Original Article

Does the government agreement's grip on policy fade over time? An analysis of policy drift in Belgium

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Abstract   Government agreements (GAs) are key drivers of future policies in most countries with multi-party coalitions and also serve to limit policy initiatives not included in the GA. However, little is known about how this 'grip' of GAs over policies changes over time. Throughout the legislative term, new policy issues arise and public demands change. If governments are responsive, they address these issues, leading to increasing divergence from the GA: policy drift. The central question this study addresses is whether the changing social and politico-strategic environment leads to a fading grip of the GA on policy, causing policy drift *vis-à-vis* the initial policy program. Using an agenda-setting approach, we map the policy priorities of the GAs to two measures of policy priorities of Belgian governments from 1992 to 2006: ministerial council decisions and state of the union speeches. Despite evidence of intrusion of policy issues from beyond the GA, we do not find policy drift, in terms of systematic temporally determined deviation from the 'original' policy priorities. Hence, this study finds that GAs, at least in Belgium, maintain control over the policy agenda, both as a source and a constraint, on future policies throughout the legislature.
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Introduction

In democracies where governments are formed by a coalition of political parties, there is an obvious need for clear and binding policy guidelines that commit the governing partners to a particular bargain. Every coalition partner wants to

implement its preferred policies and electoral pledges, and without management of the decision-making process that prevents one party from putting forth those preferred or pledged policies that are intolerable to coalition partners or that binds those partners to support action they may individually not find optimal, cabinet government would become unstable and incapable of governing.

The solution found in many countries relies on negotiating a government agenda and drafting policy documents *before* installing a new government, and reflects the goals and agreements to guide and bind the government over its term. The government agreements (GAs) and the subsequent policies are part of this political process of negotiating the main policies and the important political decisions that will accompany the daily life of the government. Therefore, the governmental policy agenda embodied in the GA connects the result of the electoral process whereby parties propose policy priorities and alternatives through their manifestos, to the process of governing and making policy in coalition governments (Rallings, 1987; Klingemann *et al*, 1994, 2006; Royed, 1996; McDonald and Budge, 2005; Mansergh and Thomson, 2007; Costello and Thomson, 2008). As such, GAs appear to be vital, not only for the survival of the cabinet but also for obtaining strong and coherent governmental policies (De Winter *et al*, 2000; Timmermans, 2006; Timmermans and Moury, 2006), as well as for ensuring any promise of representation or popular policy control at the ballot box.

Prior research confirms that GAs are an important source of government policy action in a variety of countries, as the policy pledges included in these documents are very likely to be enacted (Thomson, 2001; Mansergh and Thomson, 2007; Costello and Thomson, 2008; Moury, 2011). Likewise, GAs also constrain the future policy initiatives of the members of the government in order to maintain its stability (De Winter *et al*, 2000; Moury, 2011). In addition to the impact on policy and its coherence, GAs also unite parties with different ideological backgrounds and ensure that coalitions 'stick'. Hence, given the importance of these two functions for ensuring that members of coalitions 'get what they paid for' in striking the bargain over government composition, GAs are essential to government stability in most coalition countries. Inclusion of new issues often requires new negotiations, and thus the risk of fights among coalition partners, or even dissolution of government.

However, throughout the legislative term, governments are faced with unstable voter priorities, focusing events and new social circumstances that were not foreseen and included in the governmental program. Agenda-setting research of the last two decades shows the importance of such events and evolutions in policy change, in addition to elections (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Birkland, 1997; Jones and Baumgartner, 2005; Baumgartner *et al*, 2011). Punctuated equilibrium theory, for example, suggests that policymaking is an incremental process, alternated by short periods of disproportionate policy change, which can rarely be anticipated or initiated by political parties or the government (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993). Walgrave *et al* (2006) examined both perspectives in Belgium and confirmed that they need not be

seen as competitive explanations. They showed that, while GAs were the best predictors of overall policy priorities of the governments (that is, legislation), 'external pressure' (media coverage, demonstrations and parliamentary scrutiny) performed best at explaining the yearly changes in policy.

So, if governments take into account new issues throughout a legislative term, this should affect their policy priorities. Hence, it is plausible that, over time, the priorities of the government are adjusted and increasingly diverge from those they expressed at the onset of the legislature. However, currently, we know very little about the prominence of GAs over policy activities across the term of government. This study, therefore, examines whether the 'grip' of the coalition agreement on the government's policies fades over time, and thus whether policy drift occurs.

Using an agenda-setting framework, we examine how the policy priorities of the government at the onset of the legislature correspond to those of the policies actually addressed *and* acted upon throughout the 4-year term. Agenda-setting allows us to assess the policy priorities of the government using the entire GA and not just a selection. It is then possible to comparably track these governmental policy priorities throughout the policy-making process – from the expression of intent at the outset of the government, to the construction of annual legislative plans, to the actual disposal of these issues within the executive – and from one year to another. This approach is different though complementary to the aforementioned pledge studies (Thomson, 2001; Mansergh and Thomson, 2007; Costello and Thomson, 2008; Moury, 2011).

We specifically examine the case of Belgium, a small Western European partitocracy (De Winter *et al*, 1996), over a period of 15 years, from 1992 to 2006, including a total of four legislative terms. More specifically, we ask whether accumulated issue intrusion over time loosens the grip of the GA – leading to policy drift – by examining whether the correspondence in policy priorities between the GA and the weekly ministerial councils (MC), as well as the yearly state of the union (SOTU) speeches, decreases throughout the legislature, or whether the GA really is binding. Shrinking correspondence would hereby imply shifting priorities, and thus policy drift. The MC constitutes the policy agenda that is closest to the end of the policy-making process, as it includes both legislative governmental initiatives and budgetary decisions. The annual SOTU speeches accompany the votes on the next budget and leave more room for rhetoric. Hence, it presents the government with an opportunity to revisit its policy priorities in light of current events.

