

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Economic, Social and Political Sciences

Department of Politics and International Relations

Understanding the nature of presidential policymaking in Mexico
through an agenda-setting approach

by

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Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

September 6, 2018

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

ABSTRACT

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In Latin American democracies, the figure of the president is often considered to be an actor with considerable capacity for agenda-setting and a significant role in influencing the definition of policy agendas. Scholarship has frequently analysed the role and function of the president including institutional changes to the presidency and changes in the constitutional and agenda-setting powers of the president. The process by which the president influences prioritisation of issues to be handled by an administration in their policy agendas has not been fully examined. A case in point is the Mexican presidency that allows testing for hypotheses about agenda-setting in a context in which democracy is replacing autocratic forms of policy-making. This thesis identifies some of the factors that determine the propensity of presidents to attend to policy issues. It postulates and tests existing theories on agenda-setting to form a hypothesis on punctuated equilibrium theory for a democratisation context. In this task, it uses a new dataset of Informe de Gobierno presidential speeches between 1988 and 2015. The empirical analysis finds that the theory of punctuated equilibrium applies to presidential agendas in Mexico. The causal process explaining these patterns is the presence of bounded rationality and institutional friction. The institutional characteristics of this presidential system, with a separation of powers and multipartism, explain much of the institutional friction against policy changes. A negative feedback process, emerging from the presence of political fragmentation, holds the presidential agenda in a long-term equilibrium. Meanwhile, a president's entrepreneurial behaviour enhances a positive feedback process through formation of political coalitions that helps to reach agreements between political actors. The analysis also finds that institutional friction limits Mexican presidents' ability to convey priorities into other stages of the policymaking process. This thesis provides evidence that the Mexican president is a strategic political actor that anticipates shifts in the political environment and adjusts the presidential policy priorities accordingly. The thesis concludes with a general discussion concerning the study of presidential policymaking and policy agendas in Mexico in particular and, in general, in democratisation contexts.

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Declaration of Authorship

I, **Ana Carolina Aranda Jan** , declare that the thesis entitled *Understanding the nature of presidential policymaking in Mexico through an agenda-setting approach* and the work presented in the thesis are both my own, and have been generated by me as the result of my own original research. I confirm that:

- this work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
- where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
- where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
- where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
- I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
- where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
- none of this work has been published before submission

Signed:.....

Date:.....

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Prof. Will Jennings and Prof. Pia Riggirozzi for being fantastic mentors. They were always helpful, supportive, thoughtful and generous during this process. My gratitude goes to the outstanding team of co-supervisors that always showed interest in my research. They were involved from the beginning of this project to the final version. Their numerous comments and recommendations were invaluable for writing this thesis. I would also like to thank my examiner, Prof. Emiliano Grossman, for his insightful questions and comments.

I would like to thank Prof. Jack Corbett, Dr Matt Ryan, Prof. Ben Saunders, Dr Ana Margheritis and Dr John Boswell from the Department of Politics at the University of Southampton. The Department provided me with a stimulating environment and excellent conditions for developing my research and other academic activities.

I am grateful for having the opportunity to meet the vibrant scholar community from the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP). This gave me a sense of belonging as a member of a stimulating international research community. I also want to extend my gratitude to Dr José del Tronco Paganelli for his advice when visiting the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO) while doing fieldwork in Mexico. I would like to thank María José Godínez-Loecken, Montserrat Fernández de la Garza and Ana Luisa Cinta for their assistance.

This research would not have been possible without the financial support of the Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología (the National Council of Science and Technology) (abbreviated CONACYT). The University of Southampton also provided with financial support through the Faculty-Awarded Vice-Chancellor Scholarship.

Thank you to Simon Patterson and Louise Rayment for their help with editing this thesis. Editorial advice was sought with the oversight of my main supervisor. No changes of intellectual content were made as a result of this advice.

I would like to thank Nick Or and Eunice Akullo and the rest of my graduate student colleagues that helped in the development of this thesis. I would like to thank Alessandro Trastullo, Yusuf Ciftci and Alejandra Vergara for their unconditional friendship. I also express my deep sense of gratitude to my friend Esther Zurita for all the trips, words

and laughs we shared while I was writing this PhD. I take this opportunity to express my greatest regards to the fellowship: Jeanne Blanchard, Vivian So, Arinze Ekwosimba, James Roges Justin and Charlene Akoto. My thanks are also due to my amazing housemates and friends Eduardo Pérez, Enrique Cuan and Anais Vermonden. Thank you to Mariely Toro and Helen Shaw for all their advice and guidance.

Most of all, I would like to thank my wonderful parents, Virginia Jan and Rafael Aranda, to whom I owe ninety per cent of my vocation. Thank you to my small-big family in the United Kingdom, Clara Aranda and Thomas Miller for supporting me at all times but more, for sharing a great time together while living in Cambridge. Thank you to Virginia Aranda and Adriana Aranda for always teaching me so much about sisterhood. To Valentina Gutiérrez, thank you for showing me how a little heart works. I hope to always have a childlike heart. Finally, thank you to my first Love, my heart will sing: I love You.

List of Abbreviations

AC	Administrative Category
ADL	Autoregressive Distributed Lag
CAP	Comparative Agendas Project
CS	Carlos Salinas
DF	Dickey-Fuller test
EP	Enrique Peña
EZ	Ernesto Zedillo
EZLN	Ejercito Zapatista de la Liberación Nacional (Zapatista Army of National Liberation)
FC	Felipe Calder'on
MDS	Multidimensional scaling
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
PAN	Partido Acción Nacional (National Action Party)
PNR	Partido Nacional Revolucionario (National Revolutionary Party)
PRD	Partido de la Revolución Democrática (Party of the Democratic Revolution)
PRI	Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party)
PT	Partido del Trabajo (Labour/Workers' Party)
PRM	Partido de la Revolución Mexicana (Party of the Mexican Revolution)
PVEM	Partido Verde Ecologista de México (Ecologist Party of Mexico)
U.K.	United Kingdom
U.S.	United States
VF	Vicente Fox
WM	Westminster Model

Chapter 1

Introduction

The central focus of this thesis is the study of presidential policy agendas. This is to identify and explain how and why policy issues become important for presidents. It identifies political and institutional factors (i.e. multipartism and fragmentation of the party system) that affect whether issues gain attention by presidents (see Chapter 2). The discussion focuses on information processing and argues that decision-making has a bounded capacity and faces institutional friction. This analysis on policy agendas is done by measuring and looking at *issue attention*. In doing so, this thesis aims to develop theoretical contributions to agenda-setting literature by examining the politics of attention in presidential policy agendas in a democratisation context whereby autocratic forms of policymaking are being replaced by democracy. In this context, there may be regular elections but presidents are sometimes still able to exercise substantial agenda-setting powers.

A case in point is the Mexican presidency. A characteristic of the Mexican political system is its increasing pluralism since the start of the democratisation process in the mid-1990s (Cox and Morgenstern, 2002, p. 448). A feasible assumption is that the lack of majorities in Congress negatively impacts the capacity of Mexican presidents to deliver policy. This causes agendas to remain in a long-term equilibrium. The Mexican political system has moved from one of political cohesion to one facing increasing political disagreement because of the presence of minority governments. It could be that the institutional configuration of political systems pushes presidents to be obstructed to not fully react to the changing political and economic environment. Another point of view, however, is that presidents are still in control of political agendas and exercise autocratic forms of power that give enough capacity to freely change agendas and thus generate policy instability. In this perspective, presidential capacity for setting agendas emanates from constitutional rules and, sometimes, informal forms of power. The Mexican case presents an opportunity to test various hypotheses about agenda-setting.

This thesis introduces the punctuated equilibrium theory to explain changes in policy agendas. This is to assume that patterns of changes exhibit a combination of moments favouring the equilibrium and periods of radical shifts in policies. A bounded nature in the cognitive capacity of individuals and institutional path dependency — i.e. institutional friction — set limits to the capacity of individuals to allocate attention, which biases making decisions towards gradual adjustments (incrementalism). However, there are institutional changes that sometimes cause the nature of policy attention to deviate from a gradual process of change. The policymaking process experiences moments where changes in policy attention are large and widespread (punctuations). The punctuated equilibrium theory provides an understanding regarding the nature of policy change by analysing the characteristics of decision processes.

A negative feedback process explains the gradual pattern of changes. The punctuated equilibrium theory describes this process as monopolising politics. This monopolisation of policies occurs when particular political groups at the lower level of politics (i.e. policy subsystems) maintain control over the political rhetoric (i.e. policy image). Meanwhile, these policy monopolies are ruptured if relevant political actors move the discussion to a higher level of politics (i.e. macro politics). The influence of external factors — i.e. public opinion or media — in the political context amplifies reactions and propels change, helping to produce a shift in policy attention. This produces a positive feedback process of change. This theory is able to explain policymaking in different political systems where these dual feedback processes are evident.

In the case of Mexico, this thesis suggests that a negative feedback process explains stasis in policy agendas because of a lack of capacity of presidents to reach agreements regarding similar policy priorities with other political actors. There is a monopolisation of political interests that emerges due to political fragmentation and political actors aim to protect individual political interests. This produces political paralysis where the president needs to support a process to overcome opposition against policy shifts. A president's entrepreneurial behaviour enhances a positive feedback process through the formation of coalitions that facilitate agreements with other political actors regarding similar policy priorities. The literature on coalition formation in Latin American provides theoretical support to this argument ([Méndez de Hoyos, 2012](#); [Alemán and Tsebelis, 2011](#); [Cheibub et al., 2004](#); [Carey, 2002](#)). A sense of urgency, a shared understanding about an issue and presidential entrepreneurship are key elements in creating a veto point to generate policy change (i.e. punctuations). As a result, this process produces patterns in policy agendas that exhibit periods that favour the status quo, but with other moments that make possible policy agendas to experience shifts.

In comparative studies of Latin American politics, research on presidential systems has furthered understanding regarding the democratic stability of these governments. There has been a recurrent claim that democratic stability is strongly dependent on institutional structures and checks and balances in highly concentrated presidential political

systems (Cox and McCubbins, 2001; Mainwaring, 1993; Linz, 1990). Linz (1990) argues that the incapacity of presidents to generate policy is a source of instability in presidential systems (see also Sartori, 1994). According to this perspective, some Latin America democracies experience regular democratic setbacks due to the presence of ‘disloyal opposition’ from political opponents seeking to compete for political power (O’Donnell, 2004, 1988, 1973). The presence of conflicts between the Executive and the Legislative branches can lead to inter-institutional gridlock and make it impossible to generate policy. At times political actors can perceive a military intervention as the only resolution to a political stalemate. This political situation was relatively common in some democracies in Latin America particularly during the 1960s and 1970s. Since the 1990s, Latin American democracies have consolidated as systems and the option of military intervention has been diminished as civil control over arms forces have been institutionalised across the region (Aguero, 1998). As a system, democracy has consolidated as a political manifestation of policy change (Albala, 2017; Alemán and Tsebelis, 2011; Mejía Acosta, 2009; Chasqueti, 2008; Perez-Liñan, 2007); however, instability seems to be a feature of democratic governance in Latin America. Instability occurs at the level of government rather than at the level of political systems (i.e. the democracy will remain even if the government is overthrown) (Perez-Liñan, 2007). The presence of hypresidentialism¹ and governments’ leeway to introduce reforms are still argued to be features of these political systems as some presidents may constantly supersede Congress and the courts, violate the rule of law and use political power to prolong their stay in office (Díez, 2012; Malamud, 2003). Therefore, there is no consensus as to whether presidential agenda-setting powers fully enable a division of responsibilities into different powers (i.e. the Executive, Legislative and Judicial branches) or are closer to autocratic centralisation, and the extent of the impact on processes for setting policy agendas.

The point of analysis is whether governments, democratic or otherwise, in political systems lead to particular patterns of policymaking and policy change (i.e. instability vs. stability). This approach, advances research from examining the institutional conditions of the Mexican state to studying the characteristics of agenda-setting in this presidential system. The study of presidential agendas can develop knowledge regarding presidential politics in general. It also contributes to the further understanding of political systems by examining policy processes and presidential behaviour. In addition, a focus on Mexico can contribute additional knowledge regarding characteristics of policymaking by setting a framework for investigating the features of presidential policy agendas in a democratisation context.

¹Hypresidentialism is defined as a presidential system where a president is allowed by constitutional and informal rules to use unilateral power in the adoption of decisions (see Nino, 1996).

1.1 The study of presidents' policy agendas

The study of presidents has been at the centre of Latin American political science and political economy literature. At times presidents can be blamed for the state of public affairs and the economy because of their position at the top of the structure of government (Cox and Morgenstern, 2002). They have been characterised as able to jeopardise institutions and coarsen politics with their often 'unconventional' ruling practices and sometimes personalistic style of politics (Alcántara et al., 2017). Some views consider institutional structures and constitutional design in these democracies to greatly empower presidents (see Corrales, 2018; Negretto, 2013; Cheibub et al., 2011; Mainwaring and Shugart, 1997; Shugart and Carey, 1992). The institutional conditions of these political systems are seen to grant enough power for presidents to act independently. This is often blamed for democratic instability in these presidential systems (Helmke, 2017; Shugart and Carey, 1992; Linz, 1990). However, these insights have not always shed light on how presidents make decisions when setting the policy agenda.

From a theoretical standpoint, the institutional approach has been one of the dominant theories for the analysis of Latin American politics. These works have studied how institutions shape political behaviour. This thesis is not critical of institutionalism but transfers some theoretical concepts into the understanding of agenda-setting. It supports the view that there are institutional rules that create incentives for political actors to pursue particular political actions. For example, strong electoral rules set incentives for legislators to follow the party lines instead of individual political benefits. The extent that electoral rules allow legislators to develop a long-term legislative career, instead to cultivate electoral support by "personal votes",² emanates from strong institutional structures (Desposato, 2006; Cheibub Figueiredo and Limongi, 2000; Mainwaring, 1999). This research supports arguments concerning the presence of strong institutions as relevant in promoting the creation of orderly decision-making processes where there are limits to independent political powers.

Similarly, rational institutionalism argues that the quality of institutions affects decision processes. This approach focuses on understanding the behaviour of political individuals in cooperative actions. Stein et al. (2008) argue that strong institutions promote cooperative policymaking and high quality policies. A context of strong institutional structures helps policymaking to be adjusted according to a changing political environment. Actors are less likely to participate in political processes by seeking personal benefits if institutions are strong. These processes of decision-making are possible because there is a greater possibility to reach agreements. In contrast, weak institutional structures may lead to political fragmentation. This thesis supports rational institutionalism regarding

²A "personal vote" is defined as that part of vote based on the personal reputation of a politician and distinct from those of his parties (Shugart et al., 2005; Carey and Shugart, 1995).

the positive impact of a strong institutional context in the capacity of decision-making from political actors.

This thesis also considers theories on coalition politics as particularly relevant. The literature argues that the formation of coalitions has been frequent in Latin America (Albala, 2017; Alemán and Tsebelis, 2011; Mejía Acosta, 2009; Chasquetti, 2008; Perez-Liñan, 2007). In the Latin American context, presidents allocate political and economic resources to effectively build and sustain political coalitions (Pereira et al., 2016; Raile et al., 2011). This capacity of policymaking has pushed some to argue that Latin American presidents are proactive political actors (Cox and Morgenstern, 2001; Cox and McCubbins, 2001; Shugart and Carey, 1992). This thesis argues that there are shifts in policy priorities because actors can accommodate preferences for similar policy priorities through the formation of coalitions. It is possible to generate policy change if presidents are able to create processes for political cooperation. This is an alternative explanation of the positive feedback process of policy change from the original development of punctuated equilibrium theory (see Section 2.2).

From a methodological perspective, this research has an interest in filling a gap in the study of policy agendas through coding policy instruments to measure policy priorities. A key research challenge addressed by this study is the measure of the linkage between changes in policies and observable phenomena affecting decisions and policymaking. The definition of policy priorities as an object of study and as a dependent variable that can be objectively investigated is a key research challenge. This project, therefore, codes policy instruments (i.e. speeches and budgetary expenditures) to provide insights into how presidents allocate their attention and change policy agendas. The analysis adopts a consistent measuring scheme to systematically measure policy priorities. This thesis shows that by examining the definition of policy priorities it is possible to obtain an in-depth analysis of the workings of policymaking in a democratisation presidential context.

1.2 Research question

Some characteristics of presidential policy can be identified from the literature on public policies from Latin America. The study on public policy has been focused on individual policy areas including economic policy (Alston et al., 2016), social and welfare policy (Garay, 2017; Sinha, 2012; Weyland, 2005; Mesa-Lago, 2004), health policy (Homedes and Ugalde, 2005; Lloyd-Sherlock, 2000) and others. Meanwhile, other research has also ascertained the institutional and political characteristics of individual presidential administrations. This work has described the adoption of particular policies in presidential administrations in Chile (Waylen, 2016), Argentina (Malamud and De Luca, 2015), Brazil (Love and Baer, 2009; Bourne, 2008) and Venezuela (Ellner and Salas, 2007),

for example. The study of presidential agendas has arguably been underdeveloped for the Latin American case in general and Mexico in particular. The literature focuses on policy areas that authors deem historically significant and pertain to a presidential legacy. An objective study would examine as many policy areas as possible regardless of the subsequent and contemporary importance.

The study of policy agendas helps to advance knowledge on classical political questions about strategies political actors use to influence policymaking and political decisions (see [Schattschneider, 1960](#)). Seminal works by [Bachrach and Baratz \(1962\)](#) and [Schattschneider \(1960\)](#) focus on understanding policy attention. This research observes the nature of policymaking by studying the prioritisation and distribution of attention on policy issues. [Cobb and Elder \(1983\)](#) and [Kingdon \(1984\)](#) complement the study of policy decisions and attention with an agenda-setting perspective based on [Schattschneider \(1960\)](#) and [Bachrach and Baratz \(1962\)](#). The agenda-setting approach focuses on understanding the dynamics of policy change ([Baumgartner and Jones, 1993](#)). Based on Schattschneider's ([Schattschneider \(1960\)](#)) scholarship and Bachrach and Baratz's ([1962](#)) contribution, [Baumgartner and Jones \(1993\)](#) develops the punctuated equilibrium theory that argues that a change in policy attention results from tensions between political institutions, where shifts in attention results from mobilising support for a particular issue.

The punctuated equilibrium theory gives an opportunity to analyse the nature of policymaking and prioritisation of policy issues. It provides a means for determining the degree of continuity and change in policy priorities (see Section 2.2). It is possible that researchers can raise further questions regarding how issues capture the attention of presidents over time and which processes presidents follow to prioritise issues. Therefore, this research examines the extent to which presidential agendas exhibit shifts in policies as described by the punctuated equilibrium theory. In this task, the central question of this research project is:

RQ0: *Does the general distribution of attention in presidential policy exhibit patterns of continuity and change?*

The presence of periods of change in presidential policy agendas will show that policy attention is a response to political tension in policymaking. To my knowledge punctuated equilibrium theory has widely been tested in different political systems but few case analyses have been conducted outside industrialised democracies (i.e. Western democracies).

1.3 Research aims

In addressing this research question, this study seeks to fulfil a number of wider aims. Those aims are as follows:

- To have a better understanding of policymaking processes and policy priorities by examining presidential policy agendas using the agenda-setting approach.
- To contribute to the study of presidential agenda-setting, the definition of the characteristics of the decision-making and the features of policy outcomes in a democratisation context.
- To contribute to new theoretical developments for the agenda-setting approach and punctuated equilibrium theory.

1.4 Theoretical approach and framework

1.4.1 Punctuated equilibrium theory and information processing

There are different theoretical developments for the study of policy agendas and policy change. This thesis observes the nature of policymaking as a state in which policies stay without change for extended periods of time while a few of them change quickly and dramatically. This approach considers that profound change that sets policy in new directions comes after decades of minimal changes. This causes a *policy monopoly*,³ where some actors are able to dominate the discussion on particular policy issues. If there are no external factors that can challenge the character of disputes within a policy monopoly, it is improbable that policies will depart from their equilibrium. The policy agenda suffers punctuations when external factors change the framing of policy issues and there is an expansion of political discussions to other institutions. This opens an opportunity for policy entrepreneurs to take advantage of this situation and to introduce a new policy into agendas.

In the original development of punctuated equilibrium theory, [Jones and Baumgartner \(2005b\)](#) and [Baumgartner and Jones \(1993\)](#) state that the U.S. political system is designed to generate gridlock, particularly with its system of separation of powers and institutional checks and balances (i.e. division of power between the Executive, Legislative and Judicial branches). The institutional conditions of this political system bias policymaking towards the status quo. Institutional gridlock and path dependency tends to favour a gradual process of policy change. This process of decision-making has additional bias due to limitations in the cognitive capacity of individuals (bounded rationality) to attend multiple issues simultaneously. However, [Baumgartner and Jones \(1993\)](#) also observe that policy process can undergo periods of rapid change, in the correction of previous under-responsiveness. A negative feedback process explains the preference for the status quo. Conversely, a positive feedback involves a failure of a

³Chapter 2 provides a definition of policy monopoly.

policy monopoly where a decision-making process overcomes friction⁴ against policy changes. As a result policy responses progress from previous policy decisions into new policy priorities. Section 2.2 provides further explanation on punctuated equilibrium theory.

Following punctuated equilibrium theory, it is possible to argue that policy changes in presidential policy agendas result from a shift in attention by the president. If a president can mobilise enough support for issues, it is likely that some implementation of reforms is going to be possible. The president can be a political actor that helps to overcome resistance to policy reform. In the U.S. context, the president can go public as a strategy for influencing the actions and opinions of other political actors through public engagement (see Kernell, 2006). If an issue gains enough attention, it can generate some abrupt and radical changes in the policy agenda.

1.4.2 Punctuated equilibrium theory and democratisation

In the Latin American case, the dynamics of change and continuity concerning public policies are explained by theoretical elements other than those proposed by the original theory. For example, while for the U.S. separation of power produces gridlock, in the case of Mexico political fragmentation is a more important factor with regard to the limitation to policy change. Some institutional characteristics vary across different political systems, which produce differences in friction in policymaking processes. The bounded cognitive conditions are similar for individuals in any political system. However, for the Latin American case in general and Mexico in particular, it might be that the combination of a presidential system and particularities of a party system create different levels of resistance against presidential policies.

Mainwaring (1993) argues that a ‘difficult combination’ of political systems, including presidential institutional structures and multipartism, is behind instability in Latin American democracies. There is a tendency for these systems to produce political fragmentation, making it impossible for presidents to generate political agreement. This creates disputes between presidents and Congress and sometimes encourages presidents to exercise excessive independent political action. Under such conditions, these systems have experience military interventions and coups as a way out of political gridlock. However, the literature on political coalitions has shown that stalemate is not always the case. On many occasions, presidents in Latin American have been able to deliver reform by building political alliances. Therefore, presidents have shown a political ability to negotiate and build political agreements and the negative political effects of this ‘difficult combination’ have not always ended in democratic setbacks.

⁴The concept of friction refers to those difficulties that a decision-making process faces to change policies (Flink, 2017). It can refer to decision costs that can be barriers that policymakers must overcome for reforming policies. Jones and Baumgartner (2012) define friction as the resistance to adjustment built into the policymaking process.

This thesis argues that the mechanism explaining changes in policy attention in presidential policy agendas is the formation of informal coalitions. The consideration of these political institutions as informal structures is due to the characteristics of political negotiation that these political alliances follow. There is often a clientelistic exchange of resources for political support. A lack of formal mechanisms for the formation of coalitions such as those found in parliamentary systems supports the formation of these informal coalitions. The formation of political coalitions creates a mechanism which is able to produce a positive feedback process, and therefore instead of public policy being limited to continuity, radical shifts also become possible. Meanwhile, a political paralysis explains a negative feedback process that causes policies to exhibit continuity. Section 2.3 provides further details on this argument.

1.4.3 Informal friction in a democratising context

The possibility of expanding punctuated equilibrium theory to analyse presidential agenda-setting in a democratisation context, set this research on the quest for evidence about the presence of both a negative and positive feedback process of policy change. Similar to the original theory, in this case, there is a negative feedback process explaining the preference of policy to remain in equilibrium. In the case of Mexico, this negative feedback process is characterised by monopolising politics, where it is common for members of opposition parties to obstruct reforms in Congress. There often are rent-seeking incentives that encourage members of Congress to seek individual political and economic benefits.

A positive feedback process, by contrast, occurs when a strategic action by the president produces shifts in policy priorities. If a president creates a mechanism for accommodating different preferred policy priorities into a common policy priority, the presidential policy agenda will be likely to experience change. This prioritisation of similar policy priorities — usually between the president and members of Congress — is done by forming political coalitions, which operate with a great sense of urgency to find policy solutions to a particular policy problem and, a common understanding about a social problem and its solution ('policy image'). The combination of these negative and positive feedback processes will show evidence of punctuated equilibrium theory.

1.5 Hypotheses

As this thesis will explain further in Chapter 2 in the theoretical framework, there are different viewpoints about presidential policymaking. This thesis suggests that punctuated equilibrium theory may give an explanation regarding the characteristics of the policy change of presidential policy agendas. An alternative explanation will be that

presidents concentrate power and are omnipotent agenda setters without the will to cooperate with other political actors. This will create instability in presidential policy agendas and patterns of change will be explained by repeatedly abrupt and radical changes in policy attention. It may also be that presidents constantly face fragmentation and political inability to enact policy reform. As a result, policy priorities will exhibit extreme continuity in their patterns of change. Therefore it is possible to generate some hypotheses about policy attention and presidential policy agendas as follows:

Punctuated Equilibrium Agenda Hypothesis (H1): The dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit both incremental patterns of change and abrupt change (punctuations).

Unstable Agendas Hypothesis (H2): The dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit repeatedly abrupt and radical change.

Stable Agendas Hypothesis (H3): The dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit stable patterns of change.

In this analysis, each hypothesis is tested against the null hypothesis of non-significance referred to as **H0**. The presence of evidence to reject the *Punctuated Equilibrium Agenda Hypothesis (H1)* may confirm a political tradition of omnipotent presidents being a source of radical policy change and political instability. Or it could be that democratisation processes are making presidents face political stalemates and in turn generating rigid policy agendas where policy reform is not possible and there is a risk of creating problems with democratic governability.

1.6 The Mexican presidents and presidential agendas as a case study

The Mexican political system represents an opportunity to test hypotheses on presidential policymaking. There is a lack of consensus about which role the president is take when defining and setting policy agendas. The compelling reason for examining the Mexican case is the possibility to test a number of different hypotheses regarding presidential policymaking.

The authoritarian Mexican political system is perhaps one that best captured the concentration of power in the hands of presidents and their capacity for framing government agendas (Díez, 2012). An authoritative power of the presidency was possible due to the formation of a corporatist form of state. For seven decades the Executive branch exercised extra power and excessive influence over the Legislative and Judicial branches (from 1929 to 2000). A majority in Congress secured a high capacity of policymaking for

the Mexican president. Meanwhile, a clientelistic system of rewards was built through a corporatist structure which secured benefit in exchange for political support.

Through this informal corporatist structure, the president and the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party; hereafter PRI) concentrated political power by creating a single-party regime. Philip observes that “there [was] virtually no constitutional check on the power of the Mexican President” (1992, p. 167). Most political powers were vested in the hands of presidents. The governmental decisions were highly centralised within the presidency. The president authoritatively allocated attention to particular topics in line with the preferences and priorities of the party and other elites and political groups close to the presidency. As a result, Mexican elites and the president controlled most decisions regarding the social, economic and political development of the nation.

The end of the single-party regime came with the loss of PRI’s majority in Congress. In 1997 for the first time, the PRI lost its majority in the Mexican Congress. This brought changes in the corporatist structure of the Mexican state and the party system became a multiplicity of parties able to compete for political representation. Since the end of the hegemonic regime, increasing pluralism, to some extent, has been possible. In Mexico, there is a legal separation of power in different branches aiming to reduce control of the Executive branch. Its federal government systems, with a national government sharing sovereignty over the republic with the governments of individual states, is also increasingly setting checks to the centralisation of power by the presidency. Meanwhile, Díez (2012) argues that increasing electoral competition has reduced the political power of the president. Mexican presidents, with the increasing democratisation of the system, are increasingly likely to be challenged by other political actors. This rising plurality is mainly the result of the system moving from a single-party system to a multiparty system.

There are arguments regarding the Mexican presidents suggesting they still have the ability to control almost any political process, including policymaking and electoral process, at all levels of government (Domínguez, 2015; Rivera Pineda, 2009; Domínguez, 2004b; Domínguez and McCann, 1998; Smith, 1996). Mexican presidents may still enjoy significant levels of discretion in the use of administrative resources and authority (Díez, 2012). A critical view of this democratic transformation is that the Mexican case does not represent a move into a strong democratic system but rather the systems are moving into O’Donnell’s (1994) type of democracy: a delegative democracy. O’Donnell (1994) defines a delegative democracy as a weak democracy with an organicist and technocratic structure where individuals delegate policymaking authority to their representatives (see also Domínguez, 2008; Kurtz, 2004; Teichman, 1996; Smith et al., 1994). There is little participation of citizens in the definition of policy initiatives. This reflects a dominant role of presidents as agenda setters. The impact of an excessive power is that policy

agendas will continuously observe instability as presidents can freely decide on policy agendas.

Light (1999) argues for the case of the U.S. presidency that changes in government will create constant instability in presidential policy agendas. An assumption is that presidents try to be responsive to social needs and these are highly complex. Presidents need to go through a process of deciding whether they want to attend to a particular problem or not by considering and assessing the fact that finding solutions is difficult and costly. This complexity varies from issue to issue, and thus each issue requires a particular solution. This characteristic of policymaking makes presidents' agendas to exhibit instability over time as every president faces different difficulties. In addition, political capital is a factor that affects yearly variations in presidents' policy agendas. The interaction between political resources generates cycles that affect presidential strategies of decision-making and encourage presidents to generate changes early in office (see Light, 1999). For the case of Mexico, Domínguez and McCann (1998) observe that citizens can make their representatives more responsive in an increasing democratisation context. The Mexican president has electoral incentives to provide solutions to the rise of social problems and thus he constantly adjust policy agendas. The inherent complexity to find solutions to social problems can make Mexican presidential policy agenda to exhibit further instability. Therefore, it is possible to test a hypothesis about policy exhibiting continuous instability.

A different argument considers that presidential politics have actually been characterised by continuous stasis. Gillingham (2012) argues that even during the authoritarian regime in Mexico there was some limitation to presidential powers — particularity between the 1940s and 1960s — as the hegemonic party frequently lost control of local elections giving power to local elites. The democratisation process increased the possibility of political paralysis and the inability of presidential decision processes to generate changes in policies due to political fragmentation. Weldon (2005) argues that a transformation from a single-party regime to divided governments has reduced further the capacity of presidents to enact policy changes. Therefore, having presidents without capacity to define their policy agendas allows a hypothesis about political paralysis and policy continuity due to the presidential inability of agenda setting to be tested.

This thesis suggest that, in Mexico, there is evidence of punctuated equilibrium theory in presidential policy agendas. The presence of punctuations shows the effects of exogenous forces or events (e.g. political and economic crises) in Mexico's presidential policymaking as well as the influence of more competitive partisan politics. It is possible to consider Mexican presidents to be proactive political actors as they seize and adjust policy priorities to changing economic and political environments (see Cox and Morgenstern, 2001; Cox and McCubbins, 2001; Shugart and Carey, 1992). The president reacts to the context of facing a divided government by trying to accommodate preferences for similar policy priorities. Thus, by adopting a role of a policy entrepreneur, as defined

by the agenda-setting literature, the president is able to change policy. [Casar \(2013\)](#) argues that political gridlock has been rare in Mexico's presidential policymaking under increasing pluralism. Similarly, [Nacif \(2006\)](#) observes that presidents create ad-hoc coalitions that help them to build support around their policies. This thesis argues that punctuated equilibrium theory provides a better characterisation of presidential policymaking and policy agendas in Mexico. Section [2.7.3](#) provides further details on this argument.

