

Different governments, similar agendas? Analyzing more than seven decades of Norwegian policy agendas presented in executive speeches

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Abstract

Norwegian politics have undergone significant changes since 1945. This paper analyzes over seven decades of policy agendas outlined in Norwegian executive speeches focusing on the composition and development of the agenda using categories from the Comparative Agendas Project. The analysis focuses on (a) the dynamics of agenda changes over time, (b) the diversity and distribution of attention, and (c) in how far external shocks or partisan factors drive major agenda shifts. Our results show that the Norwegian executive agenda has become more encompassing over time, that it is comparatively diverse, and that diversity increases as Norwegian politics becomes more complex. While there is generally a high degree of stability in the agenda, sudden punctuations also occur. Partisan factors only play a limited role in explaining these attention shifts, while external shocks seem to be more relevant.

KEYWORDS

executive speeches, Norway, partisan politics, policy agendas, punctuated equilibrium

INTRODUCTION

Norwegian society underwent fundamental changes in the last seven decades as the country shifted from being homogenous and antipluralistic to becoming more diverse (Rommetvedt, 2005; Østerud, 2005). Similarly, partisan dynamics increased in complexity. While in the 1960s Norwegian political scientists predicted that Norway would soon become a two-party system, the party landscape became more fragmented over time with more fragile coalition patterns (Heidar, 2005). With these fundamental changes as a backdrop, this

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study uses a newly generated data set to investigate the issue composition and diversity of the Norwegian governments' executive agendas as presented in executive speeches.

The government's agenda can be defined as the “list of subjects or problems to which governmental officials [...] are paying some serious attention” (Kingdon, 1984, p. 3). Which policy issues manage to get attention has been a central topic of research (Baumgartner et al., 2019; Kingdon, 1984). The relevance of the composition of the agenda is linked to the realization that to occur, policy changes need to be debated first. However, decision-makers work under constraints regarding the time they can devote to an issue. This means that actors in political systems have to filter issues from the input stream (Baumgartner et al., 2009). Based on this, some argue that attention is actually the scarcest resource for politicians (Jones, 2003; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005). This implies that increased attention to one issue has implications for other issues by Kingdon (1984). Thus, issues that do manage to reach the agenda tell us something about the probability of policy proposals and output in the future.

Policy agendas have been studied intensively focusing, for example, on the agendas of parties (Walgrave & Nuytemans, 2009), the executive (John & Jennings, 2010; Van Assche, 2012), or the legislative (Baumgartner et al., 2009). For Norway, longitudinal studies of the policy agenda have so far mainly focused on expert or election survey data (see e.g., Hesstvedt et al., 2021; Ray & Narud, 2000). Our study adds to this existing literature by focusing on the Norwegian governments' agendas by mapping the content of key executive speeches delivered at the start of the legislative year (the *Trontaler*). In this politically important speech, the king on behalf of the government presents the key policy initiatives that the government plans to pursue in the coming year. We base our analysis on a newly created data set that uses the coding approach developed in the Comparative Agendas Project.¹

A focus on executive agendas is key for understanding policymaking processes since there is a tight link between a government's policy intentions and laws proposed later on (Baumgartner et al., 2019). In addition, the diversity of the government agenda can also inform us about the issue priorities of a government (Jennings et al., 2011). In studying governments' agendas, executive speeches are often used as a measure of executive priorities (Breeman et al., 2009; Dowding et al., 2010; Jennings et al., 2011; John & Jennings, 2010; Mortensen et al., 2011). While there are variations regarding the institutional setting in which these speeches are held, they all serve the purpose of representing government priorities for the upcoming year (Jennings & John, 2009). Examples of such speeches include the Speech from the Throne in the United Kingdom (Jennings & John, 2009; John & Jennings, 2010), the *Discurso de Investidura* in Spain (Chaqués-Bonafont et al., 2019), or the Dutch *Troonrede* (Breeman et al., 2009). Our study contributes to this literature by presenting the first comprehensive analysis of all *Trontaler* between 1946 and 2022 and thus

providing a unique longitudinal assessment of the Norwegian executive agenda against the backdrop of significant societal and political changes.

In our study, we will focus on the diversity of the agenda, change dynamics, punctuations, and attention shifts as well as the partisan composition of government. The following section will provide an overview of the societal and political changes in Norway, followed by an overview of the literature on government agendas as well as executive speeches. This is followed by an elaboration on the research methods and data. Afterward, we will present our results followed by a discussion of their relevance in light of the literature. Finally, we will present concluding remarks and avenues for future research.

STABILITY AND CHANGE IN GOVERNMENT AGENDAS

A key feature of the political agenda is that it cannot cover all issues at once. As the attention of politicians is a scarce resource, but also a necessary condition for policymaking (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005), politicians need to prioritize issues at the expense of others. The government has a privileged position in this process as they are expected to steer policy formulation during their term in office. To conceptualize changes in the government's agenda, we build on Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET). A key argument of PET is that decision-making in response to complex problems will not be proportional to inputs. In addition, political institutions are set up in a way that they do not respond to all impulses equally, as some stability is necessary to keep political order (Baumgartner et al., 2009). Jones and Baumgartner (2005) distinguish here between transaction costs and decision costs. Decision costs refer to costs related to bargaining over diverging preferences. In a coalition, for example, parties cannot realize all their preferences as they need to harmonize their own preferences with the ones of their coalition partners. Transaction costs refer to the translation of policy proposals into policy output through the policymaking process, which creates additional hurdles. Both these costs can be summarized under the label of institutional costs. Taken together, both human limitations and institutional costs create an environment that favors “stickiness” of the political agenda, biasing the government's attention toward the status quo (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009).

Shifts in Norwegian politics since 1946

Norwegian society underwent significant changes moving from being very homogenous in the 1950s and 1960s to becoming much more heterogenous from the 1990s onwards (Rømmetvedt, 2005). Similarly, Norwegian politics became more complex, fragmented, and dynamic (Heidar, 2005; Rømmetvedt, 2005). In parliament, the number of represented parties increased

from between 5 and 6 in the postwar period to 7 to 8 in the 2000s (Rommetvedt, 2005) and even 10 following the 2021 election. Scholars of Norwegian politics identify three phases of development of the party system: a period in which the social democrats were the dominant party (from 1945 until the early 1960s), a period of two competing party blocks (until the early 1990s), and a period of diffusion and increased complexity (since the mid-1990s) (Heidar, 2005; Rommetvedt, 1992). Similarly, the patterns of types of government that ruled Norway changed over time (Rommetvedt, 1992, 2005; Østerud, 2005; Østerud & Selle, 2006): After 1945 the dominant position of the social democrats allowed them to rule in one-party majority governments until they lost their majority in 1961. This started a phase characterized mainly by one-party minority governments led by the social democrats at times interrupted by comparatively fragile coalition governments from the opposing block. This phase lasted until 1997. It was followed by a third phase of diverse coalition governments² that lasts until today.

