

Policy with or without parties? A comparative analysis of policy priorities and policy change in Belgium (1991-2000)

Stefaan Walgrave, Frédéric Varone, and Patrick Dumont

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Whether policy outputs emerge from an orderly and predictable rather than a chaotic and unpredictable process is one of the main debates among public policy analysts. In that debate, the role of political parties is paramount. Via the electoral cycle, parties present their preferences to the electorate, gather public support, enter government (or not) and carry out their promises (or not). Thus, a functioning party democracy implies a planned policy process leading from party preferences to policy priorities. As party programmes aggregate citizens' demands articulated by interest groups and mass media, external pressures are not ignored but endogenized at pre-election time. Yet, many policy scholars argue that sudden focussing events, changing policy images, shifts in advocacy coalitions, new available solutions, issue expansion – in sum external pressure - can bring about unforeseen and often major policy changes, without political parties having an initiating role. The latter follow rather than steer an externally-induced disjointed change process.

In this paper we evaluate these two approaches: the “party model” leading to intentional policy choices and the “external pressure model” predicting abrupt policy change.¹ Notice that the first is primarily concerned with *relative policy priorities* whilst the second is designed to account for *policy changes*. We draw on the case of Belgium, a small, West-European, consociational democracy, widely considered (with Italy) as a copybook example of a partitocracy. Hence, our case study is conducive to finding strong bearings of parties on policy and to confirm the party model. On the other hand, during the period covered here, the 1990s, the Belgian political system underwent numerous destabilizing events, among which the Dutroux case was by far the most notable, that led to policy change. So we expect to find evidence underpinning the external pressure model as well. The data we draw upon consists of yearly time series (1991-2000) containing evidence about all issues dealt with in a large range of policy agendas, “party” agendas and “external pressure” agendas. Our aim is to test whether policy priorities (statics) can indeed be predicted best by party agendas and policy changes (dynamics) by external pressure agendas.

The first section briefly discusses both approaches to the policy process. Then, we present the Belgian case and introduce our longitudinal agenda evidence. Next, we analyse the data and confront both approaches empirically. We end with a summary of major findings and a discussion of avenues for further research.

¹ For the sake of simplicity, in this article we re-label the models originally known as the general “democratic policymaking” (or “party-to-policy”) model laid out by Klingemann et al. (1994) and the “punctuated equilibrium” model designed by Baumgartner and Jones (1993).

TWO MODELS FOR TWO VIEWS OF THE POLICY PROCESS

In their seminal *Parties, Policies and Democracy* Klingemann et al. (1994) boldly conclude that party democracy works. They maintain that political parties are the major actors in the system connecting citizenry and governmental process. Parties pronounce their preferences publicly in their electoral manifestos and carry out their promises once elected and in governmental charge (the “mandate model”). In their “agenda model”, Klingemann et al. even assume that congruence of programmes and policy is not predicated on holding office: government parties may even carry out the pledges of opposition parties as all parties’ manifestos collectively outline the agenda of policy action. The main idea behind these models is that parties matter and more specifically, that the distribution of issue emphases in parties’ statements of intent are reflected in policy priorities as measured by percentages of government spending. As parties draft their manifestos on the basis of citizens’ demands relayed and articulated by interest groups and mass media, external pressures are not completely absent from the models, but they are endogenized in party preferences. However, party manifestos lay out policy priorities for the whole duration of the legislative term. They are not reactive to external pressures and unpredictable events occurring *during* the term. These events may only be taken into account for the next elections. Moreover, according to (see also: Budge and Klingemann 2001), parties’ preferences as mapped via manifestos are remarkably stable and sudden changes only occur exceptionally. Hence, the party model view of policymaking is one of a predictable and orderly policy process driven by parties, with policy priorities reflecting the relative preferences. This was overall empirically confirmed in an analysis of ten post-industrial democracies over a 50-year period (1945-1990).²

At about the same as the, mainly European, party model was being developed, another, mainly American, approach was devised stressing disjunct and abrupt bursts of policy change. In *Agendas and Instability in American Politics*, Baumgartner & Jones (1993) state that long periods of incremental changes are alternating with short periods of intense policy shifts (see also: Jones and Baumgartner 2005). These policy punctuations are essentially abrupt. External events or/and ideas hit the system drawing attention to an issue, redefining it and bringing about sudden bursts of policy activity and change. Of course, political actors are instrumental in this period of positive feedback - they translate external stimuli in policy images, solutions, preferences and interests - but neither individual actors nor parties are masters of the game. Interest group pluralism, a plurality of policy venues and institutional competition make it impossible for any actor to control policy change, at least in the U.S. Hence, in this model the role of political parties is considered to be much less important. In fact, in their 1993 book, Baumgartner & Jones hardly speak of political parties at all. This is understandable in an American context but it is difficult to maintain in the European context. Recently some authors have argued that for the punctuated equilibrium approach to be useful in a European context, parties should be incorporated (Green-Pedersen 2004; Green-Pedersen 2004; Walgrave and Varone

