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Agenda-Setting in the Florida Legislature

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Florida is the nation's third largest state and among the most racially, socio-economically, and politically diverse. Approximately 60 percent of the population is White, with Blacks and Latinos accounting for 16 and 17 percent of the population respectively. Nearly 20 percent of the population speaks Spanish, owning in large part to the Cuban and Caribbean diaspora. Florida's median income is slightly below the national average, but its income is among the most unequally distributed in the Union.

The Project is actively collecting and coding several datasets. The first and largest consists of approximately ten thousand bills, sponsored by members of the Florida House of Representatives in odd-numbered years, 1989–2015. The second dataset consists of media articles from the online aggregator Sayfie Review, which is widely read by members of the Florida state legislature and other policymakers. The third dataset uses policy-agendas codes to categorize biographical information of state legislators.

23.1 Florida

Florida is a rapidly growing diverse state whose political institutions are adapting to meet new realities and manage new challenges. The state's population has nearly doubled between 1989 and 2015, and several major metropolitan areas (Orlando, Jacksonville, Tampa, Miami-Ft. Lauderdale) reflect the growing diversity of its people. At the same time, the state's governing institutions have undergone significant changes in recent decades, including legislative term limits, revisions to the state constitution, and a shift in partisan control from Democratic to Republican.

The state legislature is part-time and semi-professionalized with 120 members in the lower chamber and forty in the upper chamber. Members of the House are elected every two years; Senators every four years. They meet sixty days each year and oversee a budget of approximately $83 billion. Florida's budget and appropriations process is handled through a single omnibus package. Relative to the US Congress, the Florida speaker of the house and Senate majority leader exercise substantial formal power in assigning members to committees, and control over the chamber rules. The governor is elected for a maximum of two four-year terms, and has seen his institutional powers grow as the state has taken on additional administrative tasks. From managing the state's economic growth, shaping the state judiciary, or mitigating the risks of climate change facing many of Florida's coastal cities, the governor has taken an increasing role in the affairs of the state.

The state's media environment has slowly adapted to the decline of print newspapers and the explosion of Internet media. Online aggregators such as the Sayfie Review or POLITICO Florida provide consumers with daily digests of political news, while traditional newspapers such as the *Tampa Bay Times* (formerly *St. Petersburg Times*) and the *Miami Herald* provide coverage of the activities of the government.

23.2 Extant Datasets

As the second sub-national project under the CAP umbrella, the Florida Policy Agendas Project is designed to replicate many of the processes of Pennsylvania, the first sub-national project.[1] By maintaining this continuity we can pursue true apples-to-apples comparisons of sub-national units. Florida's unique Sunshine Law requires transparency of most, if not all, activities of political elites, allowing us to maximize direct comparability to the Pennsylvania Project.

23.2.1 *Bills*

The primary dataset of the Project is a set of over ten thousand bills sponsored by the Florida House of Representatives. We predominantly chose odd-numbered years as they are the first year of the two-year session and not an election year.[2] Each member of the Florida House of Representative may propose only six substantive bills a year, making their bill proposal decisions critical. Each bill must be proposed and properly drafted before the start of each session. The Speaker largely controls which bills are assigned to committees. Additionally, committee chairs can absorb individual bills into so-called "committee bills," with different topics.[3]

Our work on the Florida legislature's bill proposals lead us to examine the linkages between legislators' personal preferences and obligations to their constituents. Legislators share relationships with each other that form a network of interdependent bill proposal choices, while also balancing the many needs of the electorate. At the end of this chapter, we provide an example of using our data to explore networks of bill proposals by members of the Florida House of Representatives.

23.2.2 *Biographical Data of Florida State Legislators*

As part of analyzing the behaviors of members of the Florida legislature, we have collected a comprehensive biographical dataset that encompasses ascriptive characteristics and traits, historical information, political backgrounds, and potential conflicts of interest. These data allow researchers to examine the role of personal attributes in agenda-setting.

