

# Punctuated Equilibrium and Agenda-Setting: Bringing Parties Back in: Policy Change after the Dutroux Crisis in Belgium

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*The article analyzes how focusing events affect the public and political agenda and translate into policy change. Empirically, the study focuses on the policy changes initiated by paedophile Marc Dutroux's arrest in 1996 in Belgium. Theoretically, the article tests whether Baumgartner and Jones's (1993) U.S. punctuated equilibrium approach applies to a most different system case, Belgium being a consociational democracy and a partitocracy. Their approach turns out to be useful to explain this "critical case": Policy change happens when "policy images" and "policy venues" shift. Yet, the Dutroux case shows also that political parties, as key actors in the Belgian policy process, should be integrated more explicitly in the punctuated equilibrium theory. Finally, the article argues that the quantitative analysis of longitudinal data sets on several agendas should be supplemented with qualitative case study evidence (e.g., interviews with key decision makers) to unravel the complex case of issue attention and policy change.*

## **Introduction: The Dutroux Affair as a Puzzle**

This article empirically analyzes how focusing events translate into policy change in a democratic regime dominated by political parties. Concretely, it focuses on the policy changes initiated by Marc Dutroux's arrest in 1996 in Belgium. After the discovery of the terrible crimes committed by this world-known pedophile, the organization of the police services, the functioning of the judiciary, and even the legitimacy of the whole Belgian state became the subject of an intense public and political debate. External pressure to adopt major reforms was massive. Yet, policy change was blocked and reforms were entirely bogged down. Two years later, another focusing event—Dutroux's incredible escape—led to a major reform of

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*Governance: An International Journal of Policy, Administration, and Institutions*, Vol. 21, No. 3, July 2008 (pp. 365–395).

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both the judiciary and the police. This major policy change is remarkable as, at that time, the attention of the media and the public was clearly declining and external pressure was down. The puzzle of much attention combined with no major policy change and then, later, less attention but a major policy shift, forms the core question of the study. This puzzle is theoretically interesting as it seems to challenge Baumgartner and Jones's (1993) widely influential theory of punctuated equilibrium.

The Dutroux affair doubtlessly represents the most important crisis in Belgium in the 1990s; it can even be considered as one of the deepest crises in recent Belgian history (Walgrave, De Winter, and Nuytemans 2005). The number of demonstrators taking to the streets reached all-time highs in 1996 and 1997, for example (Walgrave and Rihoux 1997). Thus, the Dutroux affair constitutes an ideal case to investigate how external shocks influence issue attention and policy change in a partitocracy. The empirical aim of this case study is to assess to what extent political parties were responsible for the initial nonreaction after the first focusing event (Dutroux's arrest), despite a strong external pressure, and for the major policy reaction after the second focusing event (Dutroux's escape), in a context of declining external pressure. To tackle this historical puzzle—"much attention, little policy change" versus "little attention, major policy change"—theoretically, we draw upon Baumgartner and Jones's theory of punctuated equilibrium.

The present study has three theoretical and methodological aims. First, we test whether Baumgartner and Jones's theory devised for the open U.S. polity actually works in a most different political system—that is, a small and closed consociational democracy like Belgium. Our analysis of the Dutroux case demonstrates that the punctuated equilibrium approach is useful even in a system that is dramatically different from the U.S. polity. Second, and at the same time, to be really able to pinpoint the causes and drivers of policy change in different polities (and especially in the Belgian partitocracy), the Baumgartner and Jones framework should also integrate and focus on party politics. The Dutroux case clearly shows that an increase in issue attention as well as the interaction between a new policy image and new institutional venues do not lead to major policy change automatically; the political parties within the new venues obviously determine whether major policy change will be produced or not. Thus, we contend that Baumgartner and Jones's concepts of issue attention, policy image, and institutional venues have to take into account the crucial role of political parties who can act either as veto players or as issue entrepreneurs. Third, we argue that the mixture of a quantitative approach with long-time series assessing issue attention on various agendas and a more qualitative and case-study-centered approach offers valuable and complementary insights. Thereby, we strongly support the methodology already applied by Baumgartner and Jones (1993) to analyze major changes in the U.S. nuclear power, smoking, and pesticides policies.

In the next section, we elaborate our theoretical framework. We connect Baumgartner and Jones's American agenda-setting and policy change approach with the idea of focusing events (Birkland 1998) and their policy change consequences. Then, we present our research design and empirical evidence on the Dutroux case, using a host of qualitative evidence, among which are in-depth interviews with key actors and an extensive quantitative, longitudinal data set covering several agendas (media, parties, parliament, legislation, and budget) during the whole 1991–2000 period. Next, we explain in detail under which conditions and how parties played a role in adopting policy changes on four policy issues: early release for convicted criminals, relief and procedural rights for victims, the installation of a High Council of the Judiciary, and, last but not least, the merger of the three Belgian police services. We conclude with remarks putting our empirical results in perspective and suggest avenues for further research.

### **Focusing Events, Policy Punctuations, and Political Parties**

Policy change is at the heart of (comparative) policy analysis. To what extent do policies ever change, and to what extent are policies responsive to (changed) preferences and circumstances? Bryan Jones and Frank Baumgartner consider policy change to be a matter of agenda-setting. A crucial condition for policy change is political *issue attention*. An issue must be put on the political agenda; it has to attract resources (e.g., time, money, expertise) before any policy change is possible (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). In their longitudinal agenda-setting analysis of the functioning of the American political system, these authors show convincingly that, in contrast to the classic thesis of the incrementalist approach (Lindblom 1959), policy change *does* frequently happen in the USA (Baumgartner and Jones 1993).

Dramatic changes—Baumgartner and Jones call these *policy punctuations*—alternate with long periods of stability. Thus, sometimes, sudden sweeping movements challenge closed subsystemic politics: policy monopolies collapse, high politics gets temporarily heavily involved until the policy domain at stake is contracted out again to a small group of experts and stakeholders; a new policy monopoly gets established. The main reason for the changeability of American policies is the availability of many policy entrepreneurs (Kingdon 1984) and, even more important, the presence of a lot of institutional *policy venues* that can be used to sell an alternative *policy image* to. Policy venues are institutional arenas where decisions on an issue can be taken. Policy images are policy communities' shared ideas about the policy at stake. They explain what the issue is about, how it should be seen, and which solutions are appropriate. Venues and images are coupled. Policy change essentially happens when a new policy image finds receptive ground in a new policy venue and the old venue loses control over the issue, leading to issue expansion.

The open social and institutional pluralism of the American system accounts for policy change in the USA, Baumgartner and Jones state. With 50 autonomous states, an activist judiciary on different levels and in different guises, a vibrant interest group sector, a strong executive, and, especially, with Congress organized in many competing (sub)committees, the American polity offers many access points for challengers (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). There are many different policy entrepreneurs, many possible policy venues, and always many competing policy images available in the “primeval policy soup” (Kingdon 1995). Interesting for our purpose here is that, both in their 1993 and in their 2005 books, Baumgartner and Jones hardly mention political parties at all, and if they do, they contend that parties are not very important in the agenda-setting process (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Jones and Baumgartner 2005, 84–85). In a sense, Baumgartner and Jones do not take parties seriously.

Policy punctuations can be initiated by several factors, one of which are so-called *focusing events*. These external shocks, policy analysts agree, highlight policy deficiencies. They may directly challenge the existing policy image and the venue that promotes it. Consequently, these external shocks may lead to grand changes (Hall 1993; Sabatier 1988; Sabatier and Jenkins 1993). The focusing events approach is the second theoretical source this article draws upon. Birkland (1998) ascertains that focusing events, under specific conditions, lead to the most drastic policy changes we observe in reality. Such events are defined along five dimensions: they are sudden, uncommon, harmful, concentrated on a particular geographical area or community of interest, and known to policymakers and the public simultaneously. Thus, the media coverage of these focusing events immediately highlights obvious harms for specific publics. The evidence of the damage done by external events is “focal” in the sense that government may respond by putting a new policy issue on its agenda or by modifying previous policies. Naturally, focusing events do not mechanically lead to policy changes: The impact of external events on politics and policies depends upon the media coverage and social mobilization (external pressure) and upon political actors’ position within the policy domain (internal response). One might expect agenda-setting and policy change after a focusing event if the nature and harm done by the event are visible (which is quite obvious in the Dutroux case), if a community of interest is mobilized, and if this community can instrumentalize this event to put forward its own values, beliefs, and interests. In this article, we integrate the idea of focusing events in the punctuated equilibrium approach. In other words: within the larger agenda-setting framework we adopt the initiating and changing force of focusing events.

