

## What Are Policy Punctuations? Large Changes in the Legislative Agenda of the UK Government, 1911–2008

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*In this article, we argue that policy punctuations differ from each other in ways that reflect distinct types of political change. We identify three main kinds. The first are procedural changes that have unique unrelated policies within the same issue area. Within the remaining large policy changes, high-salience punctuations are associated with increased attention in the media, whereas low-salience punctuations do not attract such scrutiny. The analysis applies the typology to data from the UK Policy Agendas Project, identifying punctuations from the content of Acts of the UK Parliament between 1911 and 2008. Using evidence from the historical record and the data series, the analysis places each observation within the typology. We claim that the typology has a more general application and could be replicated in other jurisdictions and time periods. We conclude that attention to the historical record and qualitative studies of punctuations can complement and inform the analysis of aggregate data series.*

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Punctuations are now recognized as a defining feature of the policy agenda. Instead of the small steps envisaged in the incrementalist model of decision making (Lindblom, 1959; Wildavsky, 1964, 1975), policy change often occurs in a discontinuous pattern, characterized by a large sudden shift in attention that departs from a long period of stability. To identify this kind of change, scholars have used a wide range of graphical methods, statistical tests, and simulations that they have applied to longitudinal data on the content of public policies (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993, 2009; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005a, 2005b; Jones, Baumgartner, & True, 1998; Jones, Sulkin, & Larsen, 2003). Moreover, Jones and Baumgartner claim that the frequencies of such changes conform to a leptokurtotic rather than to a normal distribution. That is, these changes concentrate in the slender “central peak” and in the “fat tails” of the distribution while they tend to be absent in the “narrow shoulders.” As a result of the application of these methods, there is now a considerable body of academic work that demonstrates a punctuated pattern to policy change, which occurs in a wide range of jurisdictions, institutional arenas, and time periods (for example, Baumgartner, Foucault, & Francois, 2006; Baumgartner et al., 2009; Breunig, 2006; Breunig & Koski, 2006; Jennings & John, 2009; John & Jennings, 2010; John & Margetts, 2003;

Jones & Baumgartner, 2005a, 2005b; Jones et al., 1998, 2009; True, Jones, & Baumgartner, 1999; Walgrave & Nuytemans, 2009).

One limitation of the aggregate method is that it underemphasizes the specific characteristics of individual policy punctuations that are analyzed as part of the distribution rather than in context. A more detailed consideration of the punctuations themselves offers a way of understanding the nature of transition points and the underlying factors associated with large changes in policy, an idea that qualitative and mixed-method studies of policy change have also addressed (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993, 2009; Busenberg, 2004; Pralle, 2003; Repetto, 2006; Resodihardjo, 2009; Walgrave & Varone, 2008). Detailed attention can be paid to the extent and transformative nature of these policy changes as well as to distinguishing between different types. Is every large shift in attention punctuated? Moreover, detailed qualitative analysis can offer an additional check on the validity of quantitative methods (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005a, pp. 93–106). Inferences drawn from aggregate distributions of policy change can be treated with greater confidence if more is known about the nature of individual punctuations. The charge that a policy punctuation is only a metaphor (Prindle, 2006) can be countered with a better account of the causal processes at work at each critical juncture.

In this article, we build on existing quantitative and qualitative work by identifying different types of punctuations that may range from the generation-defining events involving escalations of attention to short-run and less obtrusive changes. We set out a typology that takes account of the different processes underlying policy changes. To this end, we select the case of the UK, identifying punctuations in Acts of the UK Parliament between 1911 and 2008. These punctuations are then analyzed and compared with the historical record.

The article is structured as follows. First, it considers the definition of policy punctuations, drawing on literatures on punctuated equilibrium and agenda setting. This generates a set of criteria for identification of punctuations, both for aggregate distributions of policy change and within the context of a particular domain or issue. Second, the article describes the data and methods, in particular the method chosen for the identification of punctuations. Third, the article reviews the list of punctuations, seeking to classify those that are procedural, focusing on a variety of unrelated policies; those that are low salience, tending toward low salience; and whether the remainder are high salience, corresponding to what in the literature are defined as policy punctuations. In conclusion, the article reflects on the measurement of punctuations for understanding policymaking, and considers the lessons that may be drawn from this approach.

### What Are Policy Punctuations?

The basic intuition behind the idea of policy punctuations is that the political agenda is stable for extended periods of time but is also subject to occasional changes that are large in magnitude (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993, 2009). This means that—from time to time—policy deviates from its long-established equilibrium as issues shift from incremental decision-making processes within institutional sub-

systems to the realm of macropolitics (True et al., 1999). Such changes in the prioritization of issues or problems lead to changes in policy outputs and outcomes. As True et al. note, “political processes are generally characterized by stability and incrementalism, but occasionally . . . produce large-scale departures from the past” (1999, p. 97). The alternation of long periods of stability and intense bursts of upheaval is observed across several fields in the natural, technological, organizational, and social sciences (see Gersick, 1991). The debate over the coexistence of stability and change is pronounced in the field of public policy because of the longstanding dominance of incrementalist models of decision making. While the classic accounts of incrementalism (e.g., Davis, Dempster, & Wildavsky, 1966; Wildavsky, 1975) acknowledge the occurrence of large policy changes, public policy researchers tend to adopt the view of Lindblom (1959) on the prevalence of change through small steps. The incremental model is consistent with a great deal of work in political science that emphasizes the relative stability of policymaking (e.g., Richardson & Jordan, 1979; Rose & Davies, 1994) and the gridlock of legislative policymaking (e.g., Binder, 2003). Stressing the occurrence of large policy changes—policy punctuations—was counter to the conventional wisdom and was also a different emphasis to existing qualitative studies of large policy initiatives (e.g., Schulman, 1980).