² But see the debates over methodological issues, involving also earlier work on the U.S. only by Budge and Hofferbert (1990) by King and Laver (1993) and Thome (1999), and the replies and rejoinders by Hofferbert et al. (1993) and McDonald et al. (1999). The questions revolve mainly around causality versus association, on trends in time series data with such a slow-moving policy measure as government spending, and on single-nation and cross-country studies.

2005). In their 2005 book Jones & Baumgartner (2005: 84-85) very briefly explicitly address the matter of change based on electoral mandates and new majorities entering the legislative body. But they conclude that external issue-intrusion is a more plausible explainer of policy change than electoral change. Hence, their view of the policy process is a nonorderly one and external pressures bring about policy change, not parties.

In essence, these two approaches are not competing neither make contradictory predictions as they address two different aspects of policy. The party model was devised to explain policy *priorities* whilst the external pressure model was designed to account for policy *changes*. The first can be tested on *static* measures of relative policy priorities and the second on *dynamic* measures, such as differences of emphasis between t and $t-1$. However, the two approaches rely on clearly divergent assumptions about the policy process: one is of an orderly process with parties warranting planned policy priorities announced beforehand in party manifestos; the other contends that the policy process is disorderly and unplanned and that parties are not in charge. According to the latter view, external events sometimes destabilize the political system and a frenzy of change runs through the system sweeping away parties' carefully designed preferences and elaborated manifestos. Is this really so? Do party preferences indeed best explain policy *priorities* while external events can account for policy *changes*?

To evaluate and confront both of these models, we rely on extensive data regarding Belgium. In the literature, this small consociational country is considered as a clear example of a partitocracy. Strong mass parties have a firm grasp on the state and its personnel while at the same time being the major policy initiators and veto players (De Winter, della Porta et al. 1996; Deschouwer, de Winter et al. 1996; De Winter 2002). Given its highly fragmented party system, coalition government is the rule in Belgium. The often numerous partners negotiate detailed agreements during the formation of a new government. The government agreement lays out the policy priorities the government partners intend to carry out during the term. Coalition agreements in Belgium are important documents both for policymaking and government stability (De Winter et al. 2003). Surprisingly, the only country for which Klingemann et al. did *not* find empirical evidence supporting their party model was Belgium. They argued that Belgian politics, at least from the sixties to 1990, was more about defining the political community in a random search for solutions to constitutional problems than about classical government: "*Belgian government... has been more an exercise in crisis management than a considered implementation of substantive policy programs*" (Klingemann, Hofferbert et al. 1994: 224). According to us, methodological flaws largely account for such an odd result considering the partitocratic type of the Belgian system: Klingemann et al. aggregate party preferences of Flemish and French-speaking parties, neglect newer parties and their demands, only take budget expenses as dependent variable, etc. This calls for a retest of the Belgian case with more recent and refined data, including legislation and not only slow-moving policy outputs like budgets. Our analysis is not only relevant for Belgium, as parties are key in the policy process in most polities, and as studies linking party manifesto evidence with parties' legislation are scarce (Stimson, Mackuen et al. 1995; Budge and Bara 2001). On the other hand, in the period we study, Belgium underwent a number of external events which destabilized its political system. Scandals involving political

parties and dramatic focusing events reflecting bad governance led not only to record lows in public satisfaction with parties but also contributed to major policy changes. Hence, we contend that finding empirical evidence for both models is plausible as they are not mutually exclusive and both the structure of the Belgian political system and the period covered are conducive to such findings.

OPERATIONALIZATION

Our research design is straightforward. Policy priorities and policy change can be gauged relying on two indicators: *budgets* and *legislation*. In line with Klingemann et al. (1994) we consider that the relative proportion of budgets and/or legislation devoted to an issue in a given year gives an indication of how this policy issue is prioritized. Like other students of the policy process we consider policy change to be a matter of rising or declining budgets on the one hand and/or of an intensification of the legislative output dealing with an issue on the other hand (Sabatier 1988; Hall 1993; Sabatier and Jenkins 1993).

