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Questioning the government in time of crisis

An analysis of Question Time in Spain¹

Enrico Borghetto

enrico.borghetto@fsch.unl.pt

Crises are focusing events which alter the ordinary state of things and demand a greater than usual amount of attention and resources on the part of political actors. Both attention and resources are finite in politics, therefore each decision on how to react to a crisis bears with it a potential trade-off: attention to particular issues closely associated with the crisis may squeeze out attention to other domains. This paper addresses the effect of the recent events connected to the Eurozone crisis on agenda diversity in the Spanish parliament. Agenda diversity is defined as the relative dispersion of attention across issues debated during question time at any one point in time. The findings show that indeed, as never before in Spanish democratic history, the legislative agenda contracted and the economy dwarfed all other issues. This results mainly from the opposition parties' strategy of directing attention to economic failings so as to attack the government and gain an electoral advantage. The empirical analyses will make use of a data-set on Spanish oral questions spanning a time-frame of 31 years (1982-2013).

¹ I want to thank the Spanish Policy Agendas team for sharing the data on Spanish parliamentary questions in their website. The list of oral questions (2009-2013) I coded are available upon request.

1. Introduction

A growing number of studies have been recently directing attention to the macro-political effects of the euro crisis on parliamentary activities.² It has been showed that the crisis severely affected citizens' trust in national parliaments (Roth 2010). Others discussed what role national parliaments played and should play in the reform of the European economic governance (Wessels and Rozenberg 2013; Auel and Höing 2014). The special issue in the Journal of Legislative Studies edited by De Giorgi and Moury (2014) offers new insights into the effect of the eurocrisis on interparty agreement by using final votes on adopted legislation. Remarkably, none of these studies have so far focused on the impact of the Great Depression on the overall agenda of parliaments, understood as the complete range of issues parliaments deal with in their day-to-day business. It is expected that, in time of extreme economic downturn, the economy is prominent not only in voters' (Singer 2013) but also in their representatives' agenda.

² The financial crisis of late 2008 and the global recession which has followed and remained since is a topic of great interest to researchers and policy practitioners. Although the burst of the property bubble in Ireland in 2008 had already given some hints of the upcoming economic storm which would wreak havoc in Europe, the Eurozone crisis formally set off in 2009, as a result of the revelations about the size of Greece's debts. This first shock set in motion a chain of events that impacted on the finances and economic conditions of the whole southern Europe, spreading across Spain, Portugal and Italy. The management of sovereign debt crises, volatile stock markets, rising unemployment and lagging economic growth featured prominently in the agenda of these countries. Moreover, all four countries experienced a turnover in government, their governments passed austerity measures and three of them (Greece, Portugal and Spain) eventually turned to the European Union for a bailout.

Theories of economic voting argue that the economy has an advantage over other factors guiding how voters weigh issues (for a review Singer 2011). Worsening of economic conditions are more easily perceived by the public opinion and, partially as a consequence, they are more likely to be covered in media reports. These signals are read by politicians which strategically decide to act or not act upon them, depending on whether doing so is deemed beneficial from their point of view (Walgrave and Van Aelst 2006). As a result of the extreme gravity of the current crisis, it is expected that politician will not be able to openly disregard economic issues and that economic issues will enjoy an extraordinary surge in attention. Most importantly, this should hold true not only during electoral campaign (as already shown by Singer 2013) but in everyday institutional activities.

Another consequence of economic downturns is that, because agenda space is constrained (Jones and Baumgartner 2005), activity in “other” areas will not be proportional to what one would expect in ordinary times. These issues have not disappeared, yet they are no longer given as much representation in the political debate. This expectation reflects recent findings about the content of national executive and European Council agendas (Jennings et al. 2011; Alexandrova, Carammia, and Timmermans 2012). They showed how an increase of salience for certain core issues (the economy is one of them), constrains the space available for other problems. The first aim of this chapter is to assess whether the severity of the recent economic crisis made a difference in terms of attention diversity, by directing attention to economic issues in parliamentary agendas.

Talking solely of displacement of “other issues” from the political agenda could end up giving a simplified account of agenda-setting in times of austerity. Issue prioritization would be treated as a direct function of incoming information about most important problems.

Importantly, this perspective leaves out the intervention of political party agents, namely those actors that in virtue of their representative functions have most interest in controlling the political agenda. Their preferences on which issues to allow in or out from the agenda may be motivated both ideologically and strategically. First, they are carriers of political preferences, of visions of the world driving their selection of which issues to attend. Second, they might find an advantage in emphasising an issue rather than another, irrespective of its intrinsic values in their eyes: “reward” or “damage” motives underlie their agenda decisions (Vliegenthart, Walgrave, and Zicha 2013). The second aim of this chapter is to introduce a preliminary exploration on how the “debt crisis” affected issue competition by distinguishing parties’ agendas according to their institutional position (either majority or opposition) and according to their ideological profile.

As for the first, the climate of social discontent created by the adoption of austerity policies is expected to play to the advantage of the opposition. Since they are not required to deliver policy solutions on those issues that they decide to emphasise, they have greater freedom to be responsive to the electorate’s priorities and maintain the emphasis on crisis-related issues (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010). Given the particularly severe economic and social fallouts of austerity measures, the opposition will disproportionately focus on these problems. The selective focus of opposition attention will be further accentuated by the impossibility for cabinet parties to offer “painless” policy solutions to these problems, because of external commitments that place limits on their freedom to respond to their electorates. On their part, as partial “takers” of priorities, incumbents will have to continue focusing attention on all issues in the agenda.

Secondly, it is offered a cursory exploration of whether different parties adopt different agendas, despite of crisis conditions and despite holding similar institutional positions. The relevant works to be addressed here are those dealing with the impact of party identities on policy-making. The literature has by now abandoned a strict division between proponents of the “partisan-neutrality” and “partisan-differentiation” theses and started focusing on the conditions under which the partisan composition of government and parliament matters (Schmidt 1996). The expectation is that strategic politicians, when choosing how to allocate their limited amount of attention, are not only responsive to the electorate’s concern (mainly emphasising economic issues in time of crisis) but they will also highlight party owned-issues, so as to consolidate or create an image of competence on the issue (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996).

The empirical analyses will make use of a data-set on Spanish question-time activities (“preguntas orales em pleno”, questions for oral reply in plenary sitting) spanning a time-frame of 31 years (1982-2013). Compared with traditional studies of legislative processes as such, the analysis of the content of parliamentary questions remains largely unexplored (Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2011). Asking questions is strategic in nature, so it represents a suitable setting to study issue competition in times of economic crisis. The chapter is organised as follows. The first section presents the state of the art in the field of issue competition, the contribution of agenda studies and outlines the guiding hypotheses. The second section describes the procedures of parliamentary questioning in Spain and shows some descriptive evidence regarding their evolution. The fourth presents the results and concludes by discussing the implications of these findings.

