

# **The Political Agenda in Denmark: Measurement and trends since 1953**

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Research note

## **Introduction**

This research note describes the development of the political agenda in Denmark from 1953 to 2003. The research note serves as background material for the wider project “Party Competition, Agenda-Setting and Public Policies in Western Europe” with regard to the development of the (party) political agenda in Denmark. It, therefore, contains a combination of empirical results and discussions of question relating to operationalization and measurement, the type of questions that it is rarely possible to cover in depth in academic publications but still are crucial for anyone wanting to look more closely at published empirical findings.

The research note is structured in three sections. The first one discusses what is meant by the political agenda, and the second discusses how it can be measured. In the third section the development of the political agenda in Denmark since 1953 is described using two measures. This discussion also sheds light on some of the measurement issues in the section before

## **What is the political agenda?**

The political agenda is defined as the issues that politicians, and in a parliamentary context political parties pay attention to. It is thus defined in contrast to what Cobb and Ross (1997) describe as the public agenda meaning the agenda of the people and the mass media. It is clear that these agendas are linked, but it is also clear democratic elected politicians constitute a special group in society, which makes a special focus on their agenda warranted. It is, for instance, politicians who through political parties make laws and other important policy decisions. The party political agenda emerges as the result of the attention that political parties pay to different issues. The individual party on the one hand influences the party political agenda through its actions, but on the other hand is also influenced by it as a party has to pay attention to the issues that are prominent on the party political agenda.<sup>1</sup>

## **How can the political agenda be measured?**

Having thus defined the political agenda as the issues that political parties pay attention to, the question becomes how it can be measured. There are several ways in which political parties reveal which issues interest them and. They hold speeches, give press conferences, write letters to the editor, give comments in the news, publish party documents, and finally they ask questions of a minister, schedule interpellations debates, propose new laws, and arrange other parliamentary activities.

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<sup>1</sup> This dual relationship between individual parties and the party political agenda is what Giddens (1984, 5-40) more generally describes as the “duality of social structure”.

Coding of these different activities is thus the way to measure the party political agenda, and at least three specific ways of measuring the party political agenda are possible. The first one, which will be used in the following, is to code parliamentary activities. They take place in a well-defined institutional setting and are systematically reported in parliamentary yearbooks. One alternative option is to code media data based on the argument that political discussion to a large extent takes place in the media (e.g. Gaasholt & Togeby 1995, 130-136). However, there are several weaknesses of measuring the political agenda through media data. First part of what takes place in the media does not involve politicians and therefore reflects the media agenda more than the political agenda. Secondly, given the nature of media attention (cf. Cook 1998) there is reason to expect that only the issues that have high political attention get covered in the media. Issues that receive limited but still not unimportant political attention will be much more difficult to capture through media data. Thirdly, media appearances of politicians may be a response to issues taken up by the media and thus reflect the media agenda more than the political agenda. Fourthly, there are considerable practical problems involved in coding of media content over long periods due to for instance change of format of newspapers. TV- programs etc.

Another ways of measuring the party political agenda is through party manifestos (cf. Green-Pedersen 2005) but they have the drawback that they are typically only published every fourth year and are often only focused on a few issues on the top of the agenda.

It is, however, important to be aware that the coding of parliamentary activities does not imply that these are the political agenda or that for instance asking a question to the minister is necessarily the most important activity for a politician wanting to influence the political agenda. The claim is simply that parliamentary activities are a useful proxy or reflection of the political agenda. The claim thus is that it is unlikely that political interest in an issue will not also result in parliamentary activities around it. As Baumgartner (1997, 161-186) argued in his study of agenda setting in French politics, a parliamentary debate on an issue is one of the most powerful agenda setting tools and it is thus unlikely that politicians will not make use of it if they pay attention to an issue.

As explained in Green-Pedersen (2004), the database on parliamentary activities, which this paper draws on, contains all bills, parliamentary resolution, interpellation debates, accounts, and questions to the minister in Denmark from 1953 to 2003. Based on this, two measures of the political agenda can be created. One is the number of questions to the minister and the other is the length of parliamentary debates about bills, parliamentary resolutions, interpellations and

accounts by ministers. Each measure has pros and cons. There is a huge number of questions (64.263) which makes it a robust measure and powerful at tracking the political interest regarding issues that never reach the top of the political agenda. However, it has one major drawback namely that most questions are asked by the opposition and to some extent, they reflect the issues that the opposition would like to see on the agenda. It is also vulnerable to the actions of individual parties which put all their focus on one issue.