1.7 Scope and methods

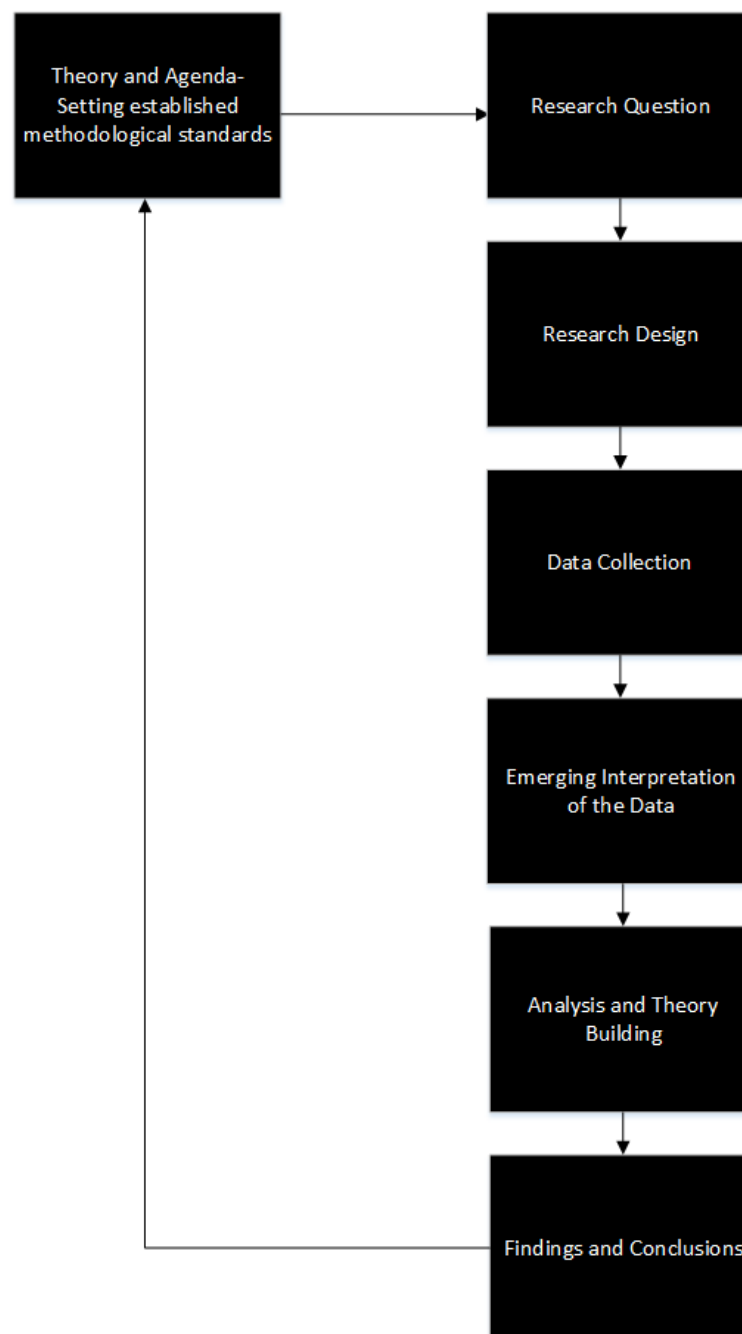
The study of agenda-setting relates to understanding the processes of selecting relevant policy issues. A focus on policy agendas then requires defining agendas as “the list of subjects or problems to which governmental officials, and people outside of government closely associated with those officials, are paying some serious attention at any given time” ([Kingdon, 1984](#), p. 3). [Light \(1999, p. 155\)](#) calls this list the ‘President’s must list’. This thesis will refer to the concept of policy attention as priorities and this will also encapsulate all relevant issues that demands attention from presidents and are discussed by governments. This concept is further explained in Section [2.7.1](#).

The philosophical and theoretical foundations of this research project are *positivist*. In its positivist standpoint, this research project follows the scientific method as a means to achieve knowledge ([Creswell, 2014](#)). The logic of reasoning is deductive by emphasising and understanding social problems from the general to a particular. In the particular view, this research tests the punctuated equilibrium theory for a democratising context. For the general view, it focuses on introducing an innovative element to the punctuated equilibrium theory. The theoretical standpoint follows an observational logic to research which allows me, as the researcher, to test and study theories through qualitative and quantitative methods. This research combines insights and procedures from both approaches as a means to produce a better understanding of agenda-setting (see [Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004](#)).

The study of agenda-setting finds that there is universality in the application of punctuated equilibrium theory (see [Chan and Zhao, 2015](#); [Lam and Chan, 2015](#)). Scholarly research shows evidence of punctuated equilibrium theory in policymaking for both democratic and authoritarian policymaking processes. However, no theoretical developments have been made for democratisation contexts. A two-fold aim of applying and contributing to the development of punctuated equilibrium theory is the basis of this thesis. This research looks to make that contribution through the approach depicted in Figure [1.1](#).

The design involves an embedded single-case analysis of the Mexican presidency which looks at the decisions during five different presidencies (see [Tashakkori and Teddlie,](#)

Figure 1.1: Positivist approach of the research process



Source: Own elaboration

2010). It includes two administrations from the PRI party in the 1990s. These are the presidencies of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–1994) and Ernesto Zedillo (1994–2000); two presidents from Partido Acción Nacional (National Action Party; hereafter PAN) who occupied office from 2000 to 2012: Vicente Fox Quesada (2000–2006) and Felipe Calderón Hinojosa (2006–2012); and that of Enrique Peña Nieto, who won the presidential election in 2012 as the PRI party regained the presidency (2012–2018). These administrations are considered to provide an overview of the democratic transformation

of the political system in Mexico. The selection of these presidencies does not allow for comparability of administrations between democratic and authoritarian governments. However, this breadth allows the identification of the characteristics of presidential policy agendas and patterns of decisions in a time span of almost three decades. There is also the possibility of developing a comparative analysis between administrations because of the changes of government. Therefore it is possible to build a cross-case difference analysis between presidencies.

Punctuated equilibrium theory was developed in the context of the U.S. political system, with its particular set of established and stable institutional arrangements. This means that the theory does not address some of the issues faced in developing democracies, such as high political fragmentation and rent-seeking institutional incentives. This thesis seeks to redress that by making theoretical contributions when applying this theory to other democratic contexts. This research project mainly relies on the use of qualitative methods for the understanding of this friction within democratisation institutions by looking at the Mexican political system. Many of these findings are linked to existing literature on Latin American and Mexican politics. The qualitative analysis follows a thematic approach. Chapter 4 presents findings on interviews with elites⁵ including former and current ministers, politicians and academics about presidential policymaking in Mexico. These confirm that an informal form of veto point⁶ is a mechanism behind a positive process of change that produces punctuations in presidential policy agendas in Mexico.

The quantitative analysis aims to display the mechanism producing change on presidential policy agendas. The chapters with empirical quantitative analysis emphasise the formal and informal institutional conditions that shape presidential policymaking. These chapters examine policy agendas to empirically assess the nature of policymaking and policy change by using mainly descriptive statistics. There is evidence in these results that policy agendas follow patterns of gradual changes — near stasis — and radical changes (punctuations) over time. Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 explain further the methods this research project uses in its quantitative approach.

This research project focuses on understanding presidential policy attention and provides accounts of policy change. By following the Comparative Project Agendas (CAP) approach to the coding of policy content,⁷ there are expectations that it is possible to generate data that allows comparability with theoretical consistency (see Dowding and Martin, 2017). This coding scheme provides a framework for the collection of data on

⁵Beamer (2002, p. 87) defines elite informants as follows: “[t]hese individuals may have special insight into the causal processes of politics, and interviewing them permits in-depth exploration of specific policies and political issues”.

⁶Stasavage defines a veto point “as a political institution, the holder of which has the power to block a proposed change in policy” (2003, p. 44).

⁷Find information about the coding scheme and procedure at <http://www.comparativeagendas.net/>. John (2006) conducts a review on the original U.S. policy Agendas Project developed by Bryan John and Frank Baumgartner.

attention to policy issues from which it is possible to analyse the nature of change of public policies. Dowding and Martin (2017, p. 17) observe that “[t]he essential feature of the coding exercise is to code the ‘policy agenda’”. The CAP is a coding system that captures those issues governments are discussing and attending to and measures the impact of different factors on this attention over time (e.g. health, immigration, labour, social welfare, defence, etc.). Dowding and Martin (2017) observe that what the CAP measures is the amount of attention given to different policy areas. Using content analysis logic helps to operationalise the codification of policy instruments. In this case, the content of speeches as a policy instrument signalling presidents’ priorities is coded by topic (Chaqués Bonafont et al., 2015; Chaqués Bonafont et al., 2014; Chaqués Bonafont and Palau, 2011; Bevan and Jennings, 2014; Jones et al., 2009, 2003). Section 5.4.1 further explains the use of this coding scheme.

The speeches about the state of the union are a policy instrument that the president uses to announce and send messages about important legislative intentions to Congress (Pardinas, 2004, p. 81). All presidents need to deliver these statements in a joint session of Chambers at the beginning of each annual congressional term. The address fulfils a constitutional obligation of the Mexican president to give information about the state of the Mexican nation. The president submits a written document to Congress and maintains a tradition of delivering a message to the Mexican people. This research uses these Informe de Gobierno speeches as an instrument to identify presidents’ priorities. The Informe de Gobierno represents an agenda-setting venue to measure presidential policy priorities which is the particular interest of this research.

This thesis suggests that presidents’ words are important in comprehending the functioning of the Mexican presidency and its political system. Informe de Gobierno speeches are an instrument by which the president demonstrates his priorities, rather than formal pledges. In these speeches, presidents can outline present and future policy intentions. These speeches may present policy intentions that do not necessarily become a policy outcome. They may also present policy issues that were transformed into policy outcomes (policy implementation). This policy instrument shows both presidential purposes and solutions. It is also an instrument of presidential accountability. Finally, comparability is possible as similar speeches are found for various presidential and parliamentary democracies (see Bevan et al., 2011; Jennings et al., 2011b; Mortensen et al., 2011; Jennings and John, 2009; John and Jennings, 2010; Breeman et al., 2009). It is plausible to compare the prioritisation of policy issues in Mexican presidential policy agendas with other policy priorities in other democratic systems.

1.8 Thesis outline

The structure of this thesis contains seven chapters. The first part of the thesis aims to explain the workings of the Mexican political system. It also introduces the theoretical framework that supports the use of punctuated equilibrium theory and the agenda-setting approach in the development of this thesis. The second part of this thesis shows evidence about the mechanism explaining the process of policy change that generates punctuations and changes in policy attention in presidential policy agendas in Mexico. The thesis presents a complementary analysis by developing both qualitative and quantitative analysis in some of its chapters. The final chapter presents the general conclusion about opportunities for studying policy agendas and presidential policymaking in Latin America in general and in Mexico in particular.

Chapter 2 presents the theoretical basis of this analysis and the framework for studying presidential politics in a democratising context. At the core of this chapter is the definition of three hypotheses to be tested throughout this thesis. Chapter 3 introduces the characteristics of the Mexican presidential system and theories for understanding presidential policy agendas for this case.

Chapter 4 provides evidence through interviews with experts of the process behind the dynamics of policy agendas. In the increasing plural and conflicting context, successful presidents in Mexico make use of political coalitions for advancing their policy agendas. A relevant conclusion of this chapter is that presidential politics in Mexico is becoming a form of politics of consensus where presidents are not independent agenda setters.

Chapter 5 is devoted to the analysis of the president's policy agenda regarding its content and dynamics. The principal aim is to test whether the effects of electoral cycles explain changes in policy attention. The chapter investigates whether Mexican presidents have greater incentives to enact policy early in their administrations. It also analyses if there are partisan factors explaining presidents' policy priorities. The final part of the chapter analyses political and institutional factors associated with the diversity of issues on the presidential policy agendas. The measure of diversity is used to measure changes in policy attention as well as provide a value of concentration or dispersion of attention of particular presidents' policy priorities (Alexandrova et al., 2012; Jennings et al., 2011b). A key conclusion from this chapter considers whether democratisation has brought greater diversity to the issue-attention structure of presidential policy agenda (i.e. with attention spread across many issues). The results suggest that presidents' attention remains in long-term equilibrium. This analysis finds evidence of punctuated equilibrium theory in presidential policy agendas.

Chapter 6 assesses the extent to which presidential attention can influence the attention of other policy institutions (i.e. budgets, bills, laws). In this chapter, by using budgetary data as a proxy for an implementation stage in the policymaking process, the analysis

focuses on identifying variations between the agenda-setting stage and a later stage of the processes of decision-making. The chapter aims to measure the extent to which these policy instruments correlate in their attention to similar policy issues. It measures whether the attention of presidents is similar to budgetary priorities. The findings indicate that the institutional friction of each area of policymaking poses challenges for the transfer of the priorities of the president into other stages of the policymaking processes. There is evidence of gradual changes and punctuations in both policy institutions. This shows that each institution (i.e. presidential priorities and budgetary policy) follows independent policymaking processes which make their policy attention divergent from each other.

Chapter 7 focuses on drawing conclusions about the relevance of studying issue-attention in a developing democracy. There is the perception that much of the Mexican presidents' attention is explained by old political cleavages, a response to political and economic crises and accommodation of preference for similar policy priorities. By looking at distribution of policy attention, it is possible to reflect on elements in the working of institutional processes and the Mexican democracy. The conclusion considers the possibility of extending this theory and the coding system of the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) more widely in the Latin American region. It also assesses the possibility of officially introducing the Mexican case into CAP's research agenda.

Chapter 2

Theoretical Framework

2.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the elements of punctuated equilibrium theory. It also presents a combination of theories that aim to complement the agenda-setting approach. This chapter provides a framework that asserts that policymaking involves an exchange of resources and that political actors funnel information in order to generate opportunities for policy change through political agreements. Similar to [Jones and Baumgartner \(2005a\)](#) and [Baumgartner and Jones \(1993\)](#) for the U.S. case, the main argument is that the presence of veto points is a cause of periods of incrementalism interspersed with bursts of policy instability for a democratisation context. This framework suggests that in a democratisation context veto points explain friction against change (i.e. stability), from which policy instability arises (in the form of punctuations) when the necessity of change overcomes the friction that has accumulated. These veto points are potential blocks to changes in presidents' policy agenda, which in this case arise from political gridlock because of political fragmentation and multipartism. Meanwhile, the formation of political coalitions explains punctuations (i.e. sudden and disproportionate changes) in presidents' policy agendas as these institutional mechanisms allow a president to overcome friction.

The chapter develops three possible hypotheses to be tested throughout the development of this thesis. It introduces a hypothesis that argues that policy changes occur rapidly and recurrently. In this thesis, this is referred to as the *Unstable Agendas Hypothesis* (**H2**).¹ The chapter also raises the possibility of testing a hypothesis regarding gradual patterns of change — incrementalism — by considering the possibility of the dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibiting patterns of continuous stasis: this is the *Stable*

¹*Unstable Agendas Hypothesis (H2): The dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit repeatedly abrupt and radical change.*

Agendas Hypothesis (**H3**).² Finally, it sets out the possibility of punctuated equilibrium theory providing an explanation for the dynamics of policy attention, referred to as the *Punctuated Equilibrium Agenda Hypothesis* (**H1**).³

In presidential systems, the president is the main actor responsible for recognising problems relevant to the nation and setting the national agenda. Yet, there are reasons to be sceptical about whether presidents are able to generate and implement their preferred policy agendas. There are always opposing groups that might be hostile to some presidential initiatives, which force presidents to exclude certain issues from potential consideration. Some political issues are rarely discussed and policy remains unchanged, whereas other issues can experienced rapid reform.

In developing democracies, particular institutional structures can contribute to a further inability to deliver policy reforms. There are viewpoints that argue gridlock can result from political fragmentation in some multiparty and presidential democracies (see [Lijphart, 1991](#); [Linz, 1990](#)). This combination of presidential systems and multipartism is ‘difficult’ according to [Mainwaring \(1993\)](#). The failure to reach agreements can block the capacity of the president to influence policy agenda. The presence of political fragmentation generates political stalemates as other political actors may not be willing to support presidential initiatives. A multiparty system in presidential systems leading to fragmentation generates immobilisation of the president as a result of political conflicts and a reduced capacity to agree on policy solutions with Congress. In the presence of political conflict and immobilisation, the opposition can consider that supporting military intervention is the only means of removing an ineffective president (see [Lijphart, 1991](#)). The institutional combination of multipartism and presidentialism, thus, has impact on decision processes and democratic governability.

Some institutional structures have proven to help governments to deliver policy solutions and overcome political conflicts that produce risks of democratic breakdowns. The literature on coalition formation in Latin American provides theoretical support to the argument regarding political agreements and negotiation as an instrument to overcome political paralysis ([Méndez de Hoyos, 2012](#); [Alemán and Tsebelis, 2011](#); [Cheibub et al., 2004](#); [Carey, 2002](#)). This literature finds informal forms of political alliances to be a mechanism to deliver successful policy reforms ([Helmke and Levitsky, 2006](#); [Siavelis, 2006](#); [Desposato, 2006](#); [Mejía Acosta, 2006](#)).

This research will answer the question: *Does the general distribution of attention in presidential policy exhibit patterns of continuity and change?* It aims to identify characteristics of presidential decision-making and presidential policy agendas. This chapter supports the assertion that there are periods of time where presidents support continuity

² *Stable Agendas Hypothesis* (**H3**): *The dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit stable patterns of change.*

³ *Punctuated Equilibrium Agenda Hypothesis* (**H1**): *the dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit both incremental patterns of change and abrupt change (punctuations).*

of their policy agendas. If a president in a particular case faces an increase in his decision costs which unfavourably affects decision processes, it is less likely that agendas will experience shifts. These contextual factors push presidents to act strategically so that they are able to reduce costs and generate changes in their policy priorities. The key is to understand the intersection between ‘policy images’⁴ and ‘venues’⁵ and how the president as a ‘policy entrepreneur’⁶ can from time to time break certain policy monopolies in Congress. The focus on coalition formation through informal negotiations requires examination and analysis of the executive and legislative relationship in Congress.

The first section introduces the punctuated equilibrium theory as a means for understanding presidential policy prioritisation. Next, it defines concepts of friction — a fundamental concept in agenda-setting literature introduced by [Jones and Baumgartner \(2005b\)](#) — and policy punctuations. There follows an introduction on research regarding political institutions and an explanation of the importance of using agenda-setting theory for understanding presidential policymaking in a democratisation political context. The next section explains a mechanism behind policy change in a democratisation context, which relies on formation of political coalitions. Finally, this chapter introduces the hypotheses relating to presidential agendas that are going to be tested in the remainder of the thesis.

2.2 Agenda-setting theory and presidential policymaking

The original development of agenda-setting theory by [Baumgartner and Jones \(1993\)](#) aimed to explain policymaking in the U.S. political system. The particular application of this theory in the study of presidents’ agendas requires an explanation of its theoretical elements. This theory considers a bounded capacity of individuals and institutional costs for processing information as elements that generate uneven patterns of policy change. A punctuated process is characterised by extended periods of incrementalism (near stasis) and short bursts of large policy change (‘punctuated equilibrium’).⁷

Incrementalism theory has helped to analyse patterns of decision-making processes. Incrementalism is a model of choice that describes changes in policy as marginal adjustments from previous policy choices (see [Braybrooke and Lindblom, 1963](#); [Dahl and Lindblom, 1953](#); [Lindblom, 1959](#)). Individuals take past decisions as a benchmark for future decision-making. According to [Pierson \(2001\)](#), public policies are usually designed

⁴This thesis follows the definition provided by Walgrave and Varone that “[p]olicy images are policy communities’ shared ideas about the policy at stake” (2008, p. 367).

⁵Policy venues are the policy communities or “institutional locations where authoritative decisions are made concerning a given issue” ([Baumgartner and Jones, 1993](#), p. 32)

⁶The concept of policy entrepreneur was first used by [Kingdon \(1984\)](#) and refers to a political actor who uses their information and skills to access policy that fulfils his own policy priorities.

⁷The approach has proved universal in its application as there are theoretical developments of punctuated equilibrium theory in comparative perspectives in both democratic and authoritarian regimes (see [Baumgartner et al., 2017](#); [Lam and Chan, 2015](#); [Chan and Zhao, 2015](#); [Baumgartner et al., 2009b](#)).

with continuity in mind. Governments will rely “on the record of past experience with small policy steps to predict the consequences of similar steps extended into the future” (Lindblom, 1959, p. 79). Wildavsky (1988) notes that decision-making is incremental because of institutional limitations concerning capacity and resources (also Davis et al., 1974, 1966). There is a preference for pursuing policy changes by reaching agreement as it is less costly to maintain policy from previous governments than to implement completely new policies (see Sabatier, 1988).

It is very likely that presidents will maintain some of the previous administrations’ programmes. If presidents aim to change legislation or budgetary expenditures, for example, they will need to go through the Congressional process for getting policy reform. Congress may reject presidents’ initiatives as it can be economically and politically costly for governments to change policies. There may be a preference for the status quo which will favour gradual adjustments in policies. Thus, presidential policy agendas can exhibit continuity near stasis with only minimal change to policy.

However, research has questioned whether decision processes do in fact follow a gradual process of change. Authors suggest that more often than not there is policy continuity, but large change sometimes happens as well (Davis et al., 1974; Wanat, 1974). For example, Hall (1993) classifies changes in policy in three different orders — first, second and third order change⁸ — by drawing on arguments on paradigmatic change. The intellectual precision of a fundamental paradigm decreases as policy anomalies accumulate. This shift produces a change in the credibility of an old paradigm, thereby creating a new paradigm. A pattern of incremental policy prioritisation might be interrupted with ‘paradigmatic change’⁹ rather than follow only a gradual change.

Baumgartner and Jones (2002) explain that punctuated equilibrium theory more accurately accounts for policy changes than incrementalism theory. In this standpoint, incrementalism does not recognise the role that attention has in the process of updating and adapting policy decisions (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005b). Agenda-setting literature recognises that under some conditions policy changes occur in large bursts. Most of the time policies remain in a continuous and gradual process of change (near stasis);

⁸Hall explain these order change as that the “[f]irst and second order change can be seen as cases of “normal policymaking,” namely of a process that adjusts policy without challenging the overall terms of a given policy paradigm, much like “normal science” (1993, p. 279). Third order change, by contrast, is likely to reflect a very different process, marked by the radical changes in the overarching terms of policy discourse associated with a “paradigm shift.”

⁹Hall (1993) explains policy changes as being highly constrained because there are powerful ideas that reinforce the status quo. However, there will be a move into a new equilibrium in the presence of paradigmatic shifts. A paradigmatic shift is a radical change of a previously accepted idea that dominates the process of decision. Baumgartner (2013) develops an argument regarding the relevance of considering the relationship between ideas and policy change by referring to Hall’s paradigmatic change. This thesis argues that policy agendas suffer radical changes that sometimes can be based on paradigmatic changes, but it is not an aim of this thesis to fully join arguments of punctuated equilibrium theory and Hall’s theory of paradigmatic change. There is sometime a reference to ‘paradigmatic change’ to explain the process of generating changes in ideas regarding policy domains.

yet, based on empirical observation, [Jones and Baumgartner \(2005b\)](#) observe that policy shows moments of radical change during short periods of time before returning to a renewed state of continuity. The prioritisation of decisions is driven by attention when external factors (i.e. economic or political crises) become important and are impossible to ignore. Political actors have to engage with such circumstances and the resultant new set of information produces radical and abrupt changes in policy decisions.

For [Jones and Baumgartner \(2005b\)](#), an incomplete capacity of individuals and institutions to consider all relevant and available information when making policy decisions explain incrementalism. The bounded capacity of decisions necessitates institutions to be path dependent — *sticky* — and unable to produce an effective response to information signals. This ‘stickiness’ stops the development of significant momentum for policy change. Therefore, there is a pattern of continuity in a response ([Jones et al., 2003](#)). It can take a long time before policymakers realise that a problem requires attention. But policymakers will not typically ignore a problem forever. The moment when a problem receives attention generates a departure from stasis by producing an abrupt adjustment (correction) of a policy decision. This abrupt change emerges because there is a selective capacity to solve problems. In making decisions, individuals are not fully able to attend all problems at the same time. This logic of correction is developed based on the idea of Herbert Simon’s ([1985; 1955](#)) notion regarding the cognitive limitations of individual’s minds.

The punctuated equilibrium theory explains that the design of governmental structures and its decision processes often replicate this bounded rational capacity of individuals. The decisions of governments are constrained by rules and structures that help individuals to organise agenda-setting and policy definition, which generates some stickiness in their process of policymaking. This is because, in democratic structures, many governmental activities are arranged in sub-structures that institutionalise policymaking within policy sectors (policy subsystems) ([Baumgartner and Jones, 1993](#)). These policy subsystems are institutional structures that react to societal problems by defining particular policy directions. The influence of recurring patterns of behaviour for developing solutions (that is, that particular paradigms or ideas dominate the definition of policy solutions) supports restriction to changes in policies. As a result, this institutional design necessitates individuals to choose and define solutions to particular policies areas instead of others ([Lam and Chan, 2015](#), p. 3). In the agenda-setting literature, these policy subsystems are sometimes called ‘policy monopolies’ if these institutional structures have a monopoly of understanding in their preferred way of framing a particular policy area.

The design produces inefficiencies in the political system as policy subsystems fail to effectively transfer and communicate information about policies between subsystems. The process of gaining expertise in a particular policy area reduces the ability of individuals for policy innovation as they become experts in solving particular subjects and are not

necessarily able to generate solutions in more than one policy domain (see [Janis, 1972](#)). [Baumgartner and Jones \(1993\)](#) describe this process as political debate happening at the level of policy subsystems with policy experts and policymakers trying to find solutions to a particular policy. Eventually political debates regarding a policy can move to a national level of debate, but this happens only if a problem becomes so important that solutions need the intervention of individuals at higher levels in the structure of policymaking — for example, the intervention of the president. These subsystems have an individual answer to problems until those problems become subject to broader interest.

In punctuated equilibrium theory the influence of ideas that frame a common understanding regarding policy problems and solutions is called a ‘policy image’ ([Baumgartner and Jones, 1991](#)). The discussion of public policies is usually done by using a conventional *language* within a subsystem. The use of a conventional language compels changes in policy decisions to occur if there are changes in this *language*. If a change in language takes place — that is, a change in the understanding of a particular problem — there will be a shift in policy images and it is more likely that policy changes will happen.¹⁰

A change in policy images refers to how policy is understood and discussed in a particular ‘policy venue’. The possibility of changing a policy image increases when there is enough political mobilisation in support of a new understanding of a particular policy. If an issue catches attention with the public and the media, it becomes difficult to ignore. The occurrence of a ‘focusing event’¹¹ — i.e. sudden crises — might also help to produce a policy change (see [Birkland, 1997](#)). Similarly, [Jones and Baumgartner \(2012, p. 7\)](#) describe this shift as policy decisions responding to ‘exogenous forces’, which often come in the form of scandals or crises and push policymakers to address a particular issue. The attention given to a problem shifts as there is a response from policymakers that expands the political discussion from a subsystem level to a broader level of debate.

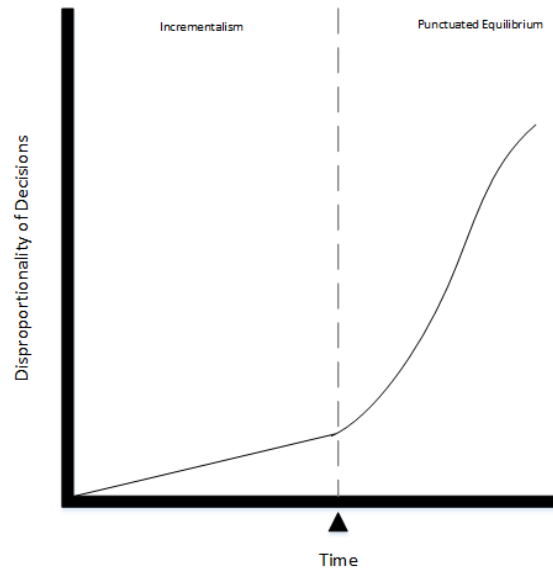
[Baumgartner and Jones \(1993\)](#) consider the relevance of a policy entrepreneur as an agent producing policy change. A policy entrepreneur has the possibility of expanding debates whenever a favourable condition arises (i.e. an issue receiving attention from the public and the media) ([Baumgartner and Jones, 1993](#); [Kingdon, 1984](#); [Schattschneider, 1960](#)). There is a favourable condition when a “window of opportunity” — a period of time during which an individual can take relevant political decisions — opens and makes policy change possible. This opportunity will typically only last a short time and needs a quick action.

The presidency has a bounded capacity to deal with social problems and policy solutions. The president and the staff use shortcuts in their decisions to simplify decision processes

¹⁰The reference to changing a paradigm on a specific problem and its solutions can be made by following Paul Hall’s (1993) argument. See also 9.

¹¹A focusing event is a process that communicates information regarding the urgency of producing policy change as it reveals failure of a particular policy and produces a shock that makes change more likely ([Birkland, 1997](#)).

Figure 2.1: The incrementalism and punctuated equilibrium in presidential decisions



Source: Own elaboration based on [Jones and Baumgartner \(2005a\)](#), [\(Baumgartner and Jones, 1993\)](#) and [Hong and Sohn \(2014\)](#)

in order to deal with the complexity of a particular situation ([Larsen-Price, 2012](#)). The president can only choose some issues to focus on from a vast realm of possibilities and define which is the best course of action.

After a president takes office, there might be some preference for policy continuity as the opposition may not be willing to assume the cost of reform. If the equilibrium prevails there will be a gradual process of change (near stasis). Figure 2.1 shows in the x -axis a variable of time and a hypothetical point where incremental change suffers a radical change. The y -axis explains the type of change that the president's policy decisions can suffer in time — incremental versus punctuations (radical change). The graph demonstrates that there is a point where the pace of decision-making changes after a period of incrementalism. The moment in which a president can overcome this friction¹² is a point when he can deliver policy change. This hypothetical point represents opposition to change that is overcome only if there is a change in policy images and an entrepreneurial, political action from the president.

¹²The concept of friction relates to the obstruction of policy change as well as the forces that will enable change to occur when the process overcomes this obstruction. There is a dual force explaining these effects, and this refers to a negative feedback process (against policy change) that is a result of friction, whereas positive feedback occurs when friction is overcome.

2.3 Institutional friction and policy dynamics in democratic political systems

The punctuated equilibrium theory explains that the dynamics of policy incrementalism (near stasis) and punctuation periods are a product of *friction*. A positive friction explains the process that is triggering policy change. There are interests and costs that push decisions on policies to continuous stasis. This restraining force can be understood as a negative friction.

The pressures from social problems and demands might build up to the point where it becomes possible to overcome friction and bring about a policy response. The threshold levels for responding tend to be low in democracy as some response is expected when external pressures are present (e.g. pressures from social movements, interests groups and lobbying). This interaction between political tensions and stimuli between institutions in decision-making processes is defined as *institutional friction*.

The institutional structure of a system sets the conditions under which information signals lead to policy action (Baumgartner et al., 2009b, p. 608). The system can emit a response if an information input passes particular thresholds. Baumgartner et al. have recently argued that “[e]very government has a certain threshold of institutional response. Below the threshold policymakers ignore problems; above the threshold, they attempt to solve them” (2017, p. 6). The characteristics of the electoral system, party systems, the organisation of interests groups and bureaucratic structures, as well as other elements of institutional design, affect the efficiency and levels to which governments react to information. Democracies have an advantage over other political systems when it comes to producing prompt responses as democratic systems have a high capacity to gather and process information about social problems. These information and institutional advantages in democracies set a low threshold of institutional response that allows policymakers to consider information and to adjust public policies more frequently (see Baumgartner et al., 2017; Lam and Chan, 2015).

There is always a *reducing* force and an *amplifying* force of policy change that affect presidential policy agendas (see Baumgartner et al., 2009b, p. 607). Negative feedback explains a resistance of the system to change in the form of friction, which generates policy continuity. The agenda seldom changes because decision-making requires processing information and implementing a new policy is costly. However, a change in attention can produce a surpass of the threshold of response and propel public policies to a new equilibrium. A positive feedback explains a process that overcomes the pressures imposed against policy changes. This positive feedback process pushes individuals (i.e. policymakers, the president, legislators, etc.) to focus their attention on a policy issue that becomes salient. According to the punctuated equilibrium literature, this produces disproportionality in a response as when a threshold is overcome it pushes individuals

to focus their attention on small number of particular issues ([Jones and Baumgartner, 2005b](#); [Jones et al., 2003](#); [Jones, 2003](#)).

