

# 6

## The Canadian Agendas Project

*Jean-Philippe Gauvin and Éric Montpetit*

The Canadian Agendas Project was instigated in 2004 by Stuart Soroka, who sought to measure legislative activity and government responsiveness to public opinion by adapting the codebook of the US Policy Agendas Project. Since then, many researchers have contributed to the project, multiplying datasets on a diversity of agendas. Most datasets were produced with documents that highlight governmental activity and include oral questions, Speeches from the Throne, and governmental bills among others.

### 6.1 The Canadian Political System

Canada's political system combines British parliamentarism with federalism, giving rise to unique patterns of policymaking. As in the United Kingdom, Canada is a constitutional monarchy, with Queen Elizabeth II acting as symbolic head of state. Her majesty's representative in Canada is the governor general, who mostly has a ceremonial role. Canada also has a Westminster-style parliament, with a prime minister as head of government. Finally, Canada has a federal system, comprised of ten provinces and three territories.

This specific combination of Westminster parliamentarism and federalism grants intergovernmental relations some importance for policymaking. On the one hand, the Westminster type of parliamentarism concentrates powers in the hands of the executive branch. In other words, the prime minister and cabinet exert considerable control over the policy agenda (Savoie, 1999). The principle of responsible government in fact requires government to define policy priorities, present budgets, and introduce most bills while keeping the confidence of the House of Commons. Party discipline ascertains confidence and therefore the government's control of the agenda diminishes only on the rare occasions when the governing party cannot count on a majority of

seats in the House of Commons. On the other hand, federalism divides powers territorially, among the provinces and territories. In their exclusive spheres of jurisdiction, provinces are free to prioritize whichever issues they choose. In a context of policymaking complexity, however, intergovernmental relations among the members of the federal and provincial's executive branches have gained in importance, in some cases at the expense of federal and provincial legislative assemblies.

Owing to the decentralization of the Canadian federation, provinces now play a large role in governance and policymaking (Atkinson et al., 2013). Many policy innovations come from provinces, before diffusing across the country. In the last decade, the provinces have also demonstrated more leadership in specific domains, such as the environment, given the relative disengagement of the federal government. Textbooks point to an era of collaborative federalism (Simeon et al., 2014), in which intergovernmental relations become a way of improving policy through learning from each other's experience, even in policy domains where the federal government is relatively absent. These relations between sub-federal units (as well as federal-provincial relations) typically occur during sectoral meetings of ministers and deputy ministers, often prescheduled to happen once a year. During these meetings, priorities are negotiated and agreements are made. Between these meetings, civil servants from various governments interact with a view to implementing these priorities and agreements.

Federal politics in Canada revolves around three main parties, as well as a regional party limited to Quebec. Since 1921, governments have alternated between the right-wing Conservative Party of Canada and the Liberal Party of Canada, which stands in the centre. The left spectrum of politics is occupied by the New Democratic Party, as well as by the Bloc Québécois, which only presents candidates in the province of Quebec. Provinces have their own party systems. As a result, most provincial parties are independent from their federal counterpart. While most provinces have Liberal, Conservative, and New Democratic parties, several of them are independent from their federal cousin. To illustrate, the Liberal Party of British Columbia is closer to the federal Conservative Party than it is to the Liberal Party of Canada. There are also several province-specific parties, notably the Wild Rose in Alberta and the Parti Québécois in Québec. In fact, Quebec's party system is the most distinct of all provinces owing to the importance of the independence issue in the province's politics since the end of the 1960s.

The federal government and the ten provinces use the same plurality voting system. Candidates compete in constituencies and the winner becomes a member of parliament (MP). The legislative branch in Canada is comprised of these elected MPs. The party that wins the most seats becomes the governing party and its leader becomes prime minister. The prime minister and cabinet form the executive branch.

