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Frank R. Baumgartner, Bryan D. Jones and John Wilkerson

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and John Wilkerson<sup>3</sup>**

## Abstract

Major new understandings of policy change are emerging from a program to measure attention to policies across nations using the same instrument. Participants in this special issue have created new indicators of government activities in 11 countries over several decades. Each database is comprehensive in that it includes information about every activity of its type (e.g., laws, bills, parliamentary questions, prime ministerial speeches) for the time period covered, typically several decades. These databases are linked by a common policy topic classification system, which allows new types of analyses of public policy dynamics over time. The authors introduce the theoretical and practical questions addressed in the volume, explain the nature of the work completed, and suggest some of the ways that this new infrastructure may allow new types of comparative analyses of public policy, institutions, and outcomes. In particular, the authors challenge political scientists to incorporate policy variability into their analyses and to move far beyond the search for partisan and electoral explanations of policy change.

## Keywords

comparative politics, comparative public policy, policy agendas, punctuated equilibrium, policy dynamics

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Comparative politics research generally highlights three main variables as central to understanding policy change: preferences, institutions, and information.<sup>1</sup> However, the roles of preferences and institutions have received much more attention than the role of information. Because institutions are usually stable except in the very long term, preference shifts as the result of electoral replacement are widely assumed to be the central source of policy change. The policy preferences of a governing coalition change when election fortunes dictate, which in turn brings about a new set of policies. Institutional variations are valuable in explaining differences across countries, but intracountry variation over time is often attributed to partisan shifts in government control brought about by elections. Indeed this is sometimes treated as if it were the *sine qua non* of democratic politics. In their influential book, Hans-Dieter Klingemann and colleagues reflect this common view: “To a remarkable extent, the policy priorities of governments in modern democracies reflect the formal programs presented by competing political parties during elections. This congruence between promise and performance is at the heart of what we mean by ‘democracy’” (Klingemann, Hofferbert, & Budge, 1994, p. 2). To many political scientists, elections are the key element of democracy, and if policy changes cannot be explained by elections, then these changes lack democratic legitimacy. We believe that elections are indeed fundamental elements of democracy but that policy changes frequently stem from the emergence of new information or changes in the social or economic environment that are not so simply related to the electoral process.

Political actors have policy preferences and attempt to maximize their behavior with respect to them. The extent of their abilities to do this is limited, however. Herbert Simon (1985) noted that different scholars mean very different things when they assume rationality—that is, goal maximization—in politics. In the “strong” form, rational actors who benefit from complete information have unlimited cognitive capacity. In various “weak” forms, information is incomplete and actors simply “do their best” to make the most appropriate decisions, given the information at hand. This last point is essential: If the preferences drive action as they interact with the best available information, then we need to know more about that information. Where does it come from? How do political actors who cannot attend to all incoming signals all of the time become aware of new information? How do they respond to it? How do they interpret it? Do they attempt to alter their rivals’ interpretations of the same bits of information?

Given the complexity of political life and the myriad problems facing modern governments, information is intimately connected to attention. New information about long-term poverty rates may draw attention to an aspect of

the issue of poverty that was not previously central to the debate. But if that information is ignored, then it can have no effect. Much of politics is about highlighting information as political actors compete to define a political issue. If such “attention shifts” occur, behavior might very well change whereas preferences do not. Behavior is partly a product of assumptions about which alternatives best advance one’s preferences—and these assumptions are inevitably products of information. Thus, at least for the “weak” form of rational choice decision making, attention, or information, is a key component of policy change. In the “strong” form, information is assumed to be complete and cognitive capacity unlimited, so there can be no “new” information, and attention can therefore be safely ignored. Moving from the “strong” to the “weak” form of rationality therefore introduces a new essential variable, which is attention. By shifting attention from one to another element of a complex decision, new information plays a key role in updating preferences. In any case, information is central in any theory of policy choice, though it is often left implicit under the guise of “updating preferences.” We believe the two are better retained as separate variables. As we show, virtually all of the empirical power comes in integrating attention, or information, not with any assumptions about how preferences shift.

We do not argue that policy preferences are unimportant, only that the importance of information is generally underappreciated and, as a result, understudied. For example, in the case of the 2008 vote in the U.S. Congress on the Troubled Asset Relief Program, less favorably termed the “Wall Street bailout bill,” many legislators shared the sentiment of Republican Party Leader in the House of Representatives, John Boehner, who commented, “My colleagues are angry about the situation they find themselves in. Nobody wants to have to support this bill” (Jones & Surface-Shafran, 2009). In this case, the standard rational choice assumption that actors “update their preferences based on information” seems to leave much to be explained. New information, the financial collapse of September 2008, certainly produced changes in behavior. But it is less evident that the behavioral changes were motivated by preference shifts (resulting from the introduction of new information).

In our view, preferences lose their independent explanatory power when the effects of “preference shifts” and “new information” are indistinguishable. If preferences can change based on new information, they risk becoming meaningless as scientific explanations of policy change, or at least indistinguishable from the information that causes preferences to change. To avoid conflating preferences and information, they must be treated as separate analytic categories. The effects of preference shifts can be assessed by how elections or other leadership changes alter policy. The effects of information can

be generally assessed by the policy changes that occur in the absence of such membership shifts, including whether membership shifts fail to produce substantial changes in policy. Information flows can be monitored via indicators of social and economic change, whereas policy maker attention to information can be assessed by changes in their attention to a given policy topic (after controlling for electorally induced preference shifts). Changes in policy relevant information can sometimes be measured systematically (e.g., changing economic conditions or crime rates). Sometimes, however, it is more difficult to measure (e.g., progress in maintaining a nation's economic competitiveness or position in the world order). Attention to information can be more readily measured, and that is our focus here.

