

The policy agenda in the United Kingdom: a longitudinal analysis of Queen's speeches, 1990-2004¹

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Abstract

This paper seeks to describe the policy agenda in UK, exploring how the content of the agenda has changed since 1980. The data are based on a coding of the Queen's speeches, which are annual statements of policy and legislative intent made by the head of state at the beginning of the parliamentary year, usually in November, or shortly after a General Election. The data collection method uses the Policy Agendas Project code frame for an annual representation of policy and other types of political interest the first application of this procedure to the UK case. The descriptive part of the paper describes the ebb and flow of the policy agenda over time, summarising the growth and decline of issues through descriptive statistics and graphical representations. The analytical part of the paper seeks to account for the differences in the context of the agendas according to party in office and leadership tenure. The paper addresses the literatures on British politics, comparative policy agendas, the policy impact of parties and the policy-opinion link. The paper is particularly concerned to explore agenda setting theory and practice in the UK, with particular application to the difference of institutions and political traditions to the processing of agendas.

How do executives seek to shape the policy agenda? Twenty years of research on policy agendas tells us that there are many venues in which the agenda of public policy is set, with the implication that there are multiple sources of policy change (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). Rather than stable institutional patterns, where executives preside over policy monopolies of interest groups and agencies, the world of policy monopolies long exploded. With the importance of the media in driving change, and the role of experts and consultants, it became fashionable for a while to believe that executives were in retreat, unable to shape policy priorities, adrift on a sea of public opinion and the circulation of ideas (King 1980). Of course, such a view is an oversimplification, but nonetheless it highlights the issue of the contemporary executive agenda, and how the policy preferences of the executive are shaped by the leaders within them, and how they have to compromise and strategize their priorities in the context of party pressures, bureaucratic pressures, public opinion, and the demands of the international system. Within these myriads of influences on what executives should do, the question is what room for maneuver do they have to emphasize their own priorities or to give a distinctive shape to the agenda.

Executives have many means to agenda set, which take place through their powerful place as the head of the bureaucracies, and at the formal process of initiating laws, orders and regulations, and from the sheer attention and following of the executive in the person of the prime minister or president, who can use their prominence set agendas and to change priorities as well as to respond to that attention. Then there is the role of executives in relationship to political parties, either at their head in the UK case or as the

nominee in the case of the US president, where parties seek to shape their executive when in power but where leaders are a part of their political parties and seek to shape their party's orientation. In all these case, executives seek to use the power of office but also the symbolic power, heightened by their command of rhetoric. This is the classic way things get done a democracy.

Linked to their more general command of rhetoric, executives have occasions to mobilize their supporters and publics, and to set the agenda, set piece events that set out the way ahead, usually for a year, so that a plan is evident, so that the executive may put its recourses to achieve it. These events usually take the form of a speech, not that long, where the policy priorities are very highly articulated. In the UK, each session of Parliament is addressed by the sovereign, currently Queen Elizabeth II in front of the House of Lords, with members of the House of Commons watching from the galleries. It is a highly ceremonial occasion, where the head of state arrives in a horse-drawn carriage, amid pomp and ceremony – with the House of Lords and officers of the Crown are in ceremonial dress. An overseas observer might think that Britain has a monarchical government if he or she did not know that the speech is almost entirely written by the prime minister's staff and is approved by the Cabinet! Partly as a result the speech is a formal list of measures that will appear later in the year or soon after the general election if the election is held mid session.

To understand the nature of executive-led policy agendas, it is important to understand the nature of the executive: the UK's centralized executive is based on party discipline,

which allows the executive a good deal of reign under most conditions because of the control of the parliamentary voting and hence the support for the legislation. In that sense, we might expect strong executives to have a separate agenda from public opinion and public problems for example in the UK and be more policy response in the UK case, which echoes the work of Soroka and Wlezien (2005) for example. So the comparison between the US and UK in this paper can serve to promote further understanding of their institutional systems, particular as some accounts stress the institutional continuity of the systems (Krause and Cohen 2000). In many senses, the study of agendas can be a confirmation of the new institutionalist notion that executives are caught up in the rule and norms of each political system, as each executive seeks to shape its policy. Then there are separate pressures of public opinion, policy demands that make each political system unique. To study executive-led policy agendas may be just to report the wider agendas in miniature.

