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Policy Agendas in Germany – Data Base and Descriptive Insights

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Abstract

Agenda-setting focuses on how political issues emerge within society, enter parliamentary debates and are responded to by government decisions. We introduce a database that traces policy issues in Germany between 1978 and 2017. These political activities include political inputs (public opinion), processes (party manifestos, parliamentary questions and government speeches), as well as outputs (laws). Each activity's topic is identified using the *Comparative Policy Agendas* scheme. Collectively, these observations comprise the policy agenda of Germany. We highlight the database potential by describing all German policy issues for the 39- year period and by tracking how immigration became a political issue.

The politics of Germany since 1945 has been characterized as consensus-seeking, eschewing radical political reforms and proceeding incrementally on policy-making. Institutional structures curtailing majoritarian tendencies are often understood as the foundation or the culprit of these modest policy outcomes (Rudzio 2015; Schmidt, 2002; Scharpf 1988). Does this neat summary of policy-making describe German politics well? How would one measure the way issues emerge, evolve and are processed by political institutions?

In this paper, we introduce a comprehensive data set that describes the political agenda of Germany over nearly 40 years and illustrates its potential. The database enables researchers to identify policy issues along all stages of the policy process in Germany: the input level, the policy-process level and the output level. By doing so, we map the political agenda of Germany, which is defined as ‘the set of problems a society faces at a particular moment in time and reveals how government directs action to areas where it thinks it is needed’ (John et al. 2013:1). The data set covers the period from 1978 to 2017 and has been coded by policy issue following the *Comparative Agendas Project (CAP)*. Data are publicly accessible at [BLANKFORREVIEW](#).

The paper consists of four parts. First, we lay out the intellectual origins of the data set: the policy agendas approach. In the second part, we detail what kind of data was retrieved, how they are coded, and what type of indicator each data series represents. In the third section, we highlight its capacity to enrich research on agenda-setting as well as German and comparative politics: first and following its intellectual roots, the data set enables researchers and the broader public to trace policy changes in a consistent and comprehensive fashion over a long period of time. We use all data to summarize the political agenda of Germany. Second, the presented data offer scholars interested in specific public policy fields an exhaustive and easily accessible way for identifying political activities across different policy agendas on a particular issue. The ability to locate quickly and exactly political activities within a political domain facilitates qualitative and quantitative research designs. In a brief application, we examine immigration policy in Germany. In the conclusion, we stress two final assets of the project: the ability to utilize the coding scheme for other political activities, such as media coverage, protest, or judicial decisions and its linkage to a cross-national effort by the *Comparative Agendas Project* to classify political activities in 16 additional countries and the European Union.

1 Intellectual Roots: The Policy Agendas Approach

The policy agendas approach (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Baumgartner, Jones, and Wilkerson 2011; Green-Pedersen and Walgrave 2014) provides a theoretical understanding of how, when, and which political issues political systems choose and act upon. The study of political agendas has its roots in classic works (Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Schattschneider 1960) on power and representation. Since the 1980s, studies of public policy and agenda-setting have focused on the process by which certain issues receive public attention and under which conditions authoritative decision-making occurs (Kingdon 1995; Baumgartner and Jones 1993). The agenda-setting approach is based on the observation that the size of political agendas is limited and that therefore ‘social problems must compete for space in the public arenas. This competition is ongoing; problems must compete both to enter and to remain on the public agenda’ (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988: 70). This process necessitates to understand why certain problems emerge at the expense of others and to identify the dynamics that facilitate their success on the political agenda. Works on policy agendas thus contribute to political science by identifying ‘the mechanisms through which issues gain or lose traction’ (Green-Pedersen and Walgrave 2014: 1). Its focus on mechanisms places the role of political actors, timing, and multi-layered institutional structures at the center of debate. A key theoretical and empirical challenge of these research traditions is the dynamic nature of the examined processes and their accompanying complex theoretical frameworks. Focusing on issues in politics can be compared to ‘injecting a tracer liquid into a living body to measure the circulation of fluids and determine any deficiencies therein’ (Green-Pedersen and Walgrave 2014: 9). Policy agendas are thereby related to a broader research on public opinion, media, protest and legislative behavior. These theoretical advances grew out of a substantive investment in data collection and processing. In the following, we contribute to this effort and introduce a large database on political activities in Germany.