These shifts in party politics also affected agenda dynamics in Norway as issue competition and issue ownership changed over time. While political values are rather stable in the Norwegian electorate (Karlsen & Aardal, 2016), these values do not prescribe voter allegiance or issue ownership with similar stability. The postwar period with the dominant role of the social democrats was characterized by stable class conflicts and class voting, but more recent decades have seen a shift to issue voting and a partisan fight for space on the agenda (Hesstvedt et al., 2021; Valen, 1999). At the same time, Norwegian election studies and survey experiments have shown that issue ownership influences voter decisions in Norway and that parties subsequently have focused more on pushing “their” issues (Beyer et al., 2014; Bjørklund, 1988). However, a recent analysis using data from the Norwegian national election study shows that there is fluctuation over time regarding which parties voters perceive as the most competent on an issue highlighting that issue ownership is a moving target (Hesstvedt et al., 2021).

Given the increased complexity of Norwegian politics, our first hypothesis is:

H1: The Norwegian executive agenda will become more diverse over time.

Moreover, as the analysis focuses on the executive agenda, one can expect a relationship between the composition of the government and agenda diversity. We test this using two hypotheses:

H2a: The three phases with differing dominant types of government will have increasing levels of agenda diversity.

H2b: More parties involved in a government will lead to a more diverse agenda.

While the literature on Norwegian politics suggests that the government's agenda should become more diverse over time, results from PET studies of government agendas in other countries suggest other dynamics. They highlight that while agenda diversity varies between countries, its development over time in each country should be similarly stable (Boydston et al., 2014; Jennings et al., 2011). Most observed change is rather incremental (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005), and studies show that even exogenous shocks only have short-time effects (Jones & Baumgartner, 2012). While none of these studies focuses on Norway, we still want to do justice to both strands of literature. Therefore, we formulate hypothesis 3 somewhat in contradiction to the previous ones:

H3: The diversity of the Norwegian executive agenda will stay stable over time.

Agenda changes

When visualizing changes in government agendas, scholars usually plot the frequency of agenda changes (see e.g., John & Jennings, 2010). These graphs provide an overview of the frequency of gradual versus punctuated changes and the common distribution pattern is leptokurtic, meaning the graph has a high positive kurtosis with several observations placed far away from the mean in the tails of the distribution. The peak is usually centered at zero showing the stability of the agenda and the prevalence of incremental changes, while the long tail indicates instances of disproportional shifts (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005).

Support for these dynamics has been found in many studies of government agendas (Breeman et al., 2009; John & Jennings, 2010; Van Assche, 2012). PET explains these sudden shifts by highlighting that the same forces that cause stability in the policy agenda are also at play in instances of major changes (Jones & Baumgartner, 2012): Up to a certain threshold the importance of inputs to the agenda is reduced by limits in the human capacity and institutional costs; when this threshold is surpassed though, issue salience is significantly amplified as institutional costs shift and begin to exaggerate the importance of an issue (Jones & Baumgartner, 2012). Based on these arguments, we expect:

H4: The Norwegian executive agenda is characterized by incremental changes disrupted by seldom punctuations.

Parties and agenda change

Political parties provide input into the political system that can cause policy punctuations. Concepts like party competition or issue ownership (Walgrave et al., 2015) stress that different parties will highlight certain policies that give them

an advantage in partisan competition. Contrary, the partisan neutrality perspective argues that partisan transitions have limited effects on agenda composition. Although an incoming government with a different composition would want to change the policies of the preceding one, this will not alter the structure of issue attention on the agenda, but rather the ideological direction of policies (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Jones & Baumgartner, 2012). For example, a left-wing and a right-wing government can both address the issue of tax policy albeit with policies aiming in opposing directions. In this situation, the room that the issue receives on the agenda would be similar and the difference would mainly be in the directionality of the policies proposed. Moreover, all governments need to react and adapt to external factors such as economic development or international crises and it is therefore unclear how far a change in party composition alters the agenda composition (Jones & Baumgartner, 2012).

Executive speeches present the government's agenda for a comparatively short period of time, namely, the coming (legislative) year (Breeman et al., 2009; John & Jennings, 2010). Consequently, they tend to be shorter texts. This creates trade-offs regarding which policy issue will be included. Following the “progressive friction hypothesis,” which expects that institutional costs increase the further one moves toward actual policy output (Baumgartner et al., 2009), executive speeches should be characterized by a high degree of stability. At the same time and contrary to, for example, coalition agreements, executive speeches are formulated during the time in office. This means that they can be directly influenced by external shocks.

A common finding in the literature testing effects of elections on executive agendas is that policy punctuations appear independently from elections and shifts in party composition (Baumgartner et al., 2019; Breeman et al., 2009; Mortensen et al., 2011). Breeman et al. (2009) even find that attention changes in Dutch executive speeches are rarer in situations of government turnover. Mortensen et al. (2011) similarly argue that rather than the ideological composition of the government, it is the set of issues that a government inherits from its predecessors that shapes executive agendas. These findings provide further support for the partisan neutrality perspective.

At the same time, the PET literature highlights that there is a need for a more in-depth investigation of the role of partisan factors in shaping executive agendas (see e.g., Baumgartner et al., 2019; Jones & Baumgartner, 2012). Our data on Norway gives us a good starting point to contribute to this literature. With nearly eight decades of data, we cover more changes in party composition (17) than any of the previous studies. This includes both partial and complete party turnovers, partisan shifts after long periods of single-party governments, and coalition changes within the period of one electoral cycle. Moreover, the fundamental changes that Norwegian politics experienced since 1945 (Heidar, 2005; Rommetvedt, 2005) and recent findings regarding dynamics of issue ownership (Hesstvedt et al., 2021) make Norway an especially interesting

case to test core assumptions of the partisan neutrality perspective. We, therefore, formulate our final set of hypotheses based on this approach:

- H5a:** Punctuations in the Norwegian executive agendas will align with external shocks.
- H5b:** Punctuations in the Norwegian executive agendas will not align with changes in the partisan composition of governments.

DATA AND METHODS

Our data include all Norwegian *Trontaler* between 1946 and 2022. Following §74 of the Norwegian constitution, these speeches are given annually by the king at the start of the legislative year, and they highlight the government's main policy agenda.³ The speech has a formalized introduction and final sentence, but besides that, there is no fixed structure. We also conducted two expert interviews with speechwriters who were involved in the drafting process both on the side of the government and on the side of the Royal Court. These interviews focused on the process through which the speeches get drafted, their relevance, and the work division between the government and the court. Our data set includes a total of 78 executive speeches and covers 15 different prime ministers, 26 different governments and 20 parliaments.⁴ While *Trontaler* is not the only possible type of data to study executive agendas, their high visibility as events in the parliamentary year makes them important indicators for executive attention.

To code the data, we relied on the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) and their master codebook (Baumgartner et al., 2019; Bevan, 2019), which we adapted to the Norwegian context. The master codebook consists of over 200 subtopic codes distributed over 21 major policy topics. It has been used to code data from more than 23 countries (Baumgartner et al., 2019). Like other national versions, the Norwegian adaptation of the codebook retained all codes from the master codebook and added some context-specific subcodes to address national peculiarities. The codebook only focuses on whether a policy area is addressed or not and does not address ideological placement. While the data have been coded into over 200 subcodes, for our analysis we will focus on the 21 major topics presented in Table 1. However, we have conducted robustness checks using subcodes, which are available in Supporting Information: [Appendix](#).