Key to the articles in this issue is the shifting attention of governing coalitions. Shifts in attention must precede changes in policy action, whether these shifts are caused by changes in electoral fortunes or other factors. These studies all are based on comprehensive analyses of governmental activities over several decades, across multiple institutions. Each study relies on the same policy content system that covers the full range of the policy activities of Western governments and allows scholars systematically to trace shifts in policy attention: across countries; across time, including preceding and following elections; across issue domains, within and between countries; and across institutional settings within a single country. The broad scope of our project allows us to compare the relative importance of possible sources of variance in policy attention and subsequent policy action, and we find important components of change related to each. Elections matter, but so do many other factors.

The subject of agenda setting has received considerable attention in comparative studies. However, the concept means different things to different scholarly communities. In communications studies, works refer to McCombs and Shaw's (1972) conception of the "agenda-setting function of the mass media" (also see Dearing & Rogers, 1996). Here, and for many scholars (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987), agenda setting is assessed in terms of media coverage of a given topic and how media frames affect how members of the public conceive of or think about the topic. As Bernard Cohen (1963) wrote, the media cannot tell us what to think, but they can tell us what to think about. Some communications scholars have examined the scarcity and the diversity of the media agenda, including the number of stories carried in a daily newspaper compared to the number reported on the nightly news broadcast (McCombs & Zhu, 1995). Through their ability to frame understandings of issues, newspapers and other media outlets "set the agenda" for the public or for government officials.

Another significant body of agenda-setting research focuses on how institutions or parliamentary leaders affect policy outcomes by controlling the sequence of voting on various alternatives (see, e.g., Cox & McCubbins, 2005; Rasch & Tsebelis, 2010; Riker, 1986, 1995; Shepsle & Weingast, 1981, 1987). This literature is familiar to scholars of comparative political institutions as it is related to fundamental theoretical concerns about issue cycling (Arrow, 1970) and the effects of institutional rules and parliamentary “agenda setters” on the outcomes of parliamentary debates without necessarily changing any preferences.

A third body of work follows a long tradition in American politics focusing on the dynamics by which policy issues emerge as political controversies. In this policy literature perspective, stemming especially from the work of Schattschneider (1960) and Bachrach and Baratz (1962) and followed up by the works of Cobb and Elder (1972), Kingdon (1984), and Baumgartner and Jones (2009), agenda-setting research starts with the assumption that governmental agenda space is scarce. Scholars ask why certain issues make it onto the agenda whereas others do not.

The typical agenda-setting study from the policy literature suggests a highly dynamic policy-making process where change can occur more rapidly than a preference-based approach would lead us to expect. Changes in information are central to any explanation. The scarcity of the attention of policy-making institutions is critical. There are many more problems than governments can possibly attend to, and each problem may be extremely complex. These challenges lead to attention scarcity. For example, discussions of poverty may be focused on the severity of the problem or on the efficiency of the solutions but rarely both at once. Both are relevant dimensions, but attention typically is not divided in proportion to any comprehensive assessment of the relative weight of the diverse elements of an issue (see Jones & Baumgartner, 2005).

This policy agenda-setting perspective also highlights the multidimensional nature of the policy process—how attention scarcity can cause policy-making attention to shift from energy to health care to immigration to the economy to war, climate change, or human rights. Policy makers clearly respond to new information. A recent example of the importance of changing information flow for policy change was the economic and fiscal crisis of 2008-2009, which prompted a U.S. president who described himself as a “free market kind of guy” reluctantly to propose massive economic interventions, including state acquisition of banks and insurance companies and infusions of state funds into private markets. Bank bailouts were clearly not part of any party’s political platform, but President Bush’s Democratic successor, Barack

Obama, and governments throughout the West responded similarly. That so many governments (conservative and socialist alike) responded so similarly testifies to the value of studying the potential importance of changing information flows for policy change.

The fact that nations and leaders responded differently to this crisis just as clearly demonstrates that the impact of institutions, preferences, and policy legacies must also be considered. Actors process and respond to information, but policy changes are ultimately products of collective decisions occurring within specific institutional contexts. Organizational information processing is shaped not only by the cognitive capacities of individual actors but also by institutional procedures and patterns of communication that influence how perspectives are aggregated to produce collective decisions (see Jones, 2001).

No one denies that political leaders respond to changing contexts in the world around them. But in our view, there is a risk that readers of contemporary comparative politics research might conclude that knowledge of preferences and institutional design are sufficient to explain policy change. At the same time, portraying every collective outcome as driven by unique factors is equally problematic. One tradition sweeps changes not attributable to election-induced preference shifts into the catchall category of “exogenous shocks” (often represented by dummy variables in multivariate analyses). The problem, as authors in this issue show, is that responses to incoming information from such external changes are anything but smooth, proportionate in scale, or easily predictable (see Jones & Baumgartner, 2005). Thus, the linkages among information, events, institutions, and preferences deserve far more attention than they typically receive.

