

# 5

## The Belgian Agendas Project

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### 5.1 The Belgian Agendas Project

The Belgian Agendas Project started in 2001 when professor Stefaan Walgrave from the University of Antwerp (UA) acquired a grant (2001–3) from the Belgian government (Federal Science Policy) to code political agendas for issue content. The initial project was co-sponsored by the Université Catholique de Louvain (UCL), and more specifically by professors Lieven De Winter, Benoît Rihoux, and Frederic Varone. The project covered the 1991–2000 period and involved the coding of media, laws, questions, and budgets at the federal level. Yet, unconnected to the work being conducted in the United States and Denmark at that time, the issue codebook was not the same as the present CAP codebook—this is why all the old data have been recoded afterwards using the common CAP issue codebook. A second grant (2005–8) was acquired by Walgrave from the UA research council (BOF) and the decision was taken to restart the coding process using the common CAP codebook, as there was now an emerging CAP community and an international network with whom arrangements could be made. Some of the older data were recoded automatically (e.g., the questions dataset because this dataset was originally coded using the very detailed EUROVOC system) but most of the material had to be coded from scratch. New data were added, so that the full research period now ran from 1991 to 2008—and for some agendas, even older and more recent data were gathered. The third and fourth grant came from the UA research council (BOF) and from the European Science Foundation (ESF) and covered the same period (2008–12). Finally, a grant specifically focusing on the agenda-setting power of protest was awarded by the Flemish Science Foundation (FWO) and ran from 2011 to 2014. Through these five grants, the present Belgian agenda data were coded. More than half a dozen research

assistants (Knut De Swert, Michiel Nuytemans, Jeroen Joly, Brandon Zicha, Tobias Van Assche, Anne Hardy, Julie Sevenans, and Régis Dandoy) coordinated data gathering and a few dozen student coders did the actual coding. Note that the bulk of the Belgian data have been coded manually. Some of the media data have been coded using computer learning procedures for which the team has been assisted by Wouter van Atteveldt from the Free University of Amsterdam (VU).

## **5.2 The Belgian Political System**

Belgium is divided by a linguistic fault line (Deschouwer, 2009). During the post-war period, Belgium was characterized by three cleavages—a religious, a socio-economic and a linguistic one. While the religious conflict has withered and the socio-economic remained constant, the linguistic conflict has been acerbated during the last decade. Belgium is decentralized in regions and communities that have adopted a good deal of the competences from the central level over the years in a conflictual process of state reform in which mostly the Flemish, Dutch-speaking, northern region has asked for more power and autonomy. Although Flemings outnumber Francophones, the Belgian government constitutionally consists of an equal number of Dutch- and French-speaking ministers. The country is a parliamentary democracy with a monarch without any real power. The government needs a constant majority in parliament and heavily dominates the legislative branch of government. Due to the splitting up of all former unitary parties into two linguistically homogenous parties and due to the proportional system and the success of green, nationalist, and populist radical right parties, the polity is extremely fragmented, with a lot of parties sitting in Parliament and none of the parties really outnumbering the others. National governments generally consist of four to six parties. Apart from its decentralized system and its fragmentation, the Belgian polity is characterized by the strength of its parties. Belgium is considered as a textbook example of a partitocracy with parties, and their leaders, dominating policymaking and administrating (De Winter et al., 1996).

## **5.3 Belgian Datasets Description**

The Belgian Agendas Project (BAP) includes a wide variety of datasets from different political actors. Note that the focus of BAP lies on the federal level. All political agendas that were collected and coded—for instance, parliamentary and governmental agendas—are federal agendas. Regional political actors (from the Flemish, Walloon, and Brussels region; and from the Flemish,

French, and German-speaking community) are not included in the project. This means that after the three first state reforms, political attention for the few issue domains for which the regional level received exclusive authority, such as agriculture, education, housing, spatial planning, or culture, is rare in the political datasets (for more information about the state reforms, see Section 5.5). Also, with regards to political parties—an agenda in which the Belgian team invested a lot—we coded the party manifestos preceding federal elections. It is not uncommon, however, for political parties to elaborate on regional issues in their federal manifestos.

The most notable absence is that of the public opinion agenda. There is no tradition in Belgium to ask for the most important problem (MIP) and, thus, simply no longitudinal public opinion data are available. The Belgian team has alternatively invested a lot in two agendas that may serve as a proxy for public opinion: mass media and protest. Of course, these datasets contain federal, regional, and international issues alike. Furthermore, in the first generation agenda project, the budgetary agenda was also coded, but these data have not been updated or recoded according to the common CAP issue codebook.