Public Demands and Policymaking

There are a number of ways through which changing public demands, such as shifts in concerns, changing preferences and other types of changes in social circumstances, may be translated into political priorities and make their way onto the policy agenda. Probably the most straightforward and meaningful way from the perspective of

democratic theory is through the electoral process. An abundance of authors have studied policymaking and policy change as a function of the electoral cycle in which political parties and government play the main roles (see, for example, Klingemann *et al*, 1994; McDonald and Budge, 2005). Before elections, parties propose policy programs in which specific policy issues are addressed, along with alternative solutions. As the goal is to attract voters, parties will try to appeal to citizens by proposing programs and engaging in campaigns that respond to their concerns. Once in office, parties then try to carry out their electoral programs. However, in multi-party democracies where coalitions are often formed, governments carry out the GA, negotiated by the coalition parties during government formation before any law-making occurs.

Government formation and GA

GAs, being the result of negotiations between the parties that form the future government coalition, contain information on the main public policies that will be carried out by the government during the coming legislative term, regarding all policy domains and even sometimes include a detailed executive calendar, timing the policy enactment of certain specific measures. Negotiating the content of this agreement is generally considered as the most time consuming step of government formation, most often requiring several weeks and sometimes months in the Belgian case. In 2010–2011, for example, just the negotiation of the GA took almost 200 days, mainly focusing on the state reform and on socio-economic policies. The next steps in the government formation – portfolio allocation, confirmation of parties' participation at party congresses, the oath of office and confidence vote – are generally shorter and only take a few days. The length of the Belgian GAs has increased over time, confirming a more general trend observed in Europe (Müller and Strøm, 2003). This is rather surprising given the successive delegation of power and competences from the federal to the European and regional levels since 1970, which should have decreased the length of these agreements. In Belgium, the increasing length seems to be a consequence of increasing mistrust between the members of the coalition (Moury, 2013, p. 56).

Although GAs are not legally binding, they have an important political and policy impact, as they bind together several bodies of the coalition parties. These agreements are signed by the party president of each coalition partner, after which party MPs and members endorse the agreement, and thus government participation at specific party congresses. This party investiture via the congresses is a crucial step in making agreements stick, not only between parties but also within parties (De Winter *et al*, 2000). In Belgium, the GA heavily constrains the parliamentary agenda, as majority MPs are forced to stay in line with what has been decided during the coalition formation process. For both Dehaene cabinets (1992–1995 and

1995–1999), the GAs indicated that issues that were not included in the GA could only be politicized by majority representatives, with the explicit consent of the majority parties, to avoid alternative majorities (Rihoux *et al*, 2005).

Many studies have demonstrated the impact of the GA on policy outputs. In the Netherlands and Ireland, Thomson and colleagues demonstrated that the electoral pledges expressed by parties in their manifestos were more likely to be carried out if they were included in the GA (Thomson, 2001; Mansergh and Thomson, 2007; Costello and Thomson, 2008). They found the enactment rate of those pledges to be as high as those of government parties in single-party governments, such as the United States and the United Kingdom (Rallings, 1987; Royed, 1996). Moury (2013) directly examined the pledges issued in the GAs and found high enactment rates in Belgium (78 per cent), Germany (78 per cent), the Netherlands (70 per cent) and Italy (58 per cent).

She also found the GAs to be very constraining, as very little initiative could be taken outside the agreement. In other words, from all the *important* decisions taken by the cabinets or by the individual ministers, a large majority originated from the GA (except for those decisions in response to unpredictable events). In her interviews (2013, pp. 56–57), all of the 14 former Belgian ministers reported that they felt constrained by the GA when they were in office, stating that it was almost impossible to pass measures for which there was no ground in the GA. Hence, ministers avoid issues from outside the GA and loyally enable measures included in the agreements, whether they personally approve or not. They do so in a *quid pro quo* spirit to make sure their own measures will get passed.

This latter issue is particularly interesting, as the constraining power of the GAs – the degree to which it excludes policy issues and alternatives from outside the agreement – has not received much scholarly attention. While we know that the GA is a program of policies to be carried out, it is also a commitment from the signatory parties that entails certain restrictions. Coalition parties depend on being reliable coalition partners and usually try to avoid open disputes so as to not be seen by voters or future potential coalition partners as unreliable government saboteurs. Operating within the boundaries of the GA is the most straightforward way for a party to show that it is a reliable partner. Moreover, although prior pledge studies have convincingly demonstrated the importance of the GA, especially as a source of policy, their analyses gave little to no indication as to its impact over time (Thomson, 2001; Mansergh and Thomson, 2007; Costello and Thomson, 2008; Moury, 2011). That is why the main goal of this study is to explore and understand the impact of the GA on policy over time.

Policy drift and the policy 'grip' of the GA

Since the GA is drafted before the beginning of the legislative term, it cannot possibly take into account everything that will happen during the entire legislative

term. Agenda-setting theory emphasizes the forces and dynamics that explain how issues become societal problems, requiring governmental attention, independently from the electoral process (see, for example, Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Jones and Baumgartner, 2005). These dynamics should affect the GA's monopoly over the policy agenda implemented by government. That possibility motivates this study to examine how the grip of the GA on policy is affected by the emergence of 'previously unappreciated issue[s] into a stable policy-making system', otherwise known as *issue intrusion* (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005, p. 68). As new issues arise and need to be dealt with, it can be expected that the policy priorities of the government increasingly diverge from those set out at the onset of the legislature and recorded in the GA. Once new issues reach the government agenda, they are likely to remain there for some time. This cumulative effect of issue intrusion over time is theorized here as the driving force behind policy drift.

