

Policymaking in Data Poor Countries – Measuring the Lebanese Political Agenda in a New Data Set

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ABSTRACT This paper introduces a novel data set on legislative activity in Lebanon covering all important primary and secondary legislation between 1950 and 2016. It analyzes the data set based on agenda-setting theory and traces patterns of political attention across policy areas and over time. The paper shows how legislation data can offer important insights into the political agenda of countries whose legislative institutions provide little data on their workings. In this way, the creation of the data set ties in with increasing scholarly attention to governance issues in the Middle East and North Africa. Moreover, the paper contributes to the study of political attention by proposing to identify important legislation based on reviews of legal experts.

KEYWORDS Political Agendas, Agenda Setting, Policymaking, Agenda Diversity, Political Attention, Political Priorities, Development, Middle East, Lebanon

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Introduction

Development economists and practitioners rely on an accurate understanding of policymaking processes in the drafting of policy recommendations and reform programs. Many developing countries, however, either collect or provide few comprehensive and comparable data on policymaking processes, hampering assessments of the functioning and priorities of governmental institutions. Insights into the workings of the governments in countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region are particularly limited despite the increased attention of scholars and practitioners following the Arab uprisings in 2011, which highlighted the pressing nature of governance issues in the region (OECD, 2013; World Bank, 2015; ESCWA, 2017; Mahmalat and Sumpf, 2018).

This paper remedies this gap with a novel data set on legislative activity, designed to provide insights into patterns of political attention. It introduces a novel data set on legislative activity in Lebanon, covering all important primary and secondary legislation between 1950 and 2016 issued by the Lebanese Parliament, the Council of Ministers, and ministries. The main advantage of this data is its availability: legislation must be made public in official governmental journals or similar outlets to become legally binding. This data is hence similarly available in, and the analytical approach adaptable to, the context of other countries including countries of the MENA region. That way, the creation of this data set ties in with the increasing scholarly attention on policymaking processes in the MENA region over the past decade. The data is available for download under mounirmahmalat.com/data.

The analysis in this paper takes legislation as a measure of political attention and uses agenda-setting theory to identify issues that dominate the Lebanese governments' legislative agenda (Jones and Baumgartner, 2004, 2005; Jennings et al., 2011; John, Bevan and Jennings, 2011). The underlying intuition follows the attention-driven model of policy choice (Jones, 2001). Policymakers and bureaucrats are confronted with a constant stream of information about a wide variety of topics, from security and immigration to education and the economy (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005). This abundance of information requires prioritization in order to allow policymakers to concentrate and respond to the most pressing and important issues. The priorities a government identifies determine its political agenda, according to which it issues legislation (McCombs and Zhu, 1995; Kingdon, 2003; Peter and de Vreese, 2003; Jones and Baumgartner, 2004).

A political agenda, then, is the set of issues that receive serious attention from policymakers at any given time (Kingdon, 2003, p. 3). The main concept in this definition is the “attention” policymakers pay, which puts an issue on the agenda when policymakers prioritize an issue and elevate its importance relative to others. Defining and constructing a measure of attention is, therefore, the key methodological challenge to assess political priorities over time.

The paper follows the approach first outlined by Baumgartner and Jones (1993) to indicate attention by measuring the occurrence of issues in policy texts and documents. The number of references to issues in these texts serves as an indicator of the importance of an issue for a governments’ agenda. This analysis takes both primary legislation (laws) and secondary legislation (decrees, resolutions, and other items) as a measure of political attention and discusses several advantages and limitations of this approach.

This paper contributes to the study of agenda-setting by addressing one of its key methodological challenges. Since each legislative text deals with only one issue, the coding happens at the document level. This procedure assigns one issue category to each legislative text, regardless of its type or scope. For example, a law that introduces a comprehensive change in a tax code, as well as a resolution that provides a simple trade license for a specific firm or product, would both equally count as one observation in two different policy areas. That way, however, the coding cannot introduce conceptual distinctions between documents of major importance. The tax law has most likely demanded a significantly higher degree of attention from policymakers on different levels of government than the issuance of the trade license has. The challenge, therefore, is to introduce a conceptual distinction between observations that have a minor or major importance for the study of attention, which would otherwise have equal weight within a data set.

A widely cited reference to address this issue is the *Congressional Bills Project* (Adler and Wilkerson, 2017), which provides a database of bills introduced into the United States House and Senate. Their database offers a filter for “important” bills, which excludes those bills that relate to issues of minor importance, such as the transfer of lands or renaming of buildings. While making a major contribution, the authors of the Congressional Bills Project note that this approach might not be sufficient to identify all documents of minor importance across all policy

areas. Moreover, their methodology applies to the context of the United States and must be adapted to the legal context of other countries.

The data set introduced in the present paper addresses this challenge by inverting the approach taken by Adler and Wilkerson (2017). It filters out texts of minor importance and includes only those legislative texts whose ‘legal value’ was confirmed by legal experts and therefore bear political and legal relevance. Of all primary and secondary legislation published in the official governmental journal, the Lebanese *Official Gazette*, the data set includes those texts that lawyers and legal practitioners deem to be of relevance for legal practice (see section 3). This approach reduces selection bias by shifting the task of identifying important legislative texts from the researcher to legal experts. In this way, the filtering goes beyond the application of fixed identification criteria, excludes irrelevant legislative texts equally across all policy areas and includes only those texts that are of relevance for the study of political attention.

Lebanon has been confronted with a particularly diverse array of pressing issues in recent decades, including civil war (1975-1989), financial crises and hyperinflation (1987-1994), looming debt crises (2000-2006), political instability (2005, 2008), and the repercussions of the Syrian crisis (2011-2018). Much of the extant literature analyzes the political responses to these challenges from a perspective of sectarianism and fractionalization as the Lebanese polity is organized in a consociational power-sharing agreement (Makdisi and Marktanner, 2009; Salamey, 2014; Salloukh *et al.*, 2015; Karam, 2017). This arrangement includes a large number of formal and informal veto players in the form of the leadership of sectarian communities and their representation in governmental institutions, which tends to inhibit legislation pertaining to nationwide issues (Mahmalat and Chaitani, 2019). However, as this paper will show, there exists a significant variation of legislative activity over time and across policy areas.

The analysis offers – for the first time – a comprehensive, quantitative assessment of political agenda-setting in Lebanon. Lebanese legislative institutions provide very little data on policymaking processes, such as voting records or meeting agendas of committees, either due to missing statistical data collection or lack of transparency, which prevented the consolidation of available data in the past (LCPS, 2018). Much of the literature on the Lebanese political economy therefore relies on descriptive analyses and qualitative approaches (Gaspard, 2004; Makdisi, 2004; Dibeh, 2005; Salamey, 2014; Salloukh *et al.*, 2015; Hermez, 2017). The paper

and data set complement efforts to gain insights into the workings of Lebanese governmental institutions and contribute to our understanding of the political economy in Lebanon.

