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The Dutch Policy Agendas Project

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The Dutch Policy Agendas Project was initiated in the summer of 2006, shortly after an ECPR workshop on agenda-setting organized by Christoffer Green-Pedersen and Arco Timmermans in April 2006 in Nicosia, Cyprus. Since then, the project has been directed by Gerard Breeman and Arco Timmermans, and it moved from coding national executive agendas to the agendas of political parties, the legislature, the media, local executives, and party think tanks.

A central characteristic of the Dutch Agendas Project's approach is its explicit combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. Besides quantitatively mapping and explaining the up-and-down patterns of the policy agendas over time, we want to put meaning to these patterns for both academics and practitioners. As we will illustrate at the end of this chapter, we analyzed, for instance, how the development of attention to security issues in the past twenty-five years revealed that the securitization agenda is the result of both proactive long-term policy investment and short-term reactive policy decisions with a crisis element in them.

14.1 The Dutch Political System and Agenda-Setting

The Dutch parliament (Staten-Generaal) consists of a first and a second chamber. The 150 members of the second chamber are directly elected based on proportional representation. There is just one national electoral district and there is practically no electoral threshold, which means that small parties can easily enter the second chamber. After the general elections of 2017, there were thirteen parties in the second chamber. The seventy-five members of the first chamber, the Senate, are elected indirectly. Contrary to senates in many

other countries, the Dutch Senate cannot formally propose or amend legislation, but only accept or reject.

Thus far it has always been necessary to form a coalition government, which typically works with a written coalition agreement that forms the political agenda of the government, and which usually also commits the supporting parties in the second chamber. Traditionally, the three large parties are the center-left PvdA (Labor; social-democrat), the centrist CDA (Christian-democrat) and the center-right VVD (liberal-conservative). Since 2000 new parties have entered the stage, of which most notably are the party for the elderly, the animal rights party (“Partij voor de Dieren”), and the provocative anti-Muslim and anti-EU party PVV (party of freedom) led by Geert Wilders.

The traditional Dutch model of consensus (Lijphart, 1968) has come under pressure. Despite mechanisms of coalition governance such as written coalition policy agreements and arenas for political conflict management, the branches of parties in government have become more exposed to leadership battles. Traditional political parties experience function loss, and the politicization of issues such as immigration and the European Union has turned out to be a fruitful activity for populist parties. In this development, new institutional mechanisms of representation and interest representation are employed, such as referenda and negotiations with social and economic stakeholders in order to extend the basis of societal support for government policies.

14.2 Datasets and Coding Procedures

In the Netherlands, institutional friction plays an important part in coalition politics, and the Dutch Policy Agendas’ datasets cover all the “stages,” of the policy cycle, from input agendas to output. Table 14.1 presents the datasets developed in the Netherlands.

In 2016, the codebook and Dutch datasets were adjusted to come into line with the international CAP coding scheme. The Dutch codebook thus contains twenty major topic categories and each of these is further subdivided into more detailed subtopics, in total 226 subtopics. All datasets are constructed with historically consistent topic categories that do not change over time. We paid attention to coding items consistently in terms of the framing of the policy topics at the time they appeared on the agenda.

The datasets were constructed by trained human coders applying consistent definitions of the content categories across the entire historical period and across all the data sources. Coding was done by at least two coders independently and checked for intercoder reliability (minimal 95 percent on main topic and 80 percent on subtopic level). After the training phase we had weekly or