Relying on the agenda-setting approaches of both Baumgartner and Jones (1993) and Birkland (1998), our null research hypothesis—to explain the policy impacts of the Dutroux affair—reads as follows: *If a focusing event strongly increases public and political attention for a policy issue, then it*

*will modify the dominant policy image and create new policy venues and, consequently, it will translate into a major policy change.*

To analyze the policy impact of the two focusing events observed in the Dutroux case in Belgium—Dutroux's arrest in 1996 and his escape in 1998—we draw upon the longitudinal agenda-setting approach developed by Baumgartner and Jones. We apply this account to a polity dramatically differing from the USA in/for which it was initially developed. Our aim is not to show that Belgium is different from the USA and that, therefore, the policy processes in Belgium unfold differently; this is, of course, quite obvious. Our aim is to show that an approach specially devised for tackling the USA's open and pluralist polity is also useful for analyzing policy change in a very different political system. Following a call for more comparative work in political agenda-setting (Baumgartner, Green-Pedersen, and Jones 2006), we want to test the generalizability of a U.S.-based approach confronting it with a most different system. Our case is not Belgium as such, but a policy process induced by a focusing event that took place in the context of an entirely different political system. Far from arguing that our Belgian findings are generalizable to all democracies, we believe that our focus on political parties can be useful and informative also for other polities where parties play a larger role than in the USA. Previous empirical studies applying the punctuated equilibrium approach to a European context have focused on the impact of political parties on agenda-setting in Belgium, the United Kingdom, and Denmark (e.g., Breunig 2006; Green-Pedersen 2007; John 2006a, 2006b; Walgrave, Varone, and Dumont 2006). Their diverse findings indicate that there is still much to learn about the effects of partisan choices on agenda-setting processes (Baumgartner, Green-Pedersen, and Jones 2006, 966).

Especially two features of the Belgian political system make it utterly different from the U.S. polity. First, Belgium is widely considered as a textbook example of a *consociational democracy* (Lijphart 1999). Elites representing the traditional pillars of Belgian society act cautiously and embrace an accommodating strategy (Lijphart 1975). Consequently, political processes tend to be closed, elite-steered, and top-down. Second, Belgium constitutes a very strong case of *partitocracy* (De Winter, della Porta, and Deschouwer 1996; Dewachter 1981). Political parties are the key actors in the policymaking process, and party leaders are present at all crucial decisions and in all institutional arenas. What matters in terms of agenda-setting and subsequent policy change is that, in a consociational partitocracy, alternative issue entrepreneurs are not widely available nor are alternative policy venues. As political parties are occupying all access points, the only way to the decision-making agenda goes via political parties.

Several case studies about agenda-setting in Belgium relying on qualitative evidence confirmed political parties' central role. For example, decisions or nondecisions about biomedicine policies (assisted reproductive technologies, embryos, and stem-cells research), about GMOs in the

agro-food sector, and about the Belgian position toward war in ex-Yugoslavia were mainly determined by parties. Parties can either push a policy forward (GMO) or deliberately keep it off the political agenda and legitimize nondecisions (biomedicine, war in ex-Yugoslavia) (Varone and Schiffino 2004; Varone, Stouthuysen, and Schiffino 2005). Also, previous quantitative analyses of Belgian politics have confirmed the central role of parties in determining policies in general (Walgrave, Varone, and Dumont 2006).

Taking into account these peculiarities of the Belgian polity and the substantial differences between the Belgian and the U.S. system, which should have an impact on how policy processes unfold in general and on the policy change induced by the Dutroux affair in particular, we revise the original hypothesis of Baumgartner and Jones as follows: *If a focusing event increases parties' attention for a policy issue and if parties adopt a new policy image and control the new institutional venue, then it will translate into a major policy change.* In a nutshell, we hypothesize that parties are the key gatekeepers in the policy process induced by the Dutroux affair and that the dramatically heightened attention producing new policy images and new venues does not suffice to bring about change automatically.

We measure our dependent variable, policy change, through two formal outputs of the decision-making process: the number and content of passed bills on the one hand, and the relative part of the yearly budget dedicated to a specific public policy on the other hand. Furthermore, we define a *major* policy change as the formulation of a new policy paradigm, objectives, instruments, and implementation arrangements institutionalized by laws, and as an increase of the financial resources that go beyond the traditional incrementalism of public expenditures (Hall 1993; Sabatier 1988; Sabatier and Jenkins 1993). In Baumgartner and Jones's (1993) terms, major policy change (or policy punctuations) implies the collapse of a subsystemic policy monopoly and a fundamental shift of the policymaking stakeholders. Minor or intermediate policy changes, on the contrary, are limited to the modification of the settings of policy instruments and implementation arrangements, without inducing a dramatic shift in the policy paradigm or in financial resources.

### Case Selection, Methods, and Data

Our empirical study analyzes the Dutroux affair and its policy consequences. From a theoretical point of view, this case study can be considered as a "critical case" for testing the punctuated equilibrium theory (Eckstein 1975; Flyvbjerg 2006, 231; George and Bennett 2005, 120–121). Some scholars have argued that "one can often generalize on the basis of a single case" (Flyvbjerg 2006, 228). Of course, the generalizability of a single case depends upon proper case selection. In particular, a "critical case" allows a generalization following the logic: "If it is (not) valid for this case, then it is (not) valid for many cases" (230). When looking for critical

cases, it is recommended to look at the “most (or least) likely” case, that is, a case likely to clearly confirm (or irrefutably falsify) the hypotheses (231). George and Bennett (2005, 253) discuss this as follows: “In a most likely-case, a single variable is at such an extreme value that its underlying causal mechanism, even when considered alone, should strongly determine a particular outcome. . . . If the predicted outcome does not occur, then the hypothesized causal mechanism underlying the extreme variable is strongly impugned.” The Dutroux case is a critical case in two respects. On one side, it is an example of an enormous increase of public, media, and political “issue attention”; in fact, the Dutroux case represents the highest explosion of attention to any issue in Belgium over the whole 1990–2000 decade. Thus, if issue attention and the subsequent policy image change and the shift in institutional venues have an impact on policy change as Baumgartner and Jones state, then the Dutroux case clearly is a most likely case. If we do not find policy change here under such extreme circumstances entirely in line with the punctuated equilibrium approach, the theory probably is not valid. On the other side, the Belgian institutional context, especially the Belgian partitocracy, is very different from the U.S. pluralist system in/for which the punctuated equilibrium approach was initially developed. Therefore, the Dutroux case allows for generating and testing an additional hypothesis about the impact of political parties controlling policy images and institutional venues. From a party perspective too, the Dutroux case is a most likely case to test the impact of political parties on policy change. The generalizability of this critical case’s empirical results is limited to systems with strong parties and with coalition governments—arguably characteristic for most Western political systems.

The case study is based on a mix of quantitative and qualitative evidence. The method applied is process tracing (George and Bennett 2005, 205ff) as we attempt to identify the causal chain and mechanisms between focusing events (as independent variable) and policy changes (as final outcome). Concretely, we focus on several agendas to assess intervening variables. We draw, first, on an extensive, longitudinal data set covering the whole 1991–2000 period in Belgium. The data set contains eight different agendas: (1) mass media encoded from news broadcasts on four national TV channels and from the front page of five main newspapers; (2) organized public opinion indirectly measured via street protest (mostly in Brussels); (3) party manifestoes assessed by attributing issue codes to all (semi-)sentences featured in the three party programs of all 12 Belgian parties issued during the 1990s; (4) government agreements measured according to a similar encoding of the three government declarations in 1991, 1995, and 1999; (5) parliamentary control activities encompassing oral and written questions and interpellations; (6) parliamentary legislative proposals; (7) passed bills; and (8) yearly budget. All agenda data, except for the media, have been collected *in extenso* without any time gaps or sampling. All issues appearing on these agendas have been coded in terms of the space they occupy. No issues were excluded; all issues were

encoded based on an elaborate 143-issue codebook. Here we will only draw on a small subset of three issues matching the Dutroux case and its political consequences (i.e., crime, justice, and police). Empirical evidence will be presented alternatively in absolute (the *number* of parliamentary interpellations, proposed bills, and passed bills dedicated to a certain policy issue) and relative form (the *percentage* of the total attention within the media, street demonstrations, party programs, government agreement, and budget growth devoted to a certain policy issue).

