

Dynamic Agenda Representation in Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

Dynamic agenda representation represents the transmission of the priorities of the public onto the policy priorities of government. This paper considers the relationship between public priorities and policy agendas in the US, UK, Denmark, Canada, Spain and the Netherlands. Through the estimation of time series cross-sectional models we find that national governments in countries with a greater vertical division of powers (i.e. federalism) exhibit higher responsiveness. Within countries, responsiveness is higher for institutions used for agenda-setting and subject to lower friction (i.e. executive speeches compared to legislation). We also find that executive speeches exhibit lower responsiveness for issues relating to “core” policy responsibilities of government (the economy, law and order, defense, foreign affairs, and government operations), but find the reverse in legislation. Public opinion leads executives to attend to issues outside their core policy responsibilities and causes legislatures to trespass on policy responsibilities typically left to the executive.

“Dynamic agenda representation” refers to the process through which the issue priorities of the public are translated into the policy priorities of government (Bevan and Jennings 2013).¹ Attending to and solving problems is a fundamental dimension of politics and policy (e.g. Cobb and Elder 1973; Cobb et al. 1976; March and Olsen 1983; Kingdon 1984; Baumgartner and Jones 2005a; Mayhew 2006; Fiorina 2006; Adler and Wilkerson 2013). Citizens share concerns on many issues – consistent with Stokes’ (1963) definition of valence issues as subjects where there is consensus over what is desirable (and what is not desirable). The vast majority of people tend to be in broad agreement that they want less crime, more economic growth, protection from terrorism, better public services, a more effectively run government, and so on. These concerns underpin the issue priorities of the public, as they favour government action on one issue or another. As a consequence, the allocation of attention – in response to problems – is an important dimension of policy-making and democratic representation (see Flemming et al. 1999; Baumgartner and Jones 2004; Jennings and John 2009; Jones et al. 2009a; Chaqués Bonafont and Palau 2011; Bevan and Jennings 2013). In order for positional representation to occur (e.g. Stimson et al. 1995; Wlezien 1996; Erikson et al. 2002; Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Bartle et al. 2011), there must first be a change in the content of the policy agenda. In other words, the direction of policy cannot change until it makes it to the decision-making agenda (Baumgartner and Jones 2004, p. 2).

Policy-makers are faced on a daily basis with a relentless barrage of information about policy problems in need of solutions, but only have finite time and resources to process it (March and Olsen 1983; Kingdon 1984; Jones 1994; Jones and Baumgartner 2005a; 2005b; Baumgartner et al. 2009; Adler and Wilkerson 2012).

¹ This is derived from Stimson et al.’s (1995) definition of dynamic representation.

This attention scarcity requires prioritization between competing concerns, meaning that there are unavoidable trade-offs in policy-making. Political institutions structure this pressure for issue prioritization and how it affects agenda representation within the political system (Baumgartner and Jones 2004; Jones et al. 2009a; Chaqués Bonafont and Palau 2011; Bevan and Jennings 2013). Institutions influence the behavior of policy-makers in two important ways. Firstly, friction in decision-making restricts the scope for representation of public concerns through exerting resistance on policy change, but institutional venues designed to signal general priorities and set the political agenda are freer to align government attention with public priorities. Secondly, the institutional division of powers within a political system shapes how public priorities and preferences are incorporated into public policy, giving rise to variety in the quality of representation across political systems (Lijphart 1984; 2012; Soroka and Wlezien 2010). Institutions matter in determining which sections of society policy-makers seek to respond to, but also impose veto points (Tsebelis 2002). These institutional veto points constrain political choices about policy priorities shaping patterns of policy change (Baumgartner et al. 2009; Montpetit and Foucault 2012).² For agenda representation, the division of power between political units in federal systems creates a motivation for national governments both to reflect public concerns at the national level at the same time as setting policy priorities for other tiers of government.

² The clarity of responsibility that is established by institutional structures similarly determines how easily citizens are able to recognise who precisely is responsible for policy outcomes and hold them to account (Powell and Whitten 1993; also see Soroka and Wlezien 2010).

We argue that *dynamic agenda representation* is shaped by institutions – both *across* and *within* countries – because: (a) the vertical division of powers within a political system creates incentives for the national government to attend to issues of public concern, and (b) institutional structures exert different levels of friction against policy change with varying latitude for adjusting priorities and agenda-setting in line with public concerns.

This paper adopts a comparative design to examine how political institutions affect the responsiveness of policy agendas to public priorities, expressed through the “most important problem” question, for executive agendas and legislative outputs in six countries: the US, UK, Canada, Spain, Denmark and the Netherlands. It builds on the growing field of comparative analysis of dynamic representation (Soroka and Wlezien 2004; 2005; 2010; Hobolt and Klemmensen 2005; 2008; Weldon et al. 2013; Wlezien and Soroka 2012) and dynamic agenda representation (Bevan and Jennings 2013).³ The distinctiveness of this contribution stems from its comparison of *agenda* representation across countries, institutions and over time. Specifically, it combines analysis of federalism, institutional friction and dynamic agenda representation in the policy priorities of government, in comparative perspective. We find that within countries the responsiveness of the policy agenda to public priorities is greater where institutional venues are subject to lower friction and are designed for agenda-setting (i.e. executive speeches). Across countries, we find that national governments in political systems subject to a greater vertical division of powers (i.e. federalism),

³ Note that extant studies also compare across political institutions *within* countries, both with respect to dynamic representation (e.g. Stimson et al. 1995; Erikson et al. 2002) and agenda representation (e.g. Baumgartner and Jones 2004; Jones et al. 2009; Chaqués Bonafont and Palau 2011).

exhibit higher degrees of responsiveness. Also related to the institutional location of policy responsibilities, we find that executive speeches exhibit lower responsiveness for “core” issues (the economy, law and order, defense, foreign affairs, and government operations), than for other issues, but find the reverse in legislative outputs. This reflects the influence of public opinion, leading executives to attend to issues outside their core functional responsibilities and causing legislatures to trespass on policy responsibilities typically left to the executive.