In this preliminary paper of the research project, which is mainly a first cut of the data, we will mainly seek to report on the descriptive findings as the data are still being gathered as the intention is to create a long enough time series to satisfy econometric concerns and to have a long period of policy change. So at this stage, we are not able to report on the policy responsiveness of executive agendas or see the extent to which they are translated into outcomes (but see Hobolt and Klemmensen 2005) for a comparison of Denmark, the UK and the US, using a different coding procedure to the policy agendas project). The main focus is on how the agenda changes over time. Here the key change in executive priorities may come from party change in power. For the executive agenda,

parties may matter as the traditional output literature suggests, that ideology of the parties shapes the agenda, which it is implied then shapes the output of nations (Castles 1982, Garrett 1998, Jones et al 1998). Some parties may emphasize certain kinds of policy to target to their core supporters; or they may emphasize policy they feel they have less of an advantage so they can capitalize upon them. The other change comes from a change in the prime minister, who may be able to put their personal stamp on the agenda, especially given the centrality of the prime minister to the selection of legislation for the coming year. Over time the prime minister may be able to put their stamp on the agenda.

The paper is structured around the descriptive data. After setting out the data collection and methods, this paper reports the main findings, tests for party and prime ministerial effects, before coming to some tentative conclusions.

Data and Methods

The measure of leadership policy attention for this project is United Kingdom's Queen's Speeches. For this paper, this spans from 1980 to 2003. The speeches were coded at the quasi-sentence level for policy content according the universal coding system of the Policy Agendas Project. The Policy Agendas Project is unique in that all data collected is coded in a uniform manner by issue area (using 19 major topic codes and 225 sub topic codes, with the major topic codes listed in Table 1 below), allowing for comparisons in issue attention across datasets (see www.policyagendas.org for the details of the coding,

and see John 2006 for a review of the coding research programme). This coding scheme allows for the investigation of the dynamics that exist, not only across these two types of national speeches, but also offers insight into the relationships that exist between issue areas within each type of speech, over time. Each quasi-sentence was also coded at a more basic level, indicating whether a statement had any policy content whatsoever. Queen's speeches have a ceremonial component, and places where the monarch makes very general statements. Therefore, all analyses in this paper focus on the percentage of statements spent on a given issue out of all policy statements in a speech. In other words, all non-policy statements are omitted from analyses.

The Queen's Speeches were coded by two coders, who compared responses and reconciled them, procedures that lead to about 95 per cent intercoder reliability for most years. We used the US codebook with the intention of creating a separate codebook. However, it did not prove necessary as the major topic codes fitted into the US code scheme, with some minor adjustment of the subcodes. The Queens Speeches are much shorter and tend to have less non-policy statements, though these occur and the coders removed them and used the policy statements as the code.

Table 1: Major topic codes from the Policy Agendas Project

Table 1: Policy Agendas Major Topic Codes	
1. Macroeconomics	12. Law, Crime, and Family Issues
2. Civil Rights	13. Social Welfare
3. Health	14. Housing and Urban Development
4. Agriculture	15. Commerce and Banking
5. Labor	16. Defense
6. Education	17. Science and Technology
7. Environment	18. Foreign Trade
8. Energy	19. International Affairs
10. Transportation	20. Government Operations
	21. Public Lands

Descriptive findings.

By graphing the policy attention according to the major topic codes we can see the attention to key policy issues over time. Figure 1 gives the attention to the two key issues that changed over time: the economy and crime. Here we find that attention to the

economy has gone down and crime gone up. This may reflect the economic prosperity of the country during this period, 1988-2004, and the way in which a key policy issue has gone up the agenda and the way the Labour government has sought to associate itself with what was considered to be a Conservative policy issue.

Figure 1: policy attention to the economy and crime in UK Queen’s Speeches 1980-2004

