# Policy agendas and immigration in Australia 1996–2012

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## Abstract

Immigration in Australia is inherently a controversial topic. Events such as the MV Tampa affair cause increased media and legislative attention but increased legislative attention in the policy area do not always follow such dramatic events. We analyse media and legislative attention in the area of immigration and show increased activity in parliament around both dramatic events discussed in the media and also over more technical issues. Increased attention within parliament sometimes occurs outside of the gaze of the media.

**Keywords:** Australia, immigration, migrants, policy, mass media

## Introduction

Immigration is a highly salient policy issue in Australia, particularly since 2009 when Australia began to witness a significant increase in boat arrivals carrying asylum seekers from Sri Lanka and Afghanistan. In 2012 alone, up to 17,000 asylum seekers arrived in Australia by boat. While the number of boat arrivals in Australia is comparatively small compared to countries in Southern Europe and Southeast Asia, the issue attracts a great deal of media and political attention (Goot & Watson 2011; Pietsch 2013). In this article, we examine the relationship between public and government attention on immigration policy and legislation at different points in time. While immigration policy covers a range of major programs including skilled and family migration as well as humanitarian migration programs, we focus particularly on three different areas including: asylum migration, skilled migration and student migration. Even though each migration stream involves different policy and media responses, they all share in common the capacity to generate spikes in public interest and political attention.

We note here that policy attention and policy content are two different things (Dowding et al. 2013). The fact that an issue is discussed in the public, or in parliament, or is subject to legislation increasing policy attention, does not mean that much changes in the content of policy. Conversely an issue that does not receive much attention might, with a simple piece of legislation, or even a change in the rules implementing legislation or through a judicial decision, lead to wide-ranging changes in the content of the policy. John and Bevan (2012) show that punctuations in the legislative agenda in the British parliament do not always correspond to what historians recognise as major changes in policy content. Some major changes in policy content on immigration in Australia are reflected neither in legislation nor in media coverage but through High Court activity. We are not concerned with that aspect of immigration policy, important though it is. Rather we examine the relationship of media and legislative attention showing that change in the attention in one does not always track that in the other.

A wealth of material demonstrates that public and government attention to policy issues can vary significantly. This has been demonstrated in the comparative Policy Agendas Project (PAP). The policy agendas project has shown that the policy agenda – what the media talk about, what government talks about and legislates for – may remain relatively stable for long periods, but at times is punctuated with much greater focus on certain issues (Baumgartner & Jones 1993; Jones & Baumgartner 2005; Baumgartner et al. 2009). PAP has shown that graphing changes in policy attention produces a high degree of kurtosis.[1] Jones and Baumgartner (2005) suggest the leptokurtic distribution of changes in policy attention can be explained by a number of factors, including the boundedly rational nature of human decision making, friction in the policy process, the framing of issues and exogenous shocks.

First, people can only process so much information at one time, so that even though government and the public might be aware that problems are emerging in a given issue-area, they do not engage with those problems until they hit some critical moment. Second, institutional processes also play a part. Even after an issue receives public attention or is discussed in parliament there are various institutional hurdles that need to be cleared in order for such notice to result in legislation. Formally, veto players are agents that can stop policy change and among the veto players are political parties, the bicameral nature of most legislatures, the public service to some extent, as well as those influential pressure groups or social elites that have access to the top echelons of the parties or can sway public opinion for or against action. In Jones and Baumgartner's account the retarding forces are the set of institutional rules that block change, the amplifying forces constitute political mobilisation.

Again government has only limited time and sometimes legislation has to wait until other issues have been dealt with, especially in established democracies where governments have to deal with an enormous range of policy issues in areas such as education, health, foreign affairs, defence and security. Governments cannot possibly give equal attention to all policy areas at the same time. In practice, a broad array of policy information is detected, filtered and prioritised (Jones & Baumgartner 2005: 10). Sometimes, however, an issue forces itself on to the agenda due to some crisis, or perceived crisis, that captures media and public attention. Where these exogenous shocks occur punctuations will result. Punctuation in this sense is massively increased by policy attention and/or legislative intent. Thus, according to Baumgartner and Jones, we can explain the pattern of agenda change over time through such mechanical processes or through exogenous shocks.

Recognising that the punctuated nature of policy agendas can be explained mechanically is one thing. Explaining why a particular issue surfaces at the time and place it does is another. We address these latter questions with regard to the issue of immigration in Australia. We focus on some of the underlying triggers that push immigration on to the political and policy agenda. Immigration policy is an issue that is both popularised and politicised, and hence gains significant public and political attention. What is often unclear is what determinants periodically push the immigration issue further up the hierarchy of issues on the national policy agenda. We first discuss some of the main theoretical approaches as to why issues emerge centre stage at particular times. Much of the literature is focused within a European and North American context. We build on this literature to see whether theories of policy agenda change can be similarly applied to the issue of immigration in Australia. We provide a content analysis of Australian newspaper coverage, of Hansard and of legislation over a seven-year period to examine empirically whether there is a correlation between coverage in the media and political attention in parliament and in legislation. We then examine the mediating effects of party competition on the policy agenda. We argue that public concern about immigration represented

in newspaper coverage and public opinion polls is correlated with increased parliamentary activity but not with primary legislative activity. We discuss the reasons for these findings.

