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At the last minute: the use of the prime minister's power to amend the agenda during a crisis

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ABSTRACT
Coalition management is challenging, especially during the agenda-setting stage. The prime minister has to balance the priorities of the coalition partners, ministers from her party, and broader government priorities. To meet this challenge, the prime minister has agenda-setting power. Most research has studied the agenda-setting power during periods of stability. This paper asks how a crisis affects prime ministers' use of agenda-setting power by looking at the use of one discretionary agenda-setting rule: amending the agenda at the last minute. We use unique data from Israeli cabinet meetings over a period of 21 years and three crises, comparing prime ministers' last-minute changes to the agenda. We find that prime ministers are less inclined to change the agenda at the last minute during crises, and when they do so, this power is often, but not exclusively, deployed for crisis management. These findings suggest that crisis decreases the pressures exerted by prime ministers' party members and coalition partners, allowing prime ministers more latitude to promote their priorities without recourse to manipulation. The findings underscore the importance of coalition dynamics, coalition management, and agenda setting for crisis management.

Introduction

The government's advancement of its policy priorities is constrained by the limited capacity of the decision agenda (Jennings et al., 2011; Mortensen et al., 2011). In coalition governments, there is competition over this limited capacity between the government's compromise, the distinct priorities of the coalition partners (Martin & Vanberg, 2014) and the government's need to address emerging problems and core functions (Jennings et al.,

2011). To strike a balance between these multiple demands, the prime minister is institutionally endowed with agenda-setting power. This power comprises control over the content of the agenda (which issues are placed on the agenda) and its timing (when issues are placed on the agenda).

Research on prime ministers' deployment of their agenda-setting power has yet to examine its use during periods of crisis. Likewise, crisis management research tends to overlook the importance of the agenda-setting stage. It focuses on the content of crisis-management decision-making and the extent to which it is centralised (A. Boin et al., 2005), while ignoring the competition between managing the crisis and other concerns that politicians value. Moreover, crisis-management research is excessively focused on leaders (the prime minister, the president) and their activities. However, in multi-party parliamentary democracies, the prime minister is first among equals and is subject to pressures from coalition partners. Therefore, prime ministers' decisions at all stages of the policy process need to account for the coalition partners' priorities and demands. Consequently, agenda-setting and crisis management studies can benefit from understanding how prime ministers simultaneously manage crisis incidents and their coalitions by controlling the government's agenda. This article theorises and empirically examines whether and how the prime minister's exercise of agenda-setting power changes during periods of crisis.

The institutional rules regulating prime ministers' agenda-setting power comprise routine and discretionary procedures. Discretionary agenda-setting procedures, on which we focus in this article, involve formal and informal stipulations intended to provide the prime minister with flexibility to address emerging needs. This paper examines the prime minister's use of one type of discretionary agenda-setting procedure: amending the cabinet's agenda by removing or adding issues at the last minute (hereafter: last-minute agenda change). An important methodological advantage of this focus, as we show in this article, is that it allows us to empirically measure the prime minister's use of the agenda-setting power, a usually hidden and difficult-to-measure behaviour. We assume that, beyond its intended aim to enable flexible prioritisation of urgent issues, the power to change the agenda at the last minute allows prime ministers to prioritise their concerns alongside pressing coalition-management demands, while containing intra-cabinet conflict and mitigating public blame. By adding issues at the last minute, prime ministers limit the time cabinet members and external observers have to gather information and organise opposition regarding a proposal. Similarly, removing issues at the last minute enables a quick response to actual or anticipated opposition.

We argue that, during crises, prime ministers are less inclined to amend the agenda at the last minute and, when doing so, use it to focus the coalition's efforts on crisis management. This is so since heightened media attention and

public expectations induce the prime minister and cabinet ministers to collectively focus on managing the crisis. Thus, ministers from the prime minister's party and coalition partners are likely to temporarily forego pressuring the prime minister with their partisan demands. This provides prime ministers more leeway to advance the government's agenda via routine procedures and selectively deploy discretionary powers for their intended goal of addressing pressing concerns.

Empirically, our analysis draws on unique data we assembled of the agenda of the Israeli cabinet's meetings between 2013 and 2024. During this period, the government handled three crises: a major operation in Gaza in 2014, the multiple COVID-19 waves, and the ongoing war, which started on October 7th 2023. Advancing a novel operationalisation, we examine prime ministers' exploitation of their ability to add issues to the cabinet's agenda or remove them at the last minute. We find that Israeli prime ministers are generally *disinclined* to exploit this power during crises. Conversely, during periods of stability, they frequently use it to promote their priorities over those of ministers from their party and coalition partners. In addition, during a crisis, this power is often but not exclusively used for crisis management. Decisions that implement coalition agreements or address nominations and budget appropriations, which are unrelated to crisis management, are also added or removed at the last minute. Lastly, since the October 7 attack, Prime Minister Netanyahu has made exceptionally extensive use of his power to change the agenda at the last minute. We conjecture that this may be attributed to the public's attribution of responsibility for the attack to the government, as opposed to exogenous factors, which shaped distinct coalition dynamics.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. First, we introduce the challenges prime ministers face during the agenda-setting stage and how changing the agenda at the last minute can be deployed to manage them. Then we theorise prime ministers' use of the power to amend the agenda at the last minute during crises. Next, we describe the Israeli case and the data and methods used, introducing our novel measurement, followed by analyses of the frequency and purpose of Israeli prime ministers' use of their power to amend the agenda at the last minute during periods of crisis and stability. Lastly, we discuss our results, their implications, and directions for future research.

Coalition management and the prime minister's agenda-setting power

Coalition management is a complex task. Governments are expected to govern and solve the problems of all citizens and address core functions (Jennings *et al.*, 2011). Consequently, to govern successfully, coalition

governments need to overcome the tension between their collective interest in governing and the incentives of ministers and parties to pursue their distinct interests (Martin & Vanberg, 2014). This tension manifests at all stages of the policy process, but it is most acute at the agenda-setting stage, due to the limited number of issues that can be placed on the agenda (Alexandrova et al., 2012; McCombs & Zhu, 1995) and the need to prioritise them (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005).

Parties in the coalition are judged by their constituencies on their record in government. Every compromise the parties make as coalition partners might make them look unaccountable to their voters, and result in an electoral loss (Andeweg & Timmermans, 2000; Bergman et al., 2021). Coalition partners, therefore, utilise their government portfolios to advance policies that satisfy their supporters. This sometimes conflicts with the coalition compromise (Bergman et al., 2021; Martin & Vanberg, 2005, 2011). In addition, most ministers are occupied with the agendas of their departments, disregarding the agenda of other ministers or whole-government issues (unless these overlap with their partisan priorities) (Blondel, 1993).

