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Political Agendas in Germany

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10.1 The German Political System

In textbooks on German politics (Rudzio, 2015; Schmidt, 2003), the post-World-War-II political system typically is described in terms of stability and moderation. Several institutional features foster cooperation and consensus. A proportional electoral system paired with competition among a modest number of parties produces broad-based two-party coalition governments. Party competition is dominated by two large parties—Christian Democratic Union and Social Democratic Party—with relatively similar policy stances. The Germany political system is also characterized by the high degree of federalism, a strong upper chamber, and the existence of several other relatively independent institutions, such as the central bank and the Federal Constitutional Court. Because industrial conflict is highly institutionalized among interest groups and government, the term "policy of the middle way" is commonly used. As Schmidt (1987: 138) states: "The policy of the middle way marks a third way between the extreme poles of Scandinavian social democratic welfare capitalism and political economies in which bourgeois tendencies dominate." Classical studies of comparative politics therefore categorize Germany a consensus democracy (Lijphart, 1999) or a semi-sovereign state (Katzenstein, 1987).

During the last decades however, two large-scale transformations—Europeanization and reunification—contributed to a restructuring of the political system (Breunig, 2014). As for the other member states, one of the main challenges of Europeanization is coordinating public policy at the domestic level with actions taken at the European level. European influence in politics and in legislation has grown steadily over the last three decades. However, this trend typically remains concentrated in some policy domains, such as agriculture. In contrast to the creeping influence of Europeanization, German

reunification in 1990 led to a sudden and lasting reconfiguration of the political system. The addition of five new *Länder* changed the composition of the upper chamber. The inclusion of a new left-wing party (former PDS, now Die Linke) with strong support among the former East German states created strategic dilemmas within the party system.

Institutional transformations often spur changes in the wider political environment, ranging from how citizens understand political issues to public policymaking. In this chapter, we describe a data set on political activities in Germany that enables researchers and the lay public to investigate how German politics has evolved since the 1970s. Utilizing the presented data, we can inquire into core questions about the German polity. Is policymaking really characterized by deliberation and incremental adjustments? Did the institutional ruptures occurring in the last thirty years lead to a different style of policymaking? Does Europeanization remove some issues out of national public and parliamentary attention and relegate them to less visible supra-national decision-making? Are policymakers responding to public concerns and what institutional tools do they use in their response?

The chapter first introduces each political agenda, ranging from policy inputs to government outputs. We describe data sources and their coding, including a discussion on intercoder reliability. Following a discussion on coding procedures, a brief application that examines the German reunification process highlights the potential of the database and concludes the chapter.

10.2 German Political Agendas

Individual political agendas, especially for particular policy domains, have been the subject of research in German politics: the legislative agenda, parliamentary questions, government speeches and public opinion as measured by the most important problem question. What is missing is a comprehensive dataset that covers different political agendas over a long period of time. We examine all political activities within each agenda and code each item thematically. Doing so, our effort—the German Agendas Project—offers a database that is exhaustive, consistent, and comparable across time and agendas. In the following description, we split out the policy cycle into input (public opinion and party platforms), policy processes (government speeches, parliamentary questions, and bills), and outputs (laws). The time span of the database covers the years from 1986 to 2005 for the answers to the most important problem (MIP) question and 1976 to 2005 for all the other documents. Unless otherwise noted, all data are based on the Dokumentations—und Informationssystem für Parlamentarische Vorgänge (Parliamentary Material Information System [DIP]).

