# 24

# Pennsylvania Policy Database Project

*Jay Jennings, Stefanie Kasparek, and Joseph McLaughlin*

The Pennsylvania Policy Database Project (PPDP) was built by faculty-supervised students at Temple University and five other universities with the support and cooperation of the Pennsylvania General Assembly. Also participating in the initial construction phase of the project were students and faculty members at Pennsylvania State University, Carnegie Mellon University, the University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania State University Harrisburg, and the University of Pennsylvania. Since 2010, the project has been exclusively maintained and updated by Temple University students. The project allows users to trace the history of public policy in the Commonwealth since 1979. It is the first sub-national project within the Comparative Agendas Project, having been started in 2006; PPDP has been releasing its data to the public since 2010 (see McLaughlin et al., 2010).

## 24.1 The Government and Politics of Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania's government is similar to the US federal government with separate legislative, executive, and judicial branches. The General Assembly is the legislative body and consists of a lower house—the House of Representatives, and an upper house—the Senate.

The General Assembly consists of fifty Senators and 203 members of the House of Representatives. All 203 members of the House and half of the Senate (25 members) are elected biannually. The General Assembly is a continuing body during the term for which its representatives are elected. In national assessments of state legislatures, the Pennsylvania General Assembly is regarded as a full-time and professional legislature.

The governor of Pennsylvania (PA), who is the head of the executive branch, is elected every four years and limited to two consecutive terms. Among the governor's numerous duties are: the appointment of executive officials, management of the executive branch, veto power over legislation, commander-in-chief of the Commonwealth's military force, and the power to pardon. In addition, the governor proposes the general fund budget in February and March, which has to be enacted before the beginning of the fiscal year on July 1st. Local governments in the United States are creatures of state government and possess no independent sovereignty. Many states, including Pennsylvania, grant at least some local governments "home rule," which generally means that in addition to the powers specifically delegated to them by the legislature, they can adopt legislation and exercise powers neither specifically reserved to the state government nor specifically prohibited to local governments.

Article Five of the Pennsylvania Constitution vests judicial power in a unified system that includes three courts of appeal: the Supreme Court, the Superior Court, and the Commonwealth Court. The Courts of Common Pleas are trial courts and have original jurisdiction in all matters not exclusively reserved to the appeals courts. Courts of Common Pleas are established in sixty judicial districts. In addition, there are a number of minor courts including magisterial district courts and municipal courts in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. The Supreme Court is Pennsylvania's highest court and holds the Commonwealth's supreme judicial power. Pennsylvanian judges are generally elected through partisan elections for ten-year terms and are eligible for retention elections.

Pennsylvania is a competitive two-party state. While Republicans and Democrats have frequently shared power over the past several decades, Republicans have held a continuous majority in the Senate since 1994. Most of the state's Democratic base is concentrated in and around its cities, particularly the two largest—Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. Most of the Republican base is found in rural counties in central Pennsylvania and along the northern border with New York State. Pennsylvania's suburbs and smaller urban areas are home to the most competition between the parties.

## 24.2 Datasets

The PPDP provides access to more than 215,000 state and news media records on the history of public policy in the Commonwealth. The database includes an extensive array of government records, news accounts, and opinion data (see Table 24.1).

**Table 24.1.** The datasets of the Pennsylvania Policy Database Project

| Dataset | Period cover | Available on the CAP website (Y/N) | Total Number of records available |
|---|---|---|---|
| Hearings House | 1979–2016 | Y | 5,655 |
| News Clips | 1979–2018 | Y | 69,788 |
| Bills, Resolutions, and Laws | 1979–2016 | Y | 102,728 |
| Governor's Budget Address | 1979–2018 | Y | 11,018 |
| Budget (Total Spending) | 1979–2014 | Y | 14,414 |
| Most Important Problem | 1994–2018 | Y | 1,254 |
| Executive Orders | 1979–2018 | Y | 332 |
| Pennsylvania Supreme Court | 1979–2012 | N | 5,044 |
| *Governing* Magazine | 1988–2018 | N | 8,095 |
| Legislative Service Agency Reports | 1979–2018 | N | 986 |
| General Fund Balance | 1979–2014 | N | 36 |

*Source*: Comparative Agendas Project—Pennsylvania

The data have been coded in accordance with the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) for all of its major and minor topic codes and gets updated constantly. In order to capture Pennsylvania's specific issues, the database includes additional and in part substantively different data in unique topics like coal mine subsidence and reclamation. Beyond that, the Pennsylvania database includes tools for analysis of the legislative process itself. Its consistency with CAP facilitates international, federal, and state policy comparisons at large.

