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## The communiqués de conseil des ministres. Preliminary analyses

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# Agendas<sup>France</sup>

**- Work in progress – Do not quote without permission -**

## *The Communiqués de Conseil des ministres (1974-2006)* **Presentation of data and preliminary analyses**

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### *Abstract*

This report provides a wide picture on a new database on the weekly government statements in France. They provide detailed information on the effective agenda of French governments over time. A detailed topic coding, moreover, allows for an analysis of the evolution of relative attention to different topics.

This report presents a series of research questions and projects that have motivated the creation of this database in the first place. It moreover provides a series of descriptive analyses and tentative answers to some of the research questions raised in the introductory section.

**Working Paper 1/10 – February 2010**

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## *Introduction*

How does government attention to policy issues evolve over time? What determines changes in government attention? Are there some policies that durably attract more attention than others? Are there policies, on the contrary, that only attract attention periodically? How do parties and elections play into government attention? Are there left-wing and right-wing issues? Has popularity an impact on government priorities? How about media attention? Can the media determine government attention? Or does media attention disrupt policymaking or affect it in some significant way?

These and other questions, we contend, can be investigated – if not answered – by our new dataset on weekly government declarations in France. This dataset contains topic codings for every single item mentioned on the weekly press conference following the meeting of the ministerial council at the Elysée Palace for a period starting in 1974. This dataset contains more than 6000 entries accounting for governmental priorities for this period. Each entry is, moreover, assigned a “topic code”. The codebook is inspired from the original US policy agendas project, realized by Frank Baumgartner, Bryan Jones and John Wilkerson<sup>1</sup>. The French codebook is the result of an initial translation of the original US codebook, but has also incorporated subsequent changes that have been negotiated across all existing national agenda projects<sup>2</sup>. It contains about 250 different items, organized into 27 “major topics”, ranging from Economic Policy or Health to Immigration, Transport or Foreign Policy.

This report presents the data contained in this new dataset, providing descriptive statistics, as well as a discussion of the kind of theoretical problems that this kind of data may help elucidating (Section 1). Section 2 will study the evolution of policy priorities over time. Finally, we will devote some time to study effects of partisan government on policy attention (Section 3).

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. <http://www.policyagendas.org>.

<sup>2</sup> More elements on this aspect on <http://www.comparativeagendas.org>.

## ***Section 1: Questions and data***

This section will briefly discuss potential questions to which our project may deliver potential replies (1.). It will then go over to present the general structure of our data and the analyses developed in the rest of this report (2.).

### **1. Understanding the dynamics of policy attention**

How does policy evolve over time? With their work on the *politics of attention* Baumgartner and Jones (Baumgartner & Jones, 2005) have probably made one of the most important recent contributions to the study of public policy. Their book deals with classical debates in the area of public policy concerning the determinants of the directions public policy decisions may take. Those debates can be divided into at least three major categories. A first group of authors assumes that politics hardly affects policymaking and, if it does, only very *incrementally*. A second group of authors tends to disagree, but sees change as essentially the product of sector level developments. Finally, another substantial strand of literature argues that parties do matter, albeit not always the way we would expect.

#### **1.1 The weak-politics thesis**

A first group of authors remains fundamentally skeptical towards the very capacity of policy making and the effects of politics. Indeed, probably a majority of public-policy specialists do not consider partisan politics to play any significant role in everyday policymaking. Yet, there is a great variety of arguments that can be found under this heading.

A classical approach has tended to argue that politics is unlikely to have any strong impact on policymaking, provided that policies are determined by a variety of factors that water down the influence of politics. For example, Cutright (1965), Haniff (1976) or Wilenski (1975) point out that welfare-state expenses depend on economic growth and demographic variations rather than on partisan preferences. And there is a lot of evidence to show that even today, the ageing of European populations is the single most important factor driving reforms and welfare state retrenchment. The detailed historical work of R. Rose and P. L. Davies (1994) on Britain policies also concludes that parties do not matter in policy making. Evidence on budgetary policy in France tends to confirm these conclusions (Baumgartner, Foucault, & François, 2009).

While not in contradiction, there are at least two sub-groups in this view of the policy process. A first tradition is mainly interested in explaining the policy process as a whole, while a second focuses on sector-level analyses of individual policies.

### *1.1.1. Macro-views of the policy process*

US public policy, moreover, has been dominated by “incrementalist” views of policymaking (Lindblom, 1959). These ultimately assume that most policies can hardly be considered to have been discussed by political representatives. Rather, on a day-to-day basis, policymaking is managed by policy experts and entrepreneurs. These are potentially part of policy subsystems of some kind (Hecl, 1977). The main characteristic of policymaking is the technique of “muddling through”, rather than that of a grand political design, where elected representatives implement the mandate they have received from voters.

But more fundamentally, these approaches in fact focus on macro-processes of policymaking as they ambition nothing less than explaining THE policymaking process. In a review of advances in public policy theory over the past thirty years, Peter John (2003) argued that only three major works had been added since seventies and had opened up new perspectives. The first are the *policy streams* of John Kingdon’s (1984) work. Policymaking can be understood as several distinct processes – streams – that sometimes interact, but that are moved by fundamentally different factors. The first element concerns the recognition and definition of problems. The second concerns the definition of policy solutions, determined by policy communities where “ideas float around” like “molecules...in the primeval soup” (Kingdon 1984: 116/117). Finally, the political stream concerns political representatives. It is the interaction between those three that may open up policy windows and, thus, lead to change. This process, while probably rather realistic, leaves a lot of space to accidents and has proved difficult in terms of hypothesis-testing.

A different development is the work of Baumgartner and Jones. In *Agendas and Instability in American Politics*, Baumgartner and Jones (1993) proposed their “external pressure model”. Baumgartner & Jones (2005: 84:5) state that policy change can be explained through external issue-intrusion rather than electoral change. But the major contribution in their work concerns the *distribution* of attention. Attention and, thus, agenda-space are rare goods in policymaking. Decision-makers are constrained by time and their cognitive limits. Hence the real question is not so much where change comes from, as there are constantly a myriad of

actors pressuring the government for change. The real question is how demands for change are filtered, computed and, eventually, responded to.

Baumgartner and Jones (2005) show that there is a great deal of inertia in political attention – due to “institutional friction”. As a consequence, policy demands will have to build up a lot of momentum before being “heard”. However, if this high threshold is reached and policymakers finally respond to demands, they will compensate for earlier inaction through over-attention to the issue. The result is a distribution of changes in attention that is very far from the Central Limit Theorem. Rather, the distribution of attention is strongly *leptokurtic*, meaning that there is a very high number of issues where no change takes place while there are few or no moderate changes. However, a non-neglectable number of issues will undergo very strong change.

The authors further complexify their analytical framework by showing that friction depends on a variety of issues, such as the position in the decision-making chain or institutional procedures. For instance, Congress hearings tend to be rather “open”, i.e. they will follow closely swings in attention in the general public or the media. As such, their distribution will be rather normal. At the opposite end of the decision-making chain, adopted bills will hardly represent public opinion. A bill will have to have made a long way from public opinion, to Congress hearings, to the executive, legislative committees and the plenary, plus further potentially disruptive media attention in the later stages of the bill (Jones, Larsen-Price, & Wilkerson, 2009).

Case studies on policy agendas elsewhere than the US have confirmed the existence of some kind of “power law” of policy-making processes that holds across very diverse agendas and institutional and political settings. Yet, this may also stem from large definition of the agenda and policymaking in this work. It is true that the two other group of authors do not develop such general theories of policymaking.

### ***1.1.2. Long-term perspectives***

Finally, long-term analyses of the policy process represent another way of conceptualizing macro-views of policymaking. Alan Mayhew (1991), for instance, in an influential analysis of US policymaking since World War 2, concluded that policymaking transcends partisan politics. Contrary to accepted wisdom, Mayhew sets out to show that divided government does not have the expected negative consequences for the policymaking capacities of either the presidency or Congress. Furthermore, while this is not strongly conceptualized, Mayhew shows that policy change is determined by “surges”, i.e. some kind of policymaking fashions.

Mayhew in particular identifies “progressive” policy periods and more conservative ones. These periods, however, do not coincide with periods of Democratic or Conservative governments. Republican president Richard Nixon’s government adopted probably one of the most progressive pieces of legislation with regard to social housing, while Democratic president James Carter initiated a new cycle of more conservative policies that later culminated under Ronald Reagan.

Those surges are of course difficult to identify unambiguously. Yet, there are many arguments about the long-term transformation of policy-making, such as arguments on the “rise of the regulatory state” (Majone, 1997, 1990) or the rise of the “managerial state” (Clarke & Newman, 1997), welfare state retrenchment (Korpi, 2003) or restructuring (Scharpf & Schmidt, 2000) or the emergence of a new paradigm in public administration (Dunleavy & Hood, 1994; Hood, 1995). This list is of course not exhaustive, but simply illustrates the importance of attempts to identify and name long-term changes that affect contemporary states in advanced industrial democracies and elsewhere.

### ***1.1.3. The policy-shapes-politics thesis and sector-level politics***

Beyond those marco-views, a second strand of literature has focused on sector-level politics to understand the policy process. This has at least partly built on central “incrementalist paradigm” of US policy studies, but has been dominated by European scholars.

Maybe one of the most influential contributions in this area has been a series of articles by Theodor Lowi in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Lowi, 1964, 1972). The author developed a counter-intuitive approach. Turning classical theories upside down, the author argued that policies create specific types of policy conflict according to whether they are redistributive, distributive or regulatory in nature. While his classification has since been abandoned – it was too deterministic -, the general thrust of the slogan “policy shapes politics” survived. Yet rather than concentrating on some kind of intrinsic nature of policies, which proved illusory, this slogan can now be read in a more institutionalist manner. Put differently, actors that want to influence a given policy are constrained by existing definitions, framing, institutions, cleavages etc. of those same policies. Any strategy of change will have to take those existing structures into account.

This has created or fuelled sector-level analyses of policymaking and interest in a wide array of different types of actors. The policy-subsystem literature and the wider literature on policy communities and networks (Marsh & Rhodes, 1992; Le Galès & Thatcher, 1995) has concentrated on understanding those institutions and the political battles that take place at the

sector level. Case studies and theoretical work in this field look at sector-level political institutions and structures, actors and rules. Rather than political parties, this work will focus on interest or citizen groups, experts, bureaucrats and related actors.

Sector level studies thus do not reject the influence of politics in policymaking. Simply, entire libraries of case-studies tend to show that politics is made up of bureaucrats, interested citizens, experts and other types of stake-holders. Political parties and electoral representatives *may*, on occasion, play a role, but rarely in the way that classical mandate theories of politics expect them to.

From a theoretical point of view, this type of literature has led to a renewal of the conceptualization of the state as an intrinsically hybrid entity that is both an actor and an arena, where many different types of actors meet and influence each other. This is probably best epitomized by the term “governance” (Rhodes, 1997; Hooghe & Marks, 2003).

### **1.2 The partisan-influence hypothesis**

Quite contrary to the public-policy perspectives reviewed above, there still is a large literature that argues that election matter, that elected representatives fulfill their mandates and that alternation in power leads to policy change. The partisan-influence thesis was initially a way to demonstrate the intrinsically political character of public spending, as opposed to efficiency- or economy-based explanations (Castles, 1982; Castles & McKinlay, 1979; Blais, Blake, & Dion, 1993; Cameron, 1978). Much work in this tradition has mainly been based on general assumptions on what typical leftwing and rightwing spending patterns are supposed to look like. Based on the assumption of “issue ownership”, the Left, for instance, was expected to spend more on welfare, while the Right was supposed to increase spending in defence (Bawn, 1999; Boix, 2000).

In one of its most forceful and more interesting versions, this argument is based on the effect of party platforms on spending. Budge and Hofferbert present the partisan hypothesis as a “mandate theory of party democracy” (Budge & Hofferbert, 1990; Hofferbert & Budge, 1992). This groundbreaking work has had a lasting influence as it presents several original specifications concerning the importance of salience and issue ownership (Budge & Hofferbert, 1990: 114). Unlike earlier and much subsequent work, moreover, Budge and Hofferbert show that party platforms are a significant predictor of spending priorities, irrespective of diverging political structures, even in countries with supposedly weak parties

like the US<sup>3</sup>. They confirm mandate theory and, thus, one of the fundamental justifications of liberal democracies.

The actual importance of the partisan hypothesis has been qualified, however. Schmidt has shown that certain contexts and institutions may somewhat weaken partisan influence on policymaking (Schmidt, 1996, 2002). Moreover, several recent contributions have questioned the continuing importance of partisan influence. Boix, for instance, shows that while the partisan hypothesis has been verified for much of the postwar period, specific spending patterns have faded between the late eighties and early nineties (Boix, 2000). The explanations for fading differences or the “end of ideology” are various. While some authors have renewed industrial society convergence theory (Pryor, 1968; Parkin, 1973), others claim that other factors may decrease the likeliness of partisan influence. In particular, some scholars explain that globalisation (Garrett & Lange, 1989; Keohane & Milner, 1996), the increasing levels of complex interdependence (Nye, 1976; Keohane & Nye, 1989) and international capital mobility (Simmons, 2001; Goodman & Pauly, 1993; Frieden & Rogowski, 1996; Garrett, 1996) decrease sharply the probability of partisan influence. More generally, arguments about the cartelization of parties (Katz & Mair, 1995; Blyth & Katz, 2005) or the decline of the social basis of party politics (Crouch, 2004; Mair, 2005) come to similar conclusions concerning decreasing party influence.