We characterize the public's agenda using public opinion data and concentrate on answers to the most important problem (MIP) question: An open-ended question asks respondents what they consider to be the most important problem in Germany. The exact wording of the question is: "According to you, what is the most important problem in Germany at the moment." The most important problem database is compiled from yearly survey databases for both West and East Germany provided by the Politbarometer survey. Conducted by the Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e.V. (the German Institute for Election Research) in mostly yearly intervals since 1977, the Politbarometer survey has become the major representative survey of German society. The GESIS Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences makes the data publicly available through its ZACAT data portal. A large number of respondents are included in each survey wave: 11,000 to 25,000 respondents for the yearly waves in the old Bundesländer, and 11,000 on average in the new Bundesländer. Instead of using the cumulated dataset provided by GESIS, we compiled and recoded the variables of interest of all individual waves. Doing so enables more fine-grained coding. The most-important-problem question was first asked in 1980. It appeared in the surveys consistently and with the same wording from 1986. The data can be broken down to the monthly level and are not weighted. The answers to the open-ended questions have been grouped in more general categories by the Politbarometer team. All answer categories have been CAP-coded on the basis of the yearly databases.

The input series is complemented by the content of the party platforms for the eight legislative elections between 1980 and 2005. Party platforms of the five German parties represented in the Bundestag (CDU/CSU, FDP, Grüne, Linke/PDS and SPD) have been coded on the level of natural sentences under the direction of Christoffer Green-Pedersen (Aarhus University) and Isabelle Guinaudeau (Sciences Po, Bordeaux) with the identical coding-scheme and protocol.

Government speeches (*Regierungserklärungen*) can be used as indicator of the government's agenda. Government speeches are not codified in parliamentary law or the German Constitution. The federal government (Bundesregierung) employs government speeches for explaining its political principles and past actions as well as emphasizing its legislative intentions. The government cannot be compelled to make a government policy statement by the Bundestag. At the start of a legislative period, the chancellor gives a "major" government policy statement (Korte, 2002: 13) in which policy goals of the newly elected government are presented. Since the late 1960s, most governments also deliver a "state of the union speech," which is typically held early in the year and presents specific policy ideas for the subsequent sessions. Speeches generally concentrate on the policy packages of the current coalition and aim to display the chancellor's power to determine broad policy principles

(Art. 55, Grundgesetz (GG)). The chancellor as well as other members of the government are able to offer a government policy statement in order to explain the government's perspective on current political topics or in the course of political events (e.g., meetings of the European Council). These statements are shorter in length, less comprehensive, and their number has increased over time. For our database, we only considered major speeches given by the chancellor and if several government speeches where held by the chancellor the same year, the most important speech was identified. Speeches covering several topics were privileged over one-issue speeches and longer speeches over shorter ones. We split each speech into quasi-sentences and then coded each quasi-sentence thematically.

Parliamentary questions (Große Anfragen/Kleine Anfragen—minor and major interpellations) are a parliamentary process that is typically used by opposition parties and MPs. Technically, every parliamentary group or 5 percent of all MPs can ask a parliamentary question in Germany (rule 75–76, GODB). Empirically, this instrument is mainly used by the opposition parties and among them the Green party and the Left party/former PDS. For instance, 62 percent of the Kleine Anfragen in the 14th legislature originate from members of the Left party. Minor and major interpellations have to be answered in written form by the federal government. While major interpellations might be discussed in the plenum, this is generally not the case for minor interpellations. Minor interpellations are mostly used to monitor government action by requesting information about "specifically designated issues" (rule 104, GODB). Major interpellations can be described as the "most important instrument of the opposition to initiate major plenary debates about political issues" (Ismayer, 2007: 183) and as a form of political control (Rudzio, 2015: 234). We coded each parliamentary question according to CAP and relied on title, key words, and the summary of the questions provided by the Dokumentations—und Informationssystem für Parlamentarische Vorgänge (Parliamentary Material Information System [DIP]). In case of doubt we additionally relied on the text for the whole question.