One implication of arguments about policy punctuations is that long periods of stability in decision making can contribute to the intensity of policy change. For long periods, institutional and cognitive friction can inhibit the expansion of the public agenda (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005a). Because of this, the agenda can have long periods of stability and at other times, when the pressure for change exceeds a certain threshold, exhibit disproportionate changes that are manifested by positive feedback and cascades. When change occurs, such as in response to an external event, there can be large shifts in the attention of policymakers to certain issues. These contribute to policy punctuations as decision makers respond to pressures for change.

Critics, such as Prindle (2006), believe that Baumgartner and Jones’s approach elides the causal processes behind punctuations. Researchers are not able to attribute causal processes as in the evolutionary theory of Gould. Prindle complains that Baumgartner and Jones’s “formulation has no grounding in operational definitions of stasis and sudden change and is therefore a metaphor rather than a causal theory” (2006, p. 11). The challenge for analysts of policy change is to come up with a more convincing account of the causal processes at work, and one way to achieve this is to differentiate between different kinds of policy punctuation.

### The Classification of Policy Punctuations

We claim that the measurement of punctuations by aggregate data analysis disguises a number of different processes that may get classified in the same way by the coding scheme of the Policy Agendas Project. This is because a change in the amount of the agenda can be caused by different reasons, which means that the resulting agenda change may not have all the characteristics as set out by the classic

writers on policy punctuations. Of course, it may be the case that all the large changes in the data do in fact correspond to the high-salience events as outlined in the previous section; however, it is likely there are different elements to punctuations, partly for reasons to do with coding and measurement and partly due to different levels of intensity and importance.

### *Procedural Punctuations*

We proceed by first separating punctuations that occur because of procedural processes and the coding system from the rest. This method has the advantage of avoiding punctuations that we believe are not large policy changes even though their different elements might be important policies. Usually, the expansion of the agenda implies one item dominates public attention, such as a war, or a major financial crisis. Out of accident because different but related things need doing at the same time,<sup>1</sup> government can attend to different problems within a major topic category. In spite of the activities not having much to do with each other, they get defined as part of the same policy punctuation as they occur in the same major topic category. Procedural punctuations do not come about from any formal aspect of policymaking. Rather they emerge from the exigencies of the coding system, which requires that related issues be placed within the same major topic code. The coding procedure adds these related, minor topics together into their respective major topics but does not establish whether the contents of the major topics are part of the same causal process. The research methodology needs a second step to do this that can either be achieved by the analysis of more quantitative data, such as from the media, or by collecting and interpreting qualitative data.

If this argument is accepted, the appearance of these punctuations in the dataset is a misclassification, a type I error or a false positive, and they should be removed or analyzed separately as they are large shifts in attention that do not match the agenda-altering definition of a punctuation. Of course, it is not possible to rule out that different expansions are an aspect of the same kind of interest but expressing itself in different minor topic codes. And researchers must guard against the opposite problem of identifying large agenda changes as procedural punctuations, the type II error or false negative.

### *Low- and High-Salience Punctuations*

It is possible to have large changes in the policy agenda that make little or no impact in the wider public arena. There may be reasons for changing legislation that involve compliance with international obligations or following European Union decisions. For example, about 90 percent of the UK 1990 Environmental Protection Act was taken up with implementing EU directives. Often a large amount of legislative time is taken up with revising legislation that wider publics and even many other policymakers are not interested in because it has a technical nature and it might involve ensuring compliance with previous acts of parliament. In this case, there might be punctuations in the data series, but they are low-salience punctuations and

Table 1. Types of Punctuations

Punctuation Type	Description
Procedural Punctuation	Attention to a single major topic through multiple minor topics following separate causal processes.
Low-Salience Punctuation	Attention to a single major topic through a single minor topic but with limited or no attention by the media.
High-Salience Punctuation	Attention to a single major topic though a single minor topic with high levels of attention by the media.

can be called as such. On the other hand, high-salience punctuations garner interest from wider publics and policymakers alike leading to major changes in policy that are reported in the media. In this way, our categorization of punctuations in laws reflects their importance, rather like other schemes, such as Mayhew’s (1991) list of “important laws.” Rather than a general sense of importance, however, we focus on the causal mechanisms analysts commonly associated with policy punctuations—their attention in the media and in other venues—so the cases resemble the endogenous processes identified by Jones et al. For this reason, we treat data points differently in our data series, distinguishing between high- and low-salience punctuations through attention in the media. This categorization, as well as procedural punctuations, are summarized in Table 1.

Data and Methods

The data we use to assess the typology outlined above is from the UK Policy Agendas Project (<http://www.policyagendas.org.uk>) on Acts of the UK Parliament. Acts are of course only one measure of attention, and more commonly budgets have been taken to represent punctuations (e.g., John & Margetts, 2003) as well as executive speeches (John & Jennings, 2010). With budgets, it is plausible to see punctuations sustained in time, but laws arrive on the statute book and there may be no need to return to that policy area subsequently, which makes them similar to the legislative promises in Queen’s speeches. Given that laws are needed for very specific reasons, such as to change previous laws, they are more discrete than other measures of attention. This may make each law distinct from each other, and the analysis below is careful not to take a particularist approach that is common in the field (for example, Page, 2001). One of the advantages of laws is that it is easy to find out what the measure is about, whereas the changes in budgets may appear opaque behind general requisitions for funds. This assists identification, which is the core task of this article.

