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Party manifestos, opposition and media as determinants of the cabinet agenda

Abstract

Cabinets are the engine of policy change in parliamentary systems. Yet we still know little about how cabinets micro-manage the content of their multifaceted agenda during their term in office. Drawing on the party and agenda-setting literature, this article addresses this gap by focusing on three main determinants of cabinet priorities: issue priorities in the electoral platforms of majority and opposition parties, and new and unforeseen problems as conveyed by the media. Our analysis reveals that: 1) as expected by the party agenda hypothesis, majority platforms have a stronger impact on the cabinet agenda than those of opposition parties, but this effect decreases as the legislative term progresses; 2) cabinet agendas do take into consideration opposition electoral priorities but only when the latter are expressed by mainstream competitors or when the media focus on them; 3) an externally-imposed adjustment programme can also create conditions for strengthening the congruence between electoral and cabinet agendas. This article furthers the understanding of the mechanisms used by cabinets for their regular agenda-setting through an analysis of the policy content of the Council of Ministers' press releases in Portugal from 1995 until 2015.

Key-words: party manifestos, media agenda, cabinet's agenda, government, opposition, Portugal.

Understanding the dynamics of governments' issue prioritisation is central to the study of democratic political systems. Cabinet attention is crucial to the attainment of policy change, particularly in parliamentary systems. As a result, the burgeoning literature on policy agendas (Baumgartner et al., 2011; Green-Pedersen and Walgrave, 2014) has given pride of place to the study of cabinets' policy priorities. While some works addressed this topic by analysing budget spending (e.g. FR Baumgartner et al., 2009; Blais et al., 1993; Hobolt and Klemmensen, 2008; Kang and Powell, 2010; Russo and Verzichelli, 2016), other more recent research studied the policy content of prime minister or queen's speeches (e.g. Borghetto et al., 2017; Breeman et al., 2009; Jennings et al., 2011; Jennings and John, 2009; Mortensen et al., 2011). These speeches are often referred to as "symbolic agendas" because they do not have immediate policy consequences but are used by cabinets at the start of either their mandate or the legislative year to make an official and public commitment to a range of policy goals.

Only a few studies have looked at "substantive" agendas (F Baumgartner et al., 2009; Walgrave et al., 2008), namely the myriad of tangible but, at times, less visible policy decisions taken on a regular basis by the cabinet.¹ The difference with the above-mentioned approaches lies in the capacity to track agenda change over time with greater precision as cabinets normally convene on a weekly basis²; moreover, a wider spectrum

¹ The Cabinet, also referred to as the 'Council of Ministers', is a collegial body made up of the Prime Minister, ministers and other cabinet members without portfolios.

² Although procedures vary substantively across countries, full cabinet meetings are held at least once a week (but the frequency can increase due to ad hoc meetings, (Andeweg, 1997)) in order to discuss or formerly approve the government's core policies.

of decisions is taken into consideration.³ Since cabinets in modern democracies are simultaneously the main legislative agenda-setters and the heads of the administrative apparatus, they make decisions on bills to submit to parliament or ministerial decrees, sign international treaties, appoint high order civil servants or manage administrative units. Together these acts constitute the backbone of a country's legislative and administrative policy-making and, this article argues, a useful level of analysis in order to shed light on how cabinets set their policy priorities. Neither public spending nor Prime Minister speeches can capture this complex range of decisions.

Inspired by the party and agenda-setting literature (e.g. Froio et al., 2017; Green-Pedersen and Walgrave, 2014), this article sets out to develop an explanatory attention-based model of cabinet agenda-setting revolving around three main determinants: the electoral agenda of its supporting party/coalition, issues in the opposition platform and new and unforeseen problems as conveyed by the media.

Parties' electoral mandates are recognised as being at the core of democratic representation. Cabinets must deliver on the policy commitments made to their voters during the electoral campaign if they want to avoid being punished at the next election (Mansbridge, 2003; Thomson and Brandenburg, 2018). Thus, elections represent the core mechanism allowing the translation of citizens' preferences into political decisions. Electoral commitments are normally summarised in party platforms which are the parties' primary instrument to communicate their political goals to the public and the

³ Decisions are formally adopted in cabinet meetings, but the policy content can be discussed and agreed elsewhere, especially in cabinet committees (Blondel and Muller-Rommel, 1993).

basis on which voters hold them accountable for policy decisions (Bara, 2005; Schedler, 1998). Party electoral priorities are, therefore, an important determinant of which kind of issues will make it into the cabinet agenda.⁴

On the other hand, while cabinets do their best to stick to their electoral mandate, they also try to dodge or neutralise their political opponents' present and future attacks (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010; Seeberg, 2013) by addressing issues they raise. Since opposition parties were elected based on an electoral agenda, it is fair to assume that, to respond to their voters' expectations, they will tend to wage opposition in parliament in areas emphasised in their electoral platforms (Louwse, 2011). As a result, part of the electoral agendas of opposition parties may find its way into cabinet decision-making, albeit indirectly.

Whereas the party literature focuses on electoral priorities as the compass orienting cabinet policy direction, the agenda-setting literature has traditionally drawn attention to the constant flow of new and unforeseen problems (or 'incoming information') calling for cabinet intervention during the mandate (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005). In other words, cabinets' decision-making must reconcile the fulfilment of promises made to voters in elections (the 'promissory agenda', according to Mansbridge, 2003), with the response to emerging public concerns and policy problems during the legislature (the

⁴ It should be clear that the main goal of our attention-based approach is to assess the determinants of executive agenda-setting and not of mandate fulfilment. The latter would require a closer look at the translation of pledges into policies (e.g. Thomson et al., 2017; for an analysis of the Portuguese case see Moury and Fernandes, 2018). Yet policy attention is an essential prerequisite for policy action, so we feel confident that what we observe is partially related to mandate fulfilment and relevant for this kind of literature.

