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Gone Fishing

The Creation of the Comparative Agendas Project Master Codebook

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For the past decade, I have spent more time discussing fishing than I would have ever expected when I started my career in political science. Amazingly this is not because of an advisor's obsession with fishing,[1] the need to escape my work with a nice day along a river, or due to the unending series of *Deadliest Catch* marathons on the Discovery Channel since I started my graduate training. Instead my time contemplating and deliberating on fishing has been about policy, namely the difficulties in conducting comparative analyses of public policy across nations. To allow the pun, this research note fishes through the creation of the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) the finalization of the CAP Master Codebook and my time as a student, researcher, manager, faculty member, and ultimately director of the Master Codebook for the CAP. It is an effort to better understand CAP coding and data as well as the difficulties and limitations of a comparative approach to coding policy agendas.

Policy issues such as healthcare, national defense, and social welfare are often grouped in a logical manner based on one's own interpretation and understanding of the world. This inherent grouping extends to both human and computer coding techniques, including methods of scaling that group items based on the usage of keywords. However, as considerable work has shown scaling techniques are only applicable in a single language as different languages or even contexts can lead to considerable differences in the categories (e.g., Klüver, 2009). As datasets, languages, countries, and time periods change so does our interpretation and understanding of the world along with

the usage and the meaning of words. In short, when a coding system is created, regardless of the means, it inherently matches the context it is created in. This background represents a massive challenge for the study of comparative policy agendas as no two contexts are ever exactly alike. As it turns out fisheries, policing, culture, and many other policy areas present interesting challenges for comparative public policy as how these policies are defined and addressed varies considerably from nation to nation. To that end, this research note openly discusses the challenges of the CAP and introduces the CAP Master Codebook discussing its creation, intended use, and limitations. The chapter is a guide for those interested in the ever-growing volume of CAP-coded data that highlights the logic behind the CAP codes. It is my hope that this explication will lead to a better understanding of what can be done with CAP codes, how they can be iterated on, and the wider use of CAP coded data as well as new projects that value the approach.

The rest of this chapter takes the following form. First, I discuss the creation of the CAP from its roots in the US Policy Agendas Project to its guiding principles of a limited coding system focused on coding policies, not targets. I next move onto the Master Codebook process explaining its necessity and the process of creating it. I further discuss some of the more difficult-to-address issues cross-nationally and present a discussion of external validity. I conclude with an overview of the value and the limitations of CAP data for current and future research. In addition, several appendices are tied to this chapter including a set of basic coding rules, the continuing Master Codebook process for new and existing projects, and a brief introduction as well as guidelines for starting new projects. Up-to-date versions of these appendixes are maintained at https://www.comparativeagendas.net/.

2.1 The Comparative Agendas Project: A Philosophy and a Beginning

The CAP was built on the shoulders and limitations of the US Policy Agendas Project (US PAP) created by Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones. Widely used by political scientists, practitioners, and students the US PAP data represents a key achievement for public policy research in the United States. The project's goal was to create a series of commonly coded databases focused on the policy content of government and public agendas since World War II. To achieve this goal the US PAP codebook was created based on the development of the project's congressional hearings dataset with major and subtopic codes, the method for classifying data employed by the CAP, reflecting the policy attention of the US Congress. As good planning, luck, and/or serendipity would have it hearings are in fact a highly representative government agenda leading

to the creation of a robust and lasting codebook for US government agendas (see Jones and Baumgartner, 2005).

The codebook did, however, go through several revisions since the project was first started in 1993, such as the folding of family issues into law, order, and family issues[2] and the development of several new subtopic codes in the major topic of health. It has also been modified to fit new datasets. Even before the development of comparative projects challenges have routinely presented themselves such as how to address randomly sampled media data with stories on the weather, fires, and obituaries presenting new topics not present in government datasets. Voluntary associations presented another problem with not all associations interested in policy such as Bob's International an association of people named Bob with awards for, among other things, the best Shiska-Bob (Bevan et al., 2013). To deal with these issues new, non-policy codes were developed and introduced uniquely for the datasets that required them.

Each of these changes followed the "prime directive," to quote Bryan Jones, of the CAP if you will, which states that existing codes may never be combined, but that new codes can be created either to match truly new concerns or through the further separation of existing codes. For example, sports, specifically sports scores and news unrelated to the business aspect of sports, warranted a new code when the media data was first coded in the United States. Moving beyond the United States, immigration, an existing subtopic code in the original US codebook, warranted an extensive separation into a detailed major and subtopic structure in the majority of European nations where the policy area receives extensive attention in relation to the European Union (see Guiraudon, 2000). By following the "prime directive" these and other changes to the original codebook were in theory easily reverted in order to create a harmonized, common codebook for comparative analyses. In practice the process of harmonization was more involved and led to several revisions to the original codebook discussed in section 2.2 "Coding through Compromise."