Using two specific examples, Figure 1 illustrates how cumulative issue intrusion could lead to policy drift. It shows how Belgium's former national airline company, SABENA, pops up on the MCs with little to no attention before 2001. Although the issue was *not* included in the GA of 1999, it remained on the governmental agenda for about 2 years. In 2002, another major and unforeseeable issue emerged onto the policy agenda after the attacks of 9/11 in the United States: terrorism. Again, the policies following this unpredictable event were not addressed in the GA. Despite the relatively exceptional nature of these events, other unpredictable issues intrude the policy agenda, bringing the government to adopt new policies and drift away from their original policies.

Thus far, policy drift has received little scholarly attention and has therefore remained a relatively underdeveloped concept in political science. Political
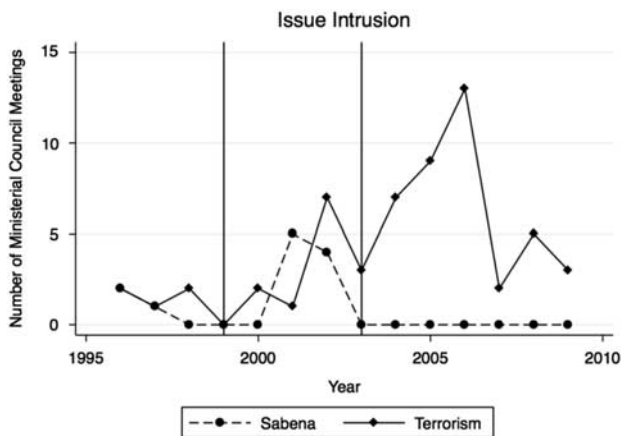
Figure 1: Number of MC meetings related to 'SABENA' and 'Terrorism'.

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economists use policy drift to indicate small policy changes due to policymakers' neglect or inaction (Hacker, 2005; Béland, 2007). This study disregards policymakers' 'intentions' and only looks at the changes over time. Here, we conceptualize policy drift as increasing issue divergence in the policy priorities over time, as compared with the initial priorities expressed at the onset of the legislative term (in the GA). Thus, drift indicates a fading impact of the GA.

Policy drift can imply two main dynamics: decreasing implementation of the GA and/or increasing incorporation of new issues from outside the GA. As time in office proceeds, the government, or a number of its members, can insist on re-evaluating and re-negotiating several aspects of the government's priorities. Thus, drift occurs when the impact of issue attention from the GA on policy attention decreases over time. It needs to be noted at this point that the enactment of policies can, in itself, also contribute to policy drift. Indeed, as policies from the GA are passed, it is possible that these issues then disappear from the government agenda.

The absence of policy drift, then again, implies that the GA maintains its influence or grip on policy: both as a source and as a constraint. This implies that most policy comes from the GA, and that new policy initiatives not included in the GA tend to be avoided or blocked. Hence, examining policy drift and the constraining power of the GA tells us a great deal about policymaking in coalition countries, as it informs us on how governments deal with new issues and shifts in policy priorities. Governments have to choose whether to address new issues – sometimes at the risk of a government falling – or to leave them for the next elections and the next government. Policy drift is due to a variety of reasons or 'external pressures' (Walgrave *et al*, 2006) and builds up over time, as these new issues accumulate.

Mechanisms of drift

Policymaking is usually an incremental process whereby issues become policy concerns when the understanding of an issue – and its solution – changes and when important political actors become involved. This means that as the public understanding (or policy image) of a given issue changes, it starts to become perceived as a problem. As more and more people change their perception of the issue, more people become involved, among whom politically powerful actors. A change in the image of an issue, combined with the involvement of political actors, then often entails a disproportionally large change in policy.

As an issue gets redefined (understood through a different frame or perspective), more people may come to see it as a problem and the advocated policy as a solution. Once such a new idea gains prominence among the public and among different policymakers, the wheels are set in motion for policy change (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Jones and Baumgartner, 2005). Many different causes can lead an issue to the governmental agenda and bring about shifts in priorities. 'Problem attention

can be inspired by media coverage, public discontent [or] changes in the real world as these are monitored by government officials' (Baumgartner *et al*, 2011).

One important way through which an issue can impose itself onto the government agenda is through a focusing event. Such events are often 'shortcuts' to gaining prominent attention and reframing a policy problem and its solution. Birkland (1998, p. 54) defines focusing events as 'an event that is sudden; relatively uncommon; can be reasonably defined as harmful or revealing the possibility of potentially greater future harms; has harms that are concentrated in a particular geographical area or community of interest; and that is known to policymakers and the public simultaneously (Kingdon, 1995; Birkland, 1997, pp. 94–100)'. Hence, while certain issues can be ignored, a focusing event simply cannot, as their impact and the potential harm they can cause in the future require immediate governmental action. Focusing events can, thus, draw major attention to specific policy problems and impose new issues onto the governmental agenda (Kingdon, 1995; Birkland, 1998). Policy advocates will then try to exploit this situation by reframing the issue problem in a different, advantageous, way to promote their policy alternative (Birkland, 1997, 1998). This way, issues that were not included in the GA can impose themselves onto the government agenda. A prime example of this was the closing of nuclear power plants in Germany due to a nuclear catastrophe in Japan in 2011 and increased antinuclear sentiments and protests. Hence, such focusing events can be the source of new policy initiatives.

Another possible source of drift is indicators of popular support, such as election results at other governmental levels or (popularity) polls. Owing to public discontent, a majority party at the national level can suffer an important defeat at other, regional or local, elections. This party may then feel the pressure to compensate this defeat by profiling itself among the coalition partners to avoid further electoral defeats. This can be done by emphasizing a party's own policy issues and achieving 'policy successes' before the next elections. Conversely, a party that wins those elections can try to take advantage of this strengthened position and require a larger role within the majority, or impose a number of issues that have proven important during those elections. Hence, elections at one level can influence the policies at another level.

Still in an electoral perspective, policy priorities in the year of the next elections can be expected to deviate most, as it is the last opportunity for the majority parties to implement specific policies. Therefore, as parties start to compete with each other, they might want to stress certain policies. As parties attempt to profile themselves in the government due to the proximity of the elections, they may demand the inclusion of issues dear to their electorate. Certain parties may want to show their voters that, within the government, they are paying attention to those issues they believe to be the most important. As a result, we would then observe drift away from the initial GA and its priorities.