## Why do issues emerge when they do?

Taking the frictional account as the background to the emergence of issues, there are two general approaches to understanding the precise timing of their appearance on the policy agenda. The first approach concerns the external effects of the media and public opinion on the policy agenda. These can be seen in terms of a build-up over time of issues – a general frictional argument, but also including exogenous shocks or sudden events that rapidly fix attention on a specific issue. In some accounts (McCombs & Shaw 1972) the mass media are seen as the agenda-setter with the power to decide what issues are salient to voters and thus to set the tone for each political campaign. This approach is often referred to as the external pressure model of agenda setting (Walgrave et al. 2006). A second approach focuses on the role of political parties in setting the policy agenda. This approach is primarily concerned with the structure of party competition and the need for different parties to draw attention to particular policy issues (Green-Pedersen & Krogstrup 2008), and is often referred to as the party model (Klingemann et al. 1994). Political parties play little role in Baumgartner and Jones's policy agenda model, perhaps because of the weaker party structure in the United States where their original model was developed. It has proved important in the later comparative policy agenda projects within parliamentary systems (Green-Pedersen 2006; Green-Pedersen & Stubager 2010).

Both of these approaches attempt to predict the key variables that determine the political and legislative agenda. The external pressure model focuses on external *changes* as the main determinant of legislative activity, whilst the party model focuses on policy *priorities* as the main determinant of legislative activity. Overall, there is complex interplay between the effects of the media, the public and political parties on the policy agenda (Soroka 2001; Green-Pedersen & Stubager 2010). Each theoretical approach is discussed in turn.

Research has shown that external pressure indicators can often predict the political and legislative agenda (Soroka & Wlezien 2010; Vliegenthart & Walgrave 2011). External indicators include heightened media and public activity on an issue or a sudden event or crisis. The media, for instance, can apply external pressure on political parties to respond to a particular policy issue. Alternatively, opposition parties may focus on media coverage and pick up on issues that are of concern to the public in order to pressure the government into action or expose the government's lack of action. This has been particularly evident in the asylum-seeker debate in Australia. Political parties on both sides of the political spectrum have raced to the bottom to implement tougher border control measures aimed at deterrence in response to media and public concerns about boat arrivals.

Agenda-setting theory has shown that public concerns expressed in the media are not always an accurate representation of public opinion. Indeed, the media can use certain techniques to control the public agenda rather than simply reflecting public opinion. One such technique involves a transfer of salience or 'perceived importance' from the media to the public (McCombs & Shaw 1972; Dearing & Rogers 1996). According to this theory, the public perceives policy issues that receive most media coverage to be the issues of greatest importance. Therefore, by focusing on some policy issues more than others, the media have the power to set the public agenda (McCombs & Shaw 1972; Cobb & Ross 1997; Jones et al. 2003; Jones & Baumgartner 2005). In terms of immigration policy, each year nearly 16,000 migrants overstay their visas in Australia, representing a security concern for government officials. For example, in 2010, the number of migrants overstaying their visas and hence living unlawfully in Australia was 53,900. As a comparison, only 8,250 people applied for asylum, yet asylum seekers attract a great deal more public and political attention because of the perceived importance to national security (DIAC 2013).

Political parties may or may not respond to the issues discussed by the media. Electoral considerations will play a major part, as will the ideology of the party and the issues which government is most committed to addressing. Several studies have tracked the way the national policy agenda fluctuates with the volume of media attention to some issues but not others (for example, Dunaway et al. 2010). This evidence suggests that for some policy issues the 'party political' agenda may be influenced by the public agenda (Green-Pedersen & Krogstrup 2008). For example, public opinion may determine which issues receive more attention. When concerned about re-election, policy makers will seek to change policy to the position expressed by the public (Sulkin 2005; Mortensen 2010). When Australia was confronted by the high-profile *Tampa* asylum-seeker incident, six weeks before the 2001 Australian federal election, the Coalition, led by former Prime Minister John Howard, introduced immigration as a new issue into an election campaign that had previously been dominated by other policy issues such as health, jobs, education and the GST. This was in response to the fact that the issue of terrorism and asylum seekers received a disproportionate amount of news media attention (Denemark et al. 2007). Shortly after the 2001 election, the Howard-led government made substantial increases to the budget for its counter-terrorism strategy. As part of the counter-terrorism strategy, the government introduced new legislative measures aimed at expanding intelligence gathering and police powers (Pietsch & McAllister 2012).