The paper illustrates the use and content of the data set by presenting four examples: 1) agenda diversity across all major policy areas, 2) patterns of political attention after the end of the civil war in 1990 until 2016, 3) the political agenda before and after the Paris I-III donor conferences, and 4) comparison of the political agenda in times of political “gridlock” (Clinton and Lapinski, 2006) in 2007 and 2014. The analysis pays particular attention to legislation related to developmental issues in the policy areas education, health, environment, transport, industry, electricity, and water.

Two findings are highlighted in the discussion. First, legislative activity varies greatly among policy areas and over time. Even in times during which institutional capacities were severely impaired, such as the final years of the civil war (1975-1989), or in periods of political gridlock, during which either a caretaker Government was in place or governmental institutions could not convene, Lebanese policymakers enacted important legislation.

Second, the Lebanese legislative agenda has been dominated by issues related to finance, the economy, and property and real estate, while developmental issues have been relatively underrepresented. The results tie into extant analyses on the Lebanese political economy of reform which posit that economic and social policy in Lebanon is dominated by an ideology of “laissez-faire” (Gaspard, 2004; Traboulsi, 2007). Based on this ideology, the Lebanese Government maintains a “small state” by outsourcing important governmental services to the private sector in order to avoid unequal treatment among sectarian communities. Despite multifaceted developmental challenges (Garrote Sanchez, 2018), attention to developmental issues in the education, electricity, environment, health, industry, transportation, and water sectors is not only comparably low but decreases as agenda diversity declines. Legislation pertaining to issues of international affairs, finance, the economy, property, and real estate gained in attention over time and made up 87 percent of all important legislative documents issued by the Parliament and Council of Ministers in 2016.

The paper proceeds as follows: section 2 reviews the theory of agenda-setting. Section 3 describes the data set and discusses the advantages and limitations of using legislation data as a measure of political attention. Section 4 illustrates the use of the data set by applying it to four examples. Section 5 concludes by outlining approaches for future research.

Agenda-Setting and Issue Diversity

Agenda-setting describes the process by which governments distribute their attention across issues. Following attention-driven models of policy choice, it is attention, rather than resources, which is scarce for processing the abundance of information in the policymaking process (Jones, 2001). As a common feature of all polities, policymakers have finite amounts of time and resources available to consider and process information. Agenda-setting, then, describes the process by which a government distributes its attention across issues. In other words, a political agenda is a governments' priority list.

The number of topics a government puts on its agenda determines its diversity. Agenda diversity describes the extent to which a government "shares its attention between various issues competing for the finite space available on the agenda" (Jennings *et al.*, 2011, p. 1004). In a diverse agenda, a government shares its attention between a broad range of issues and offers opportunities for representing the interests of a wider set of political groups. In a narrow agenda, a government confines its attention to very few issues. As the attention to a particular issue might divert attention from other domains, every policy choice impacts the diversity of the political agenda as a whole (Jennings *et al.*, 2011).

Agenda diversity also reflects the capacity of the government to attend to multiple issues and interests at the same time: the higher the diversity, the more institutional resources (such as time, lawyers and economists) a government allocates to a larger number of issues. If the diversity is low, resources are concentrated on the core functions of a government (which pertain to defense, international affairs, the economy, government operations, and the rule of law) (John, 2006; Jennings *et al.*, 2011). While short-run increases in attention can cause sudden spikes in legislative activity in response to a certain issue (such as attention towards migration issues in the face of a refugee crisis), a government's agenda diversity should absorb shocks over time and maintain a long-run equilibrium (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005; Baumgartner *et al.*, 2009).

Giving Meaning to Legislation Data

Considering the origin of a legislative text adds to the assessment of the political dynamics that shape an agenda. Firstly, legislation texts originating from different institutions, such as laws from the parliament and decrees from a president, involve a different set of actors and resources (such as lawyers and economists) (Kingdon, 2003; Jones and Baumgartner, 2005; Ziblatt,

2008). Secondly, governmental institutions vary in their capacities to share attention across issues. Higher layers of government, such as prime ministers, presidents or supreme courts, process fewer issues serially than line ministries and other institutions that provide mechanisms for the parallel processing of multiple issues (Jones, 1994; Kingdon, 2003). Analyzing a specific set of institutions thereby enables a researcher to draw conclusions about specific sets of processes, bureaucrats and policymakers.

In order to gain further insight into the political dynamics that shape an agenda, legislation needs to be understood as a multi-layered concept based on the requirements it takes to enact it. These requirements differ according to the voting requirements, institutional resources (such as lawyers and economists), as well as the number and nature of political actors and veto players involved in the policymaking process (Cox and McCubbins, 2001; Spiller and Tommasi, 2003). They increase the *institutional friction* to enact a given piece of legislation the higher its rank in a country's legal hierarchy (Chaqués-Bonafont, Palau and Baumgartner, 2015, pp. 19–45). The institutional friction of a given legislation depends on the decision costs involved, which rise when its elaboration and approval requires the attention and consent of a larger number of actors.

Table 1: Simplified description of Lebanese legal code (Sources: Lebanese Constitution, Dictionnaire du droit privé, and Glossaire de Vie Publique.)

Rank	Type of Legislation	Description	Issuing Body	Institutional Friction
1	Law	A supreme, general and impersonal legal rule, following the Parliament's deliberation and initiative. No law can be enacted if it has not been passed by the Parliament.	Parliament	High
2	Decree	Administrative orders taken by the President of the Republic, or the Council of Ministers according to the powers allocated by the Constitution and the Laws. No parliamentary	Council of Ministers, President	Moderate

		approval necessary but limited in scope by applying the law.		
3	Resolution	Issuance of the Executive power, i.e., the Ministers or the administrative authorities, to which constitutional laws conferred regulatory power. Limited legal scope within the realm of existing legal frameworks.	Ministers	Low

In the case of Lebanon, there are three major types of legislative output: laws, decrees, and resolutions (table 1). These types of legislation differ in their scope of application. Laws require parliamentary approval and establish a generally applicable and impersonal rule. Decrees constitute administrative orders and decisions issued by either the Council of Ministers or the President. The scope of decrees is limited to the application of the law, rather than the establishment of independent, impersonal, and general rules.¹ Resolutions are decisions taken by ministers within existing legal frameworks and generally do not require the formal approval of the Parliament or the Council of Ministers.

The institutional friction to enact legislation increases with the number of political actors across parties and institutional resources that are involved in elaborating and approving a legislative text. Laws exhibit the highest institutional friction as these require most attention by lawyers and related staff as well as a majority vote of members of parliament and thereby a broad consensus among political parties. Decrees only need the Council of Ministers' or President's approval and therefore generally entail more moderate friction. Resolutions exhibit the lowest friction and are issued by ministers generally without formal voting procedures. That way, legislation that involves a high degree of consensus among political parties, such as laws, have a higher likelihood of being blocked by veto players. Resolutions, on the other hand, can be enacted even in the absence of consensus among parties or the blockage of governmental institutions, such as the parliament.