To demonstrate the importance of information for policy change and to appreciate its contribution relative to institutions and preferences, we investigate many policies over long periods of time, across many countries. In so doing, we hope to contribute to an improved understanding of the relative effects of elections, institutional design, information processing, and even unique country-specific or period-specific effects on policy change.

## **Comparative Policy Dynamics**

A policy dynamics perspective assumes that in many situations where preferences and rules are fixed for all practical purposes, information is the key “moving part” for understanding policy change. Studying collective attention shifts over long periods of time pushes scholars to appreciate aspects of the political process that are less noticeable during shorter time periods,

when attention (and preferences) may be relatively fixed. Policies develop through a series of stages, starting with a problem that somehow gains the attention of policy makers (Kingdon, 1984). Many important problems fail to pass over this threshold. Understanding why some do whereas others do not is central. Political leaders do the best they can in paying attention to the issues of the day, but they are faced with an overwhelming flood of information. The dynamics of how they decide to attend to some information more than others is fundamental to appreciating government decision making, and yet we know little about these processes.

Problem attention can be inspired by media coverage, public discontent, changes in the real world as these are monitored by government officials (such as the unemployment or inflation rates), actions within government as politicians exploit issues for personal or partisan gain, or other factors. Attention to one problem depends on the sum of attention currently being paid to all other problems. If there are more urgent problems on the national agenda, attention will not move to a lesser problem even as conditions worsen. At other times, for example in the absence of a serious economic recession and in times of peace, there may be more space on the agenda for new issues to emerge. This trade-off explains why scholars have found surprisingly low linkages between the severity of social problem and the degree of government attention or response to them.

A problem that does gain the attention of policy makers must then gain access to the governmental (or decision) agenda. Different political systems offer different channels of access. In the United States, presidential speeches, bill introductions, and congressional hearings are often where issues first appear on the governmental agenda. In many parliamentary democracies, executive speeches and parliamentary question periods appear to serve a similar function. However, a policy dynamics approach emphasizes that there are many potential venues for policy change. In the absence of legislation, an entrepreneur may seek change through other channels such as the bureaucracy or the courts. Thus, to fully appreciate the dynamics of policy change, it is essential to study the system as a whole rather than just one part of it. Approaches that focus on a specific institution risk overlooking important processes and decisions occurring elsewhere.

Each stage of the policy process is characterized by rules that shape attention. The effects of these rules cumulate as a policy idea advances through the decision-making process. Our research in the United States and elsewhere indicates that public priorities tend to be better represented during early agenda-setting stages (e.g., executive speeches) than later stages (e.g., laws and budgets; Jones, Larsen-Price, & Wilkerson, 2009). During early stages of the process, attention also tends to shift relatively easily from one



issue to another in response to changing information inputs, such as changing public priorities. Later stages, in contrast, exhibit greater “stickiness” or resistance to change (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005). Although we have yet to explain these findings completely, they appear quite robust, as a recent comparison of the United States, Denmark, and Belgium demonstrated (Baumgartner, Breunig et al., 2009). Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, another study stemming from the projects described here showed striking similarities in spending change patterns across time in eight Western democracies (Jones, Baumgartner et al., 2009). These findings suggest that a punctuated equilibrium approach with attention shifting may have broad applicability. They also appear to confirm that institutional variations, in particular the number of institutional veto points, play a significant role in determining the degree of “stickiness” that is observed across countries.

## **Governments as Problem Solvers**

Citizens of democratic societies expect their governments to solve important social problems, or at least to try. Although an elections-only focus might lead one to think that parties simply implement their ideologies after gaining control of the government, it is not that simple. Governments must also govern. Every government confronts multiple contradictory problems that lack clear solutions. Platforms should only weakly predict government agendas for at least three reasons: First, electoral platforms and government agreements cannot anticipate the problems that will arise over the term of an electoral mandate (the banking crisis comes to mind). Second, a response to one problem is likely to contradict solutions to others. As a result, mixed responses are called for (Kingdon, 1984). And third, the political landscape will change as the loyal opposition draws attention to deficiencies in proposed solutions or highlights problems that were not government priorities (see Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2009).

The fundamental issue is uncertainty. No government can know, ahead of time, the range of policy problems that will be facing it, or those that will demand the greatest urgency in the eyes of the public. Once again, comparativists broadly recognize that uncertainty is part of politics. But government agendas are much more strongly influenced by unanticipated events than contemporary approaches often suggest. We do not seek to shift attention unduly away from the role of elections and preferences. Rather we hope to add the dynamic demands of problem solving to the mix. When agenda space is scarce, the first question for a government official is, what are my priorities? Successful administrations adjust their party-based priorities in light of

changing patterns of information, including how the opposition and the public respond to these changing patterns.

Attending to problems is the sine qua non of policy making. Attending is a precursor of policy changes. Not all attention changes result in policy changes, but major policy changes are always preceded by attention changes. As a consequence, measuring changes in the attentiveness of governments to the various problems that face them is the first priority of our agenda-based approach. The approach originally developed to study policy dynamics in the United States was to assemble systematic indicators of attention to various policy issues over long periods of time and then to examine patterns of attention and relate them to patterns of policy change (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993, 2009; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005).

