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## **When Do New Issues Appear? Punctuations in the Belgian Executive Agenda**

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper investigates what might cause punctuations in the agenda of a country's executive branch by examining the annual Prime Minister's speech to the Belgian Parliament (1993-2008). After having established that the Belgian executive agenda is punctuated, meaning it has long periods of stability that are offset by major shifts in attention, the paper closely examines to what extent focusing events, leadership changes, and elections can explain these shifts. Focusing events that were specifically mentioned in the speech, can explain seven of the 18 punctuations. They cannot shed light on what occurred in the other 11 cases. Changes in leadership also do not systematically cause punctuations. The 1999 election of Verhofstadt as prime minister can partly explain the shift in attention of that year, while the change in leadership from Verhofstadt to Leterme did not cause any significant alterations in the agenda. Finally, elections did not cause immediate shifts in attention.

Key Words:

Executive agenda – beleidsverklaring – agenda setting – punctuations

## Introduction

In most democratic nations, the chief executive annually presents its accomplishments and goals for the upcoming year in the form of a speech delivered to the parliament or its equivalent. For example, in the United States of America, the President reads his State of the Union address to the other branches of government, in Great Britain and the Netherlands the executive drafts a text which is then ceremoniously read by the Monarch, while in Belgium the Prime Minister presents his 'beleidsverklaring' or policy declaration at the beginning of the parliamentary session in early October. This type of presentation is an important tool for the executive as it provides a platform to raise issues to other governing bodies and the public. It can for instance be used to announce successful initiatives, new programs, and important messages. Studies have demonstrated that the State of the Union speech in Belgium had some effect on the public and media agenda (Gilberg, 1980; Wanta et al. 1989; Cohen, 1995).

This annual speech serves as a good indicator of the executive's agenda, or list of topics that the government considers important at that moment in time. It normally covers a broad range of issues: large proportions are traditionally dedicated to topics that the government generally considers important, such as the economy and (un)employment, while other subjects such as the environment, transportation, international conflicts, and immigration, might be prominently on the government's agenda one year, but can barely be addressed—if at all—in the subsequent speech. The topics can thus be ranked hierarchically, based on the

assumption that the more attention dedicated to an issue in the speech, the higher it will appear on the executive agenda.

This paper specifically focuses on significant shifts in attention from one year to the next, which according to the punctuated equilibrium model (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993, 2005), occurs quite infrequently. Baumgartner and Jones argue that the amount of attention dedicated to the different topics that appear on the agenda of a political institution from year to year tends to be punctuated. It is characterized by long periods of stability and incrementalism, with every now and then a significant shift in attention. This pattern was found in different types of policy agendas in a number of countries (Baumgartner et al. 2009). According to this framework, a significant change in attention is rare, as both cognitive and institutional friction causes the different political institutions to continue to address the issues it considered important in the past (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993). So, if stability is indeed the norm and sudden significant shifts in attention are rare, what can cause them to occur, and when might we expect them? These are the questions this paper will address. Specifically, it will focus on particular moments in which the executive could be more likely to change its attention such as focusing events, leadership changes, and elections.

This study is firmly vested in the agenda setting literature, which addresses the larger question: why do certain policy problems and solutions receive attention from policy makers, the media agenda, and/or the public agenda while others do not (Dearing and Rogers, 1996)? The main premise of this literature is that there are limits to what the policy makers and public in general can pay attention to at any

given time (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Political and social actors have to thus pick and chose which issues they will address or pay attention to and which ones to set aside.

The executive agenda in Belgium is the focus of this essay. Belgium is a small constitutional democracy in Western Europe, in which party politics plays a very important role (De Winter, della Porta, and Deschouwer, 1996). Using both quantitative and qualitative methods this paper will first demonstrate that significant policy changes do indeed occur in the Belgian executive's policy agenda. Next it will analyze to what extent focusing events, leadership changes, and elections can explain why issues suddenly arise on the Belgian executive agenda.

This study adds to the literature in two ways. First, no other study in the agenda setting literature has previously analyzed the Belgian executive speech. Second, this paper goes beyond establishing that various agendas are punctuated on a macro level. Instead, it performs an in-depth analysis of the significant shifts in attention and tries to explain why they occurred. Most of the prior studies on attention shifts merely established the pattern without analyzing the peaks.

### **Incrementalism, Unstable, or Punctuated Equilibrium?**

This empirical study of the executive agenda in Belgium addresses a larger debate in comparative politics: Is the policy making process relatively stable and incremental, or is it instead unstable and thus continuously fluctuating? For a long time, the theory that policy-makers do not drastically shift their attention from one topic to another as problems arise, dominated. According to this view, the process is characterized by gridlock and incrementalism (Dahl and Lindblom, 1953; Lindblom,

1975; Wildavsky, 1984). These scholars argue that the policy making process provides so many hurdles, making a significant change in focus very difficult to accomplish.

Other studies, however, have demonstrated that incrementalism does not adequately explain how the political process evolves. Although most agree that gridlock dominates, Baumgartner and Jones (1993, 2005) demonstrated that this does not explain the entire story. They argue that instead of constant gridlock, agendas are punctuated: there are longer than expected periods of policy stability punctuated by rapid and dramatic policy adjustments. This model is dubbed the punctuated equilibrium model (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Jones and Baumgartner, 2005). This pattern was demonstrated in various political systems and different types of agendas during the input (elections, news), decision-making (bill introductions, hearings, party platforms, executive orders), and output stages (appropriations, budgets) of the policy making process (Baumgartner et al. 2009)<sup>1</sup>.

