

The UK Policy Agendas Project

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20.1 The UK Policy Agendas Project

Through a series of collaborations and research grants, the UK Policy Agendas Project has collected a wide range of data on the policy agendas of major institutional venues in British politics and on the public and media agendas. This began with a small grant from the British Academy to support coding the policy content of Speech from the Throne over the post-war period (John, 2005), along with the collection of historical Gallup poll data on public opinion about the most important problem (Jennings and John, 2009). The datasets were extended back in time and further datasets were added—including budgets, Acts of UK Parliament, front-page stories of *The Times of London*, Prime Minister’s Questions, and bills and hearings of the Scottish Parliament—under a grant from the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (John et al., 2008). These data underpin the book *Policy Agendas in British Politics* (John et al., 2013), which summarized our key findings on policy stability and instability—developing a theory of “focused adaptation” to explain patterns of policy change, characterized by structural breaks in time series of issue attention. Since ESRC-funding ended in 2012, the UK Project has continued updating several of the datasets and generating new data sources through collaborations, such as on UK party manifestos (Froio et al., 2016), reports of parliamentary select committees (Bevan et al., 2018), and statutory instruments (Bevan, 2015).

20.2 The UK Political System and Agenda-Setting

The United Kingdom’s political system takes the form of a majoritarian parliamentary democracy (influential as the Westminster model of parliamentary

democracy adopted by many other countries). Members of the lower house of the legislature (the “House of Commons”) are elected via a first-past-the-post electoral system in single-member districts, while members of the upper house (the “House of Lords”) are largely political appointees alongside a small number of hereditary peers. The prime minister is the member of the House of Commons who is able to command the support of a majority of the Commons, forming the executive from members of both Houses and exercising executive powers on behalf of the monarch.

There are a range of institutional venues in which governments, parties, and legislators can set the agenda in the UK political system. Formally, UK governments set out their legislative and executive agenda in the Speech from the Throne (also known as the King’s or Queen’s Speech), which opens each session of Parliament (see Jennings et al., 2011a). This is typically done on an annual basis, though on occasion speeches have been presented more than once in a year (e.g., 1921, 1974) or skipped a year where the parliamentary session was extended (e.g., 2010–12). While the speech provides a high profile signal of the priorities of the executive, the government enacts its policy agenda via primary legislation (Acts of UK Parliament). In recent decades the number of acts passed by the UK government has declined—and it instead has made use of omnibus legislation that combines policy measures, expanded its use of secondary legislation and handed over decision-making authority to independent regulatory agencies and supra-national bodies such as the European Union. The executive still maintains considerable discretionary power through statutory instruments—often empowered under the terms of previous legislation—though these typically are not a venue for symbolic agenda-setting.

Formal channels for the opposition to set the policy agenda in the UK Parliament are relatively limited, though “urgent questions” (granted by the Speaker of the House of Commons) and Opposition Day Debates give it opportunities to draw attention to specific issues. The most prominent parliamentary venue for holding UK government to account is the weekly Prime Minister’s Questions (PMQs), where the opposition leader(s) and MPs have the opportunity to highlight issues or concerns—often impacting on the media agenda by setting the content of later news bulletins. In recent decades, development of the system of parliamentary select committees has created venues in which cross-party groups of legislators—independent of government or opposition—can set the policy agenda through their inquiries, hearings, and reports. This reflects the growing dispersion of agenda-setting power in formal institutional venues in the UK political system. Also integral to this is the process of devolution that the United Kingdom has undergone since the late 1990s, which has seen the creation of new venues for agenda-setting—the devolved legislatures in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland—and given

prominence to new actors, first ministers, as leaders of the devolved governments. Beyond the United Kingdom's patchwork of institutional rules and arrangements that create multiple formal venues for agenda-setting, there are of course many informal settings in which both elites, organized interests, and citizens can seek to shape the agenda—often funneled through traditional news media, and now increasingly via social media.

20.3 Project and Data

20.3.1 *The UK Coding System, Protocols, and Reliability*

The original coding system of the UK Project was directly adapted from the codebook of the US Policy Agendas Project, with very few adjustments. Most major and subtopics translate very well to UK public policy (and the public's issue agenda). For purposes of coding and data use, we developed a national codebook with additional instructions and UK-specific examples to aid coders and data users. All UK data has now been coded in line with the Comparative Agendas Project coding system. Notable coding practices that apply to the United Kingdom specifically relate to the use of 1627 for domestic terrorism and 1927 for international terrorism. Another quirk of the coding system for the United Kingdom is that the 2105 topic is used for dependent territories of the British Empire/Commonwealth (which are then coded under international affairs once independence is achieved) and for control of UK government over its countries (e.g., Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland), dependencies (e.g., the Isle of Man), territories (e.g., Bermuda, Falkland Islands), and for members of the Commonwealth where the Queen is head of state. One dataset where coding has had to break convention is for the Ipsos MORI "most important issue" series. The pollster's coding of survey responses groups together the issues of defence and international affairs, major topics 16 and 19 respectively in the CAP coding system. The decision was taken to code these responses as international affairs. This means that it may be advisable to merge topics 16 and 19 when using UK data on the public agenda.