Measuring Political Agendas with Legislation Data

¹ Exceptions to this rule are legislative decrees, which have the status of ordinary laws. These decrees are issued by the Council of Ministers after having been granted the authority to do so by the parliament in rare and exceptional circumstances. Such decrees, however, have not been used since the late 1960's and are coded as decrees in this data set.

The data set introduced in this paper is based on the Lebanese *Official Gazette*. The Gazette is a journal “issued by the ‘Official Gazette Department’ of the General Directorate of the Council of Ministers” and includes “the legislative and regulatory texts that govern the affairs of the country.”² Thus, the Gazette is the official journal of the Lebanese Government where all primary and secondary legislative texts need to be published in to take effect and become legally binding.

The data set has been retrieved from *Al Mustachar*, a Lebanese law firm who provides an online archive for legislative documents.³ *Al Mustachar* employs a team of legal experts who developed a methodology to review the weekly publications of the *Official Gazette*. Based on a review of the legislation in the Gazette, it republishes those legislative texts that these experts identify to be of relevance for the daily work of legal practitioners, such as lawmakers, judges, and lawyers. These experts include independent judges that base their decisions of which legislative texts to include into the archive on a texts’ “legal value,” that is, whether the text can be referenced in appeals and court cases. The review process filters out legislative texts that are usually irrelevant for appeals or court cases, such as laws that correct spelling mistakes, naturalizations of citizens, registrations of organizations, or the acceptance of donations and in-kind contributions. That way, the archive assumes an important function for practitioners by reducing the volume and complexity of the weekly *Official Gazette* publications to only those texts that are relevant for legal practice. Among legal practitioners within courts and commercial law firms the archive is a widely accepted and utilized reference.⁴ This renders bias in the selection of texts unlikely as systematic neglect is easily verifiable by competitors and would threaten the reputation of the institution as a whole.⁵

This data set leverages the selection of legislation of “legal value” as it filters out mundane legislation that binds very little administrative, financial, and political resources. This approach

² See the official webpages of the Lebanese Government and parliament: <http://www.pcm.gov.lb/arabic/subpg.aspx?pageid=31>, <http://www.loc.gov/law/help/legal-research-guide/lebanon.php> [accessed October 2017].

³ The archive can be accessed under: <https://almustachar.com/> [accessed May 2018]

⁴ While there are several firms that provide online archives for legislative documents, *Al Mustachar* is the only one who provides filtering for relevant legislation. *Al Mustachar* does not publish data on the number of subscriptions, however, the major role of their online archive in Lebanon has been verified by the author in several interviews and discussions with the CEO and employees from *Al Mustachar* as well as other legal experts, such as CEO’s and lawyers from competing law firms, researchers from Lebanese University’s Faculty of Law and Political and Administrative Sciences, as well as experts from think tanks on legal and policy issues, in particular *The Legal Agenda*, and the *Lebanese Center for Policy Studies*.

⁵ The author verified the content of the archive by reviewing the archive provided by the Official Gazette Department of the Lebanese Council of Ministers itself and tested dozens of samples for their accurate reflection in the archive of *Al Mustachar*.

has a crucial advantage for the study of political attention: the criteria for the identification of what makes legislation relevant applies to all policy areas equally and is consistent over time. Since experts define the criteria for exclusion and inclusion of texts, the filtering does not risk being biased by limitations of legal knowledge or normative assessments of the researcher. Because of this review process, the revisions by the author after retrieving the data from the archive did not necessitate substantive corrections or cleaning.

Advantages and Limitations

Legislation data is not the only method to measure political agendas. However, the approach has several advantages over alternative data collection strategies, such as text analyses of executive speeches, interviews, or surveys. First, using a standardized coding scheme to categorize the legislation makes the agenda comparable over time, across topics and institutional origins, such as a Parliament, Council of Ministers, or ministries (Alexandrova et al., 2014). Thereby, it enables a researcher to construct political agendas in retrospect and to ‘zoom in’ on specific topics and times. The attention to specific issues, such as to the environment or reconstruction, can be traced over time and compared across governments.

Second, the approach enables an analysis of the relative attention across all issues on the political agenda, independent from election times and any institutional calendar. Interviews, surveys, and executive speeches are much less conducive in this regard. Respondents to interviews or surveys are usually unable to estimate attention outside their own area of expertise and activity (Alexandrova et al., 2014). What is more, executive speeches do not necessarily reflect the priorities a government eventually pursues. Lastly, by combining the data with other sources, such as macroeconomic or qualitative data, the data set enables an analysis of the conditions under which certain topics become priorities (Jones, Sulkin and Larsen, 2003), or under which the characteristics of a setup of actors, such as their degree of fractionalization or polarization, impedes or facilitates policymaking (Mahmalat and Curran, 2019).

Nevertheless, the approach has limitations. Firstly, the data set only reflects legislation that eventually made it into the *Gazette* and has been successfully agreed and voted upon. The data does not reflect meeting agendas of political institutions, that is, it does not reflect what the policymakers discussed in the first place and how much time and resources they devoted to addressing specific issues. Secondly, as the data reflects the outcome of a political bargain over legislation rather than the process of doing so, the data set cannot indicate the policy positions

of actors during the negotiations. Lastly, an assessment of the implementation of the legislation – once enacted – requires additional data sources.

Data set properties

In total, the data set includes 15,112 observations over 67 years from 1950 to 2016. As each document deals with a single issue, the coding is done on the document level so that each legislative text, such as a law, a decree, or resolution, constitutes one observation (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005). The data set distinguishes between 33 policy areas of legislation. These areas are defined by the Official Gazette department and structure the printed version of the *Gazette*. These policy areas pertain to the prerogatives of ministries and other authorized legislative entities, such as the Central Bank of Lebanon, in that a text falls into a specific policy area when it is signed by a respective minister or authority. The allocation of texts to policy areas hence follows a criterion that defines the document itself, i.e., the principal minister who developed and signed a document, rather than being subject to manual assessments based on codebooks.

While the composition of ministries changed over time, the categorization offered by *Al Mustachar* remained the same and maintained the structure and policy areas that the *Gazette* adopted post-independence (1943). When newer versions of the *Gazette* adapted to changes in the structure of legislative authorities, experts from *Al Mustachar* manually allocated affected documents to the relevant policy areas. For example, “public finance” and “banks and financial institutions” are policy areas that, today, both fall under the prerogatives of the Ministry of Finance but can be clearly distinguished based on the subject matter. This way, the allocation of texts among policy areas is consistent and comparable over time. The delineation of texts allocated to policy areas in this and related cases of change in the structure of the *Gazette* were all reviewed and checked for consistency by the author.⁶

The data set provides for each observation the reference number, the type of legislation (i.e., law, decree, resolution, or other), the date of publication, policy area, and the title. For the analysis undertaken in this paper, the texts have been aggregated by policy area, type, and both by year and the respective government in office to provide the total number of legislative texts in each dimension.⁷ Table 2 displays summary statistics. The number of observations per policy

⁶ In the review process, two categories related to property, public works, buildings and real estate were consolidated into one policy area “property and real estate.”

