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Assessing the Responsiveness of Spanish Policymakers to the Priorities of their Citizens

LAURA CHAQUÉS BONAFONT and ANNA M. PALAU

This article analyses how well Spanish political elites have responded to the issues signalled as priorities preferred by Spanish citizens from the early 1990s to the present, and to what extent the degree of correspondence between citizens' and policymakers' priorities is related to elections, type of government, issue jurisdiction and institutional friction. To measure this the authors rely on Most Important Problem surveys and several databases on laws, bills, oral questions and annual speeches, coded according to the comparative agendas project. They argue that the prioritisation of issues by political elites better matches public preferences at the agenda-setting stage than at the decision-making stage, and that correspondence of public and policymakers' priorities is inversely related to institutional friction. The evidence also illustrates that policymakers are more responsive to public priorities on those issues without shared jurisdiction, when the executive governs without a majority and immediately after elections.

Most Spanish citizens believe that policymakers do not respond to their preferences and that there is an increasing distance between the policies they signal as the most important and policy decisions (Martínez and Crespo 2006). In 2009, more than 70 per cent of Spanish citizens believed that policymakers were not very concerned about what they thought, and almost 80 per cent considered that their ability to influence the policymaking process was almost non-existent. These attitudes have proven to be quite stable over time, in contrast to political discontent or satisfaction with the performance of the incumbent government, which has fluctuated according to economic and political circumstances from the democratic transition to the present (Gunther and Montero 2009). This way of thinking contradicts existing empirical analyses of political responsiveness. As Manin *et al.* (1999: 18) and Manza and Lomax (2002) emphasise, existing research demonstrates that there is some correspondence between public opinion and

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policy, and that policymakers more often than not follow public preferences in advanced democracies.

In line with this, the aim of this article is to analyse whether Spanish policymakers have been paying attention to the issues signalled as priorities by Spanish citizens from the early 1990s to the present, and to what extent variations in the degree of correspondence between citizens' and policymakers' priorities are related to institutional factors. From different perspectives, scholars have analysed the correspondence between public opinion and political behaviour as a means to better understand the functioning of democracy (Page and Shapiro 1983; Page 1994; Erickson *et al.* 2002; Manza and Lomax 2002; Przeworski *et al.* 1999). Some existing empirical research compares the attitudes of representatives and constituents, focusing on the correspondence between legislators' policy positions – often measured by roll-call votes – and their constituents' policy preferences, measured by opinion polls (e.g. Miller and Stokes 1963; Weisberg 1978; Burden 2007).

Recent analyses of agenda-setting develop an alternative approach more focused on policy priorities (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). In order to explore the relationship between public preferences and the political agenda, Jones *et al.* (2009) analyse the extent to which the issues prioritised by policymakers in different policy venues (speeches, bills, laws, budgets, etc.) match those issues prioritised by the general public in the US from 1945 to the present. From a similar perspective, Soroka and Wlezien (2004, 2010) develop a cross-national comparison of the correspondence between public preferences and public spending in Canada, the UK and the US in order to test their *thermostatic model* of opinion and policy. Following this model, Jennings and John (2009) analyse the reciprocal relationship between the issues prioritised by the executive in the Queen's Speeches and public opinion in the UK; and Binzer and Klemmensen (2005, 2008) analyse to what extent the issues prioritised by the executive in speeches and public spending have corresponded to public preferences in the UK, Denmark and the US over the last few decades.

In this article we follow this agenda-setting approach to the study of political responsiveness in Spain. To focus on the Spanish case is in itself a contribution, as most empirical analyses of the link between political activities and public preferences focus on the US and, more recently, the UK, Canada or Denmark. The questions we address are (1) whether Spanish policymakers respond to issues signalled as priorities by citizens (Manza and Lomax 2002); (2) whether the correspondence between parliamentary and public priorities is related to institutional factors such as political decentralisation, type of government and the electoral process (Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Binzer and Klemmensen 2005, 2008); and (3) to what extent variations in correspondence between citizens' and policymakers' priorities can be explained by institutional friction (Jones *et al.* 2009, Jones and Baumgartner 2005).

To answer these questions we have measured public preferences using Most Important Problem surveys, and policymakers' activities using the information provided by databases – on laws, bills, oral questions and annual speeches by prime ministers – created by the Spanish policy agendas project (<http://www.ub.edu/spanishpolicyagendas>) following the methodology of the comparative agendas project (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Jones and Baumgartner 2005). Our results indicate that the Spanish case corroborates the hypothesis of previous research on correspondence: public policy seems to follow public opinion, although large differences exist across policy areas and policy venues (Manza and Lomax 2002). First, following the work developed by Jones and Baumgartner (2001, 2005) and Jones *et al.* (2009), we arrive at the conclusion that public and policymakers' priorities are inversely related to institutional friction – the higher the institutional friction, the less responsive the policymaking channel to citizens' preferences. Second, in line with Soroka and Wlezien (2010), we present some evidence as to the importance of political decentralisation: the higher the degree of political decentralisation, the lower the correspondence between public opinion and parliamentary activities at the national level. Finally, the evidence presented here for the Spanish case suggests that policymakers respond better to public preferences immediately after elections and when the government has no majority in Parliament, which corroborates previous analyses of the UK and Canada (Jennings and John 2009; Soroka and Wlezien 2010).

The article is organised as follows. We first develop several hypotheses as to how far variations in the degree of correspondence between citizens' and policymakers' priorities are related to institutional factors. The second section explains the methodology and data. Based on this, the third section describes the evolution of public and political agendas in Spain from 1994 to 2007, and the fourth section analyses the correspondence between the two. The last part of the article discusses to what extent correspondence between the priorities of the public and policymakers is explained by institutional friction, political decentralisation, type of government and the electoral process.

Are Policymakers Responding to Public Priorities?

Correspondence between what the public identifies as its major concerns and policymakers' activities exists and is expected in a democracy (Manin *et al.* 1999). A government will respond to the interests and preferences of citizens because, in democracies, politicians suffer the consequences of their policies and unpopular policies make them lose elections (Maravall 1999). There is a large body of research that demonstrates this relationship between public preferences and policymakers' priorities using different approaches and methodologies (e.g. Page and Shapiro 1983; Page 1994; Stimson *et al.* 1995; Maravall 1999; Manin *et al.* 1999; Erikson *et al.* 2002). Despite this, as

Manza and Lomax (2002) emphasise, although policy tends to follow public opinion more often than not, the capacity of policymakers to respond to citizens' preferences varies across issues, across countries and across policy venues, and these variations are partly explained by the institutional arrangements governing the political system.