The data cover the period from 1911 to 2008, spanning nearly 100 parliamentary sessions and comprise 19 major topic codes that encompass all the issues the UK Parliament deals with. Using this dataset, we calculate both the total number of acts in each parliamentary year and the number of acts for each issue also by parliamentary year. These calculations are represented in Figures 1 and 2, respectively, while Table 2 presents a list of the 19 major topic codes and the associated abbreviations and numeric codes.

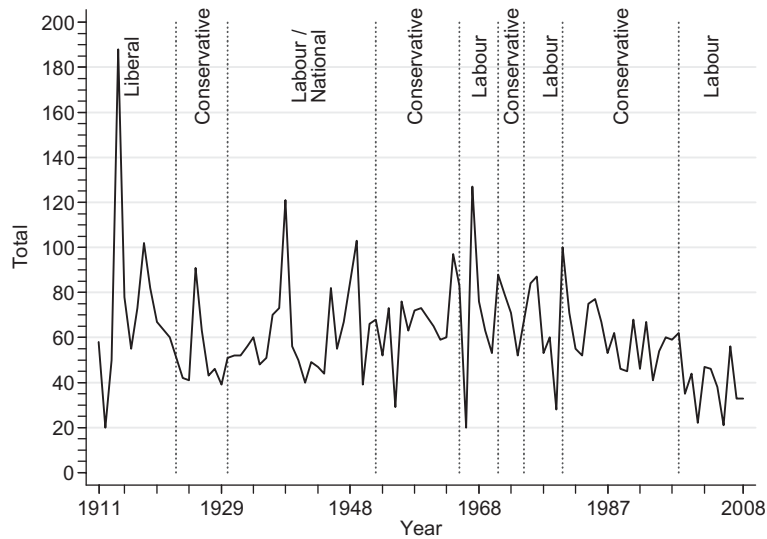


Figure 1. Total Acts of the UK Parliament, 1911–2008.

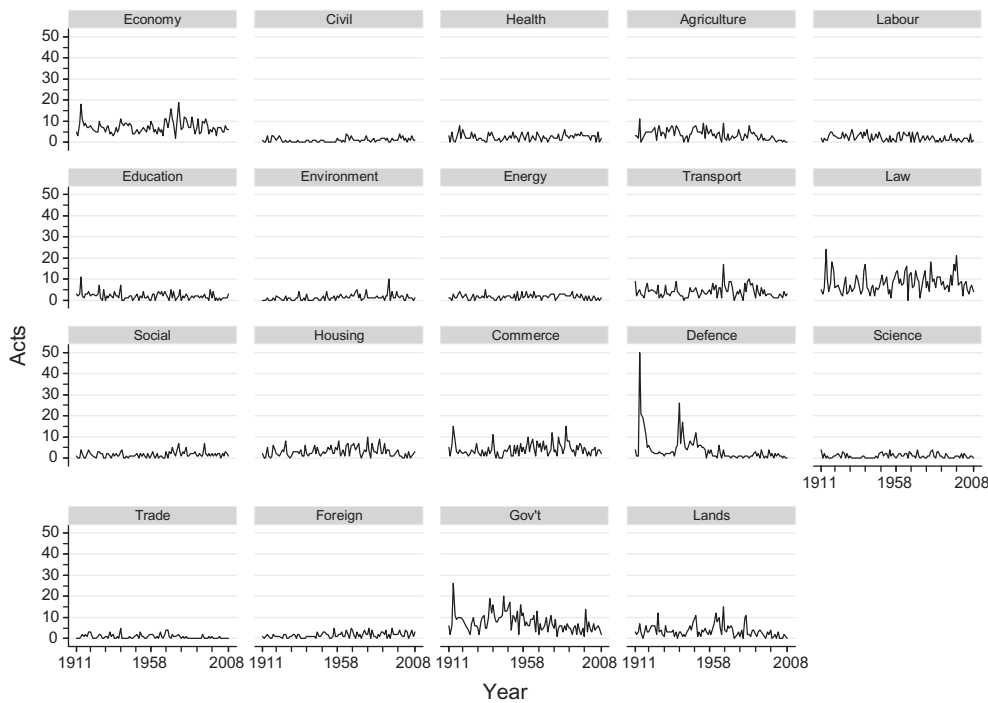


Figure 2. Acts of the UK Parliament by Issue, 1911–2008.

Table 2. UK Policy Agendas Topic Codes and Abbreviations

Topic	Abbreviation	Name
1	Economy	Macroeconomics
2	Civil	Civil Rights, Minority Issues, Immigration, and Civil Liberties
3	Health	Health
4	Agriculture	Agriculture
5	Labour	Labour and Employment
6	Education	Education
7	Environment	Environment
8	Energy	Energy
10	Transport	Transportation
12	Law	Law, Crime, and Family Issues
13	Social	Social Welfare
14	Housing	Community Development, Planning, and Housing Issues
15	Commerce	Banking, Finance, and Domestic Commerce
16	Defence	Defence
17	Science	Space, Science, Technology, and Communications
18	Trade	Foreign Trade
19	Foreign	International Affairs and Foreign Aid
20	Gov't	Government Operations
21	Lands	Public Lands, Water Management, Colonial, and Territorial Issues

From a brief visual inspection of Figure 2, a few obvious punctuations immediately jump out, such as legislative attention to defense during the start of World War I and the decolonization measures of 1979, which falls under lands in Figure 2 (for example, the Gilbert Islands and the New Hebrides). However, not every spike in individual issue attention is a high-salience event. Shifts in the total number of acts can lead to increases in attention for an issue that does not lead to similarly large increases in attention when compared with the total legislative agenda.