At the pinnacle of the judicial branch is the Supreme Court of Canada. It is the highest court in the country and has been the final court of appeal since 1949. Prior to this date, final appeals were given by the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London. The role of courts in Canadian politics has increased since the adoption of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982. Since then, courts are authorized to overturn governmental and legislative decisions that interfere with some basic rights, adding to the court's role to settle jurisdictional disputes between the federal and provincial governments. The Supreme Court can also be called upon by government to provide opinions, so-called reference cases.

## 6.2 Canadian Political Agendas

The Canadian project covers some, but not all of the particularities of Canadian politics just presented (see Table 6.1). For instance, it has so far covered executive priorities as presented in Speeches from the Throne, some legislative activities, some Court decisions, and public opinion.

Like many other CAP projects, public opinion data are produced from survey questions on the most important problem (MIP). The question asks respondents: What is the most important problem facing Canadians today?; it was asked in Environics Focus Canada quarterly omnibus surveys from 1987 to 2009. These data exist both in quarterly periods and yearly averages. They are coded for main topics only.

The project initially aimed to measure how legislative activity in the Canadian House of Common reflected changes in public opinion. Two time series were thus created. One was a database of governmental bills that spanned the period 1968 to 2004 (Soroka and Blidook, 2005). This series included 1,852 observations and was coded for topic and subtopic, including multiple subtopics when necessary. This series is currently being expanded from 1960 to 2010. A second series was produced using oral questions. While

**Table 6.1.** Canadian Political Agendas datasets

	Indicator	Period covered	CAP ready	N
Public	Most important problem	1987–2009	2018	1,322
Legislative	Oral questions	1982–2004	2018	43,426
	Government bills	1960–2010	Expected 2019	3,646
Executive	Speeches from the Throne (federal)	1960–2009	2018	8,147
	Speeches from the Throne (provinces)	1960–2009	Expected 2019	108,606
	Intergovernmental meetings	1969–2015	Expected 2019	3,468
Judiciary	Supreme Court decisions	1960–2010	Expected 2020	4,875
	Leave to appeal	1990–2010	Expected 2020	10,835

Source: Comparative Agendas Project—Canada

formal rules were established and codified in 1964, the practice of the Question Period exists since the beginning of the Confederation in 1867 and provides the opportunity for the opposition to hold government accountable by criticizing its policies and administration. A total of 43,426 questions and answers were coded between 1982 and 2004 for topic, subtopic, date, length, and which MPs asked and answered the questions (Soroka, 2005).

A second phase of the project focused on executive priorities. The Speeches from the Throne were chosen as the main indicator of such priorities. Such Speeches are delivered at the beginning of every legislative session and typically serve to announce the government's plans for the coming year. Using multiple trained coders, the federal and provincial Speeches were coded from 1960 to 2009. In total, 117,146 quasi-sentences were coded for topic and subtopic. The main objective of this research was to study federalism in Canada, comparing federal and provincial priorities (Montpetit, 2012). Following this research, Gauvin et al. (2014) looked at how intergovernmental meetings in Canada shaped these executive priorities. Meetings between ministers and deputy ministers typically occur each year in a variety of policy sectors. These meetings serve to decide upon common nationwide priorities and to harmonize policies. The Canadian Intergovernmental Conference Secretariat (CICS) maintains a registry of these conferences. Each meeting file was coded for topic, as well as multiple variables such as presence of federal government, location of meeting, presence of a press release, etc. A total of 3,468 meeting files that span the years 1969 to 2014 are included in the dataset.

The Canadian project is currently investigating the work of the Supreme Court of Canada. Decisions of the Court are being coded for both topic and subtopic over the period of 1960 to 2010. Looking at distributions of judiciary attention can lead to insightful conclusions about courts' involvement in policy decisions. Furthermore, in the Canadian judiciary system, appellants can apply for leave to appeal, which if granted will allow them to go plead their case in a higher court. Granted motions for leave to appeal in the Supreme Court are currently being coded for the period 1990–2010. By looking at both inputs and outputs of the judiciary system, it will be possible to see if the Supreme Court is actually responsive to citizens' demands for the revision of government policy.

