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UK Policy Agendas Project (www.policyagendas.org.uk), June 2012

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Findings of the ESRC-funded 'Policy Agendas in British Government'

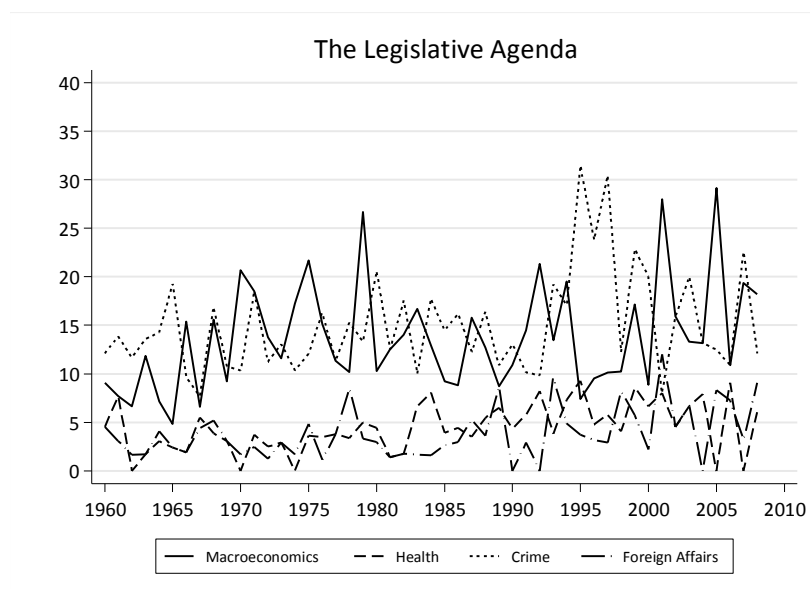
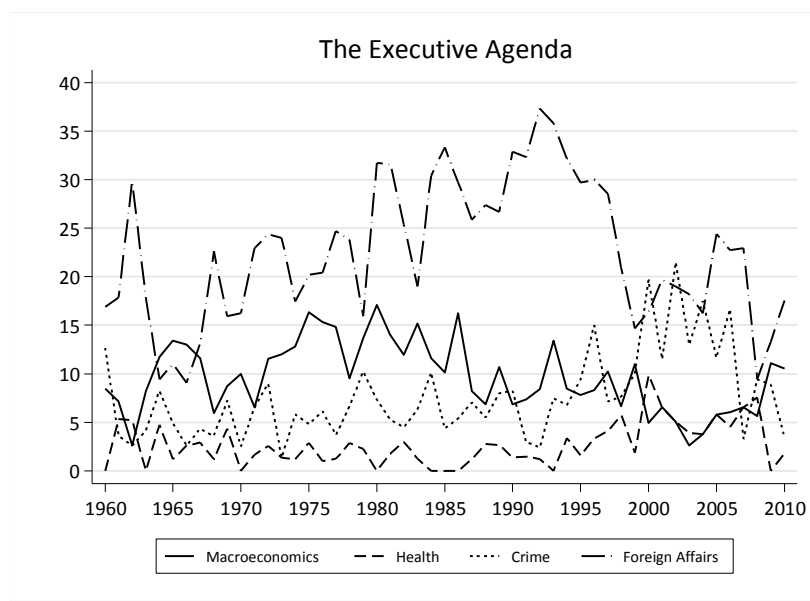
Background

Governments have extensive freedom to concentrate their attention on one topic or problem in contrast to another, such as between the economy, foreign affairs, the health service or crime. Our project seeks to describe how UK government formulates its policy agenda, and to understand why it changes. To do this, we have systematically mapped the policies that the UK government has concentrated on over the last hundred years by coding data on the policy content of Speeches from the Throne (i.e. the Queen's or King's Speech), Acts of UK Parliament since 1911, the budgetary expenditure of central government since 1911, the issues the public think are important from opinion polls since 1960, the front page headlines of *The Times* since 1960, and Prime Minister's Questions since 1997. All were coded according to a UK-adapted version of the Policy Agendas Project (www.policyagendas.org) policy content coding system, which records whether the content of a given speech or a piece of legislation, for example, refers to a particular policy topic, such as crime, the economy or health.

