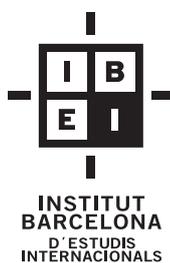


# COMPARING GOVERNMENTAL AGENDAS: Evolution of the Prioritization of Issues in the USA and Spain

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## **COMPARING GOVERNMENTAL AGENDAS: EVOLUTION OF THE PRIORITIZATION OF ISSUES IN THE USA AND SPAIN**

Laura Chaqués, Anna M. Palau, Luz Muñoz and John Wilkerson

**Abstract:** This paper is the first step in a long term project investigating policy stability and change in Spain from an agenda setting perspective and comparing the Spanish policy agenda to that of other advanced democracies. Here we begin to compare the allocation of issue attention in Spain and the USA by comparing the substance of annual President and Prime Minister speeches from 1982 to 2005. Existing research argues that the public agenda has become more crowded, competitive and volatile in recent years. We find that in both countries there has been a transformation of the political agenda towards an increasing diversity of issues. However, most of the volatility in executive attention seems to be explained by salient events rather than by issue crowding. We conclude by discussing some limitations of executive speeches as a measure of governmental issue attention and directions for future research.

**Key words:** Issue Prioritization, Presidential and Prime Minister Speeches, Agenda Setting and Policy Change

This paper takes part of the project named Consenso y polarización. Opinión Pública y decisiones políticas en España (1993-2006). Reference: SEJ2006-13152/CPOL. Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia, Spain.

## 1. Introduction

To what extent do elections, changes of administration and turnover in legislatures alter the issue priorities of elected lawmakers? How responsive are policymakers to the changing issue priorities of the public? To what extent is government issue attention driven by salient external events or crisis? How do institutional reforms, such as European integration, transform government issue attention? This paper represents the first step in a long term project investigating policy stability and change in Spain from an agenda setting perspective. In it, we investigate the issues discussed by Presidents in their government addresses over 23 years, from 1982-2005. Our findings are based on an analysis of approximately 13,000 quasi-sentences from speeches given by three Spanish Presidents<sup>1</sup> and four American Presidents of conservative and liberal persuasions. These sentences have been coded for primary topic, allowing us to ask a number of questions about the general substance of President's speeches, changes in issue attention across time and between regimes, and similarities and differences in attention across two very different political systems.

Our attention to speeches in this paper constitutes a starting point. A speech is a form of political attention that is shaped by considerations that are both similar and different from other forms of political attention (such as legislation). We anticipate that different forms of issue attention serve different purposes and face different constraints – cognitive and institutional. In this sense, we expect a study of speeches to be enlightening but also limited in terms of capturing all of the different means by which governments attend to issues. Appreciating how speeches are similar and how they differ from other forms of attention will be one of our central goals.

Our primary frame of reference is policy agenda setting research, which offers a number of testable hypotheses concerning the dynamics of policy attention as well as the impact of longer term political developments in issue attention. In the next section, we introduce this important literature by briefly discussing several prominent perspectives, and deriving hypotheses that we will test in our own research. We then provide some background on speeches as political activities and offer some basic information about the data collection project itself. In the analysis section we begin to test some of hypotheses drawn from existing agenda setting research while providing general information about issue attention in speeches for the 1982-2005 time period. Finally, we discuss these findings and future directions for our research.

## 2. Agenda Setting Perspectives

Political scientists studying democratic systems are fundamentally interested in representation. They investigate the goals and preferences of political decision-makers, the electoral

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1. In the paper we are refereeing to Presidential speeches in general, without making the formal distinction between whether it is the Prime Minister (for Spain) or the President (for the US) the person giving the speech.

processes by which these decision-makers are selected, the consequences of alternative decision-making structures, all with the ultimate (though often unstated) objective of evaluating the extent to which the actions and decisions of policymakers reflect and serve the preferences and interests of citizens.

Agenda setting is an important and understudied aspect of this representational process. Agenda setting research begins from the assumption that there are limits to what policymakers are able to accomplish. The focus of agenda setting research is on understanding why some public problems or policy solutions receive attention from government at a given point in time, while other problems and solutions that are not obviously less important do not. Overall, a central theme is that governments do not tend to give many issues the attention they seem to deserve. The preferences of decision-makers and the public influence this selective attention process, but agenda setting research highlights additional factors as just as important for appreciating policy stability and change. For example, it draws attention to the political environment as an important constraint on policy priorities, the role that institutions play in advantaging or disadvantaging particular alternatives, and even the cognitive limitations of the decision-makers themselves.

Agenda setting research covers many different subjects. In this paper, we limit our attention to four important agenda setting perspectives that seem particularly applicable to appreciating issue attention in executive speeches.

## 2.1 Agenda Capacity and Volatility

Governments lack the capacity to do everything that is asked of them. There are limits in terms of time and resources, which vary over time and depending on the type of government action involved. One important perspective argues that this governing challenge has intensified due to broader changes at the political, economic and social level experienced in most advanced democracies in recent decades. Traditional economic and redistributive issues (mostly related to the welfare state) are giving way to new issues such as immigration, food safety, global warming, and gender inequality. As a consequence, the historically stable class-based voting electorate is gradually being replaced by a less stable and more volatile issue based electorate, new political parties are emerging, and the media and non-governmental organizations are becoming more influential in terms of setting the agenda. By the same token, new institutional structures have reduced state autonomy in favour of supranational institutions such as the European Union; and in favour of regional and local governments.

In their analysis of the public agenda, McCombs and Shaw (1977, 1995) argue that one effect of these changes has been to produce a more fragmented and volatile public agenda: *“issues contend for a position on a public agenda that is constrained in size, not open-ended. Although it is possible that the public agenda may have expanded somewhat in recent decades to accommodate the press of more issues, it is more likely that the public agenda has accommodated more issues over time by reducing their duration in the agenda”* (1995, 497).

Green Pedersen (2006) studies the government agenda in Denmark – defined for his purposes as the issues that *political parties* attend to — and finds that it has become larger, more complex and more volatile over time. Party competition has undergone a transformation from a few class-related issues, to a broader set of changing issues that are salient to the public more generally<sup>2</sup>. Ramiro and Morales (2004:218) reach a similar conclusion in their study of Spanish political parties. In response to transformations in citizen preferences, electoral competition and the changing social and economic context, Spanish political parties are becoming more responsive to citizen’s preferences and electoral competition than in the past.

## 2.2 Policy Windows

If the issue carrying capacity of the government is limited, then what determines whether an issue makes it onto the agenda? Agenda setting research emphasizes the complexity and uncertainty of the agenda setting process. Particular variables, such as the preferences of government officials are often neither necessary nor sufficient to generate policy change. Kingdon (1995, 2002) introduces the concept of the policy window to illustrate why policy change can be so unpredictable. A policy window is a metaphor. Kingdon uses it to refer generally to situations where an opportunity for policy changes suddenly exists where one did not appear to exist just a short time before. Policy windows can open for a variety of reasons. A change in partisan control, a focusing event, or even the efforts of one dedicated political entrepreneur can make change possible. Other problems come to occupy the attention of governmental officials when new information (such as second hand smoke, or death penalty exoneration through DNA tests) change how issues are understood.

But policy window can also close just as quickly and unexpectedly. Birkland (1997), for example, shows how the Exxon Valdez oil spill abruptly halted a movement to expand oil drilling in Alaska and led to a flurry of environmental legislation where little action was expected just months before. Changes in the political sphere can also lead to shifts in problem attention. Swings in the national mood, elections bringing new administrations to power, new partisan or ideological distributions to Parliament can be powerful agenda setters. They create new opportunities to push some problems and solutions to the fore and (equally important) to suppress others. This is not only because the new party in power controls more votes; it is also because the party has some flexibility to define why it was that the public elected them to office.<sup>3</sup>

One of the most relevant implications of Kingdon’s model is that the same actor pursuing the same strategy at two different times, will not necessarily achieve the same results. Good ideas do not succeed on their merits alone. Policy entrepreneurs are to some extent hostages of the political environment. They must “keep their proposal ready, waiting for one of two things: a problem that might float by to which they

2. About party competition and transformations in issue attention see also Gunther, Montero and Linz (2002).

3. Kingdon stresses the difference between governmental agenda and decision agenda or list of subjects that is moving into position for an authoritative decision such as legislative enactment or presidential choice. Changes in the decision agenda are a result of a complex interaction of unrelated streams –problem, policy and political stream- coming together quite unpredictably (Kingdon 1995).

can attach their solution; or a development in the political stream, such as a change of administration, that provides a receptive climate for their proposal” (Kingdon 1995:195).

## 2.3 Policy Punctuations

Baumgartner and Jones (1993, 2005) emphasize a similar theme in their research applying *punctuated equilibrium* theory to policymaking. The empirical pattern motivation this research is the fact that policies that appear to be stable over long periods of time often change rapidly and unpredictably. This pattern appears to contradict path dependency perspectives, which predict little policy change, and full rationality perspectives, which predict that policies (like stock markets) will rapidly adapt to changing policy needs. In their research, Baumgartner and Jones document patterns of policy change that exhibit longer than expected periods of policy stability, punctuated by rapid and dramatic policy adjustments.

The explanation offered to explain these patterns is that policy is normally governed by political subsystems composed of affected actors inside and outside of government<sup>4</sup>. These actors tend to benefit from current policy and will resist change perhaps because they fail to recognize the need for change (cognitive friction) or because they are able to use their positions in the process to prevent it (institutional friction). Overcoming these sources of resistance normally requires an extraordinary change in the political environment, such as a highly salient “shock” that draws the attention of actors outside of the subsystem to the poor fit of current policy to current needs.

## 2.4 Issue Salience and Policy Representation

Very recent agenda setting research is attempting to compare the changing issue preferences of the public to those of policymakers. This research is interested in both correspondence between public and policymaker issue positions (Penner, Blidook & Soroka 2006), and public and policymaker issue priorities (Jones, Larsen-Price and Wilkerson 2008; Walgrave et al. 2006). In general, this research finds that public-policymaker correspondence varies depending on the issue and the context. The issues that are more salient or important to the public also tend to be the ones that receive more attention from policymakers. But this responsiveness also appears to depend on the decision-making context. In particular, some venues tend to be more visible to the public, and public-policymaker issue correspondence tends to be higher in these venues. In addition, decision-making venues also vary by *friction*. Policy actions tend to be less representative of public priorities in decision-making venues where more actors are involved in the decision-making process (e.g. friction is higher).

