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The Danish Agendas Project

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The Danish policy agendas project was initiated by Christoffer Green-Pedersen in 2002. With much inspiration and generous support from Bryan D. Jones, Frank R. Baumgartner, and John Wilkerson, the aim of the project was a double one: First to use a policy agenda-setting approach to better understand the Danish political system. Second, to introduce a comparative perspective into the policy agenda-setting literature to foster its further theoretical development. Based on a grant from the Danish Social Science Research Council, a Danish version of the US codebook was developed and the first parliamentary time series were developed.

Later, Peter B. Mortensen joined the project, which made it possible first to add further datasets on executive speeches and party platforms and later on also to expand the project into local government, see Section 8.4. Rune Stubager has also been involved in developing the media dataset of the project. Further grants from the Danish Social Science Research Council and from the Research Foundation of Aarhus University have made the data collection possible.

8.1 The Danish Political System

To understand the idea behind the datasets that have been developed, the functioning of the Danish political system must be taken into account. The Danish political system can in many ways be characterized as a “single venue system” (Green-Pedersen and Wolfe, 2009). To understand Danish politics, one must focus on parliamentary party politics. In practice, Denmark in general has no other central political venues at the national level of policy-making. There is no presidency, no second chamber, and no constitutional

court. The constitution (§42) allows for extensive use of referendums, but in reality referendums only take place with regard to European integration.

The Danish parliament, Folketinget, is strongly structured around party lines as party cohesion is comparatively very strong (Skjæveland, 2001). Furthermore, Denmark has no strong separation between the executive and the legislative branch. This means that parliamentary politics is structured as competition between the parties holding government power and those being in opposition. The Danish PR electoral system allows many political parties to gain representation, which, together with the principle of negative parliamentarism, makes majority governments the exception. Almost all governments since the early 1970s have been minority governments. This constellation implies that the political parties in parliament can be divided into three groups, namely those holding government power, those supporting the minority government and the “real opposition” wanting another government (Green-Pedersen and Thomsen, 2005).

One final aspect of the Danish political system which is important to be aware of is that despite Denmark being a central state and not a federation, Denmark is in fact quite decentralized. Thus many policy aspects especially of the extensive Danish welfare state are actually managed by local government, which opens the door for considerable local influence. The decentralized nature of the Danish state is also reflected in the constitution (§82).

8.2 Datasets

The nature of the Danish political system has of course strongly influenced the dataset collected. Table 8.1 presents an overview of the datasets.¹

All the data in Danish datasets, with the exception of the media data, were originally coded according to the Danish version of the policy agendas codebook, which was developed when the project started. This first version of the Danish codebook generally stayed close to the original US one, including categories for different country groups under the main topic of international affairs (topic 19). However, some additional subtopics referring to cultural issues and fishing were added.

When the comparative Master Codebook was developed (see Chapter 2), a new version of the Danish codebook was developed. This is fully compatible with the Master Codebook, but has some additional subtopics. For instance, it has a subtopic (210) for attention to the Danish national church, which is a subtopic of 207 in the Master Codebook (freedom of speech and religion). Compared to the original Danish codebook, the differences are minor. The introduction of the 1227 subtopic (domestic response to terrorism) is the most significant difference.²

Table 8.1. Datasets of the Danish Agendas Project

Policymaking level	Dataset	Period	Unit of analysis	N
National	Bills	1953–2013	Individual bill	14,333
	Accounts	1953–2013	Individual account	779
	Interpellations	1953–2013	Individual interpellation	1,794
	Motions	1953–2013	Individual motion	6,176
	Parliamentary Questions (§20)	1953–2013	Individual question	106,911
	Opening speeches	1953–2013	Natural sentences	16,220
	Closing speeches	1979–2013	Natural sentences	7,459
	Party manifestos	1953–2011	Natural sentences	30,165
	Radio news	1984–2003	News feature	196,831
	Local	Local council meeting agendas (from all 98 Danish municipalities)	2007–13	Items on the council agendas
Local council meeting agendas (from 23 Danish municipalities)		1990–2006	Items on the council agendas	76,164
Local standing committee meeting agendas (from 14 municipalities)		2007–13	Items on committee agendas	97,598

Source: Comparative Agendas Project—Denmark

One of the special subtopics in the Danish codebook compared to the Master Codebook is the existence of a special subtopic to capture attention paid to European integration.³ This subtopic captures questions relating substantially to the European Union, such as enlargement and institutional questions. At the same time, a dummy variable has been added to capture all references to the European Union, thus also including for instance, a directive on environmental affairs that is coded under the main topic 7. This coding thus reflects whether European integration is *about* European integration or about policies *through* the European Union (Senninger, 2016).

Most national-level time series go back to 1953 when Denmark had a constitutional reform, which among other things abolished the second chamber.