2. State of the art and research hypotheses

The core of this project draws from the literature on the dynamics of policy agendas, defined as “the set of issues that are the subject of decision making and debate within a given political system at any one time” (Baumgartner 2001, 288). Governmental and legislative bodies are regularly faced with a constant flow of information regarding questions of national and international importance that they are expected to deal with (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). This plethora of information has to be examined and sifted before it can lead to any real action by elected representatives. Recent contributions in the field highlighted that the responsiveness of a political system to external signals is not proportionate. The flow of information is at times blocked or slowed down when entering the system by elements of friction inherent in every institutional configuration (Jones, Sulkin, and Larsen 2003). Institutional friction originates from two categories of factors: cognitive limitations and bottlenecks of attention; the decisional and transaction costs imposed by every political institution. Therefore, not only the nature of signals varies but also the capacity of actors to detect, select and act on them. The goal of agenda-setting studies is to explain how and why any of the “endless” number of issues takes precedence over others when entering the “constrained” agenda of public decision-makers.

The understanding of agenda-setting as a precondition for political action was originally advanced by Schattschneider (1960) - when he emphasised the importance of the scope of conflict - and Bachrach and Baratz’s (1962) - when they introduced the concept of second face of power. Since then, issue prioritisation has been the object of numerous works trying to understand how and why policy decisions are made (e.g. Cobb, Ross, and Ross 1976;

Kingdon 1984; Baumgartner and Jones 1993). These seminal policy studies contributed immensely to our knowledge of policy-making in specific fields and some of them developed conceptual tools (e.g. the concept of “window of opportunity” developed by Kingdon or that of “punctuated equilibrium” put forward by Baumgartner & Jones) which were then applied on a more general scale in policy research. Agenda-setting studies are currently going through a third phase. Inspired by the work of Baumgartner & Jones (2005) on the “politics of attention”, this new wave of studies shifted their focus from the study of specific policy areas, to the study of entire political systems. Their key idea is to open new windows on “politics” by studying how issues are processed by the political system. Like tracer liquids injected into a body allow physicians to understand its (mal-) functioning, similarly analysing the flowing of issues through actors and venues and across time provide researchers with a fresh perspective on political dynamics (Green-Pedersen and Walgrave 2014). In other words, we learn about actors and institutions (the focus of politics) by understanding how they process real world problems and information. Grasping the process of agenda development, it is argued, allows lying bare the dynamics of power within a political system. This research program comes also with a distinct methodological design. Agenda-setting students map attentions across “issues”. It is the content of the political struggle which gains centre stage.

One of the insight of agenda studies has to do with the impact that shifts of attention on an issue have not just on that issue, but on the rest of issues competing for the restricted agenda space. The concept of “agenda diversity” measures how attention is distributed across all issues composing the agenda at any one time. Studying policy agendas from the point of view of diversity is important for two reasons. On the one hand, given the finite

nature of attention, it is problematic to account for the rise of an issue on the agenda without considering its interrelationship with the rest of competing issues. On the other hand, variation in diversity affects how a political system processes information and reacts to societal signals. Agenda diversity and representation are positively correlated: the greater the diversity of the parliamentary agenda, the more opportunities for the representation of interests (Schattschneider 1960).

In a recent comparative analysis, Jennings et al. (2011; see also Alexandrova, Carammia, and Timmermans 2012 for an analysis of the European Council Agenda) explored the determinants of agenda diversity. They offered compelling evidence that the concentration of government agendas around key core functions (i.e. economics, defence, foreign policy, government operations and the rule of law) contracts the diversity of executive agendas consistently across a range of political systems and over time. They measure executive agendas as the proportion of sentences or quasi-sentences contained in executive speeches and devoted to a specific policy topic. Their theoretical premise is that a rise of attention on economic issues has consequences not only for policy-making in this domain, but for the structure of attention to all issues across the agenda. This occurs even though other great challenges – such as climate change – have not gone away.

This work takes cue from these findings to enquire about the effect of the current financial and economic crisis on agenda diversity in the legislative agenda, measured as the proportion of parliamentary questions asked on specific topics. Since the crisis has put under increased stress one of the core functions of the democratic state, the sustainability of the public debt, it is expected that the political pre-eminence accorded to it in the parliament came at the expense of other issues, which experienced a contraction in their

agenda space. Due to limitation in the carrying capacity of parliamentary, I expect that while economic issues in the agenda will receive a disproportionate attention, others will receive very little. In other terms, I hypothesise that one effect of the crisis is to congest the working of national parliaments at the expense of other less pressing issues.

H1: In times of economic austerity, overall agenda diversity should decrease by shifting disproportionate attention towards economic issues

Although understanding the dynamics underlying the formation of the agenda is easily one of the core questions in political science, the lack of available data on the content of legislative activities has so far constrained the analysis of legislative institutions through the lenses of agenda-setting. Only recently, these types of questions have been granted attention. In one of the first studies on the content of parliamentary questioning, Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2010) exposed a model of issue competition. Parties focus not only on issues that they “own” (a party “owns” an issue when there is a widespread belief among the voters that it is the most competent to deal with it, e.g. Petrocik 1996), but strategically engage in their competitors’ issues to gain some advantage. The result of the interplay between parties’ agendas is the so-called party-system agenda. Ignoring an issue on the party-system agenda may be deleterious for a party’s image, thus influencing its content is of primary importance in the struggle for power. Yet, the opportunities of influence (not control, which is impossible) differ for majority and opposition parties. When majority parties emphasise an issue, they are required (to some extent) to also deliver policy solutions. As a result, they should be more prone to independently steer attention towards past or future accomplishments of the executive or a specific minister. On the contrary,

opposition parties are not accountable for providing policy solutions. This gives them a structural advantage over the selection of which issue to address and emphasise and for how long. At the same time, it provides them with a weapon to try to influence those in power. It has been shown that opposition MPs can politicize specific problems with the aim of eliciting the executive's reaction on issues the latter would rather keep away from public discussion (Seeberg 2013).

In line with this theoretical argument, I expect that the contraction of the agenda results mainly from a change of opposition's issue emphasis. It is in the opposition's interest to politicize economic issues, because it shows that it is addressing public discontent with austerity measures (without being required to offer policy solutions). Moreover, it hits the cabinet where it is the most vulnerable, when the confidence in the cabinet performance is on a decreasing trend. Finally, since the executive tied its hands in the core area of public spending and committed to specific reforms in front of its EU partners, it will have fewer resources to avoid or counter the blame, thus depoliticising the issue. On their part, incumbent parties should be expected to modify only marginally their issue emphasis, which should be as diverse as the range of activities undertaken by the cabinet.

H2: In times of economic austerity, opposition parties should display lower agenda diversity than the majority and focus more prominently on economic issues

If the two previous hypotheses are verified, one should observe that the crisis brought about a greater similarity between the agenda of opposition parties. They will be less prone to focus as much as possible on issues that they own. Rather, they will opt for "riding the

wave” (Wagner and Meyer 2014), talking about economic problems and thus showing to be responsive to public concerns. Conversely, incumbents will try to use their access to decision-making to either create or consolidate their ownership of a specific issue. As a result, their agendas should be more differentiated.

H3: In times of economic austerity, agenda differentiation according to partisan lines will be more apparent when parties are in cabinet than when they are in opposition.

