
Original Article

Agenda-setting dynamics in France: Revisiting the ‘partisan hypothesis’

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Abstract This paper presents an original way of testing the ‘partisan hypothesis’. Building on the substantial literature on the party-policy link, we test this link with respect to issue attention, rather than spending or macroeconomic outcomes. We examine the evolution of issue attention through the systematic analysis of agenda setting of three major French political institutions: the President, the government and the National Assembly. Although our results point to partisan differentiation on some issues, the overall conclusion is that partisan differentiation is at best one factor of variation among others.

French Politics (2009) 7, 75–95. doi:10.1057/fp.2009.7

Keywords: agenda-setting; France; issue attention; political parties; presidency; law-making

How does issue attention change over time and what determines such change? Are there left-wing or right-wing issues? Do partisan preferences affect issue attention or do the media or public opinion determine change in political attention? Or are institutional dynamics of political life more important? Does the proximity of elections, majority status or years in office explain issue attention?

A large body of literature has emerged since the late 1970s on the importance of partisan government on policy priorities. The influence of partisan government on policy-making was regularly opposed to approaches underscoring the importance of the numerous constraints faced by governments. Owing to the availability of data, this work has usually concentrated on



spending patterns and macroeconomic outcomes. Moreover, both strands of literature have progressively converged, as it is generally acknowledged that it has become more difficult to make a difference for left-wing or right-wing majorities in a context of increasing budget deficits and international capital mobility.

This paper examines the dynamics of issue attention in France. It develops an entirely new way of testing for the partisan differentiation hypothesis. In doing so, it will draw on the increasing amount of monographic or comparative work on the politics of attention and agenda setting. It is based, moreover, on original data on presidential speeches, bills, government statements and bill proposals. For all of these indicators, we possess data for the period between 1986 and 2006.

Our objective on the French case has several dimensions. First and foremost, we want to renew the study of French institutions by developing original and innovative indicators of the life of political institutions, as well as partisan and media indicators. Although this paper is only a first step towards this wider objective, it already builds on a significant amount of data. Second, from a more comparative point of view, we intend to build on the literature in comparative politics and comparative public policy, as well as on the currently ongoing agenda projects elsewhere (Wilkerson *et al*, 2009), to explore the dynamics of attention and to understand the specific determinants – institutional or other – of issue attention change.

In this paper, we will concentrate in particular on the importance of the partisan character of particular issues. To which extent are issues partisan: that is left-wing or right-wing? To which extent, on the contrary, are they determined by other factors? In the rest of this paper, we will first discuss in further detail our research outline and hypotheses. We then look at static differences, before looking into a small sample of individual policy areas.

Issue Attention and Partisanship

In democratic theory, whether traditional or economic, people vote in accordance with policy preferences, and political parties propose and try to implement specific policies for instrumental or intrinsic reasons. So, the identity of the governing parties should matter in policy-making. This is one of the major underlying assumptions of contemporary liberal democracies.

Yet, historically a significant number of scholars have questioned this relationship. For example, Cutright (1965), Haniff (1976) or Wilenski (1975) point out that welfare-state expenses depend on economic growth and demographic variations rather than on partisan preferences. And there is a lot of evidence to show that even today, the ageing of European populations is



the single most important factor driving reforms and welfare state retrenchment.¹ The detailed historical work of R. Rose and P.L. Davies (1994) on British policies also concludes that parties do not matter in policy-making.

The resulting 'partisan-neutrality' thesis has in turn been criticized by the defendants of what can be called the 'partisan differentiation' thesis. According to the latter, partisan composition of governments *does* affect policies. This was initially a way to demonstrate the intrinsically political character of public spending, as opposed to efficiency- or economy-based explanations (Cameron, 1978; Castles and McKinlay, 1979; Castles, 1982; Blais *et al*, 1993). Much work in this tradition has mainly been based on general assumptions of what typical left-wing and right-wing spending patterns are supposed to look like. Based on the assumption of 'issue ownership,' the Left, for instance, was expected to spend more on welfare, while the Right was supposed to increase spending in defence (Bawn, 1999). Most of this literature however is mainly concerned with general attributes of left- and right-wing spending.

In one of its most forceful and more interesting versions, this argument is based on the effect of party platforms on spending. Budge and Hofferbert present the partisan hypothesis as a 'mandate theory of party democracy' (Budge and Hofferbert, 1990; Hofferbert and Budge, 1992). This groundbreaking work has had a lasting influence as it presents several original specifications concerning the importance of salience and issue ownership (Budge and Hofferbert, 1990, p. 114). Unlike earlier and much subsequent work, moreover, Budge and Hofferbert show that party platforms are a significant predictor of spending priorities, irrespective of diverging political structures, even in countries with supposedly weak parties such as the United States.² They confirm mandate theory and, thus, one of the fundamental justifications of liberal democracies.

The actual importance of the partisan hypothesis has been qualified, however. Schmidt has shown that certain contexts and institutions may somewhat weaken partisan influence on policy-making (Schmidt, 1996, 2002). Moreover, several recent contributions have questioned the continuing importance of partisan influence. Boix, for instance, shows that while the partisan hypothesis has been verified for much of the post-war period, specific spending patterns have faded between the late 1980s and early 1990s (Boix, 2000).