The coding unit for the analysis was whole sentences, and each sentence has been assigned only one code. Based on the CAP coding strategy, sentences were coded based on policies rather than policy targets, meaning that the focus is on the means used to achieve a goal and not the goal itself (Bevan, 2019). Each document was coded by a single coder. Before the final coding, the coder team did multiple rounds of training. We performed multiple reliability tests and

TABLE 1 CAP major topics.

-
1. Macroeconomics
 2. Civil rights, minority issues, and civil liberties
 3. Health
 4. Agriculture and fishing industry
 5. Labor
 6. Education and culture
 7. Environment
 8. Energy
 9. Immigration and refugee issues
 10. Traffic
 12. Legal affairs
 13. Social policy
 14. Housing and urban development
 15. Industrial and commercial policy
 16. Defense
 17. Research, technology, and communications
 18. Foreign trade
 19. Foreign policy and relations with other countries
 20. Government operations and government issues
 21. Public lands and water management
 23. Cultural policy
-

Abbreviation: CAP, Comparative Agendas Project.

continued training until we regularly reached satisfying levels of intercoder reliability. For the reliability tests, we used Krippendorff's α and we reached a reliability score of above 0.7 when coding on the level of subcodes and above 0.8 when coding on the level of major topics (Krippendorff, 2004). Table 2 presents an overview of the data.

Operationalization

For each document, each major topic received a value between 0 and 1 based on its relative space. To illustrate how attention on the executive agenda shifts over

TABLE 2 Overview of the data

Number of documents	78
Number of sentences	5925
Number of sentences including policy	5576
Average number of sentences	76
Minimum number of sentences	26
Maximum number of sentences	124

time, we applied a relative measure of change in issue attention. This approach controls for changing agenda length and thus focuses solely on how governments spread their attention to policy issues over time without considering whether the overall length of a document has changed (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005). The relative changes are then aggregated across all major topics.

To study changes in issue attention, we first calculated kurtosis scores on the frequency distribution of change. This gives us an indication of how many cases are positioned among the extreme values of the distribution compared to cases centered around the peak (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005). Leptokurtic distributions are characterized by a kurtosis score above 3. Second, we perform a Kolmogorov–Smirnov (KS) test to compare the distribution of changes in the data to a probability distribution (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005). If the null hypothesis of the KS test is rejected, it means that the data is not derived from a normal distribution. Since both the KS test and kurtosis measures are sensitive to extreme values, and leptokurtic distributions include observations many standard deviations away from the mean, we also calculate the L-kurtosis to limit the effect of outliers (Breunig & Koski, 2012). A score above 0.12 indicates that the distribution is characterized by more extreme values and less medium-sized changes than in a normal distribution. Finally, we also perform a Shapiro–Wilk (SW) test, which is less sensitive to extreme values than the KS test, to provide additional robustness to our analysis (John & Jennings, 2010).

Identifying punctuations and testing partisan effects

To test partisan effects on the agenda, we followed John and Jennings (2010) and Van Assche (2012). We listed the most significant punctuations of the agenda to see whether they align with changes in the partisan composition of the government. While there is no common agreement on how severe a change needs to be to count as a punctuation, we again followed John and Jennings

(2010) suggestion and operationalized punctuations as an increase of over 250%.

A disadvantage of using punctuations as a measure of instability is the focus on single policy areas and not changes in the speech as such. To get a better understanding of the links between change dynamics and partisan factors, we used an approach suggested by Mortensen et al. (2011, pp. 980–981). They assign executive speeches a single stability score and map these scores over time:

- (1) Each major topic receives a percentage score based on its relative space.
- (2) The absolute percentage difference within each major topic's score from 1 year to another is estimated.
- (3) The absolute changes are summarized into one score across all major topics. In this, a score of 0 would indicate perfect stability, while a score of 200 indicates complete instability.
- (4) Last, the range is standardized between 0 and 100 and subtracted from 100 to create a stability (rather than instability) measure. This can be expressed as

$$AS_t = 100 - \left(\sum_n i = 1 |GS_t - GS_{t-1}| \right) / 2.$$

Thereby, if $AS_t = 50$, it means that there is a 50% overlap in the content from one speech to the next. A score of 100 means perfect stability, and a score of 0 means that the speeches contain entirely different topics. If parties vary significantly in what issues they include on the policy agenda, years with the lowest stability scores should correspond with years of partisan changes. Breeman et al. (2009, p. 17) use correlation coefficients between speeches to map links between partisan and agenda changes. If the partisan effect is present, the years with the lowest correlations should also be the years when new parties enter government. As with punctuations, this is solely a descriptive method, not controlling for intervening variables. However, this allows for a more systematic comparison of agenda stability between different types of governments (Breeman et al., 2009, p. 20).

One problem when studying agenda dynamics focusing on relative changes over time is that it excludes observations where an issue has 0% attention, as one cannot divide by zero. This has implications for our analysis. First, the frequency distribution does not include instances in which issues rise to or fall off the agenda and thus provides an incomplete description of agenda shifts. Second, the list of punctuations matched with partisan factors does not capture whether completely new issues are included on the agenda. Thereby, instances where new parties include previously excluded issues are not captured, risking underestimating a potential partisan effect. For these reasons, we added a selection of instances where

issues shift from exclusion to be included in the agenda, which in the following will be labeled as zero-punctuations. As it is more common that issues move from receiving 0% attention to receiving a small percentage of attention in the following year, we will focus on major shifts in attention. Following Van Assche (2012), we have identified the 10 observations that were not included in the agenda in the previous year and then observed the largest absolute percentage point increase. To assess how severe the zero-punctuations are in comparison to the rest of the data, we added 1% to the relevant values in the respective years and estimated the relative increase that they represent.

Entropy scores

To measure the diversity of executive agendas, we calculated entropy scores that describe the spread of observations across the 21 major topics (Jennings et al., 2011). It is estimated using Shannon's H (Shannon, 1949). This measure is well-suited to capture diffusion and concentration among different categories and even accounts for the number of categories included (Boydston et al., 2014)

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

The entropy score H is the negative sum of the likelihood that a given policy statement (x) will fall in one of the 21 major categories (i), multiplied by the natural logarithm of that likelihood (Jennings et al., 2011). An entropy score of 0 means that all attention is concentrated on one single topic, while the maximum score of $\ln(21) = 3.04$ means that each major topic receives the same amount of attention.

RESULTS

During the interviews, the informants described the process by which *Trontaler* have been drafted in recent years. It is coordinated and led by the office of the Prime Minister, who also sets the general policy focus for the speech. A speech writer will then start to work on the speech by collecting input from all ministries on their key upcoming legislative initiatives. After the input is collected and combined into a text that fits the duration of the speech, the draft is presented to the Prime Minister and if s/he is satisfied with the draft it is proposed and discussed in a meeting of the entire cabinet. Here, ministers have another chance to provide comments, and in the end, the cabinet accepts the speech. Afterward, the speech is sent to the Royal Court where the staff checks the speech to ensure that it is appropriate for being delivered by the monarch. This final stage of the process usually does not interfere with the policy content but focuses on the public image of the monarch who delivers the speech on behalf of the government. Moreover, the interviewees highlighted the

importance of the speech for the government in that it describes the executive's main agenda for the coming year. Overall, the encompassing process of drafting the speech and confirmation by the interviewees of its important support assumptions in the literature about the relevance of executive speeches.

