

## **Who sets the agenda and who responds to it in the Danish parliament? A new model of issue competition and agenda-setting**

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**Abstract.** Inspired by the agenda-setting literature, this article outlines a model of issue competition focusing on the interaction between government and opposition parties through the party-system agenda. Unlike previous studies of issue competition, the model makes it possible to answer questions such as why some parties have greater success than others in forcing other parties to address unpleasant issues. One of the central implications of the model is that opposition parties are freer to focus continually on issues that are advantageous to themselves, whereas government parties more often are forced to respond to issues brought up on the party-system agenda. Using data on issue competition in Denmark covering 25 years and 23 issue categories, the issue competition model is evaluated and finds strong support in a set of cross-sectional time-series analyses.

### **Introduction**

The idea of ‘issue competition’ (Carmines 1991), or party competition through ‘selective emphasis’ (Budge & Farlie 1983; Robertson 1976), has existed in political science for decades. According to this view, a crucial element in the competition for votes between political parties is that parties emphasise issues that are advantageous to themselves, while they ignore those that are disadvantageous. However, the literature has focused almost exclusively on individual party strategies (see Meguid 2005; Riker 1996) and failed to explore the interaction between political parties. Moving beyond studying which issues parties emphasise to what matters for the outcome of issue competition requires a model capable of explaining the interaction among political parties. For instance, why are some parties more successful than others at getting opponents to focus on an issue they would have preferred to ignore?

To begin addressing these questions, this article develops and tests an agenda-setting model of issue competition among political parties. Inspired by the agenda-setting literature, the model introduces the concept of a ‘party-system agenda’. In a democracy, political parties are constantly engaged in

debates with one another over a number of policy issues. The party-system agenda, for instance, is institutionalised in regular parliamentary debates. Influencing the composition of the party-system agenda is thus a crucial element in issue competition, not least because the content of the party-system agenda also constrains the issue emphasis of individual parties.

By conflating the focus on the issue strategies of individual parties with the systemic agenda concept, we can actually investigate the dynamics of issue competition. More particularly, we argue that issue competition is an ongoing struggle between government and opposition parties over the content of the party-system agenda in which opposition parties enjoy a structural advantage over government parties. There are considerable constraints on government parties in their issue foci, whereas opposition parties have greater control with respect to which issues they choose to address and emphasise.

We evaluate the issue competition model using data mapping issue competition in Denmark over a period of 25 years. The dataset comprises approximately 100,000 observations of parliamentary activities (questions to the minister, debates, sentences in Prime Ministers' speeches, etc.), thus providing a unique opportunity to study issue competition in politics. While the existing literature primarily consists of studies of election campaigns (e.g., Sigelman & Buell 2004; Damore 2004), this study broadens the perspective to the continuing interaction among political parties outside election campaign periods.

## **Issue competition**

The notion of issue competition emerged from several sources. Robertson (1976) argued that party competition is focused on selective emphasis rather than direct confrontation – an argument that was further developed by Budge and Farlie (1983). Parties compete by trying to draw attention to issues they find advantageous rather than by assuming diverging positions on pre-determined issues. This idea of party competition formed the basis of the much-used 'party manifesto' dataset, which measures the issue emphasis of different political parties by coding party manifestos from a large number of countries dating back to the Second World War (Budge et al. 2001; Klingemann et al. 1994).

The same notion about the importance of 'issue emphasis' lies behind the issue evolution model developed by Carmines and Stimson (1986). Developed on the background of race relation studies in the United States, the central notion in this model is that party differentiation at the elite level is crucial in raising voter awareness of political issues. Carmines (1991) later developed a model of party alignments and issue competition similar to the Robertson/

Budge and Farlie idea. As Carmines argues (1991: 75): 'All successful politicians instinctively understand which issues benefit them and their party and which do not. The trick is to politicize the former and depoliticize the latter.' Other significant contributions consistent with the basic idea of issue competition are found in Riker's (1996) principles of dominance and dispersion, in Petrocik's (1996) study of issue ownership in presidential elections (see also Damore 2004; Holian 2004), and in Simon's (2002) theory of campaign dialogue.

The idea of issue competition is thus well established. However, arguing that parties compete by drawing attention to different issues is merely the beginning. Taking the idea of selective emphasis to its logical conclusion implies that parties focus on different issues with very little overlap. As Sigelman and Buell (2004: 652) summarise the literature: 'Even though adherents of the accounts we have just summarized do not take literally the possibility that issue convergence would be totally lacking in campaign discourse . . . , it seems fair to hold them to the expectation that it should be the exception rather than the rule.'

Nevertheless, empirical studies of the issue emphasis of electoral competitors systematically find issue overlap. Studies of American presidential campaigns (Sigelman & Buell 2004; Damore 2005) unearth considerable issue overlap, as do studies of party families in Western Europe (Green-Pedersen 2007). Therefore, although parties may in principle prefer to focus exclusively on issues that are advantageous to them, the reality is that they also pay attention to other issues, including issues 'owned' by their opponents.

Because of its exclusive focus on the strategies of individual political parties, the literature has been unable to investigate the interaction among political parties and provide answers to the question of 'what matters in issue competition'. From the perspective of the existing literature, the fact that interaction actually takes place is puzzling, as argued by Sigelman and Buell (2004). These problems are also evident in one of the most recent contributions to the issue competition literature. Meguid (2005) argues that the issue attention and positions of mainstream parties shape the electoral success of 'niche' parties such as Green parties. From the issue competition perspective, the most interesting case is when one mainstream party tries to get another mainstream party to focus on an issue the latter would prefer to avoid. According to Meguid (2005: 351), it is the duration and intensity of the issue emphasis that matters. From the perspective of an individual party it is a very attractive strategy to focus long and intensively on an issue. However, if each party confines itself to focusing long and intensively on its own preferred issues, then no interaction would take place, which is contradicted by the studies of issue overlap.