2.1.1 *But What Is CAP Data?*

Up until April 2016 and the launch of the CAP website CAP data has been defined quite broadly, namely as any dataset using a version of the CAP codebook in order to capture the policy attention of different government and public datasets based on their textual content. Policy attention meaning the substantive focus of the policy used, proposed, or discussed for each observation. These observations can vary, from individual laws or news stories, for example, to aggregated measures such as with "most important problem" type measures that capture the general policy attention of the public

(e.g., Bevan and Jennings, 2014). Regardless of the unit of analysis each observation is coded based on a common set of rules for that dataset aimed at capturing the primary policy focus of the observation. For example, coding newspaper stories based on their introductory paragraph or secondary legislation based on their explanatory notes that summarize highly technical legislation. In general CAP datasets are coded over a long time frame and as comprehensively as possible, including all known bills or executive speeches over several decades for example. The datasets themselves include as much information as possible, including links and/or identifying information for each case as well as the text or other information used to code the case when such information is available and legally shareable. CAP data is therefore also as transparent, replicable, and contestable as possible.

This broad definition of what CAP data is has been refined to a new gold standard based on the criteria for data included on the common CAP website, namely, the ability for data to be matched to the CAP Master Codebook. This standard exists to ensure the CAP can live up to the first part of its acronym, comparative, well into the future.

2.1.2 Coding Limited by Design

Despite the scale of the data gathering across the CAP, the effort put into the Master Codebook and the unprecedented level of detail and access to raw data, the CAP is limited by design. The CAP community includes a wealth of researchers from political science, sociology, communication, and computer science amongst other disciplines. That says nothing for the wealth of subfields represented and research questions being asked by the members of CAP projects. In short, while everyone involved in the CAP is concerned with attention in some manner or another, why and how they look at attention almost always differs. Building such a diverse and differently motivated group of scholars led to the limited, but robust coding system it employs. After all, attention is the sine qua non of policymaking as a change in framing, preferences, and/or direction requires that a policy is first attended to. While this focus limits how CAP-coded data can be directly used, the transparency and inherent replicability of the CAP datasets allows for more detailed work on the framing, preferences, and other factors beyond policy attention that make up each case. Whenever possible CAP datasets include both a means of linking to the original documents and importantly whatever text or information that was used to code each observation. This allows the users of the data to locate policies related to specific problems or countries, to build on or further refine the CAP coding by adding frames or more specific breakdowns of policy, and importantly to challenge how a case or cases have been coded. Like any dataset, CAP data has errors, but by limiting the coding's focus to a common interest in attention and

making the data as transparent as possible the quality of the data and its continued quality is as robust as the communities resources can allow for.

2.1.3 *Policy Not Targets? Terrorism and the Economic Crisis*

Targets and policies are not the same. Whether or not solutions search for policy windows (Kingdon, 1995), the policies aimed at targets often come from several places and often need to. Terrorism is one target for policy that often requires many different policies to address. Terrorism is a problem that can highlight issues with specific policy areas such as military intelligence, airline safety, immigration, and a host of other areas. Moreover, the responsibility for directly addressing acts of terrorism can fall to the police, the military, or a combination of both depending on the system of government and the source of terrorism itself. The CAP codes the policies that address the problem of terrorism according to their substantive policy focus rather than simply terrorism as a target for policy.

The CAP coding system's emphasis on the substantive focus of policy is perhaps its most common criticism (e.g., Dowding et al., 2016). Clearly based on the description above a complete look at terrorism using CAP data would require additional work to identify the policies that were aimed at addressing the problem, but the same is true for other problems as well. How the CAP coding system addresses an economic crisis is another important example of the difference between targets and policies. The economic crisis that occurred in the late naughts, and that has had continued effects for a number of years since, was a problem of banking, consumer confidence, unemployment, and more. In short, it was a macroeconomic problem. However, the policy solutions to this macroeconomic problem did not just focus on changing interest rates, lowered taxes, and other macroeconomic tools, but also focused on creating jobs, supporting new businesses, and addressing social welfare issues in order to combat increasing unemployment numbers. In fact, the politics of austerity pushed by many nations meant that addressing the economic crisis included policies, however contentious, that touched on nearly every policy area government deals with from healthcare to public lands at least when it came to government spending. Ultimately, the economic crisis was a shock, a large shock that affected many policy areas that the government dealt with for a considerable time.