In order to avoid inconsistencies in terminology and change in meaning, each individual record has been read, abstracted, and double-blind coded by two student workers. An exception is the coding of over 100,000 bills, which are the centerpiece of the database. Here, one student has been replaced by a computer using a custom-made policy-coding software. The results have been proven highly consistent with the human coders. In case of disagreements among the coders, the research manager tie breaks votes.

Overall, PPDP provides different series of data for the Comparative Agendas Project. A challenge exists for news clips, as no dominant news source covers the entire state. The Pennsylvania media data therefore lack comparability with *The New York Times* data in the US Policy Agendas Project. Instead, news clips data rely on collections of news reports from diverse newspapers and electronic media across the state produced every working day by Capitol press offices. As compared to the US Project, which reflects the policy focus of the *Times*, as a proxy for the national media, the PA project reflects the news media's policy focus *as it perceived* by government decision-makers. The project abstracts and codes under major topics a random sample of 10 percent of the news reports produced by Capitol press offices. House Hearings are complete and provide abstracts written

by the House Archives staff in addition to information on committee specifics and legislative discussions.[1] The annual governor's Budget Address is seen as equivalent to the president's State-of-the-Union address and coded in quasi-sentences. A total of over eight thousand sentences or sentence fragments results in accurate policy coding over time. The comprehensive coverage of Executive Orders is an exclusive part of the Pennsylvania database. *Governing* magazine focuses on trends in state and local government, coded by major topics. The Franklin Marshall College Poll provides PPDP with the most important problem (MIP) question for Pennsylvania residents beginning in 1994. Through a unique licensing arrangement, the project includes and codes Westlaw's abstracts of Pennsylvania Supreme Court decisions.

Finally, the two budget data series (total spending all funds and general fund balance) have unique characteristics. The general fund balance dataset is drawn directly from annual reports produced by the National Governors Association and the National Association of State Budget Officers and has no counterpart in the national project or CAP. It represents Pennsylvania's fiscal condition as opposed to its policy attention, but fiscal condition profoundly affects the state's policy choices. The total spending dataset codes the Census Bureau's *State Government Finances* data into the CAP major topics. Users of the project should be aware that the PA spending codes and data are not consistent with the US Project's budget data, which use topics devised by the US government's Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and have to be crosswalked to the Policy Agendas coding scheme for comparability with other projects.

## 24.3 Specificities and Perspectives

Users of our data should be aware of two special characteristics associated with PPDP. The first characteristic is obvious: Pennsylvania is a sub-national state and therefore differences in scope and focus of the agenda exist. State governments in the United States are considered to have a greater degree of sovereignty than sub-governments in most of the world's two dozen or so federalist nations. US states are primarily responsible for, or play a large role, in determining education, healthcare, welfare, public safety, and many other policy issues. Viewed in this way and in their sweeping powers with respect to local governments, Pennsylvania is more similar to a unitary, or non-federalist, nation than to the US federal government. There are, however, policy areas not focused on by Pennsylvania policymakers that would be focused on by most national states. In particular, international relations, foreign trade, and defense are policy topic areas that are sparsely used in our datasets. Because

our codebook was based on the US Policy Agendas and now CAP codebooks, the Pennsylvania codebook needed to add additional codes to capture areas of policymaking not relevant to the US federal government. Two prominent examples can be found in the banking, finance, and commerce topic code. The US federal government does not regulate most professional services or the sale of alcohol, so the Pennsylvania project codebook added codes for these important state policy areas. In addition, PPDP includes a major topic for the state's extensive activities relating to the establishment and regulation of local governments.

The second special characteristic of PPDP is that it was initially funded by the PA General Assembly. This is worth noting because it influenced the level of detail collected in our data, particularly within the legislation dataset. A large focus was placed on accurately assessing the legislative history of each bill introduced to the General Assembly. Because our data link directly to the General Assembly's online archives, users of our project[2] can not only graph patterns of policy attention reflected by the aggregation of bills, resolutions, and laws (called "acts" in our database) but can, by clicking on embedded links, call up the actual text of all legislation as introduced and all subsequent amendments, a summary of the legislative history of each and every bill, and for many, if not most, the online record of House and Senate debate on the measure, including roll call votes. Although most of this legislative history functionality has not been incorporated into the CAP website, users should be aware that tools for analyzing the legislative process are available for each bill on our project's website.

## 24.4 Data Analysis Example

Since 1859, the drilling of oil and natural gas wells, most recently through the process known as fracking, has shaped Pennsylvania's landscape significantly through extensive industrialization of the land. PA residents and advocates have raised serious concerns about environmental damage and about health and drinking water safety. The relationship between drinking water safety and fracking has long been disputed by oil and gas companies and received only limited attention by lawmakers for long stretches of time. Since the early 2000s, Pennsylvania experienced a dramatic increase in natural gas and oil production. Figure 24.1 reflects this development and displays the significantly changed awareness of state legislators towards drinking water safety and the fracking of natural gas and oil.