In order to capture how institutions have an impact on political responsiveness (and policy dynamics), Jones and Baumgartner (2005) and Jones *et al.* (2009) develop the concept of institutional friction. This concept is measured by taking into account the transaction costs associated with a particular policy venue and the number of individuals and collective actors whose agreement is required for decision-making. According to Jones *et al.* (2009), institutional friction is an important variable for explaining lack of correspondence, reducing the chances of sudden policy changes and thus the capacity of policymakers to respond rapidly to public preferences. It increases as (1) the number of individuals or collective actors whose agreement is required for a change in policy increases; and (2) as a proposal moves through the policy stages (from very high for organic laws to very low for speeches). In other words, institutional friction varies across policy venues (speeches, oral questions, bills, laws) and increases as an issue moves through the policy stages from agenda-setting actions (those that influence which issues will be formally considered by the government and policymakers) to decision-making actions (formal decisions). The basic assumption is that the capacity of policymakers to respond to citizens' preferences will vary across policy venues according to these differences in the level of institutional friction: the greater the institutional friction, the lower the capacity of representatives to respond to public demands in the short run. Following this line of research we test this first hypothesis for the Spanish case.

H1: Correspondence between public and policymakers' priorities is inversely related to institutional friction: the greater the institutional friction, the less responsive a policymaking channel is to citizens' preferences.

Institutional friction is an important variable explaining different levels of correspondence across policy venues and time. However, as suggested by different theoretical perspectives, correspondence also varies according to other institutional factors that structure the functioning of the political system at the macro level, such as the distribution of jurisdiction across different levels of government. One of the most interesting debates about political responsiveness relates to this process of increasing delegation of political power to subnational and supranational institutions, and the creation of multilevel systems of governance. As Scharpf (1999) argues, the increase in the number of governments involved in the policymaking process makes it less clear which government is doing what in relation to specific

policy areas. The attribution of responsibilities for policy areas is less clearly defined, which results in a reduction in the incentives of policymakers to pay attention to public opinion. Each government can blame the other for political inactivity, reducing the electoral costs incurred by a lack of responsiveness.

From a different perspective, Soroka and Wlezien (2010) argue that responsiveness to policy at any particular level of government will be lower in federal than in unitary states, as responsibility for those issues signalled as priorities by citizens is less clearly attributed. Thus, in federal systems, responsiveness will be especially low in those policy areas where there is overlapping jurisdiction. The analysis by Soroka and Wlezien (2004, 2010) of the correspondence of public expenditure and public opinion in the US, the UK and Canada, and the analysis by Jennings and John (2009) of the Queen's Speeches and public opinion in the UK provide some evidence for this argument. Both illustrate how parliamentary and governmental actors at national level are less responsive to public opinion in those policy areas where regional or local governments are involved.

Testing whether the distribution of jurisdiction across different levels of governments has an impact on political responsiveness is especially relevant for the Spanish case. The Spanish Constitution of 1978 defines a quasi-federal system of political decentralisation, which changed the fundamental pattern of politics in Spain after Franco's death. This is a quite open and flexible system of political decentralisation aimed at accommodating different political positions and interests within the structure of government during political transition (Linz and Stepan 2006; Tezanos *et al.* 1993). The creation of the *Estado de las Autonomías* was the result of demands for self-rule by certain territorially-based groups which reflect the distribution of power in Spanish society (Hooghe *et al.* 2008; Requejo and Caminal 2010). Each of the 17 *Comunidades Autónomas* (CCAA) has significant capacity to exercise authority in its territory over a wide range of issues. More precisely, according to the Spanish Constitution, the national government has the monopoly of regulation over defence, foreign policy, justice, criminal and commercial law, foreign trade, currency, citizenship, and customs and immigration, while each CCAA can claim jurisdiction over a list of issues including social welfare, police, economic issues like taxation, or cultural and educational policy (Aja 2003).

Following Soroka and Wlezien (2010) we should expect differences in responsiveness across these policy areas according to political jurisdiction. In other words, for those issues over which the national government has exclusive jurisdiction (like foreign affairs), correspondence between citizens' priorities should be higher than for issues with shared jurisdiction (like welfare-related issues). The overall degree of responsiveness could be

significant, but regarding one level of government (the national level), correspondence should be lower for those issues in which the national government shares political responsibilities (in the regulation of issues or in their implementation) with the CCAA. This lower level of correspondence could be related to two different arguments: one possible explanation is that Spanish national policymakers are not responding to citizens' priorities because they do not have jurisdiction to regulate or to go further in the regulation of a particular issue. Another argument is more related to the lack of political will of national policymakers to respond to citizens' priorities, in a political context in which they can blame others for political inactivity, avoiding the electoral costs deriving from lack of responsiveness. In any case, we would expect that:

H2: Correspondence between public and policymakers' priorities is higher for those policy issues without shared jurisdiction: the lower the degree of political decentralisation, the more correspondence between the priorities of the public and political elites.

In order to analyse how institutions matter, we also consider the type of government as an independent variable that may influence correspondence between public and policymakers' priorities (Lijphart 1999). We depart from the idea that the cost of reaching a consensus in the Spanish parliamentary system increases when the governing party does not have a majority in Parliament. As in any other parliamentary system, we expect that the incentives to make compromises are lower for an executive that has a substantial majority, whereas an executive without a majority in the legislature is forced to compromise more (Binzer and Klemmensen 2008: 315). Therefore, when the Spanish executive does not have a majority, like the first mandate of José M. Aznar (*Partido Popular*, PP) from 1996 to 2000 or José L. Rodríguez Zapatero (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*, PSOE) from 2004 to the present, it is expected that a wider range of preferences of different political parties will be accommodated, and the outcome is likely to be closer to the preferences of the majority of the electorate. Soroka and Wlezien (2004: 8) employ a similar argument to explain the case of Canada, arriving at the conclusion that under a majority, 'it is more difficult for opposition parties to undertake error correction, adjusting the government's positions where it may be going too far or not far enough given public preferences'. On the basis of these arguments, we would expect the prioritisation of issues by Spanish political elites to vary according to whether the executive has a majority of seats in Parliament or not.

H3: When the executive is a minority government, correspondence between the priorities of the executive and public opinion is higher.

Finally, we also consider whether the electoral process has an impact on correspondence and whether political elites are more responsive to public preferences when elections are closer. The parliamentary session before elections is an important venue for giving visibility to those issues that potentially maximise the votes of political parties. The basic assumption is that the prioritisation of issues by political elites across different policy venues (oral questions, bills, speeches) is the result of a rational process in which policymakers, among other things, try to maximise their chances of re-election. Hence political parties will give special attention to those issues that are particularly salient to their voters immediately before elections as a means of launching an electoral campaign and maximising their chances of re-election (Kuklinski 1978; Sartori 1987; Jones 1994; Maravall 1999, Klingemann *et al.* 2006). By the same token, policymakers will tend to give special attention to public priorities during the parliamentary session immediately after elections, when a new government has come into power. As democracy is about the mandate that voters give parties to implement their preferred policies, policymakers also take into account public preferences when setting the agenda for the next legislature. Policymakers commit themselves to achieving particular policy goals according to public concerns because this is one of the basic elements of the functioning of a representative democracy, but also because they are seeking future electoral rewards (Manin *et al.* 1999). In short, the priorities of the public and policymakers will match better during parliamentary sessions closer to elections, as defined in our last hypothesis:

H4: Correspondence between the priorities of the public and policymakers is higher in election years.