The agenda of the parliament as a whole finds its expression in legislative bills. Bills can be submitted by the government, the Bundesrat or by 5 percent of all MPs (Art. 76, GG). Bills from the government are usually prepared by a division within the ministry responsible for the respective policy area. These so-called draft bills are revised several times and reviewed by the Ministry of Justice. Before a draft bill becomes a federal government bill it has to meet the approval of the cabinet. Federal government bills have to be sent up to the Bundesrat, which can comment on such bills within six weeks (in exceptions within three or nine weeks) (Art. 76 (2), GG). The government initiates more than half of all bills. Bills from the Bundesrat can be introduced by one or several federal states. An absolute majority of all members of the Bundesrat have to

support the initiated bill. Bundesrat bills are sent to the Bundestag, which can comment on such bills within six weeks (in exceptions within three or nine weeks) (Art. 76 (3), GG). Bills from the floor of the Bundestag must be signed by 5 percent of the members of the Bundestag or a parliamentary group (a parliamentary group must also consist of a minimum of 5 percent of the members of the German Bundestag) (rule 75 and 76, GODB). Bills from the floor of the Bundestag constitute about one third of all legislative initiatives introduced.

Federal laws are passed by the Bundestag. A distinction can be drawn between approval laws and objection laws. Approval laws need to be passed by the Bundestag and the Bundesrat, objection laws can be passed by the Bundestag without the support of the Bundesrat. Approval laws are laws that make amendments to the constitution (Art. 97 (2), GG) or affect the finances of the Länder (Art. 104a (4) GG) or whose implementation would interfere with the Länder's administrative sovereignty (Art 84 (1), GG). Before a bill is put up for a vote in the Bundestag, it usually has to pass three readings and be discussed in a committee. In the third reading amendments can only be requested by parliamentary groups or groups of at least 5 percent of the members of the Bundestag. At the end of the third reading the bill is put to final vote. Most laws need a simple majority to be passed (Art. 24 (2), GG). Laws that make amendments to the constitution need a two-thirds majority (Art.79. (2), GG). If the bill has passed the Bundestag, it is assigned to the Bundesrat. Approval laws need to be passed by the Bundesrat, objection laws can come into force without the approval of the Bundesrat. In case of conflict between the two chambers the Mediation Committee can become active on the basis of a request from the Bundesrat, the Bundestag, or the Federal Government. For each bill or law we used the title, the key words, summary, and the whole content of the text provided by the DIP as well as the ministry assignment of the document in order to place it into a particular policy category.

10.3 Coding Procedure and Data Description

Following the Comparative Agendas Project coding scheme, the data are coded into twenty-one major and 232 minor topic areas. Unique to the German codebook is a separate category for issues related to reunification. Documents are coded under reunification if the item directly mentions unification or clearly links to the consequences of reunification. We opted for this restrictive approach as a balance between capturing this unique historical incident and recognizing the political challenges of new Germany.

All documents have been coded by at least two well-trained coders, looked through by a third person and in case of divergent classifications discussed collectively and then placed in a policy category. For all parliamentary documents (questions, bills, and laws) we coded the title, the key words and

Table 10.1. German political agendas

	Indicator	Actors	Unit of analysis	No. of observations	Intercoder reliability
Input	Most important problem (*Wichtigstes Problem*)	Respondents of representative survey	Answer to open survey question	379,820	90.6
	Party platforms (*Parteiprogramme*)	Political parties	Sentences	39,603	97.7
Policy process	Most important government speech for each year (*Regierungserklärungen*)	German Chancellor	Quasi-sentences	13,566	87.2
	Parliamentary questions (*Große und kleine Anfragen*)	Every parliamentary group or 5 percent of all MPs	Text of the question	10,029	81.9
	Bills (*Gesetzesentwürfe*)	The government, the Bundesrat or 5 percent of all MPs	Text of the legislative activity	5,801	82.6
Output	Laws (*Verabschiedete Gesetze*)	Parliament voting the laws	Text of the law	3,137	79.8

Source: Comparative Agendas Project—Germany

the summary of the text provided by the DIP. In case of doubt we additionally opened the document itself. The parliamentary questions of the (11–15 legis-lature) have been coded semi-automatically with the help of RTextTools. The algorithms were trained to classify texts using previously manually coded texts and the results verified following our normal coding procedure (by at least two well-trained coders, looked through by a third person, and in case of divergent classifications discussed collectively and then placed in a policy category). In the case of the semi-automatically coded texts, the original documents were not opened.

