

## The Public Agenda

### A Comparative Perspective

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#### 25.1 The Public Agenda and Theories of Agenda-Setting

If the political agenda consists of those subjects or problems that are the focus of policymakers at a given moment in time (Kingdon, 1984), then the public agenda refers more specifically to the issues that are atop the public's mind, or the concerns and anxieties prevalent in the wider social milieu. When an issue makes it onto the public agenda, it is more likely to be put on the formal political agenda. Agenda-setting in public opinion is thus a prerequisite for achieving policy change. Such an argument was developed by Cobb and Elder (1972), who distinguished between the "systemic" and "institutional" agenda. The systemic agenda consists of "all issues that are commonly perceived by members of the political community as meriting public attention" (Cobb and Elder, 1972: 85). Even before an issue can reach the systemic agenda it must satisfy a number of criteria: the public must be aware that there is a problem, often via media coverage, there must be consensus that action needs to be taken, and government must be seen as *capable* of doing something about it. The institutional agenda, on the other hand, is "that list of items explicitly up for the active and serious consideration of authoritative decision makers" (Cobb and Elder, 1972: 86). When an issue reaches the attention of the executive, legislature, or judiciary, this is the precursor to the possibility of policy change (Jones and Baumgartner, 2004: 2). The public agenda matters, then, in reflecting the broader set of concerns within a society that are seen as needing addressing. This in turn feeds into the "problem stream" (Kingdon, 1984) of concerns preoccupying decision-makers in and around government.

As Jones (1994) observes, shifts in issue salience can occur due to a change in the underlying facts of a situation, or due to changes in the meaning of “facts.” Public attentiveness to crime might rise, for example, either because of increasing levels of victimization or, instead, because media or political elites start to talk about the issue as being a problem. Studies find that the public agenda tends to closely track this “problem status” of certain issues (e.g., Hibbs, 1979; Hudson, 1994). Elites can alternatively mobilize attention to issues (e.g., Carmines and Stimson, 1989; Cohen, 1995; Lovett et al., 2015). The agenda-setting power of elites may lead the level of public concern to bear little relation to the degree to which there is a problem. Another reason why changes occur in the public agenda is that new problems or events demand attention—since the mass public have limited capacity in the number of topics that can be attended to at a given moment in time (McCombs and Zhu, 1995). Increased coverage of so-called “killer issues” (Brosius and Kepplinger, 1995) can move some issues off the agenda altogether while leaving others unaffected. Simply explaining what gains traction on the public agenda is crucial for accounts of agenda-setting.

The dynamics of change in the public agenda can be sporadic and rapid or slow and gradual. In general, issue attention tends to move more quickly than preferences (Jones, 1994). For example, bouts of disorder or the occurrence of a dangerous dog attack can induce “moral panics” and over-reactions about perceived problems or threats (Cohen, 1972; Hood and Lodge, 2002; Jennings et al., 2017). Birkland (2011: 180) defines “focusing events” as “sudden, relatively rare events that spark intense media and public attention because of their sheer magnitude or, sometimes, because of the harm they reveal.” These events draw attention to dormant issues or concerns, taking the form of natural or manmade disasters, accidents, scandals, terrorist attacks, financial crises, protests, or other incidents. Events such as 9/11, or the United Kingdom’s fuel protests of 2000, can result in a sudden rise in issue salience. Upsurges in attention can lead to pressure on policymakers to take action in those domains characterized by stability. The public agenda can also move slowly, as attention adjusts incrementally in response to long-term trends or cycles of social and economic change. For example, attention to the economy tends to track consumer sentiment (Wlezien, 2005) while concern about inflation and unemployment follow these indicators directly (Hibbs, 1979; Hudson, 1994). Such patterns of issue attention matter in understanding the different sorts of pressure on policymakers.

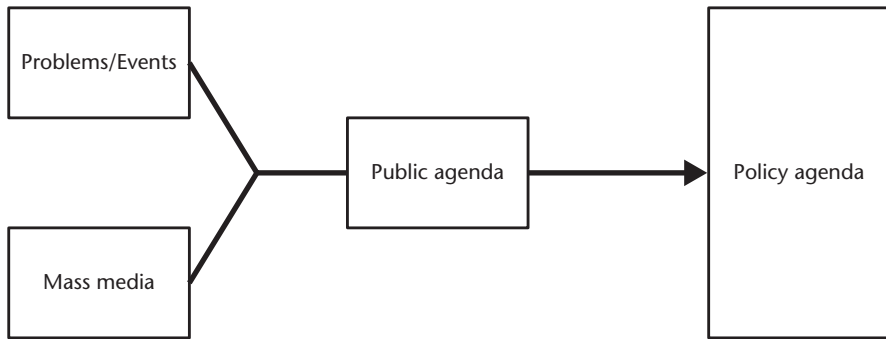
In this chapter we consider theoretical perspectives on possible causes and effects of the public agenda: specifically, (1) media agenda-setting and (2) agenda representation. We assess the benefits of comparative analysis of the public agenda, and insights this might provide on differences between political systems or policy contexts. For example, it can show how the concerns of

particular national publics differ, how these reflect cross-national differences in the issues that the media attend to, and the seeming influence over the priorities of policymakers. We then consider the most important problem (MIP) survey question, and its variants, as a measure of the public agenda. We compare the public agenda in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Spain—describing similarities and differences in trends over time, both in terms of the content and patterns of change and stability in the public agenda. Our analysis then considers how media coverage and problem status are linked to public attention for selected issues (the economy and crime) and how the public agenda impacts on the policy agenda over time. This reveals that the public agenda tends to respond to the severity of policy problems—for the economy and crime—and slightly weaker evidence for the agenda-setting power of the media.

### 25.2 Causes and Effects of the Public Agenda

What shapes the public agenda? It has long been argued that mass media exerts substantial agenda-setting influence in determining the issues that are atop the public's mind. In their famous study, McCombs and Shaw (1972) highlighted that the content of media coverage impacted on the priorities of voters. Through funneling the attention of its audience towards certain topics, the mass media condition the issues that the public is more likely to consider important. News coverage tends to favor "episodic" frames, reporting stories about specific events or cases, above more "thematic" frames relating to policy problems or social conditions (Iyengar, 1991). This bias in news framing means the public agenda is often shaped by events as well as responses to the emergence of social problems that require attention from policymakers.