As the head of government, the prime minister is institutionally positioned to attend to the government's response to concerns that transcend the jurisdiction of individual ministries. Prime ministers and their parties are also held responsible for the government's overall performance (Angelova et al., 2016). Thus, it is in the prime minister's interest to prioritise core and pressing problems and ensure the operation of the 'machinery of government' (Heath, 2020). At the same time, prime ministers need to maintain the coalition, requiring them to cater to coalition partners' partisan priorities and negotiate the distribution of government powers and resources among ministers and their parties. Lastly, prime ministers have their own and their party's priorities to consider. Hence, they must juggle multiple demands (Brodie, 2018). Controlling the government's agenda is therefore central to prime ministers' management of the multiple tensions in coalitional settings.

To manage these tensions, prime ministers typically have agenda-setting power (Barry et al., 2022; Müller et al., 1993; O'Malley, 2007). That is, deciding which issues are placed on the government's agenda and when, and which remain in the pipeline (Bergman et al., 2021; Green-Pedersen et al., 2018; O'Malley, 2007). The agenda-setting power of the prime minister is based on formal and informal rules. Some rules address the routine agenda-setting process (for instance, the prime minister is the one responsible for the agenda, the agenda ought to be presented to the ministers in advance, etc.), while others refer to exceptions from routine processes. These exceptions are aimed at allowing the prime minister flexibility to address changing circumstances.

One of the main venues in parliamentary democracies in which prime ministers exercise their agenda-setting power is the cabinet. A cabinet is an

institution composed of ministers who make government decisions collectively (Barbieri & Vercesi, 2013). Cabinets vary in their collegiality – the degree to which all votes are equal, and collectivity – the degree to which important decisions are brought to the cabinet. The more collegial and collective the cabinet, the more decisions are brought to the cabinet (Andeweg, 1993; Barbieri & Vercesi, 2013; Blondel, 1993; Blondel & Manning, 2002; Vercesi, 2020) and the more reliant prime ministers are on their agenda-setting power in this venue.

The agenda-setting power of the prime minister over the cabinet's agenda, and its consequences, has its limits. The full cabinet is seldom a true decision-making arena. It often operates as a rubber stamp for agreements reached in other venues, such as formal and informal interdepartmental meetings (Vercesi, 2020). Additionally, the ministers are typically the ones introducing the issues to be placed on the agenda, and the role of the prime minister is often reactive (Müller *et al.*, 1993; Vercesi, 2012). Moreover, ministers whose agenda is undermined can threaten to exit the coalition, thereby jeopardising the government's survival. Furthermore, the more parties are in the coalition, the more difficult it is for prime ministers to advance their own agenda priorities while satisfying conflicting demands (Green-Pedersen *et al.*, 2018).

To increase control over the agenda, prime ministers can exploit discretionary rules intended for rare circumstances. This paper focuses on one such rule – amending the agenda at the last minute, involving either adding or removing items. Using this power can enhance prime ministers' control over the agenda by containing conflict regarding the prioritisation of some issues over others and their content. First, by adding or removing issues at the last minute, prime ministers can prioritise their own concerns or respond to the pressing demands of some ministers and coalition partners, while limiting the opportunity for contestation by ministers whose priorities are being delayed. Second, introducing at the last minute an issue for which there is not yet a consensus for or against in the cabinet restricts the scope for conflict over its substance. Some cabinet ministers, including the minister introducing the decision and others whose jurisdiction overlaps with the decision content, are likely to hold developed preferences and negotiate them in advance. However, most cabinet ministers will not have a developed stance on issues outside the jurisdiction of their ministry (Blondel, 1993). Introducing such an issue at the last minute reduces the scope for potential opponents to deliberate and negotiate with other ministers and build an opposition against it. Furthermore, time is also needed to gather information on each issue. Without information, the ministers become more dependent on the prime ministers and their stance (Curry, 2015). Likewise, the ability of the opposition, the media, and the public to scrutinise the government's agenda also requires knowing in advance what issues are placed on the agenda and when, so they can gather relevant information on the issue

and formalise their critique. The less time external audiences have to study the issue, the less scope for effective critique. Similarly, removing an issue at the last minute curbs conflict by foregoing issues that raise conflict within the cabinet, or are anticipated to stir public scrutiny due to their contentious content, inappropriate timing, or the two combined. Hence, beyond response to urgent concerns, exploiting last-minute agenda changes allows the prime minister to limit the scope of conflict within government and vis-a-vis the public (Schattschneider, 1960), while successfully advancing their priorities and satisfying the pressing pressures of some ministers while resisting others.

The use of last minute agenda change during crisis

Most research on the prime minister's agenda-setting power examined its exercise during periods of stability. However, how prime ministers use their agenda setting power, including discretionary agenda setting rules, might differ between periods of crisis and stability because the political constellation within which the government operates changes.

Crises are socially constructed. An event is conceived as a crisis when most people in a polity experience it as an urgent threat (A. Boin *et al.*, 2005; Rosenthal *et al.*, 1989). In some cases, the definition of an event or a threat as a crisis is clearer (pandemic, war) and is accepted by many, and in other cases, people differ in their perception of the event. Conflicting interpretations result from the plurality of values and interests and the competition between the government and the opposition (A. Boin *et al.*, 2009; R. Boin *et al.*, 2024). Therefore, crises can be defined as 'events or developments widely perceived by members of relevant communities to constitute urgent threats to core community values and structures' (A. Boin*et al.*, 2009, p. 83). Such events can be a war, a pandemic, an economic downturn, a natural disaster, and more (Rosenthal *et al.*, 1989, 2001).

The social construction of events as crises carries opportunities and risks for the prime minister. During a crisis, people turn to the prime minister and the government to avert the threat or minimise the damage. The public expects leaders to rise to the occasion, put aside party politics, their personal and partisan priorities and ambitions, and promote the public interest (A. Boin*et al.*, 2021). In other words, the government is expected to focus its agenda on managing the crisis. Moreover, a crisis generates intense media attention and emotions such as fear or anger among members of the public. If the leaders fail to deliver on managing the crisis, the public will blame them for the failure (A. Boin & t'Hart, 2003; A. Boin *et al.*, 2009; 2021).

