Agenda diversity and the role of core functions of governments in Hungary: the case of executive speeches

First draft version

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to follow up and extend the research agenda set, for example, by Jennings et al (2011) of agenda diversity and the effects of core functions of governments. According to our thesis, the attention of decision makers may fundamentally shape the Hungarian executive agenda by focusing on a few issues ahead of the others. Based on the mean values of mentioned policy topics in the parliamentary speeches of prime ministers, we selected the effects of three cored issues to analyse: macroeconomics, foreign affairs and government operation. According to our results, government's core functions have significant effects on the diversity of executive agenda in Hungary.

Key words: agenda diversity, attention, executive speeches, public policy, core functions of governments

Introduction

Post regime change has fundamentally influenced the structure of Hungarian executive agenda. The transition to a democratic system has caused a more diverse agenda, with a focus shared across more issues than before. Nevertheless, the attention of the government is infinite, therefore it should establish some priorities periodically, reflecting to the main political changes and preferences of public opinion (Jones-Baumgartner, 2005). The main question is, how influences this selection the diversity of the executive agenda?

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the relations between agenda diversity and the core functions of Hungarian governments. According to previous researches (eg Jennings et al, 2011) in cases of increased attention of decision makers it is possible to hypothise the decrease of agenda diversity as well. We tested this thesis with a three-step calculation: at first, we selected the three issues the government cored with by investigating the mean value of mentioned policy issues in parliamentary executive speeches. Then, we calculated the degree of agenda diversity with the method of Shannon's H (1948), what we compared to the relative attention of the selected policy issues.

The theory of agenda diversity and the core functions of governments

A huge set of information flows towards the government from many sources every day. Despite a significant part of these issues is of great importance, decision makers usually don't have the capacity to pay attention all of them. Therefore, in the continuous flow of information they have to establish some priorities paying concentrated attention to (Jones-Baumgartner, 2005).

In general, politicians have the intention to provide information about the main lines and topics of government policy. As these overweight issues are important in shaping the executive agenda, it has the opportunity to demonstrate a firm commitment to specific policy areas as well. Thus, government may expect from determined priorities dominate in the policy arena, mainly in legislation processes. Nevertheless, attention on these informations will not remain overweight for a long period, effects of the huge set of inputs is changing their position continuously (Bevan et al, 2011).Based on this thesis, how attention is distributed across the issues on the agenda? Why some topics receive concentrated attention from the government, while others don't?

Jochen and De Vreese (2003) determined agenda diversity as a semantic variety of issues on the agenda of social units, which are differ by diversity, and by the theme of priority topics as well. This definition connects to traditional agenda-setting researches which conceptualised agenda by investigating the influences of separating a few from the set of main topics. However, not only social units, political units (such as the government) may determine priority issues shaping their agenda as well. The diversity and the themes of dominate issues of these units may be similar (or in extreme cases the same), thus the main changes in their agendas usually may influence each other. For example, in Hungary, the international echo of „lex CEU", and the increased demonstrations against it, forced the government to give priority for an issue suddenly became dominant in public opinion.

According to this theory, two types of agendas can be separated. In the first case, when agenda is diverse, the government shares the attention across several competing issues (eg. McCombs & Jian-Hua, 1995). Nevertheless, when agenda is less diverse, the attention of decision makers is separated among only a few topics. Therefore, while the first case increases the political activity by allowing the select of more dominate issues, latter tends to decrease policy changes (Jennings et al, 2011).

Based on the research of Jennings et al (2011), the diversity of executive agendas is fundamentally influenced by the increased attention of governments to core policy issues. Their thesis connects to Kingdon's (1984) agenda-setting theory, what argues that the attended issues of governments are determined by the combination of policies, problems and politics. Nevertheless, the attention of decision makers are infinite, thus the government has to select a few issues paying concentrated attention to. These processes make the executive agenda less diverse and the relation between issues and government attention more assymetric (Jennings et al, 2011).