The paper is organised as follows. We first outline the attention-based model of dynamic agenda representation. We next discuss how political institutions structure patterns of attention-allocation and resistance against policy change. Specifically, we consider how the institutional separation of powers within a political system might affect agenda representation by national governments, focusing in particular on the vertical division of powers, drawing on the work of Lijphart (1984; 2012) and Soroka and Wlezien (2010). We then introduce data on policy agendas and public priorities in the six countries. Dynamic agenda representation for each agenda is then assessed, for core and non-core issues, through the estimation of time series cross-sectional models. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of the findings for models of representation and for understanding of the democratic process across and within nations.

Dynamic Agenda Representation

Do shifts in public opinion lead to subsequent shifts in policy? An increasingly sizeable literature has sought to examine the representation of public preferences in public policy at the aggregate level (see Page and Shapiro 1983; Stimson et al. 1995; Wlezien 1996; Erikson et al. 2002; Soroka and Wlezien 2005; 2010; Bartle et al.

2011). This perspective treats representation as dynamic, i.e. as a relation between different points in time, and as positional, i.e. as organised on a single dimension of preferences for more (liberal) or less (conservative) policy. Dynamic representation is facilitated through the mechanisms of both electoral turnover and rational anticipation of future electoral costs by officeholders (Stimson et al. 1995).

There has been parallel interest in the question of whether the priorities of the public are matched by the priorities of government (e.g. Jones and Baumgartner 2004; Jones et al. 2009; Chaqués Bonafont and Palau 2011; Lindeboom 2012). One way in which policy-makers can represent citizens is via reflecting their concerns, selectively assigning the government's attention across issues and dealing with problems on their behalf. Voters tend to elect governments who reflect their priorities (McDonald et al. 2004; Pennings 2005), while the threat of electoral punishment at future time points provides a further incentive for rational anticipation, where policy-makers adjust their policy priorities in response to changes in the priorities of the public. Public concern about an issue sends a signal that there may be a future cost for any failure to attend to it and solve the related policy problem. However, as was noted above, policy-makers are faced with an abundance of information and insufficient time to process it all (Jones 1994; Jones and Baumgartner 2005a; 2005b). Because of this, prioritisation of certain issues above others is a necessary precondition for representation in public policy. Our general expectation concerning dynamic agenda representation therefore is that changes in the public's issue priorities are associated with changes in the policy agenda of governing institutions.

H₁: The issue priorities of the public are represented in the policy agendas of government.

Our approach differs from extant studies in focusing on changes in the policy agenda that are not due to shifts in preferences, but are due to shifts in attention.

Institutions, Attention and Representation in Comparative Perspective

Political institutions structure the relationship between the issue priorities of citizens and the policy priorities of government. This is mediated through the formal distribution of power within political systems (Madison 1787; Lijphart 1984; 2012), and through how institutions process information and prioritise their attention across a multitude of policy problems and nascent issues (Jones 1994; Jones and Baumgartner 2005a; 2005b; Adler and Wilkerson 2012). The dynamics of issue attention inevitably stem from the interaction of institutional forces (Edwards and Wood 1999; Flemming et al. 1999). Institutions are the political venues through which attention is allocated to policy problems. Institutional friction also imposes constraints on changing attention or facilitates agenda-setting behaviour in venues where there are low costs of signalling priorities. However, institutional structures of attention may break down under pressure from public opinion or the media, overriding the segmented functional responsibilities of different branches or levels of government. Agenda dynamics thus inform our theoretical expectations concerning the representation of public priorities in the attention of government to policy issues. We next outline the reasoning behind these institutional mechanisms of dynamic agenda representation.

The Division of Powers

The defining question of democratic representation, as Lijphart (2012, p. 2) famously posed it, is “who will do the governing and to whose interests should the

government be responsive when the people are in disagreement and have divergent preferences?”. The question of how the concerns of citizens are incorporated into – or excluded from – the policy agenda is similarly interlinked with the institutional design of political systems. The vertical division of powers (Soroka and Wlezien 2010), or the federal-unitary dimension (Lijphart 1984), refers to the degree to which decision-making power and policy responsibilities are shared between multiple governments or spheres of influence. This dimension, Soroka and Wlezien (2010) argue, determines how clear the signal of what government is actually doing is to citizens. Because of this, federalism tends to dampen public responsiveness and, as a result, complicates representation at each particular level of government (ibid). However, according to Lijphart (2012) it also indicates the extent to which public policies can be adjusted across institutional venues – enabling a more differentiated response to public opinion across the system as a whole.⁴ For issue attention, the vertical division of powers creates both incentives and opportunities for the signalling of policy priorities in line with public concerns. Montpetit and Foucault (2012, p. 643) argue that the exposure of governing parties to new ideas through intergovernmental relations may give rise to shifts in attention. Further, the ability to set the national agenda is an important source of influence over public policy. In contrast to national governments in unitary systems federal governments have incentives to promote their policy priorities to other levels of government – especially when these priorities are considered to relate to “national” level problems. Such agenda-setting behaviour also applies to the horizontal interaction of agendas (e.g. Edwards and Wood 1999; Flemming et al. 1999; Peake

⁴ Such a pattern is observed in correspondence between political outcomes and public preferences at the state-level in the US (Erikson et al. 1993).

and Eshbaugh-Soha 2008; Cohen 2012).⁵ The vertical division of powers therefore pressures federal government to set the national agenda, and in so doing provide representation of the issue priorities of the public. An example of this is responsiveness of the presidential agenda to public priorities in the US (Cohen 1997).

In sum, we expect that national governments in federal systems will tend to be more responsive to public opinion, providing representation of issue priorities across the political system as a whole (i.e. national opinion). In unitary systems governments have less need to set the agenda and communicate their policy priorities.