4. This idea of closed policy subsystems shares much of the ideas implicit in the policy networks literature.

### 3. Studying Agenda Stability and Change

In the above discussion, we have ignored the question of how we measure what the government is doing. This is an important subject by itself, because “the issue agenda” can be measured in different ways, and how it is measured can affect one’s conclusions. For example, we might generally differentiate between two forms of political activity. There are actions that influence which issues will be formally considered by the government (call these “agenda setting” actions), and there are the formal decisions themselves (call these “decision-making” actions). Both are important. Issues that do not make it past the first stage are as dead as those that fail during the second stage. Thus it would be dangerous to draw general conclusions about agenda setting based only on what happens during one of these stages (or even just one type of “agenda setting” activity).

For example, prior agenda setting research highlights capacity limits as an important constraint on what governments are able to do attention (McCombs and Shaw 1977). But it seems plausible that this conclusion depends on which type of policymaking activity is being studied. For example, if we study bill introductions, we might find that the agenda can accommodate more issues than if we study laws. If so, conclusions based on an investigation of one type of activity may or may not apply to others. The only way to answer this question, and to fully appreciate agenda setting processes, is to study the range of policymaking activities. Such a study has to start somewhere, and in this paper we start with the official speeches of national leaders.

#### 3.1. Presidential Addresses in Spain and the U.S.

We eventually intend to compare the political agenda of Spain over the past 25 years with the political agendas of other advanced democracies.<sup>5</sup> Our starting point is to compare presidential addresses in Spain and the USA. This comparison seems especially interesting because most observers would expect little in the way of similarities. Spain is different from the U.S. in almost everything. It is a southern-European country with a short democratic tradition that has transformed its political institutions radically in the last three decades. In contrast, the U.S. is nearly 5 times as large in population and geographic size, with a political structure that has changed little over the past two centuries.

The consolidation of democratic institutions, the construction of a quasi-federal state; the entry in the European Economic Community and the development of the welfare state has transformed the Spanish political system, reducing its differences with other European democracies. In contrast, the U.S. has seen little convergence in this respect. Institutionally, political parties are the central agen-

5. Currently the USA, Denmark, France, UK, Germany, Italy, Belgium, and Switzerland

da setters in Spain, and the executive branch of government dominates the legislative branch. The U.S. system is widely regarded to be more open to influence by groups other than parties, while the executive's role in the lawmaking process is intentionally limited by the Constitution.

On the other hand, both nations are advanced democracies in the western world, and the responsibilities of their executives are somewhat similar (as we will discuss). So although there are many reasons to expect differences in executive attention in the USA and Spain, there are also reasons to expect similarities.

### 3.2 Why Speeches?

From an agenda setting perspective, official executive speeches possess some interesting attributes. In both countries, they are one of the most visible political moments of the year. When a President gives a government speech, he is speaking for the nation and the government - to the nation and to the government - in a highly visible setting. What he says is reported by the media and watched and debated by the public and their representatives. In these respects it is an important agenda setting event. It is the President's opportunity to define or "frame" what the government has done and what he hopes it will do, in ways that advance his personal goals. As an elected official, it is also an opportunity to demonstrate concern for the issues that concern the public. These goals may be policy centered, electorally centered, legacy centered, or all of the above.

We anticipate that speeches will display patterns similar to those predicted for other agenda setting and decision-making venues because what executives talk about should be related to what they do. For example, existing research leads us to expect that increasingly diversity of policy demands will lead more recent Presidents to talk about a greater number of issues (and devote less attention to each of them) than was true for earlier Presidents. In addition, we expect that this increasing diversity of demands will lead to greater volatility in terms of what Presidents talk about from one year to the next.

But we also expect differences when compared to other venues. The costs of shifting speech attention to a new issue or devoting more or less attention to a given issue from one speech to the next should be relatively low compared to other types of activity. Speeches are exceptionally salient events, and this should make Presidents more responsive to public priorities. In addition, if the President wants to shift attention to a new issue, he does not need the consent of as many other actors as is required (for example) to pass a law.

## 4. Data and Methodology

As mentioned the primary focus of attention in this analysis are the public speeches given by Presidents in Spain and the USA. In the case of Spain, our database includes two types of speeches:

*Debates de Investidura*: These are the speeches of candidates for the Presidency of the Spanish government. Their formal purpose is to seek the confidence of the Parliament. As defined in article 99 of the Spanish Constitution, the proposed candidate (designated by the King after consultation with the representatives designated by each parliamentary group with representation in the Spanish Congress) submits to the House of Representatives the political program of the Government he intends to form, with no time restrictions. We have coded the speech of the candidate, but not the general debate that follows this speech (in which each parliamentary group intervenes for thirty minutes). In the case of Spain, as most Parliamentary systems, the first speech (the *discurso de investidura*) is also aimed to seek the confidence of the Parliament.

*Debate sobre Política General en torno al Estado de la Nación*. This is an annual speech given by the Prime Minister for the purpose of informing the Parliament about his future policy priorities, as well as current policies and programs. This speech also has no time restrictions and is followed by a general discussion with all parliamentary groups (again, not coded). The Prime Minister has the ability to decide when this speech and the succeeding debate takes place (rules of the Congress, articles 196-197).

We have coded 26 speeches, one per year from the end of transition to democracy to present (1982-2007). During this period there are 7 *debates de investidura* –four of them corresponding to Felipe González candidate of the Socialist Party, two of them to José María Aznar, candidate of the Popular Party, and the last one to José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, candidate of the Socialist Party— and 19 *debates sobre política general en torno al Estado de la Nación* – 10 speeches of Felipe González; 6 of José María Aznar, and 3 speeches of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero.

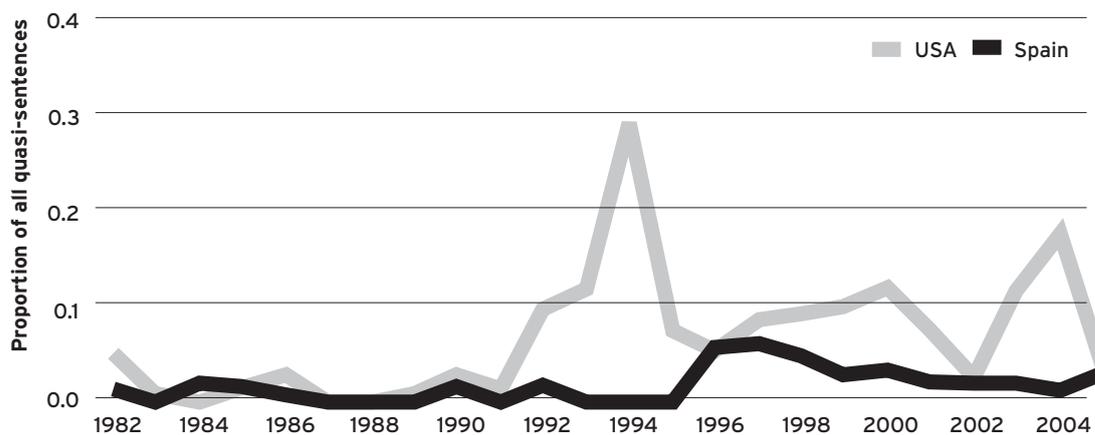
In the case of the USA, the U.S. Constitution requires the President “*from time to time give to the Congress information of the state of the union, and recommend to their consideration such measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient*” (Article II). Since 1790, Presidents have reported to Congress annually (with a few exceptions), and since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century most of these speeches have been given in person before both chambers of Congress. As is true in Spain, there are no time limits on these speeches. All of the major media cover them, and they are widely considered to be the President’s best opportunity to influence future legislative action, but nothing prevents a President from also highlighting past accomplishments, or even drawing attention to issues that have little hope of seeing action in the Congress (often the President’s party does not control the legislature). These speeches have been coded back to 1947, but we limit our attention to those from 1982-2005 (years beyond 2005 have not yet been coded). During this pe-

riod, 7 speeches were given by Ronald Reagan (1982-1988); 4 by George H. Bush (1989-1992), 8 by Bill Clinton (1993-2000), and 5 by George W. Bush. (2001-2005).

Each speech has been coded at the quasi-sentence level according to the universal coding system of the Policy Agendas Project developed and supervised by Baumgartner, Jones and Wilkerson in the United States (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, Jones and Baumgartner 2005). This system includes 19 major topic categories (education, social welfare, defence), each of which is further divided so that there are an additional 225 subtopics (Table 1).<sup>6</sup> In general, the same system developed and applied elsewhere works very well for Spain, although we have introduced some revisions at the subtopic level to reflect aspects of Spanish policy that have no equivalent in the United States. Examples include the national health system (which the USA does not have) and the establishment of the Autonomic State (*Comunidades Autónomas*). The analysis that follows is based on approximately 7,200 quasi sentences from the Spanish speeches, and 6,000 from the U.S. speeches.

As an example, Figure 1 displays the proportions of all quasi-sentences in each year devoted to the subject of health in the two countries. We see although health has received relatively more attention in recent years in both political systems, it is clearly given much more attention by U.S. Presidents than by Presidents in Spain. The most likely explanation for these differences is that although health care is becoming an increasingly important concern of governments in both systems, it is a greater concern (problem) of the public and therefore policymakers in the USA (Green-Pederson and Wilkerson 2006). In 1994, Bill Clinton introduced his health care reform bill, after being elected in large part because of public concern about the rising costs of health care.

**Figure 1. Presidential Attention to Health, 1982-2005**



6. See [www.policyagendas.org](http://www.policyagendas.org) A special issue in the *Journal of European Public Policy* (August, 2006) was also devoted to the Comparative Agendas Project. The Spanish project web page is located at <http://www.ub.edu/dconst/depart.htm>.

## 5. An Introductory Analysis of Executive Speeches

As discussed, existing agenda setting research suggests that societal developments have led to increasing issue demands, and these in turn have led to governmental agendas that are more fragmented and volatile (McCombs and Shaw 1977; Green-Pederson 2006). Do we find support for these expectations in executive speeches? We begin by testing 3 established hypotheses about the changing content of issue agendas over time.

Hypothesis 1: The span of issues addressed has increased over time

Hypothesis 2: The issue agenda has become more fragmented over time (h)

Hypothesis 3: The issue agenda has become more volatile over time.

Existing research also highlights the importance of particular events, such as changes in governmental control, focusing events, and even institutional reforms as central to understanding shifts in government attention.