Specifically concerning the executive agenda, the punctuated equilibrium model was among others confirmed over time in Britain (Jennings and John, 2008, 2009; Jennigs et al. Forthcoming), the Netherlands (Breeman, et al. 2008, Breeman et al. 2009) and Spain (Chagues et al. 2008). This pattern was also identified in Belgian decision-making bodies such as party platforms, government agreements, written questions in parliaments, bills, parliamentary interpellations, executive orders, and laws (Baumgartner et al. 2009). Nobody however has studied the

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<sup>1</sup> Baumgartner et al. (2009) specifically focused on the United States, Denmark, and Belgium.

evolution of the executive agenda relying on the Belgian equivalent of the State of the Union speeches.

As the punctuated equilibrium model has been confirmed in executive agendas in other countries, and in other political decision-making institutions in Belgium, this paper also expects to find long periods of stability followed by moments of rapid change in the Belgian annual State of the Union speech. What can cause these shifts in attention is the eventual question this paper investigates. It examines three plausible causes of attention shifts: 1) governments are reacting to specific events that occurred in the prior year, 2) leadership changes that occur following an election allow governments to shift focus, and 3) the fact that elections were recently held gives policy makers the opportunity to focus on new issues that emerged during the campaign. Next to identifying what might have caused specific shifts in attention, this analysis can also contribute to another debate in the agenda setting literature. Does the content of the speech reflect the median voter of the parties, and is thus less likely to be influenced by elections etc. (McDonald and Budge, 2005), or does it reflect the mandate theory, which says that new coalitions will cause a significant shift in attention (Hofferbert and Budge, 1992).

### **Examining Changes in attention in the Belgian Executive agenda**

The priorities of the executive will be measured by analyzing the 'beleidsverklaringen'. These are the annual speeches that the Belgian prime minister delivers to the parliament at the beginning of its legislative session in early October. Although this event receives much less popular attention in Belgium than similar speeches in for example the United States and the United Kingdom, this speech

performs the same function as for example the State of the Union speech in the United States or the King's/Queen's speech in the Netherlands and Great Britain. It is an annual formal statement in which the executive presents the proposed legislative program of the government (Jennings and John, 2009). As opposed to Great Britain and the Netherlands, where the king or queen delivers the speech as part of a formal ceremony, the Belgian government follows the United States and Spanish model, where the chief executive presents the document. In this speech, the Prime Minister has the opportunity to mobilize his or her supporters, present the issues that the executive wishes to focus on the upcoming year, and convince other political institutions to follow its lead. The functional equivalents of the Belgian State of the Union speech in other countries have been used in various other studies as a measure of policy-making attention of the executive (Cohen, 1995; Hobolt and Klemmensen, 2008; Jennings and John, 2009; Breeman et al., 2009).

As opposed to other countries, where speech has been institutionalized for many years, the Belgian tradition only started fairly recently. Prime Minister Jean Luc Dehaene only presented the first State of the Union speech in 1993. Since then, it has been given annually, except in 2007, because at that time, there was no official government that could give the speech due to an extended government formation.

Speeches are somewhat different than other measurements of political agendas, such as government agreements and party manifestos, because the cost of shifting attention in public statements is relatively low. The Prime Minister can be more responsive to the public and the media, and does not need the consent of as many other actors as is required to pass a law (Chaques et al. 2008: 9). Still, a

change in attention is by no means easy. In Belgium, the priorities need to be established with the consent of all coalition parties (which can sometimes be up to six parties), and a large section of the Belgian State of the Union speech is used to discuss the annual budget, which is traditionally a very stagnant agenda (Jones et al. 2009). There are thus opportunities to drastically change the agenda as well as forces that push for continuity.

The agenda of the executive will be established by analyzing how much attention the prime minister allocates to the various policy topics in the full text of his annual speech (1993-2008)<sup>2</sup>. The documents were coded at the quasi-sentence level of analysis for policy content based on the universal coding system of the Policy Agendas Project, designed and supervised by Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones ([www.policyagendas.org](http://www.policyagendas.org)). As is demonstrated by the fact that this codebook is being used by projects in among other countries, the US, the UK, Denmark, the Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, and France, it allows for comparisons in issue attention across datasets collected in different countries (John, 2006). The scheme, which has been adapted to account for topics more applicable to Belgium, consists of 22 major categories and 225 sub-topic codes (major topic codes listed in Table I). The codebook only analyzes whether a topic is mentioned or not, it does not measure how it is covered.

**Table 1: Policy Agenda Major Topic Codes**

1. Macroeconomics	13. Social Welfare
2. Civil Rights	14. Housing and Urban Development
3. Health	15. Commerce and Banking

<sup>2</sup> As opposed to the Netherlands and the UK, the Belgian speeches do not include a lot of ceremonial statements, so the full text can be coded.



4. Agriculture	16. Defense
5. Labor	17. Science and Technology
6. Education	18. Foreign Trade
7. Environment	19. International Affairs
8. Energy	20. Government Operations
9. Migration	21. Urban Development, public, nature, and water management
10. Transportation	23. Arts, Entertainment, and Culture
12. Law, Crime, and Family Issues	24. Community and Provincial Management

