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Will Jennings, Shaun Bevan, Arco Timmermans, Gerard Breeman, Sylvain Brouard, Laura Chaqués-Bonafont, Christoffer Green-Pedersen, Peter John, Peter B. Mortensen and Anna M. Palau

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# Effects of the Core Functions of Government on the Diversity of Executive Agendas

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## Abstract

The distribution of attention across issues is of fundamental importance to the political agenda and outputs of government. This article presents an issue-based theory of the diversity of governing agendas where the core functions of government—defense, international affairs, the economy, government operations, and the rule of law—are prioritized ahead of all other issues. It undertakes comparative analysis of issue diversity of the executive agenda of several European countries and the United States over the post-war period. The results offer strong evidence of the limiting effect of core issues—the economy, government operations, defense, and international

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affairs—on agenda diversity. This suggests not only that some issues receive more attention than others but also that some issues are attended to only at times when the agenda is more diverse. When core functions of government are high on the agenda, executives pursue a less diverse agenda—focusing the majority of their attention on fewer issues. Some issues are more equal than others in executive agenda setting.

### **Keywords**

comparative public policy, agenda setting, executive speeches, policy dynamics

At any moment in time, policy makers in political systems of all shapes and sizes are confronted with an abundance of information about the state of the world (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005; Simon, 1971). Such information relates to matters ranging from domestic policy to international affairs—on topics such as the economy, education, immigration, public services, defense, crime, and climate change. This never-ending flow of information requires processing, prioritization, and action as policy makers attempt to incorporate information into their decisions. From time to time, certain issues have far-reaching effects for the structure of attention across the entire political agenda. For example, the events of 9/11 led to a rapid elevation of the issue of national security in the United States at the expense of other policy concerns, such as the environment and civil liberties. Likewise, the events of the Credit Crunch shifted the focus of the agenda away from issues such as health care and the environment in European countries.

The distribution of attention across issues is of fundamental importance to the political agenda and outputs of government. How do policy makers distribute their finite attention across or within issues? Every policy choice has potential consequences for diversity of the agenda as a whole. This is because attention to particular issues may squeeze out attention to other issues or precipitate changes to policies in related domains. The diversity of the political agenda not only relates to the set of issues government attends to but also affects representation of other actors, such as organized interests and the public, in the governmental process. A diverse agenda implies more opportunities for the representation of interests. Furthermore, agenda diversity affects the carrying capacity of the political environment for attending to multiple issues and interests—as a diverse environment increases political competition (Schattschneider, 1960; Truman, 1951). Studies of public policy generally consider individual issues or domains independent from each other

(e.g., Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Downs, 1972; Kingdon, 1984), even though trade-offs and conditions are known to be required for policy change (e.g., True, Jones, & Baumgartner, 2007). Yet in practice policy decisions are bounded (Simon, 1957), resources are limited (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005), and decisions are interdependent of one another (True et al., 2007). The diversity of the agenda describes how attention is distributed across issues and is therefore a measure of variation in the agenda. Some issues gain access to the agenda, whereas others do not. All attention to issues is information based, but certain information can be privileged above other information. The diversity of the agenda may be more sensitive to attention to some issues compared to others. This raises questions about the relationship between agenda diversity and attention to issues. Is this an asymmetric relationship where some issues are more equal than others? Some issues can dominate the agenda, whereas other issues gain access only when the main concerns of government are considered less urgent.

The operation of government involves real-time processing of information about the state of the world. Governing agendas matter because they are an indicator of priorities that are not confined to election time or to an institutional calendar. Executive agendas involve both planning of public policies and reaction to events. This is a common feature across all democratic systems. Comparative analyses of political attention are relevant to questions regarding the comparative design of political systems and responsiveness of institutions. There is a longstanding tradition of comparative scholarship concerning the effect of institutions on political processes and outcomes (Cox, 1997; Lijphart, 1994; Powell, 2000; Soroka & Wlezién, 2010; Strøm, 2000). Systematic comparative analysis of government agenda setting is disparate in comparison to that concerning issue competition by parties during election periods (e.g., Budge, Klingeman, Volkens, Bara, & Tanenbaum, 2001; Klingemann, Hofferbert, & Budge, 1994). Some recent studies explore dynamic properties of executive agendas within single countries (e.g., Breeman et al., 2009; Green-Pedersen, 2007; Jennings & John, 2009). Not much is known, however, about the diversity of government agendas, that is, the spread of attention across issues. Comparative analysis can be concerned with both the differences and similarities of the structure of political attention (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Brouard et al., 2009; Jones et al., 2009).

This article focuses on issue diversity and undertakes a comparative analysis of the executive agenda of several European countries and the United States over the postwar period. The organization of the article is as follows. First, it explains why the structure of issue diversity in political attention is important for understanding agenda-setting processes. Second, it presents an

issue-based theory of the diversity of governing agendas. This generates a hypothesis of the effect of specific issues on diversity, controlling for the autoregressive nature of agendas over time. To test this hypothesis, time-series cross-sectional analyses of issue diversity of the executive agenda in six countries are undertaken. These countries are the parliamentary systems of Denmark, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United Kingdom, the semipresidential system of France, and the presidential system of the United States.

## **Issue Diversity of Government Agendas**

The concept of agenda diversity (Jochen & De Vreese, 2003; McCombs & Jian-Hua, 1995) provides insight into the dispersion of attention of government to issues across the political agenda. This describes how government shares its attention between various issues competing for the finite space available on the agenda. A diverse agenda is one in which attention is shared between a broad range of issues, whereas a less diverse agenda is one in which attention is confined to only a few issues. However, diversity does not refer just to the total number of issues on the agenda but rather refers to the concentration of the agenda across issues. In other words, the amount of attention assigned to each issue affects diversity as well as the total number of issues on the agenda. Since the seminal work of Schattschneider (1960), politics has been understood as the mobilization of support or opposition to issues and the competition for attention to particular issues over others. The concept of agenda diversity therefore relates to how much attention is assigned to each issue but also to how much attention is assigned across all issues. A diverse agenda provides more opportunities for the representation of interests across a wider range of issues. It also increases political competition and activity, allowing for the engagement of multiple issues and interests in the governmental process.