⁷ The data set accompanying this publication provides the number of texts published in each policy area and by type of legislation. Timewise, the data set provides two aggregations: a) by year and b) by

area varies from 0 for all areas in at least one year to 218, the global maximum in the area “property and acquisitions.” “Press and Publications” receives the least attention with a maximum of 2 legislative texts over the whole period per year. Most legislation has been enacted in the area “property and real estate” (1921) followed by “tax and customs” (1669) and “international treaties” (1530). On average, the Lebanese Parliament enacted 28.5 important laws, the Council of Ministers and President 94.5 decrees, and the ministries 74.8 resolutions per year.

Table 2: Categories and summary statistics of legislation within the data set on the Lebanese *Official Gazette*, 1950–2016

Category	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max
Agriculture	611	9.1	15.5	0	76
Tourism and Heritage	440	6.6	6.0	0	26
Labour and Social Security	207	3.1	5.0	0	19
Transportation, Cargo & Traffic	400	6.0	4.2	0	16
Water and Electricity	190	2.8	3.6	0	21
Industry and Oil	119	1.8	2.6	0	9
Trade and Economy	451	6.7	9.3	0	60
Tax and Customs	1669	24.9	38.3	0	175
Foreign Affairs	66	1.0	1.6	0	8
International Treaties and Organizations	1530	22.8	28.0	0	91
Banque du Liban (Circulars)	1223	18.3	18.2	0	94
Banks, Finance and Financial Institutions	561	8.4	10.4	0	56
Public Finance	248	3.7	6.6	0	48
Constitutional Law	186	2.8	2.6	0	11
Correspondence and Communications	399	6.0	8.7	0	38
Municipalities and Mayors	472	7.0	12.3	0	60
Coordination of Ministries	689	10.3	12.2	0	56
Public Institutions	562	8.4	7.5	0	27
Personal Affairs and Sects	204	3.0	3.1	0	14

government in office past 1989, which marks the end of the civil war. The time in office of a government is identified by leveraging the date of issuance of the inauguration decree for each new government (see also The Monthly, 2017).

Media and Advertisement	51	0.8	1.4	0	9
Property and Real Estate	1921	28.7	45.3	0	218
Environment and Public Health	401	6.0	6.9	0	26
Education and Culture	899	13.4	13.4	0	89
Culture Sports and Arts	112	1.7	2.1	0	9
NGO's, Cooperatives and Housing	138	2.1	2.6	0	14
National Defence and Security	502	7.5	17.5	0	144
Social Affairs	53	0.8	1.1	0	4
Internal Affairs	65	1.0	1.4	0	7
Press and Publications	18	0.3	0.5	0	2
The Judiciary	206	3.1	3.3	0	14
Sanctions and Penalties	61	0.9	1.0	0	5
Obligations and Contracts	49	0.7	0.9	0	4
Unions and Professions	409	6.1	9.0	0	46

Figure 1 shows the evolution of laws, decrees, and resolutions from 1950 until 2016 in total numbers per year. Legislative activity was severely undermined during the civil war (1975 to 1989), resulting in near collapse in 1976 and 1989 where only 12 and 24 important legislative texts were published. After 1990, legislative activity increased significantly and reached a local maximum in 2007 (690 legislative texts) and global maximum in 2016 (912 legislative texts). While the number of decrees and resolutions rose steadily after 1989, the number of laws enacted experienced a marked decline starting from the early-2000s: the decade from 2006 to 2016 witnessed four years in which less than 20 important laws passed the parliament. From 2011 to 2016, the parliament passed, on average, as many important laws as it did in the early 1990s after the end of the civil war.

Figure 1: Types of Lebanese legislation passed from 1950 to 2016

[INCLUDE FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The quantity of legislative texts published is highly and positively correlated with measures of state capacity, which is commonly defined as the capacity of the state to implement its objectives (Skocpol, 1985; Hendrix, 2010). Legislative activity, the process of putting political will into effect *de jure*, is the necessary (albeit not sufficient) first step in the implementation

of such objectives. The elaboration, processing and implementation of legislative texts requires institutional resources in the form of technology, specialists, and expertise (Ziblatt, 2008). Increases in legislative activity therefore require higher capacities of its legislative institutions to elaborate these texts and their associated documents, especially in higher levels of government, such as Parliament and Council of Ministers (Chaqués-Bonafont, Palau and Baumgartner, 2015). As figure 2 shows, legislative activity in Lebanon is significantly and positively correlated with the ratio of tax revenues to GDP (Pearson correlation coefficient .63, $p < .01$), a widely used indicator for measuring state capacity (Hendrix, 2010). Future research should explore the mechanisms that connect legislative activity and state capacity by, for example, investigating to which extent the quantity and content of legislative texts elaborated by ministries can serve as an indicator of their individual institutional capacities.

Figure 2: Association of tax revenue to GDP ratio and total legislative activity, Source: IMF Statistical Database, Lebanese Ministry of Finance, author's calculation

[INCLUDE FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

The Lebanese Political Agenda

The data set can be used for different types of analyses (Alexandrova *et al.*, 2014). For example, it allows a researcher to analyze the temporal dynamics of political attention across issues. Moreover, the data enables a detailed analysis of specific issues and topics. This section presents four examples to illustrate the use and content of the data set:

- Agenda diversity across all 33 major policy areas;
- Political attention after the end of the civil war in 1990 until 2016;
- Political agenda before and after the so-called Paris I-III donor conferences;
- A comparison of the political agenda in times of political gridlock in 2007 and 2013.

While these examples are largely descriptive, they can be combined with other data sources and serve as a basis for more detailed explanatory analysis. For example, the data can be used to examine the effects of macroeconomic developments or electoral cycles on agenda priorities and diversity. What is more, as the data includes the titles of each legislative text, it can be used for various types of quantitative or qualitative analyses, such as spatial analyses of policy developments over time in real estate or the establishment of trade unions, to name two examples.

Lebanon's Agenda Diversity

As introduced above, agenda diversity provides a measure for the degree of dispersion of attention across policy areas on a governments' agenda. In doing so, agenda diversity indicates the capacity of the legislator to pay attention to multiple issues at the same time. A diverse agenda is one in which the attention of the legislator is shared among multiple issues and vice versa.