2 German Policy Agendas

Legislative agenda, party manifestos, parliamentary questions, government speeches, or public opinion: the various political activities in Germany have been subject of research, within comparative designs as well as case studies. What has been missing is a comprehensive data set covering different agendas over a long period and coded thematically in a consistent way. The data collected by the *German Agendas Project* covers all stages of the policy process and across all policy issues. Such a database enables the joint analysis of different agendas as well as their interactions.

2.1 Data Sources

In the following description of our database, we divide the policy cycle into three stages: inputs (public opinion and party manifestos), processes (government speeches, parliamentary questions, and bills), and outputs (laws). The time span of the database covers the years 1976 to 2017 for all documents except for the answers to the ‘Most important problem’ (MIP) question (1986 to 2017) and the party manifestos (1980-2013). Unless otherwise noted, all data are based on the *German parliaments official documentation service (Dokumentations – und Informationssystem für Parlamentarische Vorgänge, DIP)*. Table 1 summaries the data base.

Table 1: German Political Agendas.

Series	Indicator	Actor	Unit of analysis	Number of observations	Intercoder reliability
Input	Most important problem	Respondents of representative surveys	Answer to open ended survey question	30599	0.91
	Party manifestos	Political parties who stood in the legislative elections	Sentences	57821	0.88
Policy Process	Most important government speech for each year	German chancellor	Quasi-sentences	29037	0.82
	Parliamentary questions	Parliamentary group or five percent of all MPs	Text of question	21132	0.81
	Bills	Government, Upper Chamber or five percent of all MPs	Text of bill	3667	0.85
Output	Laws	Parliament	Text of law	4730	0.81

The public’s agenda consists of public opinion data and entails answers to the open-ended survey question on the most important problem in Germany. The question is part of the Politbarometer survey by the ‘Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e.V.’ and is asked in regular intervals since 1977. The survey question on MIPs appears monthly and comparably from 1986 onwards. The data are publicly available through GESIS Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences’s data portal. Each annual wave consists of 11,000 to 25,000 respondents in the old *Bundesländer*, and 11,000 on average in the new states. We compiled and coded the answers

from each annual wave, which resulted in a more fine-grained topic coding, than using the cumulated files.

The input series also contains the content of the party manifestos for eight legislative elections between 1980 and 2013. Party manifestos of the five German parties represented in the Bundestag (CDU/CSU, FDP, Grüne, Linke/PDS and SPD) have been coded on the level of natural sentences under the direction of Christoffer Green-Pedersen and Isabelle Guinaudeau with the identical coding-scheme and protocol (Guinaudeau 2015).

Government speeches (*Regierungserklärungen*) are an indicator of the governments' agenda. The federal government employs speeches for explaining its political principles and past actions as well as emphasizing its legislative intentions. In the beginning of a legislative period, the chancellor gives a 'major' government policy statement (Korte 2002) in which the incoming government presents its specific policy goals. Since the 1960s, most governments also deliver a 'state of the union speech' typically held early in a year which introduces concrete policy ideas for the subsequent legislative sessions. Speeches generally concentrate on the policy packages of the current coalition and aim at displaying the chancellor's power to determine broad policy principles (Art. 55 of the German Constitution). Since the election of Angela Merkel in 2005, the trend for more, shorter and specific government speeches grew markedly. We only consider major speeches held by the chancellor here. If several government speeches were held by the chancellor the same year, the most important speech was identified. Speeches covering several topics were privileged over one-issue speeches and longer speeches over shorter ones. We split each speech into quasi-sentences and then coded them by policy issue.

Parliamentary questions (*Grosse/ Kleine Anfragen*) allow parliamentary groups or five percent of all MPs to obtain information from the government and to initiate deliberation on particular issues (rule 75-76, GOdB). In our investigated period, mainly opposition parties employ this process. Minor interpellations are used to monitor the government action by requesting information about 'specifically designated issues' (rule 104, GOdB). Major interpellations can be described as the 'most important instrument of the opposition to initiate major plenary debates about political issues' (Ismayr 2007: 183) and as a form of political control (Rudzio 2015: 234). For coding each parliamentary question, we relied on its title, key words and the summary of the questions provided by the DIP. When necessary, we used the whole text of the question.