To provide an overview of the executive agenda in Norway, we will first present some descriptive statistics before analyzing entropy scores and the distribution of changes. Figure 1 shows how the length (total count of sentences) and the number of policy statements (count of sentences with policy content) have developed.⁵ The average number of statements over the entire period is 71.5. The red and blue shaded phases indicate periods of governments led either by social democrats or other parties. The figure highlights that there does not seem to be a clear pattern that links the partisan composition of the government and the length of the agenda. As it was mentioned in the interviews as a relevant factor influencing the length of the speech, we also investigate how far the age of the king as the person giving the speech matters. The data seem to suggest that there is an increase in length in the beginning and a decrease toward the end of the reign of a monarch (see Supporting Information: [Appendix](#)). Thus, the age of the monarch can be a limiting factor for the speech as the potential duration of the speech (and thus the presented agenda) depends on the physical fitness of the monarch.

It is clearly visible that the length and number of statements have increased over time, but that there are significant variations between years.

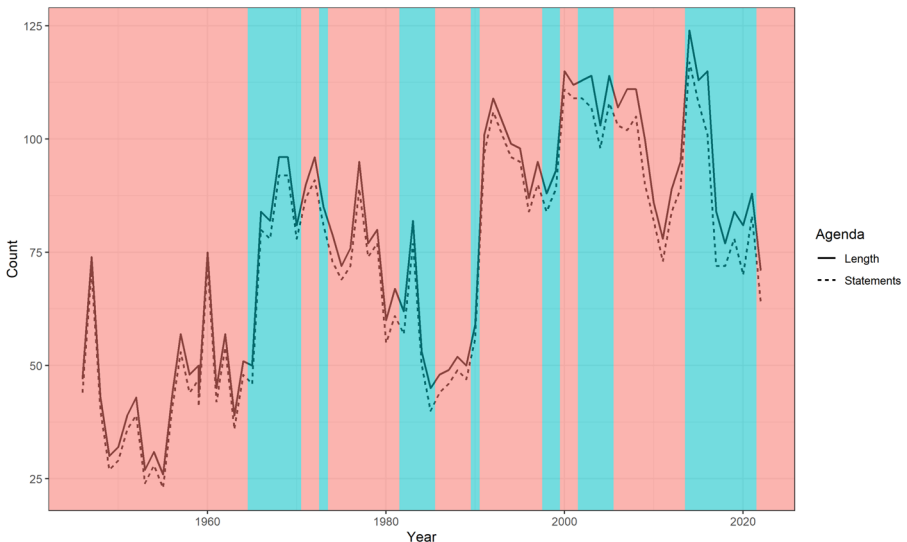


FIGURE 1 Agenda size 1946–2022 by governing coalition 1946–2022. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

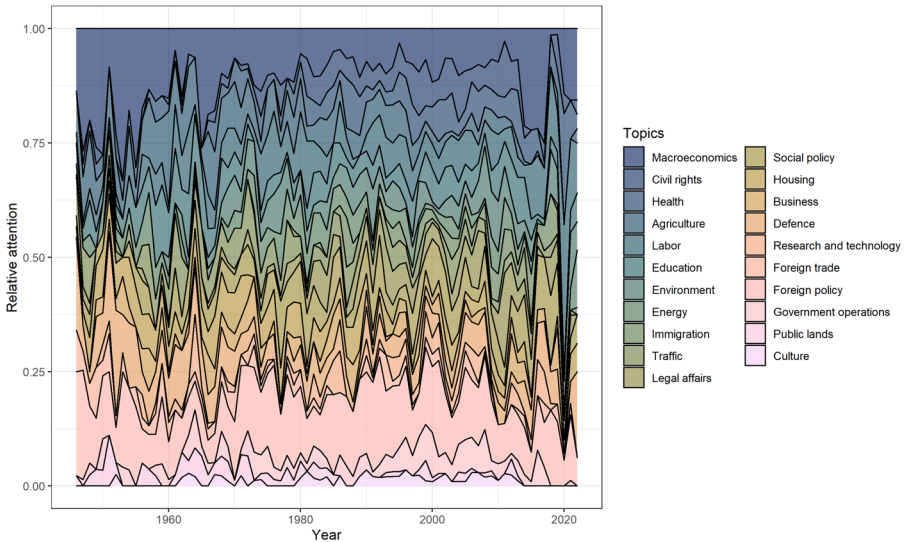


FIGURE 2 Relative attention over time 1946–2022. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-9477.12292)]

This increasing pattern of agenda length is in line with results in other countries (Jennings et al., 2011). Looking at the total count, a topic has been mentioned in all *Trontaler*, the most frequently mentioned policy topics are core issues such as Foreign policy or Macroeconomics, while Cultural policy is rarely included. This is in line with earlier results highlighting the importance of core policy topics (Jennings et al., 2011). Moreover, when considering how *Trontaler* are drafted, the fact that these core policy issues tend to have dedicated ministries further explains their prominent position.

Figure 2 shows how much space is allocated to each major topic in each speech. A comparison between Figure 2 and the absolute count over time presented in Supporting Information: Appendix highlights the importance of separating the total number of sentences devoted to an issue and that same issue's relative space over time. For example, although macroeconomics and foreign policy are most frequently mentioned (see Supporting Information: Appendix), the relative attention devoted to them varies widely across speeches.

Assessing agenda diversity and stability

As we are also interested in how diverse and stable agendas are over time, we calculated several measures to assess this.

Table 3 provides an overview of entropy scores; the first column includes all speeches in the data, and the second column excludes the 2020 speech. This separation is necessary as the 2020 speech, which was held just half a year after the outbreak of Covid-19 is a clear outlier. Figure 3 provides an overview of the entropy scores over time along the three phases of different dominant types of government. It shows an increase in agenda diversity from the first to the second phase during which the entropy scores plateau and slightly fluctuate. From 2013 onward there is decreasing diversity leading to a slightly lower mean entropy score in the third phase. Figure 3 also reiterates that the 2020 speech is a clear outlier, with an entropy score of 1.89.⁶ In presenting the government's main priorities in the light of the pandemic, 60% of the speech concentrated toward three issues: Health (24%), Macroeconomics (14%), and Labor (32%).⁷ Even when repeating a similar analysis using more fine-grained subcodes, we can observe the same dynamic (see Supporting Information: [Appendix](#)).

TABLE 3 Entropy scores 1946–2022.