This context provides the prime minister with public legitimacy to exercise firmer control over the government's decision agenda. Compatibly, during crises, leaders tend to use a top-down, command-and-control decision

style to speed up the government's response, with less scope for deliberation, consultation, and compromise with various stakeholders (A. Boin & t'Hart, 2003). Additionally, a crisis creates a window of opportunity to place new issues on the agenda (Kingdon, 2011), allowing prime ministers more opportunities to advance their priorities. Alongside empowering the prime minister, public expectations likely induce coalition partners and ministers from the prime minister's party to suspend their partisan priorities and focus on crisis management. Consequently, the pressure exerted by the coalition partners and the prime minister's challenge of placing broader government issues on the agenda are plausibly reduced.

Given the above, we assume that during crises, the prime minister faces less within-coalition pressures and, therefore, has less of a need to resort to discretionary rules for the sake of managing conflicting demands. This leads to our first hypothesis, regarding the frequency of last-minute agenda changes:

> H1 Prime ministers are less inclined to change the agenda at the last minute during a crisis compared with periods of stability

Additionally, we assume that during crises, prime ministers want to gain credit for managing the crisis and to forego blame for advancing their partisan concerns, because the spotlight will be on their performance. Hence, we expect that their deployment of last-minute agenda changes will be for the purpose of crisis management.

> H2 During a crisis, insofar as prime ministers amend the agenda at the last minute, this will be used mostly for crisis management

Background to the Israeli case

Israel is a multiparty parliamentary democracy with a coalition government. The institutional structure of the Israeli government and cabinet (Shpaizman & Cavari, 2023), and the power of the prime minister as formalised in the cabinet's rule book (Barry *et al.*, 2022) resemble those of other parliamentary democracies. Therefore, it is logical to assume that the findings from the Israeli case regarding agenda setting and coalition dynamics can be generalised to other multiparty coalition governments.

The Israeli government is a collegial and collective cabinet government (Blondel & Müller-Rommel, 1993; Vercesi, 2012). The cabinet is therefore central to the government's policymaking. The cabinet is composed of all ministers, most of whom are elected politicians. It meets weekly for about three hours. Most decisions are made in the cabinet plenum (Zohar, 2018). Cabinet decisions involve legislation, decrees, large-scale programmes, budget appropriations, nominations, establishing committees, and more. Some of these decisions are the realisation of coalition agreements, while others address emerging issues.

According to the cabinet's rule book, the prime minister is responsible for setting the cabinet agenda, and the ministers can discuss only the issues on the meeting's agenda. Decisions are initiated by the prime minister, ministers, or senior administrators. After drafting a decision, it is passed on to the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Justice, and any other ministers whose authority overlaps with the decision's subject for their comments and consent. A minister who initiates a decision proposal has to negotiate with the prime minister to place it on the cabinet's agenda. The initiator of a proposal-the prime minister or a minister – may also negotiate with other ministers to gain the needed majority to pass the decision. Consequently, most deliberations are informal and take place before the cabinet meeting. Still, this article assumes that prime ministers sometimes opt to advance their proposals or those of other ministers without allowing a full pre-cabinet-meeting deliberation process.

Once the agenda is set, the Government Secretariat provides the ministers with the agenda for the cabinet's meeting, including all supplementary materials, at least 48 hours before the meeting. However, the prime minister can make an exception and add an item to the agenda or remove an item at the last minute. When an issue is added at the last minute, the ministers, in most cases, receive no supplementary materials to support their decision. The power to amend the agenda at the last minute is designed to allow flexibility, allowing prioritisation of urgent issues, or removal of items to allow longer deliberation of other issues. The specific conditions for amending the agenda at the last minute are not specified in the rule book, allowing the prime minister to use this discretionary power strategically.

Our analysis spans over 12 years, from March 2013 until September 2024, for which information is available. During this period, there were five governments (#33 to #37) and three prime ministers, all men. We treat three events during this period as crises due to their severe impact, media salience, and the large share of people affected (see online Appendix A for precise dates). One, between July and August 2014, the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) clashed with Hamas (*Ttuzk Eitan operation)*. This involved the IDF's ground forces' incursion into the Gaza Strip, and more than 4,500 rockets fired from Gaza at Israeli towns. The toll of this conflict included the death of 72 Israelis and around 2,800 Palestinians, with many more wounded on both sides. Israel was governed at the time by a Center-Right coalition, comprising five parties, headed by Benjamin Netanyahu in his 3rd term as prime minister (Government #33).

Second, like the rest of the world, Israel faced the COVID-19 pandemic, which lasted between February 2020 and April 2022 and involved a series of lockdowns and restrictions. The pandemic caused the death of about 12,500 people, along with an economic downturn. Due to the long and

dynamic nature of the pandemic, we differentiate between crisis periods involving the four main waves, with each wave beginning with policy restrictions and ending with their removal and non-crisis periods in between. In 2020, during the first wave, Israel had a caretaker government headed by Benjamin Netanyahu during his 4th term in office (Government #34). The coalition was Right-wing and composed of six parties. During the second and third waves, a newly elected government was in power, dually headed by Benjamin Netanyahu and Benny Gantz (Government #35) with a Center-Right coalition and eight coalition partners. This government lasted one year, after which a new government was elected, dually headed by Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid (Government #36). The coalition was composed of eight parties from the Left, Center, and Right-wing. This government was responsible for managing the fourth wave of the pandemic.

Third, the ongoing October 7th War started with Hamas' October 7, 2023, attack, which involved taking over several Israeli towns and communities ('Kibbutzim') by around 3000 Hamas militants and the killing of ~1200 Israelis, mostly civilians, and abducting ~250 hostages. The following day, October 8th, Hezbollah began firing rockets at towns in the northern part of Israel. Following these attacks, residents of Israeli communities and cities bordering Gaza and Lebanon were either evacuated or left their homes for safety reasons, and citizens throughout the country faced frequent missile strikes from Gaza and later from Lebanon. Moreover, hundreds of thousands of Israelis were recruited to the IDF's reserve forces. These events were followed by the IDF's ground incursion into the Gaza Strip, alongside air strikes on Hezbollah in Lebanon, the gradual evacuation and displacement of Gaza's residents, and the death of over 40,000 Palestinians by the end of this research. During this time, the Israeli government was again headed by Netanyahu (Government #37), in his 6th term, presiding over an extreme-right-wing coalition composed of six parties.

The above Israeli context allows us to compare the behaviours of prime ministers during times of stability and crises, the same prime minister during different types of crises, and different prime ministers and governments during the COVID-19 pandemic. This provides an opportunity for a comprehensive analysis of how prime ministers use their power to amend the agenda at the last minute during crises compared to periods of stability.