In sum, while some say that parties do not have any significant influence on most issues, others argue that they do. A third line of arguments puts forth that parties may have had an influence in the past, but that this influence is fading.

### **1.3 Towards an institutional perspective of policymaking: political attention cycles**

Last but not least, our dataset, by investigating the dynamics of government’s issue attention, provides tools for tracking issue attention dynamics and to understand whether the government’s issue attention follows discernible cycles (Downs 1972). Data and variables on policy content in a long period (1974-2006) provide quantitative indicators for testing the dynamics of government’s attention. This may, in fact allow for a new kind of understanding of the interaction between policymaking and politics.

One potential research venue and objective could be the mapping of public policies according to their relative political sensitiveness. We can assume that some policies are to narrow in

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<sup>3</sup> But see the discussion by King and Laver and the authors’ reply (King & Laver, 1993)

focus, costs or benefits to interest a large fraction of the electorate, of public opinion or the media. In other areas, in turn, even minor initiatives may become very quickly very salient and may be pushed by partisan actors to improve their situation or to deteriorate the position of their opponents. This mapping exercise may be an end in itself as it may allow to understand the space of political competition in a given political context.

Once this classification is done, however, a lot of questions remain. Studies on the impact of alternation on government outputs in France have so far been inconclusive. A study on French budget has shown essentially that there are hardly is a “Mitterrand” effect in terms of spending, nor have the systematic subsequent government alternations between 1981 and 2002 led to any discernible pattern in spending (Baumgartner, Foucault, & François, 2006). A further analysis, comparing presidential speeches, government statements and adopted laws, has come to similar results concerning government priorities (Baumgartner, Brouard, & Grossman, 2009).

Yet, future research should pay attention to the interaction between the political *and* the institutional context in order to identify issue competition and ownership (Green-Pedersen, 2007). One potential direction here could be *political attention cycles*. The simple idea behind this term is similar to that underlying the concepts of political budget or business cycles (Brender & Drazen, 2005; Rogoff, 1990). According to this literature, governments are likely to bring economic cycles closer to the electoral cycle through macroeconomic stabilization and spending. The underlying idea is that voters will judge an incumbent government more favorably if the wider economic context is perceived as inherently good or improving. Evidence on the existence of such cycles is mixed. There are many reasons for this: in the context of free capital movement and economic globalization, governments are no longer free to arbitrarily raise spending. This is particularly true for EU member states like France, where the “stability and growth pact” in principle strongly limits budgetary autonomy. Moreover, in the context of greater economic interdependence, the effectiveness of such measures may be more than neutralized by foreign markets, leading simply to a deterioration of the balance of payments.

Political attention cycles may thus appear as the perfect answer to those problems from the point of view of governments. Rather than increasing spending and trying to change the economic context, governments may simply signal their attachment to a given fraction of society through shifting attention to issues dear to a particular group in the context of increasing electoral competition. Work on economic voting and the opinion policy link have

shown that this kind of linkage may vary as a function of the institutional and political context, though (Soroka & Wlezien, 2005; van der Brug, van der Eijk, & Franklin, 2007).

## 2. New data to understand old problems

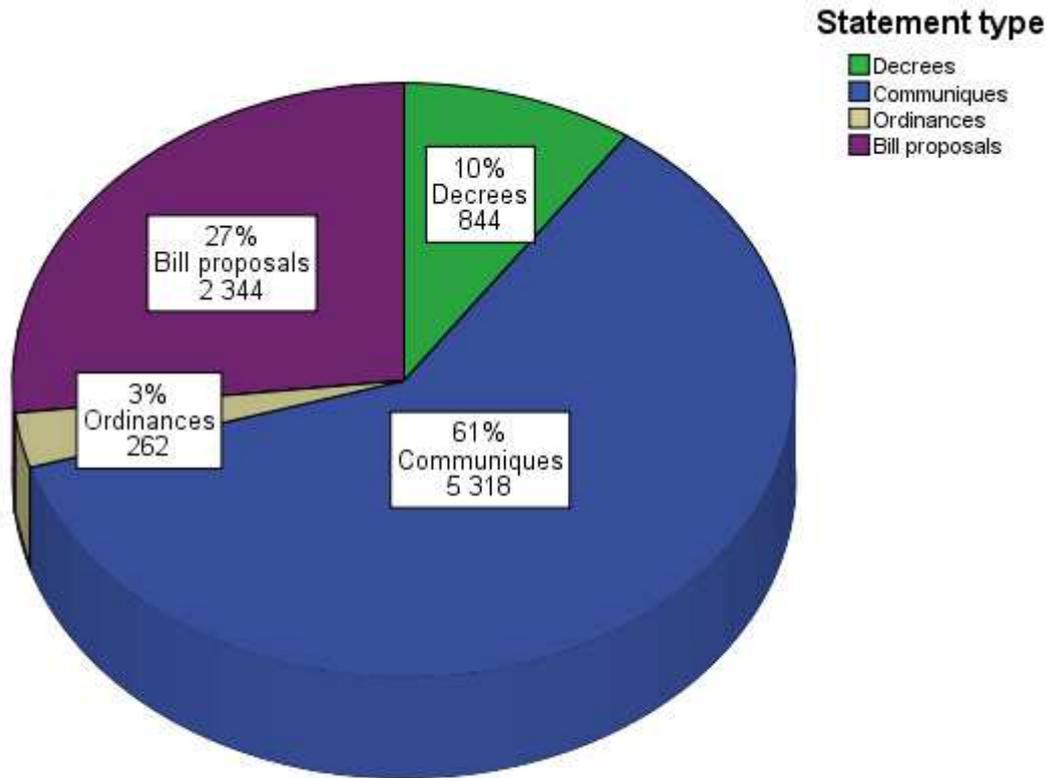
The data compiled from the *communiqués* may help solve some of the puzzles that the preceding section refers to. French weekly government statements from 1974 to 2006 were selected to study week-to-week government issue attention. They are issued by the French council of ministers (*Conseil des ministres*), which is a mandatory governmental meeting held on weekly basis (except during governmental holidays), i.e. from 48 to 50 times a year. It includes the President, the Prime Minister, all ministers, and some *ministres délégués* or state secretaries to discuss current issues and bill proposals. Statements are published immediately after the meeting and contain from 3 to 17 items. Those items include bill proposals, communications, decrees and ordinances (another type of decree). The summary for each item may vary from a couple of lines to a couple of pages. There are very few interruptions and the format is overall stable, weekly government statements thus represent a formidable indicator of government attention.

How can you measure government attention to policy issues and their eventual change in the long and in the short run? This study provides easily identifiable sources for comparative and case study research in the general field of public policy and more specifically on political parties, political institutions, and studies of the issue-attention cycles.

The data is publicly available, in principle. Data availability is largely unproblematic for the past fifteen years or so. For the period before, we benefited from support by government services and obtained electronic data for the period from 1974 to 1995. Hence our database currently covers governments from the first government of Pierre Messmer in 1974 to the government of Dominique de Villepin in 2006. For these years we have, moreover, the date for each item and a serial number created by governmental services. A developer cleaned up this data and compiled it into a spreadsheet. Data quality is rather stable over time, as is the general structure of presentation of the data. Only the earliest period (1974-1978) presents some irregularities and is, generally speaking, of lower quality, as individual items and/or initiators of individual items are less clearly identifiable. Data structure (page setting, item size, content presentation) varies slightly over time, although it does not affect statistical analysis as our coding unit was the statement's item.

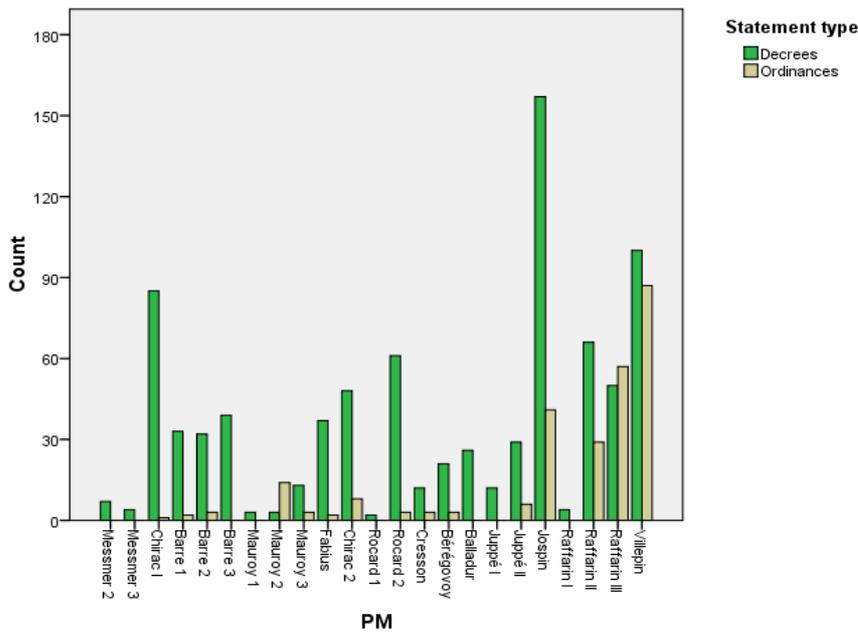
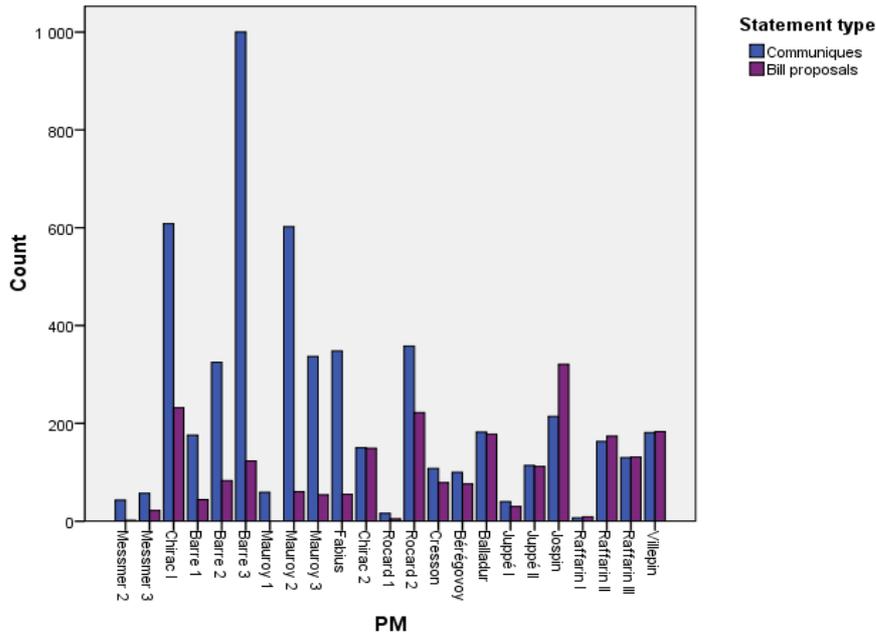
Graph 1 shows the general structure of the data. All items thus add up to a total of 8768 items.

*Graph 1.1 – Statement types*



As graphs 2 and 3 show, the structure and amount government activity significantly varies with cabinets. Especially in the early periods under study “communications” strongly outweigh bills. Communications are statements of all kinds, ranging from action plans on crime and summaries of the last G7 meeting to government statements on the flooding of a certain region of France. Bills, instead, vary little in time. They are not very visible under the first two governments considered, probably due to the general quality of the data for the two Messmer governments.

*Graphs 1.2 and 1.3 : Government activity by type of item*



Decrees and ordinances are of varying importance, too. Ordinances have been increasing significantly since the year 2000 in particular, for reasons that are not very well known so far (Grossman, 2008).

One of the major problems with the study of French institutional and political life has to do

**Table 1.1 – Legislatures, governments and presidents in France**

Année-gvt	Lég.	Gouvernement	Président
1974		Messmer 2	Pompidou
1974,3		Messmer 3	
1974,6		Chirac I	
1975		Chirac I	
1976	IV	Chirac I	
1976,5		Barre 1	
1977		Barre 1	
1977,5		Barre 2	Giscard
1978		Barre 2	
1978,5		Barre 3	
1979	V	Barre 3	
1980		Barre 3	
1981		Barre 3	
1981,5		Mauroy 1-2	
1982		Mauroy 2	
1983		Mauroy 2	
1983,5	VI	Mauroy 3	
1984		Mauroy 3	
1984,5		Fabius	Mitterrand 1
1985		Fabius	
1986		Fabius	
1986,5		Chirac 2	
1987	VII	Chirac 2	
1988		Chirac 2	
1988,5		Rocard 1-2	
1989		Rocard 2	
1990		Rocard 2	
1991	VIII	Rocard 2	
1991,5		Cresson	Mitterrand 2
1992		Cresson	
1992,5		Bérégovoy	
1993		Bérégovoy	
1993,5		Balladur	
1994		Balladur	
1995	IX	Balladur	
1995,5		Juppé I	
1996		Juppé II	
1997		Juppé II	
1997,5		Jospin	Chirac 1
1998		Jospin	
1999	X	Jospin	
2000		Jospin	
2001		Jospin	
2002		Jospin	
2002,5		Raffarin I-II	
2003		Raffarin II	
2004	XI	Raffarin II	
2004,5		Raffarin III	Chirac 2
2005		Raffarin III	
2005,5		Villepin	
2006		Villepin	

with the varying length of government tenure. This is not simply linked to government instability, such as under the 4th Republic or in Italy’s “1st” Republic. It has to do with the diverging length of presidential and legislative mandates. Until 1981, dissolution of the Assembly was exception, but it has become more common since. As a consequence, Assembly tenures have had their lengths varying from two to five, while governments have known tenures from 9 months to five years. Even presidential tenure has varied, as the mandate has been reduced from seven to five, to bring it line with the parliamentary mandate<sup>4</sup>.