The agenda of the parliament as a whole finds its expression in legislative bills and laws. Bills can be initiated through three channels. First, the government, the upper chamber or five

percent of all MPs can submit a bill (Art. 76, GG). Second, one or several federal states in the Bundesrat can introduced a bill. Third, bills from the floor of the Bundestag must be signed by five percent of the members of the Bundestag or a parliamentary group (rule 75 & 76, GOdB). Most laws need a simple majority of the Bundestag to be passed (Art. 24 (2), GG); laws amending the constitution need a two-third majority (Art.79. (2), GG). We coded all introduced bills and enacted laws. We relied on a document's title, key words, summary, and when necessary the complete text provided by the DIP in order to place it into a particular policy category.

2.2 *The Comparative Agendas Coding Scheme*

Following the *Comparative Agendas Project* coding scheme, the data are coded into 21 major and 232 minor topic areas. We examine all political activities within each agenda and assign each item one exclusive thematic code. The database and its coding is therefore exhaustive, consistent, and comparable across time and data series. Unique to the German codebook is a separate category for issues related to reunification. One can easily recode country-specific topics for international comparison. Data made publicly available contain thus two codes: one including German specificities, one according to the international master codebook (Bevan 2019).

All documents are coded by at least two well-trained coders, reviewed by a third person and in case of divergent classifications resolved collectively. The parliamentary questions of the 11th-16th legislature are coded using semi-supervised learning based on the *RTextTools* package (Jurka et al. 2012). Starting with the 17th legislature, we combined pre-trained BERT models with neural networks implemented in Keras to code the parliamentary questions (Devlin et al. 2018). The algorithms were trained with manually-coded parliamentary questions. The estimated results were verified following our normal coding procedure. Inter coder reliability on the level of the major codes is highest for party manifestos and MIPs (with respectively 98% and 91%). For bills and laws, we obtained an agreement rate of 84%, for government speeches of 81% and for parliamentary questions of 79%.

3 *The Political Agenda of Germany*

In this section, we first offer a summary of all data and then trace immigration as a policy issue across different agendas. These two sketches illustrate the potential usage of the data – one exploring long-term trends and the other for fine-grained analysis that can jumpstart or supplement detailed case studies.

