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Abstract

Attention is a disruptive force in politics; it is also a scarce resource. Decision-makers must prioritize which issues receive attention—typically educing policy change—and which issues are ignored. While issue attention is a key component of policymaking at various levels of analysis, these differing analytical constructs are often compartmentalized and treated as separate from a theoretical standpoint. This study uses the concept of issue attention to analyze connections between two such levels of policymaking abstraction: Congress and policy subsystems. Specifically, issue attention from the two major parties in Congress is analyzed using a unique dataset of over 43,000 speeches given on the floor of the House of Representatives. Times series analysis indicates the parties engage in a clear, substantive policy debate using these floor speeches. More importantly, the minority party is actually able to influence the majority party’s level of attention to specific policy issues—when the minority party shifts focus, the majority party responds. Finally, a case study on U.S. offshore oil and natural gas drilling policy demonstrates how changes to partisan issue attention interact with other exogenous effects—e.g., economic indicators, public opinion, and focusing events—to disrupt subsystem dynamics and result in significant policy change. Taken together, the findings from this study highlight how shifts in attention at the highest levels of decision-making directly impact lower levels of policymaking, such as policy subsystems. The policy process is broad and complex, but understanding these dynamic connections brings the system into sharper contrast.

Chapter 1: Connecting Congress and Policy Subsystems Through Issue

Attention

“Attention allocation affects the choice of issues, the choice of issue characterizations, and the choice of solutions. Attention is a severely constraining factor in politics—a bottleneck through which all matters must squeeze. As a consequence, attention allocation must be disproportionate. This raises an important issue: just how are problems in the environment translated into policymaking responses?” (Jones and Baumgartner 2005: 208)

Introduction

Attention is a powerful and disruptive force in politics; it is also a scarce resource. Decision-makers at all levels of politics are faced with cognitive limits that make it impossible for all policy problems to garner even an insignificant amount of attention (Simon 1957; Jones 1994; Jones and Baumgartner 2005). This means policymakers must place priorities by giving attention to certain policy problems while completely ignoring others. Attention is a dynamic component of policy change within specific policy subsystems, which are collections of policy actors interacting on the basis of shared policy goals (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). These subsystems are considered a lower level of political abstraction, but it is unclear how the concept of attention can be applied to higher levels of political abstraction, like the U.S. Congress. This study draws a direct connection between these two levels of abstractions. Specifically, issue attention from the two major parties in Congress is measured and analyzed to demonstrate how dynamics at the highest levels of decision-making disrupt policy subsystems and result in significant policy change.

In order to explain the connection between the levels of policymaking abstraction, parallels are drawn between two distinct and compartmentalized literatures

that explicitly deal with the policy process. More importantly, the findings from this study broaden our understanding of how public policy is made. The policy process does not take place in a closed system; the process is complex and involves multiple institutions and a host of policy actors. This study clearly highlights this complexity, but also demonstrates that policymaking spans institutions, conceptualizations, and levels of abstraction. These different aspects of the policy process are interconnected. The outcomes in one segment of the process have clear implications for other segments. The chapters that follow analyze this dynamism, especially the connections between levels of abstraction in the policy process.

Levels of abstraction refer to the specificity and generalizability of political analysis (Sartori 1970). The level of specificity and generalizability relates to individual issue areas, rather than general theories of the policy process.¹ Policymaking happens at more than one level of abstraction. As such, this study deals explicitly with analyzing and connecting two different levels of policymaking abstraction: the macro and meso-levels.

The macro-level of policymaking abstraction is the most broad and general. Broad generalizations can be made at the macro-level level of policymaking because little emphasis is placed on the specificity and peculiarities of specific policy issues. For this reason, macro-level level examinations of policymaking typically take place at

¹ A number of general theoretical frameworks provide guidance and hypotheses for examining policymaking at the meso-level of abstraction (i.e., Punctuated Equilibrium Theory, the Advocacy Coalition Framework, and Multiple Streams). While these theories do make generalizations about the policy process at the meso-level, the analyses themselves still focus on specific policy jurisdictions and subsystems. In contrast, both theories and analyses of congressional policymaking make generalizations across a number of policy domains.

the highest and most general levels of decision-making. The macro-level level examinations in this study focus explicitly on the U.S. Congress. For example, theories and hypotheses of congressional policymaking focus on a multitude of legislative activities—e.g., the behavior of legislators (Mayhew 1974; Arnold 1990), congressional committees (Fenno 1973; Krehbiel 1990; Hall and Grofman 1990), legislative actions by the president (Edwards 1990; Howell 2003; Krutz and Peake 2009)—without accounting for variability across issue domains.

Meso-level policymaking abstraction lacks generalizability, but better analyzes specificity and variation within individual issue domains. In contrast to broad examinations of the highest levels of decision-making, meso-level analyses focus on specific policy jurisdictions and subsystems. Analytical frameworks have been developed to guide analyses of meso-level dynamics (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993; Ostrom 2005; True et al. 2007; Zahariadis 2007), but the emphasis in such analyses is placed on the contextual differences between policy issues. Despite conceptual differences between the macro and meso-levels of policymaking abstraction, the two levels are intrinsically connected because what happens at one level should affect the other level. On this note, issue attention is seen as a vital component of policy change at the meso-level of policymaking abstraction—especially within policy subsystems. However, attention is not a concept that has been systematically applied to analyzing policymaking within Congress. This line of thinking spawns a very important question: can the concept of issue attention help to explain policymaking process at the highest levels of decision-making, and, if so, does macro-level implication impact policy subsystems.

This chapter clarifies several key concepts used throughout future chapters. In particular, the concepts of agendas and issue attention are explained. These two concepts are related, but there are minor nuances that differentiate the two. Moreover, the terms “policy agendas” and “issue attention” are utilized by a multitude of scholars, and the use of these terms in the current study differs slightly from previous definitions. Finally, the key research questions examined in later chapters are briefly described.

Conceptualizing Policy Agendas and Issue Attention

Policy Agendas and Issue Attention

The concepts of policy agendas and issue attention are related, but signify to different aspect of the policymaking process. Both agendas and attention refer to how decision-makers prioritize policy issues. The concepts have been used widely in the extant literature, but definitions vary greatly from study to study. For this reason, the definition for each concept used in this study needs to be explained and the discrepancies between the concepts explored.

In the chapters that follow, I use the terms “agenda” and “issue attention” in slightly different contexts. Traditional examinations of agendas focused on both institutional agendas and the agendas of individual decision-makers or coalitions of decision-makers. According to Kingdon (1984), agendas are “the list of subjects or problems to which governmental officials, and people outside of government closely associated with those officials, are paying some serious attention” (3). Within this broad conceptualization of agendas, scholars also delineated between two different levels of agendas. The first level is the larger, “systematic agenda” that characterizes policies garnering at least some attention from government officials (Cobb and Elder

1983). The second, smaller level explicitly states those aspects of the systematic agenda that receive serious consideration within policymaking institutions (Kingdon 1983; Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 2008; Binder 2003; Cohen 2012). The difference between agenda levels is one of tangible policymaking activities. An agenda item may receive some consideration on the systematic agenda, but may never be involved in policymaking activities in a decision-making institutions, like Congress or the presidency—e.g., congressional hearings, bills, roll calls, presidential signing statements, or executive order. This difference is the basis for demarcating agendas and issue attention in the current study. For the purposes of this study, I use the term “policy agenda” to indicate policies receiving attention through explicitly legislative activities.

Issue attention encompasses the same aspects as Kingdon’s definition of agendas, but differs from the policy agenda. Before diving into the differences between these terms, a brief explanation of the term “issue” is warranted. Policy issues are best described as “general themes that transcend a particular incident, structuring the content of political discourse and policymaking over a relatively long period of time” (Sulkin 2005: 45). Therefore, issues refer to general policy domains, such as health care, education, or foreign affairs. Given this definition, issue attention refers to the amount of consideration particular issues receive by decision-makers.

The conceptualization of issue attention used for this study is more indicative of Cobb and Elder’s “systematic agenda” than of the smaller “policy agenda.” The main difference is how issue definition is operationalized and measured. Issue attention is measured using a particular kind of speech given on the floor of the House of

Representatives. Speeches given on the floor of the House can certainly be considered a legislative activity. However, there is a qualitative difference between speeches and actual policy outputs and throughputs.

Bader (1996) considers floor debate to be an aspect of the congressional agenda because speeches are an “up-front activity by party leaders for the explicit purpose of influencing the tenor and substance of the policy debate in Congress and the policy dialogue with the president” (11). While controlling debate in Congress is important, delivering a speech is very different from introducing a piece of legislation or holding a hearing on a particular policy in a subcommittee. Speeches can be given on any policy issue, but this activity is relatively costless and not necessarily indicative substantive policy change. On the other hand, legislative activities—such as, the introduction of a bill, holding a subcommittee hearing, or conducting a roll call vote—are far more costly and signal the potential for actual policy change.

Essentially, all policy activities are a potential source of issue attention, but not all measures of issue attention are policy activities. The two concepts are definitely related, but demarcations need to be made. In some ways, the argument is semantic, but semantics are important for better understanding the nuances of attention and policy change. Institutional constraints also play a factor in differentiating between issue attention and policy agendas. As we will see, measures of agendas built strictly on legislatives outputs and throughputs can overlook important dynamics within a decision-making body. This study seeks a broader understanding of issue attention by focusing on the attention allocation of the two major parties in the House of Representatives.

Partisan Issue Attention

A key component for better understanding the politics of attention within Congress is recognizing how the two major political parties distribute attention across policy problems. This distribution of attention is the basis for the measure of partisan issue attention used in this study. Political parties are integral parts of contemporary congressional politics. The parties—specifically, the majority party—exhibit considerable control over the congressional agenda through the use of rules, procedures, and the committee system (Cox and McCubbins 2005, 2007). At the same time, homogeneity within the parties and high levels of polarization between the parties creates an environment conducive to responsible party government (Rohde 1991; Aldrich 1995; Aldrich and Rohde 2001).

Agenda control and stronger party coalitions have serious implications for how attention to policy problems is concentrated in Congress. This is especially true considering party coalitions are most likely to form when issues are boiled down to a single dimension, such as ideology or individual preferences (Lee 2009). The ability to form coalitions around ideological issues means leaders tend to steer the congressional agenda in a way that differentiates the majority party from the opposition. Therefore, the policy problems competing for attention tend to conform to a left-right continuum, making it easy for the parties to form opposing views that translate to public perception.

These implications demonstrate the need to create a comprehensive, longitudinal measure of the parties' issue attention in Congress that allows researchers to draw connections between policy subsystems and the macro-level politics of Congress. While many scholars successfully created measures of the congressional agenda based

on passed legislation or committee decisions, very few offered a complete examination of the specific policy problems that are given attention by both parties concurrently (Bader 1996; Cox and McCubbins 2005; Evans 2001; Lee 2009). This study creates such a dataset by analyzing the one-minute speeches given at the beginning of each day of in the House of Representatives.

One-minute speeches in the House of Representatives provide an outlet for individual members to voice his or her concern over a particular policy problem. As such, parties utilize these one-minute speeches as a way to broadcast a cohesive message regarding the parties' policy priorities (Evans 2001; Harris 2005). In order to construct issue attention for the two major parties, all one-minute speeches between 1989 and 2012 were gathered using online editions of the Congressional Record. These speeches were then coded by policy content according to Baumgartner and Jones' Policy Agendas Project coding scheme using a "supervised learning" automated text classification process. The result is a longitudinal measure of issue attention for both parties in the House.

The measure of partisan issue attention developed for this study essentially measures the agenda setting activities of the two major parties, which can be defined as "the process by which the organization comes to pay attention to some issues rather than other" (Jones and Baumgartner 2005: 38). Agenda setting and attention allocation are the all-important first step to policy change. For this reason, partisan issue attention is the main metric used to analyze how macro-level level dynamics affect specific policy subsystems.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to connect policymaking dynamics at the highest levels of decision-making with policy subsystems. Issue attention from the two major parties in Congress is the lynchpin for understanding this dynamic relationship. However, a direct leap from macro-level level attention to subsystem policymaking cannot be made without first analyzing the landscape and behavior of issue attention in Congress. The following subsections provide brief explanations of the main research questions asked by this project.

What does Partisan Issue Attention look like?

Understanding the overall landscape of partisan issue attention in Congress is a vital first step in the study. Specifically, the one-minute speech debate period needs to be closely examined before utilizing the measure of partisan issue attention in broader analyses. This research question addresses two key aspects of partisan issue attention: the measure's validity and any underlying patterns that help explain the partisan nature of one-minute speeches.

Issue attention in Congress is typically measured using policy outputs or throughputs, such as hearings, bill introductions, or roll call votes (Bader 1996; Cox and McCubbins 2005, 2007; Baumgartner and Jones 2009). Measures of attention built on such outputs and throughputs only supply the attention of the majority party. In the comparative context, speeches have been a popular tool for measure partisan issue attention in multi-party systems (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2009; John and Jennings 2010). These studies are the impetus for using congressional speeches in this study, but an in-depth analysis is needed to determine the face validity of the measure.

A central concern is whether or not the one-minute speech debate period adequately captures the attention of the two parties, because individual legislators may use the debate period to espouse their respective policy views. Such a finding would invalidate the measure of partisan issue attention.

This research question also seeks to build the foundation for the entire study. For example, understanding the ebb and flow of partisan one-minute speeches could provide insight into how and when partisan issue attention in Congress affects policy subsystems. Moreover, parties are an integral part of the contemporary Congress, and analyzing party messaging techniques uncovers important aspects of congressional politics. This question is the cornerstone of the entire project; connections between the macro and meso-levels cannot be made without first understanding the nuances of partisan issue attention.

Is there an Interaction between the Parties' Issue Attention Levels?

The greatest strength of the measure of partisan issue attention developed for this study is its ability to measure the issue priorities of both parties concurrently. This aspect of the data make it possible to examine whether or not the minority party in the House of Representatives can influence the majority party's levels of attention. Not only does this question have obvious implications for the study of agenda setting in Congress, but understanding the relationship between the parties at the macro-level is an important component of the overall goal of the project.

There are two schools of thought on partisan agenda setting in legislatures (Budge and Farlie 1983). One school suggests opposing parties will create diverging issue agendas—focusing on different policy issues than the opposition. The extant

literature indicates this is the predominant form of partisan agenda setting in the U.S. Congress (Cox and McCubbins 2005, 2007; Lee 2009). Divergent partisan agendas would further highlight the dominance of the majority party in Congress. In essence, the majority party would control both policy outcomes and the policy debate.

The other school of thought proposes converging issue agendas between opposing parties—the parties in a legislature focus on the same policy issues. While there is little supporting evidence for such party dynamics in the American context, several studies of multi-party systems in Europe demonstrate how the minority party can influence both the policy debate and policy outcomes (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2009; Seeberg 2013); similar dynamics may also be at play with partisan issue attention in the House of Representatives.

Agenda setting is one of the most important components of the policy process. Any possible interaction between the agenda setting activities of the parties provides valuable insight into congressional politics. Even the slightest indication of minority party influence in Congress potentially changes our understanding of contemporary congressional politics. Moreover, analysis of partisan agenda setting highlights possible avenues for subsystem disruption.

Can Connections be drawn between Macro-level Attention and Policy Subsystems?

Drawing connections between the macro and meso-levels of policymaking abstraction is the main goal of this project. Specifically, this question asks whether or not macro-level dynamics—in the form of partisan issue attention—affect policymaking within specific policy subsystems. Despite the obvious relationship between

policymaking in macro-level institutions and policy subsystems, there are no examples from the extant literature directly connecting these conceptual levels.

Two theories of the policy process provide guidance for this cornerstone research question: Baumgartner and Jones' (1993, 2008) Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET) and Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith's (1993) Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF). Both of these theoretical frameworks analyze the inner-workings of policy subsystems, and both recognize the importance of attention as a resource utilized in the policymaking process. Moreover, issue attention is treated as an exogenous effect on subsystems.

PET and the ACF explicitly analyze meso-level policymaking, but also provide broad frameworks that act as guides for analyzing specific policy subsystems. One thing that is clear from these frameworks is sudden shifts in exogenous attention can result in subsystem disruption by altering policy frames, subsystem resources, and the make-up of coalitions within the subsystem. Therefore, the key to connecting Congress and policy subsystems is to explore such shifts in macro-level attention to see if there is corresponding subsystem disturbance and policy change. The measure of partisan issue attention developed for this project is ideal for uncovering such relationships, because partisan politics at the macro-level highlight volatility that may be indicative of subsystem disruption. Any direct connections made between the macro and meso-levels of policymaking abstraction greatly broaden our understanding of the policy process by demonstrating the interconnected nature of the policy process across concepts, institutions, and levels of abstraction. In this way, empirical findings from the

research questions in the study culminate into the ability to answer this empirical puzzle.

Plan of the Project

The research questions detailed in the previous section are answered over the course of five chapters. Chapter 2 explains how this study fits into the extant literature and lays out specific hypotheses that will be empirically tested in later chapters. The main component of Chapter 2 is a clear delineation between the macro and meso-levels of policymaking abstraction. Explaining the differences between these levels of policymaking abstraction highlight the compartmentalized nature of the study of the policy process. Theories and analyses of the macro-level of policymaking abstraction pay little mind to the substantial variation of the policy process within specific policy issues, and, instead, focus on broad generalizations of institutional policymaking. Meso-level examinations of the policy process sacrifice generalizability across policy issues to focus on the specificity and variation within issues. Based on this comparison, hypotheses are formulated to help explain macro-level issue attention and the connection between macro and meso-level policymaking.

Chapter 3 directly examines the basis for the measure of partisan issue attention: the one-minute speech debate period. The supervised learning process for creating the measure of partisan issue attention is described in this chapter. Moreover, aggregate and individual-level analyses examine the policy content and partisan nature of one-minute speeches. The aggregate analyses find the vast majority of speeches relate to a specific policy issue, and the parties discuss the same policy issues in the same relative proportions. An individual-level analysis of one-minute speeches indicates speeches

containing policy-relevant information are disproportionately given on days that contain a total of 10 or more speeches, which suggests an opportunity for a back-and-forth between the parties. The final analysis in Chapter 3 demonstrates a negative relationship between the monopolization of issue content within the debate period and the number of legislators delivering speeches. In other words, as the one-minute speech debate period's issue agenda becomes more concentrated, the pool of speakers diversifies. Overall, the findings in Chapter 3 serve to validate the measure of partisan issue attention and highlight characteristics in the data that point to possible connections between the macro and meso-levels of policymaking abstraction.

Chapter 4 examines the manner in which the two parties influence the opposition's level of issue attention. As previously discussed, the majority party dominates the political process, so majority party influence is assumed. Time series analyses indicate the minority party is able to influence the majority party's level of attention to a wide variety of policy issues. In other words, when the minority party places more relative attention on a policy issue, the majority party responds in-kind. The analyses also indicate this relationship is partly conditional on party control of government for a handful of policy issues. Chapter 4 demonstrates an important interplay between the issue attention of the two major parties in Congress. This relationship highlights the need to measure attention for both parties concurrently, and provides evidence of minority party influence on the congressional policy debate—something overlooked by current theories of congressional organization.

All of the findings from previous chapters culminate to the empirical analysis in Chapter 5. Using a case study of energy policy from 2008, Chapter 5 successfully

demonstrates how changes in issue attention in Congress can affect policy subsystems. This case study shows how shifts in attention to energy policy issues—initiated by the minority party—interacted with public opinion and high gas prices to create dramatic policy change, effectively lifting of the 25-year-old moratorium on offshore drilling. A comparison of policy change and issue attention of other incidents of policy change highlights how partisan issue attention may not be applicable to all domains. However, it is clear shifts in macro-level issue attention can induce substantive change at the subsystem level. Finally, Chapter 6 provides a brief summary and conclusion for the project. A recap of the major findings is given and implications for these findings are described.

Chapter 2: Different Levels of Policymaking Abstraction

Introduction

Understanding the policy process has long been a goal of political scientists. However, the research remains largely compartmentalized and fragmented. So-called “institutionalists” tend to focus on broader conceptualizations of the policy process within decision-making institutions. On the other hand, issue-specific research on the policy process focuses on the variation and nuances present within individual issue domains. Both areas of study provide vital explanation for different aspects of policymaking, and, in some regards, the current study serves as a bridge between these two literatures. More importantly, insights need to be taken from this diverse body of scholarship to answer the project’s central research question: do political factors at the highest levels of decision-making affect dynamics within policy subsystems?

A defining characteristic of the differences that exist between examinations of the policy process is the level of abstraction, as it relates to specific policy issues. Some studies focus on a more general level of abstraction that pays little heed to variation and specificity within issue domains; instead, the focus is on broad generalizations regarding policy outputs. A different subset of studies places more emphasis on analyzing and describing the nuances and differences between issue domains. This difference is the foundation for understanding how the research questions and findings of this study expand our understanding of the policy process.

This chapter draws on a variety of political science scholarship in order to formulate hypotheses regarding the relationship between macro-level issue attention

and policy subsystems. First, two different levels of policymaking abstraction are identified and defined: the macro and meso-levels. The different components of these levels of abstraction are also highlighted. Next, hypotheses are created explaining the dynamics of partisan issue attention in Congress. Finally, expectations are drawn about how macro level attention can affect policymaking within policy subsystems.

Levels of Policymaking Abstraction

A Ladder of Abstraction

Like most political processes, policymaking is complex. Policies are not created in a closed system involving a limited number of institutions and actors. Instead, the creation of a single policy involves a large network of actors across a plethora of policymaking institutions. The policymaking process also varies significantly across individual policies and issue domains—the institutions and actors involved in one policy area will not be the same for another policy area. If the venues and actors creating policy varies significantly across issue domains, this dynamism suggests policies are also created across different levels of political abstraction.

Following the idea of Sartori's (1970) "ladder of abstraction," levels of political abstraction become more general and less specific as one ascends the ladder. Climbing the ladder of abstraction with regards to policymaking allows researchers to make broad generalizations across a wide variety of issue domains, but very little emphasis is placed on examining the specificity of individual policy areas. Conversely, lower levels of abstraction sacrifice generalizability for specificity and variation in describing the creation of individual policies within issue domains. In many ways, the ladder of abstraction is best described by the old adage "not seeing the forest for the trees." At

lower levels of policymaking abstraction, there is so much focus on individual policy issues (trees) that a broader picture of the policy process (forest) cannot be formulated. On the other hand, higher levels of policymaking abstraction are better able to take stock of the larger policy process, but the important variation among policy issues is lost. The different levels of policymaking abstraction are important avenues for understanding how public policy is made, but connections need to be drawn between the levels in order to more fully understand the policy process. The purpose of this chapter is to describe two levels of policymaking abstraction and demonstrate how the concept of issue attention is key for making connections between these levels. In doing so, a general theory of issue attention and policymaking is created that specifies a number of empirically testable hypotheses.

The Macro and Meso-Levels

Conceivably, any number of levels of abstraction regarding the policymaking process could exist. This study is concerned with only two such levels: the “macro” and “meso-levels.” The macro-level of the policy process is the highest level of political abstraction where broad generalizations are made about the creation of public policy. Little attention is paid to the content of policy (i.e., issue domains) at the macro-level. Instead, broad theories and generalities are created that attempt to explain the policymaking process across a host of policy issues. Specifically, macro-level analyses commonly make generalizations about the policy process within institutions that produce a final policy output (e.g., Congress, the presidency, the bureaucracy, the federal and state court systems, state legislatures, local governments). For example, theories and hypotheses pertaining to the creation of public policy have been created to

explain the general behavior of members of Congress (Mayhew 1974; Arnold 1990), policymaking by congressional committees (Fenno 1973; Krehbiel 1990; Hall and Grofman 1990), the legislative power of the president (Edwards 1990), and unilateral policy actions by the executive branch (Howell 2003; Krutz and Peake 2009).

Each of the theories and generalities expressed by these studies provides valuable insight into how public policy is created at the highest levels of decision-making. However, little attention is paid to variation across policy issues. Aside from any theories of congressional behavior or organization, analyses of single policy issues within macro-level institutions are too broad and general to fully account for the variety of actors and variables that may influence the policy process. The extensiveness and lack of specificity regarding policy issues is the hallmark of the macro-level. The broad scope of macro-level policymaking is a not a shortcoming—quite the opposite. Generalizations about the creation of public policy at the highest levels of decision-making are necessary in order to generate hypotheses about policymaking within these institutions.

Given the focus dedicated to analyzing policy at the highest levels of decision-making, one way to observe the policy process at the macro-level of abstraction is to focus on a single policymaking institution. Specifically, this project focuses exclusively on policymaking in the U.S. Congress. Broad generalizations are certainly an important part of understanding the creation of public policy in Congress. Nevertheless, there needs to be a way to account for the significant variation between specific issues in the policy process. In order to account for this variation, we need to move down the ladder of abstraction to the meso-level.

Meso-level policymaking is the midpoint on the ladder of abstraction, and is best defined by the concept of policy subsystems—or the study of policies within specific issue domains. This concept is vital because subsystems give researchers a general framework for analyzing and describing changes to individual policies. Before delving into the definition of policy subsystems used in this study, it is important to understand how the concept developed over time.

Policy subsystems were born out of the early-20th century idea of “sub-governments.” In the traditional sense, sub-governments consist of patterns of interactions between specialized policy actors within a particular policy area, which is limited to organized interests, congressional committees, and bureaucratic administrators. Put simply, sub-governments represent the classic iron triangle (Griffith 1939; Maas 1951; Redford 1969; Berry 1989; Thurber 1991; Howlett et al. 2009). The idea of sub-governments was an ideal starting point for the fledgling field of policy sciences because it gave researchers a finer-grained unit of analysis to understand the policy process. However, the shortcoming of sub-governments was the unrealistic assumption of closed systems with a limited number of actors. In reality, examinations of organized interests, congressional committees, and bureaucratic administrators overlook the multitude of actors who attempt to influence public policy formation. For this reason, conceptualizations of sub-governments gradually became more open and inclusive.