Second, we also draw upon qualitative data about the Dutroux case. Pure quantitative data do not show, for example, whether passed laws are important or not. In terms of quantity, minor problems may get ample attention. The amount of attention might suggest wrongly that a major policy change took place while, in reality, no fundamental change occurred. Therefore, we scrutinized the precise content of the adopted laws and we reconstructed the political discussions of the time in detail. We mainly drew on the detailed yearbooks of *Res Publica*, Belgium's political science journal (Deweerd 1997, 1998, 1999). This content analysis allows us to identify four major policy issues directly related to the Dutroux affair: (1) early release for convicted criminals, (2) relief and procedural rights for victims, (3) the installation of a High Council of the Judiciary, and (4) the merger of the three Belgian police services.

Third, to reveal what went on in the "black box" of political decision making and elite negotiations at that time, we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with three of the absolute key players during the Dutroux affair: Jean-Luc Dehaene, Prime Minister for the Christian-Democrat CVP at that time (interview conducted in Brussels February 19, 2007); Johan Vande Lanotte, vice Prime Minister for the socialist party SP during the period we focus on here (interview conducted in Brussels February 19, 2007); and Louis Michel, at the time of the events chairman of the French-speaking liberal party PRL and leader of the opposition (interview conducted in Vilvoorde February 22, 2007). We selected our interviewees not haphazardly. Both Dehaene and Vande Lanotte were key negotiators of the 1995 government agreement. Our three respondents come from each political family (Christian-Democrats, socialists, and liberals), all three of them have negotiated the Octopus agreement in 1998, we both interviewed Dutch- and French-speaking politicians, and we spoke with actors both from government (Dehaene and Vande Lanotte) and from the opposition (Michel). We believe these three interviews to yield us a reliable insight on what was going on at the highest political level in Belgium during the Dutroux affair. Most statements derived from the interviews have been double-checked and confirmed by one of the other sources; we explicitly mention in our narrative when sources contradict each other.

In spite of the large amount of data collected, the evidence of our article is limited as it only focuses on one issue in one country. Variation is further limited because we study a single case of policy change after a focusing



event that is limited in time. In fact, we only take into account the parties' behavior during a single government coalition: the Dehaene II government (1995–1999) consisting of Christian-Democrat (CVP and PSC) and socialist parties (SP and PS). The liberal parties were in the opposition (VLD and PRL). No elections were held during the settlement of the Dutroux case; elections were not even threateningly close. All this may have affected the general makeup of the case and the parties' strategic behavior.

## Policy Impact of the Dutroux Affair: Analysis and Findings

### The Dutroux Affair: Facts and Figures

Before turning to the empirical evidence, let us sketch in some more detail what the Dutroux case was about. The affair broke out in August 1996 when the police freed two young girls who had been kidnapped, incarcerated, and abused by a known pedophile called Marc Dutroux. The police arrested Dutroux. Soon, the mortal remains of four more Dutroux victims were exhumed. The functioning of the police services and the whole judiciary, even the legitimacy of the entire Belgian political system, became the subject of an intense societal debate with loads of media attention and massive popular mobilization. Especially the fact that examining magistrate Jean-Marc Connerotte—he had freed the two final victims and arrested Dutroux—was taken off the case because he was considered not being impartial and sympathizing too much with the victims, caused an outrage. The mobilization wave sparked by Dutroux's arrest was the largest in Belgian history, with as apex the so-called *White March* in October 1996 attracting 300,000 people (Walgrave and Rihoux 1997). After the initial retrieval of the girls, many new developments in the case kept the whole country's attention captured for months. Mobilization was sustained and a new wave of small, local white marches pervaded the country in the first half of 1997. Large pressure was put on politics to act and to reform the failing Belgian judiciary system and police services. The Lower House installed a parliamentary commission that had to examine what had gone wrong with the Dutroux inquiry. The commission, headed by opposition MP backbencher Marc Verwilghen (VLD), began questioning and grilling police officers and examining magistrates in public hearings that were broadcast live on television and attracted a wide audience, even in the middle of the night. The *Commission Dutroux* uncovered a lot of deficiencies and dominated the news for months. Probably the most important of these gradually unfolding events was the press story in January 1998 claiming that there was a vast child prostitution network with high-ranking political and judicial authorities involved. This caused a rift in public opinion and a bitter struggle in the press between so-called "believers" and "nonbelievers," but it did not seem to have directly affected the policy process (Deweerd 1999). In April 1998—Belgium seemed finally to be slowly digesting the Dutroux affair—the unthinkable

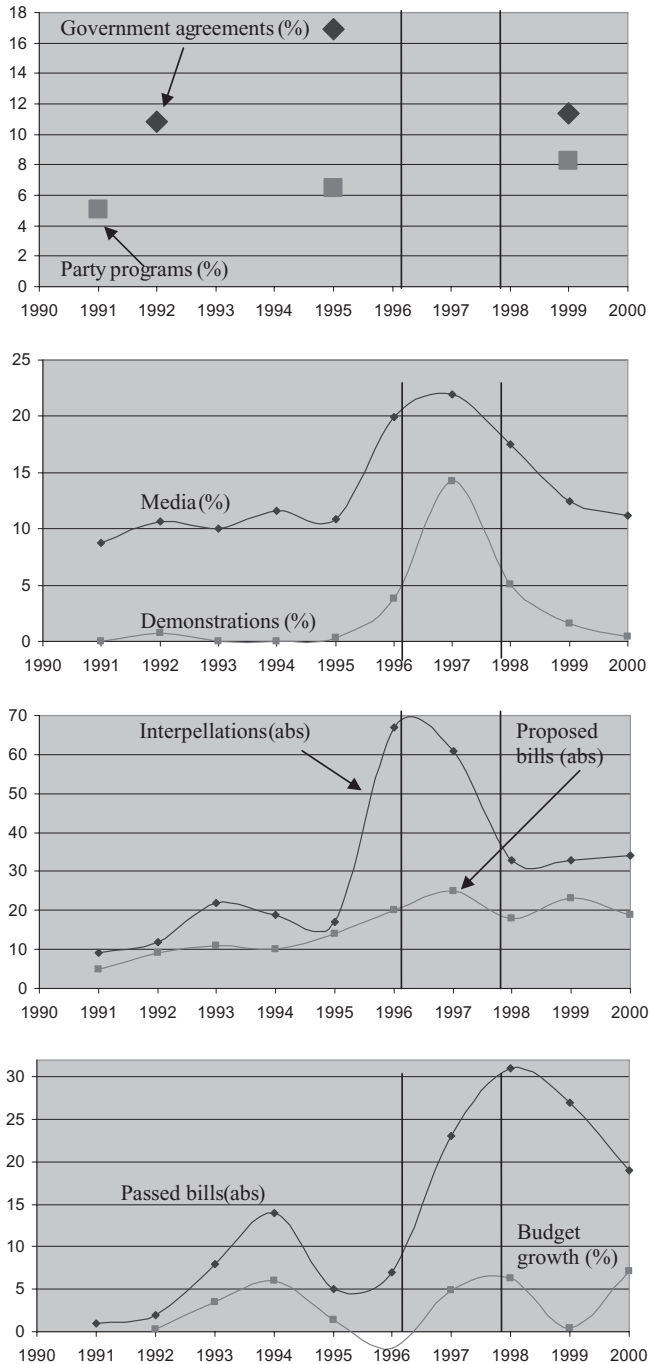
happened: Dutroux, public enemy number one, escaped during transport to the courthouse. The minister of Justice and the minister of Interior Affairs, Stefaan De Clerck (CVP) and Johan Vande Lanotte (SP), immediately resigned. Still on the same day, Dutroux was recaptured by a young forest ranger. His escape was the second decisive focusing event reinvigorating public pressure to take firm policy measures. It took long before Dutroux was tried, but when this finally happened in June 2004—he was sentenced to life—the affair had lost saliency and public and media attention had withered. Did these two powerful focusing events—the arrest of Dutroux in August 1996 and his escape in April 1998—bring about policy change? How big was this policy change? And what role did the political parties play?