H₂: The vertical division of power in federal systems make their national governments more responsive to public priorities.

Friction and Agenda-Setting

These institutional structures that directly affect representation also have implications for patterns of issue prioritisation and policy change (Jones et al. 2009a; Bevan and Jennings 2013). Specifically, friction and the agenda-setting function of institutional venues determine the extent to which policy-makers are able to shift attention and make adjustments to policy in response to shifts in public opinion. This operates on two levels.

Firstly, Jones and Baumgartner's (2005a; 2005b) disproportionate information processing model is premised on the friction that institutions exert on policy change.

⁵ Because dynamic agenda representation is the focus of this paper we do not consider the horizontal interdependence of institutional agendas, although it is clear executive and legislative agendas will be more or less responsive to each other depending on the composition of the political system.

In institutions, decision- and voting-rules set the parameters for making adjustments to policy. Constitutions, electoral systems, institutional rules, regulations and voting procedures determine how easy it is for policy to be changed. These create resistance to departures from the status quo. Attempts to secure policy change can be vetoed by other actors with different sources of authority or undermined by requirements such as supermajorities. What we know about friction is that it produces uneven and sticky patterns of policy change (e.g. Jones and Baumgartner 2005a; 2005b; Baumgartner et al. 2009; Jones et al. 2009b), suggesting that the responsiveness of the policy agenda to changes in public priorities might be badly impeded by high levels of institutional friction. Different agendas – such as executive statements, legislation and spending – are subject to different degrees of friction, however (Baumgartner et al. 2009). This is expected to give rise to institutional variation in agenda representation.

Secondly, some institutional venues are subject to less friction and instead are designed to communicate policy priorities of government. Press conferences, public statements and speeches, etc., fall into this more *rhetorical* channel of public policy. Attention is still at a premium in these venues, due to the multitude of issues and policy problems that are active at any given point in time. Because of this, policy-makers must decide which issues are most urgent and important to them, and prioritize some of them for their attention. It follows that there will tend to be higher levels of dynamic agenda representation in institutional venues where there is greater emphasis on agenda-setting and the signalling of policy priorities, than those where there are greater constraints on policy change. To this effect, studies of agenda representation have shown variation between institutions, tending to be most responsive to public concerns when there is the least institutional friction against policy change and most emphasis on agenda-setting and communication of policy

priorities (Baumgartner and Jones 2004; Jones et al. 2009a; Chaqués Bonafont and Palau 2011; Bevan and Jennings 2013). This hypothesis suggests that institutional friction and agenda-setting will determine the level of dynamic agenda representation.

H₃: Policy agendas subject to less institutional friction and more conducive to agenda-setting are more responsive to public priorities.

Core Policy Responsibilities

Some issues are simply more salient to government than others. Preservation of territorial borders and security of the state and promotion of economic prosperity are the top priorities for, and phases in development of, any government (Rose 1976).⁶ Once these “core” policy functions have been attended to, the state can then look to other tasks such as building infrastructure and delivering social or economic benefits to various groups. The predominance of these core responsibilities is demonstrated in comparative analysis of executive agendas where attention to these core issues crowds out attention to other policy concerns (Jennings et al. 2011). It follows that patterns of dynamic agenda representation will differ for core policy domains compared to more selective policy activities – since certain political institutions will attend to them as a matter of course. Prioritisation of core issues – the economy, defense, foreign affairs, law and order and government operations – will primarily be linked to their intrinsic importance to governing, making them less sensitive to short-term fluctuations in public concerns. This suggests that policy agendas will tend to be less responsive to

⁶ These categories are not dissimilar to the “constituent functions of government” that are identified by Wilson (1889).

public priorities for these core issues.⁷ At the same time, however, institutions structure issue attention through the functional division of policy responsibilities, leading institutions to specialize in certain domains. For example, in the US and UK the executive is largely in control of policy activities relating to macroeconomics, defense, foreign affairs and government operations (for the US see Sundquist 1981; Edwards and Barrett 2000; and for the UK see Dunleavy and Rhodes 1990). On these issues, legislation is an unwieldy tool for policy change, especially in the short-term, so differences are to be expected between institutional venues in their attention to core issues.⁸

Nevertheless, institutional structures of attention may break down, under pressure from public opinion or the media, overriding the segmented functional responsibilities of different branches or levels of government. As such, public opinion – and the complex interdependence of policy problems – may lead to greater permeability of institutional responsibilities, leading executives to attend to issues outside their core functional policy responsibilities and causing legislatures to trespass on policy responsibilities typically left to the executive. Dynamic agenda representation therefore captures the degree to which public opinion is able to divert the focus of government units from their normal policy activities – reflecting pressure from public opinion and events. This turns the conventional logic of representation on

⁷ Interestingly, this expectation runs counter to much of the work on mediating effects of issue salience on representation, which suggests policy-makers tend to be more responsive to public opinion for salient issues (e.g. Burstein 2003; Jones et al. 2009a; Soroka and Wlezien 2010).

⁸ This difference is particularly stark in federal compared to unitary systems with no division of power between the executive and legislature branches.

its head, since responsiveness to public opinion is expected for less salient issues, in executive agendas at least.

H₄: Executive agendas are less responsive to public priorities on their core policy responsibilities, while legislative agendas are more responsive to them.

Data and Methods

To test these theoretical expectations we use data on policy agendas and issue priorities of the public across two institutional venues in six countries: the US, UK, Canada, Spain, Denmark and the Netherlands. These cases offer a mix of federal and unitary systems, providing a strong basis to test our hypotheses. Furthermore, this set of countries include several of those considered in previous comparative studies of dynamic representation – the US, UK, Canada, and Denmark – enabling comparison of results against the findings of Soroka and Wlezien (2004; 2005; 2010) and Hobolt and Klemmensen (2005; 2008).