An alternative perspective of what shapes the issue content of the public agenda suggests it responds to fluctuations in severity of the *problem status* of particular issues (Wlezien, 2005; John et al., 2013: Ch. 7). This sort of public response to the discovery of emergent policy problems was implicit to Anthony Downs' (1972) seminal theory of the issue attention cycle. For example, public concern about inflation and unemployment are shown to track their actual levels (Hibbs, 1979; Hudson, 1994). Similarly, public attention to the issue of strikes tracks the scale of industrial disputes in the United Kingdom (Jennings and Wlezien, 2011). The final possibility is that the public agenda is influenced by elite mobilization. That is, policymakers use their rhetorical or institutional platform to draw public attention to specific issues. As an example, the US president is able to use the State of the Union Address to talk about particular policy areas, eliciting a response from the mass public (e.g., Cohen, 1995; Lovett et al., 2015). In parliamentary systems, legislators



**Figure 25.1.** Models of the public and policy agenda

*Source:* Comparative Agendas Project

can highlight particular issues through asking questions in formal debates. Even here, elites rely on mass media for coverage in order that their rhetoric reaches its public audience.

How does the public agenda influence public policy? The logic is straightforward: if an issue is the subject of public attention, then it is more likely to be considered important by policymakers, and put on the formal agenda (e.g., Cobb and Elder, 1972; Kingdon, 1984; Baumgartner and Jones, 1993). If this expectation applies to attention to issues within specific domains, it follows that the policy priorities of government in the aggregate correspond to the issue priorities of the public (e.g., Jones and Baumgartner, 2004; Jones et al., 2009; Chaqués-Bonafont and Palau, 2011; Lindeboom, 2012; Alexandrova et al., 2016). Some go further and expect over-time aggregate correspondence between the public agenda and the policy agenda (e.g., Jennings and John, 2009; John et al., 2011; Bevan and Jennings, 2014). “Dynamic agenda representation” refers to the process through which the issue priorities of the public are translated into the policy priorities of government (Bevan and Jennings, 2014). While it is possible that the public and policymakers are responding simultaneously to the problem status of issues, congruence between the public and policy agenda indicates some level of democratic performance—though is not the same as responsiveness to public preferences for policy (Jennings and Wlezien, 2015). Possible relationships between problems/events, mass media, the public and policy agenda are illustrated in Figure 25.1, though are by no means exhaustive.

### 25.3 Comparing the Public Agenda

Most studies of the public agenda are limited to a single country (see Bevan et al., 2016 for an exception), and often a single policy domain or subset of

policy domains (e.g., the economy, foreign affairs, defense). These provide insights on the factors that shape the public agenda—such as social and economic conditions or mass media—and its impact on policymakers in different contexts, but there is limited scope for generalization. Not least, studies often depend on measures that are not directly equivalent or cannot be replicated. Yet one might expect variation in the sorts of issue priorities on the public agenda across countries and political systems. This might be due to differences in the particular values of a country, or its historical set of state institutions (e.g., welfare state regimes). It might also reflect variations in the contemporary set of policy problems facing a polity (e.g., economic crises, crime rates, public health emergencies), and the signals provided to the mass public by elites (such as by political parties).

Taking a comparative perspective to analysis of the public agenda offers the promise of addressing questions that have been little explored. How do the issue priorities of citizens vary across countries? What differences are there in the stability or instability of the public agenda? How much influence does mass media have in different political systems? Does responsiveness of the policy agenda to the public agenda vary across political institutions and countries? These questions can only be properly resolved through systematic cross-national comparison based on equivalent measures of the public and policy agendas. Data collected through the Comparative Agendas Project offers such an opportunity.

### 25.4 Measuring the Public Agenda

To measure the public agenda, scholars have often used aggregate responses to the survey question asking about the most important problem (MIP) or most important issue (MII) facing the country (e.g., McCombs and Shaw, 1972; MacKuen and Coombs, 1981; Jones, 1994; McCombs and Zhu, 1995; Soroka, 2002; Jones and Baumgartner, 2004; Jones et al., 2009; John et al., 2013; Bevan and Jennings, 2014; Green and Jennings, 2017).<sup>1</sup> These responses are taken to characterize the broader public salience of issues at particular points in time and over time. Much research shows that MIP responses indicate the issues on people's minds (e.g., Jones, 1994; Soroka, 2002; Bartle and Laycock, 2012; Jennings and Wlezien, 2011). Simply, the proportion of the public naming an issue as the most important indicates its prominence on the agenda relative to other issues. If "the economy" is mentioned by 50 percent of respondents and crime is mentioned by just 10 percent, this indicates that the economy is a more prominent issue on the public agenda. Change over time in the proportion of MIP responses for an issue indicates that it has increased or decreased in its prominence on the public agenda. While an imperfect measure of the

*importance* that individuals attach to a given issue, the MIP does indicate those issues at the forefront of public attention.

Survey data on the MIP (or MII) over long periods of time is in short supply. In the United States and the United Kingdom, data is available back to the 1940s, while regular data is available for Germany since the mid-1980s and Spain from the 1990s. In other countries data tends to be sparser. In Europe, the Eurobarometer series offers a measure of MII that covers up to twenty-seven countries from the early 2000s, but it includes survey responses for just seven issues (the economy, immigration, pensions, environment and energy, law and order, terrorism, and international relations), and is not based on open-ended responses. Within the CAP, then, data on the public agenda is dependent on the duration and reliability of time series of MIP responses—which are not available for every country.<sup>2</sup> Whereas it is typically possible to reconstruct measures of the policy agenda based on the historical record (such as from speeches, laws, or budgets), it is not possible to retrospectively collect data on mass opinion.