The other measure largely avoids this problem. It has a reasonable balance between government and opposition as bills and accounts are mainly put forward by the government whereas interpellation debates and suggestions of parliamentary resolutions mainly come from the opposition. Further, though an individual party may ask for, for instance, all the interpellation debates it wants, long debates only come if the issue also interests the other parties. The weakness of this measure is that it is based on a much smaller number of activities (18.264), which makes it less robust and also weak when tracking interest in issues that do not become major political issues but still get significant political attention. Altogether, when looking at the political agenda in general as done in this paper, the length of parliamentary debates on bills, resolutions, interpellations, and accounts will be used as the prime measure, and the questions will be used to validate the conclusions.<sup>2</sup>

As explained in Green-Pedersen (2004), the parliamentary activities have been content coded using a modified version of the American developed policy-agendas coding scheme with 19 main categories and 236 subcategories. One of the great advantages of this scheme is that the many sub-categories makes it flexible and thus allows for recoding. A recoding was thus made of all the activities, coding them into 24 main issues which correspond quite closely to the Danish ministries and parliamentary committees. A table showing the 24 main new issues and the sub-categories which they are based on can be found in appendix 1.

### **The Political Agenda in Denmark 1953-2003**

A way to describe the long term development of the structure of the political agenda in Denmark is through the three dimensions, capacity, complexity and volatility (see McCombs & Zhu 1995; Talbert & Potoski 2002).

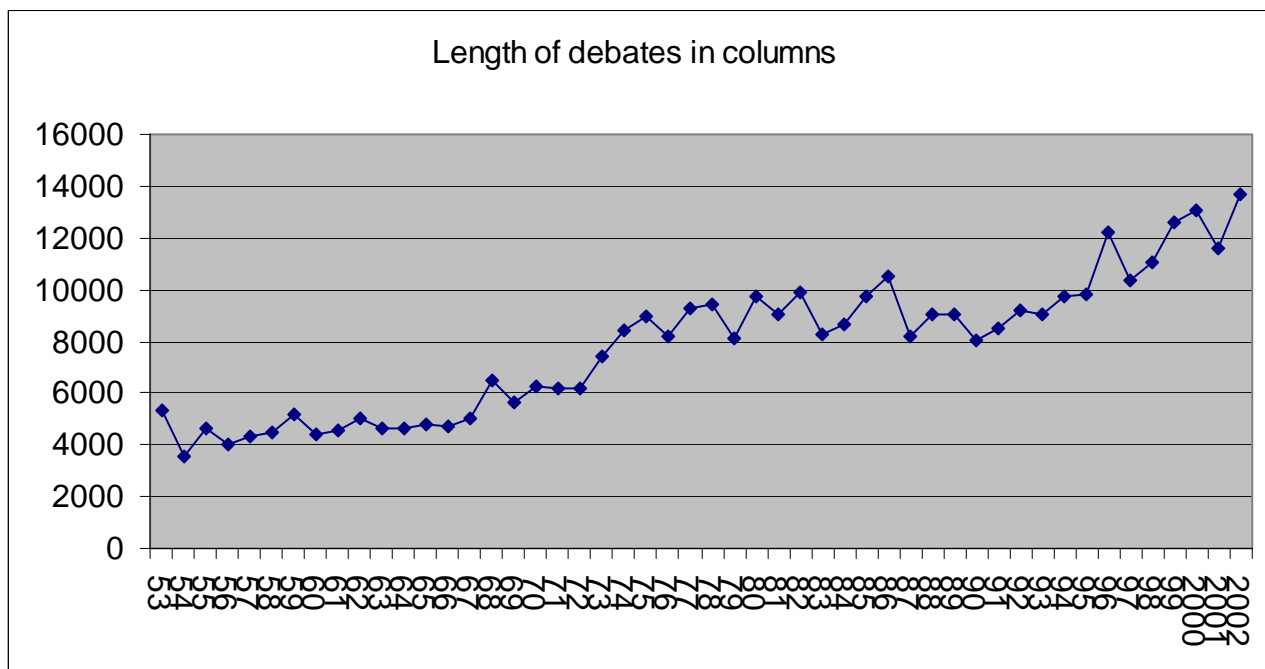
Capacity refers to the amount of issues that can be on an agenda. Agenda literature always underlines that capacity is limited. Not all issues can receive strong attention at the same

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<sup>2</sup> The questions are more useful when focusing on a single issue as they provide more information on which parties in particular have been trying to attract attention to it.