## **The Structure of Issue Diversity in Political Attention**

The attention-driven model of policy choice developed by Jones (2001) argues it is attention, rather than resources, that is scarce for decision makers in this world of information abundance. Although governments and their bureaucratic apparatus are institutionally designed to attend to many issues simultaneously, they must prioritize the issues that are most urgent and important to them, and do so on the basis of a limited set of indicators. There are institutional and other costs associated with retrieval and processing of

information. Political systems provide mechanisms for parallel processing of hundreds of issues, such as bureaucracies, coalition negotiations, and legislative hearings (e.g., Jones, 1994; Müller & Strøm, 2008; Timmermans, 2006; True et al., 2007). Fewer issues are processed serially at the higher reaches of government by actors such as the president or prime minister, the legislature, and the supreme or high court. Policy makers have a finite amount of time and resources to consider available information, leading to bounded decision making (Simon, 1971). This is a feature of all political systems.

The distribution of policy-making resources across different jurisdictions is designed to enable the simultaneous handling of multiple issues, where the long-run stability of the agenda is maintained through the incremental adjustment of attention and policies. This equilibrium state undergoes sudden change when certain issues are elevated into the realm of macro-politics, whereas attention to other issues is downgraded. This generates an iterative process of updating where decision making follows an autoregressive process for extended periods of time but is subject to episodic corrections and overcorrections. Policy makers may overweight certain indicators at the expense of others, and from time to time information signals exceed the threshold of attention that is required to stimulate a response (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005). For comparative political analysis, the common structure of governing agendas is important for understanding similarities in government decision making across countries (e.g., Baumgartner et al., 2009; Jones et al., 2009). This differs from the study of partisan effects on policy programs (e.g., Budge et al., 2001; Budge & Hofferbert, 1990; Klingemann et al., 1994; McDonald & Budge, 2005) since although the content of governing agendas may change because of partisan preferences (mediated by electoral outcomes), its distribution is shaped by the overall spread of issues confronting government.

The attention-driven model of policy choice suggests that the day-to-day business of government exhibits an incremental model of issue dynamics, subject to occasional shocks.<sup>1</sup> Because attention is finite, agenda diversity should maintain a long-run equilibrium, regardless of the degree of low (incremental) or high (punctuated) change observed for individual topics. Although there might be short-run punctuations in attention, the overall diversity of the agenda remains stable as it absorbs sudden changes. Just as some issues are quickly elevated in importance, others are downgraded to the fringes of government attention. The institutional capacity of government for serial processing of information is limited, also constraining the diversity of the agenda. In addition, decision makers weight information according to its importance, generating a disproportionate pattern of attention. Together, finite institutional capacity and the weighting of information restrict the diversity of the agenda.

This literature on agenda setting and decision making suggests that the issue diversity of government attention is a function of its past structure subject to random errors, persisting in a long-run equilibrium. In this autoregressive process the structure of the policy agenda depends strongly on the agenda structure at earlier time points. It suggests that subsequent steps—choices to attend to new issues—are random in direction but tend back toward the long-run equilibrium of the political system. Although the diversity of governing agendas therefore might be subject to erratic patterns and fluctuations in the short run, these usually return to their long-run state. Despite punctuations in attention to specific topics, issue diversity tends to revert to its long-run equilibrium, but is this long-term agenda diversity influenced in different degree by variation in attention to specific issues?

### **The Effect of the Primary Functions of Government on Agenda Diversity (H<sub>1</sub>)**

When considering the agenda of national government, the key function of the state is an important explanation of diversity of attention. Kingdon's (1984) agenda-setting theory argues that a combination of policies, problems, and politics determines which issues receive the attention of government and which issues are unattended to. Other studies of agenda setting (e.g., Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; B. Cohen, 1963; Downs, 1972; McCombs & Shaw, 1972) also suggest that certain conditions must be in place for an issue to access the agenda. Such analyses tend to consider the characteristics associated with decision making on individual issues or domains independent from one another. Downs's (1972) influential work on the rise and fall of environmental issues on the agenda, for example, did not account for the broader competition between issues to explain the cyclical nature of the agenda. That is, even though decision making is bounded (Simon, 1957), resources are finite (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005) and decisions are interdependent (True et al., 2007). Furthermore, some issues are more critical to government than others. Such concerns can be traced to classic theories of the state such as Hobbes (1651), Locke (1689), and Rousseau (1762), where the state's core responsibilities are to defend its borders, manage its relations with foreign powers, provide for the general well-being of its people, and maintain the apparatus of government. Similar ideas are to be found in the work of Wilson (1889), where the constituent (or primary) functions of government were again consistent with the importance of preservation of the state, defense of the realm, promotion of the common good, maintenance of the rule of law, and management of relations with foreign powers. These ideas about core functions of

government continue to be relevant despite expansion of the modern welfare state, as government must still attend to these core issues. Public policy theories assume that the essential functions of government exist but do not affect decision making in other domains. Even ideas such as simultaneous policy streams (Kingdon, 1984) and parallel processing (True et al., 2007) do not test the interdependent structure of political attention. Across most political systems, government agendas tend to focus heavily on the economy, defense, and international affairs (e.g., J. E. Cohen, 1997; Edwards & Barrett, 2000). Such ideas have implications for the mobilization of bias (Schattschneider, 1960), determining which issues government attends to and which issues it ignores. Given the finite nature of attention, information processing is not equal across all issues. The relationship between information and government attention may well be asymmetric, where information signals on some issues are disproportionately weighted over others.