Whilst the media and the public might affect what the legislature and government talk about and consider for new legislation, most government activity is inherited (Rose & Davies 1994). Not only is most activity of government officials concerned with implementing policy agreed by previous governments, much of the new legislation that government develops is generated by past legislation, eliminating loopholes that have emerged, amending where problems have been created, or changing aspects for ideological reasons. Most of these changes in legislation are minor and receive little public or media

attention. Such processes of 'path dependency' (Pierson 2000) are well known in the literature. Where previous legislation causes problems and needs to be repealed or part repealed, or loopholes emerge, increased attention is due to what Jones and Baumgartner (2005) refer to as negative feedback. They also argue that legislation creating new agencies often leads to more attention in that area, as the agency generates more legislation by finding new areas within its remit that require attention. They call this positive feedback. Positive feedback is an important process for political science, for it demonstrates the interaction of policy and institutions, institutions and policy.

Friction might explain why issues remain dormant for a long time and also why they can suddenly explode, since problems have been building whilst public and government attention has been focused elsewhere. For example, there were many warning signs of the global financial crisis from the unsustainable risk in asset prices, high levels of personal debt, banks over-extending their leverage, whilst banks trading in securitised assets had created new arenas for taking risk (Stiglitz 2010; Hindmoor & McConnell 2013). But hindsight is easy and before the global financial crisis broke issues such as terrorism, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and climate change seemed more urgent. With a booming economy, low inflation and historically low levels of credit default, and banks making record profits, regulating the financial institutions hardly seemed a policy priority.

It can be argued that the global financial crisis was not an exogenous shock to most economies but the result of lack of attention to a looming issue; and arguably, because earlier bank problems had led to tighter regulations, Australia had even less to invest in the issue. Indeed it might be thought that few crises are genuinely exogenous. A similar argument can be made in relation to immigration policy attention in Australia. The asylum-seeker issue is frequently viewed by the media and political parties as a contemporary crisis that has come about as a result of a combination of exogenous shock factors. Yet what we are witnessing across the world is widespread irregular people movement as a result of governments gradually tightening up their domestic policies on migration. This process of tightening border control has been occurring for decades in Southern Europe, Southeast Asia and more recently Australia. Of course, a major terrorist outrage using techniques not previously imagined, such as the events of 9/11, can be seen purely as exogenous and requiring legislative attention. However, there are relatively few of these examples, since it is the job of government to regulate risk. Many crises are simply due to the fact that government has not given enough consideration to a particular risk. In governments' defence, the distribution of the incidence of high-cost, low-risk events is itself leptokurtic, so we should expect government attention and activity with regard to such events to have that shape.

Jones and Baumgartner (2005: 51) suggest that governments might sometimes over-respond to an issue because of a disproportionate amount of public attention or collective action. Punctuations in the general level of attention paid to particular policies can be mapped where there is a sudden increase in media

activity associated with a perceived crisis or event (Baumgartner & Jones 1993). Sometimes the media can highlight a specific event which then seizes public and political attention even though it is not, in fact, out of the ordinary. Public outcry over a child murder or abduction, or an incident of bullying at school, might capture public attention and lead to new legislation even though the frequency of such events has been falling over time. The issue in question is in fact being dealt with, but a particular event is taken up and the public demands more dramatic action even if that action has few long-term effects.

Such outcries provide opportunities for lobby groups, the public and political leaders to focus public and political attention on previously dormant issues (Walgrave et al. 2006). For example, following a perceived crisis, interest groups representing a broad range of interests will mobilise in order to push for policies that will prevent or mitigate such a disaster in future. When public interest is high or easily mobilised it is more likely to have an impact on political activity. For example, with the GFC beginning to affect local employment conditions in Australia, trade union organisations were able to lobby for improved working conditions for local and temporary migrant workers. Opposing more scrutiny, business organisations also lobbied for more workplace flexibility. External pressure from lobby groups with particular interests led to an inquiry into temporary skilled migration programs involving 457 visas, Enterprise Migration Agreements and Regional Migration Agreements. This is just one example of the ways in which public interest can be mobilised and have an impact on political activity.

While the external effects of the media and public opinion can result in a disproportionate amount of political attention, there are notable restrictions on the impact of the media in shaping the political agenda. First, as previously discussed, it has been established that the extent of media coverage can shape the salience of policy issues during political campaigns. This can be achieved when the media suppress or skew information as a result of the ideological preferences of those in power (see Bernhardt et al. 2008; Anderson & McLaren 2009). However, while the media can influence the salience of issues, they are restricted in their capacity to change political attitudes towards these issues. This is because the media tend to reinforce rather than change pre-existing predispositions. Converse (1962), for example, argued that media effects on political attitudes are constrained by voters' existing political loyalties, beliefs and information. Notwithstanding these drawbacks, when elections are won by two to three per cent of votes and where many voters are dependent on news coverage during the campaign, the effect of the media in shaping the campaign can still be substantial (see Denemark et al. 2010).