Executive speeches in Hungary

Political scientists studying democratic systems are interested in examining the government operation from different perspectives. Based on previous researches (eg Jennings et al, 2011, Alexandrova et al, 2012) analysing executive speeches provides such a good method to explain how governments determine general priorities and dominate issues reflecting to public preferences or political changes. (Chaqués et al, 2008)
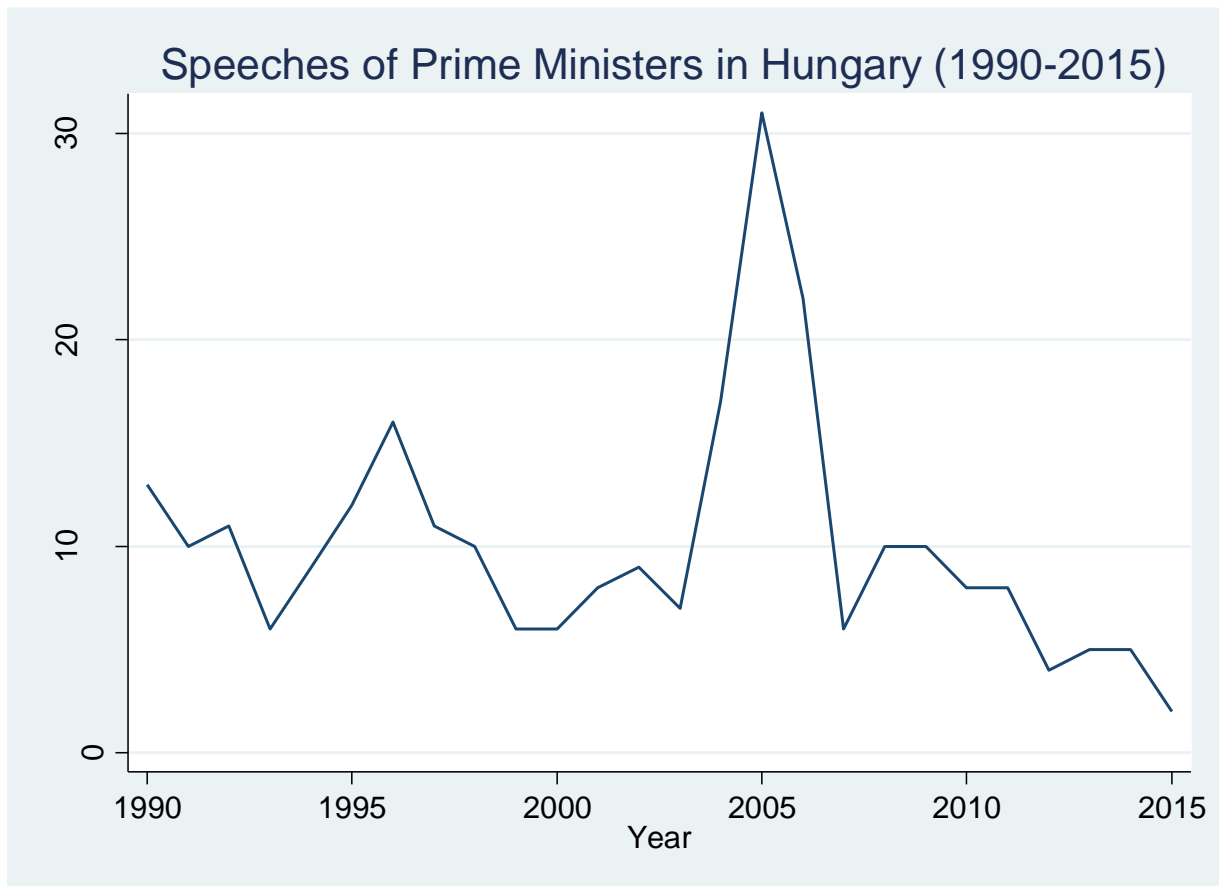
Few topics of concentrated attention are mentioned by members from the highest levels of government hierarchy, such as the prime minister. It has a great importance to demonstrate the main purposes this way, presenting the outlines of decision making not only for the rest of the parliament, but for citizens as well. Besides, statements reported by the media may influence political processes as well, by increasing forthcoming changes and debates of selected issues. Thus, speeches of prime ministers usually contain symbolic elements and ceremonial sentences with the purpose of strengthened importance of these priorities (Jennings et al, 2011).

According to Boydstun et al (2014) selecting the right speeches to compare has the same importance as calculating processes have: generally, investigating speeches from different electoral cycles of the same head, or statements from one prime minister to next should give interesting drafts about the main changes inside government agendas.

Nevertheless, by determining priorities, speeches create future potential costs for the government as well. If policy outputs differ significantly from mentioned issues, the possibility of increased negative opinions on reliability could continuously weaken the position of the government in the political arena (Bevan et al, 2011).