'anticipatory agenda', see Froio et al 2017 for an application of this framework to the analysis of legislative agenda-setting in the United Kingdom). The cabinet can detect these problems through various sources and the media is one of the most important (Van Aelst and Walgrave, 2016).⁵ Therefore, the incessant intrusion of new issues in the public agenda should be taken into consideration when accounting for the issue content of the cabinet agenda. The advantage of our research design, and our first contribution to the literature, is that the simultaneous effects of majority and opposition electoral priorities on the regular agenda of the cabinet can be assessed, while controlling for the relevance of external problems as conveyed in the media.⁶

Our second contribution is to test the conditions under which party programmes become more important. Our model posits that partisan effects are mediated by four factors: the type of opposition, the timing in the electoral cycle, the attention of the media and the presence of external constraints that curtail the cabinet's freedom of manoeuvre. First, we expect the congruence between cabinet and the majority agendas to be stronger in the aftermath of the elections when the political capital of the newly formed cabinet is still high, and then to progressively decline as more and more pledges are acted upon. Second, we distinguish between challenger parties, a subset of

⁵ Other sources of information are government administrative apparatuses, public opinion surveys and interest groups (Baumgartner and Jones, 2015; Kingdon, 1984; Soroka and Wlezien, 2010).

⁶ The need to take into consideration also opposition parties' electoral priorities when assessing mandate fulfilment had first been noted by Louwse (2011). For examples of recent studies in pledge research doing so, see Thomson et al. (2017) and Moury and Fernandes (2018).

opposition parties with no experience of office and that are unlikely to join governing coalitions (Hobolt and Tilley, 2016; Vries and Hobolt, 2012), and mainstream opposition parties with a track record of alternation in office. The former are not credible competitors and tend to campaign on narrow radical issues, so the cabinet should have weaker incentives to engage with their agenda. Third, we consider the media as both a moderating and mediating variable. We hypothesise that the political costs of not considering the opposition core issues should be higher when the media also focus on them. Finally, we expect all partisan effects to lose significance when external constraints, such as externally-imposed structural adjustment programmes, limit the cabinet's room of manoeuvre. This is an indirect test of the hypothesis that the autonomous intervention of domestic executives is steadily declining because of the impact of globalisation and market forces (Ezrow and Hellwig, 2014; Mair, 2013).

In this article, we consider the case of Portugal from 1995 to 2015. This country case presents two advantages. First, Portugal has a diversified and very stable party system, with two mainstream parties alternating in government (the centre-left Socialist Party, PS, and the centre-right Social Democratic Party, the PSD). When coalition cabinets, as opposed to one-party governments, are formed, it is typically by the right-wing PSD and CDS-PP (Social Centre/People's Party) parties. The remaining two main parties in the Portuguese party system, the radical left-wing communist party (CDU) and left bloc (BE), can be classified as challengers as they had never been in a government coalition until recently.⁷ We argue that this stability makes it easier to test the influence of party

⁷ The CDU is the Unitary Democratic Coalition, formed by the Portuguese Communist Party, PCP, and the Greens. The BE, the most recent party to emerge in the Portuguese

agendas on the government over time. Second, the Portuguese case allows to control for the impact of external constraints on government agendas as Portugal is one of the countries that received financial assistance from the EU and IMF in the recent Eurozone crisis on condition it implemented a programme of reforms.

The paper begins with an overview of the relevant literature, before setting out the hypotheses to be tested. The next section introduces the data and research methods and presents the findings. Finally, concluding remarks are provided.

Literature and Hypotheses

According to the normative "responsible party model" (e.g. Klingemann et al., 1994), it is up to the voters to make a conscientious, rational electoral choice in the electoral booth based on the available information about the parties. The mandate mechanism gives constituents indirect control over political decisions as the party is expected to keep the promises that presumably reflect their voters' wishes or risk punishment at the next election (McDonald et al., 2004; McDonald and Budge, 2005). Re-election depends to a great extent on parties' accomplishing their own campaign pledges (e.g. Bara, 2005). Although the wider public and some experts (Manin, 1997: 163–183) cast doubt on the rate of parties' pledge fulfilment, recent studies have provided empirical evidence that this criticism is undeserved (Artés, 2013; Klingemann et al., 1994; Moury, 2011; Thomson, 2001; Thomson et al., 2017). Government parties' policy priorities as

Parliament, is a left-libertarian party. Both parties are supporting the socialist minority government that took office in 2015 (Lisi, 2016).

conveyed by electoral platforms are, therefore, expected to play a significant role in cabinet's agenda-formation.

In comparison with government parties, opposition parties have no control over the cabinet agenda, yet they can exert influence over it. They can raise public attention for specific issues (recent research showed evidence that part of their electoral commitments are even fulfilled; see: Thomson et al., 2017; Moury and Fernandes, 2018) by keeping a constant eye on cabinet's activities through oversight procedural tools in parliament (such as hearings and parliamentary questions) and publicly challenging its decisions in the media. Previous research has shown that these strategies are not inconsequential. Cabinets may decide to give in to these pressures as a way to preemptively defuse the opposition's attacks (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010; Seeberg, 2013). Moreover, opposition parties generally have more freedom to select their topics and may maintain them as priorities for longer periods as they are not held responsible for providing immediate solutions (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010).

Following Louwse (2011), we argue that opposition parties should be more active on policy areas prioritised in their own manifesto. In fact, one way to fulfil their voters' mandate is "to strive for the implementation of policy proposals [i.e. those contained in electoral platforms] in parliament, or at least to voice these policies. After all, opposition party voters have supported its manifesto and can be expecting opposition along the lines of that manifesto" (Louwse, 2011 :430). Yet, overseeing and publicly challenging the government does not always translate in policy influence, so our expectation is that the cabinet agenda should be more congruent with the majority agenda than with that of the opposition. The first hypothesis reads as follows:

H1 (*Party agenda hypothesis*): The cabinet agenda is more congruent with the issue emphasis of the government parties than the opposition parties.