3. Parliamentary questioning in Spain

This research framework is applied to oral questions in Spain. Spain is one of the European countries, whose economy has most suffered since the outbreak of the crisis. Spain entered recession in the second quarter of 2008, after the real estate bubble burst off and markets could finally appreciate the shaky grounds on which the Spanish economic boom of 2000 was built on. Apart from a modest recovery at the beginning of 2010, the country faced a worsening of the situation with the acceleration of the sovereign debt crisis. Both unemployment rate and government debt rose to unprecedented levels during this period (Ortega and Peñalosa 2012). A bailout for Spanish banks was finally approved by the EC in June 2012.

Economic turmoil reverberated also at the political level, where the snap elections called in 2011 ousted the incumbent Prime Minister Zapatero. The “crisis theme” lingered heavily over these elections and saw the punishment of Zapatero’s reform agenda, made of substantial social spending cuts and reduction of social rights (Martín and Urquizu-Sancho

2012). Ever since the second year in Zapatero's second mandate, the year when Spanish economy officially entered recession, the percentage of citizens evaluating the government's performance as "bad" or "very bad" increased substantially.³ Disapproval with Zapatero II cabinet started from an average 28% in 2008, it reached 40% the next year and in 2011, the year of the defeat, it hovered around 60%. Rajoy cabinet fared better only during its first "honeymoon" year (40% average disapproval). Then, its disapproval rate plummeted again and attained a resounding 68% (Figure 1). All in all, survey data reveal that incumbents vulnerability increased significantly during the economic crisis. This is important for this chapter's argument, since it is expected that changes in government popularity affects the opposition's behaviour (see also Palau, Márquez, and Chaqués-Bonafont 2014). It increases the chances of opposition parties winning votes, thus it is in their interest to increase pressure on the cabinet by politicizing economic issues.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE](#)

What the 2011 election did not overthrow was the classic "two-and-a-half" party system which has been in place in Spain for the last two decades. This system envisages the competition for the executive office between two main state-wide parties, the PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) and the PP (Popular Party). Occasionally, they succeeded in gaining an absolute majority in the Congress (Gonzalez 1982, 1986, 1989, Aznar 2000, Rajoy 2012). In the not-so-uncommon case of minority governments, they had to rely on

³ Data on government's popularity were drawn from the barometer published by the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (<http://www.cis.es>).

more or less formalized support of smaller parties for government survival. It was argued that the bargaining power of small partners, mostly regionalist parties, should not be overstated in this quasi-federal system because it partly hinges on their corresponding power at regional level (Capo 2003). What is more, even minority governments can benefit from the strong agenda-setting powers granted by the Constitution to the executive (Ajenjo and Molina 2013).

To measure the legislative agenda the present analysis relied on Spanish oral questions on the floor (Laura Chaques-Bonafont and Baumgartner 2013). Legislative studies have not failed to grasp the relevance of non-legislative activities as agenda-setting devices (Green-Pedersen 2010; Martin 2011). Asking a question or filing an interpellation is considered one of the institutionalised channels to introduce new ideas and themes in the parliamentary arena or politicize issues which are momentarily out the public spotlight. In a theoretical agenda-setting cycle, non-legislative activities would be located at the very first steps of the process. Yet, in the presence of certain conditions, such as their being televised or the provision of follow-up discussions on the floor, they may generate cascading effects over the whole policy-making process (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010). This is one of the reasons why their number increased substantially in most European countries over the last decades (Green-Pedersen 2010). Spain is no exception as illustrated in Figure 2, although for reasons which will be made clear later on, this figure contracted during the last two legislatures.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE](#)

The Spanish Congreso's Standing Orders envisage three kinds of instruments to question the cabinet on the floor (Rules 180-190). Interpellations may only concern the conduct of the Executive in matters of general policy.⁴ This provision constrains the range of matters to be picked up by the interpellant to what is already in the Executive's agenda. As they are largely measures taken in reaction to some existing policy stance, in principle they should not play any direct agenda shaping role. Their expected effect should be more visible at the level of policy framing. Although they normally spark debate in the assembly and can also result in the voting of a motion, their visibility in the eye of the wider public is limited due to the fact that they are not televised (they are scheduled after question time). All in all, they are used to challenge the executive on important and consequential matters but the above-mentioned restrictions do not make them a good proxy of parliamentary agendas.

Similarly to most parliamentary regimes, MPs can request written or oral replies on the part of the executive. Written questions are by far the most frequent category and have been on the rise lately (Sánchez de Dios and Wiberg 2011). For the most part, they aim at collecting information from government administrations or "demand an administrative intervention" (ibid: 364). For this reason, they have a local/specific focus which does not make them good indicators of the range of issues composing the agenda.

Finally, the Cortes have their own version of "question time" taking place every Wednesday morning. The definition of debatable topics is left rather open. They should concern "a certain fact, situation or item of information, whether the Government has taken or is going

⁴ Each parliamentary group is granted a number of interpellations proportional to its size, with the limitation of one interpellation per group in a single session.

to take certain action in connection with a given matter, or whether the Government is going to forward any document to the Congress or inform it on any point” (Section 188, Standing Orders of the Spanish Congress).⁵ Question time is shown on television, which makes it a strategic tool to table new topics or drawing attention to certain issues. Said that, question time lasts generally a maximum of 4 hours, which constrains the number of questions to be asked (a ceiling of 25 was set after 2011).⁶ The distribution of questions across parliamentary groups has undergone alterations over the years, although the general rule is for each of them to be allocated a number of slots somewhat proportional to its strength. This means that parties have to be strategic in the choice of questions and, on the other hand, MPs have to subordinate personal interest to the party line. Parliamentary questioning is by and large an inter-party game in Spain (not differently from other European cases, see Vliegenthart and Walgrave 2011), which makes it a suitable case to study the effect of party competition on legislative agendas.

As in other countries, questions are typically considered ammunition in the arsenal of the opposition. Especially in the presence of a dominant executive, as in Spain, they are among the few formal tools available to reduce information asymmetries, criticize executive’s policies or attempt to influence its policy orientation. As highlighted by Capo (2003, 127): “The control mechanisms do not prevent the executive from running the agenda and the

⁵ English Version of the Standing Orders of the Congress available at:

http://www.congreso.es/portal/page/portal/Congreso/Congreso/Hist_Normas/Norm/standing_orders_02.pdf

(last visited 25/09/2014)

⁶ Resolution of the Congress Presidency, 28th December 2011, available at:

http://www.congreso.es/public_oficiales/L10/CONG/BOCG/D/D_010.PDF (last visited 25/09/2014)

public policies, but these, especially in exceptional situations, become a useful tool of the opposition in the face of public opinion". Even so, in the Spanish case, their use by government parties for credit taking is not as sporadic as it could be expected (Figure 3). Especially in the Aznar years, almost 40 per cent of the questions recorded were asked by members of the Popular Party. In the legislatures of the crisis (Zapatero II and Rajoy) this proportion has significantly decreased and the greatest majority of the questions are asked by opposition parties, especially from the main opposition party.