### Quantitative Analysis: Issue Attention on Nine Agendas

We summarize the quantitative evidence in Figure 1. It contains the issue attention evolution for Dutroux-related issues on eight agendas. Three issue codes of the 143 codes in our codebook capture the Dutroux affair best: (1) crime (all sorts of crimes, including sex-related crimes), (2) crime policy (prisons, criminal law, preclusion, conditional release, etc.), and (3) the organization of justice and police (police reform, legal costs, depoliticization of the judiciary, and coordination of police services, etc.). We simply aggregated the attention for these three issues.

Figure 1 groups the quantitative issue-attention evidence in four separate graphs. The start of the affair in August 1996, Dutroux's arrest, is marked with a full line as well as the second focusing event, Dutroux's escape in April 1998. The first graph contains two quantitative measures of the party agenda, the main independent variable: the party manifestoes and the government agreements. Both tap what policy measures parties—in terms of party manifestoes all parties and in terms of government agreements only the government parties—were planning to implement during the legislature. In other words, they gauge parties' issue preferences. Because Belgium had only three elections (and governments) in the 1990s, we dispose of only three measuring points regarding parties' preferences (as measured by party manifestoes). Media and demonstrations form the external societal agenda; they grasp the external pressure on politics and are represented in the second graph. The third graph contains institutional political activity by parliament. It groups not only largely symbolic activities like interpellating government, but also more substantial actions like proposing bills. The last graph presents our best evidence for policy change, the dependent variable. It contains the number of passed bills. Most of the time legislation in Belgium originates from government and not from parliament: Ninety-eight percent of the legislation originates from government proposals (De Winter and Dandoy 2005). The graph also shows the yearly percent *growth* in the national

**FIGURE 1**  
**Attention for Crime, Justice, and Police Issues on Eight Agendas in Belgium (1991–2000)**



budget attributed to the three issues under study. Only in one year did the budget for crime and justice matters decrease: that was, ironically, in 1996, the year when the affair broke.

Until 1995, most agendas seemed to behave incrementally: the attention for crime, justice, and police issues was considerable but fluctuated only moderately. This changed dramatically in 1996: the Dutroux affair broke with Dutroux's arrest. On many agendas the attention for crime, justice, and police issues surged abruptly. Media attention doubled in a time span of only one year from 10% to 20% and more. The number of justice-related demonstrations reached an all-time high in 1997 with a massive wave of mobilizations on a normally not-so-protest-prone topic. Never in recent history had Belgium witnessed such a massive wave of protest. After 1997, the attention of the media and public opinion dwindled fast, returning to normal pre-Dutroux levels by 2000.

The media frenzy and protest boom immediately strongly affected parliament: the number of justice-related interpellations in parliament quadrupled from 1995 to 1996–1997. Not only criticizing government but also trying to remedy the situation by proposing bills became popular: After parliamentary recess stopped early in September 1996, MPs frantically started introducing bills and even more so in 1997. In 1997, bill-introducing activity was almost double compared to pre-Dutroux times. Analyses based on trimonthly and monthly evidence indicate that the parliamentary attention boost, indeed, happened immediately after Dutroux's arrest in August 1996. Clearly, both the public agenda (media and demonstrations) and the "symbolic" parliamentary agenda were peaking in 1996–1997. Detailed time-series analyses on a weekly basis showed that it were especially the mass media that strongly pushed parliament and not the other way around (Walgrave, Soroka, and Nuytemans 2008). From 1998 onward, interpellations as well as the number of introduced bills sharply dropped.

Both indicators of substantial policy change—laws and budget—reacted remarkably slowly. The last graph documents a net increase in attention for justice in 1997 and 1998. The amount of passed justice legislation exploded and more than quadrupled from the pre-Dutroux period to 1997–1998. The legislator became very active in the justice domain. But, as we will show below, the bills passed in 1997 did not really constitute a major policy change; the essential policy changes were only voted by parliament by the end of 1998. So, it took more than two years to decide upon the fundamental policy changes. The picture regarding the budget is a bit more mixed. The (inflation corrected) justice budget grew in almost every single year in the 1990s; the budget had been increasing for over 10 years. So budget increases occurred before, during, as well as after the Dutroux-case. Second, the 1997 (+4.8%) and 1998 (+6.3%) budget increases following the Dutroux case are among the most substantial budget increases in the whole period. But the budget grew even more in 2000 (+7.1%). The 2000 rise is also attributable to delayed effects of the Dutroux

case as the expensive police reform resulting from it only started to be implemented from 2000 onward (Dehaene and Vande Lanotte, interviews). In his State of the Union address in parliament announcing the 1997 and 1998 budgets, PM Jean-Luc Dehaene twice announced that next year's budget for justice and police would increase substantially, and twice he explicitly legitimated these budget increases by referring to the Dutroux affair. Both PM Dehaene and vice-PM Vande Lanotte declared in their interviews that the budget increases for justice and police in 1997 and 1998 were linked to the affair. Vande Lanotte stated that "We were in the middle of next year's budget negotiations when the case unfolded and bodies (victims of Dutroux) were discovered. Every discovery of a new body resulted in an increase of next year's budget for justice and police. We had to do something" (Vande Lanotte, interview).

Although the budget increased substantially after the Dutroux affair, the most important political reaction was not allocating more money to justice and police but rather a major legislative reform of justice and police (Dehaene, interview). The main puzzle the rest of this article tackles is why these major policy changes did not happen right after the first focusing event, Dutroux's arrest in 1996, but took more than two years later, after the second event (Dutroux's escape in 1998), to materialize and be implemented. Why was policy change not immediate?

The delay of major policy changes that media and public opinion were relentlessly asking for was not due to the slower workings of Belgian government as compared to Belgian parliament. It was caused by *conflict between political parties*, among government parties as well as among opposition parties. The Dutroux affair, in Baumgartner and Jones's (1993) terms, created a new policy image and it created two new policy venues—the parliamentary Commission Dutroux after the first focusing event and the Octopus negotiation group after the second focusing event. Only the second venue produced major policy change because parties could control this venue and managed to get a firm grip on the policy process. So, even if the Dutroux case put the Belgian government under a never-before-seen pressure to act quickly and to implement reforms, parties blocked structural changes for almost two years as they refused to adopt the new policy image and as they rejected policy change proposals of a policy venue they could not control. It took a second focusing event, Dutroux's escape in 1998, to unblock the stalled reforms, to create a second new policy venue—this time a partisan venue—and to brush all objections away. How come?

The first section of Figure 1 gives the quantitative part of the answer. Crime and justice issues were already high on the parties' agendas and were by no means marginal issues on which parties could compromise easily. Justice issues were already subject to the traditional tensions and conflicts within government and between government and opposition. The graph underscores this point quantitatively. It shows that, in the party manifestoes and the government agreements, crime, justice, and police

issues were important even before the case broke. Parties had adopted a specific position, they had developed elaborate policy proposals, and, most importantly, they had drafted diverging policy plans. Parties were geared up for a political battle. In 1995, attention in the government agreement and in the party manifestoes had increased compared to 1991. As much as one-sixth of the 1995 government agreement discussed matters of crime, justice, and police. Yet, the government agreement of 1995 was a compromise. Moreover, it was a very short text—government negotiations had only taken a short while as the existing government wanted to continue its work (Vande Lanotte, interview). The plans regarding justice and police were very vague and did not anticipate the Dutroux storm. The government agreement pleaded, for example, for a better *coordination* and collaboration and not for an integration of the police forces; it mentioned the establishment of a national *advisory* council for the judiciary and not the installation of a decisive and externally controlled body. Exactly these two points would later grow out to become the main divisive impediments thwarting major policy change for two years. The 1999 government agreement, struck after the reforms studied here, starkly reduced its attention to justice-related issues: the then new government considered the justice problem as being “solved.” Party program’s attention for crime, justice, and police issues grew further in 1999. This increase probably reflected a long-standing trend in Belgian party manifestoes toward more attention for justice-related issues.