The political interactions between actors and institutions also produce variations in their levels of friction (i.e. costs of decisions). There are some institutions that impose higher decision and transaction costs than others ([Jones et al., 2003](#)). There are institutional structures that centralise decision-making processes but others where decision processes are dispersed between many actors. The more dispersion there is, the higher the decision and transaction cost. For example, a president experiences low decision costs when defining agenda-setting through his presidential speeches. The cost is higher when defining budgetary priorities: costs increase as more actors interact in the definition of the policy agenda as well as its implementation. The result of these decision-making processes is policy outputs in the form of programmes, budget categories and expenditure. The speech writing and passage of laws requires significantly less cost than allocating budgetary resources. The decision costs are higher in the bureaucratic-budgetary settings, as amending legislation requires high political bargaining, but a decision about closing or reducing funds for a social programme might generate stronger political pressures. The later stages of policymaking are subject to more friction as the interactions between more political actors imply a dispersion of power that increases conflict for reaching policy agreement. The difficulty of reaching agreement constrains change and this is significantly more difficult in late stages than in the early stages of policymaking.

[Jones et al. \(2003\)](#) build on stochastic processes to explain the dynamics of the distribution of policy attention and change. The distribution of policy attention is found to present leptokurtic distribution that refers to a departure from normal (Gaussian) distribution of policy attention ([Baumgartner et al., 2009a](#)). The leptokurtic shape of this distribution characterises the fluidity between small changes (incrementalism) and some abrupt shifts (punctuations), which are consistent with punctuated equilibrium theory ([Breunig and Jones, 2011](#)). Typically kurtosis and L-kurtosis statistics are used for estimating levels of institutional friction in political systems and institutional processes ([Baumgartner et al., 2017](#); [Epp and Baumgartner, 2017](#); [John et al., 2013](#); [Chaqués Bonafont and Palau, 2011](#); [Breunig and Jones, 2011](#); [Breunig et al., 2009](#); [Baumgartner et al., 2009b](#); [Howlett and Rayner, 2006](#)).

2.4 Punctuated equilibrium theory and the Latin American institutional context

The punctuated equilibrium theory has been shown to be universally applicable by analysing policymaking in both democratic and authoritarian regimes. This thesis offers to be one of the few applications of punctuated equilibrium theory in a democratisation context (see [Yoon, 2015](#); [Hong and Sohn, 2014](#)). It is relevant to explain, thus,

that using the agenda-setting approach needs support from other literature and theoretical approaches that had been used to describe institutions and policymaking in Latin America.

The democratising character of a country may show a different process of policymaking to that shown by other democracies. The viability of applying the punctuated equilibrium theory in democratisation context needs to be examined. The institutional infrastructure for policy advocacy, interest representation, managing political resources and setting political debates in a developing democracy may show institutional weaknesses because of problems with rule of law and enforcement (see Helmke, 2017, 2010; Perez-Liñan, 2007; Tsebelis, 1995). The institutional weakness that sometimes characterises institutions in Latin America may make policymaking the subject of high levels of institutional instability. This means there may be some difficulties in applying the punctuated equilibrium theory as part of the theory considers stability in decision processes and Latin American institutions seem to lack this characteristic.

The application of punctuated equilibrium theory from a comparative perspective could be problematic in a democratisation context as patterns of institutional change are likely to resemble neither modes of gradual change or patterns consistent with the punctuated equilibrium model (Levitsky and Murillo, 2009). The patterns of institutional change might rather resemble changes that are both radical and recurrent. The behavioural expectation with formal institutions in developing democracies is one where formal rules are routinely violated and frequently changed. The rules can be used to limit or permit enforcement and the violation of these rules has different ramifications to those found in industrialised democracies. Levitsky and Murillo (2009, p. 123) argue that substantial variation in the stability and durability of institutional rules in developing democracies increases uncertainty and reduces expectations about political cooperation. Therefore, some assumptions arise regarding a context that lacks institutional stability that make the concept of path dependency¹³ inapplicable. A context of constant change inhibits path dependent behaviour as formal institutions are overturned, so there is no institutional memory from which to base future policymaking and institutional developments.

The investment in institutional arrangements where rules are repeatedly violated may be creating a path for more crises. Levitsky and Murillo argue that “[p]atterns of institutional weakness may be reinforced by actors’ investment in the skills and technologies appropriate to an unstable institutional environment or to alternative informal rules of the game” (2009, p. 123). Actors reinforce the expectations of institutional weakness, as costs of institutional replacement remain low. Helmke calls this an “institutional

¹³Pierson defines path dependency as a process “in which preceding steps in a particular direction induce further movement in the same direction” (also known as self-conditioning) (2000, p. 252). There is an increasing returns process in which “the probability of further steps along the same path increases with each move down that path” and thus makes “the costs of exit — of switching to some previously plausible alternative — rise.” A self-conditioning process strengthens and reinforces the association between a stimulus and a response. This enforcement makes a response occur again or be similar to a previous response (see Skinner, 1990).

instability trap” with reference to a context where a polity is locked into a path of institutional failures (2010, p. 749). A path of “historically contingent circumstances” may produce constant instability, which consequently weakens institutions (Levitsky and Murillo, 2009, p. 123). As a result institutional continuity is not possible; therefore, institutional change is considered to be frequent — recurrent — and radical instead of incremental (Levitsky and Murillo, 2014).

Spiller and Tommasi (2007) analyse the effects of institutional structures on instability and quality of policy. The argument is that institutions’ instability reduces an actor’s capacity to reach agreements in policymaking. The institutional context may be creating a situation where inter-temporal¹⁴ agreements cannot be achieved (Spiller and Tommasi, 2007). In the long term, this has adverse effects on political stability and governance (Fukuyama, 2008).

However, not every institutions in Latin America has been shown to be in an “institutional instability trap.” At times more optimistic viewpoints have led to the analysis of institutional transformations through the lens of institutional continuity (see also Capoccia and Kelemen, 2007). For example, in Mexico after the end of the Mexican revolution in 1929, prohibition for presidential re-election was established to become one of the strongest institutional rules in this political system. In the case of Latin American, Berins Collier and Collier (1991) analyse modes of labour integration into the polity and its impact on democratic developments. In this other example, these authors emphasise the importance of socioeconomic factors on institutional entrenchments as well as on shifting patterns of institutional change. In one example more, Cuadra-Montiel (2016) applies what he calls an evolutionary approach to track institutional change and policymaking in economic policy in Mexico. This author’s approach considers a cumulative incremental pattern of change and patterns of evolution as a complex network with opportunities and constraints. Scholarship has in fact considered that there are elements of continuity in Latin American institutions. Therefore, following these approaches this thesis suggests the applicability of the punctuated equilibrium approach of a Latin American case study.

2.5 Institutional friction, informal institutions and policy change

A main task of this thesis is to search for evidence of a punctuated equilibrium model of choice in presidential policymaking in a Latin American democracy. The key element when using punctuated equilibrium theory is to find a mechanism that can explain

¹⁴This concept relates to the capacity of political actors to repeat cooperative action. This transaction requires exchanging something in time_t for something else at time_t + 1. These political transactions necessarily need to promote enforcement as dishonest behaviour from an individual can affect cooperative action in the future. For further reference see Spiller and Tommasi (2007).

policy stability (incrementalism) as well as moments of time when a certain threshold of response is overcome to produce a radical change (punctuation) in policy making. The transferability of this theory into the democratisation context requires identifying these negative and positive feedback processes. A key concept explaining ‘punctuated equilibrium’ patterns of change is the presence of institutional friction. In Section 2.3 friction was defined as a restraining force inhibiting policy change and keeping the status quo. This section explains that a type of friction is built by the presence of political fragmentation often as result of institutional structures that combine presidentialism with multipartism.

Scholarship on institutional change identifies concerns about political actors having enough capacity in governments to deliver public policies (see Mainwaring, 1993; Shugart and Carey, 1992; Linz, 1990). The literature defines this as having political effectiveness or ‘capacity’ of decision-making (see Fukuyama, 2008). It is also observed that there is a dilemma between having sufficient policy effectiveness and having legitimacy (see Fukuyama, 2008; Buchanan and Tullock, 1962). In this relationship, a rise in the representation of interests¹⁵ strengthens legitimacy by increasing pluralism. An increase in political pluralism that is, the coexistence of more political actors, institutions, social groups and sources of authority, can prevent a government from having the support of a small minority. Yet, when pluralism increases, there could be a reduction of government’s effectiveness. This is because the capacity of decision-making might become costly as political disputes arise with increasing pluralism.

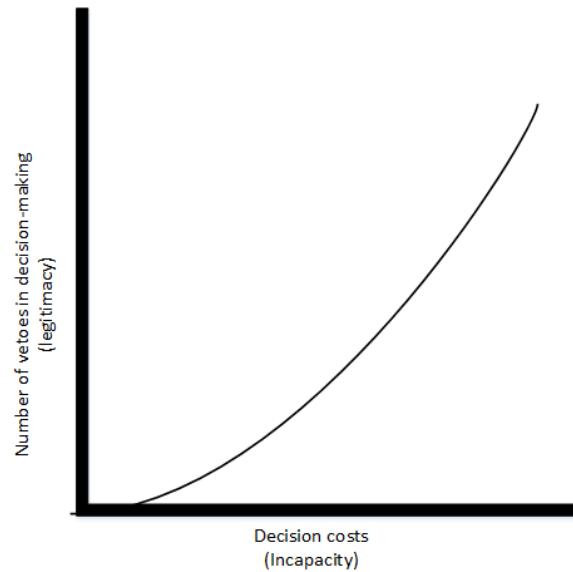
Cox and McCubbins (2001)¹⁶ use the concept of veto players¹⁷ to explain trade-offs between legitimacy and the capacity of decision-making (effectiveness). A political system designed to place many more veto players — checks and balances — in decision-making

¹⁵Pitkin’s (1967, p. 8) in her seminal work *The Concept of Representation* explains political representation as to make ‘present’ different political interests in the process of policymaking. This happens if political actors advocate and act on behalf of various interests (i.e. vulnerable groups, business, workers, etc.). See also Fain (1980) and Rehfeld (2011).

¹⁶Buchanan and Tullock (1962) suggest that political systems can be classified by the number of veto players. An authoritarian regime has few or a single veto player in the figure of a dictator, while a democracy with its plural configuration of political actors has many more veto players.

¹⁷Tsebelis defines a veto player as “an individual or collective actor whose agreement is required for a policy decision” (1995, p. 293). Additionally, Tsebelis defines veto players as those political actors “whose agreement [...] is required for a change of the status quo” (1995, p. 289). These actors can be individual or collective players. The terms veto players and veto points are used interchangeably in the literature (see Zehavi, 2012; O’Reilly, 2005, pp. 312–313). Baumgartner et al. (2009b, p. 610) consider veto points as a term that refers to the opportunity for policy change. The term considers institutions and actors as able to block change in some moments of time but also facilitate change in other points of time. If an agreement for change is not possible these veto points are an obstruction that propagates friction against policy change (Bevan and Jennings, 2014). Yet, if an agreement on change is possible veto points are also a source of instability (John and Jennings, 2010, p. 657). This thesis supports Baumgartner and Jones’s (2009b) perspectives and make an indistinct use of the terms veto point and players.

Figure 2.2: Legitimacy and effectiveness in decision-making in a democratic context



Source: Own elaboration based on [Cox and McCubbins \(2001\)](#) and [Buchanan and Tullock \(1962\)](#).

will be less effective in its decision processes. Figure 2.2¹⁸ suggests that the more veto players participate in decision processes (y -axis) — increasing interests representation — the more there is an increase in costs for reaching policy agreements (x -axis) (see [Buchanan and Tullock, 1962](#)). This reduces effectiveness in the decision process of political individuals. Therefore, Figure 2.2 shows the more legitimacy there is in a system, the more costly decisions become.

Latin American presidential democracies in some cases have institutional configurations that are inefficient in narrowing decision-making down to a few veto players. An institutional tendency to political fragmentation, increases the number of political players. Political fragmentation reduces the incentives to reach political agreement. This inability for decision-making produces a negative effect on the quality of policymaking ([Fukuyama, 2008](#); [Spiller and Tommasi, 2007](#)). As [Spiller and Tommasi \(2007\)](#) explain, an absence of incentives for political cooperation because of fragmentation generates excessive continuity in policies, which find difficulties in adapting to political and economic changes. The presence of fragmentation frequently leads to political systems creating incentives for rent-seeking benefits. Consequently, this makes it less likely for actors to reach long-term agreements. This institutional setting of political fragmentation can also generate incentives for excessive fluctuation in policies as shifts can result from changes in government and strong political authority if institutions provide this political power

¹⁸This figure aims to show that there is a positive relationship between the number of veto points and decision costs. Although there may be a mathematically calculable relationship between these variables, the purpose here is to display the general relationship between variables. An attempt to develop an equation requires mathematical knowledge that transcend the skill of the researcher.

(i.e. a president might have the political power to act independently by using decrees and can avoid sending initiatives to Congress).

In contrast to some Latin American democracies, for example, the plurality system in the U.S. presidential system allows the funnelling of political views into fewer points. There is pluralism with high levels of interest representation; nonetheless, U.S. institutions develop decision processes in a political system that enables governments to generate effective policymaking, even if sometimes it produces gridlock (Lijphart, 1991).

The capacity of decision-making in the U.S. political system can be explained by what Tsebelis (1995) defines as ‘political congruence’ — that is, the difference in the political position of political actors. Tsebelis argues that the possibility of moving from the status quo decreases if there is a greater distance between the preferred policies of the various veto players (1995, pp. 309–311). If the dissimilarity of policy positions between veto players is low, change is more likely to happen. The gap in the preferences of actors is reduced when their political positions converge by what Tsebelis (1995) calls the ‘absorption rule’. There is a greater capacity of decision-making when there is a decrease in the distance between the preferences for policies of veto players.

Yet, the literature in Latin America also reveals that institutional structures can help to accommodate different political interests in similar policy interests. In Latin America, scholars studying coalitions in presidential systems recognise that the president sometimes has the ability to form political agreements and generate political cooperation (Arnold et al., 2017; Albala, 2016; Pereira et al., 2016; Martínez-Gallardo, 2012; Alemán and Tsebelis, 2011; Chasquetti, 2008; Cheibub et al., 2004; Garrido, 2003; Lanzaro et al., 2001; Mainwaring, 1993). Helmke and Levitsky (2006) argue that politicians rely on informal institutions¹⁹ to solve problems resulting from strong presidentialism and party fragmentation. In particular Latin American presidents have shown to be actors that rely on informal means of political cooperation to achieve their goals (see Mejía Acosta, 2006; Siavelis, 2006; Desposato, 2006). For example, the Chilean political system is based on a strong presidential system that provides few incentives for cooperation with Congress. Yet, after the end of the military regime (in the early 1990s) without constitutional reform, political actors instead built a mechanism for cooperation through an inter-party coalition for executive–legislative consultation. This informal mechanism for political cooperation was crucial for Chile’s democratic transformation.

A possible punctuated equilibrium theory model for a democratisation context is based on the assumption that there is negative friction through institutional structures that reduces political cooperation when there is an increase in the number of veto players (that is, increasing political fragmentation). If individuals promote a process to overcome this friction against policy change and reforms, the possibility of policy change

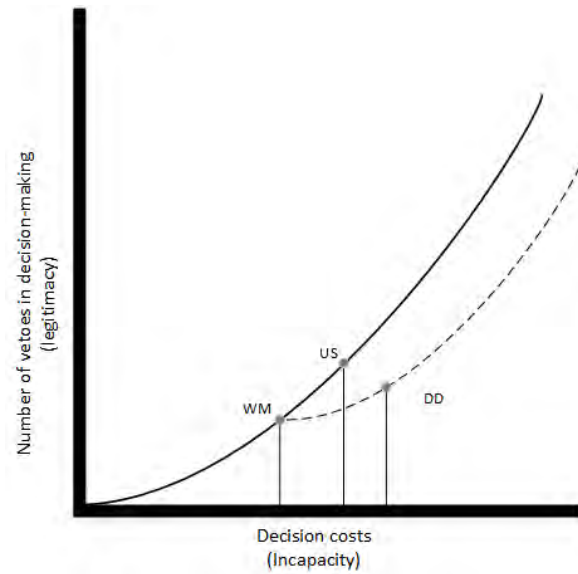
¹⁹Helmke and Levitsky define informal institutions as “socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside officially sanctioned channels” (2006, p. 5). See also O’Donnell (1996) for an early explanation of informal institutions.

will increase. For presidential agenda-setting, this thesis argues that the formation of coalitions and informal agreements creates a process that helps presidents to overcome institutional friction by promoting cooperative policymaking. The president tries to reduce the number of veto players to increase effectiveness in decision processes by building coalitions.

By following Tsebelis (1995, 2002), this framework considers that an increase in the numbers of veto players reduces the capacity of decision-making as it increases decision costs. Figure 2.3 compares the Westminster model, the U.S. presidential model and a developing democracy in terms of how the number of veto player affect decision-making legitimacy and efficiency. It shows a hypothetical point where the Westminster model (WM) is positioned in a more effective point when compared to the U.S. presidential model (named 'US' in the graph). This is because its number of veto players and thus decision costs are minor. The WM parliamentary system has one of the fewest number of veto players. There is no separation of powers and a simple majority gives the possibility to have substantial power to change legislation in parliament. By contrast, the U.S. presidential system favours a separation of power (the Executive, Legislative and Judicial branches) and has bicameralism, federalism and an independent judicial system, which means the system has more veto players and higher costs of decision-making.

For a Latin American democracy even when having a presidential system similar to the U.S., its institutional condition can producing greater costs in the decision processes assuming they generate political fragmentation because of multipartism, for example. The system has little capacity to 'absorb' different preferences for different policy from various political actors. There is an increase in friction and a reduction in the capacity of decision-making because of these institutional characteristics. In addition, the presence of political fragmentation also creates a negative effect on interest representation that reduces the quality of institutional legitimacy. This reduction in legitimacy is because fragmentation can be allowing representatives to be elected by a slim plurality of the population. Also, there are no incentives for a cooperative policymaking because political actors can increase their individual wealth through rent-seeking. These combinations of effects are shown by the dashed line in the graph (Figure 2.3). A democratising democracy (DD) with high political fragmentation will have lower levels of institutional legitimacy and higher costs of decisions in policymaking. Taking WW as reference point of the most efficient point, then, a DD will be less efficient than WW and US based on the number of veto players.

Figure 2.3: Legitimacy and effectiveness in decision-making in a democratisation context



Source: Own elaboration based on [Cox and McCubbins \(2001\)](#), [Buchanan and Tullock \(1962\)](#), [Tsebelis \(1995\)](#) and [Helmke and Levitsky \(2004\)](#).

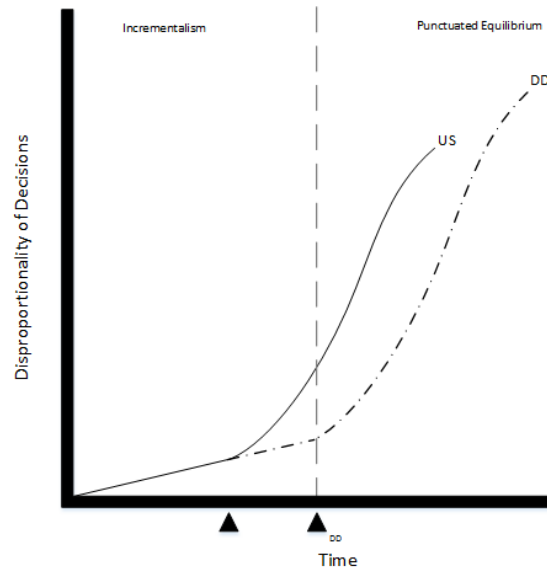
2.6 The dynamics of attention allocation in a developing democracy

The introduction of informal institutions as a mechanism enhancing the presidential capacity for decision-making requires adding a concept of the *informal* veto point in punctuated equilibrium theory. The presence of informal veto points — political coalitions through informal negotiation processes — allows the co-existence of policy stability (incrementalism) mainly associated with political fragmentation and disproportionate change (punctuations) as cooperation is possible. The process produces a pattern of change that combines moments of policy continuity with moments of radical change in policies, similar to the patterns of change exhibit by policymaking in the United States.

Mexico provides an example of a country where there will be moments of both continuity and change characterising a president's agenda. It can be assumed that the agenda will concentrate attention on some issues for long periods of time, while in other moments the agenda will expand to include a greater number of issues. There is a negative feedback process where political disagreement obstructs change to uphold the policy status quo.

The fragmentation of the political system increases political disagreements — friction — and can generate stalemates in political processes. This political fragmentation is argued to create incentives for political actors to try to protect their policy priorities and reduces the opportunity for the president to reach further policy agreement. A president in a system with high fragmentation has the risk of facing political inaction.

Figure 2.4: The disproportionality of presidential decisions in a democratisation context



Source: Own elaboration based on Jones and Baumgartner (2005a); Baumgartner and Jones (1993) and Hong and Sohn (2014), Tsebelis (1995), Helmke and Levitsky (2004) and Hong and Sohn (2014).

Moreover, political inaction can be reinforced if there are incentives for political actors to increase their individual wealth by protecting the status quo. This process of negative feedback gridlocks the possibility of policy changes.

By contrast, a process of positive feedback can occur if there is a president with capacity for decision-making. There will be incentives for the president to lean towards generating reform and negotiate policy with other political actors as there are electoral incentives to be responsive. Moreover, this is possible if an issue acquires a character of urgency allowing it to move interests in the direction of policy change and if there is a change in the ideas regarding particular solutions that dominates the process of decisions of the issue at stake.

Figure 2.4 represents an hypothetical dynamic of both an incremental pattern of policy change (near stasis) and a point in time when there is the presence of a policy punctuation. It hypothesises that the solid line is a representation of this dual process of response for the U.S. presidential system (US) and the dot-dashed line displays the process for a developing democracy (DD), a political system in a process of democratisation.

There are higher costs of decisions — that is, more institutional friction — in DDs that prolong a policy response because decision-making is more inefficient than in US. There are incentives that favour continuity because political actors support policy continuity as they avoid political cooperation because they can increase their individual wealth through rent-seeking. Thus, continuity patterns of policy change (incrementalism) prolong the response in time as the dot-dashed line shows for a DD. Yet, Figure 2.4 also

shows a moment in time — \blacktriangle_{DD} — when policy continuity is interrupted by a large and rapid shift. The institutional strength of the U.S. political system (line named ‘US’) shows a capacity to produce policy change sooner in time — \blacktriangle . This is consistent with the conclusion drawn from Figure 2.3 from the previous section (Section 2.5). The U.S. presidential policy process has greater legitimacy and capacity for decision-making if compared to a democratisation setting where institutional structure produces higher decision costs.

2.7 Presidential agendas

This section presents a definition of agendas and the main object of study of this thesis: issue attention. In this study issue-attention is understood as the relative amount of time a political actor — i.e. the president — spends discussing and considering a particular policy issue. The chapter presents different theoretical explanations regarding how policy issues might enter the president’s agenda. From these theories, the chapter develops three hypotheses about presidents’ agendas and policy change. These hypotheses will be tested in the remainder of this thesis.

2.7.1 A definition of presidential agenda

This thesis aims to identify how the presidential attention is distributed between policy domains and how much this changes over time. The attention given to these policies can remain gradual or undergo radical changes. The agenda-setting literature refers to policy domains that receive governmental attention — including that of the President — as part of the agenda. This section aims to give a detailed definition of the term agenda that is consistent with the literature on agenda-setting. It looks to clarify the object of analysis of this thesis. The explanation given here allows for comparison with other agenda-setting research, particularly with theoretical developments within the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP).²⁰

Cobb and Ross define agendas as “that set of items explicitly up for the active and serious consideration of authoritative decision makers” (1997, pp. 86–87). This consideration of issues requires a process where a political actor or organisations “comes to pay attention to some issues rather than others” (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005a, p. 40) and decides the solutions to policy problems (Kingdon, 1984). This process of agenda-setting narrows these “set of conceivable subjects to the set that actually becomes the focus of attention” (Kingdon, 1984, p. 3). Meanwhile, Light gives a more specific definition for a president’s agendas (1981, p. 1):

²⁰Further reference to the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP): <https://comparativeagendas.net>

The President's agenda is a remarkable list. It is rarely written down. It constantly shifts and evolves. It is often in flux even for the President and the top staff. Items move onto the agenda one day and off the next. Because of its status in the policy process, the President's agenda is the subject of intense conflict.

Paul Light calls this agenda size, to which he indistinctly refers as the amount of issues — the absolute number of issues in the president's agenda — or the amount of attention given to issues. In this literature, the agenda size is called the 'President's must List' (Light, 1999, p. 155).

Although presidents might want to include a large number of issues into their agenda, there is a limitation because of some practicalities, such as having political opposition in Congress and the inability of government bureaucracy to fulfil all of their policy objectives. The policy interests of a president also compete with other interests and policy priorities (see Jones and Baumgartner, 2005a). There is a finite capacity of decision-making — i.e. carrying capacity²¹ — as is it only feasible to deal with a few problems at a time. The president picks topics strategically as there are limited attention and resources.

This selection process results in some problems being overlooked while issues compete for attention as the president tries to mobilise support around these particular issues (see Schattschneider, 1960). Therefore, if presidents assemble support around certain issues, it is because this is politically appealing and beneficial for them. These topics receive attention and become issues for political discussion (Boydston et al., 2013a). The definition of social problems and policy solutions, thus, is the substance of presidential politics (see Baumgartner and Jones, 2015; Bertelli and John, 2013; Larsen-Price, 2012, p. 1).

It is unlikely that presidents will allocate the same amount of attention to every policy issue. Policy issues compete for a portion of the attention of the agenda's capacity. Some authors refer to attention in the agenda as 'diversity' (Jennings et al., 2011b, p. 1004). This diversity of the agenda relates to the dispersion of attention across policy issues. An equal spread of attention means that diversity will be at its highest level, contrasted with a situation where attention is focused on one or two issues, which means that diversity will be at its lowest level. A preference for incremental decision-making might bias agenda diversity towards keeping the status quo. The agenda will only be considered to experience a change in its composition whenever those dominant issues lose some attention on the agenda and receive equal attention to other issues (Jennings et al., 2011b).

²¹Jones and Baumgartner define carrying capacity as the maximum amount of issues that an institutional agenda (i.e. presidential speeches, budgetary expenditures, law and bill, etc.) can contain (2004, p. 19).

Agenda definition is a complex process that requires discussing ideas, allocating resources and exerting power (see [Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake, 2005](#)). The definition of agenda is not intended to reduce policy to a simple ‘list of issues’.²² According to [Light \(1999\)](#), any social problem relates to broad general topics that may or may not become part of presidential agendas. This thesis considers agendas as the set of policy issues a president is giving attention to in a moment in time — namely those issues a president ‘talks about’ and become part of the agenda — and moreover this attention is also considered to be distributed across different policy issues. The analysis will be focused on defining characteristics of the current policy agenda.

2.7.2 Political motivation and presidential agendas

The president will have different motivations for selecting policy issues. The advantage of supporting particular issues may derive from a number of personal, partisan, ideological or contextual sources (i.e. elections) (see [Boydston et al., 2013b](#), p. 256). There are going to be some issues that the political environment will elevate on the president’s agenda. But generally, the president will choose to act by having a political opportunity. A president assesses whether the context favours particular political interests when trying to advocate for reform and match political success to particular goals.

One of the primary sources of political advantage stems from the idea that political parties have a reputation for handling policy issues well and therefore ‘own’ some particular topics (see [Egan, 2013](#); [Holian, 2004](#); [Budge and Farlie, 1983](#)). This might be a good indicator of presidents’ policy preferences. On some occasions, it may be that the president will be able to generate changes in the agenda by supporting topics the incumbent party owns.

Another factor may influence changes in policy agendas is electoral motive. In a democratic context, elections are an incentive to be responsive to the electorate and to define presidential goals. Therefore, elections might create incentives for governments to follow citizens’ policy priorities to ward off competition for those votes (see [Hobolt and Klemmensen, 2008](#), p. 309). This electoral mechanism, even when not very strong (i.e. if there are problems with clientelism and vote buying), is still present in democratisation settings. For the Mexican case, [Domínguez \(2015\)](#) argues that even without the possibility of re-election, voters use electoral rewards and punishments to influence the behaviour of politicians. The electorate can always vote out from government a party

²²As this thesis develops its analysis and theory, it will refer to the concept of policy attention and priorities indistinctly. The term ‘issues’ can be defined in the form of political promises or initiatives that guide the actions of presidents and their staff. Meanwhile, the term priorities refers to more narrow interests. These include final proposals of solutions to problems ([Light, 1999](#)). An aim of the agenda-setting approach and the CAP coding scheme is, in fact, to identify what actors pay attention to and ‘talk about’. This is about examining agendas, which involves a consideration of what political actors — i.e. the president — and institutions discuss. In this thesis, both terms, policy attention and priorities, refer to what a president concentrates attention on.

and vote for the opposition instead (Cleary, 2010, 2007). The president might need to be responsive to the incumbent party as, even though the president is not seeking re-election, the incumbent party wishes to remain in power for more than one term. Thus, presidents have electoral motivations to support particular policy topics and prioritise some issues over others.

The judgment of history and historical recognition is also an incentive for presidents to define their policy agendas (Light, 1999). A key motivation is to consider whether they will be compared in the future with other relevant political actors in history. There may be no president that does not want to be remembered as a 'great president'. A particular path to greatness may be also motivating Latin American presidents in the formulation of their policy agendas. For example, some presidents in Mexico have written memoirs or books highlight the vision they have for the development of the nation. In Mexico, many presidents want to attach their names to a particular policy. The competitive electoral processes create greater incentives to aim for historical legacy (see Domínguez, 2004b). For example, presidents and candidates from Acción Nacional (PAN) have strongly emphasised the importance of erasing the legacy of previous PRI presidents and building a legacy with respect to democracy and political change. Thus, a president can have historical legacy motivations to support particular policy topics more than others.

Similarly, there are also programmatic incentives for presidents when defining their policy agendas. They might need to adjust their policy priorities by following an overall schedule of ongoing public programmes. Also, the president might select some policies based on his personal beliefs, regardless of changes in public opinion, pressures from the media, congressional hostility or bureaucratic resistance (Light, 1999).²³ The president might feel a moral responsibility to focus on these issues. Finally, some policy goals might become priorities in response to particular events or crises (see Birkland, 1997). Issue salience might have a positive relationship with assessments of a president's performance and public perceptions, which create extra positive opportunities for the president to remain as a relevant political actor and his party to win further elections (see Edwards et al., 1995). Thus, there are incentives to respond to issues that are salient.

The president will need to evaluate the political context to move issues onto the agenda. Having clear priorities help the president and his staff to manage his political resources. The value of setting priorities relies upon creating a political basis that guides decision-making and action. It also helps the president to indicate a list of priorities to Congress, as Congress could shift attention to other business. Congress also needs to make choices concerning the congressional agenda (Larsen-Price, 2012). It requires some signals from the president regarding what comes first and which issues can wait (Light, 1999).

²³Light (1999) defines good policy as a policy that a president feels a moral obligation to act on and find a policy solution.

2.7.3 The presidential agenda and punctuated equilibrium theory

As a starting point, it must be understood that in the usual course of events, policy is unlikely to move from equilibrium. To consider whether an agenda has been successful or not, one could simply argue that a successful agenda is one that at least was able to produce a change in something that has some social importance. A president without the capacity to produce cooperation for dealing with a relevant social problem, therefore, indicates that the agenda will hold the status quo. An unfavourable situation that can happen to a president the demonstration of having a desire to change something and not being able to do it. Similarly, a president being forced to maintain a policy they do not agree with, which possibly is closely associated with the previous administration, can represent political failure.

The particular approach to understanding policy — the agenda-setting approach — provides means for analysing issue-attention and policymaking. It has been argued in Section 2.6 that most of an agendas' policy changes will happen because of an accommodation of a common interest for similar policy priorities. These mechanisms most frequently occur within the context of informal institutions — formation of coalitions through informal negotiation — and help the president and Congress to overcome friction that results from having no incentives for political cooperation. The theoretical framework suggests that if the president is unable to accommodate different interests to support similar policy priorities, the presidential agenda is less likely to be subject to changes. The mechanism is the formation of political coalitions.