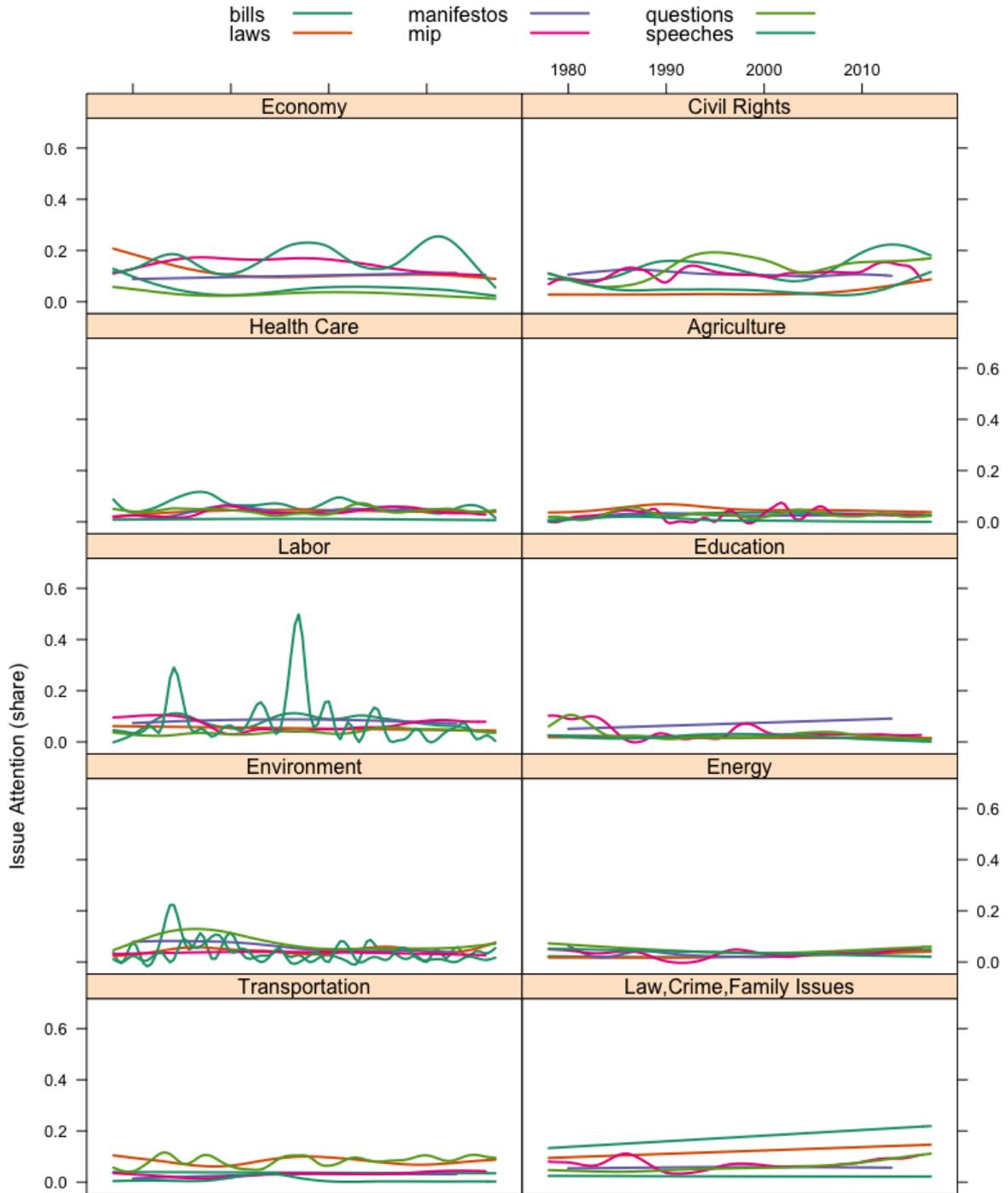
3.1. Long-term trends

The political agenda of Germany entails several dimensions (Baumgartner et al. 2019). The first dimension, concentrates on different stages in the political process ranging from inputs, such as public opinion and party manifesto, to political activities in the parliament and the government, such as speeches and laws. The second dimension considers the 23 major policy domains, for example economy or education. The third dimension is time. Taking all three dimensions together is both comprehensive and challenging. We therefore just highlight a few observations about long-term trends.

Scholars may be interested in the dynamics of issue attention or focus more specifically on moments of change in attention. Indeed, many agendas move simultaneously at times. A good example is the German Reunification in 1990, which triggered attention on this issue in all German agendas. Comparison across policy domains reveals that some agendas are more volatile than others, or that change in one agenda triggers change in other agendas. This occurrence can be the case of the political input (in party manifestos -for instance with the rise of the Green party), for policy processes (e.g. when a new party enters the parliament and introduces new issues) or for outcomes (when parliament passes laws).