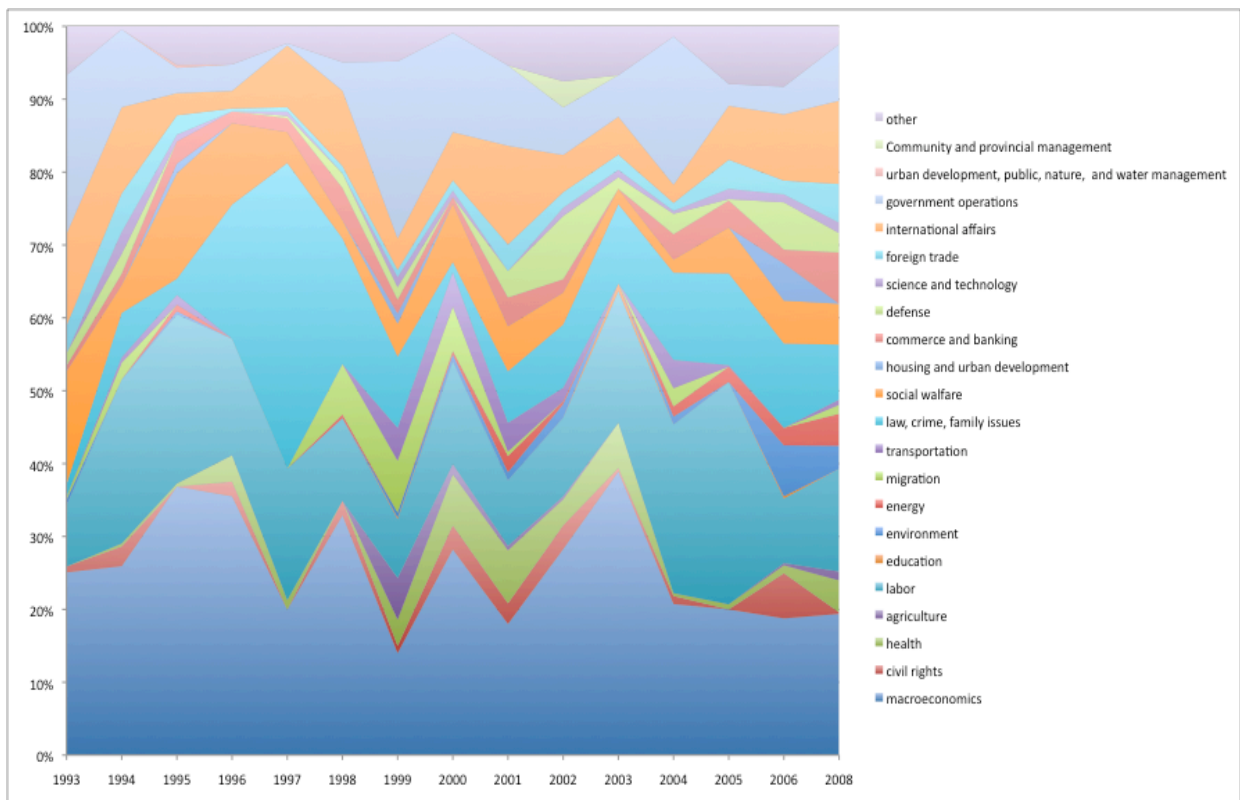
The author himself coded all of the speeches. In order to assure that the data is reliable, two of the speeches were also assigned to student coders who were trained and had experience with coding party manifestos, which are coded in the same fashion. As coders had to divide the text into quasi-sentences, as well as assign issue codes, it is not possible to measure reliability at the issue code level using methods such as the percentage agreement or Krippendorff's Alpha. Instead the aggregated agenda at major topic code level was correlated, using a Pearson correlation, with the results of the student coders. The resulting aggregated agendas, correlated at a .92 and .96 level, demonstrating that the coding is reliable.

The executive agenda consists of 15 speeches between 1993 and 2008. There was no speech in 2007 because of the electoral crisis that left Belgium without a government for 196 days between 10 June 2007 and December 13, 2007. The complete dataset consists of 4480 coded quasi-sentences, or an average of 298.7 quasi-sentences per speech. The longest speech was in 2005 with 430 quasi-sentences, and the shortest one was in 2003 with 193 quasi-sentences. The length of the speeches did not show any specific trends. As the policy agenda is constructed as the percentage attention to an issue compared to the total speech, the number of

quasi-sentences will not significantly affect the distribution of attention to different topics.

Figure I shows the distribution of attention to topics in the different State of the Union speeches between 1993 and 2008. As this chart demonstrates, the prime minister on average spends a little more than a quarter of the time on macroeconomic issues (25.3%), and also consistently focuses much attention on labor (15.6%), law, crime, and family issues (11.2%), and government operations (9.2%). This supports the findings of Jennings et al. (forthcoming) who argue that the government will always address certain core issues<sup>3</sup>.