In sum, the issue competition literature offers a variety of different and increasingly sophisticated strategies that parties may pursue in issue competition, but a basic model showing what factors actually shape the competitive interaction among political parties has yet to be developed. Developing such a model requires attention to the extent to which these strategies are constrained and influenced by the activities of other political parties. It is argued below that an obvious starting point is to be found in the agenda-setting literature.

### **An agenda-setting model of issue competition**

Like the issue competition literature, the agenda-setting literature focuses on political dynamics as a question of allocating scarce attention (see Dearing & Rogers 1996; McCombs 2004; Jones & Baumgartner 2005). Hence, the agenda-setting literature is of clear, albeit neglected, relevance for studying a phenomenon such as issue competition. Inspired by this literature, we propose a model of issue competition that focuses on the interplay between the issue emphases of individual parties, on the one hand, and on what we term 'the party-system agenda', on the other.

When referring to agendas, the agenda-setting literature refers to the idea that at a certain point in time there is a hierarchy of issues, to which the relevant actors must pay attention even as they compete about the future content of this hierarchy (e.g., Dearing & Rogers 1996: 1–3). An agenda is thus a structural phenomenon in the sense that it constrains the relevant actors at any given time. They must address the issues that are prominent on the agenda. At the same time, however, they compete to influence the composition of the agenda.

A good example of the systemic logic involved in the agenda idea is when mass media studies of agenda-setting describe the media agenda as being governed by news criteria (Cook 1998). An individual newspaper or television station may generate a news story that becomes part of the media agenda; however, they also have a strong incentive to cover the stories on the media agenda, even those that originate from their competitors. The core of agenda-setting and agenda-setting competition is thus the reciprocal relationship between an agenda and the issue emphasis of the actors related to it.

The study of issue competition has tended to focus exclusively on the intended emphases of various political parties or candidates. The very idea of a party-system agenda thus represents a cardinal contribution to the modeling of issue competition. The party-system agenda emerges from the continuous political debate among political parties. This party political debate is a crucial

element in a democratic society; it often takes place in the mass media (see Zaller 1999), but is also institutionalised in various other ways. All democratically elected bodies, such as parliaments, have institutionalised the party system agenda through 'question hours', hearings and so on (see, e.g., Baumgartner 1989).

From an agenda-setting perspective, party interaction is thus completely expected because individual parties have a strategic interest in shaping the common party-system agenda, even when that involves paying attention to disadvantageous issues. Surely, it may be tempting for a party to ignore an unfavourable issue, not least because addressing it might draw even more attention to an issue. Ignoring an issue on the party-system agenda may nevertheless be both difficult and risky. Difficult because political parties are expected to have an opinion on all issues and therefore may come under pressure from various actors – in particular the mass media – to address issues that are prominent on the party-system agenda. And risky because a hotly debated issue always has a particular tone or frame attached to it (Baumgartner & Jones 1993; Stone 1997; Baumgartner et al. 2008), and ignoring such an issue means relinquishing influence over how it is framed (Jerit 2008). It may be necessary to reframe a salient issue owned by opponents to win elections, as exemplified by the Democratic experience with the crime issue in American presidential campaigns (Holian 2004). Several studies have documented that 'issue trespassing' may offer an effective campaign strategy (Sides 2006; Norpoth & Buchanan 1992).

The party-system agenda thus connects the issue emphasis of individual parties and helps explain the considerable, but not complete, issue overlap found in empirical studies. Each party tries to emphasise advantageous issues in order to influence the party-system agenda. At the same time, however, parties must also respond to whatever issues are salient at any given time.<sup>1</sup>

Introducing the notion of a party-system agenda is the first step towards developing the agenda-setting model of issue competition. The next step is to focus on the reciprocal relationship between the party-system agenda and the issue emphases of government and opposition parties, respectively, as illustrated in Figure 1. From this perspective, issue competition is a process in which the party-system agenda both influences and constrains the issue emphases of the political parties.

The party-system agenda is related to the issue emphasis of both government and opposition parties, but the crucial proposition is that government and opposition parties most likely find themselves in fundamentally different positions in this respect. More particularly, the argument advanced here is that opposition parties have more power to set the party-system agenda than government parties. Hence, the relationships in the basic agenda-setting model

of issue competition depicted in Figure 1 are not expected to be of equal strength and size. Rather, they are expected to reflect the following features of issue competition.

First, when engaging in the ongoing political debate, governments, and thus government parties, are expected to deliver solutions to a huge number of policy problems facing modern societies, even if the government bears no direct responsibility for these problems, and even though many of them may not be amenable to government solutions in the first place. This means that avoiding blame for the many unsolved policy problems is a central element of being in government (Weaver 1986). If a government does not respond to issues, it is automatically accused of being in trouble and unable to deliver the expected policy solutions. Hence, ignoring issues on the party-system agenda is almost impossible for government parties. Consequently, government parties may find it difficult to keep focus on the issues they prefer.

Moreover, when trying to influence the party-system agenda, government parties are expected to deliver policy solutions, which often have to be implemented as well. Governments possess various means of opening policy windows (Kingdon 1995), but in doing so they also assume responsibility for delivering policy solutions, the effects of which may become subject to immediate criticism by political opponents, experts and so on. Furthermore, they may also be held accountable in the future for undesirable effects of these policy solutions. For instance, the ultimate agenda-setting device for a government is to start a war, but such an agenda-setting strategy possibly also involves considerable risks as it becomes quite difficult for government parties to move away from the issue if it becomes disadvantageous. The Iraq War thus offers a fine example of how a government can become locked into an unfavourable issue, which it had originally placed on the party-system agenda itself, thus demonstrating an inherent weakness in the agenda-setting means available to government parties. Governments possess numerous policy-making tools, but they must also think in terms of policy solutions – not just policies – when they want to draw attention to an issue.