The majority of the UK data was double-blind coded by postgraduate or postdoctoral students.¹ While levels of intercoder reliability varied somewhat across datasets it was generally consistent, typically in the region of 85 percent to 90 percent reliability at the major topic level. Following this initial phase, all coded data were subject to an intensive moderation process, led by one or more of the project leaders, which included the resolution of any coding disagreements, random checks of agreed codes, and targeted checks on identified problem areas. Importantly, our approach to coding classification is "open source," so wherever it is possible (i.e., when not constrained

by copyright restrictions), the raw data needed to code each dataset (e.g., the long and short title of Acts of UK Parliament or the full text of the Speech from the Throne) is made publicly available. This enables other researchers to check, and provide feedback/corrections on, our coding. It also allows other researchers to add to or easily build on our work (e.g., Annesley et al., 2015).

20.3.2 *Comparing Cross-Nationally*

The UK data series have a high degree of comparability to those for other parliamentary systems and advanced democracies in general. This has been consistently demonstrated by comparative studies; which have used the Speech from the Throne and similar executive speeches (Breeman et al., 2009; Jennings et al., 2011b; Mortensen et al., 2011), Acts of UK Parliament and primary legislation (Brouard et al., 2009; Bevan and Jennings, 2014), and PMQs and parliamentary questions (Vliegenthart et al., 2016).

As with any comparative analysis, one must be aware of institutional differences when using the data. For example, the United Kingdom produces a relatively small number of pieces of primary legislation compared to legislatures in other countries across the Comparative Agendas Project, on average around fifty Acts of Parliament a year. This is due in part to the UK government's heavy use of delegated legislation, where "statutory instruments" (secondary legislation) are able to fulfill many tasks reserved for primary legislation in other systems (see Bevan, 2015). This means that level-differences must be controlled for when comparing with legislatures that produce far more pieces of legislation (such as US Congress). Similarly, the Speech from the Throne provides a formal statement of the intended programme of the government, read by the monarch, but does not typically seek to influence other political actors or groups through rhetoric and symbolism in the same way as the US president's State of the Union Address (which can be substantially longer than the UK speech). While the UK data is entirely appropriate for cross-national comparisons, slight differences in the institutional function or logic of equivalent agenda venues in other countries need to be understood before use.

20.3.3 *Datasets*

The data collected for the United Kingdom include measures of prominent institutional agendas of British politics and government (covering both the executive and the legislature), as well as measures of the public and media agenda. The timeline of when particular data was collected and updated/

Table 20.1. Timeline of data releases for the UK Policy Agendas Project

Phase	Pilot	Extension	Expansion	Current
Period	2005–6	2006–8	2008–12	2012–present
Team	John	John and Jennings	John, Jennings, Bevan, Halpin, and Bertelli	Bevan and Jennings
Funders	British Academy	LSE Manchester	ESRC Manchester	Mannheim Edinburgh Southampton
Speech from the Throne (King’s and Queen’s Speech)	1945–2005	1945–2005	1911–2010*	1911–2016
Acts of UK Parliament		1945–2008	1911–2008	1911–2016
Public opinion (the most important problem/issue)		1960–2001	1960–2008	1944–2016
Public expenditure by function of UK government			1911–2007	1911–2007
Media (front-page headlines of <i>The Times of London</i>)			1960–2008	1960–2008
Prime Minister’s Questions			1998–2008	1998–2008
Public opinion, Scotland (the most important issue)			1998–2008	1998–2008
Bills/Acts of Scottish Parliament			1999–2008	1999–2008
Hearings of Committees of Scottish Parliament			1999–2007	1999–2007
Party election manifestos				1983–2008
Reports of Select Committees of UK Parliament				1997–2014
Statutory Instruments of UK Parliament				1987–2008
Prorogation speech				1975–2016

Note: * Recoding of the Speech data as part of ESRC project.

Source: Comparative Agendas Project—United Kingdom

extended is summarized in Table 20.1. This highlights the expansion of the number of venues covered by the project over the time period between 2005 and 2018.