Another hypothesis in the literature, but which is rarely tested (for a recent exception see Brouard et al., 2018), is that mandate effects should vary during the electoral cycle. The impact of the party programme should be greater at the start of the mandate, especially in the case of government parties. This results from the convergence of a number of factors: some sort of “honeymoon effect”, whereby the high level of popularity enjoyed by the incumbent in the first months in office usually wanes as time goes by and this makes the passage of important reforms less likely; as the legislature progresses and electoral pledges make it to the statute book, government parties gain freedom to focus on new policy issues, not included in their manifestos; the government's need to adapt to changes in public opinion (see the concept of “dynamic representation”, Stimson et al., 1995) or to unexpected events during the mandate (Peterson et al., 2003). This discussion can be summarised in the following hypothesis:

H2 (*Waning mandate hypothesis*): The impact of the government party's issue emphasis on the cabinet agenda should decrease as the legislature progresses.

Our third hypothesis considers that not all opposition parties are the same in the cabinet's eyes and that this should affect the probability of the cabinet engaging with their priorities. As utility maximisers, parties tend to choose tactics that will maximise their benefits and, at the same time, minimise their costs. Consequently, parties in government will tend to ignore issues brought forward by other party agendas and only

respond to them when the electoral costs of avoidance increase. Two possible mechanisms can be invoked. On the one hand, since mainstream opposition parties are the most credible candidates to replace parties in cabinet in future elections, cabinets should be more prone to taking some of these parties' issues on board, thus neutralising their attacks.⁸ On the other hand, challengers' efforts are usually focussed on connecting with their specific electoral basis and defying the mainstream political consensus, rather than appealing to the widest possible bloc of voters (Hobolt and Tilley, 2016: 974–975). Additionally, as aptly put by Thomson et al. (2017: 531): “Parties without prior governing experience may not expect to enter government and therefore have to implement their pledges, which may make them more inclined to formulate pledges that are difficult to fulfil”. As a result, it should be easier for cabinets to find compromises on issues included in the more “moderate” agenda of mainstream opponents. This leads us to expect the following:

H3: (*Opposition type hypothesis*) The mainstream opposition's issue emphasis has a stronger effect on the cabinet agenda than that of the challenger opposition.

We already know of the complex link between the issue attention of political actors and the media (Bennett et al., 2008), and that editorial guidelines are important to the way in which the media cover government and opposition parties. Newsworthiness results from the competition for public attention between societal problems and political

⁸ In a similar vein, Van de Wardt (2015) shows that mainstream opposition parties influence the executive's issue attention more effectively than challenger opposition parties.

realities (Green-Pedersen et al., 2017). Recent research has demonstrated that mass media coverage contributes to shaping the attention of political elites (Soroka, 2002; Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011; for a discussion of the literature see Wolfe et al., 2013). Opposition forces should have greater incentives than government parties to use media coverage strategically to advance their agendas and to criticise the cabinet's performance. Their use of the media is less constrained than that of governments as they benefit from media attention given to owned issues without being substantially penalised when the media focuses on issues owned by government parties. In contrast, government parties suffer electoral costs both when the media agenda concentrates on opposition-owned issues and when news on their owned issues are bad. Opposition therefore has little to lose and much to gain from an issue friendly agenda (Thesen et al., 2017). It is easier for the opposition to react to news when it is advantageous to them, and not to react when it is disadvantageous; on the other hand, government parties have most of the times a policy responsibility to respond (Thesen, 2013). By highlighting issues that are already salient in the media, opposition parties are able to give visibility to their claims and thus exert pressure on government parties to make their position on the subject public. We therefore expect the policy issues that are salient in the media and brought to the public debate by opposition parties to be more likely to be picked up by the cabinet. Our fourth hypothesis is therefore:

H4: (*Media and opposition hypothesis*) The effect of the opposition parties' issue emphasis on the cabinet agenda is stronger when the media emphasise the same issue.

In addition to the impact of party and media agendas, which are our main focus, also the effect of external conditions on cabinet agenda-setting needs to be taken into consideration. The occurrence of an extremely harsh economic crisis - such as the one that hit Portugal in 2010 - is undoubtedly relevant here, as it potentially constrains the government's room of manoeuvre (see e.g. Bosco and Verney, 2016 for an overview of the political consequences of the economic crisis in southern Europe).⁹ For a window of almost three years, the cabinet was not only conditioned by severe budget limitations due to the deep recession across most of the Eurozone but also by the external imposition of a policy package to be implemented in exchange for financial assistance (Magone, 2014). In other words, the cabinet's leeway on policy decision making was relatively curtailed. While pledge research already found that periods of economic downturn tend to be correlated with lower rates of pledge fulfilment (e.g. Thomson et al. 2017), we still know little about their effect on cabinet agenda-setting.¹⁰ Our expectation is that the cabinet agenda became less congruent with the issue emphasis of party platforms while the economic assistance programme was being implemented.

⁹ In March 2011, the Socrates Government was compelled to request intervention from international lenders, the so-called troika (made up of the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund). The external intervention programme included a package of severe austerity measures that were implemented by the newly elected PSD/CDS-PP majoritarian coalition led by Passos Coelho (2011-2015).

¹⁰ An exception is Chaques et al. (2015), who measure cabinet responsiveness in terms of number of issues "mentioned in the party manifesto, but not enacted by the governing party [using governmental bills] during the subsequent legislature" (2015: 80). Their analysis of the Spanish case yielded partial support for a negative effect of the recent economic crisis on the correspondence between electoral and legislative priorities.

The tension between responsiveness to voters and responsibility to the markets and external lenders (Mair, 2009) is solved in favour of the latter. Both the majority and opposition's electoral priorities could be "exceptionally" disregarded by invoking external constraints. Our fifth hypothesis reads as follows:

H5: (*External constraints hypothesis*) The effect of the parties' issue emphasis on the cabinet agenda should decrease when government autonomy is curtailed by externally imposed constraints.