The analyses presented here are based on aggregate-level data on executive speeches, law-making and issue priorities of the public in each of the six countries. This data is coded according to the policy content coding system of each of the six national-level projects of the Comparative Agendas Project (www.comparativeagendas.info). The decision to use national codebooks is both practical and matches the judgements of experts in each country as to how policy is

understood in that political and institutional context.⁹ The advantages of this coding framework are twofold: firstly, it is an established method for coding government and public attention (see Baumgartner et al. 2011), and secondly it renders the content of agendas comparable across institutional venues allowing us to model dynamic agenda representation consistently within countries and over time. The general list of major topics included in our analyses is presented in Table 1.¹⁰

[insert Table 1 about here]

Dependent Variables

Executive Speeches

In many political systems the head of state or the head of government delivers an annual formal statement that sets out its policy priorities for the year ahead. These are forward-looking statements, communicating general priorities as well as specific measures the executive intends to address in the coming year. In each of the countries considered in this analysis, the executive speech provides a clear signal of the policy agenda of the executive (as shown in Light 1999; Breeman et al. 2009; Jennings et al.

⁹ Practically the differences between countries are extremely small with the most notable difference being the inclusion of immigration issues under the Labor and Employment topic (5) in some nations and under Civil Rights (2) in others.

¹⁰ Note that two topics, Commerce (15) and Science (17), are excluded from our analyses for practical reasons. While both are important subjects of public policy in the countries we look at, almost without exception these issues receive no attention from the public. Due to the high number of zeros for these topics, their inclusion led to over-inflation of coefficients. We prefer to present more conservative estimates, excluding these two policy areas.

2011; Mortensen et al. 2011; Montpetit and Foucault 2012).¹¹ The policy content of each speech was divided into quasi-sentences, with each quasi-sentence assigned a single unique major topic code. For each country the executive agenda is organized according the sessions of government. For example, the data is setup by calendar year in the US and by parliamentary session in the UK, matching the political process in each country. The same temporal aggregation is used for legislative outputs as well as for public priorities.

Legislation

Law-making provides opportunities both for agenda-setting and the signalling of priorities, as well as for the enactment of substantive policy outputs (see Mayhew 1974; Schiller 1995; Martin 2004; Krutz 2005; Lapinski 2008; Adler and Wilkerson 2012). In this analysis we use adopted legislation of the parliaments of Canada, Denmark and Spain UK and the Netherlands and statutes of US Congress. Each piece of legislation is coded with a single major topic indicating the primary focus of the legislation, with the observed time point being the date upon which it was signed into law.

¹¹ As Cohen (2012, pp. 27-28) points out, there are problems associated with using an annual speech such as the annual State of the Union message to measure the executive agenda. These are not always complete (i.e. policy priorities may change in response to events) and they are not dynamic (i.e. the agenda of the executive will most likely shift during the course of any given year). Nevertheless, annual speeches still provide a time-specific measure of the policy agenda that enables its relationship with public priorities in the preceding time period to be tested.

To allow for direct comparisons across institutional venues and countries, both dependent variables are transformed into the proportion of attention to each topic, calculated as the number of cases (e.g. quasi-sentences, laws) for each topic divided by the total number of cases for each time period. Our measures of executive speeches and legislation across each of the six countries are summarized in Table 2.

[insert Table 2 about here]

Independent Variable

Public Priorities

One of the most common ways to measure the issue priorities of the public is with survey instruments that ask about the “most important problem” (MIP) facing the nation (see Wlezien 2005).¹² Following previous studies (e.g. Jones 1994; Bevan and Jennings 2013), we use aggregate MIP responses measured as the percentage of all responses to represent the broader public prioritization of issues at particular points in time. These responses have been gathered from a variety of polling companies and survey organizations (see Appendix A1), recoded to match the national codebook for each country.

Core Issues

Following the concepts put forward in previous work (Rose 1976; Jennings et al. 2011), we classify core issues as referring to the economy (1), law and order (12), defense (16), international relations (19) and government operations (20), as indicated

¹² The similar “most important issue” question has become increasingly common as a substitute, in light of concerns regarding what the “most important problem” question is tapping (Wlezien 2005).

with an asterisk in Table 3. All the other major topics are treated as “non-core” issues for the purpose of this analysis.¹³ We conduct separate pooled analyses of dynamic agenda representation for these core and non-core issues in each institutional venue across countries.

Political Institutions

To consider how political institutions structure dynamic agenda representation between and within countries, measures of the vertical division of powers are used. In terms of the general classification of political systems examined, the US is the solitary federal-presidential system, Canada a federal-parliamentary system and Spain a quasi-federal-parliamentary system, while the UK, Netherlands and Denmark are unitary-parliamentary systems. The system type can be used to provide a quite blunt measure of institutional power with federal systems tending to involve greater vertical separation of powers compared to unitary systems. It is also possible to rank the vertical division of powers using Lijphart’s (2012) federal-unitary dimension, which consists of an alternative set of measures (federalism, bicameralism, constitutional rigidity, judicial review and central bank independence). This allows us to rank the vertical division of powers from the most to the least decentralized system of

¹³ This classification does not imply that issues such as education or social welfare are unimportant, only that core issues are fundamental preconditions for existence of the state that enable the pursuit of other policy activities, such as creation of a developed welfare state.

government: i.e. US (2.25), Canada (1.73), Spain (0.47), Netherlands (0.3), Denmark (-0.34), UK (-1.06).¹⁴

Error-Correction Models of Dynamic Agenda Representation

To assess dynamic representation of the issue priorities of the public in policy agendas, comparing between institutional venues, across countries and over core and non-core issues, time series cross-sectional error-correction models are estimated. The use of an error-correction model (ECM) enables the simultaneous diagnosis of short- and long-run effects of public priorities on the policy agenda. An error-correction framework is appropriate given that it is possible, both in theory and in practice, for dynamic agenda representation to arise from long-term trends in public priorities and from short-run variation and shocks (Jennings and John 2009; Bevan and Jennings 2013). Further, through considering pooled models, we are able to focus on the general relationship between public priorities and policy agendas. The model can thus be represented in the form:

$$\Delta \text{AGENDA}_{it} = \alpha_0^* + \alpha_1^* \text{AGENDA}_{it-1} + \beta_0^* \Delta \text{OPINION}_{it} + \beta_1^* \text{OPINION}_{it-1} + \varepsilon_{it}$$