Drawing on the classic theories of state and the idea of issue intrusion (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005, chap. 3), it is possible to hypothesize that there are systematic effects on agenda diversity associated with changes in the level of attention to specific issues. Core concerns of the state such as defense and the economy should be associated both with a high level of government attention and with a less diverse agenda, leaving less space on the agenda for other issues. These other topics of political attention might be either conditional or peripheral, gaining access to a more diverse agenda when the essential concerns of state are less salient. These issues can be described as selective issues consistent with theories of selective emphasis from the study of political competition (Budge et al., 2001; Budge & Farlie, 1983). Government can decide whether or not to attend to selective issues, in contrast to those issues related to its core functions. Changes in attention to such issues are not expected to alter the overall structure of the agenda in the same way as the core functions of government. For example, punctuations in attention to a selective issue such as immigration might reflect change within a particular domain but not lead to a fundamental reorganization of attention, which remains largely focused on the core issues. In contrast, war or other such fundamental shocks are expected to lead government to restructure its attention, giving lower priority to or even dropping issues that it had dealt with selectively. This interpretation of agenda diversity integrates the importance of information processing in the attention-driven model with classic theories of the state, where the core functions of government—defense, international affairs, the economy, government operations, and the rule of law—are prioritized ahead of all other issues. Other information on selective issues is incorporated into decision making when executive concern with core issues wanes and there is more space on the



agenda for other matters. This has fundamental implications for understanding the nature of issue dynamics since it identifies the conditions under which certain issues are elevated to the realm of macro-politics and receive attention from government.

According to this model, effects of government attention to core issues on agenda diversity will be negative. As the executive agenda assigns more attention to the core functions of government, which already constitute a large share of the governing agenda, the agenda becomes less diverse. This generates the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 ( $H_1$ ): Increases in attention of government to core issues—the economy, international affairs, defense, government operations, and law and order—lead to a lower diversity of the agenda.

## **Executive Speeches in Six Countries**

The national government agendas considered in this article are the annual statements of policy priorities and commitments presented in executive speeches in a number of countries. In many political systems the head of state or head of government delivers an annual formal statement, on behalf of the executive, setting out its policy priorities for the year ahead. These speeches are forward-looking statements, communicating general priorities and specific measures that the executive intends to address in the following year. Although in some countries, such as the United States, this indicates a governing agenda that is independent of the legislature, it nevertheless expresses the policy intentions of the executive in the same way as speeches in parliamentary systems, such as in the Netherlands. This substantive function of executive speeches is reflected in their effect on policy outcomes (e.g., Bara, 2005). Such a convention is found in both presidential and parliamentary systems and performs the political function of highlighting matters of importance and detailing the legislative programme that government intends to enact in the forthcoming year. This analysis considers the issue diversity of such executive agendas in six countries. Four of these are parliamentary democracies: Denmark, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United Kingdom; one is a semipresidential system: France; and one is a presidential system: the United States. Of these, the United Kingdom and the United States are two-party systems, whereas Denmark, France, the Netherlands, and Spain are multiparty systems. Coalition governments are the norm in Denmark and the Netherlands, often with minority status in Denmark where governments depend on opposition cooperation in policy making. The design of comparative analysis is neither a most-similar nor a most-different

systems approach but considers a mixed bundle of cases for testing hypotheses about the sources of issue diversity of executive agendas.

In each of the countries, the annual speech provides a high-profile signal of the priorities of the executive to the legislature, governing and opposition parties, bureaucrats, interest groups, the media, and the public. This occurs at the beginning of the parliamentary session in Denmark, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom and around the start of the calendar year in France and the United States, whereas in Spain the timing of the speech is at the discretion of the government. The speech is made on behalf of the government by the prime minister in Denmark and Spain, the president in France and the United States, and the monarch in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. In each case it summarizes legislative and executive priorities for the forthcoming year (e.g., Breeman et al., 2009; J. E. Cohen, 1997; Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2005; Jennings & John, 2009). The speech sometimes contains ceremonial and symbolic statements about the government's achievements and major domestic or international events. Despite some cross-national variation in institutional format, the speech is almost invariably substantive and performs a comparable function of agenda setting and attention signaling for the executive in each political system. These executive speeches therefore constitute a common form of government agenda that is suitable for comparative analysis. Furthermore, such speeches represent a meaningful and reliable measure of executive attention across each of the six countries.

## Data and Analyses

This analysis uses a data set on annual executive speeches that consists of approximately 50,000 coded policy statements. The full text of the annual speech of the executive was collected for Denmark (1953-2006), the Netherlands (1945-2007), Spain (1982-2007), the United Kingdom (1945-2008), France (1958-2006), and the United States (1946-2005). The text of each speech was coded using policy statements as the unit of analysis.<sup>2</sup> The identification of these units of text is not susceptible to the sorts of measurement error observed in coding of other political texts (e.g., Benoit, Laver, & Mikheylov, 2009). Although there is variation in the length of executive speeches, their structure tends to be more consistent and subject to less variation than other texts such as party manifestos. Because executive speeches are prepared for oral presentation, their structure tends to be consistent across countries, despite differences in political institutions. These speeches contain natural breaks and limited use of devices such as lists or bullet points, which otherwise are problematic for the measurement of discrete policy statements. Studies of executive

**Table 1.** The Policy Agendas Project Major Topic Codes

- 
1. Macroeconomics
  2. Civil rights, minority issues, and civil liberties
  3. Health
  4. Agriculture
  5. Labor, employment, and immigration
  6. Education
  7. Environment
  8. Energy
  10. Transportation
  12. Law, crime, and family issues
  13. Social welfare
  14. Housing and urban development
  15. Banking, finance, and domestic commerce
  16. Defense
  17. Space, science, technology, and communications
  18. Foreign trade
  19. International affairs and foreign aid
  20. Government operations
  21. Public lands and water management
- 

speeches across extended periods of time also suggest there is considerable stability in content and form (Breeman et al., 2009; Jennings, Bevan, & John, 2011; Mortensen et al., 2011). The use of quasi-sentences as the unit of analysis therefore does not present a serious threat to inference in the context of executive speeches.<sup>3</sup>

The transcripts were then coded according to the policy content coding system of the Comparative Agendas Project, adapted from the original U.S. Policy Agendas Project (see Baumgartner, Jones, & MacLeod, 1998; [www.policyagendas.org](http://www.policyagendas.org)). This coding framework contains 19 major topics such as macroeconomics, health, and international affairs. These topic codes are reported in Table 1. The national versions of the codebook adhere to the full range of major topic codes, ensuring that the data sets are comparable across countries. This system for the coding of categorical data on policy content creates fewer measurement issues than the construction of continuous scales of left–right positions estimated based on an underlying set of categorical data (see Benoit et al., 2009). Furthermore, coding procedures are comparable across the six countries with coding accuracy checked through blind

coding and/or random sampling at regular intervals to check for errors. This generates data on both the frequency and proportion of executive statements for all countries in a given year on each of the major topics. Across the six countries, the reliability of manual coders was on average 80% in the identification of quasi-sentences and 85% in coding of the policy content at the major topic level.

