Agendas and Representation in British Political Institutions

To what extent does the attention of government to particular topics represent and respond to the wishes of the public? This is a longstanding benchmark for evaluation of the performance of democratic government. While there is an extensive literature on the link between public opinion and public policy (see Manza and Lomax Cook 2002; Weakliem 2003; Wlezien and Soroka 2007 for reviews), there is now growing interest in the responsiveness of policy agendas and policy outcomes to the issue priorities of the public (for example, Jones and Baumgartner 2004; Jennings and John 2009; Jones et al. 2009). As Jones et al. (2009, p. 277) observe "…typical representation studies assess the extent to which policymakers' issue positions correspond to those of the public, but do not investigate whether the issue priorities of policymakers correspond to those of the public." The degree of correspondence between the concerns of citizens and the attention and outputs of political institutions is, however, an important indicator of how the political system processes information and adapts to demands for action from the public.

To assess the representation of public opinion in governing agendas in Britain, the analysis that follows uses a method that tests the level of correspondence between the public agenda and policy agendas across a range of issues and a number of institutional venues (see Jones and Baumgartner 2004; Jones et al. 2009). It assesses the degree of political representation of the public agenda, measured in the form of public responses to survey items about the 'most important problem' or 'most important issue' facing the nation (MIP-MII), tested across a number of governing agendas: the Speech from the Throne, Acts of UK Parliament and budgetary expenditure. We also test correspondence between public priorities and the media agenda. Following Jones et al. (2009), the method tests representation through constructing a correspondence matrix where each data point is the correlation between an issue k's salience to the public and the level of media or government attention to that issue over a given time period, either in the form of calendar years (for example, where this spans 65 years for budgetary spending, between 1943 and 2007) or parliamentary

sessions (for example where this spans 67 parliamentary sessions for the Speech from the Throne, between 1943 and 2009). To estimate these correlations, matrices of priorities are constructed over time. For the public agenda, each cell indicates the proportion of MIP/MII responses ranking a given topic as the most important facing the nation in that year. For the corresponding matrix of government priorities, each cell indicates the proportion of the policymaking activity on a given topic. The correspondence matrix is estimated as the degree of correspondence between public prioritization of an issue and the proportion of the policymaking and media agenda assigned to that same issue.

The results of this test of agenda representation is presented in Table 1, with each major topic listed in rows and governing and media agendas reported in successive columns. Each cell reports the correlation coefficient (Pearson's *r*) for correspondence of MIP-MII and the governing or media agenda for a given topic and institution. The correlations indicate the direction, magnitude and statistical significance of the link between public opinion and the media or governing agenda. The results for the Speech from the Throne, reported in the first column, shows that the executive agenda is positively correlated with public priorities for macroeconomics, civil rights and immigration, health, agriculture, labour and employment, education, environment, law and crime, welfare, foreign trade and public lands and territorial issues. In one case, defence and international affairs, there is negative correspondence between public opinion and the policy agenda. The strongest degree of correspondence is observed for law and crime (0.63***), health (0.53***) and macroeconomics (0.49***) suggesting these are issues on which the policy agenda most closely reflects public priorities. Turning to the legislative agenda, and the correlations reported in the second column for Acts of UK Parliament, it is notable first of all that there are fewer significant correlations. Nevertheless, there is a positive and significant relationship between the public agenda and the legislative agenda for health, agriculture and law and crime, foreign trade, and public lands and territorial issues. The link between the public and legislative agenda for welfare issues is negative, however -- suggesting an inverse pattern of representation (i.e. when the public is concerned about welfare issues, the government is less active in legislative terms). For budgetary spending of UK government, reported in the third column, there is a positive and significant correlation with public priorities for health, agriculture, transportation, and law

and crime, with the latter again observing the strongest degree of correspondence (0.79***). Further to this, however, there are negative and significant correlations between public opinion and the budgetary agenda for welfare and housing, suggesting there is an inverse relationship between public priorities and policymaking. Finally, the set of correlations between public priorities and the media agenda, reported in the fourth column, reveal a large number of issues on which there is positive and significant correspondence: macroeconomics, civil rights and immigration, health, education, environment, energy, transportation, law and crime and foreign trade. There is a negative relationship, as for the executive agenda, between public priorities and the media agenda, for defense and international affairs.