Hence, studying legislative productivity in this perspective becomes more difficult as the periods compared are not necessarily very similar. For instance, the Chirac government in 1986 knew that it would not last beyond the 1988 presidential election. Chirac had already been a candidate to the 1981 presidential election and it was not secret that he was aiming at replacing Mitterrand in the upcoming election. Hence, if he won, he would pick a new Prime minister. If he lost, however, there was little doubt, either, that Mitterrand would call for new legislative elections as he had one after his election in 1981. Hence electoral horizons vary strongly, as does the tenure of legislatures: 5,5,3,5,2,5,4,5,5.

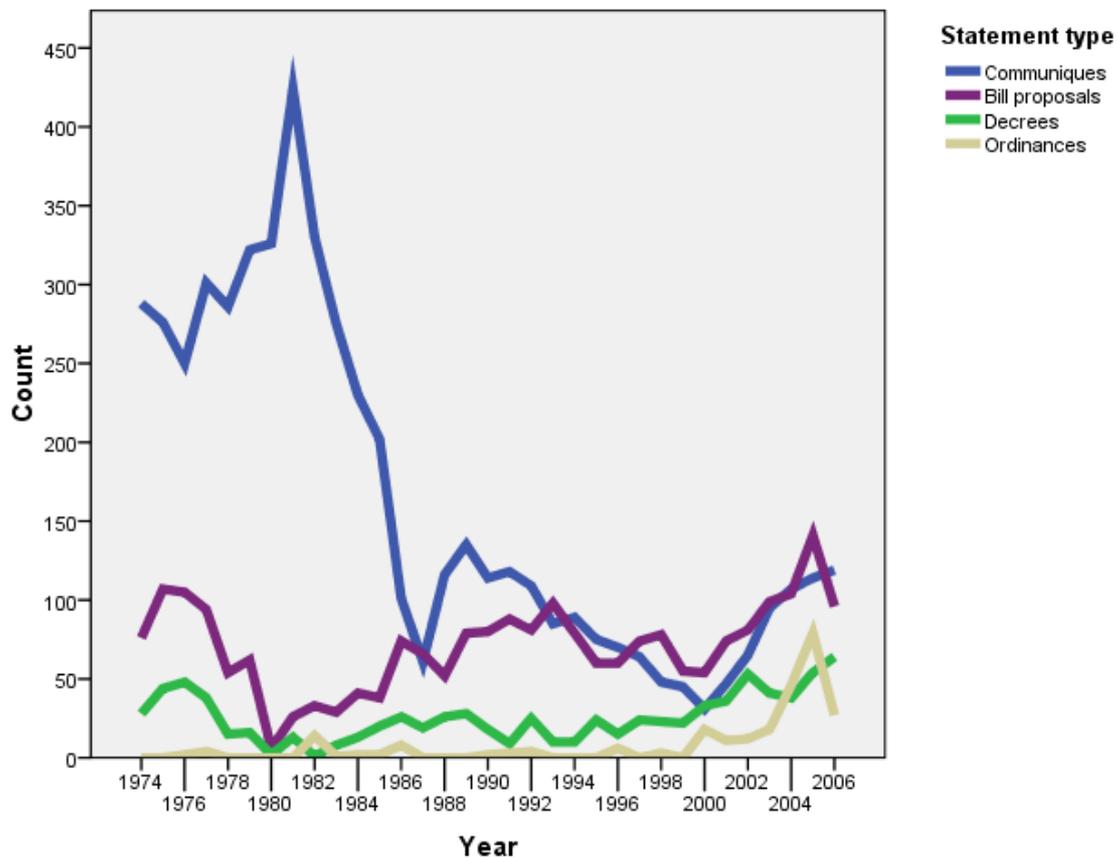
Government tenure This should in principle be over after the 2000 reform that brought presidential and parliamentary mandates in line, as voters are expected to vote similarly in elections that take place within six weeks. Yet, there is enough evidence of split votes elsewhere, to trust the French to discover it sooner or later.

<sup>4</sup> Presidential pre-eminence and government tenure are part of longstanding debates in French politics that we analysed elsewhere (Grossman, 2009; Grossman & Sauger, 2009).

It appears that the most “productive” governments taking into account all of the above categories (bills, statements, decrees and ordinances) have been Chirac 1 (right-wing) in 1976, Barre 3 (right-wing) in 1979 and Mauroy 2 (left-wing) in 1982. The governments that most communicated were almost the same: Mauroy 2 in 1982 (330 communications) and Barre 3 in 1980 (326 communications) and 1979 (322 communications). The leader in the “bills” category is Raffarin III in 2004 (131 items), Chirac I in 1975 (107 items), Raffarin II in 2003 (99 items).

Moreover, beyond ideology, there also is some evolution over time, as graph 4 illustrates.

*Graph 1.4 - Items frequency (clustered by statement type) by years*



The 1970s and early 1980s thus showed intense governmental productivity, especially in terms of communication. This period was followed by a relative 15-year decline in statement production until the 2000s. Government productivity has started rising again and culminated in 2004/2005, which seems to have been an exceptionally productive year.

The dramatic decrease of statements since its peak in 1980 has only partially been compensated for by overall rise in the three other categories. It may say something about the relative efficiency of government statements through this weakly declaration. It is certain that TV statements by individual members of the executive have probably replaced this type of government statements, which has become a lot more “technical” over time.

Statmnt/year	C	P	C+P
<b>Mean</b>	161	71.03	232.03
<b>Std Dev</b>	108.57	27.89	101.16
<b>Median</b>	114	74	206
<b>Mode</b>	114	74	168
<b>Minimum</b>	31	6	85
<b>Maximum</b>	424	141	450

In sum, this is a large dataset, covering a long historical period and many different configurations of the distribution of power. It should allow for a great variety of analyses. The remaining sections will look at some of those possibilities.

## Section 2: The evolution of policy priorities

As we have seen in the preceding section, large strands of public-policy analyses assume that changes in policy take place through incremental processes that are not visible in the short run. Arguments on the rise of the regulatory state, increasing interdependence or the crisis of the welfare state all make arguments about the way in which those changes should take place independent from party government. This section will realize a brief mapping exercise concerning the long-term evolution of several major policy areas.

Figure 2.1

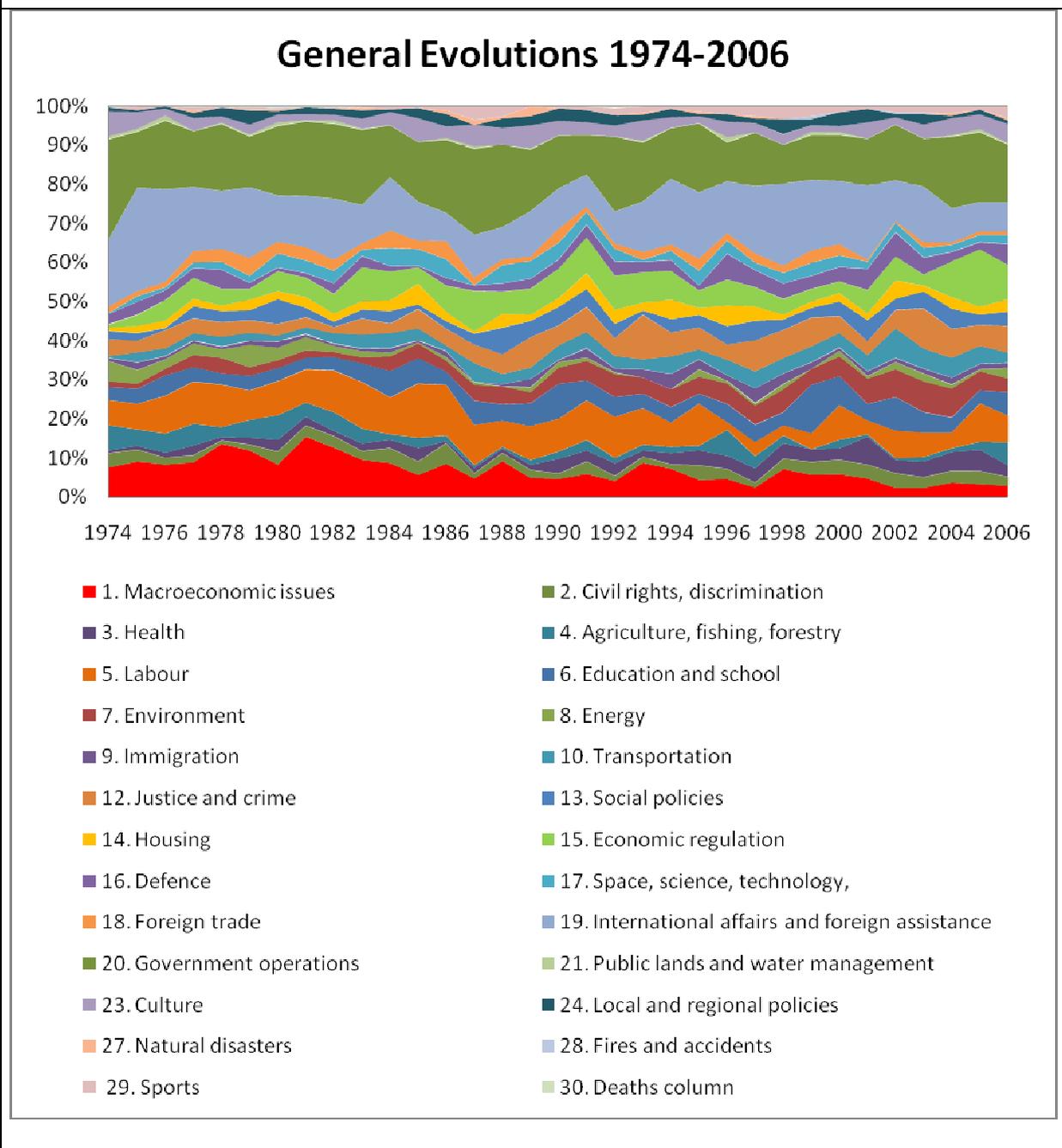
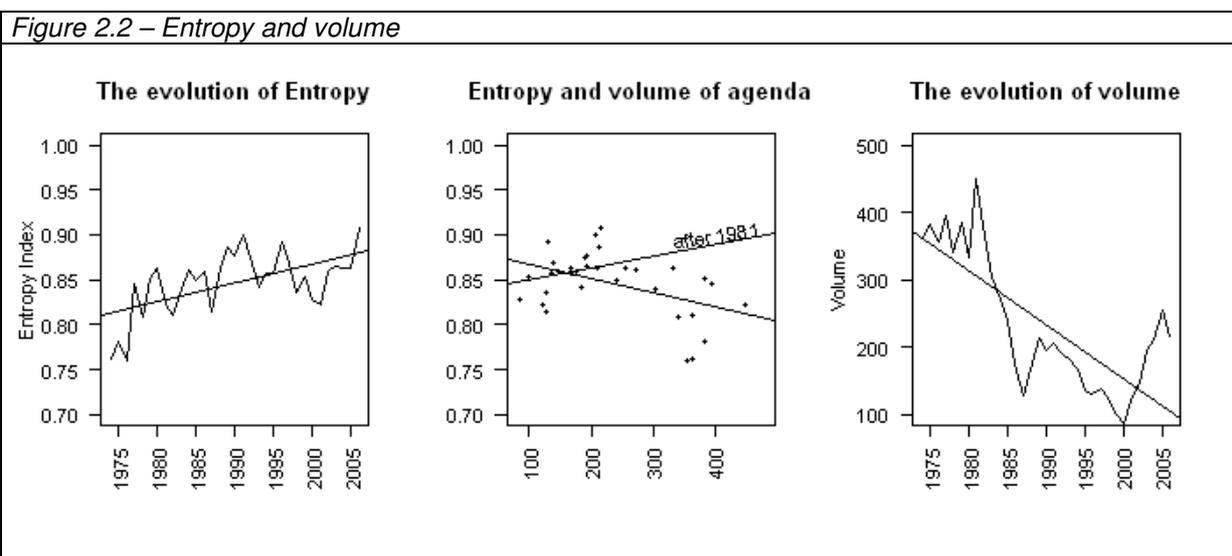


Figure 2.1 provides a general overview over our data by topic. If anything, this kind of graph shows that there a lot of variance over time and that it is not straightforward to pinpoint unambiguous long-term trends. Hence we will disaggregate this graph into several, in order to better understand this evolution. We will first look at the overall evolution of the agenda structure, before identifying changing or stable sectors. Finally, we will look at some cases in more detail.

### 1. General tendencies

Before looking into the evolution of attention, we will briefly look at the structure of attention. One way of doing this is by measuring the overall dispersion of attention among all topics. In the work of comparative agendas, this is conventionally measured through the entropy of attention and, more precisely, through Shannon’s  $H^5$ . This is not the place to explain in detail how Shannon’s  $H$  is computed (Brouard, Wilkerson et al., 2010). Simply, in the indexed version of entropy that we use here, 1 means a perfectly dispersed attention and 0 would signal the total concentration of attention on one issue only. Rather than trying to interpret the relative importance of each level, it is important to note here that the entropy increases over time, i.e. that attention becomes more and more dispersed. One hypothesis, put forth by Baumgartner and others, is that dispersion increases with volume.