We capture the party model with measures regarding the content of *party manifestos* and *government agreements*. Parties' impact on policies, in fact, is mediated through the electoral cycle. In Belgium, general elections are held every 4 years. If, based on the pre-electoral party manifestoes and the postelectoral government agreement which is negotiated by the coalition partners, we succeed in predicting policy attention during the legislative term, this would corroborate the party model: parties make promises, form a government and act according to their pledges.

The external pressure model, in contrast, must be tested relying on more flexible and rapidly changing indicators of external pressure. We propose four indicators: *mass media*, *protest*, *interpellations* and *oral questions*³ in parliament which we all measure on a yearly basis. We expect these four agendas to capture a wide range of external pressures on a political system; each of them can assess, for example, the impact of focussing events (Birkland 1998). While mass media and demonstrations are in essence more external to the policy process, as they are in theory immune from policy-makers' control, interpellations and oral questions are definitely less external. Ministers are mostly questioned and interpellated by opposition MPs, so these instruments may confound the external pressure and the party model. Yet, interpellations and oral questions tend to react primarily to external events, and are neither planned a long time in advance nor closely associated with parties' agendas. If we succeed in predicting policy change during a certain year relying on measures of attention change in our four indicators during that same year, this would underpin the claim of the external pressure model: policy follows discontinuous and changeable external pressures.

³ Interpellations are the most powerful and classic tool of parliamentary control of government and individual ministers, as they may be followed by a debate in which a motion of censure may be introduced by the interpellant. Oral questions are not followed by a debate (De Winter and Dumont, 2003: 267).

DATA AND METHODS

Our study draws on a longitudinal dataset covering eight agendas – two policy agendas, two party agendas, and four external pressure agendas – in Belgium throughout the 1990s (1991-2000). The complete agendas were encoded in their entirety in order to compute relative issue attention (saliency) in percentage of all issues appearing in these agendas. All items were attributed to one of the 137 categories of an exhaustive and elaborate codebook.

For the policy agendas (our dependent variables), we dispose of two yearly time series:

- (1) The legislation series contains the 1,200 bills passed during the whole period.
- (2) The budget series contains national annual budget entries coded in single exclusive categories; altogether we have 12,000 budget items.

For the party model, we draw upon two series gathered on a four-yearly basis:

- (3) The party manifesto agenda is assessed by attributing all (semi-)sentences featuring in the party programmes of all 12 Belgian parties issued for the three general elections held in the period (1991, 1995, 1999), altogether resulting in a 45,000 issue entries database. For each election year, the average of all parties' issue emphases is computed.
- (4) The government agreement agenda consists of a similar encoding of the three documents drafted during the formation of the three Belgian governments in power during the 1990s: Dehaene I, 1992-1995; Dehaene II, 1995-1999; and Verhofstadt, I 1999-2003⁴. This yielded 1,800 governmental issue records.

The external pressure agendas are yearly and fourfold:

- (5) Interpellations are tapped using official parliamentary documents, resulting in a database of about 3,000 items.
- (6) For oral questions we followed the same procedure resulting in a series of about 8,000 oral questions.
- (7) The protest agenda is measured via street demonstrations, which resulted in a database with more than 4,000 demonstrations (mostly in Brussels).
- (8) The media series, finally, contains almost 200,000 news items, encoded from the complete news broadcasts of four national TV-channels and from the front page of five major newspapers. As TV-news strongly correlates with newspaper coverage and turned out to be the best predictor of legislative and budgetary attention, we only use TV data.⁵

A problem when analysing these data is the different *temporal structure* of the eight time series under study. Most problematic is the fact that both party agendas can only

⁴ The first two consisted of four parties: both the Flemish and the French-speaking Christian Democrats and both the Flemish and French-speaking Socialists. The third government was a six-party coalition consisting of Liberals, Socialists and Greens (both Flemish and French-speaking ones).

⁵ However our data series for TV news broadcast only starts in 1993; as for reasons related to other independent variables (see below) we restrict our analysis to post-1992 years, this has no distinct influence on our analysis.

be measured once every four year. We decided to carry out all analyses on yearly-based evidence; that is: we calculated yearly proportions of issue attention on all agendas. For the manifestos and government agreements, the issue attention proportions were duplicated for all years following the publication of these documents until new manifestos and a new agreement were issued. Using yearly data, we have to withdraw the years where new party manifestos were issued (1991, 1995 and 1999) from the analysis, as we do not know which part of policy for these years of elections or government formation must be attributed to the old or to the new party programmes and government agreement. As we did not find systematic differences between years in the beginning or the end of a legislature in our dataset, we can assume that parties and governments tend to carry out their promises throughout a governmental term (see also Jones and Baumgartner 2005). Hence, we incorporate the Verhofstadt I government in the analysis even though it was only formed in July 1999 and our dataset only covers the first 1.5 year of its existence.