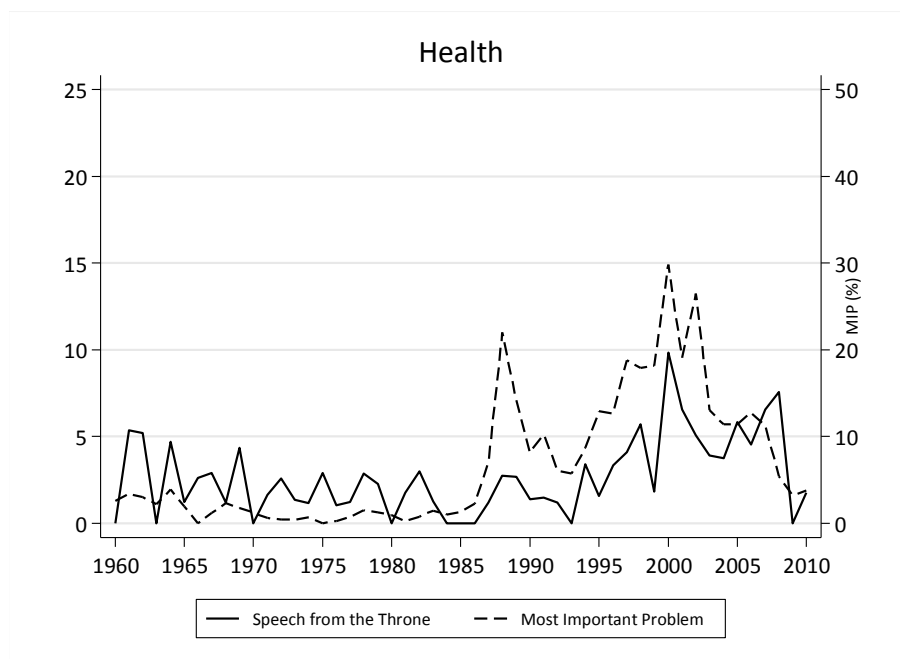
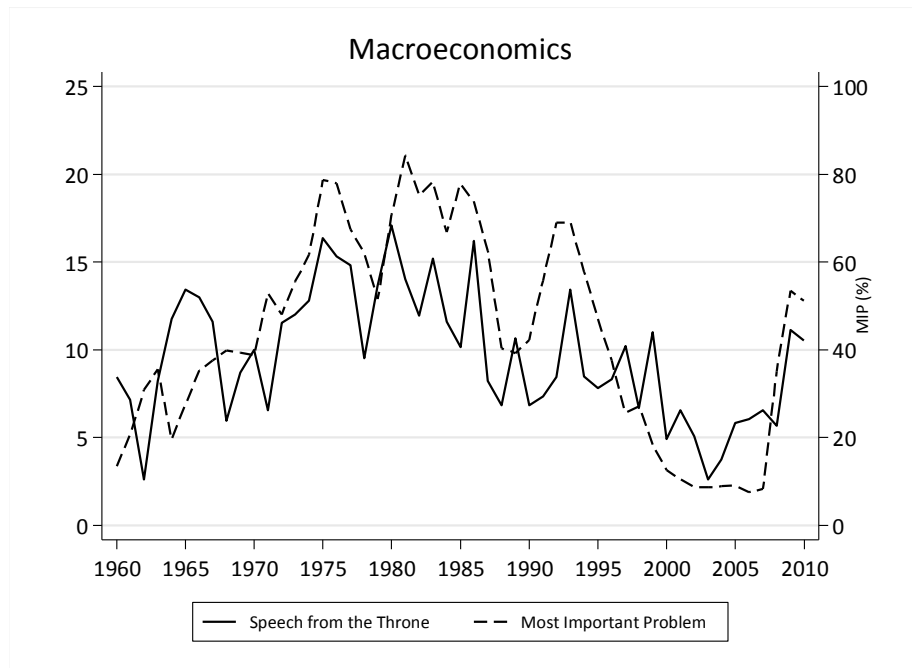
Main Findings