Problems no matter where they come from can lead to many different policies in many different areas with targets for policy such as terrorism or the economic crisis of the naughts driving new policies in the majority of policy areas. This is not a flaw of the CAP system of coding, but a choice to focus on policies and not targets. However, different targets as well as different problems, like countries and regions, can easily be identified through a search of the raw CAP data.

2.2 Coding through Compromise: The CAP Master Codebook

Each project and often each dataset requires specific adaptations of the codebook to address observations and topics that do not exist in other contexts. More often than not these changes include the adaptation of existing codes to match the context of the project or dataset in question. However, with the number of projects having grown to nearly two dozen as of July 2014, the lack of a hierarchical CAP leadership and various levels of resources created a noticeable level of codebook drift. Much of this drift was of course necessary as projects needed to adapt the original American codebook to fit different contexts, while still keeping the key goal of comparison in mind. While each project does an excellent job of coding and reconciliation with initial coding agreements ranging between 75 percent and 90 percent before cleaning, each of these activities were completed independently for each project. Only the determined focus and collegial nature of the CAP community led to generally comparable datasets that have already led to several noteworthy findings, such as the general effect of core issues on government attention (e.g., Jennings et al., 2011) and truly general patterns of public policy (e.g., Jones et al., 2009).

Nevertheless, these analyses were not without their flaws due to cross-national codebook incompatibilities. Some clear incompatibilities such as how immigration was included in the codebook were obvious. For the yet unknown differences robustness checks performed by the authors of this early research such as the jack-knifing of topics to search for any influential issues (e.g., Jennings et al., 2011) means that while these codebook issues were not severe enough to change the inferences gained from these analyses future work without a truly comparative coding system might not be so lucky. As of July 2014, more than 450 subtopics existed across fifteen projects with complete or draft crosswalks from an initial list of 225 subtopics. While most of these revised subtopics introduced minor alternations of existing codes in order to deal with minor differences between projects, a clear need for a common, comparative Master Codebook existed.

The process of developing the CAP Master Codebook started early on in the CAP's life and has had various members of the CAP community involved with Herschel F. Thomas III and Jeroen Joly having acted as previous heads, laying the groundwork through an independent assessment of each team's national language codebook. This partial crosswalk was used as a basis for comparison in several comparative papers (e.g., Baumgartner et al., 2011), but a great deal of work was left to be done, especially on the subtopic level where many errors and incompatibilities were left to be addressed. The rest of this section describes the logic and history of the Master Codebook. Our website includes the Master Codebook itself as well as full documentation about how it came about and examples of how to apply the Master Codebook crosswalk to

project-coded data. It is designed to be useful both to users of the data as well as to anyone thinking of creating a new project for a political system that does not already have one.

2.2.1 *The Master Codebook Process*

In the summer of 2012 I was informally elected by a group of project PIs to act as the Topic Coding Coordinator for the CAP with the goal of finalizing the process through a true Master Codebook. The objectives of this effort were outlined in a memo to all teams explaining the concept and the process of creating the CAP Master Codebook and were as follows: (1) create a common Master Codebook that allows for accurate comparisons across all CAP datasets; (2) minimize the overall amount of work by seeking a common middle ground between projects rather than asking any project to use a particular country's codebook; (3) whenever possible avoid the need for recoding with appropriate aggregations.

Objective 1 was a clear-cut goal to not exclude any project from the Master Codebook as the power and ideal of the CAP is its comparative nature. The second Objective, to create a new Master Codebook, was both practical and diplomatic in that my other work in the community did not drive the process. While I have and continue to work on the US and UK projects neither of their codebooks were appropriate as a basis for comparative Master Codebook. This is not just because the United States is one of the only countries with a secondary mortgage market and the United Kingdom still has a monarchy either. In reality, like all project codebooks, they were adapted to a specific case and could not fit policy cross-nationally in general. Finally, considering the immense amount of work conducted by each team by the summer of 2012 Objectives 2 and 3 further proved essential with many teams low or lacking any additional resources in order to conduct this work. These objectives reduced the workload through a least common denominator Master Codebook that maintained a balance of detail and feasibility splitting the distribution of work between projects.