### *Entropy as a Measure of Agenda Diversity*

To measure the diversity of attention of government to issues across the entire agenda, entropy scores are calculated for the content of executive speeches according to major topic codes. The measure of entropy used here, Shannon's (1948)  $H$ , is adapted from information theory to estimate the issue diversity of policy-making attention. Shannon's  $H$  is a probabilistic measure of the spread of objects or observations across a defined number of (discrete) nominal categories. This is represented as the logarithm of the sum of probabilities of the different possible states in a system. The agenda has a low degree of entropy if executive attention is concentrated on a single topic and a high degree of entropy if attention is widely dispersed over the agenda with all issues obtaining equal but limited coverage. Entropy therefore provides a measure of issue diversity of the political agenda. This measure of information diversity is represented in the form

$$H = (-1) \sum_{i=1}^n p(x_i) \ln(p(x_i)) \quad (1)$$

where entropy scores ( $H$ ) are estimated as the negative sum for all topics of the likelihood,  $p(x)$ , that an object  $x$  (in this instance a policy statement in the executive's speech) falls within a particular topic  $i$ , multiplied by the natural log of that likelihood. Since logs of zero cannot be calculated, it is assumed that  $0 \times \ln(0) = 0$  for topics where there were no policy statements in a given year.

To demonstrate how this measure of agenda diversity works, consider the examples presented in Table 2. Example 1 shows a hypothetical agenda with just one issue receiving 100% of the attention, where the lowest possible entropy score (0) is therefore calculated. Example 6 shows an agenda where each issue receives an equal share of attention ( $\approx 14.3\%$ ) and the highest possible entropy score for a seven issue agenda (1.95) is obtained. Examples 3 and 4 illustrate how a reversal in attention between Topic A and Topic B, with no other changes in attention to Topics C, D, E, F, and G, does not change the overall entropy of the agenda (1.44). It is therefore possible for there to be a

**Table 2.** An Illustration of Calculation of Agenda Entropy

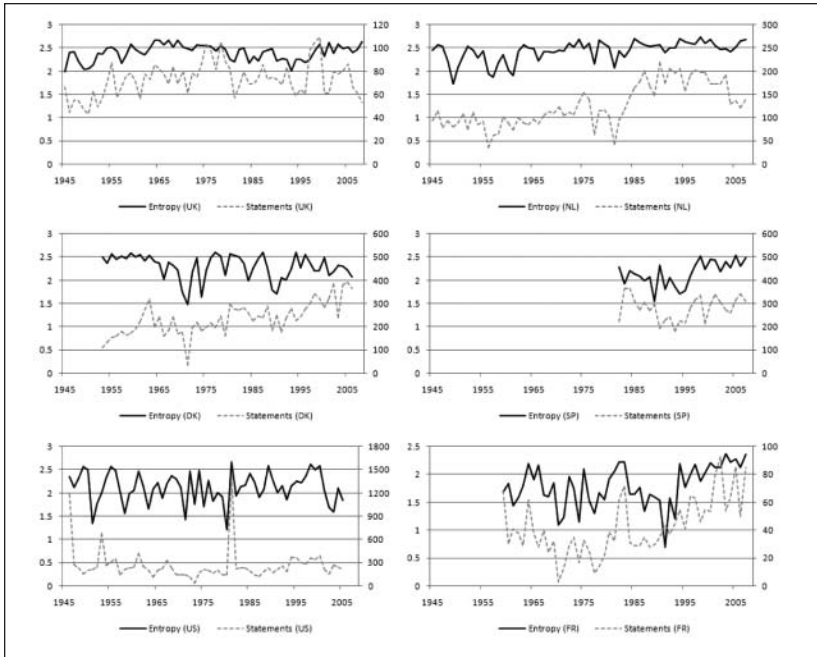
Example	Issue (%)							Total (%)	Entropy
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G		
1	100	0	0	0	0	0	0	100	0
2	75	25	0	0	0	0	0	100	0.56
3	50	25	5	5	5	5	5	100	1.44
4	25	50	5	5	5	5	5	100	1.44
5	25	25	10	10	10	10	10	100	1.84
6	14.3	14.3	14.3	14.3	14.3	14.3	14.3	100	1.95

shift in attention between issues without a corresponding change in agenda diversity. Example 2 shows, in contrast, that if Topic A instead takes attention from all minor issues, C, D, E, F, and G, there is a decrease in agenda diversity compared to Example 3. Example 5 shows that a transfer of 25% of attention from the issue with the highest share in Examples 3 and 4 across other issues results in a more diverse agenda (1.84).

### Summary Statistics

Prior to analysis of the diversity of executive agendas, summary statistics are reported for the total number of executive statements in the six countries. The mean number of statements is (in descending order) 280 in Spain, 268 in the United States, 235 in Denmark, 126 in the Netherlands, 72 in the United Kingdom, and just 42 in France.<sup>4</sup> This reveals a degree of cross-national variation in size of the executive agendas across the executive speeches.<sup>5</sup> The annual number of statements is plotted over time in Figure 1. This reveals some upward drift in executive agenda size in Denmark, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and France. This upward drift is not replicated in the U.S. State of the Union Address (though there are punctuations in 1946 and 1981) or in the prime minister's speech in Spain (which is a shorter time series in comparison to the others). This suggests that both the format and the agenda-setting function of the executive speech are quite stable over time both within and across the six countries.

The frequencies of mentions for each major topic are used as the independent variables in time-series cross-sectional analyses by topic to test our hypothesis,  $H_1$ . To consider differences in agenda diversity as the result of partisan control of government, the analyses include a variable to differentiate periods of left- and right-wing government. The effect of agenda size, measured by the



**Figure 1.** Policy content and issue diversity of executive speeches in Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States

annual number of statements, on issue diversity of executive speeches is controlled for in these tests.