time. Nevertheless, agendas may expand, for instance the public agenda may expand due to increased levels of education (cf. McCombs & Zhu 1995). Capacity has been measured by looking at the length of all parliamentary debates<sup>3</sup> and the number of questions<sup>4</sup>. As shown in figure 1 and two, both measures show at significant increase over the period. The debates have increased by approximately a factor of 2.5 from 5.295 columns in 1953<sup>5</sup> to 13.712 in 2002. The expansion of capacity has been even more dramatic when looking at the questions. The number has gone up from 61 in 1953 to 5.017 in 2002, a factor of 82,2. That the expansion has been much greater when focusing on the questions than when focusing on the debates is not surprising. As the number of members of parliament has remained constant, there are clear limitation to how many debates and how long they can be. Questions are very simple to produce and though there are limits to the number which each member can produce there is still room for considerable expansion. In the parliamentary secession from 2002 to 2003, the member that asked the most questions asked 378. If all other members had asked as many questions, the total number would have been 67.662! (Folketingets Årbog 2002-2003).

Figure 1. Length of all parliamentary debates from 1953 to 2002 in columns.

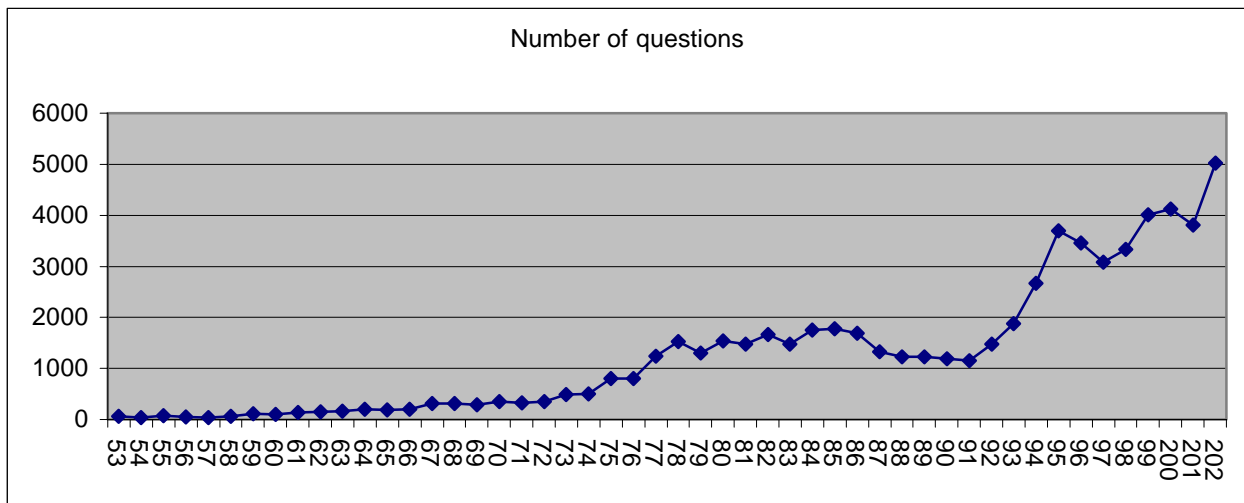


<sup>3</sup> When working with the parliamentary debates, the general debates found at the beginning of each secession, at the end of most secessions and at a few other occasions, such as a change of government, constitute a problem. They do not fit a particular category and because they are mostly very extensive and have a significant influence on the picture found when looking at the debates. They have therefore been omitted in the following analyses except for the study of capacity where the distribution across categories is not used.

<sup>4</sup> As explained in Green-Pedersen (2004), around 4% of the questions could not be coded based on the summaries in the yearbook and they have been left out. However, when looking at the number of questions they have been included. The figure also include questions to the minister in the new question hour introduced in 1997.

<sup>5</sup> In the following, the years, for instance 1953, refers to the beginning of a parliamentary year, which runs from October to October.