The analyses below are based on so-called *stacked datasets*. Stacking the dataset strongly increases the N of the analyses but the drawback is that we will not be able to distinguish different issues nor take into account their potentially different agenda-setting dynamics. Since our dataset is exhaustive and contains the complete agendas we can use all issues for our analyses. Yet, our codebook is so detailed that some issues are very small: they hardly received any attention in Belgium during the 1990s. These issues are policy wise extremely unimportant. In the statistical analyses, however, their weight is as large as the weight of the real important issues. That is why we always run all our analyses twice: once on the complete dataset with all issues *and* once on a smaller sample version of the data only containing the substantial issues. Of the 137 issues, 42 were selected based on their importance in the legislative production in the period we study. These 42 issues cover the major share of issue attention on the eight agendas concerned and they include all major political issues: state reform (devolution), crime policy, economic policy, welfare, unemployment, social policy, international trade, education, social security, immigration, mobility and traffic, development aid, energy, financial policy, environment, defence, etc.⁶ When substantial differences between the analysis on the whole dataset and on the subset selected appear, we report these in the text.

Finally, as the models we set out to test were primarily destined to explain different aspects of policy outputs, we distinguish between static and dynamic versions of our dependent variables. The former tackles the matter of prioritization of issues, by looking at the proportion of attention devoted to an issue relative to all issues dealt with on a given agenda. The latter accounts for shifts in issue attention by subtracting proportional attention for a certain issue in year $t-1$ from proportional attention for this issue in year t , thereby identifying changes of emphasis. We thus perform separate analyses to test the two models and see whether the factors of interest hold even when “competing” factors from the alternative model enter the equations.

⁶ These 42 issues cover 85% of all legislation in the 1991-2000 period, 49% of the budget, 63% of the government agreements, 50% of the party programmes, 69% of the demonstrations, 66% of the interpellations, 64% of the oral questions and 39% of the TV coverage.

ANALYSES AND FINDINGS

Static analyses

To what extent are the budgetary and legislative priorities associated with party and coalition pledges, as hypothesized by Klingemann et al. (1994), and are external pressures linked at all to this static aspect of policy? The correlation matrix in the table below, in particular the shaded area in the table, presents results for the static analysis.

Table 1: Correlation (Pearson) and significance of yearly proportional issue attention level (137 issue categories) on eight agendas in Belgium 1991-2000 (822<N<959)

	Bdgt.	Leg.	Gv.ag	Manif.	Interp.	Orq.	Demo	Media
Policy process	Budget	1	.114**	.117**	.075*	.090*	.064	.024
	Legislation	.131**	1	.508**	.382**	.482**	.469**	.149**
Party Model	Government agreement	.114**	.508**	1	.605**	.675**	.641**	.207**
	Party manifestos	.117**	.382**	.605**	1	.513**	.519**	.318**
External pressure model	Interpellations	.075*	.482**	.675**	.513**	1	.818**	.272**
	Oral questions	.090*	.469**	.641**	.519**	.818**	1	.248**
	Demonstrations	.064	.155**	.207**	.318**	.272**	.248**	1
	Media (TV)	.024	.149**	.184**	.105**	.329**	.350**	.291**

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed); * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).

The first thing that strikes the eye is the low correlation of the budget series with any other agenda, while legislative outputs are correlated with most other agendas' priorities. Budgetary incrementalism (Wildawsky 1964) seems to make the annual budget an agenda of its own, with hardly any relation with other agendas. Elsewhere, the seemingly decoupled make-up of Belgian budgets was elaborated in more detail (Dandoy and Varone 2005). Here, we find nevertheless weak but significant correlations of budgets with both party agendas, being government agreements and party manifestos. This is a result that does not corroborate Klingemann et al. (1994) findings. With external pressure agendas – interpellations, oral questions, demonstrations and TV – budget correlations are more modest or inexistent.