This section introduces a measure for agenda diversity based on entropy scores. The measure used here is "Shannon's H" (Shannon, 1948), a measure adapted from information theory (Jennings *et al.*, 2011). Shannon's H constitutes a probabilistic measure of the spread of observations across a defined number of policy areas. The measure is calculated as the logarithm of the sum of probabilities of all possible states of a system. Applied to agenda diversity, the score has a low value when the attention of the legislator is concentrated on a single topic. If the attention of the legislator is widely dispersed over a wide array of issues, the entropy score is high. Shannon's H is calculated as follows:

$$H = (-1) \sum_{i=1}^n p(x_i) \ln(p(x_i))$$

The entropy score H is calculated as the negative sum for all issue areas of the likelihood $p(x)$ that an observation (here a legislative text published in the *Gazette*) falls into a specific policy area i , multiplied by the natural log of the same likelihood.⁸

Figure 3 shows how the diversity of the Lebanese agenda varied over time. While the average diversity (2.74) remains almost constant over time, several spikes mark the agenda. Lebanon experienced a particularly narrow agenda in 1976, after the outbreak of the civil war (1975 to 1989), where few legislative texts were issued, most of which focused on issues related to financial policy areas (only 12 important pieces of legislation could be issued in total). Similarly, the diversity score drops during the later period of the civil war in the late 1980s during which Lebanon experienced high degrees of political violence and polarization. The period of reconstruction in the early 90s experienced a surge of legislation in a variety of topics. In 2016, however, after 27 years of physical and institutional reconstruction since the end of the civil war, Lebanon's agenda diversity does not exceed its long-run equilibrium.

⁸ As $\ln(0)$ is not defined, $0 * \ln(0) = 0$ is defined for all issue areas in which no legislation has been published in a given year.

Figure 3: Lebanon's Agenda Diversity from 1950 to 2016

[INCLUDE FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

The diversity decreases in the early 2000s, which coincides with a shift in priorities towards financial and macroeconomic issues that, among others, aimed at containing the threat of a debt crisis (Makdisi, 2004). This shift in attention coincides with a decrease of legislation that addresses developmental issues, here referred to as issues in the policy areas of education, electricity, environment, health, industry, transport, and water. As Figure 4 shows, lower degrees of agenda diversity are associated with slightly lower attention to developmental policy areas (left graph, Pearson correlation coefficient 0.16) and significantly higher attention to financial and economic policy areas (right graph, Pearson correlation coefficient -0.25, $p < .05$).

Figure 4: Left: Agenda diversity to developmental legislative categories (in % of total legislation per year); Right: Agenda diversity to monetary and financial categories, 1950 to 2016 (in % of total legislation per year)

[INCLUDE FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

The Political Agenda After the Civil War (1990 until 2016)

The higher degree of political attention towards macroeconomic and financial issues rather than developmental ones remained salient after the end of the civil war (1989). Figure 5 shows the average spread in legislation across policy areas after 1990. International affairs, taxation, monetary issues, and property and real estate enjoy disproportionate higher levels of attention per year than the remaining policy areas. The high degree of attention to issues related to the core functions of the Government, in particular to international affairs and the coordination of ministries, is not a specificity to Lebanon but rather a bias inherent in all political systems (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005; Jennings *et al.*, 2011). What is more pronounced, however, is the focus on issues related to taxation and customs, property and real estate, and the relative underrepresentation of any policy areas related to broader aspects of development, such as transport, environment, electricity, water, health, or education. The whiskers in the graph reflect spikes in attention by indicating the minimum and maximum amount of legislation in a year of the sample.

Figure 5: Political Agenda in average total legislation per year, 1990 until 2016

[INCLUDE FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE]

Note: The vertical bars in each box represent the median, and the enclosed boxes represent the 2nd and 3rd quartiles. The whiskers indicate the minimum and maximum values.

In the period 1990 to 2016, the governmental agenda shifts. Figure 6 displays the distribution of laws and decrees across major issue areas over time. These types of legislation exhibit the highest institutional friction and require majority vote within the Parliament and the Council of Ministers.

Most political attention on the level of the Parliament and Council of Ministers was consumed by international affairs, followed by monetary issues, macroeconomy, and finance. While issues related to international affairs and defense consumed about 19 percent of the attention of the Council of Ministers and parliament between 2000 and 2005, they made up almost half of the agenda in 2016. Legislation addressing economic issues, taxation and finance decreased from 31 percent to about 18 percent, while developmental issues were at their lowest levels after the civil war with only 4 percent of all legislation. Instead, legislation pertaining to property and real estate increased in importance on the governmental agenda from about 4 percent after the end of the civil war and the beginning of the reconstruction period to 36 percent of the governmental agenda in 2010. In the latest decade (2006 to 2016), more than every third legislative text issued by the Council of Ministers or the parliament addressed issues related to property and real estate.

Figure 6: Share of laws and decrees in developmental categories to total laws and decrees, 1990 to 2016

[INCLUDE FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE]

The Policy Response to Donor Conferences, Paris I-III

The years of the early 2000s were marked by significant financial distress. In order to stem the financial burden of reconstruction after the civil war, Lebanon resorted to a financing model based on external creditors, which led to very high degrees of external indebtedness (Makdisi, 2004; Credit Libanais, 2016). In an effort to prevent a financial crisis, three donor conferences

were held in Paris (2000, 2001, and 2007) during which an international community pledged financial assistance. Each of the assistance packages was tied to a reform program that aimed to strengthen the revenue base and to consolidate governmental expenditures (Salamey, 2014; Atallah, Mahmalat and Zoughraib, 2018).

Figure 7 displays the share of all legislation in monetary, financial, and macroeconomic issue areas to total legislation from 2000 to 2003 and 2006 to 2009. The figure shows that the Lebanese Government in the early 2000s under then-Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri was mostly concerned with strengthening and regulating the revenue base by concentrating on issues related to taxation and customs. In 2001, more than 30 percent of the total governmental agenda was consumed by issues related to taxation and customs. Moreover, the political agenda focused on regulating banks and financial institutions, a sector which is a major contribution to the Lebanese economy (Barakat, 2015). Yet, soon after the initial demands of the reform agendas for Paris I and II seem to have been met, the focus on taxation and financial institutions decreased from 40 percent to less than 20 percent of the political agenda. The reduced attention on financial policy areas was accompanied by an increase in agenda diversity from 2.4 in 2002 to 2.9 in 2008.

A weaker but similar pattern can be discerned during and after the 2007 Paris III conference. Legislation in policy areas related to taxation and customs ceased in importance after the conference. However, the government slightly increased its attention to other issue areas, such as the economy, trade, and industry. What is more, the Lebanese central bank, the Banque du Liban, increased its output of circulars relating to monetary issues in relation to total legislative activity. Based on the data, further in-depth evaluations can assess the extent to which donor demands could influence legislative activity and thereby the success or failure of a reform agenda.