The aim of the data collection was to obtain data from different actors at different stages of the policymaking process over an extended period of time. This allows us to examine how policy priorities evolve throughout the policy process, from expressed party priorities during the electoral campaign to the priorities of the newly installed government and their ensuing policy outcomes. This vast data collection also allows us to assess how different actors are able to affect these priorities at different moments and understand how they influence the policy priorities over time. The datasets were collected and constructed in a way that would allow for both quantitative and qualitative approaches to studying policy agendas and how issues evolve over time.

The Belgian datasets (see Table 5.1) have been coded in accordance with the prevailing international CAP methods and standards on how to code agendas. The Belgian agendas topical codebook was originally based on the US version and included some of the changes made by the Danish, British, and Dutch teams. We included a major topic code (9) to capture policies related to immigration, integration, and refugees, as well as a minor topic code to capture policies related to federalization (state reform), the distribution of competences, and relations between different levels of government within the main ‘government operations’ category (20). All datasets have recently been updated to correspond to the harmonized master CAP codebook matching standards.

From the outset, the Belgian Agendas Project has invested in the collection of news media priorities, in part to compensate for the lack of available public opinion data to obtain input on what is going on in society. Hence, we coded ten years of the front section of *De Standaard*, a Flemish quality newspaper, comparable to *The New York Times* in the United States, or *Le Monde* in France.

**Table 5.1.** Belgian Agendas data

Agenda	Data source	Unit of analysis	Period	Number of observations
<b>Media—Newspaper</b>	De Standaard	Individual front-section articles	1999–2008	20,963
<b>Media—Television news</b>	VRT and VTM RTBf and RTL	Individual news items	2000–8	135,582
<b>Political Parties</b>	Manifestos	(Quasi-)sentences	1978–2008	174,994
<b>Protest</b>	Police archive	Individual demonstrations	2001–10	5,328
<b>Government</b>	Coalition agreements	(Quasi-)sentences	1978–2008	12,936
<b>Government</b>	State of the Union	(Quasi-)sentences	1992–2008	
<b>Government</b>	Ministerial Council press releases	Individual decisions	1992–2008	11,021
<b>Parliament</b>	Bills (including laws, which are accepted bills)	Individual bills	1988–2010	8,737
<b>Parliament</b>	Questions and interpellations	Individual oral parliamentary questions and interpellations	1988–2010	48,381

Source: Comparative Agendas Project—Belgium

From 1999 until 2004, we coded the front page and after a change in format, we coded the front section, called “Vooraan” (“Up Front”). These are the first three pages of the paper and, on average, contain the same number of news stories as the front page did before 2004. Additionally, we also coded the individual news items from the main 7 o’clock evening television news for the public and commercial Flemish broadcasters (Flemish VRT and VTM and Francophone RTBF and RTL, resp.) for that same period (1999–2008). Data were hand-coded by students and each news item received one topical CAP code.

Given the central position and role of political parties in the Belgian political system, coding policy priorities of each party for every federal election campaign was a crucial ambition of the Belgian Agendas Project. Hence, the manifestos of every party holding at least one seat in parliament have been coded<sup>1</sup> from 1978 to 2008. All manifestos were coded using a similar approach to that of the Manifestos Research Group (now MARPOR) whereby each (quasi-)sentence was coded on its topical policy content, with the possibility of attributing up to three codes per unit. Using the same procedure, we also hand coded every coalition agreement from 1978 to 2008, as well as yearly state of the union speeches by the prime minister.

To measure governmental priorities in a more dynamic way and on a more frequent basis, we also coded press statements of the weekly ministerial councils. Each decision or statement was coded individually on its policy content,

providing us with an insight into the decisions that have been made and the issues that have been discussed by the government on a regular basis. Data was only available in a reliable and consistent format from 1995 onwards, first through a magazine called *Feiten* (“Facts”) and published by the government, then, from 2001 through weekly online press briefings.

Additionally, bills and laws provide a more regular measurement of governmental priorities. Here, we make a distinction between governmental bills (*wetsontwerp/projet de loi*) and parliamentary bills (*wetsvoorstel/proposition de loi*) submitted by Members of Parliament. These data were available from 1988 to 2010 and were coded by the parliamentary services according to the elaborate European EUROVOC coding system and automatically recoded into our Agendas coding scheme using a matching codebook. The same recoding approach was used for all parliamentary data, including oral and written parliamentary questions and interpellations.

Finally, the Belgian Agendas Project has coded protest data that were collected by Ruud Wouters directly from the Brussels police archive. The data are an alternative way to look at public opinion, giving an indication of the issues that make people take to the streets. All individual demonstrations taking place between 2001 and 2010 were coded according to an extensive coding scheme, including CAP codes, but also, for instance, protest size, degree of disruptiveness of the protest, and so on.