The formation of coalitions is defined as a feedback process that generates policy change. Some elements are needed to increase the likelihood for the formation of coalitions between Congress and the president to occur (see [Chaisty et al., 2014](#); [Raile et al., 2011](#); [Del Tronco, 2009](#)). A key factor for building coalitions is to have a perception or sense of urgency. The president pays more considerable attention to problems that require immediate attention. The perception of crisis will usually make the president and staff decide on policy change quickly. This urgency relates to the concept of 'policy image' that this chapter explained before (see Section 2.2). The president can have incentives to change the tone of the debate on particular issue areas. Having shared ideas about the policy at stake among all political actors engaging in these policy exchanges will help to raise this sense of urgency.

Often, political cooperation will be possible through informal structures where the exchange of public funds plays an essential part in negotiation processes (see [Chaisty et al., 2014](#), p. 76). This is an exchange of political benefits and resources (i.e. clientelism and

Table 2.1: Elements of informal coalitions for policy changes

Elements	Description
A sense of urgency	Both the president and Congress match their preference to a social problem and policy solution. The circumstances make all relevant political actors see an urgent necessity to deliver reform. A perception of a latent crisis pushes the president and Congress to pass reforms.
A shared policy rhetoric	Setting a common idea that helps to frame a problem in an understandable definition for both Congress and the president. This idea refers to the policy image; in other words, the form a policy issue is understood by both the President and Congress.
Exchange of public funds	There are clear relationships of patronage and clientelistic exchanges of public funds. These give the informal character to these coalitions.
Policy entrepreneurship	The President evaluates the political context and when a ‘window of opportunity’ is opened, a policy change is likely to happen.

Source: Own elaboration

patronage). The president often has access to resources only available to the president. The president has access to ‘coalitions goods’²⁴ and ‘pork’,²⁵ by having access to budgetary resources and office positions in the bureaucracy [Chaisty et al. \(2014\)](#); [Raile et al. \(2011\)](#). The president has enough resources to exchange for political support (i.e. cabinet nominations, the definition of budgets proposals, the definition of programmes, implementation of public funds, etc.). The presence of relationships of patronage and clientelistic exchanges of public funds explain much of the informality behind the formation of these political coalitions.

Also, presidential *entrepreneurship*²⁶ is a crucial element for policy change, particularly if urgency is present, political benefits are clear and a standard rhetoric — language — or idea about solutions and alternatives is shared between the president and Congress. The president’s ability to set priorities in these moments is key, as the president can put

²⁴The president can secure support by allocating cabinet and legislative portfolios. Coalition goods refer to the offer of seats in government or representative positions.

²⁵The appropriation of public spending to particular projects to provide economic and political resources to individuals for increasing their individual wealth is usually called *pork barrel* (see [Wong, 2017](#); [Hilgers, 2008](#); [Cadot et al., 2006](#); [Costa i Font et al., 2003](#)).

²⁶A policy entrepreneur is a political actor who takes advantages of opportunities to introduce new ideas and uses his knowledge to generate policies for furthering his individual policy ends ([Roberts and King, 1991](#); [Kingdon, 1984](#)).

some pressure on the agenda by ‘talking about’ these issues. A ‘window of opportunity’ is opened and the president is able to introduce new issues in presidential agendas (see [Kingdon, 1984](#)). The four elements behind this informal mechanism of punctuations are shown in Table 2.1.

Following this framework, there are expectations that there will be evidence of these elements in democratisation contexts in general and for the Mexican case in particular. This supports the argument regarding the president acting strategically when defining his agenda, making presidents proactive political actors as they use some institutional tools to increase the possibility of reform (see [Cox and Morgenstern, 2001](#)).

Section 2.4 highlights the possibility of applying punctuated equilibrium theory to the understanding of policy change in a democratisation context — weakly institutionalised contexts. This section explained the mechanism behind this theory, whereby a lack of political cooperation, highly associated with fragmentation, generates a negative friction of change. The formation of coalitions leads to a process that allows cooperation for policy change and thus generates a positive friction. There will be evidence of punctuated equilibrium theory if the patterns of presidential policy attention exhibit both long periods of policy continuity (incrementalism) interrupted with radical moments of change (punctuations). Therefore, for understanding the nature of presidential policy agendas in a democratisation context this framework suggest testing for the following hypothesis:

Punctuated Equilibrium Agenda Hypothesis (H1): The dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit both incremental patterns of change and abrupt change (punctuations).

2.7.4 The president’s agenda and policy instability

This section presents an alternative hypothesis that suggests that the political system gives institutional powers to the president, which gives them the capacity to deliver policy change. This viewpoint suggests that presidential policy agendas experience continuous instability in the definition of policies.

In the literature on presidents’ agendas in the U.S., Light’s (1999) work emphasises the instability of presidential agendas. For [Light \(1999\)](#) the decision context is always complex and each president needs to assess whether or not to include issues in the policy agenda.

In addition, the concept of presidential political capital — that [Light \(1999\)](#) introduces — has been a key factor in explaining the characteristics of the president’s agenda. According to [Light \(1999\)](#) *presidential political capital* is the driver of the plans of presidents and governments. The chief element of presidential political capital is having party support, favourable public opinion and patronage ([Light, 1999](#), p. 56). [Light \(1999](#), pp. 122;126) argues that presidents with Congressional and public support will

embark on large and new policy programmes. It is evident that public support may not be able to develop significant gains for presidential agendas. However, a lack of political support and approval can always hurt the president (Edwards, 1997). The fact that a president has support may be taken as something that provides some political advantage, and that should help the president weaken opposition to his policy (see Green and Jennings, 2017; Eshbaugh-Soha and Peake, 2005). In some occasions, particular public support can move a bargaining position to confrontational action by ‘going public’ (Kernell, 2006). Neustadt (1991, 1960) considers that the president has already a bargaining power inherent in the job but the president’s power will also be the product of his own public support, reputation and prestige. In general, presidents will introduce issues onto the agenda when they have enough political capital, thus generating some volatility in presidential policy agendas.

Light (1999) notes that presidents are more likely to enact policy at the beginning of the administration as their capacity to influence decisions and political resources declines over time. There is a short period that produces a space of opportunity early in office; this is the president’s honeymoon. By the end of the first year, positive expectations about an administration and leadership might start to drop, which creates incentives for the president to act quickly. Presidents also need to be accountable and responsive to the electorate as the end of their term draws near and an election looms. Some presidents might want to stay politically active or support their parties to remain longer in power. Timing is critical because agendas might need to adapt to pressures generated by the economic and political environment as well as other external factors (Wood, 2007; Edwards and Wood, 1999; Light, 1981). A president will try to produce change as early in the administration as possible, generating instability in the presidential agenda in the case of being successful.

The relevant idea in Light’s (1999) argument is that presidential policy agendas experience instability because of a constant assessment of the relevance of including some issues in the policy agenda instead of others. The context constantly affects how issues move on and off policy agendas and this makes them remain on the agenda for short periods of time. Therefore, presidential policy agendas often exhibit great policy instability. From administration to administration, presidents’ agendas will, thus, exhibit continuous adjustments. By considering that agendas constantly experience changes, this framework proposes to test the following hypothesis:

Unstable Agendas Hypothesis (H2): The dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit repeatedly abrupt and radical change.

The instability of presidential agendas can be exacerbated in weakly institutionalised

democratic contexts because of the possible presence of a ‘personalistic’²⁷ style of presidential politics. This personalistic type of politics is predominant if presidents’ actions depart from more partisan politics and gain support because of a charismatic style of politics based on his own personal qualities. In this view, agenda instability can result from a president having the constitutional and sometimes less institutionalised powers than necessary for an independent action, which reduces any incentive for political cooperation (see [Shugart and Carey, 1992](#)). There is an autocratic character of decision-making that is a manifestation of a capacity to override constitutional checks. The president is able to freely re-prioritise issues within presidential policy agendas. This assumption suggests that some autocratic elements in presidential policymaking are still in place even after a political system has moved into a process of democratisation.

[O’Donnell \(1994\)](#) explains that some democracies point towards a path of being ‘delegative democracies’ and never developed strong patterns of representation. [O’Donnell \(1994\)](#) argues that a delegative democracy is aligned with a democratic tradition but is less liberal than a representative democracy. Also, political leaders usually rely on technocratic solutions to social problems ([O’Donnell, 1994](#), p. 62). There is a technocratic belief that politics is not necessary to agree on policy with other actors. For technocrats, a ‘rational’ policy is technically correct, but not necessarily politically correct ([Domínguez, 1997](#)). In a ‘delegative democracy’, “the president and his most trusted advisers are the alpha and the omega of politics” ([O’Donnell, 1994](#), p. 60). In this case, “after the elections, voters/delegators are expected to become a passive but cheering audience of what the president does” ([O’Donnell, 1994](#), p. 60). Most of the agenda-setting power of government relies on the elected president. [Domínguez \(1997\)](#) argues that presidents might prefer to rule by decree and bypass congressional action to avoid political dispute.

A common reaction against Congress is that the president sidesteps and disempowers the legislative process. A president can exercise some ‘meta-constitutional’²⁸ powers to act at the margins of the constitutions to reduce horizontal accountability — i.e. neutralize the powers of the Supreme Court and Congress — and to use individual political power to act by decree (see [Pereira et al., 2008](#); [Negretto, 2004](#); [Reich, 2002](#)). This style of presidential governance allows a president to arbitrarily create policy by bypassing the Congress. Therefore, it is possible to expect that presidential agendas will show substantial degrees of instability in their patterns of policy prioritisation.

²⁷[Weyland and Weyland \(2002\)](#) consider a personalistic leader as an individual who exercises government power based on direct and not institutionalised popular support. [Philip and Panizza \(2013\)](#) look at presidential systems in Latin America and observe that presidential personalistic politics manifested when the president is seen as being responsible for the nation’s allocation of public resources and policymaking. See also [Vanden and Prevost \(2006\)](#).

²⁸According to [Tusaleu \(2016, p. 528\)](#) a president that assumes meta-constitutional powers faces a contest with “very limited horizontal accountability checks, and where political parties remain under-institutionalized.” For further reference see also [Alvarez Tovar \(2013\)](#), [Díez \(2012\)](#), [Gonzalez et al. \(2005\)](#) and [Carpizo \(1978\)](#).

The policy power concentrates in the president's authority, and it is not distributed through a network of autonomous institutions and organisations that necessarily needs to come to agreement for policymaking. In a comparison with Table 2.1, it is possible to suggest, thus, that there are no incentives for the president to generate reform and negotiate policy with other political actors, a sense of urgency is not necessarily relevant for policy change as institutional conditions reduces responsiveness. In addition, is possible that a common idea will dominate debates in favour of keeping the status quo.

2.7.5 Presidential resources and gradual policy change

The framework now moves to consider another alternative explanation of policy change (or a lack of it). A feasible explanation is that the president's agenda will displace stability rather than continuous change. A frame of reference in the literature is that inter-institutional deadlocks, resulting from a lack of support in Congress, reduce the ability of a president to generate policies (see Linz, 1990). An oppositional majority can harass a minority president by blocking relevant policy initiatives. If the support for policy status quo is strong, there will be a decrease in the prospects for change in the presidential agenda accordingly. This approach considers the possibility of finding excessive continuity in presidential policy agendas. The argument is that political actors sustain an interest in keeping the policy status quo.

In the weakly institutionalised contexts that characterised some Latin American democracies, a political stalemate can produce extremely stable political agendas. There are no constitutional tools in these presidential systems to always avert government gridlock (i.e. dissolution of the parliament and votes of no confidence). If, additionally, these systems face increasing fragmentation this will increase the difficulty in reaching political agreements (Mainwaring, 1993).

In various countries in Latin America, presidents are increasingly governing with minority support in Congress (Cheibub, 2002). For example, it has been argued that Mexican presidents increasingly face political stalemate with the end of the single-party regime in the late 1990s (Rubio, 2004, 1998). This is also the case for the Chilean political system after the end of the military regime (in the early 1990s) (Waylen, 2016; Siavelis, 2016, 2006; Carey, 2002). Therefore, there is the possibility of suggesting whether presidents are facing political paralysis and if there could be governability problems that affect decision processes and agenda-setting. The inability of some presidents to deliver policy solutions and reform because of political gridlock can impact policy agendas by reducing the likelihood of change. In that sense this framework presents the following hypothesis regarding policy change and attention in presidential agendas:

Stable Agendas Hypothesis (H3): The dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit stable patterns of change.

By comparing with Table 2.1 this viewpoint suggests that often there are no incentives for political actors to create policy agreements and negotiate policy with other political actors as rent-seeking incentives dominate decision processes. Additionally a sense of urgency is not important as responsiveness is inefficient and it is possible that different discourses dominate debates as each political actor aims to increase their individual wealth by getting economic and political benefits. These conditions will greatly favour a situation that supports the equilibrium of policy agendas.

By studying the U.S. presidential system, Jones (1994) contends that presidential agendas are highly stable and resist change. The president's agenda is predisposed to address certain issues and policies, particularly those coming from ongoing governmental activities and policy programmes. According to Jones's (1994) view, presidents rarely alter their agendas during their terms in office. It is very likely that presidents will prefer to work on those issues an executive institutional structure and bureaucracy is already working on. It is costly to change policy as ongoing governmental activities involve policy commitments and building supporting coalitions that are hard to bring to an end. In addition, generating new policy is costly as it requires investing extra resources to close knowledge and experience gaps. It is less costly for governments to give continuity to current ongoing activities and pursue gradual policy changes in those activities. There is a high possibility that the U.S. president will face a political stalemate in Congress, particularly under increasingly divided governments. As a result, there will be a tendency for presidential agendas to favour the policy status quo. A similar logic could be operating in Mexican presidential policy agendas.

2.8 Discussion and conclusion

This framework sets the theoretical basis for answering questions like: How do presidents prioritise issues? What causes a policy to change in presidential agendas? As this was of particular interest, this thesis aims to answer the question: *Does the general distribution of attention in presidential policy exhibit patterns of continuity and change?* The general expectation following punctuated equilibrium theory in agenda-setting literature is that policy prioritisation is bounded and encounters friction that pushes decision-making towards favouring continuity. However, if this friction is overcome, the process of policymaking will generate radical changes in policy agendas.

For the study of presidential agendas, the concept of equilibrium is implicit in the lack of response by the president, whereas change can be associated with political action and a positive feedback process. If a response is low (near stasis), then it is argued that policy attention changes are going to be marginal and not radical. However, if there is a large response (punctuations), this shows the presence of positive feedback process that produces changes in presidential policy agendas.

The primary aim of this chapter was to identify processes explaining negative and positive friction behind the policy's punctuated equilibrium in a democratisation context. These processes are explained by the formation of informal coalitions where there is an accommodation of interests for similar policy priorities. According to Tsebelis (1995) if the number of veto players increases in the policymaking process this will increase the costs and affect the capacity of decision-making — or institutional friction in Baumgartner and Jones's terms. Having political fragmentation to such a degree generates political inaction from presidents as they are blocked from producing policy change. However, as the literature also argues, there are some institutional structures that might reduce this friction by promoting cooperation among political actors. The ability of the president to reach agreement and cooperation in policymaking will be vital for agenda-setting.

This thesis built arguments on punctuated equilibrium in presidential agendas by relying on the existing academic work on coalition formation, informal institutions and veto players. Chapter 3 introduces the case of Mexico and the possibility of studying presidential policy agendas and, by analysing the literature on Mexican politics, it suggests the feasibility of testing the hypotheses that were developed in this framework.

In the formation of political coalitions a presence of a sense of urgency and a common idea about the policy at stake will drive the possibility of policy agreements. In addition, the president needs to develop policy entrepreneurship so as to be able to move political discussions into shared policy priorities. An exchange of public funds for political support also needs to be present, which creates a clientelistic incentive for political cooperation between the president and the opposition. The analysis needs to provide evidence that this process of coalition formation produces patterns of presidential policymaking similar to 'punctuated equilibrium' patterns of change.

The presence of *Punctuated Equilibrium Agenda Hypothesis* (**H1**) in presidential policy agendas suggests that *the dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit both incremental patterns of change and abrupt change (punctuations)*. The president starts office by adopting the public policies of the outgoing president. In general, there is a tendency to favour the continuity of policies. However, if the new president has enough political support, it is possible that actors will generate processes that generate change in particular policy issues. A move from policy equilibrium to shifts in policy attention followed by a move back to equilibrium is believed to be consistent with agenda-setting literature and punctuated equilibrium theory.

There are alternative hypotheses that were outlined to explain changes in presidents' agendas. One assumption favours the understanding of a presidential policymaking as a process generating unstable agendas. This might be associated with a political system that promotes a strong personalistic style of presidential politics and limited horizontal accountability. It suggests that presidents have few or no incentives to reach policy cooperation with other political actors and agenda-setting by decree dominates presidential

policymaking. The acceptance of this claim provides support to the hypothesis regarding patterns of policy priorities in presidential agendas as continuously instability. In this case, the thesis should show evidence to support the *Unstable Agendas Hypothesis* (**H2**) that means that *the dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit repeatedly abrupt and radical change*. This will be a relevant finding that suggests that even after democratisation process some autocratic forms of policymaking are still in place.

In contrast, the *Stable Agendas Hypothesis* (**H3**), states that *the dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit stable patterns of change*. If this hypothesis is proven significant, this will suggest that presidential agendas are in a long-term equilibrium. This will be a relevant finding as it could support an argument regarding the incapacity of presidents to generate policy changes. In addition it could provide support for viewpoints regarding presidents' inability of decision-making as something problematic for democratic governability. It will be contributing to approaches analysing the structural problems of presidentialism ([Linz, 1990](#)).

The analysis will investigate the presence of punctuated equilibrium (**H1**), that is the (*Punctuated Equilibrium Agenda Hypothesis*), and coalition formation as a mechanism supporting positive friction that changes policy (i.e. punctuations). A lack of confirmation of these attention patterns then implies that either **H2** the *Unstable Agendas Hypothesis* or **H3** the *Stable Agendas Hypothesis* are applicable.

Chapter 3

The president, the political system and presidential policy in Mexico

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an outline of how the Mexican political system and the presidency functions. It presents an introduction on how the literature has studied the Mexican president. The chapter is then divided into two sections. The first section presents a description of presidential policymaking and its transformation after democratisation in Mexico. The second section presents different arguments regarding the understanding of policy continuity and policy shifts in presidential policymaking in Mexico and the possibility of testing the hypotheses that were introduced in Chapter 2.

The Mexican political system has been characterised as having regime stability in the past. The Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI)¹ was first founded in 1929 with the aim of institutionalising politics after the end of the Mexican Revolution (1920). The president, as head of state, concentrated power and distributed it through different organisations that were close to the official party. This centralisation of power gave birth to the *Presidencialismo Mexicano*. This regime was characterised as having a pattern of governance with corporatist representation, a structure that reduced political competition and leadership that promoted hierarchical policymaking. This regime stayed in power for over seven decades, from 1929 to 2000.

The literature observes that during Mexican authoritarianism, and even after the end of the single-party regime, presidents had few barriers to their decisions and were able

¹The party was first founded as Partido Nacional Revolucionario (National Revolutionary Party, PNR) and later as Partido de la Revolucion Mexicana (Party of the Mexican Revolution, PRM).

to promote the regime's preferred policies. Mexican scholars describe the structure and efficient process of autocratic politics as able to deliver policy change (Cordera, 2015; Williams, 2002; Camp, 1989; Reyna, 1977; Smith, 1977). Perhaps, no other period of time in Mexican history better reflects a capacity for policymaking than the Mexican Miracle² (1940–1970) and the economic and political liberalisation of the 1980s. The former refers to the economic policy that aimed to protect domestic production sectors from external competition (Cordera, 2015; Foley, 1995). The latter was the radical reorientation of development strategies away from state controls³ (Cordera, 2015; Edwards, 2003; Morton, 2003; Teichman, 1996; Foley, 1995). Autocratic forms of policymaking emerged from presidential powers of decision-making that created incentives for presidents to exercise independent policymaking.

A patronage network where political loyalty was rewarded with government positions was set through a corporatist structure. The regime continuity resulted from the capacity of presidents to organise these loyalty-based networks. The fact that it was possible to hold regular elections gave some variation to government even under the same party regime.⁴ Thus, some degree of 'pluralism' was present in the political system (Williams, 2002). In this process, different political groups legitimised the single-party regime by supporting a nomination because they hoped that in the future leaders from their own group could become the future president. However, it was not until the 1990s that the end of the single-party regime brought full pluralism in Mexico.

The victory of the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) in the 2000 presidential election indicated the start of the democratisation process in the Mexican political system. The Legislative and Executive branch became relevant actors consolidating a separation of powers. These new conditions of the political system have slowed the ability of Mexican presidents to set their own agenda when compared with the capacity of decision-making they had under authoritarianism. This has raised arguments concerning the rise of political disagreements and gridlock in democratisation politics in Mexico (Alvarez Tovar, 2013; Paz, 2005; Domínguez, 2004a). The literature shows that the Mexican president is no longer an actor with absolute control over the nation's political decisions and capacity of independent policymaking (Camp, 1999). The loss of a majority in Congress weakened the Mexican presidency and increased political fragmentation. As this chapter explains

²The Mexican Miracle refers to a period of political and economic development in Mexico after World War II. This period was characterised by a reduction of political turmoil and the creation of a single dominant party system. In terms of economic policy, it was characterised by the nationalisation of oil, land and some sectors of the transport industry. An import-substitution development model protected an internal common market and introduced protective tariffs, giving sustained fiscal balance and growth to the Mexican economy for three decades (Cuadra-Montiel, 2016; Careaga and Weingast, 2012; Baer, 1972).

³Economic and political crises particularly at the end of the 1980s cast doubt regarding the impact of policies on economic and political liberalisation of the 1980s (Shirk, 2005).

⁴There have always been presidential elections every six years. The re-election of any electoral position was not possible including that of the president. In Mexico re-election is possible for local congresses and mayors from 2018 and it will be possible for the Assembly and Senate from 2021.

there are observations suggesting that there has been a move from a centralisation of decisions to decentralisation of policymaking.

To provide context for presidential policymaking in Mexico, section 3.3 presents a review concerning the evolution of presidential policymaking from an authoritarian to a democratic regime. It examines the institutional changes in presidential policymaking and decision-making because of democratisation.

Section 3.4.1 presents arguments regarding the autocratic character of presidential policymaking. It suggests that may still be a degree of *presidencialismo* that allows for presidential policymaking that is autocratic. As some of the literature indicates autocratic powers for agenda-setting have often allowed the Mexican president to deliver shocks to the political systems. This can be a source of continuous instability in presidential policy agendas. Section 3.4.2 presents a different argument regarding presidential policymaking as inherently leading to continuity in presidential policy agendas because presidents fail to advance their initiatives. A different view considers that this was even the case for presidential policymaking under the single-party regime (Gargarella, 2013; Philip, 1992; Smith, 1977; Purcell, 1975; Glade and Anderson, 1963; Vernon, 1963). Section 3.4.3 explains that there has been a devolution of power from the Executive to the other branches. The literature shows that the Mexican president relies on strategic actions for making the policy agenda more likely to receive congressional approval and enactment. It is possible that presidential decision processes sometimes express support for continuity of policies in presidential policy agendas and there are moments where reform is feasible.

3.2 The study of the Mexican president and presidential policymaking

The study of the president has been part of academic literature regarding Mexican politics. However, to produce new literature it is relevant to move studies from examining the characteristics of political systems to study presidential policymaking. The generation of new insights requires the use of innovative research design and methodologies to examine presidential policymaking in Mexico. These designs can facilitate the analysis and understanding of presidential priorities which develop into policy agendas as well as reveal the factors that affect policymaking.

Mexican political scholarship has examined different periods of the presidency and historical developments of political institutions. Overall, from this literature, it is clear that the president is a central feature for understanding the working of the political system. By way of example, Morton (2013) examines the relationship between the president and the formation of the Mexican state. Meanwhile, Díez (2006) includes an analysis on

the evolution of constitutional powers of the presidency and concludes that the authority of the presidency emanates from non-institutionalised structures (i.e. discretionary allocation of public resources, presidential control of nominations for bureaucracy positions, informal negotiations with members of Congress). Similarly, [De Lomnitz et al. \(2010\)](#) identify an informal political source of authority in the Mexican presidency. The literature also focuses on describing the democratic evolution of Mexican political institutions including the presidency. [Morris \(1995\)](#) studies the democratic transition and investigates the relevance of building political agreement between the president and the political opposition for the development of democracy in Mexico. Meanwhile, [Selee and Peschard \(2010\)](#) describe the presidency as a strong political institution that is the centre of authority in national politics, concluding that challenges in balancing a separation of powers persist even after the end of the single-party regime. However, regardless of the recognition of the importance of the president and the presidency in understanding the Mexican political system, not many have looked at the president and the president's behaviour as an individual entity of study.

From a methodological perspective, literature has focused on understanding the grand vision of presidents and particular historical moments. As a result, some research approaches have dominated the study of the Mexican presidency. There is a notion that studies examining the presidency have mainly been designed by following case studies of particular policies and by focusing on single presidential administrations. The study of the presidency has tended to favour a biographical and historical analysis, with case studies and interviews with elites the preferred research methodology. For example, [Camp \(2002\)](#) examines Mexican presidentialism through studies on Mexican political elites and leadership through elite interviewing. Meanwhile, behavioural studies scholarship is increasing and gives insight on presidential politics but does not fully consider the study of presidential policymaking. For example, [Romero \(2014\)](#) has ranked the performance of twenty-six Mexican presidencies using data from a survey of experts. Domínguez and Lawson's panel study on votes assesses the impact of presidential campaigns and public opinion on voting ([Domínguez, 2015](#); [Domínguez et al., 2009](#); [Domínguez, 2004b](#)). Other research evaluates the electorate's economic ([Buendía, 1996](#); [Magaloni, 2006](#)) and political ([Gómez Vilchis, 2012c,b,a](#)) perceptions regarding the performance of the presidency. This thesis seeks to use innovative research design and methodologies to examine presidential policymaking and agendas in Mexico in more detail to contribute in this area of research.

There has been some progress in the study of agenda-setting, yet literature can be developed further. For the Mexican case, research understanding presidential agenda-setting has been mostly done by looking to law-making agendas and legislative policymaking ([Nacif, 2006, 2003](#); [Casar, 2002, 2008, 2013, 2016](#)). Authors account for the ability of presidents to be successful in Congress by using roll call votes. In general, findings observe that the more a president finds support in Congress, the greater the probability

of having a successful agenda. This literature looks at the legislative agenda in general but needs further comprehension of the particular issues presidents discuss in Congress. An examination of factors supporting the emergence and development of policy issues, and explanations of the manner in which presidents set their policy priorities, are still needed.

3.3 The Mexican political system and the presidency

This section presents some arguments that scholars have made regarding Mexican politics. The constitutional design of the Mexican presidential system imposes checks and balances, similar to those that the U.S. Constitution imposes on its presidential system (see Valdés-Ugalde, 2012; Fukuyama, 2008). However, these constitutional rules were not enough to prevent actions by any branch from exercising independent power over the other branches and therefore was incapable of setting restrictions to autocratic presidential powers. In the case of Mexico, the figure of the president as the chief executive of the corporatist structure of the state and the official party gave an autocratic character to politics that gave birth to an authoritarian presidency.

The president enjoyed extraordinary political powers based on a set of unwritten norms that allowed the president and ruling party to override institutions (Hernández Chávez, 1994). Schmitter (1974, p. 96) described this decision structure as *presidencialismo*. This structure was founded on the belief that the superiority of a leader, *el Señor Presidente* (Mister President), led to political unity. In early literature Brandenburg (1964) introduces the concepts of the “Revolutionary Family”, the “Family Head” and the “Revolutionary Creed”. Brandenburg explains that (1964, p. 3):

Mexico is ruled by an elite. For the sake of convenience, and to suggest the nature of this leadership group, it will be assigned the label of [...] “Family”. The Revolutionary Family is composed of the men who have run Mexico for over half a century, who have laid the policy-lines of the Revolution, and who today hold effective decision-making power.

The fact that the Mexican president could become the Head of the Family gave the executive capacity to run most of governmental decisions. The president of Mexico headed the political apparatus in his capacity as president and principal leader with absolute control over policy decisions (Brandenburg, 1964, p. 5). The presidency exercised substantial control over policymaking, not only within the Executive branch by controlling the bureaucracy, but also in Congress by surpassing the agenda-setting capacity of the Legislative branch. Therefore, the president is described as the actor dictating every political action that is relevant for the nation.

Cosío Villegas (1974) argues that the political stability of revolutionary Mexico was reached by a political monopoly between an official party and a president with broad political faculties and resources. It was with president Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940) that the political power of government was informally institutionalised into two institutions: the presidency and the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) (Williams, 2002; Philip, 1992; Cosío Villegas, 1974). This organisational structure created a corporatist Mexican state, where political patronage sustained the political power of the presidency.

This corporatist structure of representation and authoritarian presidential governance reduced the incentive for the president to be responsive to political pressures. The authoritarian structure contained political conflict and concentrated political action at the top of the state's structure. The regime could isolate itself from reacting to external political pressures. The corporatist structure blocked internal disputes that could make the regime and the official party vulnerable to the interests of the opposition parties (Langston, 2001, p. 491).

A loyalty-based network connected different individual interests with the political interests of the state. Often government positions were strategically assigned and used as a reward to develop long-term political careers (Edmonds-Poli and Shirk, 2015). Philip (1992) suggests that the strength of the presidential power relied on the president's ability to exercise authority over the governmental structure and the bureaucracy. Similarly, Klesner argues that "clientelism became an essential means of ascent in a system in which political recruitment was dominated from the top by the president" (2006, p. 388). The politicians and bureaucrats did not develop a career based on performance or constituencies' popular support. Members of the chambers were accountable to political sponsors as they usually obtained the position through elections influenced by patronage. This was also the case for other positions in government both at the national and local levels of the bureaucracy. The highest expression of this power of appointing political positions by the president was the capacity of the incumbent president to nominate a successor candidate. This nomination, or *el dedazo* (finger picking) as it is known in Mexican politics, gave continuity in power to the party.

The government was able to incorporate interests of different sectors as part of the party platform and corporatist structure of the state. The state promoted the formation of organisations to represent different societal interests within this corporatist structure (i.e. organisation of peasant, workers' unions, etc.) (Durand, 2010). Therefore, the structures were able to reduce interest representation and help to prioritise social control to support regime stability (Klesner, 2006). Padgett (1966) argues that the structure of the party served as an apparatus for organising government support. This political structure diminished "the development in Mexico of real and representative political organizations" (Reyna, 1977, pp. 161–162). As Williams states "classic Mexican corporatism did not facilitate open competition between organized interests nor restrict the state to being

a neutral mediator between competing social groups” (2002, p. 168). The corporatist structure built a mechanism of control to communicate information from the bottom of the society, through local and regional representation and social organisations, to the presidency. This institutional configuration exerted substantial capacity to reduce political conflict and restrict it to the realm of the political elite.

After the end of the single-party regime with the 1997 mid-term congressional election and the 2000 presidential election, Mexico started its process of political democratisation. It became a democracy with competitive party politics in a multiple party configuration. The corporatist state has significantly been eroded with democratisation. The Mexican democracy is one with increasing electoral competition and political consolidation. In addition, the democratic transformation of the Mexican political system has helped to decentralise the political power from the president to other political actors, such as governors or members of Congress.⁵ But the Mexican democracy is still in a process of consolidation (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñan, 2015). Chapman (2012) argues that the state-society relation was changed to one exhibiting ‘transnationalized corporatism’, which refers to plurality in some sectors while others remain under the political control of the state. The Mexican president still sometimes manifests capacity to exercise autocratic forms of political power.

In general as Philip observes, “[t]he power of the Mexican state is gradually reducing and that of certain sections of society increasing” (1992, pp. 178–179). Casar (2016) considers there to have been a shift of powers from the president towards Congress and other political parties. Rubio (1998) argues that the presidency became weak, as there are new ways to challenge it and the government’s authority. It seems that there may be a pattern of decline in the capacity of presidents to independently lead the nation, which for some can be understood as the deterioration of the Mexican presidency (Loaeza, 2006; Schmidt, 1991). These conclusions support the point of view that the Mexican president is an actor that no longer dominates the legislative process and policymaking. The Mexican political system has enhanced democracy and its political institutions, including the presidency, are gradually becoming more democratic (Alvarez Tovar, 2013).