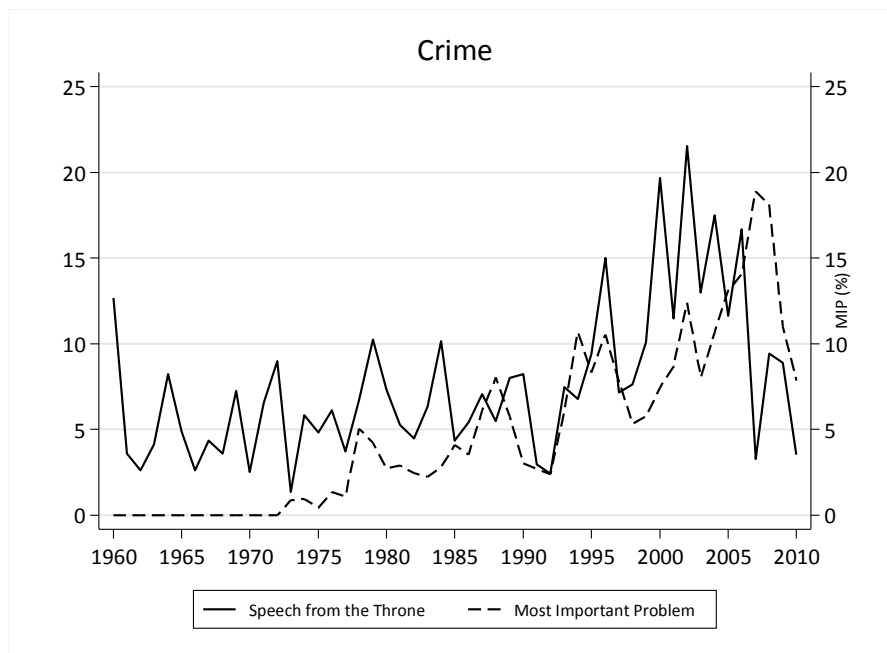
- a) There is variation over time in the policy topics that UK Government has attended to during the period since 1911, which reflects the changing

nature of the British state and its commitments, whether to the British Empire, building the welfare state, or responding to periodic economic crises or the emergence of other new issues on the political agenda (see figures below). We find that attention to foreign policy, agriculture and territorial matters falls off during the post-war period and the economy gains in importance on the policy agenda up to the mid-1980s, then declines (rising again in 2007 at the onset of the global financial crisis), while certain issues, such as education, health, crime and the environment have received greater attention from government since 1990s, especially under New Labour. These trends have also been associated with an increasingly diverse policy agenda.



b) The policy agenda is linked to the issues that the public worry about. For example, the figure below plots the level of public concern about the economy and the share of the policy agenda dedicated to the issue in the Speech from the Throne. There are similar patterns for the issues of crime and health, with the public and policy agendas moving together over time. We find evidence of congruence between policy and public opinion for a number of issues: for examples, see the three figures below.





c) Through analysing the overall distribution of change in the issue attention of the policy, public and media agendas, we find large changes in some years of more than 200 per cent, providing evidence of ‘punctuated equilibrium’ (which combines extended periods of stability interrupted by occasional periods of large and dramatic change). Further, the findings suggest that the Speech from the Throne has the lowest degree of ‘punctuatedness’ due to the limited institutional constraints on policy change, while budgets are the most punctuated agenda as they are subject to occasional bursts of large-scale change. Qualitative research shows that many of these punctuations correspond to defining changes in public policy, such as New Labour constitutional reforms or attention in wartime.

d) Political parties shape the policy content of the executive agenda, with Labour governments assigning more attention to social policy’ and that this is a stronger relationship than other countries: for example, in the Speech from the Throne, Labour governments pay around 2.5 per cent more (each) attention to health,

crime and welfare, and Conservative governments pay around 5 per cent more attention to foreign affairs. The Conservative party **say more** on law and order in the speech, but Labour government **do more** on this topic with acts of parliament.

e) The prominence of the 'core issues' of government on the policy agenda (i.e. the economy, defence, foreign affairs and government operations) influence the attention of policy-makers to alternative 'selective' issues (Jennings et al. 'Effects of the Core Functions of Government on the Diversity of Executive Agendas').

The implication of this is that issues often linked to economic insecurity and instability (e.g. immigration and crime) tend to receive less attention during economic downturns, as the economy takes precedence over non-core issues.