Short-run changes in the policy agenda relating to a particular issue ($\Delta \text{AGENDA}_{it}$) are a function of short-run changes in the public's prioritization of that same issue ($\Delta \text{OPINION}_{it}$), the long-run changes in public priorities (OPINION_{it-1}), and the lagged value of the dependent variable (AGENDA_{it-1}) measures the speed of re-equilibration (α_1^*) in response to shocks to the long-run equilibrium of public priorities and the

¹⁴ This ranking is identical regardless of whether or not the version of Lijphart's (2012) federal-unitary dimension used refers to the 1945-2010 or 1981-2010 period.

policy agenda.¹⁵ Within the ECM framework, changes in the content of the policy agenda are estimated as a function of contemporaneous changes in the issue priorities of the public and the degree to which these are outside the long-run agenda/opinion equilibrium.

Analyses

To assess dynamic agenda representation across six countries, two institutions (executive/legislative) and two types of issues (core/non-core) a total of 24 time series cross-sectional models are estimated and presented in Table 3.¹⁶ In addition, Figure 1 presents the coefficient estimates and 95% confidence intervals for short- and long-run effects of public priorities by executive speeches and legislative outputs for core and non-core issues in separate graphs.

[insert Table 3 and Figure 1 about here]

¹⁵ Unlike many models of dynamic representation and dynamic agenda representation (e.g. Wlezien 2004; Bevan and Jennings 2013) we do not include a measure for party control of government. By definition, core issues are essential for all governments, regardless of party color, so there is no reason for thinking there will be differences in attention to core issues compared to non-core issues.

¹⁶ In addition to our primary variables of interest, Table 3 includes the lag of each policy agenda. This parameter is the error-correction term, taking values in the models between -0.173 to -0.943, which indicates that the rate of re-equilibration in response to shocks ranges from very slow to very fast. As each value falls between 0 and -1, the models follow the assumption concerning an error-correction process and suggest that our choice of model is appropriate for this data.

The direction, size and significance of the coefficients presented in Table 3 and Figure 1 reveal a number of general patterns of responsiveness of policy agendas to public priorities. Firstly, there is evidence of dynamic agenda representation in the majority of cases in either the short- or long-run or in both, providing support for H1.¹⁷ The notable exceptions to this are found in the US and UK. In the US, the effect of MIP on attention to both core and non-core issues in the legislative agenda is negative and significant at the 95 percent confidence level, which seems to indicate that policy priorities of US Congress tend to lead, rather than follow, public priorities. Given that our expectation is that legislative agendas will tend to be less responsive to public priorities than executive speeches, this is not entirely surprising.

Secondly, in the UK, the effect of MIP is not significant at the 95 percent confidence level for core issues for either executive speeches or legislative outputs. This suggests British government only responds to public concerns for those matters outside its core policy activities. This also is consistent with theoretical expectations, namely that policy-makers tend to be less concerned with representation when dealing with issues that are central to governing, providing partial support for H4.

Turning to the mediating effects of political institutions on dynamic agenda representation, the coefficient estimates and 95 percent confidence intervals for the short- and long-run effects of public priorities are plotted for executive and legislative agendas, and core and non-core issues, for all six countries in Figure 1. This reveals some clear patterns. The figure reports coefficients for unitary-parliamentary systems towards the left end of the x-axis, those for federal-parliamentary systems towards the right, and the federal-presidential system of the US to the far right, following ranking

¹⁷ Overall, the mean coefficient size for short- and long-run effects of MIP is 0.13, which is substantial given that past values of the policy agenda are controlled for.

of the countries according to Lijphart's (2012) federal-unitary dimension concerning the vertical division of powers. This displays a general pattern of dynamic agenda representation which suggests that federal systems on average tend to be associated with more significant and larger positive effects of MIP on the policy agenda. Note that the mean effect of MIP on executive and legislative agendas, for both core and non-core issues, is equal to 0.20 for federal systems and 0.07 for unitary systems. The difference is most evident for executive speeches, and somewhat less pronounced for legislative outputs, where there are positive and significant effects of MIP for core issues in two of the federal systems (Spain and Canada) compared with one unitary system (Denmark). The findings are divided for non-core issues with one positive and significant effect of MIP on the policy agenda for a federal system (the US) and one for a unitary system (the UK). Combined, these findings suggest that the vertical division of power in federal systems makes their institutional agendas more responsive to public priorities in line with H2.

The findings also provide evidence that institutional venues subject to lower friction and more suited to agenda-setting (i.e. executive speeches) tend to be more responsive to public priorities, consistent with H3. From inspection of Figure 1 it is apparent that the effect of MIP on executive speeches is positive and significant far more frequently (for both core and non-core issues), compared to legislative outputs.¹⁸ Across the six countries, the mean effect of MIP is 0.20 for executive speeches and 0.07 for legislative outputs. Interestingly, only in the US and the Netherlands are there

¹⁸ Although the coefficient size tends to be larger for the small number of positive and significant effects of MIP for legislative outputs, this is likely due to the greater scope for agenda expansion in the volume of legislation compared to speeches – where there is greater pressure on agenda space.

no positive and significant effects of MIP on the legislative agenda (for either core or non-core issues). In the US, the negative but significant coefficient suggests that the legislative agenda tends to lead public priorities, rather than vice versa, as discussed earlier. In the Netherlands, this result suggests that policy-makers tend to respond to public priorities earlier in the agenda-setting process, via the executive speech. In fact, overall our findings are consistent with representation of agenda/opinion dynamics as an equilibrating process of dynamic agenda representation and agenda-setting. They also, importantly, are consistent with the argument that responsiveness varies across institutional venues (Jones et al. 2009a).