Hypothesis 4: Changes in government control lead to major changes in the executive agenda

Hypothesis 5: Salient events lead to major changes in the executive agenda

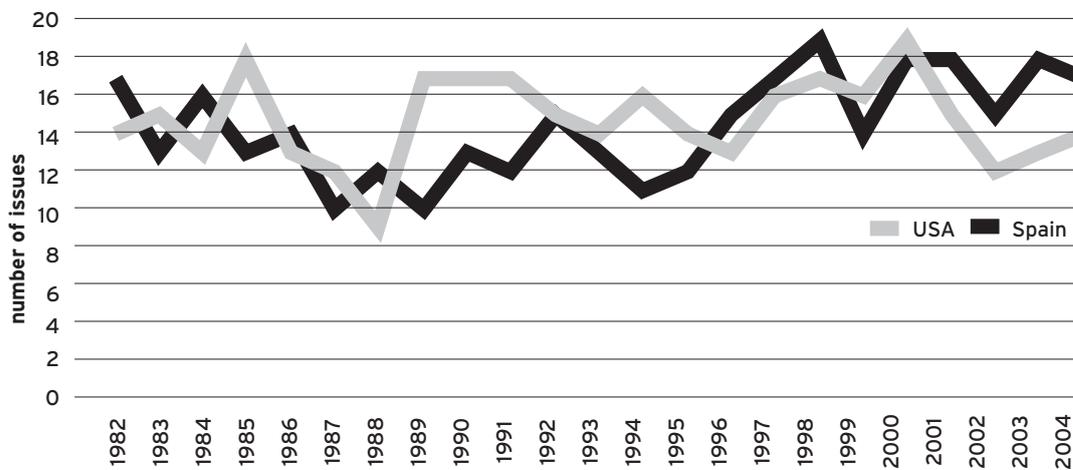
### 5.1 Measuring issue attention and changes in attention

To test these hypotheses, we construct four indicators that measure the *span* of the issues discussed, the *fragmentation* of the issue agenda, the *volatility* of issue attention from one year to the next, and the *intensity* of issue attention.

**Span of the agenda:** The number of issues discussed by the executive during a speech (maximum of 19). This indicator provides information about how many issues are being discussed, and whether agenda setting decisions should be conceptualized as zero-sum tradeoffs, where attention to one issue comes at the expense of attention to others, as McCombs and Shaw (1977) suggest.

Figure 2 displays the issue-carrying capacity of the agenda from 1982 to 2005 in the USA and Spain. In both cases, the mean number of issues discussed in any speech is 14 (out of 19). In the case of Spain the number of issues receiving attention increases over time, whereas there is no upward trend in the US. Important variations do occur in both countries from one period to the next.

**Figure 2. Issue carrying capacity of the agenda USA and Spain**



In Spain, the number of issues on the agenda varies from 19 (out of 19) –2003 and 2005— to 10 (out of 19) –in 1989 and 1994 under government of Felipe Gonzalez<sup>7</sup>. The average span of issues increases slightly in 1996 with the election of the conservative party (Popular Party) and remains high during the Rodriguez Zapatero government (2004-2008). It is also interesting to note that this increase occurs at a time when the overall length of speeches is declining.

In the US, the span of issues addressed ranges from only from 9 issues in 1988 to 19 issues in 2000, but there is no linear trend in the data. From 1982-1988 (Reagan) and 2000-2006 (George W. Bush) an average of 13 issues are addressed, while between 1988 and 2000 the number of issues on the agenda is around 15. A look at the earlier period for the U.S. (1947-1982) indicated a similar cyclical pattern for speeches.<sup>8</sup>

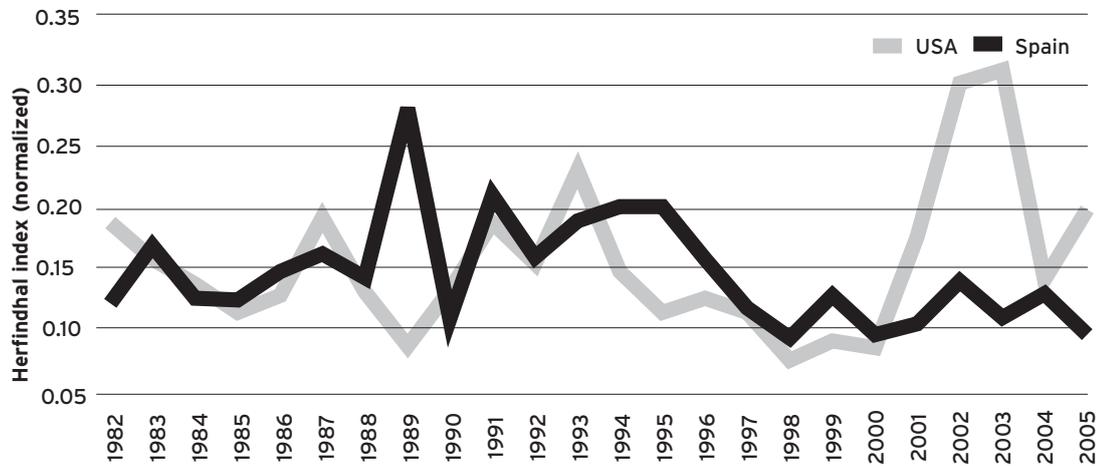
**Issue competition.** Although the number of issues being addressed does not markedly increase over time in either country, it may still be the case that attention is more evenly distributed today than it was in the past. To test this hypothesis, we compute Herfindahl scores for each President’s issue attention in each year. The Herfindahl is used in economics to measure market competition. It is defined as the sum of the squared percent of attention devoted to each issue. We use the normalized version of the Herfindahl index that ranges from theoretically perfect competition (0) to monopoly (1). An H score below 0.1 is generally taken to indicate a lack of concentration, between 0.1 to 0.18 moderate concentration; and above 0.18 high concentration of the agenda.

Figure 3 displays the results. Overall, the levels of issue concentration in both countries are similar (0.16 on average in Spain and 0.17 in the USA). However, each coun-

7. In order to measure fragmentation we have considered the 19 codes defined in table 1. This means that the maximum fragmentation is 19.  
 8. We have checked whether this pattern was also present for the rest of period (we have data available) for the USA in order to test whether some of this changes simply occurred before the eighties in the USA.

try also exhibits variations that seem to offer evidence that additional factors need to be considered. In Spain, the first socialist period under absolute majority (from 1982 to 1988) was characterized by low concentration (H index is 0.106); the second socialist period between 1989 to 1996 characterized by the reduction of the majority control of the Parliament by the PSOE in which the H index is 0.164 showing a moderately high concentration of the agenda in a few issues and a third period from 1996 to 2008 characterized by a quite low concentration of the agenda (H index is 0.08 for José Maria Aznar and 0.075 for José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero). This evolution is clearly expressed in figure 3 and 4. The degree of concentration of the agenda is quite similar between the first eighties and the first years of the new millennium; and (again) there is a slight tendency towards less concentration of the agenda across the period.

**Figure 3. Concentration of the agenda in USA and Spain (Herfindahl index)**



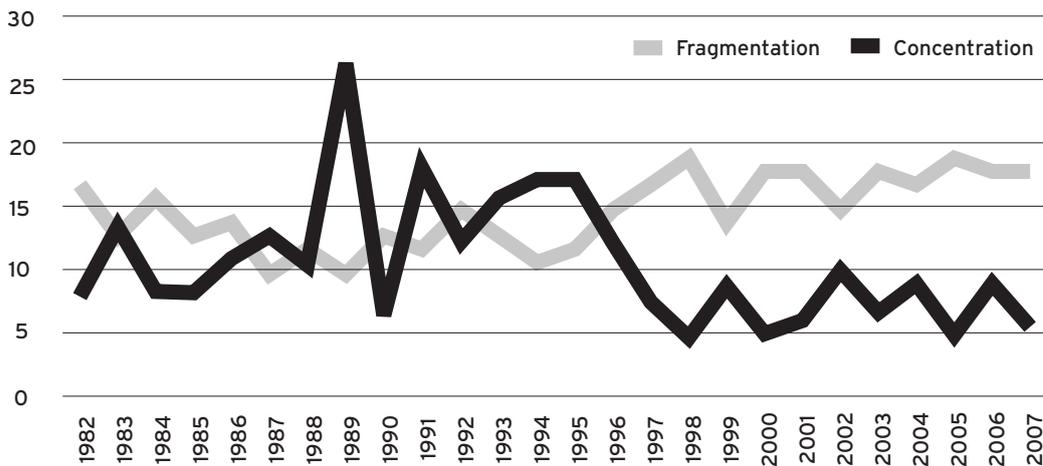
\* H index below 0.1 indicates an unconcentrated index; H index between 0.1 to 0.18 indicates moderate concentration; H index above 0.18 indicates high concentration.

In the case of the USA, from 1982 to 2000 there is a moderate concentration of the agenda with a slight tendency toward less concentration under Democratic Clinton Presidency, despite the fact that Clinton devoted a very large proportion of his 1994 speech (45%) to health care. But the most remarkable feature of the data is the high concentration of the agenda during George W. Bush’s first term beginning in 2001. His first speech was focused disproportionately on economic issues – a pattern we see across Republican Presidents. In 2002, however, the focus of his attention shifts dramatically to international affairs and defence. These two topics consume more than half of his speeches in 2002 and 2003 and are obviously related to the New York terrorist attacks and the wars that resulted.

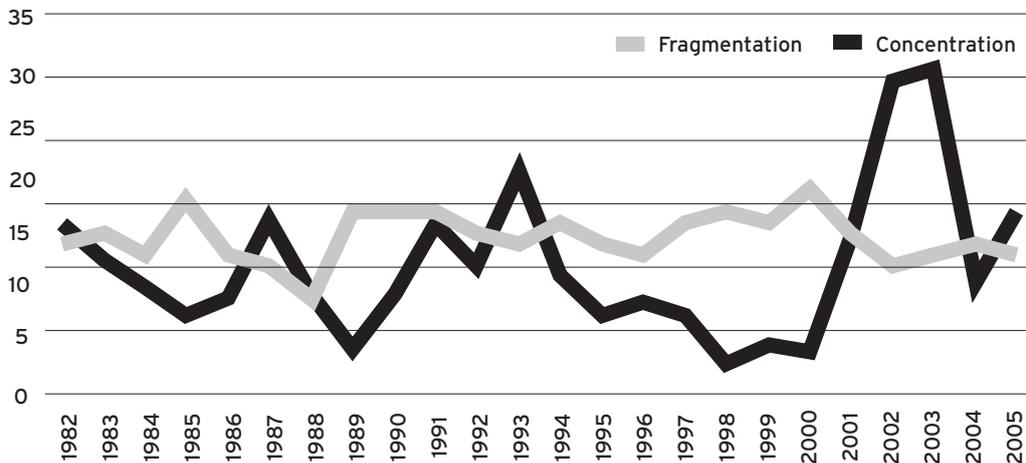
When more issues are on the agenda, there also tends to be more issue competition (Pearson’s  $R = .70$ ). But the relationship is not a simple one. For example, in 1988 in the USA, Reagan’s speech agenda spanned 9 issues with a Herfindahl score of .09. In

1990, Bush's speech agenda spanned 17 issues but was no less concentrated. This tells us that although Bush mentioned many more issues than Reagan, he devoted most of his attention to a more limited set of issues (like Reagan). By the same token, US Presidents talked about 13 issues in 1996 and 2003, but the amount of attention was much more evenly distributed across the 13 issues in 1996 ( $H = 0,08$ ) than was the case in 2003 ( $H = 0.29$ ). In Spain, 10 issues were discussed in 1987 and 1989, but the agenda was twice as concentrated in 1989 (0.13 versus 0.26).