This study examines policy drift on two very distinct policy agendas: the MC decisions and the yearly SOTU speeches. The MCs represent the weekly activities of

the government and its members. MCs are among the best measures of policy attention at the executive level, as they include both budgetary and legislative decisions made among members of the coalition government. Since ministerial councils include actual decisions that will be implemented, they are situated at the end of the policy-making process. SOTU speeches, then again, are declarations that are linked to the parliamentary vote on the budget of the coming year. Through this speech, the government expresses its policy priorities for the next fiscal year. Hence, these speeches are the opportunity for the government to update its priorities *vis-à-vis* the GA. To gain a better insight into how the different policy agendas come about, the next sections detail the procedures and formalities of the MCs and the SOTU speeches.

The Ministerial Council

Officially, the MC is the main political arena where deliberations are held and decisions are made. The Council is held weekly on Friday and is composed of no more than 15 members. 'With the possible exception of the prime minister, the Council of Ministers is composed of an equal number of Dutch-speaking members and French-speaking members' (Article 99 of the Constitution). Although State Secretaries are formally only present for those matters involving their competence, common practice shows that they participate in the entire Council since 1992. The council debates policy decisions and current events and takes decisions upon consensus, thereby testing and confirming the political coherence of the government. Article 69 of the Special Law of 8 August 1980 stipulates that the government decides upon consensus on the matters that belong to its competencies. Given that the MC, as an institution, as well as its procedures, is not constitutionally defined, the 'practical instructions concerning the functioning of the government' are used as guidelines. These instructions state that, to involve all government members, the MC has to agree on all subjected proposals of royal or ministerial decrees to which its intervention is legally required and on all issues whose content or consequences have political or budgetary repercussions (Dewachter, 2003, p. 199; De Vos, 2006, p. 386). Moyse and Dumoulin (2011, p. 42) state that an explicit governmental consensus is required for all politically sensitive decisions. For those issues, a minister depends on the consent of his colleagues. Debates thus last until consensus is reached, to assure common responsibility for all governmental decisions. However, in practice, consensus means majority rule (Dewachter, 2003, p. 209).

Although some argue that the MC has become a ratification machine, due to the different prior consultation moments (Claes, 2000, p. 40; Dewachter, 2003, pp. 290–296; Moyse and Dumoulin, 2011, pp. 44–45), the MC is still the arena where all the policy issues are voted upon, which means that they represent the policy actions of the government very well – even if the actual consensus may have been forged before.

As neither public nor press can attend the actual MC meetings, we rely on the press briefings issued by the press office of the government. To preserve the stability and discretion of the government, only those agenda items where a consensus could be reached are communicated. Certain sensitive cases – strategic or secretive – dealt by the MC are never communicated. Walgrave *et al* (2005, p. 227) compared the press releases with the actual MC agendas and found that more than 80 per cent of all the agenda items of the MC were reported on through press releases. The MCs decisions are often the last step before policy implementation and can therefore be considered as the most suitable policy measure to examine whether policy drift from the GA has occurred over time.

SOTU Speeches

In Belgium, the yearly SOTU speech or policy statement consists of a declaration made by the prime minister in front of the Chamber, outlining the main policies and issues that are going to be dealt with by the cabinet during the following legislative year. This declaration is linked to the budget and takes place at the opening of every parliamentary session (on the second Tuesday of October – Article 44 of the Constitution). The length and style of this document varies, depending on the Prime Minister. Thus contrary to many other countries where similar political/policy statements exist (see, for example, the throne speeches in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands), this declaration is not presented by the head of State but by the prime minister. Given its recent introduction in Belgian politics – with a first occurrence in 1993 – the scope and political importance of these speeches can be considered as political practice and is not 'imbedded' in the constitution or the legislation.

The SOTU is discussed during the plenary session, usually during 2 days (the second Wednesday and Thursday of October) and is also submitted to a vote of confidence (following Article 133 of the parliament's internal House rules). Since the introduction of the SOTU into Belgian federal politics, all recorded votes of confidence have been positive. Compared with the traditional GAs, the SOTU speeches are a relatively recent phenomenon and are therefore not yet covered by the scientific literature on Belgian politics. Similar queen speeches have been used as policy agenda for research in the Netherlands (Breeman *et al*, 2009) and the United Kingdom (John and Jennings, 2010; Jennings *et al*, 2011). However, in Belgium, we cannot yet assess its significance as a governmental agenda at this point. The reactions of the main political actors and the media coverage suggest that its political weight has grown over time. As these speeches outline the government's policy priorities of the next year, any deviation from the initial GA can be considered as a policy change. The SOTU constitutes an opportunity for the government to adjust its policy priorities for the next year and provide policy solutions to current societal

concerns, as the SOTU is linked to the next budget and its priorities. Hence, the SOTU speech is also an opportunity to rally the different coalition parties around a common policy document and a vote of confidence in the House. Furthermore, it is also a way for the cabinet to communicate its priorities for the next parliamentary year to the public. Hence, SOTU speeches mix policy statements with rhetoric. The meaning of policy drift on the SOTUs depends on drift in the MCs; while drift on both might imply that the function of the SOTUs is to update the policy priorities of the government, drift on the SOTU exclusively would suggest that these speeches hold more rhetorical than substantive policy value. Hence, comparison of both policy agendas may reveal the way Belgian governments deal with new issues and how they communicate on them.

Data and Method

To assess policy drift, we examine whether the correspondence between the GAs on the ensuing policies decreases over time. To do so, we match the policy priorities of the GA to those of the subsequent yearly SOTU speeches and to those of the MCs. If governments pay attention to new issues, over time, this should affect their priorities *vis-à-vis* the original GA. Policy priorities are obtained by taking the relative issue emphasis on each policy domain. Hence, we use the entire policy programs to measure priorities, and not just a fraction of all sentences. This agenda-setting approach allows us to compare and match the policy priorities of different actors – or different activities of the same actor – and across time.