With these objectives in mind and through the support of the Mannheim Centre of European Social Research (MZES), alongside the various projects I picked up where the previous efforts had left off by asking each team to create an English language codebook and arranging face-to-face meetings with projects over the next year. Prior to each meeting teams completed a common coding exercise on a selected set of UK Acts of Parliament intended to highlight common issues and difficult cases and which was graded and discussed in detail in the meeting. Also prior to each meeting I read each English language codebook in its entirety to identify possible drift and new interpretations of codes to be discussed in the face-to-face meetings. Finally, before my

first meeting I created a draft Master Codebook with twenty-one major topics and roughly 230 subtopics as a point of reference based on the previous Master Codebook efforts.

With a list of issues and the "graded" coding exercises in hand I visited each team to discuss their codebook and coding efforts in detail over the course of two days. Using my notes and the draft Master Codebook as a guide we discussed how to deal with any drift and inconsistencies either through the need for the project to recode the data or through the use of a crosswalk that often combined topics that were difficult to bound cross-nationally, such as policing.[3] I left each team with a brief list of issues for the team to directly address along with many notes concerning my draft Master Codebook and how to rebuild the crosswalk. After my last face-to-face meeting in the late spring of 2013 I cross-referenced these notes to build a second version of the Master Codebook with twenty-one major topics and 213 subtopics.

With a memo outlining the major differences between the Master Codebook and many national project codebooks and the draft Master Codebook sent to all teams, I presented and sought comments at the largest coding meeting yet at the 2013 CAP conference in Antwerp, Belgium. Following a difficult discussion at the meeting and several revisions to the explanation of the changes and the process of recoding the data the first crosswalks between the Master Codebook and each project were completed and sent to national teams for further comments. This process led to several small changes concerning the crosswalks, but ultimately resulted in a final version of the Master Codebook with twenty-one major topic codes and 213 subtopic codes although significant revisions to the names of these topics were made to make them more generally applicable across projects. Crosswalks based on this final version of the Master Codebook continue to be produced, revised, and proofed based on individual project feedback. When a proofed version of a project crosswalk is produced it is added to the Master Codebook crosswalk and the project adds the Master Codebook major and subtopic codes to their data.

Major topic codes and names for the CAP Master Codebook are presented in Table 2.1. A complete list of all subtopic codes is available at the CAP website along with an up-to-date version of Appendix B that outlines the process of matching project-coded data to the CAP Master Codebook.

2.2.2 The Devil in the Details

Despite this rather straightforward, but intensive process for creating the Master Codebook the effort was far from easy. In order to create a truly comparable Master Codebook the devil was absolutely in the details with seemingly easy-to-understand issues like fisheries and culture creating some

Table 2.1. CAP Master Codebook major topic codes

Major Topic	Title
1	Domestic Macroeconomic Issues
2	Civil Rights, Minority Issues, and Civil Liberties
3	Health
4	Agriculture
5	Labor and Employment
6	Education
7	Environment
8	Energy
9	Immigration and Refugee Issues
10	Transportation
12	Law, Crime, and Family Issues
13	Social Welfare
14	Community Development and Housing Issues
15	Banking, Finance, and Domestic Commerce
16	Defense
17	Space, Science, Technology, and Communications
18	Foreign Trade
19	International Affairs and Foreign Aid
20	Government Operations
21	Public Lands, Water Management, and Territorial Issues
23	Cultural Policy Issues

Source: CAP Master Codebook

of the most intense debates possible concerning the coding system. Policy, after all, differs based on context and with a variety of different political and temporal contexts to address a common understanding of policy across projects was a difficult task. As of July 2014 a total of more than 450 different subtopics existed across fifteen projects with completed or draft crosswalks. The majority of these subtopics offered slight revisions in order to cover some unique aspect of the political system in question. Others were more unique, highlighting the importance of specific religions in a country's policymaking or chose to split existing codes like freedom of speech and religion into its component parts. Some new codes like fishing and culture, however, had no true analog in the original US codebook and served as a source for debate since before I first started working with the CAP in 2007.

Fishing, a primary means for agribusiness in many European nations, fell in a mixture of the original US codes loosely tied to agriculture and was never an issue in landlocked countries like Switzerland. Comparatively, however, fishing is at least as important as ranching in the United States or food safety in the United Kingdom.[4] Based on the importance of the policy area, fishing was added as a new subtopic under agriculture in the Master Codebook.