Table 14.1. Overview of datasets of the Dutch Agenda-Setting Projects

Dataset	Period covered	Unit of analysis	N
Speeches from the throne	1945–2015	Quasi-sentence	9,855
Coalition agreements	1963–2012	Paragraph	5,391
Bills (legislative proposals)	1981–2009	Bill	6,574
Laws (adopted in parliament)	1981–2009	Law	6,574
Media:		Article (keywords)	
–Safety topics NRC	1990–2008		38,572
–Safety topics Telegraaf	1999–2008		9,723
–Environmental topics NRC	1990–2008		13,485
Publications of the Environmental and Nature Planning Agency (MNP) and the National Institute for Health and Environment (RIVM) (Both are scientific advisory agencies on the environment (topic 7)).	1990–2006	Publications	848
Local executive policy agendas (local coalition agreements)	1986–2014	Paragraphs	8,657
Election programs of national political parties	1981–2012	Paragraphs	45,528
Policy agendas of think tanks related to political parties	2000–2011	Reports and articles	3,612
Questions from parliament to the government (<i>vragenuurtje</i>)	1984–2009	Question	1,507
Interpellation debates (<i>spoeddebatten</i>)	2004–2009*	Topic of the issue	247
Introductory section to the budget of the minister of the interior	1985–2008	Paragraph	4,972

Note: *1 April 2004–31 March 2009.

Source: Comparative Agendas Project—Netherlands

bi-weekly meetings to discuss the problematic cases. Consistency with other Agendas Projects was achieved through frequent contact with other project leaders (especially Denmark, France, and Spain).

14.3 Description of Datasets

Questions from parliament to a minister (vragenuurtje). Every Tuesday afternoon at 2 p.m., individual members of parliament invite ministers to the parliament to question them about a certain topic. Usually the MPs refer in their question to an issue that obtained media attention, which is a variable in the dataset. Please refer to Timmermans and Breeman (2010) when using this dataset.

Interpellation debates (spoeddebatten). This small dataset contains all extraordinary debates considered urgent, for which endorsement of at least thirty members of the second chamber is required.

Coalition agreements. Coalition agreements between the political parties who won the general elections are important policy agendas in the Netherlands. They contain the most important policy priorities and intentions of the

coalition partners for the coming term in office. The discipline and enforcement when implementing items in the coalition agreement can be quite strong. Please refer to Timmermans and Breeman (2014) when using this dataset.

Local coalition agreements. This dataset contains local coalition agreement of six municipalities of different sizes in the Netherlands between 1986 and 2014. Refer to Breeman, Scholten, and Timmermans (2015) when using this dataset.

Speeches from the throne. The speech from the throne is delivered by the King (since 2013, before then the head of state was a Queen) on the third Tuesday of September at the opening of the budgetary year. The speech contains policy plans of the government (and it is written by the government) for the coming year, as well as a “state of the nation.” The dataset includes variables for policy intentions (versus general statement about problems) also for references to the European Union or the international environment. For the use of this dataset, refer to Breeman et al. (2009).

Introductory section to the budget of the minister of the interior. This database was developed for the safety policy project described further below. It consists of the introductory paragraphs of government budgets, and thus can be seen as an indicator of more specific policy plans in the domain. Refer to Breeman, Timmermans, and Van Daltsen (2011) when using this database.

Bills and laws dataset. This dataset contains all bills (*wetsvoorstel*) sent to parliament by the government and bills drafted by MPs (*initiatiefwet*). More than 95 percent of all bills are drafted by the government. Since agenda-setting is about raising attention to topics, we considered the date that a bill is sent to parliament as the agenda-setting moment. Separately available is a dataset containing all voting dates (in the second chamber) from 1995 to 2009. The dataset also contains the number of amendments per bill. For use of this dataset please refer to Timmermans and Breeman (2014).

Media datasets. The media datasets were constructed for two specific projects. One about the politics of attention of safety issues (commissioned by the Ministry of Internal Affairs) and the other about agenda-setting on environmental issues (commissioned by the Dutch parliament). The data are based on keywords searches in LexisNexis. The safety dataset contains thirteen different subtopics covering a variety of safety and security related issues—from juvenile delinquency to flooding. The environment dataset covers all subtopics of main topic category 7 (the environment). When using the safety database, refer to Breeman, Timmermans, and Daltsen (2011), when using the environment database refer to Breeman, Dewulf, Pot, and Timmermans (2009).

Publications of the MNP and RIVM scientific agencies on the environment (topic 7). This small dataset includes all publications of two important advisory agencies

to the government on the environment. It was developed for the project commissioned by the parliament. For this project we also subdivided some of the subcodes into more detailed subcodes. Refer to Breeman and Timmermans (2008) when using this dataset.

