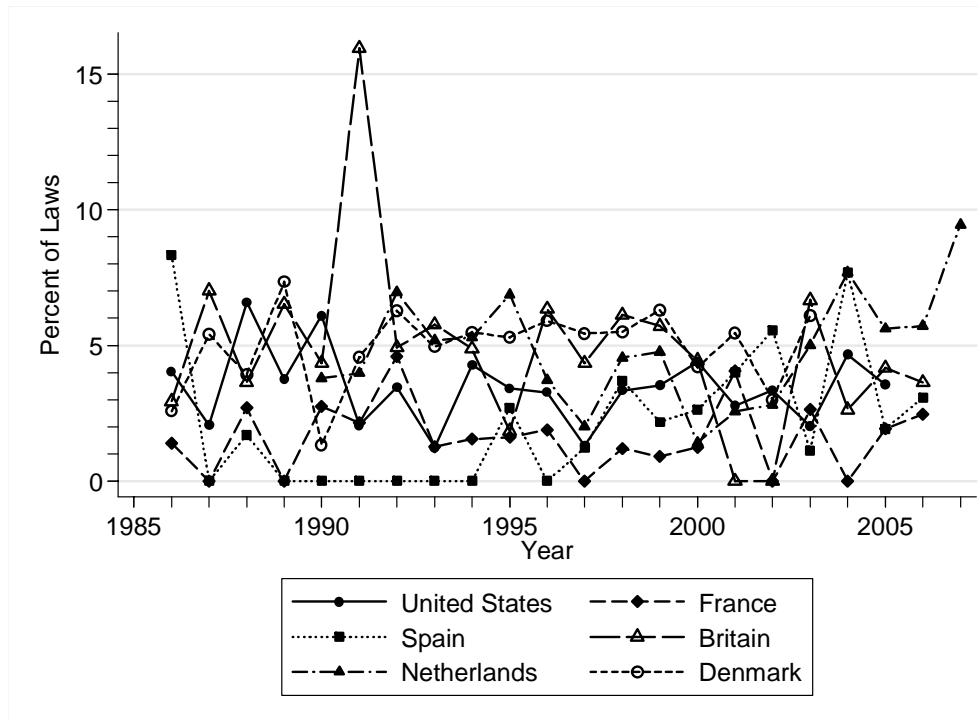


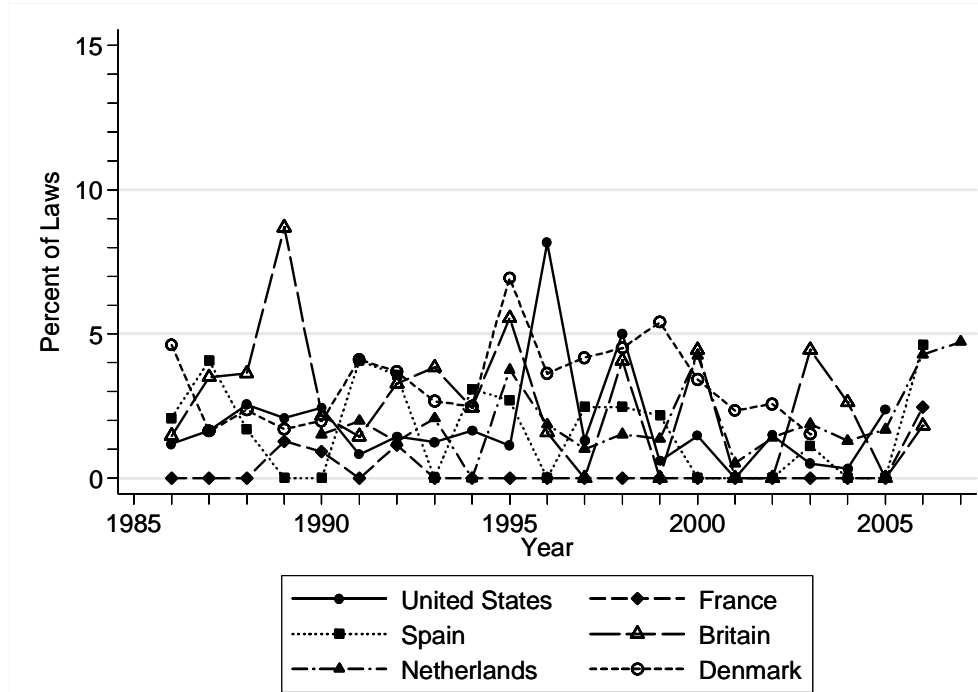
Figure 4. Attention to Four Specific Policy Areas over Time in Six Countries.
Health