At the time of writing (summer, 2017), we have access to MIP data recoded according to the CAP coding system for Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Data for Hungary has recently been added to the CAP data system, and data for Germany is due to be made available soon. One of the advantages of using the CAP coding system is that the issue categories used can be standardized (with topics referring to the same policy area), while information is not necessarily lost if coded at the subtopic as well (where MIP response categories exactly match CAP subtopics). The system makes comparative analysis rather more straightforward than using the original survey data—where there are often variations across countries, and over time, in the categories of “problems” that are used by survey organizations (as an example, MIP responses about health in the United States tend to refer to “healthcare” or “Medicaid,” whereas in the United Kingdom the “National Health Service” is more commonly used). Each of these series is measured using aggregate annual responses to the MIP or the MII question as a percentage of all responses (including “other” responses).<sup>3</sup> These provide a measure of the broader public prioritization of topics at particular points in time. Our analysis here is therefore limited to these three countries, but in future it should become possible to include other national and sub-national cases as the data coverage of CAP increases. Researchers may in future need to decide whether to focus their comparative analyses on a smaller N of cases but for a longer time period, or for a larger N of cases with shorter time series.

For the purposes of this chapter, we treat the MIP and MII questions as interchangeable, since they have been shown to exhibit a high degree of common variance (Jennings and Wlezien, 2011).<sup>4</sup> It is important to note, however, that these are not measures of public preferences (Wlezien, 2005;

Jennings and Wlezien, 2015), and responses may vary according to egocentric and sociotropic versions of the question (Bevan et al., 2016).

## 25.5 Analysis

### 25.5.1 Comparing Public Agendas in United States, the United Kingdom, and Spain

In the analysis that follows we focus upon the period for which we have overlapping data for all three countries, between 1993 and 2012. This enables a direct comparison of the public agendas of these countries over the same period. Figure 25.2 plots a horizontal bar chart of the average proportion of MIP responses, by issue, over that period, for each of the three countries. MIP responses are shaded dark grey for the United States, medium grey for the United Kingdom, and light grey for Spain. This simple analysis provides some immediate insights into the issues that dominate the public agenda in these countries. Firstly, these reveal the dominance of macroeconomic issues (at around 30 percent to 40 percent), health (around 10 percent) and crime (over 10 percent) during this time period. That the economy is the top priority tells us quite a lot about the similarities between public agendas in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Spain—countries with distinct political systems and values. We also see similarities in the level of public attention to

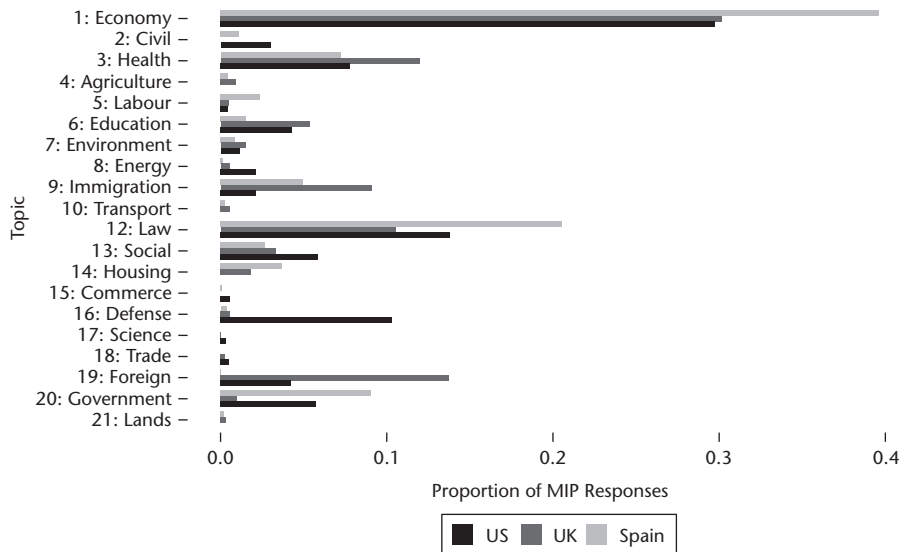


Figure 25.2. Average MIP response, by major topic, 1993–2012

Source: Comparative Agendas Project

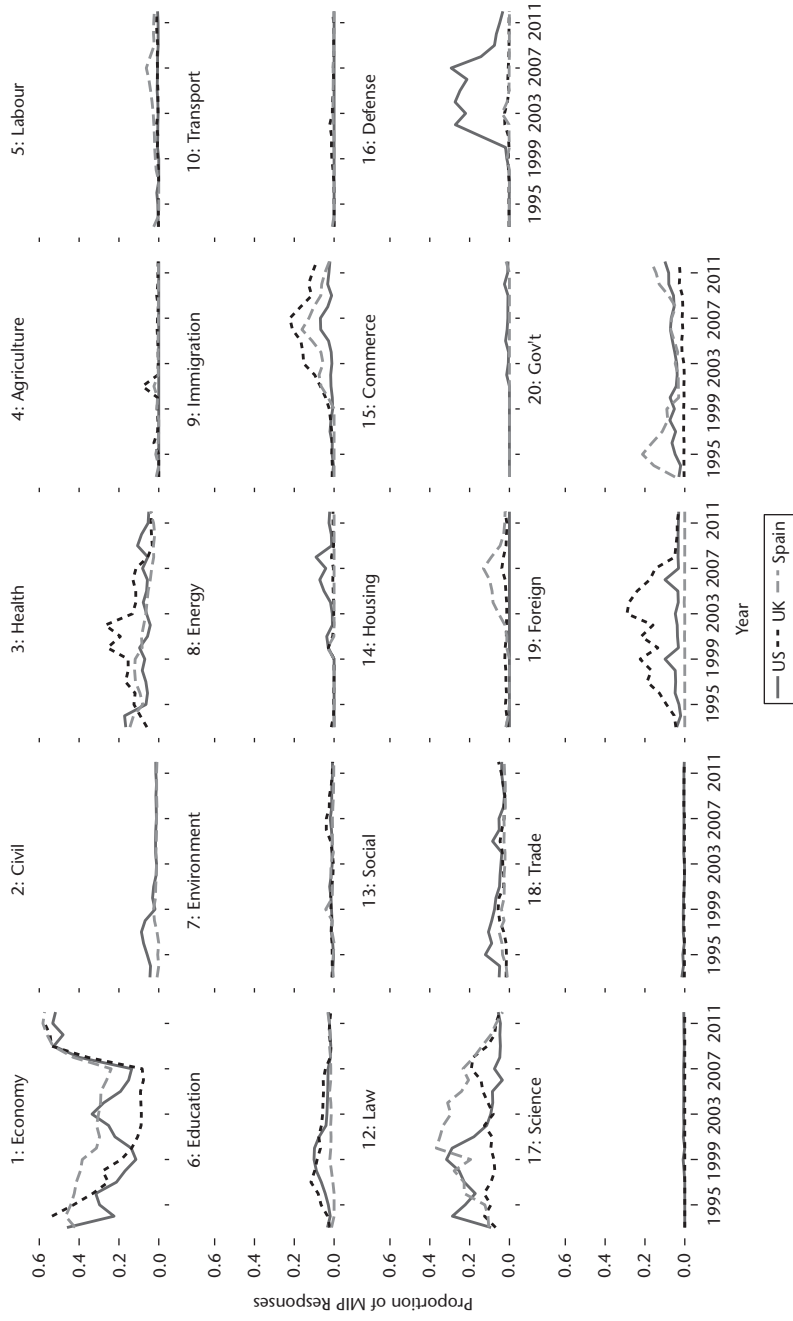
education (around 5 percent in the United States and the United Kingdom, though less than half this in Spain) and the environment (but at a low level of between 1 percent and 2 percent). The differences across countries are especially interesting: immigration is a much more salient issue in the United Kingdom (at just under 10 percent of the public agenda) than in either Spain (where it is around 5 percent) or the United States (where it is just over 2 percent).