## 5.4 Focus of the Belgian Project

In terms of content, the Belgian project has had three distinct substantive foci over the years. First, and most importantly, the Belgian project has dealt extensively with the impact of the media agenda on the political agenda. Drawing on the agendas data, numerous publications on that topic have been published, mostly by the Antwerp team, often co-authored with Rens Vliegthart from the University of Amsterdam (UvA) (Walgrave and Van Aelst, 2006; Walgrave et al., 2008; Vliegthart and Walgrave, 2011; Vliegthart et al., 2013; Sevenans and Vliegthart, 2015; Vliegthart and Walgrave, 2008, 2010; Vliegthart et al., 2016a; Joly, 2014, 2016). A second line of research has focused on the political parties that play such a central role in the Belgian political system. We asked the question: To what extent the party agendas are influenced by and are influencing other agendas (Vliegthart et al., 2011; Joly and Dandoy, 2016; Joly, 2013)? A third aspect of the UA’s research program has been the interest for protest and its agenda effect: Do the issues that get protested about subsequently get more attention on the political agenda? Results have been presented in several publications (Vliegthart and Walgrave, 2012; Walgrave and Vliegthart, 2012;

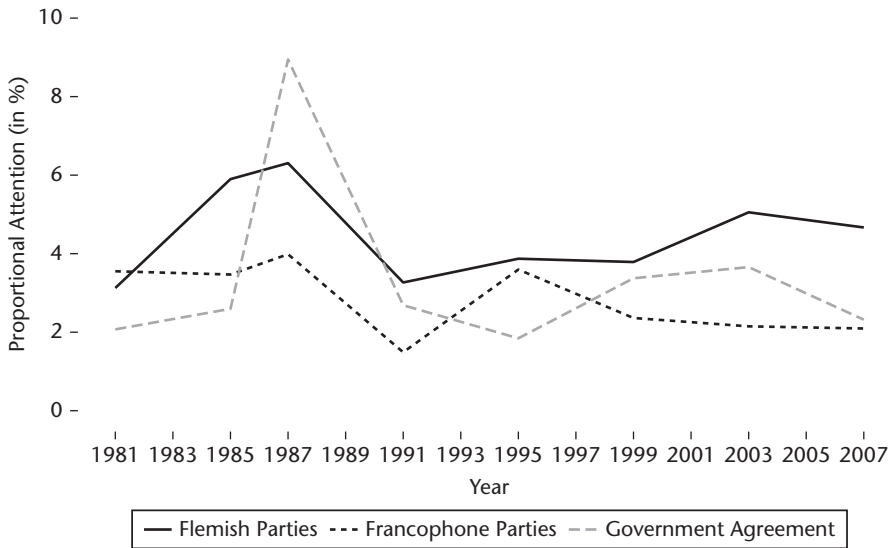
Vliegenthart et al., 2016b). A constant in all the work done by the Belgian CAP team so far is that the interest has been in assessing the effect of one agenda on another. Departing from the idea that observing how issue salience “jumps” from one agenda to the other is an important way to measure power in a political system. Actors who manage to let their issue attention affect other actors’ agendas exert power.

## 5.5 Example: State Reform

To show how our agenda-setting data allow us to track attention to a specific issue over time, but also how attention from one actor influences that of another, we focus on the specific case of Belgian state reform. Belgium has had six major state reforms, the last one following the ‘Butterfly agreement’ of 2011. After two first state reforms of 1970 and 1980, Flemish demands for further reform continued and increased. While each language community was now in charge of its own cultural and language policies, Flemish parties wanted to expand their institutions and policy competences. In 1987, as a result of much attention from both Flemish and Francophone parties, almost 10 percent of the government agreement was dedicated to reforming the Belgian constitutional setup and redistributing policies from the national level to the language communities. The result was a third, major, state reform that delegated educational policies to the communities and created a separate decentralized entity—region—for Brussels in 1989.