**Figure 4. Issue carrying capacity and concentration in Spain**



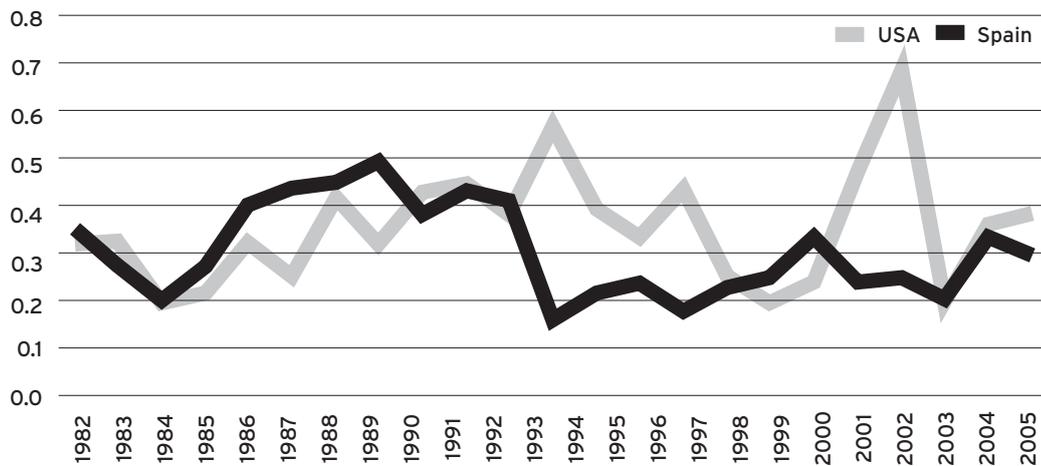
**Figure 5. Issue carrying capacity and concentration in the USA**



**Agenda volatility.** Another perspective is to ask to what extent issue attention varies from one year to the next. As discussed, McCombs and Shaw predict that issue agendas have become more volatile in recent years due to increased issue competition. But volatility may also be caused by other factors such as shifts in political control or salient events. We measure volatility as the average change in attention to each issue from one year to the next following Jones and Baumgartner (2005) analysis.

In figure 6, the average agenda volatility in both countries is quite similar (3.6% in the case of the US and 3% for Spain). We also measured (not shown) whether first speeches tend to be more different from other speeches (due to a change in government). In the case of Spain, the average volatility rate for first speeches is 3.5, compared to 2.8 for the previous speech (the last speech of the previous government). In the US, first speeches have an average volatility of 3.85, compared to 3.29 for last speeches. However these differences are not statistically significant. Thus we must conclude that the most important shifts in issue attention are not explained by changes in government.

**Figure 6. Volatility in USA and Spain (variation in percentatge)**



In Spain, the highest period of volatility is from 1989 to 1994 under Felipe Gonzalez, in conjunction with two important political events in Spanish political history. The first is European Integration and the second is a series of political corruption scandals (*GAL, Banco de España, and Caso Roldan*). From 1995 onwards, volatility declines although as was true for issue competition, there does not appear to be a clear pattern of increasing volatility across time.

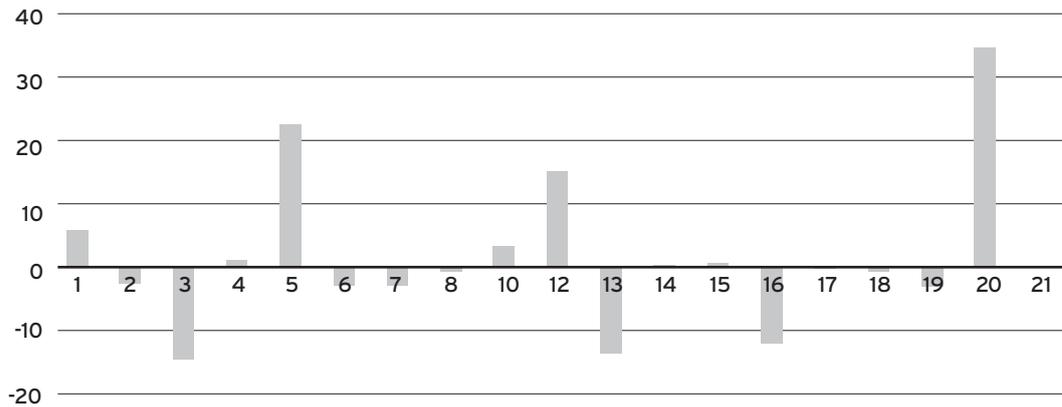
In the USA, volatility dramatically increases in recent years, but once again the explanation appears to be particular events (the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2003) as opposed to the evolutionary argument proposed by McCombs and Shaw. The exceptionally low volatility for 2003 is also related to G.W. Bush’s sustained emphasis on this issue during the speeches of his first term.

**Issue intensity.** Finally we investigate similarities and differences in the substance of the issues being emphasized across nations, presidents and time. Existing research compares the roles of the executive, how decisions are made, and executive authority in Spain and the U.S., there has been little if any attention to issue attention. For example, because foreign policy is an important executive function in both countries, we would expect this issue to receive emphasis in executive speeches. But what other issues do executives emphasize and why?

Figure 7 conducts such a comparison by subtracting the percent of attention U.S. Presidents devote to each of the 19 issues from the percent of attention Spanish executives devote to these issues (averaged across all years). Arguably, the most interesting finding of figure 7 is the high level of agreement. On most of the 19 issues, the differences in attention across these two “very different systems” are small to non-existent.

If we focus on the differences, US Presidents have historically devoted more attention to health, social welfare and defence, while Spanish Presidents have historically devoted greater attention to labour, law and order and government issues. In 1989, labour absorbs more than 50% of the speech as a consequence of the general strike of 1989. A different set of labour issues monopolize the agenda in 2003 (immigration, gender inequalities and family-labour issues). Similarly, the high levels of attention to government issues in Spain are largely explained by the political scandals of the mid-1990s.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 7. Mean Differences**

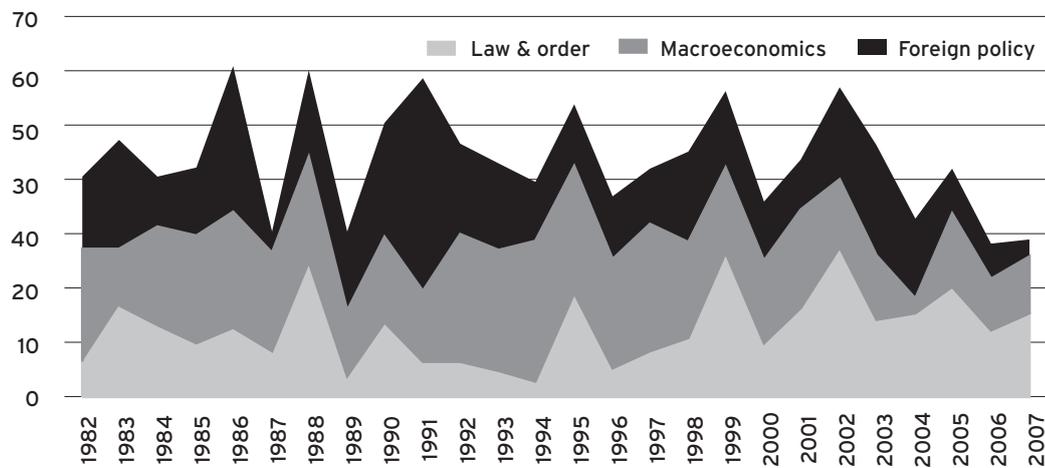


Which issues are receiving the most Presidential speech attention in the two nations? Figures 8 and 9 indicate that *economic policy, foreign affairs and law and order* are the most prominent issues in both countries. In the case of Spain these three issues alone consume more than 40% of all presidential speech attention - although there are important variations that seem to be explained in part by changing socio-economic conditions.<sup>10</sup> The exception with respect to economics is the first speech (2004) of Rodriguez Zapatero, who devotes a mere 2,7% of his inaugural speech to economic issues. In the USA, economic and foreign policy consistently receive the most attention, although they were less important under Democratic President Clinton (1993-2000).

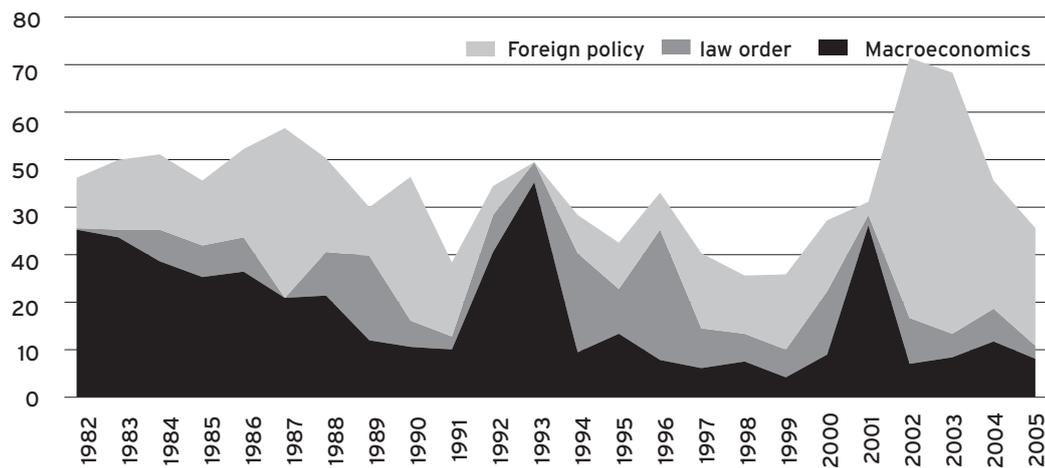
9. We mean by governmental issues: Relaciones intergubernamentales y entidades locales; Eficacia de la administración pública; Función pública; Designación de cargos; Premios y reconocimientos; Contratos públicos, subcontratación de servicios y mal uso de recursos públicos; Privatización del sector Público y propiedades del Estado; Relaciones entre Gobierno y Parlamento; Regulación de actividades políticas, elecciones y campañas electorales; Reforma constitucional; El Parlamento como institución; Cuestiones genéricas sobre la transición y la consolidación democrática; Cuestiones relativas a la distribución y conflicto de competencias en temas de administración pública.