Second, the impact of the media on setting the agenda may only have relevance for particular types of issues. Zucker (1978) first introduced the 'obtrusive thesis' – the more obtrusive an issue is, the more likely individuals experience it directly and the less likely the media will be able to shape the party political agenda. Issues are seen as obtrusive when individuals have a direct experience with them and as unobtrusive when individuals have not had direct experience and therefore must rely on the mass media for information instead of their own

experience (Birkland 1998). Therefore, the capacity of the media to influence the policy agenda may have more relevance for *unobtrusive* issues than for *obtrusive* issues (Winter & Eyal 1981; Lee 2004).

Third, party issue saliency may moderate the impact of the media, public opinion and sudden events on political attention (Hester & Gibson 2007). Since the decline of social structure and party identification as determinants of voting behaviour, policy agenda setting has become more important for political parties (Vliegenthart & Walgrave 2011). In addition to the external and disproportionate effects of the media and public opinion, whether or not an issue makes it on to the political agenda has a lot to do with party priorities and governmental mandate. Previous research has shown that party manifestos are normally good predictors of future legislation (Klingemann et al. 1994). Such manifestos play an important role in electoral party competition. Therefore political activity may have more to do with the dynamics between party competition and voter preferences than with external effects or events (Thomassen 2005).

During election campaigns, focusing attention on a policy issue where all parties hold a similar position is not electorally beneficial. It is far more advantageous for a party to focus on a policy issue where there is a conflict with other parties. This is often referred to as 'issue ownership' (Green-Pedersen & Krogstrup 2008). Whether an issue makes it on to the agenda may depend on the extent of party conflict over it. Given that the public tends to have a short attention span, political parties may attempt to introduce new policies that inspire change among younger generations. It is likely that new policy domains are more punctuated than older inherited policy domains that are less easy to change.

Focusing political attention on issues where there is internal party conflict is similarly not electorally beneficial. This is particularly the case in countries where internal party discipline is not guaranteed. Internal party discipline is often necessary for the successful passage of legislation. A political party's reputation and chances of re-election often depend on its record of legislative accomplishment (McCubbins 2005). To address this problem, governments may prioritise some bills through positive agenda power and block other bills through negative agenda power or by keeping the issue off the policy agenda.

The existing theoretical literature on policy agendas shows a wide variety of factors that interact with each other in complex ways to affect what policies are placed on the national political agenda. In the next section, we focus on immigration, which national polls have shown is a salient public issue in Australia (see McAllister et al. 2010). Immigration provides an important case study to test some of the theoretical literature on agenda setting. It is a highly politicised issue that has become popularised and used competitively in political campaigns. Looking at the dynamics of immigration policy may help us to unravel the complexities of why some issues get on to the agenda while other, equally important, issues do not. In particular, we draw on a case study of immigration policy to test whether media and political activity is followed by corresponding legislation at different points in time.

## Immigration policy as an empirical case study

First, to address whether media activity is correlated with political and policy activity, we conducted a content analysis drawing on relevant keywords in newspapers and Hansard. Before the mid-1990s, immigration was considered a bipartisan issue in Australia (McAllister 2003; Pietsch et al. 2010). Since then the issue of immigration has become increasingly polarised in the media and in political debates throughout western democracies. This is evidenced by increasing support for extreme right-wing anti-immigration parties in Europe and anti-immigration laws in Arizona. Much of this has been driven by concerns about asylum seekers, and about legal and illegal labour migration. Until the mid-1990s, electoral outcomes had been relatively immune from concerns about immigration and asylum seekers. However, the situation changed dramatically in 2001 when border protection became a major issue and determined the outcome of the federal election (McAllister 2003). The first stage of the empirical analysis examines the extent of newspaper activity in Australia on the issue of immigration between 1996 and 2012. To do this we examine the extent of newspaper coverage of the immigration portfolio using the online newspaper Factiva database (http://www.nla.gov.au/app/eresources). We note at this stage that there are limitations to Factiva searches, which rely heavily on keyword searches. A significant limitation is that computer programs such as Factiva do not search for meaning underpinning particular concepts. Terms such as 'refugee' or 'illegal boat person' may often change meaning over time. Nevertheless, such database searches are a well-used tool of modern communications and public policy research. Furthermore, whilst newspapers are not the only, nor for many people the main, way in which they access news, they do provide a ready source of data to examine peaks and troughs in media attention. We should therefore expect that the troughs and peaks found in newspaper coverage will correlate strongly with those on the television and radio. Indeed, Graber (2009) suggests that television tends to follow the trends that emerge in newspapers, as TV journalists, executives and producers are avid followers of the print media. Thus newspapers provide a ready source for the data in which we are interested. Newspaper hits for specified immigration policy keywords are measured on a monthly basis from January 1996. The keywords used in the Factiva database are: 'asylum seeker', 'refugee', 'boat people', 'boatpeople', 'immigration', 'migration', 'Minister for Immigration' and 'Immigration Minister'. We counted the total number of articles that included the keywords. The analysis does not include all words relevant to immigration policy, merely the keywords which would identify an immigration article. Our study is also limited to articles published in Australia. Figure 1 shows that between 1996 and 2012, the total number of articles on immigration increased significantly. However, during the same time period there is increased media activity. Therefore, we scaled the results of total media articles proportionate to the increase in total articles.