Our final hypothesis states that executive agendas are less responsive to public priorities on issues relating to their core policy responsibilities compared to other issues and that legislative agendas would be more responsive for the same core issues. Through comparison of the short- and long-run effects of MIP on executive speeches in the same institution and the same country, shown in Table 3 and Figure 1, this expectation is met, with more significant and larger positive effects for non-core issues – except for short-run effects in the cases of Canada and the Netherlands. For executive speeches the mean effect of MIP is equal to 0.16 for core issues and equal to 0.23 for non-core issues. These findings provide support for H4, suggesting that pressure from public opinion leads executives to attend to issues beyond their core policy responsibilities. In contrast, results for legislative outputs are observed in the opposite direction, with the effects of MIP tending to be greater for core issues, also consistent with H4. The mean effect of MIP is equal to 0.10 for core issues and equal to 0.03 for non-core issues. This pattern suggests that public concern leads legislators to intervene on core issues. This is an important finding, since it indicates both that

dynamic agenda representation varies across institution and that this relationship is not simply mediated by issue salience.

Conclusion

This paper has offered the first comparative analysis of the responsiveness of policy agendas to public priorities, across institutions and across issues.¹⁹ It builds on a fast-growing field of comparative analysis of the policy/opinion link (e.g. Soroka and Wlezien 2004; 2005; 2010; Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008; Wlezien and Soroka 2010), but offers a distinctive perspective on representation of public concerns in the issue attention of governing institutions. Burstein (2003) argues that research on the responsiveness of public policy to public opinion suffers from inconsistent findings across issues and institutional venues. To address this shortcoming we have sought to offer a basis for the comparison of patterns of dynamic agenda representation and scope for drawing general inferences about how this is shaped through institutions – both within and across political systems. Furthermore, the focus on attention and agenda-setting offers different insights on representation than existing accounts of the policy/opinion link. Attention scarcity requires prioritisation among competing concerns, while institutions impose friction on change or means for signalling priorities requiring a different form of political representation. This differs in important ways from the representation of preferences in public policy, offering a new line of research on representation, not an incremental development.

¹⁹ Bevan and Jennings (2013) analyse patterns of dynamic agenda representation for institutional venues in the US and UK, but do not assess differences between political systems (instead considering the pattern of representation within systems).

Through our analyses we have shown distinct patterns of dynamic agenda representation across six countries, two types of institutional venues and two types of policy, offering a possible basis for generalisation. Our findings strongly indicate the issue priorities of the public are represented in the policy agenda over time across all countries, that this relationship tends to be strongest for federal systems, and that institutional agendas subject to least friction and most designed for agenda-setting, executive speeches, are most responsive to public priorities. Our findings concerning dynamic agenda representation in relation to policy responsibilities of executive and legislative government are also important. The differences in representation for core and non-core issues demonstrate that executive agendas tend to be more responsive to public opinion for issues other than their core policy activities whereas the reverse is true for legislation. This reflects influence of public opinion on the issue attention of government, leading executives to attend to issues outside their usual policy concerns and causing legislatures to trespass on policy responsibilities that are typically the domain of the executive.²⁰

By examining the effect of public priorities on policy agendas of governments in six countries – the US, UK, Canada, Denmark, Netherlands and Spain – over an extended time period, we have been able to identify a number of general patterns of dynamic agenda representation and extrapolated them to other contexts. This is all made possible through the systematic measurement of the policy agenda and public

²⁰ It is worth noting that analyses of all issues in a single model for each country and institution not presented here led to the same inferences for our other hypotheses, but with lower or even insignificant effects for public priorities in those cases where the effects for core and non-core issues in our analyses differ. Therefore, there is a clear value to this separation.

priorities and offers an important basis for moving towards a general framework for comparing the dynamic interrelationship of public opinion and public policy across political systems and institutions.

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Table 1. General Major Topic Codes

Topic	Abbreviation	Name
1	Economy	Macroeconomics*
2	Civil	Civil Rights, Minority Issues, and Civil Liberties
3	Health	Health
4	Agriculture	Agriculture
5	Labor	Labor and Employment
6	Education	Education
7	Environment	Environment
8	Energy	Energy
10	Transport	Transportation
12	Law	Law, Crime, and Family Issues*
13	Social	Social Welfare
14	Housing	Community Development, Planning and Housing Issues
16	Defense	Defense*
18	Trade	Foreign Trade
19	International	International Affairs and Foreign Aid*
20	Gov't	Government Operations*
21	Lands	Public Lands and Water Management

Note: * Indicates that the issue is a core issue.