The content of the executive speeches is used to calculate entropy, the measure of agenda diversity for this analysis and dependent variable for testing the hypotheses. The entropy scores for each of the executive agendas, calculated Country  $\times$  Year, are plotted against the annual number of statements in Figure 1. The maximum possible entropy score for the 19 major topic codes is equal to the natural log of 19 (i.e., 2.944). An entropy score of 0 indicates that attention is concentrated on a single topic, whereas a score of 2.944 indicates that attention is equally spread across all 19 major topics such that each issue receives approximately 5.26% of the attention. From visual inspection of Figure 1 it appears that agenda diversity is mean reverting over time within each of the countries, returning to its average level after short-term deviations.

The statistics reported in Table 3 indicate that there are differences in the mean level of agenda diversity by country. This appears to be lower in presidential systems than in parliamentary systems. The entropy score for the

**Table 3.** Entropy of Executive Speeches

	Political system	Start	End	n	Entropy			Number of policy statements		
					M	SD	Min	Max	M	SD
United Kingdom	Parliamentary	1945	2008	64	2.401	0.167	1.997	2.659	72.672	14.878
Netherlands	Parliamentary	1945	2007	63	2.438	0.219	1.733	2.734	126.191	45.658
Denmark	Parliamentary	1953	2006	54	2.294	0.264	1.484	2.607	235.370	71.740
Spain	Parliamentary	1982	2007	26	2.154	0.266	1.538	2.538	280	51.584
United States	Presidential	1946	2005	60	2.116	0.331	1.208	2.670	268.167	216.326
France	Semipresidential	1958	2006	49	1.797	0.374	0.695	2.375	42.224	20.528

executive speech in semipresidential France (1.797) is considerably less than for the four parliamentary democracies in Denmark (2.313), the Netherlands (2.456), Spain (2.166), and the United Kingdom (2.391), whereas the score for the presidential system in the United States (2.116) is a fraction lower than the other countries. Although this difference could result from institutional features such as the constitutional format and political function of each of the executive speeches, general inferences from this finding should be treated with caution.

The agenda diversity of each of the executive speeches is mean reverting over time, returning to the long-term equilibrium of the distribution of attention to issues (see Figure 1). This measure of agenda diversity is the dependent variable in the following analyses which use tests for unit root and time-series cross-sectional models. It is because of this common structure of governing agendas, explained below, that differences between countries can be modeled with fixed effects in a time-series cross-sectional format, which measure differences in the average level of diversity between countries.

### *Cross-National Stability in the Structure of Political Attention*

To conduct analysis of similarities in the structure of governing agendas across these six countries, it is first necessary to establish that they exhibit the same underlying processes. For such a comparative design to be valid, differences of agenda diversity between countries must be confined to the mean level of diversity—reflecting institutional variation—with similar degrees of change and stability in the structure of political attention. This is consistent with theoretical expectations concerning the finite nature of governing agendas and the systematic importance of the core issues of government. As noted, for institutional and other reasons, the executive agendas analyzed here show limited variation in length and format within and between the six countries. Furthermore, the cross-national replication of the data collection process ensures that the same issues are measured in each case. The following analysis investigates the autoregressive character of agenda diversity, that is, the degree to which issue diversity is stable over time. This analysis is conducted to confirm that the level of issue diversity exhibits similar persistence across countries.

When plotted over time, entropy provides an indication of the persistence in diversity of executive attention across all topics on the agenda in each of the six countries (see Figure 1). No general pattern of change in agenda diversity is observable from cross-national comparison. In the parliamentary systems of Denmark, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United Kingdom, the levels of



entropy fluctuate less than in France and the United States. The Netherlands, France, and Spain also show some upward drift in agenda diversity.

To determine the time-series characteristics of the agenda diversity series and to justify the pooling of these data, Augmented Dickey–Fuller tests for unit root in the levels and first differences are reported in Table 4. These results reject the presence of a unit root in agenda diversity for each country. Exogenous shocks to diversity of the executive agenda do not appear to persist over time in any of the six countries. This suggests that agenda diversity of executive speeches is an autoregressive, stationary process that returns to its long-run equilibrium for each of the individual countries. These results confirm that the time-series characteristics of agenda diversity are comparable across countries, with the only notable difference being in the mean value of agenda diversity by country. The underlying dynamic of agenda diversity is the same in each of the six countries, with the only substantive difference being in the intercept (i.e., the mean level of issue diversity). This finding confirms the common structure of agenda diversity, which is important for comparative enquiry and is consistent with the decision to pool the cross-national data.

The autoregressive character of agenda diversity can be further tested through estimation of a time-series cross-sectional autoregressive distributed lag (ADL) model of agenda entropy. The cross-sectional data are organized in the form country ( $i$ )  $\times$  year ( $t$ ), with this model represented in the form

$$Y_{it} = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 Y_{it-1} + \varepsilon_{it}$$

where diversity ( $Y_{it}$ ) is a function of a constant term ( $\alpha_0$ ), plus some fraction ( $\alpha_1$ ) of past values of itself ( $Y_{it-1}$ ) and a random shock ( $\varepsilon_{it}$ ), including country fixed effects to account for differences in the mean level of agenda entropy (taking the Netherlands, which has the highest mean in Table 3 as the base).<sup>6</sup>

This time-series cross-sectional framework enables analysis of the general autoregressive character of agenda diversity (estimated using panel-corrected standard errors). This model specification assumes that agenda diversity exhibits persistence regardless of the characteristics of the political system, with institutional variations in the form of executive speeches reflected in the mean level of issue diversity. Other model specifications were used to test for sources of cross-national differences other than fixed effects, controlling for institutional variation across in the six cases because of presidential systems, election years, and minority or coalition government. The inclusion of these controls to measure any differences in diversity associated with institutional variation or the electoral cycle did not alter the substantive inferences drawn