Environment



Energy



Defense

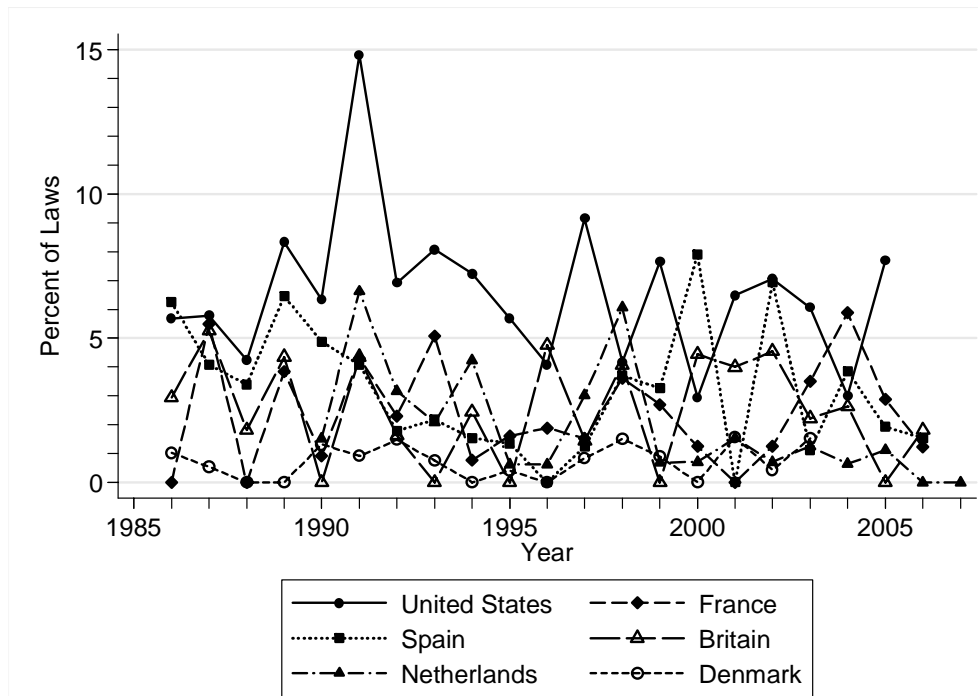
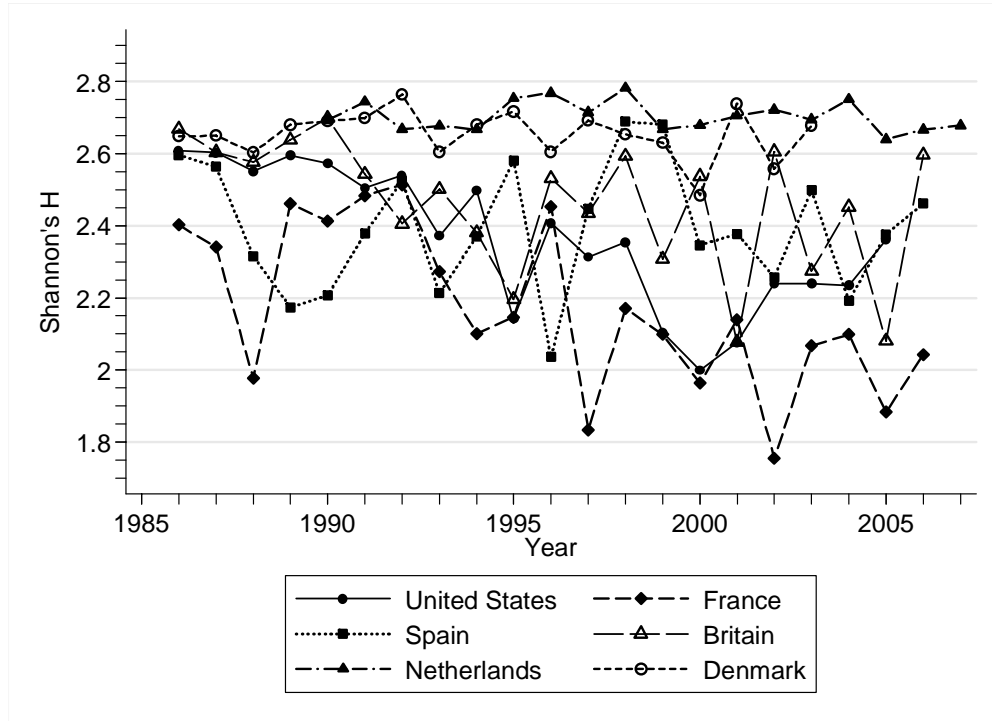


Figure 5. The Fragmentation of National Lawmaking Agendas



Note: The figure shows Shannon's H, a measure of fragmentation of attention. If attention were concentrated in a single policy topic, H would equal zero; if it were evenly distributed across 19 policy topics, it would have a value of 2.94.

Figure 6. Change in the number of laws on the same topic per year.