Figure 2 is a time series representation of the total number of articles identified in the database that matched the dictionary keywords on immigration. The data are grouped on a monthly basis, scaled to the total number of articles in the Factiva dataset. After scaling, the data reveals a general level of activity in the 2,000–4,000 articles per month range, with three clear periods of heightened activity occurring in the 8,000–10,000 articles per month range.

**Figure 1: Total number of articles on immigration in Australia in the Factiva database**
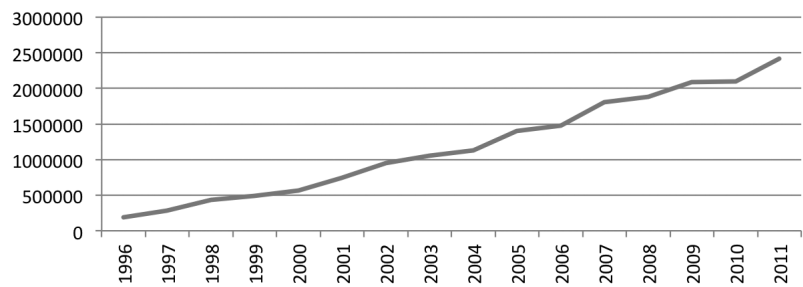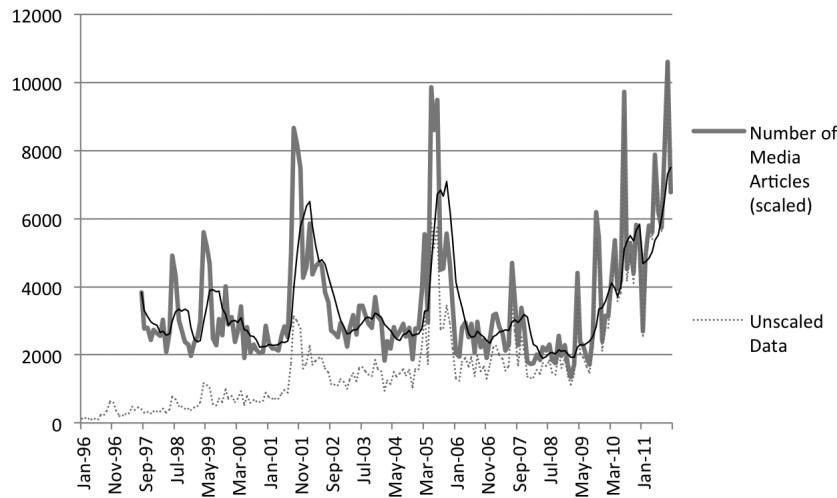


**Figure 2: Time series of immigration articles in the media, scaled to total media articles in database. Data is aggregated on a monthly basis**



A qualitative review of the media content that falls within this period shows that the three spikes are driven by particular media events. The first notable spike is between August 2001 and June 2002. This media spike is related to the Tampa Affair of 2001, which was followed by an election in 2001 in which immigration was a central theme. The second spike occurs between March and November 2005. This is related to general scandal in the portfolio. A number of scandals in immigration detention emerged during this period in the media. The media focused on the Immigration Minister Senator Vanstone and her handling

of the wrongful immigration detention of Cornelia Rau in 2004. The episode resulted in the Palmer Inquiry of 2005, and exposed a number of other issues in the immigration detention system – particularly in the Baxter Detention Centre in South Australia (Palmer 2005). The third spike began in October 2009, prompted by a substantial increase in boat arrivals carrying asylum seekers.

Figure 3 represents the increase in boat arrivals carrying asylum seekers to Australia from 2009. This has led to a heightened prominence of the overall immigration portfolio in the media, with media attention focusing on immigration detention and the pressures on it, and on several government policies that have been announced to address increasing boat arrivals. This shows that increased media attention is strongly related to the number of boat arrivals.

**Figure 3: Unauthorised boat arrivals (passengers) to Australia, grouped by year of arrival. Source: Parliamentary Library of Australia**
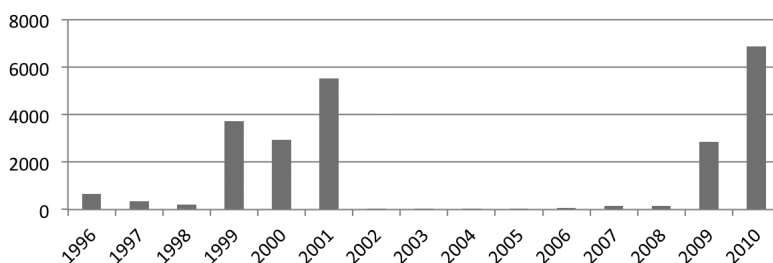


The second stage of our empirical analysis looks at whether such spikes in media activity are correlated with political attention. It is important to distinguish policy attention from policy change. For example, Dowding and colleagues (2011: 4) observe that:

> At times a significant policy issue may only be the subject of a few well-chosen words and a key policy announcement. On other occasions governments may deliberately downplay some issues in order to minimise political conflict. Alternatively, they may devote a great deal of attention to other more marginal issues if they are low cost and popular.