**Table 4.** Unit Root Tests for the Entropy of Executive Speeches

	United Kingdom	Netherlands	Denmark	Spain	United States	France
Augmented Dickey–Fuller test statistic (levels)						
Random walk	-4.524***	-4.228***	-4.531***	-3.090**	-7.196***	-4.256***
Trend	-4.476***	-5.463***	-4.640***	-4.351**	-7.134***	-4.727***
Augmented Dickey–Fuller test statistic (first difference)						
Random walk	-10.500***	-9.608***	-8.762***	-10.524***	-12.687***	-11.538***
Trend	-10.384***	-9.552***	-8.673***	-10.353***	-12.572***	-11.451***
<i>n</i>	64	63	54	26	60	49
Start	1945	1945	1953	1982	1946	1958
End	2008	2007	2006	2007	2005	2006

\*\*\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01.

from the models. Although there are differences in the level of agenda diversity according to context, the structure of governing agendas is consistent across cases.<sup>7</sup>

There is evidence of persistence in agenda diversity in the results for the time-series cross-sectional analyses presented in Table 5. The coefficients reported in the first column (“AR”) indicate that agenda diversity is an autoregressive process of 0.3,<sup>8</sup> indicating that past values are predictive of its future values and that diversity is a partial function of past values subject to random errors, with finite variance between the lower and upper bounds of the entropy measure. This means that 30% of the diversity of the executive agenda in the current year is carried forward into the next year. These findings are consistent with the incremental evolution of agenda diversity over time reverting to the long-run equilibrium (i.e., mean) of entropy of the executive agenda. However, a coefficient of 0.3 for an autoregressive process is lower than might be expected. The autoregressive component of agenda diversity is not the only determinant of its future values.

### *The Effect of the Core Functions of Government on Agenda Diversity*

To test  $H_1$ —that increases in attention to the core issues of the economy, international affairs, defense, government operations, and law and order leads to a lower diversity of the executive agenda—the basic ADL model considered earlier is used. This is now represented in the form

$$Y_{it} = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 Y_{it-1} + \beta_1 X_{it} + \beta_2 C_{it} + \beta_3 D_{it} + \varepsilon_{it}$$

where diversity ( $Y_{it}$ ) is a function of a constant term ( $\alpha_0$ ), plus some fraction ( $\alpha_1$ ) of past values of itself ( $Y_{it-1}$ ), the level of attention to an issue ( $X_{it}$ ), the number of executive statements per year ( $C_{it}$ ), a variable to test for the effect of partisan control of government ( $D_{it}$ ), and a random shock ( $\varepsilon_{it}$ ). The partisan control variable is equal to 1 when a left-wing party controls government, is equal to 0 when a right-wing party controls government, and is equal to .5 in those few cases where there is a left-right coalition in government.<sup>9</sup> In this model specification, the effect of core issues on agenda diversity is expected to be negative ( $\beta_1 < 0$ ), indicating a decrease in the level of diversity.

The results presented in Table 5 first of all indicate that, across all issues, there is no systematic evidence of a significant effect of partisan control of government on issue diversity. There are two minor exceptions to this. For the topic relating to space, science, technology, and communications (17), the

**Table 5.** Time-Series Cross-Sectional Autoregressive Distributed Lag Model of Agenda Entropy, Issue Intrusion, and Agenda Capacity With Country Fixed Effects (omitted from this table)

	AR	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	10
L. entropy	0.348*** (0.055)	0.331*** (0.056)	0.329*** (0.054)	0.333*** (0.053)	0.341*** (0.054)	0.341*** (0.055)	0.304*** (0.052)	0.335*** (0.053)	0.348*** (0.055)	0.300*** (0.052)
Issue		-0.573*** (0.184)	1.692*** (0.514)	1.757*** (0.428)	2.156*** (0.428)	2.156*** (0.428)	1.615*** (0.348)	1.399*** (0.543)	-0.131 (0.390)	3.529*** (0.559)
Left		0.019 (0.025)	0.011 (0.025)	0.005 (0.026)	0.015 (0.024)	0.017 (0.025)	0.022 (0.025)	0.023 (0.024)	0.019 (0.025)	-0.005 (0.025)
Statements		0.001*** (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)
Constant	1.459*** (0.135)	1.618*** (0.149)	1.477*** (0.133)	1.468*** (0.13)	1.416*** (0.134)	1.459*** (0.135)	1.488*** (0.127)	1.462*** (0.130)	1.461*** (0.135)	1.477*** (0.131)
R <sup>2</sup>	.517	.535	.544	.538	.539	.518	.552	.530	.517	.552
	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
L. entropy	0.329*** (0.054)	0.326*** (0.056)	0.339*** (0.052)	0.347*** (0.053)	0.332*** (0.054)	0.296*** (0.050)	0.335*** (0.055)	0.234*** (0.046)	0.346*** (0.055)	0.344*** (0.055)
Issue	0.527 <sup>†</sup> (0.280)	1.124*** (0.366)	2.682*** (0.461)	2.962*** (0.494)	-0.514* (0.211)	3.949*** (0.676)	0.322 (0.445)	-1.044*** (0.119)	-0.495 (0.208)	1.225*** (0.439)
Left	0.020 (0.025)	0.015 (0.026)	-0.007 (0.024)	0.020 (0.024)	0.020 (0.026)	0.054* (0.024)	0.020 (0.025)	0.040 <sup>†</sup> (0.020)	0.015 (0.025)	0.025 (0.026)
Statements	0.001*** (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)	0.001*** (0.000)
Constant	1.488*** (0.132)	1.449*** (0.136)	1.369*** (0.133)	1.373*** (0.131)	1.524*** (0.136)	1.515*** (0.122)	1.443*** (0.136)	1.93*** (0.122)	1.502*** (0.136)	1.447*** (0.135)
R <sup>2</sup>	.522	.533	.551	.546	.524	.562	.518	.602	.528	.525

N = 310. AR = autoregressive. The Netherlands was selected as the base so the constant provides an estimation of the mean level of entropy. Panel-corrected standard errors for all time-series cross-sectional models are in parentheses. Except for the United Kingdom, all country fixed effects were negative and significantly different than the base country, the Netherlands, indicating a lower mean level of entropy controlling for the other variables in the model. Depending on the topic, the United Kingdom varied from negative to positive and from significantly to insignificantly different from the Netherlands. The use of a different base country, while altering the coefficients for each country's fixed effects, does not alter the sign or significances of the other results presented in Table 4.