### **6.3 Contributions of the Project and Perspectives**

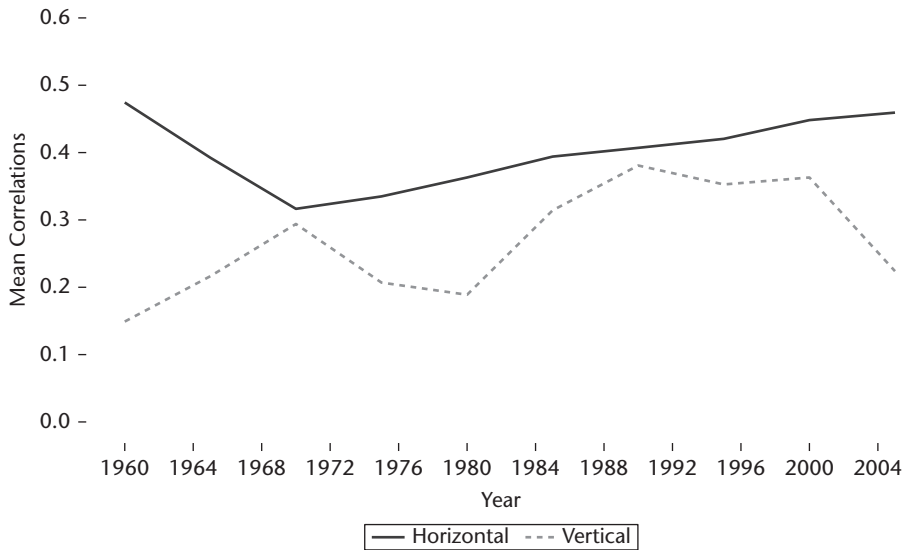
Since its beginning, the Canadian CAP's primary objective has been to collect data on policy agendas in order to analyze possible interactions between them. As mentioned earlier, Canadian policymaking is heavily influenced by a key feature of its political system: the combination of Westminster parliamentarism, federalism, and judiciary.

To get a better understanding of policymaking as conditioned by these features of the Canadian system, the project first looked at the relationship between legislative attention and public opinion through the study of oral questions. Using oral question and public opinion data, Soroka et al. (2006) asked whether federal legislators were responsive to the public's agenda. The authors find that when focusing on four major topics, namely health, education, debt, and taxes, parties' agendas vary in ways that reflect public opinion. Going even further into the analysis of oral questions, Soroka et al. (2009) found that individual MP's questions were driven by specific constituency characteristics, suggesting the existence of a dyadic representation in the Canadian parliamentary system.

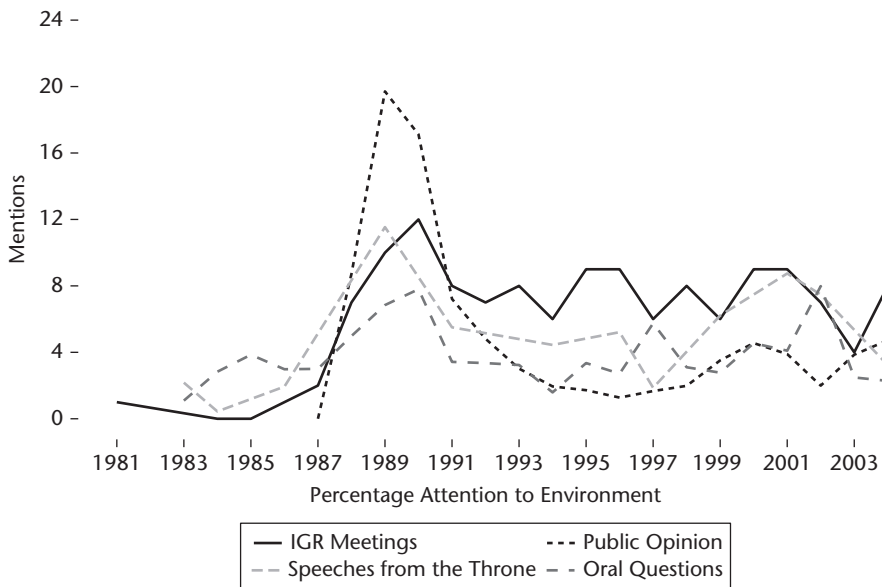
Second, the project looked at the impact of federalism on executive priorities. It asked the following question: Since federal systems multiply actors and potential veto points, does it lead to more stalemates than found in unitary systems? When comparing Canadian priorities as expressed in Speeches from the Throne with those of the United Kingdom, Montpetit and Foucault (2012) found that while federal systems do lead to constrained policy changes immediately after a government change, the following years present opportunities for larger changes in policy attention than found in the United Kingdom. Further study of these documents looked at correlations of attention between federal and sub-federal units and found interprovincial correlations to be stronger than federal-provincial correlations (Montpetit, 2012; Montpetit and Foucault, 2014). Figure 6.1 shows the correlations in attention from the federal to the provincial level (vertical), and across the provinces (horizontal).