The explanations for fading differences or the 'end of ideology' are various. While some authors have renewed industrial society convergence theory (Pryor, 1968; Parkin, 1973), others claim that other factors may decrease the likeliness of partisan influence. In particular, some scholars explain that globalization (Garrett and Lange, 1989; Keohane and Milner, 1996), the increasing levels of complex interdependence (Nye, 1976; Keohane and Nye, 1989) and international capital mobility (Goodman and Pauly, 1993; Frieden and Rogowski, 1996; Garrett, 1996; Simmons, 2001) decrease sharply the probability of partisan



influence. More generally, arguments about the cartelization of parties (Katz and Mair, 1995; Blyth and Katz, 2005) or the decline of the social basis of party politics (Crouch, 2004; Mair, 2005) come to similar conclusions concerning decreasing party influence.

In sum, while some say that parties do not have any significant influence on most issues, others argue that they do. A third line of arguments puts forth that parties may have had an influence in the past, but that this influence is fading.

For the purpose of this paper, we adopt a cursory view of party influence. Our data starts in 1986, that is, at a time when influence was weakening even according to most of the tenants of the partisan differentiation thesis. Therefore, we will not test for the *evolution* of partisan influence, but simply for the *presence* of partisan influence over the whole period. In this period of supposed decline of party influence, any effect or influence will be interesting.

Moreover, we will avoid assigning issue ownership arbitrarily, as much of the above quoted work has done. Issue ownership is – by nature – contested, especially when the issue is durably salient (Green-Pedersen, 2007). We test the simple hypothesis that parties have different policy priorities and that partisanship will induce variation in attention allocation. This hypothesis has the great advantage of being easily testable. This is not to say that certain issues are not historically linked to particular political camps. Yet, we believe it is essential to adopt a more exploratory approach of issue ownership. As classical spending patterns do appear to weaken over time, it is necessary to look for the way in which issue *attention* may account for new forms of partisan differentiation.

How do we apply the debate on partisan influence to issue attention, rather than spending? Let's look first at the *partisan neutrality* hypothesis. A first argument is very straightforward: given that portfolio holders want to attach their name to a policy initiative, each government, president, or legislature will try to legislate on each topic. Put differently, parties are made of individuals and party leaders, once in power, will attach more importance to their own success than to the values and the ideology of their party. Second, even assuming, on the contrary, that parties are indeed characterized by strong (ideological) preferences, this does not necessarily affect issue attention: newly elected governments will want to erase changes from outgoing governments. This will thus induce a similar attention allocation after alternation, even if this does not – and cannot – account for changes in the direction of given policy. Provided that alternation has been the rule for every general legislative election in France between 1981 and 2002, that is *all* the elections in our sample, this hypothesis is paramount for our paper. Finally, a third line of argument posits that governments are driven by the general dynamics of public problems that arise from the media agenda, public opinion, international events, the economy, etc. In the last perspective, political attention is thus first of all shaped by *external*



events. So there are strong reasons to expect no differences in the allocation of attention across issues by governments controlled by the Left and Right.

Turning now to the *partisan differentiation* hypothesis, several equally simple assertions can be made. Party competition is at least partially characterized by conflicting policy preferences. So parties will try to attach their name to particular policies and measures according to their policy preferences. They have a reputation based on the policy stances taken in the past. Moreover, different partisan constituencies dedicate an uneven level of attention and importance to different issues. So beyond conflicting policy preferences, party competition gives incentives to parties to prioritize certain issues in order to attract certain categories of voters. Priming some issues is also a way to avoid the electoral penalty of a bad reputation in specific policy fields. Most importantly, however, it is what parties do when they are in office that actively shapes and confirms a given image of issue ownership (Bélanger, 2008, p. 478). Since issue ownership is contested, parties will often try to underscore the ownership of 'traditional' areas to confirm the continued valuation of a particular area, especially, when ownership is contested (Blomqvist and Green-Pedersen, 2004).

Those alternative hypotheses are of course fundamental. Given our data, we will not be able to take into account all potentially meaningful dimensions. In particular, for the time being, we lack systematic data on *external* variables. Moreover, it will not be possible – within the limits of this paper – to explore in more detail the eventual sources of partisan similarity, as this would require a separate and specific research design. In sum, then, we will only look at whether differences between parties are strong and significant.

Data and Classification

As mentioned in the introduction, we draw on the four different series shown in Table 1: statutes, Presidential New Years' Address, government bills and weekly government statements.

The four series are very different, of course, in that they vary in frequency, type of content and style. The number of adopted laws in France is much lower than, say, in the United States (Brouard *et al*, 2009). It is only about 100 on average in the post-war period, which comes close to the average in most European Union member states. Another peculiarity is the very high share of 'international affairs' bills, which make up about 40 per cent of adopted laws on average. This is mainly because of the fact that all international conventions and agreements – including bilateral agreements – have to be ratified by law.