8.3 Parliamentary Data Series

The first time series to be constructed were various outputs from the working of the Danish parliament. All bills back to 1953 have been coded. In the Danish context almost all bills are presented by the government and almost all bills are passed.⁴ Accounts are another government-initiated output presented to parliament by a specific minister often based on a prior parliamentary decision. They are quite few in number and are only sometimes followed by a parliamentary debate.

Motions and interpellations are important instruments of the opposition. Interpellations can be asked for by any party and generate a debate in the plenary of the Danish parliament. A resolution can be passed in the end by a simple majority, but this is rarely the case. Motions resemble laws in as much as they can in principle ask the government to do certain things. However, in most cases motions like interpellations only generate a parliamentary debate.

Parliamentary questions are regulated by §20 of the standing order of the Danish Folketing. Unlike the other activities coded, which are party based, parliamentary questions are asked by individual MPs without much coordination. The main type of §20 questions are written and generally also answered in writing, though a small number of questions are answered during weekly question time. From 1997, a question hour was also introduced where MPs can ask questions to the minister without any prior notice and receive an answer right away. Both types of questions are coded. In the Danish context, the vast number of questions are asked by opposition MPs. MPs from the government parties ask very few questions, reflecting their loyalty to the government. This distinction is another indication of the lack of clear executive/legislative division.

Since the number of bills and accounts is relatively low, measuring the issue priorities of the executive is difficult simply based on the parliamentary outputs. Therefore, two types of executive speeches delivered by the Danish prime minister (PM) were also coded with natural sentences as the coding unit. The most important one is the one given at the opening of parliament each year in October as specified in the constitution (§38). Since 1979, the PM has also given a speech at the end of each parliamentary session, which has also been coded.

All the data series based on the parliamentary behavior of the parties are strongly colored by whether a party is in government or in opposition. This means that comparing agendas across different parties can be challenging based on parliamentary outputs. Comparing issue priorities as expressed in parliamentary speeches directly to an agenda expressed in parliamentary questions involves problems of comparability.

The party manifesto data series provide opportunities for comparing directly across parties. In the Danish context, identifying party manifestos can, however, be challenging as Denmark has no real tradition for producing party manifestos (cf. Hansen, 2008). However, parties almost always produce some sort of document presenting their issue priorities when an election is called. Such documents were identified by the CMP project and the same documents have been coded in Denmark based on the agendas coding scheme.

For the period, 1984–2003, a media time series has been coded based on Danish radio news. Radio news has been used to capture the entire media agenda because in the period radio news was shown to provide an important link between the bigger Danish morning newspapers and the news broadcast

of the television in the evening (Lund, 2000). In the period, the noon radio news had up to a million listeners out of a population of around 5 million. The coding of the radio news was based on summaries of the individual news features. The coding scheme used for the issue codes was a simplified version of the original Danish policy agendas coding scheme with 58 subtopics.

All coding of the time series has been done by student coders who first went through intensive training and who were then subjected to intercoder reliability tests, which all showed acceptable or high levels of intercoder reliability. Details about the coding are provided in the data-reports of the different time series and their update, available at www.agendasetting.dk.

8.4 Local Government Agendas

Based on a four-year grant from the Danish Social Science Research Council, the CAPCAS⁵ project was initiated in January 2014. A central part of the project is collection and content coding of Danish local government agendas. Originally, agenda-setting research grew out of the local US community power studies, and a main motivation of the CAPCAS project is to show how the local level of government can provide new insights into the causes and consequences of policy agenda-setting.

After a major structural reform in 2007, the number of Danish municipalities was reduced from 275 to ninety-eight. Compared to many other countries, the ninety-eight Danish municipalities are quite large with an average of about 55,000 inhabitants. The municipalities are also multipurpose political units with significant policy responsibilities within areas such as primary and secondary education, daycare, elderly care, unemployment, health, environmental protection, traffic and roads, immigration, and culture.

The main units of analysis in these datasets are items appearing on the local council meeting agendas. Given the structural reform of 2007, the time series cover the period January 1, 2007 to December 31, 2013. In this period all council meeting agendas have been content coded based on a coding scheme that is consistent with the Comparative Agendas coding scheme. Some of the major topics have been expanded in order to better capture local government variation, whereas others have been simplified, reflecting, for instance, that the Danish municipalities do not have any responsibilities with respect to defense, and international affairs.⁶

The items appearing on the local council meeting agendas are coded based on the heading under which they appear. Various tests have indicated that this heading is very informative about the content of the item on the agenda. The total number of agenda items coded adds up to more than 200,000. The meeting agendas have been coded in a collaboration between human coders

and new computerized tools (see Loftis and Mortensen, 2018). The latter has made it possible to extend the local government data in two ways. First, for a set of fifteen municipalities it has been possible to collect and content code council meeting agendas back to 1990. This addition makes it possible to trace more long-term developments in the local government agendas. Furthermore, given the structural reform of 2007, the longer time series make it possible to investigate what happens to the policy agenda when one or more political units are merged into one. Second, a large number of meeting agendas from local standing committees have been collected and content coded. The question about the interplay between the committee system and the central assembly is a classic one, and the multiple local government units makes it possible to approach this question from a new perspective using statistical tools of analysis.