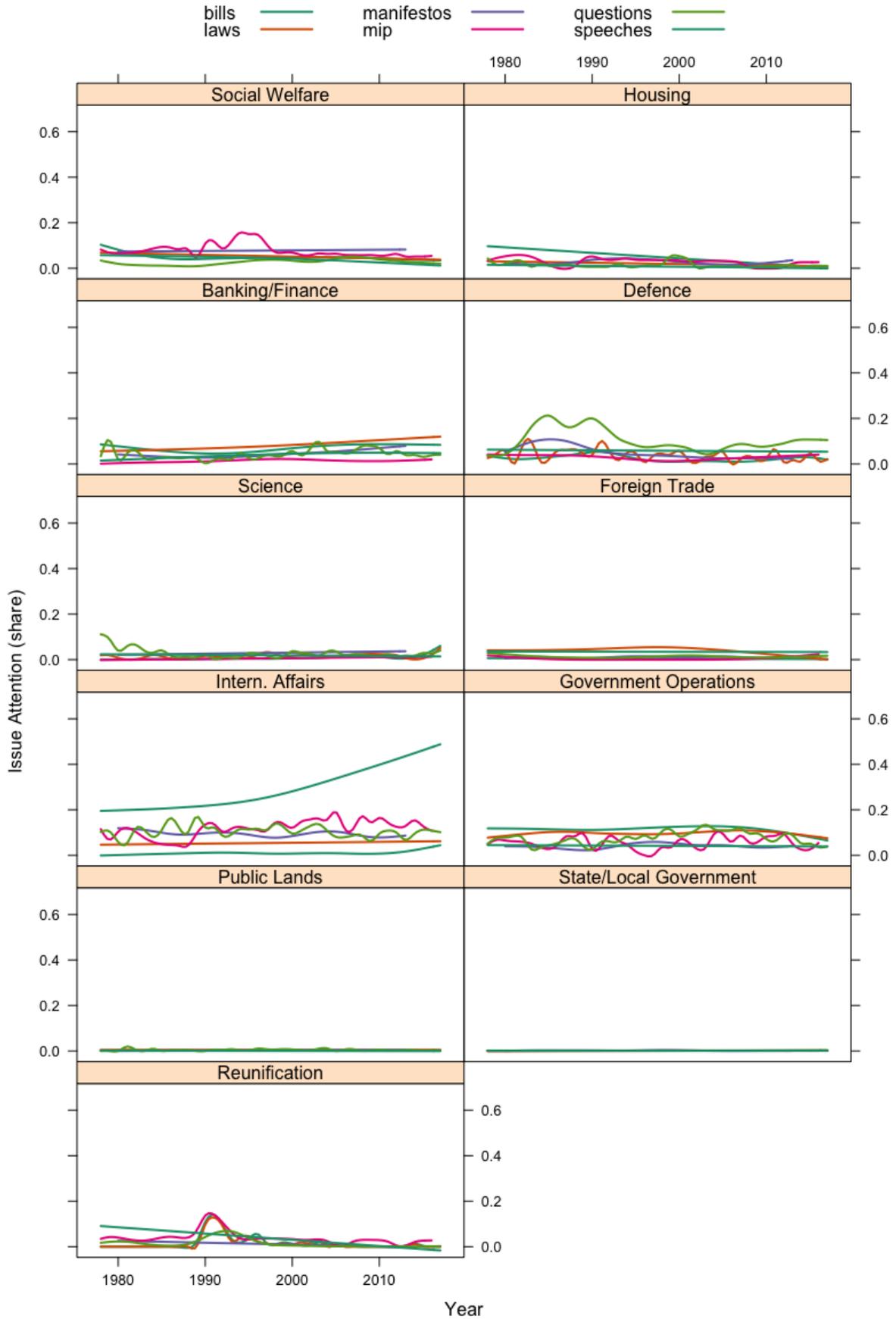
Figure 1 offers a first illustration of the structure of our database, covering all major policy domains over time for the different agendas. The representation of issue attention in percentages takes account of the fact that attention within a given agenda is limited. It also facilitates the comparison between agendas of different sizes.

Figure 1a Issue attention over time by political agenda



Year

Figure 1b Issue attention over time by political agenda



A first visual interpretation of Figure 1 reveals differences between agendas as well as between policy issues. Party manifestos for instance show only slight changes in topics over time and no single topic ever reaches more than 15% of manifestos' total content.

For parliamentary questions, one of the main instruments of the parliamentary opposition, a broad shift in attention occurred in recent decades. With the entry of the Green Party into the Bundestag, topics related to the environment and defense played an important role in the questions of the 80s. Questions about civil rights gained in importance with the arrival of the PDS/Left in the Bundestag.

Government statements are subject to changes that are more frequent. Since the end of the 1990s, German Chancellors focus more and more on international relations. However, other issues such as the economy, labor or energy also play an important role from time to time.

Answers to question about the most important issues question display some of the most spectacular changes in issue attention. In general, topics about the economy and labor markets dominate. Repeatedly, other issues disrupt their dominance. These include civil rights in the late 1980s and early 1990s or, in response to the international banking and financial crisis of 2009, international relations.