<sup>†</sup>p ≤ .10. \*p ≤ .05. \*\*p ≤ .01. \*\*\*p ≤ .001.

results suggest there is a positive and significant effect of partisan control of government ( $0.054, p \leq .05$ ). However, there is no reason to expect that partisan control should make a difference on this particular topic. This finding is most likely the result of the very low frequency of mentions of this topic, where the disproportionate number of zeros across countries and over time on this issue means that variation from zero generates the spurious relationship between partisan control and issue diversity. In the case of foreign affairs (19), the results indicate that there is a near significant relationship ( $0.040, p \leq .10$ ) between partisan control of government and attention diversity. The most logical explanation for this is the difference between the amount of attention that left and right parties assign to foreign affairs. On average, right governments mention foreign affairs significantly more than their left counterparts, which leads to a decrease in issue diversity. Overall, there is little evidence of partisan effects on issue diversity.

There is, however, a general positive effect of agenda size on issue diversity. The results in Table 5 indicate that the effect on agenda diversity of the number of executive statements ( $0.001, p \leq .001$ ) is positive and significant at the 99% confidence level but quite small. For each additional statement that is included in an executive speech, there is on average a 0.001 increase in diversity of the executive agenda. Given the relative stability in the length of executive speeches noted earlier, the magnitude of this effect is minimal. It confirms the observation in description of Figure 1 that the agenda size of executive speeches in each of the six countries is largely stable over time in view of the extended time series.

Turning next to the effect of specific policy topics on diversity of the executive agenda across the six countries, a distinct pattern emerges that is consistent with  $H_1$ . The effect on agenda diversity is negative and significant at the 95% level for four out of the five major topic codes associated with the core functions of government: macroeconomic issues (1), defense (16), foreign affairs (19), and government operations (20). This indicates that increases in executive attention to each of these topics lead to decreased agenda diversity. In other words, these core functions of government tend to crowd out attention to other topics, leading to decreased agenda diversity. When government attends to these core issues, the share of attention allocated to other issues drops. The largest reduction in diversity is observed for international affairs ( $-1.044, p \leq .001$ ), and the smallest effect on diversity is for government operations ( $-0.495, p \leq .05$ ). For example, if the executive assigns 50% of attention to international affairs, this is associated with a 0.522 decrease in diversity of the agenda ( $0.5 \times -1.044$ ). Contrary to  $H_1$ , law and order is positively signed ( $0.527, p \leq .10$ ), indicating an increase in diversity, but is

significant at only the 90% confidence level. This suggests that law and order, although a core function of government, may be selective for the executive agenda. Policing and criminal justice concerns might instead be attended to by other branches of government and less in annual statements of executive priorities. Overall, the results confirm that when the economy, government operations, defense, and international affairs are high on the agenda, the executive pursues a far less diverse agenda—focusing the majority of its attention on fewer issues. These findings are consistent with  $H_1$ .

For the majority of topics, the effect of the number of topic mentions is positive and significantly greater than 0 at the 95% confidence level. These topics are immigration and civil liberties (2), health (3), agriculture (4), education (6), environment (7), transport (10), welfare (13), housing (14), business and commerce (15), telecommunications, science, and technology (17), and public lands (21). For example, if the executive assigns 5% of its attention to education, this is associated with a 0.08 increase in diversity of the agenda ( $0.05 \times 1.615$ ). It follows that certain issues are associated with a more diverse agenda as the executive considers a broader range of issues. Some of these issue topics are characteristic of policy activities that are interlinked with a welfarist European model of the state, suggesting that increased diversity of the executive agendas is enabled at times when the core functions of government are lower on the agenda. Certain issues are therefore associated with a more diverse agenda; as government attention to core issues decreases, opportunities for other issues to access the agenda increase.

What might explain such a pattern of agenda setting? The autoregressive character of agenda diversity may be a result of attention trading between issues. For instance, executive attention might be transferred from international affairs to defense during wartime, with no effect on issue diversity of the agenda (see Examples 3 and 4 in Table 2). Such attention shifts could occur between selective issues—generating either negative or insignificant effects on agenda diversity. The results here suggest that changes in the level of government attention to particular issues do, in fact, have an effect on the level of agenda diversity. Combined, these findings provide strong evidence in support of  $H_1$ , the core functions of government theory of executive agenda setting. The results for the effect on agenda diversity of core policy issues are notable in their direction and magnitude. The level of attention to most issues has consequences for the overall distribution of the executive agenda.<sup>10</sup> There is a long-run equilibrium in agenda diversity of executive speeches across countries and negative effects of core issues on diversity. Selective issues tend to gain access to the agenda when the core issues of government are less urgent, leading to greater agenda diversity.

## Conclusion

This analysis has sought to model and explain the diversity of executive agendas in six countries—Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States—that exhibit variation in both their political system and their form of government. The results indicate that the diversity of executive agendas across countries exhibits a similar pattern of persistence following a long-run equilibrium in all of the six countries. The issue diversity of the executive agenda does not appear to be punctuated by shocks in attention to specific issues as is the case within policy domains (e.g., Baumgartner & Jones, 1993). Even when there are disproportionate adjustments in attention to individual topics, the overall diversity of the agenda does not experience a similar degree of change. The results offer strong evidence of the limiting effect of core issues—the economy, government operations, defense, and international affairs—on agenda diversity whenever the salience of these core issues increases. This suggests not only that some issues receive more attention than others but also that certain issues receive attention at the expense of others. There is a trade-off between government attention to core and selective issues. When the core functions of government are high on the political agenda, the limited institutional capacity of the agenda allows the executive to pursue a far less diverse portfolio of issues—assigning minimal or no attention to issues outside its immediate concerns.

The findings suggest that this crowding-out phenomenon occurs between core and selective issues, but not between core issues. This indicates that when a core issue receives more attention from the executive, it is not at the expense of other core issues but rather occupies space on the agenda previously taken by selective issues and vice versa. The core functions of government are issues with a preeminent status in politics. These main responsibilities of the state are to defend its territory, interact with other states, manage the well-being of its citizens and maintain the state apparatus itself. The limiting effects of the core functions of government on agenda diversity are not the result of the higher than average level of attention alone but rather indicate that these issues take attention away from selective issues but are not in competition with each other. When selective issues receive an increased amount of executive attention, this occurs at times when core issues are less salient. These selective issues occupy space on the agenda that otherwise tends to be assigned to core issues (this is indicated by the positive coefficients in Table 5). From the evidence reported here, then, the relationship between these core issues and selective issues appears to be unequal. Attention to the core issues of government affects not only which issues government attends to but also which issues are excluded.