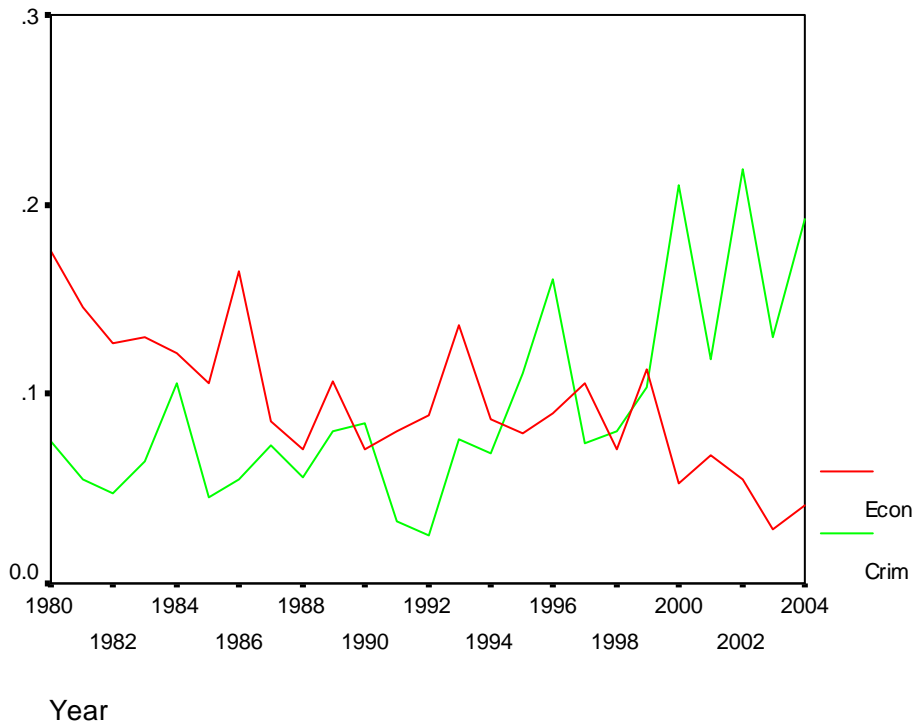


Figure 2 presents another changing series across the period, which is defense and foreign affairs. It makes sense to amalgamate the two topic codes of defense and foreign affairs.. What is striking is the change over time for the main international relations code, which peaks in 1989, and then declines rapidly, though increasing again in 2001, post 9/11.

Figure 2: policy attention to the foreign affairs and defense in UK Queen’s Speeches

1980-2004

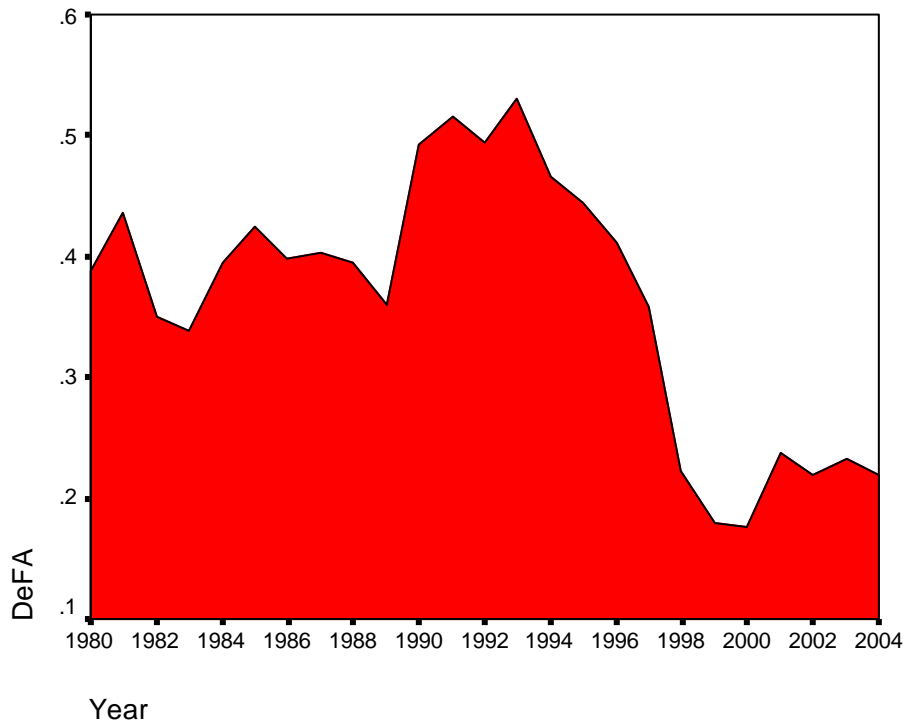
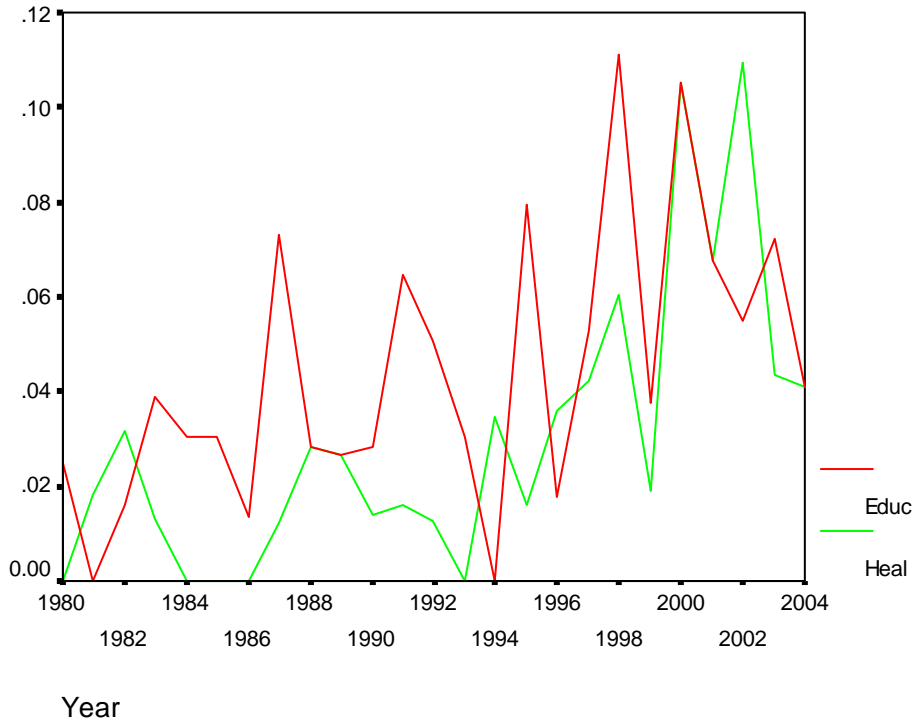