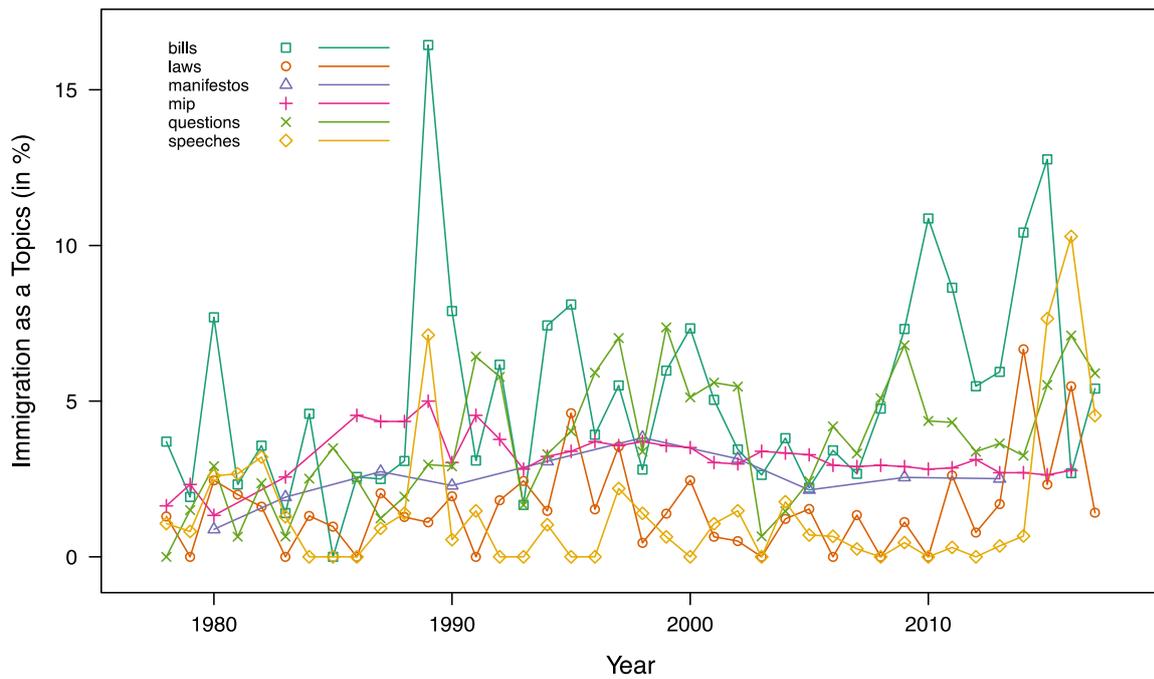
3.2. Zooming in and tracing immigration policy in Germany

Our data offer new opportunities for within-case analysis that enable the gathering and triangulating of empirical evidence for an in-depth case study (Shpaizman 2019). Scholars interested in specific fields of public policy can employ the database as an exhaustive and easily accessible waypoint in order to identify political activities across different policy agendas. The database identifies more than 230 policy issues. This depth enables researchers to locate political activities in a political domain easily and supports the construction of qualitative and quantitative research designs. In the following, we briefly highlight one example of a more in-depth case study: immigration policy.

The issue of immigration nicely illustrates the hierarchical structure and flexibility of our database. Immigration is classified as a subtopic of civil rights and liberties, which is among the most frequently addressed issues according to Figure 1. By retrieving, all entries related that are only related to immigration among all civil rights topics, Figure 2 zooms into this broad category and traces the issue of immigration across different political agendas in Germany since the late 1970s. A first visual interpretation shows that an increase in attention to immigration issues occurs in the late eighties and early nineties across several German agendas. Notable peaks in attention emerge in public opinion, government speeches and bills

in 1989 and parliamentary questions in 1992. These peaks correspond to the expected inflow of migrants from Eastern Europe and Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union. The observed increase in attention clearly precedes the so-called “asylum compromise” of 1993.

Figure 2 Time series for the issue of immigration. The data comprises all series in the subtopic 230 Immigration in the German Policy Agendas data base 1978-2017.



From 2000 onward attention towards immigration decreases across all agendas. Interestingly, the ‘German Citizenship Act’ in 1999 and the ‘Immigration Act’ in 2005 did not find expression in a similar increase in attention in other agendas. While a modest rise of the number of bills and parliamentary questions on the issue in the year before the law of 1999 indicates intensified parliamentary activity, only little concern on the issue prior to the ‘Immigration Act’. The peak of attention in 2010 for bills is mainly due too legislative initiatives on dual citizenship while the increased attention in parliamentary questions the same year is due to two very active MPs of the Left party (Jelpke and Dagdelen).