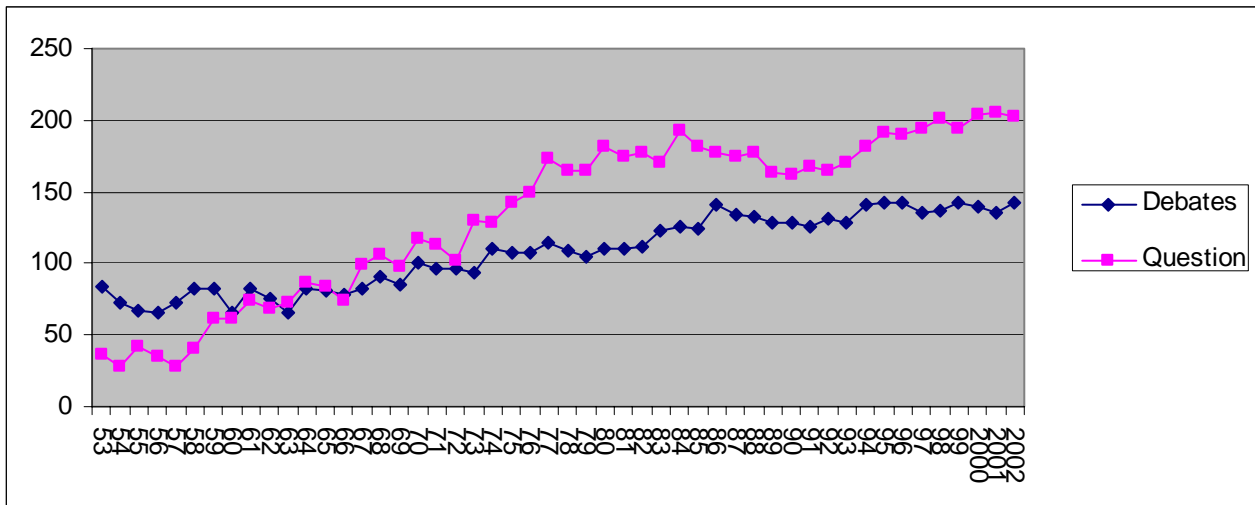
Figure 2. Number of questions to the minister from 1953 to 2002



The next dimension in describing the development of the political agenda in Denmark since 1953 is to look at complexity. The question of complexity refers to how attention is spread across issues. Is it concentrated on a few issues or spread out over a number of issues? One way to look at this is to see how many of the 236 subcategories in the coding scheme were used in each parliamentary session.<sup>6</sup> As displayed in figures 2, this indicator shows a significant increase with regard to both questions and debates. In the debates, the number of subcategories used has gone up from 84 subcategories used in 1953 to 142 in 2002. With regard to questions, the rise has been from 36 in 1953 to 203 in 2002. In other words, the complexity of the political agenda has risen in the sense that it deals with much more issues. It is not surprising that for most of the period, the questions relate to more subcategories as the questions represent a broader political agenda with more diffuse interest in the issues.

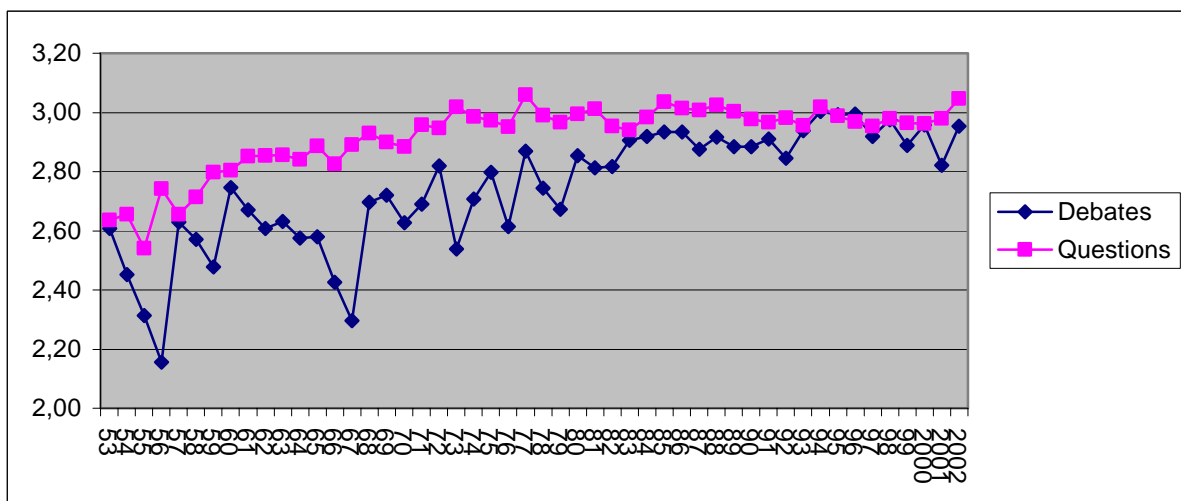
<sup>6</sup> This approach was suggested to me by Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones

Figure 3. Number of 236 subcategories used from 1953 to 2002.