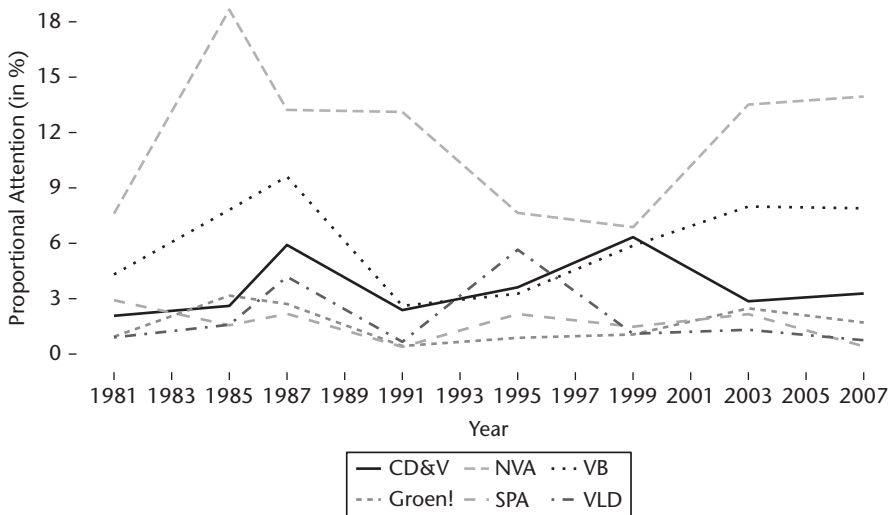
In 1992, an agreement was made for a fourth state reform, which radically changed the institutional setup by transforming the unitary Belgium to a federal state with separate regions and communities and proper legislative assemblies. Once the Francophone parties had obtained a number of competences they wanted, it is clear from Figure 5.1 that their attention to state reform and community issues dropped, reflecting their preference for the status quo position. For Flemish parties, however, demands for further reforms and more competencies kept arising slowly but steadily after 1995, suggesting that the Flemish and Francophone parties have become increasingly out of sync with each other on this issue.

A closer look at the attention of each individual party per language community in Figures 5.2 and 5.3<sup>2</sup> shows that neither Flemish nor Francophone parties operate as a monolithic voice, and that differences in attention to state reform greatly vary within each language community and over time—even within a given party. Looking at the Flemish parties on the left side of the ideological spectrum, it is clear that the major gap in attention between Flemish and Francophone parties is mostly driven by one or two nationalist parties—VU/N-VA and Vlaams Blok/Vlaams Belang. This also explains the



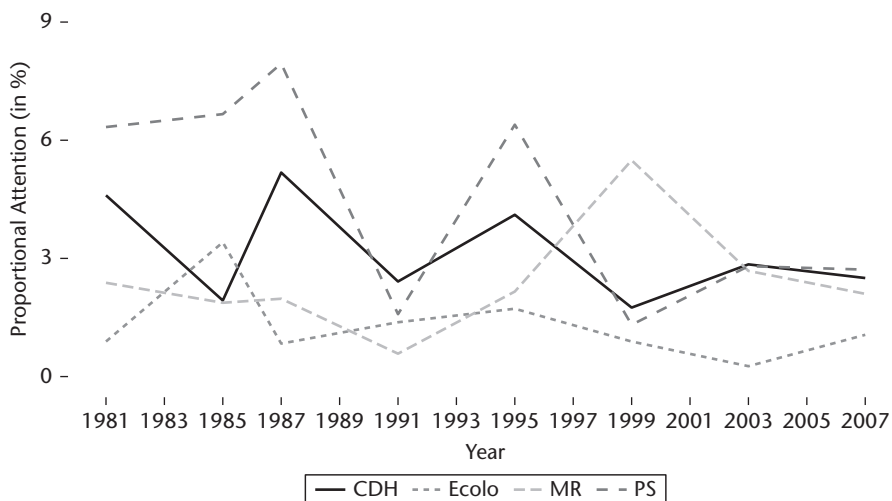
**Figure 5.1.** Proportional attention to state reform by Flemish and Francophone parties and the government (agreement)

Source: Comparative Agendas Project—Belgium



**Figure 5.2.** Proportional attention to state reform by Flemish parties

Source: Comparative Agendas Project—Belgium



**Figure 5.3.** Proportional attention to state reform by Francophone parties  
 Source: Comparative Agendas Project—Belgium

lower levels of attention to state reform in the government agreements in Figure 5.1, given that they were not part of the government and given the VU/N-VA’s modest electoral performances in the period under study.

Hence, this example shows how our agenda-setting approach and data can be used as a useful tool to examine how an issue evolves on the agenda of a specific actor over time, compare attention from different actors, and how attention from one (set of) actor(s) influences that of another. In this particular example, as elections precede the formation of a new government and the drafting of a coalition agreement, we know that the correspondence in attention between partisan and governmental attention ( $r=.66$ ,  $p<.1$  for both Francophone and Flemish parties) reflects a causal relationship. Such analyses can be carried out—qualitatively as well as quantitatively—for a wide variety of policy issues, separately or simultaneously, demonstrating the general influence one actor has over another. These results can also reveal certain aspects of the polity, as Figure 5.1 shows that policy changes are largest when parties from both communities dedicate much attention, but much smaller or almost inexistent when their attention is not in sync.

## Notes

1. Except for the manifesto of ROSSEM in 1992, which was unavailable, and for the Flemish Greens in 2003, who were included in our dataset despite not having a seat in the federal parliament.



2. FDF and FN were not included in Figure 5.2, as they did not issue an electoral manifesto at each election. The available manifestos were, however, included in Figure 5.1, as part of the Francophone party agenda.

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