Data and methods

The analysis combines data sets on the agendas of the cabinet, the parties and the media. To capture variation in the distribution of attention for the same set of issues across different actors, relevant documents (see below) were classified according to one of 21 policy codes (Appendix A) making up the Portuguese Policy Agenda (www.comparativeagendas.net/portugal). The reliability of the coding procedure was assured by having two coders blind-coding simultaneously the same document.¹¹

To analyse the cabinet agendas (*Cabinet*), we used the official press releases of the regular meetings held by the Portuguese Council of Ministers, which take place normally on Thursdays (available at <http://www.portugal.gov.pt/pt/o-governo/arquivo-historico>). In the absence of the official minutes, these are the best documents available to

¹¹ The average inter-coder reliability was 87% and the remaining differences in coding decisions were resolved through discussion. In case of disagreement between the coders, the two authors of the article made the final decision.

document cabinet discussions. They are also very heterogeneous in terms of content. Cabinet decisions range from initiating legislation (either by signing a bill to be submitted to Parliament, filling in the details of existing legislation through secondary measures, or requesting authorisation from Parliament to legislate when the latter has exclusive competence on the matter), to issuing administrative resolutions, appointing officials (in the civil service but also in the army and hospitals, for example), creating new agencies, and approving international treaties.¹² Since each bullet point of a press release contains a decision on a specific topic, this became our unit of analysis. During an average meeting, ministers discuss 12 issues (standard deviation of 7). The final dataset consists of 9627 decisions taken over the course of 19 years (6 legislatures). Figure 1 presents the distribution of decisions by topic. As expected, “state operations” – namely all decisions related to the management of the public administration – ranked first (12.1 percent). We can also see that the Portuguese Council of Ministers is very active in the area of finance, industry and commerce (economic regulation, 9.9 percent) and transport (including also public works, 9 percent).

Our dependent variable, $Cabinet_{it}$ is the share of decisions in press releases devoted to a specific topic i in month t . We followed Vliegenthart and colleagues (2016) and selected months as the temporal unit of analysis because: a) they allow sufficient time for the

12 The ratio between cabinet and MP-sponsored bills is 1 to 3.5 but the approval rate of cabinet bills is much higher (81% to 32%) (data from V to XII legislatures drawn from Fernandes (2015: 46)). This implies that bills discussed by the Cabinet have a great chance of getting into the statute book. Also individual ministers can issue decrees but only to regulate the activities of their ministries (*portarias*) and only as an integration/clarification of legislative acts.

cabinet to process media signals and organise a response; b) lower aggregation levels “would result in too low values and too many zeros” (Vliegenthart et al., 2016: 290).

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Party agendas were reconstructed using party platforms. Coders parsed the platforms of the main elected parties, extracted all policy pledges using the method developed by Royed (1996) and assigned a policy code.¹³ Only precise and objectively testable pledges to act were included in the analysis (vague or pro-status-quo commitments were dropped). Party agendas are obtained by computing the share of pledges for each of the 21 policy sectors. Then, for each legislative term, we aggregated the agenda of the majority and the opposition as a whole. Additionally, the opposition was also divided between mainstream and challenger opposition. The different political weight of parliamentary groups inside each cluster (for instance, PSD and CDS-PP parliamentary groups substantially differ in size) is taken into account by computing policy-specific averages weighted for the group’s share of seats in parliament. $Platform(Gov/Opp/Main\ Opp/ Challenger\ Opp)_{ik}$ measures the share of mentions of topic i respectively in the electoral agenda of the government, the whole opposition, the mainstream opposition and the challenger opposition at the most recent election k .

The mass media agenda relies on the coding of the headlines of all front-page news of one of the main Portuguese newspapers, Público (www.publico.pt). On the one hand, it has been shown that newspapers exert more influence on the political agendas than TV

¹³ We follow Royed's definition of ‘pledge’ as “the commitment to carry out some action or produce some outcome, where an objective estimation can be made as to whether or not the action was indeed taken or the outcome produced” (1996: 79).

(Walgrave et al., 2008). On the other, since newspapers in Portugal do not follow a clear party line, we consider that media attention can be validly tracked based on just one newspaper. The final dataset contains a total of 22994 front page articles. Using the share of articles falling into each of the 21 policy sectors at month t would pose a problem of endogeneity, since some of them may just report on cabinet decisions. To eliminate any variation in our measure of media attention due to the coverage of cabinet press releases, we regressed the former on the latter and extracted the residuals from the model. The following analyses will use these residuals (*Media(residuals)_{it}*).¹⁴

We can test H1 on the impact of the party platforms on the cabinet agenda using the following equation:

$$Cabinet_{itk} = constant + \beta_1 Cabinet_{it-1} + \beta_2 Media(residuals)_{it-1} + \beta_3 Platform(Maj)_{ik} + \beta_4 Platform(Opp)_{ik}$$

In order to test H2, we computed the number of months elapsed since the start of the legislatures (*time_elapsed*) and interacted it with our party platform agendas. The differing impact of mainstream and challenger opposition agendas (H3) is evaluated by splitting *Platform(Opp)* into its components, *Platform(Main Opp)* and *Platform(Challenger Opp)*. H4 is tested by interacting our measure of issue attention respectively in the media and party platforms. Finally, testing H5 – on the impact of the adjustment programme – entailed interacting our party platform agendas with a dummy

¹⁴ For a similar approach, see Froio et al. 2017.

variable (*adjprog*), taking 1 for the months Portugal was formally under the foreign lenders' supervision (from May 2011 to June 2014), and 0 otherwise.

Our model violates the assumption of independence between observations since attention to a topic is dependent on the attention to all others and attention at time t is dependent on its value at time $t-1$. To account for the cross-sectional autoregressive nature of our data, we used ordinary least squared (OLS) regression models with a one month lag dependent variable ($cabinet_{it-1}$) and panel corrected standard errors (PCSE) (Beck and Katz, 1995).¹⁵

Analysis

Table 1 reports the result of four time-series cross-sectional models, presenting the estimates for the main effects of our three independent variables. The first noteworthy finding is the strong autoregressive nature of the cabinet agenda, with the values in the previous month accounting for a significant share of the variation in cabinet attention in the following month. As expected, cabinet business exhibits a significant level of stability, with specific issues never leaving the monthly agenda.