The other aspect of complexity, namely the distribution of attention across the issues, can be measured using the  $H$ -statistic developed by Shannon and Weaver (1949).<sup>7</sup> As shown in figure 4, this measure has gone up with regard to both questions and debates, indicating that attention has become more equally distributed across 24 main political issues. Figure 4 also shows that for most of the period, attention is more equally dispersed with regard to the questions than with regard to debates, but the debates catch up in the 1990s. As will be shown below, the political agenda as measured through debates has been much more dominated by economic issues and as this dominance has disappeared, the attention has become equally dispersed over a number of issues and the debates have in this way come to resemble the questions.

Figure 4.  $H$ -statistic from 1953 to 2002.



<sup>7</sup> This measure is defined as  $-\sum P(x) \cdot \log(p(x))$  where  $\log$  is the natural logarithm. With 24 categories it varies between 1 and 3.18 where 1 indicates that all attention is given to one category and 3.18 indicates that it is spread equally over the 24 categories.

The final aspect is the volatility of the political agenda. In the following, this has been measured as the average change in length of debates or number of questions compared to the year before across the 24 categories. It is important to be aware that this measure looks at volatility from an absolute perspective. It looks at how big the attention changes are in absolute terms, not in relation to the size of the agenda. The reason for using this measure is that it allows an answer to the question of whether the increased capacity of the political agenda also implies that the agenda shifts are greater. It thus looks at the question of agenda change without treating the agenda size as fixed. Figures 5 and 6 show considerable growth in the average size of agenda shifts with regard to both debates and questions. In other words, the expansion of the capacity of the political agenda also means that the shifts within it are larger in absolute terms.

Figure 5. Average change in number of columns 1953 to 2002

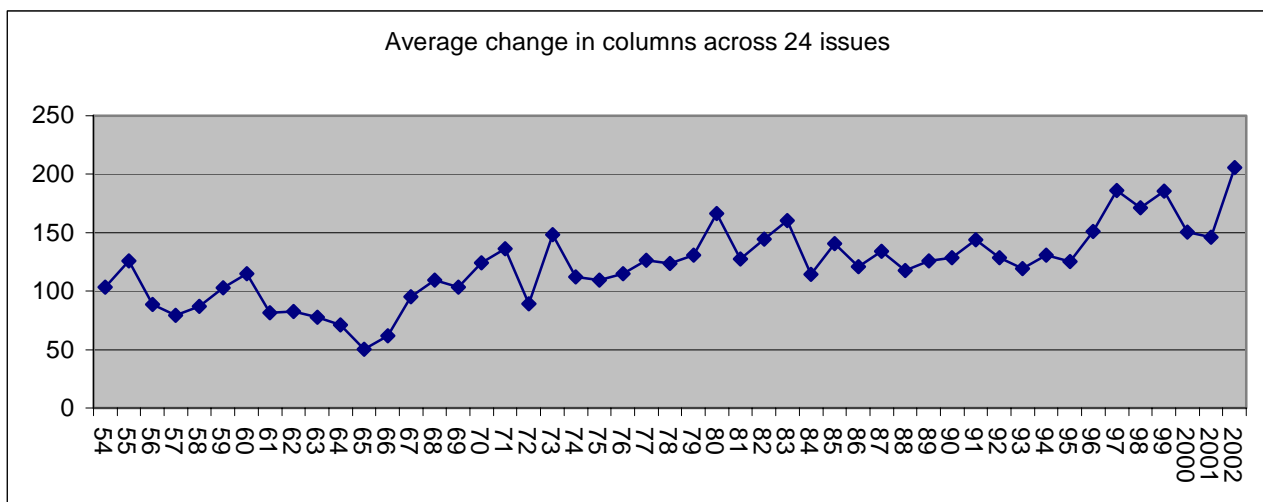
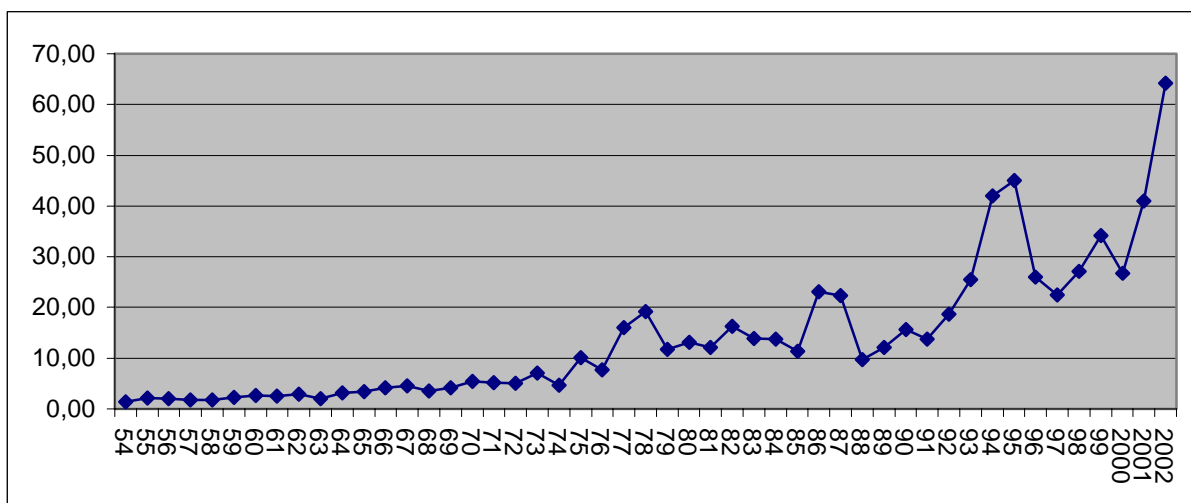