To illustrate this point in the context of immigration policy, a large change in the migration programme from skilled to unskilled immigration represents a large change in policy *content* with little budgetary effect, but potentially with little political *attention* on the part of decision makers. Conversely, political or media hysteria about immigration policy on refugees may generate substantial political attention without having a large effect on the budget for the portfolio or major changes to government activity related to the issue. Another indicative example would be substantial budget changes caused by factors outside the government's control. This is particularly possible in demand-driven programs such as immigration and healthcare.

We conducted a content analysis of Hansard from the House of Representatives to show the number of instances of the following keywords relevant to immigration policy: 'migration', 'immigration', 'asylum', 'boat people', 'boat person', 'refugee', 'Minister for Immigration' and 'Immigration Minister'. Understanding what is recorded in Hansard is fundamental to understanding what the data show. Hansard is the official record of Members' speeches during parliamentary debates on bills and several other items of business. Questions without notice (question time) and matters of public importance (hour-long debates usually based on the political issue of the day) are also included in Hansard, among other parliamentary activities. Therefore, the words related to immigration matters in Hansard are one indication of the level of parliamentary activity relating to immigration occurring in the House.

Figure 4 shows a time-series representation of the prevalence of the keywords in Hansard from January 1996. The data are grouped monthly. The line is jagged due to the fact that Parliament does not sit constantly and rises for several weeks at a time at various stages of the year – the line returns to 0 at these times. A six-month moving average is included in the chart to illustrate short-term trends and to reduce the influence of outliers. It is also necessary because, in the structure of a parliamentary day, debates on particular issues may either be spread over an allocated time over several days, or concentrated during a single day, depending on how the House wishes to order its business.

**Figure 4:** Time series of instances of immigration policy keywords in Hansard, grouped monthly. Trend line is a six-month moving average
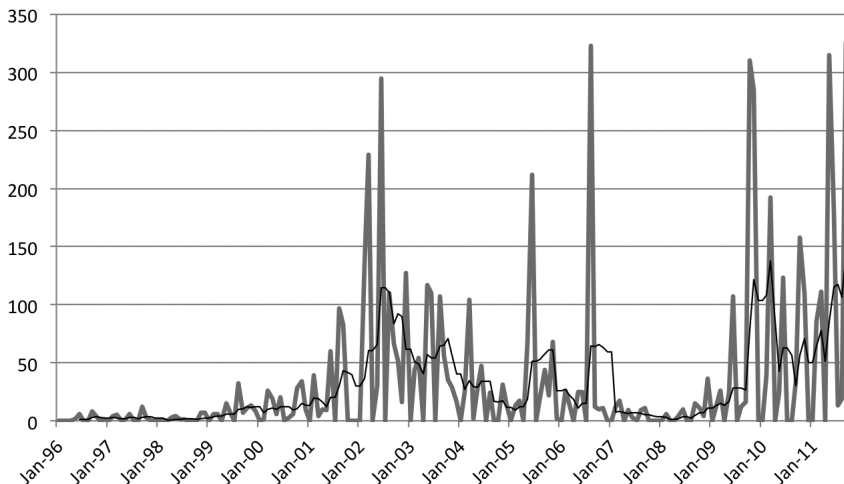


Two things are readily observable in the results presented in Figure 4. First, there is a clear baseline of general activity, with a notable tail to the right indicating substantial spikes from the baseline. Second, Figure 4 shows that there are three spikes in Hansard activity, which follow the spikes that occur in media activity, suggesting that there may be a relationship between media

coverage and political attention. We note that Hansard activity is higher over the boat arrivals spikes than the Vanstone scandal; once the inquiry was set up, Hansard activity died down until the inquiry reported, when it spiked again. How far the Hansard activity results in policy change, as suggested in much of the policy agendas literature, is still unclear. Attention to immigration might be used as an electoral weapon with little actual change in policy. Below we try to examine the extent of legislative activity in the portfolio over the same time period. First we consider immigration as an electoral weapon.

In contrast to immigration levels more broadly, we expect to find a correlation between media coverage of and political attention to asylum seekers for a number of reasons. First, the asylum-seeker issue might be considered an unobtrusive issue, given that the majority of Australians have not personally experienced either fleeing persecution or seeking refuge in another country, nor knowingly have had contact with asylum seekers. On the other hand, it is an issue that can generate a great deal of fear in the public. It is therefore expected that on this policy issue the media are likely to have some impact, which may in turn trigger increased political attention and increased opportunity for political parties to exploit the situation for their own political gain. Second, the issue of asylum seekers exposes a political problem for the government in that it raises public concerns about border security and human rights. Given that the news media rely on conflict to draw in consumers, we would expect not only increased media coverage with each new boat arrival carrying asylum seekers, but also increased political attention – as opposition parties similarly gain from exposing a political problem for the government.