## **The Relevance of Policy Content**

The policy dynamics approach incorporates something that is typically missing in comparative political studies: the changing subjects of policy attention. For example, a number of prominent studies have sought to explain legislative productivity by examining the number or importance of laws adapted from one period of time to the next. Far fewer studies have investigated productivity in terms of change within policy areas, and those that do find that preference shifts do not consistently predict the timing or magnitude of policy changes (Adler & Wilkerson, 2010; Baumgartner, Grossman, et al. 2009; Lapinski, 2008). Events, issue competition, and other policy-related factors appear to be much more important. Although case studies of decision making in particular policy domains (e.g., health care, immigration, the elderly and pensions, macroeconomics, labor issues) are relatively common in comparative policy research, how attention to other issues affects policy change within a given issue area is rarely investigated. New “postmaterialist” issues such as human rights, the environment, and immigration have destabilized established political debates in many Western countries. But there has been little systematic investigation of how these new issues have altered national agendas. Did they have similar effects across all nations? If not, why did their effects differ? The data sets being developed as part of the current project will allow researchers to study such questions systematically.

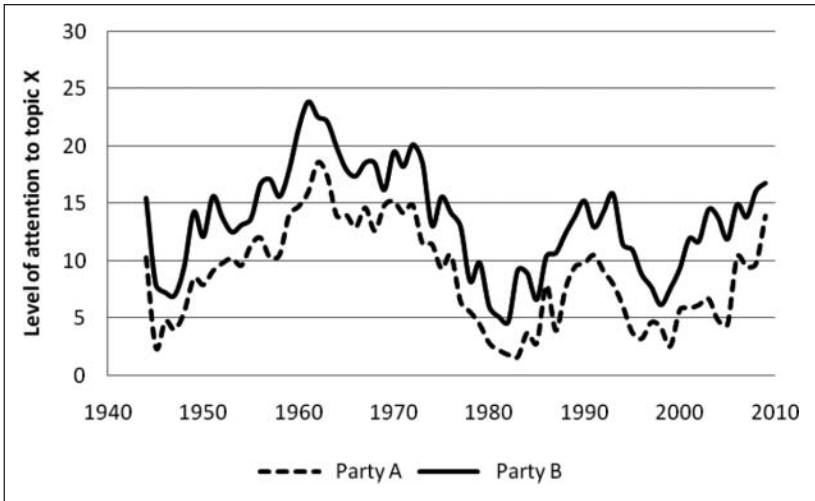
## **The Time Dimension**

The Comparative Policy Agendas Project, which provides the basis for the articles in this volume, is driven by an interest in comprehensiveness,

comparability, and dynamics. It differs from other common approaches to the study of comparative politics and public policy because it is equally concerned with changes over time as differences across issues, countries, or institutions. Previous scholars have not, of course, overlooked the time dimension, but research designs have typically been either longitudinal or cross-sectional in their conceptual approach. Policy histories, for example, typically focus on the development of a single issue in a single country. Explicitly comparative cross-national policy comparisons usually focus on a relatively static comparison, attempting to explain why policy choices differ from country to country, not over time. Or where policy developments are compared over time in more than one country, attention has focused on the adoption of a particular policy reform in various countries, a shift in the conceptual paradigm that justifies an underlying policy approach such as free trade or the rare case of adoption of a major social reform (see, e.g., Hall, 1986, 1989, 1993; Keeler, 1993). Here, we look over long periods of time and at scores or hundreds of different issues in several countries. This allows some new types of analyses and new perspectives on some old issues.

One advantage of a cross-sectional time-series design is that one can investigate empirically whether the most important sources of variance are ideological, partisan, cross-national, or dynamic. Consider Figure 1, which presents a hypothetical comparison of the degree of attention that two political parties might give to a given policy issue. The issue could be health care, immigration, or any other. In this example, Party B “owns” this issue and prefers to talk about it. Party A, however, does not ignore it completely. Even if Party B always shows about 5% more attention to the issue than Party A, in the illustration both parties sometimes pay more attention and sometimes pay less attention to the issue. For example, if the issue is energy prices, Republicans in the United States typically prefer to talk about that issue more than Democrats, but both parties also react to external shocks such as spikes in the price of gasoline. Of course, there is no reason to assume that any particular issue will follow the dynamic laid out in Figure 1, but it illustrates what we mean by being open to investigating empirically both that variance that might separate two parties at a given point in time and that which might distinguish different political eras.

We can also use Figure 1 to illustrate another idea, which is how political parties might move ideologically over time. In fact, Figure 1 is adopted from James Stimson’s measure of the “policy mood” in the United States (see Stimson, 1999). If the y-axis is considered to be the relative position of a party on the left–right scale (say, with more progressive positions at



**Figure 1.** Hypothetical movement of two parties over time  
Party B always pays approximately 5 points more attention to Topic X than Party A.

the top of the scale, and conservative positions at the bottom), one can imagine that although Parties A and B systematically differ from each other and always maintain their relative positions, they both move over time in similar ways, seeking to remain in synch with the national mood, which moves considerably over time. Examples of this type of movement are easy enough to convey: Consider the disastrous showing of Barry Goldwater in the 1964 presidential election but the success of Ronald Reagan in 1980. Or compare the ideological position of Bill Clinton, who vowed to “end welfare as we know it” (and stuck to that promise), to that of Lyndon Johnson some three decades before. Richard Nixon’s creation of the Environmental Protection Agency, his proposal of a negative income tax to supplement the incomes of the poor, and other proposals clearly reflected the ideological character of the 1970s more than what would normally be considered core issues of the Republican Party. The simple idea is just that parties shift quite substantially in their ideological positions over time. In fact, the variance over time in party positions within a single country may well be greater than the cross-sectional difference in the positions of the parties at any given time. Or, as in the previous example, one party may prefer to talk about a given issue, but no party can completely ignore it when it rises on the agenda. The importance of

cross-sectional versus longitudinal variation in party positions and issue attention are of course are empirical issues, and ones that we hope to explore within the Comparative Agendas Project.