Second, *party model* indicators, especially the government agreements, are very closely associated with legislation. When parties agree on a governmental programme, chances are high that they will pass laws dealing with the same topics in the years that follow. Party manifestos too seem to be good predictors of legislative production. Remarkably, we ran correlations with different categories of party manifestoes – all parties, government parties and opposition parties separately – and found that correlations are highest with aggregated party agendas. This suggests that parties, once in power, not only carry out their own promises but the promises of the opposition parties as well. In the words of Klingemann et. al. (1994), this is evidence of an agenda model rather than a mandate model.⁷

⁷ Notice that the government agreement can be considered as a refined indicator for testing the "mandate model" as government parties accept to carry out this program during the term.

Third, also the *external pressure* indicators have a great deal of similarities with the legislative agenda. Interpellations and oral questions, mutually very strongly related, both display strong associations with the legislative output. The issues covered on TV and staged in protest events on the streets do resemble the legislative issue attention to a much lesser extent (about three times less). Although the most “pure” external pressure indicators are hardly more associated to legislative priorities than party indicators were linked to budgets, one may say that taken together, the external pressure model indicators appear to matter for static legislative outputs, at least bivariately.

All the statements above apply when we carry out the same correlational analyses on the ‘42-important-issues’ dataset (correlation coefficients are only slightly lower).

Correlation, however, is not causation. To rule out spurious relationships and gauge causal effects we estimated a simple OLS regression with legislation as a dependent variable and incorporating both party model and external pressure model series. Results can be found in the table below.

Table 2: OLS regression of yearly proportional issue attention *level* on the legislative agenda (137 issue categories) party model and external pressure model agendas in Belgium 1991-2000⁸

		Standardized Beta	Std. Error	Significance
(Constant)			.001	.024
Party model	Government agreement	.272	.050	.000
	Party manifestos	.058	.071	.134
External pressure model	Interpellations	.148	.073	.007
	Oral questions	.160	.075	.003
	Demonstrations	.005	.021	.878
	Media (TV)	-.016	.037	.624
		N=822	Adj R ² .303	

Three predictors of legislative attention pass the multivariate test: one of the party model, government agreements, and two of the external pressure model, interpellations and oral questions. Yet, as shown by its higher standardized Beta coefficient, the government agreement stands out as the best predictor of overall legislation output. Replicating the same regression on the 42-issues dataset confirms this picture: the government agreement becomes an even better predictor whilst no other variable pass the significance threshold.

⁸ Doing OLS on stacked our pooled data risks to violate the assumptions of OLS as the residuals might be correlated (autocorrelation). This means that observations are not independent from one another (e.g. if attention for one issue goes up, attention for at least one the other issues has to come down). The fact, however, that we work with a very detailed and long list of issue codes containing 137 individual descriptors limits the autocorrelation problem considerably. The Durbin-Watson statistic grasps autocorrelation and its value has to be between 1 and 2 to be on the safe side. For the regression reported in table 2 the DW-value is 1.006 and we just pass the test. For the regressions reported in table 4 DW-values are respectively 1.794 and 1.426 which is good. So, autocorrelation tests show that we can do OLS on our pooled data. Because we have a much larger N (137) than T (6), alternative estimating strategies like panel corrected standard error models or fixed effect models were unsuitable.

Regarding the static analysis focussing on policy priorities, the conclusion is that, as expected, the party model is a better match than the external pressure model. In particular the government agreement is a powerful predictor of law-making. The overall political party discourse (the “agenda model”) does not seem to have an independent effect on the legislative attention level; the party democracy model works via the government agreement. These findings for 1991-2000 contradict Klingemann et. al.’s findings about for the 1945-1989 period as they found that party democracy was *not* functioning well in Belgium (based on budgetary data). Our findings also confirm the central role of government agreements in policymaking in Belgium. The external pressure model is not completely refuted, at least for the parliamentary activity indicators, but the party model explains policy priorities better.

Dynamic analyses

The external pressure model focuses on changes in political attention, predicting that these come in large bursts. So we expect this second approach to perform better with *dynamic* measures (policy change) instead of statics (policy priorities). To what extent are changes in budgetary and legislative outputs associated with bursts of issue attention in external agendas and do parties play any role in policy change? First, it must be noted that working with *differences* instead of proportions reduces the number of cases considerably. As we do not have data for the party manifestos and government agreement preceding 1991, we cannot compute differences of issue attention in our party model independent variables for the whole 1991-1995 legislature. As we also eliminated 1995 and 1999 in the previous analyses because it was unclear to which party program and government agreement legislation passed in those years should be attributed, we only keep the differences 1997-1996 and 1998-1997. These are the only non elections years for which we dispose of data for all our variables. Moreover, as the differences between party and government issue attention are fixed for these two years (as they both refer to the difference between manifestos drafted in 1991 and 1995 and the government agreements of Dehaene I and Dehaene II respectively), we run the analyses for each of these years separately. This permits us to test the party model in the same conditions as the external pressure model and to include them both in a single regression analysis.