It is difficult to account for such a turnabout without a deeper inspection of the procedural and tactical changes involved. In part procedural rules were changed (L. Chaques-Bonafont, Palau, and Baumgartner 2014). Before the alteration to the standing orders in 2008, those oral question slots not used by majority MPs were available for opposition MPs.⁷ Thus, there was an incentive for the formers to ask as many questions as they were allowed. Since 2008 the number of questions for each group has been fixed in advanced. In part, it might be hypothesised that due to the increasing unpopularity stemming from the adoption of austerity measures (Field and Botti 2013), cabinets found themselves less and less in a position to exploit parliamentary questions to publicise a government accomplishment. Credit-claiming is not as effective or even possible when most policy measures are taken to fulfil external international actors' requests or as a reaction to pressures from the markets. In an attempt to limit potential losses, it is preferable for the cabinet to limit as much as

⁷ Resolution of the Congress Presidency, 10th June 2008, available at:

http://www.congreso.es/portal/page/portal/Congreso/Congreso/Hist_Normas/Norm/NormRes/respres10062008 (last visited 25/09/2014)

possible exposure during “question time” (Weaver 1986).⁸ This inevitably left the stage to opposition groups, especially the biggest one which is procedurally granted a greater number of questions.

[INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE](#)

4. Analysis

4.1 Issue diversity and the salience of the economy

In order to inspect the content of parliamentary questions, the analysis makes use of the data on policy agenda created by the Spanish Policy Agendas Project (L. Chaques-Bonafont, Palau, and Baumgartner 2014). The project is part of a transnational network of research teams involved in developing and applying common methods for the comparison of policy agendas (Comparative Agendas Project [CAP], <http://www.comparativeagendas.org>). The common methodological approach envisages the coding of each document or activity traceable to a given agenda (for example: laws -> law-making agenda; statements in electoral platforms -> agenda of political parties; newspaper articles -> media agenda; and so on) according to a specific policy sector. The database on parliamentary questions

⁸ The sharper decrease of oral questions during the Rajoy cabinet might also be explained by the fact that it could count on an absolute majority and it found less incentives in giving reasons of its actions in front of possible parliamentary partners.

contains 13673 “preguntas orales em pleno” tabled for discussion between 1982 and 2008. Each question was coded manually by two coders in accordance with the Spanish codebook which identifies 19 major legislative fields and 247 subcategories. The author completed the database with information on questions introduced between the beginning of 2009 and the end of 2013. Details on the title, date and sponsor were collected from the official Spanish Parliament website (www.Congreso.es).

To address the first question about the impact of the crisis on issue diversity, it is first provided a measure of overall agenda entropy for each legislature. This is measured through the normalised Shannon’s H entropy score (Boydstun, Bevan, and Herschel 2014). This score varies between 0 and 1 and it increases as the spread of attention across all issues evens out. Assuming a maximum of 20 topics in the agenda, it will get: a 1 if each topic receives exactly 5% of the attention; a 0 if the speech deals with just one topic.⁹ Figure 4 plots the variation of entropy scores across the last nine legislatures. The level of attention diversity is notably high (close to 1) throughout the study period and reaches a peak during the second Aznar cabinet (2000-2004). The level drops significantly with the outbreak of the crisis, which approximately coincides with the start of the second Zapatero cabinet. There is a marginal increase of diversity at the beginning of the first Rajoy government but at the end

⁹ It is calculated as follows:

$$\text{Shannon's } H_{\text{norm}} = \frac{-\sum_{i=1}^n (p(x_i)) * \ln p(x_i)}{\ln(N)}$$
 where x_i represents an issue, $p(x_i)$ is the proportion of total attention the issue receives, $\ln p(x_i)$ is the natural log of the proportion of attention the dimension receives and N is the total number of issues (Boydstun, Bevan, and Herschel 2014, 183) .

of the study period in 2013, the score has already reached a record low. The overall distribution of attention across topics became less diffused thus confirming H1.

[INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE](#)

The change in the overall legislative agenda can also be analysed at the topic level. Figure 5 calculates the percentage change of attention 5 years before (2004-2008) and after (2009-2013) the crisis for each of the 19 topics composing the Spanish policy agenda codebook.¹⁰ A positive value indicates that the topic was granted more attention in the overall agenda after 2009, vice versa for negative values. For instance, if environment constituted 10 percent of the agenda in the first period and 5 percent in the second period, the amount of percent change would be $(.05 - .1)/.1 = -.5$. As expected, the bar plot reveals an increase in attention for macroeconomics. The second salient topic, labor & employment, is still crisis-related but it is more specific to the Spanish case. It reflects the relevance of the unemployment issue in Spain since the outbreak of the crisis, with rates peaking at about 25% in 2012, more than 50% among young people. This increase in attention occurred at the expense of most other issues.

[INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE](#)

¹⁰ Percentage changes are calculated as follow: $\frac{\text{percent}(\text{topicA})t2 - \text{percent}(\text{topicA})t1}{\text{percent}(\text{topicA})t1}$ See Baumgartner & Jones (2005, 202). This measure has the advantage of treating agenda size as constant through time, so it is less sensitive to the majority party's decision to limit the number of questions asked by their parliamentarians after 2008.

4.2 Difference use of questioning by majority and opposition parties

What does explain this high level of attention diversity and its decrease after the crisis? On the one hand, it could be interpreted as a generalised tendency of parties to devote attention to a smaller number of sectors. This is a rational strategy to follow in extraordinary times such as an economic crisis. Instead of dispersing their attention across many topics, the incentive is to concentrate on a few general issues dominating the party-system agenda. Figure 6a plots the evolution of agenda diversity for the two mainstream parties (PSOE and PP) and the other parties, treated as a unique category.¹¹ Entropy indeed decreases during the Second Zapatero cabinet for all three actors. But this reduction is more pronounced for main opposition parties, namely the PP (which exhibits a decrease already in the previous Zapatero I legislature), and the rest of small parties. The same dynamic can be noticed during the Rajoy government, with the cabinet party, PP, displaying a higher level of diversity with respect to its competitors. The evidence seems to suggest that one should turn to an explanation based on the government/opposition divide - as suggested by the model of issue competition (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2010) - to better account for the crisis effect on attention diversity.

Figure 6b illustrates entropy scores by dividing between majority, main opposition party and other parties. Indeed, the three trajectories followed a common pattern up to the first Zapatero cabinet (2005-2009) when there is a first noticeable drop of entropy scores for the

¹¹ Grupo Parlamentario Catalán (Convergència i Unió), Grupo Parlamentario Vasco (EAJ-PNV), Grupo Parlamentario de Esquerra Republicana - Izquierda Unida-Iniciativa Per Catalunya Verds, Grupo Parlamentario Mixto, Grupo Parlamentario de Unión, Progreso y Democracia (UPyD) (only 2011)

main opposition party. Yet, the trend continues also in the subsequent “crisis” legislatures, although this time it involves also other smaller parties. As expected in H2, the crisis meant a change in the diversity of issue emphases particularly for opposition groups and parties not directly holding government responsibilities. Conversely, the impact on the behaviour of government parties was smaller.