Opposition parties are in a different position. Unlike government parties, they are not to the same extent held responsible for policy solutions. Instead,

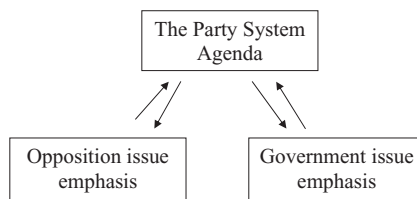


Figure 1. The agenda-setting model of issue competition.

they can focus on criticising the government on whatever issues they deem advantageous. As Klingemann et al. (1994: 28) state: 'Incumbents have a record, the opposition has only its words.' This is the crux of the opposition's agenda-setting advantage according to the agenda-setting model of issue competition. Hence, while the influence of the opposition on the party-system agenda is expected to be strong compared to that of the government, the opposition is also expected to be less constrained by the party-system agenda than the parties in government. This discussion of the relative influence/responsiveness of opposition and government parties on the party-system agenda can be summarised in these two key hypotheses:

- a. *The agenda-setting hypothesis*: Opposition parties exert greater influence on the party-system agenda than do government parties.
- b. *The agenda-responsiveness hypothesis*: Government parties are more responsive to the party-system agenda than opposition parties.

In addition to these two key hypotheses, a number of other hypotheses can be derived, thus demonstrating how the model not only incorporates existing understanding of issue competition but also raises new and central questions. First, as shown by the agenda-setting literature (see Edwards & Wood 1999; Soroka 2002; Baumgartner et al. 2008), agendas and issue emphasis, like most other political phenomena, are characterised by inertia. Once an issue has gained prominence, the actors involved deem it important to address this issue, thus increasing the likelihood that the issue will remain prominent in succeeding periods. This can be summarised in the following hypothesis:

- c. *The inertia hypothesis*: The party-system agenda and the issue emphases of individual parties are influenced by their own histories.

Moreover, the model allows us to incorporate and study the use of two central strategies emphasised in the recent literature on issue competition. First, based on Meguid's duration argument (Meguid 2005), one reason why opposition parties are more successful agenda-setters than government parties is that they are not forced to respond to all issues in the same way government parties are. They can thus maintain their focus on favourable issues over longer periods of time. The issue emphases of opposition parties can therefore be expected to show higher levels of inertia than those of government parties. This is expressed in the following duration hypothesis:

- d. *The opposition duration hypothesis*: The issue emphases of the opposition are more stable over time than the issue emphases of the government.

Finally, in line with the agenda-setting perspective, Sulkin (2005) reveals 'issue-uptake' of opponents' issues as an important strategy for United States Congressmen. Incumbents take up issues that their opponents have emphasised during the previous election campaigns to eliminate any possible advantage the opponent might have on those issues. Thus, government parties may be forced to respond not only to the party-system agenda (as implied by the agenda-responsiveness hypothesis above), but also more directly to issues emphasised by the opposition.<sup>2</sup> In Figure 1, a direct effect of the issue emphasis of the opposition on that of the government parties would thus constitute issue-uptake. This proposition is expressed in the government issue-uptake hypothesis:

- e. *The government issue-uptake hypothesis*: The issue emphasis of the opposition directly affects the issue emphasis of the government.

## Data

The need to develop the study of issue competition further is related not only to the theoretical questions, but also to the availability of data. Issue competition studies have almost exclusively been based on election campaign material. For instance, the party manifesto dataset (see Budge et al. 2001) is a frequently used data source (e.g., Meguid 2005; Green-Pedersen 2007). Nevertheless, given that election campaigns are also fairly short periods and elections typically come every fourth year, the data obtained from studying party manifestos only give a measure of issue emphasis at a given time, and there are long intervals between the measurements. This impedes the study of issue competition, and it is also difficult to extract a measure of the party-system agenda from such datasets.

In this article, we therefore draw on a new database on parliamentary activities in Denmark presented in Table 1. In the database, all activities were coded according to their policy-content code based on a scheme developed by the American Policy Agendas Project (Baumgartner et al. 2001).<sup>3</sup> The content code specifies whether a given activity was about defence, education, transportation and so on. The Danish version of the content scheme consists of 236 subcategories. Based on the 236 subcategories in the content coding scheme, we developed 23 issue categories. Where many agenda-setting studies focus on only a few issues, this dataset thus covers the entire policy space (see Table A1 in the Appendix).

These data offer several advantages with regard to evaluating the agenda-setting model of issue competition. First, the political activities are recorded



consistently for each parliamentary session, thus providing us with annual observations, which significantly improves our ability to trace political agenda dynamics across time and between elections.<sup>4</sup> Second, the parliamentary arena is clearly dominated by national political parties, and activities in this venue are visible to a broader public audience. As argued by Baumgartner (1989) in his study of agenda setting in French politics, parliamentary debate of an issue is a powerful tool for expanding an issue to the general public, and it is unlikely that broad political interest in an issue will not result in parliamentary activities around it (see also Bennett 1990). Hence, it seems suitable to construct proxies for party strategies and the party-system agenda from a dataset on parliamentary activities.