The corporatist structure of the state and the PRI party can no longer claim to represent most of Mexicans’ interests. The structure of the party cannot channel social demands as it did during the single-party regime. The literature also demonstrates how the official party faces an increasing legitimacy problem and how opposition representatives are winning elections particularly at local and regional levels (see Lujambio, 2002).

⁵Presidents Zedillo’s (1994–2000) proclamation of New Federalism in the mid-1990s aimed to transfer authority to the states. In a similar initiative, President Fox supported increasing federalisation of powers (Merchant and Rich, 2003). However, strong economic and political decentralisation of the states is not going to be accomplished quickly. García Sepúlveda (2016) shows that fiscal federalism needs to be strengthened as subnational entities greatly depend on federal funds and lack budgetary sustainability.

In general, there has been great dissatisfaction and concern about the democratic development of the country (Domínguez, 2015). Since the start of the democratisation process, civil society is increasingly playing an important role in influencing government decisions (Philip, 1992). However, as Díez (2006) observes there has been an increasing inequality and deterioration of socioeconomic conditions that are unleashing general social discontent. Yet, as Cleary (2010) argues, electoral competition still has some institutional problems and thus participatory politics explains much of governmental responsiveness. The political representation of societal interests has become more plural nonetheless.

3.4 Presidential policy and agenda characteristics

This section presents possible theoretical explanations concerning the capacity of the Mexican president to change policy agenda. Technocratic policymaking with autocratic tones in a democratic context may explain presidential decision-making (see O'Donnell, 1994). This considers a type of democracy that has difficulties becoming a fully representative democracy. The fact that citizens delegate all policymaking authority to a representative produces policy instability as there is leeway to decide policy on behalf of citizens and accountability usually has weak levels of institutionalisation. The president has substantial political powers to exercise independent agenda-setting power and has no incentives for political cooperation. Therefore, there is a standpoint in the literature regarding presidential policymaking as authoritative, even after the end of the single-party regime in Mexico (1929–2000). A contrasting view, however, suggests that Mexican presidents are increasingly facing a political stalemate. The president cannot decide independently the priorities forming the presidential policy agenda. A rising political fragmentation causes difficulties for presidents to deliver policy change, thus producing policy continuity in presidential policy agendas. Finally, a different viewpoint in the literature also claims that the process of presidential decision-making actually move from moments where changes in agendas remain unchanged to moments when shifts in presidential policy agendas are possible (see Mendez, 2018; Cuadra-Montiel, 2016). The following section will explain each argument. The literature shows that the Mexican president relies on strategic actions during the process of setting the policy agenda.

3.4.1 Presidential agendas and policy instability

There are arguments that the Mexican president has the necessary powers to change the policies going into the policy agenda. Instability in agendas is generated by the president's overriding power to create policy change and the lack of incentives for political cooperation. The president is considered to have enough power to define policy priorities and these priorities are largely aligned with policy priorities of political elites that aim to

protect their individual interests. An ideological unity and consensus politics prevail and are strong in Mexican politics. Thus, the president is often described as having enough power to undertake policy reforms. The concentration of power in the presidency, it is argued, allows the president to quickly and forcefully make changes to re-prioritise programmes and resources. This argument supports an argument suggesting that Mexican presidents have autocratic agenda-setting powers and are able to produce continuous shocks to public policies. Therefore, it is feasible to consider testing a hypothesis on the possibility of continuous instability in presidential policy agendas. This is the *Unstable Agendas Hypothesis* (**H2**) that states that *the dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit repeatedly abrupt and radical change*, which was presented in Chapter 2.

Rubio (1998) observes that Mexican presidents during authoritarianism exploited their extraordinary powers to launch policy reforms that were very ambitious and politically sensitive. For example, by having a majority support in Congress for legitimising the regime, presidents could enact policy for industrial reform during the 1970s and 1980s (see Williams, 2002) and were able to implement the privatisation of banks after the financial crisis in the mid-1990s. For Philip (1992) there was a strong Mexican presidency with an authoritarian power that gave the president an ability to deliver shocks to the system. The concentration of powers allowed the president to enact policy that went from exclusion to populism (Philip, 1992).

Early politics literature considers the Mexican president to have had an intense and active role in the political management of economic growth during the single-party regime. Brandenburg (1964) recognised that Mexico's political system and the president did much to advance social and economic development. However, he was sceptical regarding the success of economic policy as the government promoted a policy for social equality and prosperity mainly by borrowing resources from abroad. These increases in public spending aimed to redress social pressures and mitigate disobedience that was emerging as a result of the changing political environment with Mexico's industrialisation (the 1940s to 1960s). This led to increasing problems with balancing payments and public spending, which drove Mexico to various economic crises particularly during the 1970s and 1980s.

Research has also shown that social policy is an area where presidents had exercised great agenda-setting capacity. For Pardinás (2004) social policy, before the implementation of large programmes of national welfare policy, had a *sexenio*⁶ horizon. The control on social spending helped presidents to exercise political control over social groups and sometimes it supported clientelistic practices to help their individual electoral purposes. This power has not necessarily been reduced with democratisation. There has been a continuous support of these social programmes — like the Oportunidades money-transfer

⁶*Sexenio* refers to the six-year term of the Mexican presidency.

programme⁷ — and sometimes these were just re-branded in their names or implementation processes. For example, since Salinas' administration (1988–1994) much of the welfare resources had been placed in the hands of the presidency (Rubio, 1998). The design of national welfare programmes has given sizeable political power to the president, and social policy is in the hands of the Executive branch. Through large federal budgets, the Mexican president has access to resources and sometimes has discretionary allocation of resources for these social programmes.

Since the end of the 1980s, there has been a technocratic boom in Mexico (see Camp, 2002). Rodríguez Araujo and Scott Fox (2010) observes that the influence of a technocratic model of policymaking has directly impacted presidential decision-making. Domínguez (1997) recognises the influence of technocrats in policymaking⁸ as not just providing an understanding of technical issues but also increasingly considering the nation's politics when designing economic and social policies.⁹ According to this view, the Mexican president and his staff have the political power and technical knowledge to freely decide policy issues (Centeno, 2010). There is a paradigm that the president is the actor that has solutions to all the problems of the nation. In Mexico, the implementation of a technocratic approach to the definition of public policies has been present since the early 1990s.

By following the technocratic paradigm, presidents expect to create a competitive state by supporting economic liberalisation and market-led policies. There is also an interest in supporting and investing in 'human capital'¹⁰ (e.g. education and health policies). Williams mentions that "technocratic policy making also permeated other public realms, including social security, health care, labour relations, and social welfare provision, [...]" (2006b, p. 119). Technocrats, as Smith (1996, p. 253) observes, promote welfare policies as a factor that can unleash political transformations and, in turn, places the foundation for democracy. For Rodríguez Araujo and Scott Fox (2010, pp. 36, 42), the transition of government between the PRI and the Acción Nacional party in the early 2000s meant a continuity and consolidation of the technocratic policy implemented since the early 1990s. These authors question whether there is a need for a change in the technocratic

⁷This is a social welfare programme in Mexico to target poverty by providing cash payments to families. Bolsa Familia in Brazil is a similar welfare programme that bases its design on Oportunidades as a nationwide government social assistance programme.

⁸Technocratism is defined as the use of highly technical knowledge and expertise in policymaking and thus refers to a departure from setting political debates in policymaking. There is a particular preferences for enacting policies on privatisation and market liberalisation (see Rodríguez Araujo and Scott Fox, 2010; Williams, 2006a).

⁹Domínguez (1997) define this type of technocrat as technopols as these actors have a particular preference to produce technical solutions to social problems but also get involved in political debates. Camp (2002, p. 239) defines this type of technocratic policy-maker as political-technocrats.

¹⁰Domínguez (1997, p. 29) observes that in Latin America "[...] technopols have sought not to kill the state but to save it, to force the state to shed its 'fat' but to ensure that the state will be 'fit' to government and to elicit the consent of citizens." Technocrats in Latin America often protect state's structures and welfare provision is part of the definition of technocratic policy. Therefore, Domínguez (1997) argues that these technocrats are not capitalist in the strict sense as they would be considered in the liberal context of the U.S and the United Kingdom.

paradigm following the democratic transition of Mexico. This appraisal challenges arguments regarding the creation of a competitive democratic state in Mexico.

In general, this strand of political literature considers the institutional characteristics of the Mexican political system as creating few incentives for the Mexican president to engage in political cooperation. It describes a political system in which there is a prevalence of consensus politics that enhances the capacity of decision-making by the president. There is no distribution of political power through a network of autonomous institutions and organisations, and the power concentrates in the president's authority. Thus there is no need to come to agreement with other political actors for policymaking.

3.4.2 Presidential policy priorities and policy stability

The previous section discussed one perspective that suggests presidents can exercise substantial agenda-setting powers and thus produce rapid and frequent changes in policy agendas, generating instability in decision processes. This section presents a different view, namely the dynamics of presidents' policy priorities exhibit a preference to prolong continuum. These arguments present the Mexican president as a political actor that faces constant political obstruction when trying to generate reform and major policy adjustments.

The literature argues that the president often faces limitations that prevent the enactment of substantial policy reforms. [Nacif \(2006\)](#) shows that the president has lost the ability to direct policy and that the policy that prevails is dependent on the political position of the incumbent party in Congress. Similarly, [Rubio \(2004\)](#) argues that the president faces a rebellious Congress and has much less agenda-setting power after the end of the single-party regime, which, in his opinion, often leads to political gridlock. Also, governors and local political actors are considered to have increasing political power. This allows them to influence national politics and obstruct presidential policy decisions as well as control regional political and economic resources ([Langston, 2011](#)). In this sense, Romero observes that "[t]he Mexican executive does not have sufficient formal powers to behave as an omnipotent leader" ([2014](#), p. 126). In general, scholarship considers the degree of constraints over presidential powers of policymaking to be greater in democratisation than during the single-party regime.

For example, [Jaime \(2004\)](#) observes that since Salinas's presidency up until Fox's administration, the government's economic policy has prevailed and experienced gradual adjustments. [Jaime \(2004\)](#) argues that the presidents can influence the strategy by defining economic policy in Mexico. However, structural changes require confrontation with strong industrial and group interests. For successful reform in economic policy there is a need to overcome the resistance of these groups and also public opinion. Meanwhile, [González Gómez \(1998\)](#) argues that economic development models did not necessarily

affect major private and political interests in Mexico. Incentives for economic reform are not always available if political actors can get political and economic benefits from the state. Therefore, with regards to economic policy, it may be possible to observe some degree of policy continuity in governments' policy agendas.

However, arguments concerning the stability of presidential decision-making are not necessarily new. Authors have shown that there was some obstruction to presidential policy priorities from powerful elite groups during the hegemonic regime. In that sense, [Cosío Villegas \(1974\)](#) describes the Mexican president as having greater, but not total, political power relative to other political actors (see also [Scott, 1959](#); [Padgett, 1966](#)). Similarly, [Carpizo \(1978\)](#) and [Casar \(2002\)](#) argue that the president faced checks from other political actors in the corporatist structure of the state. [Hernández Chávez \(1994\)](#) argues that the stability of the presidency came from the integration of a diverse range of social organisations, elite groups and the Executive power in the government's structure. In order to sustain political stability, the president needed to negotiate policy implementation with other political actors that were part of the corporatist structure of the state. The president needed to possess the requisite negotiation skills in order to be able to integrate each of the different political interests of all relevant political actors that were part of the corporatist structure of the state. The consideration of particular interests and political concerns of these actors is argued to have created difficulties for presidents to freely enact policy reforms and produced political stalemate.

There are different examples in the literature that characterises the Mexican presidents as having weak policymaking powers. [Smith \(1977\)](#) questions the capacity of the president to set policy agendas by arguing that other competitive elites also dominated certain areas of policymaking during Mexican presidencialismo. [Purcell \(1975\)](#) sheds light on factors generating political disagreement between government actors and the official party during the single-party regime (i.e. disagreement in the implementation of industrial policy and support for particular business communities). There always were some disputes between technocrats, political leaders and policymakers in defining presidential policies ([Glade and Anderson, 1963](#)). The business sector has also been seen as imposing political checks as presidents needed to negotiate agreements on policies to achieve their policy objectives on economic development and growth ([Vernon, 1963](#)). Similarly, [Philip \(1992\)](#) observes limitations in presidential policy agendas resulting from requirements set by international investors and bankers. [Hernández Chávez \(1994\)](#) argues that even though the PRI dominated Congress, there were different political groups and their representation in Congress pushed presidents to be responsive to external interests, particularly those of peasants and workers. This literature accounts for the Mexican president seeking cooperation between the presidency and other political actors.

The review of the literature shows that presidents constantly face constraints in their capacity to decide presidential priorities and generate policy change. By following this viewpoint, in the Mexican case thus it is possible to test for the presence of the *Stable*

Agendas Hypothesis (H3). This states that *the dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit stable patterns of change* due to political gridlock. This argument supports a viewpoint regarding Mexican presidents being a ‘lame-duck’ political actor that struggles with adjusting priorities and enacting reforms. The presidents is often considered to not have enough decision-making capacity to produce relevant changes in governments’ policy agendas.

3.4.3 Presidential agendas and proactive presidents

This section provides an examination of the literature that considers the president to be a proactive political actor. The literature has evolved from considering Mexican presidents as omnipotent actors to characterising them as actors who rely on negotiation strategies to be successful in setting priorities. Those who subscribe to this viewpoint oppose those arguments that present presidents as autocratic actors able individually to decide adjustments to policy programmes and public resources. It also departs from the literature that considers presidential policymaking as a process facing continuous political stalemate and limitations for producing substantial reforms.

Rubio (1998) highlights that for decades the presidency was the centrepiece of Mexican politics. In further work, Rubio observes that “[t]he presidency used the PRI to advance its goals, the foremost of which was to maintain control and discipline over organizations, regions, or individuals” (2004, p. 19). The president exercised substantial power by using the institutional structure of the PRI party. Williams (2002) argues that the presidents dominated legislative decisions and the courts, and political representation was not through Congress, but through a corporatist structure. However, the election of 2000 and Vicente Fox (2000–2006) reaching presidential office — from opposition Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) — raised an expectation of increasing pluralism. Victory in the presidential elections by a member of a different party heralded a period of increasing political competition as well as changes in the political system (Rubio, 2004).

Casar (2016) argues that the Mexican president ceased being the major initiator of legislation with the rise of minority governments. Yet, political practices still allow some elite groups and political parties¹¹ to obtain economic and political benefits from the state. Nacif (2006) suggests that the advent of divided government caused opposition parties to become the main source of legislative change. Metaconstitutional¹² presidential practices started to have limitats in the presidency’s exercise of power over policymaking. As competition has increased, presidents need to find the mechanism to generate political cooperation so as to be able to prioritise policy issues that they prefer. Those who

¹¹At times, Mexico can be seen as a democracy dominated by party politics. This may be creating a cartelization of parties which use the resources of the state to maintain their position within the political system (see Katz and Mair, 1995).

¹²The metaconstitutional presidency was characterised by a unified government, the president’s party leadership and the political hegemony of a single party (Weldon, 1997b).

successfully build such alliances are considered to be proactive presidents (see Cox and Morgenstern, 2001).

It can be argued that the emergence of minority governments highlights the few powers that the Mexican constitution provides to the Mexican president. The Mexican president is fairly weak in constitutional terms with regard to agenda-setting powers (Rubio, 1998). The Mexican president lacks emergency decree powers, for example. The president, thus, has attempted to halt the decline in his powers by relying on formal and informal institutions to enhance agenda capacity. As (see Casar, 2016, p. 151) argues, the only action the Mexican president can undertake is to encourage Congress to support the initiatives and priorities of the president.

The literature describes some elements of political cooperation whereby support for the presidents' priorities is possible. A paradigmatic change in the understanding of a particular policy domain is found to increase the chance of presidential reforms occurring (Mendez, 2018). Cuadra-Montiel (2016) argues that policy contradiction is mediated through crises; policymaking might be resolved by the decisive intervention of the state, but also by negotiating policy in minor moments of crisis by pursuing softer policy reform. Magar and Romero (2008, p. 284) observe that the president and Congress left behind their *maximalist* positions to comprehend the relevance of negotiation in the process of 'giving and receiving'. Meanwhile, Temkin Yedwab and Salazar-Elena (2012) perceive that reforms face limits if presidents are not able to negotiate policies with representatives of other parties. According to Zamitiz (2016), a recent political agreement between the president and the representatives of the three major political parties, the Pacto por México (Pact for Mexico), helped to enact various economic and political reforms in president Peña's administration. In general, the fact that a president is able to form political alliances is perceived to increase the likelihood of enacting policy reforms.

From this literature, therefore, there is theoretical support for testing a hypothesis on patterns of policy changes responding to moments when presidents find difficulty in reaching agreements but also other moments when political cooperation in favour of reform is possible. Consequently, this thesis will consider the argument that presidential politics in Mexico will actually produce patterns of policymaking that are consistent with the punctuated equilibrium theory. As a result, it is possible to test the *Punctuated Equilibrium Agenda Hypothesis (H1)* that states that *the dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit both incremental patterns of change and abrupt change (punctuations)*. This argument will also support a viewpoint regarding Mexican presidents being proactive political actors that adjust their behaviour to changing political and economic environments.

Table 3.1: Policymaking in Mexico

Variable	Single-party system	Multiparty system
Political power	Centralised	Decentralised
Representation	Corporatist	Plural and Corporatist (mixed)
Contestation	President	President
	Local elites	Chamber
	Elite organisations	Interest groups
Governance	Top down	Political parties
		Top down and bottom up

Source: Own elaboration based on [Williams \(2002\)](#) and [Klesner \(2006\)](#).

3.5 Discussion and conclusion

Political scholarship has richly covered analysis of the president and some aspects of the Mexican presidency. However, this review suggests that there are still opportunities to form a better understanding of the president and his decision process beyond current research that, in general, presents presidents in historical terms or focuses on particular events, policies, personalities or institutional configurations of Mexican presidential politics. The literature lacks a complete understanding of presidential decision processes and agenda-setting.

The agenda under authoritarianism was certainly rigid, and its response could be linked to shocks that the president could deliver with the aim of ensuring the continuity of the regime or of protecting the political interest of the elite. However, the Mexican president needed to be responsive to political pressures, powerful political actors and external factors, such as social pressures and political and economic crises, as well as the changing nature of socioeconomic development in the country or even international pressures. There are obstructions to the capacity of decision-making of presidents and these were present even during the single-party regime. Therefore, scholarship on Mexican politics has presented arguments regarding an absence of presidential ability to foster political cooperation and a lack of capacity to overcome inter-institutional gridlock. The impact of this inability is argued to produce continuity in presidential policy agendas and policy reform failures.

The first part of this chapter presented a survey of literature on Mexico's political systems and categorised the Mexican political system (see Table 3.1). It showed an evolution of policymaking from an authoritarian to a democratic system. From the literature on Mexican politics, it was possible to describe the context in which presidents develop and implement policies and presidential policy agendas. The interest of this thesis, however, goes beyond describing particular characteristics of the political system.

An opportunity to give an innovative assessment of presidential policymaking in Mexico is presented by developing literature on Mexican politics that suggests that presidents' decision processes might be producing patterns of policy prioritisation that are consistent with the punctuated equilibrium theory. There are moments where presidential priorities cease to be relevant for governments' agendas (see Cuadra-Montiel, 2016). But the literature also argues that reforms will be possible and there will be an increase of attention in presidents' priorities if political cooperation is possible and different priorities converge in a shared political interest. The support of this viewpoint requires consideration of the Mexican presidents as political actors able to generate strategic and proactive actions that allow the negotiation and accomplishment of some policy reform. Section 2.7.3 argued that specific elements were relevant to the production of these shifts in the agenda: a sense of urgency, a shared policy rhetoric, exchange of public funds and entrepreneurial leadership. It is not clear from the literature to what extent these factors create incentives for the president to lean towards generating reform. Therefore, findings from subsequent chapters need to provide evidence to support these factors as relevant elements producing a process that helps to move policies from a period of continuity to a moment experiencing policy shifts.

If the analysis provides further evidence of the presence of the elements described in Section 2.6 then it will be possible to support the presence of the *Punctuated Equilibrium Agenda Hypothesis* (**H1**).¹³ The *Unstable Agendas Hypothesis* (**H2**)¹⁴ or the *Stable Agendas Hypothesis* (**H3**)¹⁵ will also be examined to test other possible viewpoints identified by this chapter's literature review.

The literature review offers two viewpoints regarding presidential authority in Mexico. The first of which presents Mexican presidents having great political power to generate changes in policy agendas. The leadership of the president is characterized possessing individual control over all decisions and promoting little input from other political actors. This autocratic form of leadership overshadows a type of leadership that aims to organize individuals to achieve shared policy goals and priorities. An autocratic leader can often use public resources and political powers to produce shocks in the political systems. In this autocratic setting, a lack of incentives for political cooperation justifies much of the continuous radical adjustments of policy priorities. A failure to support punctuated equilibrium theory in Mexican presidential agendas can support viewpoints emerging from literature describing autocratic forms of policymaking.

The second view of presidential authority is one that considers presidents as possessing a great inability to produce changes in public policy. A failure to find evidence that

¹³ *Punctuated Equilibrium Agenda Hypothesis (H1): the dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit both incremental patterns of change and abrupt change (punctuations).*

¹⁴ *Unstable Agendas Hypothesis (H2): The dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit abrupt and radical change.*

¹⁵ *Stable Agendas Hypothesis (H3): The dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit stable patterns of change.*

presidents actually have some capacity to produce shifts in policy agendas would support viewpoints describing ‘lame-duck’ presidencies. Therefore, this thesis will empirically test whether the patterns of presidential policy priorities exhibit continuous stasis.

Chapter 4

Coalition formation and presidential agendas

4.1 Introduction

In Chapter 2 (and Chapter 3), this thesis explained the possibility of testing three hypotheses regarding policy prioritisation in presidential agendas. There are some arguments that arise regarding democratic instability ([Linz, 1990](#)) and volatility in policy-making ([Spiller and Tommasi, 2007](#)) because of an institutional context which reduces horizontal accountability. Additionally, in the context of democratisation, considerable agenda-setting power is provided to presidents. One of these hypothesis relates to arguments regarding instability in presidential policy agendas as this viewpoint considers presidents have capacity to re-prioritise programmes and re-allocate resources quickly and forcefully.

For scholarship considering autocratic forms of presidentialism, Mexican presidents have enough agenda-setting powers to make decisions regarding the agenda that produce instability in policymaking as often policy decisions can be adjusted with little opposition. For example, as [Elizondo Mayer-Serra \(2001\)](#) explains, the nationalisation of banks in Mexico in the mid-1970s was possible because President López Portillo (1982-1988) had the support of a majority in Congress and the presidency centralised decision-making. López Portillo secured legislative approval before sending the bill to Congress, by secretly negotiating with legislators and consulting with his staff, government advisors, cabinet members and corporatist leaders. The President could deliver this reform with no accountability and considerable political cohesion (see [Maxfield, 1992](#)). In the subsequent administration, President Salinas (1988–1994) was able to return bank property to the private sector in a context of autocratic policymaking and an effective political strategy with elements of political entrepreneurship ([Hiskey, 2008](#)). Observing this type

of presidential decision-making, therefore, allows this analysis to test for the *Unstable Agendas Hypothesis* (**H2**).¹

In an alternative viewpoint, some argue that there are no incentives for political actors to cooperate with the president in the definition of public policies, particularly if political fragmentation is high. The Mexican president might be a ‘lame-duck’ president that faces continuous political gridlock. An increase in political plurality and fragmentation set limits to the president’s political power and ability to negotiate and reach political agreements with other political actors. This fragmentation increases the decision costs and institutional friction of decision processes. The impact of these factors is that extremely stable policies are generated as presidents are constantly blocked from enacting reform. For example, with a minority in Congress, it was impossible for president Calderón to end with more than seventy years of state monopoly in the oil and energy sectors. The identification of this type of stasis in presidential policies, therefore, allows the *Stable Agendas Hypothesis* (**H3**)² to be tested.

This chapter also searches for empirical evidence to suggest that if a president builds political alliances, there will be a possibility of enacting policy and promoting a process where different preferred policy priorities converge in a shared political interest (Section 2.7.3). The patterns of policy change will exhibit moments of policy continuity combined with moments of change. There will be continuity in presidential agendas until the president gains support for his priorities. For example, a deep examination of reforms in the oil and energy sectors in Mexico would suggest that indeed there was a major reform for the nationalisation of the sector in the 1950s with a combination of enactments of secondary legislation for decades and finally a major reform to end with the state monopoly in 2015. Therefore, this chapter also tests for the possibility of *Punctuated Equilibrium Agenda Hypothesis* (**H1**)³ in presidential agendas.

This chapter argues that the process explaining policy changes sometimes in the form of radical shifts (punctuations) in policy dynamics is one based on the formation of political coalitions. In a political environment with fragmentation, most policy agendas are going blocked if presidents do not have enough political support. As the theoretical framework suggested in Section 2.7.3, the opportunity to reach agreement on policy priorities with opposition parties increases with the presence of elements like having a sense of urgency, sharing a political rhetoric based on having a similar idea about the policy at stake, using public funds in exchange for political support and having policy entrepreneurship. An entrepreneurial president will look for political opportunities to introduce issues into policy agendas and act quickly. These political opportunities are

¹ *Unstable Agendas Hypothesis* (**H2**): The dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit repeatedly abrupt and radical change.

² *Stable Agendas Hypothesis* (**H3**): the dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit stable patterns of change.

³ *Punctuated Equilibrium Agenda Hypothesis* (**H1**): the dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit both incremental patterns of change and abrupt change (punctuations).

characterised by presidents and members of Congress having a sense of urgency to find a solution to a social problem and sharing a view regarding the relevance for finding a solution. In the concluding remarks of this chapter and by following Chapter 2, it is explained that the formation of coalitions is understood as a process producing positive feedback. In order to understand the characteristics of the Mexican presidential system and the informal formation of coalitions as a process helping to produce policy change, a series of interviews with elites were conducted and analyzed and findings regarding presidential politics and policy change will be presented over the course of this chapter.

By examining these informants' views, an explanation of the workings of presidential agenda-setting in Mexico can be made. These informants observe that there are differences in the prioritisation of policies by each administration. However, there are also some policy areas where presidents tendency is to give priority to similar policy issues.

The analysis in this chapter is done through a thematic analysis of seventeen interviews with Mexican elite informants. It uses semi-structured interviews with questions regarding presidential policymaking and presidential policy agendas. The thematic analysis examined patterns within informants' answers. The research question — the possibility of finding 'punctuated equilibrium' in the patterns of presidents' policy prioritisation — set the guiding themes for finding patterns in the answers regarding the characteristics of presidential policymaking. The responses and identity of participants were kept confidential and anonymous.

Section 4.2 of this chapter cautiously incorporates scholarly work on informal institutions and coalition formation into the understanding of processes of policy change described by the punctuated equilibrium theory. It then introduces a qualitative analysis of interviews to support the argument about formation of coalitions as a mechanism behind processes — negative and positive feedback — explaining policy continuity and policy shifts in Mexican presidential agendas (Section 4.3). The last section presents the concluding remarks.

4.2 Political fragmentation and coalition formation

One of the objectives of this thesis is to present an explanation of the dynamics of policy change in presidential policy agendas. The framework presented a hypothesis regarding continuity and punctuations: the *Punctuated Equilibrium Agenda Hypothesis* (H1). This section aims to justify the possibility of considering coalitions as a mechanism influencing processes of change in presidential policy agendas, in particular to what has been referred as a positive feedback of policy change in Chapter 2 in the theoretical framework. This mechanism helps to overcome political paralysis that, in general, is a result of increasing political fragmentation and increasing pluralism. Finding evidence

of coalition formation as a mechanism producing a positive feedback process of policy change and overcoming a negative feedback process for policy change will support **H1**.

In the Latin American context, the presence of divided governments with multipartisim and substantial political fragmentation often leads to arguments regarding this institutional setting being a source of political paralysis. Scholars argue that in this context, a president and Congress can find limitations in delivering policy reform (Lijphart, 1991; Mainwaring and Shugart, 1997). In the presence of strong presidentialism and high fragmentation of the party system, it is possible that a problem of “dual legitimacy” will emerge (Linz, 1990).⁴ In presidential systems, both the president and Congress can claim to represent society. This dual legitimacy can be problematic to the extent that it generates institutional tensions and political crises between democratic institutions. Political dispute between Congress and the president can block presidential actions, and political actors may see coups as an exit from this political stalemate.

However, literature on coalition formation suggests that political cooperation for policy reform has been possible in institutional settings characterised by large political fragmentation. There is a possibility of cooperation through the formation of political coalitions that often requires informal negotiation on policymaking between the president and other political actors (Mejía Acosta, 2006; Siavelis, 2006). The formation of coalitions creates a mechanism for accommodating the policy priorities of different political actors in shared and mutual policy interests (see Chasquetti, 2008).

A case in point is Chile. After the end of the military regime in the early 1990s, *Democracia de los Acuerdos* (Democracy of Agreements) was a mechanism that the president and Congress instituted for promoting political cooperation. This was a political instrument that elites used to negotiate policy reforms and helped to increase the chance of legislative success. In addition, the *Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia* (Coalition of Parties for Democracy) was an informal institution for forming political coalitions and *Democracia de los Acuerdos* was a complement to the features of coalition formation. These political instruments were of great help to democratic governability in Chile after the end of the military regime in the early 1990s (Siavelis, 2016; Carey, 2002). Similarly, Mejía Acosta (2009) analyses the formation of legislative and governing coalitions in Ecuador. In the Ecuadorian context, presidents have often been able to pass reform with minority support in Congress. The Ecuadorian president eschews the formation of formal coalitions to form legislative and governing coalitions through informal negotiations that Mejía Acosta (2009) calls ‘ghost-coalitions’. The formation of these coalitions is a regular political practice in different Latin American countries.

The Mexican political system may show some similarities with these cases. In the context of democratisation, the presence of divided governments in Mexico is argued often

⁴Mainwaring (1993) argues that a combination of a multiparty system and presidentialism affect the democratic stability of political systems. It makes it difficult to govern and democratic stability can deteriorate. Therefore, Mainwaring (1993) considered this combination as “difficult”.

push presidents to rely on ad-hoc strategies for passing reform initiatives in Congress (Casar, 2013). The president finds political capacity by forming political coalitions and reaching an informal political agreement with other actors that helps to override political paralysis.

In the case of Mexico, Del Tronco et al. (2009) explains that congressional negotiations facilitate the exchange of political benefits. The president and political parties taking part in negotiation processes come to prioritise issues after identifying similarities in their preferences regarding policy priorities. The formation of coalitions is likely if political elites have a common understanding concerning a particular policy solution (see Alston et al., 2016). For example, Mendez (2018) explains that President Peña needed a change in a paradigm about oil and energy issues in order to pass a radical reform in 2012 on the energy sector and to overcome opposition to his initiative. The signing of the Pact of Mexico (2012–2013) — a political coalition between the three major political parties — reached an understanding regarding the problems facing the nation and enhanced the capacity of the president to enact major constitutional reforms.

However, there are points of view that consider the formation of coalitions as not always a robust mechanism for political cooperation. Albala (2017) looks at government's coalitions formation and survival in twenty-eight Latin American countries and argues that party fragmentation makes coalitions less likely to survive and leads to an inability of presidents to generate reforms. Similarly for the Latin American case, Martínez-Gallardo (2012) argues that cabinet coalitions building is less likely if the president has strong unilateral institutional powers and thus exercise great agenda-setting powers. Alemán and Tsebelis (2016) show that legislative coalitions are less likely to be formed when parties are ideologically far from that of the president and the president has strong political powers. In the case of Mexico, the president has shown the capacity to form political coalitions, yet, it is possible that presidents will still find some difficulties in generating changes in their policy agendas. This chapter will investigate the possibility of coalition formation as a mechanism supporting processes of policy change.

4.2.1 Information processing and coalition formation

Baumgartner and Jones (1993) in their punctuated equilibrium model look to explain some of the causes of policy change. By studying the U.S. case, these scholars argue that because there is a finite capacity to allocate attention, there is a bias of decision-making processes towards gradual change (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005b; John, 1999). Institutional structures and costs of decision also affect the capacity to produce policy changes (that is, the presence of institutional friction). However, they also observe that these long periods of policy continuity sometimes experiences radical adjustments. They contest the classic view of inter-institutional gridlock in the U.S. political system. A rise in the salience of an issue (pressures from public opinion and media) often opens a

‘window of opportunity’ for a policy entrepreneur to introduce policy reforms (Kingdon, 1984). This breaks a policy monopoly and makes shifts in policies more likely.