Data and Methodology

To study issue prioritisation, we have created several databases following the methodology of the Comparative Agendas Project (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, Jones and Baumgartner 2005). In the case of the political agenda, each speech, oral question, bill and law has been coded according to a universal coding system based on 19 major topic categories and 247 subcategories (Table 1). This coding system, first developed for the US, has been adapted to the characteristics of the Spanish political system by introducing certain revisions such as questions dealing with the national health system or ETA terrorism. These databases cover the period 1977–2008 on laws (organic laws, ordinary laws and decree-laws), executive and parliamentary group bills, oral questions and Presidente del Gobierno speeches, and include in total almost 30,000 records. Table 2 gives information on the 15,530 records for the period considered in this analysis: 1994 to 2007.

TABLE 1
ISSUE TOPICS OF THE COMPARATIVE AGENDAS PROJECT

1. Macroeconomics
2. Civil rights
3. Health
4. Agriculture
5. Labour
6. Education
7. Environment
8. Energy
10. Transportation
12. Internal affairs and justice
13. Social policy
14. Housing
15. Commerce and industrial policy
16. Defence
17. Science and technology
18. Foreign trade
19. International affairs
20. Government and public administration
21. Public lands and water management

TABLE 2
POLICYMAKING CHANNELS

Policymaking channel	Records (1994–2008)
Organic laws	117
Ordinary laws	684
Decree-laws	205
Executive bills	622
Parliamentary bills	1100
Oral questions	7995
Speeches	4,807
Total	15,530

In order to assess the public agenda we rely on data collected by the *Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas* (CIS), which has reported citizens' views on the most important problem (MIP) facing the nation since 1994. Before 1994 the wording and format of the survey changed dramatically, which limits the possibilities of measuring correspondence before then for the case of Spain. MIP responses provide data on the problems people think are most important for the nation. They illustrate which issues are salient to the general public and reflect what problems most concern people. To avoid problems related to the variability of question wording, we have coded the answers to the question: 'What is, in your opinion, the most important problem that currently exists in Spain? And the second? And the third?' from 1994 to 2007. This is an open, multi-answer question that provides information on issue prioritisation, but not on citizens' policy positions or preferences for solutions. To translate CIS polls into issue attention percentages we took three steps following Jones *et al.* (2009). First we coded

each answer according to the Policy Agendas Project methodology; second, we calculated for each poll the percentages for each issue category; finally, we aggregated the data on an annual basis, taking average values in those years where multiple polls were conducted.¹

Evolution of Public and Political Agendas

Few issues capture most of the attention of Spanish public opinion. The evolution of the economy, terrorism, political corruption and health issues occupy a prominent place in the public agenda, capturing between 80 and 90 per cent of attention during the 1990s. In 1996, these four issues so dominated the agenda (90.9 per cent) that there was little room for public discussion of anything else (Figure 1). As a whole (1994 to 2008), economic issues capture 34.6 per cent of the public agenda, justice and crime (terrorism) 25 per cent, and government affairs and health issues about 8.3 per cent each. From the turn of the twenty-first century, policy areas traditionally overlooked increasingly capture public attention (Figure 2). In 2006, 17.2 per cent of all responses fell into the category of rights (representing only 0.53 per cent in 1995); housing issues also register a significant increase with the new millennium (representing 12.8 per cent of all responses in 2007, while only 1.3 per cent in 2001), and other issues like defence, housing and/or transport also increase moderately in relation to previous years.

FIGURE 1
MOST SALIENT ISSUES ON THE PUBLIC AGENDA (1994–2007)

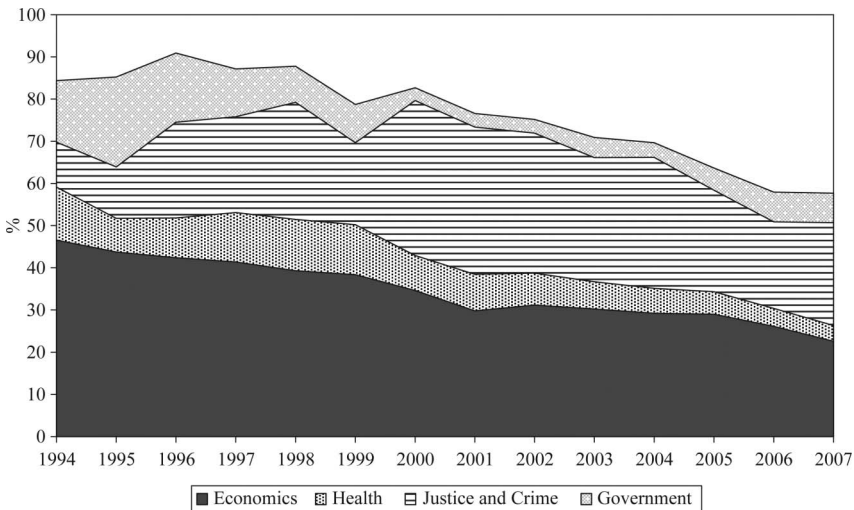
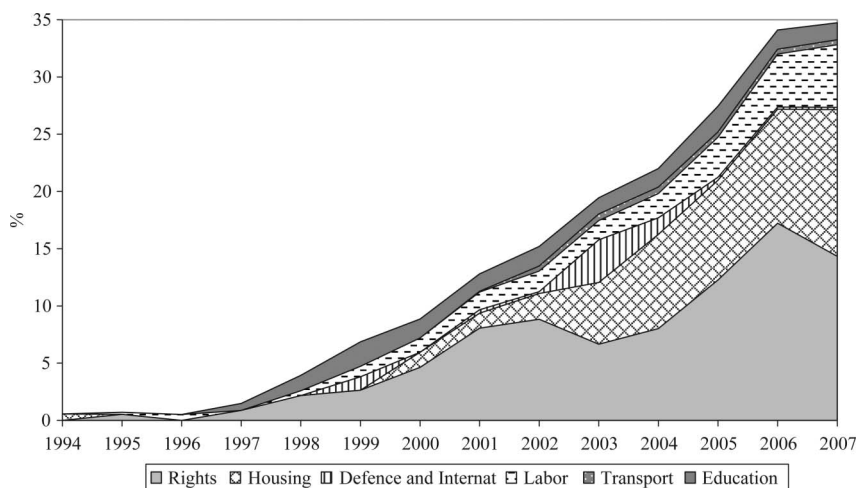


FIGURE 2
NEW ISSUES ON THE PUBLIC AGENDA (1994–2007)



The questions to be answered are whether the issues that public opinion defines as the most important are also the priorities of policymakers; whether both the public and the executive have paid attention to similar problems over the last 14 years; to what extent José M. Aznar and José L. Rodríguez Zapatero have given more attention to rights, housing or international affairs while giving their annual speeches; and whether the issues addressed by parliamentary groups while introducing an oral question or bill are changing in the same direction as public priorities. To answer these questions we first describe issue prioritisation across different policymaking channels, and in the next section we measure the correlation between these venues and public opinion.