Political science has been slow to study these concepts systematically, partly because so much of our collective attention has been focused on understanding how people vote in a given election. In any given election, of course, there is no variance over time, so the analytical puzzle can only be to explain why some voters prefer Party A over Party B. But as election studies have been repeated over the decades, it has become clear that ideologies shift significantly over time. Both cross-sectional and longitudinal sources of variance should be integrated into any overall understanding of policy change.

## **Issue Ownership in the Real World**

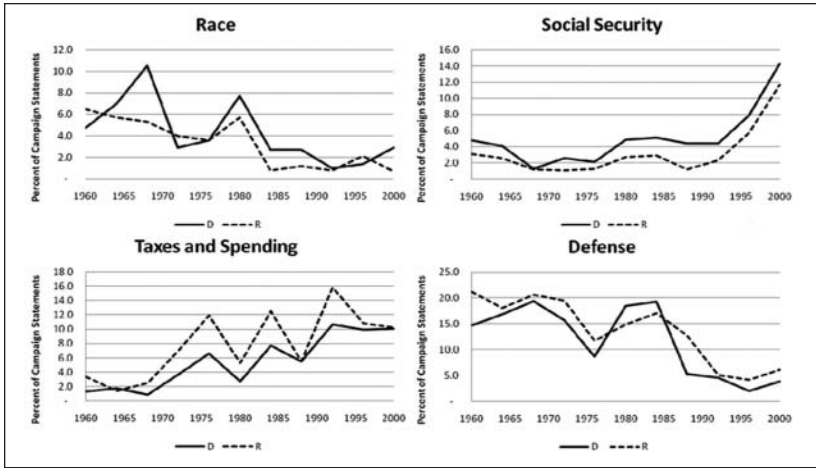
How do such processes work in the electoral context or in policy making? A number of theories lead one to expect that parties will exclusively focus their attention on those issues which they “own” (Petrocik, 1996; also see Austen-Smith, 1993; Riker, 1986, 1988, 1995, 1996; A. F. Simon, 2002). As Riker (1996) points out, the “dominance principle” suggests that if one party has an advantage over another on a given issue, it should focus attention on it, whereas if neither party has an advantage, the “dispersion principle” suggests that both should avoid discussing it. But what about the “convergence principle” where both parties might, like it or not, need to discuss the important issues of the day? Anthony Downs (1957) suggests that major parties need to converge to where the voters are. So there are strong reasons to think that diverse logics may be at work here, and it is an empirical question to know whether parties succeed in focusing attention on those issues where they have an advantage, or whether they are sometimes forced, by the actions of their opponents or by developments in the real world, to discuss issues that may not give them an advantage. Furthermore, no matter what the parties prefer to do, the media may be interested in conflict, and therefore what the voters see may not reflect only what the parties would prefer in the abstract. Many constraints, including the actions of rivals, force political leaders to engage in debates that they may prefer to avoid. Christoffer Green-Pedersen and Peter Mortensen (2009) have recently demonstrated that this is particularly true of parties in government; their study of Danish politics, using data from the Danish Agendas Project, showed that members of the parliamentary opposition may have the luxury of focusing their questions on those issues most likely to embarrass the government but that the government cannot simply ignore these questions, and the media of course are interested in the

partisan scuffle. Walgrave, Lefevere, and Nuytemans (2009) found that experimental treatments in which members of the public were exposed to just a few media appearances of leaders of various political parties discussing different issues led them to associate those issues to those parties. So parties can struggle and compete over issue ownership; the linkage between parties and issues is not fixed once and for all.

Several scholars have investigated the issue-ownership thesis within the context of U.S. political campaigns (see Damore, 2004, 2005; Sigelman & Buell, 2004), and each has found considerable evidence for overlap rather than ownership. Lee Sigelman and Emmet Buell (2004, p. 653) looked at statements by presidential campaigns reported in New York Times coverage of each presidential campaign from 1960 to 2000, some 10,286 news stories. They categorized the statements by policy topic, and Figure 2 shows the relative attention to four of the issues that received the most attention: race, social security, taxing and spending, and defense and national security.<sup>2</sup>

Issues ebb and flow on the national agenda, as Figure 2 makes clear. Although the candidates differ on the relative attention they give to each issue, the variability across time is much greater than the differences across the parties. Some simple summary statistics are of interest here. If we compare the average absolute difference between the two parties from Figure 2, these numbers are as follows: race = 1.6, social security = 1.8, taxing = 2.4, and defense = 3.1. If on the other hand we look at the difference between the lowest and the highest levels of attention to the issues, we see as follows: for Democrats, race = 9.5, social security = 13.0, taxing = 9.8, and defense = 17.4; for Republicans, race = 5.8, social security = 10.6, taxing = 14.4, and defense = 17.0. There is considerably more movement (sometimes 10 times more) over time than difference at any given time in attention to the major issues of the day.