**Figure I: Distribution of Issue Attention (%) in Belgian State of the Union Speeches (1993-2008)**



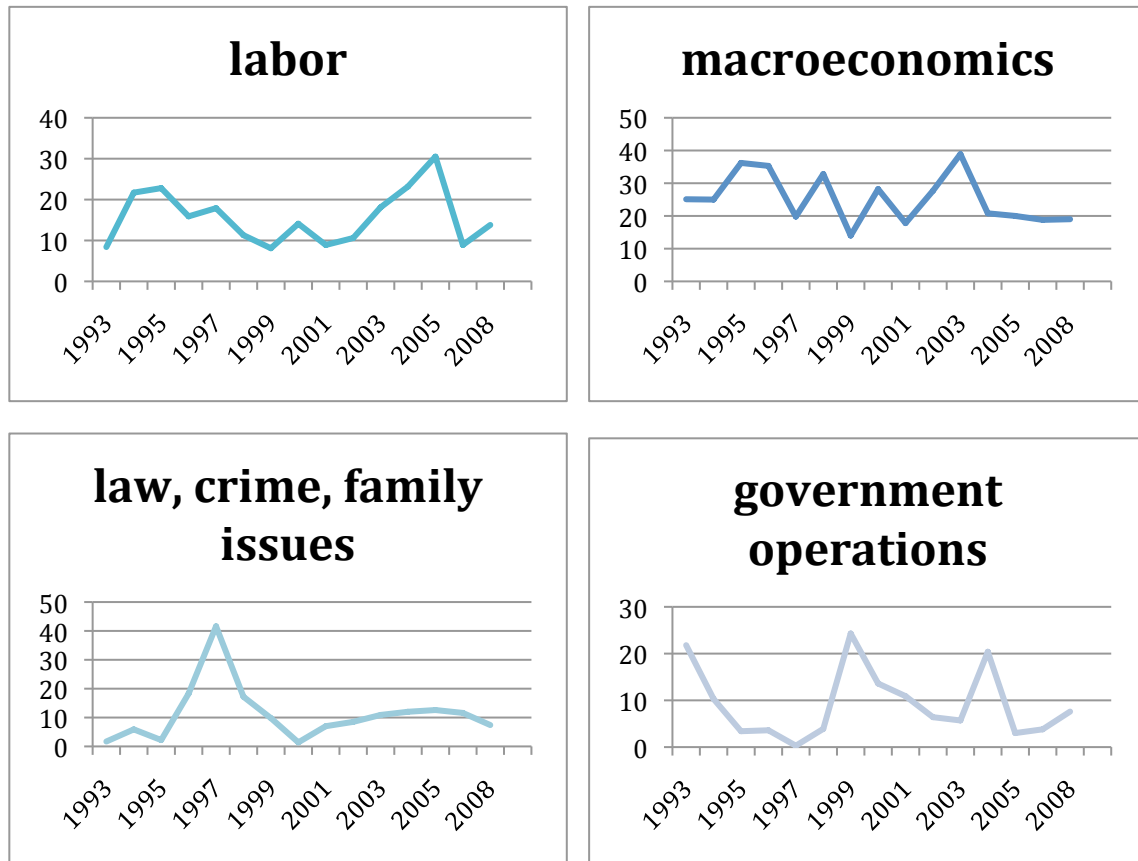
<sup>3</sup> Jennings et al. (Forthcoming) state that this makes it very difficult for other subjects to get on the agenda.

Examining the four most frequent categories over time provides some evidence that the executive's agenda is indeed punctuated. The attention to labor and macro-economics most clearly demonstrates the incrementalism in the agenda. These categories are consistently present on the agenda. Although the attention fluctuates to some extent, the focus remains between 8 and 30% for labor, and between 14 and 39% for macroeconomics. There are changes from year to year, but these cannot be considered punctuations as the percentage change is not large enough. At first glance, there are also no specific trends in the data.

These patterns are different for law crime, and family issues and governmental operations, where there are some significant shifts in attention. For law, crime and family issues, the chart demonstrates that there was a drastic increase in attention to this topic in 1996, which corresponds with the Dutroux crisis. After a period of intense focus, the attention to this topic however quickly returned to its normal proportion of between 2 and 13%. Government operations seems to be the most volatile category. Here, the attention fluctuates between 24% and 1% with significant changes from year to year. The largest fluctuation occurred between 1998 and 1999, when the executive increased its attention from 4% to 24%, after having gradually declined from 21% between 1993 and 1997. This renewed focus on government operations corresponded with the change in leadership from Prime Minister Dehaene to Verhofstadt, following the dioxine crisis. An initial examination of the data thus shows that the major categories are indeed

quite stable, although the law, crime, and family issues and government operations categories did show significant variations.

**Charts 2-5: Attention to Labor, Macro-Economics, Law, Crime, and Family Issues, and Government Operations.**



A common measure to see whether or not a policy agenda is punctuated is the kurtosis statistic of the distribution of the percentage changes in attention to the various topics from one year to another. As there are 22 major topics over the period of 1993-2008, this generates a distribution consisting of 315 observations of percentage change. The kurtosis score measures the level of peakedness of a distribution. The punctuated equilibrium model implies a leptokurtotic distribution of policy change (Jones et al. 2003), which represents small change most of the time

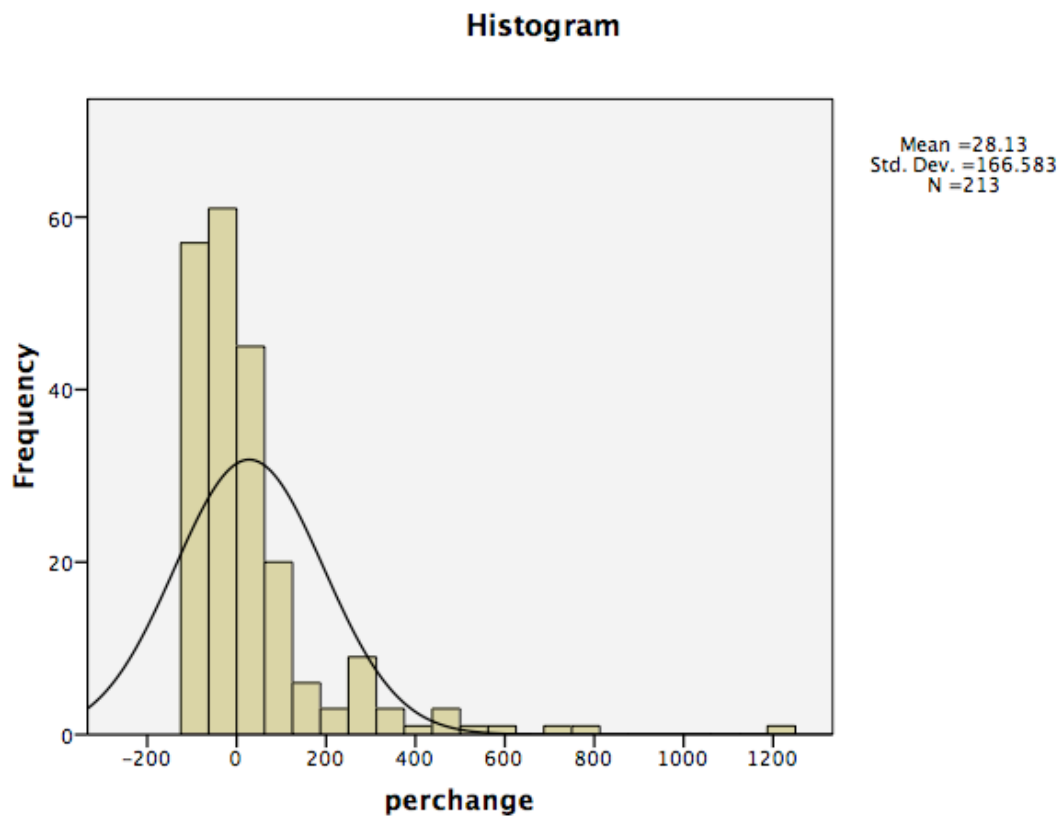
but episodic large change. When compared against the normal distribution (Gaussian), those with a positive kurtosis (leptokurtosis) are very peaked. They have a large, slender central peak that corresponds to extended periods of incrementalism. This distribution also has weak shoulders, with shows a relative lack of moderate change and fat tails that represent the disproportionate occurrence of extreme, infrequent disturbances (punctuations).

**Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Percentage Change in the Annual Executive Statement, 1993-2008**

Mean	28.13
Median	-10.94
Variance	27750.05
Standard Deviation	166.58
Skewness	3.22
Kurtosis	14.84
Minimum	-100
Maximum	1200
N	213

Figure II shows the distribution of annual percentage change in the executive's attention to particular policy topics in the yearly speech, plotted against a hypothetical normal distribution with the same mean and variance. This histogram demonstrates that the changes in the policy agenda are indeed leptokurtotic, and thus not normally distributed. The kurtosis score is positive and equal to 14.84. This indicates that the executive policy agenda based on the annual speech is indeed punctuated: it is characterized by long periods of incrementalism, followed by moments of rapid change.

Figure II: Distribution of Percentage Changes in Proportion of Issue Attention (%)



### What Causes Punctuations?

Now that it has been confirmed that the executive agenda indeed is punctuated, the next step is to examine what could have caused these extreme shifts in attention. Kingdon (1995) says that policy makers can use 'policy windows' or situations where an opportunity for policy changes suddenly exists where one did not appear to exist a short time before. Some factors that can cause policy windows to open are focusing events, leadership changes, new information, the presence of a policy entrepreneur, and elections. The objective of this section of the paper is to investigate whether three factors that according to Kingdon can cause policy windows to open can explain punctuations in the Belgian executive agenda: focusing

events, leadership changes, and elections. Did the executive respond to these policy windows by shifting its attention, or not? The objective of this study is to explain as many of the punctuations as possible, using these three variables. In some cases however, it is possible that two or more plausible causes can explain the policy changes. Examining which explanation fits better is beyond the scope of this paper.

A first important step is to define what is considered a significant shift in attention<sup>4</sup>. Although there is no unanimous agreement on how to determine punctuations, this issue is generally downplayed in the literature (John, Bevin, and Jennings, 2010). Prior studies mainly focused on general tendencies in changes of attention, and to determine this, the results were robust using various details in specification and calculation (Baumgarner et al. 2009). Overall, percentage changes in attention have been the norm, but this approach is not optimal to identify individual punctuations as it leaves out a number of plausible changes in attention. When the executive initially does not pay any attention to an issue at all, and then notices the topic matter in the subsequent year, it will not be included in the results of percentage change because it is impossible to divide a number by zero.

In order to account for this problem, this paper uses two criteria to define a punctuation based on the analysis of percentage changes from the previous year. First, all cases in which the percentage change is larger than two standard deviations away from the mean amount of change are considered a punctuation. Therefore, if the percentage change is larger than 333.16%, it is considered a significant shift. These instances are outlined in the first part of Table 3. In order to

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<sup>4</sup> For this paper, shifts in attention and punctuation will be used interchangeably.

accommodate for the problem of not being able to divide by zero, the universe of punctuations in the executive agenda in Belgium will be expanded to include the ten highest absolute percentage changes, where the initial value was zero (see second half of table 3). This results in a total of 18 cases of punctuation.



**Table 3: Significant Shifts in Attention in the Executive Agenda (1993-2008)**

<b>Percentage Change</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>From/to</b>	<b>Prime Minister</b>	<b>Event</b>	<b>Year of Leadership change</b>	<b>Year of election</b>
1200%	Government Operations	1997/98	Dehaene	Floods	No	No
800%	Health	1995/96	Dehaene	No	No	No
732%	Security	1995/96	Dehaene	Dutroux	No	No
567%	Defense	1997/98	Dehaene	Kosovo	No	No
523%	Gov. Operations	1998/99	Verhofstadt	No	Yes	Yes
450%	Migration	1993/94	Dehaene	No	No	No
400%	Security	2000/01	Verhofstadt	No	No	No
340%	Energy	2000/01	Verhofstadt	No	No	No
<b>Absolute % Change (From 0 - X)</b>	<b>Topic</b>	<b>From/to</b>	<b>Prime Minister</b>	<b>Event</b>	<b>Year of Change of leadership</b>	<b>Year of Election</b>
7%	Environment	2005/06	Verhofstadt	Inconvenient Truth	No	No
6.9%	Migration	1997/98	Dehaene	No	No	No
6.2%	Civil Rights	2005/06	Verhofstadt	No	No	No
5.7%	Agriculture	1998/99	Verhofstadt	Dioxine Crisis	Yes	Yes
5.1%	Housing	2005/06	Verhofstadt	No	No	No
4.5%	Transportation	1998/99	Verhofstadt	No	Yes	Yes
3.9%	Transportation	2003/04	Verhofstadt	DHL expansion	No	No
3.6%	Defense	2000/01	Verhofstadt	September 11	No	No
3.6%	Health	1998/99	Verhofstadt	No	Yes	Yes
3.5%	Business and Enterprise	2003/04	Verhofstadt	No	No	No
3.5%	Community dev.	2001/02	Verhofstadt	No	No	No

### *Focusing Events:*

A first objective is to find if focusing events can indeed account for some of the drastic changes in the policy attention of the Belgian executive. A focusing event is an event that is sudden; relatively uncommon; can be reasonably defined as harmful or revealing the possibility of potential greater harms; has harms that are concentrated in a particular geographical area or community of interest; and that is known to policy makers and the public simultaneously (Birkland, 1998: 54; Kingdon, 1995: 94: 100). Focusing events can be natural disasters such as an oil spill, a forest fire, or a health scare, or man made events such as a war, a criminal act, or the leaking or publication of shocking information.