Table 3 gives information about the average percentage of attention given to each topic in different policy venues. First, there are some issues that always capture most of the attention of Spanish policymakers. Economic issues, labour, crime, foreign affairs and government capture most attention in all policymaking channels, with some exceptions in the case of parliamentary bills. Parliamentary groups do not pay much attention to foreign affairs (only 1.3 per cent) or economics (4.8 per cent), and focus more on rights-related issues (9.9 per cent), education (7.4 per cent) and social policy (8.4 per cent). Second, there are some issues that never capture the attention of policymakers, such as energy, the environment, housing, research and development, foreign trade, social policy and transport issues. Here again there are two important exceptions: more than 8 per cent of the oral questions presented over the last 14 years are devoted to transport issues, and 8.4 per cent of parliamentary bills deal with social policy issues.

TABLE 3
 PERCENTAGE OF ATTENTION BY POLICY AREA (1994–2007)

	MIP	Laws (all types)	Parliamentary bills	Executive bills	Oral questions	Speeches
Economics	35.5	14.5	4.7	16.3	6.6	15.8
Rights	6.4	3.7	10.0	3.8	4.1	2.2
Health	8.6	3.5	2.1	3.1	6.3	2.5
Agriculture	0.4	4.6	1.5	4.2	6.8	1.0
Labour	2.6	6.1	9.6	5.2	3.8	10.9
Education	1.2	3.6	6.8	4.1	7.7	6.3
Environment	1.2	3.0	3.0	3.3	3.4	1.2
Energy	0.0	1.3	0.1	1.4	3.0	0.5
Transport	0.3	4.8	3.4	4.7	8.3	1.7
Crime	24.8	14.4	13.7	13.3	9.6	14.7
Welfare	3.4	1.2	7.3	1.0	2.2	2.7
Housing	4.0	0.9	2.8	1.3	2.3	1.6
Commerce	0.0	13.5	5.7	13.1	4.3	1.4
Defence	0.3	3.4	5.1	3.2	5.1	3.1
Science	0.0	2.9	4.5	3.6	4.5	2.8
Foreign trade	0.0	0.7	0.3	0.5	0.5	1.4
International	0.0	4.1	1.0	5.2	6.7	11.8
Government	8.3	9.9	15.8	9.1	11.2	17.1
Public lands	0.2	3.9	2.2	3.7	3.4	1.2

In addition, three of these issues – foreign trade, energy, and research and development – are never mentioned as important by public opinion, which could be seen as an indicator of the lack of visibility and opacity of the policymaking process associated with these issues.

Third, there are some issues that have gained increased attention over time. Table 4 provides information about the percentage of attention devoted to each issue for the period 1994–2000 compared with that devoted to the same issues in the new millennium (2001–07). First, there is only one issue (rights) that captures an increasing amount of attention in all venues; second, economic and industry-related issues have been gaining less and less attention over the last decade (although they capture a sizeable share of the political agenda for the whole period); third, some issues are especially important in a particular venue: there are an increasing number of executive bills about trade, an increasing number of laws on education, and an increasing focus on labour, crime and justice (especially terrorism) and rights issues in annual speeches. Finally, parliamentary groups are giving special attention to welfare and rights issues through the introduction of parliamentary bills, and to issues related to crime and international affairs through oral questions.

Measuring Correspondence

To measure whether the issues that are the focus of policymaking activities are also the priorities of the public, we construct a non-symmetrical

TABLE 4
NEW ISSUES: PERCENTAGE CHANGE 1994–2000 AND 2001–2007

	MIP	Laws (all types)	Parliamentary bills	Executive bills	Oral questions	Speeches
Economics	-12.61	1.18	1.82	0.09	0.16	-8.87
Rights	9.23	2.29	3.37	2.76	0.64	2.84
Health	-4.57	-0.19	0.86	0.39	-5.08	-1.40
Agriculture	0.09	-1.98	-2.43	-1.72	-2.94	0.12
Labour	2.50	0.92	0.30	-0.15	-0.47	6.54
Education	0.85	0.91	-3.15	-0.91	0.30	3.06
Environment	-0.20	1.76	-0.01	1.50	1.34	1.36
Energy	0.00	-0.12	0.19	-0.74	0.47	0.26
Transport	0.42	1.55	-1.17	-0.55	-1.87	1.91
Crime	6.47	-0.10	-4.01	2.57	1.84	5.47
Welfare	-0.38	0.13	4.17	-0.12	0.53	0.05
Housing	6.68	-0.84	-1.14	-1.57	2.60	0.90
Commerce	0.00	3.62	0.57	8.64	0.73	-1.40
Defence	0.66	0.05	-2.72	-0.32	-0.67	-1.17
Science	0.00	-2.08	-1.30	-3.08	-0.70	-0.05
Foreign trade	0.00	-0.85	-0.68	0.15	0.14	-0.86
International	0.07	-2.99	1.31	-6.57	2.26	-1.03
Government	-7.16	-4.17	3.17	-1.31	0.01	-8.62
Public lands	-0.57	0.89	0.54	0.93	0.86	0.90

correspondence matrix following the research design developed by Jones *et al.* (2009). The correspondence matrix masses correlations formed from the *priorities-by-time* and the *activities-by-time* matrices for any one policymaking channel. In the *priorities-by-time* matrix, each column is a MIP topic (15 in total)² and each row is a year. Each cell entry indicates the percentage of the public that considers this topic to be the most important problem facing the nation. In the *activities-by-time* matrix, each entry shows the percentage of activity in a policy channel that is devoted to each of these 15 issues in a given year (14 in total). By estimating the correlation between the *priorities-by-time* and the *activities-by-time* matrices we obtain the correspondence matrix. Each entry in the matrix shows the correlation between the proportion of all MIP responses dedicated to one issue and the proportion of total activity in a policy channel devoted to the same issue over the 14 years (14 annual observations).