	With 2020	Without 2020
Minimum	1.89	2.03
Maximum	2.91	2.91
Standard deviation	0.22	0.21
Mean	2.61	2.62
Average number of policy statements	71.49	71.51
<i>N</i>	78	77

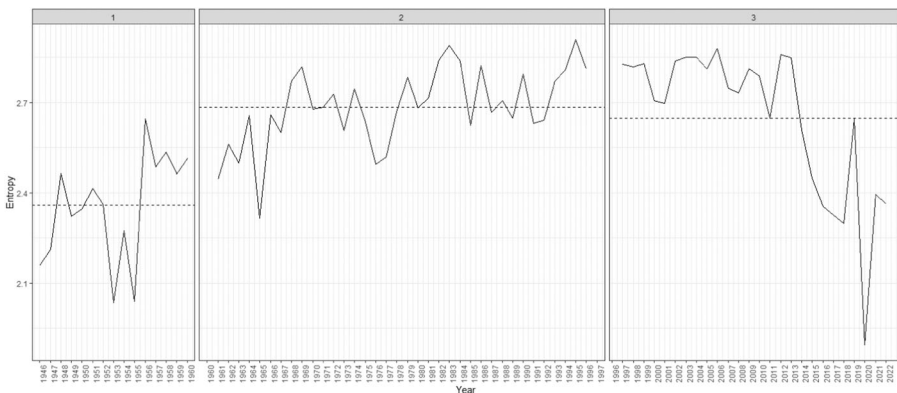


FIGURE 3 Entropy scores 1946–2022.

When looking at the diversity of the agenda in the three phases of dominant types of government, we observe that the mean entropy score is the lowest in the first phase (2.36), characterized by social democratic one-party majority governments, which is in line with hypothesis 2a. However, the increase is not steady, as the third phase (mainly coalition governments) shows a slightly lower entropy score (2.65 including 2020/2.68 excluding 2020) compared to the second phase (2.69) (mainly one-party minority governments).⁸ We also calculated regression models, using both entropy scores based on major topics and subcodes as dependent variables and ran the models with and without the 2020 speech (see Supporting Information: [Appendix](#)). All models show that the second and third phases have significantly higher entropy scores. Moreover, when excluding the 2020 speech, the third phase also has noticeably higher entropy scores compared to the second phase. Thus, our analysis provides support to hypothesis 2a, especially after excluding the 2020 speech.

The data presented above show a pattern that is more in line with arguments from the literature on Norwegian politics than the general PET literature. Contrary to expectations formulated in hypothesis 3, we find that the diversity of the executive agenda increases over time supporting hypothesis 1. However, entropy scores also show that the diversity of the agenda decreases after 2013, and when looking at entropy scores based on subcodes (see Supporting Information: [Appendix](#)), this trend already starts in the mid-2000s. Similar patterns emerge regarding entropy scores in the three phases of dominant types of government. Here, the executive agenda is least diverse during the period of one-party majoritarian rule (1946–1960), then becomes more diverse during the period of mainly one-party minority governments (1961–1996), and then entropy scores stabilize during the last phase (since 1997). To assess the relationship between the number of parties involved in government and agenda diversity we calculated additional regression models. Again, we used entropy scores for major topics and subcodes as dependent variables and ran models with and without the 2020 speech (see Supporting Information: [Appendix](#)). The basic model that only includes the number of parties in government and entropy scores shows, in line with hypothesis H2b, that more parties in government are linked to a more diverse agenda. Even in a more sophisticated model that controls for the age of the king, whether the government is led by social democrats, and the number of effective parties, the effect still holds highlighting that governments that are composed of a larger number of parties have more diverse executive speeches.

Overall, our data suggest that the Norwegian executive agendas mirror the significant increase in societal and political complexity described above. As more parties enter government and parliament, a greater range of policy issues is being discussed in executive speeches. These significant shifts make Norway an interesting, and somewhat contrasting, case for the general PET literature. Having a long phase of one-party majority governments with a rather

homogenous society and then diversifying rapidly over just a couple of decades makes Norway not a typical case of multiparty democracies (even if the general trend of increased diversity is common across Europe). Thus, our results of increased diversity of the agenda over time, which somewhat contradict the PET literature, provide some interesting context for future analyses.

Figure 4 illustrates the dynamics of attention shifts over time, plotted against a normal distribution. The changes are aggregated into one frequency distribution, showing the frequency of percentage changes from 1 year to another. The peak on the left side of the figure indicates instances where an issue has decreased its space by a 100%, meaning it is excluded from the agenda. As predicted by PET, most changes happen through incremental adjustments. Furthermore, the high central peak of the distribution illustrating instances of 0% change depicts stability. On the right tail of the distribution, the data points indicate cases with sudden increases in attention. Finally, both the kurtosis and L-kurtosis indicate a distribution with observations many standard deviations away from the mean, narrow shoulders, and a pointy shape. The KS and SW statistics further support this.⁹ All these results support hypothesis 4.

Overall, this part of our analysis highlights that Norwegian executive agendas are rather diverse as represented by the high entropy scores. Results from Jennings et al. (2011) show that comparable speeches in other countries

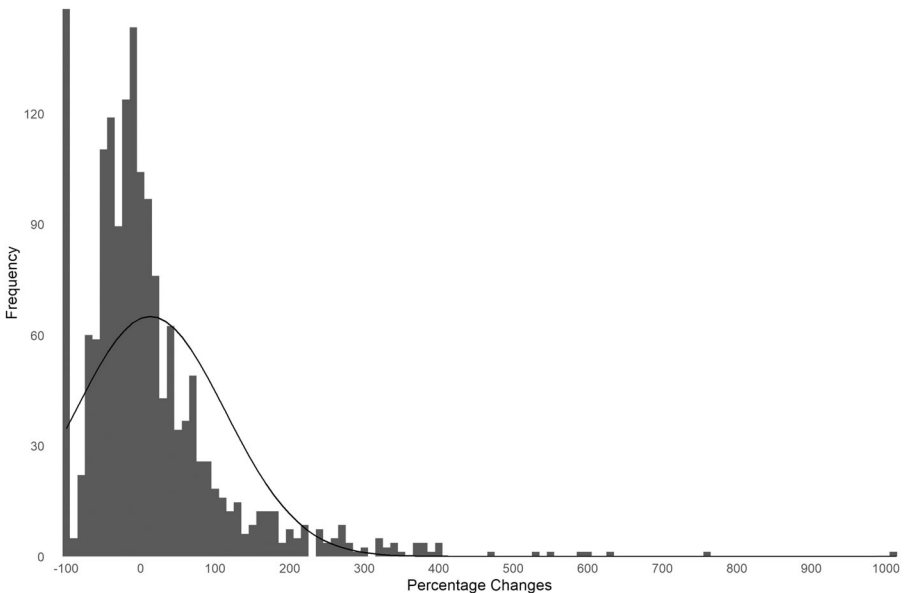


FIGURE 4 Frequency distribution of annual percentage changes in attention 1946–2022.

have on average lower scores. Moreover, Norwegian agendas became more diverse over time and throughout the phases of different dominant types of government, but in recent years diversity has not increased. While the first aspect fits our expectations, the lack of increase in recent years is somewhat surprising. Finally, our results show that a higher number of parties in government is associated with a more diverse executive agenda. The change distribution of the Norwegian executive agenda follows the common PET pattern, and there are first indications that external events influence the composition of the policy agenda as exemplified by the 2020 speech.