Denmark has a multi-party system with typically seven or eight parties represented in parliament – parties that are all characterised by very strong party cohesion (Table A2 in the Appendix presents an overview of government and opposition parties in the period). The parties on the far left (Unity List, the Left Socialist Party and the Socialist People's Party) and those on the far right (Progress Party and Danish People's Party) have remained in opposition throughout the period of our study. Government power has oscillated only between the Social Democrats, on the one side, and Liberals and the Conservatives, on the other. The small centre parties (the Social-Liberals, Christian People's Party and Centre Democrats) occasionally joined either left or right governments. Most have been minority governments in search of majorities for legislation from case to case, but there is a clear division between government and opposition parties in the Danish system (Christiansen & Damgaard 2008), making it suitable for testing the parsimonious agenda-setting model of issue competition laid out above. No political system is 'proto-

*Table 1.* Database on Danish parliamentary activities

Parliamentary activity	N (1979–2003)	Length of debate in columns (1979–2003)
Questions to the minister (excluding questions from government parties)	53,920	Not relevant
Bills	6,565	117,047
Account by ministers	431	12,649
Interpellation debates	1,062	46,467
Parliamentary resolutions	3,330	50,124
PM's opening speech (sentences)	6,706	Not relevant
PM's closing speech (sentences)	4,214	Not relevant

typical', however, and in the concluding section of this article, we will return to the question of generalising our empirical results outside the Danish system.

### *Variables*

How do we construct measures based on these data on the three central variables outlined above? The challenge is to construct a measure that reflects the systemic nature of the party-system agenda versus the issue emphasis of government and opposition parties. Beginning with the issue emphasis of the government parties, we derive our measure from the Prime Minister's speeches at the opening and closing of each parliamentary session. More specifically, we use each sentence in these speeches and estimate the government's issue emphasis from the number of sentences devoted to various policy issues (see John et al. 2006). A great advantage of this measure of the government's issue emphasis is the lack of formal constraints on these speeches as to which issues to address, how the issues are weighted and the total duration of the speeches, meaning that they can reasonably be interpreted as the government parties' issue emphases at a specific point in time.<sup>5</sup>

As a proxy for the opposition's issue emphasis we use questions to the ministers posed by the opposition parties in each parliamentary session. Asking questions is just one strategy the opposition parties can use to advance their own issues, but using questions as a proxy for the opposition's issue emphasis provides us with a clear identification of the initiators of these parliamentary activities measured consistently over time.<sup>6</sup> This way of using the questions is supported by an analysis of the contents of the questions, which shows that even though questions are asked by individual MPs, there is a clear partisan pattern in their issue content (Green-Pedersen forthcoming).

The final question is how to measure the party-system agenda. Because of its systemic character, it would be problematic to measure it as merely the sum of the issue emphases of individual parties. We therefore turn to the length of all debates in parliament as a proxy for the party-system agenda. Debates in the Danish national parliament occur in relation to four activities: proposals of new bills, policy accounts by the ministers, interpellation debates and parliamentary resolutions. While the two former types of activities are mainly initiated by the government parties, the latter tend to be initiated by the opposition parties. The length of debates is measured as the number of columns in the parliamentary records devoted to covering debates. What makes the length of parliamentary debates particularly apt as a measure of the party-system agenda is that lengthy debates arise only on issues that many parties from both government and opposition deem important. Whereas a single party is able to ask as many questions as they want and the prime minister can allocate as

much of a speech time to any given issue as he wants, a party cannot on its own set long debates in motion; that would require that many or all parties address the issue at the same time. The measure thereby captures the systemic nature of the party system agenda. Furthermore, as can be seen from Table 1, the length of debates is also fairly balanced between activities initiated by the government and the opposition, and the inclusion of debates related to activities such as bills implies that it captures party attention to issues on more than a short-term basis, making the aggregation to annual data appropriate.

For the empirical analyses, the units of analysis are the relative shares taken up by the 23 issues of the total agenda/emphasis measure each year. Thus, to construct an empirical estimate of the relative share of the party-system agenda of the 23 issues in any given year, we divide length of parliamentary debate devoted to an issue by total length of debates in parliament that year.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, we construct a measure of the government's relative issue emphasis by dividing, for each year, the number of sentences devoted to an issue by the total number of sentences in the Prime Minister's speeches. The relative issue emphasis of the opposition is calculated as the number of questions to the minister on a given issue divided by the total number of questions raised by opposition parties in that parliamentary session (see also Table A1 in the Appendix).

## Model and analysis

Given these measures of the central concepts in the agenda-setting model of issue competition, Hypotheses a–c derived above can now be converted into a set of testable propositions using the following three equations:

$$Psa_{it} = \alpha_{1i} + \beta_1 * Psa_{it-1} + \beta_2 * Ge_{it-1} + \beta_3 * Oe_{it-1} + \varepsilon_{1it} \quad (1)$$

$$Ge_{it} = \alpha_{2i} + \beta_4 * Psa_{it-1} + \beta_5 * Ge_{it-1} + \beta_6 * Oe_{it-1} + \varepsilon_{2it} \quad (2)$$

$$Oe_{it} = \alpha_{3i} + \beta_7 * Psa_{it-1} + \beta_8 * Ge_{it-1} + \beta_9 * Oe_{it-1} + \varepsilon_{3it} \quad (3)$$

where  $Psa$  is the party-system agenda measured as shares of the length of parliamentary debates;  $Ge$  is government emphasis measured as shares of the sentences in the Prime Minister's speeches;  $Oe$  is opposition emphasis measured as shares of questions to the minister; subscript  $t$  denotes annual time periods; subscript  $i$  denotes issue categories;  $\alpha$  is the intercept;  $\varepsilon$  is an error term; and  $\beta_1$ – $\beta_9$  are estimable parameters.

As evident from the theoretical discussion above, we do not expect all the estimable parameters ( $\beta_1$ – $\beta_9$ ) in Equations 1–3 to be of equal size and importance. More particularly, Hypotheses a–e derived from the agenda-setting model of issue competition can now be expressed as in Table 2.