Table 10.1 summarizes the databases. Overall our database consists of six data series. For inputs, we classified 379,820 answers on the most important problem question and 39,603 quasi-sentences in party manifestos. Intercoder reliability is 90.6 percent for MIPs and 97.9 percent for party platforms. For policy processes, we coded 13,566 quasi-sentences in government speeches, 10,029 parliamentary questions and 5,801 bills with an intercoder reliability of 87.2 percent for government speeches, 81.9 for parliamentary questions and 82.6 percent for bills. On the output side, we coded 3,137 laws with an intercoder reliability of 79.8 percent.

10.4 A First Look at the Database: Reunification in Political Agendas

The reunification of East and West Germany transformed the German polity. We briefly describe how this process unfolded across different political
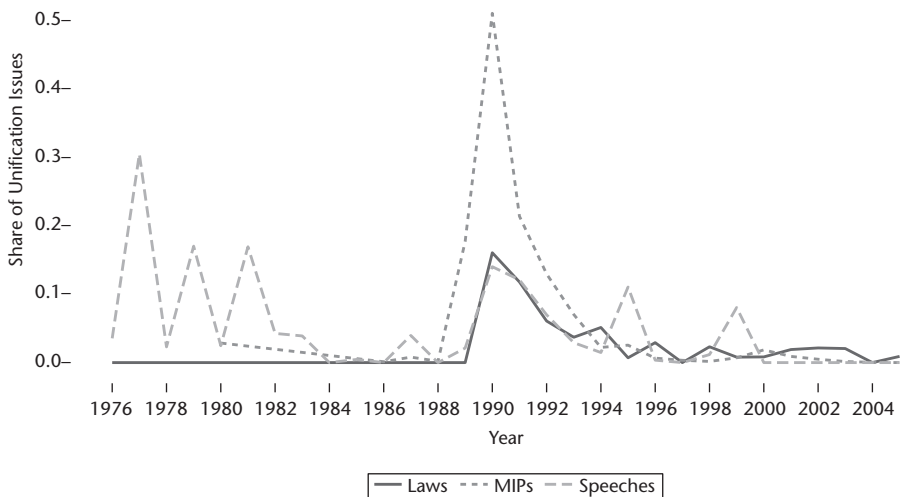

Figure 10.1. Reunification issue in Germany
Source: Comparative Agendas Project—Germany

agendas and thereby offer a quick glimpse into the power of our database. Figure 10.1 displays the percentage share of the reunification topic over time across three policy series: public opinion, government speeches and laws.

Public opinion, captured by the most important problem question, changes most dramatically. This seesaw pattern confirms the ephemeral nature of public opinion. Government speeches display three noticeable peaks in attention in the 1970s and 1980s. These peaks are a consequence of the new eastern policy (*Ostpolitk*) that was initiated during Brandt's chancellery. German chancellors regularly discuss reunification issues in the state of the union speech. The discussions often conclude speeches and are expressed in a propitiatory tone. Laws on reunification are concentrated in a short period in the early 1990s. In the years of the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and reunification (1990), we observe an increase in attention on reunification issues across all political agendas. This finding is unsurprising but delivers some clear validity for our data. What is more interesting are the clear differences between political agendas over time. Reunification issues have seldom been aired in party platforms before an election and in parliamentary questions during the legislative session (and therefore we didn't plot them). This inattention shows that reunification has neither been an important issue in electoral competition, nor has it been an issue for the opposition. The issue has not really been politicized and has predominantly been driven by speech-making and legislation. Our conviction is that the database can be fruitfully employed not only for disentangling the reunification process but also for other broad questions on German politics and public policy.

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