Changes in issue attention

For a detailed look at issue attention over time, we mapped the relative attention for all 21 major categories.¹⁰ When interpreting changes in issue attention different dynamics can be at play. First, governments can use speeches to highlight a policy area, which is important to them (Walgrave et al., 2015). An example of this is the conservative government that came into office in 2013 after an 8-year rule by social democrats that put a much greater focus on Macroeconomics, a policy area for which they have issue ownership (see Supporting Information: [Appendix](#)). Second, one can distinguish policy areas as either core or selective issues (Jennings et al., 2011). Core issues are all primary functions of government that demand permanent attention, such as foreign policy. All remaining policy areas can be described as selective. As the length of a speech has a positive effect on agenda diversity (Jennings et al., 2011), the relatively short *Trontaler* should have a stronger focus on core issues. An example for this is the larger focus on foreign policy and relatively lower focus on agriculture visible in Figures 5 and 6, a dynamic that has also been identified in other countries (Jennings et al., 2011).

Finally, a key assumption of PET is that external shocks will make punctuations of the policy agenda more likely. Since *Trontaler* are delivered yearly they can be more reactive to ongoing events compared to, for example, coalition agreements. Our data offer three good examples of this. First, Figure 7 shows a spike in attention to health following the outbreak of Covid-19. Second, Figure 8 shows a similar spike in the focus on legal affairs following the July 22 terror attack in Oslo and Utøya. Third, Figure 9 shows a spike in issue attention to defense policy following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which is only trumped by the first postwar speech in 1946 and the speech in 1953, the year in which 30% of the state budget was spent on defense as part of Norway's rearmament.

All these examples highlight that Norwegian executive agendas are responsive to current events and that the government uses the speech to highlight how they address pressing problems. This supports hypothesis H5a.

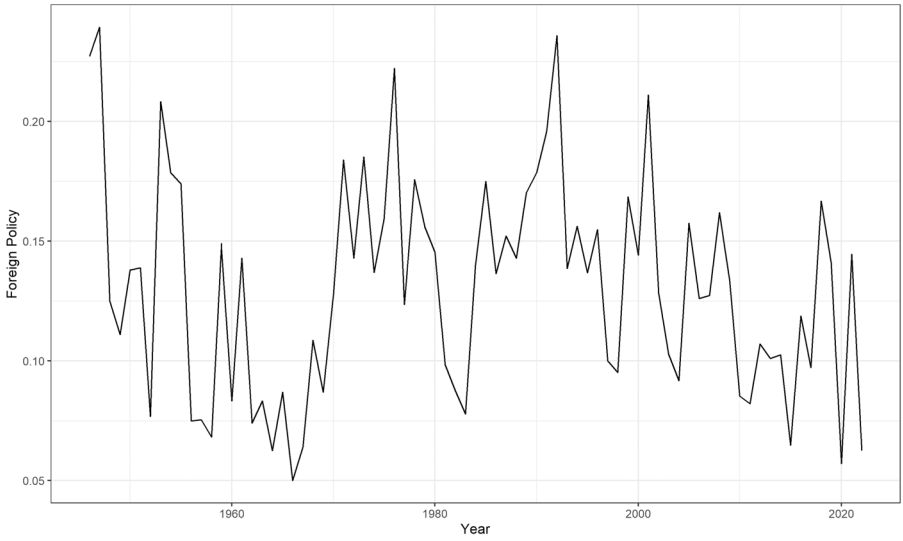


FIGURE 5 Attention to foreign policy 1946–2022.

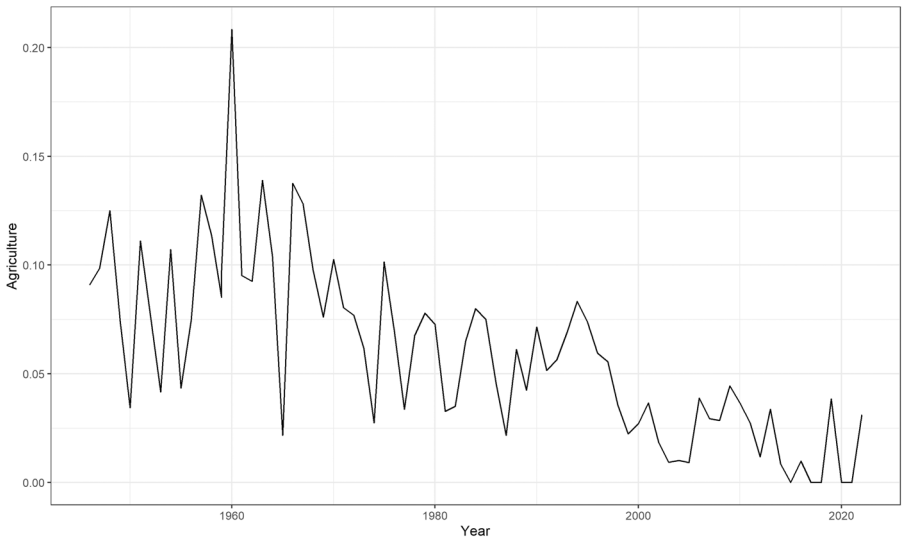


FIGURE 6 Attention to agriculture 1946–2022.

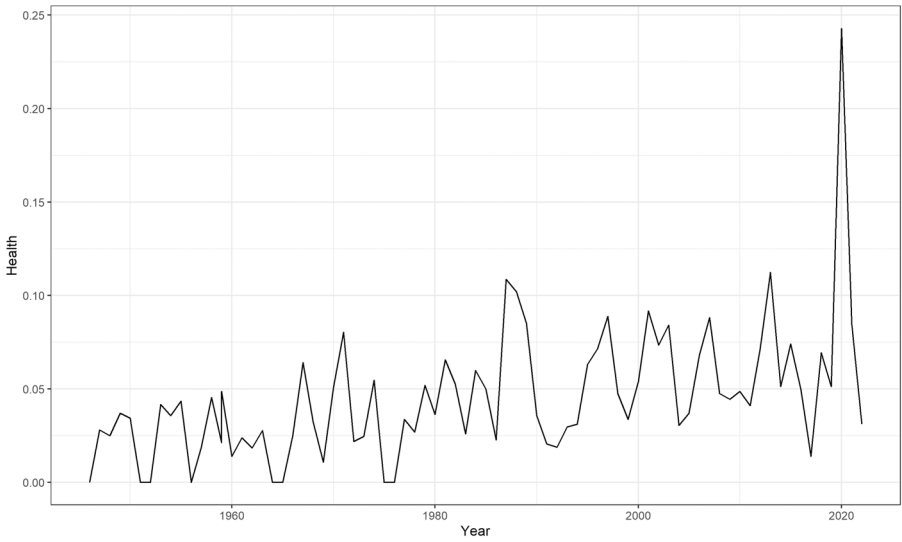


FIGURE 7 Attention to health 1946–2022.