The Presidential New Year's Address ('speeches') can hardly be compared to the US-equivalent either. Unlike the State-of-the-Union speech, it is rather

**Table 1:** Number of actions by policy area, 1986–2006

Topic	Description	Laws		Speeches		Bills		Communications	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1	Economics	93	5.01	160	14.83	101	6.06	74	4.12
2	Civil Rights	52	2.80	64	5.93	40	2.40	52	2.90
3	Health	49	2.64	27	2.50	42	2.52	72	4.01
4	Agriculture	30	1.62	3	0.28	33	1.98	42	2.34
5	Labor	77	4.15	73	6.77	114	6.84	109	6.07
6	Education	20	1.08	32	2.97	18	1.08	134	7.47
7	Environment	34	1.83	40	3.71	52	3.12	128	7.13
8	Energy	3	0.16	1	0.09	13	0.78	14	0.78
9	Immigration	22	1.18	4	0.37	29	1.74	16	0.89
10	Transport	51	2.75	8	0.74	58	3.48	65	3.62
12	Crime	96	5.17	40	3.71	176	10.56	65	3.62
13	Social Welfare	29	1.56	76	7.04	30	1.80	119	6.63
14	Housing	30	1.62	11	1.02	26	1.56	74	4.12
15	Commerce	105	5.65	4	0.37	150	9.00	107	5.96
16	Defense	45	2.42	36	3.34	59	3.54	47	2.62
17	Science	18	0.97	22	2.04	31	1.86	80	4.46
18	Trade	90	4.85	21	1.95	17	1.02	48	2.67
19	International	706	38.02	307	28.45	435	26.09	172	9.58
20	Government	175	9.42	143	13.25	163	9.78	236	13.15
21	Lands	92	4.95	1	0.09	39	2.34	27	1.50
23	Culture	40	2.15	6	0.56	41	2.46	114	6.35
Total		1857	100.00	1079	100.00	1667	100.00	1795	100.00

Notes: Laws are laws passed by Parliament. Bills are bills reported in the weekly cabinet meetings. Communications are communiqués issued at the weekly cabinet meetings. Speeches are quasi-sentences in the President’s annual New Year’s Address.

Source: All the data presented in this paper has been coded by and/or under the responsibility of Sylvain Brouard and Emiliano Grossman.

short and really more of New Year’s Address than a political program. It is true, though, that major political issues are always mentioned and sometimes discussed during this particular speech (Finniss-Boursin, 1998).

The weekly government statements have to be put into the context of parliamentary government, where the prime minister is usually the single most important political actor. Yet those weekly statements are not very common elsewhere in Europe, even if similar statements exist in Belgium. Those statements list all items that have been dealt with during the Wednesday government plenary meeting at the presidential palace. During this meeting, several types of items are discussed. The most important ones are government bill proposals: provided that on average 88 per cent of adopted bills between

1986 and 2006 are government bills, this element is crucial. The second most important item – in quantity – are government statements; these may be issued on any area of policy-making and need not be associated with a particular policy proposal. Finally, two other items are relevant: decrees and ordinances are law-like decisions without direct parliamentary approval.³ We have excluded decrees and ordinances here because there are relatively few cases.

All items of the four series have been assigned a topic code. The French code book is a translation and adaptation of the original US topic code, developed by Baumgartner and Jones⁴ (Baumgartner and Jones, 2002). The French codebook, like its equivalents in the United States and elsewhere, contains 21 general topics, which are on average sub-divided into 10 or more sub-categories. This leads to a total of 250 topic codes. For the purpose of the agenda comparisons in this paper, we will limit the analysis to the 21 more general topic codes.

In order to account for the relative (in-)stability of every agenda, Figure 1 displays the period-to-period correlations in issue attention for each of the four data sets presented in Table 1. A period here is defined as a year except in those cases when the Government shifts in partisan control, in which case the period corresponds to those months of control by a single majority. For each period, then, we simply calculate the correlation in relative (percentage) attention across the 21 topic categories with the period before. If important shifts occur

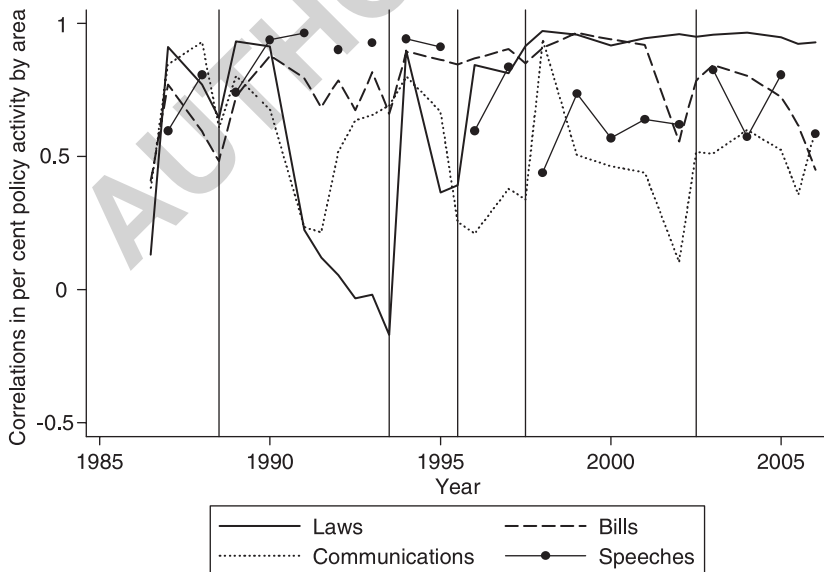


Figure 1: Year-to-year correlations in policy attention, 1986–2006.



in the policy agenda, these correlations will be low; if there is high stability, the correlations will be high. If the patterns of stability *vs* change correspond to shifts in partisan control, this will be obvious by different correlations in those periods where governments changed in control from Left to Right. Figure 1 represents these series.⁵ We have added vertical lines for each change in electoral majority following general elections (1988, 1993, 1997 and 2002), as well as the presidential election and resulting government change of 1995, when Jacques Chirac replaced François Mitterrand (1995). If partisan shifts drive the policy agenda, the periods immediately following these changes should show much lower correlations than the periods of partisan stability.