Secondly, it is worth pointing out that both party platforms and media agenda are significantly positively correlated with the cabinet agenda in all our models. These results

¹⁵ The Breusch-Pagan test (see Appendix C) reveals significant cross-sectional dependence in panels, which justifies our modelling approach.

increase our confidence in our theoretical framework, positing that cabinets have to constantly strike a balance between delivering on issues that are part of their electoral agendas, defending themselves from opposition criticism and responding to new events and problems requiring their attention. As far as this last factor is concerned, our findings reveal that cabinets do respond to societal events as conveyed by the media. As a relatively small committee, cabinet decision-making is more flexible than that of the legislative branch and, through the administrative apparatus, they are often the first institutional actor to detect and act upon potential or actual problems. Furthermore, their response can also be triggered by parliamentary oversight, which – as other studies have consistently shown (Vliegenthart et al., 2016; Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2011) - interacts strongly with the agenda of media outlets.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

According to our first hypothesis, the government platform agenda should have a stronger effect than the opposition on cabinet agenda. Model 1 shows that this is indeed the case. Both the government and opposition party platforms have an impact on the cabinet agenda which is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). On the other hand, as expected, government platforms exert a stronger effect on cabinet agendas. In substantive terms, for government parties, a 1 per cent increase in platform attention results in an average increase of 0.21 per cent in cabinet attention. The effect is half as big for opposition parties (aggregated): 0.12 per cent. These findings are consistent with what we know about the Portuguese case, namely its progressive transformation into a majoritarian political system (Costa Lobo, 2005; Lisi, 2015).

Our second hypothesis stated that the impact of opposition platforms differs between mainstream and challenger opposition party. Model 4 tests the impact of issue emphasis respectively for the mainstream $Platform(MainOpp)_{ik}$ and challenger $Platform(ChalOpp)_{ik}$ opposition. Tellingly, only the former has a significant average impact on the cabinet agenda, both from a substantive and statistical point of view (0.10, $p < 0.001$). This finding reflects a relevant cleavage running across the Portuguese party system between anti- and pro-system parties (Jalali, 2007).

In the remainder of this section, we turn our attention to the interaction effects delineated in hypotheses 3, 4 and 5. To illustrate more effectively these conditional effects, we rely on a graphical display of estimated marginal effects (the table of coefficients can be found in appendix B). Figure 2 plots the marginal effects of the three types of party platforms on the cabinet agendas conditioned on time, running from 1 to 50 months. As one would expect, the relationship is negative in all cases. The correspondence between the electoral and cabinet agendas is at its peak at the beginning of the legislature and it decreases as new issues come to the fore and electoral pledges are fulfilled. However, in line with H3, only the plot referring to the majority platform displays positive and statistically significant effects at all values of *time_elapsed*.¹⁶

¹⁶ We also tested whether the relationship between time and our regressors is curvilinear and not linear (we thank the reviewer for this suggestion). Following the electoral cycle, one might expect the effect of manifestos to be strong right after elections, to trend downwards over the term and climb up shortly before the subsequent elections. Our analysis (see Appendix B) reveals that adding a quadratic term slightly improves the model explanatory power only for the interaction between time and challenger party manifestos. We may hypothesise that the cabinet focuses on responding to the challenger party agenda right before the elections to defuse their

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

We next turn to the effect of electoral agendas in interaction with attention in the media. Our expectation (H4) is that the cabinet agenda is more respondent to the opposition platform when the media is also focusing on them. Figure 3 shows that as media residual values vary from their minimum (-0.16) to their maximum (0.23), the marginal effect of electoral agendas tends to increase. As expected, when the media devote attention to an electoral issue, it is more likely to be picked up by the cabinet. Interestingly, the analysed conditional impact is particularly strong for the manifesto priorities of opposition parties in comparison with the majority. As far as the mainstream opposition party is concerned, marginal effects cannot be distinguished from zero statistically at low values of media attention but they become positive and significant around the mean (0). The conditional impact on challenger manifestos is even more noticeable. Marginal effects take both negative and positive values along the range of media attention. The marginal effect line slopes upward at a rate of 1.41 for each one-unit increase in media attention and is comfortably significant statistically. Vice versa, the effect of the majority agenda varies only marginally at different levels of media attention (coefficient of 0.35 and not significant at the 95% confidence level). These findings tend to support our expectation that, on average, media attention is of particular benefit to opposition parties, rebalancing their disadvantage in agenda power with respect to the majority.

attacks. Conversely, they engage with the mainstream opposition agenda, their most credible and relatively like-minded opponent on a more regular basis during the mandate. Since the additional variable provides little improvement in terms of model power, we opted for presenting the more parsimonious linear models.

INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE

Finally, Figure 4 depicts the marginal effects of the three party electoral agendas during and outside of the adjustment programme period. H5 expects all electoral agendas to experience a decrease in impact because cabinet decisions had to be taken in coordination with foreign lenders. The graph tells a different story. On the one hand, only the impact of mainstream opposition electoral priorities, which was the socialist party at the time, declines marginally and becomes indistinguishable from zero, whereas the estimated marginal effects of both majority and challenger opposition electoral priorities increase during the adjustment programme (*adjprog*). On the other hand, two points are worth noting. First, the coefficient of challenger parties continues to be statistically indifferent from zero at the 95% confidence level. Second, the magnitude of the coefficient of the majority platform is almost twice as big during the crisis period (going from 0.16 to 0.31).