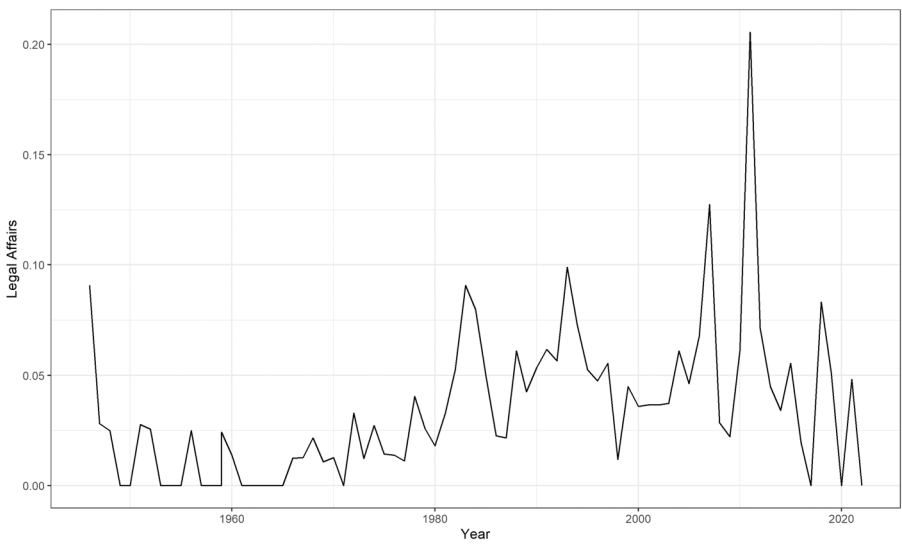


FIGURE 8 Attention to legal affairs 1946–2022.

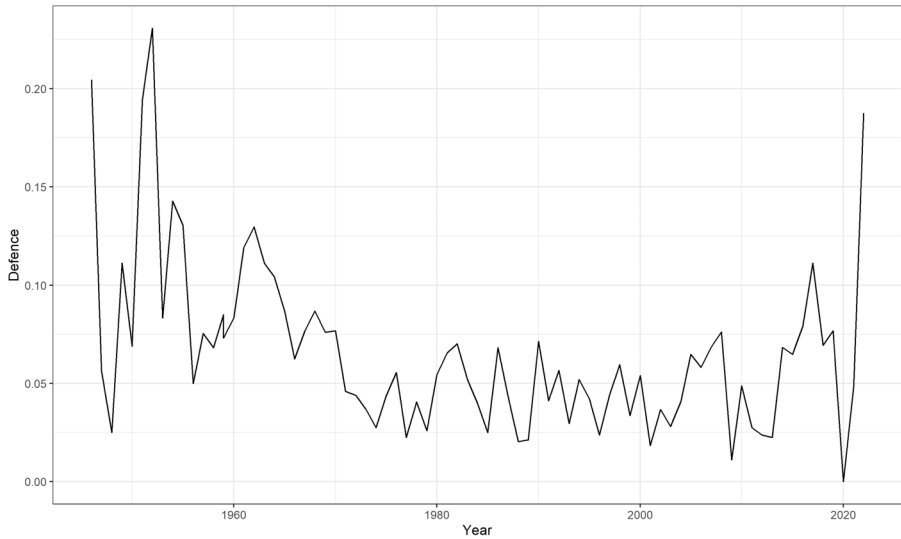


FIGURE 9 Attention to defense 1946–2022.

Partisan factors and punctuations

Turning to hypothesis H5b, we focus on the question of how far changes in governing parties align with shifts in issue attention. Both issue ownership theory and partisan differentiation hypothesis stress that parties choose to promote different issues and that elections are a way for voters to put new issues on the agenda (Walgrave et al., 2015). On the contrary, the partisan neutrality perspective emphasizes that parties can disagree ideologically on their positioning on an issue, but still talk about similar issues (Baumgartner et al., 2009). Therefore, government parties will have limited effects on the agenda space devoted to an issue but rather influence the ideological position.

In Table 4, the 15 biggest shifts in issue attention between 1946 and 2022 are listed. Along with the issue area, the table shows the amount of change, the year it occurred, and the partisan composition of government before and after the punctuation. The light shading indicates a partial partisan turnover, and the darker shading a complete turnover.

Only 4 of the 15 biggest punctuations overlap with partisan changes.¹¹ This highlights that most partisan changes do not generate major punctuations and that most punctuations happen independently of partisan changes. In addition, some of the punctuations that do overlap with partisan change are hard to link to issue ownership. For example, the Macroeconomics punctuation in 2019/2020 is most likely due to Covid, and not linked to the right-wing populist

TABLE 4 Overview of the 15 biggest punctuations.^a

Punctuations (%)	Major topic	From/to	Party change (from/to)	
1014	Macroeconomy	2019/2020	H, V, KrF, FrP	H, V, KrF
755	Government	2015/2016	H, FrP	H, FrP
628	Energy	1976/1977	Ap	Ap
600	Energy	2008/2009	Ap, SV, Sp	Ap, SV, Sp
586	Labor	1960/1961	Ap	Ap
546	Business	2018/2019	H, FrP, V	H, FrP, V, KrF
532	Agriculture	1965/1966	Ap	Sp, H, V, KrF
466	Education	1998/1999	KrF, Sp, V	KrF, Sp, V
400	Health	2017/2018	H, FrP	H, FrP, V
400	Social	1984/1985	H, KrF, Sp	H, KrF, Sp
399	Labor	1973/1974	Ap	Ap
385	Civil rights	1976/1977	Ap	Ap
378	Health	1986/1987	Ap	Ap
378	Immigration	1986/1987	Ap	Ap
378	Government	1971/1972	Ap	Ap

^aA more encompassing overview and party abbreviations are provided in Supporting Information: [Appendix](#).

Progress Party exiting government. Similarly, the changes in attention to business in 2018/2019 is most likely not due to the entry of the Christian-Democrats (KrF), as they have a different issue ownership, and they did not get this policy area as a portfolio. However, other punctuations are more relevant in terms of issue ownership. For example, the punctuation in agriculture in 1965/1966 could be linked to the new coalition government headed by a prime minister from the former Agrarian party (now Center party (SP)), which has agriculture as one of its key issues. Similarly, the change regarding health in 2017/2018 can be linked to the left-liberal Venstre entering the government as they had campaigned for a more liberal drug policy.

When looking at the distribution of punctuations across the three phases of dominant types of governments, one can identify similar patterns to the ones regarding agenda diversity. During the more homogenous phase of one-party majority governments (1946–1960), only 6 punctuations occur, while during the phase of mainly one-party minority governments (1961–1996), 22 punctuations

occur, and in the final phase of coalition governments (since 1997), 19 punctuations occur. Thus, descriptively it seems the agenda has become more prone to sudden changes. We also ran regression models assessing whether the likelihood of punctuation occurring is significantly different between the three phases (see Supporting Information: [Appendix](#)). While coefficients point in the right direction, the models do not show significant results. However, this could be because punctuations occur very seldom—there is a total of 47 in the data. We also calculated a second set of models (see Supporting Information: [Appendix](#)) using correlation coefficients between speeches as a dependent variable (see below). This shows some significant results, indicating that speeches in the third phase (1997–2022) show more variation compared to the first phase (1946–1960).