A cursory look at the different graphs in figure 2.2 shows that first that entropy has indeed been increasing over time. At the same time, however, as the graph in the middle shows, the

<sup>5</sup> Shannon’s  $H$  has proved more solid and less sensitive to variance in frequencies than other commonplace indicators, such as the Herfindahl-Hirschmann Index (HHI) that economists use to measure market concentration.

relation between volume, i.e. the number of measures per year, and entropy is far from straightforward. The adjustment curve is in fact negatively sloped, which would mean that entropy *decreases* with volume. Yet, as we have explained above, the communiqués were used slightly differently in the early period under study. And this period, as the right-hand graph shows, is characterized by the historically highest levels of activity. Put differently, this period is not particularly representative of the rest of the period. We therefore plot a second regression line excluding all observations prior to 1981. As a consequence, the relation between volume and entropy becomes positive. In fact, it becomes stronger and stronger, thus validating Baumgartner's hypothesis concerning the positive effect of volume on entropy. This may in itself be a significant observation, as this tells us something about the overall tendency of governments to focus on certain policy areas, rather than others. The above graphs appear to show that specialization is becoming less and less possible and likely. Governments are constantly confronted with an ever-increasing number of external incentives and signals to a point where differentiation between left-wing and right-wing policies is hardly discernible anymore. This is a widely accepted conclusion, though the evidence presented here is less straightforward, as we will see in a later section.

A separate question, which has been central to analyses of agenda-setting concerns the distribution of attention. As explained later in greater detail, Baumgartner and Jones focus on the importance of punctuations in political attention (Baumgartner & Jones, 2005).

## 2. Stable and changing sectors

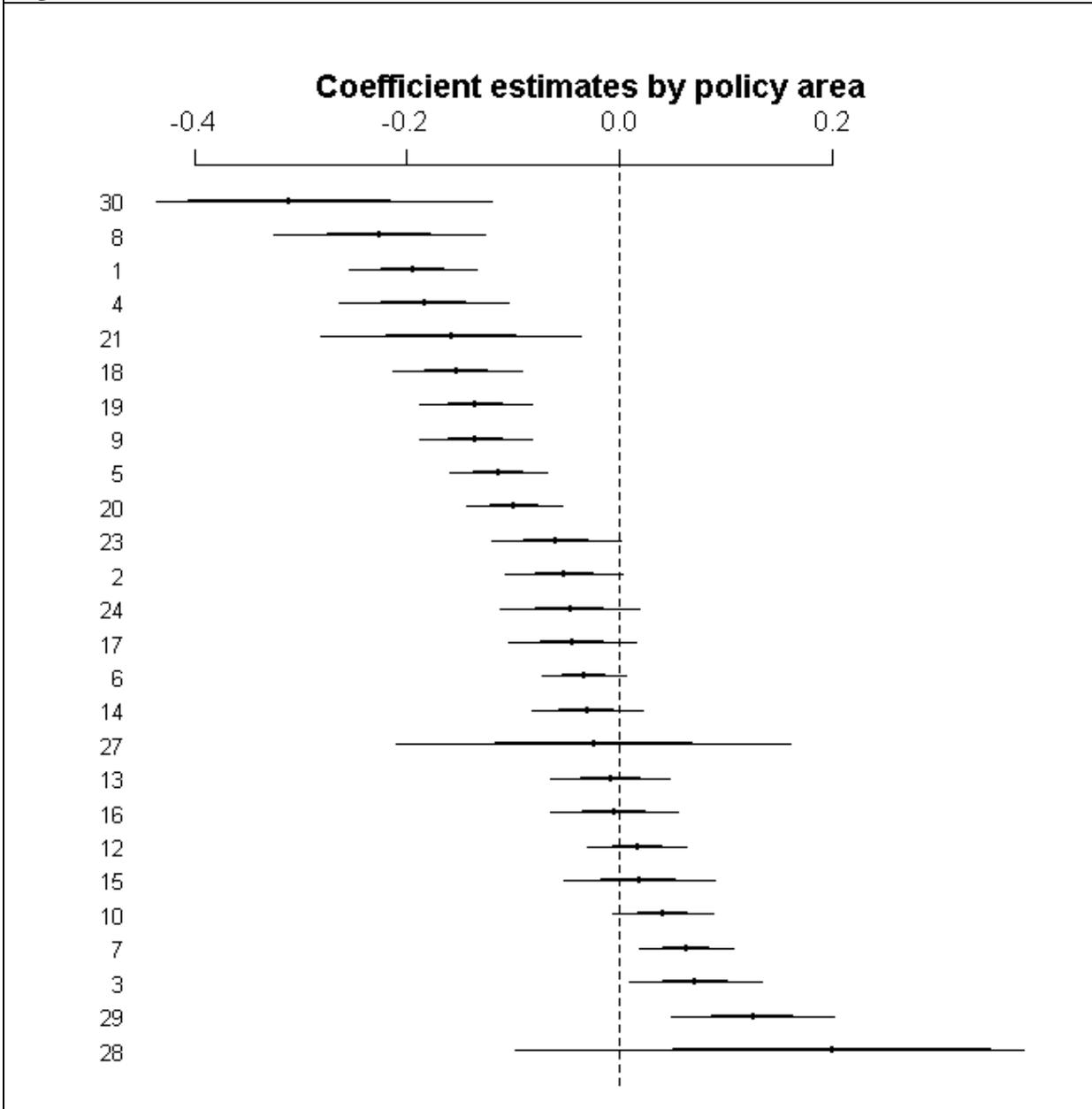
Figure 2.3. presents general trend lines for policy sectors marked by insignificant and weak changes in government attention. It includes eleven policy sectors. We divide those into a group of *slowly increasing* and another of *slowly decreasing* attention. Table 2.1 presents the coefficients for the regression lines with the corresponding standard error. While some coefficients are statistically significant, e.g. immigration, the overall tendency is very weak for both sides. For immigration, there is a slight decrease in attention, essentially due to the fact that the issue as such emerged in France in 1974, i.e. the first year of our study (Favell, 1998).

Beyond immigration, it is striking that there are a certain number of significant *decreases* over time, but hardly any increases. Any explanation of this phenomenon could be based and/or would be related to the phenomenon of increasing entropy that we alluded to earlier.

As entropy increases, the relative of over-representation of certain issues fades. At the same time there is only a much more limited number of issues that *increases*. Finally there is a large number of issues that does *not change* significantly.

This shows that future studies should rather look for cyclical explanations. This also means that the dynamics of attention for these issues *may* be subject to more political dynamics than to larger a-partisan forces. Further analyses will have to look at the dynamics of change in greater detail.

Figure 2.3



Finally, it is also worth looking at the issues that actually decrease and increase in relative importance. While there are some more anecdotal issues, several major issues diminish:

energy, macroeconomic policy, agriculture, trade, foreign policy, immigration, labour issues, government operations and rights. This reads like a list of “grand” policies, i.e. policies that have been associated with highly proactive and interventionist states. This would of course need further elaboration, but appears to support regulatory-state theses. Among those increasing significantly, we see the environment and health in particular.

Many issues have quite substantive errors showing that significant fluctuations took place over the years. Variance has to be accounted for through different explanations.

This section would thus confirm that there are some areas where change clearly transcends political alternations. We are not able, within the limits of this paper, to evaluate exactly to which extent this changes over time validate any of the theses exposed in section 1 concerning the long-term evolution of policies. Yet, there clearly appears to be some “generational” change of policy change that appears to confirm common sense intuitions. As state interventionism in the economy fades, macroeconomic or energy policies become less important. Similar explanations could be mobilized for energy and agriculture. The rise of economic regulation (not significant) and environmental issues appears to mirror those changes. The other issues do not support this kind of change. But it is also true that health and crime have become increasingly salient for different reasons. Future studies should look at internal dynamics and trade-offs in greater detail than we were able to do it here.

### **3. Examples of policy sectors**

We will now look at a certain number of specific policy sectors. We selected four issues for this case study: topic codes 1 (macroeconomics), 7 (environment), 13 (social policies), and 15 (economic regulations). Macroeconomic issues and economic regulations are worth comparing, as data may reveal interesting clues concerning the hypothetical replacement of macroeconomic policies by economic regulations when it comes to state economic interventionism. Besides, environment appeared as a public issue in the 1970s, and is therefore encompassed by our data. Finally, social policies are considered as a left-wing issue, and appear to be an interesting variable to evaluate the impact of partisanship on issue attention.

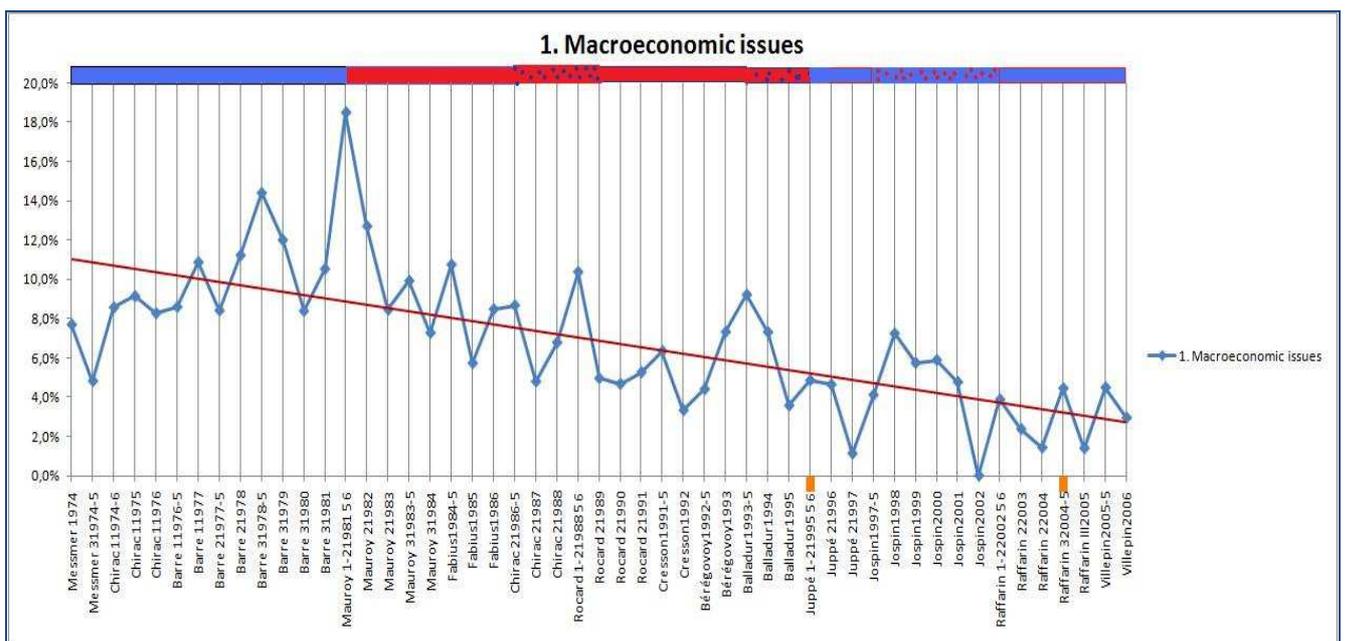
Table 2.1 – Crosstab of frequencies and percentages for each topic code

		Macroecon.	Environment	Social policies	Econ. Regul.	Total average
Freq	C	448	197	211	253	196.96
	P	191	98	44	201	97.67
	C+P	639	295	255	454	294.5
Percent	C	8.42%	3.70%	3.97%	4.76%	3.70%
	P	8.15%	4.18%	1.88%	8.58%	4.17%
	C+P	8.35%	3.85%	3.33%	5.93%	3.85%

As table 2.1 shows, the environment appears as an “average” political issue in terms of attention, close to the total average of all topic codes, whereas macroeconomics clearly appears as one of the major issues. Social policies and economic regulations show comparable levels for. Communications. Social policies, however, are characterized by really little political action, whereas on the contrary economic regulations show intense law-making activity.

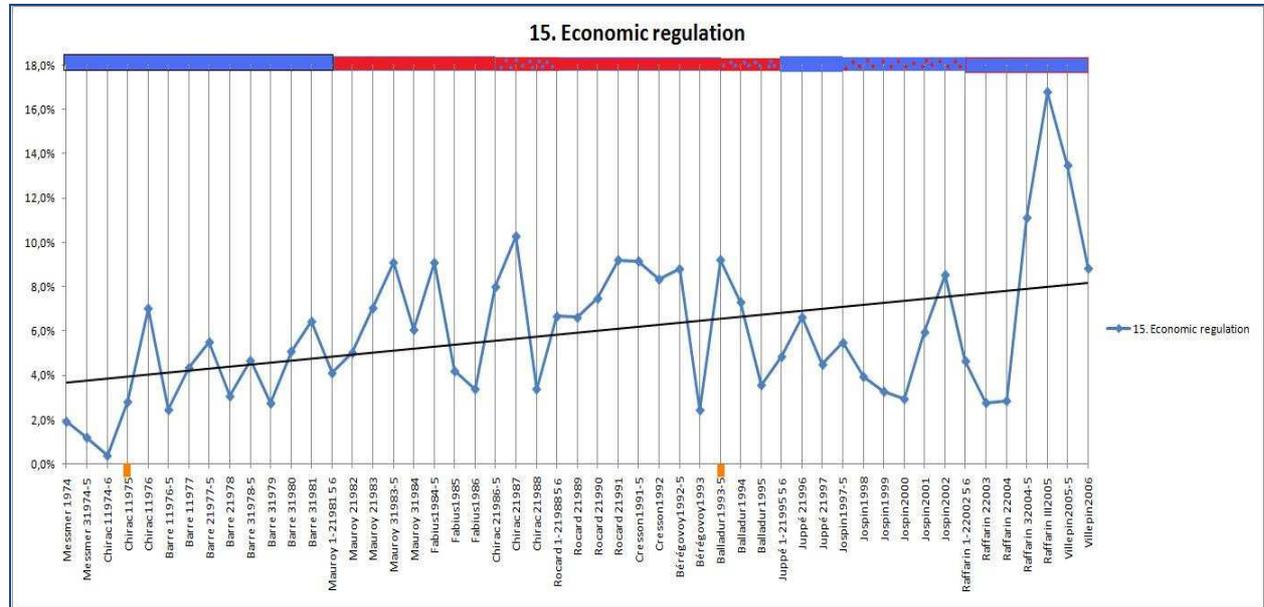
The case of attention to macroeconomic issues is illustrated in figure 2.4. Governmental attention to this policy sector has gradually decreased. Before 1981 we find higher levels of attention to macroeconomic issues with a unique peak in 1982 during the Mitterrand Presidency and the expansionary economic policy program that was abandoned two years later.