In the case of Mexican presidential policymaking, the argument to test is whether a president needs to break a particular policy monopoly and it happens when presidents negotiate policy reforms through the formation of political coalitions. There is a negative feedback process if opposition parties block policy reform in Congress. However, presidents can rely on political negotiations and coalition formation as instruments for gaining support. Section 2.5 explained that change in presidential policy agendas is likely if presidents are able to accommodate preferences for similar policy priorities by relying on forming political coalitions.

The formation of a coalition helps the president to create a situation in which it is possible to overcome opposition against presidential policy decisions. A president negotiates policy reform before sending a legislative initiative to Congress. This helps to breakdown a policy monopoly by re-framing issues and moving attention towards a particular issue. Change is possible if a president is able to accommodate different interests in support for a common policy priority. The political power is distributed among a network of political elites that need to come to agreement for generating changes in policy agendas. There are incentives for political actors to generate reform and negotiate policy with other political actors and independent agendas decisions do not fully dominate presidential agenda-setting.

4.2.2 Methods of inquiry: interviews and causal interpretation

This chapter used qualitative methods to analyse interviews through thematic analysis. It began the analysis with a theory in mind and then attempted to assess the ability of punctuated equilibrium theory to explain characteristics of presidential policy agendas and policymaking (see George and Bennett, 2005). The analysis tested whether there was evidence to conclude that the dynamics of presidential agendas were to some extent dependent on the capacity of the president to overcome gridlock through coalition formation and informal negotiations. The patterns of presidents’ priorities were, thus, expected to show a combination between gradual policy change (near stasis) and policy shifts.

The analysis offers evidence from in-depth interviews with seventeen policymakers and politicians in Mexico. The interviewees are considered to be experts on the topic of presidential agendas and agenda-setting as their professional backgrounds are closely related to working with, advising or studying the Mexican president. Therefore, the material is unique as it allows access to the opinion of elite policymakers and politicians about presidential policymaking. At all times the aim was to maintain a the rigorous quality of data gathering on this research project.

The selection of the informants was a purposive sampling based on their professional backgrounds. The original list of participants included former and current cabinet ministers, advisers and lawmakers. In the sample, there are some professional backgrounds which related to academia. At all times any bias was identified and avoided while carefully and systematically performing it. In the Mexican context, it is difficult to approach elite decision makers whose background corresponds to a single lifetime professional activity. Politicians and policymakers in Mexico aim to have a long-term careers without necessarily performing the same job for years. They do remain close to politics; however, they do not intend to keep the same jobs. Thus, in this informants' sample, it is possible to find a former members of Congress and lawmakers that are now members of staff in politics departments in Mexican universities.

For identifying informants, this research also used a snowball sampling method. Informants referred the researcher to future subjects from among their acquaintances. This method is a chain-referral sampling non-probability technique.⁵ The analysis does not look to represent a population; therefore, the design relaxed the methodological expectation about the representation of the sample. Selecting informants based on their professional experience helped to reduce potential biases in snowball sampling as informants from different political positions and parties were chosen. This analysis focused on identifying some of the key factors behind the decision processes in presidential policy-making. It related to describing decision processes and their impact on policy outcomes. The analysis in general aimed to describe the configuration of presidential policy agendas and decisions processes in Mexico. These findings are presented in following sections in this chapter.

Each participant was contacted via social media, email and telephone using a letter with the explanation about the characteristics of this project. The confidentiality of this research was explained when contacting all possible informants. Once the appointment was agreed, the researcher provided further information about the confidential character of the interview. The informants' name and position are kept confidential for the analysis.⁶

The interviewees were engaged in face-to-face meetings for an average of forty minutes and were semi-structured type of interviews. The interviews used a structured list of questions to understand different aspects of presidential agendas and policymaking. Some flexibility was allowed by not following the same sequence, as the order of questions was dependent on the flow of the comments and contribution of each of these

⁵For further reference to this sampling technique see [Marcus et al. \(2017\)](#).

⁶**Appendix A** presents the list of informants. A code is assigned for each interview following the date in which these were conducted and not by keeping the name of the informant. The interview code starts by referring to a letter of the alphabet which indicates the order in which these interviews were conducted followed by the year, month and day. Table [A.1](#) presents the number of the informant, a code, a professional background and the presidential administration of which each of them provide information based on their professional experience and jobs.

interviewees. The questions included asking about the process of formation of presidential agendas, including questions on the strategies presidents follow when selecting issues for their agendas, the topics going into the agendas and some of the factors pushing those issues into the agendas.⁷

This chapter used thematic analysis and examined if there is evidence for punctuated equilibrium theory in presidential decision-making and policy agendas. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within informants' answers by using a previously defined theory that guides for the analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The analysis sought to identify a causal relationship between coalition formation and policy changes in presidential policy agendas (see Yin, 2014). The analysis used interview materials in a deductive approach.

4.3 Policy attention and alliances in presidential policy-making

Chapter 2 argued that the agenda-setting approach suggest that there is a range of particular issues on which policymakers concentrate their attention. Therefore, findings report that the informants recognise that the attention of the president is always distributed across few policy issues. The policy attention changes across presidential administrations and exhibits some differences between administrations. However, policy attention sometimes exhibits continuity from administration to administration as presidents find limitations in their capacity to generate shifts in their priorities. Findings show that informants recognised that there are constraints that affect the number of issues a president can include in an agenda; therefore, the prioritisation of policy is a strategic action. For example, it is unlikely that programmatic policies will vary extensively and experience radical changes between administrations. The chapter moves to examine that the formation of political coalitions through informal negotiations explain the existence of a mechanism behind the dynamics of policy change in presidential policy agendas. The formation of coalitions is a political process that helps presidents to increase the likelihood of policy changes.

⁷Appendix B shows the list of questions in their English translation. Interviews were conducted, transcribed and analysed in Spanish. The analysis in this chapter presents results and translations of the contributions in English by quoting all comments in both Spanish and their translation in English when supporting arguments on this thesis. The researcher attempted to translate as closely to the original text as possible whilst maintaining its sense. The original text in Spanish is provided in footnotes as means for everything to be checked. The analysis uses quotation marks in indented quotes as to refer that this quotes use a translation in English.

4.3.1 Presidential agendas and policy issues

The theoretical framework (Chapter 2) considered that the president's agenda can be defined as a "remarkable list" of priorities and issues (Light, 1999, 1981, p. 1). The particular focus of this thesis is to identify how presidents allocate their attention between different policy domains and provide an understanding of why priorities change over time. The informants observed that presidents prioritise different issues at different points of time.

Presidents in Mexico use different ways to communicate their priorities. In recent years it has been common that presidential candidates write books and other publications to promote their reputation and candidacies, which include a series of ideas on particular issues (A161004) and positions regarding particular policies. Presidential candidates show their willingness to present innovative agendas through these publications. As some interviewees suggest, much of a president's agenda appears to be built during their campaigns (L161102, N161103, R161207). In the words of one of the experts, the presidential agenda is a mix of elements, namely "*During the process of campaigning, the compromises that are being defined, the ambitions and aspirations of the work team that is around the president*"⁸ before entering office (M161108). After the election, the elected presidents have six months to formulate a National Plan in which they set a list of priorities for their administrations (B161006, A161004). The Plan Nacional de Desarrollo (National Development Plan) is a policy document that all presidents need to present at the beginning of an administration and covers all the policy topics that a government looks to implement while in office (M161108). This document presents the government's vision of the political, social and economic development of the country. One informant comments on this:

*"These are a series of actions, this is the Nation's project if you want to put it in grandiloquent words, the Nations' project of whoever wins the presidential elections, this plan is a series of legislative reforms, public policies to conduct the nation"*⁹ (S161212).

Once a president has completed his first year, he presents the first annual government report and deliver a presidential speech, similar to the U.S. State of the Union Speech. Mexican presidents inform citizens about the government's activities through the official Informe de Gobierno (Government's Official Report). All these different documents and publications have a similar attribute of being able to be an indicator of presidential priorities. There is consensus amongst some interviewees' answers that generating an

⁸"Durante el proceso de campaa, los compromisos que se van definiendo, las ambiciones y aspiraciones del equipo de trabajo que está alrededor del Presidente."

⁹"Son la serie de medidas, el proyecto de Nación si lo quieres poner en términos grandilocuentes, el proyecto de Nación de quien gana las elecciones presidenciales, una serie de reformas legislativas, de polícas públicas que van a guiar al país."

administration's agenda requires a selection of particular issues from a large number of issues.

Looking at each president's particular agendas, some informants find differences between their policy priorities. Rubio observes that "[President] Salinas sought to transform the economic foundation of the country and make the Mexican economy competitive internationally" (1998, p. 8). The design of policy for long-term growth and development — including privatisation, deregulation and import liberalisation — became a priority for his administration. President Carlos Salinas (1988–1994) aimed to privatise different state-owned companies including enterprises in the banking and telecommunications sectors (Meyenberg and Aguilar, 2015, pp. 97–98). Some of these experts observe that the president also looked to liberalise the economy by signing different trade agreements, including the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) (S161212, J160830). On the other hand, he implemented social-assistance programmes to target poverty by providing cash payments to marginalised households (Meyenberg and Aguilar, 2015, pp. 96–97). González Gómez (1998, p. 40) suggests that actions in this administration were grouped into the following categories: macroeconomic adjustment, structural change and extreme poverty reduction. The main objective of macroeconomic adjustment was to keep fiscal discipline and to have a prudent monetary performance. Meanwhile, social welfare reform aimed to reduce the poverty of the lowest income groups. As one of the interviewees comments, his idea of development was mainly based on modernising the country and in creating the *Solidaridades*¹⁰ programme (R161207).

Meanwhile, President Zedillo (1994–2000) put an effort into enacting a series of electoral reforms, which allowed political parties to start competing for votes in a fairly democratic environment. A political agreement — Acuerdo Político Nacional (National Political Agreement) — between parties made this political reform possible. This reform helped to start reducing controversies in elections and electoral processes. According to Meyenberg and Aguilar (2015, pp. 117–118), the Federal Electoral Institute became a structure autonomous from the Executive branch, and the Electoral Tribunal became part of the Federal Judicial Branch (see Rubio, 2004). The financing scheme for electoral processes became more accessible to opposition parties (Meyenberg and Aguilar, 2015, pp. 117–118). By taking as an analogy the case of the end of the Soviet Union, Jaime (2004, p. 42) comments, Zedillo's agenda would be dominated by politics like *glasnost*¹¹ while Salinas would have promoted *perestroika*. One of the informants considers that a relevant element for the democratic transformation of the country was Zedillo's interest in strengthening the Judicial branch and the Supreme Court (161006). However, the 1995 economic crisis pushed the President to make the economy one of the most important topics of his

¹⁰This programme is a government social assistance programme of conditional cash transfer, which has been re-named as *Oportunidades* (Opportunities) and *Progreso* (Progress). Parker and Todd (2017) present a literature review on developments of this governmental programme.

¹¹Perestroika was a movement during the 1980s in the Soviet Union for economic liberalisation and reformation within the Communist Party. This process also included political reform, known as *glasnost* (Desai, 2014).

administration (O161106). Ernesto Zedillo invested a great amount of time in solving the economic crisis and laid the foundations to sustain a solid economy (R161207).

Vicente Fox (2000–2006) was the first president to be elected in the democratic transition and from a different party than the Revolucionario Institucional party (PRI). One of the experts comments that his agenda aimed to be representative of the Mexican democratic transition (R161207). President Fox proposed various reforms in administrative and transparency issues (N161103). The government also implemented new policies on social security, healthcare and housing (Meyenberg and Aguilar, 2015, pp. 135–136). The Fox administration began with the policy to universalise access to health care (G161018). However, real structural reform was difficult (H161005). The institutional transformation was a real challenge as he could not supplant the preexisting corporatist structure. Without the support of a majority in Congress, the president faced legislative blockage in his initiatives. The members of Congress protected old organisational structures from being reformed (Rubio, 2004). This political gridlock gave the impression of an administration without a particular direction. This impression is shared by the informants, as for example, one of them claims that President Vicente Fox did not know which priorities he wanted for his agenda (F161018).

The agenda of President Felipe Calderón (2006–2012) is perceived by some informants to be a much more structured agenda than President Fox's agenda (Q161130, S161212, A161004, D161013). President Calderon chose security and crime issues as the central theme of his administration (S161212, M161108, I161020). His agenda also included issues to reform the oil and energy sectors. President Calderón aimed for major reforms in human rights including indigenous rights, education, expatriate voting, transparency and welfare (López Leyva, 2016). Similar to President Fox, without a majority in Congress, the President had a reduced capacity to generate reforms. This raises an interest finding as President Fox is perceived as lacking direction, but Calderón is perceived as having more structure, but yet both faced similar inter-institutional gridlock. In fact, Felipe Calderón did enact reforms but not all involve fundamental institutional transformations (López Leyva, 2016). Moreover, the aftermath of the 2008 international financial crisis forced the President to focus on particular reforms for generating economic stability. This set some limitations to his capacity to expand the content of his agenda (S161212, A161004).

President Peña Nieto (2012–2015) did not emphasise security issues as much as President Calderón in the previous administration. Peña Nieto pushed an agenda which focuses on to reducing violence, improving education quality and promoting economic growth, as the major policy elements of his administration in the time period assessed by this analysis. This became part of a national agenda — Pacto por México¹² — which facilitated enacting legislation with the approval of opposition parties. This political strategy demarcated this president, in a couple of informants' opinion, as a president with agenda

¹²In its translation to English as Pact for Mexico.

capacity. As one of the informants comments, the Pact for Mexico was figurative emulation of a manual for guiding policy decisions at the beginning of this administration (A161004). Another expert opinion shows scepticism about the impact of this political pact (O161106). The security and transparency scandals that have characterised the administration reduced the expectation of success regarding this administration's actions, and popularity of the president and his administration have increase rates by the end of the first half of the administration.

Some of the informants perceive that there are topics that have become less relevant in president's agendas (J160830, L161102). In general, the prominence of agriculture and rural issues has diminished in presidential agendas since the early 1990s. Carlos Salinas enacted some reforms on land tenancy by allowing *ejido*¹³ tenants to change their form of land ownership (Jaime, 2004). No major reforms have been identified for the subsequent administrations. Another topic that seems to be unpopular for the Mexican president's agenda is human rights (O161106).

There are some issues that, by contrast, become main issues in the president's agendas. Some experts mention that sometimes policy issues come to be part of the agenda's priorities in a abrupt form (R161207). Some topics become relevant because of the occurrence of a crisis, for example this was the case with health issues during the influenza virus outbreak in President Calderón's administration (Q161130, R161207). One of the informants mentions that in the face of presidential elections in the near future, topics like transparency, accountability, government operations and the rule of law will become increasingly salient and get included in campaigns (H161005).

Some external factors influence how presidents prioritise issues in their policy agendas. The new political and economic landscape and demographic changes push different concerns onto the presidential agendas (R161207). This was the case with the economic Tequila Crisis in 1995, for example. One of the informants outlines this process:

“There are some issues that can be an individual decision, that is a privilege, but there are moments in which a national reality needs solutions and this national context is not just about perceptions, but literally it could be a real crisis, [e.g.] the 95's economic crisis was a real crisis”¹⁴ (H161005).

¹³The *ejido* is a form of land tenure and redistribution (Cornelius and Myhre, 1998; Vázquez Castillo, 2004). The jurisdiction of the *ejido* lay in the hands of peasants, *ejidatarios*. *Ejidatarios* are the only group of people allowed to own *ejidos*, which until this reform could not be conveyed, leased or used as collateral for loans.

¹⁴“Hay unas [opciones] que pueden ser por decisión, y que privilegiado que puedan ser por decisión, pero hay otros que es una realidad nacional que tienes que afrontar, y una realidad nacional no solo de percepción sino literal, la crisis del 95 era una crisis real.”

Another expert puts it in these words: *“if suddenly you have a huge fiscal deficit, your capacity of reaction diminishes enormously”*¹⁵ (B161006). Similarly, another expert states *“President Zedillo had to postpone many issues with the hit of the economic crisis that arrived at the beginning of his administration [...], which forced him to postpone a series of policy ideas that he had and favour other priorities instead of these ideas”*¹⁶ (K161025). The government experienced challenges in tackling the crisis and was unable to carry out all the reforms that the President and his staff intended (Jaime, 2004).

Some informants’ point of view is that there are some similarities on issue priorities between presidencies, despite the differences that each administration shows in presidents’ priorities (J160830). An informant comments that when *“in government, the bureaucratic structure of the country organizes policy by different policy areas which very often are divided by government ministries. There is a ministry of agriculture, a ministry of finance, a ministry of interior, labour, etc.”*¹⁷ (H161005). There are programmatic policies already operating under the activities of different ministries. As such, that give some reason to consider that it is impossible that from one administration to the next, the president will end with all operating policy programmes (H161005). The allocation of public resources and policy attention from presidents, thus, takes as a basis for setting the agenda the continuity of these ongoing policy programmes. In addition, there will be issues that are a main concern for governments. For example, tackling economic growth and reducing poverty are issues that every Mexican president will focus on and discuss (I161020), therefore; presidential agendas between administrations will show great similarity and continuity. There is a sort of continuity in the amount of attention that presidents allocate to issues like macroeconomics, health and education.

From these interviews, it is possible to understand the agenda as those policy priorities that the president has during his term in office (K161025). These definitions suggest that agendas formation requires presidents to distribute his attention across different issues. These informants recognise that the president will not allocate all of his attention to a single issue. In addition, it is necessary that presidents generate a strategy of action to define their priorities. There is a positive opinion from the informants regarding the capacity of presidents to generate political agreement and reforms through political alliances — by using a political instrument like the Pact for Mexico (A161004, B161006, D161013, F161018, G161018, L161102, Q161130, S161212, P161129). There

¹⁵ “[...] [A]hora, esa es una parte, la otra es, pues tienes que estar atento a las circunstancias internacionales y nacionales, no es lo mismo estar placentemente diciendo: ahora vamos a construir esto y vamos a hacer lo otro, cuando de pronto se te viene un déficit fiscal enorme y tus capacidades de reacción se disminuyen horrorosamente como estamos precisamente en este momento.”

¹⁶ “También por ejemplo, el Presidente Zedillo tuvo que posponer muchas cosas con el advenimiento de la crisis económica que llegó al principio de su administración, a los 28 días de su administración tuvo una crisis financiera muy importante muy importante, que lo obligó a posponer una serie de ideas que él tenía y a favorecer otras en lugar de ellas.”

¹⁷ “Dentro del todo país y la administración pública de use país, tienes distintas áreas que se dividen generalmente en las secretarías para la atención de las misma. Tienes una secretaría de agricultura, una secretaria de hacienda, de gobernación, de trabajo, etc.”

is no evidence that suggests that policy power concentrates only in the authority of the president and that he is independently determining policy decisions.

The evidence demonstrates that there are topics that are going to be relatively stable in the president's agendas. Other issues are popular with some presidents while they seem to be dropped in other administrations. On some occasions, crises and events will push issues onto the president's agendas. The effect of such elements on presidential agendas is consistent with the definitions informants provided on agendas, which is consistent with the punctuated equilibrium theory. The dynamics of presidential policy attention seem to exhibit both incremental patterns of change and patterns of radical changes.

4.3.2 Proactive presidents and policy change

The previous section suggested that 'punctuated equilibrium' patterns of change may be present in presidential agendas in Mexico. Therefore, this section moves to identify institutional processes that are affecting how presidents allocate policy attention. For the case of Mexico, it seems that a president can not always freely decide which of those issues will be going onto their agendas. As one of the informants puts it "*there are those who think that the president can do everything he wants, yet, this is not true*"¹⁸ (O161106). Some informants recognise that the president has a limited ability to attend to all relevant and important issues (M161108, S161212, B161006, N161103). Therefore, this limitation requires strategic action for organising policy priorities particularly under democratisation of Mexican politics (M161108, G161018). A process of policy change (positive feedback) is apparently explained by the ability of a president to reach agreements with other political actors.

One informant states that under the democratic system, presidents need to lobby different political actors in order to enact particular policies (N161103). If the president prefers some issues to others, he needs to negotiate with the opposition and other parties, particularly in an increasing plural context. Another expert observes that measuring the political viability of changes is essential for presidents, particularly if they are facing increasing political conflict (M161108). Mexican presidents cannot deal with every front of conflict, so they will only engage with other actors to solve political disagreements (R161207).

In an increasing plural context, a president is required to anticipate contextual effects on policymaking, whereby first "*he generates some commitments with different policy sectors.[...] He consolidates these commitments once he wins the presidency. Second, he supports those issues with a greater possibility of success according to the configuration*

¹⁸ "Alguien piensa que efectivamente, como dicen hay veces que piensan que el presidente lo puede todo y no es cierto."

of seats in Congress”¹⁹ (L161102). The political circumstances may help and benefit the capacity of a president to generate fruitful policy reform. A president will need to generate a political strategy to help advance his agenda and to overcome political obstructions. The informants perceive that the attention of presidents to issues experiences adjustments based on their political ability to end with a legislative gridlock and overcome political disagreements. The selection process of issues going onto the agenda also reacts to crises as mentioned in the previous section. This situation is what some informants call *coyuntura* (juncture), a political or economic situation that requires an urgent solution (M161108, S161212, H161005, A161004, B161006, K161025, Q161130, L161102, R161207).

The success of a president is perceived to rest on the fact that he can deliver policy change by negotiating reform with members of Congress and interest groups. This mechanism is a strategy that gives the president the possibility to overcome political paralysis. The president gains some advantages from forming coalitions, which reduce confrontational political positions and give an opportunity to advance the presidential agenda. If Congress supports the decisions of a president, this enhances the capacity to react to crises as well (e.g. junctures, financial crises, political uprising). The content of the agenda will not be defined by electoral cycles and a president’s political capital as much as the president’s ability to negotiate and keep allies in Congress.

The Mexican president as political actor looks to build enough political support to introduce specific topics onto the national agenda. Occasionally, a president may lack support even within members of his political party (P161129, A161004). Therefore, as one expert puts it, a first step was to have intra-party negotiations and after to move to negotiate with members of other parties (A161004). Much of a president’s success will be determined by a strategy to gain support and agreement from inside and outside government. Even during the hegemonic regime in Mexico (1929–2000), the Mexican president needed to negotiate policy agendas with members of the official party (A161004). This strategy required presidents to be able to change discussions within political groups.

A political tool supporting policy change for Mexican presidents in democratisation contexts (since the early 2000s) is to build political agreements between parties and other organisations (A161004). In presidential politics, it has been common to build institutional tools for political collaboration for settling disputes (i.e. coalitions, pacts, agreements) (Rubio, 1998). For example, a coalition — the Acuerdo Político Nacional — between parties made it possible to agree new rules for electoral competition in the early 1990s. This political agreement allowed the passing of electoral reform for the democratisation of the Mexican political system. The emergence of a multiparty system

¹⁹ “[L]a parte política, y desde luego lógicamente tiene, por un lado, el consolidarse cuando el candidato gana, primero, y segundo, el que sea viable en función de cómo se define el Congreso. Como lo comentabas hace rato, si el Congreso es un Congreso a favor, es muy fácil que la agenda se cumpla y que no haya que estarla recomponiendo. Si el Congreso está dividido, es cuando empiezan los ajustes a la agenda.”

has pushed every Mexican president to build coalitions with a broad number of actors including the opposition parties.

The formation of coalitions has been a practice since the political system became a multiparty system. It is described as follows by an interviewee:

“[L]et’s say, in times of Presidents Salinas and Zedillo, the opposition parties already had some presence in Congress, only because they could help to legitimize and endorse some policy initiatives, or they could oppose to it. Their vote were needed to enact major reforms. I know that Salinas, for example, made various parliamentary or legislative alliances with the PAN party. I mean a ‘great alliance’, they did many of them, this was a great legislative alliance with the PAN party. And thus he was able to pass some very important constitutional reforms, [...], reforms to key constitutional articles, pillar of the Constitution, it was possible to reform because president Salinas negotiated with members of the PAN party and obtained some extra legislative votes”²⁰ (S161212).

Another example is President Peña Nieto’s (2012–2018) political pact to enact constitutional reforms at the beginning of his administration. Before occupying office and during the presidential transition, he built the Pacto por México (Pact for Mexico). The President negotiated policy implementation and reforms with various leaders of opposition parties, which helped him to pass reform in Congress (B161006, L161202, F161018, P161129). One expert comments that “[t]he Pact for Mexico, [...], I must admit, it was something strategic. I must admit, it was a very clever and astute action by Peña, to draw and push an ambitious legislative, political agenda. He got the support of a political alliance, or let’s say, an association between the PRD²¹, the PAN and the PRI parties to get an agenda passed in Congress”²² (S161212). Therefore, the opinion of these informants offers evidence to support an argument about a process that is able to overcome gridlock and produces changes in policy agendas.

There is the impression that the Mexican president can generate a process for expanding discussions by changing political debates. There is evidence from some of the informants that presidents try to become policy leaders by supporting very particular issues that

²⁰ “[D]igamos ya en la época de Salinas y de Zedillo, era cuando ya los partidos de oposición tenía ya cierta presencia en el Congreso, pues solamente para saber si avalarían alguna iniciativa presidencial, o no, porque necesitaban sus votos. He sabido que Salinas, por ejemplo, hizo muchas alianzas digamos parlamentarias o legislativas con el PAN, o una gran alianza, para no decir muchas, una gran alianza legislativa con el PAN. Y así salieron reformas constitucionales importantísimas, [...], reformas a artículos claves, pilares de la Constitución, salieron porque el presidente Salinas negoció con el PAN para obtener sus votos.”

²¹ Refers to the Partido de la Revoluci’ón Democrática (Party of the Democratic Revolution).

²² “El Pacto por México [...] pues fue una acción audaz, sí debo reconocer que bastante sagaz y astuta de Peña, para sacar una agenda, una agenda ambiciosa, legislativa. Logró el apoyo de la alianza, o la digamos, sociedad entre el PRD, el PAN y el PRI para sacar esa agenda.”

aim to characterise their administrations (L161102, F161018, P161129). One of these experts comments that for the case of Mexico, it looks like presidents are increasingly taking a proactive role and they need to *lobby* different political groups, political parties and organisations (N161103). Some informants recognise the relevance of reaching political agreements in Congress, for example, this was the case with reforms in the energy sector in 2012 and the Pact for Mexico (2013–2013) (A161004, H161005, B161006, D161013). Some minor reforms on the oil sector were enacted in 2008 but major reforms came with President Peña (2012–2018). [Farfán Mares and García Briones \(2009\)](#) describe how in passing 2008 reforms for the oil and energy sectors there was some preliminary negotiation and also inter- and intra-party negotiations before the initiative reached Congress. Many of the preliminary negotiations helped President Calderón to bring together an initiative for reform. The exchange of information between those controlling the legislative agenda kept the reform initiative off the Chamber's floor until the President proposed an initiative that was more likely to receive support in Congress. Yet, Calderón was still unable to push radical constitutional changes for promoting the privatisation of these sectors. The privatisation of the sector was only feasible after President Peña managed to get support from some members of the left-wing party between 2012 and 2013. This reform was possible as a political partnership when the Pact for Mexico reduced congressional obstruction and allowed fast-tracking legislation in Congress in 2012 (see [Mendez, 2018](#)). This finding is consistent to the theoretical framework described in Section 2.7.3, regarding presidents being policy entrepreneurs if a president can take advantage and influence a re-prioritisation of issues through negotiation processes.

The evidence leads to the conclusion that a sense of urgency and a common understanding of problems increases the likelihood of enacting reforms. For example, the perception of a latent fiscal crisis pushed the president and Congress to pass reforms on oil and energy in 2008 ([Farfán Mares and García Briones, 2009](#)). A persistent inability to generate fiscal income and a strong dependence on oil income made evident the fiscal problems of the Mexican state. Yet, in 2008 this sense of urgency and perception of that a fiscal crisis could emerge was just enough to pass secondary legislation, but not for radical constitutional reforms. A shift in paradigm regarding the nationalisation of oil to one where the sector needed to increase productivity was a significant factor leading to the passing of reforms four years later in 2012 ([Mendez, 2018](#)). One of the informants comments that *“one needs to think on the context as well; for example, with the energy reform, the oil is like one of our strongest religious beliefs, perhaps we are the first generation that do not have this ingrained belief about it, but thinking about our parents, the nationalisation of oil and the Virgin of Guadalupe and our mothers are something basically at the same level, it distinguished us as Mexicans, it distinguished us as being able to prevent an intervention of international interests and imperialist views. This is a socialist vision*

embedded in institutions since [President] Lázaro Cárdenas²³²⁴ (H161005). This sense of urgency and change in a paradigm — similar understanding regarding solutions to a social problem — made it more likely that President Peña would be successful in getting support in Congress for his reforms initiatives. This finding is consistent with the theoretical framework described in Section 2.7.3, that suggests that elements of urgency and changes in political debates are positive for generating a processes of policy change based on reaching policy agreements that are likely to produce ‘punctuated equilibrium’ patterns of policy change in presidential policy agendas.

Some informants observe that there are some differences in the ability to generate agreements for each president. They recognize that President Peña Nieto had the capacity to negotiate reforms that allowed radical policy changes in the presidential agenda. In general, there is an opinion that PRI’s presidents have more success in implementing their vision for the nation. One expert voices this opinion as follows:

“An example of something that was on PAN’s party agenda, in the right-wing of the political spectrum, is the idea of dismantling PEMEX²⁵. The PAN party was born as an opposition to Lázaro Cárdenas, and his political agenda. One of the most emblematic policies of Cárdenas was to nationalise and expropriate oil. Felipe Calderón had the intention of step forward with giving concessions for privatisation [...] and he discovers that the PRI party did not accept this, and, Andrés Manuel López Obrador²⁶ led a mobilisation against his administration, so he could not implement these reforms. After that, the PRI party, which had previously opposed reform, more recently has taken these reforms as part of Peña Nieto’s agenda. This is an example, of those things that the members of PAN could not implement, the members of PRI can.²⁷” (D161013).

The informants consider that presidents from the PAN party (right-wing) have shown more difficulties in negotiating policy. This has been particularly the case between 2000,

²³President Lázaro Cárdenas occupied office between 1934 and 1940.

²⁴ “[H]ay que pensar en contexto, volviendo al ejemplo de la reforma energética, la reforma energética, el petróleo y demás es como nuestro fervor guadalupano, probablemente nosotros seamos la primera generación que no lo tengamos tan arraigado pero pensando a nivel nuestros padres, si definitivamente la nacionalización del petróleo y la Virgen de Guadalupe y tu mamá están básicamente en el mismo nivel; era lo que nos distinguía de ser mexicanos, lo que nos distinguía de habernos impuesto a los intereses internacionales, a los imperialistas y demás, una versión un poco socialista aun dentro de la institución de Lázaro Cárdenas.”

²⁵The Mexican oil State company called Petróleos Mexicanos and abbreviated as PEMEX.

²⁶A political leader from the left-wing opposition party.

²⁷ “Un ejemplo de algo que era de la agenda propia del PAN, de la derecha, su idea de dismantelar PEMEX. El PAN nace como oposición a Lázaro Cárdenas, y la política. Una de las políticas más emblemáticas de Cárdenas es la nacionalización y expropiación del petróleo. Felipe Caldeón se propone dar los pasos necesarios para dar concesiones, [...] y se topó con que el PRI no lo aceptó y Andrés Manuel López Obrador encabezó una movilización en contra, no pudo. Luego llega el PRI y hace lo que antes se había opuesto y ahora lo hace como parte de la agenda de Peña Nieto. Aquí tenemos un ejemplo, lo que los panistas no pudieron los priistas lo hacen.”

with the start of President Fox's administration, and the end of President Calderón administration in 2012.