We address this issue in two ways. First, we calculate the change in attention by issue relative to its value in the previous parliamentary year.<sup>2</sup> For example, with this method, a change from one act in 1950 to four acts in 1951 leads to a 300 percent increase in legislative attention relative to the previous level of attention. Second, we calculate the change in attention by issue relative to the total number of acts in each year.<sup>3</sup> For example, when the overall agenda space remains stable at 20 acts, an increase from one act (a 5 percent share of the agenda) to four acts (a 20 percent share of the agenda) results in a 300 percent increase in legislative attention relative to the total number of acts. By using both methods to identify punctuations, we ensure not only a more robust result, but also that punctuations based purely on expansions or



contractions of the total number of acts in a given year are not included in our analyses. Finally, we identify a change as punctuated when both of these methods for identifying changes in attention are calculated to be greater than 200 percent for an issue in a given year. The choice to use 200 percent as the cutoff is motivated by the definition of a punctuation as a large change in attention. While the word large could be interpreted in many different ways, 200 percent changes in the case of UK Acts of Parliament is a logical cutoff providing a fair and consistent sample of large changes to work with.<sup>4</sup>

The next section provides an overview of the resulting list of punctuations using the combination of these two methods before moving to categorize each punctuation according to the typology proposed in this article using an investigation of the component acts and the historical record.

### An Overview of Punctuations

A complete list of punctuations using the combination of both identification methods is included in Table 3.

Table 3 reports 48 punctuations identified from 1,862 observations.<sup>5</sup> These data indicate that—when using both attention relative to the previous year's attention and attention relative to total attention—only 2.6 percent of observations are identified as punctuations. Figure 3 further describes the general patterns of acts punctuations by presenting the number of punctuations by topic graphically as well as by type discussed in the next section. From Figure 3, it is clear that certain issues, namely education (6) and defense (16), are generally more prone to punctuations than others, although labor (5), social (13), and science (17) policy also experience higher than average numbers of punctuations. This is a useful corrective to one of the problems of identifying punctuations that they may be thought to come from the topics that do not have much attention to them, hence creating a punctuation from a large percentage shift from a low level. It seems that the policy areas already receiving attention are more likely to have punctuations.

### Applying the Typology

The next step is to distinguish between the procedural punctuations and the rest. Here, we identify 11 out of the 48 punctuations that match the definition of procedural punctuations with acts occurring on multiple unrelated issues, or minor topics, within a single major topic code.<sup>6</sup> These punctuations are listed in Table 3. The first is in 1913, which is about tuberculosis prevention and mental health practices. The second is in 1918 on elections and immigration, which again do not relate well together. In 1941, there was a procedural punctuation consisting of measures on patents, securities, and mortgages. The next is in 1953 on disability benefits, pensions, and banking industry work hours, followed by another in 1958, which contains legislation on art and education. The next is about education, museums, and education (Scotland) in 1958. In 1967, there was legislation on family allowances and social work in Scotland, followed by 1969 legislation on milk for poor school



Table 3. List of Identified Acts Punctuations by Issue, 1911–2008

Year	Topic	Acts	Start Date	End Date	Type
1913	Health	5	10–03–1913	11–11–1914	Procedural
1914	Defence	50	11–11–1914	15–02–1916	High-salience
1918	Civil	3	12–02–1918	11–02–1919	Procedural
1924	Science	3	15–01–1924	09–12–1924	Low-salience
1924	Social	3	15–01–1924	09–12–1924	High-salience
1928	Education	5	07–02–1928	06–11–1928	High-salience
1931	Trade	3	10–11–1931	22–11–1932	High-salience
1935	Health	5	03–12–1935	03–11–1936	High-salience
1937	Housing	6	26–10–1937	08–11–1938	High-salience
1938	Trade	5	08–11–1938	28–11–1939	High-salience
1941	Commerce	3	12–11–1941	11–11–1942	Procedural
1942	Labour	4	11–11–1942	24–11–1943	High-salience
1945	Agriculture	4	15–08–1945	12–11–1946	High-salience
1950	Environment	4	31–10–1950	06–11–1951	High-salience
1951	Commerce	6	06–11–1951	04–11–1952	High-salience
1953	Labour	3	03–11–1953	30–11–1954	Procedural
1953	Energy	4	03–11–1953	30–11–1954	High-salience
1953	Science	4	03–11–1953	30–11–1954	Low-salience
1956	Defence	4	05–11–1956	05–11–1957	Low-salience
1958	Education	3	28–10–1958	27–10–1959	Procedural
1958	Labour	4	28–10–1958	27–10–1959	High-salience
1961	Education	3	31–10–1961	30–10–1962	Procedural
1963	Civil	4	12–11–1963	03–11–1964	High-salience
1963	Defence	6	12–11–1963	03–11–1964	Low-salience
1966	Crime	12	21–04–1966	31–10–1967	High-salience
1967	Social	3	31–10–1967	30–10–1968	Procedural
1968	Labour	5	30–10–1968	28–10–1969	High-salience
1969	Social	3	28–10–1969	20–07–1970	Procedural
1970	Education	5	20–07–1970	02–11–1971	Low-salience
1971	Science	4	02–11–1971	31–10–1972	High-salience
1979	Transport	8	15–05–1979	20–11–1980	High-salience
1979	Lands	10	15–05–1979	20–11–1980	Low-salience
1979	Housing	7	15–05–1979	20–11–1980	Low-salience
1982	Agriculture	8	03–11–1982	22–06–1983	Low-salience
1983	Science	3	22–06–1983	06–11–1984	High-salience
1987	Transport	7	25–06–1987	22–11–1988	High-salience
1990	Defence	4	07–11–1990	31–10–1991	Procedural
1991	Commerce	6	31–10–1991	06–05–1992	High-salience
1991	Social	7	31–10–1991	06–05–1992	High-salience
1992	Foreign	5	06–05–1992	18–11–1993	Low-salience
1992	Environment	4	06–05–1992	18–11–1993	High-salience
1994	Lands	3	16–11–1994	15–11–1995	Procedural
1995	Education	5	15–11–1995	23–10–1996	Low-salience
1995	Defence	4	15–11–1995	23–10–1996	Procedural
1997	Gov't	14	14–05–1997	24–11–1998	High-salience
2002	Environment	3	13–11–2002	26–11–2003	Low-salience
2003	Housing	3	26–11–2003	23–11–2004	High-salience
2005	Health	5	17–05–2005	15–11–2006	High-salience