Figure 2.4: Attention to Macroeconomic issues over time (1974-2006)



After 1982 we observe small cycles of attention, but attention never reaches again the levels of the early eighties even during periods of economic crisis.

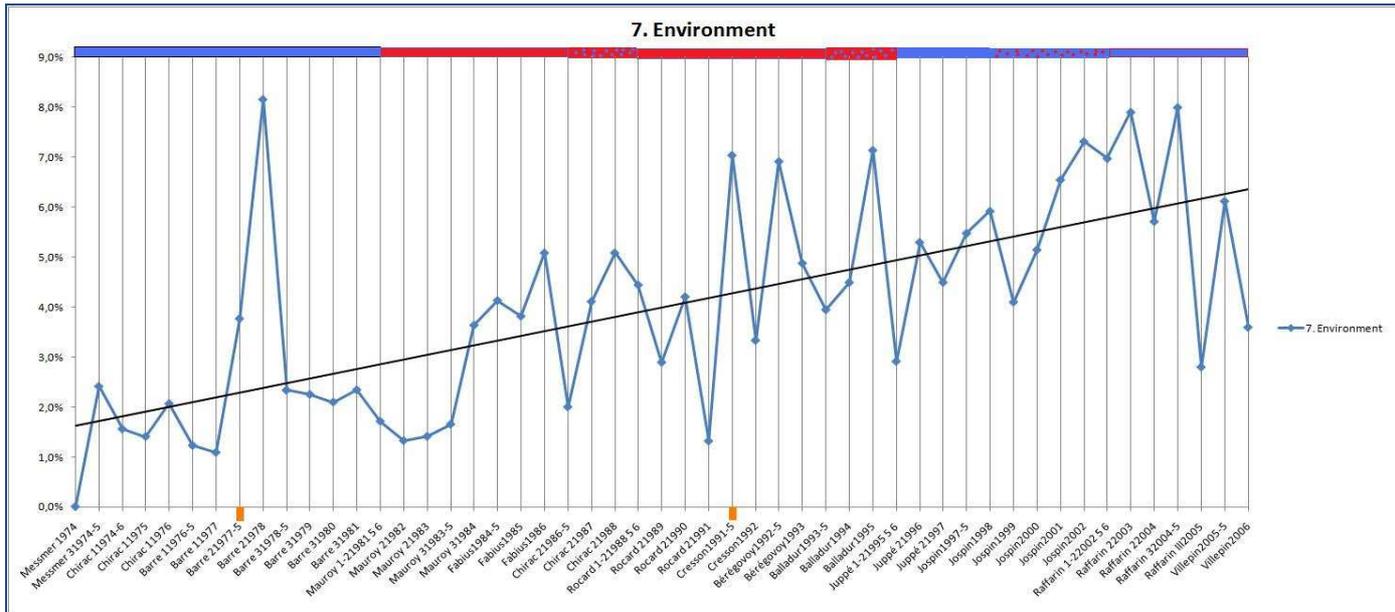
Figure 2.5 – Economic regulation



Economic regulation has increased over the same period. This *could* confirm regulatory state theses on the decline of economic interventionism and the increase of economic regulation. Yet, while the titles of the two categories match the language used by the main defenders of these theses (Majone, 1993), it is not certain that our own *sub*-categories meet those definitions unambiguously. Put differently, while this clearly points into that direction, this statement will require a more refined analysis.

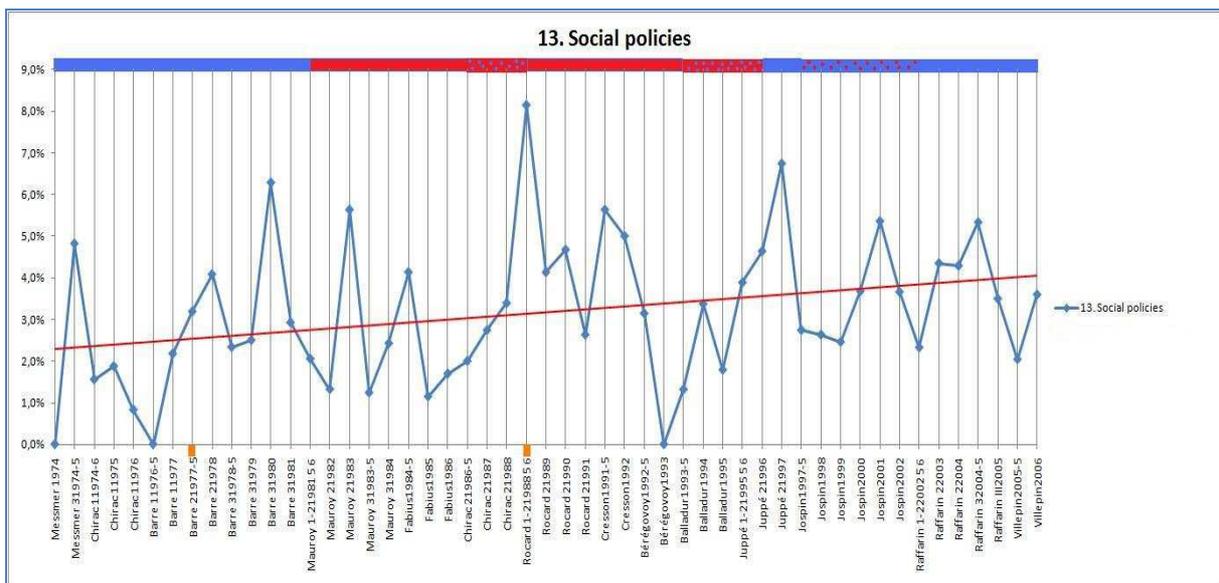
The Environment shows a different pattern (figure 2.5). Attention follows a cyclical pattern since 1974 with a first major peak in 1978 under Raymond Barre, followed by relatively little attention during the first socialist governments. From the early nineties onwards, attention increases significantly. The Jospin years, the first time the Greens actively participate in the national government, are characterized by below average activity – surprisingly enough. The highest historical levels of attention are matched under the second Chirac presidency in the context of the “Grenelle de l’environnement”.

Figure 2.6 – Attention to environmental issues over time (1974-2006)



The general distribution for social policies (figure 2.7) is clearly characterized by attention cycles, with several peaks over the years. In particular, there are some quite significant negative peaks, such as the Barre 1 government in 1976 and the Bérégovoy government in 1992. The latter appears to be electorally motivated, as elections were approaching and the left-wing minority government was having a very negative media coverage.

Figure 2.7 – Attention to Social Policies during time (1974-2006)



The upper bar on the past four figures provides information on government majorities and divided government. Four none of the four figures a clear-cut pattern can be identified. There

is no unambiguous left or right “preference” for certain issues, nor for punctuations (orange marks on the x-axis). We will look at those patterns in more detail in the next section.

In sum this last subsection has confirmed the overall conclusion that there clearly are long-term changes and patterns. But that these can hardly account for all of the changes and variance that can be observed. This may point to other explanations. Some policies may be more time-independent than others. This could also mean that some policies are more sensitive to political change and factors than others. The next section will start looking for this type of explanations.

## ***Section 3: Do parties matter?***

As we discussed in section 1, there is a large debate on the effective impact of parties on public policy contents and attention. A vast literature in public policy argues that parties hardly ever count and that policymaking is determined by subsystemic dynamics, external shocks or path-dependency. In this section, we will question those conclusions trying to test for partisan influence on attention. In order to do so, we will first look at “policy punctuations” before looking at overall partisan effects.

### **1. Agendas and punctuations**

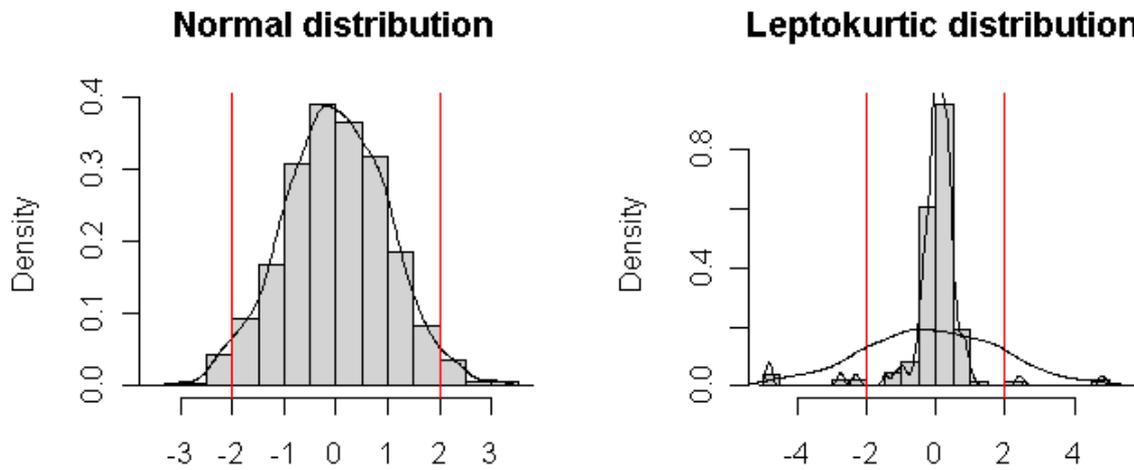
Punctuations correspond to a sudden increase of government attention for a particular subject (here sorted by major topic code<sup>6</sup>), and are computed so that any increase of statements for a given topic code which exceeds two standard deviations based on all variations for this topic code is considered a punctuation. Hence, this chapter does not concern the structure of global evolutions, but exclusively focuses on the characteristics of sudden shifts in governmental attention. Punctuations were computed only for communications and bill proposals, as the other two statement types were minor (see introduction).

Punctuations and punctuated equilibriums are central to Baumgartner and Jones’s argument on the politics of attention (Baumgartner, Breunig et al., 2006; Baumgartner & Jones, 1993, 2005). Fundamentally, they argue that changes in the distribution of attention of governments is not normal, but *leptokurtic*. The figure below illustrates the characteristics of normal and leptokurtic distribution.

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<sup>6</sup> Please refer to topic codes list in Annex 1.

Figure 3.1 – Types of distribution



Compared to the normal distribution, a leptokurtic distribution is characterized by a very high central peak<sup>7</sup>, comparatively low shoulder and relatively fat tails. This means that in such distributions of change, little or nothing takes place for the vast majority of cases. Almost no cases change moderately and a significant number of cases change radically.

Put differently, attention is not proportional to the importance (or salience or visibility) of given problems. Rather, attention is characterized by a great deal of inertia. It is very difficult for new issues to make it into the governmental agenda. Baumgartner and Jones call those obstacles to proportional attention (and normal distribution of attention) *institutional friction*. For Jones, Wilkerson and Larson-Price (2009),

*Institutional friction refers to formal institutional structures that introduce decision and transaction costs. Institutions shape the level of consensus required for action as well as the boundaries of policy action.*

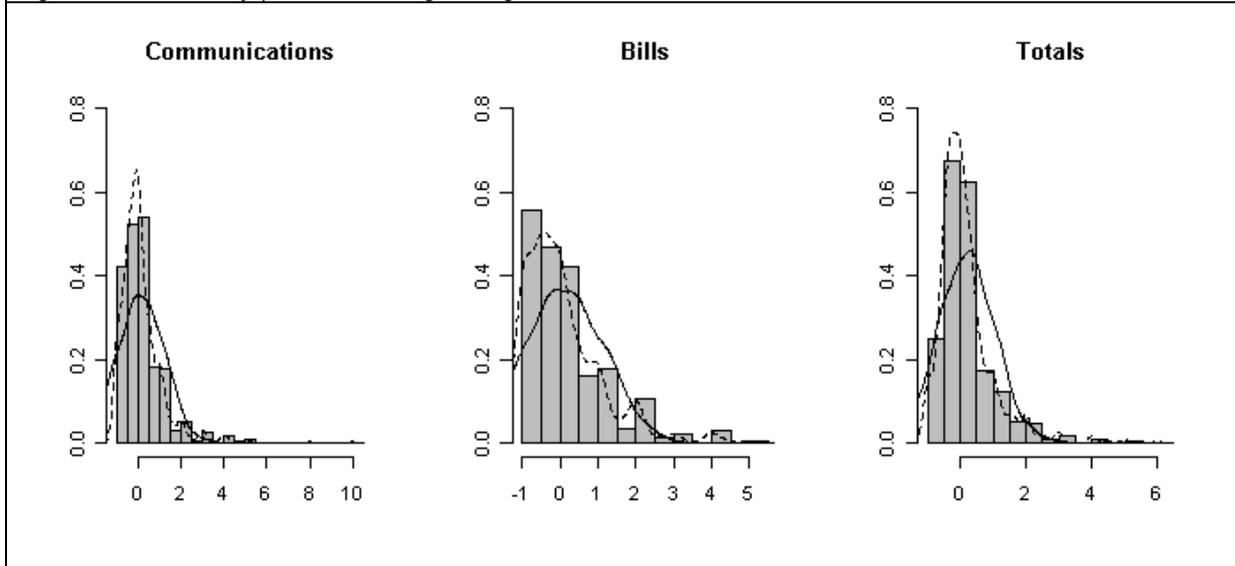
However, once they have finally got the attention of the government, this attention will be strong, leading to major policy measures and over-compensating for stagnation in previous periods. This is the results of *cascading*, some sort of spill-over effect whereby actors interested by the same topic get more and more involved, the more other actors get involved. According to Walgrave and Vliegthart (2008: 11):

<sup>7</sup> The black curve on the right-hand graph represents the normal distribution from the left-hand graph.