Figure 3 examines two of the key service areas in the UK, education and health, which have had intense public attention over the past two decades as successive governments have tried to reform them, with public opinion particularly attentive to health (Soroka and Lim 2003). Here we see rising attention during this period, which appear to trend upward after 1997, suggestive of a party effect as the new Labour government placed emphasis on ‘education, education, education’ and injected vast sums of money into the National Health Service.

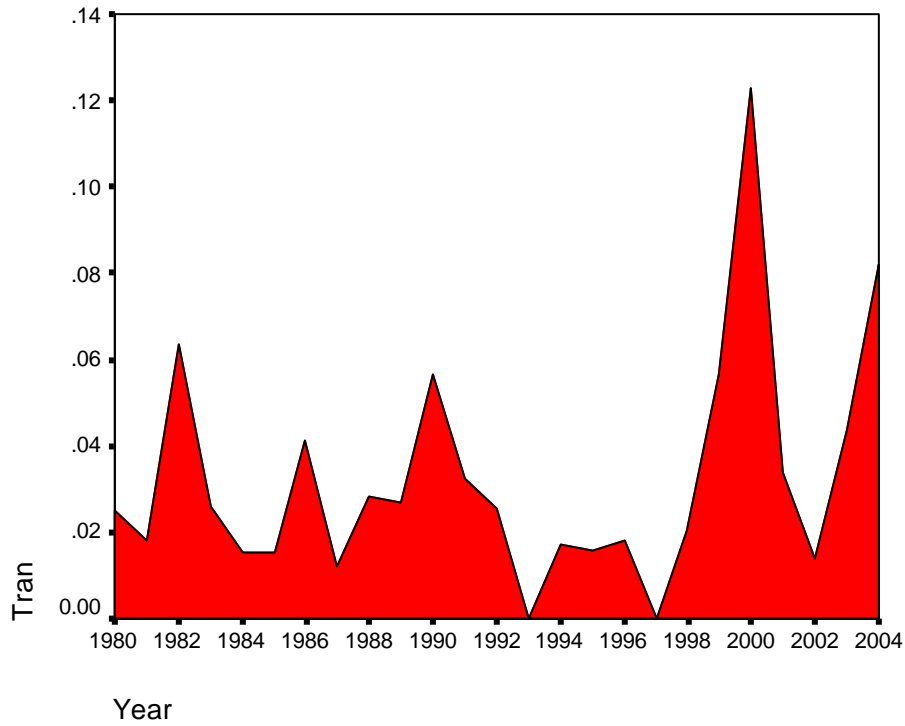
**Figure 3: policy attention to the education and health in UK Queen's Speeches
1980-2004**



Another interesting graph is for government operations, which again appears to increase greatly post 1997, as shown in Figure 4. This appears to show that New Labour governments introduced constitutional reform. Rather than a spurt, with a fall back, this interest continues.