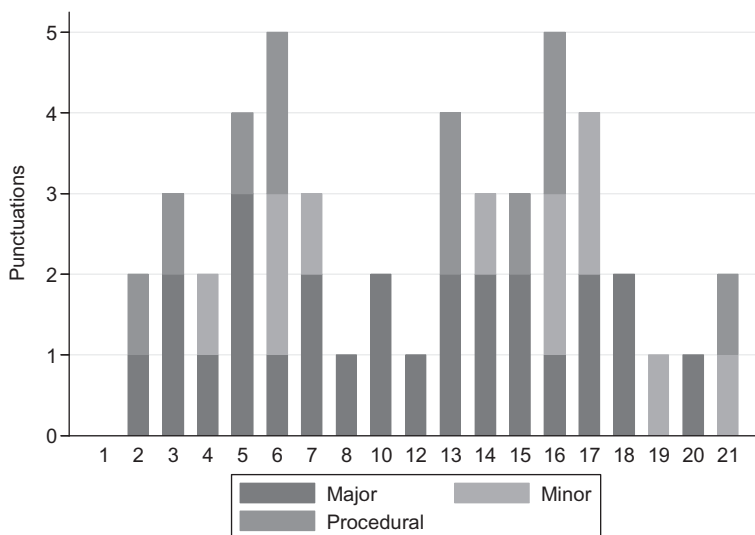


Figure 3. Acts Punctuations by Topic and Type.

children, council social services training, and disability benefits. Arguably, this last one could be about social policy, and the family allowances appear in histories of Labour's social policies (Thane, 2000, p. 109), but these items had separate origins. In 1990, there was a set of legislation on war crimes, arms control, nuclear weapons, and general military, although this was partially linked because of the end of the Cold War when it made sense to take items of legislation together. In 1994, there is another one on South Africa, commonwealth development, and Scottish Land Registers. The final one is in 1997 and is about chemical weapons, Hong Kong veterans reserve forces, and another set of unrelated items.

These items are not unimportant, far from it. It is significant that these laws are part of the same major topic code, for example, in drawing the public's attention to a policy issue like health or education. There are implications for the interest groups and policymakers in this field, say a department of health, or for a select committee, that a large number of items in a policy field are occurring at the same time. Nonetheless, it still holds there is a type difference between the procedural punctuations and ones where there are closer links between the policies creating the punctuation.

Next, we turn to the low-salience punctuations that receive attention through a single minor topic code but that receive limited or no media attention. We offer a conservative account of low-salience punctuations in that the majority of the laws that comprise them should have no attention in the media. For the media, we use the *London Times*, the newspaper of record for the period, that has already been used to measure attention in other projects using UK data (Soroka, 2006). Out of the 246 laws that form the nonprocedural punctuations, we find 85 laws that have no *Times* mentions, and we conclude that these laws were not salient. To distinguish between low-salience punctuations and others, we examine salience in connection with all

**Table 4.** Summary of High Salience Punctuations in Acts

Year	Topic	Summary
1914	Defence	Measures need to fight a world war about emergency powers and relate to the war effort.
1924	Social	Extension of pensions provision by new-elected Labour government
1928	Education	Part of series of acts reforming teacher pay and pensions and endowments in Scotland, state incorporation of religious schools
1931	Trade	Powers of the Board of Trade to impose import duties
1935	Health	Public health reforms
1937	Housing	Public housing, its finance, and regulation of the private rental sector
1938	Trade	Acts to regulate trade
1942	Labour	Acts to regulate conditions of employment
1945	Agriculture	Measures aimed at reviving agriculture postwar
1951	Environment	Regulation of water supply and management
1952	Commerce	Laws on consumer protection
1953	Energy	Measures on nuclear power and the utility industry
1958	Labour	Changes to the regulation of employment, such as Wages councils
1963	Civil	Measures to regulate immigration
1966	Crime	A series of civil rights reforms associated with Labour modernization
1968	Labour	Welfare and employment reforms, for example, national insurance
1971	Science	Reforms of entertainment industry
1979	Transport	A range of reforms of transport, introducing more commercial principles
1983	Science	Reform of licensing and privatization
1987	Transport	A range of transport measures, including the channel tunnel and seat belts
1991	Commerce	A range of measures to regulate commerce
1991	Social	A number of measures to reform social security
1992	Environment	A range of environmental measures, several aimed at animal welfare
1997	Gov't	A whole range of institutional reforms associated with the new Labour administration
2003	Housing	Planning and housing measures
2005	Health	A series of related health service reforms