These findings reflect the circumstances where the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Troika was signed: in the middle of the 2011 electoral campaign. This made possible for the platforms of centre-right parties, which were very much agreeing with some of the austerity measures making up the structural adjustment program, to already incorporate some of those priorities.¹⁷ Vice versa, as part of their electoral strategy, the PS decided to devote attention to growth-promoting measures, so as to take some distance from the “neo-liberal” austerity policies contained in the MoU they

¹⁷ Indeed, the then leader of the PSD promised during the campaign that the PSD’s government platform would go “beyond the troika” in “reforming education, justice, health, and social security” and ensuring a “transformation of the country.”

had just co-signed (Magalhães, 2012). Overall, these results are consistent with the expectations of the agenda-setting literature, which conceives of economic downturns as disruptive of the congruence between party and executive agendas, but only to the extent that they are not anticipated. Furthermore, the Portuguese case shows that, using a “no alternative” rhetoric, the Passos Coelho cabinet managed to circumvent opposition and pass a number of decisions in those areas prioritised in their platform (Moury and Standing, 2017).

INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE

Conclusion

Executives are the driving force in contemporary democracies and cabinets are their decision-making engines. Mapping out the policy content of cabinet decisions provides a glimpse into the complexity of the administrative and legislative machinery. This paper represents a first attempt to test which factors affect this important agenda, by developing an attention-based model that incorporates the issue emphasis of majority and opposition parties at election time, and the media.

We found evidence that the Portuguese cabinet forms its agenda based on the content of its programmatic platform. This supports previous findings showing that electoral agendas drive policy-making (e.g. Froio et al., 2017). However, it does so by, first, using a more encompassing and time-variant measure of government agenda than either public spending, prime ministerial speeches or legislative output. Second, it protects against the spuriousness of this relationship by including a measure of media attention. Thirdly, it points to the importance of considering the timing in the electoral cycle when

testing for the implementation of party agendas. This way, it contributes to a new wave of studies that go beyond detecting partisan effects and ask about the conditions under which they occur (e.g. Brouard et al., 2018).

Meanwhile, talking about the effect of an electoral agenda does not exclude the possibility of the cabinet taking up some issues from the opposition platform to deflect possible attacks or “take credit for popular policies proposed by their opponents” (Thomson et al., 2017: 529). Our analysis shows that the cabinet is selective when using this strategy. First, as utility maximisers, cabinets opt for tactics that minimise the costs of their policy decisions and, as a result, tend to focus their response on their most credible and like-minded opponents. This explains why the cabinet agenda is significantly influenced by the issue emphasis of mainstream manifestos and not by those of challengers. Secondly, we found that the cabinet agenda is more likely to be influenced by issues emphasised by opposition platforms if they are also salient in the media. Unlike government parties, opposition parties can use the media more freely to their advantage, either to attack the cabinet's performance or to advance their agendas.

Finally, contrary to our expectations, we found that external policy constraints ended up strengthening the effect of the government party platform on the cabinet agenda in the case under consideration. We contend that this result originates from the peculiar circumstances of the implementation of the economic adjustment programme in Portugal. First, the signing of the MoU occurred during the electoral campaign, so the drafters of the electoral manifestos already had a notion of the measures their country would be forced to implement in the coming years. Second, previous accounts of the political impact of the recent sovereign debt crisis in Portugal (Moury and Freire, 2013;

Moury and Standing, 2017) showed that the views of foreign lenders on the reforms required by the country's ailing economy converged with those of the right-wing Portuguese cabinet led by Passos Coelho. Indeed, the imposition of external constraints was used by the cabinet to increase their margins of domestic manoeuvre and advance an agenda that was sometimes more radical than required under the terms of the MoU. Our results lend further credence to these accounts.

Overall, these findings fit well with previous accounts and enrich our knowledge of the Portuguese case. It confirms Portugal's image as a centralised majoritarian political system, the result of constitutional and party system changes which started in the mid-1980s. It also lends support to the anti-system image usually associated to the two small Portuguese challengers, Left Bloc and Communist Party, which, until the start of the current legislature, had never formally supported a government (or come close to forming a cabinet on their own). On the other hand, the ambition of our analysis has been to unravel mechanisms of agenda-setting that should be generalizable across Western democratic systems. Whether this is the case is left open for future research conducted through comparative cross-country frameworks and complemented by small-N approaches (e.g. by incorporating measures of party policy position or by examining specific policy areas).¹⁸

¹⁸ For instance, we tested whether centre-left cabinets are on average more responsive (than centre-right cabinets) to the agenda of left-wing challengers in Portugal (see Appendix B, we thank one of the reviewers for the suggestion). We found that the opposite holds true: when looking at the distribution of policy attention, ideological proximity does not seem to work as expected. We argue that only a closer look at individual policy areas can shed light on this result.