[INSERT FIGURE 6A AND 6B HERE](#)

The different use of questioning by majority and opposition (mainstream and other) parties can also be analysed at the topic level. Similarly to figure 5, figure 7 calculates the percentage change of attention for majority and opposition parties 5 years before (2004-2008) and after (2009-2013) the crisis for each of the 19 topics. The first finding is that majority and opposition parties share a decrease of attention for topics which are not directly connected to the social and economic realm, such as agriculture, environment, energy, urban policy and housing and state propriety. On the other hand, as one would expect in an economic crisis context, they are asking more questions related to macroeconomic areas. Yet a dramatic shift of attention is more evident for opposition parties. They share a common focus on macroeconomics and employment and they are more neglectful of other topics, but two: health (mainstream opposition) and foreign trade (other opposition parties). While the latter is largely an artefact due to the low number of observations (1 in the pre-crisis and 3 in the post-crisis period), the second deserves a closer inspection. The marked attention shift in the substance of health-related questions in the post-2009 period mainly originates from the controversy generated by the health care

system reform of 2012 promoted by the current Rajoy government and sternly opposed by the PSOE.¹² This hints at the fact that economic and social concerns connected to the crisis do not stringently dominate the agenda. Especially for opposition parties, which can choose the topics to address with greater latitude, there are still incentives for picking up new salient issues to attack the cabinet.

[INSERT FIGURE 7 HERE](#)

4.3 Party differentiation during the crisis

The last question to address is how the crisis affected strategic issue emphasis by the mainstream majority and opposition party (PP and PSOE).¹³ Issue competition theory expects parties to compete by drawing attention to those issues that they “own” rather than by taking position on each issue. Yet, empirical studies on party competition in electoral times showed that issue overlap is not so uncommon (Sigelman and Buell 2004). Evidence points that issue overlap increases during recessionary times, when the economy gets a greater deal of attention at the expense of other issues (Singer 2013).

¹² Royal Decree Law 16/2012 Urgent measures to guarantee the sustainability of the National Health System and improve the quality and safety of services (Real Decreto-ley 16/2012, de 20 de abril, de medidas urgentes para garantizar la sostenibilidad del Sistema Nacional de Salud y mejorar la calidad y seguridad de sus prestaciones, Boletín Oficial del Estado N.98, 24th April 2012).

¹³ Other parties are omitted in the analyses for space constraints. Being for the most part smaller parties representative of regional minorities, it can be expected a strong “ownership” of particular issues on their part.

When it comes to parliamentary questions, the incentives driving opposition parties are different from those of governing parties. None of the two can own entirely the “economy issue”, because both have been in power in the decade preceding the outbreak of the crisis. Rather, as shown, opposition parties’ attention can be more selective than the cabinet’s one. Focusing on economy-related issues allows them to blame the incumbent and gain an electoral advantage. On the contrary, the cabinet party’s interest is to bring attention to areas where, despite the constraints imposed by austerity, it could achieve policy results. This should translate in increased overall levels of issue overlap for opposition parties agendas with respect to ordinary times. They converge on emphasising economic issues. Conversely, cabinet parties’ agendas should be more differentiated.

Figure 8 replicates the analysis of percent change of attention for majority and opposition parties after the crisis presented in figure 7 but compares Zapatero II with Zapatero I (minority governments) and Rajoy with Aznar II (majority governments). This comparison allows appreciating another difference between the “crisis” cabinets of Zapatero II and Rajoy. They not only belonged to different party families but they also relied on different majorities in parliament: the Zapatero II was a minority government relying on external ad hoc support while Rajoy has an absolute majority.

Starting from the change in issue emphasis displayed by cabinet parties, there is little similarity in the way majority MPs distributed their attention in the two selected comparisons. Especially with regard to those areas more closely associated to the crisis, MPs during Zapatero II and Rajoy de-emphasise different areas: the former asked less about labour & employment; the latter asked less about macroeconomics vis-à-vis the pre-crisis period. The opposite holds true for MPs of the main opposition party. No matter their

political colour, their focus is directed more vigorously than before the crisis towards those issue areas where the cabinet is the most vulnerable, namely those related to the economy and employment. Yet, some differences still persist between opposition parties' agendas. Further research is still warranted to test H3.

[INSERT FIGURE 8 HERE](#)

All in all, these findings resonates with the expectation of the model of issue competition. The crisis impacted more heavily on opposition's rather than on the cabinet's strategy of issue emphasis. Questioning become a weapon of the opposition to respond to their electorate, attack the executive and try to gain an advantage in view of the coming elections. This reflects previous findings pointing to an increase in adversarial voting behaviour by opposition parties in economic crisis years (Palau, Márquez, and Chaqués-Bonafont 2014).

5. Conclusion

This chapter set out to analyse the impact of the economic and financial crisis on the Spanish parliamentary agenda. It defined parliamentary agenda as the distribution of attention across policy areas. It used the proportion of parliamentary questions per policy area as a proxy of parliamentary attention. The empirical analysis made use of the data on the Spanish question time from 1982 to 2013, where each oral question was classified according to one policy topic of the Spanish policy agenda codebook.

The core of this project draws from the literature on the dynamics of policy agendas, which starts from the acknowledgement that attention is a limited resource in politics. Legislative bodies are regularly faced with a constant flow of information regarding questions of national and international importance that they are expected to deal with (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). This plethora of information has to be examined and sifted before it can lead to any real action by elected representatives. Crises are, by definition, focal events which cannot be disregarded. In most cases, they call for a government response proportional to the magnitude of the challenge facing the community. They act as external shocks triggering change in the system. The Great Depression, by its sheer magnitude, is expected to sweep away all other issues from the agenda and install itself as “The Topic” to confront. The expectation was that the extraordinary magnitude of the crisis diverted policy attention, traditionally more evenly diffused across policies, towards specific areas related to the crisis. This is not to say that all other issues have been forced out of the agenda. Parliamentary committees still allow the simultaneous handling of different specialized issues and occasionally they might manage to get approved a bill concerning “other issues”. Nonetheless, one of the expected effects of the crisis is the contraction of the party-system agenda space.

The findings show that indeed the post-crisis period records a contraction in the parliamentary agenda. Since the economic crisis is still undergoing it is difficult to assert whether this trend will persist. What stands out from the analysis is that 2009 – the year when the financial crisis broke out - marks a watershed in terms of attention diversity, with a decrease of almost .10 entropy scores. It stabilised around .80 since. Never had the score been below .90 in the previous decades.

The second expectation was that this pattern should have resulted by and large from questions asked by opposition parties. With respect to the five years preceding the outbreak of the crisis in 2008, main opposition parties (first from the centre-right, then from the centre-left) directed their attention on average towards typically crisis-related topics such as economy and labour/employment issues. Their tactic has been to “ride the wave” of public discontent towards austerity measures (Wagner and Meyer 2014). This way they tried to profit from the difficulties and low popularity of cabinet parties. They also profited from the lower capacity of cabinets to offer a valid countermove to opposition attacks, because they had tied their hands to the respect of budget discipline and externally imposed policy reforms. On their part, we find that incumbent parties prefer to limit the number of questions asked since the circumstances are not favourable to capitalize on (the few) cabinet accomplishments.

Indeed, these findings speak to recent arguments on how the debt crisis poses outstanding political challenges for office-holders in debtor countries (Laffan 2014). De Giorgi and Moury (2014; for an application to the Spanish case see Palau, Márquez, and Chaqués-Bonafont 2014), for instance, found out that a dilemma haunts opposition parties after the outbreak of the crisis. The choice is between acting responsibly and promoting patterns of cooperative relations with the executive so as to promptly adopt the required measures of economic reform or act in an adversarial manner, attacking the incumbent in the hope of weakening its political support and increasing the possibilities of turnover at the next elections. The results point to a generalised increase in conflictuality on those bills whose content might be related to the crisis. The present analysis finds that similar signals of

polarization in the political discourse between majority and opposition seem to emerge also when looking at parliamentary questions.