No less important were the newly created immigration and culture major topic codes employed by a large number of projects. Immigration, while a common issue in many countries has often focused on civil rights or, in

countries with seasonal and/or illegal workers, on labor issues. Yet, as most EU scholars would argue immigration is a policy area unto itself having played a major role in the creation of the European Union (Guiraudon, 2000) and as a continued source of debate and policymaking in many EU member states exemplifying its importance. Culture, namely the preservation and promotion of culture and language also plays an important role in many countries. Concerns over EU, US, and other international influences on nations like France and Italy has led to the production of a large volume of cultural policy. While countries like the United States produce far less cultural policy, the importance of cultural policy in many systems is clear. The United States' broad influence on culture internationally through its entertainment and business industries in fact adds to the external validity of culture as a policy area with little concern or need to maintain US culture compared to a strong focus by countries like France focused on the preservation of its culture and language. Due to the importance of culture and immigration cross-nationally they too were added to the Master Codebook as new major topic codes.

Ultimately the Master Codebook addresses each of these and many other seemingly minor issues by assuring that each team addresses the related policy area in the same manor in relation to the Master Codebook through each team's use of the Master Codebook crosswalk. By employing a common Master Codebook with a common and established way of coding the CAP data is internally valid cross-nationally.

2.2.3 A Cold War Mentality: Addressing the Country and Regional Subtopics

Created in the 1990s in reference to the US policy since World War II the original US codebook, like the policy it focused on, maintained a Cold War mentality and view of the world when introducing country and regional subtopics. Intended as a category of last resort, the regional and country subtopic codes under international affairs were used on items with a broad, non-specific focus on a country or region that could not be coded elsewhere. The purpose of these codes is an extremely important one though, as they allow for a separation of foreign and domestic items especially in media and other similar agendas that are likely to mention other parts of the world without producing policy implications back at home.

However, the choice of which regions and countries to focus on reflected a transitory view of the world with subtopics like Soviet Union and Former Republics based on how countries and regions were discussed in the US Congress historically rather than based on theory or geography. As a result, the country and especially the regional subtopic codes were used inconsistently between projects with no common agreement or rule on where to place

countries like Turkey and Egypt. Moreover, many projects recognized this shortcoming and chose to forgo the original system altogether and instead introduced a dummy variable system that indicated the countries present in each item with the most extensive usage occurring in media agendas. This produced one of the biggest practical and potentially financial problems for the Master Codebook. Completing an additional level of coding for all projects that did not originally use the new dummy variable system was cost prohibitive, but the usage of the dated, Soviet-era country and regional codes of yore would be wasteful. Similarly, the creation of a new system based on geography or current geopolitical standings would also be wasteful and eventually just as dated. Instead, a compromise to combine these historically dated subtopic codes into a single specific country or region subtopic code was decided upon. The exception to this rule is the code for the European Union and Western Europe due to the inability for many projects to separate these two items. This process involved the combination of all regional and country subtopics in the countries that have them, and the crosswalk to the new code when the country dummy coding system indicated a focus on another nation without a focus on the project's own country. In other words, when the item was purely international affairs, such as the election of a new foreign president, it should be coded in this general specific country or region subtopic code. While the general specific region or country subtopic code is a loss of information from both sides, the transparency of the CAP data allows for much more directed and theory-driven country and regional focuses based on a search of the data.

2.3 The Validity of Policy Differences

The process of creating the CAP Master Codebook focused on the comparability of policies and the terms/concepts that construct them. Across languages, time, and various institutional forms the system is designed so that policies governing everything from the angle of vehicle headlights to the legality of a certain election campaign receives the same major and subtopic code regardless of the time, institutions, or translations that need to take place from one data point to another. However, it is easy to forget that comparative research and a comparative design for research is about both similarity and differences. Many of the discussions and much of the feedback I received during the process of creating the Master Codebook concerned policy areas that received very little if any attention in a context or country. However, I saw these concerns as good, qualitative affirmations of validity. While the CAP Master Codebook had to be completely uniform, the applicability of CAP coding did not, in fact it should not be. For example, fishing is an important if not

fundamental issue for certain countries like Denmark, but at best a very limited issue for a landlocked country such as Switzerland. Being a landlocked or an oceangoing nation does not mean potential policy areas differ, only that their applicability and level of use does. In order for CAP data to be valid representations of policy areas variation is essential.

This section considers the validity of policy differences between projects, institutions, and time periods. It makes use of the publicly available tools on the CAP website as of January 2018 in order to promote the free investigation and interpretation of these differences by readers and other scholars. The policy differences presented here are both in no particular order and based on no particular theory or world view. Instead, they simply represent some of the most common targets of the "we don't" and "is not a policy here" comments I received while working on the CAP Master Codebook.

### 2.3.1 *Defense Policy: The United States vs Switzerland*

In some ways the major topic defense was made for the United States. Not only has the US military been involved in a large number of military actions since World War II, but spending on defense far outstrips every other CAP country.[5] That spending creates many points for policymaking as well, from procurement procedures to bases and much, much more.