Figure 5 plots changes in political activity using a content analysis of keywords in Hansard on three different areas of the immigration program: asylum seekers; skilled migration; and student visas. While significant political attention is paid to the areas of skilled and student migration, it is the asylum-seeker issue that attracts the most political attention. Furthermore, the asylum series has the strongest relationship with the three spikes outlined in the previous section. The skilled migration and student migration data seem not to be anywhere near as influential. It appears, therefore, that it is the asylum-seeker issue, rather than concerns about immigration more generally, that is pushing immigration on to the policy agenda.

In Australia, political parties have been known to target their political campaigns in ways that gain favourable television coverage. Given that the asylum-seeker issue is an unobtrusive and divisive issue that attracts media coverage, the media are likely to have a strong impact on this issue. While the media may not significantly affect the majority of voters, the effect of the media on a small sub-section of the population can be substantial (Denemark et al. 2007). For example, in 2001, the media coverage on border protection during the political campaign was influential in deciding the electoral outcome that resulted in a Coalition victory (see McAllister 2003). However, increased media and political attention does not always translate into increased legislative activity.

**Figure 5: Time series of instances of immigration policy keywords in Hansard, grouped monthly**
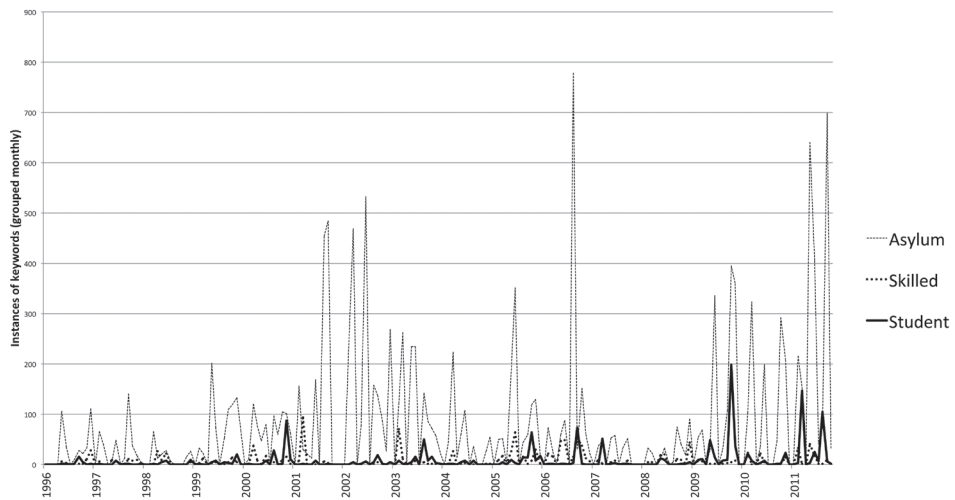


Next we look at whether increased political attention to immigration matters is correlated with increases in legislation. Some bills which take up a lot of time are of little interest to the public or backbench MPs, and debates on these bills do not warrant large numbers of speakers (or, sometimes, any speakers apart from the government minister responsible for the bill and his opposition counterpart). Other bills, however, are controversial. They tend to attract large numbers of government and opposition speakers. Sometimes, debate on such bills will extend over the course of several parliamentary sitting days.[2]

Sometimes the length of legislation may be due not to controversy and associated political attention but simply to the necessary legal requirements to address changes in policy.

Figure 6 plots the instances of immigration keywords in Hansard against the number of pages of legislation passed in the immigration portfolio. In terms of the legislation series as illustrated by the dark line, we grouped the data by the number of pages of legislation by month. The results are confined to the Acts of Parliament administered by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship. When assessed together, the data on parliamentary activity and legislative activity in the immigration portfolio demonstrate a number of conclusions.

The results in Figure 6 show four spikes in legislative activity over immigration. It should be noted that these findings do not attempt to account for all legislative activity, as some immigration laws are reformed through secondary or delegated legislation and exercises of ministerial discretion. Such secondary legislation usually does not involve extensive parliamentary debate. Furthermore, some laws come about as a result of judicial decisions, particularly in relation to laws impacting asylum seekers. Some immigration reforms are also achieved

through regulations, which are also not always captured in parliamentary debates (see Crock & Berg 2011). We can, therefore, only measure the relationship between media and political activity and primary legislation.