8.5 Major Findings from the Danish Project

The data series developed in the Danish project have been used to investigate a series of questions relating both to the Danish political system and to comparative questions. A few are worth highlighting here.

Whereas most research on political parties takes its point of departure from whether parties are left or right, the Danish project has drawn attention to the difference between opposition and government parties. Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2010) show how the opposition parties are able to influence the government agenda by influencing what Green-Pedersen and Mortensen call the party system agenda. The agenda-setting game between government and opposition and the fact that the opposition often seems to have the upper hand was further developed by Thesen (2013), who focused on the interaction between media and party competition. Seeberg (2013) shows how this dynamic also has important policy consequences.

One of the examples of opposition influence is the growth of immigration on the party system agenda, which is shown in Figure 8.1. The right-wing opposition from 1993 to 2001 used its issue-ownership of immigration to generate increasing party system attention to immigration. This issue expansion was based on claims about the need for a much stricter immigration policy (Green-Pedersen and Krogstrup 2008). When the right-wing parties then gained government power in 2001, they implemented exactly that and this makes Denmark stand out as a country with a very strict immigration policy (cf. Akkerman, 2012: 518–20).

The idea of a party system agenda has also been utilized in other publications from the Danish project. The theoretical idea is that parties through party competition influence each other so a common perception is formed of

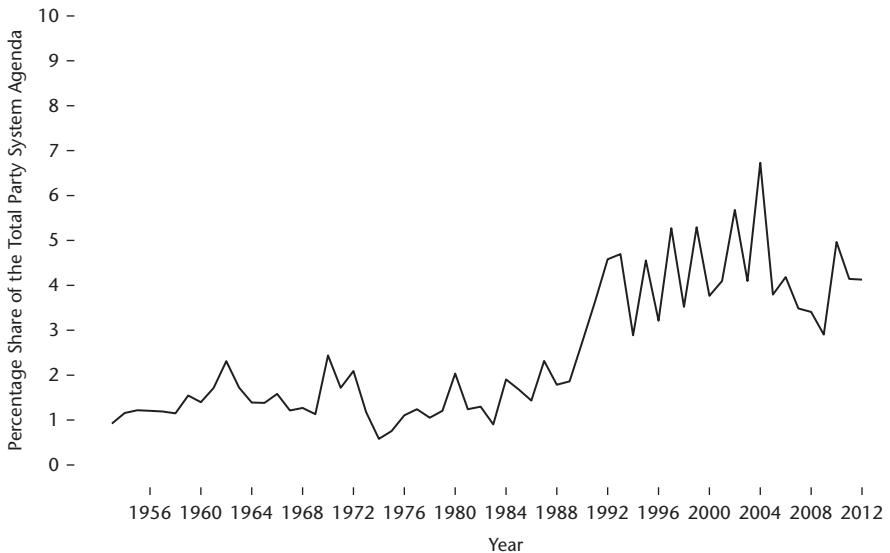


Figure 8.1. Immigration issue in the total party system agenda
Source: Comparative Agendas Project—Denmark

which issues it is necessary to pay attention to. The party system agenda is thus both constraining for political parties and something they can influence. In Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2010), the party system agenda was measured through the length of debates about bills, accounts, motions, and interpellations in the Danish parliament.

Publications from the project have shown how the party system agenda can explain whether governments pay attention to the spending preferences of the electorate (Mortensen, 2010) and the development of the Danish ministerial structure (Mortensen and Green-Pedersen, 2015). These findings thus underline the importance of understanding how the party system agenda is formed.

Notes

1. A new version of the parliamentary data and the party manifestos will have been available in the spring of 2019.
2. This made it possible to recode the original Danish data, so a version now exists that is fully compatible over time and fully compatible with the Master Codebook. This version of the data is available at comparativeagenda.net.
3. The subtopic 1910 in the Master Codebook is divided into European Integration (1910) and Western Europe (1913).
4. In the case of an election, bills not yet passed are withdrawn, but then often passed after the election.

5. CAPCAS is an acronym for Causes and Policy Consequences of Agenda Setting. Other participants in the CAPCAS project are Henrik Bech Seeberg, Carsten Jensen, Matt Loftis, and Martin Bækgaard.
6. The adjusted codebooks can be found here: <http://ps.au.dk/forskning/forskningsprojekter/capcas/data-and-codebooks/>.

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