As an illustration, Table 5 correlates MIP responses with speeches. We observe that speeches, oral questions and decree-laws are the policymaking channels that most strongly correlate with the priorities of the public. Speeches and MIPs are strongly correlated (with statistically significant correlations) with economics, rights, labour, transport, housing and government affairs. Oral questions are strongly correlated with rights, health, housing, defence and international affairs, and decree-laws with agriculture, government affairs and public lands. The correlations are weaker in the other policymaking channels, particularly with regard to organic laws and parliamentary group bills (no statistically significant

TABLE 5
CORRELATION BETWEEN PUBLIC'S MOST IMPORTANT PROBLEM AND SPEECHES (1994–2007)

	Economy	Rights	Health	Agricult.	Labour	Education	Environ.	Transport	Crime	Welfare	Housing	Defence	Internat.	Govern.	Public lands
Economy	0.832**	-0.763**	0.247	0.109	-0.490	-0.668**	-0.501	-0.770**	-0.382	-0.218	-0.482	0.154	0.276	0.635*	-0.662**
Rights	-0.729**	0.838**	-0.288	-0.155	0.677**	0.483	0.343	0.717**	0.327	0.128	0.604*	-0.283	-0.438	-0.597*	.536*
Health	0.727**	-0.759**	0.386	0.354	-0.394	-0.449	-0.401	-0.612*	-0.274	0.013	-0.613*	0.442	0.357	0.214	-0.361
Agricult.	0.185	-0.152	-0.241	0.060	-0.092	0.001	0.373	0.009	0.321	-0.261	-0.411	-0.043	-0.132	-0.107	0.036
Labour	-0.697**	0.904**	-0.306	-0.255	0.629*	0.541*	0.355	0.680**	0.246	0.120	0.692**	-0.264	-0.553*	-0.500	0.503
Education	-0.709**	0.513	0.000	0.330	0.178	0.470	0.190	0.791**	0.619*	0.466	0.247	0.254	0.022	-0.794**	0.494
Environ.	-0.046	-0.190	0.006	0.708**	-0.160	-0.156	-0.192	0.313	0.591*	0.568*	-0.337	0.428	0.285	-0.427	-0.193
Transport	-0.815**	0.540*	-0.350	0.074	0.302	0.302	0.316	0.744**	0.343	0.165	0.482	-0.261	0.060	-0.256	0.341
Crime	-0.525	0.132	0.246	-0.001	-0.034	0.671**	0.432	0.292	0.200	0.276	-0.131	0.116	0.256	-0.500	0.607*
Welfare	0.009	-0.192	0.576*	0.025	-0.519	0.149	-0.155	0.087	0.357	0.205	-0.110	0.677**	0.169	-0.263	0.017
Housing	-0.749**	0.890**	-0.370	-0.270	0.524	0.504	0.305	0.678**	0.139	0.098	0.775**	-0.285	-0.450	-0.298	0.458
Defence	-0.375	-0.145	-0.168	0.403	-0.179	-0.087	0.298	0.459	0.179	0.453	-0.081	0.113	0.590*	-0.037	0.022
Internat.	-0.640*	0.446	-0.277	-0.134	0.083	0.542*	0.105	0.200	0.070	0.116	0.135	-0.060	-0.060	0.037	0.234
Govern.	0.706**	-0.412	-0.007	-0.203	-0.274	-0.621*	-0.351	-0.611*	-0.322	-0.444	-0.113	-0.034	-0.109	0.690**	-0.638*
Public land	0.393	-0.258	-0.413	-0.138	-0.294	-0.511	-0.285	-0.313	0.137	-0.535*	-0.063	-0.207	-0.026	0.503	-0.405

Note: Pearson correlation coefficient.

*Statistically significant at the 0.05 level; **statistically significant at the 0.01 level (for the appropriate one-tailed test).

correlation), and ordinary laws and government bills (only one significant correlation in the issue area of rights). The question is to what extent institutional friction can explain these variations.

Institutional Friction and Correspondence

Table 6 ranks each policymaking channel considered in the analysis – speeches, oral questions, bills and laws – according to the degree of institutional friction (as defined above, cost required to come to an acceptable agreement, including bargaining and institutionally-imposed costs). This classification is based on the formal rules and institutional arrangements associated with bills, laws, oral questions and speeches, as defined by the Spanish Constitution and the statutes of the *Congreso de los Diputados* and the Senate. Speeches – the *discurso del candidato a la Presidencia del Gobierno* and the *discurso del Presidente del Gobierno sobre el Estado de la Nación* – have the lowest level of institutional friction and the highest level of visibility among policymaking channels. They are one of the most visible political events of the year, mainly because what the President says is reported by the media and watched and debated by the public and their representatives. There is no defined limit on the length of the speech, but the cost of shifting speech attention to a new issue should be relatively low compared to other types of activity. If the *Presidente del Gobierno* wants to give more attention to an issue, he does not need the consent of other political actors as is required (for example) to pass a law. In spite of this, there are some differences between the two types of speech we are considering here. In the case of the *discurso de investidura*, the candidate's speech is submitted to a final vote in the *Congreso de los Diputados*, introducing an institutional cost that does not exist in the case of the *Discurso sobre el Estado de la Nación*.

Parliamentary control activities are policymaking channels with a low level of institutional friction. They are usually reported by the mass media, although their level of visibility is not as high as for speeches. In this analysis we have only considered oral questions introduced in plenary meetings, which are basically an instrument for supervising the implementation of policy decisions by the executive. The introduction of an oral question is a quite open process in which a single deputy or parliamentary group can be involved. But as Wiberg (1995: 197) stresses, the introduction of an oral question always comprises many stages involving the voluntary participation of at least three distinct types of actor: one or more MP, the Chairman and other staff of the Parliament, and one or more minister. Oral questions are submitted in writing 48 hours in advance of the regular question-time session and presented orally by the relevant MP. They are always answered in writing or orally, but this is not completely at the minister's discretion, because it is the Chairman, in collaboration with the other members of the Parliament's bureau and the Speakers, who sets the agenda. Accordingly,

TABLE 6
INDICATORS TO MEASURE INSTITUTIONAL FRICTION ACROSS POLICYMAKING CHANNELS

Policy-making channel	Cost category	Agenda setters	Restrictions on issue content	Voting required?
Speeches	Very low	Initiator: candidate to <i>Presidente del Gobierno</i>	Formally regulated. Informal restrictions apply in relation to the content (especially when there is not absolute majority in the Chamber)	Yes First voting: overall majority of the members of congress Second voting: minority of the members
Oral questions	Very low	Initiator: <i>Presidente del Gobierno</i>	No formal restrictions	No
Oral questions	Low	Initiators: members of Parliament Veto players: Chairman, Parliamentary board, Speakers. The executive could postpone the answer	Formal restrictions apply: oral questions must be relevant, fall directly under the responsibilities of the Executive, and never deal with personal or private matters, or disorderly expressions	No
Bills	Moderate	Initiator: executive Veto players: Parliamentary board	No restrictions	Yes
Bills	Moderate	Initiator: members of Parliament and parliamentary groups	No restrictions	Yes
Laws	Moderate	Veto players: Parliamentary board, executive Initiator: executive	Only deal with issues that may not affect the regulation of the basic institutions of the State, the CCAA and issues regulated in Title I of the Constitution	Yes; need to be confirmed within 30 days after its enactment
Ordinary laws	High	Initiator: executive, Senate, CCAA, citizens, members of Congress	Limited to the regulation of fundamental rights and public liberties, national electoral system, and the modification of basic institutions (e.g. Constitutional Court)	Yes
Organic laws	Very high	Initiator: in this case, the parliamentary board and Speakers qualify the issue as organic law		Yes

the ability of the MP and ministers to use oral questions as devices to publicise good news or to delay reactions to bad news is controlled by the Chairman and the Speakers. Finally, some restrictions exist regarding the type of question that MPs are allowed to ask: they must be relevant, fall directly under the responsibilities of the executive, and never deal with personal or private matters, or disorderly expressions.

