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The Australian Policy Agendas Project

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4.1 The Australian Political System

The Commonwealth of Australia was formed in 1901 when the six self-governing colonies federated under a popularly sanctioned Constitution. Australia's position with regard to the United Kingdom progressed thereafter as the country's independence was recognized and most of the elements of its colonial status were removed. The federal structure was driven in part by pragmatism. Given the size of the continent and the sparseness of the population, which included a significant rural population, it made sense that the federal government take responsibility for certain policy areas. While the founders envisioned a relatively minimal role for the federal government, its reach has expanded over time, stimulated to some extent by the exigencies of war. In particular, since 1942 the federal government has collected income tax and, since 2000, a consumption tax, the Goods and Service Tax (GST), bearing out the first half of Hackett's 1891 prophecy that 'either responsible government will kill federation, or federation... will kill responsible government' (cited in Fenna, 2009: 152). Today, Australia has six states and two territories, each with its own government and public service.

Australia's Constitution enumerates the limited law-making powers of the Federal Parliament, allocating residual powers to the states and territories.¹ The Federal Parliament possesses exclusive power over an array of areas such as regulation of immigration and management of 'external affairs';² and the states possess exclusive authority in areas not expressly given to the Commonwealth. Both levels of government share concurrent powers in some policy areas (such as health and education), but the Constitution provides that federal law prevails in the event of conflicting legislation.³ Over time, the Commonwealth has acquired greater power at the expense of the states, and

the system has developed into a more cooperative form of federalism than the Constitution would suggest.

The Federal Parliament consists of a House of Representatives and Senate, with the government formed from the majority controlling the House. The House's 150 members are elected by the Alternative Vote from single-member constituencies. Elections are required within three years with the precise date chosen by the prime minister. Senators have six-year terms with half-Senate elections every three years. Government consists of a prime minister (PM) and a cabinet that must maintain confidence of its party room. The British Queen, styled Queen of Australia, is head of state, although the governor-general, appointed by the Australian government, actually performs the office's largely ceremonial functions. Because the PM and cabinet dominate legislative agenda-setting, policies that do not align with the House majority's preferences are unlikely to be enacted. Disciplined political parties ensure that legislative votes almost always follow strict party lines. Private Members (all Members of the House except the PM, Speaker, ministers, and parliamentary secretaries) may introduce bills, but without government support such measures rarely become law—only twenty-five have been enacted since Federation.

Australia melds parts of the federal structure of politics in the United States with aspects of the Westminster system in the United Kingdom. Where it comes closest to the Westminster system and least resembles the US system is the location and power of the executive. The executive sits in and derives its power from parliament. The executive also derives its power from being the party that won the majority of votes in the House of Representatives. If we think of a chain of responsibility, we could think of the PM as chair of the executive, which derives its power from being the party in control of parliament, but which is ultimately accountable to the entire parliament. The role of the opposition is a key element of Westminster systems. Rather than a legislature with floating coalitions partly held together by party loyalty, the Australian parliament, like other Westminster systems, historically comprises a governing majority party faced by a unified opposition.

A few other points should be noted. Australia's contemporary party system features three major political parties: the Australian Labor Party (ALP), the Liberal Party of Australia, and the much smaller National Party, whose stronghold is rural and regional Australia. The latter two parties, both conservative, operate together and are known simply as 'the Coalition'. In the post-World-War-II era, government has alternated between the ALP and the Coalition. Voting in Australia has been compulsory since 1924. Australia has an independent judiciary with policymaking capabilities. It can invalidate legislation that breaches its understanding of the Constitution. These decisions can only be overturned through an onerous referendum process. Judges can influence public policy through their development of the common law, statutory

interpretation, and constitutional judicial review. A system of national courts overlays separate systems of courts in each of the states and territories.

Australia’s bicameral legislature, system of courts, and federal division of power thus afford multiple policymaking venues. The political system also features two key ‘veto points’: a Senate that can obstruct the law-making process and a High Court that can invalidate legislation and disallow executive actions of governments.

4.2 Datasets of the Australian Policy Agendas Project

One helpful way to think about what we have coded is in terms of agendas developed within formal institutions (governor-general speeches, legislation, and opposition questions) and those that are constituted outside these institutions (media and public opinion) (see Dowding and Martin, 2017).

Table 4.1 outlines what we coded and over what time span. Coding work was conducted at the ANU, the University of Melbourne, and the University of Texas (Austin) by numerous research assistants. We coded six key areas.

4.2.1 Legislation

All legislation is coded according to the Policy Agendas Project (PAP) framework (slightly modified for the Australian context). The data starts with the prime ministership of Holt in 1966 and goes up to the end 2015. Details of legislation are available at the Australasian Legal Information Institute (AustLII). We coded over seven thousand pieces of legislation.