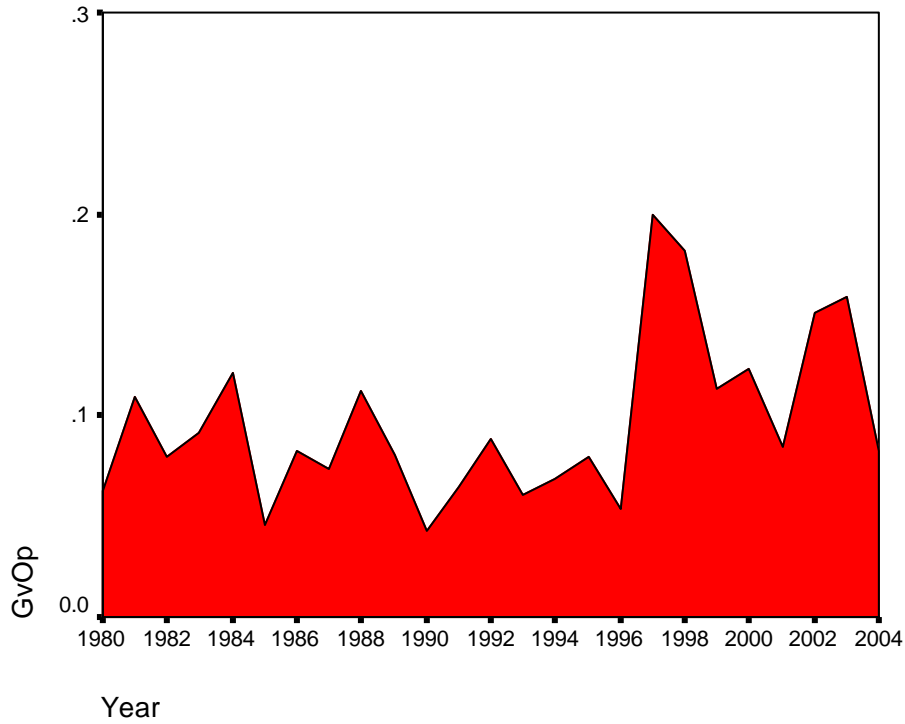
There is a similar pattern for transport issues, which show some early interest, but then which falls back, then to rise again under the Labour governments post 1997 as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5: policy attention to transport in UK Queen's Speeches 1980-2004



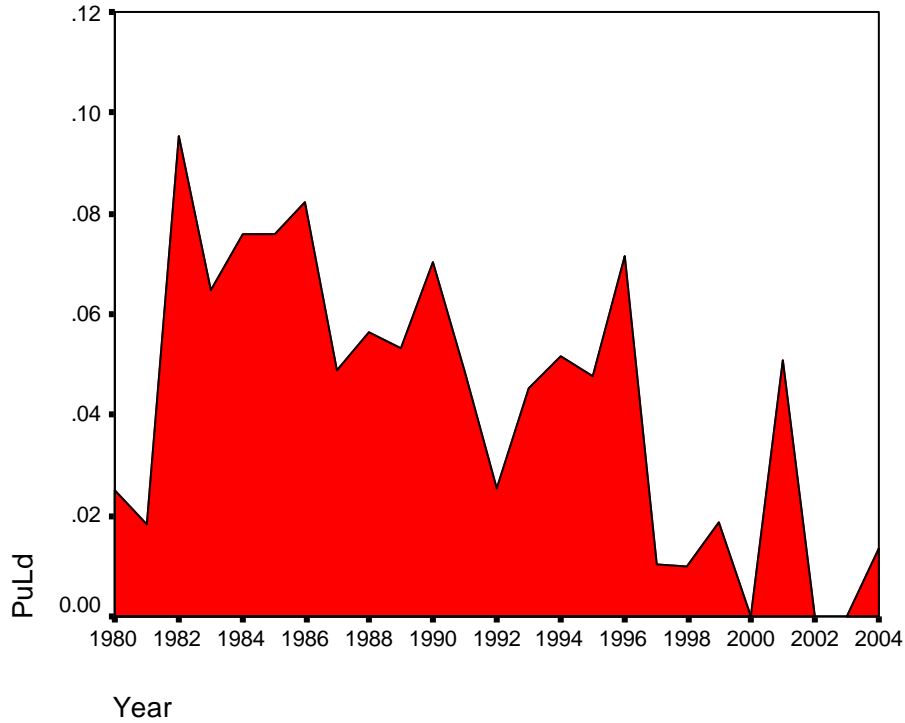
For government operations, or what might be called constitutional matters in the UK, we find increasing attention after 1997 as the Labour government launched a new set of policies, such as for devolution, information which is contained in Figure 6.