All the GAs, SOTU speeches and MCs from 1992 to 2006 have been coded on their thematic policy content. This coding was done using a version of Baumgartner and Jones' (1993) topical codebook that has been adjusted to the Belgian context. These topic codes enable us to identify and match policy priorities from the GAs to the SOTU speeches and the MCs. The codebook contains 242 specific policy topic codes, organized by main policy category, of which there are 23 (see Table 1). For the GA and SOTU, all documents were coded at the sentence level, based on the procedure described in the Comparative Manifesto Project's coding handbook (Budge *et al*, 2001). This coding procedure consists of identifying all the issues put forward in a document. Thus, if several ideas were expressed within a larger sentence, they would all be coded. This procedure entails very strict rules with respect to identifying and coding the policy ideas and issues, which were carefully executed.

There is a clear upward trend in the size of the GAs during the observed period, despite the increasing devolution of powers from the federal to the federated levels. In terms of coded material, GAs tend to get longer over time (from about 500 coded sentences in 1992 to 1500 in 2003). This trend does not seem to be affected by the number of parties in the coalition or the political 'color' of the prime minister.

Table 1: Average issue attention and standard deviation to all policy issues

	MC		SOTU		GA	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Macroeconomics and taxation	4.9	1.63	**25.74**	7.72	**10.41**	7.60
Civil rights and liberties	2.34	1	1.81	1.72	2.15	1.74
Health	**6.66**	1.73	3.02	2.84	4.33	2.62
Agriculture and fisheries	2.48	0.98	0.6	1.52	1.91	2.88
Labor	**6.82**	1.42	**15.74**	6.93	**7.67**	4.29
Education	0.37	0.33	0.11	0.28	0.33	0.26
Environment	2.31	0.73	0.99	1.81	3.13	0.55
Energy policy	2.01	1.07	0.74	0.92	1.92	1.19
Immigration and integration	1.53	0.77	1.84	2.77	3.53	1.51
Traffic and transport	3.24	0.72	1.5	1.89	3.01	2
Justice, administration of justice and crime	**7.75**	2.07	**11.45**	10.12	**12.85**	3.6
Social affairs	3.82	1.17	6.43	4.34	6.42	1.94
Community development, housing and urban planning	1.04	0.5	0.56	1.4	1.95	0.86
Companies, banking and domestic trade	4.72	1.85	2.21	1.3	4.21	2.65
Defense	5.04	1.50	2.24	2.53	3.13	0.97
Scientific research, technology and communications	3.22	1.40	0.83	0.80	0.73	1.08
Foreign trade	1.59	0.80	2.19	1.44	1.51	0.7
Foreign affairs and development aid	**10.45**	2.83	**7.25**	3.72	**12.62**	4.45
Functioning democracy and public administration	**28.12**	2.63	**9.38**	7.81	**17.69**	5.87
Spatial planning, public nature and water	0.22	0.24	0.03	0.12	0.02	0.05
Art, culture and entertainment	1.05	0.52	0.00	0.00	0.09	0.09
Municipal and provincial government	0.25	0.38	0.25	0.95	0.00	0.00
Other/miscellaneous	0.07	0.10	5.08	2.31	0.37	0.26
Average	—	1.15	—	2.84	—	2.05
Minimum	0.07	0.10	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Maximum	28.12	2.83	25.74	10.12	17.69	7.60

The top 5 issues per agenda are in bold.

The length of the SOTU, however, seems rather stable over time. This is probably due to the fact that it has to be read by the prime minister in the parliament, preventing large variation in its length (they range from 193 sentences in 2003 to 430 sentences in 2005).

To assess the priorities of the MC, the press releases for each meeting were coded. Press releases were retrieved through the online archive of the national press center from 1996 onward. Data from before 1996 was obtained through its paper version predecessor, the summary of the weekly press releases, called *Facts* (*Feiten* or *Faits*). Most often, each council agenda item has its own specific statement, which was then coded on its policy content. On average, each meeting had about 18 agenda items and each year about 39 MCs were held. If we look at the distribution before and after 2000, it seems that the government has increasingly communicated its decisions

(an average of 15 versus 22 items, respectively). The number of agenda items per meeting has remained stable after 1996, except during the election years of 1999 and 2003, where it is slightly lower. During the coalition negotiations of the future government, the caretaker government cannot take new policy initiatives.

After coding these documents, the number of sentences or agenda items devoted to the specific policy areas are transformed into proportionate measures of attention. For the weekly MCs, these proportions are aggregated and calculated at the yearly level. This provides us with the relative attention to all the policy areas, which can then be compared from one agenda to another. Hence, there are two dependent variables – the SOTU speeches and the MCs – and the unit of analysis is the proportional attention paid to each policy category at the yearly level. Attention from the GA remains constant throughout the legislature, as there is only one measurement every 4 years.

A novel approach to analyzing drift is taken here, through the use of a two-stage heteroskedastic regression model that analyzes the impact of the attention to particular issues within the GA on the level of attention given to those issues in the SOTU speeches and MC reports, and examines whether the content of these documents tends to 'drift' away from the GA over time.

To accomplish this, the first stage (Panel A of Figure 2) estimates to what degree policy attention in the SOTU speeches and MCs is a function of the attention to that policy in the GA, like a regular regression model. However, it simultaneously estimates and thus corrects for possible heteroskedasticity driven by the time count of government duration in the second stage. Moreover, modeling this heteroskedasticity is a valuable indicator of drift in itself, as it captures systematic random deviations from what would otherwise be predicted on average.