Table 3: Correlation (Pearson) and significance of yearly proportional *change* in issue attention (137 issue categories) on eight agendas in Belgium 1997-1996, and 1998-1997 (N=137)

		Bdgt. 1996-1997	Bdgt. 1997-1998	Leg. 1996-1997	Leg. 1997-1998
Policy process	Budget	1	1	.030	-.169*
	Legislation	.030	-.169*	1	1
Party Model	Government agreement	.051	.069	.144*	-.110
	Party manifestos	-.071	.084	.168*	-.186*
External pressure model	Interpellations	-.119	-.265**	.187*	.227**
	Oral questions	-.108	-.117	.165*	.048
	Demonstrations	-.008	-.039	-.288**	.230**
	Media (TV)	.093	.036	.177*	.060

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed). * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).

Correlation coefficients for policy changes, and thus for agenda dynamics, are much smaller than the previous correlations regarding static proportional attention. *Changes* in policy output seem to be more erratic and more disjointed from other agendas, be it party model or external pressure agendas, than mere policy priorities. Most correlations between external pressure indicators and the party indicators (not shown in table) are weak: this substantiates that the party model and the external pressure model are separate and diverging models when it comes to changes in issue emphasis. This was expected since external pressure indicators are more reactive than party indicators whose issue emphases only change every four years.

Again, the budget seems to be completely out of reach of parties and external pressure alike. Budget change is not even related to legislative production change. While more laws regarding a certain issue were passed in 1998 than in 1997, the budget for this issue even decreased.

Legislation is another story. Changes in legislative production are consistently significantly related to one external pressure model indicator: interpellations. Changes in oral questions and TV news coverage are positively correlated with policy change, but only significantly for one year. Change in the number of demonstrations from one year to another is significantly correlated with policy changes, but the coefficient is negative for the 1997-1996 difference and positive for 1998-1997. Opposite results, although less significant, show for both party model indicators: changes in issue emphases between 1991 and 1995 manifestos and between 1992 and 1995 coalition agreements are positively associated with legislative output changes from 1996 to 1997 but the relation is negative for the year after. Although correlations remain modest, and only one variable displays consistent correlations, the correlational analysis suggests that legislative output change is connected with what happens in the outside world. The evidence regarding both agendas grasping the party model can be interpreted in two different ways: either it can be seen as less convincing than the external pressure model, as we only record positive associations with policy change for one year; alternatively, it suggests that when it comes to changes in issue attention, parties and governments do not try to implement these changes throughout the term but rather put more effort carrying out their promises during the first part of the governmental term.

Replicating all analyses drawing on the 42-important-issues dataset leaves only one significant relation between changes in issue attention: changes in party manifestos are correlated with legislative changes between 1996 and 1997 (.307*).

Do these mixed findings hold in a multivariate analysis?

Table 4: OLS regression of yearly proportional issue attention *change* on the legislative agenda (137 issue categories) and party model and external pressure model agendas in Belgium 1997-1996, and 1998-1997.

	Std Beta 1996- 1997	Std. Error 1996- 1997	Sig. 1996- 1997.	Std Beta 1997- 1998	Std. Error 1997- 1998	Sig. 1997- 1998
(Constant)		.001	.933		.001	.856
Party model Government agreement	.058	.118	.498	-.074	.081	.415
Party manifestos	.128	.201	.124	-.157	.136	.067
External pressure model <i>Interpellations</i>	.166	.182	.041	.162	.162	.060
<i>Oral questions</i>	.163	.191	.046	.088	.147	.318
Demonstrations	-.220	.034	.011	.209.	.043	.024
Media (TV)	.099	.216	.252	-.063	.192	.489
	N=137	Adj R ² .131		N=137	Adj R ² .082	