**Figure 6: policy attention to the government operations in UK Queen's Speeches
1980-2004**



With so many of the series going upwards, suggestive of a party effect, we must think about what is going in the other direction. The attention to the economy is an important change, but also public lands goes down over this time as is down in Figure 6.

Figure 6: policy attention to public lands in UK Queen’s Speeches 1980-2004



Correlation analysis

It is instructive to examine what are the likely break points for these series. Table 2 shows the correlations between the key ones and a dummy variable based on the 1997 change of government from Conservative to Labour (pre 1997=zero; post 1997=1) for these policy areas.

Table 2: Correlations between party control and attention to selected policy agendas, 1980-2004

Kendall's tau_b

Year	Correlation Coefficient	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.
	N	25
Economy	Correlation Coefficient	-.578(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	25
Health	Correlation Coefficient	.542(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	25
Education	Correlation Coefficient	.393(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.006
	N	25
Transport	Correlation Coefficient	.107
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.455
	N	25
Crime	Correlation Coefficient	.513(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	25
Defense and Foreign Affairs	Correlation Coefficient	-.270
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.058
	N	25
Government Operations	Correlation Coefficient	.227
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.112
	N	25
Public Lands	Correlation Coefficient	-.477(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001
	N	25

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 2 shows that the intuitions from inspecting the graphs are more or less right, with both the economy and public lands being correctly negatively signed and statistically

significant, but with the other service sectors being positively signed and significant, bar transport. In the appendix, we present the correlations between the dummy variable and all the others just to correct for any bias we obtained from the visual inspection. Here we find that the variables that emerge as positive and significant are the environment and social welfare, showing the concern the post-1997 governments have with these issues. There is an additional negative correlation: agriculture, which gets less attention, which is surprising given the on-going problems governments have with agriculture, but may reflect the crisis the Conservatives faced in the 1990s. Taking the topic codes, we find that the 1997 breakpoint is significant for nine of the topic codes, and in directions that mainly make inductive sense. However, the international variable is not as would be expected. Nor is there a statistical association between Defense and Foreign Affairs for a dummy variable to represent the ending of the Cold War in 1989 (-.067, non-significant).

Of course, the 1997 is not the only possible break point in the data. So how do we know if 1997 is the best one? Rather than dredge the data, we can propose that a major prime ministerial change should be the switching point. Appendix 2 presents the results, where we see some of the same relationships, but for not so many of the topic codes, with only six correlations, suggesting it is not such an important break point. In bar one case, where both correlations are statistically significant across the two points, the correlation coefficients are weaker. The one stronger one is for agriculture, suggesting that the policy disasters of the 1990s are the important period, rather than the 1997 change, and the Labour governments did not make a policy emphasis on agriculture as opposed to education and health, for example. The other prime minister during the period was John

Major, who took over from Thatcher after an internal party coup in December 1990 (it is not possible to separately analyze Tony Blair at this stage of history and of the data collection: history because he has been Labour's leader since 1997, data because we have not yet got to the other period of Labour rule before 1979). The correlations with John Major's rule again do not indicate a distinctive stamp, though the small number of years prevents a thorough statistical analysis. But even here we find that foreign affairs and defense are important because of the major events post 1989, then the Gulf War of 1991. The foreign affairs outlook of the Major premiership is highlighted by the high and significant scores for foreign trade. Perhaps the Major government, hampered by a small majority and a rebellious caucus of MPS, decided to concentrate on the part of the agenda where the prime minister has full sway rather than risk a period of domestic legislation, bound to cause faction. It is hard from this data to work out what was driven by external events and what was by the style of a particular prime minister. A separate project underway with Heather Larsen of the University of Washington, comparing the Queen's Speeches and UK State of the Union addresses, will be able to tease out this point.