All in all, these works agree on a picture of growing divide between incumbents and challengers in times of austerity. For those holding office, the binding commitments to fiscal adjustments exacerbated the tension between responsiveness to the electorate and responsibility towards EU partners and international institutions (Mair 2009). On the other hand, it is reasonable for electorally-minded mainstream oppositions to keep the incumbents under constant attacks where they are the weakest. In most Southern European countries this strategy paid off, with the ousting from power of incumbents in all recent elections (Bosco and Verney 2012). Yet, the new office-holders do not seem to find a better treatment than their predecessors once installed in power. The winners of today might be the losers of tomorrow. The problem here is that the temperature of domestic political conflict might rise to a point where the very texture of democratic politics might be undermined. As effectively put by Kriesi (2012, 522):

“The truly critical elections [...] might only be those following up on the first post-crisis elections, when the voters have come to realize that the parties replacing the punished government were not able to do any better than their predecessors. Once the voters notice that the new government which has replaced the punished parties is forced to take just the same measures as its predecessors whom they had voted out of office, they may resort to punishing the mainstream parties as a whole in the next national elections – by turning to new populist challengers.”

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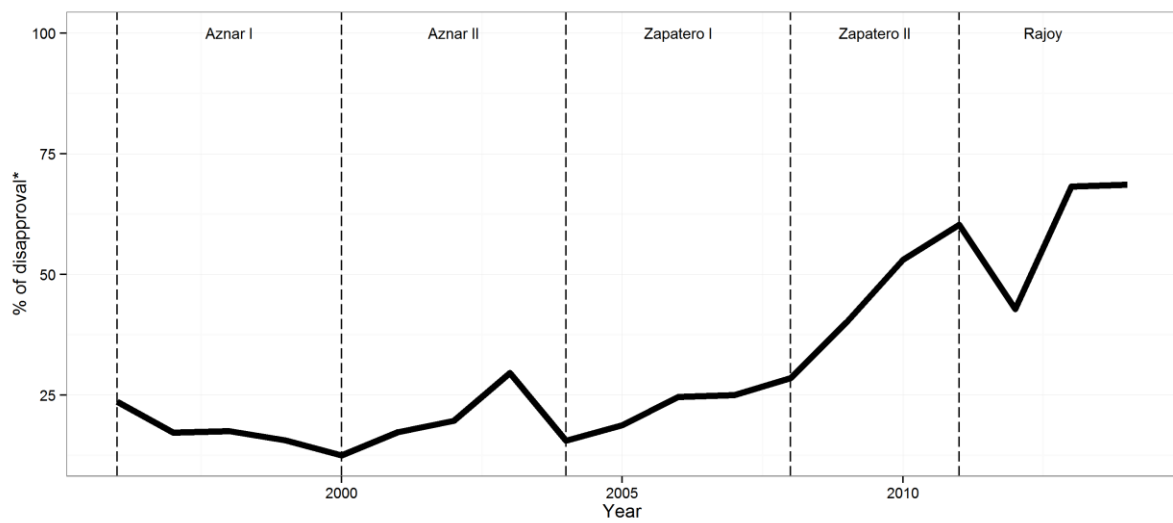
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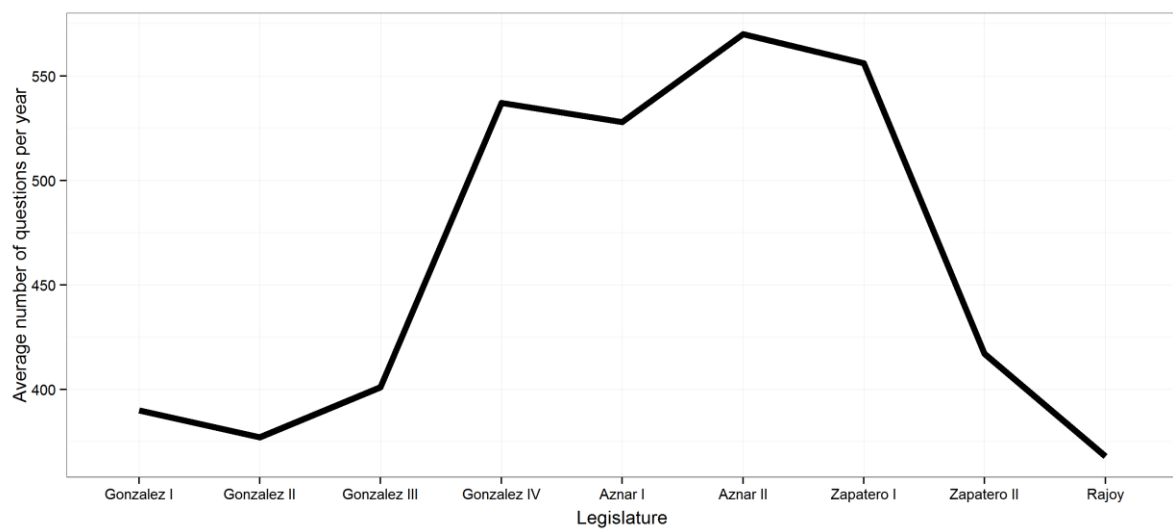
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Figure 1. Cabinet disapproval rates



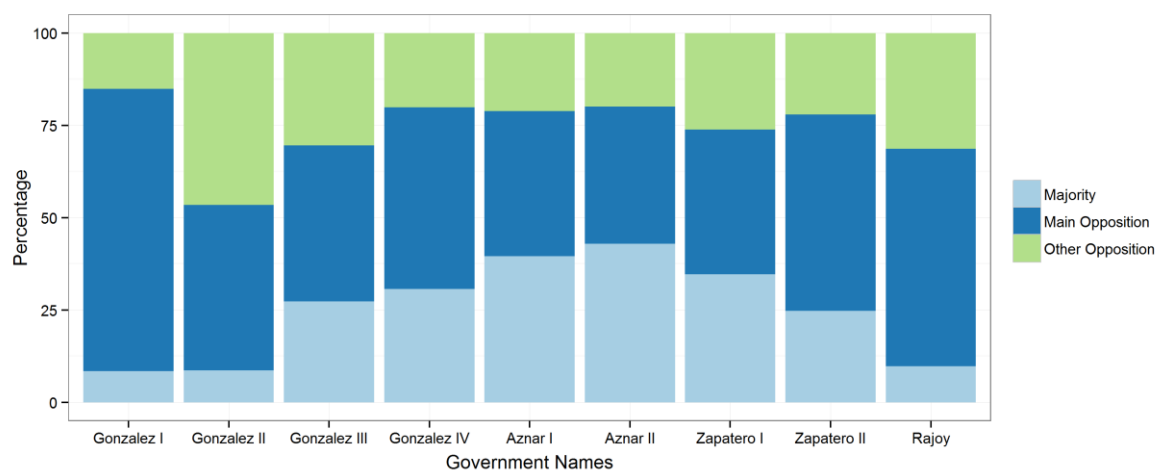
Note: * Average yearly percentage of citizens evaluating the government's performance as "bad" or "very bad" (<http://www.cis.es/>)