The regression confirms and even reinforces the correlational findings. It substantiates that legislative attention changes are disjointed and hard to predict: the explained variance of the models is small. It also shows that the party model series are in no way a useful predictor of legislative attention increases or decreases. But this result applies to most external pressure model variables as well. Few display positive relations at conventional levels of significance. For changes between 1996 and 1997, interpellations and oral questions pass an acceptable significance threshold for a N of 137 cases; it is also the case for changes between 1997 and 1998 for interpellations and for demonstrations. However, demonstrations are *negatively* linked with legislative output changes between 1996 and 1997. This makes sense since in 1996 a record size protest wave hit the country and hundred thousands people demonstrated calling for fundamental judiciary and police changes following the outburst of the Dutroux affair (Walgrave and Rihoux 1997; Maesschalk 2002). Yet, the legislative reaction to the case was delayed due to internal disputes in government and parliament (Walgrave and Varone 2005). By the time parliament and government had finally settled on the matter and passed a whole series of important laws, the mobilization had completely dwindled. So, when legislation went up in 1997, demonstrations were going down which explains the negative coefficient. If we eliminate the issue of reform of police and judiciary from the analysis the demonstrations parameter loses significance. In terms of media coverage, both separate analyses displayed in the table do not yield significant effects. However, if we aggregate both years (results not displayed in the table) we do find significant and positive media effects, although they remain modest. Restricting the analysis to the 42 most important issues, which reduces the N to only 42 cases, does not provide any significant results.

In sum, evidence relating to policy attention dynamics (changes) partially and modestly underpins the external pressure model. The parliamentary reaction to external pressure seems to generate policy change. The same applies, but more modestly, to TV news coverage. The party model indicators, in contrast, perform very poorly when it comes to explaining policy change. Notice that in any case we do *not* claim that media coverage, demonstrations, interpellations, and oral questions are the ultimate causal factors driving policy change. We do not argue that parliament simply legislates *because* there have been interpellations in parliament or *because* there has

been media attention for an issue, for instance. Rather, we consider all these external pressure agendas as *indicators* of external pressure. Focussing events, for example, put pressure on the system and inject new issues and often also new issue attributes and dimensions into the policy process. Interpellations, oral questions, demonstrations and media coverage tend to react quickly to these external events and merely translate them into internal demands. We do not claim, hence, that without interpellations there would have been no change in the amount of legislative production.

Finally, we are not sure about the direction of causality in the interpretation of results concerning our external pressure variables. Legislative change may lead to media coverage, demonstrations, and to interpellations/oral questions in parliament and not vice versa. Testing this plausible counter-argument is almost impossible, as we do not know how long it averagely takes for government to react legislatively to external pressure; nor do we know when, conversely, interpellations and TV coverage might react on passed legislation or, and this makes it even more difficult, on legislation that is *about* to be passed. That is why we did not use lagged evidence and simply correlated and regressed synchronic yearly evidence. Legislative initiatives, in fact, take more time than interpellations and oral questions to mature and to translate into passed laws. In Belgium, interpellations and oral questions, in contrast, react immediately to media coverage; it is only a matter of days (Walgrave, Nuytemans et al. 2005). Experiments with yearly lags showed that there were no associations, or only negative associations, between rise or decrease in legislative issue attention in year t and any of the party model or external pressure model series in year $t-1$. This suggests that the legislative maturing process normally takes less than a year and that law-passing happens within the same year. But this does not solve the causality puzzle empirically. We can, however, rely on other evidence. Analyses of Belgian MPs' behavior have shown that, in general, Belgian (opposition) MPs make use of interpellations and oral questions to attempt to influence the governmental agenda and *not* to react on legislative initiatives from government. If MPs want to tackle government on legislative projects, they will do so during the debate on the law and not via interpellations and oral questions (De Winter 1992). If this is true, the associations between interpellations (the only variable displaying consistent relations with policy change) and legislative output changes would indeed point towards a causal arrow going from external pressure to legislative output and not the other way around.

CONCLUSION AND AVENUES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

We evaluated and confronted two approaches of the policy process: a model stressing an orderly and predictable policy process induced by political parties with an electoral mandate; and a model emphasizing disjointed processes of sudden policy change due to unpredictable external pressure. Our empirical findings for Belgium spanning a 10-year time period corroborate *both* models which were respectively aimed at and succeeded in accounting for policy priorities and policy changes. The budget seems to be immune for impact from any other political agenda. The legislative output of the Belgian political system, on the other hand, can be partly explained by the party model and the external pressure models.

Klingemann et al.'s party democracy model is underpinned when it comes to explaining legislative *priorities*. When party manifestos and, especially, when the government agreement, stress certain issues, chances are high that these issues will be emphasized in legislation during the following year(s). External pressure is a much poorer explanans of the level of legislative attention. For legislative output *change*, the story is quite different. Change is more difficult to explain, as expected by Baumgartner and Jones, and even though the evidence is scant the external pressure model seems to work best. External events, changing policy images, the opening of new venues etc. can bring about change in the midst of a legislature unanticipated by parties' programs. We found consistent traces of such external pressure via interpellations. Also the media seem to be an indicator able to grasp and exert external pressure. In sum, parties make pledges and translate those pledges into policy priorities but intermittent challenges destabilize their fixed plans and lead to unpredicted policy changes.