This matters for the representation of organized interests, the public, and other political actors since attention to core issues restricts opportunities for securing attention on the agenda. In contrast, a diverse agenda enables the engagement of multiple issues and a broader range of interests in the governmental process by increasing political competition and activity.

The results of the analysis also suggest that, in general, partisan control of government does not have a direct effect on issue diversity. These effects are instead mediated through partisan differences in attention to particular topics. There is no systematic difference in the structure of the executive agendas of left- and right-wing governments. Furthermore, the findings indicate that the size of the executive agenda has a positive and significant effect on issue diversity of the agenda, but this effect is small in magnitude. The institutional carrying capacity of the executive agenda facilitates greater diversity. Although there are differences in the average level of agenda diversity across countries, the findings show that there is a general pattern of diversity for all countries.

The dynamics of agenda diversity across the six countries that have been considered in this analysis suggest that the attention of government in annual statements of executive agendas is driven by the prioritization of issues in view of information about the state of the world. The importance of the core functions of government conditions the amount of agenda space available to other issues. To understand the structure of attention to one issue, it is necessary to understand the general distribution of attention across all issues because of the finite nature of attention for the executive agenda. These common findings of the structure of agenda diversity across six countries, in a mix of presidential and parliamentary systems, suggest the trade-offs between issues in governing agendas exhibit comparable behavior cross-nationally.

The comparative analysis of agenda diversity and the nature of its dynamics can contribute to understanding of the content of political debate and action. To achieve a better understanding of the determinants of agenda diversity, further comparative analysis is required of executive, legislative, public, and media agendas—across a range of political systems. The finding that the core functions of government structure attention of the executive to all issues within the scope of democratic governments warrants further investigation. Studies of agenda setting and issue attention of government generally do not control for the interrelationship between issues. Studies of political attention to specific issues do not tend to consider the effects that other issues have on the allocation of attention. The attention of government to a particular issue depends on the structure of its attention to all issues across the agenda. This seems to be less driven by partisan choice because of the composition of these governments and more associated with the responses to signals relating to the



core state functions. Although an issue might be marginalized because of the prominence of other issues on the agenda, at another time or in another country the same issue might receive more attention as others issues take up less of the agenda.

The findings also suggest that within-domain studies of agenda setting would be advised to consider the degree to which agenda change is associated with the overall structure of political attention. Studies such as Downs's (1972) classic explanation of the ebb and flow of attention to environmental issues often do not look outside the policy domain in question to understand changes in government attention. Our findings suggest that governments' allocation of attention to a single issue is conditional on their attention to all issues. For example, the recent relative decline in attention to climate change might in part be the result of logics internal to the policy domain but to a great extent is attributable to changes in other domains—in particular the world macroeconomy.

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### **Notes**

1. Studies from the United States provide empirical evidence in support for this attention-based model. The reaction of policy makers to information follows a pattern of proportionate and linear increments interrupted by disproportionate responses (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005; Jones, Baumgartner, & True, 1998). Further research on policy agendas, legislative outputs, and budget allocations in the United States and a number of European countries including Belgium, France, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom has also shown nonnormal distributions of attention (see Baumgartner et al., 2009; Breunig, 2006).

2. Policy statements were coded according to sentences in Denmark and the United States and according to quasi-sentences in France, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United Kingdom.
3. Further to this, the use of fixed effects in the time-series cross-sectional models (see below) further controls for cross-institutional or cross-linguistic differences in executive speeches between countries.
4. Note that the U.S. data include two speeches in the years 1953 and 1961 where both the outgoing and incoming president gave a speech within a month of one another. There are no theoretical reasons for excluding one or the other of these speeches, so these are retained and there is an amplification of the number of policy statements in these years. Removing either the two outgoing or incoming speeches does not alter the results.
5. A specific code was assigned where there was no policy content whatsoever, such as for ceremonial statements or very general statements. The proportion of non-policy statements in each speech is, in ascending order, 28% for France, 17% for the United States, 15% for Spain, 9% for the Netherlands, 8% for the United Kingdom, and 4% for Denmark. This variation reflects cross-national differences in the institutional format and style of the speeches but does not detract from comparison of policy content.
6. Choosing other omitted categories as the base value has no effect either on the autoregressive (AR) parameter or on the relative relationship between countries' average level of entropy, as would be expected.
7. Because this analysis is limited to six countries, restricting the degrees of freedom for cross-national variation, and because our theoretical expectation is that political attention is subject to the same inherent trade-offs and persistence across countries and institutions, a model controlling both for fixed effects by country and these other variables was not considered.
8. When estimated as individual country models, the entropy of the U.S. State of the Union Speech is problematic in terms of time-series diagnostics. According to a Ljung-Box Q test, it is not white noise ( $\chi^2 = 26.820$ ), nor does it appear to be an autoregressive, AR(p), process of any order of note or indeed a moving average, MA(q), process of any discernable order.
9. This occurs for 2 years in Denmark (1978-1979) and for 8 years in the Netherlands (1994-2001).
10. The same general inferences are obtained for the majority of the results, both through different temporal samples and when dropping individual countries (i.e., jackknifing). The only notable differences through dropping countries from the analyses are the following:
  - Topic 1: If Denmark is excluded from the analysis, the coefficient direction is still negative, but the significance is lower ( $p = .095$ ).

- Topic 5: If Spain is excluded from the analysis, the coefficient direction is still positive but now significant ( $p = .008$ ).
- Topic 8: If the United States is excluded from the analysis, the coefficient direction is different (now negative) and now near significant ( $p = .091$ ).
- Topic 12: If the United States is excluded from the analysis, the coefficient direction is the same (positive) but insignificant ( $p = .931$ ).
- Topic 16: If the United States is excluded from the analysis, the coefficient direction is different (positive) and insignificant ( $p = .926$ ).

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