laws contained in the punctuations. If the majority of laws (greater than 50 percent) comprising punctuations were not salient, then these punctuations are classified as low salience and a complete list is contained in Table 3. This is a very conservative test in that many laws have a large number of mentions and only one mention puts the law into a salient camp. An example of the low-salience punctuations is education (6) in 1970, which included the following acts: Education (Handicapped Children) Act 1970, Teaching Council (Scotland) Act, Welsh National Opera Company Act 1971, and Education (Scotland) Act 197, none of which received any mentions in the *Times*. The final calculation generates 11 low-salience punctuations.

Table 4 contains the remaining 26 high-salience punctuations identified by attention to a single minor topic code and high levels of media attention identified by a majority of salient laws contained within each one. This represents a reasonable number of events in the 1911–2008 period with one large event every 4 years on average. The table lists the year, the topic area, and a brief summary of the policy issues.

There is a considerable diversity in these punctuations, which range across the decades and occur in most of the major topic areas. Some patterns stand out. Many represent attempts by parliament to get to grips with regulation in a policy field such

as the 1928 education reforms or 1971 reforms of the entertainment industry. These are classic examples of agenda expansion whereby several related areas at once get the attention of policymakers or that regulation in one area precipitates a rethink in a related policy subfield. Another example is the punctuation on social welfare policies in 1924 concerning pensions.<sup>7</sup> Governments at the time were reforming pensions law, making them contributory, introducing a big piece of legislation enacted in the following year (Clarke, 2004, p. 137). In 1924, Labour was elected as a minority government, and pensions reform was a major part of its program (Thane, 2000), and it aimed to improve and extend provision.

There were some changes that reflected major exogenous shocks such as the First World War, for example, where it made sense to have a wholesale reform of the military. The acts in 1938 to regulate international trade are in the same category. Others represent the importance of public opinion and the media place on an issue such as immigration in the early 1960s, which led to reform of nationality acts and dominated politics for over a decade afterward. Another example occurred in the late 1960s when the Labour government became preoccupied with labor market reforms, which reflected the increased public salience of employment matters and concerns about the state of industrial relations. The controversial *In Place of Strife* white paper (Department for Employment and Productivity, 1969) proposed a statutory basis for relationships between trades unions and employers, but the Labour government never implemented it. The environmental reforms of 1991 were a response to the range of environmental measures, many going through the European Union at the time, and from greater public attention to environmental matters.

Some punctuations have a partisan flavor, which is when a government in office puts its ideological stamp on a series of measures in a policy sector. The Labour government, which came into office in 1964 after a long period of Conservative rule, carried out a series of reforming measures in civil rights, and these created the policy punctuation. The Conservative administrations after 1979 were also highly partisan, wishing to introduce market forces into the public sector; for example, the 1980 reform of transport, or the privatizing reforms of the 1980s. New Labour, when elected in 1997, carried out a series of constitutional reforms that reflected its reformist and modernizing stance to government such as referendums for devolution to Scotland and Wales.

The conclusion to draw is that the selection of high-salience punctuations are indeed large policy changes that relate to periods of attention to particular policy issues, driven by external events and/or partisan preoccupations. Students of public policy and country specialists can use the typology to identify these high-salience punctuations and to observe their expression in laws.

The method does not replicate what standard histories of British politics do (for example, Clarke, 2004), which is to write about what are considered to be defining pieces of legislation and to see them as symbolizing and structuring politics and policy afterward. Instead it examines the expansion of attention to a major policy topic and its prioritization at particular moments of time. Thus, a critic could examine the list in Table 4 and ask where is the Education Act 1944 that created the post-war two-tier secondary education system, or the National Health Service Act

1948 that established comprehensive health care, and the Parliament Act of 1911 that limited the power of the House of Lords. However, the approach of the contemporary historian is different to the student of public policy: the former tends to focus on groundbreaking pieces of legislation, which may not take up a large amount of legislative time in any one year, whereas the latter is interested in the attention policymakers pay to a particular topic. While the historical method can hone in on matters that automatically appear to be of importance, it can be prone to subjectivity in the sense of reproducing accepted wisdoms about British politics, whereas the aggregate method of collecting punctuations systematically find shifts in attention that do not appear so much in the historical record, and so alert the student of public policy to important changes that might not otherwise be visible. This echoes to a traditional complaint from public policy scholars (for example, Richardson & Jordan, 1979) that other disciplines tend not to pay much attention to detailed—humdrum—matters of decision making preferring to concentrate on high politics. Our procedure for identifying policy punctuations finds a way of linking high and low politics through legislative attention.