Additionally, defense attracts a substantial proportion of the attention of the US public (around 10 percent), due to the salience of security issues in the wake of September 11th. In contrast, UK public opinion is focused on international affairs—in part due to conflicts in Eastern Europe during the 1990s, but also because of how MII responses about defense and international affairs were coded by the survey organization. Finally, the running of government takes up a good part of public attention in Spain, reflecting the dissatisfaction of the Spanish public with issues such as corruption and the management of government during parts of this period. In many ways, what is striking about the pattern we observe is the degree of similarity across these three very distinct national political systems. But comparison enables us to identify importance differences too.

### *25.5.2 Tracking the Public Agenda over Time*

In addition to considering level-differences in public attention to policy issues in the three countries during the entire 1993 to 2012 period, it is also helpful to consider variation over time. The proportion of MIP responses for each topic in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Spain is plotted in Figure 25.3. A number of observations can be made. Firstly, the overall trend in public attention to the economy, which approximately takes the form of a U-shape, is the same in all three countries. This reveals the shared experience of decline in importance of economic issues to the public during the 1990s, in a period of growth, and a rise in salience from the mid-2000s following the slowing and worsening of economic conditions (in particular with the onset of the global financial crisis in 2008). Another common pattern is the rise and fall of law and crime on the public agenda over this time period, though there are slight differences; notably that the issue is never as salient in the United States, and that the peak of attention comes later in the United Kingdom (in around 2007). In all three countries there is an increase in public attention to the issue of immigration at some point after 2000. There are striking differences too. Most obviously, public attention to defense issues in the United States spiked massively in 2001, following the 9/11 attacks. Despite major terror attacks in Spain (the Madrid bombings of 2003) and the United Kingdom (the London 7/7 bombings of 2005) there were no similar increases





**Figure 25.3. United States, United Kingdom, and Spain, 1993–2012**  
*Source: Comparative Agendas Project*

in the public agenda. Another difference across the countries relates to health, where the public agenda in the United States was fairly stable throughout the period (at least after the Clinton healthcare plan was abandoned in 1994), and steadily declined in Spain, but rose and then fell in the United Kingdom. Each reveals the distinctive cross-national dynamics of the issue of health.

### 25.5.3 Stability and Instability in the Public Agenda

We are also interested in the degree to which the public agenda is stable, or subject to rapid change, in the attention that is assigned to issues. Just as in the study of punctuated equilibrium in policy agendas (e.g., Jones and Baumgartner, 2005; Baumgartner et al., 2009), it is possible to discern patterns of stability and instability from aggregate distributions of change in public attention. This can be done, specifically, through plotting of the data on year-on-year changes in the content of the public agenda, and calculation of kurtosis scores. Kurtosis is a measure of the relative “peakedness” of a given distribution. Compared against a normal distribution, those with positive kurtosis (i.e., “leptokurtosis”) have a large, slender central peak that corresponds to extended periods of inertia in public opinion, weak shoulders to reflect the relative infrequency of moderate changes, and “fat tails” that represent disproportionately large numbers of extreme values (i.e., corresponding to extreme shifts in the public agenda). Leptokurtic distributions (those where the value of the kurtosis statistic is greater than 3) reveal cases where public opinion tends to alternative between periods of stability and occasional dramatic shifts in the issue priorities of the public.

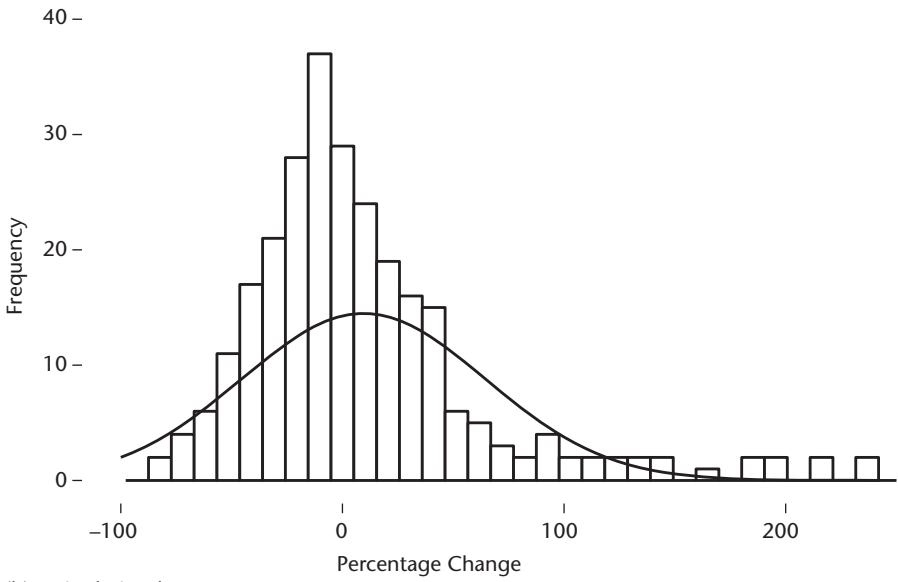
Our analysis uses the “percent-percent” method (considering the distribution of percentage change in the percentage of attention to particular issues) to calculate a kurtosis statistic for the public agenda in each country overall. These are reported in Table 25.1. Histograms of distributions of change, across all issues, are plotted in Figure 25.4. Interestingly, these reveal substantial variation in the punctuatedness of the public agenda in the three countries. The combination of incrementalism around a central peak and extreme values is most pronounced in the case of Spain, which also has the highest level of kurtosis (118.487). By comparison, the public agenda is less punctuated in the