Hence, in addition to examining the proportional policy attention driven by the attention to issues in the GA into the SOTU and MC in each year, the second stage of this model estimates whether the years in office of the government can account for increasing deviation of higher or lower levels of attention from that generally predicted by the GA. Thus, increasing heteroskedasticity across years suggests policy drift as governments age (Panel B), whereas decreasing heteroskedasticity would indicate an increased adherence to the priorities of the GA (Panel C). In other words, this model asks whether time can explain deviations from the degree of attention paid to issues in the SOTU or the MC that is – on average – predicted by the GA. Modeling drift as explainable asymmetries of residuals prevents us from requiring specific hypotheses for each issue area as to whether drift in one case is greater attention to an issue or lower attention to an issue from year to year. Rather, it is operationalized as greater or smaller deviations from that which would be predicted – on average – as a function of the duration of government. Finally, we compare the findings on these two policy measures.

With respect to the central research question of this study, if policy drift is observed, this indicates that the impact or grip of the GA fades over time.

a

b

c
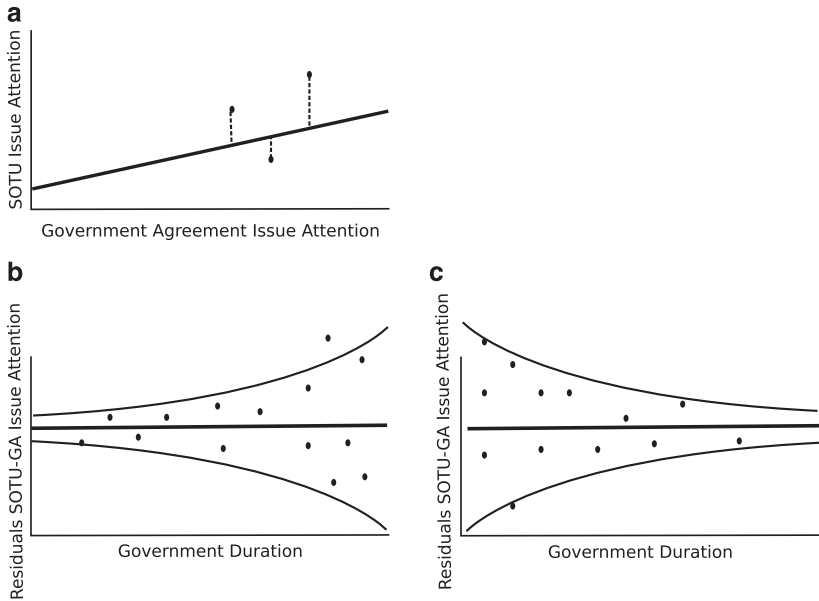
Figure 2: Illustration of two-stage heteroskedastic regression model. (a) Mean prediction of GA issue attention on corresponding SOTU issue attention; (b) Increasing variance; (c) Decreasing variance.

Conversely, if drift is not observed, this suggests that the GA remains stable as a source for future policies and as a constraint on new initiatives from outside the GA. Hence, drift – increasing policy divergence from the GA – is key to the research question of this study.

Results

Before moving to the statistical analyses, Table 1 provides an overview of the data and shows the distribution of attention among both policy agendas – which issues are most prominent and how much do they fluctuate over time. While a limited number of issues seem to dominate the agenda, Table 1 also shows that there are many differences, both within one agenda – as evidenced by the large standard deviations (SD) – and between the different agendas – as shown by the means. As could be expected, the average standard deviations show that there is more variation from one SOTU to another than between the more institutional MCs, with the GAs right in between. Even the most highly ranked issues do not dominate both agendas in the same order. There are, in fact, large differences. The standard deviations also show that the most prominent issue in the MCs (governmental affairs), for example, is

considerably more stable than that of the SOTUs (economics). This attention makes sense, as the MCs also deal with the daily management of the country, while SOTUs accompany the budget vote. More generally, the SOTUs are more 'volatile' than the MCs and the GAs.

Nevertheless, in the next stage, we choose to use two types of correlations to account for the institutionally high attention to certain issues when examining patterns of correspondence between the GA and both policy agendas: Pearson's r and Spearman's ρ. As the former takes into account the extent to which the proportions correspond, the latter looks at the ranking of the issue priorities, thus providing for a more robust test for any patterns that may occur.[1]

Indeed, some of the correspondence might not be specifically driven by attention from the GAs, but rather generated by general institutional attention, that is, systematically high attention to certain policies, such as the economy, social affairs and justice. Hence, it is important to be cautious and not to overstate the causal mechanisms this correspondence might represent. However, here we are specifically interested in the evolution of this correspondence over time, and as there is no reason to expect the institutional attention to change within a legislature from one year to another, it is perfectly possible to examine and interpret the evolution of the correspondence between two agendas over time.

Tables 2 and 3 display the correlations between the policy priorities of the GA and the ensuing SOTUs and MCs for each year at the major topic level. The correlations in both tables show fairly large correspondence in issue priorities between the GA and ensuing policy for most years. The average of the correlations in Table 2 is 0.58 for Pearson's r and 0.67 for Spearman's ρ. The lowest correlation in Table 3 is 0.47, with an average r of 0.78 and ρ of 0.80. This means that the broad policy priorities laid out in the GA match the ensuing policies really well. However, even though these correlations vary over time,

Table 2: Correlations between the 23 major policy priorities of the GA and the SOTUs for each year (1993–2006)

		GA	SOTU 1	SOTU 2	SOTU 3	SOTU 4
Pearson	1992	—	0.8561	0.6407		—
	1995	0.4889	0.6526	0.7088		0.6886
	1999	0.7766	0.5203	0.6579		0.3647
	2003	0.3079	0.6483	0.4468		0.4177
Spearman	1992	—	0.8053	0.7081		—
	1995	0.5866	0.6077	0.6271		0.7291
	1999	0.7238	0.7907	0.7860		0.5202
	2003	0.4923	0.7828	0.6189		0.5928

$P < 0.05$; $N = 23$, average $r = 0.58$, average $\rho = 0.67$.