20.4 Insights from the UK Policy Agendas Project Data

The UK Project has produced a wide range of outputs that draw on its data on policy, public and media agendas. Our data is introduced and described in most detail in *Policy Agendas in British Politics* (John et al., 2013), which traces attention of British government to different policy topics since 1945. This shows, for example, how crime has risen on the agenda since the 1950s, though dropped during the late 2000s around the time the global financial

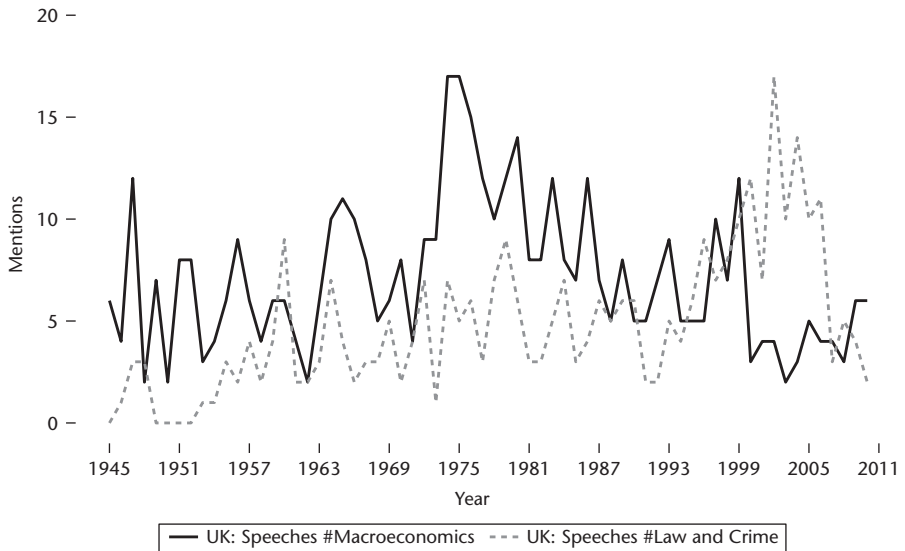


Figure 20.1. Frequency of mentions of the economy and law and crime in the Speech from the Throne, 1945–2012

Source: Comparative Agendas Project—United Kingdom

crisis hit. This is shown in Figure 20.1. The economy is notable for its “squeezing out” effect on other issues (Jennings et al., 2011a).

Broadly, publications from the project team have tended to focus on the themes of policy change and responsiveness to public opinion. Studies of policy stability have shown the uneven distribution of policy change (e.g., John and Jennings, 2010; John and Bevan, 2012), as depicted in Figure 20.2, with the dominant central peak indicating high levels of incrementalism in policymaking attention to issues and fat tails equated with occasional large and sudden shifts in attention.

Some work has looked at the transmission of attention from one venue to another, such as from Speeches to Acts of UK Parliament (Bevan et al., 2011) or from party manifestos to Acts (Froio et al., 2016). Other research has looked at the link between public opinion and policy agendas (Jennings and John, 2009; John et al., 2011; Bevan and Jennings, 2014; Bevan, 2015). Aside from core outputs related to the project, other scholars have used the UK data for their analyses, for example in studies of gender equality (Annesley et al., 2015) and crime (Miller 2016; also see Jennings et al., 2017). This UK Policy Agendas Project data therefore offers important insights into the issues that are attended to, or disregarded, by key political actors in and around British government, by the media and citizens more widely.

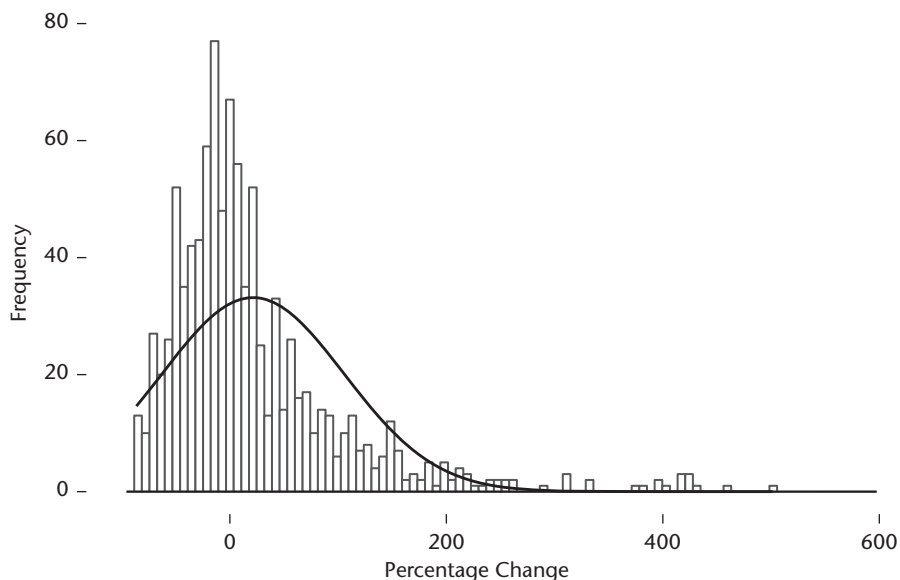


Figure 20.2. Distribution of percentage changes in attention to major policy topics in the Speech from the Throne, 1945–2012

Source: Comparative Agendas Project—United Kingdom

Note

1. There is one exception. Namely, the second coder for approximately 2/3rds of the PMQs dataset was a toolset now incorporated in RTextTools for supervised learning, which proved just as reliable as human coders despite difficulties often associated with oral questions.

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