### Case Studies

The final part of the article examines some examples of punctuations in order to validate our scheme more thoroughly. Of course to do that effectively we would need to cover a large number of punctuations and extensive portions of the qualitative record, which would be a book-length project. Here, we rely on the method of case selection, the most similar case design (Przeworski & Teune, 1970), to select pairs of cases that are similar but differ on the independent variable of interest. The idea is that by selecting comparable cases, we are able to observe differences between procedural and high-salience punctuations, and between low-salience and high-salience, as other factors are held constant. The main constraint of this exercise is that the ability to reduce the variation here is limited for we can only select by major topic code, and also choose comparators that are close together in time.

The first pairing comes in major topic 14, which is community development, planning, and housing. We select a high-salience punctuation in 2004 under Labour and a low-salience punctuation from 1979, the first year of the newly elected Conservative government. The Labour punctuation consisted of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, the Sustainable and Secure Buildings Act 2004, and the Housing Act 2004 and represented the interest of New Labour in reforming planning and housing matters. The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 was a major reform of the planning framework and replaced local and structural plans. This is regarded by planners as a fundamental rescaling of the planning system, which changed the structure of the state system (Cowell & Owens, 2006). The Sustainable and Secure Buildings Act 2004 has been similarly described as a comprehensive reform of building security, “a major policy advance in countering crime and terrorism in the context of environmental sustainability and resilience” (Coaffee, 2006, p. 4635), which may be seen as an attempt by central government to integrate housing and planning policy comprehensively,

incorporating the sustainability agenda. The Housing Act 2004 is less connected to this agenda, which introduced a change in the way in which homes are bought (subsequently reversed by the Coalition Government elected in 2010) and a range of small changes. Overall, however, these pieces of legislation reflected the preoccupation of lawmakers with housing and planning issues, which drew from the reforming impetus of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, the name of the ministry at that time, under the leadership of the influential politician John Prescott, and reflected the wish of central government to act strategically in this area. They attracted attention, in particular the Housing Act, although the Sustainable and Secure Buildings Act did not yield any media mentions.

The low-salience punctuation is about early reforms of the newly elected Thatcher government, which is about the following pieces of legislation: Land Registration (Scotland) Act 1979, Estate Agents Act 1979, Leasehold Reform Act 1979, New Towns Act 1980, and the Housing Act 1980. Recall to qualify as a low-salience punctuation over half should have no media mentions, so they reflect attention by government but on matters of largely a technical nature that need fixing. Here, it is not surprising that the Land Registration (Scotland) Act 1979 has no mentions, as it is a change in the recording of deeds. Similarly, the Estate Agents Act was a change in the law relating to property purchase and again was not a measure attracting a large amount of attention, and the Leasehold Reform Act 1979 created rights for tenants to acquire the freeholds of their properties. There is very little secondary material on the New Towns Act in 1980, which appears to be a tidying up piece of legislation. The important act is the Housing Act 1980. This gets 85 mentions in the *Times*. The reason is because it introduced a controversial and—in the end—a popular policy change that allowed council tenants to buy their homes. This was seen as a key plank of the ideological program of the Conservative government, which sought to reduce the role of the public sector and to hand back ownership of public assets to private individuals. The Housing Act generated a large and critical literature, which attests to the importance of this piece of legislation (e.g., Forrest, 1985). Yet we define the increase in attention to topic 14 as a low-salience punctuation. Does this example undermine the typology? Not necessarily. The point of the policy punctuation is to capture the attention of government to a policy category, in this case, in terms of the proportion of the amount of legislative time on community development, planning, and housing as opposed to other topics such as on health, the economy, or education. The purpose is not to pull out pieces of legislation that only take up a small amount of attention to a policy topic but have long-term importance. The Housing Act 1980 did not primarily reflect the attention of the new government to housing issues but it was part of an ideological program, pursued by the leadership of Conservative party, that aimed to privatize parts of the welfare state, which was implemented across several policy areas, such as local government (Local Government, Planning and Land Act 1980), transport (Transport Act 1980), and education (Education Act 1980). Nonetheless, as a result of the Housing Act 1980, housing received a lot of attention and future applications of the typology could take into account the total amount of media attention as well as the number of laws that get mentions within each major topic.



The second pairing concerns topic 13: social welfare. Here, we select two punctuations. The high-salience punctuation we identify occurs in 1992, which was under the Major Government. There were a range of legislative measures: Social Security Administration Act 1992, Social Security (Consequential Provisions) Act 1992, Social Security Contributions and Benefits (Northern Ireland) Act 1992, Social Security Administration (Northern Ireland) Act 1992, Social Security (Consequential Provisions) (Northern Ireland) Act 1992, Social Security (Mortgage Interest Payments) Act 1992, and the Charities Act 1992. These pieces of legislation represent a major reform of social security and welfare, which tightened up the law on benefit fraud. They attracted much public attention, and the welfare reform was championed by the minister Peter Lilley, who famously sang a ditty at the Conservative Party conference in October 1992, "I've got a little list/Of benefit offenders who I'll soon be rooting out." However, this piece of legislation only got two mentions in the *Times*. In contrast, the Charities Act of that year got 16 mentions. This changed the law on charitable giving and increased the regulation of charities. It is hard to see the connection to the reform of social security, however, so it may not have been one large rise in attention to the same issue. And this was the part of the legislation that attracted the most attention.

The second is a procedural punctuation in 1967. This comprises three acts: the Family Allowances and National Insurance Act 1967, the Family Allowances and National Insurance Act 1968, and the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968. The first was an item of legislation to implement benefit changes; the second one was to implement these changes for Northern Ireland. The third was needed to make further provision for social welfare and to consolidate legislation. Although there is a connection between the first two, they cannot be represented as an expansion of attention to topic 13 largely because they transfer across legislative measures to different parts of the UK.