Personal attributes—including gender and race to education, ambition, offices and jobs held, and marital status—were collected from legislators' own websites as well as aggregating datasets such as Project VoteSmart. Political attributes—committee assignment, party status, vote share, and membership in the party leadership—were obtained from the Florida House of Representatives archives and the state election bureaus. These data provide the potential for identifying common networks of lawmakers, providing identification strategies for the development of new agendas, or demonstrating associations between topics and lawmakers' backgrounds.

A unique aspect of the Florida Policy Agendas Project is its focus on the financial incentives of lawmakers. Due to the state's Sunshine Law, all politicians in the state must file annual financial disclosure forms. On each form they are required to list the source of all incomes, assets, or liabilities, (complete with the name of the company and an address) and the amount of each kind of income, asset, or liability. We are in the process of coding each source of income reported on financial disclosure forms using the Florida Policy Agendas Project codes. Legislators' incomes are primarily drawn from their careers in the law, or state government, or as entrepreneurs. Intercoder reliability before reconciliation is approximately 70 to 75 percent, largely due to the opacity surrounding the precise tasks of each source of income.

23.2.3 *Newspaper Data—the Sayfie Review*

In Florida, there are several major metropolitan areas, each with its own unique set of media institutions and history. As a result, there is no major statewide newspaper or media organization that both elites and the public read daily or weekly. The Sayfie Review, an online news digest, collected by a

well-connected Florida journalist and political insider and targeted for political elites, is our data source for media agendas coding. The Sayfie Review incorporates stories from major Florida newspapers as well as national news organizations. Additionally, the Review relies on subscribers to identify stories that the Review's staff do not initially publish, creating a quasi-crowdsourced media environment. In this way, stories read by the public are also pushed to politicians, providing the Florida Policy Agendas Project with a reliable, comprehensive source of political news.

The Sayfie Review began in 2005, limiting its historical application, but has maintained a similar theme throughout its existence. News stories are broadcast as one-sentence headlines (similar to the Huffington Post or Drudge Report) complete with an embedded link to the original article. The Project has scraped hundreds of thousands of Sayfie Review headlines and has begun coding.[4] Coding of these headlines has begun for 2011, 2013, and 2015.[5] We strive for major-topic intercoder reliability of 90 percent, despite the limits imposed by a headlines-only approach.

23.3 Codebook

The Florida Policy Agendas coding structure for topics and subtopics largely mirrors that of the various national projects, and heavily borrows from the Pennsylvania Policy Agendas Project (McLaughlin et al., 2010). While the topic and subtopic coding scheme developed by Pennsylvania is largely appropriate for Florida policy agendas, certain codes not relevant to the Florida economy, such as Code 805, "coal mining and production" were removed. Additionally, because Pennsylvania and Florida, the only two sub-national CAP projects in the United States, differ on several important dimensions (the Florida legislature is a term-limited legislature with a short, 60-day legislative session whereas the Pennsylvania legislature meets largely year-round and has no term limits), the codebook was developed to reflect attributes of the Florida legislature that drive policy agendas in ways very different from Pennsylvania.

The codebook was initially constructed in the summer of 2014. The codebook details the project history, developers, and provides detailed instructions for undergraduate coders. It also provides useful information for researchers wishing to utilize Florida Policy Agendas data.

23.4 Coder Training

Coders are primarily undergraduate university students trained to code bills, headlines, and legislator occupations according to the Comparative Agendas

Policy topic codes. Coders are generally trained for a month before being permitted to code data to be used in the analysis. Previously coded observations are used for training purposes. Coders are first trained to code observations according to CAP topic and subtopic, before proceeding to other variables (described below). Coders meet with the supervising graduate student once per week for training. Graduate supervisors check coders' intercoder reliability each week. Typically, coders begin with a 67 percent rate of agreement on main CAP codes, and 40 percent agreement on subtopics for bills and headlines. Coders are not permitted to code usable data for analysis until they reach over 90 percent agreement on main codes and 85 percent for subtopics (both bills and headlines). Students only code legislator occupations by main code; and, as with bills and headlines, are permitted to code usable data when intercoder reliability reaches 90 percent or more.

