

## The Portuguese Policy Agendas Project

*Ana Maria Belchior and Enrico Borghetto*

The Portuguese Agendas Project was born out of the collaboration between two Portuguese universities, the University of Lisbon and the University Nova of Lisbon, and encompasses three different but complementary projects.<sup>1</sup> Part of the output of these projects was the creation of several datasets tracing the distribution of policy attention across the media, parliamentary, and governmental agendas. Depending on data availability, the data collection and coding went as far back in time as 1995 and stopped in 2015 (datasets will be kept updated). All the projects received the financial support of the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT).

### 16.1 The Portuguese Political System

Portugal does not perfectly fit into any of the classic regime types. Following Elgie (1999), recent scholarship (Neto and Lobo, 2009; Jalali, 2011) has tended to classify the Portuguese political system as semi-presidential, since the government is politically accountable towards both a president directly elected for a fixed term and the parliament. The president is endowed with legislative and non-legislative powers and has occasionally decided to use them (at times with success), but government leadership constitutionally and substantively rests in the hands of the prime minister (PM).

In its relationship with the unicameral parliament (the Assembleia da República) the government has the duty of keeping the 230 MPs informed about its cabinet and the public administration's decisions. To do so, PM and ministers participate in floor and committee debates on various occasions during the four-year legislative term. Either parliamentary groups or individual MPs can exert oversight or try to influence the agenda of the executive by

either presenting a motion, by submitting interpellations, written and oral questions to the government, or by holding inquiries. Against the backdrop of a legislative function more and more dominated by the government over the years, the Portuguese parliament has seen its non-legislative functions reinforced (Leston-Bandeira, 2004; Norton and Leston-Bandeira, 2005).

All in all, the Portuguese parliamentary system has been described as highly cohesive and party-centered and, as a result, party discipline has generally been taken to be rather strong in Portugal (Leston-Bandeira, 2004, 2009; Lobo et al., 2012: 33–4). MPs, almost without exception, tend to follow the party line and parties mediate the relationship between MPs and voters (Leston-Bandeira, 2009: 698), so much so that, it has been shown, their perception of voters' political views does not necessarily influence their parliamentary behavior (Belchior, 2014). The closed-list proportional representation system (d'Hondt method) in force since 1976, two years after the Carnation Revolution that brought the authoritarian regime to an end, contributed to weakening a direct linkage between voters and elected representatives at the constituency level.

The configuration of the Portuguese party system was established soon after the revolution of April 25, 1974, and, apart from a few exceptions, has shown a considerable stability over time. The center-left Socialist Party (Partido Socialista—PS), founded in 1973, and the center-right Social Democratic Party (Partido Social Democrata—PSD, initially called PPD), founded in 1974, immediately became the country's largest parties. They are commonly considered catch-all parties or cartel parties and have alternated in government (either alone or in coalition) since 1987. With a few exceptions, the tendency has been for voting to be concentrated on these two centrist political parties: together they have consistently received around 70 percent of the votes.

To the right of the PSD is the Democratic and Social Center—People's Party (Partido do Centro Democrático e Social—Partido Popular—CDS-PP). Closest to a modern cadre type of party (e.g., Lopes, 2004: 33, 36–8), it represents mainly Christian-democratic values and conservative voters. Despite its small size in electoral terms (usually attracting less than 10 percent of the vote), the CDS-PP has been a government partner of the PSD on several occasions.

The radical left wing of the political spectrum is occupied by two parties. The Portuguese Communist Party (Partido Comunista Português—PCP), inspired by a Marxist-Leninist ideology, is the only one to approximate the classic definition of a mass party (e.g., Lopes, 2004: 79; Lisi, 2011). It was founded in 1921 and it is the only political formation that resisted the major hardships of the dictatorship period and had a concomitantly clandestine existence. Since 1987, the PCP has always run for election in coalition

(CDU—United Democratic Coalition) with the Greens (PEV—The Greens). The Left Block (Bloco de Esquerda—BE) is a left-libertarian party which gained its first parliamentary seats only in 1999. In the last ten years, the vote share for both parties in political elections has fluctuated between 5 and 10 percent.