This expression of the agenda-setting model of issue competition does not imply that the party-system agenda and the issue emphases of political parties are the only factors relevant to issue competition, nor that political parties develop issues out of the blue.<sup>8</sup> For instance, parties sometimes simply react to commonly perceived outside events. Nevertheless, when looking at the entire agenda space of Danish politics across a quarter of a century, as we do in this article, any such effects for a given issue-area ought to be idiosyncratic. In any case, as a first empirical investigation of these agenda hypotheses, this rather parsimonious modeling seems justified.

The idea of causality guiding the model of issue competition draws on a Granger-style logic of causality (Granger 1969). For instance, as evident from Equation 1 above, current values of the party-system agenda are modeled as functions of the lagged values of the government's issue emphasis, controlling for the past history of the party-system agenda as well as for the lagged values of the opposition's issue emphasis. Equations 2 and 3 above follow the same logic. Allowing only for lagged effects improves our ability to talk about causation and, to the extent that we miss concurrent relationships, biases our test against finding significant effects (see also Walgrave et al. 2008). Furthermore, since our data are annual, the most appropriate time lag is 1, meaning that we assume that the dependent variables at year  $t$  can be caused by independent variables at year  $t-1$ .

To evaluate the five agenda hypotheses we use a cross-sectional time-series analysis, in which each of the 23 issues represents a panel consisting of 24 yearly observations (from 1979 to 2003). This approach – also used to study agenda-setting by Walgrave et al. (2008) – allows us to focus on the dynamic effects within each issue averaged across the 23 issues. More particularly, we estimate each of the three equations outlined above using a fixed effects OLS

Table 2. Overview of hypotheses a–e

Name of hypothesis	
The agenda-setting hypothesis	$\beta_3 > \beta_2$
The agenda-responsiveness hypothesis	$\beta_4 > \beta_7$
The inertia hypothesis	$\beta_1, \beta_5, \beta_9 > 0$
The duration hypothesis	$\beta_6 > \beta_5$
The issue-uptake hypothesis	$\beta_6 > 0$

regression.<sup>9</sup> The result of a joint F-test clearly supports the inclusion of issue dummy variables, such that the estimated coefficients represent a cross-issue average of the dynamic effects within each issue. Since preliminary analyses uncovered no systematic effects from year dummies, the analyses reported in Tables 3 and 4 include only issue dummies to preserve degrees of freedom. We also follow Beck and Katz' (1995) recommendation to apply panel-corrected standard errors to adjust for panel heteroscedasticity.<sup>10</sup>

## Findings

Table 3 reports the results relating to Hypotheses a–e. Since all variables are measured in comparable units, the full set of hypotheses can be evaluated by comparing the estimated coefficients (*b*'s) both within and across the three columns. The statistical significance of the coefficients is measured using one-tailed *t*-tests due to the directional nature of the agenda hypotheses. To facilitate the presentation, our estimates of the 23 issue dummies are not shown.<sup>11</sup>

Looking first at the estimated model of the party-system agenda, Table 3 lends strong support to the agenda-setting hypothesis ( $b_3 > b_2$ ).<sup>12</sup> While the lagged values of government emphasis are unrelated to current values of the party-system agenda, the party-system agenda is clearly influenced by the lagged values of the opposition emphases. According to this model, when the percentage of questions devoted to a given issue increases by 1 in year *t*–1, the proportion of parliamentary debate in year *t* increases by an average of approximately 0.3 percentage points. In addition to this important agenda-setting result, Model 1 also indicates that there is inertia in the party-system agenda. Consistent with the first part of the inertia hypothesis ( $b_1 > 0$ ), the share of debate devoted to a given issue at time *t*–1 predicts, to some extent, the share of debate devoted to that issue at time *t*.

Model 2 in Table 3 shows the estimated model of the issue emphasis by government parties, whereas Model 3 reports the estimated model of the opposition's issue emphasis. Similar to Model 1, Models 2 and 3 both show strong inertia in the dependent series, indicating that the Prime Minister's weighting of issues and the issues opposition parties ask questions about do not change radically from year to year. Hence, across all models, the analysis corroborates the inertia hypothesis ( $b_1, b_5, b_9 > 0$ ).

Likewise, Models 2 and 3 lend clear support to the agenda-responsiveness hypothesis ( $b_4 > b_7$ ).<sup>13</sup> While a one unit change in the measure of the party-system agenda at time *t*–1 is followed by a 0.23 unit change in the measure of government emphases at time *t*, there is no such systematic relationship between the party-system agenda at time *t*–1 and the opposition's issue

Table 3. Evaluating the agenda-setting model of issue competition

	Dependent variables		
	Party-system agenda <sub>it</sub> (Equation 1)	Government emphasis <sub>it</sub> (Equation 2)	Opposition emphasis <sub>it</sub> (Equation 3)
Party-system agenda <sub>it-1</sub>	0.210*** [b <sub>1</sub> ] (0.073)	0.232* [b <sub>4</sub> ] (0.137)	0.041 [b <sub>7</sub> ] (0.036)
Government emphasis <sub>it-1</sub>	0.023 [b <sub>2</sub> ] (0.032)	0.426*** [b <sub>5</sub> ] (0.091)	0.004 [b <sub>8</sub> ] (0.017)
Opposition emphasis <sub>it-1</sub>	0.319*** [b <sub>3</sub> ] (0.053)	0.111 [b <sub>6</sub> ] (0.095)	0.530*** [b <sub>9</sub> ] (0.059)
Constant	0.831*** (0.235)	-0.265 (0.350)	1.003*** (0.228)
N	552	552	552
R	0.79	0.80	0.76
R (adjusted)	0.78	0.79	0.75
F-test (issue dummies)	7.91***	4.90***	4.74***

Notes: Unstandardised betas with panel-corrected standard errors in parentheses. Estimated coefficients for issue dummies are not shown to facilitate the presentation. \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$  (one-tailed).  $b_1$ – $b_9$  are the estimated equivalents to the population parameters  $\beta_1$ – $\beta_9$ .

emphasis at time  $t$ . Hence, while the opposition's issue emphasis clearly seems to influence the party-system agenda, the government's issue emphasis reflects rather than affects the party-system agenda.