A cursory look at the stability of each series shows that it will be difficult to identify unambiguous patterns, but also that the shifts we do observe are not systematically related to electoral shifts. Figure 1 shows that periods of relative instability (for example the early 1990s) contrast with periods of relative stability (for example the late 1990s). The early 1990s appear to be a period of particularly strong change, where each government regularly renewed its own legislative agenda – see, for instance, Rocard from 1990 to 1991. During this period, moreover, government changes have a particularly strong impact, too. After an ‘all-time low’ during the Balladur government in late 1993, the correlations go up again. There are significant differences across the four series, with some more inertial than others, but there are surprisingly few systematic effects of shifts in partisan control.

Table 2 presents the correlations between different agendas: in those periods with significant legislation on the topic of health care, for example, do we also see more speeches, bills and communications on that same topic? The correlations are all positive between the four agendas. So change in attention allocation to topics in one agenda is associated with change in the same direction in other agendas. Nonetheless, the closeness of the association between agendas varies according to the agendas. The highest correlation, 0.76, is between laws and bills; given that on average about 88 per cent of adopted laws result from government bills, this is unsurprising. Yet, it also shows that the government does not completely determine the law making agenda; MPs

Table 2: Correlations among various political agendas in France, 1986–2006.

	<i>Laws</i>	<i>Bills</i>	<i>Communications</i>	<i>Speeches</i>
Laws	1.00	—	—	—
Bills	0.76	1.00	—	—
Communications	0.35	0.38	1.00	—
Speeches	0.49	0.42	0.21	1.00

Notes: $N = 630$. Correlations are between the number of actions in each of the 21 issue areas for each year of a government.



can follow a different agenda than that proposed by the government, even if there is a high correlation.

Correlations are much weaker with the two other agendas. Government communications clearly do not reflect the legislative program, but appear to respond to other objectives. Speeches' correlation is higher, but still very low. Finally, it is interesting to note the New Year's Addresses (Speeches) and Communications correlate very weakly. Given that the speech takes place once a year and that communications are issued on a weekly basis, this is hardly surprising, either.

Eventually, the different 'agendas' will have to be compared systematically and confronted with newspaper data, partisan programs and other elements to study the relative permeability to outside influence of each of those agendas. This will help us to understand the degree of 'friction' that characterizes a particular agenda (Jones *et al*, 2009). This first glance at the data has shown that there is considerable variation in attention over time as well as between agendas and that these shifts do not appear to be linked only to electoral shifts. In the next section, we will look more specifically at the ways in which partisanship and elections influence the relative structure of agenda setting.

Left-Wing and Right-Wing Issues?

In order to look at the presence of specific left-wing or right-wing patterns in agenda setting, we have to take into account several potential settings and circumstances. It is true that certain policy areas are more associated with left-wing politics and others with right-wing politics. Historically, in many countries, defense politics has rather been a right-wing issue, whereas reforms in education or labor policy have been seen to be more characteristic of left-wing governments.⁶ However, while it may be true that these perceptions exist,⁷ it is obvious that left-wing governments also have to deal with defense issues and that conservative governments have to adopt bills on labor. As mentioned in the introductory section, the specificity of parties in terms of governmental agenda setting is subject to debate. Therefore, before looking at partisan patterns in our different agendas, we will first try to determine whether government changes do in fact have a visible impact on agenda setting. In the second half of this section we will look at the evolution of attention in individual policy sectors.

Aggregate Patterns

Table 3 looks at year-to-year correlations of the general structure of agenda setting. Entries show the correlations in the percentage of activity across 21



issue-areas from year to year. Overall correlations are in the right-most columns. The Partisan shift columns show the correlations separately for those periods characterized or not by a change in Left/Right control of either the presidency or the government. The New prime minister columns show the correlations for those periods in which there was a continuing prime minister separately from those where there was a new prime minister, even of the same party. The number of observations is listed at the bottom. N's are the 21 issue-areas times 29 periods, with one period per year for each prime minister separately.

Table 3 shows that government changes and majority changes do also have a significant impact in the expected direction. New governments want to stress their difference with preceding governments by shifting political attention to new issues and de-emphasizing issues that were important before. Yet the effects are not straightforward and they are not very strong. Somewhat surprisingly, government changes appear to have a slightly stronger impact than majority changes. Overall the data show little impact for partisan shifts, in particular when this is compared with the arrival of a new prime minister even of the same party. Finally, we adapt the same perspective for the Presidential New Years' Addresses (Table 4). They seem not to be strongly influenced by either government, majority changes or divided government. Even when there is a change of institutional balance (towards divided government or towards unified government *vs* the *status quo* in the institutional balance), presidential attention shifts only slightly. This is less surprising as the president has always tried to cultivate an image beyond partisanship. The main drop in year-to-year correlation occurs when the presidency changed hands from F. Mitterrand to J. Chirac.