The punctuations listed above are based on relative changes. This excludes the previously mentioned zero-punctuations. To address this, Table 5 shows the 10 biggest zero-punctuations. The left column shows how big the punctuation would be if the issue had increased from 1% instead of 0%.

Most zero-punctuations do not overlap with partisan changes, but there are some interesting observations: The left-liberal Venstre has the environment as one of its issue priorities in recent years and the relative attention devoted to the environment increased from 0% to 9.7% along with Venstre's inclusion in government in 2018. Labor issues went from no attention to 9% attention when

TABLE 5 Overview of the 10 biggest zero-punctuations.^a

Relative increase (+1%)	Major topic	From/to	Government parties (from/to)	
1250	Research and technology	1963/1964	Ap	Ap
970	Environment	2017/2018	H, FrP	H, FrP, V
900	Labor	1985/1986	H, KrF, Sp	Ap
830	Legal affairs	2017/2018	H, FrP	H, FrP, V
770	Civil rights	2018/2019	H, FrP, V	H, FrP, V, KrF
750	Labor	1955/1956	Ap	Ap
730	Foreign trade	1959/1959	Ap	Ap
690	Energy	1949/1950	Ap	Ap
690	Government operations	1949/1950	Ap	Ap
570	Housing	2020/2021	H, V, KrF	H, V, KrF

^aA more encompassing version of the table is provided in Supporting Information: [Appendix](#).

Brundtland's Labor Government replaced Willoch's conservative coalition in 1986. Finally, many statements behind the civil liberties increase in 2018/2019 were statements concerning the rights of families with children with special needs, an issue KrF had as a main agenda priority before entering government in 2019. Thus, although most zero-punctuations happen independently from partisan change, there are indications in Table 5 that parties entering an existing coalition may influence the agenda. To validate our findings, we calculated both stability scores following the approach by Mortensen et al. (2011) and correlation coefficients of issue distribution as proposed by Breeman et al. (2009).¹² Both results support our findings.

Our results show a rather high stability of the agenda and that the effect of government turnovers is limited. Only in situations in which the government continued but with the support of new coalition partners, we find more pronounced drops in the average stability between speeches. All in all, these are mixed results and hypothesis H5b is not fully supported. While most government turnovers are not systematically linked to punctuations, situations in which new parties enter existing coalitions seem to create windows for agenda change.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our results demonstrate that the Norwegian executive agenda has become more encompassing over time. Moreover, *Trontaler* present a rather diverse policy agenda as the entropy score is in general higher than comparative speeches in other countries. Looking at agenda diversity, our results echo findings from the literature on Norwegian politics that point to the significant societal changes and related increase in the complexity of policymaking in Norway (e.g., Rommetvedt, 2005; Østerud & Selle, 2006). The executive agenda has become more diverse, a development that correlates also with the three phases of dominant types of government. Moreover, Norwegian governments composed of a larger number of parties were found to have more diverse agendas. This supports hypotheses 1, 2a, and 2b while contradicting hypothesis 3. However, recent years have seen a stabilization and even a reduction in agenda diversity. This development demands further research.

Our results demonstrating increased agenda diversity over time contradict findings from other European countries (Jennings et al., 2011). In Norway, as more parties enter government, a greater range of policy issues is included in the executive agenda. The significant societal and political developments make Norway an interesting, and somewhat contrasting, case for the general PET literature. Having a long phase of one-party majority governments and then diversifying socially and politically in an encompassing way makes the political changes in Norway more pronounced compared to other multiparty democracies in Europe that did not have long-lasting one-party governments. Looking

at the change dynamics of the executive agenda over time, our results show that Norwegian executive speeches follow the expected pattern highlighted by PET (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005). This supports hypothesis 4. When looking at drivers of changes in issue attention, the results show that external shocks such as Covid-19 or the Russian invasion of Ukraine have a significant influence on issue attention. This supports hypothesis 5a, highlighting the responsiveness of the Norwegian government to external shocks that demand policy initiatives.

Regarding hypothesis 5b we found mixed results. On the one hand, most punctuations do not align with partisan changes. On the other hand, there are some shifts in issue attention that can be linked to partisan changes as well as issue ownership of the respective parties. Additionally, situations in which new parties enter existing coalitions seem to create room for agenda change. Moreover, the distribution of punctuations across the three phases of dominant types of governments shows an increase in the number of punctuations over time as Norway moves away from one-party majority governments toward minority and coalition governments. Following the call for further investigation of the role of partisan factors in shaping executive agendas (see, e.g., Baumgartner et al., 2019; Jones & Baumgartner, 2012), our data suggest that while partisan neutrality seems to be a common pattern, there are instances in which partisan factors are linked to punctuations. Zero-punctuations seem to be especially interesting here. They signify instances in which an issue is (re) introduced to the agenda, which can be a bargaining chip in partisan negotiations, and especially parties with matching issue ownership should have an interest in ensuring that their policies are included in the agenda. Given that besides Van Assche (2012), this study is one of the first to assess zero-punctuations, this result is especially relevant for the PET literature.

All in all, our results are to a large extent in line with previous findings from other countries (e.g., John & Jennings, 2010; Mortensen et al., 2011) but also underline arguments from earlier works on Norwegian politics (e.g., Hesstvedt et al., 2021; Rommetvedt, 2005; Østerud & Selle, 2006). Our data suggest that Norwegian executive agendas mirror the significant increase in societal and political complexity over time. As more parties enter parliament and government, a greater range of policy issues is being discussed in executive speeches and we can observe more frequent punctuations. Our results show that Norway is an interesting, and somewhat contrasting, case in the PET literature. Having a long phase of a one-party majority government with a rather homogenous society and then diversifying rapidly makes Norway an interesting case. Thus, our results somewhat contradict earlier findings in the PET literature and provide relevant context to the literature on executive agendas.

Our study has several limitations. First, it only focuses on one type of data. While executive speeches are of central importance for the agenda, they are not the only description of policy priorities. Comparisons with, for example, coalition agreements or party manifestos could help us to get a better

understanding of the funnel (and related filtering process) that connects partisan preferences and executive agendas. Moreover, our study focused only on Norway. While we embedded our findings in the literature and drew comparisons based on this, a comparative research design that analyses executive speeches in direct comparison would be helpful.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ See: <https://www.comparativeagendas.net/>.
- ² Except for a short social democratic one-party minority government.
- ³ See: <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/find-document/dep/SMK/The-Speech-from-the-Throne/id87094/>.
- ⁴ The Norwegian constitution does not allow for early elections.
- ⁵ More descriptive information can be found in Supporting Information: [Appendix](#).
- ⁶ A figure using normalized entropy scores is given in Supporting Information: [Appendix](#).
- ⁷ Further illustrations of the effect of the 2020 speech are provided in Supporting Information: [Appendix](#).
- ⁸ Detailed results are provided in Supporting Information: [Appendix](#).
- ⁹ See footnote 8.
- ¹⁰ See Supporting Information: [Appendix](#).
- ¹¹ When looking at the entire set in Supporting Information: [Appendix](#), it is 14 out of 47.
- ¹² Figures mapping the development over time and by type of government are provided in Supporting Information: [Appendix](#).

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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