Hecló’s (1978) “issue networks” are the most drastic deviation from the concept of iron triangles. Issue networks are defined as very broad systems with a fluid set of actors and amorphous boundaries that can change very rapidly. In many ways, issue

networks are a far more realistic interpretation of meso-level policymaking than classic definitions of sub-governments. However, unlike sub-governments, issue networks do not generate a clear unit of analysis for analyzing public policy because the conceptualization is too broad and nebulous. Therefore, analyses of issue networks are problematic because it is impossible to give a comprehensive account of such an open system. Policy subsystems represent a middle ground between classic definitions of sub-governments and issue networks; one that is not too closed to be unrealistic and also not too open to be unobservable.

Policy subsystems are characterized as a plurality of actors interacting on the basis of shared policy goals or interests (Kingdon 1984; Sabatier et al. 1987; Salisbury 1987; Thurber 1991; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). In other words, subsystems are defined by groups of actors who are trying to influence public policy within specific issue domains. These actors include a multitude of official and unofficial policy players, such as interest groups, think tanks, scholars, the media, individual elected officials, bureaucrats, and policy analysts. Subsystem actors typically form into two or more opposing coalitions based on shared goals. These competing coalitions are the basis for understanding subsystem dynamics. Subsystems are also defined by identifying the substantive and territorial dimensions that delineate the issue area (Sabatier and Weible 2007). Empirical observation of subsystems is made easy because the researcher needs only to identify three things: the issue domain, the decision-making venues, and the relevant policy actors.

Analyzing policymaking within subsystems differs from the macro-level of abstraction because subsystems account for the possible variation in the policy process

between issue domains. Subsystems provide a general framework and expectations about the role of actors and institutions. This framework also includes explanations for the effect of exogenous factors on policy change. However, this framework is different than the broad theories and generalizations derived at the macro-level. The expectation is that policymaking will vary significantly across subsystems—even if the guidelines for identifying and observing subsystems remain largely the same.

Despite the obvious differences between the macro and meso-levels of abstraction, the two are inherently tied together. Policy change at the highest levels of decision-making affects subsystems because the resources, actors, venues, and coalition strategies that define the subsystem will change as policy changes. Likewise, the actors within subsystems will interact with macro-level institutions in order to achieve the coalition's policy goals. This interplay is especially apparent when we use Congress to analyze meso-level policymaking. For example, congressional subcommittee hearings are often viewed as the arena in which policy battles between subsystem coalitions are fought (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). This is a clear example of actors from two different levels of policymaking abstracting interacting to affect policy change. Obviously, policymaking at one level of abstraction has implications for the other level. Despite these apparent relationships, no clear connections are drawn between macro-level and meso-level policymaking in the extant literature.

The key to making this vital connection across levels of abstraction is issue attention. Attention is a powerful and disruptive force in politics; it is also a scarce resource. Decision-makers at all levels of politics are faced with cognitive limits that make it impossible for all policy problems to garner even an insignificant amount of

attention (Jones 1994; Jones and Baumgartner 2005). According to Simon (1957), these limitations create a boundedly rational decision-maker who formulates rational decisions based on limited information and heuristics. It is also impossible for any decision-maker (or decision-making institution) to attain perfect information. Even if perfect information is attainable, a cognitively bound individual is unable to properly process large amounts of information. A lack of complete information and an inability to process large amounts of information means decision-makers must prioritize what information can be processed and give attention to only a handful of policy problems at any one time.

While attention is a scarce resource in politics, information is not. Policymakers operate in an information-rich environment; yet, individuals are unable to process this information in large amounts. Therefore, individuals must be selective in terms of which information is processed, and, by extension, which policy problems are given attention—this is the very essence of agenda-setting in institutions. The information flow in institutions is not proportional, so responses to policy problems are also not proportional. The limited carrying capacity of institutions means many policy problems go unnoticed until a major policy change is needed to rectify the problem (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). This pattern of agenda setting and issue allocation is cyclical in nature.

According to Downs (1972), the issue attention cycle progresses in stages. Issues are not simply plucked from the ether and placed on the agenda. First, an “alarmed discovery” takes place when the public and/or policymakers suddenly become aware of an existing policy problem because the problem becomes too large to ignore.

Discovery of a new policy problem usually takes place because certain indicators gradually become too large to ignore or salient focusing events cause dramatic shifts in attention (Kingdon 1984). Due to the cognitive limits of individuals and the nature of information in policymaking institutions, the allocation of attention is a zero-sum concept. After being discovered, the new policy issue moves onto the policymaking agenda, replacing issues that are now deemed less important. Eventually, policymakers and the public realize the significant costs involved in solving the policy problem, and the initial attention directed at the issue begins to wane.

Obviously, scarce attention guarantees that only a handful of issues will be placed on the macro-political agenda at any one time. The other side of this coin is that a whole host of policy issues will be ignored at the macro-level. Meso-level policymaking within subsystems continues regardless of macro-level attention. The goings-on of a policy subsystem do not stand still simply because the subsystem's issue domain does not garner attention at the macro-level—subsystem actors and coalitions continue their respective efforts to affect public policy. However, attention is an important subsystem resource that can drastically disrupt subsystem dynamics. Shifts in attention can upset the balance of power within subsystems causing a change in resource allocation between coalitions, an influx of new policy actors, or a change in dominant policy frames.

The concept of issue attention provides a potential connection between the macro and meso-levels of policymaking. Before this connection can be made, issue attention first needs to be measured and analyzed at the macro-level. Understanding macro-level issue attention is a vital first step because macro-level prioritization of

policy issues will give clues as to the relationship between the two levels of abstraction. Disruptive shifts in attention may be initiated at either the macro or meso-level. However, analyses of such shifts need to take place at the macro-level, because this is where the final policy output is realized. The macro-level is also the only level of abstraction in which it is possible to observe attention across several issue domains simultaneously.

Analyzing Levels of Abstraction

Macro-Level Dynamics

The use of issue attention as a political variable is well documented in examinations of change at the meso-level of policymaking abstraction—within policy subsystems (McCool 1998; Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 2009). Such studies demonstrate that large-scale policy change occurs within subsystems infrequently and is usually the result of dramatic shifts in attention. These “policy punctuations” have been observed in a number of policy areas, such as tobacco, agriculture, forestry, and national security (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Birkland 2004; Cashore and Howlett 2007; Worsham 2012). However, attention is not a concept routinely used when directly examining agenda setting and decision-making at the highest levels of abstraction, like the U.S. Congress.

One notion that ties the concept of attention to congressional politics is the idea of parallel and serial processing (Jones 1994). Individuals can only engage in serial processing. That is, individuals can only process one problem at a time. On the other hand, institutions overcome this cognitive limitation by parallel processing information—processing numerous problems at the same time. There are several

examples of parallel processing systems within Congress that greatly reduce the workload of individual legislators. For example, the committee system allows Congress to debate and research a host of policy issues concurrently. While the committee system is the most prominent parallel processing system in Congress that produces observable policy outputs and throughputs, a measure of attention built on committee actions would be flawed for reasons that will become apparent later in this section. Therefore, this project uses another parallel processing system to capture congressional issue attention: political parties.

Parties form to overcome collective action problems and deal with uncertainty (Aldrich 1995). Human interaction in the political world is rife with uncertainty and parties seek to reduce this uncertainty by recruiting candidates for office, mobilizing voters, and coordinating actions of elected officials. Collective action problems are overcome because elected officials within the same party hold similar preferences, which allows party members to overcome collective action problems and strive for similar policy goals (Key 1964). The attention given to certain policy problems by political parties should have serious implications for policy change when parties are able to control an institution's policymaking structures. In particular, the agenda setting activities of the two parties affect public policy at the macro-level, and, by extension, may have implications for policymaking within policy subsystems. If the parallel processing capacity of parties influences macro-level policy, surely these outcomes have implications for specific issue domains. For this reason, the prioritization of policy issues by the two majority parties in Congress provides the vital link between macro and meso-level policymaking. However, one possible complication of analyzing

partisan issue attention in the contemporary Congress is the immense control exerted by the majority party over the legislative process.

According to Cox and McCubbins' (2005, 2007) "cartel theory" of partisan politics, the majority party is able to manipulate the congressional agenda in the House of Representatives by setting rules, controlling procedures, and making committee appointments. The majority party is able to simultaneously craft their own agenda while keeping the minority party's priorities off of the agenda. Controlling strategic gate-keeping positions in the committee system and the rules governing debate on the House floor means the majority's preferences show up at all stages of the legislative process. Empirical evidence for cartel theory is present across many units of analysis, such as roll call votes, decisions by the rules committee, and the relative success of discharge petitions (Cox and McCubbins 2007; Stiglitz and Weingast 2010; Miller and Overby 2010).

The majority party's control over Congress is further strengthened during periods of intense partisan polarization. The "conditional party government" theory of congressional organization suggests the voting habits of the major parties will more closely resemble those of a responsible party government as the ideological distance between the parties grows and intra-party ideological differences decrease. Legislative outcomes are inherently closer to the preferences of the majority party regardless of the political environment, but increased polarization better allows the Speaker to move policies closer to his/her caucus through the use of congressional rules (Sinclair 2002; Bianco and Sened 2005). Similar to the cartel theory, legislative rules play an important part in controlling the agenda, but conditional party government allows for context to be

taken into account. The size and prevalence of ideological coalitions within and between parties—which has varied over time—affect control over legislative rules (Schickler and Rich 1997). Therefore, a period of increased partisan polarization and tightly bound ideological distributions within parties—as observed in the contemporary Congress—creates a political context that further reinforces the majority party’s ability to control the institutional agenda. Taken together, both cartel theory and conditional party government suggest the majority party should be able to control most aspects of the congressional agenda.

The ability of a single party to dominate the legislative agenda has serious implications for applying the concept of issue attention to policy change in Congress. Since the majority party controls all levels of the policymaking process, any conceptualization of attention using legislative outputs only captures the issue priorities of the majority party. As previously mentioned, the outputs and throughputs of the committee system in Congress are a potential source of issue attention in Congress. However, such a measure would be flawed because of the majority party’s domination of committees. For example, congressional hearings are a committee throughput routinely used as a unit of analysis for measuring issue attention and policy change within specific policy jurisdictions (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993; Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Baumgartner and Jones 2009). While hearings are useful for understanding the legislative agenda, this is a process completely controlled by the majority party. The inability of the minority party to influence the content of subcommittee hearings is best summarized by the words of one minority party committee staff member, “we can only respond to what the majority wants to focus on”

(Staff Interviews 2014).

Any measure of attention built on committee outputs and throughputs would obviously capture the issue attention of the majority party, while underrepresenting the minority party's issue priorities. A more comprehensive and valid measure needs to capture the issue attention of both the majority and minority parties. Measurement validity is obviously a central component of directly connecting congressional policymaking with policy subsystems. More importantly, the parallel processing capabilities of the parties need to be fully utilized in order to properly assess how partisan issue attention behaves at the macro-level, which is the first step in connecting the levels of policymaking abstraction. Analyses using such a measure need to account for how the parties influence their counterpart's level of attention to specific policy issues. The agenda setting capacity of both parties has implications for how we understand contemporary congressional policymaking and policy subsystems. Specifically, the ability of the minority party to engage in effective agenda setting activities uncovers previously overlooked avenues of subsystem disruption.

Complete majority party agenda control—suggested by cartel theory—does not mean the minority party is without influence. Both parties focus on the relatively small number of issues that are present on the institutional agenda, but the parties also try to shape the institutional agenda to meet the parties' respective policy goals. Moreover, parties aim to attack the integrity of the opposing party and focus on agenda items and policy frames that create larger cleavages between the parties (Lee 2009). For this reason, both the majority and minority parties should be responding to one another to combat these attempts to change public perception. After all, political losers—in this

case, the minority party—are always incentivized to strategically oppose the party in power and undermine the status quo in the hopes of wresting control of government (Riker 1986).

Debate over the policy priorities of government is the perfect medium for partisan opposition. “New issues—if they can split the majority coalition and are sufficiently attractive to the electorate—offer the opportunity for converting old losers into new winners (and old winners into new losers), and are thus the stock-in-trade of successful parties and politicians (Carmines 1991: 75). This type of partisan issue competition is an underdeveloped concept in the study of American political institutions. However, examinations of party dynamics in other legislative arenas—outside the U.S. context—demonstrate that the minority party can routinely influence the policy priorities of the majority party. Similar dynamics may also be at play in the partisan politics of Congress.

Examinations of European party politics are the most prolific in terms of demonstrating how the opposition can influence the majority party. For example, Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2009) found that opposition parties in the Danish parliament are able to affect the overall policy debate, because opposition parties are free to focus on policy issues that are more advantageous to the party; government parties are less free to pursue such policies and must respond to the systematic agenda. European political parties are also especially responsive to public issue attention (Spoon and Kluver 2014), so opposition parties are at a distinct advantage over the majority party due to the opposition’s freedom to emphasize a host of policy issues.).

Similar relationships exist across a number of multiparty systems. In particular,

numerous European parties modify their respective policy agendas for vote-seeking purposes. For example, Meyer and Wagner's (2013) analysis of 22 European party manifestos demonstrated how electoral wins and losses push opposition parties to adopt a "niche" or "mainstream" policy agenda. The ability for parties to fill such niche roles has also been shown to be vital to the opposition's ability to set the policy agenda in single-country analyses (Vliegenhart, et al. 2011).

The European multi-party systems differ from the American context in important ways, so there may be no reason to expect the same inter-party dynamics across political systems. However, in many ways, European studies provide a stricter test of minority party influence due to the unitary government structures and unicameral legislatures present in so many European countries; the Danish parliament is the best example of such parliamentary systems. Unitary systems and unicameral legislatures conceivably allow for greater domination by majority parties with less access for the opposition. Conversely, the federal structure of government in America and the bicameral arrangement of Congress create greater access for the minority party. Therefore, the very presence of minority party influence in other legislative institutions suggests the same dynamics could be observed in Congress. The ability of the minority party to affect majority party issue attention has the potential to change the way we view contemporary congressional agenda setting. Rather than simply taking for granted macro-level policy outcomes as an extension of majority party control, the interplay between the parties' issue prioritization. More importantly, minority party influence in Congress is a potential connection between the macro and meso-levels of policymaking abstraction, because it would demonstrate the disruptive dynamism of macro-level

attention. Minority party influence in Congress provides a relatively low cost avenue for subsystem issues to be thrust onto the macro-political agenda. For these reasons, the ability of the minority party to influence majority party issue attention needs to be explicitly analyzed.

The effect of the majority party on minority party issue attention is assumed, because the majority's control over the legislative process inherently shapes the minority party's policy priorities. Therefore, the important aspect of the relationship is whether or not the minority party can affect changes in the level of attention paid to specific policy problems by the majority. This testable proposition leads to the *minority party effect hypothesis*.

The minority party influence hypothesis: Increases in issue attention from the minority party will result in corresponding changes to majority party issue attention.

It may also be a possibility that partisan policy priorities are simply a reaction to majority control. If the majority is successful in creating a cartel that controls the congressional agenda at all levels of the legislative process, any measure of issue attention may be capturing reactions to the congressional agenda or the "business of the day" (e.g., hearings, bills, etc.). If this is the case, attention is simply a byproduct of the majority's legislative cartel. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect changes in issue attention to follow the manifestation of specific agenda items on the legislative calendar. This line of thinking of runs antithetical to the *minority party effect hypothesis*, and provides an alternate explanation for changes to majority party issue attention.

The majority party control hypothesis: Partisan issue attention is a reaction to the majority's policy agenda being made manifest through legislative outputs and procedures.

Party control of government also plays an important role in the legislative process, and may have implications for changes in partisan issue attention. Divided government produces very different legislative outputs than unified government (Jones 1994; Edwards et al. 1997; Coleman 1999; Binder 2003; Mayhew 2005). The effects of divided government extend beyond the passage of legislation. Party control of government affects the size of the president's legislative agenda, the use of executive orders and agreements, bureaucratic rule-making, and the appointment of federal judges (Binder and Maltzman 2002; Howell 2003; Yackee and Yackee 2009; Krutz and Peake 2009; Cohen 2012).

It is important to reiterate that parties are comprised of strategic actors who manipulate the political process to achieve policy and electoral goals (Riker 1986). If parties are acting strategically, it may be more difficult for the minority to affect changes in majority party issue attention during periods of unified government. The party in control during periods of unified government may be less inclined to respond to the minority party, because the minority is in a weaker institutional position with regard to public sentiment. Controlling the policy debate should also be much easier for the majority party under periods of unified government. The extant literature on the effects of divided government and the strategic motivations of political parties suggest the ability of the minority party to affect majority party issue attention may be conditional

on party control of government.

Conditional minority party influence hypothesis: The ability of the minority party to affect majority party attention will vary across periods of divided and unified government.

Clearly, the majority party in Congress has immense control over the legislative agenda. The question remains whether or not the minority party is able to shift the focus of the majority on specific policy issues—applying issue attention to congressional politics is key to understanding this relationship. These inter-party dynamics have serious implications for connecting Congress and policy subsystems through the concept of issue attention. If issue attention in Congress really is just a function of the majority party's policy agenda and the minority party has no influence on the policy debate, then agenda setting in Congress becomes incredibly simplified with one party owning the agenda. However, the presence of minority party influence would suggest a more dynamic agenda setting process in Congress, and this dynamism is a vital component of understanding how congressional politics affect subsystems. Put simply, it is impossible to make a connection between the macro and meso-levels of policymaking abstraction without first understanding issue attention dynamics within Congress.

Meso-Level Policymaking in Subsystems

Issue attention plays a key role in policy subsystems. Attention can transform a subsystem by placing an issue in the macro-political spotlight. The movement of an issue onto the macro-political agenda potentially introduces new actors into the

subsystem, breaks down policy jurisdictions between subsystems, and changes dominate policy frames. Policy actors and coalitions can use issue attention to strategically manipulate the subsystem environment, but sometimes attention is unavoidable due to focusing events or other exogenous changes to the political environment. Most importantly, attention is a vital subsystem resource that must be accounted for when examining policy change.

Issue attention plays a predominant role in two theories of the policy process that deal exclusively with policy subsystems: Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET) and the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF). PET is perhaps the theory of the policy process most closely connected with the macro-level of policymaking abstraction. Baumgartner and Jones (1991, 1993, 2009) observed that numerous policy issues displayed long periods of stability and incremental change followed by very sudden bursts of dramatic change. The presence of policy punctuations stood in sharp contrast to the dominant view of incrementalism in the policy sciences (Lindblom 1959; Wildavsky 1964). PET maintains that stasis and incrementalism are the norm when policy monopolies—powerful supporting policy ideas that monopolize the political understanding and institutional arrangements supporting a particular issue—remain in place. Significant policy change takes place when issue attention shifts and disrupts these monopolies by expanding the scope of conflict in the subsystem.

The ACF places a more explicit focus on understanding the inner-workings of policy subsystems, but issue attention still plays a vital role. According to the ACF, subsystems are defined by a multitude of policy actors and structured by a set of relatively stable parameters—attributes of the issue domain, subsystems resources,

policy values, and institutional rules (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993; Sabatier and Weible 2007). Participants within subsystems will align themselves with other policy actors who hold similar beliefs and formulate strategies to achieve their respective policy goals. Policy change happens when a dominant coalition is supplanted by minority coalitions or when the power structure of the subsystem is significantly altered.

Within the ACF, there are very few explicit mentions of the concept of issue attention. However, a key component of the ACF is the effect of external subsystem events, such as changes in socio-economic conditions, public opinion, governing coalitions, and other subsystems. Issue attention can facilitate such change by introducing new information, changing elections, shifting institutional venues, and adding new actors to the subsystem. These external events either caused changes to issue attention or are the direct result of shifts in attention levels. For this reason, issue attention is a valuable resource for subsystems actors who want to change the policymaking environment in order to undermine the dominant coalition. Conversely, the dominant coalition may want to avoid attention in order to maintain control over the subsystem. It is clear that issue attention plays a key role in the ACF, even if attention is not explicitly listed as an aspect of the framework.

Both PET and the ACF demonstrate that issue attention is a fundamental element of analyses of subsystems and policy change. Shifts in attention can potentially disturb subsystems and cause a policy issue to move from a state of stasis and incrementalism to one of disruption and significant change. These dynamics underscore the importance of understanding how macro-level attention in Congress affects

subsystems.

Recall that the attention allocation process is cyclical in nature (Downs 1972). The role of issue attention in the theories of the policy process suggests the initial stages of “alarmed discovered” have the greatest potential for subsystem disruption. The empirical and theoretical foundations of the initial stages of the issue attention allocation are well developed and often coupled with the concept of policy subsystems. Changes to issue attention can affect changes to policy frames (Baumgartner and Jones 1991; Schrad 2010; Baumgartner and Jones 2009; Crow 2010), decisions regarding venue shopping (Dijkstra 2012; Stephenson 2012), information flows in institutions (Robinson et al. 2007; Breuning and Koski 2009; Boswell 2012; Alexandrova et al. 2012), and salient, exogenous events (John and Jennings 2010). Singular focusing events also have the ability to open “windows of opportunity” that allow for policy change (Kingdon 1984; 2003; Birkland 1997, 2004; Zahariadis 2007). These windows of opportunity shed light on previously ignored policy indicators or bring new information and actors into a subsystem, which results in policy change. Public opinion is also a significant factor for attention allocation and subsequent subsystem disruption (Jones and Jenkins-Smith 2007; Jennings and John 2009). A common theme among the studies mentioned in this section is the factors that cause attention reallocation and policy change are external to the subsystem. While the exact causal mechanisms are not always defined, it is clear exogenous factors are the driving force behind issue attention and subsystem disruption. This study seeks to uncover this casual mechanism by exclusively focusing on how shifts to partisan issue attention in Congress—i.e., an exogenous factor—affect subsystems.

Clearly, fluctuations in issue attention can create opportunities for subsystem change. Coupled with the theoretical foundations of PET and the ACF, the extant literature on subsystem change suggests dramatic shifts in attention at the macro-level of policymaking abstraction—in this case, Congress—will change the subsystem environment and result in policy change. Moreover, factors exogenous to subsystems often instigate these changes to issue allocation, which should provide a clear signal for potential policy change. This leads to very simple and testable hypothesis.

The subsystem disruption hypothesis: Dramatic increases of attention in Congress linked to exogenous factors will result in corresponding subsystem disruption and policy change.

The implications for change to issue attention in the early stages of the attention allocation process are clear. However, very little scholarly work examines how an issue exits the agenda after the issue has been thrust onto the macro-political agenda. If it can be shown that changes to issue attention in Congress affect subsystems, it may also be possible to determine the dynamics surrounding the departure of the same issue from the macro-political agenda.

Downs (1972) suggested the initial intensity directed an issue would eventual diminish after either a solution is reached or policymakers and the public realize the substantial costs necessarily to rectify the problem. While there logic to the waxing and waning of policy issues, this explanation provides very little insight into how an issue actually exits the agenda. Peters and Hogwood (1985) observed the ebb and flow of this cycle, but no clear casual mechanisms were identified.

The very nature of attention allocation and information processing at the macro-level of policymaking abstraction produces a zero-sum agenda setting process. After all, only so many issues can be considered at any one time. Attention must be reallocated between issues when attention levels change or when a new issue enters onto the agenda. The zero-sum nature of the agenda gives us clues as to how the final stages of the issue allocation process may play out.

Significant spikes in attention to a single policy issue necessarily result in a monopolization of the agenda space. These highly salient issues will be referred to as “monopolizing issues.” Monopolizing issues inherently consume most of the available agenda space, which leaves very little attention for other policy issues. As new issues begin to monopolize the agenda space, old ones are supplanted—or, at the very least, attention levels for other issues either drops to a negligible level or exits the agenda completely. This leads to a final hypothesis regarding subsystems and issue attention.

The issue exit hypothesis: The exit of a monopolizing issue from the macro-political agenda will coincide with exogenous subsystem factors that cause a dramatic shift in attention to another issue.

Mapping the entry and exit of policy issues onto the macro-political agenda is the key to connecting the macro and meso-levels of policymaking abstraction. Shifts in attention and monopolizing issues should provide clear signals of subsystem disruption. Moreover, directly tying macro-level issue attention to subsystems will allow for the clear identification of exogenous factors that cause these changes. The hypotheses put forward in this section provide testable propositions for the presence of these

relationships.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to explain how and why the concept of issue attention is the key to making a connection between the macro and meso-levels of policymaking abstraction. Specifically, the macro-level is defined as policymaking within the U.S. Congress and the meso-level is defined by policy subsystems. The various levels of policymaking abstraction are characterized by generalizability and specificity. Higher levels of policymaking abstraction make broad generalizations across policy issues; lower levels of abstraction do not make such generalizations and instead focus on dynamics within specific policy domains. Each of these levels of abstraction is important because the specificity within issue domains warrants serious investigation, but generalizations about the policy process also need to be formulated, especially within policymaking institutions. The purpose of this study is to make a connection between the levels of abstraction by analyzing issue attention in Congress and policy subsystems.

Decision-makers must prioritize which policy issues receive attention, because cognitive limitations demand that only a handful of issues can be dealt with at any one time. This means that some policy issues encounter intense scrutiny—and change—within policymaking institutions, while other issues are ignored. Parallel processing institutions at the macro-level help facilitate the processing of information in order for institutions to solve multiple policy problems simultaneously. Political parties are one such institution that provides the main focus for understanding issue attention at the macro-level. As such, the first step in connecting the macro and meso-levels of

policymaking abstraction is to understand what factors affect partisan issue attention in Congress. Specifically, the ability of the minority party to influence the policy debate needs to be assessed.

Issue attention from political parties in Congress has implications for subsystems, because attention is a vital subsystem resource. Dramatic shifts in attention caused by exogenous forces can disrupt subsystems by introducing new information, changing policy frames, and upsetting the balance of power between subsystem coalitions. These attention shifts are the bridge that connects macro meso-level policymaking and therefore require further scrutiny to more fully understand this connection.