#### Four Policy Changes

Let us buttress and elaborate our contention that parties blocked reform with more qualitative detail. Initially, in August 1996, immediately after Dutroux’s arrest, all parties promised fast measures and a sweeping reform of the police and the judiciary. Apart from a few concrete measures closely associated with the crimes committed by Dutroux, four general policy issues soared to the top of the political agenda: (1) the modification of criminal law giving *victims* more rights and a bigger role in the procedure (the law Franchimont); (2) the reform of the *early release* scheme for convicted criminals (the law Lejeune); (3) the creation of a new administrative body in order to control and *monitor the judiciary* from outside and to externalize, thus to depoliticize, hiring and promotion decisions (the High Council for the Judiciary); and (4) the better coordination, or complete merger, of the three Belgian *police* services (local police, judiciary police, and national police). The two former points, constituting not really structural reforms, were realized easily and quickly in 1997. Both latter points, in contrast, became bogged down completely because of partisan disagreement; they only passed through parliament by the very end of 1998. This two-stage policy change explains why in Figure 1 the strongest increase in the number of new laws only happened in 1998.

1. In their 1995 electoral programs, many parties—to be precise: six of the nine parties—both from government (CVP, PSC, PS) and the opposition (VU, VB, PRL) had called for a *better treatment of the victims*. The 1995 government agreement contained a short but very explicit passage stating that victims would, from now on, be better taken care of and that victims would be given the right to intervene in the judiciary process and in the execution of the punishment. The public grief of the Dutroux victims and their shocking testimony about how they had been treated by the judiciary turned the victims' parents' call for better victim relief into a valence issue. For years, a reform had been prepared by the so-called commission Franchimont. Two weeks after the case broke, on August 30, 1996, government announced that it would speed up implementing the proposal of the commission. In March 1997, parliament passed the new legislation. So, regarding the victims, policy change came about quickly, but it was not a major change entailing a new policy image.
2. The second point, restricting the possibilities of *early release* provided by the law Lejeune, was propelled onto the political agenda because Dutroux was released on parole when he committed his terrible crimes. Few political parties had mentioned this reform in their 1995 party manifestoes, apart from three opposition parties: the extreme-Right Vlaams Blok, the Flemish-nationalist VU, and the French-speaking liberal PRL. Yet, despite the fact that only opposition parties had raised the point before, the government agreement explicitly announced that the government would reform the early release scheme: not the minister of Justice but an independent board of magistrates would judge requests for early release. Consequently, unanimity came quickly. After an initial announcement by the government in August 1996, the reform of the early release procedure following the lines mentioned above was voted by parliament in July 1997. By and large, this second reform was minor too; it did not (cor)respond to the enormous public outrage stirred by the Dutroux case.
3. Although the government also announced a better *external control on the judiciary* in its initial press conference in August 1996, this would become a divisive element contributing to stalling the reform for almost two years. Some of the 1995 party manifestoes had referred to the creation of a body that would control the judiciary and, possibly, decide on magistrates' hiring and promoting. This implied that political parties would loose their grip on the judiciary. The liberal opposition parties VLD and PRL explicitly stated in their programs that this "high council" should decide *autonomously* about nominations and promotions. The two major government parties CVP (Flemish christian-democrats) and PS (French-speaking socialists) took diverging positions in their 1995 manifestoes: CVP wanted to

depoliticize the judiciary completely, while the PS only wanted to create an *advisory* council. Consequently, the 1995 government agreement had been very vague, as mentioned above. In October 1996, a few months after its initial announcement, government restated it would press for the establishment of a general advisory high council and, in July 1997, government effectively introduced a bill in parliament on an advisory council. In January 1998, after lengthy internal negotiations, government put forward a second bill about the creation of a separate nomination and promotion agency. In the meantime, magistrates continuously openly criticized and opposed government's plans as they found that the separation of powers and the judiciary independence was threatened (Dehaene and Vande Lanotte, interviews). But the judges' resistance did not seem to impress government as the magistrates lacked political leverage within the parties. The political resistance was much more difficult to cope with. Both government bills were discussed in parliament but not voted; there was also resistance within the government parties. Moreover, to change the nomination and promotion procedures, the Constitution had to be changed and this required a two-thirds majority; government needed support from at least two opposition parties to obtain this majority. The VLD, the Flemish liberal opposition party and indispensable for this majority, refused, in April 1998, to support the government bill as long as both bills were not integrated and the high council did not get hiring power. It would not support the even more controversial reform of the police either (see below) if government would not give in about the issue of the high council. The reform of the judiciary was jammed, when Dutroux escaped on Thursday, April 23, 1998. Minister of Justice Stefaan Declerck (CVP) and minister of the Interior Johan Vande Lanotte (SP) immediately resigned; government stayed in office. Seven days later, on April 30, 1998, the four main opposition parties (VLD, PRL, FDF, and VU) and the four government parties (CVP, PSC, PS, and SP) started formal negotiations on the reform of the judiciary and the reform of the police. The eight parties constituted the so-called "Octopus negotiation group"—because of the eight parties represented—that would negotiate intensely for a few weeks to strike an overall agreement about the reform of the judiciary and the police (see below). They finally agreed that the high council would get all nomination and promoting powers. As we have shown above, this was by no means an entirely new idea: It was part of at least two party programs before the affair broke and all parties had accepted before that the judiciary needed a kind of high council. Installing an autonomous high council, hence, was not an entirely new policy image. By the end of 1998 a whole range of laws translating this decision in legislation was passed in parliament. The Belgian judiciary had been reformed substantially, but it would remain a



problem child of Belgian politics in the years to come, according to Dehaene and Vande Lanotte, because reforms had not gone far enough (Dehaene and Vande Lanotte, interviews).

Interpretations slightly differ about who precisely took the “unblocking” initiative for the Octopus negotiations and under what conditions the negotiations started. A few days after Dutroux’s escape, the opposition parties signed an agreement: They all, unanimously, defended a high council with real nomination and promotion competences, and they invited the government to start negotiations within that framework. Louis Michel stated: “I decided not to challenge the government and not make it stumble. Conscious of my responsibility I did not want to create a major incident that would have led to a regime crisis. I decided to invite government to start negotiations. Before the PM took the word in parliament, I told him: ‘Do not worry, I am ready to start negotiations for a major reform’” (Michel, interview).

The opposition saved the government, Michel claims. He also explicitly stated that his choice to collaborate and to start negotiations was based on fear for a further electoral breakthrough of the Flemish extreme-right party Vlaams Blok. In fact, the outcome of potential new elections, should government fall, were highly uncertain. In contrast to Michel’s account that the opposition took the initiative to start negotiations, both government sources state that it was the government who took the initiative immediately following Dutroux’s escape. Opposition parties would only sign their agreement *after* they had received government’s invitation to negotiate and after they had accepted this invitation (Dehaene and Vande Lanotte, interviews). Johan Vande Lanotte stated that the opposition, at first, was not prepared to start negotiations but fiercely attacked government in the hope to destabilize it. The fact that two ministers had instantly resigned, Vande Lanotte stated, and the fact that also the chief of the gendarmerie resigned two days later, deprived the opposition of a suitable government target (Vande Lanotte, interview). When the opposition felt public pressure to act collaboratively was mounting, they decided to shift strategy and to accept government’s offer to negotiate. Jean-Luc Dehaene stated: “We simply reacted too fast each time and did not give a chance to the opposition to tackle us. I addressed the liberal opposition in parliament and I asked them to take up their responsibility and invited them to negotiate” (Dehaene, interview). Either way, both government and opposition were not in a position to make the negotiations fail, all our interlocutors agree (Dehaene, Vande Lanotte, and Michel, interviews). All three confirmed that, during the Octopus negotiations, the composition of the next government after the 1999 elections was implicitly present. At any rate, speculations and expectations about the next government played a role during the negotiations and this may contribute to explaining the negotiation partners’ perseverance and willingness to reach an agreement. Finally, the personnel switch in the government also facilitated the making

of a deal on the justice issue. CVP Justice Minister Stefaan De Clerck was replaced by his colleague Tony Van Parys who disposed of more technical and practical skills to make the reform of justice happen (Dehaene and Vande Lanotte, interviews).