Figure 24.2 provides information on attention the media and the governor's Budget Address pay to the issues of drinking water safety and natural gas and oil as a source of energy. Media has generally paid more attention to the

environmental aspects of fracking than to the energy one. Data on the governor's Budget Address indicates that, in line with the received legislative attention, the governor increasingly also paid more attention to the issue of natural oil and gas in his address in the past ten years.[3]
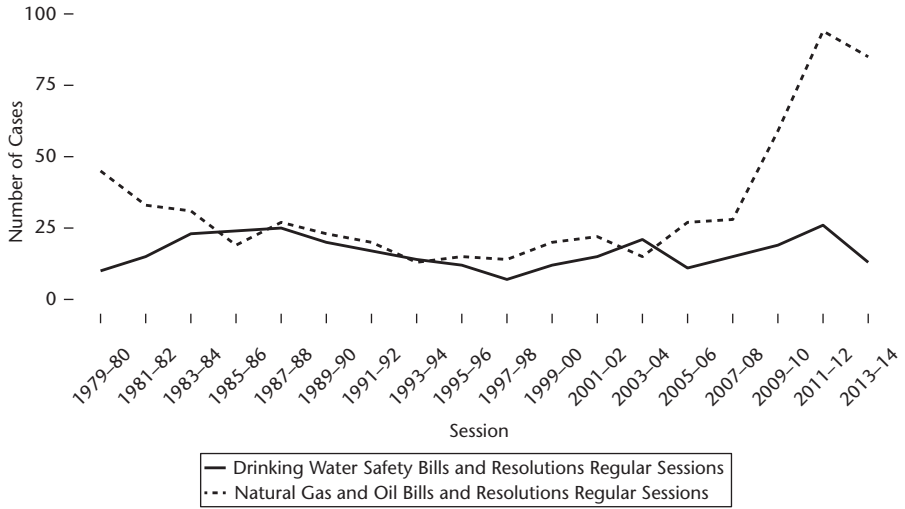


**Figure 24.1.** Drinking water safety bills and resolutions vs. natural gas and oil bills and resolutions

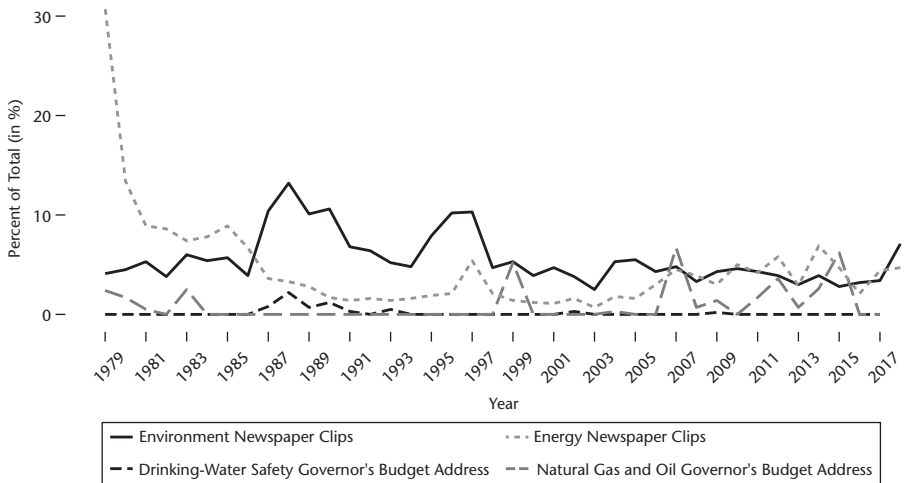*Source*: Comparative Agendas Project—Pennsylvania



**Figure 24.2.** Percentage of news clips and governor's address for drinking water safety and natural gas and oil

*Source*: Comparative Agendas Project—Pennsylvania

## Notes

1. The Senate does not consistently archive its records of hearings; hence the dataset is not comprehensive.
2. The CAP analysis tool is not able to provide this detailed information. Instead, it links to the PPDP website for a more detailed analysis tool and the original documents.
3. The data can be displayed as "percentage of total" or in raw numbers.

## References

McLaughlin, J. P., Wolfgang, P., Leckrone, J. W., Gollob, J., Bossie, J., Jennings, J., and Atherton, M. J. (2010). The Pennsylvania Policy Database Project: A model for comparative analysis. *State Politics & Policy Quarterly,* 10(3), pp. 320–36.