*The more a policy agenda is determined by (1) several actors, that are (2) structurally equivalent, that (3) communicate intensively with each other, who operate in a (4) competitive environment leading to (5) immediate rewards/sanctions for these actors, and the more (6) the game these actors play is iterative and low cost, the more the policy agenda at stake will be characterized by cascading/imitation processes rather than by friction.*

These three concepts – punctuations, friction and cascades – are the cornerstone of Baumgartner and Jones’ approach to policy change. The communiqués do correspond to a large extent to a leptokurtic distribution, as figure 3.2 shows. This figure shows that distribution of year-to-year changes in relative attention across all issues.

**Figure 3.2 – Density plots for changes in government attention**

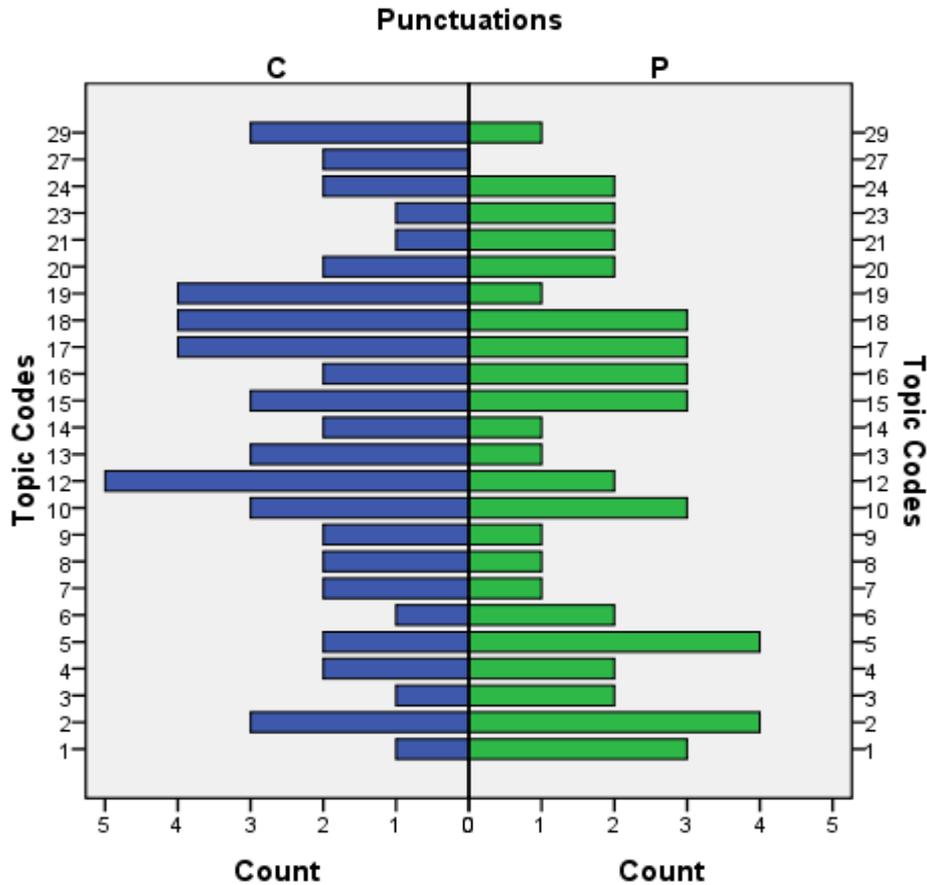


This distribution does indeed correspond to expectations, at least in tendency. There is some variance across items, though. The fact that the curve stops at  $-1$  is simply that attention cannot diminish by more than 100 per cent. Yet, it is true that decreases are smoother on average than increases, as the analysis of punctuations that follows will show. For communications, there are increases of up to 1000 percent (!).

The plain line gives the density of a normal distribution with the same mean and standard deviation as the dashed line, which represents the real density. Bills appear to be slightly more “normal” than communications. But they also show fat tails, showing that radical change, in the area of +400% of attention is not that uncommon. Totals owe to both and decrees and ordinances. Bills have another peculiarity: they show much more “negative” negative changes than communications. There are more issues where government simply stops caring. The explanation is probably simple: once on transports or energy is adopted, there won’t be a major law in the following year.

Beyond these simple observations, the problem with punctuation, friction and cascading is that the implementation of any of those concepts is – unsurprisingly – not straightforward. This section deals in particular with the problem of punctuations. The definition of punctuations is not obvious or consensual. In principle, punctuations are those changes that are situated in the fat tails of the distributions. Put differently, the term designates disproportionate changes in attention. However, when exactly can a change be considered to be radical or disproportionate? In a recent publication, Jennings and John used a rather arbitrary definition of punctuations, i.e. a relative change of 250 percent between two periods (Jennings & John, forthcoming). We tested several potential measures and finally adopted – we believe – a less arbitrary measure that is more in line with the concept of leptokurtosis. This measure is change greater than  $2\frac{1}{2}$  standard-deviations in absolute figures. This allows to take into account changes in each policy sector. Changes in relative importance tend to overemphasize the importance of “big” policy areas. Figure 2.2 provides an overview of punctuations by topic.

Figure 2.2 – Punctuations (Communications & bill proposals) per topic code



Although the number of punctuations for communications and proposals is similar (54% vs 46%), figure 2.2 first shows that some topics are more likely than others to be subject to sudden changes in government attention. Indeed, topics such as human rights (nb. 2), justice & crime (nb. 12), technology (17) and foreign trade (18) appear as major issues, whereas other topics are subject to little attention change, such as natural disasters (code 27 – 2 punctuations) – which seems logical for the latter should tend to occur more randomly.

It also appears that punctuations of attention are either oriented toward communication or governmental action (bill proposals). Considering that a fair approximation of a major discrepancy between communication and action could be a more than twofold discrepancy, macroeconomics (code 1) is characterised by intense political action but little communication, whereas sport, foreign policy, social policies and justice & crime (codes 29 19 13 12) seem to

require much communication, though it is not followed by legislative action. Other topics show rather balanced governmental attention for both items.

However, as chart 2 shows, communication and action are not evenly divided across time. Massive government shifts in communication occurred during the Barre 1 and Barre 2 cabinets (late 1976 to early 1978), but also from 1980 to 1983 (late Barre 3 and Mauroy 1 and 2 cabinets), and in 1991 and 1996 (Rocard 2 / Cresson, and Juppé 2). On the contrary, intense increases of governmental action occurred in 1976 (Chirac 1), 1995 (Juppé 1 and 2), the early years of the Jospin government (1998 to 1999), and of the Raffarin 1 and 2 cabinets (2002). Although such punctuations do not seem to be highly correlated to time periods, they give us clues and lead us to interpret changes in attention through partisan orientation.

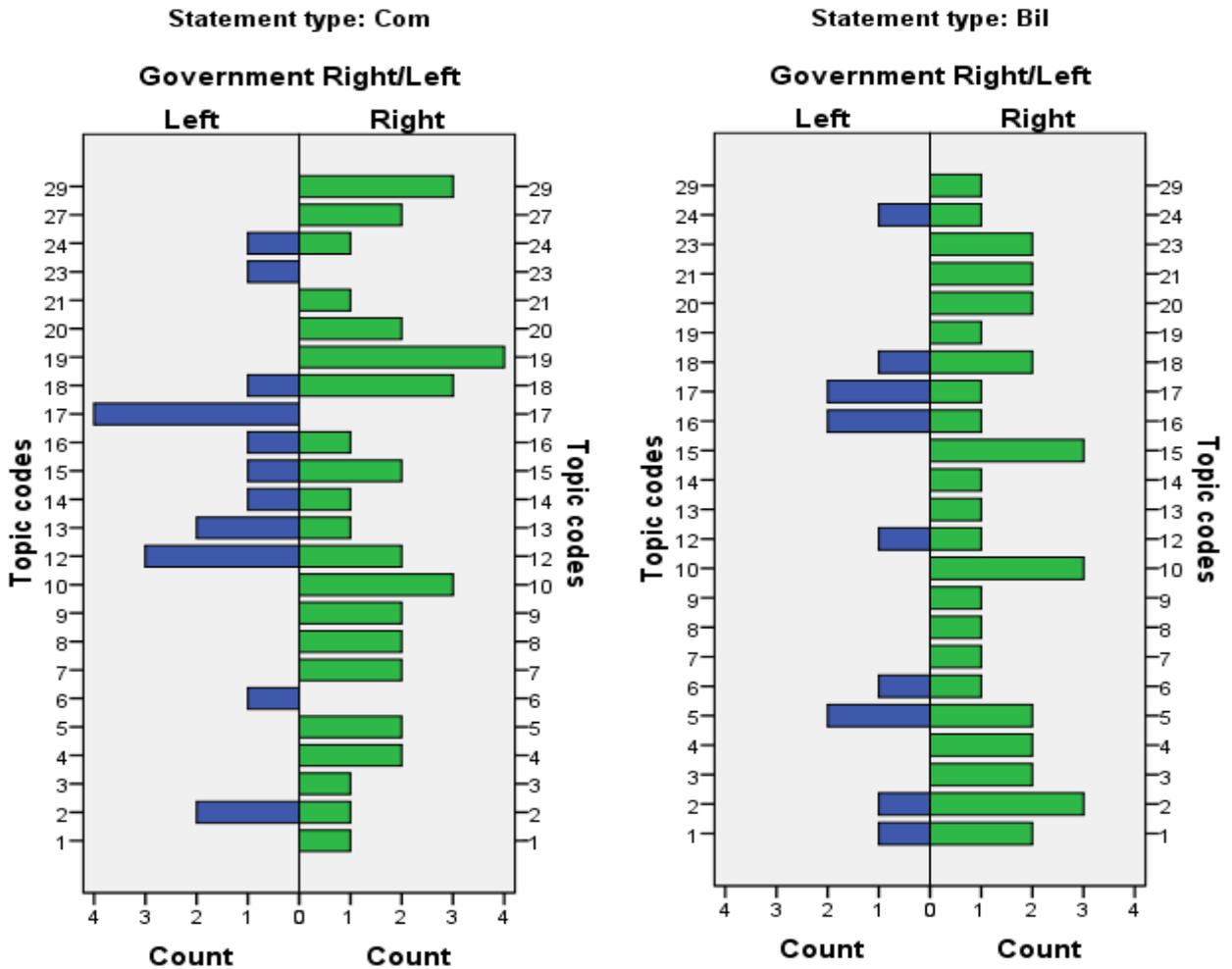
## 2. Punctuations and parties

The impact of parties and government type can be measured simply with the information summarized in table 1 be measured through left/right cleavages, and united/divided government. Although these are not the only valuable measures to study partisan structures, they are widely recognised and appear as a fair preliminary approach. We define right(left)-wing governments simply as those led by a right(left)-wing Prime Minister; whether the President is right- or left-wing determines whether the government is united or divided<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Indeed, in case of divided government, the Prime Minister is said to be preponderant in the French political system. Therefore, the government's alignment is determined by the Prime Minister's alignment.

Figure 2.4 – Punctuations by topic code and left/right partisanship



A major result here is that right-wing governments initiated far more punctuations than left-wing governments (39 vs 18 for communications, 37 vs 12 for proposals). The difference remains significant even once cabinet length is controlled for: with respectively 18 and 14 years in power from 1974 to 2006, the right scores an average 2.16 (communications) and 2.05 (proposals) punctuation-per-year ratio, whereas the left totalises 1.28 (communications) and 0.85 (proposals).

As far as communications are concerned (see figure 2.3), right-wing governments tend to monopolise most topics – especially transports (code 10), foreign trade (18), foreign policy (19), and sport (29) – whereas left-wing governments communicate comparatively more on partisan issues such as human rights (code 2) and social policies (13), but also technology and

research (17). Concerning bill proposals, we observe similar discrepancies with a right-wing domination on legislative action, although right-wing governments are more active in fields such as human rights (2), economic regulations (15) and transports (10), whereas left-wing governments focus on employment & job market (5), defence (16) and technology (17). Some issues are present on both sides (human rights, justice & crime, defence, foreign trade, and regional policies), and may therefore be considered as common major issues both in terms of communication and political action.