Zoho Creator, an existing coding interface, facilitates the implementation of the Comparative Agendas Coding framework. We balance and accomplish several objectives with this interface. First, we create a database of bills and newspaper articles that can be easily (and independently) coded by multiple coders and can be efficiently verified and reconciled. Second, we have built a system whereby the bills and news articles can be easily linked by date/constructed week. Third, we have developed a platform that can also be accessed by multiple coders remotely, so the coders can complete their coding assignments from their own computers and at their leisure. Finally, we are able to overcome the possible problem where coders could inadvertently delete data since Zoho Creator's dynamically updated datasets are hidden from coder view.

23.5 Data Example

The focus of the Florida Policy Agendas Project is on exploring the relationships between lawmakers, media inputs, and agendas. Florida's one-party dominance belies large areas where both Republicans and Democrats cooperate across partisan lines, and on nonpartisan issues, to address the needs of the rapidly growing state. We summarize this chapter by discussing some preliminary findings and promising avenues for future work.

Partisanship is not the primary reason why legislators work on particular agendas. Figure 23.1 shows the coalitions of Democrats (in black) and Republicans (in grey) on various agendas. Clearly, Democrats and Republicans work on issues together, rather than focusing on "Black State" or "Grey State" agendas. For example, we would expect Democrats to prioritize environmental issues and for Republicans to eschew environmental regulation, but we find Republicans eager to propose legislation on the environment.
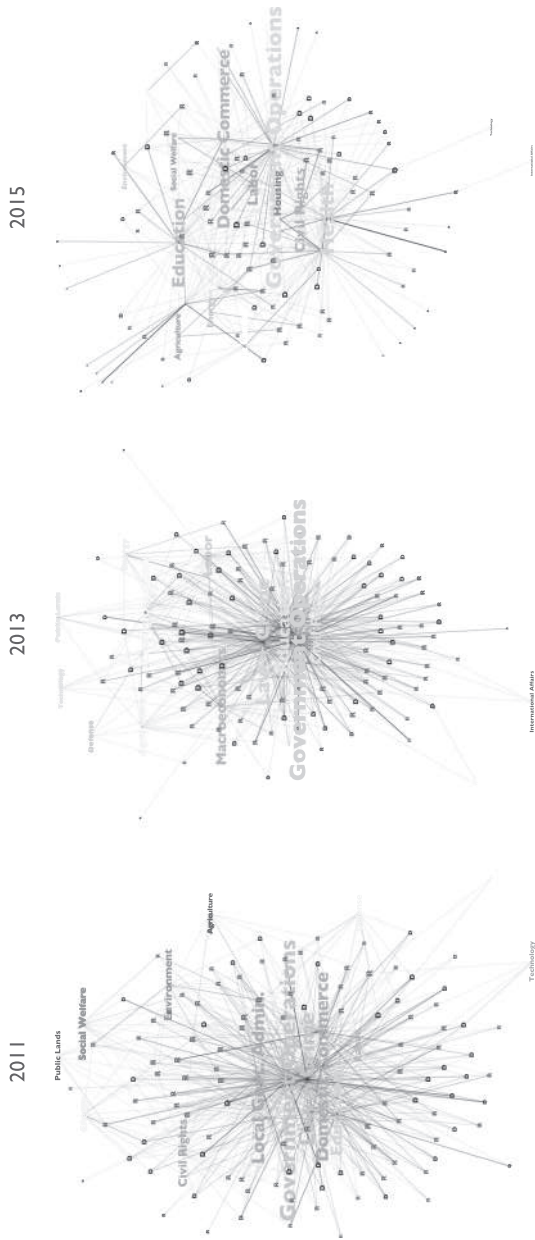
Figure 23.1. Communities of legislators and issues, by partisanship
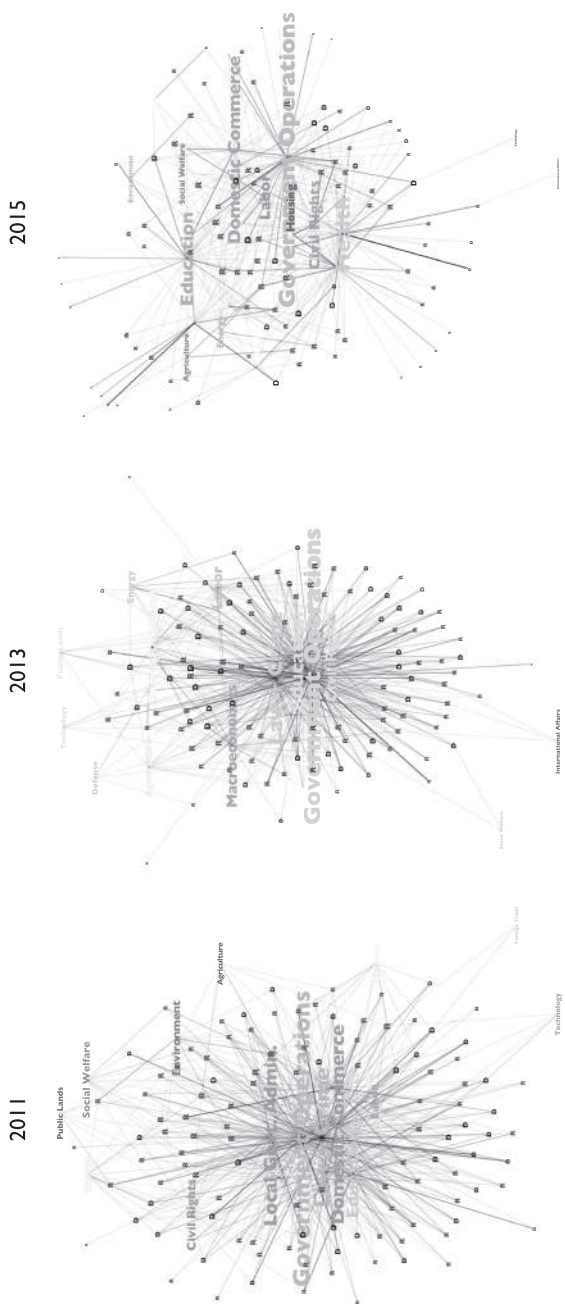*Source:* Comparative Agendas Project—Florida
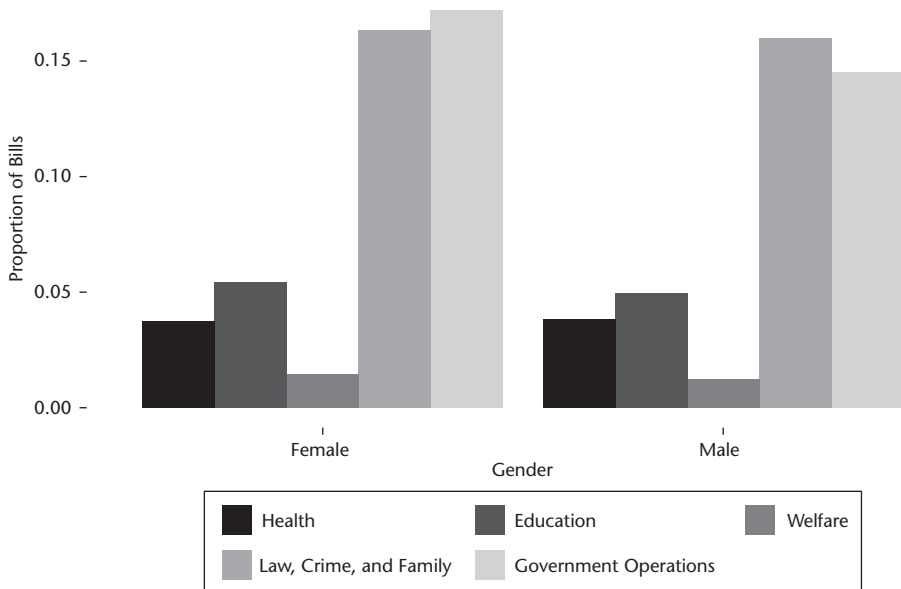
Figure 23.2. Proportion of bills introduced, for men and women, across "women's issue" topics