Data and coding

Studying the prime minister's exercise of agenda-setting power is difficult due to its hidden and often informal nature. To overcome this challenge, we focus on prime ministers' empirically observable deployment of their discretionary power to change the agenda at the last minute, as explained below. We have assembled two unique data sets based on cabinet meetings

between March 2013 and September 2024, both sourced from the Government Secretariat's website.

Meeting-level data

The first data is used to examine H1, concerning the frequency of last-minute agenda changes during periods of crisis and stability. The unit of analysis on which we focus is the cabinet meeting ($N = 483$). During the period under examination, there were 520 cabinet meetings, yet in 37 instances the cabinet's agenda was not published. We employed machine coding to scrape all cabinet meeting agendas and to calculate the overall number of items per meeting (as initially published). After each cabinet meeting, the Government Secretariat publishes an announcement listing all the cabinet's decisions and the issues discussed during the cabinet's weekly meeting. Regarding each available cabinet meeting, we manually compared the agenda published to the ministers and the public before the meeting, and the subsequent announcement of the Government Secretariat. Each item on the published agenda that did not appear in the announcement was coded as an item removed at the last minute ($N = 176$), and each item that appeared in the announcement but not in the published agenda was coded as an item added at the last minute ($N = 310$).

Our dependent variable regards items added or removed, employing two operationalizations, measuring per cabinet meeting: (a) whether *any* items were appended to or removed from the cabinet's agenda (0 or 1), and (b) how many decisions were either removed or appended. The first measure captures the frequency with which prime ministers change the agenda at the last minute. The second measure captures the magnitude of change.

The key independent variable is whether a cabinet meeting took place during one of the three crises ($N = 90$) or stability ($N = 393$). To account for variation across cabinets, we coded the cabinet (governments #33–#37) during which term a meeting took place. In regression analyses, we also account for the agenda's initial load, controlling for the number of items per meeting as published on the cabinet's agenda in advance.

Item-level data

To study the purpose for which the prime minister uses the last-minute agenda change at times of crisis and stability (H2), we constructed a second data set in which the unit of analysis is the cabinet decision ($N = 867$). We first collected all items that were either added or removed at the last minute using the same technique explained above, excluding those that did not concern substantive decisions (involving either declarations or reviews provided to the cabinet; $N = 89$). This resulted in a total of 266

items added at the last minute and 121 items removed. To this population of items that were changed at the last minute, we added a stratified random sample of 'regular' cabinet decisions placed on the original agenda as presented to the ministers and the public, and neither added nor removed. Out of the 2,717 decisions made during the period under examination, we randomly sampled 500 decisions, of which twenty were removed because they duplicated decisions that were added at the last minute. To address the difference between the number of cabinet meetings in each cabinet (and therefore the number of decisions), we sampled decisions of each cabinet based on the share of its meetings out of the total cabinet meetings during the period under examination. Additionally, to enable comparison of decisions during periods of crisis and stability, we oversampled decisions during periods of crisis. Hence, in each cabinet, half of the decisions sampled pertained to a crisis period. For further explanation of the random sampling, see online Appendix B.

To test H2, the dependent variable is operationalised as a comparison of items added or removed at the last minute versus 'regular' decisions. Additionally, replicating our coding of the first dataset, each item was coded, based on its date, as related to a period of crisis or stability, and linked to a government (#33 to #37).

As to the main independent variable, we manually coded all decisions undertaken during periods of crisis based on their headings and content, as related or unrelated to managing the crisis. In most cases, items that we coded as 'crisis-related' were such that they had a heading that explicitly mentioned the crisis. For example, 'Extension of the assistance to evacuated citizens from the North due to the October 7th War. We also treated as crisis-related items that clearly pertain to managing the crisis, such as assistance to the survivors of the NOVA Festival. Items that are not crisis-related are, for instance, the decision to appoint a member of the public broadcasting board. Decisions undertaken during non-crisis periods are coded by default as non-crisis related.

Our above coding of decisions as crisis-related and crisis-unrelated, which by definition applies only to periods of crisis, does not allow a direct comparison of the diverse purposes for which prime ministers deploy their power to amend the agenda at the last-minute agenda during periods of crisis and stability. We therefore manually coded each decision based on its content under the following prevalent categories: budget appropriation involving a decision that explicitly includes allocation of funding to various programmes; appointment of an individual, where this requires cabinet approval; coalition agreement is a decision that specifically alludes to the implementation of such agreements. All these variables are binary, and the same item may be coded under more than one category.[1] Though speculative, we suspect that appointments, given their routine nature, are seldom added at the last

minute, though they may be removed to allow space for more pressing concerns. Budget appropriations may be appended or removed if they involve within-coalition conflict over priorities. Finally, in Israel, coalition agreements often raise public criticism, due to their partisan nature, and we expect them to be appended or removed at the last minute to contain public scrutiny.

Lastly, we coded the decision owner. Based on information concerning the partisan affiliation of each minister during each cabinet and our coding of the ministry in charge of the decision, items were coded as advanced by the prime minister, by a minister from the prime minister's party, or by a coalition partner. This categorisation is intended to scrutinise our assumption that during periods of stability, prime ministers find it more challenging to place general government concerns on the agenda (i.e., core government and machinery of government issues), and are burdened by more coalition-management demands, leading them to advance these issues at the last minute. Equally, however, when facing heightened pressures from co-partisans and coalition partners, prime ministers may find it easiest to forego their own priorities, over those of others, removing them at the last minute. Because we do not have direct information about the ministers introducing decisions, we used the decisions' policy domain as a proxy. Replicating Shpaizman and Cavari (2023), each item was coded based on its content using the Comparative Agendas coding scheme adjusted to Israel (Cavari et al., 2022). Each topic was then matched to the relevant ministry based on its jurisdiction, and thereby to the relevant minister (see online Appendix C). Items matched to the Prime Minister were issues under the jurisdiction of the Prime Minister's Office (e.g., the Civil Service Commission) or items addressing the government structure or function, such as establishing cabinet committees, moving jurisdictions across ministries, and appointing ministers or junior ministers.[2]

Results

### *The frequency of use of last-minute agenda change*

Table 1 describes the overall number of cabinet meetings, the number of meetings in which some last-minute agenda change occurred, and the sum of items added to or removed from the agenda per government. As seen in Table 1, across the 483 cabinet meetings in our data, in 228 meetings (i.e., 47 percent) the agenda was changed at the last minute, involving 486 items that were either added to or removed. These last-minute changes amount to 18 percent of the total 2,717 items discussed, or to an average of 1.00 item changed per meeting (SD = 1.4, range = 0:8) out of an average of 5.6 items discussed (SD = 3.37, range = 0:24). This shows that Israeli prime ministers change the agenda at the last minute quite frequently. Of the 486 last-minute changes to the agenda, 176 items were removed, and

Table 1. The number of cabinet meetings and the changes in the agenda at the last minute.