Figure 2.5 – Partisan distribution of communications and proposals

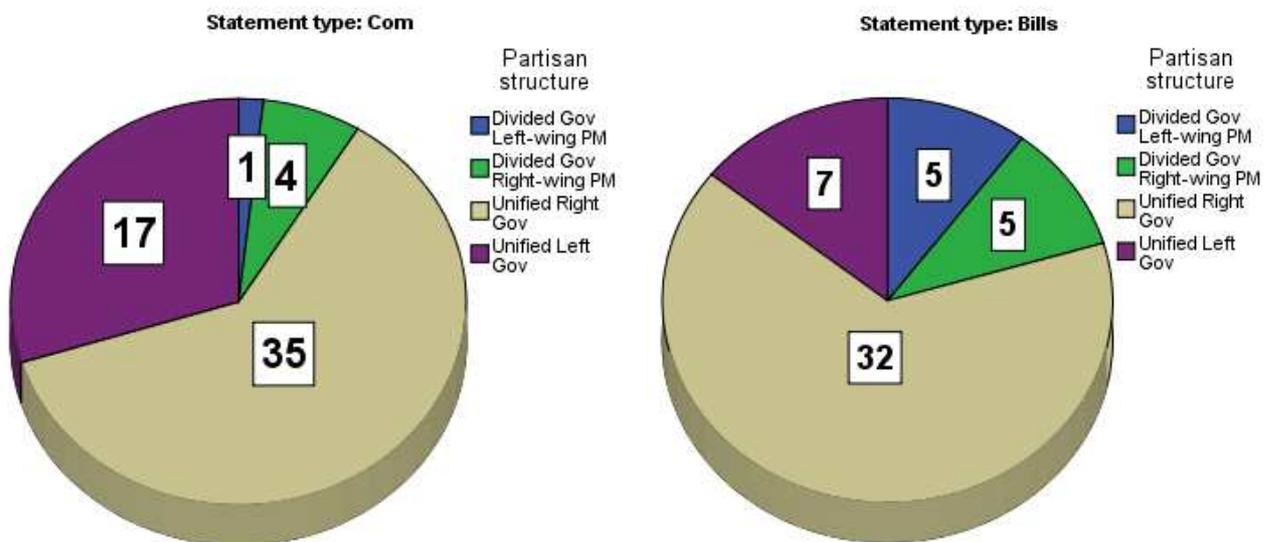


Table 2.1 – Punctuations by partisan orientation

		Divided – Left PM	Divided – Right PM	Unified Right	Unified Left	Overall
Years		4.91	3.66	14.75	9.66	<b>33</b>
<b>Comm</b>	Punct Nb	1	4	35	17	<b>57</b>
	Punct/year	0.2	1.09	<b>2.37</b>	<b>1.76</b>	<b>1.73</b>
<b>Bill Prop</b>	Punct Nb	5	5	32	7	<b>49</b>
	Punct/year	1.02	1.37	<b>2.17</b>	0.72	<b>1.48</b>

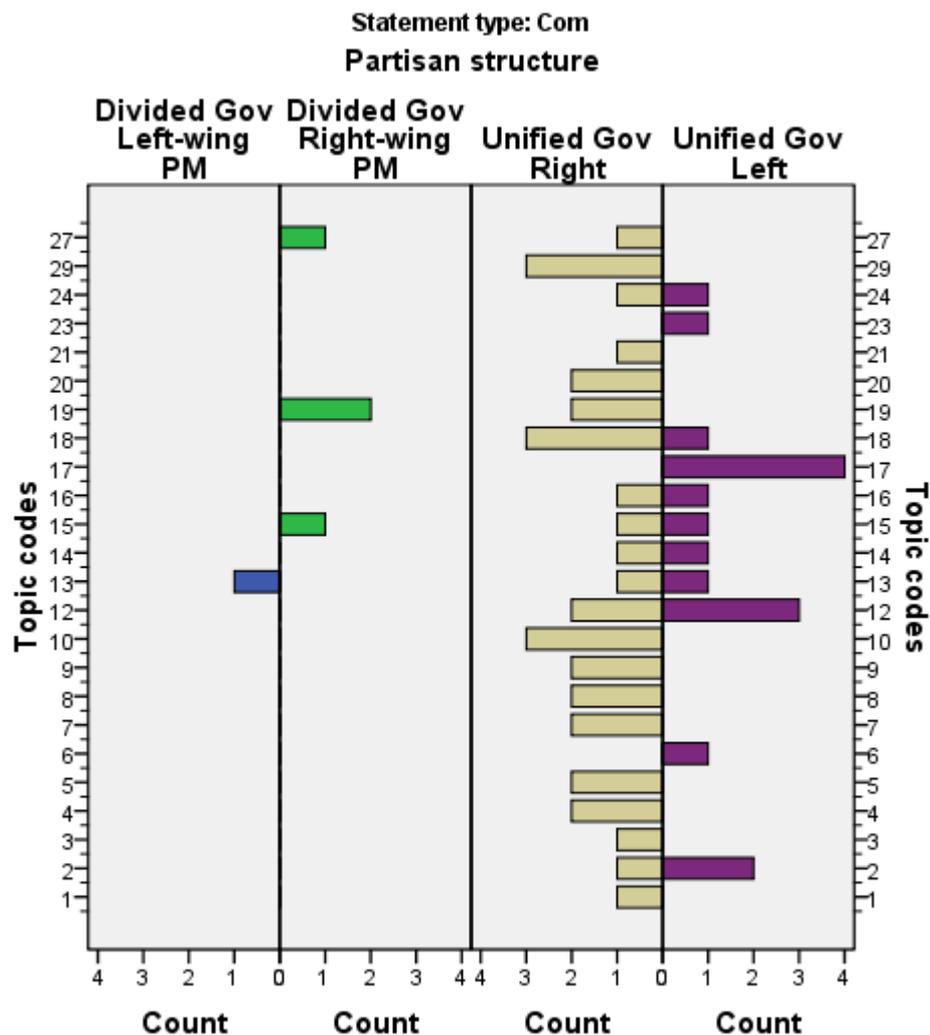
As argued by a number of authors and most French politicians, divided government appears to be detrimental to government productivity<sup>9</sup> – as measured by the number of punctuations<sup>10</sup>. Table 2.1 shows punctuation-per-year ratios that confirms that unified governments are clearly more active than divided governments. However, divided right-wing governments are still responsible for a greater number of punctuations divided left-wing governments for both communications and bill proposals. This result is in fact related to the overall higher activity of right-wing governments under the 5<sup>th</sup> Republic that we will come back to in the next section. There is thus a strong and significant impact of parties on punctuations in terms of the overall volume.

We will now turn to the effect of parties on the relative attention on issues. Figure 2.6 shows that divided governments communicate more on their usual partisan issues, such as social policies (13) for the left, or economic regulations and foreign policy (15, 19) for the right – although the correlation might not be significant. The right-wing punctuation on natural disasters (27) may be considered as contingent. As for bill proposals (chart 9), there does not seem to be any obvious pattern, probably due to the lack of contextual details.

<sup>9</sup> It has to be mentioned here that a large number of authors ranging from George Tsebelis (2002) to Arendt Lijphart (1999) favour lower levels of activity as this may preserve budgets for the former and social peace for the latter.

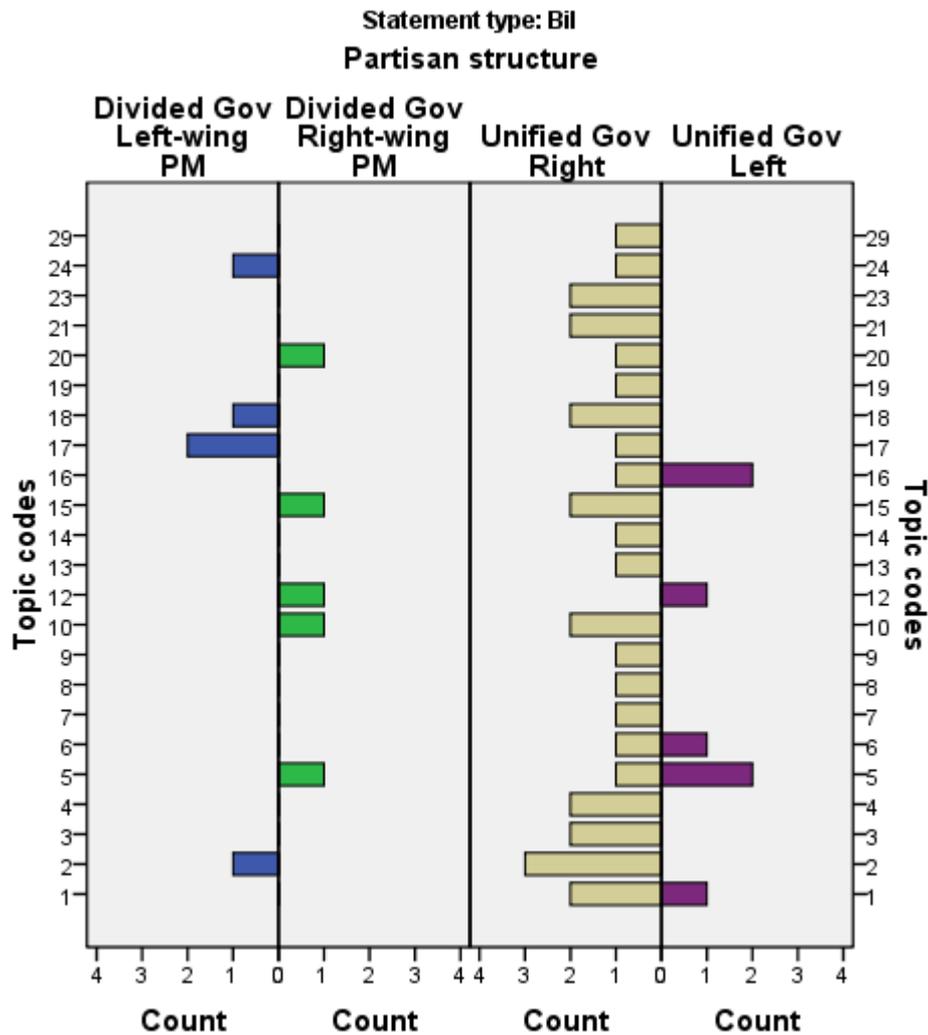
<sup>10</sup> The work of Coleman or Edwards and colleagues (Coleman, 1999; Edwards, Barrett, & Peake, 1997) contradicts here the influential work of Alan Mayhew (1991). Sébastien Lazardeux has developed a similar argument in his recent PhD-thesis (Lazardeux, 2008).

Figure 2.6 – Punctuations by partisan structure by topic codes (communications)



Punctuations in communications under divided government are extremely rare. Again the reason for this must be of institutional nature. Governments that have to share the political public sphere with a hostile president try to avoid clashes as much they can. This probably also means that they try to govern more through regulation than through legislation in order to keep it away from the media and public opinion. Bills appear to follow a similar logic, as Figure 2.7 shows.

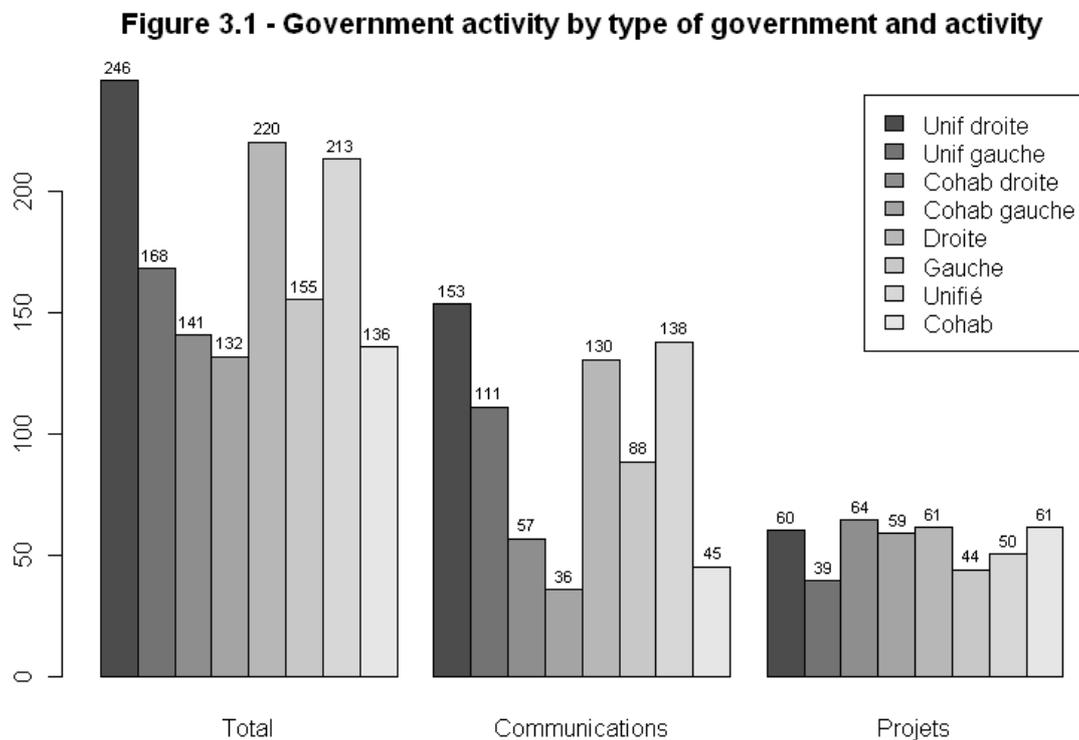
Figure 2.7 – Punctuations by partisan structure by topic codes (proposals)



Hence, right-wing governments are responsible for the large majority of radical attention shifts. Divided government, moreover, drastically reduces the number of punctuations. These results would clearly require further research and analysis, but represent clearly original evidence. The next section will deal in more detail with the issue of party orientation and legislative activity.

### 3. Legislative activism and parties

Before looking at individual topics, Figure 3.1 gives simple comparison of government activity by type of government. A striking element across all sub-divisions and specifications is that right-wing governments are significantly more active than left-wing governments.