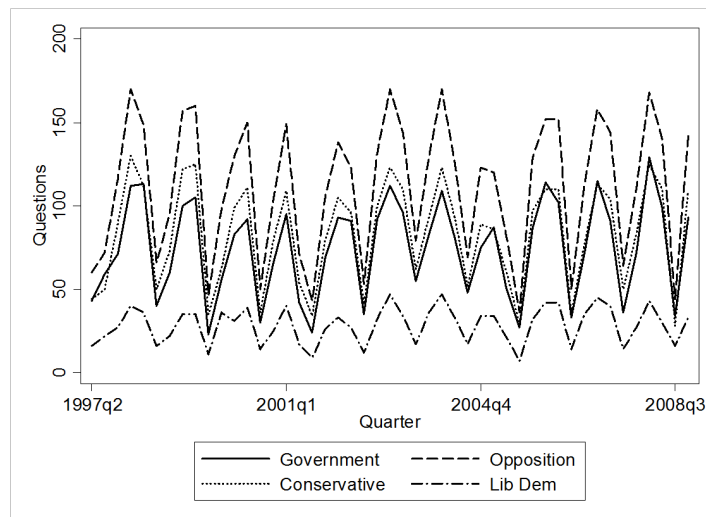
This also shapes the public agenda. For example, there is a negative correlation (-0.398, $p < 0.01$) between the public's attention to the issues of the economy and crime.

f) There is a close relationship between the policy agenda of the Speech from the Throne and Acts of UK Parliament, as governments are able to deliver on their policy agenda. However, the strength of this relationship has increased over time for Conservative governments and has declined over time for Labour and other governments (see Bevan et al. 'Keeping Party Programmes on Track').

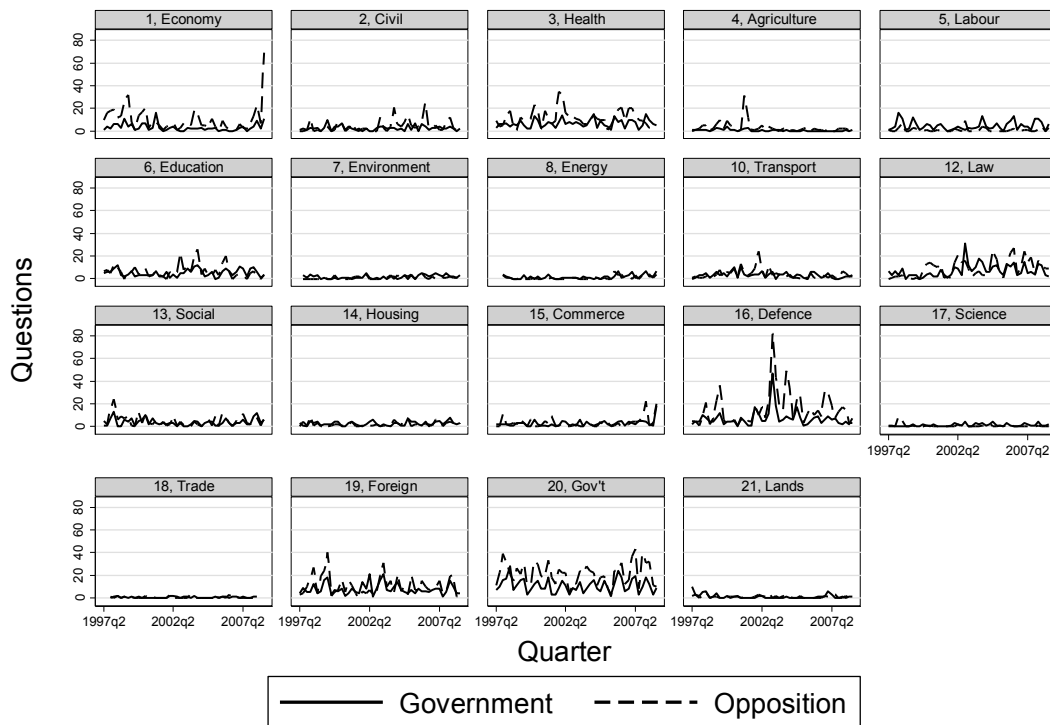
g) Through analysis of the effects of devolution on opinion-responsiveness of the policy agenda, we find a declining relationship between law-making and public opinion after devolution in the UK Parliament, and no evidence of congruence

between the public agenda and the policy agenda of the Scottish Parliament. For example we find that Acts of UK Parliament responded to public opinion prior to 1998 in a number of topics, i.e. the economy, education, environment, crime, and territorial issues - but find no responsiveness in these domains after devolution (see John et al. 'The Policy-Opinion Link and Institutional Change').

h) From 1997 to 2008, Opposition MPs posed more Prime Minister's Questions than government MPs, stressing issues such as the Iraq War and the recent economic crisis to noticeably higher degree



Total Questions to the Prime Minister by Government and Opposition Parties (Conservatives and Lib Dems)



Government vs. Opposition Questions by Topic

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