These dynamics do not square well with a party–government focus. Scholars here have focused on the ability of responsible parties to shift policy priorities after elections. Although some have noted that political leaders may not be able to predict exogenous developments in the economy, and therefore may not be able to implement each of their plans (see, e.g., Klingemann et al., 1994, p. 241; Muller & Strom, 1999, pp. 25, 296–297), much more common in this literature has been an emphasis on the ability of a newly elected party to shift government priorities (see Budge & Keman, 1990). We are in complete agreement about the importance of following the actions of parties in government, not only during elections. But we take note of important measurement problems in the literature (see Budge & Hofferbert, 1990; Budge & Keman, 1990; King & Laver, 1993) and believe that a more comprehensive



**Figure 2.** Percentage of statements by democratic and republican presidential campaigns on four issues, 1960-2000

Source: Calculated from Sigelman and Buell (2004, Table 1).

approach to policy change will be able to illustrate the relative importance of several factors that may produce it: electoral shifts, informational dynamics unrelated to elections, institutional design, and issue-specific elements. Furthermore, if issues are not so strongly connected to individual parties in the first place (or only in a few highly publicized instances), then if we seek an explanation for policy changes we need to look more broadly than only at issue ownership.

On the other hand, over time the differences between the parties can open and close. It seems that party differences act to structure the policy debate on a trend governed by other factors. Moreover, it is certainly the case that party differences can vary across issues, and that can be an important component of politics. We do not argue that political parties are somehow meaningless; rather, our collective work points to a crying need to reevaluate their roles in democratic politics.

## Intra- and Interinstitutional Dynamics

Institutional rules and procedures help to explain why policy outputs vary across nations. The policy dynamics approach assumes that institutional variation also helps to explain output variations within particular policy

areas. However, such expectations are difficult to test without reliable and comprehensive indicators of policy inputs. By providing systematic information about policy inputs, the comparative policy dynamics approach enables scholars to distinguish among responses reflecting different institutional dynamics from responses reflecting different input mixes. If countries experience similar inputs (e.g., an international economic downturn) and their outputs vary, then one likely source of the differences is the manner in which countries organize authority.

The policy dynamics approach also emphasizes that institutional rules and procedures, such as those empowering veto groups, are not the only source of resistance in political systems. For example, resistance at the agenda-setting stage can stem from issue competition. Lawmakers confronted with competing policy demands must make decisions about priorities. Thus, competing demands—not just policy makers' preferences—may be critical to understanding whether an issue is likely to be addressed.

In addition, existing institutional approaches tend to be static rather than dynamic. The existing arrangement of preferences and veto points either does or does not allow for policy change. In contrast, the policy dynamics approach portrays resistance caused by preferences or institutions to be relative rather than absolute. Physical scientists refer to friction not just in terms of blockage, but in terms of “stick-slip dynamics.”<sup>3</sup> Friction has two components: stickiness and slippage. That is, if friction were never overcome, it would simply be blockage, not friction. Friction, by definition, can be overcome with enough force. When it is overcome, “slippage” or dramatic bursts occur. Taking this analogy one step further, we believe that scholars should be as interested in understanding dramatic policy changes as they are in demonstrating the difficulty of policy change. The fact that policy change is unlikely does not imply that it is impossible, and often the most important changes occur under conditions where there seems to be little prospect for dramatic change. In sum, stalemate and blockage are not the same as friction; friction is a more complete idea as it incorporates both resistance to change as well as abrupt shifts when barriers to change are overcome. One key question is whether one can reasonably understand the causes of resistance to change without simultaneously studying the causes of dramatic punctuations. It makes sense that scholars have traditionally focused on one or the other, but recent works from a punctuated equilibrium perspective have suggested that they may be part of the same process (see Jones & Baumgartner, 2005, for an overview of these ideas). The concepts of friction, stickiness, and stick-slip dynamics are central to these ideas, but they are foreign to most analyses of policy change and institutional design.



This means that it is not enough to assume that changes in attention to a policy topic somehow automatically lead to policy change. That depends of the level of friction or resistance in political systems, which is related to the structure of their governing institutions. Institutional friction is higher in some systems (Belgium, the United States) and lower in others (Denmark, the United Kingdom), and as a consequence the magnitude of policy punctuations differs among countries. Nations with higher levels of friction experience larger but less frequent policy punctuations than those with lower levels because the friction generally has the effect of delaying policy adjustments but not eliminating them (Baumgartner, Breunig et al., 2009; Jones, Baumgartner et al., 2009). These are general tendencies; it is of course possible that attention to a policy topic builds but never comes to fruition because another issue displaces it on the policy-making agenda. Moreover, the willingness of various actors to employ the rules and procedures of the formal political structure to stall or delay policy action on an issue comes into play here; the standard considerations of political strategy and tactics are not relegated to the minor backwaters of comparative politics. They are, however, contingent on the flow of information and shifting collective attention to it.