Figure 7: Share of legislation in policy areas related to finance and economy, in percent of total legislation, 2000 to 2003 and 2006 to 2009

[INCLUDE FIGURE 7 ABOUT HERE]

Political Attention During Times of ‘Gridlock’ – Comparing 2007 to 2013

Political ‘gridlock’ is a recurring phenomenon in Lebanese politics (Nader, 2014; Salamey, 2014). Lebanon experienced several periods of gridlock in which political polarization over

contentious issues reached such an extent that certain governmental institutions were not set to convene for extended periods of time. For example, in late 2006 two parties, Amal and Hezbollah, withdrew their ministers from the unity government at the time over disputes related to executive legislation (Salamey, 2014). As the speaker of the house happened to lead the Amal party, the party could block further meetings of the Parliament by refusing to call it to convene. During the whole year of 2007, no important laws could be enacted. On another prominent occasion starting from 2011, Lebanese politics experienced a marked surge in polarization over the political response to the Syrian crisis. As a consequence, political instability increased, and several governments succeeded each other in short intervals. During 2013, the Parliament only passed two important laws due to political rifts to form a new national unity government.

Figure 8 shows that political paralysis impacted the legislative agenda in the two periods differently. While no important laws could be passed in 2007, total legislative activity did not decrease as governmental decrees partially offset the missing output of laws. In contrast, the period from 2013 to 2016 experienced a sharp contraction of legislative activity, which this time also affected the work of the Council of Ministers. The inauguration of a government in early 2014 (The Monthly, 2017) led to a slight revival of legislative activity.

Figure 8: Comparison of times of gridlock, number of laws and decrees 2006 to 2008 and 2012 to 2014

[INCLUDE FIGURE 7 ABOUT HERE]

While all policy areas were affected by the contraction of legislative activity in 2013, agenda diversity was affected differently during 2013 compared to 2007. Figure 9 shows that issues related to finance, economic issues and property and real estate maintained its relative importance for the political agenda in 2013. In 2007, the Council of Ministers in particular could spread its attention across a higher number of issues, such as developmental policy areas (transport, education, health, industry, water, electricity, or the environment), external affairs and defense and social affairs. These patterns require further exploration in order to explain the structural conditions that make governments change patterns of political attention despite similar conditions of institutional impasse.

Figure 9: Political priorities during times of legislative gridlock, left: 2007, right: 2013

[INCLUDE FIGURE 9 ABOUT HERE]

Conclusion

This paper has shown how legislation data can offer important insights into the patterns of political attention in countries whose legislative institutions provide little data on their workings. The paper has introduced a new data set on legislative activity in Lebanon, which contains all important primary and secondary legislation between 1950 and 2016. The approach of constructing the data set adds to the study of political attention by proposing a method to identify ‘important’ legislation based on the review of experts, rather than selection criteria identified by the researcher. As legislation data needs to be made public to take effect regardless of a given type of polity, similar data sets can be established for other countries. The theoretical considerations are transferrable by adjusting the framework to the legislative framework of a given country. The creation of this data set ties in with recent scholarly attention to governance issues in countries of the Middle East and North Africa (Nabli, 2007; Bishara, 2011; Sumpf, Araji and Crompton, 2016).

After having discussed the strengths and limitations of the approach of taking legislative texts as a measure of political attention, the paper described the construction of the data set and analyzed several examples to illustrate its use and content. The results add to extant literature on the political economy in Lebanon by offering a comprehensive quantitative assessment of the Lebanese political agenda. The analysis illustrates how the country’s agenda focused on issues related to macroeconomics, finance, and real estate rather than on developmental policy areas related to education, electricity, health, industry, transportation, and water. These developmental policy areas receive comparably little attention, which is further reduced when agenda diversity decreases. Instead, the government increased its focus on issues related to property and real estate over time. What is more, comparing the political agendas during periods of governmental ‘gridlock,’ in which legislative institutions such as the Parliament could not convene, reveals how political agendas differ despite similar conditions of institutional impasse.

The data set opens up several avenues for future research of potential importance for development practitioners. As the relationship between the capacities of governmental institutions and legislative activity increased in scholarly attention (Baek, 2019), legislation data enables further in-depth exploration into the mechanisms by which increases in institutional capacities interact with higher amounts of important legislation. Further research

is also warranted to discern the effects that polarization and fractionalization have on legislative activity in different governmental institutions and across policy areas.

The current coding scheme of the data set enables various applications. However, extensions and adaptations are welcome to fit the data to different research interests. For example, policy specialists may want to introduce further detail by increasing the number of subtopics or include a geographical dimension in policy areas pertaining to, for example, physical infrastructure or the establishment of trade unions. What is more, the data set can be adapted to suit the coding scheme of the Comparative Agendas Project in order to make the Lebanese legislative agenda directly comparable to other countries (John, 2006).

It is hoped that the systematic study of the Lebanese political agenda will advance our understanding of the political economy of Lebanon and other developing countries with limited data on policymaking processes. Such analyses might lead to a more evidence-based evaluation of performance and responsiveness of legislative institutions, such as the effectiveness of donor aid in response to reform programs and capacity building in governmental institutions.

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Figures

Figure 1: Types of Lebanese Legislation Passed from 1950 to 2016

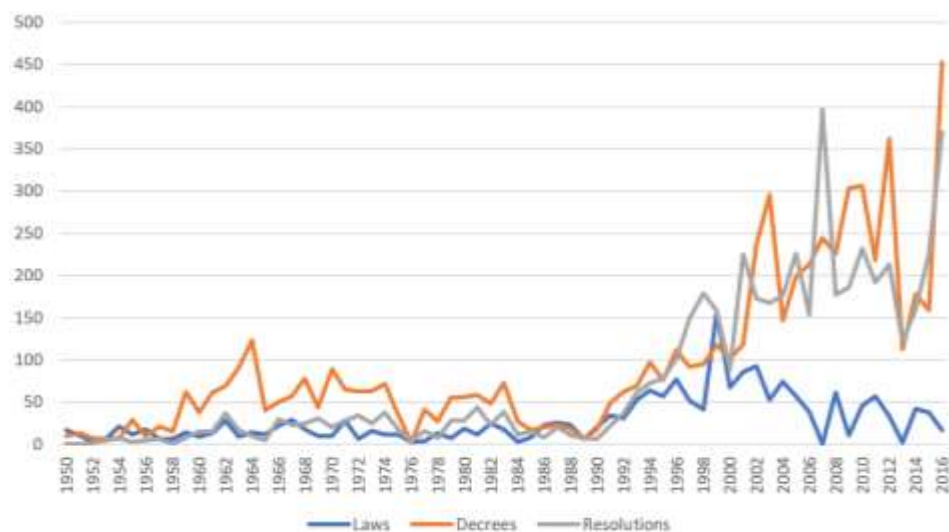


Figure 2: Association of tax revenue to GDP ratio and total legislative activity, Source: IMF Statistical Database, Lebanese Ministry of Finance, authors' calculation