Figure 2. Average number of questions per year across legislatures



Note: The Rajoy legislature includes only two years (2012-2013)

Figure 3. Proportion of questions tabled by political formations across legislatures



Note: Other opposition comprises all other parties but the PSOE and the PP. The Rajoy legislature includes only two years (2012-2013)

Figure 4. Entropy scores per legislature

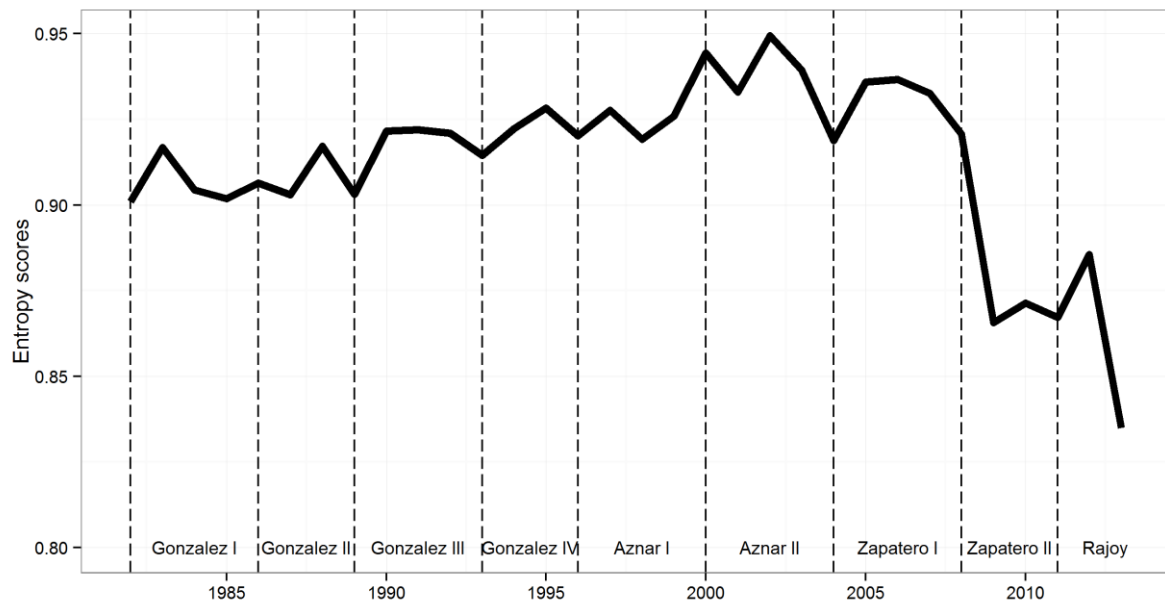


Figure 5. Gap between pre-crisis (2004-2008) and post-crisis (2009-2013) distribution of attention across topic