## **Infrastructure Development for Comparative Public Policy Studies**

The policy dynamics perspective offers a promising avenue for studying policy making cross-nationally, across policy areas, and under a variety of political conditions within a truly comparative framework. Such an approach requires what would have been thought of a few years ago as impossibly large data collections. The studies presented in this special issue are based on the application of a common methodology for measuring attention to a complete set of issue categories across 11 nations and many different policy-making venues, over several decades. Together, the various databases that make up the core of the agendas project currently include more than 1.5 million comparable events. In this section, we provide additional details about the logic of the underlying classification system, the types of policy-making activities that are amenable to comparison, and some of the challenges of constructing such a system for comparative research.

A policy topic classification system designed for comparative social science research must be comprehensive, capturing the full span of issues addressed across many countries. Such a system will be more useful for time series analyses if the topics are also mutually exclusive (an event that is about one topic is not about another topic). Finally, these topics must be consistently

**Table 1.** Major Topics of the Comparative Policy Agendas Project

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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
- 

applied over time and from country to country. Elsewhere, we have written about why keyword systems and off-the-shelf indexing systems fail to meet these criteria (Baumgartner, Jones, & Wilkerson, 2002).

In the Comparative Policy Agendas Project, each event (e.g., a law, a hearing, a parliamentary question to the minister) is classified as primarily about 1 of 19 major topics and 1 of (approximately) 240 subtopics falling under these major topics (see Table 1). For example, the major topic “environment” includes several subtopics such as “air pollution” and “species and forest protection.” Each event (a sentence in a speech, a bill, a parliamentary question) is assigned to one subtopic and one major topic. We use a system of “filters” to code relevant aspects of items where practical, for example, whether or not a hearing in the United States was on a bill supported by the president. We do not provide for multiple topic assignments per item because this causes difficulties in the construction of consistent and reliable time series. In this regard, we modeled our approach generally on the construction of the National Income and Products Accounts, which all nations use to

classify elements of GDP into categories. Any given economic transaction often has implications for more than one component, but adding multiple codes would make the tracing of changes in GDP components impossible.

Of paramount concern in our system is the reliability of the coding; as a consequence, coding is subject to stringent tests of intercoder reliabilities. Highly trained coders do the assigning to topics and subtopics based on a general set of guidelines and after reading the text or a summary of the event, rather than according to automated keyword processes. Increasingly our national teams make use of computer programs that can identify near-duplicate statements and in many cases accurately assign codes based on the frequency of occurrence of a wide range of words and phrases, but in any case these are aides to the human coders, not replacements.

Team leaders for the different countries regularly share and resolve questions about how novel events should be coded and regularly evaluate the work of their coders for accuracy and intercoder reliability. In addition, we are experimenting with machine learning methods that hold the promise of reducing labor requirements by 80% or more as these projects mature (Hillard, Purpura, & Wilkerson, 2008).

The major topics displayed in Table 1 were originally developed as part of the U.S. Policy Agendas Project. One of the early questions of the Comparative Agendas Project was whether these topics (and their underlying subtopics) would work as well for other countries. We were therefore pleasantly surprised to discover that most of these topics captured the central issues of most nations very well. More than 90% of the subtopics are being applied in the same way across all countries.

The limited discrepancies encountered tend to revolve around two issues. First, the existing classification system did not always capture important areas of other countries' economies or politics because those areas were less important in the U.S. context. Fishing is a much more important policy issue in Denmark than in the United States. In Spain, negotiations between the government and the autonomous regions are a central political issue, whereas such negotiations are not important parts of the U.S. government agenda. In each case, we altered the original topic system by adding new subtopics. Fishing was added as a dedicated subtopic under the major topic of agriculture. Autonomous regions were added to government operations (Topic 20). Similarly, the subtopics of international affairs (Topic 19) were originally constructed with U.S. international relations in mind. Other countries obviously have different international orientations, so this was another area where additional subtopics were required. For example, relations with the European

Union was a central issue in the political affairs of most of the countries of the project—except the United States.

A second source of discrepancies related to how existing subtopics were grouped within major topics. In the United States, immigration issues fall under the major topic of labor and employment. In other nations, immigration discussions often focus on matters of social integration or civil rights, which correspond to a different major topic category, civil rights and liberties. These types of differences can be easily managed by allowing researchers to include or exclude a given subtopic from their investigation. Thus, a researcher comparing civil rights and liberties in France and Spain might include the subtopic of immigration in her or his study, whereas a researcher studying civil rights and liberties in the United States would exclude it.

A central challenge of a comparative project is determining which indicators of government activity are most appropriate. Table 2 displays the indicators of activity classified for topic to date. Some indicators will be common to most of the nations studied—such as legislation, executive speeches, budgets, or media coverage. In other cases, activities that serve similar purposes—such as parliamentary questions and congressional hearings—can serve as potential points of comparison. As is true for any comparative study, the validity of such comparisons will need to be considered and defended. The articles of this special issue begin to do exactly that and suggest that the long-term potential of this project is very promising.