Yet, although the aggregate effects may be small, this does not mean that differences are insignificant on individual issues. Therefore, the rest of this section will discuss the importance of left-right sector-level differences for the complete period, that is, for all entries between 1986 and 2006. Tables 5 and 6 present two of our different series splitting Left and Right presidential or legislative majorities. Without going into the specifics of the French political

Table 3: Year-to-year correlations in areas of policy activity, 1986–2006

	<i>Partisan shift?</i>			<i>New prime minister?</i>			<i>Overall</i>
	<i>No</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Diff</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Diff</i>	
Laws	0.72	0.65	0.07	0.78	0.56	0.22	0.71
Bills	0.76	0.65	0.11	0.79	0.66	0.13	0.72
Statements	0.57	0.48	0.09	0.55	0.48	0.07	0.55
N	483	126	—	420	189	—	609



Table 4: Year-to-year correlations in areas of policy activity in the presidential speeches, 1986–2006

	New president?		New prime minister?		Partisan shift in government?		Divided government?		Change in institutional balance?		Overall
	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	
Speeches	0.76	0.60	0.76	0.73	0.79	0.71	0.79	0.70	0.77	0.69	0.75
N	378	42	210	210	294	126	231	189	273	147	420



system, we simply recall that the most important election is that of the president, but that the president is hardly powerful without a favourable majority in the *Assemblée nationale*, France's lower chamber. During *cohabitation*, that is opposing legislative and presidential majorities, it is the former that prevails.⁸

Table 5 provides the proportion of attention as measured by statutes. We are thus looking here at the outcome of partisan preferences. Provided that it takes between several months and several years to adopt a bill, it is, of course, difficult to interpret differences between camps. Yet, it is true that given the close to complete control of the parliamentary agenda by the French government,⁹ the latter is free to propose particular bills when it best suits it, rather than following the particular cycle of legislative procedure. Therefore, it can be argued that in the French case¹⁰ the legislative agenda well represents government preferences. This also confirmed by the correlation between bills and laws (see Table 2).

A first result of Table 5 is that the number of significant differences is extremely low even if we adopt a relaxed assumption of significance ($p < 0.10$). Owing to space restrictions, the table does not present information concerning the significance of all possible combinations, but only with regard to the first column (Left president, Left government). This is, however, the most appropriate baseline as it allows a clear test of whether shared or Right control causes a systematic difference in the political agenda as compared to those periods when there is unified Left government.

In fact, the *only* consistently significant left-right cleavage that we find concerns environmental policy. After the first cohabitation (1986–1988), the environment becomes very prominent in the laws agenda, certainly for the first time in French politics. The left-wing government's heightened attention to the environment under Mitterrand's presidency coincides with the first electoral successes of the ecologists, who emerged as a direct electoral threat to the socialists in parallel with the enduring divisions among the ecologists and between them and the Socialists, and the subsequent electoral decline of the Greens, subsequent governments, whether of the left or the right, never returned the issue to its previous level of prominence in spite of the participation of the Green party in the government of Lionel Jospin (1997–2002).

As a consequence, although there is a strong and highly significant differentiation on this issue during the first years of the Mitterrand period, this differentiation faded subsequently.

Other differences point to change over time rather than to partisan differences. For instance, left-wing governments under Mitterrand paid a lot more attention to reforms of the judiciary and the police (Crime) and a lot less to Civil Rights. Attention to economic regulation and commerce (Commerce)

**Table 5:** Areas of law-making activity by president and cohabitation status, 1986–2006

Topic	Description	Total	President				Significance tests		
			Mitterrand		Chirac				
			Government						
			Left	Right	Left	Right			
			(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(1):(2)	(1):(3)	(1):(4)
1	Economics	5.01	4.76	6.02	4.17	5.32	0.35	0.20	0.69
2	Civil Rights	2.80	1.59	1.62	3.08	4.86	0.67	0.03	0.39
3	Health	2.64	4.54	3.01	1.63	1.62	0.14	0.06	0.06
4	Agriculture	1.62	2.72	1.62	0.72	1.62	0.65	0.41	0.17
5	Labor	4.15	4.54	3.24	4.53	4.17	0.36	0.65	0.62
6	Education	1.08	1.13	1.39	1.27	0.46	0.24	0.41	0.42
7	Environment	1.83	3.63	0.93	1.45	1.39	0.002	0.004	0.003
8	Energy	0.16	0.23	—	0.36	—	0.35	0.35	0.65
9	Immigration	1.18	1.36	1.39	1.27	0.69	0.76	0.31	0.93
10	Transport	2.75	2.72	3.24	2.54	2.55	0.31	0.49	0.26
12	Crime	5.17	7.03	6.48	3.80	3.70	0.79	0.01	0.08
13	Social Welfare	1.56	2.27	0.69	2.17	0.93	0.17	0.55	0.38
14	Housing	1.62	1.59	1.85	1.63	1.39	0.59	0.68	0.81
15	Commerce	5.65	7.71	7.18	4.71	3.24	0.84	0.01	0.05
16	Defense	2.42	2.72	2.08	2.72	2.08	0.32	0.32	0.39
17	Science	0.97	1.59	0.69	0.91	0.69	0.22	0.30	0.27
18	Trade	4.85	4.08	3.24	5.80	6.02	0.83	0.16	0.28
19	International	38.02	28.80	35.19	42.93	43.98	0.14	0.003	0.006
20	Government	9.42	9.07	12.04	8.88	7.87	0.66	0.20	0.19
21	Lands	4.95	6.12	5.56	3.44	5.09	0.21	0.22	0.04
23	Culture	2.15	1.81	2.55	1.99	2.31	0.45	0.73	0.81
Total		100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	—	—	—
Number of laws		1857	441	432	552	432	—	—	—
Number of periods		30	9	7	6	8	—	—	—
Number not sig.		—	—	—	—	—	20	15	15
Number sig<0.10		—	—	—	—	—	1	6	6
Number sig<0.05		—	—	—	—	—	1	5	4
Number sig<0.01		—	—	—	—	—	1	2	2

Notes: The percents reported are the percent of all laws in the entire period as defined by the column headers and are the same as reported in Table 1. Significance tests are done on the basis of the percent of laws in each year. Significant difference ($p < 0.10$) are in bold.

diminished on both sides over time, while it increased with regard to foreign affairs (International), which especially concerns bilateral agreements. Finally, there is a difference in the relative importance of Social Welfare that extends



over both periods. The difference is in the expected direction – the Left cares more for this issue than the Right, even if the relationship is not statistically significant.