Moving forward, the focus of the study is twofold: understanding the dynamics of partisan issue attention in Congress and deciphering how shifts in macro-level attention affect policy subsystems. Subsequent chapters will examine these relationships and empirically test the hypotheses put forward in this chapter. Chapter 3 describes the development of the measure of partisan issue attention used in this study.

Chapter 3: Surveying the Lay of the Land

“These 1-minute speeches at the start of the business each day give Members, even of low seniority, the chance to speak on issues of real concern to the Nation. I know that I hear from people all over the country responding to what has been said during these 1-minutes, and I think those people all over the country who want to follow our proceedings would be deprived, and I do not want to see that happen. When individual Members seek to advance an agenda more far-reaching than even their leadership would propose, these 1-minutes provide a good forum for discussion.” –Rep. Steve Chabot (R-OH) in a one-minute speech given on September 10, 1997.

Introduction

Issue attention is a key component of the policymaking process. Decision-makers at all levels of politics cannot focus on every policy problem facing the general public. Therefore, policymakers must place priorities by giving attention to certain policy problems while completely ignoring others. As explored in the previous chapter, the use of attention as a political variable is well documented in the extant literature examining dynamics within policy subsystems—considered a lower level of abstraction in political analysis. It is less clear how the concept of attention can be applied to higher levels of political abstraction, like the U.S. Congress. More importantly, the institutional rules of policymaking institutions directly affect how policies are prioritized, so institutional rules must be taken into account when assessing macro-level issue attention. This chapter explains how partisan issue attention in the U.S. House of Representatives is measured and addresses two central questions: does this new measure of attention behave like other, more established measures of issue attention? And, does partisan issue attention display distinct characteristics of party activity?

A key component for better understanding the politics of attention within the contemporary Congress is recognizing how the two major political parties distribute attention across policy problems. Like many legislative institutions, the U.S. Congress is a procedural, rule-driven arena—especially the lower chamber, the House of Representatives. As such, parties exhibit considerable control over the congressional agenda. Specifically, the majority party is able to exert its will at all levels of the legislative process (Cox and McCubbins 2005; 2007). Political parties are integral parts of contemporary congressional politics, but majority party domination in Congress makes analyzing partisan issue attention extremely difficult. Any measure of attention that utilizes a legislative output or throughput—such as, committee hearings, bills reported out of committee, or roll call votes—will only measure the policy priorities of the majority party. Such one-sided measures of attention cannot properly assess the issue attention of both parties simultaneously.

The source of issue attention used in this project overcomes the problem of one-sided measures of attention in Congress by analyzing speeches given during the one-minute speech debate period in the House of Representatives. The one-minute speech debate period is unique because both parties are given equal time to address the chamber. Moreover, the party caucuses play a large role in the policy messages that are sent during these speeches. The measure of partisan issue attention presented in this project uses a supervised learning text classification technique to categorize all one-minute speeches given between 1989 and 2012 according to the specific policy topic discussed in the speech.

One-minute speeches in the House provide an ideal unit of analysis in which we can observe partisan issue attention. As such, analyzing the policy priorities contained within these speeches may provide the link between the macro and meso levels of policymaking abstraction. However, partisan issue attention needs to be analyzed in order to ascertain how and why the parties use floor speeches. The face validity of any measure of attention should not be taken for granted; nor should we expect the measure to always accurately capture attention. Like any political phenomenon, issue attention varies across time and space. It is conceivable that, at times, partisan issue attention in the House is intense and concentrated on only a few policy issues. At other times, issue attention may be far more disparate. During such times the measure could be reflecting the priorities of individuals, rather than the party caucus. Understanding such variability is paramount. This chapter examines these dynamics by analyzing how attention is allocated during one-minute speeches, whether or not one-minute speeches share characteristics with other measures of attention, who gives one-minute speeches, and overall ebb and flow of partisan issue attention in the House.

The chapter proceeds in several parts. First, the one-minute speech debate period in the U.S. House of Representatives is identified and validated as a measure of macro-level issue attention. The data collection and text classification process used to create this new measure of attention is also explained. Second, a general overview of the data is presented to illustrate how the parties prioritize policy issues in the aggregate. Comparisons are also drawn to other, more established measures of attention in order to validate partisan issue attention and identify time periods that potentially

bridge the macro and meso levels of policymaking. Finally, the data are analyzed in various ways to better understand patterns of party messaging.

Measuring Partisan Issue Attention

Finding a Measure of Attention

Chapter 2 discusses how and why attention is a disruptive force in the policy process. Despite the concept's important implications for policy change, attention is not easily observed and measured—especially within macro-level policymaking institutions. One legislative output often used to measure attention in the U.S. Congress is the subcommittee hearings process. Hearings are seen as the main arena in which subsystem actors interact to affect policy change, because the witnesses at hearings are often important subsystem players (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). Individual legislators on policy subcommittees can also be important for the subsystem, because other legislators look at these individuals as the experts within specific policy domains (Polsby 1968; Fenno 1974; Gilligan and Krehbiel 1987, 1989, 1990; Krehbiel 1991). As such, subcommittee members provide a vital access point for non-congressional subsystem actors. For these reasons, committee hearings are a specific legislative activity that has been used to measure issue attention in Congress (Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Baumgartner and Jones 2009). In certain policy contexts, hearings can provide a valid measure of attention that can signal changes to policy frames and subsystem disruption. The problem with using hearings as a measure of partisan attention in Congress is the manner in which a single party—i.e., the majority party—dominates such a process.

Subcommittee hearings often signal the policy priorities of the committee, because hearings offer an opportunity for in-depth investigation of specific policy problems. However, the minority party has very little input into the focus of hearings. In fact, the majority party—more specifically, the committee and subcommittee chairs—completely dictates the topic of hearings (King 1997). Majority party domination of the hearings process does not allow minority party members to address their own policy priorities. According to one minority committee staffer, “we can only respond to what the majority wants to focus on” (Staff Interviews 2014). Not only does the majority party control the policy focus of hearings, but the majority party also biases the make-up of hearing witnesses. Typically, the proportion of witnesses is 3-1 for the majority party, so, in a given hearing, the majority party will invite three witnesses while the minority party only gets to invite one witness. Given the majority party’s control over the process, hearings yield a very one-sided measurement of attention.

Hearings are not the only legislative process that has been used to measure issue attention and policy agendas in Congress. For example, Cox and McCubbins (2007) used roll call votes that displayed a clear divide between the parties and unified party leadership to examine agenda setting in Congress. In a similar vein, Bader (1996) utilized media accounts, legislative histories, and archival materials to identify the parties’ policy priorities across several congressional sessions. The problem with these approaches is the majority party has the ability to control all aspects of the legislative process. This is especially true in a procedure-driven arena—like the U.S. House of Representatives—where the majority party dominates the policymaking process by controlling committees and legislative rules (Cox and McCubbins 2005). Similar

dynamics have been found across a number of institutional contexts and at different levels of the legislative process (Neto et al. 2003; Cox and McCubbins 2007; Stiglitz and Weingast 2010; Miller and Overby 2010; Clark 2012). Other studies of partisan agendas circumvented the problems of policy outputs and institutional rules by analyzing the policy agenda of a specific party using caucus activities and documents (Lee 2009). However, the problem remains that none of these approach accurately measures the policy priorities of both parties simultaneously across more than one or two congressional sessions.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that political speeches are a potentially useful tool for analyzing issue attention in comparative legislative institutions (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2009; John and Jennings 2010; Bevan, John, and Jennings 2011; Mortensen et al. 2011), but speeches remain an under-utilized unit of analysis in the study of American politics.² One medium for debate that can shed light on the policy priorities of the two major parties in the U.S. Congress is the one-minute speech debate period. One-minute speeches take place at the beginning of the legislative day and allow an outlet for any member—regardless of seniority—to address the House floor. The speaker has complete discretion over the content of the speech, which can range from specific mentions of public policy—like offshore oil and natural gas drilling—to congratulatory notes directed at the speaker’s constituency—like recognizing the high school state basketball champions. The Speaker of the House reserves time for members from each party—typically 10 or 15 speeches from each side of the aisle—to address the floor on a first-come, first-serve basis. For this reason, the

² Quinn et al. (2009) provide an excellent example of how congressional speeches can be used to analyze political attention in Congress.

one-minute speech debate period provides an outlet for both parties to announce their respective policy priorities concurrently.

Parties began utilizing the one-minute speech debate period in the 1980s. However, the caucuses became more intensely involved in the crafting of policy messages during one-minute speeches when Dick Gephardt became the House Republican Leader and Newt Gingrich became the House Republican Whip in 1989 (Evans 2001). At this point, the communications groups for both parties—i.e., the “Democratic Message Group” and the Republican Theme Team”—began orchestrating the parties’ policy stances through one-minute speeches (Harris 2005; Schneider 2013). Recall from Chapter 1 the definition of congressional agendas as an “up-front activity by party leaders for the explicit purpose of influencing the tenor and substance of the policy debate in Congress and the policy dialogue with the president” (Bader 1996: 11). Given this definition, utilizing the one-minute speech debate period to measure the policy priorities of the parties is appropriate.

A series of interviews conducted with both Republican and Democratic staff members help to validate the use of one-minute speeches as a measure of partisan issue attention. According to several member offices, the one-minute speech debate period is ideal because it gives members valuable time to speak on the floor about salient issues (Staff Interviews 2014). Not only do the speeches appear on national television outlets—such as CSPAN—but both the party caucuses and individual member offices use the text and video from one-minute speeches for newsletters, mailers, and local and national news outlets. Moreover, the party caucuses have a very firm hand in the content of one-minute speeches. One Republican staff noted, “the [caucus] sends us

weekly emails asking members to highlight specific issues during the [debate period] and there are regular legislative director meetings outlining the party message” (Staff Interviews 2014). The Democratic caucus has gone so far as to draft stacks of one-minute speeches for members to use on a daily basis (Staff Interview 2014). The history of party involvement in the one-minute speech debate period and the interviews conducted with member offices makes it clear one-minute speeches provide a viable measure of partisan attention—one that allows parties and individual members to broadcast their policy priorities to both the institution and constituents.

The Supervised Learning Process

Speeches given during the one-minute speech debate period on the House floor provide an ideal unit of analysis for measuring partisan issue attention. The entire population of speeches is needed in order to obtain a comprehensive dataset. Therefore, one-minute speeches were downloaded from online versions of the Congressional Record. The data-gathering process yielded a total population of 43,880 one-minute speeches given on the House floor between 1989 and 2012.³ There is no way to efficiently label 43,330 speeches “by-hand,” so an automated text classification process is used to help efficiently categorize the data. It is also important to note the project uses a pre-determined coding scheme. Specifically, Baumgartner and Jones’ Policy Agendas Project major-topic coding scheme is utilized.⁴ The main reason for using this coding scheme is that direct comparisons can be drawn between the measure of partisan issue attention developed for this research project and other measures of attention and agenda

³ Yearly populations range from 867-3508.

⁴ The 20 “major topic” codes are utilized to categorize the data. This coding scheme places each speech in one of the 20 issue categories.

setting developed by both the Policy Agendas Project and the Comparative Agendas Project.

Superimposing a pre-determined coding scheme on the data precludes the use of a fully automated text classification process.⁵ For this reason, a “supervised learning” approach is used to categorize the data according to policy topic. While supervised learning is far more costly than fully automated approaches, a supervised learning process also incorporates the validity of human-coded text documents. Supervised learning processes classify text by first “training” on the sample of human-coded text and then categorizing the remainder of the uncoded documents based on mathematical algorithms. In this way, supervised learning processes are a mix of human and automated text classification.

A representative sample of human-coded one-minute speeches was needed to create the training dataset. However, the number of policy topics and the language used to debate these topics on the floor of the House of Representatives varies from year to year. The total population of speeches was stratified and sampled by year in order to account for these possibilities.⁶ After stratifying and sampling, each speech was assigned a single category according to the Policy Agendas Project coding scheme, which contains 20 different “major topic” policy categories. An additional category

⁵ Such an approach uses statistical “topic models” to estimate the appropriate number of categories and assigns each observation into one of the substantive topics (Quinn et al. 2010). While this approach is the most efficient way to categorize large amounts of text, topic models do not assume a set of a-priori categories. Therefore, the topic model approach is not appropriate for this research project.

⁶ Tortora’s (1978) equation for sampling on a multinomial variable is utilized to determine the sample size for each year. This is a variation on Cochran’s (1977) equation for sampling on a dichotomous variable. These equations are available in the appendix.

was added to the coding scheme for speeches that contained no policy-relevant information. This category is referred to as “no-policy.” A total of 11,333 one-minute speeches were categorized to create the human-coded training dataset. Mathematical algorithms then used these hand-coded speeches to classify the full population of speeches.⁷ The final result is a dataset comprised of 43,330 speeches categorized by policy issue that describes the issue attention of both parties concurrently.

Comparing Measures of Attention

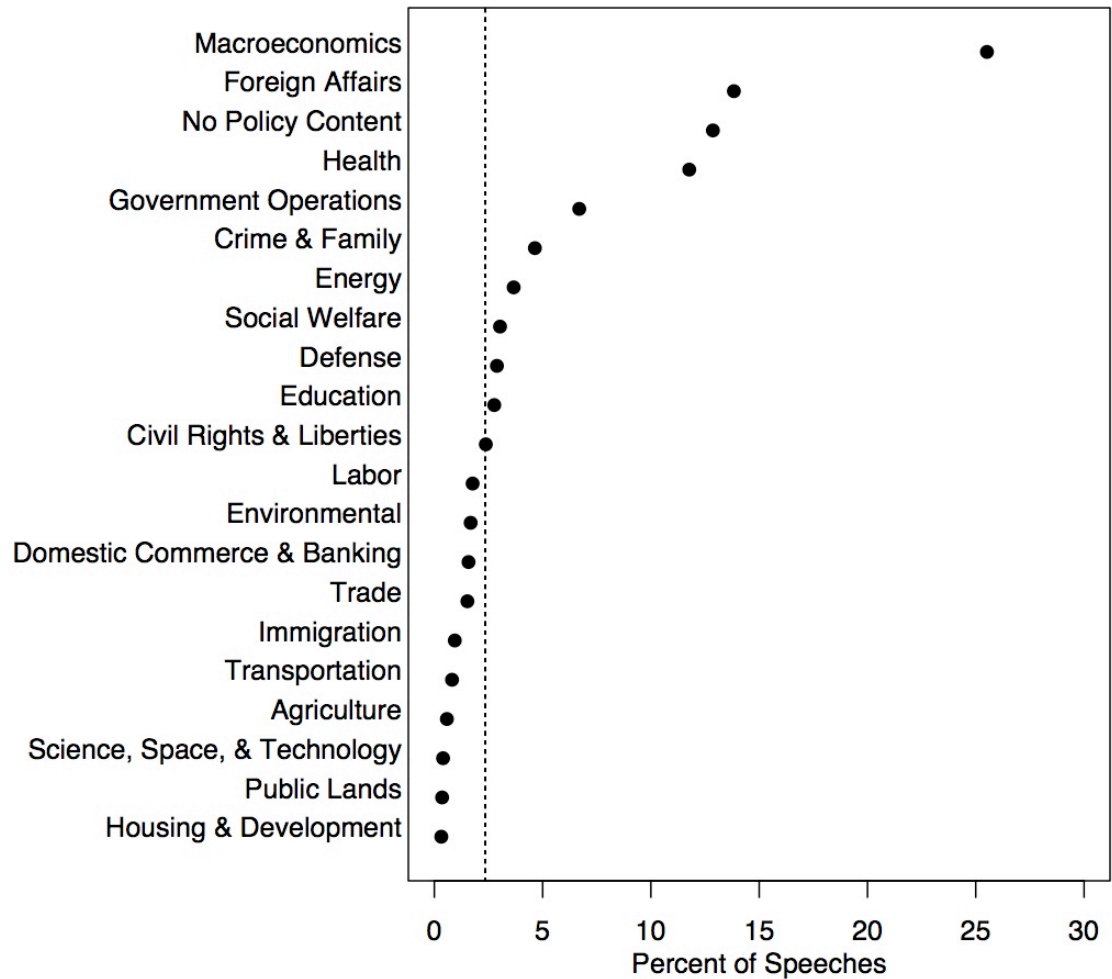
A Broad Look at the Data

Figure 3.1 shows the percent of speeches across each category in the data. An important aspect of the data is that only about 15 percent of all speeches given during the one-minute speech debate period do not contain any policy-relevant material. This means the vast majority of speeches refer to a specific policy issue. It is unsurprising that some of the speeches would refer to a legislator’s individual constituency or a vague valence issue, but the fact that only 15 percent of one-minute speeches fall into the no-policy category further validates the measure as a means to analyze the policy priorities of the two major parties in Congress.

Figure 3.1 also makes it abundantly clear that only a handful of issues garner even an insignificant amount of attention during the one-minute speech debate period. In particular, it is clear macroeconomics is by far the most discussed policy issue. Nearly 27 percent of all one-minute speeches discuss macroeconomics policy—almost twice as much as the next most discussed policy area, foreign affairs. Moreover, the

⁷ An in-depth description of the supervised learning process (e.g., the coding scheme, problems encountered during the coding process, and an explanation of the coding algorithms) is available in the appendix.

Figure 3.1: Percentage of One-Minute Speeches Across Policy Topics, 1989-2012



four largest categories in the dataset (i.e., macroeconomics, foreign affairs, no-policy, and health policy) comprise more than two-thirds of all speeches given between 1989 and 2012.

The issues that garner little or no attention in the contemporary Congress cannot be overlooked. A total of 15 of the 21 categories in the dataset capture less than 5 percent of attention during the one-minute speech debate period. While most of these issues are neither salient with the public nor easy to communicate to the public, the issues still represent areas of substantive policy debate. Examinations of inattention

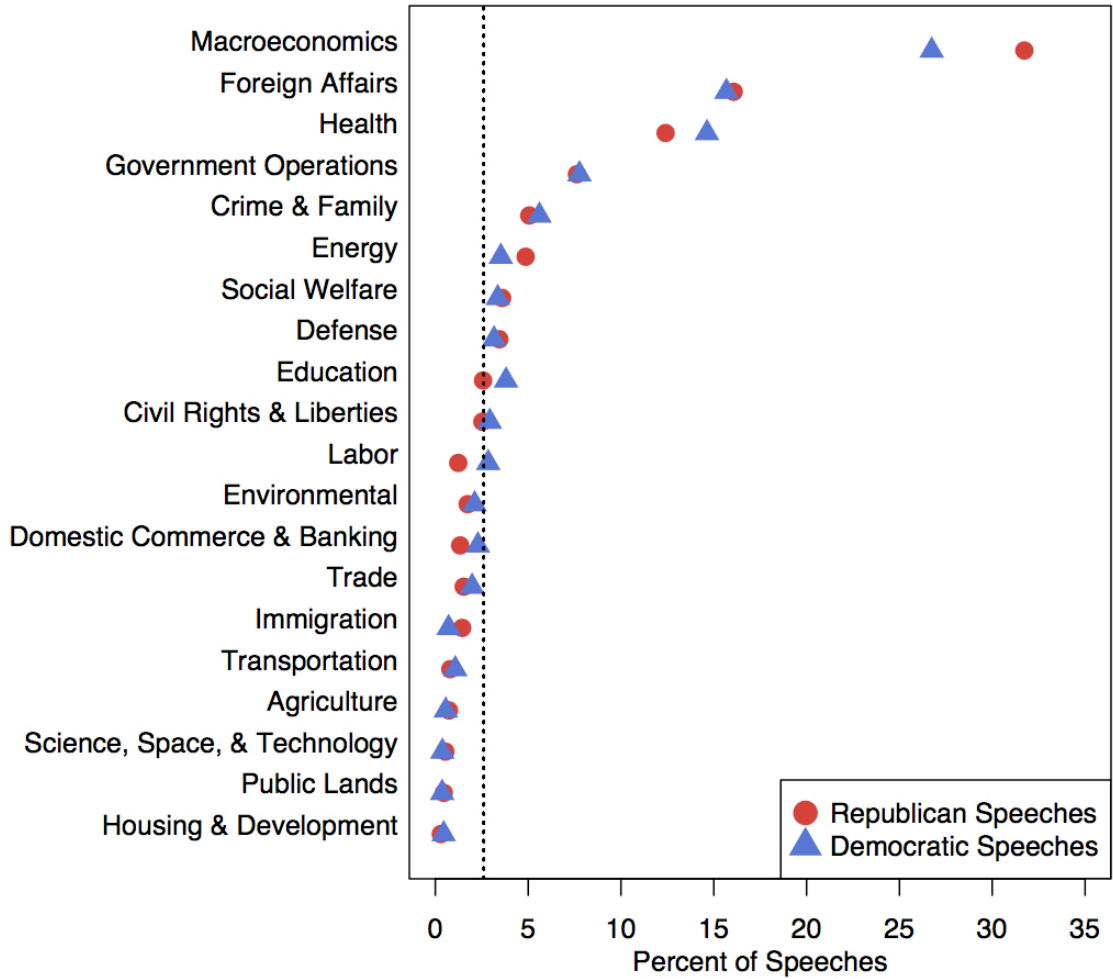
may be a potentially fruitful endeavor, because subsystems receiving little attention should remain in stasis or exhibit incremental policy change. Inattention is an underdeveloped aspect of analyzing policy subsystems that deserves further study.

The information in Figure 3.1 also makes it clear the parties choose to focus on a few issues, rather than maintain a diverse policy agenda. The handful of issues capturing large amounts of attention are issues that also appeal to the wider public. Macroeconomics, foreign affairs, and health policy are very broad categories that remain salient throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Most importantly, Figure 3.1 suggests the agenda space for the two major parties is relatively limited. Individuals and institutions can only focus on a limited number of problems at any one time. Figure 3.1 provides evidence of the limited carrying capacity of institutional agendas.

Figure 3.2 compares the percent of speeches given on each issue topic across both parties.⁸ While there are some minor discrepancies across a few policy issues, the parties are generally talking about the same issues in the same relative proportions. In fact, each yearly time series of partisan attention correlates at around $r=0.90$. This is a crucial point, because theories of American political parties suggest the parties will attempt to differentiate themselves from the competition (Lee 2009). Rather than seeing the parties focus on different policies, it is clear the parties choose to focus on the same issues. Budge and Farlie (1983) conceive of two different agenda strategies from parties: one of direct confrontation—wherein the parties confront one another on the same issue—and one of selective emphasis—wherein the parties speak past each other on different issues. The information in Figure 3.2 certainly speaks to the former

⁸ These percentages do not include the “no-policy” category.

Figure 3.2: Percent of One-Minute Speeches Across Policy Topics, by Party 1989-2012



strategy being present during the one-minute speech debate period.

Focus on the same issue from both parties does not mean the parties are not trying to differentiate themselves. Interviews with staffers from member offices that routinely engage in the one-minute speech debate period help explain the parties’ messaging techniques. According to several staffers on both sides of the aisle, the party caucuses are always trying to answer their counterparts and give the public a different product than their competitors (Staff Interviews 2014). It is also important to note that speakers never deviate from the party message. One staff member noted, “you never

give a speech on the floor and go against the caucus” (Staff Interviews 2014). The information in Figure 3.2 suggests the parties may actually be responding to one another; the policy frames may differ, but the substantive issues do not.

Comparing Measures of Issue Attention

In addition to examining the overall policy content of one-minute speeches, it is also worthwhile to compare partisan issue attention to other, more established measures of attention. Table 3.1 summarizes the percent of speeches across the 20 major topic codes⁹ and compares partisan issue attention to other measures of attention and agendas¹⁰ from Baumgartner and Jones’ Policy Agendas Project¹¹ and Wilkerson and Adler’s Congressional Bills Project.¹² One take-away from Table 3.1 is that each measure of attention places intense focus on only a handful of policy issues; though, the specific policy issues that receive significant focus varies greatly across the measures of attention. It is also clear the agenda space is incredibly limited across these measures of attention—

⁹ Again, these percentages do not include the “no-policy” category.

¹⁰ Bills reported out of committee, hearings, and public laws are included to compare partisan issue attention to other measures of congressional attention and the overall institutional agenda. State of the Union (SOTU) speeches capture the president’s policy priorities. Media attention is measured by policy topics covered in the New York Times editorial pages. Public opinion is measured as the proportion of responses to the Gallup Poll’s “most important question.”

¹¹ The data used here were originally collected by Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones, with the support of National Science Foundation grant numbers SBR 9320922 and 0111611, and were distributed through the Department of Government at the University of Texas at Austin. Neither NSF nor the original collectors of the data bear any responsibility for the analysis reported here.

¹² E. Scott Adler and John Wilkerson, *Congressional Bills Project: (1989-2011)*, NSF 00880066 and 00880061. The views expressed are those of the authors and not the National Science Foundation.