Agenda setting scholars agree that events can have a significant effect on the policy agenda (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Kingdon, 1995; Chaques et al. 2008), but how, when, and to what extent is however not as clear. Birkland (1998), for example, claims that not all focusing events lead to shifts in attention. The less clear the nature and harms done by the event, the less the issue will expand and the less the detectable influence it will have on the institutional agenda. If they appear on an agenda, it also does not mean that they lead to policy change. Walgrave and Varone (2008) for example argue that even if an event causes a significant increase in attention with the public and the government, significant changes in policy depend on changing images and venues.

To examine whether a focusing event in fact influenced the policy makers to pay more attention to this issue, the specific sections of the speeches that accounted for the punctuations were reinvestigated to see whether or not the Prime Minister

made specific references to an event. If this is the case, it demonstrates that an incident played a significant role in bringing this issue to the forefront. This is a very conservative measure of focusing events, as it is possible that other disasters, crises, exposes etc. influenced the policy makers, but were not explicitly mentioned in the speech. Why these specific events, and not others influenced the executive agenda is beyond the scope of this article.

The data shows that in seven of the eighteen cases of significant agenda shifts or 39% of the cases, the prime minister explicitly mentioned a focusing event to which the government was reacting. These incidents were the Dutroux case in 1996, the increased attention to global warming as a result of Al Gore's documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* in 2006<sup>5</sup>, the Dioxine crisis in 1999, the September 11 attacks in 2001, severe floods in Belgium in 1998, the crisis about allowing DHL to expand in the Brussels International Airport in 2004<sup>6</sup>, and the Kosovo war in 1996. These results demonstrate that events can account for some of the significant shifts in attention in the executive agenda.

#### *Changes in Executive Leadership:*

Another possible cause of shifts in attention is changes in leadership within the executive. According to this paper, a change in leadership occurs when someone from another political party replaces the prime minister. In most cases, this

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<sup>5</sup> The Al Gore effect was also felt in the Queen's speech in the Netherlands (Breeman et al. 2009).

<sup>6</sup> This issue was controversial as on the one hand it meant many new jobs for Brussels and Belgium but on the other hand meant an increase in night flights and would have a negative impact on the environment. This issue caused a significant political crisis for the Belgian Federal and regional governments.

corresponds with a shift in the most powerful party in the executive and a significant change in parties that are represented in the coalition. This paper defines leadership change in this fashion, and not as a change of all political parties in the executive, because, like in the Netherlands (Breeman et al. 2009), the Belgian executive has had at least one political party that remained in the executive following a coalition change throughout the period that was examined.

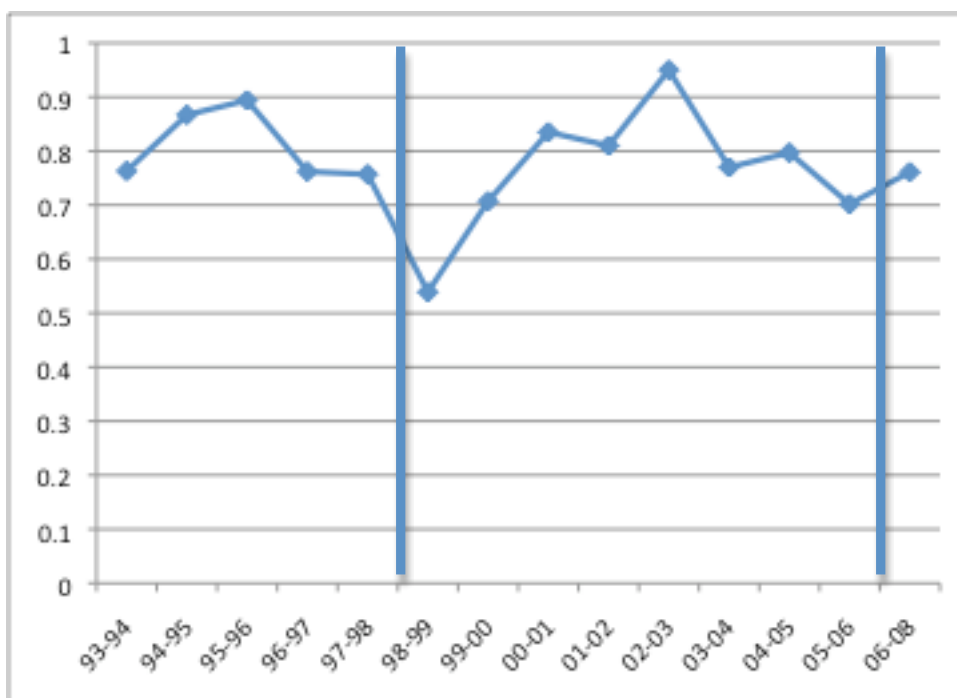
One reason a change in leadership in Belgium might result in policy shifts is because the prime minister can set the agenda and determine the timing in which policies are implemented (Dehaene, 2000: 26). Another plausible reason is that some changes in a coalition composition might cause different issue priorities to rise. This can be because parties may be expected to be responsive to their voters and fulfill electoral promises when in office, which Hofferbert and Budge (1992) call mandate theory.