10. One of the goals of our research project is to connect each of the majors with objective indicators. For example, a general overview of the evolution of labour indicates a direct connection with general strikes and unemployment. We had no time to include this result in this paper.

**Figure 8. Issue intensity in Spain**



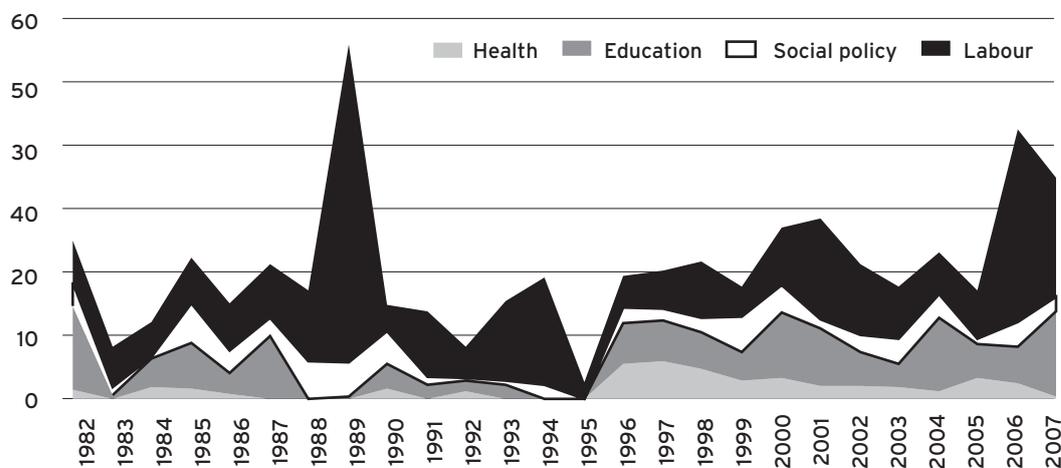
**Figure 9. Issue intensity in USA**



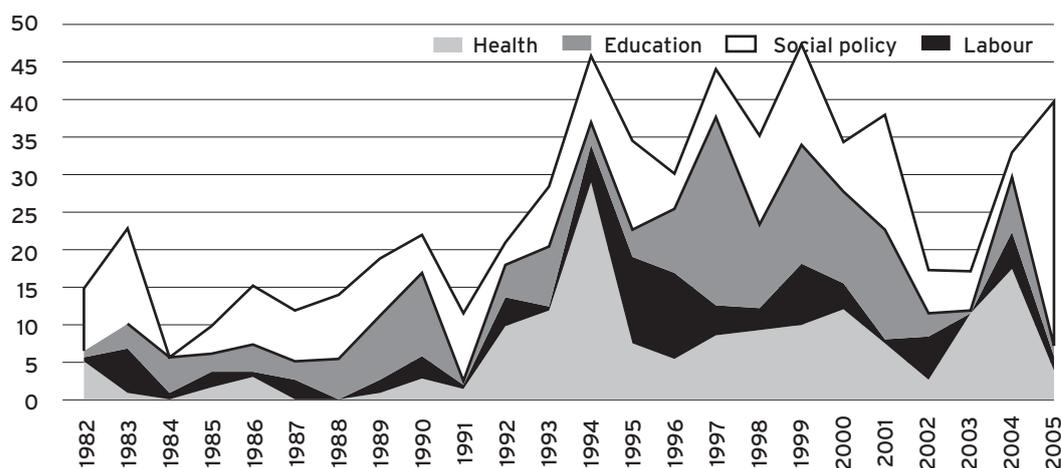
*New Issues.* There is evidence of a rise in new issue attention in both countries (Inglehart 1990, 2003). The evolution of these issues is illustrated in figures 10-13. In the case of Spain issues like rights, environment and housing receive almost no attention until the late 1990s, when the *Partido Popular* wins the elections and gains more influence under the socialist government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. The increasing importance of these issues illustrates the increasing complexity of the Spanish political agenda in the new millennium. However, in percentage terms (as figures 12 and 13 illustrate), “new issues” receive much more attention in the U.S. and been subjects of Presidential attention for much longer.<sup>11</sup>

11. Our next goal is to define objective indicators about socio-economic conditions like general strikes, unemployment rates, ETA terrorist attacks, etc. and relate them to issue attention across time. For example, in the case of Law and order, the explanation is clearly related to ETA and the relevance of terrorism as a key issue in the Spanish agenda. The prominence of this issue has increased in the last decade especially from 1998—in 1999 and 2002 more than 26% of the speech is devoted to law and order issues—. By the contrary, in the case of the USA, law and order is a much less relevant issue, with some exceptions during the nineties.

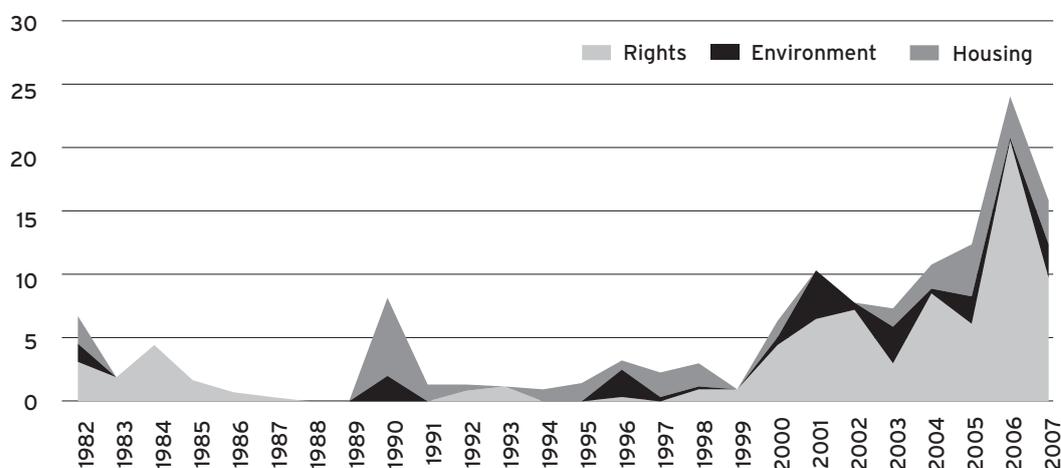
**Figure 10. Issue intensity in Spain: social issues**



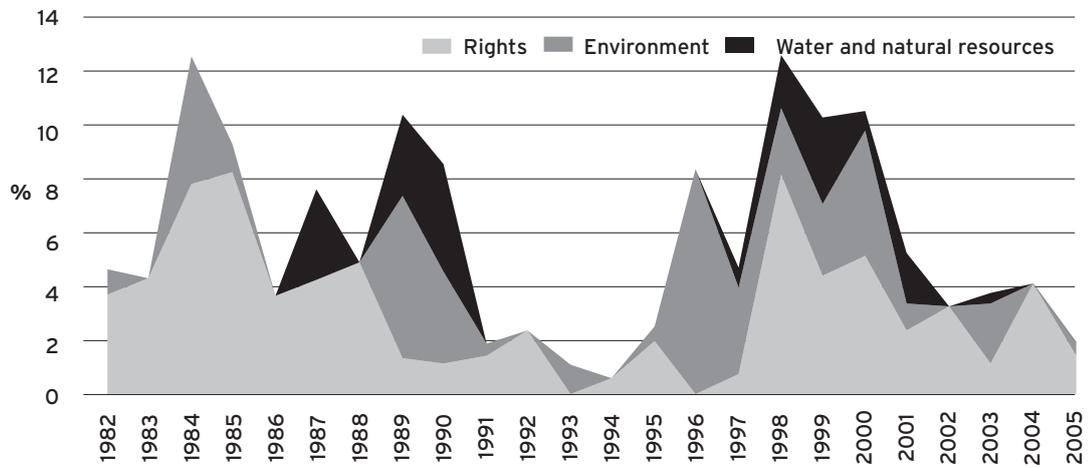
**Figure 11. Issue intensity in the USA: social issues**



**Figure 12. New issues in Spain**

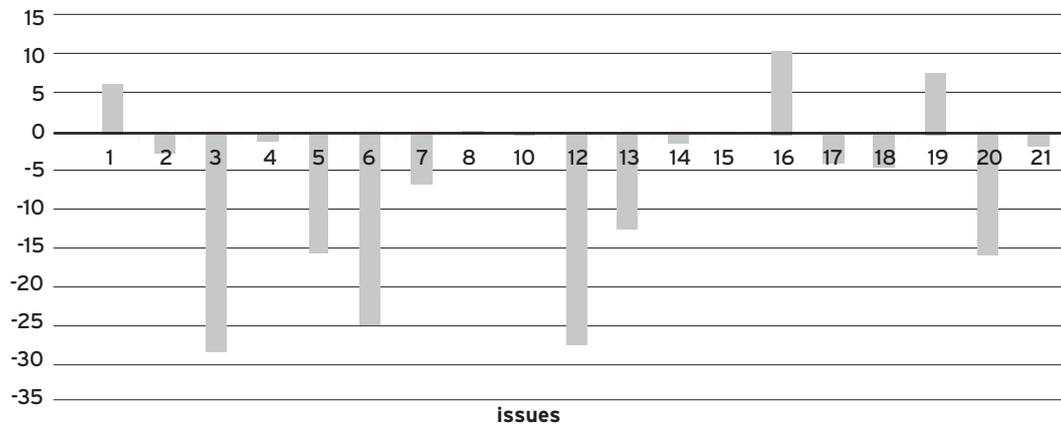


**Figure 13. New Issues USA**

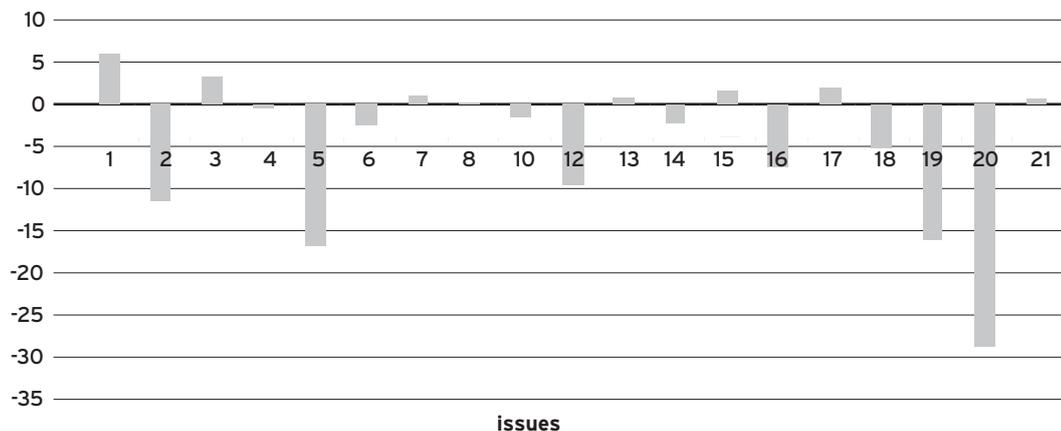


*Partisan differences.* Figures 14 and 15 compared in issue attention across political regimes - between Republican and Democrat Presidents in the US, and the PP and PSOE parties in Spain. In the U.S. Republican presidents tend to emphasize three core issues – economics, defence and foreign affairs. In contrast, the only Democratic President in the series (Clinton) devotes more attention to a range of social policy issues.

