

Background Document to the Topics codebook

For the study on agenda-setting in the European Union

By Sebastiaan Princen (Utrecht School of Governance – University of Utrecht)

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Introduction

The topic codebook is based on the codebook developed by Baumgartner & Jones and used, among others, by Green-Pedersen. There are two reasons to use this existing codebook:

- It is ‘time-tested’ and has proven its value in existing research;
- Using the same codebook allows for structured comparison between agenda-setting in the international organisations studied in this project and agenda-setting in the US, Denmark and other countries in which documents have been or will be coded. The possibility of doing this type of structured comparison will greatly increase the value of the database.

This background document to the topic codebook explains how the categories in the topic codebook relate to those in the Baumgartner & Jones codebook, and how the codebook will be used.

The topic code is, in many ways, a crucial variable in the whole coding scheme, because it is common to all datasets and it plays an essential role in most analyses carried out with the dataset. In the end, tracing variations in relative attention for certain topics, be it in time, between international organisations, between ‘access points’ within those organisations, or between international organisations and domestic politics, will be the key element of the analysis.

At the same time, previous coding experience has shown that the topic codes present most problems in terms of validity and reliability. There are several reasons for this:

- Most policy documents allow for more than one plausible topic code, which makes it difficult to determine which topic code should be assigned to them;
- It takes considerable time for coders to develop a common understanding about how to code documents in terms of topic, in particular when the more fine-grained subtopic codes are involved;
- Any classification of policy topics depends on the political context in which it is used. New topics may arise over time, or issues that are identified as a single topic in one country may be spread over several topics in another.

The first two problems require solutions in terms of training of coders and interaction between coders to establish and enhance intercoder reliability. The third problem requires that careful attention should be given to the topic codebook, both before and during the coding work. The double (and potentially contradictory) requirements thereby are that the topic codebook should allow for comparison with other studies and that it should work for the particular political system under study. Below, I will discuss how this will be done in this project.

Major topics

The project will study two issue areas in EU governance: environmental policy and health policy. Other policy areas will not be taken into account. Still, it is necessary to discuss the complete topic codebook in order to avoid bias. If the codebook for this project were only to contain topic codes for environmental and health policies, this would be likely to result in an over-reporting of environmental and health issues. The over-reporting stems from the fact that many policy documents relate to more than one policy area. In a full coding exercise, some of these would come under environmental and health policies, while others would come under another major topic. If these other topics are missing, however, all 'ambiguous' cases are likely to be coded under either 'environmental' or 'health policies'. To avoid this bias, coders should therefore know the complete coding scheme, in order to determine whether an issue rightly falls under environmental or health policy or under another heading.

The Baumgartner & Jones topic codebook consists of 19 'major topics' and 225 'subtopics'. It is based on the US political context, but has also been applied to Denmark. In the Danish context, however, Green-Pedersen has made some adjustments to reflect Danish political realities.¹ Thus, he has created a subtopic 'fisheries', since this is considered to be a single political topic in Denmark while it is spread over several subtopics in the Baumgartner & Jones topic codebook. In addition, Green-Pedersen has deleted a number of subtopics that are specific to the US context, while creating a few new ones that have no counterpart in the US. In the end, consistency between the US and Danish datasets is ensured by creating unique codes for the new (sub)topics in the Danish dataset.

Applying the topic codebook to the EU potentially raises even greater problems, since the scope of international organisations is normally defined very differently than that of national governments. A first take at this problem is to compare the US topic codebook with a number of leading textbooks on the EU and EU policy-making in order to find out whether the policy areas discerned in the textbooks coincide with the (major) topics in the Baumgartner & Jones codebook. The table in Annex 1 shows the results of this exercise, using three commonly used textbooks:

- Helen Wallace & William Wallace, *Policy-Making in the European Union*, 4th ed., London: Routledge, 2000 (using the various chapters as indications of 'major' topics in an EU-context);
- Simon Hix, *The Political System of the European Union*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1999 (using the topics mentioned in chapter and section titles in part III of the book on 'Policy-Making');
- Neill Nugent, *The Government and Politics of the European Union*, 5th ed., Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004 (using chapter 14 on 'Policies' and the tables on 'EU Policy Involvement' on pages 327 and 328).

¹ See Christoffer Green-Pedersen, *Party Competition, Agenda-Setting, and Public Policies in Western Europe. Data Rapport*, Version 1.2, August 2004, available at <www.ps.au.dk/greenp>.