Table 3.1: Average Percent of Issue Attention Captured Across Different Political Agendas, by Policy Types**

Policy	Partisan Issue Attention	Congressional Bills				SOTU Speeches	News Coverage	Public Opinion
		Reported Out of Committee	Hearings	Public Laws	Speeches			
Macroeconomics	25.5%	1.4%	3.2%	1.2%	16.2%	2.4%	30.9%	
International Affairs	13.8%	3.4%	10.0%	4.5%	17.8%	16.7%	4.5%	
Health Care	11.8%	5.1%	8.3%	5.6%	8.3%	5.7%	9.5%	
Government Operations	6.7%	17.0%	12.2%	31.3%	4.8%	6.5%	5.2%	
Energy	4.6%	3.8%	3.7%	1.7%	2.5%	1.3%	1.9%	
Crime and Family Issues	3.7%	5.6%	5.8%	5.3%	6.7%	9.5%	12.1%	
Infrastructure	3.0%	5.8%	4.3%	3.6%	0.7%	2.2%	0.0%	
Defense	2.9%	7.5%	8.7%	6.8%	11.6%	5.5%	8.9%	
Welfare	2.8%	1.2%	2.0%	1.8%	6.2%	0.6%	6.2%	
Education	2.4%	2.3%	2.7%	2.8%	8.3%	3.3%	4.0%	
Civil Rights and Liberties	1.77%	1.6%	2.2%	1.0%	2.1%	2.0%	3.2%	
Banking and Domestic Commerce	1.7%	6.7%	9.5%	5.5%	2.5%	28.5%	0.5%	
Environmental	1.6%	6.2%	5.2%	2.8%	1.7%	2.2%	1.5%	
Labor	1.5%	1.4%	2.7%	1.2%	3.8%	1.3%	0.4%	
Trade	0.9%	2.2%	2.5%	2.0%	2.7%	3.6%	0.7%	
Immigration	0.8%	1.0%	1.0%	1.2%	1.1%	0.5%	1.8%	
Agriculture	0.6%	1.3%	2.9%	2.4%	0.3%	0.8%	0.0%	
Science, Space, and Technology	0.4%	3.2%	4.4%	1.8%	1.4%	4.2%	0.3%	
Public Lands	0.4%	22.1%	7.0%	16.6%	0.5%	1.1%	0.0%	
Housing	0.3%	2.3%	1.8%	0.9%	0.9%	2.2%	0.0%	

**Most measures of attention in the table range from 1989-2012. However, news coverage ranges from 1989-2008, congressional hearings range from 1989-2010, and public laws range from 1989-2011

involving lawmaking, media, and oratory activities. Every policy area garners at least Marginal scrutiny by most measures of attention,¹³ but only a few issues are seriously considered.

Table 3.1 also suggests partisan issue attention captures a different aspect of attention than other measures. Partisan issue attention differs dramatically from hearings and bills reported out of committee in terms of the policy issues covered by each measure. In this way, partisan issue attention is different measures of attention based on lawmaking activities in Congress. On the other hand, partisan issue attention is quite similar to both State of the Union speeches and public opinion, but the percentages differ across a number of policy issues. This finding makes sense, as the policy signals sent through the media and speeches are more likely to be issues that are both salient with and easily understood by the general public. As a whole, Table 3.1 provides evidence that the measure of partisan issue attention used in this project captures a dynamic not found in other conceptualizations of attention and legislative agendas.

Leptokurtic Distributions

Partisan issue attention is obviously capturing different aspects of the policy agenda in Congress than other measures of issue attention. Despite these differences, several similarities remain. Another point of comparison is whether or not the measure of partisan issue attention developed for this project behaves in the same way as other, more established measures of attention.

¹³ Public opinion contains four policy categories that garner zero percent of overall attention.

Most outputs from policymaking institutions produce particular kinds of distributions. Specifically, distributions built on institutional outputs and throughputs have a higher than normal kurtosis because there is often little or no change centered around the distribution's mean and a small number of dramatic changes located in the distribution's tails (Jones et al. 2003; Jones and Baumgartner 2005; True et al. 2007). These "leptokurtic" distributions result because policy actions within institutions are a costly endeavor. Institutional costs "keep the course of public policy steady and unwavering in the face of lots of changes; that is, they do not allow for the continuous adjustment to the environment" (Jones et al. 2003: 152). This "institutional friction" can create dramatic changes when the context allows for it. However, large-scale changes in policymaking activities are few and far between. Therefore, a distribution resulting from institutionally imposed friction will have a high central peak—resulting from lots of incremental change—and very long tails—resulting from a small number of dramatic changes.

Leptokurtic distributions are the hallmark of a number of political outcomes and measures of political attention, such as markets, election, media coverage, congressional hearings, public laws, and budgets (Jones et al. 2003). Using a standardized measure of kurtosis (Anscombe and Glynn 1983),¹⁴ a normal distribution has a kurtosis of three; a kurtosis above three represents a leptokurtic distribution. The presence of a leptokurtic distribution within one-minute speeches would provide evidence to help validate the measure as a source of issue attention. Moreover, leptokurtic distributions provide clues as to when and where policy punctuations take place. The presence of substantial

¹⁴ Standardized kurtosis is defined as the fourth moment around the mean divided by the square of the variance.

changes—found in the tails of the distribution—in partisan issue attention could highlight points in time when macro-level attention affects policy subsystems. Put simply, the presence of such punctuations would provide the foundation for connecting the macro and meso levels of policymaking.

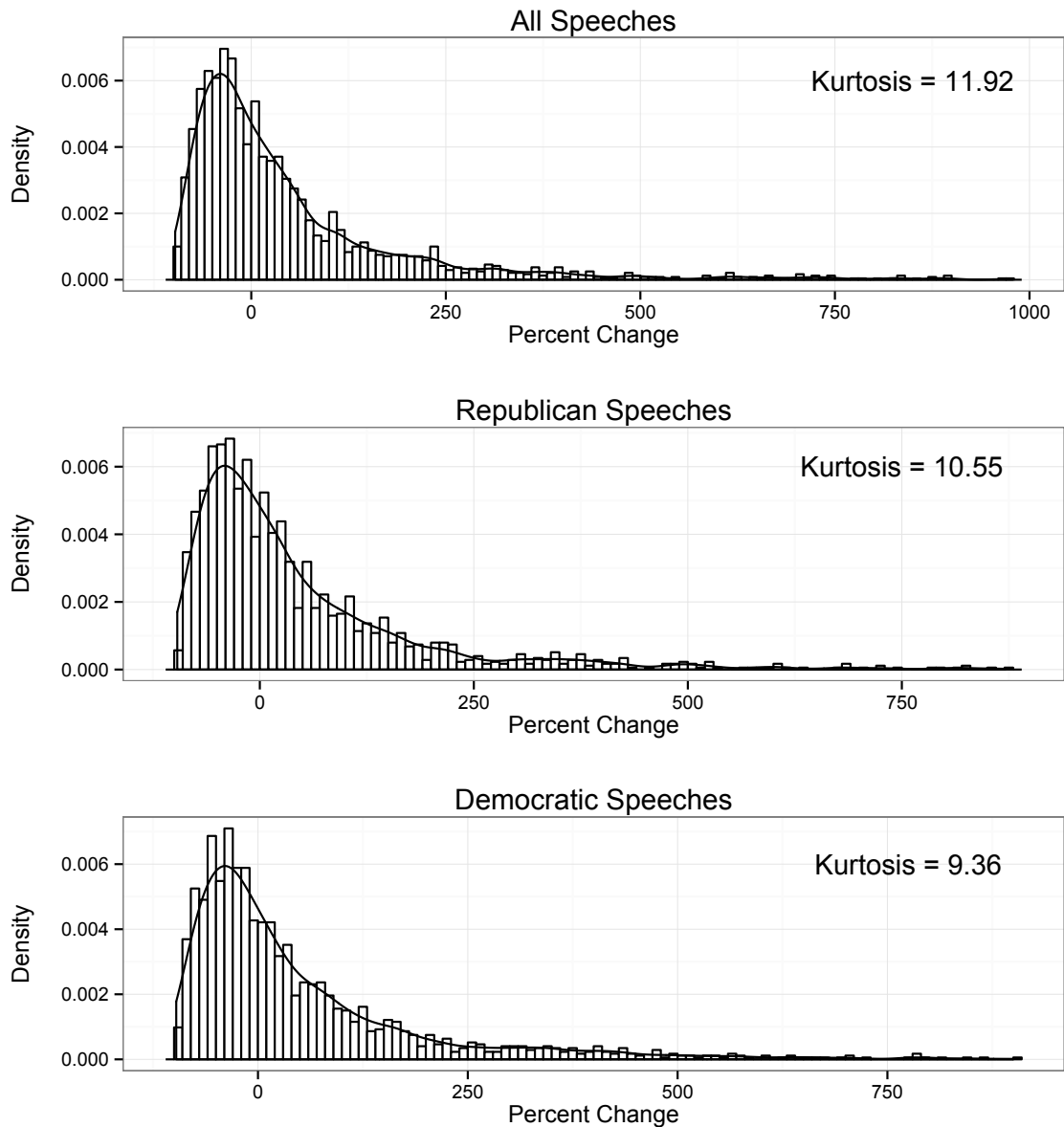
Figure 3.3 displays the monthly percent change in issue attention across all policy topics in the dataset for all speeches, Democratic speeches, and Republican speeches.¹⁵ All three plots in Figure 3.3 indicate the percent change in one-minute speeches across policy topics consistently yields a leptokurtic distribution. All three distributions have very high, slender peaks and extremely long tails. Specifically, each distribution has an exceptionally long, positive tail. Moreover, the kurtosis for each distribution is well above that of a normal distribution (the kurtosis for a normal distribution is three).

The three distributions in Figure 3.3 are nearly identical. The median value in each distribution is between -0.86 and 1.04.¹⁶ The high distribution peaks and median values centered on zero suggest the percent change of issue attention in one-minute speeches varies little from month to month. However, the long, positive tails on the distributions indicates there are brief time periods when issue attention displays dramatic increases. The lack of similar, negative changes on the opposite end of the distributions suggests issue attention in one-minute speeches decreases at a much slower rate after a dramatic increase. These large spikes in attention may be the key to

¹⁵ $Percent\ change = (Percent_{t_2} - Percent_{t_1}) / Percent_{t_1}$

¹⁶ Median values: all speeches = 1.04; Democratic speeches = -0.86; Republican speeches = 0.00.

Figure 3.3: Monthly Percent Change in One-Minute Speeches, by Policy Issue 1989-2012



connecting the macro and meso levels of policymaking abstraction, because such punctuations could lead to subsequent subsystem change.

The information in Figure 3.3 provides two key pieces of evidence. First, it is apparent a measure of partisan issue attention built on one-minute speeches in the House of Representatives behaves in the same way as other measures of issue attention. Distributions of percent change in issue attention within one-minute speeches display

higher than normal kurtoses and long, positive tails; both of these features are characteristics of other outputs and throughputs created by policymaking institutions. Second, the tails of the distributions point to possible punctuations that may be the key to connecting macro-level attention to subsystem distribution. This particular dynamic will be assessed in a later chapter. The direct comparisons made in this section between partisan issue attention and other, more established measures of political attention help to validate the one-minute speech debate period as a measure of attention in Congress. More importantly, this validation also provides clues as to when and where macro-level attention may influence policy subsystems. The next section moves beyond the establishment of the measure of partisan issue attention in order to determine whether or not the one-minute speech debate period displays periods of intense partisan influence.

Observing Partisan Activity

One-Minute Speeches without Policy Content

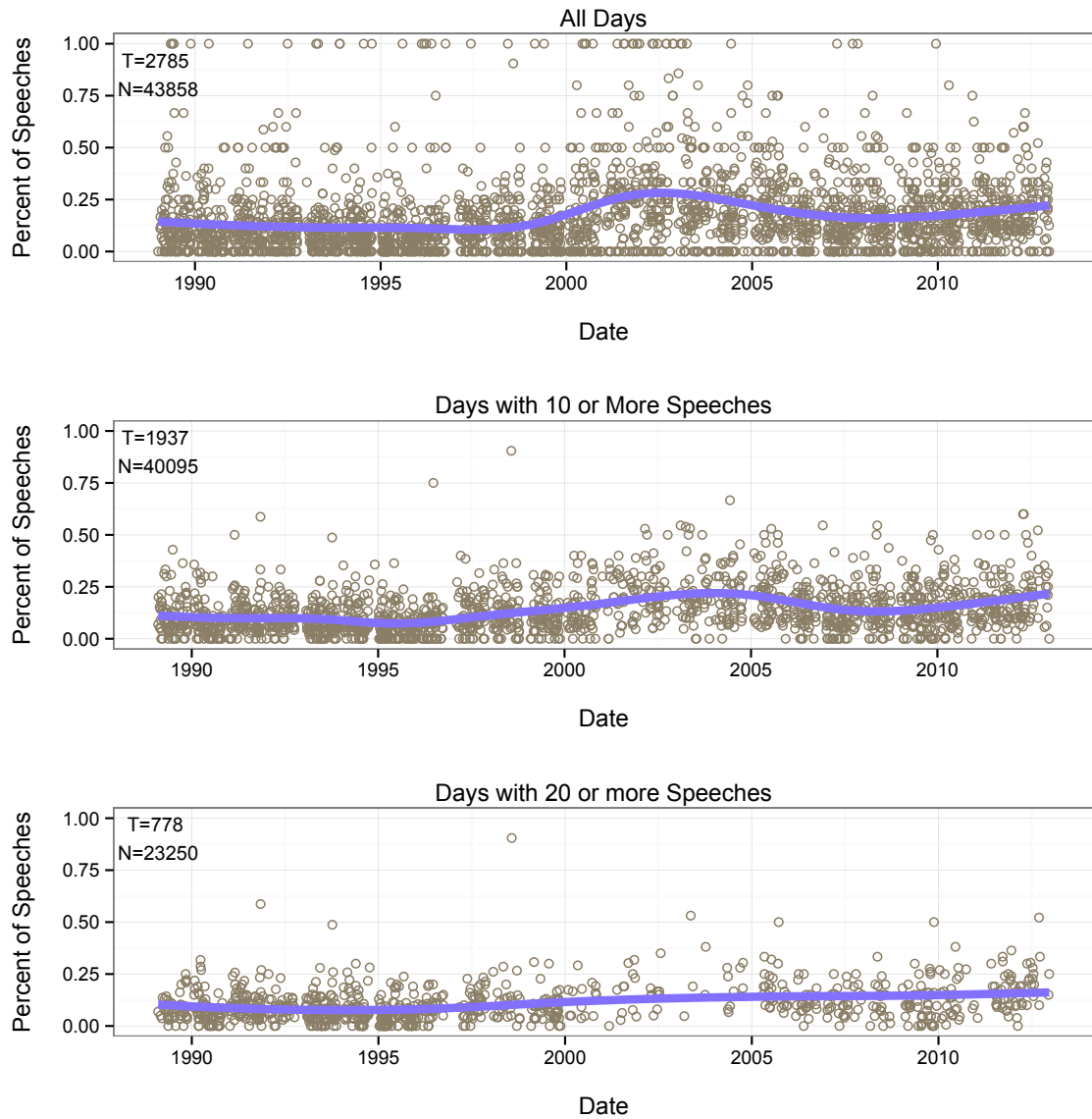
An investigation of party messaging in one-minute speeches needs to begin with speeches in the no-policy category. After all, the routine presence of no-policy speeches during the one-minute debate period is indicative of an inability of the parties to send a clear, consistent message through the speeches. One Republican staffer mused that nearly 75 percent of one-minute speeches were directed toward a member's constituency without mention of a specific policy issue (Staff Interviews 2014). The information in Table 3.1 seems to indicate the congressional staffer was mistaken about the percentage of speeches containing no policy content—at least, in the aggregate—because only 15 percent of all speeches given between 1989 and 2012 contain no reference to a policy issue. Despite the apparent difference between the staffer's claim

and the aggregate data, it is possible to empirically examine the pattern of no-policy speeches in the data. Specifically, an examination of the daily amount of no-policy speeches should indicate whether or not such speeches disrupt the ability of the parties to send signals regarding specific policy issues.

Figure 3.4 displays the percent of daily speeches containing no policy-relevant information from 1989 to 2012 across three different debate period contexts: every day in the dataset, days containing 10 or more speeches, and days containing 20 or more speeches. Each plot contains a lowess line through the plotted daily no-policy speeches. Three different time series are represented because the number of no-policy speeches could potentially vary based on how many speeches are given during the debate period. Typically, the Speaker of the House sets a limit on debate that gives each side of the aisle 10, 15, or 20 speeches. In rare cases, the Speaker allows unlimited debate, which can result in well over 100 speeches in a given day.¹⁷ There are also a number of days in the dataset when only a handful of speeches—maybe two or three—are given. On these days, the Speaker does not set a limit on debate; a couple of individuals simply come to the floor to deliver a one-minute speech. While such days are present in the data, the vast majority of speeches take place on days when there are at least 10 speeches delivered. This is an important distinction because days containing at least 10 speeches allow for a back-and-forth between the parties. Conversely, days without an explicit debate period may be more desirable for individual members who want to delivery a constituency-based message not relating to policy. The expectation is that

¹⁷ For example, several days during the summer of 2009 contain between 100 and 200 daily speeches about the Affordable Health Care Act.

Figure 3.4: Percent of Daily Speeches with No Policy Information, 1989-2012



the percent of speeches containing no policy information will decrease as the number of daily speeches increases.

The first plot in Figure 3.4 displays the percent of daily speeches containing no policy-relevant information for each day in the dataset. The information in this plot indicates no-policy speeches comprise less than 25 percent of speeches given on a particular day for the vast majority of days in the data. There are a limited number of days when at least half of a day's speeches contain no policy-relevant information. In

fact, there are a handful of days when 100 percent of speeches contain no policy-relevant information. However, we will see that such days actually contain very few speeches. It is also important to note that the highest density of plot points is between the zero and 25 percent marks. This further suggests no-policy speeches comprise less than a quarter of speeches given during the vast majority of days in the dataset.

Another noteworthy aspect of the first plot in Figure 3.4 is the apparent increase of no-policy speeches between 2000 and 2005. The most likely explanations for this increase are the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the ensuing War on Terror. It was not uncommon for members to give speeches honoring the troops or remembering fallen soldiers during this time period (or in the present, for that matter). Any speech that attaches a specific valence to the War on Terror is coded as policy-relevant; the rest are coded as no-policy.¹⁸ Therefore, it is likely the events of 9/11 and the War on Terror are intervening variables that caused a rise in no-policy speeches. This proposition will be tested later in the section.

The second plot in Figure 3.4 displays the percent of no-policy speeches on days with 10 or more one-minute speeches. The percent of daily speeches containing no policy-relevant information decreases drastically when the data are limited to days containing at least 10 speeches. There are still a handful of days containing more than 50 percent no-policy speeches, but the presence of such days decreases considerably. Moreover, there is not a single day containing 10 or more speeches that is comprised completely of no-policy speeches. The slight increase in no-policy speeches during the early 2000s is still present, which further suggests an intervening variable. It is

¹⁸ The full list of coding decisions is in the appendix.

noteworthy that limiting the data to days with at least 10 speeches cuts the number of available days down by about 800 (a decrease in T from 2,785 to 1,937). However, the number of speeches only decreases by 3,800 (a decrease in N from 43,858 to 40,095). Therefore, the vast majority of speeches are delivered on days when there is a structured debate period, which allows the parties to debate and interact with one another.

The final plot in Figure 3.4 displays the percent of no-policy speeches on days with 20 or more one-minute speeches. Again, the number of days containing 50 percent or more no-policy speeches is reduced further. The lowest line is much lower and smoother than the previous plots as well, which indicates days with 20 or more speeches have proportionately fewer no-policy speeches. It is important to note that both T and N are reduced dramatically when days with fewer than 20 speeches are removed from the data. Days with 20 or more speeches comprise about a quarter of all days in the dataset; these days also contain a little more than half of the all one-minute speeches given between 1989 and 2012. All three plots in Figure 3.4 indicate proportionately more no-policy speeches appear on days with fewer total speeches and there was an uptick in the percent of speeches containing no policy-relevant information starting in the early 2000s. A simple OLS regression equation can verify these trends while controlling for other factors.

Table 3.2 contains the results from an OLS regression based on the following equation:

$$NoPolicySpeeches_t = \alpha + NoPolicySpeeches_{t-1} + DailySpeeches_t + 9/11_t + \varepsilon_t$$

Where *NoPolicySpeeches*¹⁹ is the daily percentage of speeches containing no policy-relevant information, *DailySpeeches* is the number of daily speeches, and 9/11 is dichotomous variable indicating pre and post-9/11 time periods.²⁰

The results in 3.2 indicate the daily percentage of speeches containing no policy-relevant information is autoregressive, as a single lag of the dependent variable has a statistically significant and positive effect. This is not surprising, because structured one-minute debate periods are typically schedule for Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays when most members are present, so the number of daily speeches tends to increase as the week progresses. More importantly, the daily number of speeches has a statistically significant and negative effect. The negative coefficient suggests the percent of no-policy speeches decreases as the total number of daily speeches increases. Additionally, the statistically significant, positive coefficient on the post-9/11 intervention variable suggests the daily percentage of speeches containing no policy-relevant information is higher after the 9/11 terrorist attacks than during preceding time period.

The information in Figure 3.4 and Table 3.2 provide sound evidence that one-minute speeches containing no policy-relevant information do not present an obstacle for observing partisan issue attention within the speeches. In fact, there is a logical, discernable pattern in the percent of daily speeches that do not address policy. In the aggregate, no-policy speeches comprise roughly 15 percent of all one-minute speeches

¹⁹ A single lag of *NoPolicySpeeches* is included to account for autocorrelation in the error term.

²⁰ Indicators for changed congressional activity (i.e., low activity months and quarters, election quarters, and election years) are also included, but these coefficients were insignificant and removed to save space.

Table 3.2: OLS Regression Predicting Percent of One-Minute Speeches with No Policy Content, by day 1989-2012

Variable	Coefficient
<i>Speech Characteristics</i>	
Lag of Percent of Speeches with no Policy Content	0.072* (0.020)
Number of Speeches	-0.003* (0.001)
<i>Intervention Variable</i>	
Post-9/11	0.041* (0.007)
T	1936
R-Squared	0.121
F-Statistic	18.96*

*p<0.05

**No indicators of congressional activity(e.g., low activity months, quarters, etc.) were significant. These coefficients were excluded from the table.

in the data. Examinations of daily speeches indicate no-policy speeches are delivered at a disproportionately higher rate on days when less than 10 speeches are delivered. On the other hand, days with 10 or more speeches—which allow for a dialogue between members on either side of the aisle—are more focused on speeches that address specific policy issues. Not only is it clear the parties choose to focus on the same handful of policy issues in the aggregate, but it also appears as if the parties send their strongest signals regarding policy during daily debate periods that allow for a back-and-forth between the parties.

Issue and Speaker Concentration

Another way to identify the possible presence of party messaging through one-minute speeches is an examination of the concentration of the agenda and the monopolization of speeches by individual speech givers. Periods of agenda

concentration in one-minute speeches—when there are a very limited number of a policy topics being discussed—provide evidence of members from the same party sending the same messages regarding specific policies. Conversely, sustained periods of a very diverse issue agenda are more indicative of legislators signaling their individual policy goals or constituent interests. If the one-minute speech debate period represents a measure of partisan issue attention, the number of speakers for each party should be extremely diverse—especially periods of agenda monopolization. A small pool of speakers would indicate a lack of partisan influence during the one-minute speech debate period.

Agenda concentration is measured using the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index (HHI). The HHI is a measure originally developed in the field of economics to account for market concentration and monopolization by determining the overall distribution of firms within a market. The United States Department of Justice (USDOJ) uses the HHI as a benchmark to determine unlawful market monopolizes. The logic of the HHI can also be applied to policy agendas and measures of issue attention.²¹ In this case, policy issues represent firms within a market. Much like economic markets, the issue agenda is constrained and can sustain a finite number of policy issues. Therefore, the HHI—when applied to one-minute speeches—accounts for the concentration of policy issues on the agenda.

For the purposes of this analysis, the HHI is inverted and defined by the following equation:

²¹ There is a healthy debate regarding the most appropriate way to measure issue attention diversity (Boydston et al. 2014). However, the current analysis deals explicitly with issue concentration and monopolization, so the HHI is the only measure used.

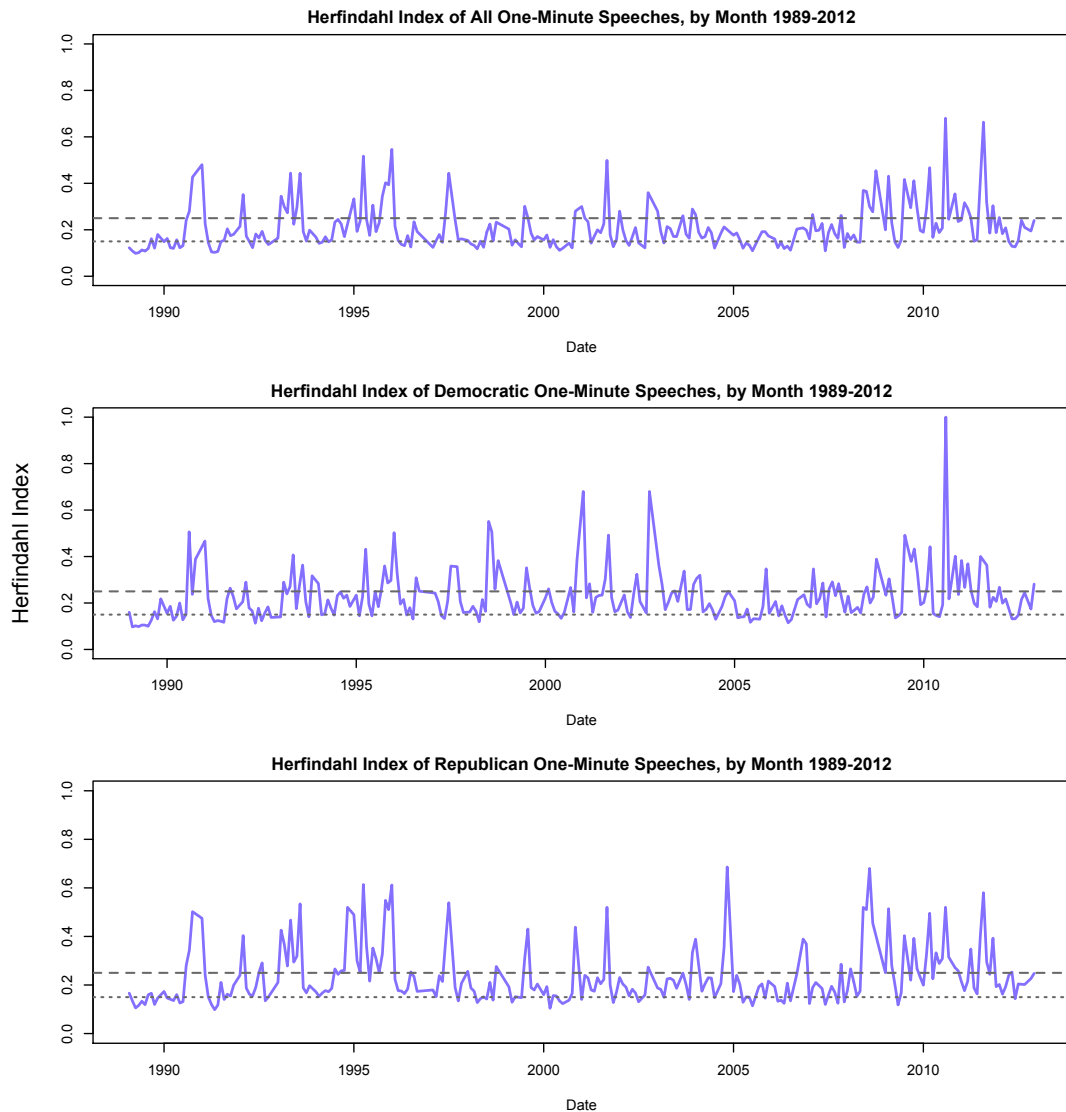
$$HHI = 1 - \sum_{i=1}^{\pi} (p(x_i))^2$$

Where x_i represents the issue topic and $p(x_i)$ represents the proportion of total attention the issue topic receives. Inverted HHI values range from 0 (extremely diverse) to 1 (complete monopoly). HHI values can be placed into three general categories: values below 0.15 indicate a diverse agenda, values between 0.15 and 0.25 indicate moderate concentration, and values above 0.25 indicate a highly concentrated agenda.²² Inverse HHIs are computed on a monthly basis.