Overall, the results suggest that the degree of representation of public opinion is greatest in those agendas subject to the least institutional friction (i.e. the media and executive agenda), whereas there is a lower degree of agenda representation in those agendas subject to greater friction in decision-making (i.e. Acts of UK Parliament and budgetary expenditure). The general pattern of institutional representation is confirmed through inspection of the box plot of correlation coefficients (by topic) shown in Figure 1. There the highest average level of representation is observed in the media agenda and the executive agenda (the Speech from the Throne), followed by the legislative agenda and then the budgetary agenda. This matches evidence from the comparative analysis of dynamic representation in governing institutions (Bevan and Jennings 2010). Also of interest, for the purpose of this analysis, is the degree of correspondence between public priorities and the media and policymaking agenda for each topic. It is evident in Table 1 that across each institutional venue, the highest correlation between public priorities and the policy agenda is observed for law and crime issues. There is likewise a recurring pattern of representation for health issues and for agriculture (without representation in the media agenda).

Table 1. Correspondence of Policy Agendas and MIP/MII (Pearson's *r*)

Topic	Issue	Speech from the Throne	Acts of UK Parliament	Budgetary Spending	*The Times*
1	Macroeconomics	**0.49** ***	0.07	-0.19	**0.68** ***
2	Civil Rights, Minority Issues, Immigration & Civil Liberties	**0.21** †	0.05	-	**0.68** ***
3	Health	**0.53** ***	**0.39** **	**0.50** ***	**0.58** ***
4	Agriculture	**0.36** **	**0.37** **	**0.42** ***	0.02
5	Labour & Employment	**0.25** *	0.06	-	0.23
6	Education	**0.35** **	0.09	0.13	**0.54** ***
7	Environment	**0.51** ***	0.18	0.13	**0.54** ***
8	Energy	**0.00**	-0.04	-	**0.32** *
10	Transportation	**0.14**	-0.12	0.23 †	**0.60** ***
12	Law, Crime & Family Issues	**0.63** ***	**0.40** ***	0.79 ***	**0.71** ***
13	Welfare	**0.27** *	**-0.24** †	-0.44 ***	0.22
14	Housing	0.09	0.03	-0.49 ***	0.23
15	Commerce	-	-	-	-
17	Science & Technology	-	-	-	-
18	Foreign Trade	**0.31** **	**0.30** *	-	**0.40** ***
16 & 19	Defense & International Affairs	**-0.22** †	**0.13**	0.17	**-0.64** ***
20	Government Operations	-0.02	-0.10	0.04	-0.14
21	Public Lands & Territorial Issues	**0.31** **	**0.31** **	-	0.05
	Start	1943	1943	1943	1960
	End	2009	2008	2007	2008
	N	67	65[#]	65	49
		Parliamentary Session	Parliamentary Session	Calendar Year	Calendar Year

† p ≤ 0.10 * p ≤ .05, ** p ≤ .01, *** p ≤ .001

[#]With gaps (i.e. there are no Acts of UK Parliament in the special recall session of Parliament in 1948, which was brought back to resolve legislative deadlock over the Parliament Act).