Table 2. Policy Agendas by Country and Institution

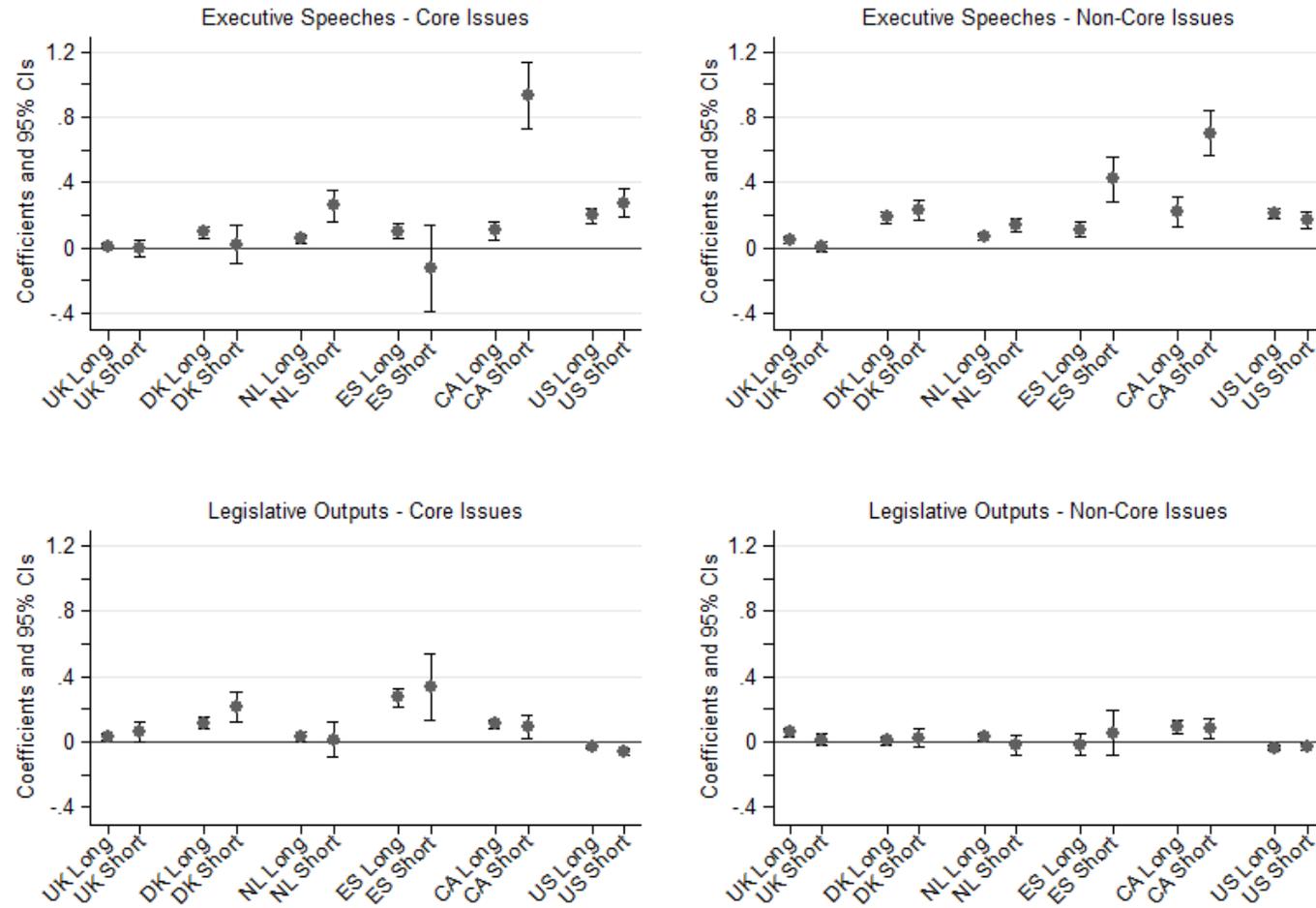
	Time Period (for speech)	Executive Speech	Legislative Output	Project Website
Canada	1960-2009	Speech from the Throne	Adopted Laws of the Canadian Parliament	snsoroka.com/data.html#legislative
Denmark	1971-2008	Prime Minister's Opening Speech to Parliament	Adopted Laws of the Danish Parliament	www.agendasetting.dk
Netherlands	1971-2011	Speech from the Throne (Troonrede)	Adopted Laws of the Dutch Parliament	vre.leidenuniv.nl/vre/mi-cdh/Pages/Home.aspx
Spain	1985-2007	Prime Minister's Speech	Adopted Laws of the Spanish Parliament	www.ub.edu/spanishpolicyagendas
United Kingdom	1943-2008	Speech from the Throne	Acts of the UK Parliament	www.policyagendas.org.uk
United States	1947-2012	State of the Union	Statutes of the US Congress	www.policyagendas.org

Table 3: Dynamic Agenda Representation by Country, Issue Type and Institution

	United States		Canada		Spain		Netherlands		Denmark		United Kingdom	
	Federal-Presidential		Federal-Parliamentary		Quasi-Federal-Parliamentary		Unitary-Parliamentary		Unitary-Parliamentary		Unitary-Parliamentary	
	Core	Non-core	Core	Non-core								
Speech _{t-1}	-0.605** (0.062)	-0.428** (0.114)	-0.428** (0.114)	-0.482** (0.111)	-0.529** (0.106)	-0.482** (0.111)	-0.403** (0.064)	-0.477** (0.060)	-0.365** (0.064)	-0.530** (0.062)	-0.232** (0.041)	-0.350** (0.040)
Δ MIP _t	0.277** (0.088)	0.935** (0.205)	0.935** (0.205)	0.422** (0.135)	-0.125 (0.261)	0.422** (0.135)	0.258** (0.093)	0.141** (0.045)	0.021 (0.116)	0.228** (0.061)	0.002 (0.051)	0.005 (0.029)
MIP _{t-1}	0.200** (0.045)	0.108 (0.057)	0.108 (0.057)	0.114* (0.049)	0.104* (0.046)	0.114* (0.049)	0.056* (0.023)	0.072** (0.019)	0.095** (0.036)	0.189** (0.034)	0.010 (0.015)	0.048* (0.019)*
Cons	4.961** (0.766)	2.834** (0.916)	2.834** (0.916)	0.772** (0.226)	5.421** (1.188)	0.772** (0.226)	3.055** (0.512)	1.598** (0.227)	2.439** (0.552)	1.036** (0.202)	2.350** (0.469)	1.123** (0.149)
R ²	0.33	0.43	0.43	0.25	0.27	0.25	0.23	0.24	0.21	0.28	0.13	0.18
N	325	102	102	177	110	177	198	356	183	403	325	780
Laws _{t-1}	-0.184** (0.049)	-0.511** (0.079)	-0.511** (0.079)	-0.806** (0.102)	-0.943** (0.140)	-0.806** (0.102)	-0.340** (0.079)	-0.679** (0.057)	-0.505** (0.110)	-0.566** (0.065)	-0.419** (0.049)	-0.685** (0.047)
Δ MIP _t	-0.060* (0.024)	0.092 (0.074)	0.092 (0.074)	0.055 (0.135)	0.339 (0.206)	0.055 (0.135)	0.016 (0.104)	-0.022 (0.059)	0.211* (0.092)	0.023 (0.055)	0.066 (0.062)	0.016 (0.036)
MIP _{t-1}	-0.029* (0.011)	0.112** (0.025)	0.112** (0.025)	-0.018 (0.066)	0.273** (0.058)	-0.018 (0.066)	0.032 (0.031)	0.035 (0.021)	0.116** (0.037)	0.010 (0.026)	0.028 (0.020)	0.058* (0.023)
Cons	1.918** (0.395)	3.832** (0.589)	3.832** (0.589)	2.792** (0.398)	5.234** (0.987)	2.792** (0.398)	2.161** (0.616)	3.079** (0.301)	1.365** (0.332)	2.764** (0.345)	3.476** (0.479)	2.416** (0.179)
R ²	0.10	0.24	0.24	0.41	0.44	0.41	0.16	0.59	0.27	0.28	0.21	0.34
N	315	178	178	177	110	177	115	207	163	360	325	780