Figure 6. Average change in number of questions.





Altogether, the political agenda in Denmark has extended both its capacity and its complexity and has become more volatile in the sense that the agenda shifts in absolute terms are bigger than before. In other words, the political agenda is more extensive, cover more issues, spreads its attention more equally over the issues and when attention changes, the changes are larger.

A further way to explore the development of the political agenda is to look at the relative importance of new politics issues. New politics issues refer to issues that are seen as belonging to Inglehart's materialist/post materialist value dimension (Borre 1995). Such issues are the environment, law and order, and refugees and immigrants. It is more of an open question whether foreign and defence policy issues and the EU belong to "new politics issues". This is especially so when looking at the question of new politics from a longitudinal perspective since there issues might have been redefined. During the cold war, foreign and defence policy issues where closely linked with the traditional left-right dimension. This might gave changed, but it makes it problematic to include these issues in the new politics measure used to study politics back to 1950s. Therefore, these issues are not included.

Figure 7: Proportion of new politics debates or questions 1953-2002

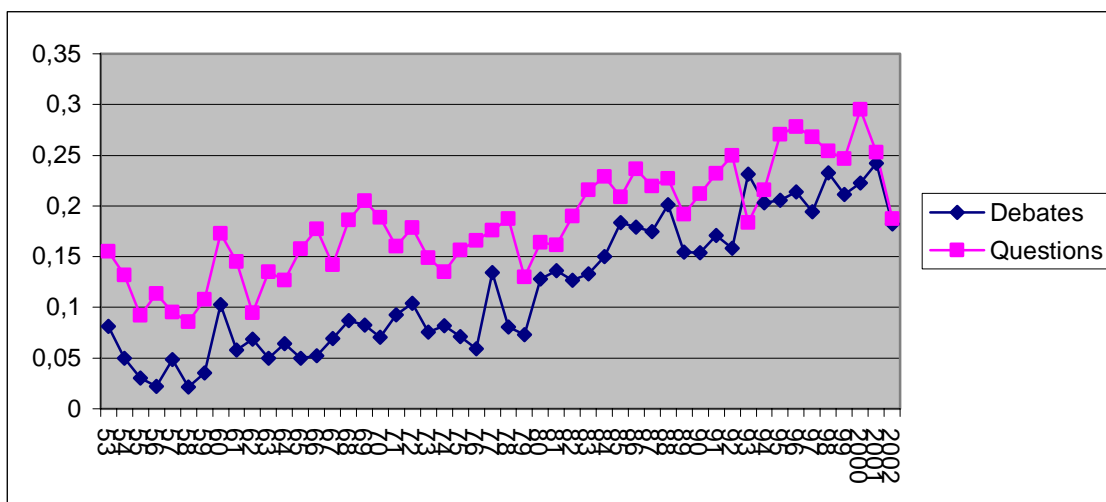
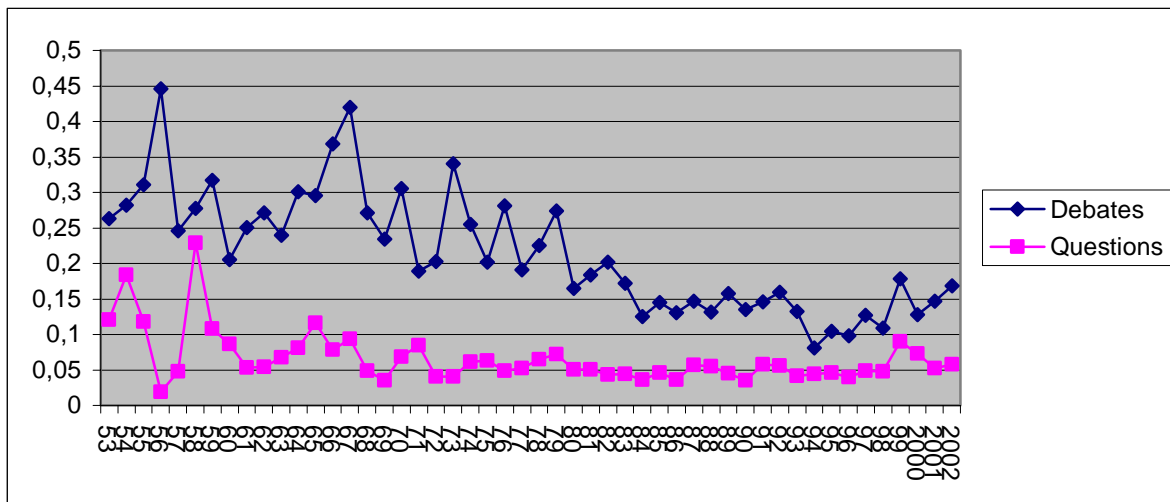