Executive statements considered in this paper are the parliamentary speeches of Hungarian prime ministers between 1990-2015.We analysed not only the annual, but each type of statements (except reactions) mentioned on debate days of the Hungarian Parliament:In Hungary, decision makers generally don't take ceremonial annual speeches, thus dominate issues are punctuated mainly on these parliamentary debates. Besides, although prime ministers do not use the opportunity of the speeches to determine key government priorities in the same way, there is only one extreme difference among the number of their political statements (Figure 1)

Figure 1: Parliamentary speeches of Hungarian Prime Ministers (1990-2015)

Speeches of Prime Ministers in Hungary (1990-2015)

Prime ministers - generally the heads of right-wing governments- prefer to use platforms outside the Parliament to speak about the most important aims and topics of government operation. Prime minister Viktor Orbán (N=71 in two electoral cycles and in 2015) and József Antall (N=34 in one electoral cycle) has spoken extreme less in the Parliament comparing to the the heads of left-wing governments; Ferenc Gyurcsány (N=69 in one and a half electoral cycles) and Gyula Horn (N=59 in one electoral cycle) between 1990 and 2015. Nevertheless, not only the political orientation of governments, but the main changes or breaks in political system may influence the number of executive statements as well. For instance, one year after the failure of Péter Medgyessy, the new prime minister of the MSZP government (Ferenc Gyurcsány) produced the highest number of executive speeches (N=31) after 1990.

Hypothesis

This analysis considers the issue diversity of government attention in speeches of prime ministers in Hungary for the period of 1990-2015. According to previous researches of the core functions of governments (eg Jennings et al, 2011; Alexandrova et al, 2012) it is possible to hypothesise strong connections among the diversity of the executive agenda and the effects of government's core functions on specific issues.

Hypothesis (H); Increases in attention of government to core issues— macroeconomy, international affairs, government operations —lead to a lower diversity of the executive agenda.

In short, the cored issues are priorised by the government ahead of all others. Increased information of them is incorporated during the decision making processes leaving more attention for other topics. The role of core functions of the government has a great importance for understanding the process of issue dynamics and the selections of the priorities as well. (Alexandrova et al, 2012)

Data and methods

In our analysis we investigate the core functions of Hungarian government for three issues (macroeconomics, foreign affairs, government operations), and the effects of concentrated attention to the agenda diversity. The analysis based on our new coded executive dataset containing 262 speeches of prime ministers taken in the Hungarian Parliament between 1990-2015. Each collected text was coded using the CAP topic codebook with 20 specific codes for the policy topics. (Table 1)

   In their parliamentary speeches, politicians mention a number of important issues. In order to determine all the policy contains of these oral presentations, we used the paragraphs as coding unit in each cases. Despite most of the researchers investigates sentences or quasi sentences for separating policy issues, in Hungarian speeches the topics are well separated in paragraphs as well as in sentences are (The mean length of paragraphs is across between 1-15 sentences).

Speeches are prepared for oral presentations. For this reason the framework of this type of statement is less structurated than the written ones (eg. laws or decrees). Besides, there are

variations in length of the speeches as well, thus a five minutes long speech is expected to contain less policy topics than the twenty minutes long ones. Nevertheless,like it is mentioned above,we find well separated policy topics in examined speeches, thus the structure of these oral outputs tends to investigate the issue diversity of the agenda as well as the written ones.

The main problem of investigating the speeches is analysing the mention of two or more issues in the same paragraph. For example, if the prime minister speaks about government measurements in dam-buliding policy, it is difficult to weight the issues and choose the more relevant one.

Table 1. CAP Major Topic Codes for Hungary

1. Macroeconomics
2. Civil rights, minority issues, and civil liberties
3. Health
4. Agriculture
5. Labor, employment and family issues
6. Education
7. Environment
8. Energy
9. Immigration
10. Transportation
12. Law, crime
13. Social welfare
14. Housing and urban development
15. Banking, finance and domestic commerce
16. Defence
17. Space, science, technology and communications
18. Foreign trade
19. International affairs and foreign aid
20. Government operations
21. Public lands and water management
23. Culture policy

Attention of the government on policy issues

In recent years the traditional economic and politician issues have given the way to new ones such as immigration, gender inequality ecc. The continuously flowing of these topics has increased the diversity of executive agendas, thus the investigation of governments core

function and agenda diversity has fundamentally importance to understand the nature of agenda dynamics. (Chaqués et al, 2008)

Testing our hypotheses we separated three policy issues as priority to compare the core functions of government with the entropy of the diversity of attention. Selected issues are the most cored by the government between 1900-2015 (Table 2).

According to Table 2, here is quite a huge difference comparing the most and the less common topic(s) the government core with. Issues such as culture policy, transportation, area of the space and science, environment have appeared just a few times in executive speeches, while public lands and water management, international affairs, government operations are mentioned in almost every oral statement of the head of governments. Based on MEAN values of policy topics, we separated the most common ones: macroeconomics (1), foreign policy (19) and government operations (20).

In followings we will test our hypothesis by comparing the scores of the entropy of agenda diversity and the value of the relative attention of Hungarian governments.