**Table 25.1.** Kurtosis of percent-percent change in the public agenda, 1993–2012

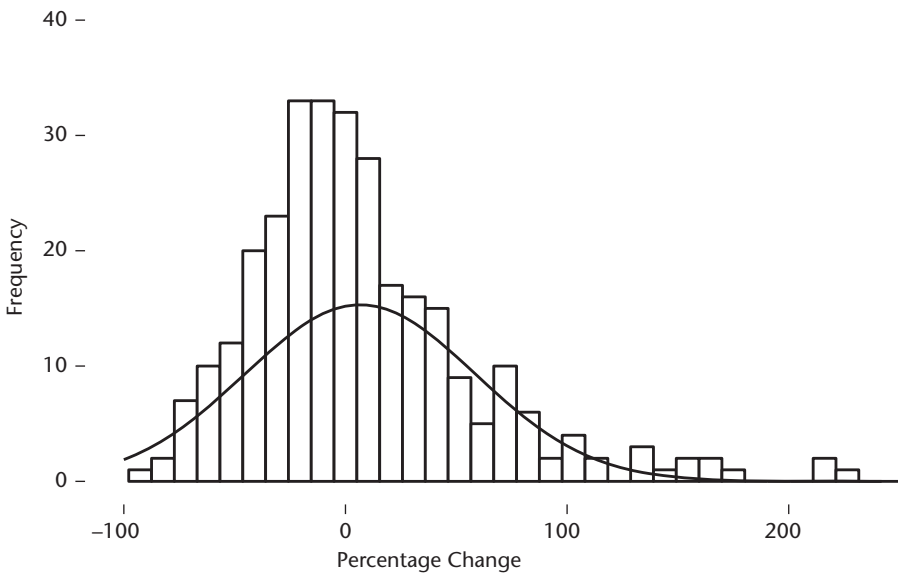
Country	United States	United Kingdom	Spain
Kurtosis	24.315	61.573	118.487
N	276	312	238

Source: Comparative Agendas Project

(a) United States



(b) United Kingdom



**Figure 25.4.** Histogram of percent-percent change in the public agenda, 1993–2012  
*Source:* Comparative Agendas Project

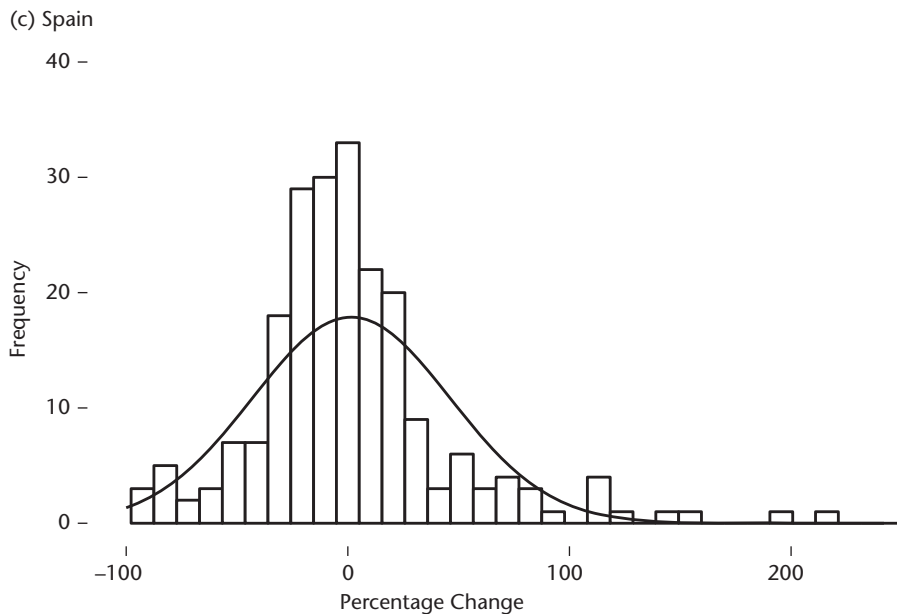
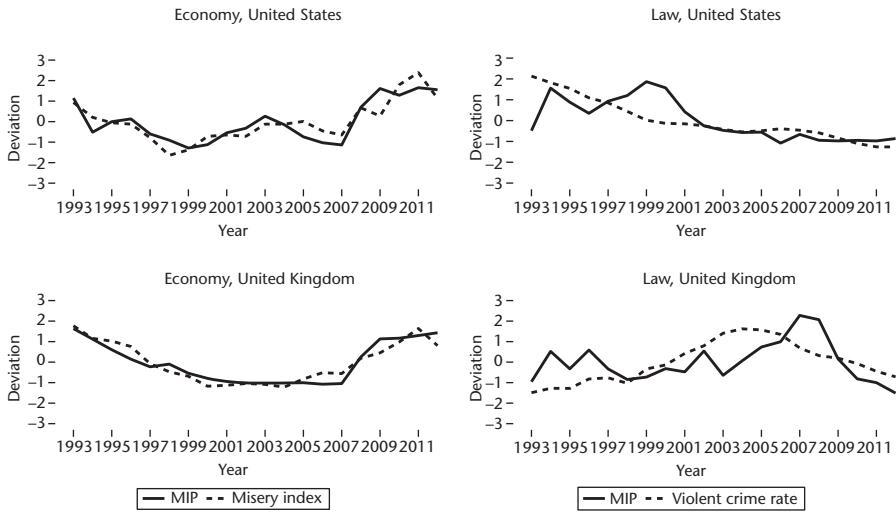


Figure 25.4. Continued

United Kingdom (61.573), and less punctuated still in the United States (24.315), though even in these cases change in the issues that the public are concerned with tends to alternate between long periods of incrementalism and infrequent but large jumps or collapses in attention.