Figure 7 shows that new politics issues have gained importance both with regard to the debates and questions.<sup>8</sup> The higher level for the questions probably reflects the non-dominance of economic issues in the questions, see below.

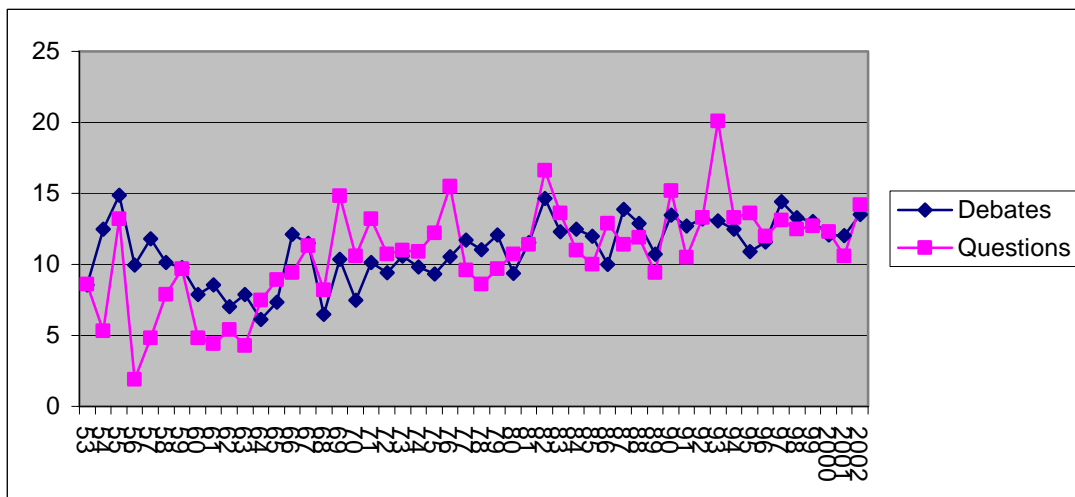
Looking at exactly the importance of economic issues<sup>9</sup>, figure 8 shows the importance of economic issues when looking at the debates, but also the decline of these matter and how the level has approached that of the questions.

Figure 8: Proportion of economic issues



Finally, it is worth looking at the importance of the welfare state for the political agenda.<sup>10</sup> This is shown in figure 9.

Figure 9: Proportion of welfare state issues



<sup>8</sup> When interpreting the figures for the question in the 1950s, one should be aware that the number of questions was so limited, below 100, that changes from year to may just reflect a change of 1 or 2 questions.

<sup>9</sup> Economic issues refer to the first of the 24 main categories, see appendix 1.

<sup>10</sup> See appendix 1 for the definition of the welfare state.

With regard to both debates and questions, the welfare state has gained increased attention. Throughout the period, there has been years of considerable attention, but the general level of attention is higher in the 1990s than in earlier periods.

Summing up, the political agenda in Denmark has changed significantly. Capacity complexity and volatility have all increased and new politics issues have, together with the welfare state gained importance together with the welfare state and economic issues have lost importance.