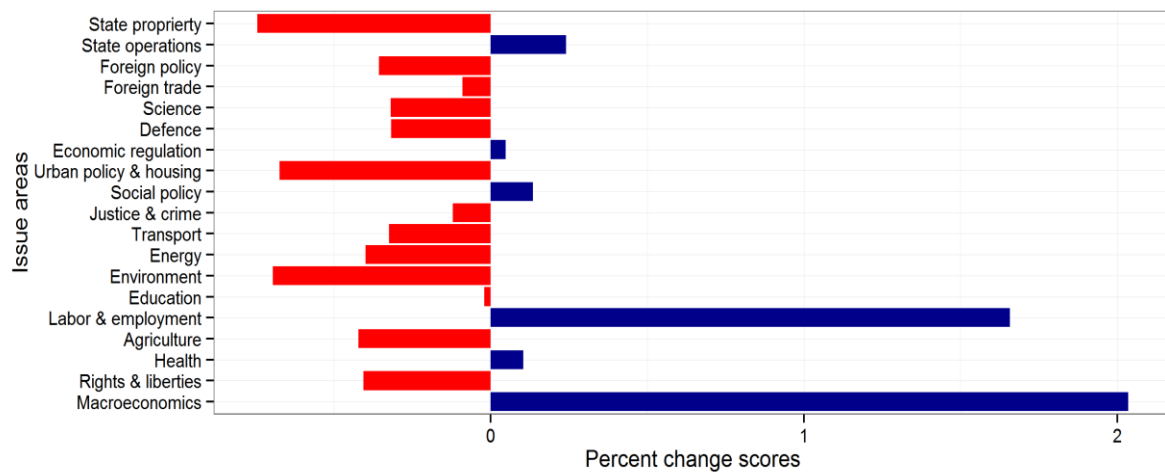


Figure 6a. Entropy scores by legislature and party

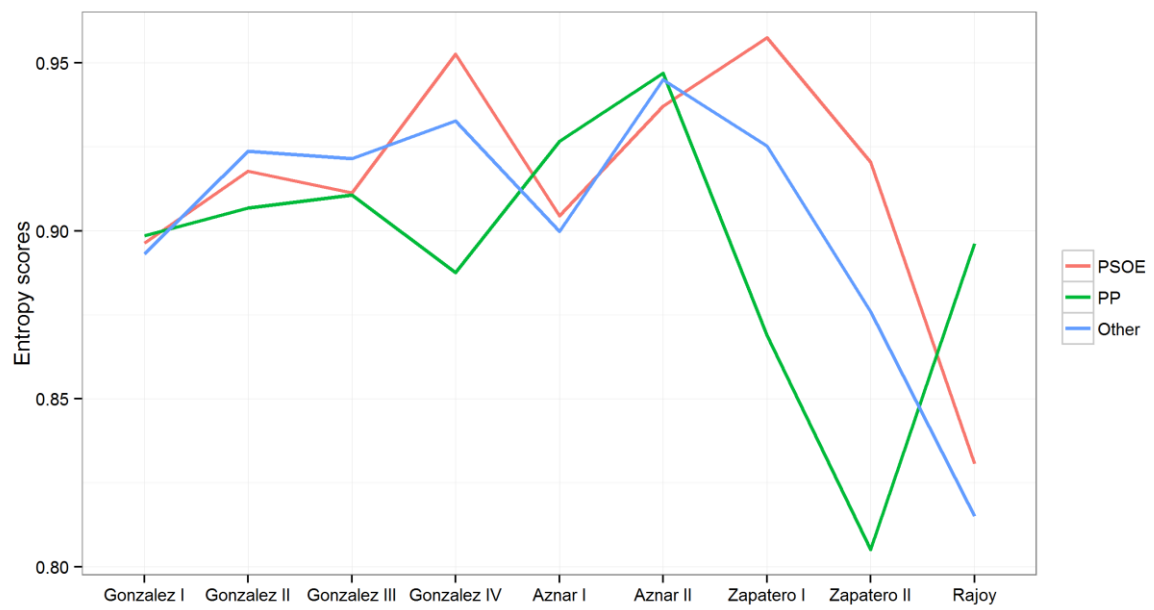


Figure 6b. Entropy scores by legislature and type of institutional position

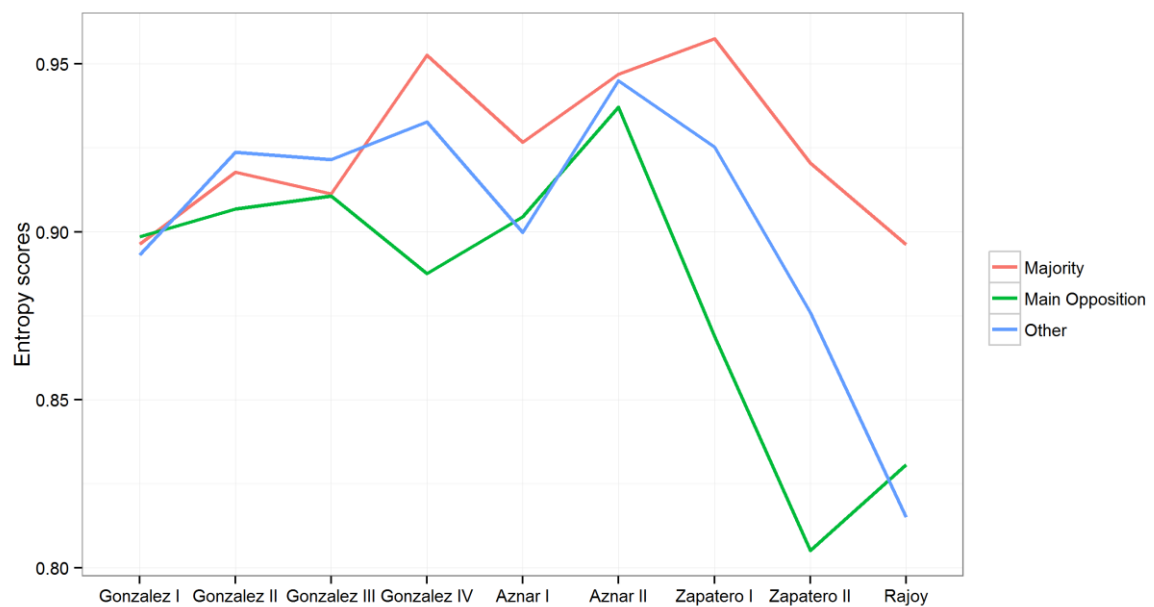


Figure 7. Gap between pre-crisis (2004-2008) and post-crisis (2009-2013) distribution of attention across topic according to type of institutional position

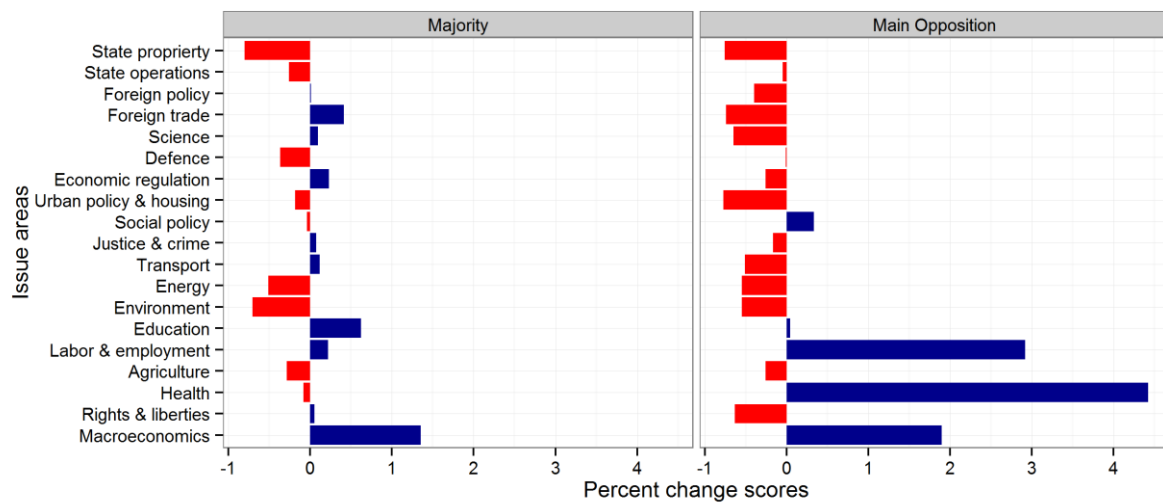
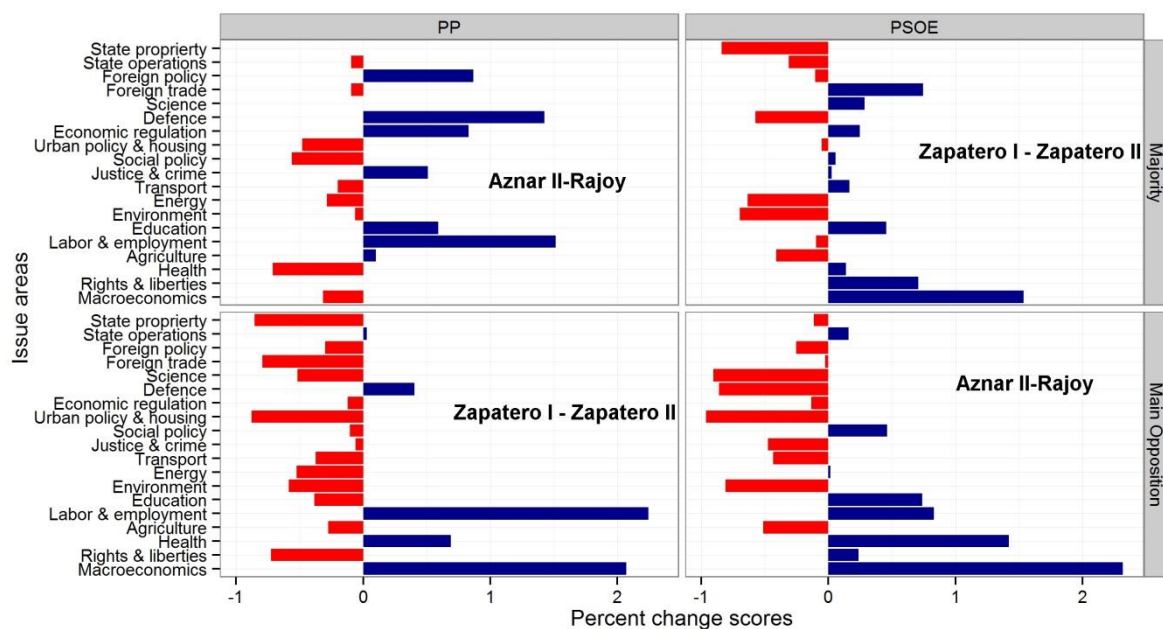


Figure 8 . Gap between pre-crisis (Aznar II - Zapatero I) and post-crisis (Zapatero II - Rajoy) distribution of attention across topic according to type of institutional position and party group



APPENDIX: Spanish codebook

CODE	LABEL	COUNT
1	Macroeconomics	1235
2	Rights & liberties	522
3	Health	946
4	Agriculture	1077
5	Labour & employment	730
6	Education	1287
7	Environment	405
8	Energy	470
10	Transport	1365
12	Justice & crime	1474
13	Social policy	348
14	Urban policy & housing	309
15	Economic regulation	680
16	Defence	764
17	Science	568
18	Foreign trade	131
19	Foreign policy	1062
20	State operations	1925
21	State propriety	424