## 16.2 Coding Issues and Data

The Portuguese codebook contains twenty-one major and 217 minor topic areas. Mostly, it follows the CAP Master Codebook, but for a few minor topic areas added to reflect the peculiarities of the Portuguese system and the specific research interests of the research team. Code 615 was added to track everything related to the career and training of school employees. All matters concerning social security and unemployment benefits were aggregated under 1309 to account for the fact that the same institution, the institute of Social Security (*Segurança Social*), is in charge of the two policies in Portugal. Finally, 2050 was added to capture matters related to former colonies and events leading to their independence. Coding activities started in 2011 and, so far, include six types of documents. In all cases the analysis was carried out by two trained coders working independently. Cases of intercoder disagreement were resolved in meetings with one of the principal investigators.

The parliamentary agenda (see Table 16.1) was measured by coding written parliamentary questions and oral questions put to the prime minister (PM) and ministers on the floor (also called “question time”). As far as written parliamentary questions are concerned, the 2007 reform discriminated between the debates with the PM and the ministers, and a new form of written questions, called *perguntas ao governo* (questions to the cabinet). There is no limit to the amount of *perguntas ao governo* an MP (or a group of MPs) can ask. Each question can be addressed to one administrative unit only (the same question has to be repeated for the number of addressees) and only addressed to senior or junior ministers (not to public officials or local administrations). When concerning different cities or geographical areas, it can be duplicated accordingly. There is an obligation for the government to answer questions within thirty days, and questions not getting an answer are published in a public list posted on the parliament’s website.

The practice of questioning the cabinet on the floor goes back to the first years of the democracy (Borghetto and Russo, 2018). Yet, at least until the 2000s, it remained one of the “most criticized scrutiny devices.” These sessions used to take place on Friday mornings and rarely managed to attract media attention. In the early phase, it was even possible for the government to choose which questions to answer and their order (Leston-Bandeira, 2004).

**Table 16.1.** Portuguese Policy Agendas

Dataset (unit of analysis)	Period covered	No. of Observations	Source
Oral parliamentary questions to the prime minister on the floor (every detected question)	2003–15 (9th–12th legislature)	2,385 oral questions	parlamento.pt
Oral parliamentary questions to the ministers on the floor (every detected question)	2003–15 (9th–12th legislature)	1,540 oral questions	parlamento.pt
Written parliamentary questions to the cabinet (every tabled question)	2007–15 (10th–12th legislature)	26,657 written questions	parlamento.pt
Party manifestos (every party pledge)	1995–2011 (7th–11th legislature)	5,630 pledges in manifestos	Electoral manifestos available in an election
PM speeches (every quasi-sentence referring to policy issues)	2002–11 (9th–11th legislature)	2,468 quasi-sentences	Prime ministers' speeches when taking office and other executive speeches
Media (every heading on newspaper's front page referring to policy issues)	1995–2015	34,810 headings	Mainstream newspaper <i>Público</i>

Source: Comparative Agendas Project—Portugal

Nowadays the debate receives considerable media coverage and it has become an important stage for the confrontation between opposition party front-benchers and the PM. The 2007 reform (and its partial revision in 2010) made the debate with the PM more frequent (from once to twice a month) and it enabled two debate formats: one allows the PM to speak first and then receive one round of questions on matters related to his/her intervention; the other leaves parliamentary groups free rein to ask one round of questions. In both cases, speakers have to communicate the general topic of their interventions at least 24-hours in advance. Time is allocated among parliamentary groups proportionally to their size and can be used all in one round or partitioned. Every minister has to appear on the floor at least once per legislative session (in line with art 225<sup>o</sup> of the Standing Orders reformed in 2007), in compliance with a schedule agreed by the Speaker, the cabinet and the Conference of Leaders (Filipe, 2009). In practice, these debates have rarely been scheduled.

Another major source of data on party agendas is electoral platforms. Unlike other CAP members, the unit of analysis in the Portuguese case is the party pledge. Using the definition and methodology developed by Royed (1996), we assessed to what extent each electoral pledge was converted into a political decision, searching many different sources, such as experts and journalists' reports, official websites, making direct phone calls to public departments, or legislation databases. Royed classifies a "pledge" as: "the commitment to carry out some action or produce some outcome,