#### 25.5.4 *What Shapes the Public Agenda?*

To understand these dynamics of the public agenda, we can look towards the factors that might account for these trends. Mass media and problem status (or problem definitions) are often put forward as reasons behind the rise and fall of issues on the public agenda. The availability of comparative data on media and public agendas, along with standard measures of problem status, enable us to test these expectations. We start by considering the common trends in measures of policy problems and MIP responses, in the domains of the economy and crime. We opt for these in part because they are issues where decent objective measures of problem status can be identified (e.g., for the former, economic growth, unemployment, and inflation rates, and for the latter, crime rates), and because these are of substantial importance to citizens (as was shown in Figure 25.2).



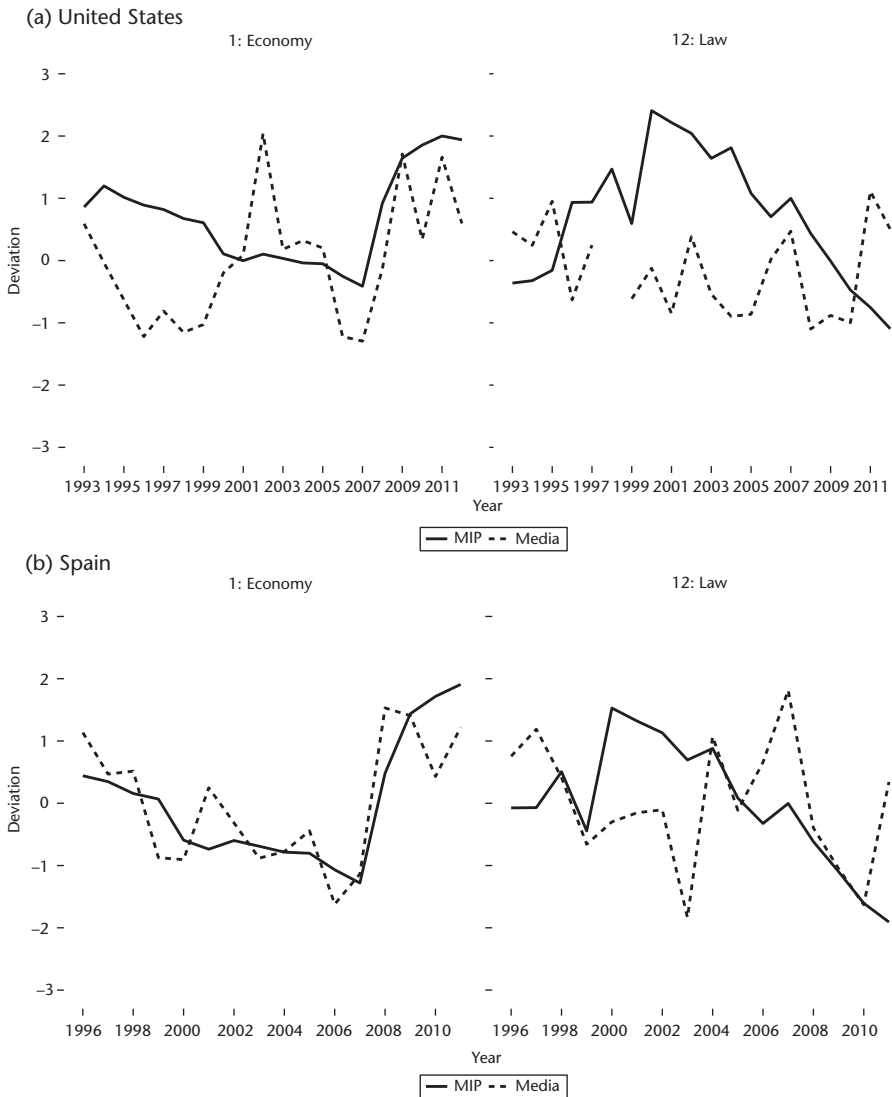
**Figure 25.5.** Problem status and MIP responses, 1993–2012

Source: Comparative Agendas Project

In the panels on the left-hand side of Figure 25.5 we first plot our measure of economic conditions, the combined unemployment and inflation rate (also known as “the misery index”), against the proportion of MIP responses mentioning the economy in the United States and the United Kingdom respectively. These variables are standardized to facilitate comparison.<sup>5</sup> Figure 25.5 reveals an impressive degree of congruence between the proportion of the public naming the economy as the MIP and the misery index in both the United States and the United Kingdom. Indeed, the trends in the two countries are notably similar—with the prominence of the economy on the public agenda declining from the early 1990s with the improvement of economic conditions, and rising sharply from 2007 with the onset of the global financial crisis. Similarly, in the panels on the right-hand side of Figure 25.5 we plot “problem status” for law and crime in the United States and the United Kingdom, as measured by the rate of violent crime, against the proportion of MIP responses on this issue. This again reveals correspondence between the public agenda and objective measures of policy problems, consistent with previous studies of public opinion on the issue of crime (Miller, 2016; Jennings et al., 2017). While the series do not move as closely together over time as for the economy, the public agenda nevertheless tends to follow changes in the rate of violent crime in the longer term; declining in the United States following the fall of crime rates from the mid-1990s, and rising in the United Kingdom until the mid-2000s after a period of rising crime and falling thereafter. On the basis of these issues there is evidence that the

public agenda moves at least partly in response to changes in exogenous policy conditions.