In sum, differences in issue attention appear to be less associated with legislative majorities than with presidential incumbents. This may be explained by the greater importance of the president in the executive, during ‘normal’ times, that is, in the absence of divided majorities. Yet, it is also true that the president *always* heads the Council of ministers and, thus, all major issues are discussed in his presence, even under divided majorities. Moreover, it has generally been accepted under the Fifth Republic that the President is to play an important role in the ‘domaines réservés,’ that is foreign affairs and defense, whatever his political color.

Yet, the results presented in Table 5 are not straightforward: whereas differences are significant on crime, the relation is not as expected. Governments under Mitterrand appear to have cared more about crime than governments under Chirac. Only the environment appears as a left-wing issue and this is limited to the first half of our period only. Moreover, Chirac appears to have had a much stronger interest for international affairs than Mitterrand. And this is the single most important difference in this table.

Hence, the main conclusion of Table 5 is the relative insignificance of partisan preferences for the adoption of laws. The fact that the legislative majority has hardly any impact clearly points to the partisan neutrality hypothesis. Moreover, the relative insignificance of partisan preferences may also characterize the presidential differences, provided that the significant differences are in the ‘wrong’ direction and remains beyond the cases of unified and divided government. More can be explained by the evolving dynamics of political issues generally than by shifts in partisan control.

We now turn to government statements. Rather than analyzing all agendas in turn, we stick to the *most different* agenda, that is the one with the lowest correlation to adopted laws. The data in Table 6 is presented exactly as in Table 5.

The results are not fundamentally different in that they do not confirm the existence of strong left-right patterns in government statements. Yet, the existing differences are to be found in areas other than in the law agenda and they are also more widely distributed.

There are significant differences in the area of Labor. The number of statements in this area was significantly higher for the Left under the Mitterrand presidency. This number was lower under cohabitation and during the Chirac years. A different evolution is evident for macroeconomic policies. The attention to this issue changed but remained similar in terms of partisanship. Both left-wing and right-wing governments dedicated a similar level of attention to macroeconomic policies during the Mitterrand years and they both significantly diminished that level during the Chirac years. But it

Table 6: Areas of government communications by president and cohabitation status, 1986–2006

Topic	Description	Total	President				Significance tests		
			Mitterrand		Chirac				
			Government						
			Left	Right	Left	Right	(1):(2)	(1):(3)	(1):(4)
			(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)			
1	Economics	4.12	5.50	6.13	2.35	2.04	0.48	0.01	0.00
2	Civil Rights	2.90	2.43	1.60	3.76	3.90	0.62	0.54	0.44
3	Health	4.01	2.43	3.20	3.76	6.28	0.28	0.43	0.02
4	Agriculture	2.34	1.13	0.80	1.41	4.92	0.29	0.99	0.03
5	Labor	6.07	8.58	5.07	4.23	4.75	0.01	0.00	0.02
6	Education	7.47	7.77	6.40	10.80	6.62	0.62	0.04	0.83
7	Environment	7.13	6.63	7.20	7.98	7.30	0.55	0.45	0.71
8	Energy	0.78	0.97	0.53	0.00	1.02	0.97	0.04	0.92
9	Immigration	0.89	0.65	0.53	0.94	1.36	0.84	0.88	0.13
10	Transport	3.62	4.05	2.67	2.82	4.07	0.21	0.28	0.94
12	Crime	3.62	3.24	2.93	3.76	4.41	0.56	0.99	0.74
13	Social Welfare	6.63	5.83	5.07	7.98	7.98	0.96	0.20	0.04
14	Housing	4.12	4.05	3.73	3.29	4.75	0.54	0.95	0.46
15	Commerce	5.96	6.47	6.67	7.51	4.41	0.49	0.17	0.44
16	Defense	2.62	2.10	2.13	1.88	3.74	0.84	0.56	0.24
17	Science	4.46	7.12	2.93	2.35	3.40	0.12	0.03	0.16
18	Trade	2.67	3.07	4.00	3.29	1.19	0.41	0.93	0.02
19	International	9.58	7.93	15.73	7.98	7.98	0.00	0.97	0.48
20	Government	13.15	13.27	15.73	13.15	11.38	0.81	0.60	0.12
21	Lands	1.50	1.94	2.13	1.41	0.68	0.96	0.80	0.13
23	Culture	6.35	4.85	4.80	9.39	7.81	0.87	0.08	0.05
Total		100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	—	—	—
Number of communiqués		1,795	618	375	589	213	—	—	—
Number of periods		30	9	7	6	8	—	—	—
Number not sig.		—	—	—	—	—	19	17	14
Number sig<0.10		—	—	—	—	—	2	6	7
Number sig<0.05		—	—	—	—	—	2	5	7
Number sig<0.01		—	—	—	—	—	1	1	1

Notes: The percents reported are the percent of all communiqués issued by the Council of Ministers in the entire period and are the same as reported in Table 1. Significance tests are done on the basis of the percent of laws in each year. Significant difference ($p < 0.10$) are in bold.

appears that for the Left education became a more important issue during this same period – in terms of communications.¹¹ In a similar fashion right-wing governments under the Chirac presidency were comparatively more



present on social welfare than left-wing governments under Mitterrand. It is true that this issue was central, especially to the electoral campaign preceding Chirac's first mandate. Yet, this issue did not become distinctive as the Left apparently adapted to the new situation in terms of attention, matching the number of conservative statements on the issue. There are other minor differences (on science, trade and culture), but these add little to the analysis. All of those span over the two presidential mandates and are hardly systematic.