Prior studies however have found mixed results concerning the role of a leadership change. Bunce (1980) claims that a change in chief executives does influence the policy process. John and Liu (2006) support this argument and state that in Britain, the executive was a key driver of the content for many policy sectors. They however also found evidence that leadership was not as significant as they had expected. John and Liu argue that the emergence of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister was a less important breaking point than the election of the Labour government in 1997. Breeman et al. (2009) also did not find any impact of changes in leadership. They claim that changes in coalition do not seem to be special occasions for governments to alter the major topics of policy conversations based

on Queen’s speeches in the Netherlands. Jennings and John (2009) and Chaques et al. (2008) confirmed the lack of influence of leadership change in Great Britain and Spain. If there are no significant changes in policy attention as a result of a leadership change it lends more support to the median voter theory, which argues that a central party has a disproportionate influence on the agenda (McDonald and Budge, 2005), hampering attempts by any new coalition partners to shift attention. This however does not apply to non-coalition governments.

To what extent changes in the executive leadership caused shifts in policy attention will be examined in two ways. First, the paper will analyze how many of the policy punctuations occurred directly after a change in leadership. Second, it will examine whether the aggregated agenda following a change in the executive is significantly more different from one of the previous year, compared to years when there was no leadership change using a Pearson correlation (Chart 6).

**Chart 6: Correlation of Executive Agenda With the Agenda of the Previous Year (1993-2008)**



During the 15-year period that was examined, there were two changes in leadership in the Belgian government. In 1999, the liberal party VLD became the coalition leader in the Belgian government, replacing the CVP (now CD&V) that had been in government almost continuously since 1944. As a result, Jean Luc Dehaene had to step down as Prime Minister in favor of Guy Verhofstadt. The coalition also changed from the major Flemish and Walloon Christian Democratic and Socialist Parties (CVP/PSC, SP/PS), to a purple-green team, which included the Flemish and Walloon liberal parties, socialist parties, and green parties (VLD/MR, SP/PS, GROEN!/ECOLO).

In 2007, the situation once again changed. The CD&V reemerged as the strongest party, but the parties could not agree on a coalition. As a result, there was no permanent government to deliver the state of the union speech in 2007. After a brief interim government led by Guy Verhofstadt, a new executive was formed with Yves Leterme (CD&V) as Prime Minister. These two periods will be examined separately.

### ***Verhofstadt 1999***

The change in leadership in 1999 had a significant impact on the executive agenda. This speech contained four major shifts in attention, which is more than in any other Belgian State of the Union speech. Although two out of four punctuations can to some extent be linked to the dioxine crisis (agriculture and government operations), the two others demonstrate a significant shift in attention, initiated by the new executive, supporting the mandate theory.

The elections of June 1999 had significantly altered the political landscape. The dioxin crisis<sup>7</sup>, which erupted during election season, led to a considerable loss for the governing parties (CVP, PSC, SP, and PS) and caused the Christian Democratic parties (CVP and PSC) to be left out of the government in favor of the Liberals and the Green parties. The opposition had blamed the government for mismanaging the dioxin crisis and argued that this was representative of how the government acted in general (Deweerd, 2000: 181). Because this focusing event had such a significant effect on the political scene, the executive paid a lot more attention to agricultural issues in the 1999 speech. The dioxin crisis can thus account for one of the 4 punctuations that can be identified in the 1999 speech (agriculture).

Another important shift in attention occurred in the government operations category (523% change). This change in attention can be explained by Verhofstadt's goal of introducing a new style of governing in Belgian politics: "a clean break with history" (Fiers and Deweerdt, 2000: 252). Verhofstadt attached a lot of attention to the relations between communities and emphasized the decisiveness and efficiency of his cabinet (Fiers and Deweerdt, 2000) in contrast with what he claimed was the inefficient government of the previous Prime Minister. This shift in attention can thus also partly be attributed to the dioxin crisis and how the VLD argued that it had been mismanaged by the Dehaene government.

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<sup>7</sup> It was discovered that many animal food products such as eggs and chicken were contaminated by Dioxin, a serious carcinogen. As a result, many livestock were destroyed and products removed from store shelves. This also led to a significant crisis in government in Belgium.

The new executive was however not only altering its focus to respond to the dioxin crisis. The 1999 State of the Union Speech also included more emphasis on transportation and health care as part of new government concept of creating an 'active welfare state' (Deweerd, 2000: 191). In the government agreement, the executive had already focused a lot of attention on creating a new mobility plan, and this is also reflected in the increased attention on mobility in the annual speech (Deweerd, 2000: 192). The new government also immediately made some changes in the healthcare sector by for example increasing the growth norm of the healthcare cost insurance budget from 1.5% to 2.5%.

That the change in leadership caused a significant shift in attention can be seen in the correlation coefficients of each aggregated agenda (at the major topic level) with the prior year. On average, the agendas correlated at the .78 level with the prior year's with a standard deviation of .1. The agendas of 1998 and 1999 correlated at the .53 level, which is significantly more than two standard deviations away from the mean. This thus means that the 1999 agenda differs significantly more from the previous year than other years.

### ***Leterme 2008***

As opposed to the election of Verhofstadt in 1999, the change in leadership in 2008 did not cause any significant shifts in attention. There were no punctuations in this year, and with a correlation coefficient of .76, it does not distinguish itself significantly from the average changes in agendas from year to year. Two possible causes for this lack of change in policy attention are the difficulties in creating a



ruling coalition and the eventual composition of the executive. This case thus supports the median voter theory.