Next, in Figures 25.6(a) and 25.6(b) we consider how news coverage of issues by the mass media moves in tandem with the public agenda over time in the United States and Spain.<sup>6</sup> This is another mechanism which might be expected to influence the issues of concern to the public. In the United States,



**Figure 25.6.** Media and MIP responses, 1993–2012

Source: Comparative Agendas Project

the media agenda is measured with a systematic random sample of the New York Times Index. In Spain, it is based on coding of all the stories published in the front pages of *El Mundo* and *El País*, the two highest circulation newspapers in Spain. We focus on the issues of the economy and law and crime, again. Here, interestingly, the correspondence between the public and media agendas in the United States is much weaker than observed previously for problem status. On the issue of the economy there is some covariation in these series around the time of the global financial crisis in 2007–8, but this is much weaker, and there is little commonality between MIP responses and media coverage on the issue of law and order. In Spain, the evidence for the media–public nexus is quite different. For the economy, the media and public agendas move remarkably closely together over time; declining in the 1990s prior to a sharp rise in 2008. While the degree of correspondence is less for the issue of law and crime it still appears that these move together for periods of time (although there are also moments of divergence). The available CAP data thus provides evidence, already, of the potential linkages between mass media and the public agenda—or at least common responses of these societal agendas to changes in the policy problems facing society.

### 25.5.5 Representation via the Public and Policy Agenda

It is possible to assess the degree of correspondence between the issue priorities of the public and those of policymakers. For this, we use data on the policy agenda of executive speeches. That is, the US State of the Union Address, the UK Queen’s Speech (Jennings et al., 2011), and the Spanish prime minister’s investiture or state-of-the-nation speech (Chaqués-Bonafont et al., 2015). These annual statements by, or on behalf of, the executive have been shown to be a reliable and meaningful indicator of the policy priorities of government (Mortensen et al., 2011). In Table 25.2 we present bivariate correlations between MIP responses and the proportion of the executive speech assigned to each topic in each country. We focus on the period between 1993 and 2012 because this is the period where we have data over the entire period for all three countries (though note that one or two policy topics are missing due to the lack of availability of MIP data). If we start with the mean correlation across all issues, this offers interesting insights into the degree of agenda representation in each country. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the majoritarian Westminster model of the United Kingdom observes the lowest rate of correspondence between public and policy agendas (0.31,  $p = 0.00$ ). In contrast, Spain (0.68,  $p = 0.00$ ) displays the highest rate of consistency with the public agenda, which may reflect the proportional electoral system through which its governments are elected, though it is also a unitary parliamentary state. The degree of representation is higher in the United States too (0.58,  $p = 0.00$ ), potentially indicating that its

**Table 25.2.** Correlations of the public and policy agendas (executive speeches), 1993–2012

Topic	United States		United Kingdom		Spain	
	Correlation	<i>p</i>	Correlation	<i>p</i>	Correlation	<i>p</i>
All topics	<b>0.58</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>0.31</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>0.68</b>	<b>0.00</b>
1: Economy	<b>0.75</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>0.69</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>0.83</b>	<b>0.00</b>
2: Civil	0.11	0.64	–	–	0.08	0.73
3: Health	<b>0.70</b>	<b>0.00</b>	0.04	0.88	0.30	0.20
4: Agriculture	–	–	–0.12	0.61	0.02	0.93
5: Labor	0.07	0.77	–0.17	0.47	0.29	0.22
6: Education	<b>0.57</b>	<b>0.01</b>	0.38	0.10	0.37	0.11
7: Environment	–0.04	0.85	–0.14	0.56	–0.17	0.51
8: Energy	0.43	0.06	0.11	0.64	–0.05	0.83
9: Immigration	0.20	0.39	0.04	0.86	<b>0.72</b>	<b>0.00</b>
10: Transport	–	–	–0.03	0.90	0.37	0.11
12: Law	<b>0.67</b>	<b>0.00</b>	0.07	0.78	<b>0.67</b>	<b>0.00</b>
13: Social	<b>0.65</b>	<b>0.00</b>	0.24	0.32	–0.30	0.20
14: Housing	–	–	–0.01	0.98	<b>0.50</b>	<b>0.02</b>
15: Commerce	<b>0.53</b>	<b>0.02</b>	–	–	0.07	0.77
16: Defence	<b>0.45</b>	<b>0.05</b>	–0.11	0.64	0.13	0.60
17: Science	–0.04	0.86	<b>0.51</b>	<b>0.02</b>	–	–
18: Trade	–0.05	0.83	<b>0.52</b>	<b>0.02</b>	–	–
19: Foreign	0.22	0.35	<b>0.59</b>	<b>0.01</b>	0.10	0.66
20: Gov't	0.12	0.62	0.01	0.96	0.33	0.15
21: Lands	–	–	<b>0.62</b>	<b>0.00</b>	–0.34	0.18

Source: Comparative Agendas Project

federal–presidential system encourages a high level of responsiveness to the issue priorities of the public (see Bevan and Jennings, 2014).

Looking across issues, a high level of correspondence between the public and policy agenda is observed for the economy, with a positive correlation ranging between 0.69 (United Kingdom) and 0.83 (Spain), significant at the 99 percent confidence level in all cases. This is arguably unsurprising given the high salience of economic issues to voters whatever the political context. The variation in the degree of representation for other issues offers some insights into the specific politics of each country during the 1993 to 2012 period. For the United States, we see substantial positive and significant correlations between the public and policy agenda for healthcare, education, law and crime, welfare, domestic commerce, and defense. The strongest correlations observed are for healthcare (0.70, *p* = 0.00), law and crime (0.67, *p* = 0.00), and social welfare (0.65, *p* = 0.00), all issues that were on the political agenda during the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations—and which were salient to the public too at different points in time. For the United Kingdom, the domains in which agenda representation is found are quite different, with positive and significant correlations for technology, foreign trade, and international affairs. The latter was an issue of importance to policymakers and to



the public during this period, in view of troubles in the Balkans in the late 1990s (due to Britain's military involvement in peace-keeping operations), the 9/11 attacks, and the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Spain, there are positive and significant correlation for immigration, law and crime, and housing. The strongest correlation is observed for immigration (0.72,  $p = 0.00$ ), an issue that moved atop the political agenda in the 2000s as a result of unprecedented waves of migration and a fast-growing foreign-born population.