Bills are the third policy venue considered in the analysis. Bills are not final policy decisions, but they do provide information about the direction of policy and the legislative priorities of government and parliamentary groups that goes beyond symbolic discussions about policy issues. In the case of Spain, the introduction of a bill is an open process in which several policy actors can participate – the executive, parliamentary groups of any of the chambers, the general population and regional authorities (CCAA). Institutional costs – areas of friction – are higher than for speeches and oral questions, mainly because they require a first voting to get through the legislative process. There are big differences between executive bills and the rest. First, government bills are prioritised over any other bill introduced during the same parliamentary period; and, second, the chances of passing a government bill are higher. Almost 90 per cent of the bills introduced by parliamentary groups have no chance of getting through the legislative process, while almost 81 per cent of government bills are eventually passed. In many cases, parliamentary bills are attention-seeking devices used by political parties to weaken the executive, or simply to respond to the preferences and demands of the electorate.

Finally, laws are the basic indicator for measuring the prioritisation of issues in a particular polity. The level of institutional friction is higher than for the rest of the policy venues, with big differences according to the type of law. Organic laws are limited to certain issues – mainly fundamental rights and public liberties, the general electoral system and modification of basic institutions like the Constitutional Court – and, in order to be passed, an overall majority of the Members of Congress is required. Decree-laws, on the other hand, can only deal with issues that do not affect the regulation of the basic institutions of the state, the rights, duties and liberties of the citizens as regulated by Title I of the Constitution, the CCAA or general electoral law; and they follow a special legislative process led by the executive.

Table 7 summarises the correlation results between MIP and each policymaking channel (each column represents the main diagonal from each of the correspondence tables) and gives information about the number of significant correlations and average correlations. We observe that, as predicted by the institutional friction hypothesis, those policymaking channels associated with a higher level of friction have a lower level of correspondence with public priorities than those associated with a low level of institutional friction. Organic laws have the lowest average correlation (0.009) and have no significant correlation with any of the topics. As we

TABLE 7
MOST IMPORTANT PROBLEM – POLICY CHANNEL CORRESPONDENCE COEFFICIENTS (1994–2007)

Cost category	Organic laws		Ordinary laws		Parliamentary groups bills		Executive bills		Decree-law		Oral questions		Speeches		Jurisdiction ^a
	Very high	High	Moderate	High	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Low	Very low	Very low	Very low		
Economics	-0.104	0.159	-0.363	0.185	0.185	-0.05	-0.05	0.185	-0.05	-0.1	0.832**	0.832**	0.832**	Not shared	
Rights	0.406	0.617*	0.467	0.616*	0.616*	-	-	0.616*	-	0.542*	0.838**	0.838**	0.838**	Not shared	
Health	0.307	-0.087	-0.05	0.074	0.074	-0.125	-0.125	0.074	-0.125	0.785**	0.386	0.386	0.386	Shared	
Agriculture	-	0.2	0.054	0.362	0.362	0.648*	0.648*	0.362	0.648*	0.258	0.06	0.06	0.06	Shared	
Labour	-0.386	0.129	0.054	0.219	0.219	-0.016	-0.016	0.219	-0.016	-0.454	0.629*	0.629*	0.629*	Not Shared	
Education	0.183	-0.204	0.214	-0.504	-0.504	0.169	0.169	-0.504	0.169	-0.114	0.47	0.47	0.47	Shared	
Environment	-	-0.015	-0.06	-0.164	-0.164	0.051	0.051	-0.164	0.051	0.499	-0.192	-0.192	-0.192	Shared	
Energy	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Not shared	
Transport	-0.248	-0.187	-0.168	-0.205	-0.205	-0.055	-0.055	-0.205	-0.055	-0.476	0.744**	0.744**	0.744**	Not shared	
Law and crime	0.049	0.034	0.034	-0.023	-0.023	0.237	0.237	-0.023	0.237	-0.242	0.2	0.2	0.2	Shared	
Welfare	-	0.044	-0.177	0.342	0.342	0.043	0.043	0.342	0.043	-0.321	0.205	0.205	0.205	Shared	
Housing	-	-0.415	-0.169	-0.34	-0.34	0.337	0.337	-0.34	0.337	0.607*	0.775**	0.775**	0.775**	Shared	
Commerce	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Not shared	
Science and techn.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Not shared	
Defence	-0.128	-0.213	-0.18	-0.055	-0.055	-0.048	-0.048	-0.055	-0.048	0.733**	0.113	0.113	0.113	Not shared	
International	-0.279	-0.447	0.457	-0.419	-0.419	0.028	0.028	-0.419	0.028	0.787**	-0.06	-0.06	-0.06	Not shared	
Foreign trade	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Not shared	
Government	0.374	0.338	0.161	0.272	0.272	0.655*	0.655*	0.272	0.655*	0.343	0.690**	0.690**	0.690**	Not shared	
Public lands	-	0.267	0.033	0.505	0.505	0.686**	0.686**	0.505	0.686**	0.083	-0.405	-0.405	-0.405	Not shared	
Significant correlations	0	1	0	1	0	3	1	1	3	5	6	6	6	Shared	
Average correlations	0.009	0.012	0.016	0.046	0.046	0.135	0.135	0.046	0.135	0.154	0.278	0.278	0.278	Shared	

Note: Pearson correlation coefficient.

*Statistically significant at the 0.05 level; **statistically significant at the 0.01 level (for the appropriate one-tailed test).

^aA policy area is defined as shared jurisdiction if most part of the issues included in this policy area are regulated by both, the national government and the CCAA (this is the case of health, education, or the environment). A policy area is defined as exclusive jurisdiction of the national government if most part of the issues included in this policy area is completely or mostly regulated by national authorities, like taxation, energy, or transportation. This classification is made according to the Spanish Constitution and the coding system.