Switzerland on the other hand is quite different in this regard. Despite being a country with mandatory military service it is also a neutral country that has not taken a major military action since 1815 with spending generally less than one third of that spent by the United States as measured as a percentage of GDP. Overall this leads to less of a need to attend to defense from a policy perspective than in the United States as demonstrated in Figure 2.1, which shows the number of Reports/Bills and Legislation for both countries from 1978 to 2008.

Clearly there is a vast disparity in legislative activity on defense between the United States and Switzerland. Nevertheless, not everything in the dataset follows this same pattern. A comparison of the front page of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* and the *New York Times* Index from 1995 to 2003 (see Figure 2.2) where data is currently available through CAP shows a noticeably higher level of attention to defense issues in the Swiss media owing to its more external and international media viewpoint.

2.3.2 *Culture: Something France Has and the United Kingdom Does Not?*

If someone was to overhear many of the discussions concerning culture within the CAP over the years it would seem as if half of policy scholars
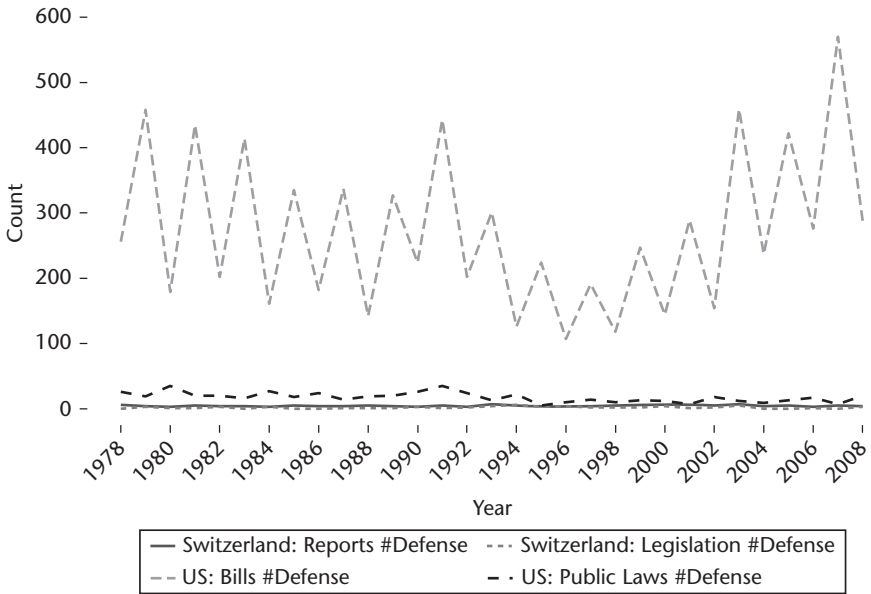
Figure 2.1. Bills and laws—United States vs. Switzerland on defense
Source: Comparative Agendas Project
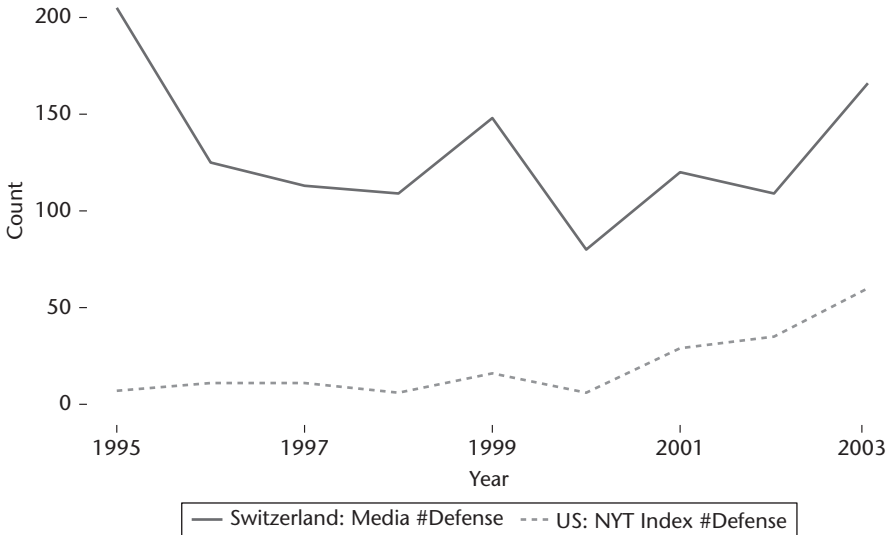
Figure 2.2. Media—United States vs. Switzerland on defense
Source: Comparative Agendas Project