In the outline of the agenda-setting model of issue competition it was argued that one factor behind the opposition's agenda-setting power was to be found in the opposition's ability to focus long and intensively on its preferred issues. Though it certainly represents a rather crude evaluation of this duration hypothesis ( $b_9 > b_5$ ), the stronger inertia in the opposition series compared to the government series can be considered at least tentative support for this expectation.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, the issue-uptake hypothesis is not supported by Table 3 since we do not find any direct effect of opposition emphases on government emphases when the party-system agenda is controlled ( $b_6$  in Model 2 is statistically insignificant). The analysis thus does not appear to support the notion that governments take up certain issues simply because they are brought up by the opposition. The effect of the opposition's issue emphasis seems to go through the party-system agenda, which further demonstrates the importance of adding the systemic agenda perspective to the study of issue competition.

Table 3 provides strong support for four of the five agenda hypotheses derived from the agenda-setting model of issue competition, and hence support for the idea of including the party-system agenda and focusing on competition between government and opposition parties. The solidity of these findings is enhanced by the inclusive nature of the analysis in that it covers all aspects of Danish politics for a period of almost a quarter of a century. The analysis has revealed effects across the entire policy spectrum and not just a few selected issues, as is typical in agenda-setting studies (e.g., Soroka 2002; Edwards & Wood 1999).

On the other hand, studies focusing on issue differences typically find variation across issues, which may be hidden in our modeling. Since such unit heterogeneity may challenge the robustness of a cross-sectional time-series analysis (Wilson & Butler 2007), we decided to perform a jackknife analysis (see Kittel & Winner 2005) to handle this challenge beyond applying a fixed effects model. More precisely, we re-estimate the models presented in Table 3 by excluding issues one at a time. This provides information about the sensitivity of the conclusions to the impact of potential issue outliers. It turns out that excluding issues generally had no important effect on the results reported above.<sup>15</sup> However, the exclusion of one specific issue – namely the economy – modifies our findings in two ways. This is evident from Table 4, which presents the estimated model for 22 issues only, the economy issue having been excluded.

The significant effects in Table 3 all reappear in Table 4, although the exact sizes of the coefficients are slightly modified. For instance, the effect of the

Table 4. Evaluating the agenda-setting model of issue competition (without the economic issue)

	Dependent variables		
	Party-system agenda <sub>it</sub> (Equation 1)	Government emphasis <sub>it</sub> (Equation 2)	Opposition emphasis <sub>it</sub> (Equation 3)
Party-system agenda <sub>it-1</sub>	0.121* [b <sub>1</sub> ] (0.061)	0.181** [b <sub>4</sub> ] (0.077)	0.077* [b <sub>7</sub> ] (0.043)
Government emphasis <sub>it-1</sub>	0.023 [b <sub>2</sub> ] (0.025)	0.322*** [b <sub>5</sub> ] (0.071)	0.005 [b <sub>8</sub> ] (0.023)
Opposition emphasis <sub>it-1</sub>	0.355*** [b <sub>3</sub> ] (0.050)	0.223*** [b <sub>6</sub> ] (0.084)	0.522*** [b <sub>9</sub> ] (0.059)
Constant	0.922*** (0.235)	-0.332 (0.269)	0.950*** (0.230)
N	528	528	528
R	0.66	0.61	0.77
R (adjusted)	0.65	0.59	0.76
F-test (issue dummies)	6.86***	6.58***	4.51***

Notes: Unstandardised betas with panel-corrected standard errors in parentheses. Estimated coefficients for issue dummies are not shown to facilitate the presentation. \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$  (one-tailed).  $b_1$ – $b_9$  are the estimated equivalents to the population parameters  $\beta_1$ – $\beta_9$ .



opposition emphasis on the party-system agenda increases from 0.319 to 0.353. However, two effects are worth noting when the economy is left out. First, the party-system agenda now has a significant effect on the opposition's issue emphasis ( $b_7 > 0$ ). However, as the effect remains lower than that of the party-system agenda on the government's issue emphasis, this result is consistent with the issue competition model. This simply means that for most issues, the party-system agenda is a constraining factor for all parties, but more so for government parties than for opposition parties, as also expected. More interestingly, the government issue-uptake estimate ( $b_6$ ) also becomes statistically significant when the economy issue is left out. For most issues, in other words, there is a government issue-uptake dynamic in which government parties appear to react in a 'pre-emptive' and direct manner to the issue emphases of opposition parties.

In sum, the support for the issue competition model appears to be rather robust. Only the economy issue seems to be somewhat of an outlier, but leaving it out actually yields further support for the model as the government issue-uptake hypothesis is then supported. As evident from Table A1 in the Appendix, however, leaving out the economy issue also means giving away a considerable amount of information – on average, almost a third of the government's issue emphasis is connected to the economy issue. The findings in Table 3 therefore provide the most general information on issue competition dynamics, whereas the findings in Table 4 support the general conclusions. However, they also suggest that variation across issues is an important question for further research – a topic we discuss further in the conclusion.

## Conclusion

Drawing on agenda-setting literature, this article outlined a model of issue competition focusing on issue interaction between government and opposition parties through the party-system agenda. It thereby represents a first attempt to move the issue competition literature beyond its narrow focus on party strategies and towards understanding the systemic outcomes of this competition. According to the model, opposition parties have more opportunities to focus continually on issues that are advantageous to them, whereas government parties are compelled to respond to issues brought up on the party-system agenda. By controlling the party-system agenda, the opposition parties can thus 'force' governments to address issues. The government may, however, also be pre-emptive in its issue emphasis and address issues because the opposition has emphasised them.