Government	No. Cabinet meetings	No. Cabinet meetings with agenda changes	Total number of items discussed	Items added	Items removed
Netanyahu III (33)	88	37	455	23	32
Netanyahu IV (34)	222	89	988	94	72
Netanyahu V (35)	37	18	243	25	14
Bennett (36)	61	42	467	73	23
Netanyahu VI (37)	75	42	567	95	35
Total	483	228	2717	310	176

were added. The greater propensity to add items at the last minute, com- 310 pared with last-minute removals, is true for almost all governments. This has become even more evident in the last two cabinets (#36 & #37).

To transparently examine H1, according to which the prime minister is less inclined to change the agenda at the last minute during a crisis, we present detailed descriptive statistics, which we complement with regression analyses. Figure 1 compares the percentage of cabinet meetings in which prime ministers added items to the agenda or removed them at the last
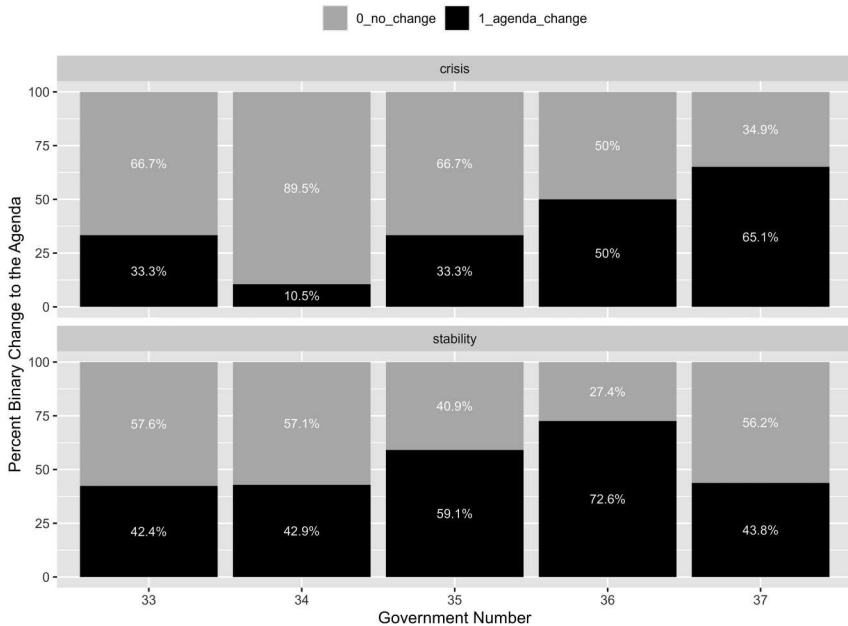
Figure 1. Percentage change to the agenda at the last minute (binary) during crisis and stability per government.

minute during periods of crisis versus stability per government. As can be seen, other than Netanyahu's current 6th term in office (cabinet #37), Israeli prime ministers are relatively *disinclined* to change the cabinet's agenda at the last minute during crisis periods compared with stability. Even in government #36, during which agenda change at the last minute was rampant, the prime minister exploited this power in 50 percent of the cabinet meetings during the COVID-19 waves compared with 73 percent of the cabinet meetings that took place when restrictions were lifted. Conversely, in cabinet #37, Netanyahu exploited his ability to change the agenda at the last minute in 44 percent of the meetings before the October 7th attack compared with 65 percent of the cabinet meetings since the attack. These findings generally support H1. However, the patterns of the 37th cabinet stand out as incompatible with these expectations.

To further examine H1, Figure 2 presents the full distribution, as well as the mean, of the number of items added or removed at the last minute per cabinet meeting during times of crisis and stability by cabinets #33–#37. Replicating the findings of Figure 1, in most governments, prime ministers are relatively disinclined to use their power to change the agenda at the last minute during a crisis compared with periods of stability. Netanyahu's behaviour in government #37 displays the opposite pattern.
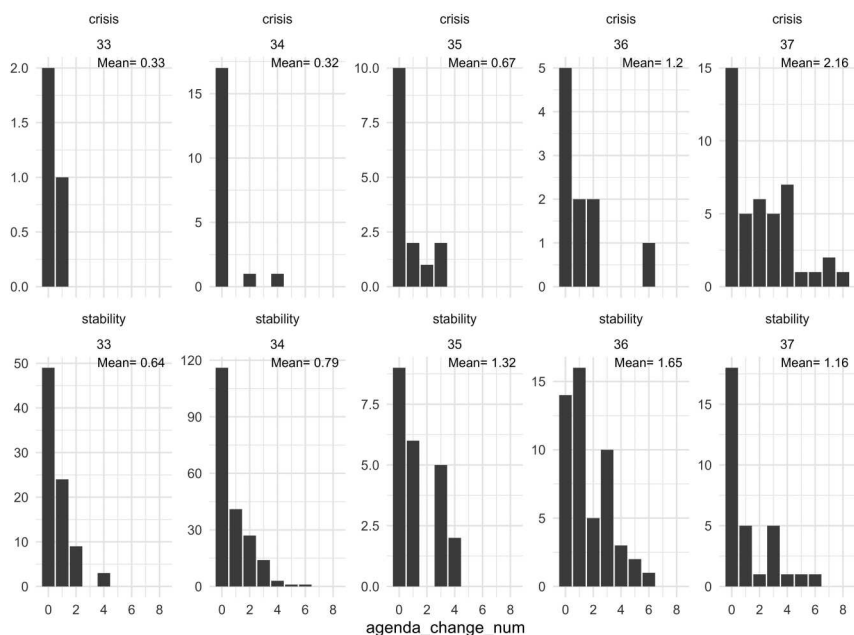

Figure 2. Distribution of the number of items added or removed at the last minute per cabinet meeting at times of crisis and stability.

Table 2. Frequency of agenda change at the last minute.