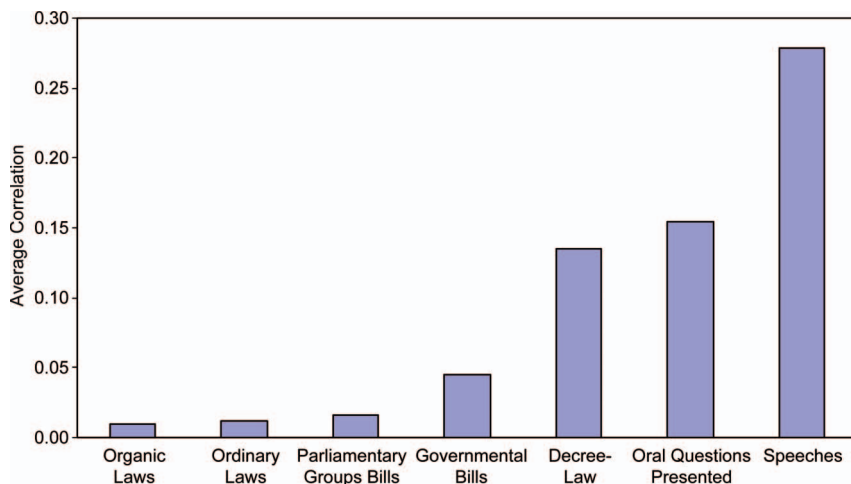
move from higher to lower levels of friction we observe that significant and average correlations increase: ordinary laws have a 0.012 average correlation (and 1 statistically significant issue), parliamentary group bills 0.016 (0 statistically significant issues), government bills 0.046 (1 statistically significant issue), decree-laws 0.135 (3 statistically significant issues), oral questions 0.154 (5 statistically significant issues) and speeches 0.278 (6 statistically significant issues). Figure 3 summarises the same information: each bar shows the average correlation across issue areas in the different policymaking channels.

The results presented so far indicate that institutional friction is an important variable for explaining issue correspondence and that the priorities of policymakers and public opinion match better at the agenda-setting stage than at the decision-making stage. In other words, as Jones *et al.* (2009) argue, correspondence is inversely related to institutional friction; the higher the institutional friction, the less responsive a policymaking channel is to citizens' preferences. The question we address now is whether other institutional factors such as type of government, elections and political decentralisation can explain differences in political correspondence not only across policy venues, but also across policy issues.

Elections, Type of Government and Issue Jurisdiction

The capacity of national policymakers to respond to public priorities varies across issues depending on issue jurisdiction. We depart from the hypothesis

FIGURE 3
AVERAGE MIP ISSUE CORRELATIONS BY POLICYMAKING CHANNEL
(1994–2007)



that the higher the degree of political decentralisation of an issue, the less correspondence between citizens' and policymakers' priorities at national level. In other words, parliamentary and government actors at national level are less responsive to citizens' preferences on those issues with shared jurisdiction. According to the formal distribution of competences, issues like defence or foreign affairs are exclusively regulated by central government, while issues like health, education and the environment are issues with shared jurisdiction – the central government enacts basic laws and the CCAA have the capacity to enact laws and/or define implementation rules (see Table 7).

Overall, the data illustrate that for those policy areas that are completely or mostly regulated by national authorities there is a higher level of correspondence, and this is especially true for general economic issues (taxation and unemployment), government issues (regulation of political parties), rights (immigration) and transport.³ The exceptions are issues such as defence or international affairs, which have a low level of correspondence. This is explained by the fact that they are rarely considered by public opinion as the most important problem, but also because in both cases policy decisions are often driven by governing obligations. The same is true of foreign trade and some of the issues related to research and development activities. Therefore, with most of the issues monopolised by the national government, such as foreign affairs, defence, and foreign trade, citizens have little direct involvement and rely on information and interpretation provided by other actors, such as the media or political elites (Page and Shapiro 1983).

The opposite is true of general economic issues, rights and government issues. These capture a large share of the attention of both policymakers and public opinion for the whole period, and they are strongly related to dramatic events, and to the political transformations that have occurred in the last two decades. Political corruption was one of the key issues during the last legislature of Felipe González (1993–96), capturing almost 20 per cent of the attention of the political agenda at that time; the evolution of the economy is always an important concern of the executive, especially for the first mandate of José M. Aznar (1996–2000) when Spain had to fulfil the requirements of the European Monetary Union, while rights issues are one of the main concerns of the first mandate of José L. Rodríguez Zapatero (2004–08).

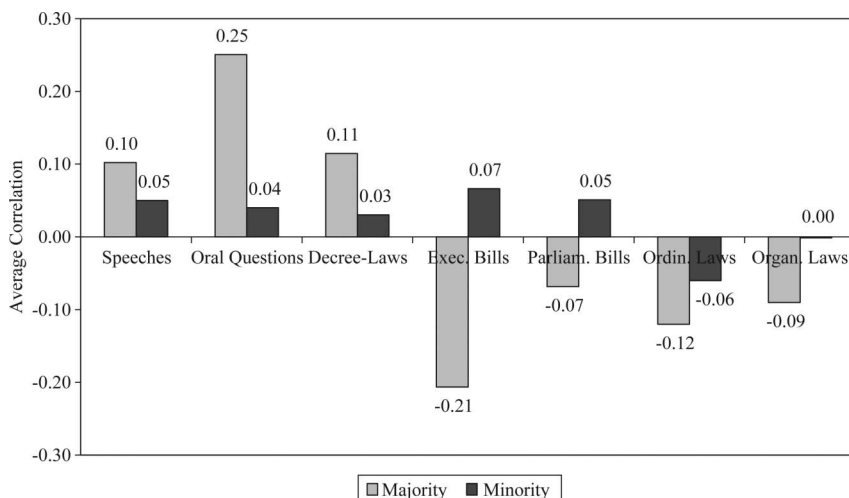
Results so far corroborate the second hypothesis – with the exception of housing. Despite the fact that this is a decentralised issue, correspondence is high and significant at the agenda-setting stage (speeches or oral questions). Both the executive and parliamentary groups pay significant attention to housing in order to show their concern for an issue that has been identified by Spanish citizens as one of the most important problems facing the nation over the last few years. But no important decisions are made at national level, mainly because most of the political competences are

delegated to regional governments. In short, the data discussed so far illustrate that there is some connection between political decentralisation and correspondence, especially in the case of highly visible issues like rights or economic affairs. For those issues that are more distant from citizens and more related to what is happening abroad, correspondence is lower regardless of the level of political decentralisation.

Another question is whether correspondence varies according to the type of government, and whether the executive is more attentive to the priorities of the public under a minority government. In order to test this hypothesis, we have compared the two legislatures governed by the PP, the first without an overall majority from 1996 to 2000, and the second with a majority from 2000 to 2004. In this way we control for party ideology and the preferences of the party leader (Jose M. Aznar), and also avoid the methodological problems related to the greater number of years of minority government – for the period analysed here, the executive only governed with an absolute majority from 2000 to 2004. From the comparison of these two legislatures, we can arrive at the conclusion that the priorities of the executive better match public preferences under minority government than majority government (Figure 4). As expected, government bills introduced under majority rule are less related to public priorities than those introduced in the previous legislature, which indicates the relative autonomy of the PP to define its own legislative agenda when controlling a majority of seats in Parliament.

