The French Agendas Project

The French Agendas Project was born during Frank's stay in Paris during the first half of 2005. During the summer 2005 we started working on the translation and adaptation of the US codebook. At the same time, we started coding bills and, soon after, government declarations. At the moment these two areas are well advanced, but we will need funding to progress significantly in other areas.

- **Team**

Currently the team includes eight researchers. Each has the responsibility for one indicator or group of indicators and we have held regular meetings to confront our experience with the data to construct additional and complementary indicators.

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- **Aim and scope of the project**

The project aims at collecting comprehensive data on the political life of France's 5th Republic. This means that we would like to construct series of indicators that allow for in-depth analysis of the evolution of relations between political institutions, parties, public opinion and the media. This should enable us to renew the analysis of French politics, as it will rely on the richest dataset on French politics to date.

Moreover, we consider this to be something like an investment in research infrastructure. Research students working on particular public policy may easily reconstruct the political history of particular issues or polices by consulting our dataset.

- **List of indicators**

We distinguish indicators from several areas:
- Parliament,
- Government,
- Justice,
- Media,
- Parties,
- Budget.

1. Parliamentary

This has been the first area where we started collecting data. In particular, we started with the coding of bills. To date, more than thirty years of bills have been coded. Categories notably include:

- name of the bill
- url of the complete bill
- ministry in charge
- topic coding

Other indicators in this area are reports on European affairs (not very conclusive) and parliamentary law proposals (95 per cent come from the government, see below).

We would like to collect data for two other indicators:
- oral questions,
- and accepted amendments.

This will depend on the availability of funding (especially for the last indicator).

2. Government

The main indicator in this area is the "Communiqué du Conseil des ministres", a press declaration, following the weekly ministerial meeting. This documents includes all governmental law proposals, governmental decrees, "ordonnances" (a special type of decree) and declarations. We adopted the more or less the same categories as for bills.

The problem here is availability. We have so far coded the complete Chirac period. We're currently waiting for the agreement of former presidents' (or their representatives) to access the communiqués before 1995. Cooperation with the National Archives is likely to facilitate this work, but negotiations go on.

It may be interesting to collect data on ministerial decrees, but we have some doubts as to the feasibility of this, as the sheer amount of such decrees makes this endeavour nonsensical. We're thinking about some way to filter and reduce the number of those decrees.

Finally, we are going to code government declarations. This should be relatively simple, as there is usually one per year at best and these are easily accessible through parliamentary archives.

3. Justice

For a former project, we have coded the decisions of the French "Conseil constitutionnel", the constitutional court. While we have not yet introduced the topic codings, this should not take too long, as the Conseil has only issued about 500 decisions since 1958.

4. Budget

Budget codings already exist as two economists having done this work before have realised most of the work. Basically, they have taken all the national statistical bulletins and coded the yearly budgets since 1820. The problem is that budgetary posts are available only according to public classifications. These, however, change over time and are thus not very useful. Moreover, we can hardly establish anything more than a very lose correspondence with agenda topics, as budgetary topics are usually organised by ministry, with no further specification.

One way out of this may be to take the budgetary bills, but we have not really made any progress, so far, on this particular problem.

5. Media

The media part looks like on of the most central ones to us. We're aiming at two different indicators here.
- Editorials

A first indicator would contain a relatively detailed analysis of the editorials of the two major newspapers three times a week. Building upon the previous experience of one of our investigators

with this, we would like to use this to include information on mobilisations and social actors, as we do not possess any other potential source for this.

- Front page

A second indicator would take the same two major daily newspapers and code all articles (except sport and other irrelevant issues) on the page.

Both indicators require a lot of time and money that we lack for the time being, but we're confident that we will eventually be able to realise theses series.

6. Parties

A final indicator concerns government platforms. This work has been done by the Comparative Party Manifestoes Project (Klingemann, Budge et al.). The most recent version which should be available by the end of the month at OUP includes codings till 2003.

The codings are very much adapted to the texts analysed. Put differently, there is a lot more detail in terms of codings on, say, social policy, but many of the items of the agendas code book are entirely absent. The person in charge of this section will work on the correspondence between the two textbook to translate the party manifesto codings into agendas codings. This will necessarily be imperfect as it is not possible to recode the manifestoes entirely.

- **Funding and funding sources**

So far we have relied on small grants and grant "rests" to finance this project. Moreover, some public institutions appear to be interested in partially funding the project (e.g. National Archives). We are looking for a comprehensive grant to finance the more costly parts (especially the media indicators) but have not been successful so far.