The next set of relationships are between the main topics variables, which may reflect tradeoffs in the government's mind, either in terms of ideology or in terms of budget or interdepartmental battles, or in terms of priorities in terms of public opinion as it is not possible for governments or public opinion to concentrate on too many things at one time. Appendix 4 presents the major topic codes. For effective presentation on A4 paper, we have removed columns without any significant correlations and also removed the N (which are always 25) and the exact probability levels (the stars remain). The

most striking finding is the negative correlations between factors affecting the economy, which may have an ideological effect, but also may reflect the decline of economic problems over time, which allowed for other topics to emerge. It is also significant that it is the main service areas that have the negative effect, which implies that as economic problems decline so spending may be directed to service areas. The other area is the negative correlations between Defense and Foreign affairs and the main service areas, which suggest a 'guns-butter' tradeoff whereby decreasing attention to defense allows spending on other service areas. Most of the other areas are trending in the same way, which gives further support to the party effects discussed earlier.

Conclusions

This preliminary paper has sought to deploy new data to represent the attention of executives to policy issues, using the UK to examine hypotheses about the content of those agendas. The paper tests the idea that the party in control of the executive is a key driver of the content, and this was found to be the case for many policy sectors. The idea that a particular prime minister could set the agenda was tested with Margaret Thatcher's unique contribution, but this was found to be a less important break point than the election of the Labour government in 1997. The Major government was mainly distinctive on foreign policy issues. When Tony Blair steps down, and some years elapse

with another premier, it may be possible to assess whether this policy active premier with a particular take on international affairs, generated a unique content.

The findings of this paper must remain tentative. The early stage of the project means that there are not a large number of years to deploy, so that some of the findings may reflect usual events that generate a correlation, such as the Conservative party in the UK association with an agricultural crisis for example. There are not enough cases to make strong inference that may be possible later in the projects with a larger number of cases. The other factor is that there has been no aggregate data deployed in this project, such as the real level of the economy for example, or public opinion, which means the range of independent variables has been limited. For these reasons, this paper should be read as an interim report rather than a full set of results.

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Appendix 1: correlation of party dummy with complete agendas topics

			Party control dummy
Kendall's tau_b	Party control dummy	Correlation Coefficient	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.
		N	25
	Econ	Correlation Coefficient	-.476(**)
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.005
		N	25
	CRts	Correlation Coefficient	.258
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.141
		N	25
	Heal	Correlation Coefficient	.634(**)
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
		N	25
	Agri	Correlation Coefficient	-.451(*)
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.011
		N	25
	Labr	Correlation Coefficient	.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	1.000
		N	25
	Educ	Correlation Coefficient	.489(**)
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.004
		N	25
	Envi	Correlation Coefficient	.455(**)
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.008
		N	25
	Ener	Correlation Coefficient	-.334
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.062
		N	25
	Tran	Correlation Coefficient	.214
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.210
		N	25
	Crim	Correlation Coefficient	.515(**)
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.002
		N	25
	SocW	Correlation Coefficient	.401(*)
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.022
		N	25
	Hous	Correlation Coefficient	.072
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.680

		N	25
	Com	Correlation Coefficient	-.026
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.883
		N	25
	DeFA	Correlation Coefficient	-.655(**)
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
		N	25
	SciT	Correlation Coefficient	-.080
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.673
		N	25
	FoTr	Correlation Coefficient	-.075
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.662
		N	25
	GvOp	Correlation Coefficient	.561(**)
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.001
		N	25
	PuLd	Correlation Coefficient	-.598(**)
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
		N	25

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Appendix 2: correlation of Margaret Thatcher dummy with complete agendas topics

Correlations

			Pre and Post Thatcher
Kendall's tau_b		Correlation Coefficient	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.
		N	25
	Econ	Correlation Coefficient	.429(*)
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.012
		N	25
	CRts	Correlation Coefficient	-.223
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.203
		N	25
	Heal	Correlation Coefficient	-.483(**)
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.005
		N	25
	Agri	Correlation Coefficient	.540(**)
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.002
		N	25
	Labr	Correlation Coefficient	.271
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.112
		N	25
	Educ	Correlation Coefficient	-.436(*)
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.011
		N	25
	Envi	Correlation Coefficient	-.290
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.094
		N	25
	Ener	Correlation Coefficient	.253
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.157
		N	25
	Tran	Correlation Coefficient	.009
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.956
		N	25
	Crim	Correlation Coefficient	-.372(*)
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.029
		N	25
	SocW	Correlation Coefficient	-.246
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.158
		N	25
	Hous	Correlation Coefficient	.170