The empirical part of the analysis examined a number of observable implications derived from this model of issue competition utilising a comprehensive dataset on Danish political activities covering 23 issues and 25 years. While some of the effects appeared to be rather issue-specific, the empirical analysis generally provided strong support for the agenda-setting model of issue competition. According to these findings, we can now move beyond the simple proposition that different parties generally talk about different issues. Parties actually affect each other in a complex but understandable manner when issue competition is modeled as a set of reciprocal relationships between the opposition, the government and the party-system agenda.

An example of how this dynamic has been evident in Danish politics is the issue of immigration during the period of left-wing governments from 1993 to 2001 (see Green-Pedersen & Krogstrup 2008). For the right-wing opposition, drawing attention to the issue was electorally advantageous as these parties had clear issue ownership in this area, whereas the government, also due to internal disagreements, would rather avoid the issue. However, it was unable to do so. The opposition consistently focused on the issue – for instance, when the mass media brought up stories about problems related to integrating young immigrants into Danish society (see Green-Pedersen & Stubager forthcoming). The government responded with a series of policy measures, but none could prevent the issue from constantly cropping up on the party system agenda, in the end forcing the government parties to pay attention to the issue, for instance in the Prime Minister's opening speeches.

To further develop our understanding of issue competition, the present analysis also proposes at least two avenues of future research. First, the finding that some issue specific effects exist points to the question of cross-issue variation. In particular, the analysis appears to suggest that the economy is very much a government issue in the sense that the government does not address it just because the opposition emphasises it. As mentioned above, cross-issue variation is a standard finding within agenda-setting studies (see Soroka 2002; Edwards & Wood 1999), and further investigation of how issue characteristics affect issue competition seems to represent an important line of research.

A second set of questions concerns the role of the political institutional context. The agenda-setting literature, which inspired the model of issue competition, has a very limited tradition for comparative research (see Baumgartner et al. 2006). The theoretical arguments behind the agenda-setting model focused on factors such as the government/opposition dichotomy found in almost any parliamentary political system. However, the logic behind it may also extend beyond parliamentary systems – for instance, to a system like that in the United States. Studies of the United States have found that the President

is a powerful agenda-setting actor (Edwards & Wood 1999; Kingdon 1995: 23–26), and compared to the findings in this article, this may indicate a difference between presidential and parliamentary systems.

Furthermore, the general relevance of the model obviously does not imply that opposition versus government issue competition materialises identically in different parliamentary systems. The findings in this article may thus be affected by the political institutional context in Denmark in three ways, all of which deserve attention in future research. First, minority governments are endemic to Danish politics. A minority government is often perceived as being weak in terms of passing policies, but the experiences of Danish minority governments do not support this idea. Danish minority governments have often succeeded in using changing majorities to pass major policy reforms (Green-Pedersen 2001; Ganghof & Bräuninger 2006).

Second, the role of the multi-party context deserves further attention. The notion of a ‘party system agenda’ clearly appears most obvious in a multi-party parliamentary system like the one described in this article. And one of the reasons why this idea has not been developed before may therefore be the dominance of studies of two-party contexts. However, there is no inherent reason why the idea of a party system agenda should not be applicable to two-party systems, just as the literature on party systems has also included two-party systems (Mair 1997). Even a two-party system will have an agenda that is open to competition between the two parties.

Third, multi-party systems also vary with respect to the relationship between government and opposition. The Danish system is characterised by a clear alternation between left and right, but other systems – for instance, ones with pivotal centre parties (Keman 1994) – are characterised by only partial changes in which parties govern. What effects this may have on the way opposition parties and government parties try to influence the party system agenda is clearly also an interesting question for future research. Maybe the issue emphasis of opposition parties is affected by the fact that future government participation will most likely involve a party already in government?

Only future empirical research can answer these questions about the role of the political institutional context for issue competition. One central reason why such questions have not been raised thus far may be that the strong focus in the issue competition literature on individual party strategies has made it difficult to raise questions about the role played by the political institutional context in a manner that actually allows for empirical investigation. What this article offers is a theoretical model that enables such an investigation and, more generally, a further development and revitalisation of the study of issue competition.

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## Appendix

**Table A1.** Topics and descriptors, 1979–2003

Issues	Party-system agenda	Opposition's issue emphasis	Government's issue emphasis
100: Economy and taxation	14.97 (3.95)	5.25 (1.25)	28.17 (10.98)
200: Personal rights	1.98 (0.96)	2.29 (1.01)	0.79 (1.11)
300: Danish National Church	0.37 (0.30)	0.46 (0.21)	0.15 (0.37)
400: Refugees and immigrants	4.19 (2.61)	5.48 (3.17)	2.33 (2.71)
500: Health	5.25 (1.74)	7.12 (1.88)	2.28 (2.20)
600: Agriculture	3.85 (1.24)	4.33 (1.11)	1.57 (1.70)
700: Labor market	8.02 (2.02)	7.06 (1.74)	10.60 (4.19)
800: Education	4.92 (1.22)	5.25 (1.68)	2.86 (1.79)
900: Culture and sports	2.16 (1.00)	2.36 (0.94)	0.98 (1.11)
1000: Environment	6.85 (2.49)	7.70 (1.44)	2.39 (1.48)
1100: Energy	3.46 (1.77)	3.74 (1.76)	1.96 (3.17)
1200: Transportation	3.88 (1.33)	6.37 (1.48)	0.89 (0.86)
1300: Justice and crime	4.60 (1.69)	6.64 (1.62)	2.28 (3.43)
1400: Social affairs	6.38 (1.37)	5.36 (1.17)	5.19 (3.14)
1500: Housing	4.77 (1.53)	2.38 (0.77)	1.49 (1.24)
1600: Business	5.67 (2.08)	5.18 (1.27)	4.23 (2.71)
1700: Defence	3.29 (2.09)	5.16 (2.84)	4.92 (3.50)
1800: Technology and communication	2.79 (1.19)	3.86 (1.22)	2.11 (2.26)
1900: Foreign affairs	4.52 (1.55)	5.60 (1.67)	10.92 (6.07)
2000: EU	2.65 (1.81)	0.98 (0.71)	6.16 (3.71)
2100: Regional and local affairs	2.03 (0.92)	1.93 (0.82)	0.55 (0.70)
2200: Public sector	1.94 (1.00)	3.72 (1.08)	3.05 (3.09)
2300: Control of government	1.45 (0.99)	1.77 (1.26)	3.94 (1.78)