Corresponding topics in these three textbooks have been placed in the same row. In the right hand-side column, the corresponding topic code from Baumgartner & Jones is indicated. Several things can be noted when reviewing this comparison:

- To begin with, there is reasonable agreement among the three textbooks in terms of what constitute the EU's main policy areas. Some books mention areas that others omit (such as energy, health and education in Nugent), but these are typically not considered as belonging to the core of EU activities. In terms of 'core' topics, all three books mention similar issue areas.
- In addition, many policies that can be considered 'major topics' in an EU-context, have equivalents in the Baumgartner & Jones topic codebook. This is true, for instance, of agriculture, environmental policy, external trade, and transport. These are, therefore, relatively unproblematic topics, at least at the level of major topic codes.
- Some topics that have a prominent place in the Baumgartner & Jones topic codebook seem less relevant in the EU context, simply because the EU pays less attention to them. This, however, is no problem for the codebook as such: if a topic appears less frequently on the EU agenda, this is a substantive outcome of the study, not a methodological problem.
- Some topics that would be considered 'major topics' in the EU-context, would be considered 'subtopics' in the Baumgartner & Jones codebook. This is true, for instance, of competition, which is an important part of the EU's core activities, but is relegated to a subtopic in the US context. Again, this need not be problematic in methodological terms: if an issue is more important in the EU context, this should simply show up in the attention paid to it relative to other topics, but it does not require different topic codes.
- Some issues that are defined as one single issue area in an EU-context are spread over several major topics in the Baumgartner & Jones codebook. This is true, for instance, of Justice and Home Affairs, which has developed as a policy area in its own right in the EU, but covers issues that would fall under three different major topics in the US codebook. This presents no great problems for applying the codebook to the EU-context, since subtopics can easily be regrouped without jeopardising comparability. For the two policy areas relevant to this study, 'environment' would potentially include both Baumgartner & Jones' major topic code 7 (environment) and 21 (public lands). Since 21 is directly linked to federal public lands in the US, this topic is superfluous in an EU-context, and all relevant environmental issues can be coded under 7. In terms of comparability, however, the US '21' major topic potentially remains problematic.
- Finally, some topics that are commonly used in the EU-context have no clear equivalent in the Baumgartner & Jones codebook. The three clearest examples of this in the table of Annex 1 are 'single market policies', 'cohesion policies' and 'fisheries'. Of these three, 'single market' and 'cohesion policies' are probably the most specifically EU-related areas:
 - 'Single market' concerns all measures to create a single European market. This consists not only of measures to dismantle domestic barriers to trade (known as 'negative integration'), but also of measures to establish common European norms and standards in areas ranging from technical

standards to environmental, social and health legislation ('positive integration'). Most of these measures are taken under Article 95 EC Treaty, which offers a broad legal basis for harmonising measures aimed at 'the establishment and functioning of the internal market'.

- 'Cohesion policy' (also known as 'regional policy' or 'structural funds') concerns a set of financial policies aimed at supporting economically weak regions within the EU.

These policy areas are normally discussed separately in textbooks on the EU, since they were created from a unifying rationale. I will deal with them as follows:

- For fisheries, a specific subtopic code was created by Green-Pedersen. Although fisheries are not a specific focus in my research, they are relevant in some environment subtopics (mainly 709: 'species and forest protection'). For this study, I have created a separate subtopic (723) for 'ecological and environmental aspects of fisheries'. Compatibility with the US data set can be achieved by recoding all items under 723 into 709; compatibility with the Danish data set can be achieved by treating these two categories separately.
- There is no need to create a specific code for 'single market policies' since each measure under this heading normally also relates to another policy issue. Most harmonisation measures have a 'dual' objective and outcome. On the one hand, by harmonising, for example, environmental policies they reduce barriers to trade; on the other hand, in harmonising these policies, they create an environmental policy at the European level. This is reflected in Article 95 EC Treaty, which explicitly calls for a 'high level of protection' in harmonising measures. It is even more prominent in measures that concern the 'functioning' rather than the 'establishment' of the single market.

If all these measures were coded as 'single market' rather than, say, 'environmental policy' or 'health policy', the study would miss important data about agenda-setting in the EU. Many environmental, consumer and other policies come onto the agenda as single market issues but are, in terms of substantive issues at stake, almost indistinguishable from domestic environmental, health and other policies. As I have argued elsewhere for the case of EU anti-smoking policy, political actors sometimes even construct single market rationales in order to achieve policies at the EU-level that are primarily driven by other, in this case health-related, political objectives.²

Agenda-setting in the EU can therefore best be studied by not coding single market issues under one code but by coding them under the various 'substantive' topic codes. Achieving a single market is then best seen as an objective, a (legal) basis or a rationale for policies, not as a topic in itself.

² Sebastiaan Princen, *No Smoking. Venue Choice and the Europeanisation of Anti-Smoking Policy*, Paper presented at the SGEU Second Pan-European Conference on European Union Bologna, 24-26 June 2004.

- In a more extensive coding project, it might be necessary to create a specific subtopic for cohesion policy, since it covers a number of funds that have no clear counterpart in the Baumgartner & Jones topic codebook. Given the limits of this study, it is for now sufficient to assume a separate ‘cohesion policy’ subtopic.