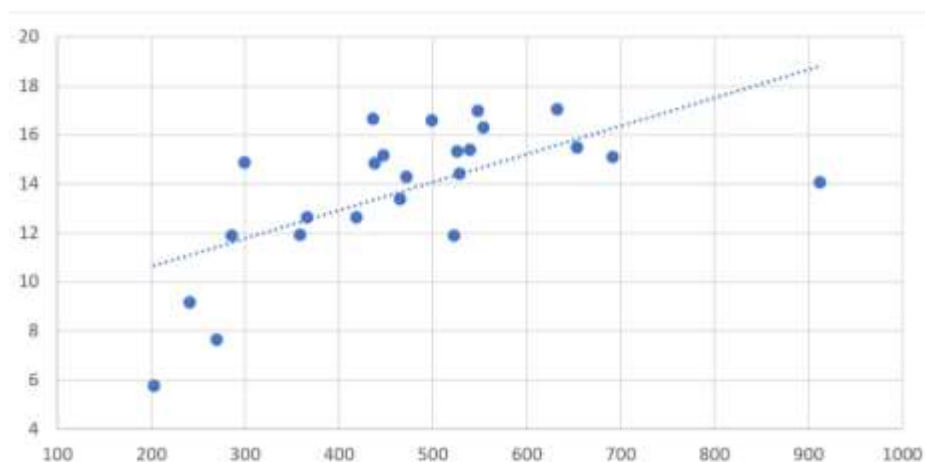


Figure 3: Lebanon's Agenda Diversity from 1950 to 2016, Source: authors' calculation



Figure 4: left: Agenda diversity to developmental legislative categories (in % of total legislation per year), right: Agenda diversity to monetary and financial categories, 1950 to 2016 (in % of total legislation per year), Source: Authors' calculation

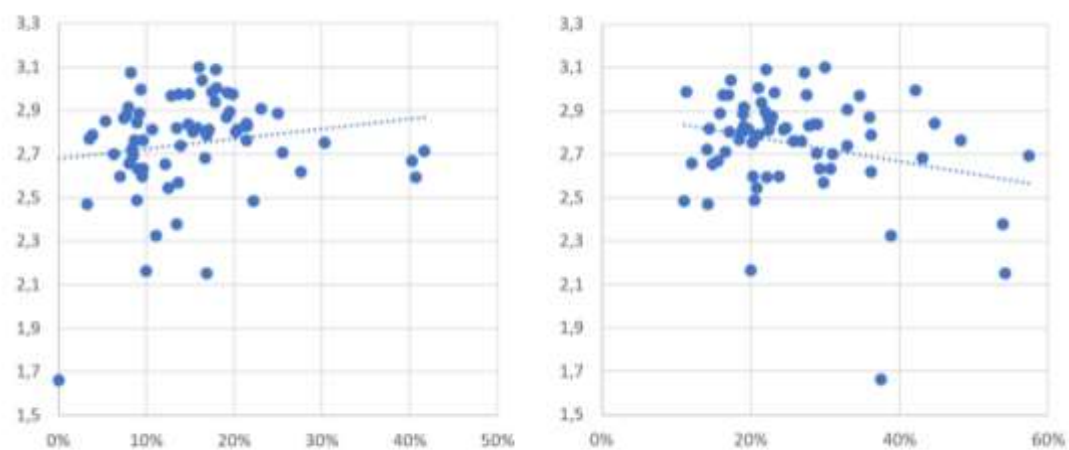
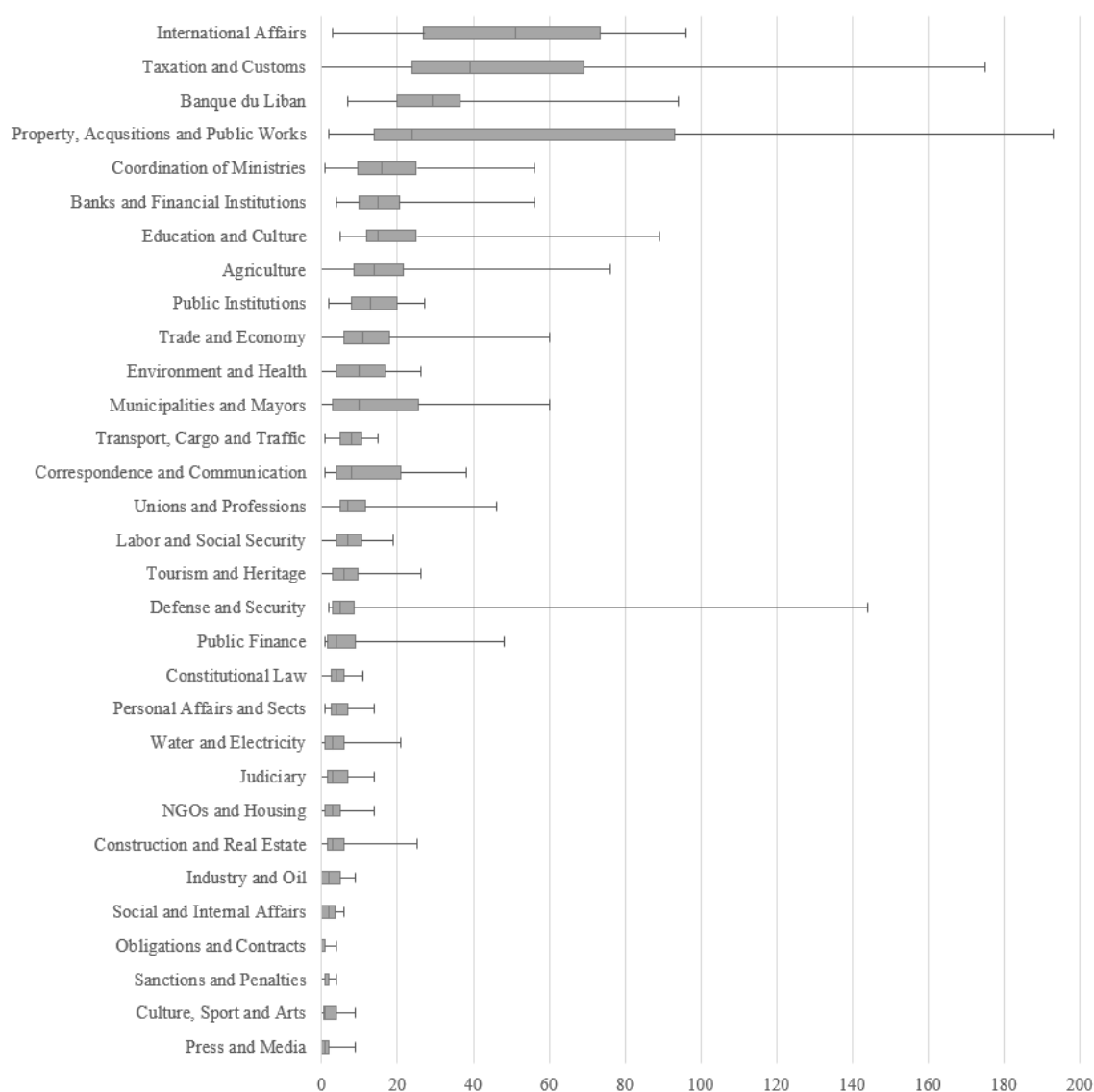


Figure 5: Political Agenda in average total legislation per year, 1990 until 2016



Note: The vertical bars in each box represent the median, and the enclosed boxes represent the 2nd and 3rd quartiles. The whiskers indicate the minimum and maximum values.