Table 3: Correlations between the 23 major policy priorities of the GA and the MCs for each year (1992–2006)

		GA	MR 1	MR 2	MR 3	MR 4
Pearson	1992	0.7799	0.7638	0.6867	—
	1995	0.6938	0.8201	0.6783	0.6796
	1999	0.7736	0.8433	0.8402	0.7988
	2003	0.8722	0.8398	0.8072	0.7860
Spearman	1992	0.6600	0.6034	0.4733	—
	1995	0.7788	0.8132	0.7589	0.7980
	1999	0.8006	0.8813	0.8266	0.8414
	2003	0.9483	0.9587	0.9196	0.9121

$P < 0.05$; $N = 23$, average $r = 0.78$, average $\rho = 0.80$.

there does not seem to be a clear trend or pattern in these changes, and certainly not a systematically decreasing one.

When we look at the correlations at the lower policy level with 242 issue categories in Tables 4 and 5, it is clear that correspondence between the policy priorities of the GA and those of the SOTUs and MCs are considerably lower. The priorities of the GA and the SOTU speeches correlate on average at 0.42 (ρ 0.47). While the MCs best matched the GA at the major policy level, at the most specific issue level, they only correlate on average at 0.32 (ρ 0.43). This is similar to the correlations found by Walgrave *et al* (2006) between the GA and legislative outputs. Again, no systematic pattern seems to emerge. However, it indicates that there is more room for issues from outside the GA, as it is easier for governments to make small changes to specific policies than to change attention to the main policy domains. Therefore, the statistical analyses are performed at this most specific policy level.

Next, Table 6 shows the two-stage multiplicative heteroskedastic regression model with a lagged dependent variable to control for cross-time dependence. The unit of analysis is the proportional attention to each policy issue for each year. This means that we are dealing with pooled data, which considerably increases the *N* of the analyses. A lagged dependent variable is therefore introduced to account for autocorrelation, as attention from the dependent variables is not independent from one year to another (for a more general discussion on the mostly incremental nature of policymaking, see, for example, Wildavsky, 1964; Baumgartner and Jones, 1993). Hence, here too, we try to account for the 'institutional' attention certain issues might display. The analyses were also run without this lagged dependent variable to ensure that the strength of the relationship between the independent and the dependent variables is not underestimated. The first stage estimates the impact of the emphasis on the 242 policy issues in the independent variables (the GA and a lag of the dependent variable) on that of the SOTU speeches and MCs, respectively, like in

Table 4: Correlations between the 242 specific policy priorities of the GA and the SOTUs for each year (1993–2006)

		GA	MR 1	MR 2	MR 3	MR 4
Pearson	1992	—	0.4622	0.4287	—	
	1995	0.3960	0.4281	0.5655	0.4612	
	1999	0.5217	0.3866	0.3471	0.2268	
	2003	0.3463	0.4895	0.4848	0.3175	
Spearman	1992	—	0.5216	0.5377	—	
	1995	0.4819	0.4982	0.4250	0.3852	
	1999	0.6287	0.4443	0.5075	0.3794	
	2003	0.3481	0.5164	0.4089	0.4447	

$P < 0.001$; $N = 242$, average $r = 0.42$, average $\rho = 0.47$.

Table 5: Correlations between the 242 specific policy priorities of the GA and the MCs for each year (1992–2006)

		GA	MR 1	MR 2	MR 3	MR 4
Pearson	1992	0.2459	0.2095	0.1619	—	
	1995	0.2587	0.4356	0.4774	0.2929	
	1999	0.4319	0.4136	0.3181	0.3796	
	2003	0.2250	0.3551	0.3152	0.2712	
Spearman	1992	0.3461	0.3147	0.2146	—	
	1995	0.4290	0.3999	0.4479	0.4042	
	1999	0.4071	0.5087	0.4850	0.4259	
	2003	0.4913	0.5469	0.4750	0.5584	

$P < 0.001$; $N = 242$, average $r = 0.32$, average $\rho = 0.43$.

regular regression models. The second stage then estimates the variance of the first stage using another explanatory variable: time. If, indeed, policy drifts away from the GA over time, this would imply that deviation from the mean (variance) would systematically increase.

The regression results in Table 6 show that the variance does not increase with the duration of the government. Hence, the 'age' of the government does not diminish the degree to which attention to a topic in the GA predicts attention to that same policy topic in the SOTU or the MC. Results suggest the opposite for the MCs; in other words, the GA is better able to explain policy attention in the last years than in the first years. This could indicate that coalition parties avoid taking risks as elections near and stick closer to the GA. Thus, and contrary to the expectations, it is safe to

Table 6: Two-stage heteroskedastic regression model predicting policy attention on SOTUs and MCs (first stage) and drift away from the GA (second stage)

		SOTU		MC	
		Coefficient (SE)	P	Coefficient (SE)	P
Stage 1: Explaining attention (mean)	Lag_DV	0.56 (0.01)	0.00	0.84 (0.01)	0.00
	GA	0.33 (0.02)	0.00	0.03 (0.01)	0.00
	Cons.	0.06 (0.02)	0.00	0.05 (0.01)	0.00
Stage 2: Explaining drift (variance)	Time	−0.04 (0.02)	0.05	−0.13 (0.02)	0.00
	Cons.	0.42 (0.06)	0.00	−1.13 (0.06)	0.00
	N	3388	—	3388	—
	Pseudo R^2	0.1520	—	0.4878	—
	VWLS R^2	0.4289	—	0.7337	—

conclude that no policy drift away from the GA – defined here as increasing divergence in policy priorities over time – occurs throughout the legislative term. The models ran excluding the lagged dependent variable and other alternative specification employing instrumental variables do not substantively challenge these results. Thus, the GA maintains its grip on policy throughout the entire legislative term. The absence of policy drift implies that the agenda space for issues from outside of the government remains stable or even decreases over time. This means that the GA remains as a strong constraint on policy initiatives in the end as in the beginning.