		Sig. (2-tailed)	.332
		N	25
	Com	Correlation Coefficient	.092
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.599
		N	25
	DeFA	Correlation Coefficient	.130
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.443
		N	25
	SciT	Correlation Coefficient	.239
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.209
		N	25
	FoTr	Correlation Coefficient	-.239
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.162
		N	25
	GvOp	Correlation Coefficient	-.215
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.208
		N	25
	PuLd	Correlation Coefficient	.515(**)
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.003
		N	25

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Appendix 3: correlation of John Major dummy with complete agendas topics

		The John Major premiership
The John Major premiership	Correlation Coefficient	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.
	N	25
Econ	Correlation Coefficient	.022
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.899
	N	25
CRts	Correlation Coefficient	-.023
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.898
	N	25
Heal	Correlation Coefficient	-.132
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.443
	N	25
Agri	Correlation Coefficient	-.135
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.450
	N	25
Labr	Correlation Coefficient	-.315
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.065
	N	25
Educ	Correlation Coefficient	-.027
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.873
	N	25
Envi	Correlation Coefficient	-.160
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.354
	N	25
Ener	Correlation Coefficient	.071
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.693
	N	25
Tran	Correlation Coefficient	-.244
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.152
	N	25
Crim	Correlation Coefficient	-.130
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.445
	N	25
SocW	Correlation Coefficient	-.152
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.385
	N	25
Hous	Correlation Coefficient	-.277
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.115
	N	25
Com	Correlation Coefficient	-.079
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.652
	N	25

DeFA	Correlation Coefficient	.563(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001
	N	25
SciT	Correlation Coefficient	-.190
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.318
	N	25
FoTr	Correlation Coefficient	.359(*)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.036
	N	25
GvOp	Correlation Coefficient	-.364(*)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.033
	N	25
PuLd	Correlation Coefficient	.054
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.750
	N	25

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Appendix 4: correlations of major topic codes, Queen's Speeches 1980-2004

Correlations

	Econ	CRts	Heal	Agri	Educ	Envi	Ener	Tran	Crim	SocW	Hous	DeFA	GvOp	PuLd
Econ	1	-.233	.630**	.327	.582**	-.312	.488*	-.326	.546**	-.521**	-.187	.402*	-.275	.411*
CRts	-.233	1	.012	-.234	-.104	.062	-.136	.300	.201	.472*	-.271	-.415*	.135	-.245
Heal	-.630**	.012	1	-.460*	.518**	.387	-.262	.390	.730**	.338	.243	-.692**	.519**	-.558**
Agri	.327	-.234	-.460*	1	-.236	-.086	.236	-.389	-.619**	-.455*	.245	.370	-.099	.386
Educ	-.582**	-.104	.518**	-.236	1	.065	-.458*	.236	.347	.313	.391	-.469*	.465*	-.517**
Envi	-.312	.062	.387	-.086	.065	1	-.244	-.003	.411*	.404*	.024	-.431*	.108	-.181
Ener	.488*	-.136	-.262	.236	-.458*	-.244	1	-.217	-.398*	-.163	-.137	.333	-.228	.010
Tran	-.326	.300	.390	-.389	.236	-.003	-.217	1	.435*	.191	.377	-.511**	-.038	-.168
Crim	-.546**	.201	.730**	-.619**	.347	.411*	-.398*	.435*	1	.350	.143	-.656**	.253	-.464*
SocW	-.521**	.472*	.338	-.455*	.313	.404*	-.163	.191	.350	1	-.206	-.566**	.327	-.486*
Hous	-.187	-.271	.243	.245	.391	.024	-.137	.377	.143	-.206	1	-.215	-.010	-.112
DeFA	.402*	-.415*	-.692**	.370	-.469*	-.431*	.333	-.511**	-.656**	-.566**	-.215	1	-.570**	.526**
GvOp	-.275	.135	.519**	-.099	.465*	.108	-.228	-.038	.253	.327	-.010	-.570**	1	-.635**
PuLd	.411*	-.245	-.558**	.386	-.517**	-.181	.010	-.168	-.464*	-.486*	-.112	.526**	-.635**	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level 2-tailed.

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level 2-tailed.