From the experts' view, it seems that some presidents lack the capacity to advance their agenda, particularly under divided governments. For example, President Fox (2000–2006) gave the impression of having conflicting priorities with cabinet members and political parties (Rubio, 2004). One of the informants observes that president Fox was very 'offhand' (casual) when defining his agenda and achievements and not much planning was done by the President and his staff (Q161130). Rubio argues that for the first non-PRI change of government was confident about having support for enacting his agenda (2004, p. 17):

[President Fox] assumed that everyone, including the Congress, would follow his lead and accede to his priorities simply due to the democratic feat he [accomplished]. His contradictory messages and campaign promises [...] became competing priorities in a fledgeling administration that [found] it difficult to define its goals, let alone accomplish them.

A 'democratic bonus' was not enough for the President to promote his idea of 'change' as this was a vision about the democratic and economic development of the country that he largely left undefined (Jaime, 2004). Similarly, the presidency of Felipe Calderón (2006–2012) was not exceptional with regard to having weak presidential power and agenda-setting capacity when compared with PRI's presidents from previous administrations. (see Mendez, 2018). For most of Calderón's administration, he experienced a congressional block by both members of the PRI and PRD. In general, presidents under divided governments are seen as weak in dealing with national politics (A161004, D161003, Q161120, S161212).

In 2012, after twelve years of having the PAN in the presidency, results of presidential elections transferred government back to the PRI. The political context regarding legislative-executive relations for Enrique Peña Nieto was not very different to those during the presidency of Vicente Fox and Felipe Calderón. However, President Peña Nieto signed a national political agreement with the representative of opposition parties the PAN and PRD for enacting reforms. The Pact for Mexico was a series of guiding principles for policymaking, aiming to strengthen the Mexican state and make the economy and political system more competitive. This included constitutional changes in different old corporatist sectors (i.e. the oil and energy sectors, the education sector and the Teachers' Union). The Pact came to an end at the beginning of 2013, ending Peña's period of constitutional-legislative reform and starting a stage of policy implementation.

4.3.3 Agenda-setting capacity and the Pacto por México

There is such consensus in some experts' opinions regarding the importance of the Pacto por México (Pact for Mexico) that this section provides extra details about this policy instrument. The Pact for Mexico was designed to be a solution for years of congressional obstruction and legislative paralysis. The Pact aimed to promote the development and growth of the national economy as well as an increase in competitiveness of the Mexican politics (Elizondo Mayer-Serra, 2017; Arrieta Cenicerros and Ramírez Arriaga, 2016). One of the informants observes this was a clever initiative by the Peña Nieto's administration (S161212). Another informant is of a similar opinion, suggesting that "*perhaps the greatest success and the biggest surprise of Peña's administration was the Pact, through which, before assuming office, he tied up things, a wonderful move!*"²⁸ (B161006). The Pact was a mechanism for achieving congressional support for his reforms, without resistance in Congress and with that expectation that if reform was possible to be achieved, the party might get an electoral bonus in the next elections.

Elizondo Mayer-Serra (2017) observes that the Pact came as a surprise to the public opinion and was an innovation in political agreements. The President's ability to persuade other political leaders about the results of these reforms was key for triumphing with this pact. This agreement showed a good capacity to negotiate and cooperate with political operators of the incoming government as well as the opposition parties' disposition for dialogue. Zamitiz (2016) is critical and describes the Pact as a political cooperation for policy reforms between just the Mexican political elites.

The Pact for Mexico had the purpose of giving a new type of agenda-setting capacity to the president. There has been an interest on the part of Mexican presidents in creating political, legislative coalitions before winning elections.²⁹ Electoral coalitions have been the main mechanism for winning an election in a context with increasing political competition (Méndez de Hoyos, 2012). These types of partnerships have never become long-term government coalitions. Many of these alliances have been broken immediately after the victorious president in a coalition initiates office. The political partnership was the first ever stable legislative coalition in Mexican politics (Baéz Carlos, 2016). This instrument of democratic governability in the presence of increasing Congress fragmentation gave President Peña Nieto an instrument to pass significant reforms and thereby institute policy changes at a level not seen in the last twenty years.

²⁸ "El éxito quizá mayor y la sorpresa más grande que hizo Peña, fue el famoso Pacto por México, en donde tenía amarrada muchas de las cosas antes de empezar y eso quizá siento que la entrada fue espectacular, maravillosa."

²⁹ Research on electoral coalitions is still in its infancy in Mexico. Among this literature, Reynoso (2011) has studied the impact of ideology in the formation of electoral coalitions. He finds that political pragmatism drives much of the formation of these alliances. Political parties build *prista* and *anti-prista* coalitions to win elections. Meanwhile, Devoto and Olmeda (2017) looks at electoral coalitions at the sub-national level and finds that coalitions between parties at the district level do not necessarily follow the original state coalition, which made a governor win an election. Méndez de Hoyos (2012) identifies some of the electoral rules that enable and incentives coalition formation.

The emergence of the Pact for Mexico indicates the necessity of creating a mechanism to help improve democratic governability and enhances the possibility of enacting policy agreements more effectively. The fragmentation of the party system and increasing plurality of the system show a need from almost any president to rely on political instruments to negotiate policy changes. The end of governments led by a highly disciplined hegemonic party reveals that the constitutional authority of the Mexican president to legislate is weak (Elizondo Mayer-Serra, 2017, p 24). This condition is raising debates about looking for institutional tools that can move a situation from a situation of failure to political success (Valdés-Ugalde, 2012). Arrieta Cenicerros and Ramírez Arriaga (2016) considers that the Pact for Mexico represents a new institutional reality in the political system in which persuasion and dissuasion are central for reaching political agreements. Espinoza Toledo (2016) observes that the Pact highlights a speech and action of the President and his team to achieve an “effective government”. The participation from society including consultation with interests groups was a missing element in the process (Espinoza Toledo, 2016). The fact that Mexican presidents may promote processes for being successful in producing policy change like the Pact for Mexico, increases the relevance of considering the institutionalisation of instruments like the Pact for Mexican to not be understated.

4.4 Discussion and conclusion

This chapter helped to identify a working mechanism able to produce policy change that could explain a feedback processes as defined in Chapter 2 in the theoretical framework. It makes a contribution to the agenda-setting literature by introducing political alliances as a factor generating policy change. This chapter presents evidence regarding an institutional tool for the formation of alliances in informal structures in a presidential political system. The approach taken here is consistent with the arguments of Cox and Morgenstern (2001) about Mexican presidents: they anticipate reactions and adjust their policy behaviour if the assembly can block presidential policy initiatives.

As the punctuated equilibrium theory suggests there is a point of stasis in policy until a policy adjustment overcomes a opposition to shifts in policy agendas. The moment when the president can overcome this opposition to change creates an opportunity to deliver policy change. In the theoretical framework (Chapter 2) this is describe as overcoming a certain level of friction. Chapter 2 in the theoretical framework explains that as long as it is possible to provide an explanation of two forces generating change — negative and positive feedback — it is possible to use this theory for describing any other decision process.

This chapter uses the theoretical framework (Chapter 2) to connect findings from informants’ opinions to the presence of punctuated equilibrium theory in a democratisation

context and to explain dynamics of policy changes with moments that at times favours change but at some other also oppose to shifts in policies. The process explaining policy change is described by many of the informants as the capacity of presidents to negotiate reform with members of Congress and interest groups. In Section 4.3.2, the analysis shows that some informants consider that elements like a shared understanding about issues and a sense of urgency regarding policy problems are present in the formation of coalitions as a process supporting policy change. By contrast the inability of presidents to build agreements generates political paralysis, which in this chapter has been argued to be a process opposing to change and generating stasis in presidential policy agendas.

The mechanism for political cooperation supporting policy changes finds its basis in institutional structures that help to reduce conflict and legislative paralysis. The formation of political alliances generates a process that gives the president the capacity to move discussions to higher levels of national politics. The presidents play an essential role in communicating a particular policy message within a policy monopoly in Congress. As a *policy entrepreneur* the president convinces other actors about the relevance of a policy to be changed. This generates a process which resolve political stalemate between Congress and thus allow political cooperation in order to reach agreement in similar policy priorities.

From some of the informants opinions, there is evidence that a reduction of political disagreement between the president and Congress increases the likelihood of policy change. As this chapter described before, instruments like the Pact for Mexico and other legislative alliances are consider to affect presidential decision processes. Following the theoretical framework (Chapter 2), this can be understood as the presence of a positive feedback process that relies on the capacity of a president to be a policy entrepreneur able to change discussion regarding particular policy issues. The Mexican president is an actor who seeks to build institutional forms of cooperation. Chapter 2 described this as the president being able to create a process in where he is able to accommodate different policy priorities into a shared policy interest. Meanwhile, a negative feedback process is understood as a force favouring the status quo and is explained by the fact that discussions do not progress and political cooperation is not possible. Some of the informants observe that some presidents faced minority governments where block in Congress was difficult to be overcome. Therefore, it will create political gridlock that as a consequence will generate continuous stasis in presidential policy agendas.

The analysis included identifying whether presidents in Mexico usually engage in building coalitions in Congress or, by contrast, try to adopt an autocratic strategy to bypass Congress. The findings shows that the Mexican president usually serves as a *coalition formateur* who is able to recruit legislative support in order to foster legislative alliance that can support the president's policy initiatives and priorities in Congress (see Casar, 2013). In a context where cooperation is not possible the degree of political polarisation is high and makes it difficult for policies to adjust to changing political environments

(see [Spiller and Tommasi, 2007](#)). If the institutional settings allow empowering a president to be the embodiment of the interests of the nation, there will be few incentives to create cooperation with other political actors. The president will have enough political power to produce shocks to quickly and forcefully re-prioritise the allocation of resources and definition of programmes. However, the analysis demonstrates that this is not the case for Mexico, and presidents usually need to engage in building coalitions to generate change in presidential policy agendas.

The analysis confirms that attention is always distributed across different domains. The informants recognise that attention changes across presidential administrations leading policy content to change over time. There is evidence that presidential policies do not necessarily follow gradual patterns of change (near stasis). It was possible to identify a mechanism behind positive and negative processes of policy change as a response to political gridlock for the case of Mexico. A step forward is to observe this working mechanism in outcomes of presidential policies with empirical analysis. The next analytical chapters aim to contribute to this objective. They show, through a quantitative approach, the impact of this mechanism on presidential policy actions. The focus in [Chapter 5](#) is to identify punctuated patterns of change in policymaking by analysing presidential speeches. Meanwhile, [Chapter 6](#) measures the extent to which presidents are able to define their policy priorities and can exercise influence over the definition of policy priorities in other institutional agenda at other stages of the policymaking process.

Chapter 5

Content and diversity of presidential agendas

5.1 Introduction

In the institutional design of presidential systems, the position “as the head of a representative government” gives “opportunity for presidents to exert popular leadership in battles over public policy” (Bimes, 2007, p. 254). Similar to other presidents in other democracies, Mexican presidents face pressure to respond to demands from different communities and organisations in the country. However, there are limitations in presidents’ capacity to solve problems as they cannot attend to all issues at the same time, and, as a result, only a few issues can capture presidents’ attention simultaneously. Chapter 4 showed that in the opinion of experts, every president needs to emphasise particular issues and disregard others. Therefore, not every issue can reach the policy agenda, and presidents are always responding to different factors that happen at the same time. The ability of the president to focus just on few issues, often makes him to set political dispute over particular policy domains that are politically relevant for his administration. The definition of a presidential policy agenda is a political action that requires some issues to be given priority over others.

The analysis in this chapter shows the process for allocating policy attention to issues is a strategic action. The processes require decisions regarding where to subtract attention for allocating attention to an alternative issue. The process for prioritising issues is a dynamic process and issue-attention may thus follow patterns where policy agendas remain unchanged and at certain moments changes can occur. This is argued to produce patterns of policy change consistent with the punctuated equilibrium theory. An aim of this analysis is to use quantitative data to corroborate the punctuated equilibrium theory.

This analysis is done by identifying patterns and characteristics of the attention of Mexican presidents using the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) coding system. The analysis uses the ‘Informe de Gobierno’ (government speeches) to understand the distribution of attention in presidential policy agendas, as well as continuity and shifts in policy attention.

In this chapter punctuated equilibrium theory helps to explain patterns of policy attention as a result of a process where presidents need to engage in strategic actions to overcome opposition to policy agendas. Therefore, the distribution of the attention of Mexican presidents shows that the policy agenda is an entity displaying patterns of policy attention with incremental changes (near stasis) over time. However, it is also possible to identify some significant policy changes. There are responses to a presence of a mechanism that helps policy change to be likely based on the formation of coalitions (this was described in Chapter 4).

In the late 1990s, the end of the single-party regime brought transformations to the presidential policymaking process as described in Chapter 3. It has become harder for presidents to decide which policies to prioritise. The prioritisation of their preferred policy option sometimes faces legislative paralysis as many interests are at play with a more active opposition trying to influence policymaking. This political stalemate at times prevents a president from responding quickly to relevant social problems. The president faces high decision costs and institutional friction. In this environment, reaching political agreement with different political actors is essential for pursuing policy reform. Chapter 4 showed evidence that presidents need to build political alliances to be able to generate change in their policy agendas. This political context set institutional conditions that affect the allocation of presidential attention. Finding a mechanism to accommodate similar policy priorities helps the president to overcome friction that opposes policy change.

This chapter is divided in various sections. Section 5.2 and Section 5.3, expand on literature so as to be able to operationalise a test on the hypotheses set in Chapter 2 and factors that could affect presidential policy attention. In Section 5.4, results are presented regarding the dynamics of policy attention in presidential policy agendas following the CAP approach. The final section contains further discussion and conclusions about the dynamics of presidential policy attention.

5.2 Party ideologies and policy attention

The literature on party competition provides a useful starting point for studying presidential policy priorities. Traditionally positional competition has implied a left-right dimension on policy positions (see Klingemann et al., 1994; Hofferbert and Budge, 1992; Budge et al., 1987; Budge and Farlie, 1983). This strand of political theory — the party

mandate theory — argues that there is a difference between issues that politicians from different parties emphasise in their policy agendas. Hence right-wing parties emphasise different policy issues to those from members of left-wing parties. This theory about issue ownership provides an explanation as to the different positions on issue preference of various politicians and parties (Bawn, 1999). Holian (2006) argues that presidents gain support and approval by supporting issues their parties ‘own’. In more recent research, Egan (2013) argues that issue ownership correlates with party prioritisation of policy issues over time. This research shows that parties give priority to issues the public come to associate with their own party. For example, a conservative president can benefit and gain political support by talking about security and economic issues. Meanwhile, a liberal president might prefer to emphasise welfare related issues. Therefore, party ownership might create some incentives for the president to focus attention on issues that correspond with their party’s traditional issue positions. The expectation of the issue-ownership theory is that presidents from the same party will have similar policy attention. It helps to evaluate to what the extent changes in presidents’ parties generate shifts in policy agendas (instability).

For the Latin American region, scholars have recently examined party positions and policy agendas (see Arnold et al., 2017; Doyle, 2014). They have focused research on the dimensionality of the left-right positions of political actors and shifts in these positions. This perspective focuses on whether party positions always belong to the same left-right position (i.e. actors from left-wing parties will tend to take up left policy positions) or switch policy positions (e.g. Campello, 2014). With a closer look at policy outcomes, Stokes (1999) identifies party positions on economic policy and finds that presidents shift their policy preferences once they enter office. There is still an opportunity to advance knowledge in this literature as tests regarding the impact of party positions on policy agendas are missing.

For the Mexican political system, according to Freidenberg and Dösek (2012) there are three main parties in the Mexican party system, and their ideological positions differ. Freidenberg and Aparicio (2016) argue that the PRI party has never stopped being the median party, whereas the Acción Nacional (PAN) party is situated to the right of its ideological position and the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) is situated to its left. The Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) has always been able to hold a centrist position in the political spectrum of Mexican politics. The PAN sits in an opposite ideological position to that of the PRD party. Because of the ideological differences between these parties, therefore, this chapter considers that it is relevant to test for the influence of party ideology on policy attention in presidential policy agendas.

5.3 Policy agendas and autocratic, lame-duck or proactive presidents

As Chapter 2 showed, there are three hypotheses that can be tested regarding the dynamics of change in presidential policy priorities. This section explores the various explanations for these dynamic in presidential policy agendas.

It is possible to hypothesise continuous policy shifts in presidential agendas by following the literature on Latin American politics regarding autocratic forms of presidential policymaking. This associates strong presidents having substantial agenda-setting powers with a capacity to produce shocks to the system (Corrales, 2018; Negretto, 2013; Mainwaring, 1993; Shugart and Carey, 1992). A president might have the necessary political power to enact new policies. The dynamics of presidential policy attention is a response to the (formal and informal) institutional powers of presidents to freely change policy agendas. This feature of policymaking reduces the incentives of presidents to participate in cooperative agreements with other political actors. In settings where political cooperation is hard to sustain, there are incentives to change policies as there are changes in the political landscape (Spiller and Tommasi, 2007). The lack of checks and balances reduces the likelihood of preventing the emergence of strong and centralised powers (see Fukuyama, 2008). This absence of control might allow systems to tendencies powerful and autocratic executives (O'Donnell, 1994). It could be that responses of presidential agendas exhibit differences in presidents because of personalistic leadership.¹ This will produce high volatility in policymaking. This analysis thus considers the possibility of testing the *Unstable Agendas Hypothesis* (H2)² by seeking evidence of priorities exhibiting constant abrupt and radical change.

The theoretical framework in Chapter 2 also presented the *Stable Agendas Hypothesis* (H3)³ regarding that the dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit great policy continuity. The assumption is that the Mexican president lacks enough political power to reform policy. The president may just have a 'lame-duck' presidency. A lame-duck president lacks support in Congress as members of Congress have no interest in following the lead of the president, especially when not following the president can create political liability and an increase in individual wealth. The presence of political fragmentation further reduces the ability of presidents to reach political agreements. This inability to reach agreements can explain the presence of long periods of gradual change (near stasis) in policy agendas. This analysis tests this hypothesis quantitatively, using data on the

¹See Section 2.7.4 for further reference regarding personalistic leadership. Kostadinova and Levitt (2013, p. 490-491) define personalistic leadership as "the exercise of authority vested in influential individuals based on their personal power rather than their role in a well-structured and/or programmatically oriented organization."

²*Unstable Agendas Hypothesis (H2): The dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit repeatedly abrupt and radical change.*

³*Stable Agendas Hypothesis (H3): The dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit stable patterns of change.*

policy content of the presidential agenda, and thus appraises the findings based on experts' opinions. The pattern of policy attention shown by presidential policy agenda are going to be close to incrementalism (near stasis) rather than to 'punctuated equilibrium' patterns of change.

The qualitative analysis conducted in Chapter 4 offers evidence to support punctuated equilibrium theory, as elites informants consider presidents to be political actors that face limitation in their capacity to generate policies and react to changing political environments (see Section 4.3.2). This chapter therefore undertakes a test of the *Punctuated Equilibrium Agenda Hypothesis (H1)*⁴ to further assess whether the dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit by both incremental patterns of change (continuity/near stasis) and radical shifts in policy attention (punctuations). If punctuated equilibrium is the case, the dynamics of issue-attention will respond to institutional conditions dampening pressures for agenda change. It will combine shifts in policies between periods of incremental change and radical changes.

Mainwaring and Shugart (1997) argue that the problem with presidential systems is their combination with multipartism. The institutional combination of a multiparty system and presidentialism is likely to produce deadlock, which later can produce disagreement between the Executive and the Legislative branches, resulting in a crisis of a democratic system. A system with fragmentation resulting from having a multiparty system might increase the incentives of political actors for rent-seeking. The fact that political actors protect individual political benefits generates a sort of political paralysis. It pushes political parties to work on political and electoral vehicles to pursue individual interests (Huber and Stephens, 2012). This inability of presidents to set policy agendas pushes the opposition and other political actors to support, as the only solution to political gridlock, military intervention and the formation of authoritarian forms of political regimes (Mainwaring and Shugart, 1997; Linz, 1990).

A mechanism to avoid stalemate and create support for presidential policies is to form informal coalitions in Congress. These alliances between parties happen when the presidents build ad-hoc legislative coalitions many times on an issue-by-issue basis (Negretto, 2006). The president is a political actor that is able to generate radical policy shifts in the policy agenda. If presidents raise a sense of urgency and an issue gains relevance, it is likely that they will gain support from other political actors.

For enhancing the capacity of policy agendas, Mexican presidents in office have relied on forming coalitions for reform success (see Chapter 4). In Mexico, since 1997 no party has had a majority in Congress. The formation of coalitions is essential for passing legislation in both chambers (Freidenberg and Dösek, 2012; Nacif, 2006). As Nacif (2003, p. 3) explains, "the ordinary policymaking procedure requires only that a majority in

⁴*Punctuated Equilibrium Agenda Hypothesis (H1): The dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit both incremental patterns of change and abrupt change (punctuations).*

Table 5.1: Representation and agenda-setting capacity by legislature

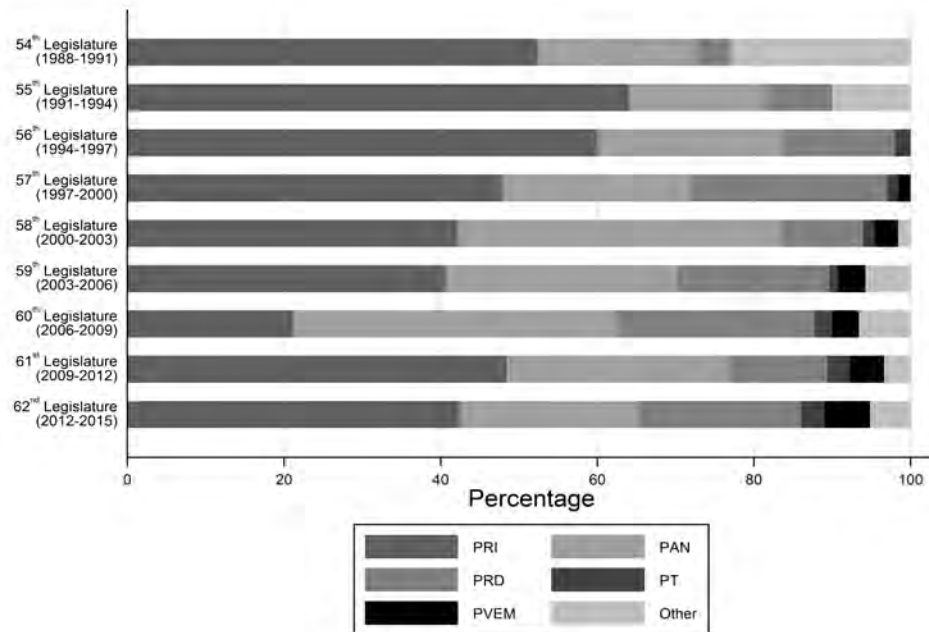
President	Party	Legislature	Congress	Senate	Leg. Cap.	Const. Cap.	Veto
Salinas	PRI	54 th (1988–1991)	52%	94%	Yes	No	Yes
	PRI	55 th (1991–1994)	64%	95%	Yes	Yes	Yes
Zedillo	PRI	56 th (1994–1997)	60%	74%	Yes	No	Yes
	PRI	57 th (1997–2000)	48%	59%	No	No	Yes
Fox	PAN	58 th (2000–2003)	41%	36%	No	No	Yes
	PAN	59 th (2003–2006)	30%	37%	No	No	Yes
Calderón	PAN	60 th (2006–2009)	41%	41%	No	No	Yes
	PAN	61 st (2009–2012)	28%	41%	No	No	Yes
Peña Nieto	PRI	62 nd (2012–2015)	42%	41%	No	No	Yes

Source: Own elaboration using data from Congress (<http://www.congreso.gob.mx/>)

the Chamber of Deputies, a majority of the Senate and the president of the Republic agree on an alternative to the existing policy.” However, in Mexico, the policymaking process requires bicameral cooperation. A legislative initiative is likely to have an origin in the chamber with a higher proportion of support, and then it moves to the revising chamber. It needs to win the support of a majority in both chambers. As Nacif (2006, p. 3) comments “[i]f agreement cannot be reached it will not be the end of the story, but the process will become more complicated.” A lack of a majority in the chamber of origin pushes the process back to start again, but the status quo will not necessarily prevail. Meanwhile, a lack of support from a majority in the revising chamber can push the process to gridlock. For policymaking procedures that require constitutional changes, a president needs considerable support from both chambers as a policy that requires an amendment to the Constitution requires two-thirds of support in both chambers if an initiative has been introduced. Mexican presidents have not had this support since 1998 except for the 55th legislature (1991–1994). If a president requires policy reforms on sections of the constitution, there will be a need to form coalitions and informal agreements to pass such policy reforms. Table 5.1 reports party share of seats, which indicates that having less than 50% in any chamber will require the formation of coalitions so as to be able to generate policy reform.

The presidential veto power seems to be the only power that presidents can use in divided governments. This veto power is an instrument to stop the opposition from blocking the enactment of a new policy. A president needs one-third of the total votes in any of the chambers to exercise this presidential power. Since the start of divided governments, except for the 60th legislature, the PRI party has always had more than one-third of the votes in Congress. This support gave presidents from the PRI power to veto any change to the constitution. The PAN has only had more than a third of support in Congress between 2000–2003 and 2006–2009. Therefore, the power of PAN’s presidents has been less, than that of presidents from PRI. Meanwhile, for the Senate, except for

Figure 5.1: Structure of Seats in Congress, 1988–2015



Source: Own elaboration based on Freidenberg and Aparicio (2016) and using data from Congress (<http://www.congreso.gob.mx/>)

2006–2009, the PRI has always controlled more than a third of the seats. As for the PAN party, having more than a third of the seats in the Senate allowed the PAN presidents to have veto power. This was the case even for the legislatures where the party did not have a third of the seats in Congress (2003–2006 and 2009–2012). In general, the PRI has always been able to secure a greater proportion of seats than any other party. Figure 5.1⁵ reports the percentage of seats in Congress for the major parties in Mexico. There is a similar pattern in the Senate. Figure 5.2 shows the structure of seats in the Senate.

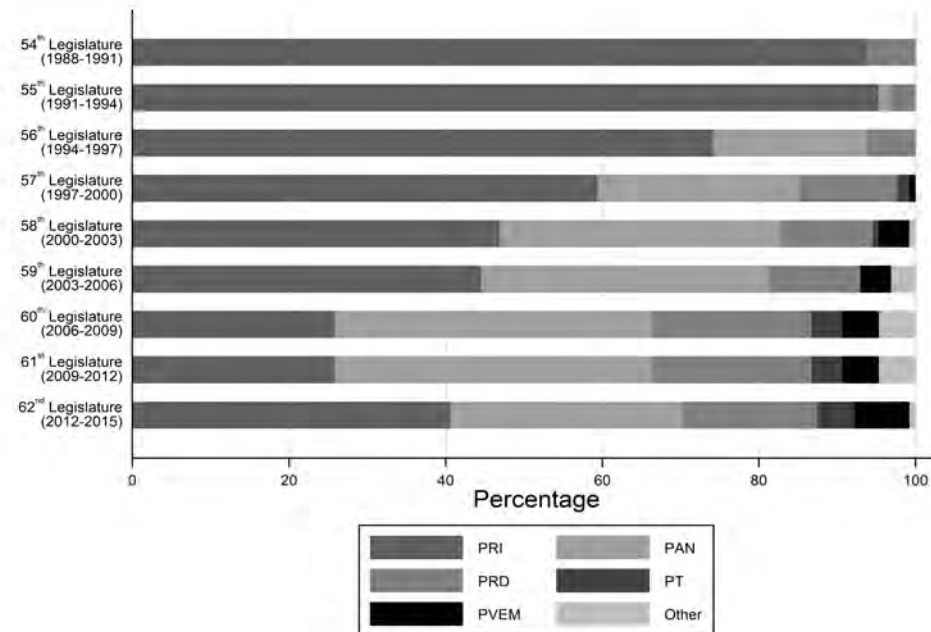
5.4 Agenda content and policy dynamics

The analysis examines changes in presidential policy priorities over time. The focus on trends describes the history of change,⁶ fluctuations between continuity and radical changes and the calculations and descriptive statistics using the proportion of policy

⁵In both Figure 5.1 and Figure 5.2, PVEM stands for Partido Ecológico de México, this is the Green Party. And PT stands for Partido del Trabajo which is the Labour party.

⁶This analysis uses a measure of trends in presidential priorities (i.e. share/proportion of attention). Measuring trends in policy attention is relevant for the study of agendas as it can explain the prevailing tendency of policy change over time that, is a ‘memory’ (regular occurrence in time) of the increase or decrease of changes.

Figure 5.2: Structure of Seats in the Senate, 1988–2015



Source: Own elaboration based on Freidenberg and Aparicio (2016) and using data from Congress (<http://www.congreso.gob.mx/>)

attention.⁷ For example, the proportion of policy attention on agriculture issues, is the number of total sentences that topics on agriculture receive in year t of the total number of sentences for all issues in a speech in year t . This measure also captures the limitations of agenda capacity as the proportion of attention for each topic and year are always measured against a total of 100%. This means that when there is an allocation of attention to one particular issue another issue loses attention. The focus of this analysis is also on the impact of changes in attention on the overall structure of attention and the diversity of the policy agenda (that is, the spread of attention across policy issues).

5.4.1 The ‘Must do List’ and the Informe de Gobierno Speech

For this analysis, the analysis uses the Informe de Gobierno speeches as an indicator of policy priorities. The Mexican president every year at the start of the annual legislative activity in Congress delivers this speech. This statement is made on behalf of the administration by the president of the Mexican Republic. The empirical analysis uses an original dataset containing presidential speeches for administrations between 1988 and 2015.⁸

The Informe de Gobierno speeches are governments’ policy instruments which signal policy priorities. Any president is free to highlight whichever issue they want in their addresses. It is common that governments in different countries outline policy priorities through such annual statements. Similar to the Informe de Gobierno speech, it is possible to find the State of the Union in the U.S. and the Queen’s Speech in the United Kingdom. The delivery of these types of speeches from Executives to the nation is also typical in other European countries and other industrial democracies including Australia, Denmark, Italy, Spain and the Netherlands (see Dowding and Martin, 2017; Jennings et al., 2017; Chaqués Bonafont et al., 2015; Chaqués Bonafont and Palau, 2011; Mortensen et al., 2011; Breeman et al., 2009). In Latin American, presidents in Brazil, Colombia, Chile and Argentina deliver this type of address, for example. López Varas et al. (2011) uses speeches of *Cuenta Anual*⁹ for observing policy dynamics of education and health issues in Chile.

There are various purposes of research using data from executive speeches. John and Jennings (2010) state that Queen’s Speeches are a tool to communicate a government’s activity to a broad audience including lawmakers, party members, voters and the media in the U.K. These type of executive speeches can be an instrument to highlight if there is any impact of ideology in government policy priorities (Mortensen et al., 2011;

⁷In this case, this is a proportional measure that refers to the fraction of attention of the total number of sentences in a presidential speech that a particular topic receives in a given year.

⁸The dataset introduced in this analysis allows the possibility of conducting comparative analysis in the future with other country members of the Comparative Agendas Project (<http://www.comparativeagendas.net/>).

⁹This refers to the Annual Account of the President of the Republic of Chile.

Table 5.2: The Comparative Agendas Project scheme by Major Topic codes

1. Macroeconomics	13. Social Welfare
2. Civil Rights	14. Housing
3. Health	15. Domestic Commerce
4. Agriculture	16. Defence
5. Labour	17. Technology and Science
6. Education	18. Foreign Trade
7. Environment	19. Foreign Affairs
8. Energy	20. Government Operations
9. Immigration	21. Public Lands
10. Transportation	23. Culture
12. Law and Crime	

Source: Own elaboration based on CAP's Master Codebook^a

^aThe CAP's Master Codebook has 21 topics, where the use of numbers 11 and 22 for naming topics are not part of the coding scheme.

Jennings et al., 2011b). Similarly, Bevan and Jennings (2014) use executive speeches to show how some issues catch the attention of government unexpectedly. Executives — both prime ministers and presidents — might have greater leeway to introduce topics in their speeches. However, a speech will always have limitations in its length and content. Therefore, every executive needs to carefully select which issues to emphasise to audiences using this policy instrument. Most of this research observes that the policy content of these type of governments' statements can provide rich information about their policy priorities, and by extension a mix of priorities can indicate their ideological preferences.

This analysis includes five administrations under the following presidents: Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–1994), Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León (1994–2000), Vicente Fox Quesada (2000–2006), Felipe Calderón Hinojosa (2006–2012) and Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–2018).¹⁰ This analysis first presents the general features of the speeches and continues to consider the nature of the structure of issue-attention in terms of policy content and agenda diversity.