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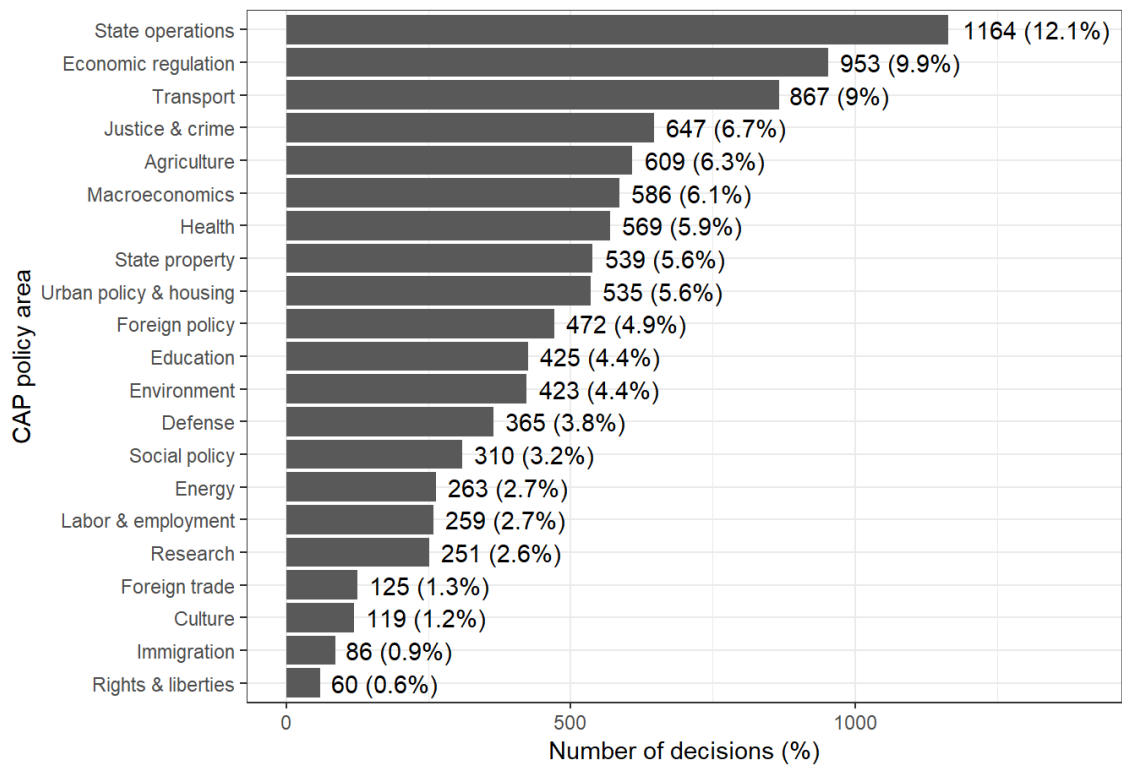
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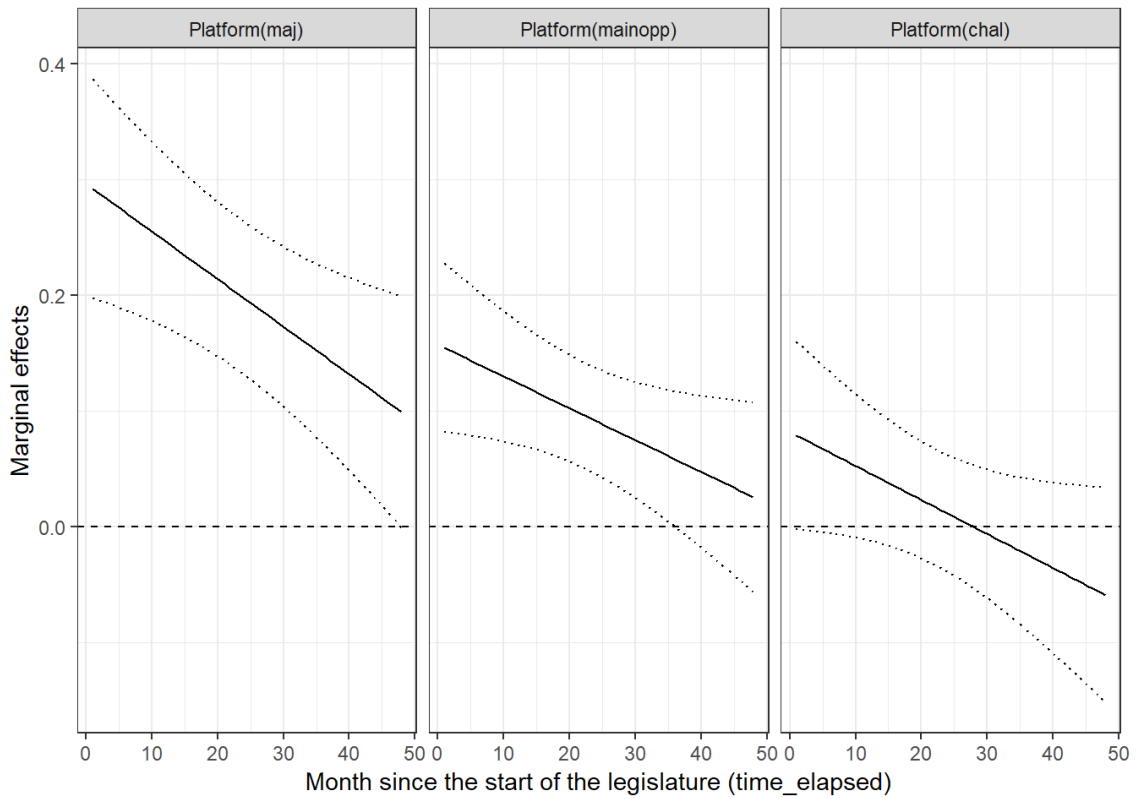
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Figure 1 Distribution of cabinet decisions by topic



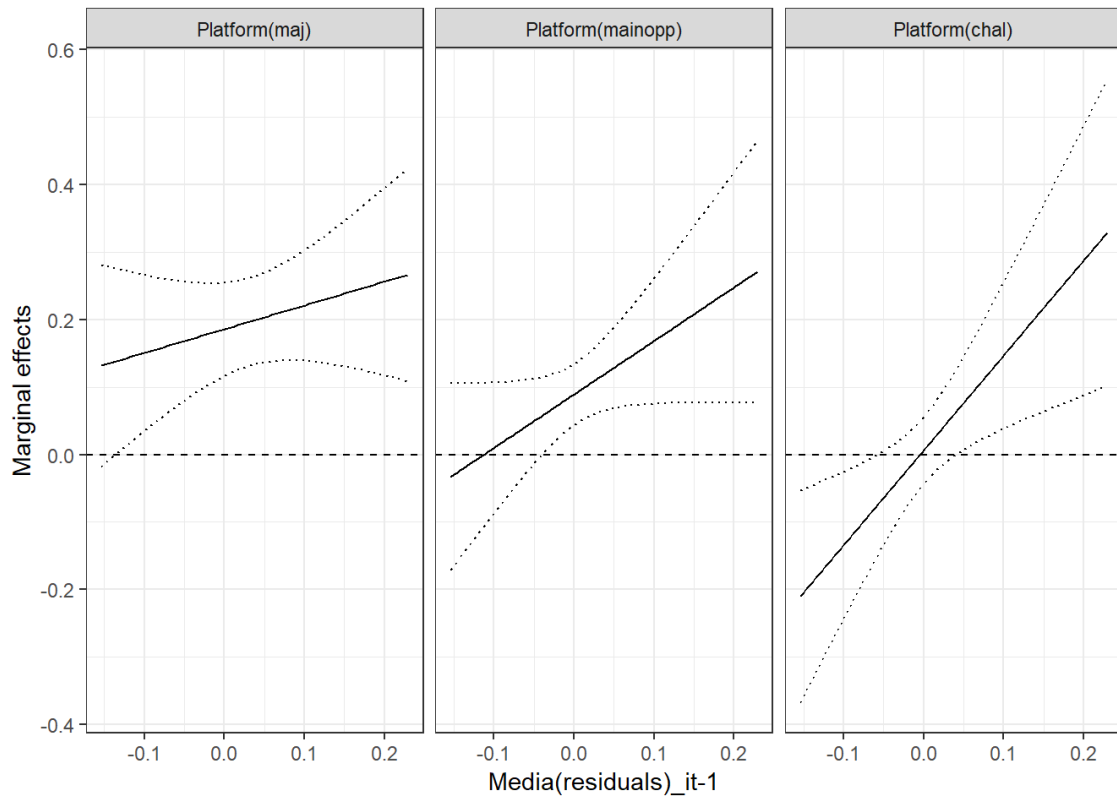
Note: Own data, the Portuguese Policy Agendas Codebook can be viewed at the following url: <https://goo.gl/26xZDD>