**Figure 14: Issue Prioritization: Republicans-Democrats (mean differences)**

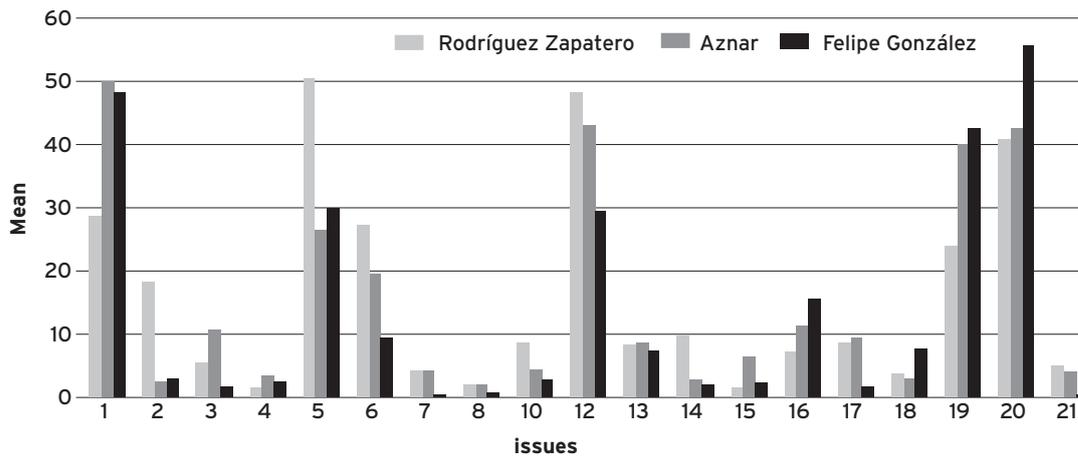


**Figure 15: Issue Prioritization: Partido Popular-PSOE (mean differences)**



In the case of Spain, it is interesting that there are almost no differences across regimes for issues like education, the environment, social welfare and industrial policy. Finally, as discussed earlier, Rodríguez Zapatero devotes much more attention to rights (immigration, homosexuals, and gender), family-labour market issues, and housing issues (figure 16). Other new issues such as environmental protection and natural resources were already present in Aznar speeches, but virtually non-existent under Felipe Gonzalez.

**Figure 16: Issue Prioritization: by Prime Ministers in Spain**



Finally, table 3 gives further evidence about the evolution of issues for the last 26 years in both countries. The analysis of trend correlations informs about the evolution of issues in the agendas and gives further information about the similarities and differences in the USA and the Spanish agenda. Issues like Transportation, Environment, Water, Housing and research and development are increasingly important in the Spanish agenda (trend correlations are high, positive and significant), while in the USA the issues that are gaining more attention are health and foreign policy. Table 3 also informs about the issues that have lost some attention in the last decade. In both countries economics issues are losing some relevance; in the case of Spain defence and commerce issues have also lost some relevance during the last decades.

## 6. Discussion

We have introduced the Spanish Agendas Project with this initial investigation of the issue content of executive speeches. We have discovered remarkable similarities in terms of issue attention, as well as noteworthy differences that appear to be explained by systemic differences as well as events unique to each system. Existing agenda setting research argues that policy agendas have become increasingly complex and volatile over time. We find limited support for these hypotheses where executive speeches in Spain and the USA are concerned. The span of issues addressed in speeches in

Spain has increased over time, with the introduction of new issues such as immigration, gender equality, and the environment. But this tendency towards increasing agenda fragmentation is quite modest. Much greater variations in agenda concentration coincide with specific events, such as the labour strikes of the 1980s and the government corruption scandals of the 1990s. The patterns for the USA also point to events as the best explanations for variations in agenda concentration – in particular the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>.

The evidence presented here seems to indicate that speeches do not generally reflect the changing distribution of government activity, as others have observed when studying other forms of policymaking activity such as bills or laws (although this remains to be tested for the case of Spain). Instead, the content of speeches tends to be more selective, emphasizing issues such as economics and foreign policy that most observers would interpret as executive responsibilities, as well as other salient issues that any elected politician would feel compelled to address.

This impact of visible “focusing events” suggests that executive speeches may also reflect less easily observed changes in the public’s issue priorities.<sup>12</sup> To begin to investigate this question, we use public opinion data collected by the *Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas* that reports citizens’ views on the *most important problem* facing the nation from 1993-2007.<sup>13</sup> Before 1993, the wording and format of these surveys changed dramatically making them unsuitable for our purposes. By coding these survey responses according to the 19 topics of our analysis discussed earlier, we have the opportunity to systematically compare changing public issue concerns with changing executive attention.

Across all topics in Spain, the correlation between public priorities (as indicated by the percentage of the respondents indicating that the issue is *the most important problem*) is significant and quite strong (.465).<sup>14</sup> Some of the underlying relationships that produce this correlation are displayed in **figures 17 to 27**. For example, there is a remarkable correspondence in economics across the entire time period (**figure 22**). This does not seem coincidental given that the public consistently ranks economics among its top concerns. In contrast, speech attention to government operations (**figure 19**) is also related to public concern, but less so. Here we see that the executive devotes more attention to this issue in 1994-95 when the public is also concerned about corruption. But executive attention also increases for the rest of the period, when the public is much less concerned government operations. This is particularly interesting if we consider that increasing attention during the late nineties to these issue are related to public administration reform.

That shifting public priorities are related to shifts in governmental attention should

12. Existing public opinion research as it relates to policy representation tends to focus on whether the public’s positions on issues are similar to those of policymakers. Here we are asking whether the issues that policymakers focus on are the ones that citizens are most concerned about.

13. In relation to that for the case of Spain, Ramiro and Morales (2004: 200) have analysed the evolution of spanish public opinion with regard to several issues and how the three nation-wide Spanish parties have dealt with them in their electoral programmes

14. This correlation is similar to the .61 overall correlation in the USA reported by Jones, Larsen-Price and Wilkerson (2007) for the 1956-2002 time period.

not be a surprise. This is what Kingdon (1995) was highlighting when he emphasized the importance of the “public mood” as one of the variables contributing to policy windows (Erikson et al. 2002). Our results clearly indicate that public concern matters, but they also demonstrate that public concern is just one of the variables driving changes in speech attention. What is emphasized in speeches also appears to reflect the responsibilities of all executives (such as foreign affairs); the political priorities of the government in power; and salient focusing events that would probably lead to executive attention even if there was no simultaneous increase in public concern (Bartels 1991).

**Future Research.** Moving into the future, we would like to better understand how the different variables affecting speech attention interact. Do executives tend to be more responsive to public concerns during election years? Are variations in speech attention related to underlying objective conditions? Are executives less likely to talk about a salient issue when there is no clear solution? To answer these questions and give a better understanding of the complex interaction between governmental activities and citizen’s preferences it is necessary to go beyond the analysis of public opinion alone. In this sense, future research should focus on the analysis of what Kingdon (1995) called the “national mood” understood as a complex interaction among public opinion, elite ideas, and the focus of the media.

In addition, executive speeches are just one indicator of government issue-attention and (based on what we have learned so far), probably not representative of issue attention in other policymaking venues. Thus, an important next step will be to begin to relate speeches to other forms of policy activity, such as bills and laws. Which of the issues highlighted as most important issues in Presidential speeches are moving into a position of authoritative decision; to what extent correspondence between Governmental activities and the public agenda decline as institutional friction increases (Jones, Larsen-Price and Wilkerson 2007).

Summing up, this paper is a starting point to develop a *systematic comparative analysis about agenda dynamics across advanced democracies*. The Spanish agendas project seeks to contribute to the quantitative measurement of policy dynamics, to develop comparative analysis of policy agendas across countries in order to explain more systematically the process of stability and change in Spain in relation to other countries; to establish a link between the comparative study of agendas to other concerns in political science such as political parties or executive-legislative relations; and to increase our understanding about the impact of politics upon agenda dynamics –the relevance of the structure of the political system or/and the ability of political parties to transform the political agenda and give a response to the priorities and demands expressed by most of the population.