Source: Comparative Agendas Project—Florida

When partisanship fails to explain networks of bill proposals, we turn to other potential explanations. Gender is often used as an explanation of differing agendas, with "women's issues" and "men's issues" highlighted in the literature (Bratton and Haynie, 1999). And gender may be related to legislative effectiveness in the US Congress (Volden et al., 2013). Yet Florida's legislature does not appear to have a distinct set of "women's issues." As noted in Figure 23.2, gender does not illuminate differences between members of the Florida House of Representatives. The legislative priorities of women, and their ability to successfully implement those agendas, remains an open question in the American states.

Yet there are interesting linkages between legislators, and these can reveal how politicians work together to influence policy in the Sunshine State. In Figure 23.3 we provide visual evidence of the coalitions of lawmakers who propose legislation on similar agendas, and how those bill proposals form "topic communities" of agendas.

Colors indicate groups of lawmakers with similar policy agendas, as measured by the topics of bills they introduce. While partisanship is not a predictor of coalition membership, there do appear to be clear coalitions of lawmakers existing on various issues (and topic families). Even when ignoring predominant topics such as government operations, personal factors and not party or ideology appear important. Interestingly, despite stable Republican dominance and high

Figure 23.3. Communities of legislators and issues: "topic communities" by year

Source: Comparative Agendas Project—Florida

incumbent retention rates, the topic families themselves shift from year to year. For example, transportation and education formed a large topic family in 2013, but not in 2011 or 2015.

23.6 Conclusion

The Florida Agendas Project data have enabled collection of legislative and media outputs, consistent with the goals of the broader Comparative Agendas Project. Initial data analyses facilitated the examination of several important questions in the literature, such as the role of partisanship and gender in the development of agendas in the Florida legislature. As our project continues to accumulate data and explore other aspects of governance, we will provide data on a fascinating sub-national government with a unique set of cultures, political institutions, and economic institutions.

Notes

1. As stated in the Pennsylvania codebook, there are some policies that US sub-national governments do not attend to, including international trade. As such, the Florida Policy Agendas codes do not include those topics, while adding additional codes that US state governments prioritize. Our codes are identical to the codes Pennsylvania uses, to maximize comparison.
2. In election years, Florida legislators use bill proposals as position-taking documents to prepare for their election campaigns. When choosing when to begin collection of data, we prioritized odd-numbered years to avoid the potential of examining legislation where the lawmaker had no intention to change policies. As our project continues, we are coding even-numbered years with the objective of testing that empirical question.
3. While the original legislator cannot submit another bill proposal if one of their six bills is subsumed into a committee bill, committee bills do have the advantage of allowing the legislature to adapt to crises that arise after bills are proposed but before the legislative session ends. Without committee bills, Florida would only be able to react to emergencies in special sessions or the following calendar year.
4. The Project made a conscious decision to only code based on the headlines, rather than the underlying articles. While this introduces a source of error, the reasons to opt for a headlines-only approach are straightforward. Many Sayfie headlines from older years include broken embedded links. In recent years, newspapers have implemented paywalls as a revenue source. These combined pressures would create more nonrandom sources of error—through major selection effects—than coding based on headlines.
5. For the purposes of our research projects, we randomly sampled bills from these three years. Work on completing these years is ongoing.

References

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