Figure 6.1 shows that interprovincial priorities steadily have been growing in similarity since 1970, while correlations of federal-provincial priorities go in cycles. This suggests that interprovincial collaboration grows steadily while federal-provincial relations go through periods of increases and decreases in similarity. Montpetit and Foucault (2014) speculated that these patterns affect policymaking in Canada. Gauvin et al. (2014) expanded on this research and looked at the precise impact of intergovernmental relations on policy priorities. Combining data on IGR meetings with both public opinion data and Speeches from the Throne, analyses show that executive priorities are heavily influenced by both IGR meetings and public opinion. These results further support the idea that intergovernmental relations in Canada shape policy agendas in significant ways.

Studying the interactions between different political agendas in Canada remains the main objective of the project for the years to come. Existing datasets will be updated and other sources of data are to be coded. However, the project's current datasets already provide interesting insights into the Canadian policymaking process. For instance, Figure 6.2 presents attention to the environment in four distinct agendas.



**Figure 6.1.** Federal-provincial and interprovincial correlations in issue attention  
 Source: Comparative Agendas Project—Canada



**Figure 6.2.** Attention to environment across series  
 Source: Comparative Agendas Project—Canada

Figure 6.2 shows that attention to this topic seems to follow a similar pattern over time and across the different agendas. The Canadian data are rich in observations of this sort that have yet to be investigated. The availability of similar data collected by the other projects also offer ample opportunities for comparative analyses. In short, the Canadian Agendas Project promises to make a significant contribution to the understanding of the country's policy-making process.

## References

- Atkinson, M. M., Béland, D., Marchilison, G. P. et al. (2013). *Governance and Public Policy in Canada: A View from the Provinces*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Gauvin, Jean-P., Montpetit, É., and Foucault, M. (2014). Intergovernmental Meetings and the Politics of Attention in Canada. Presented at the CAP conference, Lisbon, June 23.
- Montpetit, É. (2012). Are Interprovincial Relations Becoming More Important than Federal-Provincial Ones. *Federal News*, 3: 1–6.
- Montpetit, É., and Foucault, M. (2012). Canadian Federalism and Change in Policy Attention: A Comparison with the United Kingdom. *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 45(3): 635–56.
- Montpetit, É., and Foucault, M. (2014). On the Relative Neglect of Horizontal Intergovernmental Relations in Canada. In *The Changing Federal Environment: Rebalancing Roles?* ed. N. Verrelli. Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 195–214.
- Savoie, D. J. (1999). *Governing from the Center: The Concentration of Political Power in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Simeon, R., Robinson, I., and Wallner, J. (2014). The Dynamics of Canadian Federalism. In *Canadian Politics*, ed. J. Bickerton and Alain-G. Gagnon, 6th ed. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 65–92.
- Soroka, S. N., Penner, E., and Blidook, K. (2006). Legislative Priorities and Public Opinion: The Representation of Partisan Agendas in the Canadian House of Commons. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 13(7): 1006–20.
- Soroka, S. N., Penner, E., and Blidook, K. (2009). Constituency Representation in Parliament. *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 42(3): 563–91.