Note: * p<0.05, ** p<0.01; Significant independent variables in the expected direction are in bold.

Figure 1: Coefficients and Standard Errors of Dynamic Agenda Representation by Country, Issue Type and Institution



Appendix A1: Data on the “Most Important Problem”

	Time Period	Question	Source
Canada	1960-2009	“What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?” (Gallup)	Gallup Monthly Reports (1950-2000). Canadian Election Studies (1965, 1968, 1972, 1974, 1979, 1980, 1984; 1988; 1993; 1997; 2000; 2004; 2006; 2008). Environics (2001-2009).
		““What do you think are the most important problems facing Canada as a nation at the present time?”	
		“In your opinion, what is the most important problem facing Canadians today?” (Environics)	
Denmark	1971-2008	“What problems do you think are the most important today that politicians should take care of?” (DDA) “What do you think are the two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) at the moment?” (EB)	Dansk Data Arkiv (DDA), <i>Danish Election Studies (1971-2007)</i> : Danske valgundersøgelser, gentagne spørgsmål 1971-1981 (DDA-0658); Gallup, January 1977 (DDA-0166); Valgundersøgelsen 1984 (DDA-0772); Valgundersøgelsen 1987 (DDA-1340); Gallup, 1988 (DDA-1505); Valgundersøgelsen 1990 (DDA-1564); Valgundersøgelsen 1994 (DDA-2210); Valgundersøgelsen 1998 (DDA-4189); Valgundersøgelsen 2001 (DDA-12516); Valgundersøgelsen 2005 (DDA-18184); Valgundersøgelsen 2005, kombinationsundersøgelse 1 (DDA-24339); Valgundersøgelsen 2007 (DDA-26471). <i>Eurobarometer, 2002-2011</i> : GESIS Study Nos. ZA3640 (EB57.2),

			ZA3904 (EB59.1), ZA3938 (EB60.1), ZA4056 (EB61), ZA4229 (EB62.0), ZA4411 (EB63.4), ZA4414 (EB64.2), ZA4506 (EB65.2), ZA4526 (EB66.1), ZA4530 (EB67.2), ZA4565 (EB68.1), ZA4744 (EB69.2), ZA4819 (EB70.1), ZA4971 (EB71.1), ZA4973 (EB71.3), ZA4994 (EB72.4), ZA5234 (EB73.4), ZA5549 (EB74.2), ZA5481 (EB75.3), ZA5567 (EB76.3)
		“And now I would like to ask you, what do you think are the most important problems in our country?”	Aarts, Kees, Bojan Todosijevic, and Harry van der Kaap. <i>Dutch Parliamentary Election Study Cumulative Dataset, 1971-2006</i> [Computer file]. ICPSR28221-v1. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2010-09-13. doi:10.3886/ICPSR28221.v1
Netherlands	1971-2011	“What do you think are the two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) at the moment?” (EB)	<i>Eurobarometer, 2002-2011</i> : GESIS Study Nos. ZA3640 (EB57.2), ZA3904 (EB59.1), ZA3938 (EB60.1), ZA4056 (EB61), ZA4229 (EB62.0), ZA4411 (EB63.4), ZA4414 (EB64.2), ZA4506 (EB65.2), ZA4526 (EB66.1), ZA4530 (EB67.2), ZA4565 (EB68.1), ZA4744 (EB69.2), ZA4819 (EB70.1), ZA4971 (EB71.1), ZA4973 (EB71.3), ZA4994 (EB72.4), ZA5234 (EB73.4), ZA5549 (EB74.2), ZA5481 (EB75.3), ZA5567 (EB76.3)
Spain	1985-2007	“¿Cuáles son, a su juicio, los tres problemas principales que existen actualmente en España?” (What, in your opinion, are the three main problems that currently exist in Spain?) (CIS)	El Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS) http://www.cis.es/cis/export/sites/default/-Archivos/Indicadores/documentos_html/TresProblemas.html www.ub.edu/spanishpolicyagendas

United Kingdom	1943-2008	<p>“What is the most important problem facing the country at the present time?” / “Which would you say is the most urgent problem facing the country at the present time?” (Gallup)</p> <p>“What would you say is the most important issue facing Britain today?” (Ipsos-MORI)</p>	<p>www.policyagendas.org.uk</p>
United States	1947-2012	<p>“What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?” (Gallup)</p>	<p>www.policyagendas.org</p>

Note: responses are normalized to total 100 percent for each poll, as some surveys allow multiple responses. Jennings and Wlezien (2012) find that the number of permitted MIP responses has little effect on the standardized aggregate proportion compared to those bounded at 100 percent. There are therefore no threats to inference from national variations in survey methodology.