Fundamentally, it is difficult to conclude that partisan shifts in either government or presidential control determine the structure of the political agenda in France. Those few differences that we do observe seem more related to the president than to the government, but we must recall that there are just two presidents across the two decades of our analysis. And those two presidents cover a period of major change. The most important conclusion is thus that governments on the Left and the Right have reacted similarly to change. If anything the relative share of attention has grown closer. Put differently, left-right differentiation appears to be only marginal, no matter which level is taken into account. While presidential differentiation appears to prevail over governmental differentiation, our sample does not allow us to exclude the possibility that this is simply owing to cross-party changes over time.

The Evolution of Specific Policy Sectors

Finally, we will look at some individual sectors, to understand the evolution of attention in a more dynamic fashion. We have picked three sectors here: macroeconomic policy, education and the environment. These are the same data that underlie the analyses in the previous section but allow a simpler understanding of the shifts or continuity in attention to a particular policy area that follow from national elections shifting control of government from Left to Right or vice versa. As in the earlier figures, we include vertical lines in each of the graphs corresponding with shifts in partisan control. Each of the figures reports the percentage of all activities associated with the issue-domain, separately for the four agendas we study here. Figure 2 represents attention to the state of the economy.

The figure makes clear that the state of the economy often generates significant attention, especially in presidential speeches, where at several points it alone has accounted for over 20 and even 30 per cent of total attention. Other series are significantly lower, but in no case do we see systematic shifts associated with changes in partisan control, and we see no trends in the data, either. There is much fluctuation, but little systematic variation over time. Figure 3 shows attention to the topic of education.

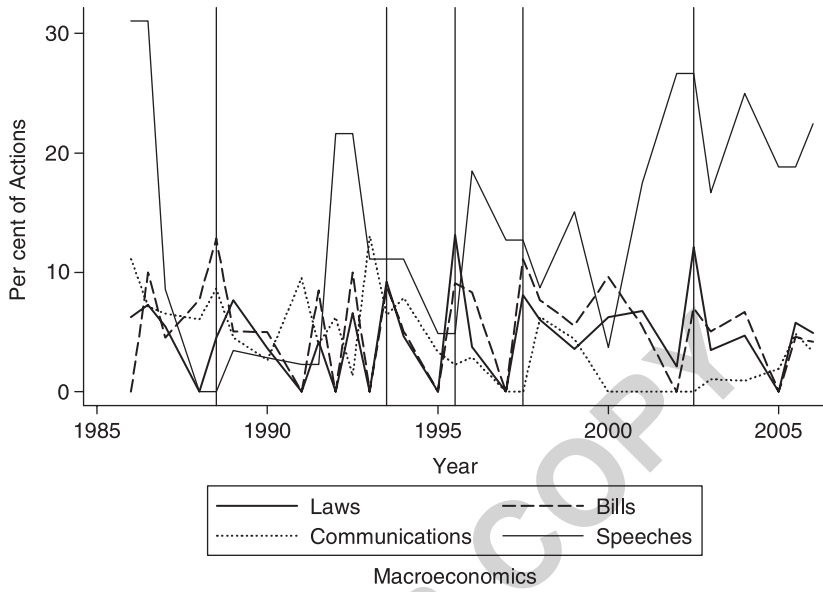


Figure 2: Percentage of annual policy-making activities focusing on macroeconomics, 1986–2006.

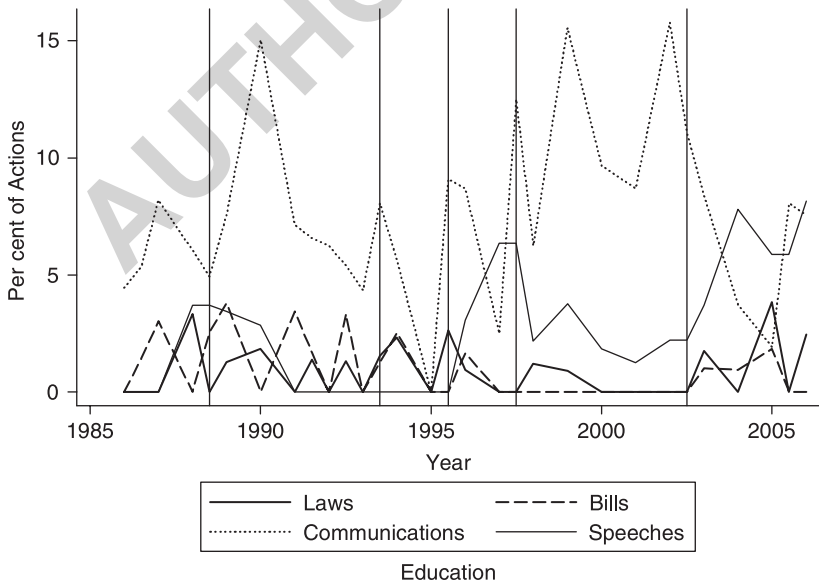


Figure 3: Percentage of annual policy-making activities focusing on education, 1986–2006.