Figure 3.5 displays the monthly inverse HHIs for all one-minute speeches, Democratic one-minute-speeches, and Republican one-minute speeches from 1989 to 2012. The most apparent point from the plots in Figure 3.5 is the inverse HHIs for one-minutes are generally moderately concentrated or highly concentrated. In all three time series roughly 75 percent of all months are above the 0.15 breakpoint—indicating a moderately concentrated agenda space—and roughly 25 percent of all months are above the 0.25 breakpoint—indicating a highly concentrated agenda space. In many ways, the information in Figure 3.5 echoes points made earlier in this chapter regarding the limited number of policy issues that garner even an insignificant amount of attention during the one-minute speech debate period. The fact that the vast majority of time points—both in the aggregate and for either party—show at least a moderately concentrated agenda is highly suggestive of party signaling through one-minute speeches. If one-minute speeches were simply a vehicle for legislators to prioritize their

²² These are the same breakpoints used by the USDOJ to determine market monopolies.

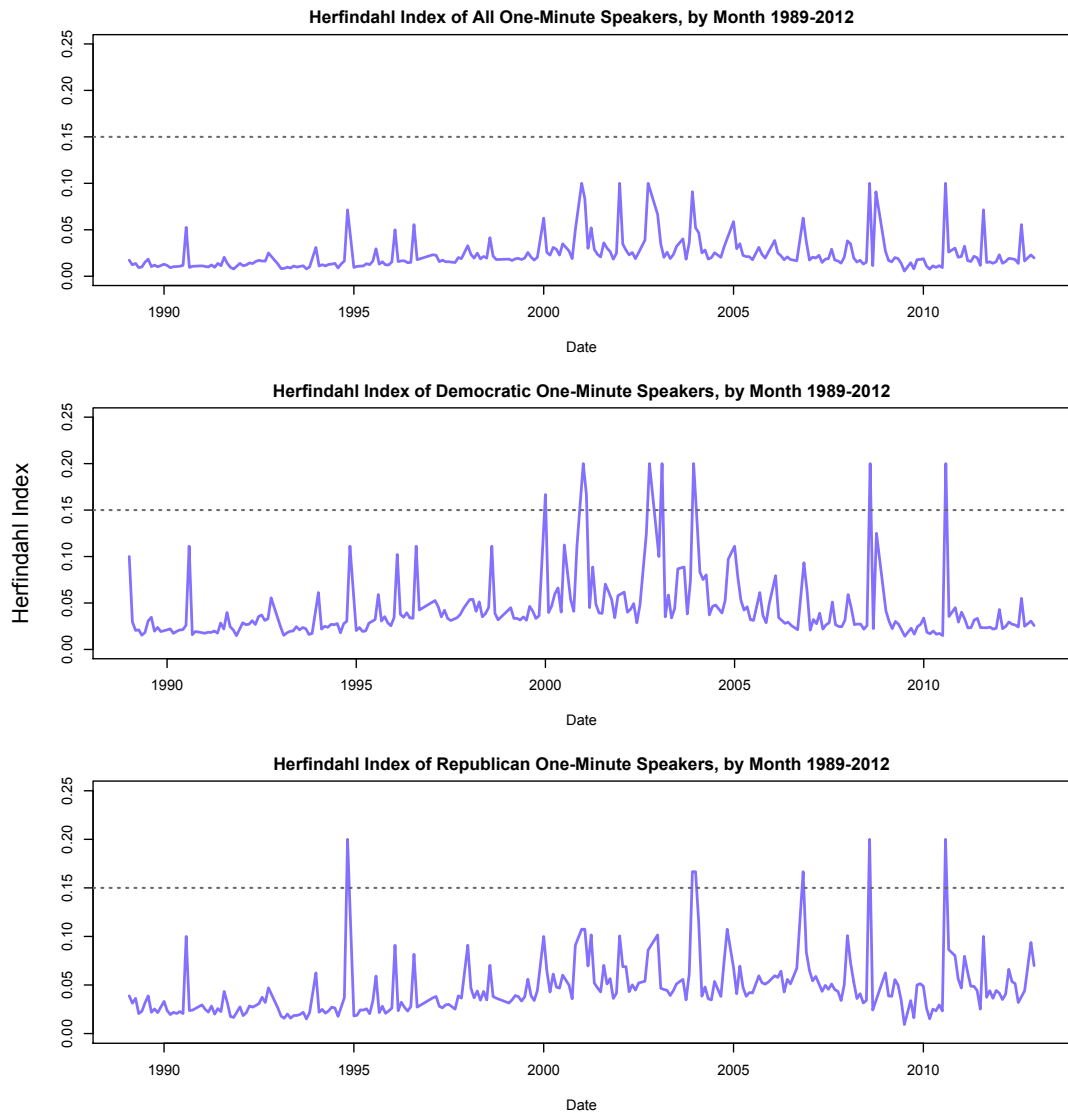
Figure 3.5: Herfindahl Indices of One-Minute Speeches, by Month 1989-2012



individual policy preferences, the agenda should be much more diverse—especially within parties.

Figure 3.6 shows the inverse HHIs for one-minute speakers. These time series are constructed using the same equation, but individual speakers now represent firms in the one-minute speech market. Clearly, there is an incredibly diverse set of legislators who deliver one-minute speeches. In the aggregate, there are no time periods that indicate a moderately concentrated market, and the times series for each party show

Figure 3.6: Herfindahl Indices of One-Minute Speakers, by Month 1989-2012



only a handful of months when the pool of speakers was moderately concentrated. At no point in time do these time series display periods of high speaker concentration. The fact that a multitude of speakers deliver one-minute speeches—rather than just a few individual legislators monopolizing the debate period—further suggests the one-minute speech debate period is used as a party messaging tool.

One final test helps make a connection between the information in Figures 3.5 and 3.6 and illuminates the partisan aspect of one-minute speeches. The relationship

between agenda and speaker concentration is paramount. If periods of agenda concentration do correspond to intense party messaging, then the set of one-minute speakers should be very diverse. However, a positive relationship between agenda and speaker concentration would suggest periods of agenda concentration are the result of a limited number of speakers monopolizing the agenda. This proposition is tested using the following equation:

$$Agenda\ HHI_t = \alpha + Agenda\ HHI_{t-1} + Speaker\ HHI_t + XB + \epsilon_t$$

Agenda HHI is the HHI for policy issues²³ and *Speaker HHI* is the HHI for one-minute speakers. The expectation is a significant, negative relationship between *Agenda HHI* and *Speaker HHI*.²⁴ Finally, *XB* represents a matrix of control variations in the model. These controls include a series of dichotomous variables capturing partisan control of government and periods of low congressional activity. Separate regressions are run using all speeches, Democratic speeches, and Republican speeches.

Table 3.3 contains the results from the OLS regression predicting the one-minute speech agenda HHI. The results suggest the measure of agenda HHI displays autocorrelation, as a single lag of the dependent variable is significant across all three

²³ A single lag of *Agenda HHI* is included to account for autocorrelation in the error term.

²⁴ There is an obvious disparity between these measures regarding the number of possible items competing for space—there are 20 policy categories and 1,265 unique speakers in the data. Therefore, normalized HHIs are computed for both times series to account for the number of available items competing for space. The normalized HHI is described by the following formula:

$$\frac{1 - \sum_{i=1}^n (p(x))^2 - \frac{1}{N}}{1 - \frac{1}{N}}$$

Where *N* is the total number of items in a time segment (month).

Table 3.3: OLS Regression Predicting One-Minute Speech Herfindahl Index, by month 1989-2012

	All Speeches	Democratic Speeches	Republican Speeches
<i>Speech Variables</i>			
Lag of Herfindahl Index	0.384* (0.062)	0.157* (0.067)	0.485* (0.065)
Speaker Herfindahl Index	-7.04* (2.145)	-2.54* (1.499)	-2.47* (1.075)
<i>Political Context Variable</i>			
Divided Government	-0.012 (0.012)	-0.007 (0.015)	0.015 (0.015)
<i>Congressional Activity Variables</i>			
January	0.025 (0.038)	0.052 (0.042)	-0.003 (0.038)
August	-0.033 (0.024)	0.056* (0.030)	-0.033 (0.029)
December	-0.030 (0.029)	-0.059 (0.037)	-0.020 (0.037)
First Quarter	0.063* (0.026)	-0.001 (0.018)	-0.010 (0.018)
Fourth Quarter	-0.071* (0.031)	0.025 (0.022)	0.001 (0.022)
Fourth Quarter of Election Year	0.021 (0.027)	0.054 (0.035)	0.059 (0.036)
T	224	222	222
R-Squared	0.248	0.106	0.243
F-Statistic	7.00*	2.50*	8.09

*p<0.05 (two-tailed), standard errors in parentheses

equations. More importantly, the results in Table 3.3 indicate there is a statistically, negative relationship between the agenda HHI and the speaker HHI. In other words, when the one-minute speech agenda is highly concentrated, the pool of one-minute speakers is highly diverse. This finding is consistent across all speeches and for each party. The fact that periods of agenda concentration correspond to a more diverse speaker pool lends further support to the notion that the one-minute speech debate period is used by the parties to send messages about policy priorities, rather than

individual legislators espousing their respective preferences. While the control variables do not perform particularly well in the models, it is important to note that party control of government does not affect agenda concentration and there are a few months and quarters that display statistically different levels of agenda concentration.

On its own, the information in Figures 3.4 and 3.4 and the OLS regression results in Table 3.3 lend little validity to the notion of building a measure of partisan issue attention from one-minute speeches. However, the overall picture presented in this chapter—i.e., interviews and empirical evidence of party involvement in the one-minute speech debate period, a consistent pattern of policy-relevant speeches, and a moderately to highly concentrated agenda space with a diverse set of speakers—is highly suggestive of the presence of party messaging patterns in the one-minute speech debate

Conclusion

This chapter set out to examine a simple empirical question: what does macro-level partisan issue attention look like? Specifically, the validity of using the one-minute speech debate period as a measure of issue attention and the presence of intense party messaging were analyzed; a copious amount of evidence is presented to confirm both propositions. The process of measuring partisan issue attention in Congress is also described in detail.

One key take-away from a cursory examination of the aggregate partisan issue attention data is the parties' issue priorities represent a very limited agenda space. Only a handful of issues garner a meaningful amount of attention from the parties within the one-minute speech debate period. Moreover, it is clear the parties prioritize the same

policy issues in the same relative proportions. While policymaking activities certainly take place within several of the policy areas not focused in one-minute speeches, a constrained agenda space is also present in other measures of issue attention, such as media coverage, hearings, and public laws.

The use of the one-minute speech debate period was further validated as a measure of attention by examining the distributions of the percent change in policy topics within the speeches. The distributions plainly show signs of leptokurtosis, which is indicative of policy outcomes and throughputs produced within policymaking institutions. It is also clear the parties have a firm hand in the policy messages sent during the one-minute speech debate period. Analysis of speeches with no policy-relevant information confirms the notion that the vast majority of speeches refer to specific policy issues, rather than a member's individual constituency. Herfindahl indices also reveal the policy agenda within the one-minute speech debate period is consistently concentrated. This concentration is most likely due to party involvement, as the speaker pool diversifies as the policy space becomes more and more concentrated.

The findings in this chapter offer much in the way of validating the measure of partisan issue attention. Validity—in its own right—a worthwhile endeavor. However, the evidence provided also points to specific aspects of the data that may bridge the macro and meso levels of policymaking abstraction. Given the constrained nature of the agenda, large shifts to previously ignored policy issues could have substantial impacts of policy subsystems. Distribution analysis also uncovers the largely incremental character of attention allocation is occasionally disrupted by sudden shifts

in attention. These punctuations are often the catalyst for subsystem change. In general, it is clear the measure of partisan issue attention captures important partisan policymaking dynamics that deserve further investigation.

Taken as a whole, the evidence provided in this chapter lays the foundation for how we understand macro-level attention and how connections can be made between Congress and policy subsystems. The following chapters build on this foundation by further examining many of these insights. The next chapter focuses explicitly on the interactions between the parties at the macro-level in order to ascertain whether or not the minority party can influence issue attention in Congress.

Chapter 4: Minority Party Influence on Partisan Issue Attention

“Parties...bring order out of chaos of a multitude of voters. If in...vast populations there were no party organizers, by whom would public opinion be roused and educated and directed to certain specific purposes? Each party, no doubt, tries to present its own side of the case for or against any...proposal, but the public cannot help learning something about the other side also...and the most artful or prejudiced party spell-binder...has to recognize the exist of the arguments he is trying to refute.”
(Bryce 1921: 134)

Introduction

The majority party within a governing institution inherently shapes the legislative agenda—something that is consistent across a number of partisan, policymaking institutions (Cox et al. 2000; Döring 1995, 2001; Neto et al. 2003; Cox and McCubbins 2007; Cox et al. 2010; Clark 2012). Current theories of legislative organization based on evidence from the U.S. House of Representatives suggest the majority dominates all aspects of the legislative process by establishing the rules for debate and dominating committee outputs (Cox and McCubbins 2005; 2007; Miller and Overby 2010; Stiglitz and Weingast 2012). In this way, the majority party is able to control the legislative agenda at all levels of the policymaking process. While these studies provide robust support for the majority party’s agenda-setting powers, little focus is placed on ways in which the minority party is able to influence the policy debate in Congress.

The previous chapter explored several fundamental aspects of partisan issue attention in the House of Representatives. One such aspect is the fact that the two major parties focus on the same policy issues in the same relative proportions. Unlike

most legislative outputs and throughputs, the measure of partisan issue attention created for this project is built from a forum that allows both parties equal opportunity to voice their respective policy goals. Why then do the parties choose to discuss the same policy issues? Theories of partisan agenda setting in Congress suggest the policy priorities of the two parties should actually diverge—the goal is to craft an agenda very different from the opposition’s (Cox and McCubbins 2005, 2007; Lee 2009). If this is the case, the minority party should focus its attention on policies that show a difference between the parties, rather than focusing on the same policies as the majority. The aggregate data presented in Chapter 2 tell a very different story.

Perhaps it is possible the parties discuss the same policy issues because they are responding to one another. If there is a level of responsiveness between the parties in terms of which policies garner attention in Congress—beyond the majority parties’ apparent domination of legislative process—the minority party would have at least some influence on both the content and tenor of the policy debate. Examinations of party politics in Europe demonstrate how opposition parties are able to shift the focus of the policy debate within legislative institutions (Budge and Farlie 1983; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2009). Similar dynamics may be at play in Congress. The purpose of this chapter is to test this proposition with partisan issue attention. In doing so, several of the hypotheses from Chapter 2 are revisited and tested using time series analysis. The results from these analyses suggest shifts in attention from the minority party result in corresponding shifts in attention from the majority party. This finding is robust across 20 different policy issues. The results also indicate divided government conditions the

ability of the minority party to affect changes in majority party attention on a handful of specific policy issues.

The chapter proceeds in three parts. First, a discussion of the extant literature characterizes partisan agenda setting in the U.S. Congress and other legislative contexts is presented along with expectations about minority party influence on partisan issue attention in the House of Representatives. Next, the monthly time series of partisan issue attention—based on one-minute speeches—for both the majority and minority parties are presented in order to motivate the analysis. Finally, the methods used to test if and how the majority party responds to shifts in the minority party’s level of issue attention are described and the results from these analysis are presented.

Partisan Agenda Setting

Majority Party Domination and Limited Agenda Space

Political parties have the potential to dominate policymaking institutions. Nowhere is this more evident than policymaking in the U.S. Congress. Partisan politics affect all categories of legislative outputs from roll-call voting (Snyder and Groseclose 2000; Ansoalabehere et al. 2001) to bill winnowing (Krutz 2005) and even procedural votes (Roberts and Smith 2003; Jenkins et al. 2005; Lee 2009). While examinations of these processes are interesting in their own right, legislative throughputs and outputs all relate to the overall agenda of Congress, and, arguably, agenda setting is the most significant role of political parties in contemporary legislative politics.

As previously discussed, according to Cox and McCubbins’ (2005; 2007) “cartel theory” of partisan politics, the majority party manipulates the congressional agenda in the House of Representatives by setting rules, controlling procedures, and making

committee appointments. These gatekeeping powers allow the majority party to control throughputs and outputs at all levels of the legislative process. Perhaps the most important aspect of the majority party's domination of the congressional agenda is the freedom to exercise negative agenda powers. Specifically, the majority party has no incentive to allow legislation proposed by the minority party to receive serious consideration, so only majority party legislative initiatives are considered in committee and on the floor. Put simply, the majority party has complete control over the legislative agenda; the minority party has no points of input.

In addition to the immense control the majority party has over the congressional agenda, the amount of available agenda space is finite and limited. Policymakers are inherently limited in the amount of attention they can give to policy problems at any one time (Simon 1957; Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Krutz 2005; Adler and Wilkerson 2013). Decision-making institutions display a similarly limited carrying capacity because individuals with cognitive limitations build institutions (Jones 1994). While institutions do allow for the processing of multiple issues at one time—something an individual decision-making cannot do—the issue agenda of an institution is still limited by the individual operating within the institution. Only a few issues can be on the legislative agenda at any one time, which means a whole host of policy problems are ignored.

Taken together, majority party domination of the legislative process—described by cartel theory—coupled with an inherently limited issue agenda indicates an inability of the minority party to engage in agenda setting activities. Despite the obvious agenda setting handicaps placed on the minority party in Congress, there may still be

opportunities for the minority party to affect the policy debate. As we will see, minority party influence on legislative agendas has been observed in other institutional contexts. Regardless, the propositions set forth by cartel theory need to be the guiding principle for understanding partisan agenda setting and policy change in Congress because of the rule-driven nature of the institution.

Minority Influence in Other Contexts

There are generally two schools of thought on the interactions between political parties in terms of agenda setting (Budge and Farlie 1983). One line of thought maintains opposing political parties will craft diverging issue agendas—focusing on wholly different policy issues. The other proposes parties focus on the same issues in an attempt to control the general frame attached to specific policies. Put simply, opposing parties emphasize the same issues on their respective issue agendas, but choose to highlight different issue attributes and dimensions. Despite the obvious implications this line of inquiry may have on the study of Congress, there are no direct tests for the divergence or convergence of opposing party agendas in the extant literature on U.S. legislative policymaking. However, studies of partisan agenda setting in Congress suggest the parties will craft divergent agendas in order to differentiate themselves from the opposition (Lee 2009).

There is also evidence of divergent partisan agendas within the U.K. Parliament (Budge and Farlie 1983). The main reason opposition parties choose to focus on different issues is the opposition's freedom to focus on the most advantageous issues. The majority party is bound by both the election platform and the contemporaneous

concerns of the public; the opposition is not bound by such mandates (Mortensen et al. 2011).

Divergent partisan agendas may be prevalent in many institutional contexts, but there is also empirical evidence of parties crafting converging issue agendas. For example, the non-legislative activities of European opposition parties can impact both the policy debate and actual policy outcomes; the parties engage one another, rather than focus on different issues (Green-Pedersen 2010; Seeberg 2013). In the American context, numerous studies demonstrate how issue agendas espoused during presidential campaigns display far more issue convergence than issue divergence (Simon 2002; Holian 2004; Sigelman and Buell 2004; Damore 2005). Rhetorical engagement between opposing parties can also be an effective strategy with specific policy issues, such as health care (Jerit 2007). Obviously, there are opportunities for the attention of opposing parties to converge on the same policy issues, and parties may even be incentivized to do so in certain contexts. Since such practices are present in different agenda setting activities, it is possible partisan issue attention in Congress displays similar dynamics.

Some of the main hypotheses proposed in Chapter 2 provide the basis for an empirical test of the ability of the minority party to influence majority party attention to specific policy issues. These hypotheses test for converging partisan issue agendas and question arguments made by cartel theory regarding the majority party's complete domination of the legislative process. Again, the main arguments of cartel theory should not be discounted. For this reason, majority party influence on the minority

party will be assumed. Therefore, the driving hypothesis exclusively examines minority party influence.

The minority party influence hypothesis: Increases in issue attention from the minority party will result in corresponding changes to majority party issue attention.

Another possibility is that partisan issue attention is not affected by an interplay between the parties, but is simply a product of day-to-day legislative outputs based on majority party control. If the majority party is successful in creating a cartel controlling congressional activity, partisan issue attention may only capture other physical aspects of the congressional agenda (e.g., hearings, bills, etc.). In other words, partisan issue attention is the byproduct of majority control. This possibility provides an alternative explanation for changes to partisan issue attention.

The majority party control hypothesis: Partisan issue attention is a reaction to the majority party's issue agenda being made manifest through legislative outputs and throughputs.

Finally, it is important to note that party control of government is an important aspect of congressional policymaking, and may also affect partisan issue attention. A multitude of studies highlight the impact divided government can have on legislative outputs. Beyond congressional policymaking, party control of government also affects other policymaking areas, such as presidential issue agendas, the use of executive orders and agreements, bureaucratic rule-making, and the appointment of federal judges (Binder and Maltzmann 2002; Howell 2003; Yackee and Yackee 2009; Krutz and Peake

2009; Cohen 2012). These findings allude to party control of government impacting the minority party's ability to influence majority party issue attention.

Recall that partisan actors act as strategists attempting to manipulate the political process to achieve their respective goals (Riker 1986). From a strategic standpoint, the majority may be less inclined to listen to and engage the minority party in policy debate under unified government, because the minority party is in a very weak institutional position; the majority party is also better able to control the policy debate under such circumstances. The institutional constraints placed on political parties under periods unified and divided government suggest the ability of the minority party to influence majority party issue attention may be conditioned by party control of Congress and the presidency.

The conditional minority party influence hypothesis: The ability of the minority party to affect majority party attention will vary across periods of divided and unified government.

There is no denying the immense amount of control the majority party has over the policymaking process. However, it is possible the minority party may influence the policy debate in important ways. The hypotheses reiterated in this section lay out empirical tests for this proposition. However, we must look beyond legislative outputs and throughputs in order to correctly ascertain the minority party's influence in Congress. A dynamic relationship between the parties in terms of agenda setting and attention allocation is an important piece of the partisan issue attention puzzle—a key to connecting the macro and meso-levels of policymaking abstraction.