Figure 6: Share of Laws and Decrees in Developmental Categories to Total Laws and Decrees, 1990 to 2016

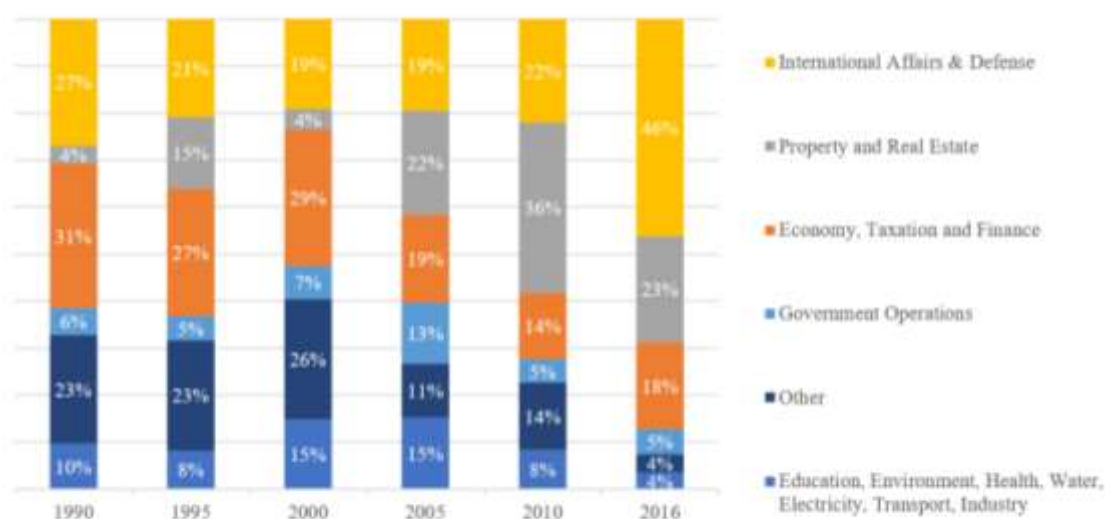


Figure 7: Share of legislation pertaining to finance and economy at the subtopic level in percent to total legislation, 2000 to 2003 and 2006 to 2009

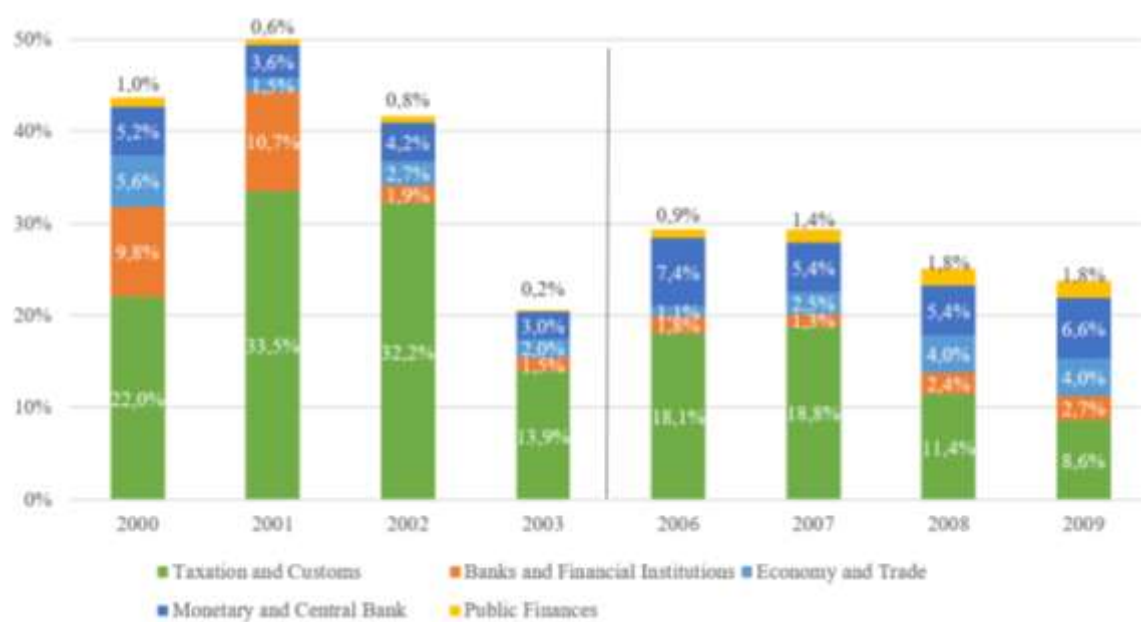


Figure 8: Comparison of times of legislative gridlock, number of laws and decrees 2006 to 2008 and 2012 to 2014, Source: Authors' calculation

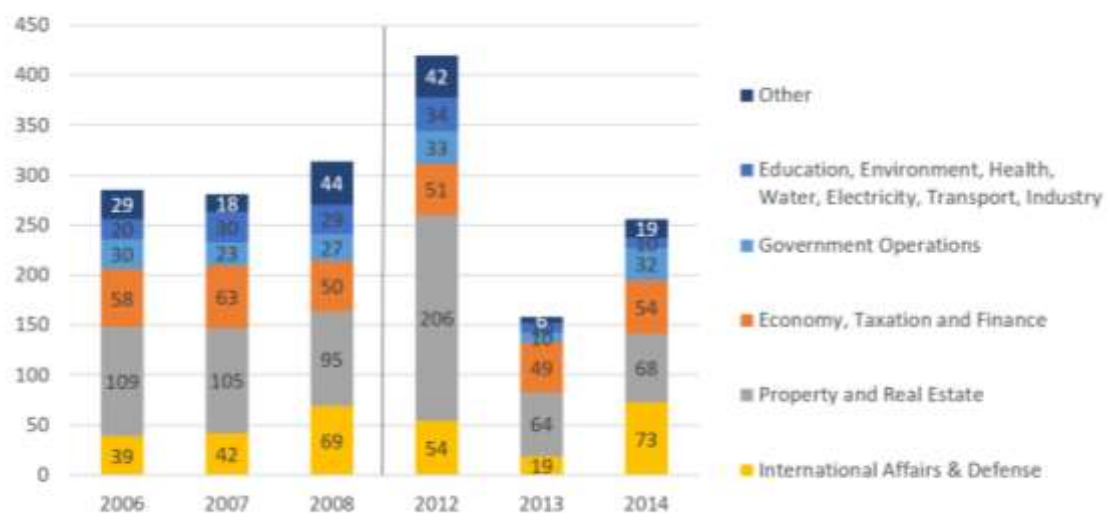


Figure 9: Political priorities during times of legislative gridlock, left: 2007, right: 2013, Source: Authors' calculation