Source: Weekly French government statements, 1974-2006

Figure 3.1 confirms the results of the previous sub-section, the weighted average of yearly “governmental production”. There is a strong and significant difference between left-wing and right-wing governments. This difference is strongly visible under unified government, but remains significant under divided government and for the overall average. This, again, probably points to some kind of institutional bias against the left that has its origins in the very institutions of the 5<sup>th</sup> Republic. Indeed, a first research direction ought to be the effects of the permanent control of the Senate by right-wing parties. While it is not theoretically impossible that this institution will ever be controlled by the left, this is highly unlikely due to

the overrepresentation of small towns and rural areas. This point would need more elaboration, but this would go beyond the scope of the current paper.

Figure 3.1 confirms another conclusion of the analysis of punctuations: the negative impact of divided government on overall productivity. The difference is very important on average, more than 36 per cent less activity for divided government. Yet, it also has to be noted that this difference is driven by the difference in communications and that slightly more bills are adopted under divided government, even though the difference is slim here.

The figure in fact shows that bills (*projets*) are a lot less subject to variance than other items.

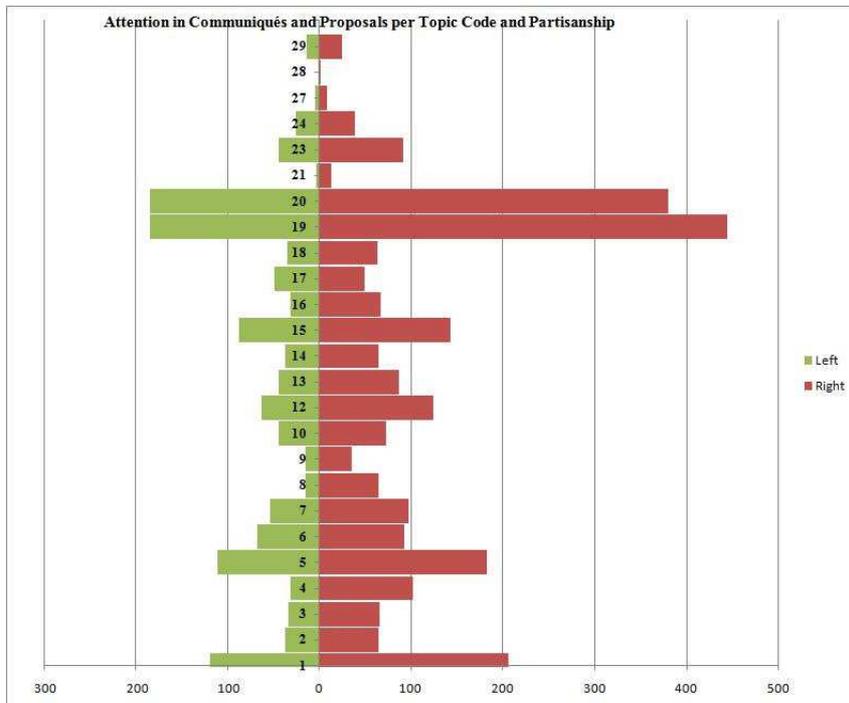
Finally, while right-wing governments are more active under divided government than left-wing cabinets, the difference is a lot smaller than for unified government. Put differently the, the depressing effect of divided government on activity is at least equally important, if not more, for right wing government. This probably explained why the 2000 amendment to the French constitution that brought in line the presidential mandate and the mandate of the Assemblée was supported by a wide majority of political actors across the political spectrum. This reform is assumed to rule out divided government for the foreseeable future.

As we have seen above (see figure 2.1), the observed trends in the content of Government's statements tend to reflect a cyclical pattern of issues in the French agenda more than a clear partisan dimension linked to Presidential or Prime Minister partisan orientation. For example, there is a gradual increase of government attention to Labor (3) over the period 1978-1986, with a successive contraction. For "Justice and Crime" (12) attention rises after the 1990s. Macroeconomic issues (1) were very strong in 1975 and contracted afterwards. In fact, we find elements of both stability and change in attention to the 26 major topics considered. Nevertheless, there is no evidence of synchronization between changes in attention and presidential elections or shifts, or in other terms between government changes and policy-agenda.

At first glance, this might suggest that the policy-making agenda is driven solely by external factors, following autonomous cycles, independent of partisan changes. Our data does not appear to confirm theses that assume left-wing or right-wing "ownership" for certain issues – for instance, social policy with the former and defense with the latter. This section will dig deeper into those structures to understand how important parties are today and/or how their importance varies over time and across issues.

We will confine the analysis here to a simple left-right comparison of issue-by-issue attention. Figure 3.2 provides absolute *weighted* yearly attention to our 26 topics (see corresponding issues in Annex 1). As before, this confirms that right-wing governments are a lot more active than left-wing governments. This is virtually true across all issues, except “Research and Science” (17) where attention is equivalent. Right-wing governments are on average a lot more active on issues such as government operations, defence, foreign policy, justice and crime or immigration. This may be in line with existing stereotypes, but right-wing governments are also more active on the environment or labour, i.e. issues that are historically more associated with left-wing parties..

Figure 3.2 – Attention in Communiqués and Proposals per topic code and partisanship



But even more surprising is the fact that both left-wing and governments show similar patterns in the relative structure of attention. Both right-wing and left-wing governments clearly focus governmental attention on four main topics. Those are: government operations (20), foreign affairs (19), Labour (5) and Macroeconomic issues (1).

Interestingly, Left/ Right variation occurs in other policy sectors which are generally characterized by lower average attention. For example, right-wing governments pay considerably more attention to Defense, Immigration, Energy and Agriculture (topics 16, 9, 8

and 4) than left-wing governments. Defense and immigration are historically associated with right-wing parties. These differences would thus tend to confirm the importance of partisan differences. This may also tell us something about the relative importance of “small” issues. Differentiation among parties may indeed take place on those smaller issues, provided that they are particularly visible or salient. We are not able, at this stage, to say anything significant about the salience of issues, but ongoing research on media attention should allow for a more complete analysis in the future.

Figures 3.3 – Communications: topic code and left/right partisanship

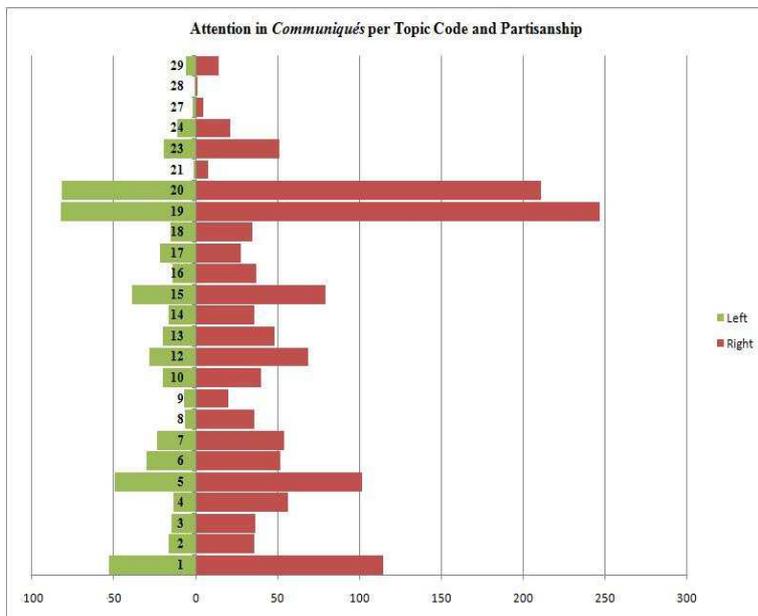
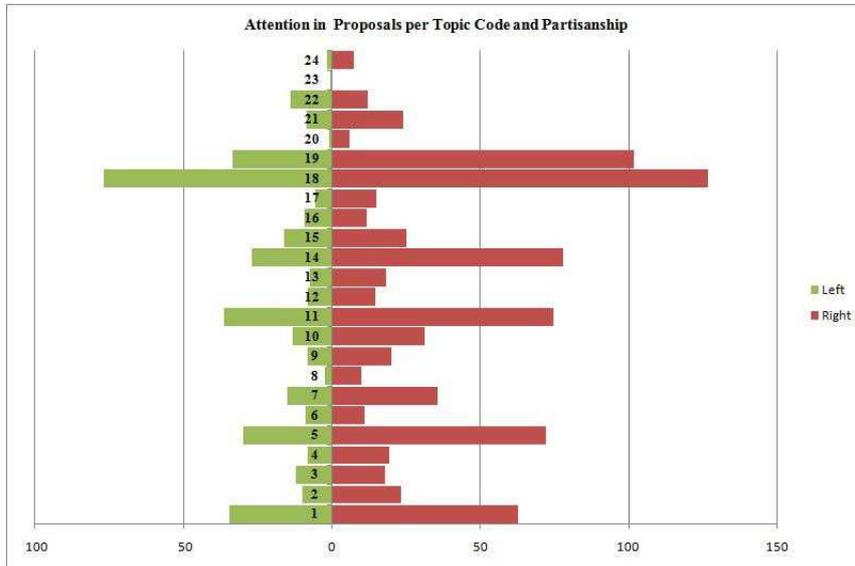


Figure 3.2 is based on totals of government actions. This includes here both projects and communications. Yet one could assume that there are different patterns. It could be that governments communicate on some issues and legislate on others. There may also be policymaking cycles with periods which are marked by communication and periods where governments legislate. Figures 3.3 and 3.4 provide information about average communications and bills by majority. Results are inconclusive.

Left-wing governments communicate comparatively less than right-wing governments on all topics, except for economic regulation (15) where left-wing government communicates a little more than right wing ones. Apart from this exception, we find patterns similar to those for overall levels of activity (figure 3.1) and the issue averages of figure 3.2: the gap in communications is smaller for government operations and foreign issues (topics 20 and 19, both characterized by higher levels of attention) and greater for policy sectors characterized

by a lower level of attention as Defense, Immigration, Energy and Agriculture (topics 16, 9, 8 and 4).

Figures 3.4 – Bills:, topic code and left/right partisanship



Looking at bills (figure 3.4), we find, again, a clear “advantage” for right-wing governments. Furthermore, right-wing governments focus on government operation and foreign issues, Justice, Labour and Macroeconomic issues (topics 20, 19, 12, 5 and 1). Even on economic regulation, where left-wing governments communicate more, right wing governments legislate more. Left wing governments tend to concentrate on the same topics as right-wing ones: government operation, foreign issues, justice (20, 19, 12, 5, 1).

Another interesting result is that differences between left and right are clearly more pronounced than for communications. Again, an explanation of these differences has to be sought for in the institutional set-up of the 5<sup>th</sup> Republic. Moreover, the evolution of long-term trends should be dissected in greater detail, as well as the relative evolution of different government agenda items.

In sum, left-wing and right-wing governments tend to focus on same issues. Differences are small for the “big” issues (government operations, in particular). The gap in attention between Right-wing and Left-wing governments is comparatively small for policy sectors characterized by higher levels of attention. Differentials are stronger for policy sectors characterized by overall lower levels of attention. It can be hypothesized that those sectors benefit from higher salience, though this will require further research.

## *Conclusions: and beyond?*

This report provides a quick survey of the opportunities associated with our dataset on French government statements over the past thirty years. The analyses provided here are mainly descriptive. Yet, they provide a clear picture of the interest of the collected data, as well as some substantial results. Fundamentally, they show that this data may usefully complement ongoing research and debates on politics and institutional life under the 5<sup>th</sup> Republic, but also on policymaking. In fact, this data may help realizing a map of policies in France, taking into account the relative politicization, governmental attention and effective variance over time.

There is a large set of potential research directions. The mentioned mapping of French policies with regard to political attention is a first research direction. This paper provides a starting point for this perspective, but this will require a more fine-tuned analysis of the evolution of individual agenda items. It may also require an additional analysis of sub-categories that have not been dealt with in this paper.

A second endeavor concerns the explanation of existing changes and differences. This concerns evolution over time, of course, but also left-right differentials in overall productivity. These issues will have to be dealt with in separate in-depth studies, combining the data presented here with additional indicators and data. The preliminary results presented in this paper point to potential explanations.

Finally, the left-right divide or, more generally, speaking the effects of parties on policymaking probably would need more detailed analysis and explanation. Overall tendencies will have to be looked at in the light of electoral and larger political dynamics than was possible within the limits of this paper.

In sum, we hope that this paper has demonstrated the interest of the communiqués data and the potential for future research that is attached to it.

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## *Annex I – List of topic codes*

<b>Topic Codes</b>	<b>Policy Sectors</b>
<b>1</b>	Macroeconomic issues
<b>2</b>	Civil rights, discrimination
<b>3</b>	Health
<b>4</b>	Agriculture, fishing, forestry
<b>5</b>	Labour
<b>6</b>	Education
<b>7</b>	Environment
<b>8</b>	Energy
<b>9</b>	Immigration
<b>10</b>	Transports
<b>12</b>	Justice and Crime
<b>13</b>	Social policies
<b>14</b>	Housing and urban development
<b>15</b>	Economic regulation
<b>16</b>	Defence
<b>17</b>	Space, science, technology
<b>18</b>	Foreign trade
<b>19</b>	International affairs and foreign assistance
<b>20</b>	Government operations
<b>21</b>	Public lands and water management
<b>23</b>	Culture
<b>24</b>	Local and regional policies
<b>27</b>	Natural disasters
<b>28</b>	Fires and accidents
<b>29</b>	Sports
<b>30</b>	Necrologies