Issue diversity and Entropy

Testing our hypothesis we used the methods of previous researches (eg Jennings et al, 2011; Alexandrova et al, 2012) for the Hungarian executive dataset. To analyse the diversity of attention on policy issues, Shannon's Diversity Index (H) was calculated for entropy scores, based on the appearances of major topics in the content of executive speeches.

This index is adapted from information theory (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005), and in the field of political science used generally in researches such as institutional agenda-setting (Baumgartner, Jones, & MacLeod, 2000), comparative policy attention (Jennings et al., 2011), or information complexity (Wolfe, 2010).

By definition, „Shannon H is probabilistic measure of the spread of objects or observations across a defined number of (discrete) nominal categories. This is equal to the logarithm of the sum of probabilities of the different possible states in a system." (Jennings et al, 2011:12)

The degree of entropy depends on the number of issues the government paying attention to, reflecting the concentration (low degree) or wide disperse (high degree) of it. In short, if government focuses on a few issues, the value of entropy decreases, while dealing with numerous issues at the same time, begin to increase.

Table 2. Summary statistics of mentioned major topics in executive speeches (1990-2015)

Major topic	Mean	Minimum	Maximum
Macroeconomics	18.46	0	185
Civil rights, minority issues and civil liberties	2.58	0	22
Health	1.33	0	53
Agriculture	1.76	0	26
Labor, employment and family issues	2.26	0	89
Education	1.44	0	24
Environment	0.19	0	5
Energy	1.34	0	14
Immigration	2.06	0	24
Transportation	0.47	0	18
Law, crime	1.79	0	27
Social welfare	2.16	0	41
Housing and urban development	2.27	0	43
Banking, finance and domestic commerce	4.22	0	31
Defence	2.84	0	27
Space, science, technology and communication	0.63	0	4
Foreign trade			
International affairs and foreign aid	17.31	1	127
Government operations	28.03	1	238
Public lands and water management	16.27	0	30
Culture policy	0.90	0	8

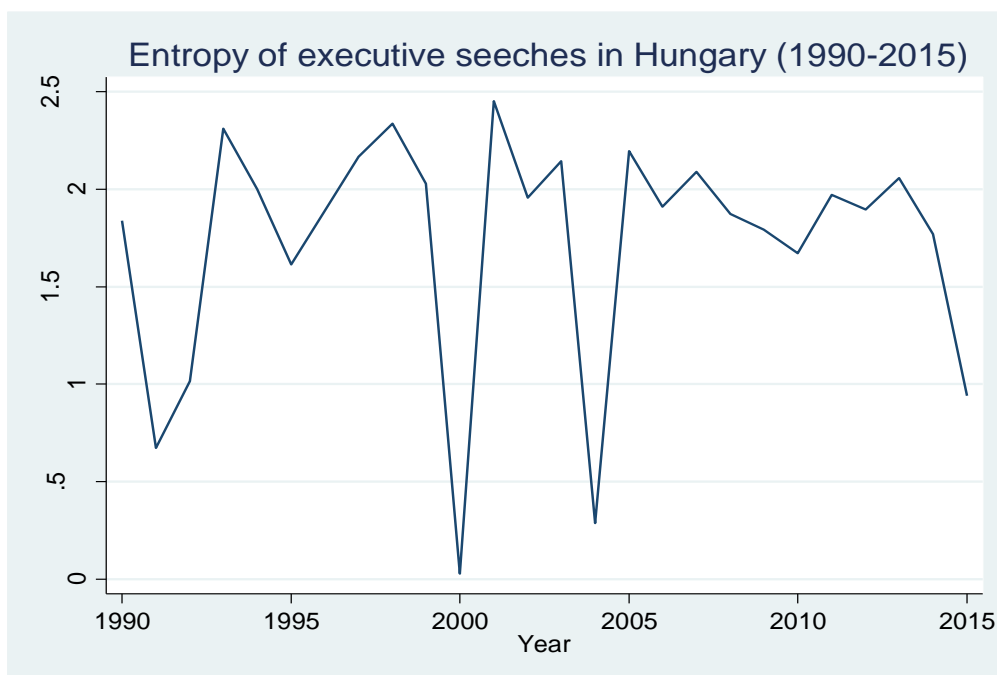Thus, Shannon H measures the issues diversity of the agenda of governments.