	LPM of agenda change (binary)		OLS of agenda change (number)	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Crisis period	−0.046	−0.195**	0.159	−0.312
	(0.065)	(0.078)	(0.181)	(0.217)
Number of initial items on the agenda	0.045***	0.043***	0.113***	0.109***
	(0.008)	(0.008)	(0.022)	(0.022)
Gov#34	0.024	0.030	0.219	0.240
	(0.060)	(0.060)	(0.169)	(0.167)
Gov#35	0.039	0.095	0.257	0.436
	(0.097)	(0.097)	(0.271)	(0.271)
Gov#36	0.207**	0.228***	0.757***	0.824***
	(0.081)	(0.080)	(0.226)	(0.223)
Gov#37	0.098	−0.077	0.855***	0.301
	(0.084)	(0.098)	(0.235)	(0.274)
Crisis period*gov#37		0.448***		1.417***
		(0.134)		(0.374)
Constant	0.187***	0.198***	0.024	0.059
	(0.065)	(0.065)	(0.183)	(0.181)
N	483	483	483	483
R^2	0.107	0.128	0.138	0.163
Adjusted R^2	0.096	0.115	0.127	0.151

Comm.: table entries are LPM/OLS coefficients, with SEs in parenthesis; *$p < .1$; **$p < .05$; ***$p < .01$.

Table 2 puts the above findings to the test using Linear Probability Models (LPM) with a binary dependent variable (as in Figure 1) in models 1 and 2, and OLS regressions modelling the number of changes (as in Figure 2) in models 3 and 4. Our focus is on models 2 and 4, which include interaction terms between the crisis periods and government #37, capturing the distinct patterns of Netanyahu in the aftermath of the October 7 attack. The *negative* association between periods of crisis and prime ministers' advancement of last-minute changes, during cabinets #33–#36, is significant with regards to their inclination to change the agenda (Model 2); a 19.5 percentage point (pp.) reduction, ($p < 0.05$), but not with regards to the intensity of change (Model 4). The increased deployment of last-minute agenda changes during the #37 government is statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) with regard to both dependent variables (Models 2 and 4). Ultimately, these findings, though inconclusive, support H1 regarding cabinets #33-#36, whereas Netanyahu's behaviour post October 7 manifests a distinct pattern.

The purpose and ownership of the use of last-minute agenda change

To examine the proposition of H2, that prime ministers use last-minute agenda changes during crisis periods for the purpose of crisis management, we employ the dataset comprising all items changed at the last minute and the random sample of 'regular' decisions. We examine two types of decision characteristics: the purpose for which a decision is advanced and the

Table 3. The purpose and ownership of last-minute agenda change.

| | Last-minute agenda change | | | |
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Crisis period	−0.284***	−0.292***	−0.231***	−0.230***
	(0.043)	(0.043)	(0.066)	(0.064)
Decision purpose				
Crisis management	0.063	0.079	0.125**	0.121**
	(0.053)	(0.053)	(0.056)	(0.055)
Appointment	0.082*	0.039	−0.050	−0.051
	(0.043)	(0.044)	(0.051)	(0.051)
Budget appropriation	0.214***	0.230***	0.225***	0.219***
	(0.046)	(0.046)	(0.053)	(0.045)
Coalition agreement	0.352***	0.329***	0.303***	0.310***
	(0.067)	(0.067)	(0.073)	(0.067)
Decision owner				
PMO office		0.203***	0.296***	0.296***
		(0.046)	(0.054)	(0.054)
Coalition partner		−0.030	0.050	0.049
		(0.034)	(0.043)	(0.043)
Crisis period *Appointment			0.322***	0.323***
			(0.098)	(0.097)
Crisis period *Budget Appropriation			−0.028	
			(0.108)	
Crisis period * Coalition agreement			0.058	
			(0.183)	
Crisis period *PMO office			−0.268***	−0.266***
			(0.101)	(0.101)
Crisis period*Coalition partner			−0.198***	−0.199***
			(0.067)	(0.067)
Constant	0.330***	0.319***	0.282***	0.282***
	(0.043)	(0.048)	(0.050)	(0.050)
Cabinet FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	867	846	846	846
R^2	0.202	0.234	0.255	0.255
Adjusted R^2	0.194	0.224	0.241	0.242

Comm.: table entries are LPM coefficients, with SEs in parenthesis; *$p < .1$; **$p < .05$; ***$p < .01$.

politician who 'owns' the decision. Online Appendix D presents descriptive statistics for these categories, divided by periods of crisis and stability.

Table 3 presents four Linear Probability Models in which we regress the dependent variable – change to the agenda at the last minute (0 versus 1) – on the decision characteristics. Regression coefficients represent marginal differences in the probabilities of a last-minute agenda change given the presence or absence of a decision characteristic. Model 1, replicating the analyses in Table 2, albeit at the decision-item as opposed to the cabinet-meeting level, examines the association between the crisis period and whether an item is either added or removed at the last minute. More importantly, this model estimates the probability of a last-minute change if a decision concerns crisis management during crisis, an appointment, a budget appropriation, and/or implements a coalition agreement (as opposed to a decision not including these purposes). Model 2 adds the decision owner, estimating the associations between last-minute agenda changes and whether a decision is

advanced by the prime minister in his capacity as the head of the Prime Minister's Office, on behalf of a coalition partner, or the prime minister's party member (the reference category). Model 3 adds interaction terms between the decision purposes and ownership and the crisis period.[3] Model 4 is a best-fit model including only interactions found significant in Model 3. All models include fixed effects for the government in which the decision was made. Unless reported otherwise, our analysis and predictions are based on Model 4. In the Online Appendix we presents robust analyses in which we run separate regressions for crisis and non-crisis periods (Appendix E), and multinomial regressions distinguishing regular decisions, decisions added and removed (Appendix F). Results are similar to our findings below other than with regards to budget appropriations, the coefficient of which is significant during periods of stability but not during crisis.

Starting with the purposes for which last-minute changes are advanced, Model 4 shows, in accord with H2, that during periods of crisis, decisions that are being changed at the last-minute are 12 pp. more likely to be such that are crisis related compared with those that are placed on the agenda in advance ($p < 0.05$). Descriptively, these decisions make up around half of the last-minute agenda changes during crisis periods.

However, the significant interaction term in Model 4 implies that decisions relating to appointments are also significantly more likely to be added or removed at the last minute during periods of crisis compared with stability (a 9-percentage point difference). Qualitatively examining the content of these decisions, we find that the appointments made during crisis periods were routine nominations, unrelated to crisis management.

Furthermore, we find that decisions addressing the implementation of coalition agreements, which in almost all cases are unrelated to crisis management, are similarly likely to be added or removed at the last minute during periods of crisis and stability. The coefficient of this variable is positive, sizable, and statistically significant (.33, $p < 0.01$; Model 4), whereas the interaction term with the crisis period is insignificant (Model 3). Descriptively, during crises eight out of the nine decisions regarding coalition agreements were added at the last minute, and during stability 36 out of 40 were either added or removed.