Subtopics

The subtopics present greater problems than the major topics, since they relate to more specific policies that differ more widely between political systems. Green-Pedersen found that most problems occurred in subtopics related to health policy, because of the specific institutional characteristics of health systems in the US and Denmark. He therefore added a number of subtopics, and deleted others.

For this project, most health subtopic codes seem to be applicable to the EU, and, at least initially, the original Baumgartner & Jones scheme will therefore be used. It is to be expected that some subtopic codes will hardly be used in actual practice, but this is a useful outcome in terms of the study’s substantive’s interests and not a methodological problem. However, Baumgartner & Jones’ use of decimal codes (.1, .2, etcetera) to denote specific programmes will not be used, since they relate specifically to the US situation. Green-Pedersen has added three health subtopics to the Baumgartner & Jones topic codebook that reflect particular Danish issues in health care. Initially, they were also used in this study, but later on it was decided to omit them because the number of entries under these topics proved to be negligible (e.g. the codes for waiting lists) or the distinction between subtopics was difficult to make in an EU context (e.g. between treatment and prevention of specific diseases).

Health subtopics relating to specific diseases, medicinal products and substance abuse could easily be applied in the EU-context as well. Health subtopics related to institutional and financial issues (health insurance, provider payment, health manpower) proved more difficult to apply. Partly, this is so because the EU is not itself directly involved in these issues. Moreover, discussion of these issues in an EU-context often focuses on cross-border treatment of patients, recognition of health professionals between member states and the like. For now, it has been decided to use existing subtopics to deal with these issues:

- 323 (‘Provider and insurer payment and regulation’) is used for issues of cross-border treatment, since the main point in these issues concerns who will pay for treatment in another member state or whether and how patients can have their health treatment in other member states reimbursed;
- 325 (‘Health manpower and training’) is used for issues relating to the recognition of medical professions and professionals across borders, since these are closely related to issues of training and professional qualifications.

In both cases, it may be appropriate to create a specific subtopic code later on in the project, but this remains to be seen until data collection has been completed.

All US environment subtopics seem applicable and will be included in the codebook for this project. Green-Pedersen made one addition (planning issues), which will not be included in this study. In coding Questions from European Parliament, it

turned out that 709 ('Species and Forest Protection') was used disproportionately often (after a first round of coding in some 35% of all cases). Moreover, 709 covered several issues that were substantively quite distinct. For these two reasons, it made sense to split the original 709 category into several subtopic codes. Comparability with the US dataset can be achieved by recoding these new categories into the old 709. In all, three new subtopic codes were created:

- 721 ('Effects of construction projects on the environment'). A large number of EP Questions concern the effects of specific building projects on the environment and habitats. Hence, a separate code was created for this type of issue;
- 722 ('Animal welfare'). Animal welfare issues have no logical place in the US coding scheme, but generally they come under 709. Christopher Green-Pedersen has created a new subtopic (406) under major topic 4 ('Agriculture') to cover 'welfare and treatment of farm animals'. I have chosen for a somewhat broader subtopic that includes all types of animal welfare issues (including welfare of non-farm animals);
- 723 ('Ecological and environmental aspects of fisheries'). In the US scheme, the ecological aspects of fisheries come under 709, but given the importance of fisheries issues in EU politics, I have placed them in a separate subtopic.

The original 709 category is also still used, for issues related to the conservation of wild animals and habitats.

As was explained above, even though this project is limited to health and environmental policy, it is important to take account of the complete coding scheme in order to avoid over-reporting of health and environmental issues. In principle, every (sub)topic in the Baumgartner & Jones codebook should be taken into account, but some (sub)topics are potentially more relevant than others. This potential overlap has been indicated in the topics codebook.

General coding rules

There are several general coding rules to be observed when applying topics codes:

1. Each document can only be coded under one (sub)topic.
2. If a document falls under two subtopics of the same major topic, it is coded under the 'general' subtopic (300 or 700).
3. The 'other' category (399 or 799) is used whenever a document falls under the major topic, but does not fall under one of the subtopics in that major topic.
4. If a document falls under two different major topics, it is coded under the subtopic that comes first in the coding scheme (i.e. the lowest of the two numbers).
5. To avoid over-reporting of documents under Health and Environment, always make sure that a document should not be coded under another major topic. If a document should be coded under another major topic, it should not be coded at all. The rule therefore is: think as if you are using the whole topic codes scheme,

but act only when something falls under major topics 3 ('Health') or 7 ('Environment').

6. The only exception to point 5 is that, in addition to major categories 3 ('Health') and 7 ('Environment'), we will also code for subtopic 403 ('Food Safety'), but not for the other subtopics falling under 4 ('Agriculture'). Take care, however, to make sure that an issue falls under 403 proper, and not under another agriculture subtopic or a combination of agriculture subtopics. If a document does not fall under 403 proper, it should not be coded at all.
7. Documents related to cohesion policy will not be coded under one of the subtopics used in this study.