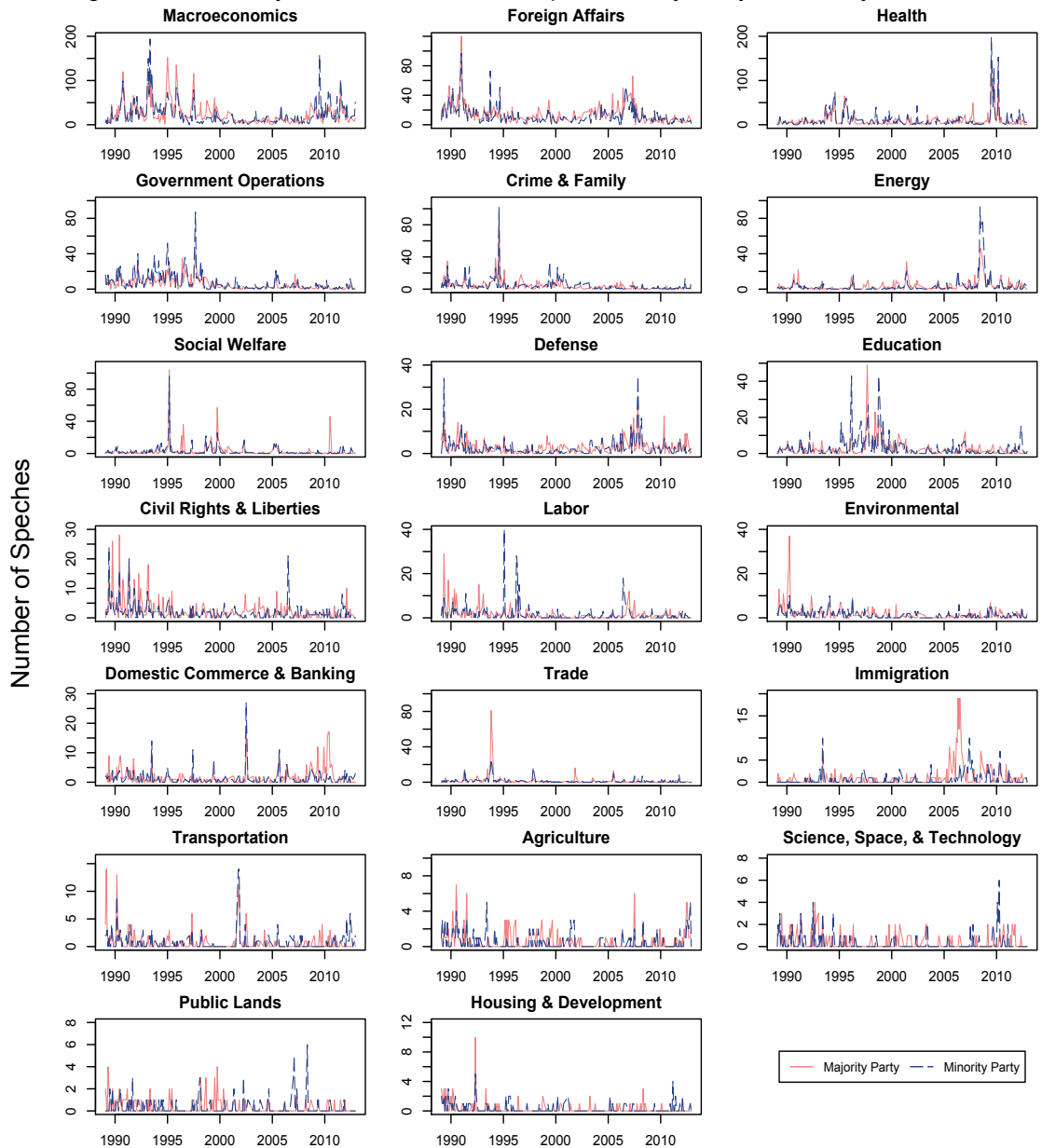
Assessing Minority Influence

Monthly Times Series

Monthly counts of one-minute speeches in the House of Representatives serve as the basis for understanding responsiveness between the majority and minority parties. This level of aggregation in the data is ideal for understanding party responsiveness for a number of reasons. First, aggregation beyond months results in either quarterly or yearly data, which does not allow for an adequate examination of responsiveness between the parties. A yearly—or even quarterly—aggregation of one-minute speeches is not indicative of a back-and-forth between the parties.

On the other hand, daily analysis of party responsiveness is too volatile for an adequate examination of party responsiveness. Recall from Chapter 3 that the vast majority of policy-oriented one-minute speeches take place on days when at least 10 speeches are delivered. Times series analysis excluding days containing less than 10 speeches would contain a number of gaps between days, so it is unclear if such an analysis would truly assess policy debates between the parties. The number of daily speeches delivered on the floor of the House also varies greatly from day-to-day, and these volatile effects would be impossible to control for; it is possible to control for activity (or inactivity) in a monthly time series. Therefore, the data used in this chapter are presented as monthly time series in order to allow for both a back-and-forth between the parties and the ability to control for the volatile nature of the legislative calendar. Figure 4.1 contains the monthly counts of one-minute speeches across the 20 policy issues present in the data. One noteworthy aspect of the plots in Figure 4.1 is the limited carrying capacity of the partisan issue attention agenda. Only a few policy issues are

Figure 4.1. Monthly Count of One-Minute Speeches, by Party and Policy Issue 1989-2012



given serious considerations by the parties at any point in time, and, for the most part, the policy issues that do garner significant amounts of attention from the parties remain relatively constant.²⁵ For example, the minimum and maximum values for “Macroeconomics” and “Health” range from zero to over 150 one-minute speeches in a single month; whereas the minimum and maximum values for “Science, Space, &

²⁵ Pay particular attention to the discrepancies between the y-axes of the plots in Figure 4.1.

Technology” and “Public Lands” range from zero to less than 10 speeches in a single month. Obviously, there are large discrepancies between the most talked about issues and the least talked about issues in the one-minute speech debate period. This aspect of the data supports the aggregate analysis in Chapter 3, which examined the overall make-up of the one-minute speech debate period.

The information in Figure 4.1 points to two things that suggest the possibility of party responsiveness in partisan issue attention. First, it is clear the parties discuss the same policy issues in the same relative proportions. This point was made using aggregate data in Chapter 3, but the same inference holds when examining monthly times series. This is noteworthy because it means the parties are trying to control the policy debate a select number of issues, which are essentially the same for both parties. The other main take-away from Figure 4.1 is the apparent relationship between the parties’ time series across time. The party time series for each policy issue track together very well. There are points in time when one party clearly attempts to shift focus to a particular issue and corresponding changes to attention from the opposition are apparent. For example, the minority party displays a huge spike in attention to Macroeconomics policy in 2008 and 2009—the start of the Great Recession—and the majority party shows a corresponding increase in attention—albeit, not as large as the minority party’s initial shift. Evidence of such changes in partisan issue attention is indicative of the possibility of the minority party influencing the policy debate in the House of Representatives. A proper assessment of temporal causality and responsiveness is needed before any solid conclusions can be reached.

Error Correction Models

An error correction model (ECM) is employed in order to test the three main hypotheses put forward in this chapter. ECMs capture the level of responsiveness between two variables in a single coefficient (controlling for a number of other factors) making it possible to summarize results from 20 different equations in an effective manner. Moreover, ECMs allow for examinations of causality that differ from traditional time series applications. Granger causality is the hallmark of time series analysis (Granger 1969). An independent variable is said to Granger-cause a dependent variable when a lag of the independent variable provides a statistically significant prediction of contemporaneous values of the dependent variable while also controlling for lagged values of the dependent variable.²⁶ ECMs build in the logic of Granger causality, but also allow for a more clear examination of the level of responsiveness between two times series. Rather than simply focusing on lagged values of two times series, an ECM measures whether or not contemporary changes in the dependent variable are related to gaps between the two time series in previous time periods.²⁷ Put simply, ECMs test for contemporary responses in dependent variable based on the differences between the dependent and independent variables in previous time periods. The analysis in this chapter uses raw monthly counts of one-minute speeches, so estimations of responsiveness between times series provide a better assessment of party interaction than simply analyzing lagged values of the series. All variables used in the

²⁶ Only two policy issue time series showed clear indications of the minority party Granger-causing levels majority party issue attention. These tests are not included in the project because Granger causality for raw counts does not provide information about the responsiveness between the parties.

²⁷ ECMs were originally created to analyze relationships between co-integrated times series. However, recent applications demonstrate the ability to use ECMs on times series that are not co-integrated (de Boef 2001).

ECMs are aggregated on a monthly basis, and separate ECMs are run for each policy topic in the data.

The ECMs used in this paper follow a two-step process (Engle and Granger 1987). The first step involves creating the error correction component by saving the residuals from a bivariate ordinary least squares (OLS) regression between the two variables of interest. These residuals represent the gap between two times series. As such, the saved residuals are the basis for understanding responsiveness between two variables. The first step is described in the following equation:

$$Majority\ Speeches_t = \alpha + Minority\ Speeches_t + \varepsilon_t$$

The error correction component, S_t , is obtained by capturing the information held in ε_t . S_t acts as an independent variable in the final ECM and measures responsiveness in the dependent variable.

The second step in the ECM is detailed in the following equation:

$$\begin{aligned} \Delta Majority\ Speeches_t \\ = \alpha + S_{t-1} + \Delta Minority\ Speeches_t + Hearings_{t-1} + XB + \varepsilon_t \end{aligned}$$

S_{t-1} represents a single lag of the error correction component from step one and is used to test the *minority party influence hypothesis*. This variable represents OLS residuals, so negative values indicate time points in which the independent variable (minority speeches) has a larger value than the predicted outcome (majority speeches). The error correction component is multiplied by negative one to make the interpretation of this effect more intuitive. Therefore, a significant, positive effect signifies contemporaneous response to minority attention that is beyond that of the majority party

in the previous time period. The lag of hearings is a dichotomous variable indicating whether or not a hearing on a particular policy issue was held in the House in the previous time period. The lag of hearings is included in the model to test the *majority party control hypothesis*. A positive, significant coefficient on the lag of hearings indicates the change in majority speeches is partly a function of the institutional agenda—an agenda already controlled by the majority party. XB represents a matrix of control variables included in the model. These controls include a series of dichotomous variables capturing different periods of party control of government, such as periods of divided government, periods of a divided Congress, and years in which a new party controls the House. The dichotomous divided government variable will form an interaction term with S_{i-1} in order to test the *conditional minority party influence hypothesis*. The significance of the interaction terms indicate whether or not the effect of minority party issue attention on majority party attention is conditional on party control of government. A variable indicating which party holds a majority in the chamber is also included as a control (i.e., Democrats or Republicans). Finally, controls are included for time periods of low congressional activity. The legislative calendar is seasonal, and many months and full quarters contain few (if any) speeches due to recesses and election cycles.²⁸

Minority Influence

The data are presented as a separate time series for each policy topic, so 20 different equations are used for hypothesis testing. The units of time in the equations

²⁸ Specifically, variables are included to control for January, August, December, and the fourth quarter of election years. All of these time periods have significantly fewer speeches compared to other months and quarters.

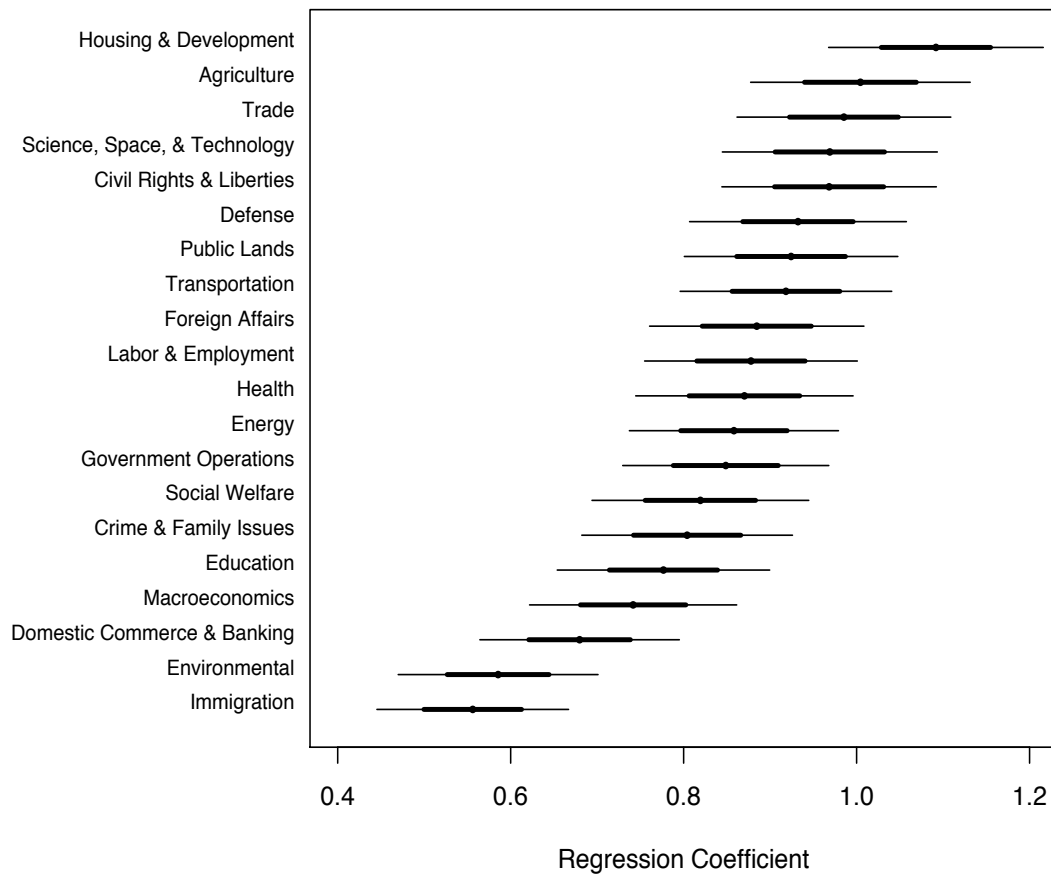
represent months and the data range from 1989 to 2010 ($T = 252$)²⁹. Figure 4.2 displays the coefficients for the lag of the error correction component for each policy topic time series.

According to Figure 4.2, gaps between majority and minority party attention produce a significant, positive effect across all 20 policy issues. The effects in Figure 4.2 are in the expected direction—when minority party attention on a particular issue is above that of the majority party, the majority party responds by also increasing attention. It is especially noteworthy that majority party responsiveness to minority party attention is significant across every policy issue. It is plausible the minority might only be able to shift the majority's attention on particular issues, but Figure 4.2 demonstrates this effect is consistent for every issue mentioned in the one-minute speeches. The coefficients across all 20 equations also produce similar effects. In most cases, a gap of one speech per month in the previous time period produces a corresponding change of a little less than one speech for the majority party in the contemporaneous time period. While the largest effect in Figure 4.2, Housing & Development, is nearly twice as large as the smallest effect, Immigration, the majority of effects fall within a range of 1.00 and 0.70.

It is not feasible to consider the substantive effects of each of these coefficients in the context of this paper. However, the information from the monthly counts in Figure 4.1 provides clues about the impact of the coefficients in Figure 4.2. For example, Macroeconomics is by far the most talked about issue during the one-minute speech debate period, but is one of the smaller effects in Figure 4.2. On average, the

²⁹ One-minute speeches are collected through 2012. However, the data on congressional hearings—another important variable in the ECMs—obtained from the Policy Agendas Project are only available through 2010.

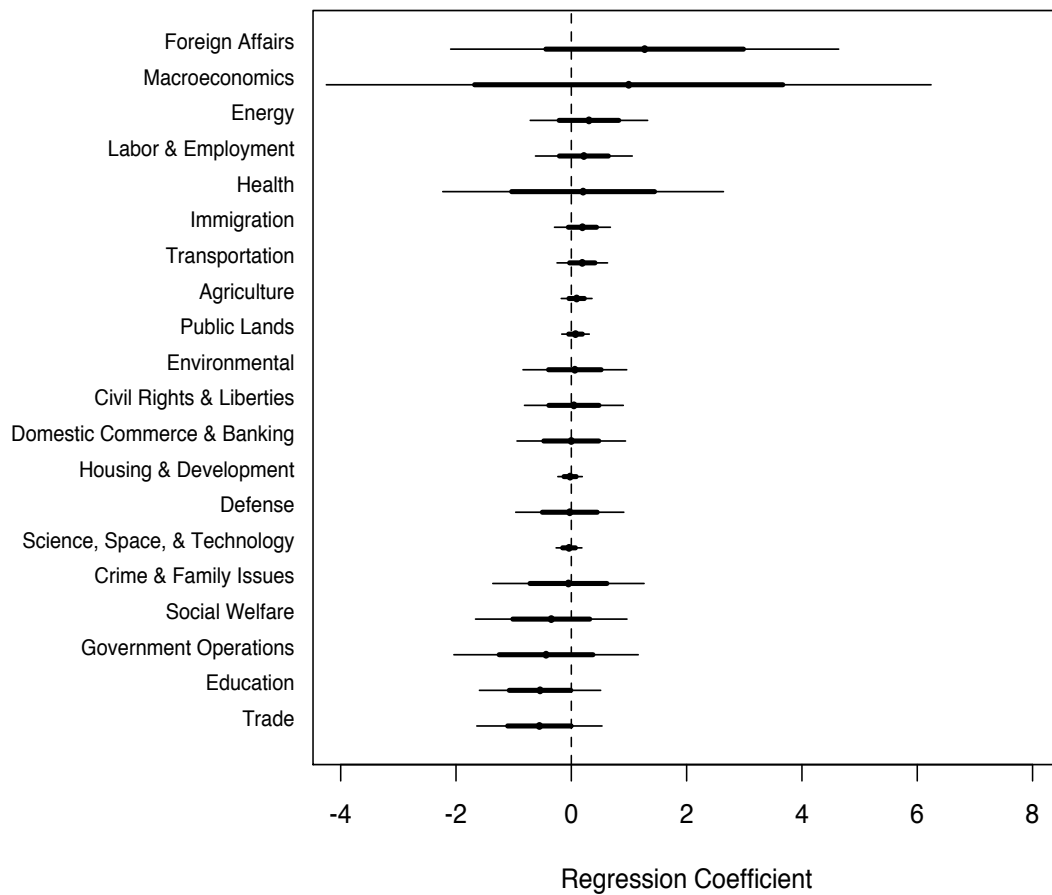
Figure 4.2: Regression Coefficients of the Error Correction Component, by Policy Issue 1989-2010



majority and minority parties mention macroeconomics a little over 19 times per month³⁰ with a maximum of 194 speeches given on macroeconomics in a single month. Conversely, Housing & Development—the largest coefficient from Figure 4.2—is also the least talked about topic during the one-minute speech debate period. Housing & Development has a monthly average of less one speech with a maximum of 15 speeches given in a single month. This information makes it obvious the proportional impacts of majority party responsiveness to minority party attention vary a great deal across policy

³⁰ This number represents the actual count of speeches in a month, and the average contains several months of zero activity.

Figure 4.3: Regression Coefficients of the Lag of Hearings, by Policy Issue 1989-2010



issues. Taken together, it is clear the significant, positive effects in Figure 4.2 lend evidence in support of the *minority party influence hypothesis*.

Figure 4.3 summarizes the coefficients of the lag of hearings variable for each ECM. The only policy areas that show significant effects for hearings held in the previous time period are Macroeconomics, Health, and Transportation³¹. These findings are in the expected direction, as a hearing held on a particular topic in the previous time period produces positive shifts in majority attention in the

³¹ The p-value for the health and transportation time series passes a one-tailed test for significance ($p < 0.10$) but not a two-tailed test ($p < 0.05$).

contemporaneous time period. However, there is little evidence to fully support the *majority party control hypothesis* because only three of the 20 ECMs produce significant results.

The significant findings in Figure 4.3 also do not produce large substantive effects. The largest coefficient in Figure 4.3, Macroeconomics, indicates a hearing held in the previous time period produces a change in majority attention of a little less than six speeches in the following month. The effect is rather small considering Macroeconomics is the most talked about topic during the one-minute speech debate period. Likewise, the effect of a hearing on Health policy in the previous time period produces a change in majority attention of two speeches—also a small effect given the prevalence of speeches on health care.

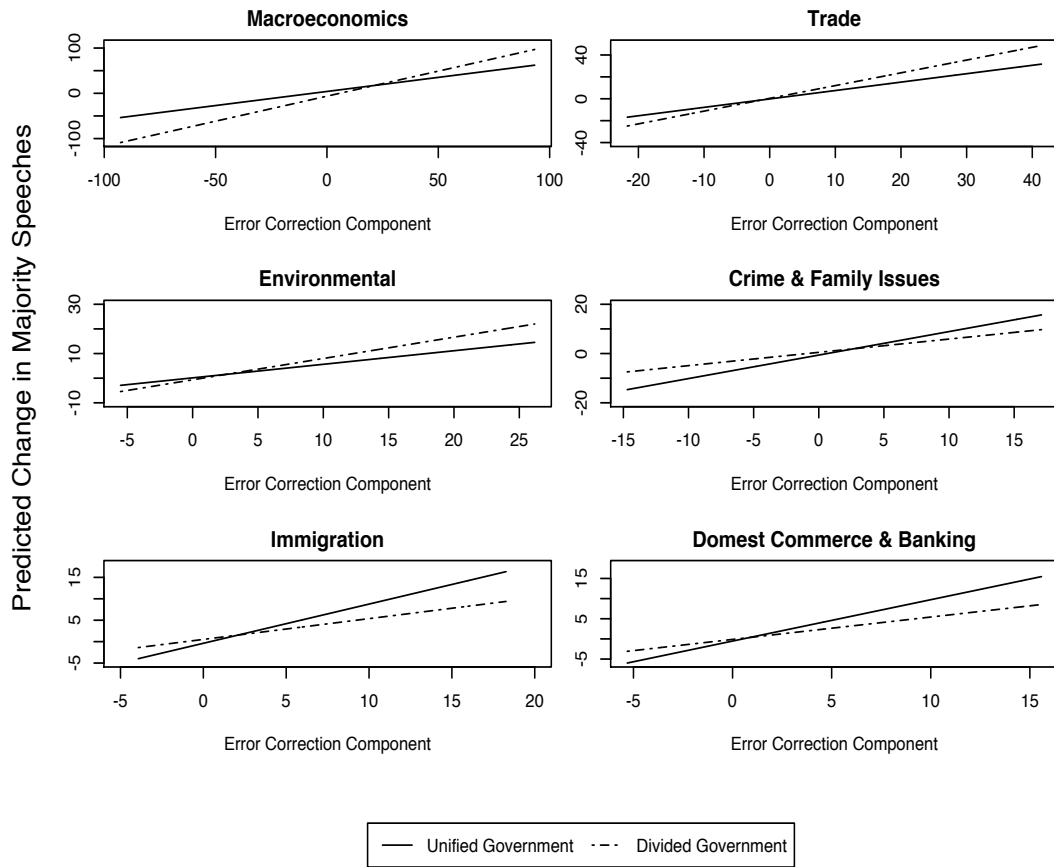
The results in Figure 4.3 demonstrate that majority issue attention is not simply a product of the institutional agenda of Congress. If this were the case, attention would mirror the day-to-day business of Congress. While the lag of hearings produces a significant effect in the expected direction for three policy issues, this is not the case for the vast majority of issues.

Partisan Control of Government

Figure 4.4 displays the significant effects from the interaction between the lagged error correction component and a dichotomous variable measuring divided government.³² These interactions are used to test the *conditional minority party influence hypothesis*. Any significant coefficient from the interaction of these two variables indicates a significant difference between the slopes of the response variable

³² Please note the different x and y-axes on each plot in Figure 4.4. Conceptually, the x and y-axes are all the same, because each axis represents the full range of the variable for each respective time series. However, the purpose of Figure 4 is only to compare slopes within a time series, not between time series.

Figure 4.4. Out-of-Sample Predictions of Error Correction Component Across Unified and Divided Government, 1989-2010



between periods of unified and divided government—only seven of the 20 policy areas show significant interactive effects. These policy areas are Macroeconomics, Trade, Environmental, Transportation, Crime & Family Issues, Immigration, and Domestic Commerce & Banking.³³

According to Figure 4.4, the difference in slopes of the error correction component under divided and unified government is consistent with the *conditional minority party influence hypothesis* for Macroeconomics, Environmental, Trade, and

³³ The interaction between the error correction component and divided government for the environmental and transportation policy series is significant in a one-tailed test ($p < 0.10$) but not a two-tailed test ($p < 0.05$).

Transportation policy. In each of these plots, the effect of the error correction component is dampened during periods of unified government. Despite the significant differences in slopes, the effect of the error correction component remains positive during unified government—just less positive than the effect during periods of divided government.

The interactive effects for crime & family issues, immigration, and domestic commerce & banking tell a different story. In each of these terms, the effect of the error correction component is more positive under periods of unified government—the response elicited from the majority is actually stronger than during periods of divided government. While these findings are statistically significant, the slopes from the three effects are not in the expected direction. Again, the slopes are significantly different between unified and divided government, but the direction of the slopes remains positive.

As a whole, the results in Figure 4.4 indicate the ability of the minority party to force shifts in majority party attention is partly conditional on the political context and policy issue. An interaction between the error correction component and a dichotomous divided government variable is significant for only seven of the 20 policy topics, and the effect of the significant interactions is not consistent across issue areas. For four of the equations, the effect from the error correction component is dampened during unified government, but other significant interactive effects display the opposite effect. Despite the inconsistency of the interactive effects, the slopes remain positive across all time series. The magnitude of the effect may be different across unified and divided

government, but the minority party can still affect changes in majority party attention across both political contexts.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to assess the ability of the minority party to affect change in the majority party's level of attention on specific policy issues. Specifically, the number of monthly one-minute speeches given by each party was analyzed across 20 different policy issues. Capturing the policy priorities of both parties in Congress highlights important interactions between the parties. Time series analysis indicates the minority party is able to influence the level of majority party attention across the 20 policy topics in the data. In other words, when minority party attention is higher than majority party attention on a specific policy issue, the majority party responds by also increasing attention on that issue. The occurrence of congressional hearings does not have the same effect on majority attention, which indicates partisan issue attention is not simply an artifact of the day-to-day congressional agenda.

Analyses also demonstrate the ability of the minority party to shift majority party attention is at least partly conditional on context. For the majority of policy issues examined in this paper, the ability of the minority party to affect change in majority party attention does not vary across periods of unified and divided government. However, seven of the 20 policy issues did show significant differences between political contexts. In four of these seven issues the ability of the minority party to shift majority party attention is dampened during unified government, but the other three policy issues display the opposite effect. The inconsistent effects across policy areas

make it clear both political and policy contexts need to be taken into account when assessing issue attention in Congress.

The evidence presented in this chapter stands in sharp contrast to other analyses of partisan agenda setting in Congress. The “cartel theory” of congressional policymaking suggests the majority party uses institutional rules and procedures to control the congressional agenda at numerous points in the legislative process (Cox and McCubbins 2005, 2007). Majority party control of institutional rules and procedures allows the majority party great freedom to exercise both positive and negative agenda powers—especially in terms of suppressing the minority party’s agenda setting abilities. Moreover, cartel theory and other examinations of partisan agenda setting predict the two parties will pursue diverging agendas—ones focusing on substantively different policy issues—in order to present a different product to the public than that of the opposition (Lee 2009). However, the examination of partisan issue attention in this chapter clearly shows the minority party has at least some influence on the policy debate in Congress.

Similar party dynamics have been observed in European party systems. These studies show a possible mix of both divergent and convergent issue agendas between majority and opposition parties. In some cases the predominant strategy is for the parties to focus on different policy issues (Budge and Farlie 1983), but there evidence suggesting the majority party is forced to respond to agenda changes induced by the opposition party (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2011). Partisan issue attention in the House of Representative displays a similar relationship.