Likewise, budget appropriations, which comprise only 13 percent of the decision sample, are positively and significantly associated with last-minute agenda changes (0.22, $p < 0.01$, Model 4). The interaction term with the crisis period is insignificant (Model 3), suggesting this pattern applies to both crisis and non-crisis periods. Descriptive statistics show that half of the few budget appropriations advanced at the last minute during crisis periods were unrelated to managing the crisis.

Moving to the analysis of the decision-owner, Model 4 indicates that during periods of stability, the PM is inclined to advance last-minute
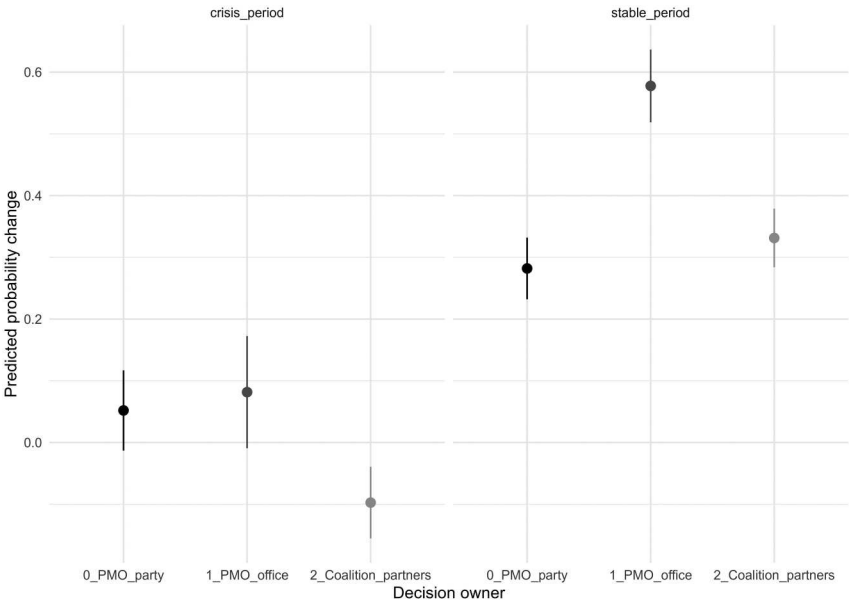
Figure 3. Whose agenda is advanced at the last minute?

changes in his capacity as the head of the Prime Minister's Office ($p < 0.01$). The interaction terms between periods of crises and decisions advanced by the PM on behalf of his ministry and a coalition partner are both negative and significant ($p < 0.01$). Figure 3 illustrates the estimated predictions of these interaction terms, holding other variables at their mean. We find that during periods of stability, the PM is 30 and 25 percentage points more likely to use the power to change the agenda at the last minute to advance the concerns of his office over those of co-partisan ministers and coalition partners, respectively. Conversely, during crisis periods, the PM is generally disinclined to change the agenda at the last minute, especially on behalf of coalition partners.

Finally, given our findings regarding the frequency of last-minute agenda changes, we inspected three-way interaction terms between the crisis period, decision characteristics, and the #37 government (available upon request). Repeating our findings in Figures 1 and 2, we find a two-way interaction between the crisis period and the #37 government, but the three-way interaction is insignificant. Hence, Netanyahu's inclination to amend the agenda at the last minute during the 2023 Gaza war is not distinct in terms of purpose or ownership.

In conclusion, during periods of crisis, prime ministers are inclined to deploy last-minute agenda changes for the purpose of crisis management (and for routine appointments). Nonetheless, they continue deploying this

discretionary power to advance budget appropriations and coalition agreements, albeit seldomly. We also find that it is only during periods of stability that prime ministers systematically deploy last-minute agenda changes to advance their own concerns over those of co-partisans and coalition partners.

Discussion

Drawing on an analysis of the Israeli cabinet decision-making over 12 years, we find, supporting H1, that Israeli prime ministers are disinclined to change the agenda at the last minute during crises. Conversely, during periods of stability, they do so frequently, transcending the intended goal of this discretionary rule. Additionally, confirming H2, during crises, prime ministers are disposed to change the agenda at the last minute for crisis management. We interpret these findings as suggesting that during crises, prime ministers and cabinet ministers collectively focus on addressing the crises, to gain credit and minimise public blame. As a result, prime ministers experience less within-coalition pressures to advance partisan demands, and have more leeway to place whole-government priorities on the agenda via routine procedures. Thus, when employing their power to change the agenda at the last minute, they mostly do so in line with its original goal to address emerging needs.

Nonetheless, last-minute agenda changes during a crisis are not exclusively used for crisis management. This suggests that the prime minister, co-partisans, and coalition partners still compete over the agenda, and do not fully abandon their pressures and motivations to advance issues unrelated to the crisis. Prime ministers continue managing these demands and advancing their concerns by taking advantage of their discretionary power. These findings are logical, since two of the three crises addressed in this article were prolonged (COVID-19 and the October 7th War), rendering full suspension of conflicting demands difficult, if not impossible.

Specifically, prime ministers change the agenda at the last minute for budget appropriations in both stability and crisis periods (though our robust analyses suggest this tendency is limited to periods of stability). Budget appropriations can create tensions among coalition partners if there is a conflict over the appropriations' goals or the target populations. Appropriations can also cause public critique if the goal is controversial, and during a crisis, if they are not targeted at crisis management. In such cases, the prime minister is incentivized to add or remove these decisions at the last moment to contain conflict.

Decisions implementing coalition agreements are distinctively added and removed at the last minute at both periods. During crises, such decisions are rarely advanced ($N = 9$), yet it is telling that 89 pet cent were added at the last minute. Coalition agreements can potentially raise public critique, because

they often include benefits targeted at specific constituencies or policies that represent partisan priorities and preferences. Public critique can become even harsher during periods of crisis as the public expects the government to focus on crisis management. To circumvent public scrutiny, prime ministers may add such decisions at the last minute. Likewise, they may remove them at the last minute to evade coalition partners' contestation or in anticipation of public criticism.

Our analysis of the ownership of decisions reveals that during stability periods prime ministers are relatively inclined to change the agenda at the last minute to add or remove issues concerning their own jurisdiction. These decisions relate to the prime minister's office, which is responsible for the overall coordination of the government's policy (Savoie, 1999), establishment of government structures, and allocation of ministerial positions and jurisdictions to parties. These findings suggest that during periods of stability, the prime minister exploits last-minute agenda rules to balance conflicting demands by adding and removing general issues and coalition partners' demands for government power. During periods of crisis, however, the prime minister faces less pressure from cabinet members to advance their distinct policy preferences and is awarded more leeway to advance general government priorities and therefore is less reliant on discretionary rules.