Figure 2 Marginal effects of party issue emphasis over time



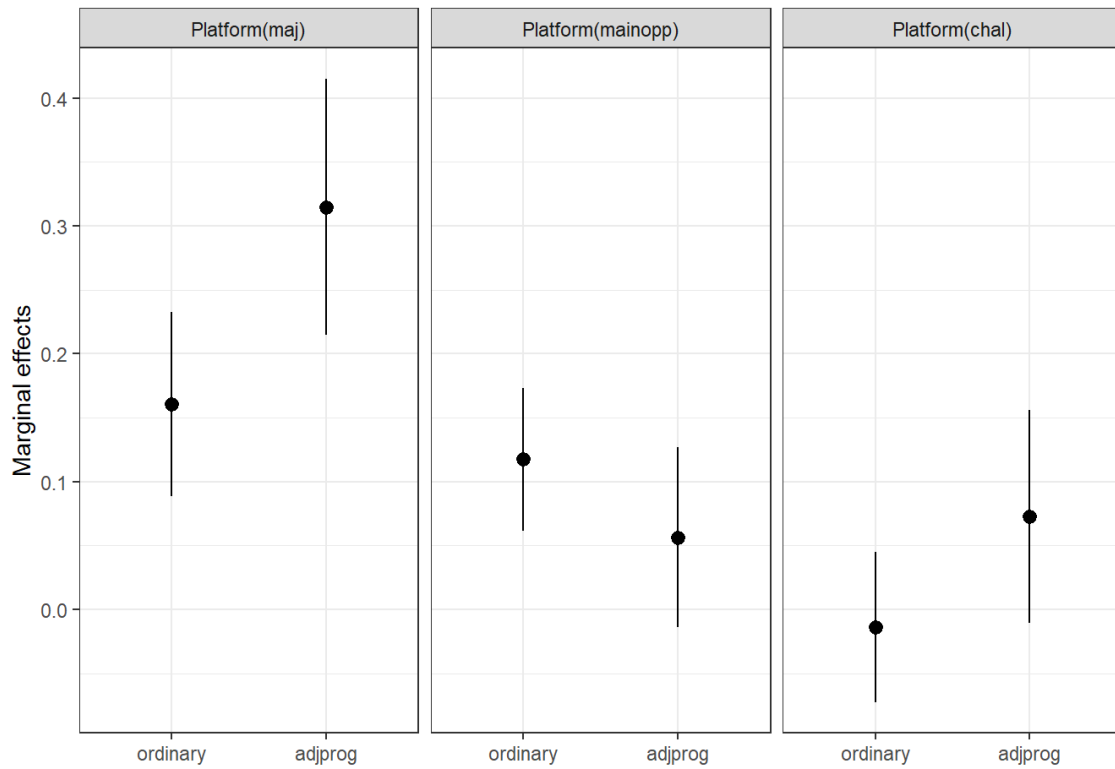
Note: Conditional coefficients of a multiplicative interaction term. For the full model see Appendix B. Upper and lower bounds represent the 95% confidence interval of the computed marginal effect.

Figure 3 Marginal effects of party issue emphasis by media attention



Note: Conditional coefficients of a multiplicative interaction term. For the full model see Appendix B. Upper and lower bounds represent the 95% confidence interval of the computed marginal effect.

Figure 4 Marginal effects of party issue emphasis during and outside of the period of economic adjustment program



Note: Conditional coefficients of a multiplicative interaction term. For the full model see Appendix B. Upper and lower bounds represent the 95% confidence interval of the computed marginal effect. *Adjprog* refers to the months Portugal was formally under a bailout program (from May 2011 to May 2014), *Ordinary* refers to the remaining months in our research period. See Appendix B for the model results.

Table 1 Time series cross-sectional analysis of the determinants of cabinet priorities

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Constant	0.02*** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)
CoM _{it-1}	0.26*** (0.02)	0.29*** (0.02)	0.26*** (0.02)	0.26*** (0.02)
Platform(Maj) _{ik}	0.26*** (0.03)		0.21*** (0.03)	0.20*** (0.03)
Platform(Opp) _{ik}		0.25*** (0.03)	0.12*** (0.03)	
Platform(MainOpp) _{ik}				0.10*** (0.02)
Platform(ChalOpp) _{ik}				0.02 (0.03)
Media(residuals) _{it-1}	0.13*** (0.02)	0.19*** (0.02)	0.12*** (0.02)	0.12*** (0.02)
Adj. R ²	0.19	0.18	0.19	0.19
Num. obs.	4767	4767	4767	4767

***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05k, panel corrected standard errors inside the parentheses