Election programs of national political parties. The electoral programs of the national political parties were content coded by Simon Otjes. The dataset contains over 45,000 observations for twenty-two parties in total that participated in ten successive parliamentary elections.

Policy agendas of think tanks affiliated to political parties. Party think tanks (*wetenschappelijke instituten*) advise party elites on strategic political decisions. We collected data for the four main party think tanks connected to parties with a governmental track record, namely CDA, PvdA, VVD, and D66 for the period 2000–11. Our measure for the agenda of party think tanks are articles included in their house journals (N=3,612). These journals are a main channel of expression of attention to policy themes and present views on them. We added a special code for capturing items addressing ideology and party principles rather than specific policy problems (refer to Timmermans, Van Rooyen, and Voerman (2015)).

14.4 Example: The Policy Agenda of Safety Issues

Our data collection was in part funded by public organizations that requested that we should carry out commissioned research on attention patterns and their underlying mechanisms. In 2012, the Ministry of Internal Affairs asked us to look at how and why the attention to safety issues diversified in the past decades. As our graphs of two coalition agreements show, the variety of topics the governments linked to safety issues increased considerably between 1977 and 2010 (Figure 14.1).

An important finding in our study was that attention to safety-related events and incidents only leads to major policy plans if politicians and policymakers link these events and incidents to longer-term trends. In this way, we were able to distinguish two types of cascading effects: a short-term cascading effect over incidents and a long-term cascading effect resulting in long-term policy plans.

In the first type, cascading occurs when different actors such as journalists, politicians, and experts respond quickly to each other about an incident. Characteristic of this type is that incidents are considered as a “stand-alone” event with no link to other phenomena. When the incident is cleared, the media and all other actors lose interest and shift their attention to other matters. Thus in this process, attention is temporal.

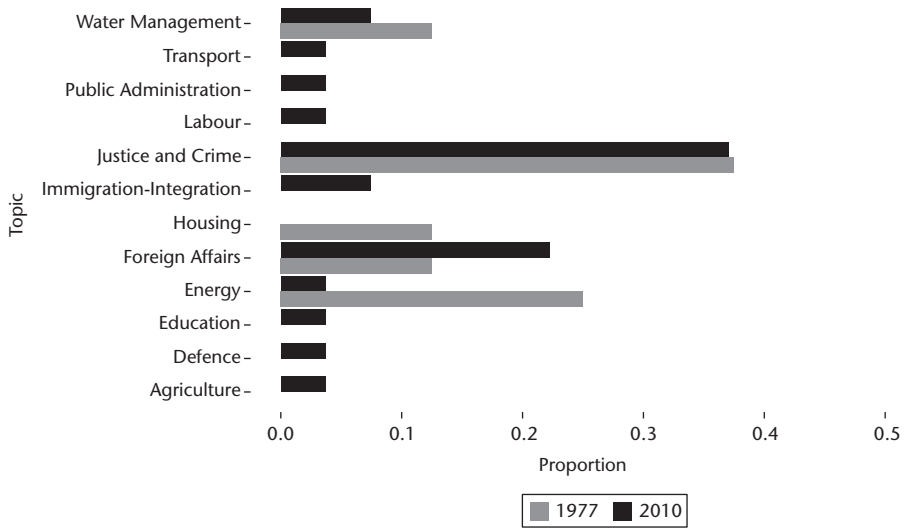


Figure 14.1. Attention to safety in policy domains—coalition agreement in 1977 and 2010

Source: Comparative Agendas Project—the Netherlands

The second type occurs when policymakers link different incidents with each other and consider these as part of a trend. A single incident does not usually lead to a major policy change. In our case studies of specific safety related issues we observed for instance how several youth crime incidents were linked to each other and were followed by a substantive policy program on immigrant integration. Once this policy program was put in place, incidents were more quickly connected to the observed trend and, as a self-reinforcing mechanism, these new incidents legitimized and strengthened the policy program. Thus, in this process, problem signals reinforced policy development.

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