**Figure 6: Time series of words of immigration legislation passed through the Parliament (dark) plotted against Hansard mentions of immigration keywords (light) as a six month moving average**
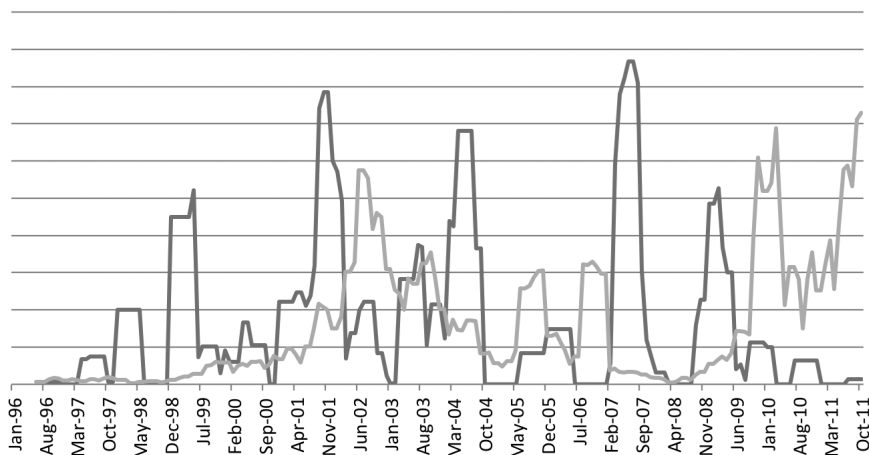


The first spike is between 1998 and 1999. Following its election in 1996, the Coalition government initiated a major review of Australia's skilled migration program, introducing mandatory English language testing and rigorous qualifications screening. This involved significant changes to the points system for students and skilled migrants. Changes to visa requirements tend to receive little media or parliamentary scrutiny, which in this case may explain why the spike in legislation on immigration is not accompanied by an increase in Hansard mentions of immigration keywords. In 2001 there is another spike in legislation, which coincides with a smaller increase in Hansard mentions on immigration matters. In 2001, a great many amendments were made to the Migration Act 1958 and the Customs Act 1901, aimed at providing officials with increased powers to protect Australia's borders. In 2001, border protection was also strengthened by the excision of certain Australian territories from the migration zone. These measures received bipartisan support and, as such, were not subject to much in the way of parliamentary debate. The third spike in 2007 relates to the introduction of the Australian Citizenship Act 2007, which revised the citizenship process. It too was supported by both sides of the House and required little parliamentary debate. The final spike in 2008 and 2009 is again related to increased measures to strengthen border security. However, after the 2010 election, these changes were subject to far more scrutiny in the House and in the Senate, with the continued arrival of boats carrying asylum seekers and the need for the ALP to negotiate with the Greens in a minority government.

## Conclusion

We have found spikes in the attention given to immigration both in parliamentary activity and in the newspapers, but these spikes in attention do not correspond precisely with each other. In parliament attention increased due to legislative activity that changed the immigration points system and introduced the Citizenship Act of 2007. There is some increase in media attention as these parliamentary activities are reported on both in news columns and in commentary. We can attribute this increase in government and legislative attention to the frictional nature of politics where pressures build up over time and government responds. Such pressures might be found through careful content analysis of the media stories but they are not immediately apparent within measures of relative attention. They are issues that are picked up by the relevant public servants and those working in those policy areas without attracting a great deal of outside attention.

We have also picked up spikes that are caused by external events impacting upon both the media and politicians. Moves to strengthen border security both in legislation and in implementation followed increased attention to the issue of boat people and asylum seeking, resulting in greater spikes in parliamentary and especially media attention. We have evidence, therefore, of government activity both as a result of the frictional nature of policy attention and of exogenous shocks. The latter motivate governments both directly through the attention given to issues by the media and public concern, and through the likely electoral consequences. Of course, not all media attention in an area leads to legislative activity. The scandal surrounding a number of wrongful detentions, notably that of Cornelia Rau, generated much media and parliamentary attention (though substantially less than asylum-seeking issues), particularly in parliament, with calls for two immigration ministers to resign, first Philip Ruddock in 2000 and later Amanda Vanstone in 2005. Whilst that did not lead to any legislation, Prime Minister Howard, though publicly absolving both ministers from blame, did eventually remove Vanstone from the cabinet (in 2009, giving her a diplomatic post soon after) and pledging $230 million over five years to improve the Immigration Department's performance (Dowding & Lewis 2012).

We have shown evidence of legislation due to the frictional nature of policy attention and due to exogenous shocks in the area of immigration. Whilst the specifics of immigration policy and asylum seeking are party political and would be expected to appeal to the core base of party support, they do not impact on the public in the same way. Government agenda attention has both a standard operating side and a reactive aspect in the controversial area of immigration rules and regulations. Relatively technical changes to immigration legislation have little effect on media output or public opinion though they might have economic effects on the public every bit as much or more than more reactive legislation based on perceived crises.

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## Endnotes

1.  Kurtosis is a measure of 'peakedness' of the probability distribution of a real-valued random variable. The degree of kurtosis describes the shape of the probability distribution. It is interpreted in terms of the width of the peak, the tail weight and distribution between the peak and the tails (the nature of the 'shoulders'). A high degree means it has a sharp peak known as leptokurtic. Such distributions have higher peaks around the mean compared to normal distributions because the data have lower variation within observations and so are highly concentrated around the mean.

2.  For example, the Native Title Bill 1993 was passed on 21 December 1993 with debate in the Senate lasting 51 hours and 49 minutes.

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