thought culture was merely a fictional concept. In reality much of the debate in the network over culture has been focused on whether or not cultural policy exists. Perhaps unsurprisingly several countries simply do not have cultural policies as the desire to promote their national language, protect cultural industries like film, theatre and more is not strong enough or central enough for the government to take notice. In others the importance of these sorts of items is strong enough to lead to government policies, sometimes very many policies. The CAP Master Codebook treats culture as a topic for policy, but one that admittedly is not attended to equally by all nations. In fact the differences between countries like the United Kingdom and France are so pronounced that they make the comparison for defense in Figures 2.1 and 2.2 look strong. Figure 2.3 shows the percentage of laws passed in the United Kingdom (1945–2012) and France (1979–2012) on cultural policy. A period of non-overlapping data for the United Kingdom was chosen to show that while cultural policy in the United Kingdom is rare, it did regularly receive attention for a time.

The difference in the production of cultural policy in France and the United Kingdom is quite clear to see. For the overlapping period almost no cultural laws are made in the United Kingdom while as much as 7.4 percent of the laws passed by France are cultural in a year. While France shows a higher average compared to the United Kingdom outright it is noteworthy that the passage of
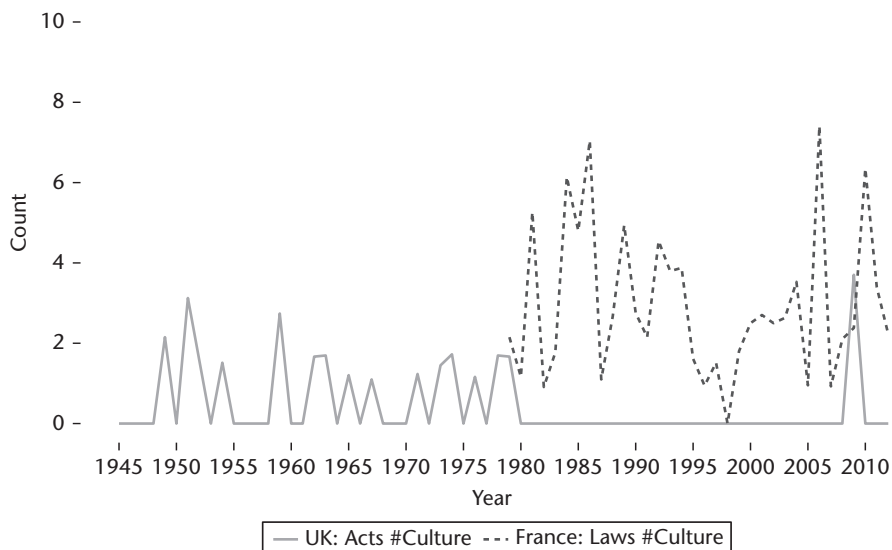

Figure 2.3. Culture across the Chanel—cultural laws in the United Kingdom and France
Source: Comparative Agendas Project

cultural laws was at one time far more regular in the United Kingdom. However, the production of cultural laws all but died after Thatcher became Prime Minister, not only for her and her party, but for the administrations that came after, showing a distinct and lasting impact on policymaking.

2.3.3 Universal Health: Policy Attention

Not all policy areas are created unequally. Perhaps one of the most surprising early comparisons born out of the emerging CAP network was the comparison of policymaking attention to health in Denmark and the United States (Green-Pedersen and Wilkerson, 2006). Green-Pedersen and Wilkerson's (2006) work showed that despite fundamental differences in each country's approach to healthcare, a general rise in the amount and complexity of legislative attention (bills, hearings, debates, and questions) from the 1950s to the early 2000s occurred in both countries. Factors like new technologies and aging populations suggest that if a country is producing healthcare policy it must continue to attend to health. Figure 2.4 extends this work presenting the percentage of hearings, questions and prime minister's questions on health in the United States, Denmark, Spain, and the United Kingdom from 1982 to 2002 (or for as long as data is available).
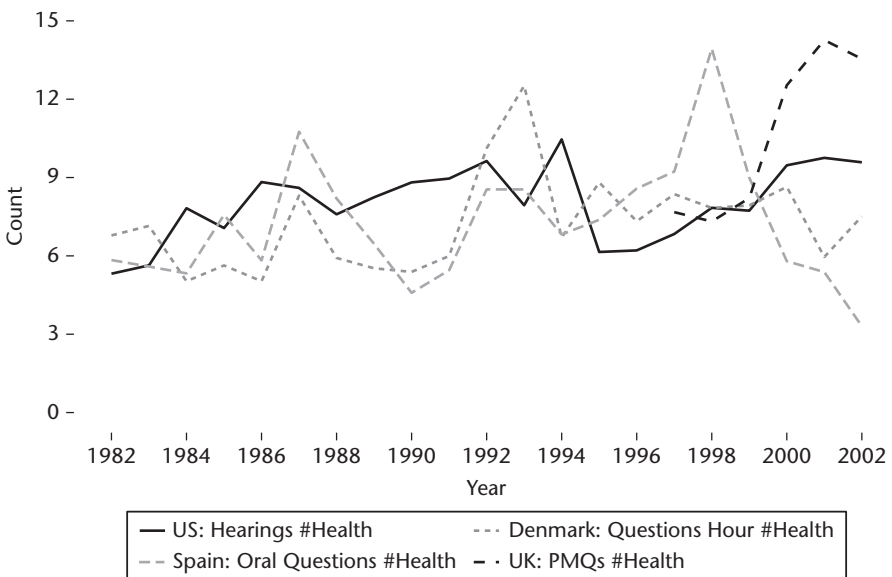
Figure 2.4. Questioning health—legislative questions cross-nationally
Source: Comparative Agendas Project