However, for decree-laws and speeches, the results contradict our hypothesis, i.e. correspondence is higher under majority than under

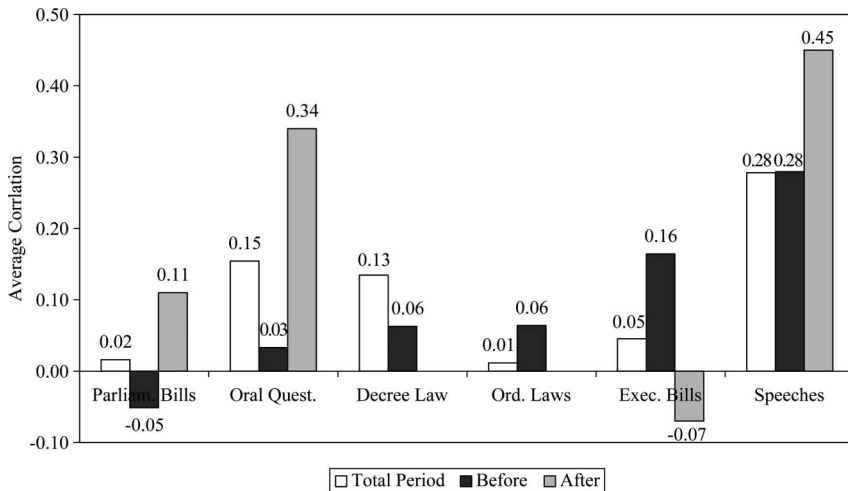
FIGURE 4
AVERAGE CORRELATIONS BY POLICYMAKING CHANNEL



minority governments. In the case of decree-laws, this high correlation under majority government is related to external events, and more specifically to the mad cow scandal. Agricultural issues never capture much public attention: only 0.53 per cent of Spanish citizens considered agriculture the most important problem facing the nation for the period 1994 to 2007, but in January 2001, the MIP poll shows that food safety issues are considered the most important problem in Spain after terrorism and unemployment.⁴ In this context, from 2000 to 2004, 14.3 per cent of decree-laws were related to agriculture, the second most important issue regulated by decree-law (industrial policy being the first, capturing 38 per cent of the total), and 50 per cent of them were related to food safety. In the case of speeches, the explanation is related more to their low level of institutional friction, which makes it easier for the President to respond to changes in public opinion (Chaqués *et al.* 2008).

Finally, in order to test whether the electoral process has an impact on correspondence, we have calculated correlations between MIPs and different policymaking channels for the six months before and after elections (Figure 5). In general terms, the average correlations illustrate that the executive and parliamentary agendas match better with public preferences after elections. The average correlation between public preferences and speeches is 0.28 for the whole legislature and increases to 0.45 after elections, while no important variations occur before elections. The opposite occurs for executive bills: the average correlation increases from 0.05 to 0.16 before elections, while no variations exist after elections. In the case of oral questions and parliamentary group bills, the results are quite contradictory:

FIGURE 5
CORRELATION MIP AND POLICYMAKING CHANNELS



in both cases, public and policymakers' preferences match better after elections (in the case of oral questions, average correspondence increases from 0.15 to 0.34, while for parliamentary bills it increases from 0.02 to 0.11), but the opposite occurs before elections.

Hence our overall results illustrate that, for the six months before elections, issue correspondence tends to decrease (bills and oral questions) or variation is almost non-existent (speeches), with the sole exception of executive bills. On the other hand, for the six months after elections, the results seem to support our hypothesis: correspondence tends to increase in the case of speeches, oral questions and parliamentary bills, and remains constant in the case of executive bills. However, at this point it is difficult to arrive at any conclusions about the impact of elections on issue correspondence. The results presented here seem to indicate that parliamentary groups do not change their strategies concerning oral questions and parliamentary bills before elections. It is more during the first months of the legislature that they tend to give more visibility to those issues which are gaining special attention among the public by introducing a bill and/or oral questions. Finally, the executive seems to behave more strategically with regard to public preferences than parliamentary groups, especially in the case of speeches after elections. Still, the results only give partial support to the fourth hypothesis. Political elites in Spain seem to be more predisposed to express attitudes or prescribe policies consistent with public preferences when setting up the agenda right after elections, but not before.

Conclusions

For the last 15 years Spanish policymakers have followed public priorities, although some important differences exist across policy venues and issues. Our results indicate that institutional friction, political decentralisation, elections and type of government matter and are important variables in explaining why Spanish political elites are responding closely to some of the issues prioritised by the public, and why the distance between policy decisions and the issues signalled as preferred by citizens increases during certain periods. We argue that the priorities of Spanish citizens and political elites match better when institutional friction is lower, and this is especially true when the *Presidente del Gobierno* gives his annual speech and when political parties introduce oral questions. The Spanish case also illustrates that policymakers are more responsive to public priorities under minority governments and immediately after elections. Before elections only the executive, by introducing government bills, responds more directly to the priorities of the public as a means to obtain electoral advantage. After elections, both the executive and parliamentary groups, while introducing oral questions and bills, respond more directly to public priorities than at any other time in the legislature. Further analysis should be undertaken in order to capture differences in correspondence before and after elections

across policy issues, and this involves the introduction of other explanatory variables, such as party ideology.

Finally, our results also indicate that correspondence between the priorities of citizens and policymakers is higher for those policy issues without shared jurisdiction, like immigration, with the exception of those issues that are more related to what is happening abroad. At this point it is difficult to say whether the lower level of correspondence associated with those issues with shared jurisdiction is a direct response of Spanish political elites to the formal definition of issue jurisdiction across levels of government, or whether it is more related to the policymakers' lack of political will to respond to citizens' priorities. The consolidation of a multilevel system of government increases the opportunities to blame others for political inactivity and thus reduce the electoral costs deriving from the lack of responsiveness. A question for future research is whether political elites, in this multilevel system of government, are increasingly less involved in the discussion and resolution of some issues which are especially controversial or costly in political terms, or whether on the contrary there is an increasing involvement of policymakers at regional level to respond more closely to the priorities of citizens.

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Notes

1. The number of polls conducted varies across years. For example, the MIP question was asked three times in 1993 and 10 times in 2001.
2. Four issues included in the policy agendas codes (commerce, energy, science and technology, and foreign trade) are never mentioned by respondents as the most important problem facing the nation.
3. The criteria used to identify whether an issue has exclusive or shared jurisdiction is based on the formal definition established in the Spanish Constitution and adapted to our coding system. When we define a policy area as having shared jurisdiction, this means that most of the issues included in this policy area are regulated by both the national government and the CCAA (as is the case of health, education and the environment). When we define a policy area as the exclusive jurisdiction of the national government, this means that most of the issues included in this policy area are completely or mostly regulated by national authorities, e.g. taxation, energy and transport.
4. As a whole, 2.47 per cent of the MIP answers identify agriculture as being the most important problem.

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