In addition, the first stage of the regression also confirms that the GA is not only a constraint, but also an important source of policy attention. Indeed, attention in the GA is a significant predictor of ensuing policy attention. This is especially strong in the first model where a 1 per cent increase of attention to a topic in the GA leads to a 0.33 per cent increase in attention in the SOTU, taking into account attention in the previous SOTU speech. This is considerably lower for the MCs (0.03 per cent), where inertia is more important.

Given the inert nature of the policy agendas, and particularly the MCs – implying that governments tend to make decisions on the same issues from one year to another – there is less margin or agenda space left for the GA to influence these priorities. Moreover, the explained variance of the second model is high, which means that the independent variables are very successful in predicting MC attention at the yearly level – this is, in part, due to the inclusion of the lagged dependent variable. VWLS R^2 is used to explain the variance because it provides a measure that is more similar to the R^2 of a regular regression. The lower R^2 for Model 1 suggests that the SOTU speeches are more volatile and leave more room for issues from outside the GA to be included. However, and most importantly, the inclusion of new issues and policies does not increase over time.

Discussion and Conclusion

The importance of GAs has been demonstrated through pledge studies in a number of coalition countries, over and again (Thomson, 2001; Mansergh and Thomson, 2007; Costello and Thomson, 2008; Moury, 2011). These studies have convincingly shown that political parties and governments tend to enact the policies they promise to implement at the onset of the legislative term. Coalition formation is thus considered as a true policy arena and the resulting GA as a solid policy agenda (Peterson and De Ridder, 1986; Timmermans, 2003). Yet, while these studies confirm the impact of the GAs, especially as a source for future policies, they do not tell us much about the constraining impact of the GA or about its impact on policy throughout the legislative term. The alternative research method used here, agenda-setting, is certainly not a new approach. However, its great advantage is that, by examining the relative issue emphasis of each policy domain, it is able to compare the policy priorities of different actors – or different activities of the same actor – over time, while not having to discard valuable information from the policy programs.

Hence, this technique allows us to examine whether the impact of the GA over policy changes across time, using the full policy agendas and not just a selection. By examining whether policy drift occurs, it is possible to investigate this constraining power of the GA over time. Policy drift is conceived of as cumulative 'intrusion' of new issues on the policy agenda, and thus increasing divergence in policy priorities from the initial policy program over time. The fact that drift is not observed means that the proportion of policy issues from outside the GA does not increase, confirming the constraining power of the GA. This is an important finding, as the strength of the impact of the GA in part determines the coherence and stability of coalition governments. Thus far, little empirical research had been done on the strength of the GA over time. The findings of this study suggest that members of the government, under impulse of their respective parties, generally do not take increasing risks as mutual trust has settled in or as new elections near – at least in Belgium.

Our statistical analyses show that GAs do not lose their impact on the ensuing policies of the government over time. In fact, GAs maintain a constraining grip on the policies the government carries out, even toward the end of the legislative term. This prevents policy drift – away from the original policy priorities – to occur, as suggested by Moury (2011). The analyses also confirm the GA as a policymaking source for the annual SOTU speeches and to a lesser degree for the weekly MC meetings. Both measures of policy show high correspondence with the GA with respect to their policy priorities. Altogether, the analyses confirm that the GA is not only a source for future policies, but also a constraint on new initiatives from outside of the agreement. The fact that no drift is observed can only indicate that policy promises are implemented at a steady rate and that the

proportion of issues from outside the agreement also remains stable throughout the legislature.

To expect that the prime minister or ministers of particular parties would increasingly try to impose their policy priorities as the government proceeds is not an unreasonable assumption. Certain parties can feel pressured to act after bad polls or lost elections at another policy level. Or, conversely, they might feel confident after positive election results or polls, and try to take advantage of their renewed electoral 'weight'. However, Belgium's consocional democracy presupposes power sharing between political actors to maintain government stability over time. Within this perspective, the respect of the initial policy agreements (even after a number of years) is the real cornerstone of the pacification of political tensions in a multi-segmented Belgium. As no 'policy drift' could be observed as the government ages, this implies that the GA in Belgium truly is a key document to grasp the federal government's policies and priorities. Moreover, the GA not only has a significant impact on the ensuing policies, it also maintains a grip on the policy space for new issues and policy changes that might appear during the cabinet's term.

It needs to be noted that such change is more likely to occur in a country with many policy venues – unlike Belgium, where parties are the main political actors – where an idea can catch on and spread (Walgrave and Varone, 2008). As a partitocracy, where parties are among the most powerful political actors (De Winter *et al*, 1996), policymaking in Belgium might be less sensitive to outside pressures than other countries. Moreover, the important cleavages in Belgian society (socio-economic and linguistic) emphasize the necessity of a strong and constraining governmental policy program. Hence, the findings of this study are mostly relevant to other countries governed by parties and especially countries with divided societies and governments. Nevertheless, this study markedly improves our understanding of how the GA is able to maintain its influence on policy over time, both as a source and as a constraint.

Most generally, we conclude from this analysis, that future studies may find promise in building on the agenda-setting approach in a comparative setting to explore the role of different parliamentary institutions for strengthening or weakening the grip of GAs across time, and the effect of this – if any – on coalition stability. Specifically, though, these findings, and particularly the comparison between the two policy agendas, tell us a great deal about the communication of the Belgian governments. The comparative approach, complemented by the knowledge of how the two policy measures come about, informs us on how the government's communication (SOTU) relates to its actions (MC). As the correspondence between the GA and the SOTU speeches remains stable over time, this suggests that the SOTU speeches, while confined by the GA, are not 'misused' by the government as a mere communication instrument and can therefore also be considered as a genuine policy agenda in Belgium.

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Note

1 In addition, correlations were also run excluding issues where both the independent and the dependent variable were zero. Although these correlations were slightly lower, similarly, no pattern emerged here either.

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