## Appendix 1: Creation of 24 issues to analyse the political agenda in Denmark

New issue	American/Danish subcategories <sup>1</sup>	Description
Economy and taxation	100, 101, 103, 104, 105, 107, 108, 110, 199, 1806, 1807, 1808, 2001	Macro-economic policy, fiscal and monetary policy, public expenditures and public budgets, economic cooperation between central and local government, balance of payments, exchange rates, competitiveness of Danish firm, industrial policy, tariff issues
Civil right and personal freedom	200, 202, 204, 205, 206, 207, 208, 209, 211, 299	Personal and civil rights, equal treatment of men and women, discrimination of elderly
The Danish National Church	210	All issues relating to the National Church in Denmark
Refugees and immigrants	201, 230, 603	All questions relating to refugees and immigrants including racism and classes in the mother tongue of immigrants
Health	300-399, 1301	All health related issues including prevention, misuse of alcohol, tobacco and narcotics and nutrition policy
Agriculture, fishery and food policy	400, 401, 402, 403, 404, 405, 406, 408, 498, 499	Questions relating to agriculture including export and import, fishing issue and issue of food quality and safety
Labour market	500-590	All questions regarding the labour market including work place safety, unemployment benefits, and cooperation between employers and employees
Education	600, 601, 602, 604, 606, 698, 699	All question relating to elementary, secondary and higher education
Culture and sports	607, 609, 1526	All issues relating to cultural policy, sports and gambling
Environment and planning	700-799, 407, 1902, 2101 og 2103	All environmental issues including international problems, planning issue and preservation issues
Energy	800-899	All issues relating to energy policy
Traffic issues	1000, 1001, 1002, 1003, 1005, 1006, 1010, 1098, 1099, 2104	Questions relating to roads, cars, ferries, bridges, railways, airplanes and harbours
Law and crime	1200, 1201, 1202, 1203, 1204, 1205, 1206, 1207, 1210, 1211, 1209, 1299	Issues relating to the police, costumes authorities, courts, prisons, law and order, organised crime, narcotics crime and prevention of crime
Social and family issues	1300, 1302, 1303, 1304, 1305, 1308, 1399 og 1208	Social policy issues, relating social assistance, the elderly, the handicapped, and family policies

Housing	1400, 1401, 1404, 1406, 1408, 1409, 1411, 1499	Private and public housing, the rental market, homeownership, homeless, housing for the elderly
Business and consumer policy	1007, 1008, 1500, 1501, 1502, 1504, 1505, 1507, 1520, 1521, 1522, 1524, 1525, 1599, 1803, og 1804	Questions regarding financial markets, banking, insurance, mortgages, consumer protection, tourism, copy-right , small business, competition regulation, export promotion
Defence and disaster relief	1523, 1600-1699	All defence and security issues including domestic disasters
Research, technology, communication and mass media	1700-1799, 2003	Issues about research, technology, space, telecommunication and mass media
Foreign affairs	1800, 1802, 1899, 1900, 1901, 1905, 1906, 1907, 1908, 1909, 1911, 1912, 1913, 1914, 1915, 1916, 1919, 1920, 1925, 1926, 1927, 1929 og 1999	Question about diplomacy, relationship to other countries, international organisations (not the EU), aid to foreign countries, problems of the third worlds, international economic issues
EU	1910	The EU as institutions and Danish relationship to it including referendums (EU influence on agricultural policy, environmental policy ETC is coded under these specific issues)
Regional and local government issues	1403, 1405, 2016	Questions about regional development and control of local government
The public sector	2000, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2015, 2030, 2099, 2100, 2199	Questions about governmental effectiveness, government contracts, governmental buildings, governmental employees
Control of government and party politics	2010, 2011, 2012	Parliamentary control of government, political parties, political agreements, elections
Faroe Islands and Greenland	2105	All questions regarding the Faroe Islands and Greenland

<sup>1</sup>A detailed description of the sub-categories (in Danish) can be found in the content codebook at [www.ps.au.dk/greenp](http://www.ps.au.dk/greenp)

## Welfare state issues

300, 301, 302, 321, 322, 323, 326, 327, 332, 333, 334, 335, 336, 337	Health care issues such as health insurance, hospitals, access to treatment, waiting lists, payment for treatments
502, 507	Labour market issues: Active labour market policy and unemployment insurance, early retirement benefits etc.
1300, 1302, 1303, 1304, 1308, 1399	Social Affairs: General issues, social assistance, public pensions, care for the elderly, day care, maternity leave, child allowances, support for handicapped, disability pensions
1406, 1408, 1409	Housing: Social housing, housing for the elderly, homeless people

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