The Octopus group—the new policy venue created especially and temporarily to reach agreement on both policy reforms—was bound to succeed. It was clearly controlled by the parties; this was a crucial difference with the parliamentary Commission Dutroux, the previous new venue that had been created after Dutroux's arrest but that did not manage to initiate major reforms (see below). The Octopus group had a partisan composition and negotiators represented in the first place their parties. All parties were represented by their president assisted by their leading MP or minister most specialized in judicial matters. The negotiating party elites had a mandate of their party. In case an agreement among elites was reached in the Octopus group, it would no doubt be approved by the parties afterward. Under time pressure, the negotiators did not have the chance to get feedback from their party, which facilitated the process (Dehaene, interview). In sum, this was a typical partisan elite process that characterizes Belgian politics. Precisely because of the partisan setup, the negotiations were successful. This stands in sharp contrast to what happened with the Commission Dutroux, as we will detail below. Note that the chairman of the Commission Dutroux, the immensely popular Marc Verwilghen (VLD), was not even part of the VLD negotiation team. This exemplifies that the Commission Dutroux and the Octopus group followed an entirely different logic.

When asked explicitly, all our interlocutors confirmed that, even without the Dutroux case, there would probably have been a reform of the judiciary under Dehaene II (1995–1999)—the reform of justice was on the governmental agenda. But the justice reform would have happened later and it would have been less important (Dehaene, Vande Lanotte, and Michel, interviews). Johan Vande Lanotte: “The High Council of the judiciary would probably have been realized without Dutroux. This was something that was already underway; it was part of the government agreement. Yet, Dutroux allowed us to go much further” (Vande Lanotte, interview).

4. The *unification of the police services* was an even more laborious issue. Here, the Dutroux case led to a really major policy shift. It was the complete stalemate about the police reform that blocked the somewhat easier-to-compromise-upon justice reform discussed above. The opposition parties did not want to deliver a two-thirds majority needed for the justice reform as they opposed government's police plans. Initially, the public's and media's criticism after Dutroux's arrest had not focused on the police services and had not demanded their merger. Neither in its initial pledge of intentions in August 1996, right after the beginning of the affair, nor in its later

announcements in October and December 1996, had the government promised that it would reform the police. Yet, in April 1997, the parliamentary Commission Dutroux inquiring the judicial flaws in the Dutroux case formulated a whole range of recommendations to the government unanimously supported by all parties in parliament. The unification of the police on the national and local levels was one of the main points. Failings in the Dutroux inquiry were attributed to a police war (*guerre des flics*), with the police services not passing on essential information to each other. The Commission's recommendation immediately pushed the police issue to the top of the political agenda. Clearly, the idea that the three Belgian police forces should be completely merged was a new policy image. The idea had been around for a while, but all parties were now forced to consider it seriously, not the least because they all had unanimously supported the Commission's recommendations.

That government had earlier avoided tackling the police issue was no coincidence. Government and opposition were deeply internally divided about a possible police merger. Two separate but confounding issues were nested within the global discussion about the police merger. A first difference of opinion regarded the abolishment of the three separate police forces and their integration into one unitary structure. Here, some parties wanted the local police to remain identifiably different and some others wanted the judiciary police to remain out of a national structure. Most 1995 party manifestoes had been very explicit on this first topic: The Flemish liberal opposition party VLD was in favor of total merger right down through at the local level; the French-speaking liberal opposition party was opposed to it as it wanted to keep especially the judiciary police autonomous; the Flemish socialist government party SP opposed the idea as well, and so did their French-speaking friends, the government party PS; but the leading Flemish government party, the Christian-Democrats of the CVP, supported unification, which was in turn contradicted by the French-speaking Christian-Democrat government party PSC who only pushed for a better coordination of the police services. In short, except for the socialists, all major political families were internally divided. This was reflected in the 1995 government agreement that only mentioned sideways that "steps would be taken" to increase collaboration and cooperation between the existing police services.

A second difference of opinion related to the degree of centralization of the unitary structure to be created: to what extent should the national police executive be able to steer and control the local branches? On this issue too, parties held diverging views. Especially, the Flemish socialist party SP—they held the ministerial portfolio of the Interior with police as one of their competences—pushed hard for an entirely centralized police force with a strong national executive and a weak local or judicial autonomy. The Flemish socialists had close ties with the top of the existing

national police (*gendarmerie*) who fostered strong central control and they believed modern managerial techniques were indispensable to modernize the police. The Christian-Democrat PM Dehaene followed the socialists to a large extent on this point and pleaded for central steering power, but his party was not convinced (Dehaene and Vande Lanotte, interviews). Indeed, parties with a lot of mayors, the heads of their autonomous local police, opposed the idea of strong centralization and pleaded for local autonomy and a large role for the local mayors. Especially, the Flemish Christian-Democrat CVP and the French socialist PS did not want to give up their local strongholds; a large amount of their MPs combined their parliamentary mandate with a local mayorship and vigorously fought against losing control over “their” local police (Dehaene and Vande Lanotte, interviews). On top of that came the differences between Flemish and Walloon mayors. The Flemish mayors had less to lose from local integration because their local police forces were on average larger and, hence, less threatened of being completely swallowed by the stronger *gendarmerie* (Maesschalk 2002). The French-speaking liberal party PRL, under the leadership of Louis Michel, vigorously opposed the idea of a centrally led police too. They were afraid that a centralized police would become “a state within the state” and the party had good contacts with the judiciary police (Michel, interview). In short, the merger of the police services was a very complex issue with several cleavages splitting parties, also internally, and the two discussions were constantly mixed.

This is why, although unanimously supported by all parliamentary parties, the April 1997 recommendation of the parliamentary Commission Dutroux was immediately vetoed by the government party PS and the opposition party PRL: The Commission had not really meant “unification” when it voted for unification. Another commission, the nonpartisan expert commission Huybrechts, was then entrusted by the government with formulating a concrete police reform proposal, drawing upon Commission Dutroux’s recommendations. In November 1997, the government adapted and adopted the proposal of Huybrechts and introduced its own bill in parliament. Under influence of the socialist SP the proposal did not contain an entirely unified police, but it did imply a strong grip of the national chief on the local divisions (Vande Lanotte, interview). Some opposition parties loudly opposed the government’s text as it did not go far enough and did not respect the conclusions of the Commission Dutroux; even government MPs of CVP and PSC slammed the plan. Government’s parliamentary fractions remained divided—two major government parties were confronted with an internal lobby of local mayors. In the first months of 1998, the plan got blocked in parliament. Similar to the high council dispute above, Dutroux’s escape changed everything. His breakout proved indisputably that the police department was not doing its job, it could not even keep the most famous Belgian criminal under lock and key; flaws were ubiquitous. The merger of the police services became the single most important ingredient of the

Octopus negotiations. The Octopus negotiators finally settled on an agreement that entirely integrated the police from top to base—there came one unitary structure—but local autonomy remained large and the impact of the national chief on the local police was limited.

This outcome was exactly the opposite than what government had proposed earlier. Note that especially the Flemish socialists of the SP headed by vice-PM Vande Lanotte had insisted on a strongly centralized police. They had to give in. Reaching an agreement about a noncentralized but unitary police had become easier after Vande Lanotte had resigned and was replaced by the more accommodating and pragmatic senior politician Louis Tobback (Vande Lanotte, interview). As a minister, Tobback had initiated a first police reform in 1990 (Maesschalk 2002). He was determined to push for a reform as he wanted to finish the job he started in 1990 (Dehaene, interview). Tobback and Dehaene had formed a tandem before and there was mutual trust and respect. Also the fact that it was precisely the national police (gendarmerie) that proved its incompetence by letting Dutroux escape did not really hold up the socialists' claim that the police should be put under unitary command of the national police (Vande Lanotte, interview). In May 1998 an all-encompassing agreement on the police reform was announced and by the end of 1998 all laws had been passed in parliament. The Belgian police had been fundamentally reformed. This implied, in Baumgartner and Jones's terms, a collapse of a policy monopoly and a structural reorganization of the power ratio in this policy domain (see also, Maesschalk 2002).