Lastly, Netanyahu's behaviour in his 6th term (government #37) stands out as an outlier case. In the aftermath of the October 7th attack, Netanyahu became exceptionally inclined to exploit his power to change the agenda at the last minute. We suspect that the difference we find between Netanyahu's behaviour during the 37th government and prior governments (#33–#36) is a function of the political risk the crises posed to the governments, leading to distinct coalition dynamics. The Israeli public perceived the military conflict of 2014 and the COVID-19 pandemic waves as exogenous, that is, resulting from factors outside the government's control (Feinstein, 2018; Lev-On & Yehezkelly, 2024; Louwerse et al., 2021). As such, these crises did not endanger the coalition governments' survival prospects, and if anything, the coalition members were incentivized to demonstrate good crisis management (A. Boin et al., 2009; 2021). The October 7 attack, conversely, was endogenized, i.e., perceived by the public as a result of the policies and activities of the incumbent government (A. Boin et al., 2009). In a survey by the Israel Democracy Institute (2023), shortly after the attack ($N = 452$), asking respondents who is responsible for its catastrophic outcomes, 54 percent blamed Prime Minister Netanyahu and 19 percent blamed the Israel Defence Forces. This endogenous blame attribution stemmed from public distrust of the #37 government already before the crisis.[4] Consequently, in the aftermath of the attack, the coalition lost public support equivalent to 12.2 Knesset seats.[5] Coalition partners, therefore, likely focused on maximising

their gains before the looming elections and pressured the prime minister to promote their partisan priorities. It seems that Netanyahu, in turn, was inclined to avoid public critique and manage pressures from his partners by exploiting his power to add issues related and unrelated to the crisis to the cabinet's agenda at the last minute.

Conclusion

This research examined prime ministers' use of their agenda-setting power during a crisis. Employing a novel operationalisation of agenda-setting power, we measured prime ministers' inclination to amend the cabinet's agenda at the last minute. Comparing across crises and governments, prime ministers are generally disinclined to use their power to amend the agenda at the last minute during periods of crisis compared with stability. We interpret this finding as an indication that coalition members tend to suspend their partisan priorities and focus on crisis management, as expected by the public. These findings are good news for crisis management and democracy since they suggest that during crises, coalitions are motivated to act responsibly, and prime ministers are inclined to act transparently. Still, alongside crisis management, coalition partners and the prime minister have additional concerns and priorities. Hence, prime ministers continue to amend the agenda at the last minute, mitigating conflict, transparency, and accountability for their advancement of issues that do not relate to the crisis.

We also find that the above typical pattern is not universal, and at least one prime minister (Netanyahu during the October 7th War) displays a mirror image, increasing his reliance on last-minute agenda change. We logically attributed this variation to the dominant public framing of the crises as exogenous versus endogenous, the implications that this carries for incumbent politicians' assessment of the government's chances of survival, and their incentives to collectively focus on managing the crisis versus advancing their distinct priorities.

We expect these findings from the Israeli case to generalise to other countries with multi-party coalition governments. This is because Israeli coalition governments are structurally similar to other cases. Moreover, diverse coalitions and competing demands from coalition partners are not unique to Israel. The uniqueness of Israel stems perhaps from the frequency of crises, but not in the political dynamics it generates. Still, our analysis focused on three incidents with vast material consequences, conceived by the Israeli public as crises. Given the constructed nature of crisis, future studies may examine the conditions under which prime ministers are incentivized to amplify citizens' perception of an event as a crisis to allow themselves to assert greater control over the agenda without recourse to discretionary agenda setting rules.

The above findings carry important implications for crisis management and coalition management scholarship. Existing crisis management research focuses on leaders' decision-making and communications, highlighting their attempt to avoid and shift blame. This article has shown that the political leadership challenge of crisis management in coalition governments includes managing coalition partners' demands. Thus, when examining crisis management and its outcomes, we should pay attention to the coalition's structure and its members' competing priorities. Many Western democracies are experiencing political instability, frequent elections, and diverse coalitions. These factors increase the pressure that prime ministers face to place partisan demands on the agenda, as well as their difficulty in addressing crises, core government functions, and other emerging needs. Understanding how prime ministers deploy their agenda-setting power to manage the competing demands of managing crises, promoting their other priorities, and addressing those of their multiple partners contributes to our understanding of crisis management and its outcomes.

Research on coalition management usually focuses on periods of stability. Our findings show that coalition management changes during crisis. These findings might suggest that the position of prime ministers as first among equals changes during crisis, making them first among unequals, therefore reducing the need to use discretionary agenda setting procedures such as last-minute agenda change. Further research might examine the use of last-minute agenda changes in other contexts, as well as other discretionary procedures at the prime minister's disposal, such as the power to pass decisions by a phone vote without cabinet deliberation, and whether their usage changes during crises.

Lastly, this research directly examined the agenda setting power of the prime minister. Research on the power of the prime minister in parliamentary democracies has argued that the power of the prime minister is mostly relational and not formal. In other words, it is based on the prime minister's relations with the ministers, the parliament, and the bureaucracy. Since the prime minister's formal power is weaker than presidents in a presidential system, an effective prime minister may creatively exploit the existing agenda-setting instruments at her disposal. This article provided empirical support for this argument. It showed that by exploiting a procedure intended to be used on rare occasions, prime ministers can push their priorities to the agenda and manage the priorities of other ministers. This finding is timely given the current rise of populist parties and leaders who often take advantage of existing formal rules to increase their power. Further research should examine such leaders' use of agenda-setting power, specifically by focusing on their exploitation and conversion of formal procedures to promote their goals. This will contribute to a better understanding of policy outcomes in populist regimes during periods of stability and especially crisis.

Notes

1. These categories do not cover all the types and purposes of cabinet decisions. Additional categories include government legislation, changes to government structures, regulation and more.
2. Twenty-one items addressed general government affairs (e.g., relations with parliament) were dropped from the analysis in the absence of measurable ministerial affiliation.
3. We do not estimate an interaction between the crisis period and crisis management, since all decisions undertaken during non-crisis periods are coded by default as crisis-unrelated; decisions made during crisis periods are coded as crisis-related or crisis-unrelated based on their content.
4. Data sourced from the Central Bureau of Statistics' data (2020–2023).
5. Analysis carried out by Raanan Sulizeano-Kenan (Gilad and Sulizeano-Kenan).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, (I.S.), upon reasonable request.

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