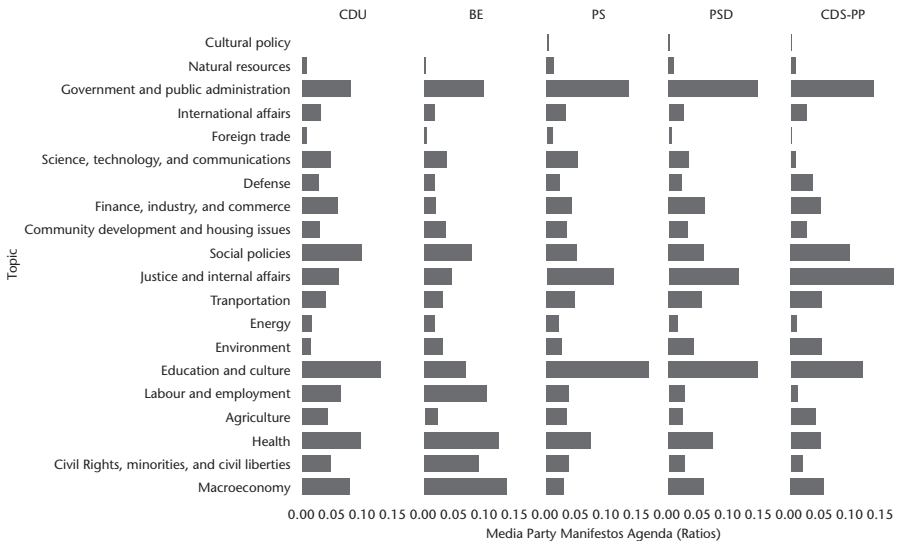
where an objective estimation can be made as to whether or not the action was indeed taken or the outcome produced” (1996: 79). Only precise and verifiable promises were included. Pledges have been coded as: fulfilled, unfulfilled, partially fulfilled, and no decision (if there is no available information). Each party pledge was simultaneously coded with the Party Pledges Group and the CAP coding systems. We included every party with parliamentary representation from 1995 until 2015.

To analyze the distribution of policy attention in the governmental agenda, we coded politically relevant PM speeches in the period between 2002 and 2011. These include: the PM speeches when taking office and at the moment of presenting the government’s program (within ten days of his/her appointment); the yearly PM interventions during the parliamentary debate on the state of the nation (in one of the last ten meetings of the legislative session, the PM presents an account of salient decisions taken or to be taken by its executive, followed by questions from parliamentary groups); the discussion of the state budget; Christmas messages and speeches delivered in other relevant occasions, such as political crises.

Finally, our analysis of the media agenda relied on the coding of all the front-page article’s headings of one mainstream Portuguese daily newspaper (*Público*, which is a leading quality newspaper). Newspapers in Portugal do not follow a party line and, for that reason, the analysis of media solely focused on a single newspaper. The dataset includes all available editions between 1995 and 2015, corresponding to a total of 7,260 front pages, and 34,810 articles/headings.

### 16.3 Party Pledges: Exemplifying on a Specificity

Figure 16.1 uses data on party pledges in electoral platforms to show that the distribution in issue attention differs across types of party. Extreme left-wing parties in Portugal (CDU and BE) present electoral platforms much more focused on macroeconomics, health, social policy, labor and employment issues, when compared to other parties. Catch-all parties (PS and PSD) exhibit a significant overlapping in terms of policy issue attention: they are more focused on education and culture, government issues and (to a lesser extent) to justice and internal affairs. Their policy attention is much more concentrated in comparison with the two left-most parties. In general, the thematic profile of the Portuguese conservatives (CDS-PP) resembles the catch-all parties’, although they devote more attention to justice and internal affairs. It must be recalled that the CDS-PP has already been part of coalition governments with both catch-all parties, although more often with PSD.



**Figure 16.1.** Party pledges in Portugal, 1995–2011 (ratios)  
 Source: Comparative Agendas Project—Portugal

### 16.4 Final Remarks

The data collected and coded by the Portuguese policy agendas team represent a new and valuable resource for scholars interested in deepening their knowledge on media, parliamentary, and governmental policy attention in Portugal. Besides the current ongoing projects (Borghetto and Belchior, forthcoming), future efforts will be directed to either increase the data time span or to collect new data (for example, regarding legislative bills, the budget, and the press releases of the Council of Ministers).

### Note

1. Party Pledge and Democratic Accountability: The Portuguese Case from a Comparative Perspective”—PTDC/CPJ-CPO/111915/2009 (2010 to 2014) coordinated by Catherine Moury; “Public Preferences and Policy Decision-Making: A Longitudinal and Comparative Analysis”—PTDC/IVC-CPO/3921/2012 (2013 to 2015) coordinated by Ana Maria Belchior; and “Portuguese Parliament: Agenda-Setting and Law-making”—IF/00382/2014 (2016 to 2020) coordinated by Enrico Borghetto.

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