This measure is represented in the form:

$$H = (-1) \sum p(x_i) \ln(p(x_i))$$

„where entropy scores (H) are estimated as the negative sum for all topics of the likelihood, p(x), that an object x (in this instance a policy statement in the executive's speech) falls within a particular topic i, multiplied by the natural log of that likelihood. Since logs of zero cannot be calculated, it is assumed that ln(0) = 0 for topics where there were no policy statements in a given year." (Jennings et al, 2011:12)

The diversity of Hungarian executive agenda is presented by Figure 1. The scores of this diversity connects to the results of previous researches (eg Jennings et al 2011), by returning to a long-term equilibrium after the short-term extreme values. Based on the values of Figure 1,the focus of governments was extreme concentrated in years 1991 (0.67), 2000 (0,02) and 2004 (0,28). By contrast, the end of 1990s presents high diversity of the agenda, measured scores above 2. Nevertheless, entropy of 2.45 in 2001 is the highest of the period, demonstrating quasi-equilibrium shared of attention across the 20 major topics. In remaining years entropy sources moves between 1-2, what means approximately 4.8% of the attention on each policy issues.

Figure 1. Entropy of executive speeches in Hungary (1990-2015)

Relative attention and Entropy

According to our hypothesis (H), the concentrated attention of governments to core issues lead to a lower diversity of the executive agenda. Testing this thesis, we compared the score of entropy presented above with the values of relative attention.

According to Jennings et al (2011) and Alexandrova et al (2012) it is possible to suppose the relevant effects of government's core functions to the dynamics of the executive agenda. Thus, the salient of cored issues may reduce the opportunity of the attention of the government for other policy issues, constantly forcing them to compete for the rest places of executive attention.

Table 3 presents the dispersion of relative attention to the three major topics (macroeconomics, foreign affairs, government operations) compared with the entropy of the agenda diversity. „Although the two represent different measures, a comparison is justified as entropy considers the dispersion of attention across the whole agenda and not topic by topic." (Alexandrova et al, 2012:14)

In most years of decreased score of entropy the attention of the government is concentrated on the investigated three cored issue.

There is only one exception, in the case of 2015, despite the extreme low score of entropy (0.94), the relative attention on selected issues remained on 40.4%. This value points to the continuously changing of priorities, by paying special executive attention to the issue of migration policy in Hungary. In recent years, to action against the EU migration policy became one of the most important topics for Fidesz, determining not only the foreign policy, but influencing significantly the whole government policy as well.

The extreme high values presented by Figure 2 reflect to main political changes of Hungary as well. For example, the concentrated attention of 1991 refer to the influences of post regime change, where the matters of „privatisation" and the transition of political system from socialism to parliamentary system were punctuated issues of macroeconomics and government operation ahead of all others. Furthermore, the failure of economic policy of Prime Minister Medgyessy Péter,then the change of the head of MSZP government explain the focus on these issues as well in the middle of the early 2000s.

In addition, when cored issues are relatively less prominent, other topics have the opportunity to gain some of the government attention. For example the year 2011 demonstrate the increase of diversity of attention (61.9) by adding moe policy issues to the agenda as in the previous year (74.4).

Table 3. Entropy and relative attention in Hungarian (1990-2015)

Year	Entropy	Relative attention
1990	1.8374043	52.03252
1991	.67301167	90
1992	1.0160085	84.210526
1993	2.3093156	50
1994	1.9991461	62.637363
1995	1.6129073	72.018349
1996	1.8876992	69.270833
1997	2.1657404	54.313099
1998	2.3358647	50.666667
1999	2.0286541	51.376147
2000	.02964974	93.103448
2001	2.4519401	47.945205
2002	1.9573721	60.447761
2003	2.1435883	50.806452
2004	.28778209	90.502793
2005	2.1943308	58.949625
2006	1.9107492	66.608696
2007	2.0892515	57.986871
2008	1.8728267	62.773723
2009	1.7915842	71.276596
2010	1.6705404	74.482759
2011	1.9710853	61.924686
2012	1.8958281	64.788732
2013	2.0562374	55.670103
2014	1.7686486	64.864865
2015	.94084544	40.425532

Investigating agenda dynamics, main trend outlined by entropy changes fits in line with our thesis: thus, the hypothesis is confirmed. Increases of the attention on cored issues move together with the decreases of diversity – and vica versa. Based on the scores of Table 3, increases in attention of government to core issues lead to a lower diversity of the agenda.

Conclusion

This paper investigated the relations between agenda diversity and the effects of core functions of Hungarian governments. Our results connect to the previous research agenda set: concentrated attention of decision makers have significant influences to the diversity of executive agenda. The values may point out a new democracy model in Hungary, continuously moving towards to a more presidental system (eg Körösényi et al, 2015). Testing this thesis we should carry out a comparative analysis across the CEE countries or between Hungary and the UK, USA.

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