It needs to be noted that cartel theory's propositions—and supporting evidence—regarding partisan agenda setting are based on policy throughputs and outputs (Cox and McCubbins 2005, 2007; Miller and Overby 2009). On the other hand, partisan issue attention represents aspects of the overall policy debate, rather than an actual policy throughput or output. Regardless, it is clear the minority party can influence certain agenda setting aspects in Congress—this insight is overlooked when examining other aspects of the legislative process. The next chapter builds on these agenda setting dynamics by using a specific policy case study to demonstrate how shifts in partisan issue attention initiated by the minority party can result in actual policy change.

Chapter 5: Subsystem Disruption in U.S. Offshore Oil and Gas

Drilling

“With the public showing increased support for increased domestic oil and gas production, Republicans have pressed to open new sections of U.S. coastal waters and Arctic wilderness to energy exploration — and to blame Democratic opposition for rising gasoline prices.” –CQ Weekly, June 30, 2008

“We’re going to blame it on speculators, blame it on oil companies, blame it on OPEC. There’s only one group in this chamber we ought to blame, and that is all the liberals in this House who have voted for ‘no energy’ each and every time over the last 18 years that I’ve been here.” –Minority Leader John Boehner (R-OH) June 2008

Introduction

On September 30, 2008, President Bush signed Public Law (PL) 110-329, an appropriations continuing resolution to fund federal agencies and activities through part of fiscal year 2009. Despite the law pertaining strictly to federal appropriations funding, PL 110-329 effectively ended a moratorium on offshore oil and gas drilling that had been in place for more than 25 years. Over the span of just three months, the issue gained a substantial amount of attention in the House of Representatives, and a law was quickly passed to end the offshore drilling moratorium; yet, increased domestic oil product has little or no effect on the price of crude oil. Then, just as quickly the issue of offshore drilling vaulted onto the legislative agenda, the issue no longer garnered substantial amounts of attention from lawmakers. How could an issue that remained in stasis for 25 years suddenly undergo such a significant policy change, despite the majority party in Congress not advocating for change? Moreover, how can an issue gain and lose attention so quickly? The change to offshore drilling policy

provides an exemplary case study to analyze the exogenous and endogenous factors that lead to policy change and subsystem disruption. Specifically, clear ties are made between issue attention in Congress and external policy indicators, such as economic concerns, focusing events, and public opinion.

Issue attention plays a key role in policy change. Policymakers and policy-making institutions are cognitively limited in their ability to process information and allocate attention (Simon 1957). Attention in decision-making institutions is limited, but these institutions are also flooded with an overabundance of information. As a result, only a handful of policy problems can garner even an insignificant amount of attention (Jones 1994; Jones and Baumgartner 2005). Policy issues garner attention because both the public and policymakers suddenly become aware of a policy problem (Downs 1972). However, the dissymmetry of attention allocation means policymakers ignore a whole host of policy issues, which allows these issues to remain in stasis.

Dramatic shifts in attention have the potential to disrupt policy subsystems. These “punctuations” force new issues onto the policymaking agenda, which change subsystem dynamics and result in policy change (Baumgartner and Jones 2009). Issue attention has been used to examine policy change across a wide variety of institutional and policy contexts (Jones et al. 2003; Schrad 2007; True et al. 2007; Mortensen 2009; John and Jennings 2010; Boswell 2012). Despite the obvious utility of issue attention for studying the policymaking process, few studies have been able to tie the concept of attention directly to policymaking in the U.S. Congress; this chapter makes such a connection

The chapter proceeds in three parts. First, I discuss the important role issue attention plays in policy change, and propose two hypotheses for how changes to issue attention in Congress affect policy subsystems. Next, I give a brief history of U.S. offshore oil and gas drilling policy starting with the first federal offshore drilling statute in 1953. I then examine the shift in partisan issue attention leading up to and following the 2008 change in U.S. offshore oil and gas drilling policy. Finally, I demonstrate how—despite the obvious utility of the measure—partisan issue attention is not the “be-all and end-all” metric for connecting the macro and meso-levels of policymaking abstraction, because some policy subsystems display clear change without corresponding changes to attention in Congress.

The case study described in this chapter is meant to offer clearer understandings and extant examples of concepts that are underdeveloped in the study of policymaking. To this end, the examination of U.S. offshore oil and gas drilling policy provides insight into how and why issue attention can shift so dramatically when exogenous and endogenous factors disrupt a policy in stasis. The change to offshore drilling policy in 2008 also demonstrates both ends of the issue allocation process—how an issue enters onto the agenda and how the issue exits the agenda. Perhaps most importantly, the case study draws on insights from earlier chapters to connect the macro and meso-levels of policymaking abstraction.

Issue Attention and Subsystem Disruption

Policy Subsystems

Subsystems represent the meso-level of policymaking abstraction, and are defined as a variety of individual actors interacting on the basis of shared policy goals

or interests (Kingdon 1984; Sabatier et al. 1987; Salisbury 1987; Thurber 1991; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). Essentially, subsystems are groups of actors attempting to influence public policy within specific issue domains. Actors within subsystems can either be official government actors or unofficial policy advocates, such as interest groups, think tanks, scholars, the media, and policy analysts. Actors typically align into two or more opposing coalition based on policy goals. The interactions between these coalitions define substantive policy battles within subsystems.

Previous chapters repeatedly noted the cognitive limitations of both decision-makers and decision-making institutions (Simon 1957; Jones 1994; Jones and Baumgartner 2005). A select few policy problems receive attention; others are ignored completely. For these reasons, issue attention is a particularly valuable resource within policy subsystems and the larger political process.

Issue attention plays a predominant role in two theories of the policy process that deal exclusively with policy subsystems: Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET) and the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF). PET maintains policy domains are generally defined by long periods of stasis and incremental change that are occasionally interrupted by sudden, dramatic change (Baumgartner and Jones 1991, 1993, 2008). Policies are held stable due to policy monopolies—powerful supporting policy ideas that monopolize the political understandings and institutional arrangements tied to a particular issue. Monopolies have a similarly stabilizing effect on subsystem actors and resources. Subsystem disruption and policy change take place when attention shifts, causing the monopoly to crumble.

The ACF also treats attention as a resource, but is more explicit in the framework's ability to understand the inner-workings of subsystems. According to the ACF, the interactions of subsystem coalitions are structured by a set of relatively stable parameters—i.e., attributes of policy actors, subsystems resources, policy values, and institutional rules (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993; Sabatier and Weible 2007). While issue attention is not explicitly mentioned as a parameter, it is an important resource because shifts in attention cause changes to the relatively stable parameters of a subsystem. These changes can include the introduction of new information, electoral change, shifting policy venues, and the inflow of new actors into the coalition. Typically, one coalition is better able to command subsystem resources in order to maintain the coalition's policy goals. Subsystem change happens when exogenous factors change the subsystem environmental allowing a minority coalition to supplant the dominant coalition.

PET and the ACF consider issue attention to be a vital component of subsystems and policy change. Shifts in attention can cause subsystem disruption, moving an issue from a state of stasis and incrementalism to one of significant change. For this reason, issue attention is the key to connecting the macro and meso-levels of policymaking abstraction, and the behavior of issue attention within macro-level institutions leads to testable hypotheses.

The Issue Attention Cycle

Recall from Chapter 2 that the issue attention cycle is cyclical in nature (Downs 1972). The first stage of the cycle is a period of “alarmed discovery” in which the public and/or policymakers suddenly become aware a previously ignored policy

problem. Discovery happens for a number of reasons, such as policy indicators gradually becoming too large to ignore or salient focusing events (Kingdon 1984). Newly discovered policy problems replace less salient issues, because of the limited agenda; it is a zero-sum process. After the initial phases of discovery, the problem is either solved or policymakers realize the enormous costs associated with solving the problem causing issue saliency to waver. Ultimately, different issues are discovered, and the cycle repeats itself with new issues replacing old ones.

The initial stage of the issue attention cycle is the most important, because sudden shifts in attention have the potential to cause the most disruption within policy subsystems. The empirical and theoretical foundations of this initial stage are well-documented in the extant literature, and typically coupled with the concept of policy subsystems (Baumgartner and Jones 1991, 2009; Schard 2010; Crow 2010; Alexandrova et al. 2012). Exogenous influences are often the impetus for such change. For example, salient focusing events can also generate shifts in attention to ignored issues, which creates “windows of opportunity” for previously unfeasible policy change (Kingdon 1984, 2003; Birkland 1997, 2004; Zahariadis 2007). Public opinion is also a significant factor in the attention allocation process (Jones and Jenkins-Smith 2007; Jennings and John 2009).

Based on the theoretical foundations of PET and the ACF, Chapter 2 described two hypotheses proposing a relationship between macro-level issue attention and subsystem disruptions that help to explain different phases of the issue attention cycle. The first such hypothesis focuses exclusively on the initial phases of the issue attention cycle. Exogenous factors are clearly a factor in the allocation process, and also have

implications for policy subsystems. Therefore, changes to macro-level issue attention may be linked to subsystem change.

The subsystem disruption hypothesis: Dramatic increases of attention in Congress linked to exogenous factors will result in corresponding subsystem disruption and policy change.

The implications of macro-level attention allocation for subsystem dynamics are clear, but very little scholarly work examines the other side of the process: how an issue exits the agenda. If changes to macro-level attention affect subsystems, similar dynamics may influence the departure of the same issue from the macro-political agenda. There is a certain logic to a natural ebb and flow of issue attention, but no clear causal mechanisms have been identified to explain such dynamics. The zero-sum nature of the agenda provides clues as to how once-salient issues disappear from the agenda. Dramatic shifts in attention necessarily result in “monopolizing issues”—issues that take up the vast majority of available agenda space. As new monopolizing issues emerge, old ones are supplanted. Therefore, when attention shifts and new issues enter onto the macro-political agenda, other issues to exit the agenda.

The issue exit hypothesis: The exit of a monopolizing issue from the macro-political agenda will coincide with exogenous subsystem factors that cause a dramatic shift in attention to another issue.

Mapping the entry and exit of issues within the issue allocation process is the key to connecting the macro and meso-levels of policymaking abstraction. The

dynamics proposed by the hypotheses in this section are directly examined using a case study approach. Specifically, the policy debate surrounding U.S. oil and nature gas policy in 2008 is analyzed to demonstrate how shifts in attention relate to agenda entry/exit and corresponding subsystem disruption. Before discussing the dynamics of issue attention and policy change in 2008, it is important to examine the policy development and subsystem dynamics of U.S. offshore oil and gas drilling policy prior to 2008.

Disruption of the Offshore Oil and Nature Gas Subsystem

Subsystem Dynamics, 1953-2008

Oil and gas companies first began extracting oil from submerged coastal lands in the 1930s. At this time, there was no policy governing the leasing of submerged land and it was still unclear whether or not these oil reserves could be developed for commercial use. The subsequent development created a clash between coastal states and the federal government over the leasing of mineral rights on submerged lands (CQ Almanac 1953).

In 1953, Congress passed the first of two laws that dealt with the growing problem of submerged mineral rights. The Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act of 1953³⁴ (PL 83-212) created a three mile boundary outside of states' coastlines and officially gave the federal government leasing rights on submerged lands beyond this boundary; whereas, the Submerged Lands Act of 1953 (PL 83-21) gave leasing rights to the states within the three mile boundary. Congress did little to alter offshore mineral leases in the ensuing time period.

³⁴ Information on congressional bills and committee hearings was gathered using the Lexus Nexus Congressional Publications online database.

The first major event that sparked environmental controversy regarding offshore mineral leases was the Santa Barbara oil spill in 1969 (CQ Almanac 1970). At the time, the Santa Barbara oil spill was the largest oil spill in U.S. history. Several congressional hearings were held in the summer of 1969 to discuss the spill and S. 1219 was introduced, which called for the termination of certain submerged mineral leases. The bill did not advance in the Senate, but later that year the Department of the Interior (DOI) issued additional leasing rules calling for increased safety regulations and inspections. For the first time since the U.S. government began leasing offshore mineral deposits, environmental externalities were thrust into the public spotlight.

The 1970s saw even more change for offshore mineral leasing policies. In 1971, a federal district judge blocked certain offshore oil leases due to concerns raised by numerous environmental groups that the government had not crafted adequate environmental impact statements in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (CQ Almanac 1971). Despite the court ruling, Congress held numerous hearings to discuss the implications of offshore drilling and national energy needs. Most of the witnesses at these hearings were bureaucratic officials and energy company officials; very few individuals from environmental advocacy groups were invited to be witnesses. The depletion of the nation's oil surplus and the Nixon administration's price control policy had damaging effects the price of domestic oil, resulting the creation of the Strategic Petroleum Reserve (Beaubouf 2007). At the same time, Nixon called for an increase to energy exploration, which included an expansion of offshore mineral leasing.

The first substantial statutory overhaul of offshore mineral leasing since the 1950s came in 1978 when President Carter signed PL 95-372. This law was created to foster greater competition for mineral leases and to create stronger environmental protections. The battle over the final bill was contentious, with environmental groups and oil companies opposing one another; eventually, a compromise was reached. However, PL 95-372 marked a turning point in Congress' role in environmental protections regarding offshore mineral leases.

A large part of President Reagan's campaign platform in the 1980 election was an aggressive five-year plan to develop domestic energy by accelerating offshore mineral leases. Despite the administration's ambitious goals, the Democrats were able to stymie the president's energy plan on many fronts. In response to the administration's provisions concerning offshore mineral leasing, House Democrats successfully imposed moratoriums in several coastal areas using the annual appropriations bill—essentially limiting the funds available to process offshore mineral leases (CQ Almanac 1981). Throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s it became common practice to impose moratoriums on offshore drilling in the DOI appropriations bill, with some minor exceptions in the Gulf of Mexico and portions of Alaska.

The stasis in U.S. offshore drilling policy remained steady until the passage of PL 109-423 in 2006. The law opened up leasing to a much larger portion of the Gulf of Mexico, including the Florida panhandle. The perceived need for the legislation was due to increasing gas prices caused by the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in the previous year (CQ Almanac 2006). The House response was initially much more aggressive, but House Republicans conceded to a compromise knowing they would

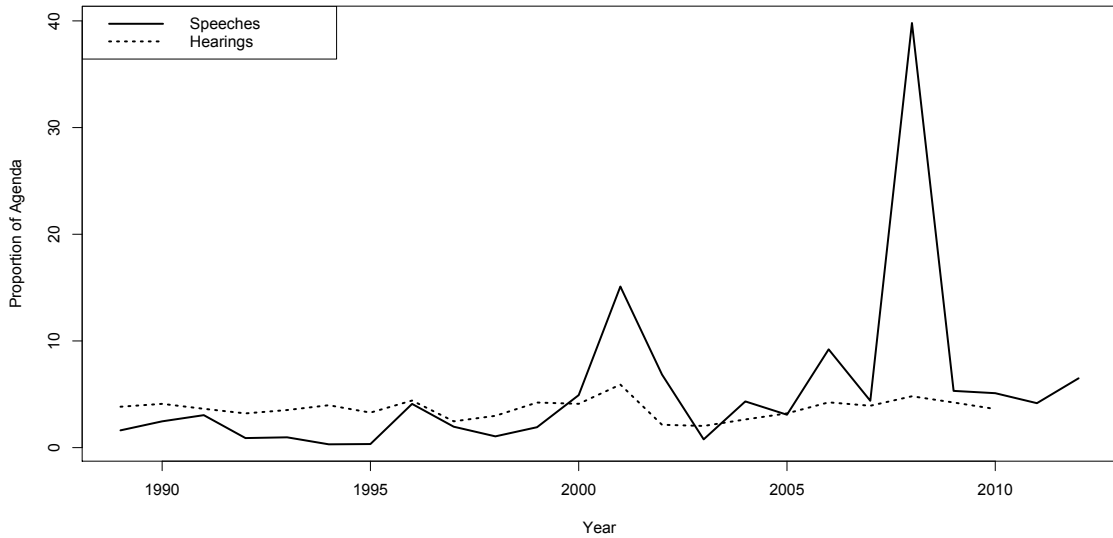
likely lose the majority in the next congressional session. Eventually, the moratorium on offshore drilling would be lifted in September 2008 in the face of rising gas prices and changes to public opinion. However, the passage of PL 109-432 opened the door for the even larger expansions of offshore mineral leasing, and clearly displayed the federal government's response to rising gasoline prices, despite the fact that domestic production has little to no effect on the global price of crude oil.

The half-century of offshore oil and gas drilling policy is interesting because it displays incredibly long periods of stasis. Since the initial statutory controls over leasing created in 1953, only a handful of changes to the policy have been made. Moreover, the subsystem's actors remained largely the same—oil companies on one side and environmental groups on the other. What then caused such a dramatic shift in federal policy in 2008? A closer examination of partisan issue attention in Congress highlights the important interplay between exogenous and endogenous factors in Congress that can produce swift, significant policy change, and shows how a salient policy issue can vanish from the agenda just as quickly as it appears.

Oil and Natural Gas Policy in 2008 One-Minute Speeches

As previously discussed, dramatic shifts in attention are rare, but partisan issue attention is ideal for capturing shifts in attention for both parties in Congress. One such shift in attention occurred on the subject of energy policy in 2008, as demonstrated in Figure 5.1. The figure shows a comparison between the percentage of the yearly agenda captured by energy topics in one-minute speeches and hearings. The most significant aspect of Figure 5.1 is the substantial spike in energy policy topics in the one-minute speech debate period during 2008. In 2008, nearly 40 percent of all policy-relevant

Figure 5.1: Times Series of Yearly Proportion of Speech and Hearing Agendas Occupied by Energy Topics, 1989-2012



speeches discussed energy policy—up from 10 percent in the previous year. However, the shift in attention was not sustained, as energy policy comprised only 5 percent of one-minute speeches in 2009. In comparison, hearings do not indicate a similar shift in attention, as 2008 saw only a modest increase in the percentage of hearings held on energy policy (a one percent increase from 2007). In fact, the percentage of hearings held on energy policy over the course of the time series remains relatively stable. Figure 5.1 makes it clear one-minute speeches and hearings are capturing different aspects of attention in Congress, further validating the use of partisan issue attention.

Analysis of the actual text of the speeches on energy policy during 2008 indicates the vast majority of energy speeches specifically discuss offshore oil and gas drilling policy. Moreover, while both parties discuss offshore drilling policy, it is clear the Republican and Democratic messages are adversarial. The following examples highlight the general tone of the speeches for both Republicans and Democrats during 2008:

“Supply is critical. Access to new supply in the Outer Continental Shelf in the Gulf of Mexico is critical, as are alternative sources of energy, as are conservation measures... Please stop the restrictions for responsible exploration for our natural resources like coal, natural gas, and crude oil. End the heavy-handed restrictions on energy exploration.”
-Michael C. Buresss (R-TX)

“The Bush administration's own Energy Information Administration says that opening up new areas for drilling would not affect production or prices for nearly 20 years, and even then it concludes that ‘any impact on average wellhead prices is expected to be insignificant.’ So much for the Republican energy plan.” –Donald M. Payne (D-NJ)

The specific language used by the parties to debate energy policy also helps to explain the struggle to control the general policy frame. Table 5.1 contains the most frequently used terms by each party in one-minute speeches on energy policy during the summer of 2008. According to the information in Table 5.1, both parties focused on domestic energy production and high gas prices by using words, such as “America,” “Gas,” “Price,” and “Drill.” While the parties focused on the same policy issues, there are clear differences in the policy alternatives and issue dimensions advocated by the parties.

The main focus of the Republican Party was on increasing domestic oil production. The Republican policy frame is made clear by the use of words like “Oil,” “Increase,” and “Production.” On the other hand, Democrats advocated for policy solutions that focused on renewable forms of energy and the dangers of “big oil” companies. The main point is both parties focused on the same policy problem—i.e., high gas prices—but the debate was over the general policy frames and alternatives. As we will see, the Republican Party was far more successful in appealing to the public and winning the policy debate.

Partisan Issue Attention, Exogenous Subsystem Effects, and Policy Change

Figure 5.2 displays the monthly proportion of speeches given on energy topics for each party and the monthly national average retail price of gasoline in America from 2006 to 2010. According to Figure 5.2, the large spike of one-minute speeches given on energy policy came from both parties. Moreover, partisan issue attention to energy policy did not show a shift until the summer months of 2008. A much larger proportion of Republican speeches discussed energy policy than Democratic speeches, but a significant proportion of Democratic speeches also covered energy policy topics. Nearly 80 percent of all policy-relevant one-minute speeches given by Republicans during May, June, and July of 2008 were about energy policy topics, while the proportion of Democratic speeches on energy policy during the same period ranged from 30 to 60 percent.

The relative proportion of speeches for each party is important, because Republicans were the minority party in the House in 2008; yet, it was the Republican Party that instigated the shift in partisan attention to energy policy. As previously detailed, the majority party dominates the legislative process in the House, but the findings in Chapter 4 demonstrate how the minority party can influence majority party issue attention. The extensive use of one-minute speeches by the Republican to shift focus to energy policy is important because Republican efforts to enact change to offshore drilling policy had been stymied in committee.

The fight over offshore drilling became so vehement that Democrats effectively stalled the appropriations process in June because Republicans wanted to add energy amendments to several appropriations bills. Rather than let the amendments come to a

Table 5.1: Comparing Most Frequently Used Words in Energy One-Minute Speeches, by Party Summer 2008

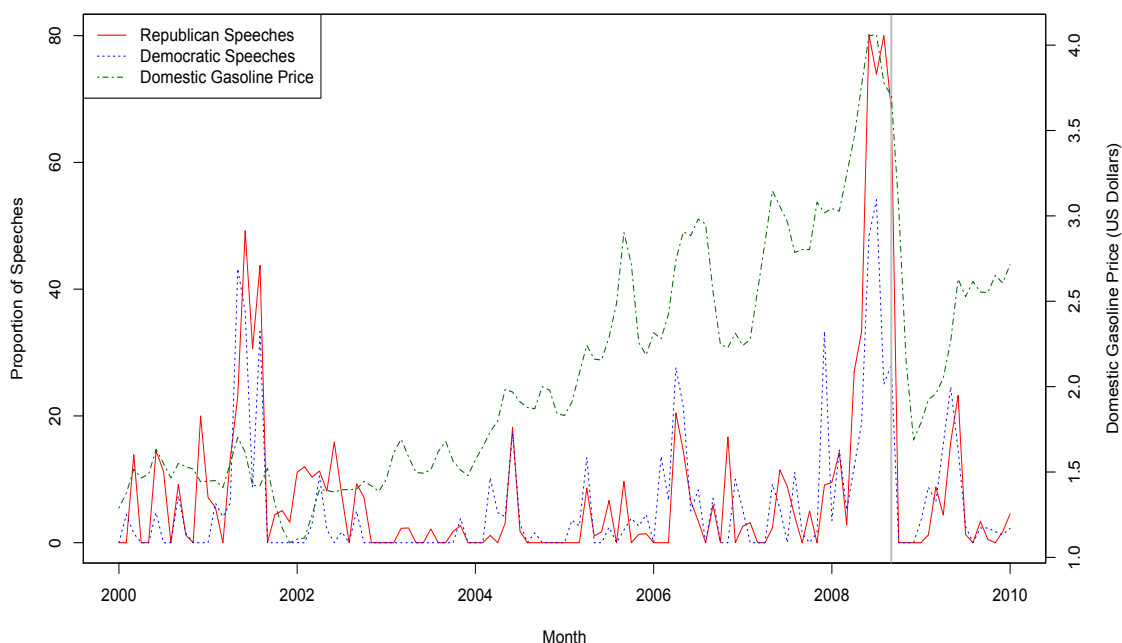
Both Parties	Republican Party	Democratic Party
America*	Oil	Republican
Price	Democrat	President
Gas	Increases*	Big
Drill	Product*	Company*
Energy		New
		Renew

*Asterisks indicate stemmed or truncated terms

vote, Democratic leaders on the Appropriations Committee decided to terminate any committee mark-up that might involve Republican efforts to advance energy policy. Appropriations Committee Chair David R. Obey (D-WI) remarked of the committee's senior Republican's efforts to add offshore drilling-related amendments to the Labor, Health, and Human Services, and Education funding bills, "I'll see them in September, on a CR [Continuing Resolution]" (CQ Almanac 2008).

The Republicans' unsuccessful efforts to change offshore drilling policy in Congress coincided with the "drill, baby, drill" rhetoric coming out of the McCain presidential campaign. The impetus for this sudden change to offshore drilling party

Figure 5.2: Proportion of Monthly Speeches on Energy Topics by Party and Monthly Domestic Gasoline Price, 2000-2010



*The vertical line represents the passage on PL 110-329 in September of 2008

was the rising price of gasoline, detailed in Figure 5.2. During the summer of 2008, gasoline prices in American reached a record high. At the same time, public opinion about energy exploration was also changing. According to the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, in June of 2008, 47% of the public viewed the most important priority for energy policy as being the expansion of mineral exploration. This was a dramatic increase of 12 percent from February of 2008, and it was the first time in the 21st century that mineral expansion became the number one priority for energy policy—historically, energy conservation/regulation has been the public’s number one priority. Moreover, the partisan gap in public opinion on energy exploration was narrowing, with 46 percent of self-identified Democrats and 43 percent of self-identified Republicans naming increased energy exploration as the number one issue.