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While not as strikingly similar nor clearly trending as in the previous work, questions related to health in each of these countries have fairly steady levels of attention marked by peaks in activity. This both demonstrates the general importance of health across these four countries and likely much more broadly across most CAP countries, but also that national variation especially relating to higher patterns of attention do exist. In fact, the same can be said for many of the major topic and subtopic comparisons made across countries, not just those for health. Given the generally similar concerns of most governments general patterns of attention across countries and datasets are to be expected though and adds to validity of CAP data.

2.4 Conclusion

Through the creation of the CAP Master Codebook and associated crosswalks CAP data allows for an unparalleled level of comparison on policy between nations. It is my sincere hope that the CAP data and the efforts the community have made at harmonizing it spurs a host of new comparative research never before possible. As the work from the CAP community has already shown, several original insights can be gained through truly comparative cross-national data such as the common law of punctuated budgets (Jones et al., 2009) or the general effect of core issues on government agendas (Jennings et al., 2011). The ever-growing volume of CAP data is a resource not just for public policy scholars or even scholars in general, but students, practitioners, the media, and elected officials alike if the success of the US PAP is any indication.

CAP-coded data was designed as a tool for understanding policy attention, but can be used as a basis for so much more. While CAP data obviously has several limitations and cannot answer all policy questions, the framework and datasets are intended not just for analyses as they stand, but to be built upon. A great deal of work already demonstrates how CAP coded data provides a stepping stone for understanding framing (e.g., Boydstun, 2013) and more complex issues (e.g., Annesley et al., 2015). While I certainly hope that the comparability of the CAP data breeds much more research into policy attention, it would be a tragedy if its design as a framework for understanding policy attention was not exploited in different ways. CAP data is at its core a database. It is a database organized by a common and comparative system for classifying policy attention that can be queried in order to locate observations of interest. Like a database of media stories it can be used to assess the level of attention, but can also be used for so much more with a more detailed and importantly directed investigation of the data. The CAP community agrees on

the importance of attention in all of our research, but work on framing, preferences, and more can and is being done based on this data. I think I am safe to say that as a community we only hope that the users of this database are able to add to and manipulate it in order to answer detailed and comparative questions on policy in a way that was never before possible. If you are interested starting a project of your own and joining the CAP community please refer to the advice for new projects contained on our website.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. My advisor is more of a tennis man actually.
2. The folding of immigration into labor and employment, and family issues into law and order is the reason for the missing major topic numbers 9 and 11 respectively in the original US codebook. The decision to combine these topics in the very early days of the project was based on how government addressed these issues in practice. For example, the US government purposefully avoids most family issues, but when it does it tends to address legal issues like child custody and illegal acts such as domestic violence. The advantage of the old, non-sequential coding system was that the missing major topics used to provide a quick indication of someone's familiarity with the codebook when asked how many major topic codes existed with the uninformed, modal answer being 21 with the correct answer being 19. Tragically, the CAP Master Codebook makes the old uninformed answer of 21 correct with the introduction of two new major topic codes removing the applicability of this informal heuristic.
3. Policing primarily varies in its structure with national and local or subnational police operating in unique ways from country to country.
4. The United Kingdom's scandal concerning the presence of horsemeat in frozen food in early 2013 did little to ease the number of jokes told concerning British cuisine.
5. Based on October 2016 data.

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