Merging the police was *the* key policy change after Dutroux. The idea had been publicly launched by the parliamentary Commission Dutroux, a new policy venue that had been installed to assess the judiciary mistakes in the Dutroux investigations and to draft policy recommendations. The Commission produced a new policy image, but, and this is a crucial difference with the later Octopus group, it was not a partisan venue controlled by the parties. The Commission consisted, except for a few, mainly of backbenchers. The chairman, the later immensely popular Marc Verwilghen (VLD), was an unknown MP and this applied to most other Commission members. From the very beginning, the Commission explicitly tried to avoid partisan biases and its members time and again repeated that they acted not as party representatives. This situation stands in sharp contrast to the traditional bargaining and accommodation process between party elites, which characterize the consociational nature of the Belgian democracy. As the Commission consisted of many individual persons, not a few party representatives with a strict mandate, reaching a compromise on the recommendations among its 17 members was tricky. Consequently, on crucial elements, the Commission's recommendations remained vague and general (Dehaene and Vande Lanotte, interviews). The Commission received massive media attention, its hearings were broadcast live on TV, and its members became steadily more popular as the Commission revealed more flaws in the Dutroux investigation. The

Commission became a public venue and functioned as a kind of public conscience, a ritual of purification. It was impossible to criticize the Commission or its members; that is also the reason the Commission's recommendations were accepted unanimously. No party could afford to oppose the Commission or to question its conclusions. Gradually, the Commission members became TV stars entirely decoupled from their party who could not control them. The Commission followed its own logic and its members drifted away from their parties. Louis Michel told us about the Commission members: "They adopted among them a sort of collective stardom. They felt untouchable. These people constantly attacked 'the system.' All parties were irritated about the way their Commission members behaved. They were entirely decoupled from their party and belonged to the circle of the 'white knights.' We did not have any power at all to remind them of their duty of reserve" (Michel, interview). The difference with the other new policy venue created after the affair—the Octopus negotiation group—could not have been bigger. Here, representative party elites were in charge and they resorted to secret negotiations far away from the public eye—business as usual in Belgian politics. Thus, although a new policy venue creating a new policy image, the Commission Dutroux did not lead to major policy change as parties were not in charge. The Commission Dutroux may have set the agenda but it was not decisive. The irritation and frustration of the party executives about the uncontrollable Commission may even have stalled change for a while. When parties later gathered in the Octopus group, they adopted the same policy image as devised by the Commission Dutroux and struck a far-reaching agreement.

We asked our three privileged witnesses whether the police reform would have happened without Dutroux's arrest and subsequent escape. All confirmed that there probably would not have been a police reform at all (Dehaene, Vande Lanotte, and Michel, interviews). Jean-Luc Dehaene, for example, stated: "The police reform originated from the Dutroux case. Only after the Commission Dutroux had revealed the deficiencies and after it had reached a very vague consensus (on the police merger), it became possible to really work on it" (Dehaene, interview).

### Testing the Research Hypothesis

The theoretical argument we earlier developed is that extreme focusing events, increasing issue attention, a new policy image, and new institutional venues do not automatically lead to major policy change in a polity dominated by parties. Major policy change depends upon the fact that political parties adopt the new policy image and control the new institutional venues. Our narrative and interpretation of the Dutroux affair presented above confirms the hypothesis.

We showed that the first focusing event, Dutroux's arrest, on the one hand, did not lead to a new policy image about victims or early release nor did it create a new police venue in which these two decisions could

be taken. Government acted on its own and simply accelerated a decision process that had been going on before. Consequently, two relatively minor policy reforms were adopted. On the other hand, Dutroux's arrest did lead to the creation of a new venue, the parliamentary Commission Dutroux. The Commission did not produce a new policy image of judiciary reform, but it did create an entirely new image regarding police reform. Yet, in this venue, the key players in the Belgian consociational polity, the political parties, were absent. They were not in charge and, thus, the venue's new policy image was not, or only halfheartedly, accepted by the main parties. It took a second focusing event, Dutroux's escape, to create another venue in which the parties were finally in absolute control. In the Octopus group, parties could play the usual negotiation game among party elites far a way from the public eye. They swiftly adopted the new policy image created in the previous nonpartisan venue and reached a far-reaching compromise.

Our empirical analysis, hence, largely underscores Baumgartner and Jones's claim that the interaction between policy images and policy venues brings about major policy change. But, at the same time, we claim it is the *actors* within venues that determine whether change will be produced. In our case, only when parties entered the venue did major policy change occur. A new policy image and a new venue do not lead to change mechanically.

That the differential dynamic of both new venues, one without and the other with parties, explains their different policy outcome, non versus major policy change, is indirectly underpinned by the fact that external pressure had withered by the time Dutroux escaped in 1998. Figure 1 clearly documents that media attention, demonstrations, and interpellations on crime and justice issues had almost returned to normal levels by 1998. When public pressure via mass mobilization and media was highest, that is, in 1996 and 1997, the policy process, in contrast, had fallen into an impasse. Both government sources confirmed that they, after Dutroux's escape, were not really afraid of new massive mobilizations and a new popular uprising (Dehaene and Vande Lanotte, interviews). "The public mobilizes much more rational than one may think. Dutroux was immediately recaptured. There were no children murdered. This was not really a tragedy. Moreover, two ministers resigned immediately" (Vande Lanotte, interview). Indeed, the threat of massive mobilization had diminished by 1998. The white movement had mainly been a victim movement focusing on victims' rights and well-being. Its internal organizational weakness and vague program had damaged the movement's mobilization potential considerably (Walgrave and Verhulst 2006). Both Johan Vande Lanotte and Jean-Luc Dehaene stated that Dutroux's escape was a "much more political event" than Dutroux's initial arrest. Jean-Luc Dehaene stated: "When Dutroux was arrested the key issue was to regain support from the public. When Dutroux escaped the key issue was to regain control of the decision-making process and to use this event as a catalyst for pushing through

policy changes" (Dehaene, interview). Political parties directly entered the stage in 1998 and the political crisis was immediate. At the exact moment Dutroux ran off, parliament was in session for the weekly Question Time and astonished MPs instantly delivered quotes to the waiting media. When Dutroux was arrested in August 1996, in contrast, parliament was in recess and most MPs were abroad, unable to politicize the event. The point is, hence, that not public pressure but rather party politicization explains change or nonchange. In one sentence, the explicit focus on the decisive role played by political parties allows us to solve our initial puzzle—from a Baumgartner and Jones perspective—of the Dutroux affair ("much attention, little policy change" after the first focusing event, versus "little attention, major policy change" after the second focusing event).

Another difference, of course, was that in 1998, compared to 1996–1997, the next general elections of 1999 had come nearer. In 1996–1997, parties could afford to let the storm blow over and await better times. This had changed by 1998 and probably pushed parties to behave more accommodatingly. "We knew we had to realize the reforms in that legislature. We only had one year left" (Dehaene, interview). Johan Vande Lanotte declared that it was much easier for him to resign and unblock the situation as elections were only a year away (Vande Lanotte, interview). That nearing elections contributed to break the deadlock does not contradict our point that parties matter. In fact, it even reinforces our claim that without focusing on parties, one cannot explain when, what, and how policy change happened.

### **Conclusion: Expanding the Punctuated Equilibrium Approach**

Our key findings are summarized and formalized in Table 1. The table shows, for each of the four policy reforms that were decided after Dutroux, whether new or old actors, policy images, and/or venues were part of the process. It also presents what would have happened without the two focusing events of the Dutroux affair. The interviewed key players come to similar conclusions when confronted with a counterfactual question: The police reform would not have happened at all while the justice reform would have been far less radical. This finding repudiates possible alternative explanations of our "delayed change" puzzle. The delay was not a matter of a slow-turning policy cycle or a "normal" inertia effect as it simply takes some time to negotiate a solution. When the main parties, finally, decided that they wanted to strike an agreement, finding an all-encompassing compromise was just a matter of weeks. Before the second focusing event, the political will was simply absent.

The table underscores our key argument that major policy punctuations, indeed, depend on changing images and changing venues as Baumgartner and Jones claim. However, actors must be put center stage. A new image and a new policy venue do not inevitably produce change. In politics dominated by political parties, we showed, these parties must be



TABLE 1  
Summary of the Key Findings

	Rights of Victims/Early Release of Criminals	Justice Reform	Police Reform
Actors	Government parties (= old) + public opinion and parents (= new)	Government parties (= old) + opposition parties (= new) + judiciary lobby (= old)	Government parties (= old) + opposition parties (= new) + mayors in parties (= old)
Venues	Government and Commission Franchimont (= old)	Commission Verwilghen + Octopus group (= both new)	Commission Verwilghen + Octopus group (= both new)
Policy image	No change (government agreement)	Moderate change (was busy + in government agreement)	Completely new image (no preparation)
Policy change	Minor reform	Intermediate reform	Major reform
Effect of affair on policy change (counterfactual evidence)	Acceleration	Acceleration + more radical reform	Reform would not have happened at all without Dutroux affair

taken into account; no parties, no change. The main puzzle we were confronted with in this study was the delay in policy change: Why did change not transpire when external pressure was highest but only two years later and after a second focusing event? The answer is that the first focusing event did not generate a suitable policy venue in which parties could play their usual role and broker an elite compromise. Without focusing on parties, the difference in timing would not have made sense. In Baumgartner and Jones's own longitudinal approach encompassing almost 50 years, a two-year delay is, of course, just a wrinkle. Their focus on the long term allows them to ignore actors to a large extent. Our detailed empirical analysis of the Dutroux affair clearly substantiates the central role played by political parties and, thereby, confirms our research hypothesis:

1. Although the initial focusing event of Dutroux's arrest in 1996 created a new policy venue (parliamentary Commission Dutroux) and although a new policy image was produced (the unification of police forces), there was no major policy change; this was due to the political parties blocking change.
2. The swift adoption of major change after Dutroux's escape from custody in 1998, in contrast, also was a result of parties' strategies and actions; parties embraced the new policy image and, more importantly, they gained control of the second new policy venue (Octopus negotiation group) that was created to deal with the Dutroux affair.