Finally, we have prepared these data sets with care and intend to make them freely available to all users as soon as practical. Many of these data sets are already online (see <http://www.comparativeagendas.org/> for links to individual country projects). However, we recognize that they will not serve all purposes. We encourage others to add additional variables to the information that we have collected, building a larger infrastructure of greater value to the scholarly community. All of our data include source information, allowing a user to identify the original source document, greatly facilitating even those types of coding and data collection that are not designed into our project. Thus, the project serves as a massive index to public records, allowing efficient identification of, for example, all government actions relating to the topic of immigration, from which a scholar might do additional work in greater detail about the policy preferences represented in the documents than we have included here. Inevitably, our desire to be comprehensive has led us to look at the largest-scale trends. The work we have done, however, should also facilitate much more detailed and qualitative analyses as well.

**Table 2.** Current Data Sets of the Comparative Policy Agendas Project

	UK	SP	DK	NL	FR	IT	SCOT	US	BEL	GER	CH
Laws	1911-2008 1910-2007	1977-2007	1953-2006 1971-2005	1980-2009	1986-2007 1820-2006	1987-2006	1998-2008	1948-2007 1947-2009	1988-2008	1976-2002 1964-1999	1978-2008
Budgets		1977-2007	1953-2003	1984-2009	1984-2007		1998-2008	1947-2008	1988-2008		
Parliamentary questions <sup>a</sup>		1977-2007	1953-2006				1998-2008	1947-2000 1947-2004	1988-2008		1978-2008
Bills						1987-2006					
Roll calls						1979-2008					
Parties (manifestos)			1953-2007						1977-2008	1953-2005	1978-2008
Govt.: speeches	1911-2008	1982-2007	1953-2007	1945-2009	1958-2008		1947-2005		1993-2008	1965-2002	
Govt.: council					1986-2007				1995-2008		
Govt.: gov. agreements				1963-2007					1991-2008	1965-2002	
Executive orders					1986-2007			1945-2003			
Courts					1958-2007			1947-2006		1960-2002	1978-2008
Media		2000-2010	1984-2003					1946-2005	2000-2008		
Public opinion (MIP)	1940-2008	1994-2007	1970-2008					1939-2007		1977-2006	
Direct democracy											1848-2008
Parliamentary interventions											1978-2008

MIP = Most Important Problem. We do not include here information about the U.S. state of Pennsylvania, but the project there is complete and compatible with the data reported here. Furthermore, we exclude projects just beginning in Israel, Australia, the European Union, and Hong Kong. In addition, the Spanish and Canadian projects include certain information for regional or provincial governments.

a. U.S. data are for hearings, not questions.

## Structure of the Volume

Each of the articles to follow uses various bits of data from the Comparative Agendas Project and illustrates a different aspect of the potential of the policy dynamics approach. Except for the final article, on intergovernmental relations within Spain's emerging decentralized structure of regionalized governance, each is the result of a large cross-national collaboration. The first article, led by Peter Mortensen, focuses on the "speech from the throne," a measure of the priorities of the executive, in the United Kingdom, Denmark, and the Netherlands. The article focuses on the limited impact of elections but the more substantial role of events and external developments in determining executive priorities. The second, led by Will Jennings, also focuses on executive speeches (across six countries) and demonstrates the importance of the "core functions" of government. Certain issues, considered central to the role of government, are virtually always "on the agenda," whereas others become the object of attention only during certain periods. The third, by Rens Vliegthart and Stefaan Walgrave, focuses on the role of parliamentary question time in determining the agendas of the Belgian and Danish parliaments. Next, Christian Breunig analyzes budgetary changes in four countries to address questions of stability and change in comparative perspective. Finally, Laura Chaqués Bonafont and Anna M. Palau Roqué explore the emerging relations among the newly autonomous regions of Spain. Each of these articles explores similar questions of the causes of attention shift and the relative roles of attention versus elections in determining changes in the direction and priorities of national governments. Furthermore, each uses a similar research approach and a common, publicly available data set. We propose the articles that make up this special issue as one of the first statements of the potential of the policy dynamics approach to the study of comparative politics and comparative public policy. Although the articles certainly do not give a comprehensive overview of the potential of the approach, they do give an excellent introduction to its potential. We hope that readers familiar with comparative institutions and comparative public policy studies will be struck by the innovations taken here. With common data resources, a wide range of new questions may be addressed, and perhaps some old questions answered as well.

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## Notes

1. This special issue introduces many readers to the Comparative Agendas Project for the first time. The U.S.-based project has long made all its data resources available over the web at [www.policyagendas.org](http://www.policyagendas.org) and also contains a data analysis tool by which users can analyze the data online without any special training. Comparative projects have also made considerable data available online, and all will do so when the data collection projects are closer to completion. We also plan to develop a web-based analysis tool in the future. Our web site, [www.comparativeagendas.org](http://www.comparativeagendas.org), provides a portal through which information about all the comparative projects can be found, a bibliography, and links to each of the national projects that make up our network of collaboration.
2. Data come from Sigelman and Buell (2004, Table 1) and exclude from their table “credibility or candor,” “dirty tricks,” and “ideology,” as they are not policy issues. Inclusion of these three terms would reinforce, not weaken, the trends shown in Figure 2.
3. For a review of stick-slip dynamics see Scholz (2002) and Turcotte (1997, pp. 245-255). Turcotte describes these as “slider-block models” as well, with the experiment being to slide a block across a surface; friction will hold it in place until the force of movement exceeds the standing friction, and the “rolling friction” may well be lower than that required to get the block moving in the first place (also see Burrige & Knopoff, 1967).

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