### 25.5.6 *Public and Policy Agendas over Time*

The final part of our comparative exploration of the public agenda considers the extent to which the public agenda moves in parallel with the policy agenda *over time*, again using data on executive speeches for our measure of the policy agenda of government. For this we focus on the economy and law and crime, issues where substantial congruence was observed in static analysis of representation (with the exception of law and crime in the United Kingdom). Using the data in this way provides insight on the dynamic relationship between the public's issue priorities and those issues that are attended to by government. If public attention to an issue increases, does the government respond? In Figure 25.7, the proportion of MIP responses on each of these topics is plotted against the proportion of the executive speech assigned to the same topic. Here we expand the time window of our analysis to the maximal amount of data available for each country. In the United States, this enables us to consider the period between 1947 and 2012. Here we see a good deal of common movement in the public and policy agendas over time for the economy and for law and crime. By simply eyeballing the data we can see that there are common peaks and troughs in the public and policy agendas. There are periods where the series drift apart, too. For example, as US public concern about the economy reached almost 80 percent of MIP responses during the late 1970s, presidential attention to the issue in the State of the Union Address did not increase to the same extent, although there was a subsequent increase in 1982. Similarly, economic downturns in the early 1990s and 2008 saw parallel increases in the public and policy agenda on economic issues, but with the MIP series appearing to move before the shift in policymaking attention.

In the United Kingdom, the public's preoccupation with the economy as an important problem facing the country undergoes much larger movements than government's attention to the issue in the Queen's Speech, reaching a similar level of MIP responses as in the United States at around the same time period—in 1981 and 1982 respectively. Large increases in public concern about the economy at times of economic crisis, in 1991 and 2008 respectively, coincide with (much smaller) increases in attention of British government to





subject to change over time, and the degree to which the public agenda is reflected in the priorities of policymakers. Systematic comparison, based upon the application of a common policy-content coding scheme, provides opportunities for inferences regarding the effects of political institutions and context. Data collected through the Comparative Agendas Project offers such an opportunity for advances in understanding of how the wider set of issues on the “systemic” agenda matter for composition of the formal decision-making agenda. Here, the survey measure on the most important problem facing the country is the most widely available measure of the public agenda (though noting the limitations of this measure too).

Our analysis has compared the issues that are prominent on the public agenda in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Spain. This reveals similarities, such as the prominence of economic issues, healthcare, law and crime, education and environment, and differences, such as the high salience of defense in the United States in contrast to the United Kingdom and Spain, and higher salience of immigration in the United Kingdom in comparison to either Spain or the United States. It also tells us quite a lot about how public attention is structured in these countries with distinct political systems and values. We further considered the correspondence between policy problems, mass media, and the public agenda. This revealed that the public agenda moves closely in parallel with exogenous measures of policy problems—at least in the salient policy domains of the economy and crime. We also showed that there is some parallelism in the agendas of mass media and the public, though the precise direction of temporal causality was not untangled here.

Further, our analysis considered possible effects of the public agenda, in particular the degree of correspondence—both static and over time—between public opinion and the policy agenda of government. Interestingly, we find the lowest level of “agenda representation” in the Westminster-system of the United Kingdom, and the highest in Spain, a unitary parliamentary system in which governments are elected through proportional representation. The degree of agenda representation is high in the United States too, under its federal-presidential system, consistent with previous work (see Bevan and Jennings, 2014). On specific issues, the highest level of correspondence between the public and policy agenda is found for the economy, unsurprisingly given the crucial importance of economic considerations to vote choice. Yet there is variety in the pattern of representation too, which reflect the particular domains in which policymakers are more representative of the concerns of citizens. For example, healthcare, law and crime, and social welfare are issues where the attention of policymakers lines up with that of citizens. In Spain, policymakers’ attention to immigration tends to be higher when it is also an important issue for the public. And in the United Kingdom, this correspondence of attention is discovered for technology, foreign trade,

and international affairs. When we look at the representational linkage in attention over time for selected issues, we observe similar patterns. Taking the economy and law and crime, common over-time movement is observed in the public and policy agendas. There is evidence, then, that the policy agenda is subject to common variation as the public agenda over time, consistent with the idea of “dynamic agenda representation” (Bevan and Jennings, 2014).

What we have presented here only hints at the possibilities of the CAP data for use in future analysis. Other researchers may wish to compare differences and similarities in the public agenda across more countries or more issues. Studies may focus on comparison of trends for specific policy domains (e.g., health, immigration), taking a more fine-grained approach to understanding factors that shape the series presented here and their interaction. Further research may also use methods specifically for diagnosing the dynamic interaction of the public agenda with other societal and institutional agendas. For example, vector autoregression models or Granger causality tests might be used to unpick the temporal relationship between public, media, and policy agendas at different time points. Researchers may also wish to explore the relationship between the public agenda and different “channels” or levels of policymaking (e.g., Jones et al., 2009; Bevan and Jennings, 2014). Regardless of the analytical or methodological proclivities of individual researchers, these comparative data provide the opportunity for systematic cross-national analysis of the public agenda over time, in conjunction with a wide range of other measures of policy activity.

### Notes

1. Formulations of the MIP and MII questions vary slightly. In the United States, the survey question asks “What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?” whereas in the United Kingdom, since 1959, it has been worded “Which would you say is the most urgent problem facing the country at the present time?” (before then it was closer to the US version, “What is the most important problem facing the country at the present time?”).
2. Obviously other opinion surveys with other survey questions exist in CAP countries as well. However, these questions are more likely to suffer similar issues in regards to length and most importantly do not clearly match onto the CAP system of attention based coding like MIP and MII measures do.
3. The percentage of MIP responses is standardized as a share of all responses, so the total is equal to 100%.
4. Gallup discontinued polling and the MIP series in the United Kingdom in 2001; however, since 1977 Ipsos-MORI has asked a survey question about the most important issue (MII). It is possible to combine these data series to construct a

continuous measure of the public agenda (e.g., Bevan and Jennings, 2014). Here we just use the MII series for the period between 1993 and 2012.

5. Calculated as the raw value minus the mean, divided by the standard deviation.
6. Data on the media agenda in the United Kingdom was not available at the time of writing.

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