## 7. Appendix. Tables and figures

Macroeconomics	Internal affairs and justice
Civil rights	Social Policy
Health	Housing
Agriculture	Commerce and industrial policy
Labour	Defence
Education	Science and Technology
Environment	Foreign Trade
Energy	International Affairs
Transportation	Government and Public Administration
	Public Lands and water management

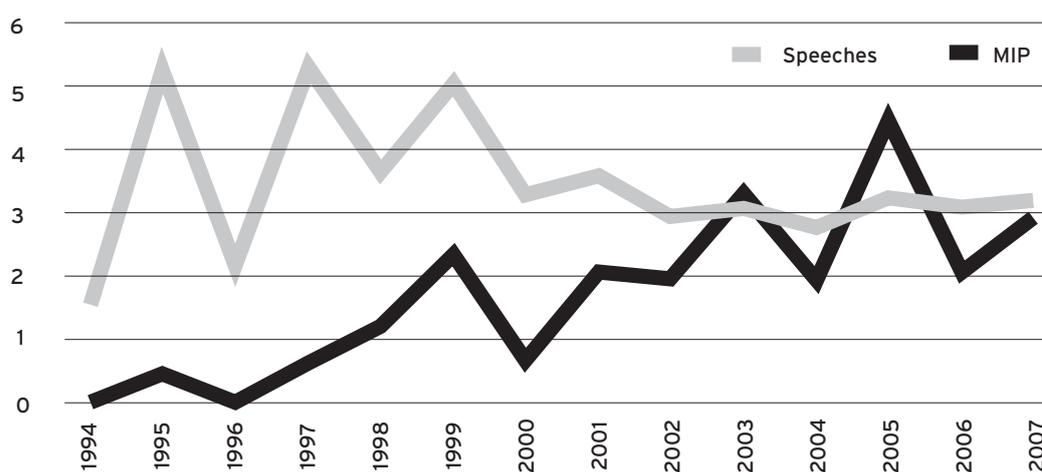
Count	Quasi sentence number within that year's speech.
Policy	1= Policy content 0= No policy content
Sentence text	Text of the given quasi-sentence
Scope of the text coded	Number of words of the quasi sentence coded
Hardcopy source	Source the Spanish policy agenda used for the Debate sobre el Estado de la Nación and the Debate de Investidura.
Date	Date the speech is delivered
Type of Speech	1= debate de investidura 0= debate sobre el Estado de la Nación
Europeization	1= EU content 0= No EU content
CCAA	1= Autonomic content 0= No Autonomic content
Outgoing	Whether the President delivering speech is outgoing, giving his last speech before transition. 1= Outgoing Prime Minister 0= Not an outgoing Prime Minister
Legislature	Legislature term: 2: 1982-1986 (From 1984) 3: 1986-1989 4: 1989-1993 5: 1993-1996 6: 1996-2000 7: 2000-2004 8: 2004-2008
Prime Minister	Name of the Prime Minister Felipe González José María Aznar José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero
PMParty	Party of the Prime Minister 1= PSOE 0= PP
Government	Type of government 1: majority 0: minority
Scope of the speech	Number of words of the speech
Year	Year the speech was delivered

Table 3. Trend correlations 1982-2007			
		SPAIN Year	USA Year
Rho de Spearman	Year	1,000	1,000
	Economics	-,343(*)	-,516(**)
	Rights	,233	-,143
	Health	,449(*)	,648(**)
	Agriculture	-,061	-,176
	Labour	,287	,264
	Education	,372(*)	,312
	Environment	,612(**)	,132
	Energy	,320	,455(*)
	Transportation	,652(**)	-,157
	Justice	,321	,305
	Socialaffairs	,029	,342
	Housing	,514(**)	-,175
	Industry	,231	,068
	Defense	-,458(**)	-,116
	Research	,654(**)	-,318
	Commerce	-,473(**)	-,210
	Foreign	-,323	,508(**)
	Government	-,256	-,378(*)
	Water	,618(**)	,223
	N	26	24

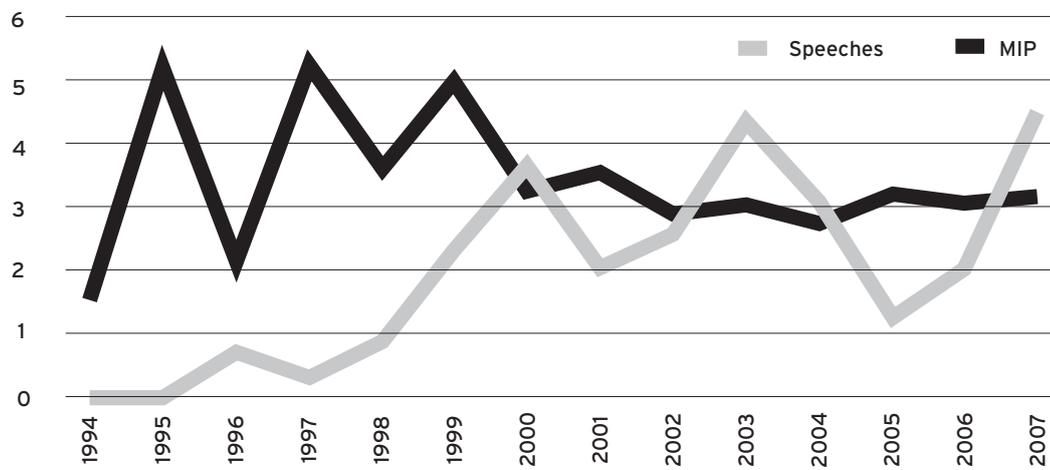
\* Correlation is significant at level 0,05 (unilateral)

\*\* Correlation is significant at level 0,01 (unilateral)

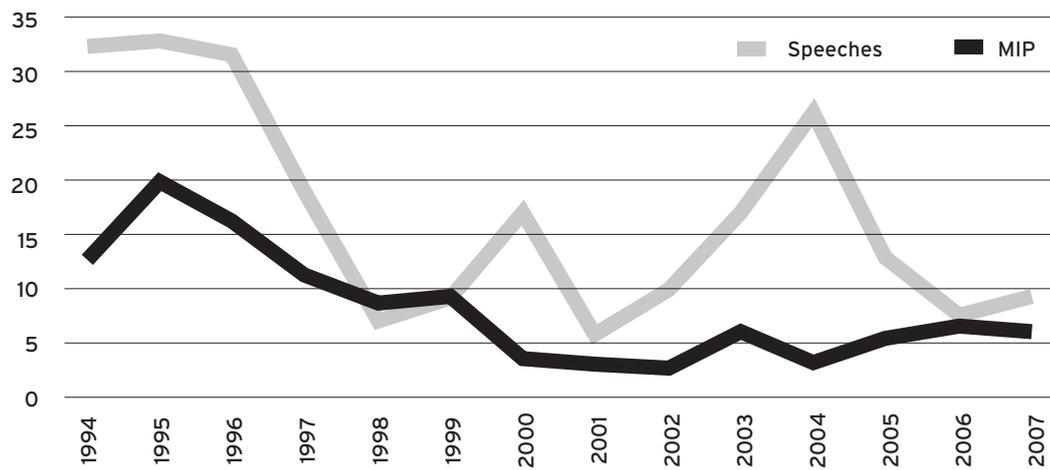
**Figure 17. Transportation: MIP and Executive Speeches (Spain)**



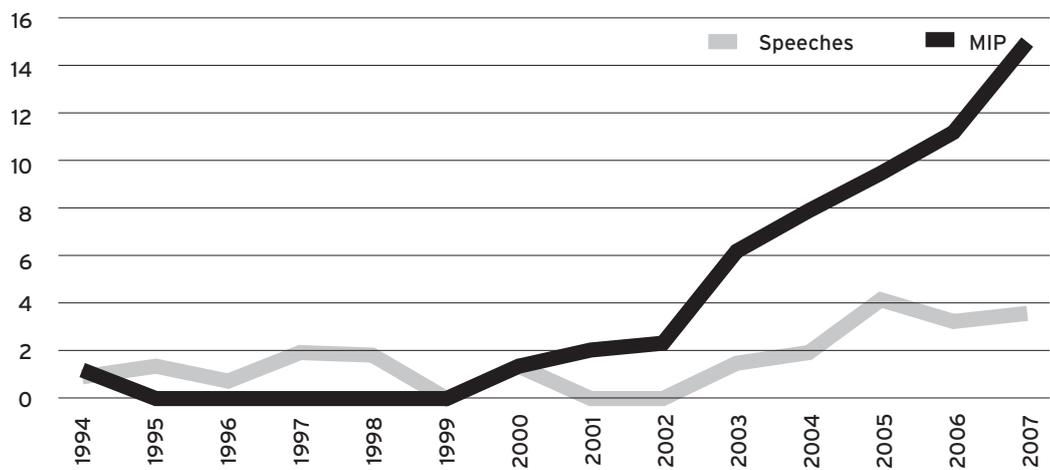
**Figure 18. Social Policy: MIP and Executive Speeches (Spain)**



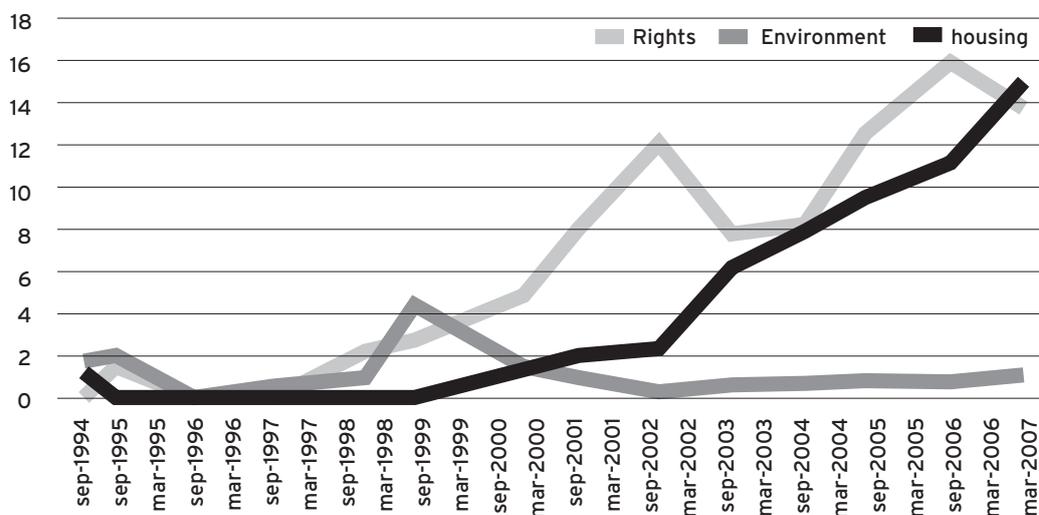
**Figure 19. Government: MIP and Executive Speeches (Spain)**



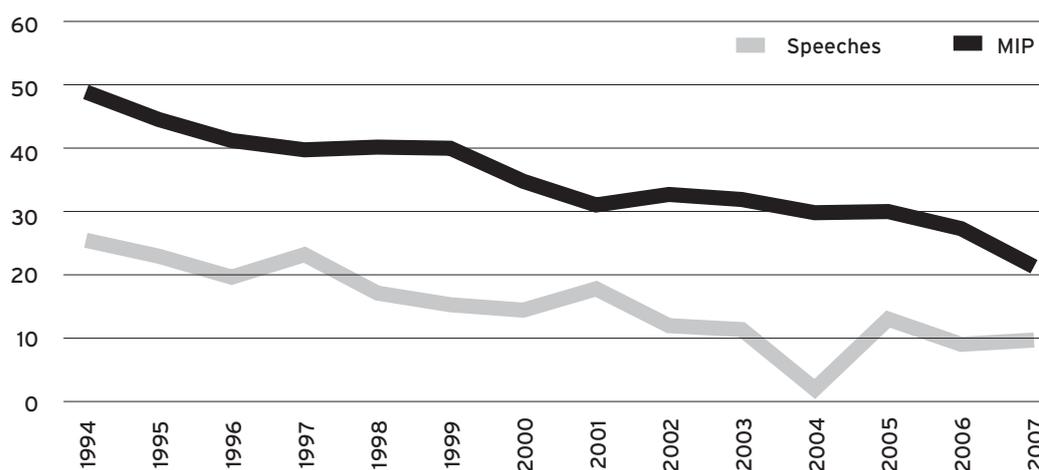
**Figure 20. Housing: MIP and Executive Speeches (Spain)**