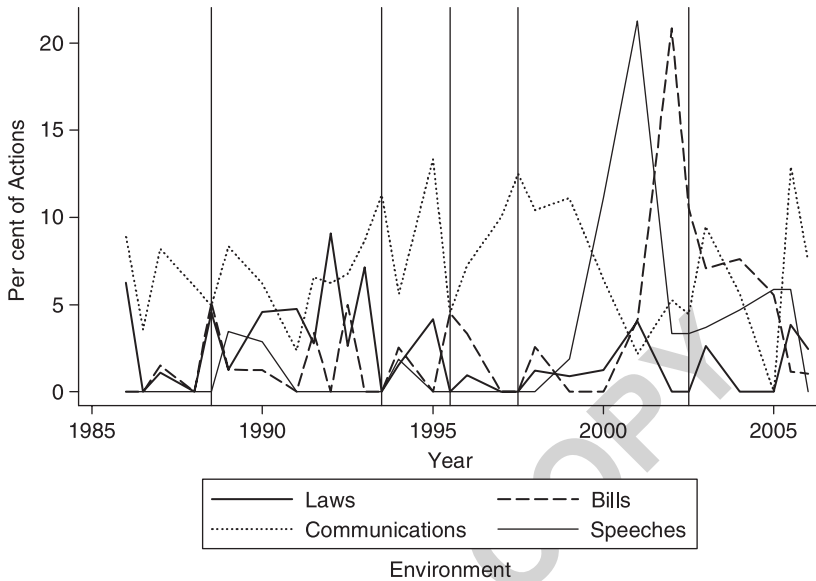


Figure 4: Percentage of annual policy-making activities focusing on environment, 1986–2006.

As in Figure 2, Figure 3 shows substantial differences across the agendas, with education being the object of relatively few law-making activities, but much more speech-making and, especially, communications from the Council of Ministers. As in the previous case, we see substantial variation across the agendas, few clear trends over time, and little impact of partisan shift. Figure 4 looks at attention to the environment.

As in the previous cases, we see substantially more rhetoric associated with the environment than legislative activity, through there were many laws on the topic during the early 1990s, as discussed in relation to Table 5. There are several periods of heightened attention to the issue, and it alone, like macroeconomics, can at times consume as much as 20 per cent of total attention. Similar to the other cases, and consistent with the findings throughout our analysis, we see few clear trends over time, erratic attention and little systematic linkage with shifts in partisan control.

Conclusion

Estimating the effect of partisanship on attention in four French agendas gives us evidence about the dynamics of political competition in France. Parties generally characterize their opponents as blind to public problems outside their



partisan ideology or clientele base. The underlying idea is that political competition is segmented, with different parties dealing with different problems for different groups. The results presented in this paper underscore that conversely, even in centrifugal political system, political competition is driven by common focus in attention. Different parties draw similar attention to the various policy issues. In such a way, parties do not allow to their opponents to maintain a monopoly on any policy issue. The environment issue exemplifies this idea. Even if left-wing parties are allied with the Greens, as the environment is settled on the agenda, right-wing incumbents dedicate a substantial amount of attention to environmental issues. At least in France, policy issues are contested. In this logic reside the dynamics of political competition. Whatever the party, a similar level of attention will be dedicated to a policy issue, only the timing of the attention may change. In comparing the partisan differentiation and the partisan neutrality hypotheses, our data clearly show that even if partisan shifts have sometimes led to changes in issue-attention, far more of the variation is owing to other factors. Newly appointed government ministers want to accomplish things within their jurisdictions. Parties do not want to cede leadership on an issue to their opponents, especially when they are in power. Events cause governments to respond, no matter what their political stripe. So while parties and elections certainly matter, when we look across the board at the full range of activities of the French parliament and executive over more than two decades, we see more shifts between elections than we do across them. Finally, this paper has allowed us to introduce a new data set and approach to the study of policy agendas in the French Fifth Republic but of course we have been able only to scratch the surface of the many questions we will need more time and space to explore in the future.

Notes

- 1 For a detailed discussion of the different arguments at stake, see Esping-Andersen (1996).
- 2 See the discussion by King and Laver and the authors' reply (G. King and Laver, 1993).
- 3 For a longer and more detailed discussion of executive politics and its evolution in France (cf. Grossman, 2008).
- 4 For the original codebook, see <http://www.policyagendas.org>. The French codebook is available from the authors on request.
- 5 As there is only one presidential speech per year, this series has several gaps corresponding to those years where there was a shift in government control, and therefore two periods.
- 6 It is those issues that have yielded significant differences in some of the major comparative studies (Blais *et al.*, 1993; Boix, 2000).
- 7 Van den Brug and colleagues recently showed that under some circumstances, voters will vote for left-wing parties in a context of high unemployment and for right-wing parties to fight inflation (Van der Brug *et al.*, 2007).



- 8 For a more detailed discussion of the French political system, see Elgie (2003) or Brouard *et al* (2008).
- 9 On this point cf. Brouard (forthcoming) and the vast comparative study directed by Ström, Müller & Bergman (2003).
- 10 But probably also in other countries with a 'premier-presidential' executive or similar 'executive-legislative relations', such as the United Kingdom (A. King, 1976; Elgie, 1997).
- 11 Education is a highly interesting area as it figures prominently among statements (up to 10.8 per cent), but represents always less than 2 per cent of the legislative load. This is mainly because of the largely regulatory character of most measures in the area of education policy in France.

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