The most plausible reason that there were no significant shifts in attention to issues is because of the difficulties in forming a government. It took the political parties six months to agree to a provisional government, led by Guy Verhofstadt. It then took another three months for Yves Leterme to establish a permanent new government. The problems with forming a new government were because the electoral results made establishing a coalition very complicated: the incumbent parties (socialists and liberals) had suffered significant losses, certain parties (MR vs. PS, all parties vs. Vlaams Belang) were unwilling to govern together, and the issue of state reform<sup>8</sup> complicated things even more. Because of the extent of this crisis, establishing a government seemed to be much more important than establishing an ambitious governing agreement. As *Le Soir* stated on 19 March 2008, the government agreement was based on finding the lowest common denominator. De Wachter (2008:160) also emphasizes that this document was a conservative retention of the elite consensus. Without specific problems that needed to be addressed (focusing events), major changes were thus unlikely.

The eventual broad coalition led by Leterme also did not allow for many radical shifts in attention. The executive consisted of both Christian Democratic parties (CDH and CD&V/NVA), the liberal parties (MR and Open VLD), and the Walloon Socialists (PS). Besides the breadth that these parties represented on the

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<sup>8</sup> State reform was a pressing issue during the 2007 elections. The Flemish parties would like to have more autonomy in certain areas, while the Walloon parties are hesitant. This issue is representative of the community conflict in Belgium.

political spectrum, the government did not change very radically from the prior one. Although the two Christian democratic parties joined the coalition, three of the four parties that were in the prior government were still present (VLD, MR, and PS). Governing with five parties, which included two parties that acted as a cartel (CD&V/NVA), also meant that it would be very complicated to agree on radical changes in attention. The government composition provided a lot of institutional friction.

### Elections:

Next to changes in leadership, elections themselves might cause changes in attention. During the election campaign, incumbent politicians address the standard issues, but might also choose to focus on other novel issues to attract voters. Therefore, it is possible to expect punctuations, even when there is no change in leadership, and when the coalition remains mostly the same.

Next to the two elections that were discussed in the previous section, Belgium had two more federal elections during the period under examination. These occurred on May 21<sup>st</sup> 1995 and May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2003. The 1995 election resulted in a continuation of the Dehaene government with no changes in the coalition (Christian Democrats and Socialist parties). In 2003, however, some adjustments occurred. The Green parties had suffered a crushing defeat, which caused them to leave the government, while the remaining government parties were able to make significant gains.

The fact that there had been elections did not cause any significant shifts in attention. There were no punctuations during this period, and the overall attention

remained very similar to the distribution of attention in the previous year. For 1995, the correlation coefficient was .86, which is higher than average, and the 2002 and 2003 agendas were correlated at a .95 level. This means that in these two years, the executive remained more stable than in years where there was no election.

One could argue that the period from May, in which the elections were held, and October, when the speech was given, is not long enough for the government to initiate many new policies or ideas. Although the parties in the executive wrote a new government agreement, they might need an incubation time (Breeman et al. 2009; Polsby, 1984) and they could choose to implement changes later on in their rule. There were for example two punctuations in the 1996 speech (security and health), and two in the 1997 speech (transportation and business). One of the 1996 cases however was caused by the Dutroux case, so it cannot be explained by elections. There is thus not much support for the claim that elections cause shifts in attention, especially not immediately.

### Conclusions/Discussion

This study concludes that as anticipated, based on Baumgartner and Jones's (1993) punctuated equilibrium theory, the Belgian executive agenda is indeed punctuated, meaning it goes through long period of gridlock, followed by infrequent major shifts in attention. The three hypothesized causes of these eighteen punctuations can only partly explain why these shifts in attention occurred. Focusing events that were specifically mentioned in the speech, can explain seven of the 18 punctuations, but cannot shed light on what occurred in the other 11 cases. Changes in leadership also do not systematically cause punctuations. The 1999

election of Verhofstadt as prime minister can partly explain the shift in attention of that year, while the change in leadership from Verhofstadt to Leterme did not cause any significant changes in the agenda. Finally, elections themselves did not cause any immediate shifts in attention.

What these results demonstrate is that in less than half of the cases, the punctuations can be explained by government reactions to events. This number could be higher but this cannot be deduced from the speeches themselves. Instead a more detailed measure of a focusing event is necessary that can identify which cases a government might be reacting to. Identifying the universe of plausible focusing events is also important because this way, one can do more than looking to which events the executive or other political institutions reacted. It is then also feasible to see in which cases focusing events do not cause a shift in attention (cases where the dog did not bark), and thus further examine what the specific characteristics of the cases are that the government chooses to react to.

It is a lot more difficult to identify in which cases the government took initiative and thus actively set the agenda. In this study, proactive changes were measured by looking at policy windows, created by leadership changes and elections. Analyzing active agenda setting is especially complex as a measure of party and leadership preferences was not available at this time. A change in leadership and coalition composition can cause shifts in attention, but they do not have to. It is possible that no changes occurred because the new coalition wanted to focus on similar issues, but perhaps tackle them in a different fashion. Historical research demonstrates that Verhofstadt's new coalition in 1999 clearly wanted to

do things differently and focus on different priorities, while Leterme's government seemed to be bound by the coalition formation process and nature of the composition of the executive. It is however not possible to confidently assess to what extent the executive's agenda might have been influenced by changes in government composition without looking at the party preferences by studying the manifestos. This will be analyzed once this data has been collected.

Overall, this study sets the agenda for many new avenues of research. It does not find full support either for the mandate or the median voter theory. The 1999 agenda provides some evidence for the mandate theory. While the other three speeches following an election do not allow for the acceptance of the mandate theory, they do not provide enough information to outright reject it either. In order to do this, once again, one should bring the party preferences in the form of political manifestos into the equation. If the manifestos clearly point towards change, mandate theory would predict a change in the executive agenda. The Median voter mandate would not expect significant shifts in attention.

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Submitted October 12, 2010

Word Count: 7300