We argued that the Dutroux case is a "critical case" because it is a most *likely* case. If we would not have recorded policy change after an explosion of attention in media, public, and politics, after the subsequent creation of a new policy venue and a linked new policy image, this would have directly challenged the basic claim of the punctuated equilibrium approach. At the same time, we contended that, compared to the U.S. system for which the theory was developed, the most *different* Belgian political system allows us to add and test a hypothesis specifying how the mechanics of policy change work in a party democracy and what role parties play therein. So, our case study allows to incrementally refine the punctuated equilibrium theory by broadening its scope of application to consociational political systems with strong political parties and by including an additional intervening variable (consensus vs. conflicts between coalition parties). Let us return to the three theoretical and methodological questions we set this contribution off with.

First, we wanted to test whether Baumgartner and Jones's approach devised for analyzing a pluralist system such as the USA works in an entirely different context. We hope to have shown that this is indeed the case. Their concepts of punctuation, agenda-setting, policy images, and

policy venues helped us to disentangle a very complex and intricate case of policy change in a country dramatically different from the USA. Their approach seems to work fine in a different polity and made us see things we would not have observed otherwise. The punctuated equilibrium theory is useful for comparative purposes and, under certain circumstances, applicable to other polities.

Second, our goal was also to show that Baumgartner and Jones's approach, in order to be really useful in a system dominated by parties, must be supplemented with an explicit focus on parties and their preferences. In their own work on the USA they almost entirely neglect parties' role. This might be tenable in the U.S. context but it is not in many other polities. We showed that without taking into account the parties' agendas—quantitatively as well as qualitatively—it is impossible to understand what happened in Belgium after the Dutroux affair. Without parties, we would not have understood why the enormous societal pressure did translate immediately in massive parliamentary indignation but only in modest policy change. Without parties, we would not have understood why it took almost two years before major policy changes were finally decided upon although external pressure had withered by then. Without parties we would not have understood why a second focusing event was needed to unblock the stalemate. We would not even have understood why the Dutroux affair resulted in four very different policy changes.

Third, Baumgartner and Jones's longitudinal quantitative agenda-setting methodology tapping issue attention on political agendas yielded valuable results as well. Our study substantiates—in line with Baumgartner and Jones (1993)—that assessing issue attention in a pure quantitative matter does not suffice. In fact, our quantitative evidence raised more questions than it answered. In the case under study here, more concretely, it confronted us with the time gap between external pressure and policy change. In a sense, the quantitative material helped us to put the right question. This question, though, could only be answered relying on detailed case-study material. So we argue for an integration of quantitative and qualitative case-study approaches. Both are useful to get to the bottom of a case. The quantitative and qualitative evidence are compatible and complementary.

Let us, finally, further elaborate on the role of parties and how they could be better integrated in the agenda-setting approach. In some polities, even after extremely strong and sweeping focusing events deeply upsetting the political system and putting large pressure on decision makers, parties remain in charge and can block any change; policy punctuations do not happen without parties' consent. Parties do not automatically turn into issue entrepreneurs forced by compelling external circumstances; they are not simply wiped away in a vortex of positive feedback; they are autonomous actors and can act as veto players in almost any circumstance (Tsebelis 2002). In the Dutroux case in Belgium, parties remained loyal to their initial stance, if they had any, and defended their

point of view against the mainstream. Because they lacked an appropriate policy venue, in spite of the weight on their shoulders to set aside their disagreements, they blocked the most fundamental change for almost two years. This finding challenges the current agenda-setting approach that, in the American context, seems to discard the role of parties in policy change. This approach is able to describe major, abrupt policy changes in other countries as well—our longitudinal Belgian evidence fits nicely with the agenda-setting expectations. Yet, for the agenda-setting model to grow out to be an explanatory and, in particular, a comparatively useful approach that can be used in political systems with strong parties—the weak American party system is the exception and not the rule—it must take political parties seriously.

From a comparative perspective, current developments in the agenda-setting approach open up possibilities to generalize agenda-setting dynamics and carry out grand comparisons across political systems (Baumgartner, Green-Pedersen, and Jones 2006). Baumgartner and Jones recently introduced the generic notion of *friction*, indicating why political actors react disproportionately on incoming information (Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Jones, Sulkin, and Larsen 2003). Friction implies that political actors, sometimes, do not react at all—they are very busy doing other things—but then they overreact and suddenly spend a large amount of attention to the issue. They suggest that, in different countries, different institutions and different actors may play the role of blocking change until there is no other option than catching-up and realizing a major reform. Jones and Baumgartner argue in their 2005 book that a number of mechanisms can create friction in the U.S. polity, focusing typically on attention bottlenecks (cognitive friction) or institutional design (institutional friction). Our analysis suggests that, in Belgium and probably in many other nations, it may be especially the political parties that take up the role of brakes on the policy process; parties induce friction in the policy process. Parties are resilient, we showed, they resist change and uncomfortable information. Our analysis of one specific case, of course, is not sufficient to conclude that political parties are always the final gatekeeping force that embody friction. Additional studies could well conclude that other elements lead to similar frictional processes. Anyway, to incorporate political parties as one additional source of friction into the punctuated equilibrium model is perfectly compatible with the original model and elaborates Baumgartner and Jones's still rather vague concept of friction.

Further integrating parties in Baumgartner and Jones's agenda-setting theory generates challenges in terms of research design and of theory. Regarding *research design*, the quantitative measure of parties' preferences in this study—using four yearly party programs and government agreements—is not really satisfying. It just permitted us to scratch the surface, but we had to rely entirely on the qualitative evidence to tap parties' preferences. We maintain that also the quantitative methodology of assessing parties' issue preferences should be improved. A primary

challenge for future research is to design better ways to grasp parties' agendas more continuously than once every four years. In other words, the frequency of the parties' issue saliency measurement is too small. Party agendas are flexible and adapt to changing circumstances more than once every four years. The present research, however, precisely showed that shifting preferences is not easy for parties and they seem, to a large extent, to be caught in a process of inertia (Walgrave, Varone, and Dumont 2006).

*Theoretically*, the challenge is how to conceive of political parties in the punctuated equilibrium approach of public policy. In Europe—where parties are chief actors—parties' impact on policy has been treated best, both theoretically and empirically, by Klingemann, Hofferbert, and Budge (1994). Klingemann, Hofferbert, and Budge also depart from the agenda-setting idea; they ascertain that parties have some bearing on policy via their party manifestoes and government agreements. Parties make pledges to their voters and they keep their promises once in power. The most encouraging theoretical track, thus, is to integrate the party competition model developed by Klingemann, Hofferbert, and Budge with Baumgartner and Jones's policy punctuations approach. Conceptually, however, this is not an easy task. The American school considers policy changes to be abrupt and sweeping and happening *within* legislatures; the European approach, in contrast, stresses planned, gradual, and well-negotiated changes via the electoral cycle (Walgrave, Varone, and Dumont 2006). Both conceptions of policy change are different, reflecting the diverging basic questions these scholars raise: Why does policy change occur (Baumgartner and Jones)? What impact do parties have (Klingemann, Hofferbert, and Budge)? Although difficult, we believe that explicitly integrating parties' agenda-setting roles in the punctuated equilibrium framework may help us to understand better why policies change and what parties have to do with that.

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