Notes: N = 552. Cells contain means (percentages) with standard deviations in parentheses.

**Table A2.** Danish government and opposition parties, 1979–2003

Time period	Government parties	Opposition parties
1979–1982	Social Democrats	Left Socialists, Communist (1979), Justice Party (1979–1981), Socialist People's Party, Liberals, Conservatives, Social Liberals, Christian People's Party, Centre Democrats, Progress Party
1982–1993	Liberals, Conservatives, Christian People's Party (1982–1988), Centre Democrats (1982–1988), Social Liberals (1988–1990)	Left Socialists (1982–1987), Common Course (1987–1988), Socialist People's Parties, Social Democrats, Progress Party, Christian People's Party (1988–1993), Centre Democrats (1988–1993) Social Liberals (1982–1988, 1990–1993)
1993–2001	Social Democrats, Social Liberals, Christian Peoples Party (1993–1994), Centre Democrats (1993–1996)	Unity List (1994–2001), Socialist People's Party, Liberals, Conservatives, Progress Party, Danish People's Party (1995–2001), Christian Democrats (1988–2001), Centre Democrats (1996–2001)
2001–2003	Liberals, Conservatives	Unity List, Socialist People's Party, Social Democrats, Social Liberals, Christian Democrats (2001–2005), Danish People's Party

## Notes

1. This idea of a party-system agenda is new to the issue competition literature, but within studies of party systems and party competition, this structural perspective on party competition is far from new. This literature stresses (see Mair 1997; Smith 1989) how competitive political parties form a system and how the behaviour of individual parties cannot be understood by focusing on individual parties alone.
2. It is worth stressing that this hypothesis is premised upon Hypotheses a and b in the sense that the pre-emptive logic of issue-uptake requires the possibility that the government may later be forced to address an issue.
3. See [www.policyagendas.org/](http://www.policyagendas.org/).
4. We start in 1979 because of data limitations before that time. Before 1979 there was no closing speech by the Prime Minister, and the number of questions raised was limited. Our measures of government and opposition issue-emphasis (see below) are thus too fragile before 1979. Years refer to parliamentary years. The first year covered is thus the parliamentary year running from 1 October 1979 to 30 September 1980, and the last year covered is the parliamentary session running from 1 October 2002 to 20 September 2003.

5. In the opening speech the government always addresses the situation in the two former Danish colonies, Greenland and the Faroe Islands, which today are semi-independent. Issues relating to these two areas have their own topic code, which was then excluded before we developed the 23 categories because government mention of these two areas is inherent to PM speeches rather than intended government issue emphasis.
6. MPs from government parties may also ask questions, but they rarely do. Questions asked by MPs from government parties were therefore excluded from the analysis.
7. General debates that traditionally take place at the opening and closing of parliamentary sessions are excluded because these debates cover a wide range of issues. Placing them within specific issue categories would strongly affect the results as these debates are very long.
8. Following Carmines' (1991: 75) argument that 'all successful politicians instinctively understand which issues benefit them and their party and which do not', we assume that parties will actually emphasise issues that are advantageous to them. Obviously, a party might make misjudgements in this regard, but that is not important for the dynamics of issue competition.
9. Another option is to apply the methods of seemingly unrelated regressions (SUR). However, since the same set of regressors is used in all cases, there are no efficiency gains from SUR estimation (see Martin & Smith 2005). This assumption is corroborated by the fact that a SUR estimation yields results identical to those shown in Tables 3 and 4 (these results are available from the authors upon request). Furthermore, in all post-estimations the null hypothesis underlying the Hausman (1978) test was clearly rejected, corroborating the appropriateness of estimating a fixed effects model rather than a random effects model.
10. A modified Wald statistic indicates problems with groupwise heteroscedasticity (calculated with Stata module xttest3). Using Maddala and Wu's Fisher type unit root test for panel data we can, however, clearly reject the hypothesis of nonstationarity in the series (calculated with Stata module xtfisher).
11. Changes in government, and thus which parties are in opposition and in government, could be expected to affect the model since last year's opposition becomes this year's government. We tested for such effects by adding a dummy variable and interaction terms for the three years when there was a change of government (1982–1983, 1992–1993 and 2001–2002). However, they were not statistically significant. There are probably two reasons for this – namely that the change in opposition is only partial: many parties remain in opposition all the time; and that for two of the three periods (1992–1993, 2001–2002) the change in government occurred in the middle of a parliamentary period, and thus does not show up clearly in the data.
12. A Wald test for  $b_3 > b_2$  yields  $X^2 = 32.9^{***}$ . \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$  (one-tailed).
13. A Wald test for  $b_4 > b_7$  yields  $X^2 = 4.76^{**}$ . \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$  (one-tailed).
14. A Wald test for  $b_9 > b_5$  yields  $X^2 = 3.64^*$ . \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$  (one-tailed).
15. The results from the other 22 re-estimations of the model are available from the authors upon request.

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