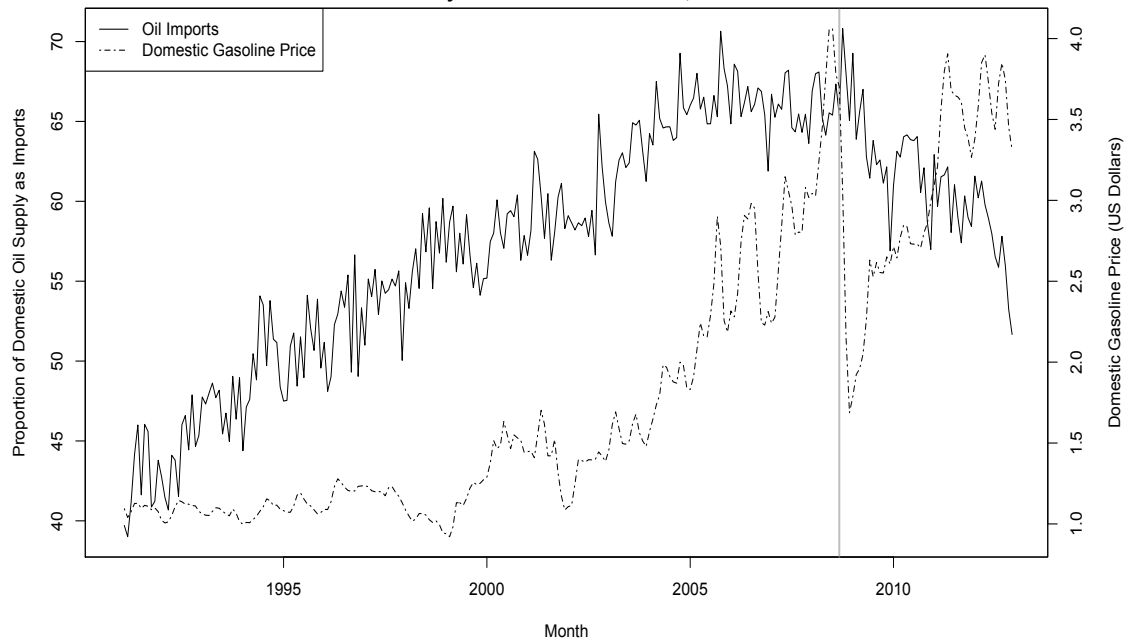
Figure 5.2 also demonstrates the impact high gasoline prices had during this time period. The gasoline price and partisan issue attention appear to track together

from 2006 to 2010. It is also clear high gas prices are the cause of the changes in public opinion, as gas prices began to climb quickly at the beginning of 2008. Taken together, the gas price time series in Figure 5.2 shows a clear policy connection between partisan issue attention and public opinion in 2008. Ironically, the push for increased energy exploration by the public and in Congress is not an appropriate policy response to rising gas prices. Domestic gas prices are tied directly to the global oil market. Therefore, increasing the domestic supply of oil would have little or no effect on the price of gasoline. The more appropriate response would be to decrease the demand for oil (Duffield 2008). In fact, the Democratic 2008 energy initiatives sought to lower domestic demand for oil, rather than increase supply.

Despite the fact that opening the outer-continental shelf for drilling would have little to no impact on perceived gasoline price crisis, the Republican Party's policy frame meshed with what the public wanted. The push for ending the moratorium on offshore drilling eventually gained momentum in Congress, despite the Democrat's majority advantage over the legislative process. Amid rising gas prices, shifting public opinion, and the pressures of the presidential election, PL 110-329 was signed into law on September 30, 2008, effectively ending the moratorium on offshore oil and gas drilling.

The argument made by Republicans about domestic supply and foreign dependence on imports is further confounded by the information in Figure 5.3, which displays a comparison between the percentage of the domestic oil supply comprised of imports and the domestic monthly average price of gasoline from 1991 to 2012.

Figure 5.3: Monthly Proportion of Domestic Supply of Oil as Imports and Monthly Domestic Gasoline Price, 1991-2012



*The vertical line represents the passage on PL 110-329 in September of 2008

According to Figure 5.3, there does not appear to be a clear relationship between the domestic oil supply that comes from imports and the price of gasoline. The proportion of the domestic oil supply coming from imports rose steadily from 1991 to 2009, with a slight decline beginning at the end of the 2009 calendar year. While the price of gasoline remained steady throughout the 1990s, the price of gasoline did increase in the following decade while oil imports also increased. It is important to note both oil imports and the price of gasoline saw a dramatic decrease following the end of the moratorium on offshore drilling. The information in Figure 5.3 suggests the change in offshore drilling policy had the desired effect—at least in the short term. However, the sharp decrease in gasoline prices at the end of 2009 was due to a significant decrease in demand—a direct result of the financial collapse of 2009. Eventually the price of gasoline rebounded to remain between \$3.50 and \$4.00 a gallon; yet, the return of high gasoline prices coincided with a substantial decrease in oil imports. Therefore,

the lifting of the moratorium on offshore drilling did affect the proportion of the domestic oil supply as imports, but the price of gasoline remained unaffected after the initial impact of the financial collapse.

It is clear the sudden shift in public opinion caused a change to partisan issue attention that thrust the issue of offshore drilling onto the macro-political agenda. These dynamics clearly demonstrate how changes in macro-level issue attention can result in swift, significant policy change—even in subsystems that exhibit stasis over a long period of time. However, the example of change in offshore drilling policy in 2009 also explains how an issue can be supplanted on the macro-political agenda just as quickly the issue originally appeared.

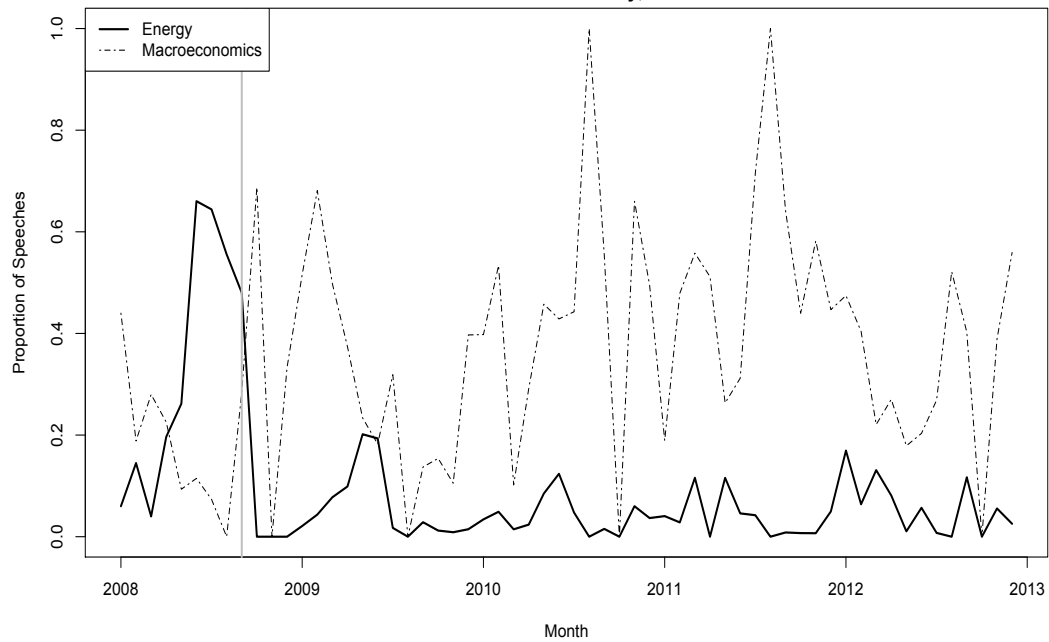
Figure 5.4 contains a comparison between the proportion of speeches on energy policy and the proportion of speeches on macroeconomic policy. It is clear energy and macroeconomics policy essentially flipped places on the agenda in September of 2008. On September 15, 2008, the Leeman Brothers financial services firm filed for bankruptcy, instigating the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. September was the same month President Bush signed the continuing resolution that ended the moratorium on offshore drilling. As such, it only makes sense that macroeconomics became a high priority issue and energy policy remained a relatively low priority for both parties.³⁵ However, energy policy did not exit the agenda simply because a law was passed.

³⁵ October, November, and December of 2008 are months in the fourth quarter of an election year, which are historically low periods of congressional activity. The zeroes in the energy and macroeconomic policy time series are indicative of this inactivity, not a symptom of agenda setting. Other regular months of inactivity (e.g, the August recess) account for the drastic volatility of the macroeconomics time series.

Recall from Figure 5.3 that gasoline prices eventually rebounded in mid-2009, and the initial 2008 decline in gasoline prices was due to the financial collapse (not the lifting of the moratorium on offshore drilling). Figure 5.4 makes it clear energy policy never regained a dominant position on the agenda—despite the return of high gasoline prices—because macroeconomic policy completely dominates the issue attention of the two parties between 2009 and 2012. Put simply, macroeconomics supplanted energy policy and maintained a monopolizing status due to the overriding economic problems in the exogenous environment.

The information in Figure 5.4 clearly demonstrates the zero-sum nature of partisan issue attention. In this case, exogenous policy indicators thrust a previously ignored issue onto the macro-political agenda—i.e. energy policy. Only three months after the parties shifted their collective attention to energy policy, a focusing event with enormous economic externalities caused another shift in attention. Thus, energy policy returned to lower levels of saliency, and macroeconomics monopolized the agenda space.

Figure 5.4: Proportion of Monthly Speeches on Energy and Macroeconomic Policy, 2008-2012



*The vertical line represents the passage on PL 110-329 in September of 2008

As a case study, the 2008 change in U.S. offshore oil and gas drilling policy provides valuable insight into how factors exogenous to subsystems and policymaking institutions can cause sudden shifts in attention and result in significant policy change. Examining partisan issue attention in 2008 also highlights two important aspects of the issue attention cycle: how an issue enters the macro-political agenda and how the same issue can be quickly supplanted on the agenda. However, significant shifts in attention and policy change are not the norm in American policymaking. A comparison of partisan issue attention across several different policy issue displays the important role policy context can play in this relationship.

Comparing Across Policy Contexts

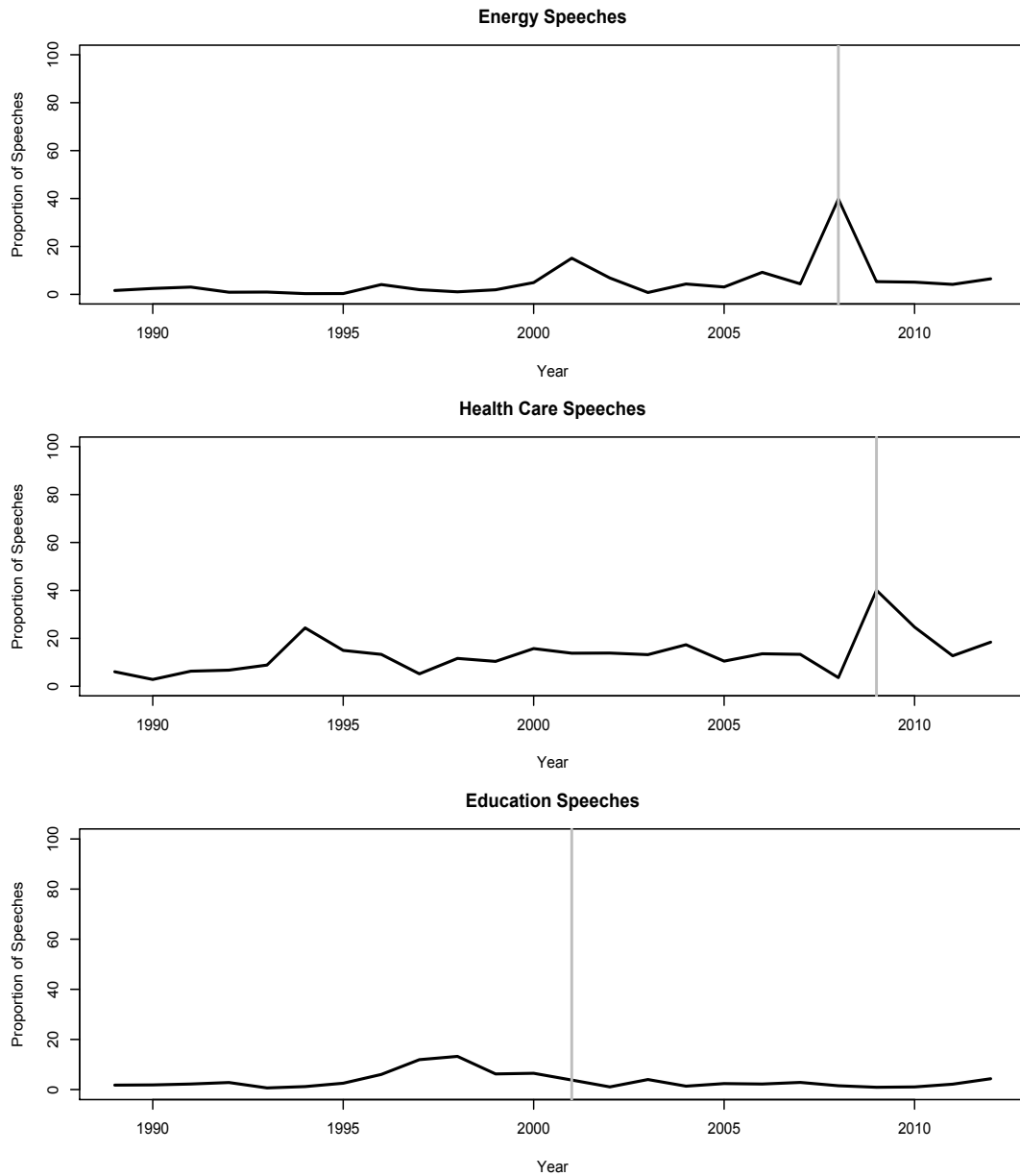
Figure 5.5 displays the yearly proportion of one-minute speeches across three different policy areas: energy policy, health care policy, and education policy. The time series for partisan issue attention to health care policy and education display

different characteristics than does the time series for partisan issue attention; yet, these three policy areas contain instances of significant policy change. As such, a brief examination of the three time series shows how the role of issue attention in significant policy change can vary substantially across policy issues.

Health Policy

Issue attention to health care policy contains many of the same dynamics as issue attention to energy policy. For example, there are two substantial spikes in partisan attention to health policy: 1994 and 2009. The 1994 spike in attention corresponds to President Clinton's failed health care reform package. The Clinton health care plan represented a potentially significant change in U.S. health care policy, but the legislation eventually met its demise in Congress after a long and contentious battle. Likewise, the 2009 spike in partisan attention to health policy corresponds to the passage—and preceding legislative battle—over the Affordable Care Act. In this way, partisan attention to health care policy exhibits similar characteristics to energy policy in regards to sudden shifts in attention and policy change. However, there are important points of deviation between the two time series, as well.

Figure 5.5: Proportion of Speeches on Energy, Health Care, and Education Policy, 1989-2012



*The vertical lines represent a significant policy change for each policy area. Energy policy is PL 110-329, the lifting of the moratorium on offshore oil and gas drilling. Health care policy is PL 111-148, the Affordable Care Act. Education policy is PL 107-110, the No Child Left Behind Act.

The relatively steady levels of partisan attention to health policy during the early 2000s show how shifts in partisan attention do not always accompany significant policy change. At the end of 2003, President Bush successfully enacted his “Medicare Part D” plan when he signed the Medicare Modernization Act of 2003. This was a salient,

significant change to U.S. health care policy; the “Medicare Part D” plan was also a point of contention between the parties. Despite the contentious, salient nature of the bill, there does not appear to be a significant shift in attention to health care policy during the early 2000s.

The key aspect about attention to health policy is the issue’s relative saliency across time. Recall from Chapter 3 that health policy is the second most discussed policy issue in the one-minute speech debate period—behind only Macroeconomics. In fact, nearly 15 percent of all one-minute speeches between 1989 and 2012 discuss health policy. The high saliency of health policy within partisan issue attention makes it difficult to discern significant shifts in attention. The obvious exceptions are the debates in 1994 and 2009. However, smaller shifts surrounding similar debates—e.g. the 2003 Medicare Part D debate—are harder to identify because the issue consistently maintains higher levels of attention than other policy issues across time. This point is made clear when the health policy time series is compared to the energy policy series; energy policy does not maintain high saliency across time, so even a small spike in attention are easily identified. For this reason, the measure of partisan issue attention may not be helpful when examining policy change within consistently salient issue domain, such as, health policy.

Education Policy

Partisan issue attention to education policy also highlights potential analytical problems, but in a very different way. The time series for attention to education policy in Figure 5.5 demonstrates that shifts in attention do not always precede substantial policy change. For example, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) is widely

considered the most significant change to Education policy in recent history. In addition to being a major shift in U.S. education policy, the NCLB was also an incredibly salient policy during the early years of the Bush administration. However, it is clear partisan issue attention to education policy shows no substantial change surrounding the passage of the law.

One explanation for the lack of any corresponding increase to partisan issue attention is the low saliency of education policy during the one-minute speech debate period. Education policy is mentioned in less than three percent of all one-minute speeches between 1989 and 2012. Moreover, the education time series in Figure 5.5 shows very little change over time. Put simply, partisan issue attention to education policy remains stable and minimal over the breadth of the time series—even in the face of significant policy change. The Education times series indicates partisan issue attention may not be useful for identifying subsystem disruption and policy change in every policy context, because some issues are simply not salient in the one-minute speech debate period.

As a whole, the information in Figure 5.5 suggests the longitudinal dynamics present in partisan attention to energy policy are not always present in other policy areas. These findings do not mean the insight drawn from examining partisan issue attention to energy policy in 2008 should be ignored or discounted. Instead, this comparison demonstrates the need to account for policy context, and indicates the danger of overgeneralizing any implications found within a specific policy area.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to examine the shift in partisan issue attention to energy policy. The rise in attention to energy policy precipitated the first major policy change to offshore oil and gas drilling policy in 25 years. As such, this case study provides a number of valuable insights into issue attention and policy change.

The examination of the events leading up to the 2008 policy change revealed the rise in partisan issue attention to energy policy was driven by two key exogenous factors: gasoline prices and public opinion. When gasoline prices reached an all-time high in the summer of 2008, public opinion also changed. Amid these changes, the minority party in Congress was able to shift focus, ending the moratorium on offshore drilling. These findings are noteworthy because clear connections can be made between factors exogenous to the policy subsystem and issue attention within a macro-level policymaking institution. It is also important to note the policy response to perceived public demands was not a realistic solution to the actual policy problem; yet, the Republican Party's policy frame was popular enough to win support in Congress.

This case study also highlights how an issue can exit the macro-political agenda just as quickly as the issue originally appeared. Agenda space is limited, so some issues must exit the agenda when new issues emerge. In this case, energy policy supplanted macroeconomics on the parties' policy agendas. However, a single focusing event—i.e., the beginning of the 2008 financial collapse—once again put macroeconomics at the front of the macro-political agenda, and energy policy was relegated to a position of lower priority. The same focusing event also had far-reaching externalities, which caused changes to the exogenous policy indicators originally tied to the initial shift in

attention to energy policy. Taken together, this study helps explain two important aspects of the issue attention process: the exit and entry of issues onto the macro-political agenda.

The partisan issue attention time series for energy policy was also compared against other partisan issue attention time series in order to show the need to account for policy context. This comparison showed how the role of partisan issue attention in Congress is not the same across all policy issues. The importance of context does not take away from the value of examining the dynamics of issue attention within a particular policy area. After all, “studies of single ‘deviant’ cases and of single cases where a variable is at an extreme value can be very useful for heuristic purposes of identifying new theoretical variables or postulating new causal mechanisms” (George and Bennett 2005).

This chapter helps to bridge the gap between the macro and meso-levels of policymaking abstraction. This case study of U.S. offshore oil and nature gas drilling policy demonstrates how political factors at the highest levels of decision-making can disrupt policy subsystems. Moreover, the case study highlights the dynamic relationship between exogenous variables, issue attention, and policy change.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Summary and Discussion

This project set out to explore the connections between the U.S. Congress and policy subsystems. Congress and policy subsystems are similar in that each contains complex policymaking processes that affect policy outcomes. However, these units of analysis represent two different levels of policymaking abstraction. A plethora of research has analyzed policymaking at each of these levels of abstraction. Despite seemingly obvious associations between Congress and policy subsystems, few studies have examined how political or institutional factors within one level of policymaking abstraction affect the other level. The key to drawing such connections is issue attention.

Issue attention is the keystone for making connections between Congress and policy subsystems because decision-makers are inherently limited in their capacity to prioritize policy issues. Some issues garner lots of attention, while others are completely ignored. These agenda setting dynamics are important for policy subsystems because issues typically undergo dramatic change under periods of intense scrutiny at the highest levels of decision-making. On the other hand, subsystems that garner little or no attention tend to foster states of stasis or incremental change within a particular issue domain.

Issue attention is obviously a vital factor for understanding policy change within subsystems. Specifically, attention is treated as an exogenous factor within theoretical and analytical frameworks used to examine policy subsystems, such as the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) and Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET). The empirical

findings from Chapters 3-5 provide the first, clear empirical link between macro-level issue attention and subsystem disruption by first analyzing patterns of attention within Congress and demonstrating how changes to congressional attention affects specific policy domains.

On its own, the ability to draw direct connections between political factors at the highest levels of government and specific policy subsystems is a noteworthy addition to the study of Congress and public policy. However, it is also important to note the various empirical findings from this study add to our understanding of political and policy-relevant processes in a variety of important ways. This chapter briefly elaborates on many of these implications and makes suggestions for future research.

Analyzing Political Rhetoric

The main source of data utilized by this project is political speeches. Despite the proliferation of methodological techniques that allow for efficient, valid coding of large amounts of text, the use of rhetorical data is a relatively new phenomenon in the study of American politics.³⁶ The main criticism of using such data is that rhetoric rarely translates into political outcomes—especially policy outputs. However, the information in Chapter 3 highlights how one-minute speeches in Congress mirror other political phenomenon commonly used in political analysis, such as public opinion and news coverage. The findings also indicate congressional speeches differ from legislative outputs and throughputs in important ways. These differences help to validate the use rhetorical data, because there is no utility in developing new data that completely mirrors other sources of data that are readily available. More to the point,

³⁶ It should be noted European scholars have been at the forefront of this movement.

the case study of policy change within the offshore oil and nature gas drilling subsystem successfully demonstrates that rhetoric can lead to policy change.

Studying rhetorical data has very clear implications for policy change within specific issue domains. Put simply, rhetoric can change public policy. Rhetoric is also an integral aspect of the larger system that affects political process and outcomes within different decision-making institutions. Decision-makers are strategic political actors who constantly attempt to influence the political process. Therefore, it follows that rhetoric is just as useful as policy outputs in terms of affecting politics, because rhetoric has the potential to expand the scope of conflict—a disruptive force in policy subsystems. While this study demonstrates how rhetoric can shape policy change, there are certainly times when rhetoric and policy change are not connected. As such, rhetorical data needs to be better tied to actual policymaking outputs and throughputs. Future work should attempt to more clearly draw such connections.

Party Politics

A common theme throughout this project is the important interplay between the parties' attempts to affect the policy debate. In many ways, the empirical findings from Chapter 4 provide evidence that current theories of congressional partisan politics do not adequately explain inter-party dynamics. Cox and McCubbins' cartel theory dominates our understanding of contemporary partisan politics in the U.S. Congress. The central claim of cartel theory is that the majority party dominates all aspects of the legislative process within Congress. As such, there is very little room for minority party influence on public policy within cartel theory. However, the analysis from Chapters 4 and 5 indicate the minority party is able to influence issue attention in Congress, and

changes to partisan issue attention in Congress can have a major impact on policy change (e.g., the change to offshore oil and natural gas drilling policy in 2008).

This evidence should make us reconsider current theories of partisan politics in Congress. The minority party obviously has an important role in the legislative process, but this role needs to be more clearly delineated. However, minority party influence is an underdeveloped aspect of contemporary theories of U.S. legislative politics. This study serves as an important first step toward better understanding these dynamics, but more work needs to be done to fully appreciate this vital component of congressional policymaking.

This study also demonstrates legislative outputs and throughputs are not the only source of policy change and activity that yield knowledge about policymaking in Congress. Solely focusing on such empirical observations hampers our ability to evaluate the whole of the legislative process. Instead, more focus should be given to the rhetoric and issue attention of the major parties. These variables interact with a number of political factors to affect the legislative process. More importantly, these agenda setting activities bring much needed specificity to the study of individual policy issues in Congress.

Issue Attention and the Policy Process

As previously mentioned, issue attention is a key component of several theories of the policy process, such as the ACF and PET, but it is often treated as an exogenous effect with unclear linkages between issue attention and change within the larger political system. Specifically, previous studies have demonstrated the disruptive nature of issue attention in a variety of issue domains. However, this disruption is rarely tied

directly to the decision-making outcomes within policymaking institutions. This study shows how changes to issue attention within policymaking institutions—like Congress—can be directly tied to other political variables (e.g., public opinion, economic indicators, etc.) to induce subsystem disruption and subsequent policy change.

It is not enough to simply throw important variables—like issue attention—under the broad umbrella of “exogenous effects.” Researchers need to consider the causal linkages between issue attention, subsystem disruption, and policy change. To this point, the concepts employed and the empirical evidence introduced in this study bring together the theories of the policy process in an effort to expand our understanding of the multitude of political variables that affect public policy. The various theories of the policy process are generally utilized in a compartmentalized fashion with studies focusing on specific aspects within a theoretical framework. This study demonstrates that aspects of multiple analytic frameworks—e.g., subsystems, issue attention, coalitions—can and should be incorporated into analyses of policy change. The theories of the policy process speak to one another’s strengths and weaknesses; the study of public policy should reflect the overlapping aspects of these frameworks.

This study is an important first step in broadening our understanding of the policy process. Like the utilization of the different theories of the policy process, analyses of public policy and political institutions are often treated as separate empirical endeavors. Using issue attention to connect two levels of policymaking abstraction is just one example of how the complexity of the policy process can be brought into

sharper focus; surely there are more such concepts. Put simply, the incorporation of difference analytical frameworks, concepts, and units of analysis is vital for making sense of the multitude of political, institutional, and social phenomena affecting the creation of public policy.

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