Figure 1. Average MIP-Topic Correlations, by Policymaking Channel (1960-2008)
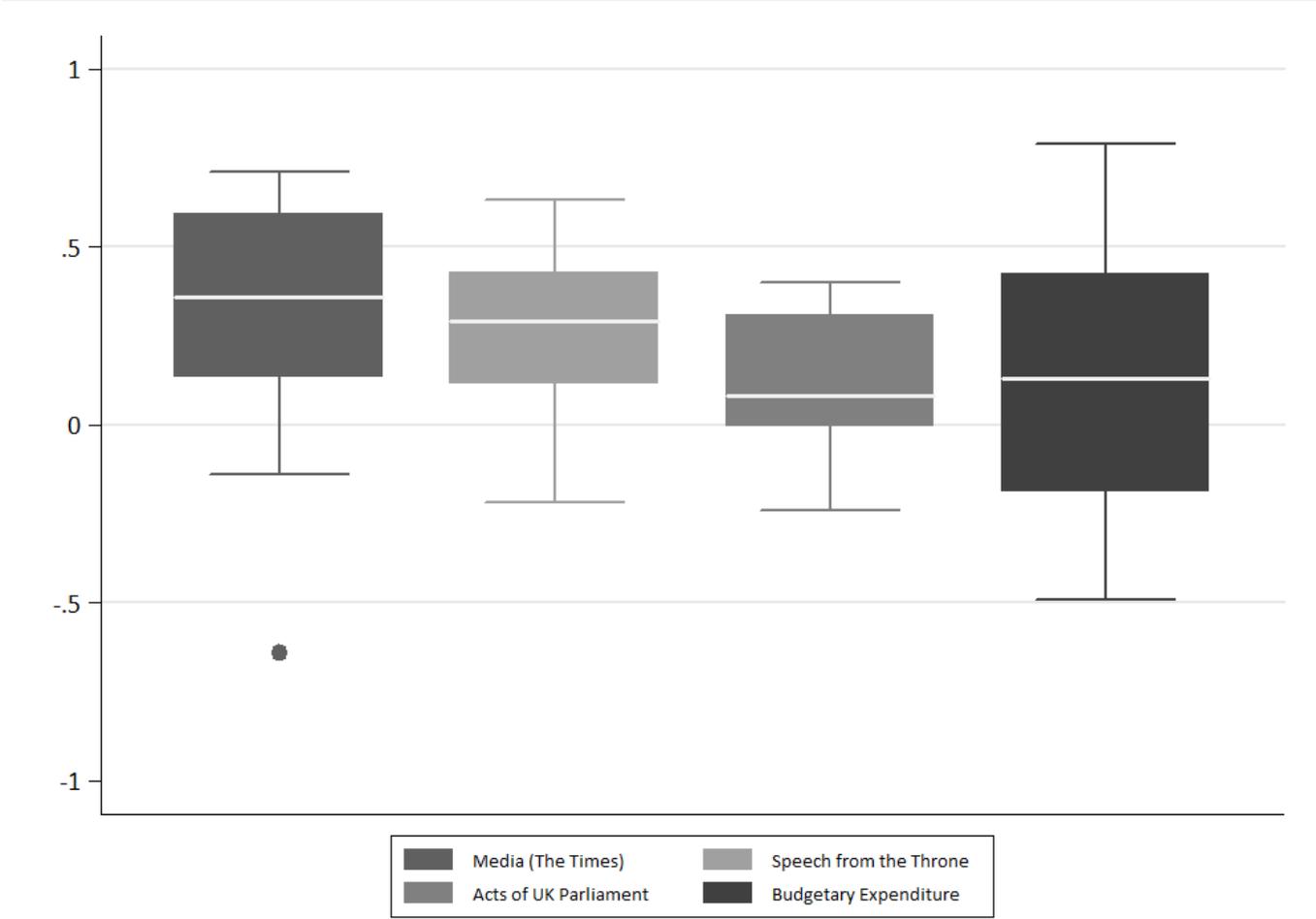
Appendix A1. The UK Policy Agendas Project major topic codes

1. Macroeconomics

2. Civil Rights, Minority Issues, Immigration and Civil Liberties

3. Health

4. Agriculture

5. Labour and Employment

6. Education and Culture

7. Environment

8. Energy

10. Transportation

12. Law, Crime, and Family Issues

13. Social Welfare

14. Community Development, Planning and Housing Issues

15. Banking, Finance, and Domestic Commerce

16. Defence

17. Space, Science, Technology and Communications

18. Foreign Trade

19. International Affairs and Foreign Aid

20. Government Operations

21. Public Lands, Water Management, Colonial and Territorial Issues

See www.policyagendas.org.uk for the full codebook with sub-topics and topic descriptions.