A crucial question, naturally, is to what extent parties – key players in most post-industrial democracies – change preferences under external pressure *during* a legislature. In other words: is there a way in which we could better integrate the party model and the external pressure model? Parties do not decide upon their preferences only once every four year when they draft their program but continuously adapt to changing circumstances and adjust their beliefs. Parties and external pressure, hence, are in reality not separate worlds but closely intertwined. Parties react to external pressure, events and new ideas, pick these up and inject them into the policy process. Interpellations, for example, are a way in which external stimuli and demands are fed into the political system with political parties or their MPs as vehicle and leading, eventually, to policy change.

To grasp this, we absolutely need better evidence gauging parties' preferences more frequently and more densely than their four yearly programmatic policy pledges. A more adequate measurement of parties' preferences is a vital methodological precondition for integrating the party and external pressure models. An obvious first candidate for grasping parties' evolving preferences is drawing precisely upon their interpellations and oral questions or a functional parliamentary equivalent. Yet, we claimed above that interpellations and questions, at least in Belgium, are primarily an indicator of external pressure and not of party preferences. They are foremost reactive devices aimed at teasing and destabilizing government. Interpellations and questions do not reflect systematically or directly what parties think to be important and what not. Whatever will bring government into trouble will be used, even if it is a minor issue. Interpellations and oral questions, hence, are, at best, situated between parties and external pressures and cannot be considered as truthfully reflecting the parties' agendas. Moreover, these parliamentary activities are predominantly practised by opposition parties and much less by MPs from incumbent parties what makes them unsuitable to compare preferences across parties. An alternative measure of parties' changeable preferences is relying on media accounts in which parties are mentioned as defending a certain point of view or raising a certain issue. There are examples of studies adopting this strategy (see for example: Kleinnijenhuis and Rietberg 1995). Again, the problem is that external pressure, in this case: the media's coverage of a certain issue and parties' preferences regarding these issues, are confounded. For

example, parties only react because they are asked by the media to react or because they are given a forum. A third strategy is to complement the four yearly manifestos with more frequent conference decisions or programmatic renewal texts. These indicators, however, are partial since they do only cover a small range of issues and they might be as slow-reacting as the four-yearly electoral texts. Probably the best solution to our measurement problem is to collect and code all press briefings and communiqués parties issue on a regular basis. In Belgium, for example, all party executives meet every week (on Mondays) and all issue a press release afterwards. For the short six-week campaign period several studies have used this press release measurement with satisfying results (Brandenburg 2000; Brandenburg 2004).

Another topic which deserves further attention is the potentially different agenda dynamics of different issues. Some issues might be more conducive to party mechanisms while other issues might be more affected by external pressure. We could not address this topic here since we pooled our data and did not estimate different models for different types of issues. Yet, there is some evidence that some issues much more than others tend to be fed into the political system by the media, and thus by external pressure. Several studies found that environmental issues or crime issues, for example, are picked up early by the media and catapulted onto the political and the party agenda rather than the opposite (Soroka 2002; Walgrave and Van Aelst 2006).

Finally, we need evidence from other countries to put our Belgian findings in perspective. First of all, Belgium is typically governed by large coalition governments comprising at least four and often even more parties. Parties negotiate lengthily over a detailed government agreement. That agreement, then, becomes a sort of bible that keeps government together, a holy document that must be carried through or else government stumbles. Consequently the manoeuvring space of government parties in Belgium is very limited and it becomes extremely difficult to react flexibly on external events during the government's term. In polities with one-party governments, for example, external pressure might be more effective in bringing about policy change as parties do not have to behave as tight-rope walkers. The same applies to systems with minority governments in which the government party can negotiate from case to case with different partners building shifting majorities. The Belgian results cannot simply be generalized because of a second reason related to its political system. Belgium probably is one of the strongest partitocracies in the world. Parties dominate policy and the state more than in almost any other democracy. This is not conducive to finding any external pressure effects either. Yet, the fact that we *do* find some external pressure effects even in a country as Belgium, with strong parties and paralysed governments, increases confidence that we would probably find external pressure effects elsewhere too.

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