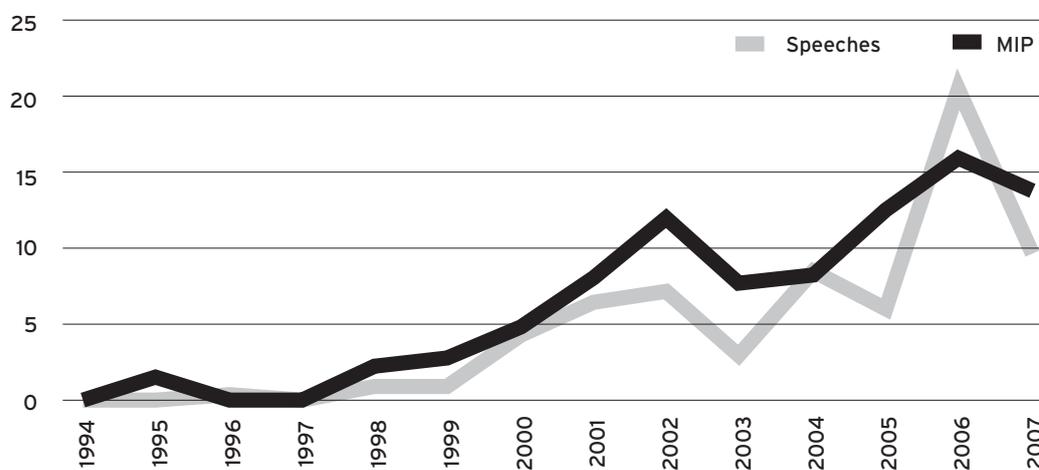
**Figure 21. New Issues Visibility in MIP (1994-2007) (Spain)**



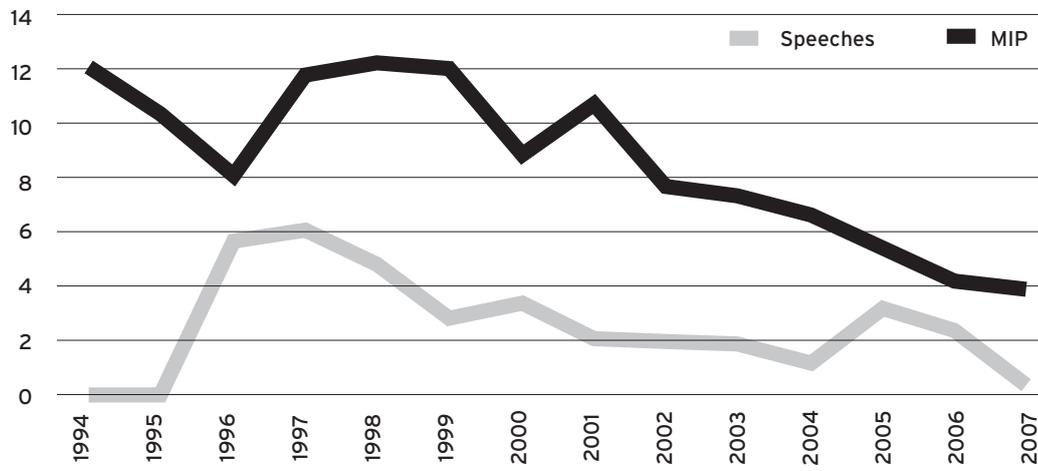
**Figure 22. Economics: MIP and Executive Speeches (Spain)**



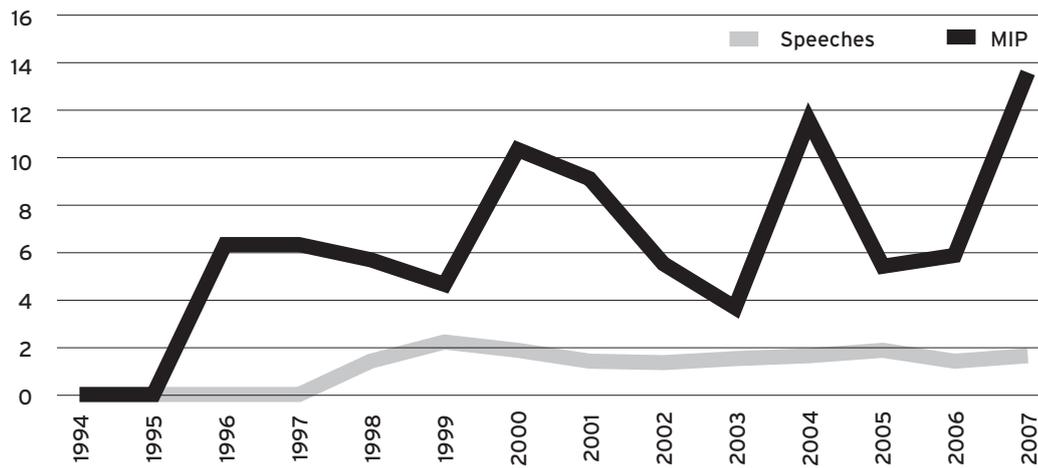
**Figure 23. Rights: MIP and Executive Speeches (Spain)**



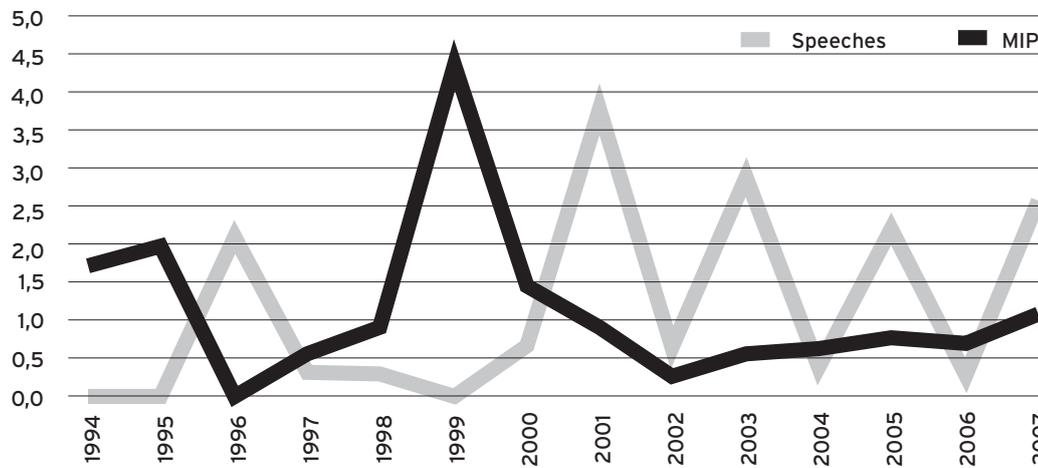
**Figure 24. Health: MIP and Executive Speeches (Spain)**



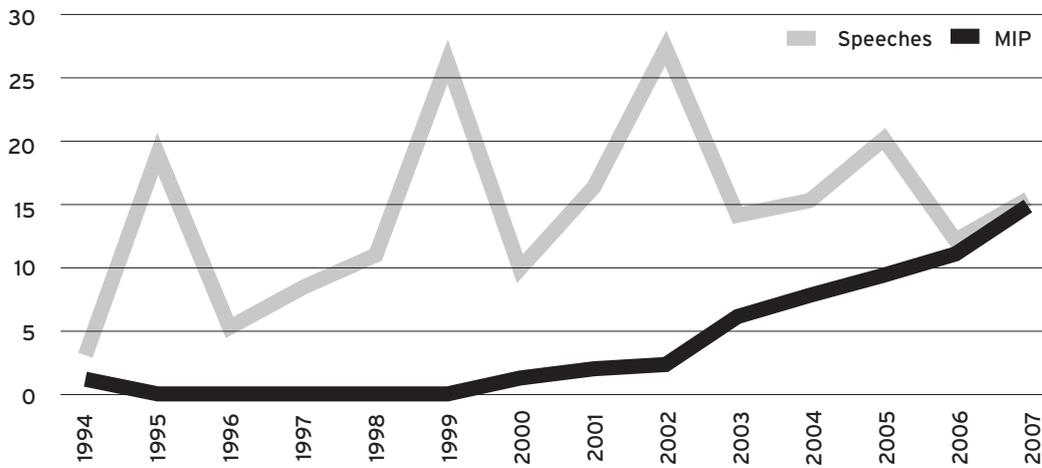
**Figure 25. Education: MIP and Executive Speeches**



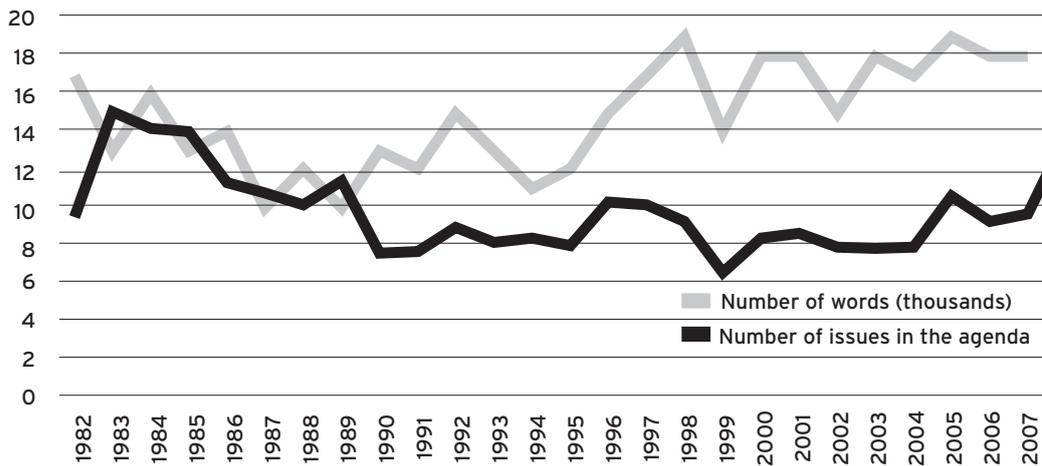
**Figure 26. Environment: MIP and Executive Speeches**



**Figure 27. Law and Order: MIP and Executive Speeches**



**Figure 28. Issue-carrying capacity and agenda space in Spain**



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