The attention of speeches and laws on immigration issues reaches its highest level with the so called ‘refugee crises’. The number of laws on immigration issues increases as early as 2014, reacting thereby to the significant increase of the number of refugees in Germany this year. In 2015, 8% of all quasi-sentences in government speeches deal directly with immigration. This rise corresponds to the moment of the famous assertion made by Chancellor Merkel that Germany could manage to absorb large numbers of immigrants in August 2015.

The special role played by the Merkel government in the so-called refugee crises, her famous statement ‘We will manage that’ and her willingness to welcome far more refugees than other European countries have been extensively discussed in the international as in the German political debates (Trauner and Turton 2017). However, the question came up whether Germany's ‘welcome culture’ ended, especially in the light of the events of the New Years’ Eve 2015/16 in Cologne. German immigration policies in the last decades are therefore a textbook example of a policy field that deserves to be examined in depth and across different policy agendas (Ellermann 2021).

The key takeaway from this brief description is that retrieving essential information about political processes on an important political issue across different policy agendas is viable. It allows tracing the developed of an issue within a larger category and identifying key moments in the given policy domain corresponding to peaks in attention in one or several agendas. This capacity of the database can serve as a starting point for closer examination. The level and volatility of attention provides also important insights. In our example, we observe some differences between the individual agendas: The highest level and volatility of attention towards immigration issues can be observed for parliamentary activities (bills and parliamentary questions), while public opinion as expressed by the answers to the *Most Important Problem question*, remains relatively stable over the period under study.

While the joint analysis of several political agendas raises our understanding of the developments in specific policy domains, e.g., immigration, our data also offer the possibility of concentrating on specific events within one policy domain. It is also possible to identify the most active members of parliament on particular issues by studying the authors of parliamentary questions, bills etc. One might even dig deeper and rely on content analysis of the underlying text sources for identifying the main arguments brought forward in a debate or framing of an issue.

These possibilities also direct our attention to some limitations and additional explorations of our database.¹ The core purpose of the database pertains to classifying political activities according to policy domain. Researchers are also interested in the tone, sentiment, or position of a particular actor on a given issue (Proksch et al. 2019). Because the database includes a unique identifier of the underlying text corpora, future analysis easily can incorporate these important features. The immigration case illustrates another limitation. Our database begins in 1978 whereas important policy decisions in the area of migration occurred in the 1960s

¹ We thank an anonymous reviewer for these helpful suggestions.

(e.g. the 1961 *Anwerbeabkommen*). The obvious remedy is to extend the database all the way back to the first legislative session in 1949.

4 Summary and Outlook

Our two illustrations highlight the database's potential to examine agenda-setting, representation, public policy, and related issues. Is policy-making really characterized by deliberation and incremental adjustments in Germany? Do institutional changes occurring in the last 30 years lead to a different style of policy-making? Does Europeanization remove some issues out of national public and parliamentary attention and relegate them to less visible supra-national decision-making? Are policy-makers responding to public concerns and what institutional tools do they use in their response?

A final promise of the data set lies in the coding scheme itself. The German Policy Agendas data show that large amounts of political activities can be classified into policy issues. We concentrated our effort on six important data series. Ongoing research projects currently apply our coding scheme to additional series such as interest groups (Klüver 2020; Pakull et al. 2020), the representation of disadvantaged group (Bailer et al. 2021; Traber et al forthcoming) or the opinion polls commissioned by the Merkel government (Schnatterer 2021). Future work may extend this effort to other agendas, such as media coverage, protests, other parliamentary or government procedures, as well as judicial decisions. These efforts would cast the theoretical and empirical relevance of our data set even wider. Moreover, the coding scheme is compatible with the larger *Comparative Agendas* project, which classifies political activities in 16 additional countries, some subnational units, and the European Union. Combining data from several countries in order to address questions on agenda-setting and representation promises to bring public policy, legislative studies and comparative politics closer together.

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