Appendix A2. Data

The Speech from the Throne

The Speech from the Throne[1] in an annual speech that presents the governing agenda of the executive for the year ahead (see John and Jennings 2010; Jennings et al. 2011). The policy content of the speech is divided into quasi-sentences,[2] with each quasi-sentence assigned a single topic code. Because of the timing of each speech (at the opening of the parliamentary session), the data is organized parliamentary session. This time interval is also used for the legislation (see below). We omit non-policy content is calculation of the agenda share. This treats the agenda space as constant through time. There is no potential for growth or inflation in the agenda unlike budgets, because this measure is bounded. Note that we also drop from our analysis a short speech given at the temporary reopening of parliament from recess for special legislative purposes in 1948 concerning passage of the third Parliament Act to resolve the gridlock between the House of Lords.

Acts of Parliament

Acts of UK Parliament includes all legislation of the UK Parliament that received royal assent between 1911 and 2008. The base measure of the agenda is the percentage of coded objects (i.e. acts) assigned to a particular major topic, as a proportion of the total number of objects for the defined unit of time (i.e. the parliamentary session).

Budgetary Expenditure

Budgetary data was gathered from both historical sources and the *UK Blue Book* based on the division of expenditure and reclassified according to major topic codes. For the period between 1910 and 1950 reported statistics from Peacock and Wiseman's (1961) *The Growth*

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[1] Otherwise known as the King's or the Queen's Speech or the Most Gracious Speech (see Jennings et al. 2011).

[2] A quasi-sentence (or policy statement) constitutes an expression of a single policy idea or issue (see Volkens 2002). Often this unit of analysis is identifiable from the use of punctuation, though it is possible for sentences to include multiple references to policy content (in particular those which address a series of major policy issues in a list).

of Public Expenditure in the United Kingdom were used. From 1951 to 2007 expenditure reported in the *UK Blue Book* completed the series. The measure of change is simply the percentage change in budgetary spending in a given topic, year-on-year, in real terms (i.e. adjusted for inflation).

The Public Agenda

The issues priorities of the public are often measured with survey instruments that ask about the 'most important problem' (MIP) facing the nation (see Wlezien 2005; Jennings and Wlezien 2011). Gallup first asked about the MIP in the UK in 1947. MIP data is not available in the UK after 2001, when Gallup ceased political operations in the UK. Since 1977, however, Ipsos-MORI has asked a similar question about the 'most important issue' facing the country. The MIP and MII categories are recoded to correspond to the Policy Agendas Project major topic codes and are normalized so that the percentage total of MIP responses is equal to one hundred (note that there is some variation over time in the degree to which both MIP and MII responses are significantly greater than one hundred). The MIP and MII questions have been shown to exhibit a high degree of common variance and both provide a comparable indication of the issues on people's minds (Jennings and Wlezien 2011).[3] This data enables construction of a continuous measure of the issue priorities of the public.[4]

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[3] Because the Ipsos-MORI data on the "most important issue" used in addition to Gallup data on the "most important problem" combines defense and foreign affairs, our analyses aggregate the Defense (16) and International Affairs and Foreign Aid (19) Policy Agendas topics to ensure that the data is comparable over time and across countries. This combination generally produced better models and greater responsiveness than while testing these two topics alone. Further, the analysis excludes two topics on which MIP and MII responses were extremely low in both countries: Banking, Finance, and Domestic Commerce (15) and Space, Science, Technology and Communications (17).

[4] To measure issue priorities of the public in the UK, data from both Gallup's MIP and Ipsos-MORI's MII is used for these analyses. To accomplish this, the two series have been combined and averaged for 19 years, from 1982-2000, when there is regular overlapping data. This extends the duration of the data series for these analyses (past 2001) and ensures that the extension of the MIP/MII for future studies is possible and will be continuous.

The Media Agenda

The media agenda consists of a database of 21,854 front page headlines from The Times of London, sampled on every Wednesday over the 1960 to 2008 period. The base measure of the agenda is the percentage of coded objects (i.e. headlines of front page stories) assigned to a particular major topic, as a proportion of the total number of objects for the defined unit of time (i.e. the calendar year).

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Project Details