Overall, these case studies lift the lid on what is inside the different punctuations. Inevitably, with laws much appears to be separate. There are some consolidating pieces of legislation and those that extend laws to different parts of the UK such as Northern Ireland and Scotland. This tendency inevitably creates some fuzziness in the categories, and some elements of procedural changes can form parts of high-salience and low-salience punctuations. Nonetheless, high-salience punctuations correspond to large changes in the policy agenda associated with media attention, and low-salience punctuations are large changes that lack media attention and are less important as a result.

## Conclusions

Since the early 1990s, public policy scholars have made considerable progress in understanding the character of the policy agenda, and they have successfully challenged the assumptions of an earlier generation of scholars who claimed that policy changes were largely incremental in character. As a result of the work of Jones, Baumgartner, and their collaborators, most public policy researchers now believe that political systems regularly experience large-scale changes in attention to public



policy even though there may be long periods when not much changes. Important in this enterprise is the analysis of aggregate measures of political attention, in particular of the data series made available by the Policy Agendas Project. In support of this approach, this article seeks to move the academic agenda further forward by investigating the exact nature of these large changes and trying to understand the causal processes that comprise them. The straightforward claim we make is that the aggregate measures subdivide into three different kinds of policy change that reflect degrees of importance in the wider political system. Some punctuations in the data are combinations of activities that are not well connected together; others are large connected policy changes, but they are not salient to wider publics. Only the rest, the high-salience punctuations, with their upswings in media attention, resemble the policy changes as described by Baumgartner and Jones.

We used laws as our measure of attention, selecting the case of the UK from 1911 to 2008 to apply the three-point typology. The advantage of studying laws is that they allow us to know the different items in the policy agenda, which would have been much harder to do with budgets and speeches where the researcher has to work out what comprises these changes. However, the implication of our work that is such an analysis could be done on other venues and—of course—in other jurisdictions. Indeed, one of the purposes of this article is to propose a generalizable typology that other scholars can use to interrogate their own data series.

The typology works well in separating out different kinds of policy change. In particular, the procedure for identifying high-salience punctuations creates an important distinction between high-profile large policy changes and other kinds of policy change. This has a dual purpose. First, it guards against the problem of overclaiming from the policy agenda data that there are more policy punctuations—in the Baumgartner–Jones sense—than there really are. Second, the typology corrects for the selection bias that is present in many contemporary histories, which tend not to be much interested in public policy and focus on a few pieces of legislation rather than the shifts in attention across the wider political system and across many decision-making venues. In other words, by offering a leaner definition of high-salience policy punctuations, public policy scholars can more effectively challenge conventional wisdoms.

We have not sought to disguise the inherent messiness and complexity of policymaking. Once the analyst looks beyond the smooth representations of data series, decision making is inherently differentiated and complex. This is the legal equivalent of Jones Baumgartner's "there are a million stories in the budget" (2005a, p. 113). As with these authors, we aim for generalization and believe that the typology and the method we propose offer a valid distinction between different kinds of policy change. Nonetheless, there may be some overlap between the different kinds of punctuations, for example, elements of a low-salience punctuation that get a lot of media attention, or procedural elements of a high-salience punctuation. Others may wish to refine the typology or devise other ways of differentiating large changes. However, we believe that they will build on our efforts and the classification we propose. In this way, studies of the policy agenda may properly integrate qualitative

and quantitative methods in ways that increase understandings about what actually happens when the public agenda shifts.

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## Notes

1. The coding system of course plays a role in the creation of procedural punctuations. For example, in the case of the UK Policy Agendas Project, both education and the arts are in the same category leading to several procedural punctuations focused on minor changes to educational and arts policy. Other procedural punctuations have less to do with the coding system though and more to do with attention to similar but unrelated policy. For example, refinements to the mental health system and to the system for treating tuberculosis are both clearly health issues and it is government or events that caused the two issues to collide producing a procedural punctuation as attention to both issues clearly follow different causal processes.
2. This is calculated as:  $Y = [(X_t - X_{t-1}) / X_{t-1}] \times 100$ .
3. This is calculated as:  $Y = [(X_t / Z_t) - (X_{t-1} / Z_{t-1})] / (X_t / Z_t) \times 100$ .
4. Using other cutoff points can logically change the results. For example, lower thresholds such as a cutoff of 150 percent leads to a greater number of both procedural and low-salience punctuations but no additional high salience punctuations. A lower threshold is therefore inappropriate. Higher cutoffs such as 300 percent lead to similar decreases in all three types of punctuations. Combined these alternative cutoffs suggest that a 200 percent is an appropriate and consistent cutoff.
5. This is calculated by taking the number of parliamentary years, 98, and multiplying it by the number of topics government deals with, 19.  $98 \text{ parliamentary years} \times 19 \text{ topics} = 1,862 \text{ observations}$ .
6. Identifying procedural punctuations was completed through a qualitative analysis of the acts comprising each one. Specifically, when unrelated policy areas within major topics were found with no single policy area large enough to be recognized as a punctuation on its own, the punctuation was identified as procedural. No procedural punctuations occur when more than four acts on a major topic were passed.
7. This high-salience punctuation contains some element of a procedural punctuation because it contains a law changing the poor law in Scotland. However, the changes to pensions alone are large enough and pass the 200 percent threshold on their own.

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