4.2.2 Governor-General’s Speeches (1945–2013)

These constitute our measure of the executive agenda. The governor-general’s speech is given at the beginning of each government’s term on behalf of the PM. In the absence of formal party manifestos, these constitute the single best

Table 4.1. Datasets of the Australian Policy Agendas Project

Dataset	Period Covered	N
Federal legislation	1966–2015	7,860
Governor–general’s speeches	1945–2013	36
Opposition questions	1980–2013	31,668
Media: <i>The Australian</i>	1996–2013	3,913
Media: <i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>	1990–2015 every 5th year	6,127
Public opinion	1992–2013	14
High Court of Australia decisions	1903–2016	7,462

Source: Comparative Agendas Project—Australia

indicator of governmental intent. They can be considered governmental ‘pre-commitments’ and we examine whether they correspond with legislative attention (see Dowding et al., 2010; Dowding et al., 2012; Dowding and Martin, 2017: Ch. 5).

4.2.3 *Opposition Questions*

The Australian parliament has formal questions addressed to the PM and we code those questions from opposition MPs from 1980 to 2013 (over 30,000). While often used for political point scoring, opposition questions reflect important and controversial issues of the day.

4.2.4 *The Media*

Almost four thousand front-page stories in the *Australian* newspaper (the only truly national popular newspaper) were coded from 1996 (when electronic copies of the front page first became available) and these are analyzed in Dowding and Martin (2017). In addition, the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) dataset contains information on each article published on the newspaper’s front page for each day in the years 1990, 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010, and 2015. Work is underway to create a complete dataset for every year between 1950 and 2016. Although not a national newspaper, the SMH is a leading Australian newspaper published by Fairfax Media and located in the country’s largest city. As such, it complements the data collected from *The Australian*, a News Corp publication, and has the added benefit of offering a nearly comprehensive online archive that facilitates data collection. Following the protocol of the US Agendas Project’s *New York Times* dataset, subtopic codes were not assigned.

4.2.5 *Public Opinion*

Public opinion, as measured by Roy Morgan Research (the respected Australian market research and polling company), was coded by the issues identified by the public as the most important. This dataset begins in 1992 when Roy Morgan began collecting and reporting these data.

4.2.6 *The High Court of Australia*

The dataset (coded under the auspices of the Edward A. Clark Center) contains information on every decision reported by the Court in the *Commonwealth Law Reports* and published online by the AustLII for the years 1903 to 2015. Decisions serve as the unit of analysis. Each decision was coded in terms of its policy content and several other variables.

4.3 An Example

Figure 4.1 (reprinted from Dowding and Martin, 2017) illustrates some of the many interesting patterns uncovered by the coding of agendas in different domains. It shows legislative, opposition, and media attention to the economy (1980–2013). We can see that government is always paying a moderate amount of attention to the economy. This is to be expected; but PAP allows us to understand the bounds of this attention. The opposition, on the other hand (most notably in 1992 and 1993), pays a disproportionate amount of attention to the economy. This has implications for accountability, because it means the opposition is probably ignoring other important policy issues such as social welfare and defence. We might expect to find the same pattern in media attention, but in fact we see that media attention more closely follows legislative patterns. These data reveal much about the allocation of attention in different agenda domains and the implications for political accountability in Australia, and underscores the value of a consistent coding scheme across time and space. Furthermore, such data allow for the type of international comparisons included in Dowding and Martin (2017) and numerous other publications that have arisen out of CAP.

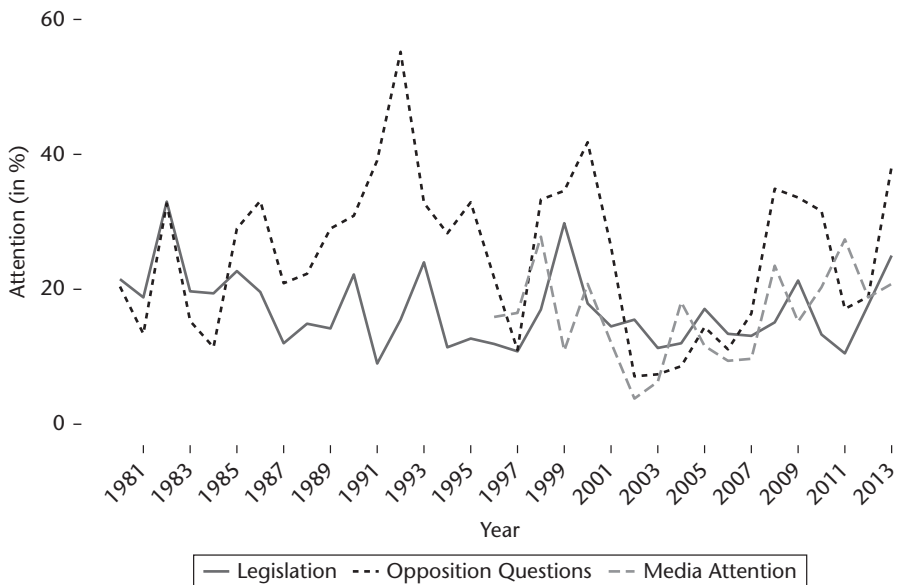


Figure 4.1. Attention across domains: economy

Source: Comparative Agendas Project—Australia

Notes

1. *Constitution of Australia*, ss. 51–2, 109 (enumerated powers); s. 107, 109 (residual powers).
2. Section 51.
3. Section 109.

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