The calculations use sentences as the unit of analysis in the text of each annual speech. These speeches were coded using a scheme of twenty-one topics (Table 5.2). This scheme follows the structure of the policy content coding procedure of the Comparative Agendas Project.¹¹ The use of a standard version of the codebook ensures comparability across countries and different policy instruments (e.g. speeches, legislation hearings, bills and laws, etc.) (see Larsen-Price, 2012; Breeman et al., 2009; Jennings and John, 2009). In

¹⁰I take only three years of president Peña Nieto, as a matter of research design. This research project has its origins as a master dissertation at the University of Southampton. As it progressed, the data were coded until 2015.

¹¹Comparative Agendas Project in <http://www.comparativeagendas.net/>

the coding scheme, for avoiding inconsistencies in fitting country-specific policies into a uniform content, there is the possibility to create policy subtopics (Jones, 2015). For example, for the South Korean case, a subtopic was created to include issues relevant to nuclear threats and economic cooperation between North Korea and South Korea (see Yoon, 2015). The Master Codebook Project¹² allows each country codebook to be harmonised into a unique coding scheme. Maintaining comparability across diverse political contexts is possible only through constant vigilance in each country's project. This comparative character of the scheme was kept for the case of Mexico. In this case, the coding process does not create new topic categories or subcategories for this study.

The following analysis is conducted at the level of major topics. The dataset consists of approximately 13,000 coded sentences in total. These numbers include both policy intentions and more general statements about policy priorities (see Breeman et al., 2009). The analysis does not consider ceremonial declarations, which constituted 23% of total sentences in presidential speeches between 1988 and 2015. The percentage of statements with no relevant policy content is higher than that observed in executive addresses in other democracies following this approach (Alexandrova et al., 2012; Jennings et al., 2011b; Breeman et al., 2009). The length of speech content varies in time, with the number of policy statements per speech ranging from 112 to 747.

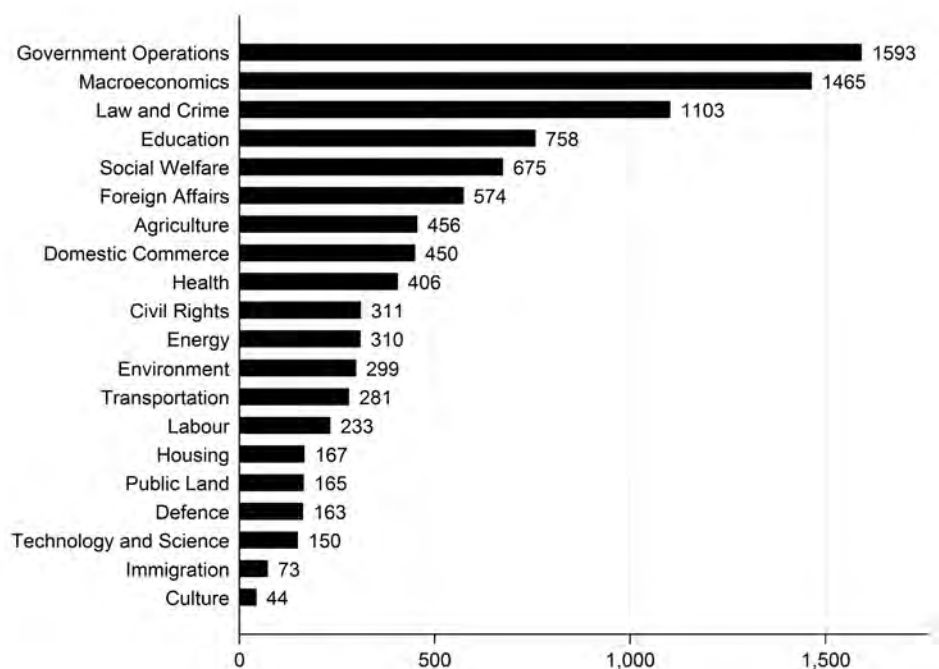
5.4.2 Changes in policy content

This section explores general policy attention across different issues. Some patterns of policy attention indicate a preference for particular policies. However, this analysis looks at measuring attention and policy agendas. The patterns of attention are observable by looking at the distribution of attention over the agenda. From this, thus, the first observation is that some topics are much more prominent within a president's agenda than others.

Figure 5.3 displays the total number of statements by major topic for the total time span of analysis from 1988 to 2015. The topics that received most attention related to policy concerning government operations. This received 19% of the president's total agenda. It is followed by policy on macroeconomics with more than 14% of the total policy attention. Issues on law and crime was the third highest topic with 12% of the total policy attention. On the other hand, science and technology, immigration and culture issues receive almost no attention in presidential speeches. Government operations, macroeconomics and law and crime attracted the greatest share of the president's attention in the last three decades (45% in total). These findings are consistent with what experts observed about presidential policy agendas in Mexico and were described in Section 4.3.1 as informants comment that in general, issues on macroeconomics, law

¹²Master Codebook Project website in <http://sbevan.com/cap-master-codebook.html>

Figure 5.3: Number of statements by Major Topic, 1988–2015



Source: Own elaboration

and crime and government operations including transparency and accountability occupy most of presidents' policy attention.

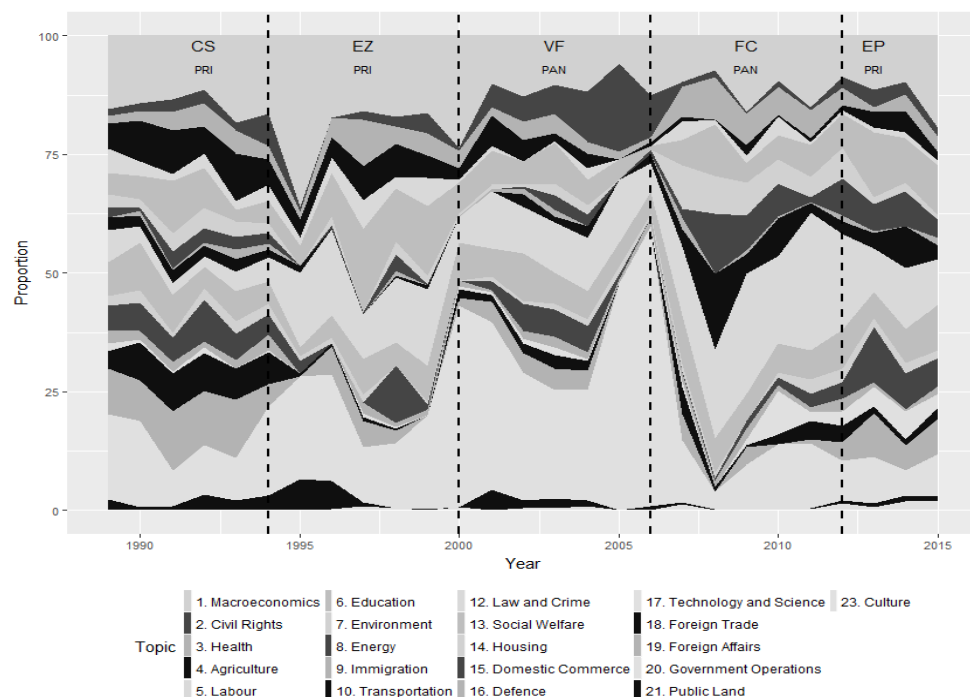
To observe the interaction between these topics, Figure 5.4 reports the relative proportion of attention of the total agenda from 1988 to 2015.¹³ The black, grey and white areas represent the percentage of attention by topic over time. These trends show how issues ebb and flow within the total policy agenda. There are periods where the level of attention suddenly declines from one year to the next year and attention rarely remains constant. The dynamics of these policies also show that large changes in attention, in the form of spikes in the share of the agenda, are also present across the policy agenda and over time. There are regular punctuations, consistent with the theoretical expectations regarding policy attention of agenda-setting theory. These results show similarities in their patterns of attention with other democracies including the U.S. and other European countries (Larsen-Price, 2012; Chaqués Bonafont and Palau, 2011; Mortensen et al., 2011; John and Jennings, 2010; Baumgartner et al., 2009b; Breeman et al., 2009).

The total proportion of attention given to the three most dominant topics¹⁴ — government operations, macroeconomics and law and crime issues — varies over time between 25% and 60%. If attention to these three core topics is lowered, space is expected to

¹³This graph shows the relative (percentage) attention of each topic in each year. The percentage of attention treats the space of the policy agenda as constant over time (see Jones and Baumgartner, 2005a). This measure also accounts for variations in the number of sentences of each annual speech as it measures percentages of attention on a 100% basis for each year.

¹⁴See Figure 5.3.

Figure 5.4: Relative distribution of coded policy topics by Major Topic, 1988–2015



Source: Own elaboration^{abc}

^aTopics in this graph follow the ordering number of the CAP's Master Coodebook

^bA change of government is indicated by vertical dashed lines.

^cCarlos Salinas (CS), Ernesto Zedillo (EZ), Vicente Fox (VF), Felipe Calderón (FC) and Enrique Peña (EP)

open up on the policy agenda for other issues to receive more attention. From Figure 5.4, there is evidence that when these dominant topics draw less attention, the policy agenda does not expand its scope to different themes like issues on technology and science, immigration or culture, for example. Some topics notably have never been very prominent in presidents' attention (i.e. immigration issues). There is no increase of attention to less prominent issues if attention is dropped from dominant issues. The attention tends to be reallocated to secondary issues i.e. education, social welfare, foreign affairs, domestic commerce and health (see Figure 5.3).

There is little evidence that the distribution of attention differs between presidents from different parties. For that reason, changes in government, in general, do not appear to create radical change in policy agendas based on partisan preferences. The distribution of attention across policy issues of presidents of the PRI (Carlos Salinas, Ernesto Zedillo and Enrique Peña) does not look that similar, despite relating to presidents of the same party. Punctuations in the attention between PRI's presidents rarely occur on the same issues. Similarly, for presidents of PAN (Vicente Fox and Felipe Calderón), it seems that preferences do not explain how they prioritise issues. The policy agendas between presidents, therefore, display substantial difference and changes are not explained by party control of the presidency. The conclusion indicates that presidents have different

policy priorities over time which do not conform to traditional party lines (see [Mortensen et al., 2011](#); [Baumgartner et al., 2009b](#); [Breeman et al., 2009](#); [Green-Pedersen, 2007](#)). Mexican presidents allocate their attention and compete for attention on issues their party do not own (see [Holian, 2004](#)).

President Fox (PAN) differentiates his policy agenda from outgoing President Zedillo from the PRI party, while President Calderón (PAN) tried to have a different agenda from the outgoing President Fox from the same political party. After the presidential elections of 2000s, President Fox had the task of promoting various policy reforms on government operations. In Fox's administration, different anti-corruption reforms were passed in Congress ([Gómez Vilchis, 2012a](#)). Meanwhile, President Calderón aimed to reduce problems related to crime and reducing drug-trafficking, thus, he gave greater attention to issues on law and crime. This explains the negative spike in issues of government operations, which allowed an increase in attention on law and crime issues after 2006. The attention given to government issues starts decreasing during Calderón's administration and crime and security issues become more relevant for his policy agendas. It seems like the issue of government operations has become less important and while that gap was initially filled by issues on macroeconomics, other topics are now starting to gain parity. From the figure one also observes that from 2014, all the three major topics seem to receive less attention when compared to the proportion of attention they used to receive in previous years. The rise of attention to issues like culture and technology and science more recently under President Peña (2012–2015) administration relates to an increase in the diversity of the policy agenda. This diversification of the policy agenda may, in part, be an effect of the Pact for Mexico and reforms agreed just after 2012 elections between the three major parties. These reform agreements included changes in legislation for issues on telecommunications, education and energy, for example.

For the PRI party, presidents Salinas (1988–1994) and Peña (2012–2015)¹⁵ seem to have distributed their attention between all topics with greater uniformity. However, these presidents, despite belong to the same administration, do not give the same proportion of attention to each issue. For example, issues on macroeconomics received 14.6% and 12.3% of attention respectively from Salinas for the total duration of his administration (six-year term) and from Peña for years between 2012 and 2015, which is the last year in the periods this thesis covers for the analysis (1988–2015). In another example, issues on law and crime received 4.0% from President Salinas and 10.5% from Peña. President Zedillo, also from PRI, focused more of his attention on macroeconomics issues compared to other PRI administrations. These patterns in policy attention are also evident by observing Table 5.3. Interestingly, all presidents, both from PAN and PRI, focus substantial attention on macroeconomics, government operations and law and crime issues. This suggests that the priorities of the presidential office have some

¹⁵President Peña Nieto was elected for the period between 2012 and 2018. This analysis only considers speeches until 2015 based on the research design of this project.

Table 5.3: Presidential policy priorities by administration and total, 1988–2015

Major Topics	Total	Carlos Salinas	Ernesto Zedillo	Vicente Fox	Felipe Calderón	Enrique Peña
		(1988–1994)	(1994–2000)	(2000–2006)	(2006–2012)	(2012–2015)
		PRI	PRI	PAN	PAN	PRI
Macroeconomics	14.3%	14.6%	19.8%	12.4%	11.7%	12.3%
Civil Rights	3.6%	2.0%	2.7%	7.7%	2.3%	2.6%
Health	4.0%	3.5%	4.4%	2.9%	5.8%	2.9%
Agriculture	3.9%	7.8%	5.4%	3.0%	0.9%	2.7%
Labour	2.1%	2.8%	3.8%	0.7%	1.8%	1.0%
Education	7.5%	6.2%	10.3%	6.2%	5.5%	10.1%
Environment	2.8%	3.2%	1.3%	1.1%	5.6%	2.7%
Energy	3.0%	2.4%	1.2%	1.0%	5.2%	6.1%
Immigration	0.6%	0.8%	0.4%	0.5%	0.6%	0.8%
Transportation	2.8%	2.5%	0.7%	1.1%	5.9%	4.4%
Law and Crime	12.0%	4.0%	13.1%	10.5%	21.0%	10.5%
Social Welfare	6.6%	7.2%	5.2%	6.9%	6.7%	7.7%
Housing	1.4%	2.2%	1.1%	0.9%	1.3%	2.1%
Domestic Commerce	3.9%	6.1%	3.3%	3.3%	1.2%	7.1%
Defence	1.5%	1.9%	1.2%	1.3%	1.5%	1.4%
Technology and Science	1.5%	0.8%	0.3%	0.7%	2.4%	4.0%
Foreign Trade	2.8%	6.8%	1.5%	1.7%	2.2%	2.2%
Foreign Affairs	4.7%	10.8%	3.2%	3.1%	1.7%	6.3%
Government Operations	19.0%	12.4%	17.9%	33.0%	16.3%	10.5%
Public Land	1.5%	1.9%	2.8%	1.6%	0.3%	0.9%
Culture	0.4%	0.0%	0.3%	0.4%	0.3%	1.5%

Source: Own elaboration^a

^aThe grey areas show dominant issues for the total policy agenda between 1988 and 2015 for each administration. Also, light grey areas show the less relevant issues for the total policy agenda between 1988 and 2015 for each administration.

continuity over time. But changes on policy attention are also evident in presidential policy agendas.

From Table 5.3 it also seems that patterns of policy attention are not explained either by dominant presidents' policymaking or electoral business cycles. In particular, at the point when a new government comes into power does not coincide with large and radical changes of policy attention. It is possible that this is because Mexican presidents are responding to the complexity of the economic and political environment of the country. Epp and Baumgartner (2017) argue that governments tend to improve institutional capacity to focus on solving complex problems i.e. poverty, inequality and economic development where policy solutions are based less on partisan divides. The provision of clean water, for example, is an important function of government but complexity in solving this problem will be less than solving poverty or impacts of an economic crisis (see Epp and Baumgartner, 2017). As Epp and Baumgartner (2017, p. 248) argue "[p]olicies addressing complex issues are much more likely to undergo punctuations than those for simple issues." Meanwhile, it is also evident that patterns of change in presidents' policy attention do not follow gradual change (incrementalism).

5.4.3 Issue-attention and trends

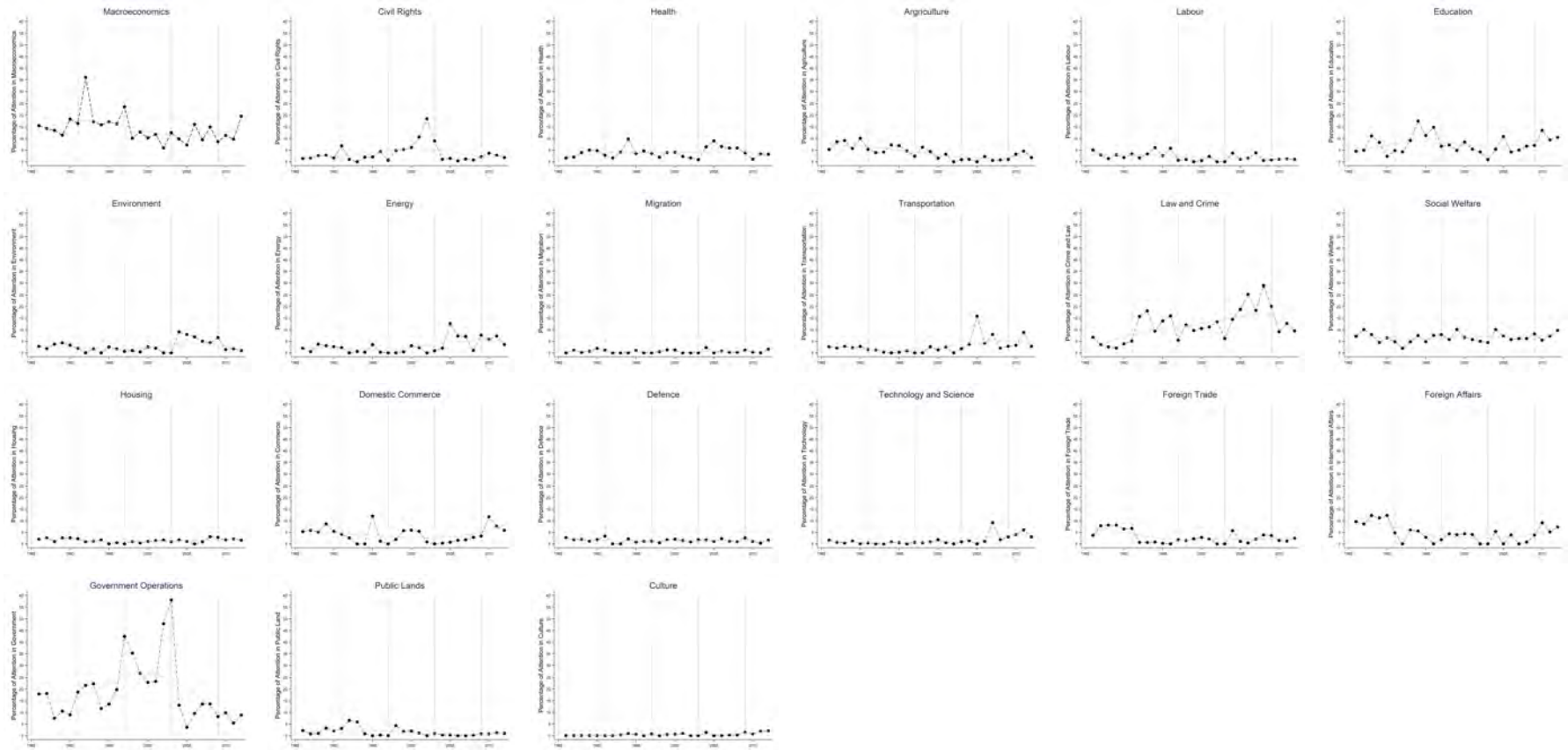
The previous section (Section 5.4.2) observes that issues can follow different dynamics of attention within the whole policy agenda for the years between 1988 and 2015. The policy agenda exhibits moments where policy attention remains relatively stable with a combination of punctuation marking increases or decreases of attention given to particular issues.

A look into the attention trends of each of the 21 major topics separately reflects different policy processes (see Breeman et al., 2009). The analysis estimates individual topic graphs and Loess¹⁶ regression curves to show overall patterns of annual change in proportions of policy attention (Figure 5.5). As with previous graphs, it uses the proportion of attention for each topic for each year. The graph for each topic uses the same scale of *y*-axis to provide better comparison and indication of relevant differences in policy attention between different issues. These graphs also account for variation in levels of attention. A change of government is indicated by vertical dotted lines. These graphs reveal that presidents have different policy priorities over time.

There are differences in the dynamics of attention on policy issues. Yet, some grouping can be useful for the analysis of trends to observe if groups of topics follow similar trends in their policy attention. First, in the last decades, some issues have become more prominent in presidents' policy agendas. There is an increase in the attention on

¹⁶This is a non-parametric smoothing technique that uses polynomial regression for finding the best curve fit (Freund et al., 2006, p. 295).

Figure 5.5: Policy topics, trends and Loess fitted regressions, 1988–2015



Source: Own elaboration

issues such as energy, law and crime, technology and science and culture since the early 1990s. Yet, particularly for issues on technology and science and issues on culture, it is not clear that this will be a long-term trend because the proportion of attention from the total attention given to these issues is still low. The proportion of policy attention to issues on technology and science varies over time between 2% and 8% between 1998 to 2015. It varies between 0% and 2% of attention for the years between 1988 and 2015 for issues on culture.

Second, there are other topics which exhibit a decrease in their attention. For example, agriculture issues seem to be following a pattern of decline in share of attention. There has also been a decrease in labour since early 2000 with a possible point of inflexion in 2004 signalling that this issue was starting to lose popularity in presidents' policy agendas. This decreasing trend of attention indicates a decline of attention given to issues on foreign trade, foreign affairs and public lands. These issues have lost popularity in presidential policy agendas. This pattern of attention may, in part, be an effect of presidents moving their policy attention into secondary issues i.e. education, social welfare, international affairs and domestic commerce issues (see Figure 5.3 for secondary issues receiving substantial policy attention after the three main policy issues that receive most of attention).

Third, there are those issues that rarely receive attention over time. This is the case for issues on housing and immigration. While these issues exhibit fluctuation in their policy attention patterns, the proportion of attention from the total attention remains low between 1988 and 2016. The proportion of policy attention to issues on immigration varies between 0% and 2% between 1998 to 2015. It varies between 0% and 3% of attention for years between 1988 and 2015 for issues on housing.

Finally, there are some other issues which experience sporadic changes at particular points in time. These punctuations, while they occur in various issues, are particularly evident in some issues including macroeconomics, civil rights, health, energy and transportation. There is a punctuation for the year 1995 for macroeconomics issues that may be an effect of the 1994 economic crisis; the 1994 Tequila Crisis. The topic of civil rights undergoes punctuations (1995 and 2006) as a response to the effects of governments' actions in response to the social movement of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN). Since 1994 the EZLN revolutionary army has been in a declared war against the Mexican state, seeking autonomy for indigenous communities in Mexico and an increase of presidents' attention to civil rights issues may be a response to this fact. But it was not until President Fox's administration (2000–2006) that legislation was passed on this issue. This may explain the presence of a punctuation in policy attention in this issue later in 2006. In 2008, three topics experienced large increases in policy attention. The issue of health received more attention from Calderón as a response to the 2008

influenza pandemic in Mexico. Meanwhile, the topics of energy and transportation received greater attention as part of the president's strategy to reduce effects of the 2008 global financial crisis.

There are four issues that may also be responding to the mechanism of change based on coalition formation in addition to the response to other external factors (i.e. economic, political or health crises): civil rights, health, defence and government operations. For example, changes in attention given to government operations issues might be explained by various reforms passed regarding government transparency and court and judicial reform including the presidencies of Zedillo of PRI (1994–2000) and Fox and Calderón from PAN (2000–2006 and 2006–2012). Knowing that every president since the end of the hegemonic regime has governed with minority governments,¹⁷ the only way of reaching these type of reforms is through the formation of coalitions through informal political negotiations.

In general, all policy areas exhibit a variety of patterns in terms of their share of attention of the Informe de Gobierno agenda over time. In Chapter 4 in Section 4.3.1, findings suggested that informants express the opinion regarding some topics increasing, decreasing or staying the same that is supportive of findings described previously in this section. It seems that patterns of policy attention are not explained either by dominant presidents' policymaking or electoral business cycles. In addition, gradual patterns of change do not explain changes in presidential policy attention.

5.4.4 Agenda content and dynamics of policy attention

For this section, the analysis moves to test with a robust statistical technique the persistent character of attention of Informe de Gobierno to policy issues and the effects of government change and party and political business cycles on policy attention. This is done to verify the findings from previous sections that suggest that presidents prefer some policy areas over others and that there is the persistence of this policy attention over time.

The analysis first conducts a time series autoregressive analysis. Therefore, diagnostic tests are conducted to ensure that data are stationary (i.e. there is no accumulation of shocks and the statistical properties of data have a constant variance, a constant autocorrelation structure and no seasonality over time). Dickey-Fuller (DF) are used to consider the null hypothesis of whether a unit root is present in the model.

The null hypothesis of these tests is that all panels contain a unit root. If looking at tests P, Z, L* and Pm, values for these test statistics and p-value, there is no presence of unit root. It is possible to reject the null hypothesis at the 5% level of statistical significance

¹⁷See Figure 5.1 and Figure 5.2.

Table 5.4: Unit root test for proportion of attention of speeches 1988–2015

		Test statistic	<i>p-value</i>
Inverse chi-squared	P	100.6147	0.0000
Inverse normal	Z	-4.8573	0.0000
Inverse logit t	L*	-5.3119	0.0000
Modified inv. chi-squared	Pm	6.3954	0.0000
Number of panels			21
Number of periods			27

*H*₀: All panels contain unit roots vs. *H*_a: At least one panel is stationary

since they are all smaller than 0.05. The results from Table 5.4 confirm that the shares of issues-attention displayed are stationary trends. The trends on the percentage of policy attention reject the presence of a unit root. There is, therefore, no evidence of exogenous shocks that persist over time in a series of policy attention, and the stationary processes return to equilibrium. This process is shown to be an autoregressive distributed lag (ADL) structure that does contain any deterministic trend in the mean. A lagged value of the dependent variable controls for the autoregressive nature of the policy agenda over time.

This model takes the form of an ADL model of the proportion of attention of the Informe de Gobierno to policy topics. The proportion of attention is a function of different variables as follows in Formula 5.1:

$$Y_t = a_0 + \beta_1 Y_{t-1} + \beta_2 Time_t + \beta_3 Party_t + \beta_4 Hnymoon_t + \beta_5 Pres2_t + \beta_6 Pres3_t + \beta_7 Pres4_t + \beta_8 Pres5_t + \beta_9 Ecocrises_t + \beta_{10} Statement_t + \epsilon_t \quad (5.1)$$

The model first looks for historical trends in time for policy topics. It also controls for the effect of party control with a variable that is coded 1 when a president belongs to the PRI party and 0 when the government is from the PAN party.

This analysis test for effects of political business cycles as well. Light (1999) argues that the impact of approval, congress configuration and expertise relates to presidential capital and the capacity to enlarge policy agendas. There is a dilemma in the interaction between these resources because support for a president is high at the beginning of his administration, but it decreases over time. This creates incentives for them to enact policy at the beginning of an administration. This effect is measured by a variable for presidential honeymoons which account for the effects of political incentives for enacting policy early in office. This is measured with a dummy variable. This measure indicates the first year of each administration, which characterises a honeymoon period to analyse whether presidents are given a period of enthusiastic support early in office.

There is a control for the effects of presidents with a dummy variable to identify each presidency. These variables measure for instability (change) due to a change of government. A key factor in punctuated equilibrium theory is the possibility of a presence of policy shocks and abrupt change. Therefore, the model includes a variable measuring the effect of an economic crisis on policy attention. The president can focus his attention on particular issues when an economic crisis occurs, while he will reduce his attention to some other issues if the economic situation decays. This is a dummy variable that is coded as equal to 1 when a crisis occurs. Finally, the model also controls for the effects of agenda size measured by the number of statements in the speech per year.

In the Formula 5.1 the policy agenda (Y_t) is a function of a constant term (α_0), plus the lagged value of the dependent variable measured as the level of attention to an issue (Y_{t-1}), a variables controlling for historical trends ($Time_t$), two dummy variables to control for partisan effects ($Party_t$) and honeymoon periods ($Hnymoon_t$), five variables for measuring effects by each administration¹⁸ ($Pres2_t$, $Pres3_t$, $Pres4_t$, $Pres5_t$), a variable which considers if the speech was delivered during periods of economic crises or stability ($Ecocrises_t$), a variable to control for the number of statements in each speech ($Statement_t$) and a random shock (ϵ_t). The variable for statements controls for the possibility of variations in length and structure of Informe de Gobierno speeches: this reduces the impact of inconsistencies in these speeches when measuring effects of other variables on policy attention.

This model has the advantage of uncovering a general relationship between attention of Mexican presidents across all policy topics and effects of past levels of policy attention that account for boundedness and other explanatory variables. Table 5.5 present results for macroeconomics, energy, law and crime, government operations, health, education and social welfare. The model presents results for main issues in presidents' agendas and secondary issues. Appendix C presents results for all the other issues.

The lagged value of the topic proportion of attention is significant at the 99% confidence level for issues on domestic commerce, 95% confidence level for issues on transportation, immigration and macroeconomics, and at the 90% confidence level for issues on labour. These findings are consistent with the argument that the policy content of presidential speeches is persistent and follows near stasis over time. There is evidence of an increase of attention over time with trend — $Time_t$ — positive and significant at 90 and 95 per cent confidence level for issues on civil rights and government operations respectively. Table 5.5 shows that less prominent issues like technology and science, housing and culture have not received increasing attention over time. The results indicate that macroeconomic issues have had decreasing policy attention. Similarly, issues on agriculture show significant values that indicate a decreasing trend in policy attention given

¹⁸For these dummy variables there is a need for a base category as a variable for estimating this model. The model takes as a base category the administration of President Salinas de Gortari for observing the characteristics of changes in policy attention.

Table 5.5: Panel regression autoregressive model of main topics and less prominent topics

Variables	1. Macroeconomics	12. Law and Crime	20. Government Operations	9. Immigration	17. Technology and Science	23. Culture
L.Speeches (Y_{t-1})	-0.413** (0.171)	-0.0114 (0.138)	0.173 (0.109)	-0.427** (0.194)	-0.311 (0.202)	0.0384 (0.224)
Time ($Time_t$)	-1.685** (0.716)	0.763 (0.505)	2.182** (0.928)	-0.192** (0.0772)	0.250 (0.261)	-0.0883 (0.0561)
Party ($Party_t$)	-4.821 (5.313)	7.257* (3.937)	0.0257 (6.189)	-0.882 (0.625)	-0.578 (2.014)	-0.696* (0.422)
Honeymoon ($Hnymoon_t$)	4.920 (3.215)	-3.845 (2.360)	7.842* (4.256)	0.244 (0.378)	-0.536 (1.260)	0.436 (0.292)
Zedillo ($Pres2_t$)	21.95*** (6.404)	7.355* (4.072)	-20.13*** (7.027)	1.468** (0.650)	-1.396 (2.095)	1.577*** (0.438)
Fox ($Pres3_t$)	16.04 (10.43)	6.381 (7.097)	-26.53* (13.85)	2.723** (1.134)	-2.541 (3.732)	1.714** (0.774)
Calderón ($Pres4_t$)	24.78* (13.88)	12.00 (9.429)	-56.39*** (18.03)	3.625** (1.507)	-1.537 (4.961)	2.253** (1.062)
Peña ($Pres5_t$)	38.89** (17.05)	-9.803 (11.82)	-64.24*** (21.40)	5.123*** (1.866)	-0.358 (6.033)	4.177*** (1.268)
Crisis ($Ecocrises_t$)	-2.938 (3.135)	0.828 (2.373)	-1.102 (3.834)	0.135 (0.522)	-2.106* (1.178)	-0.625** (0.314)
Statements ($Statement_t$)	0.0183* (0.00989)	0.00175 (0.00703)	-0.0543*** (0.0112)	0.00519*** (0.00114)	0.00310 (0.00374)	0.00316*** (0.000760)
Constant	3,371** (1,425)	-1,525 (1,004)	-4,304** (1,849)	381.3** (153.5)	-499.0 (519.1)	174.7 (111.6)
R-squared	0.608	0.834	0.895	0.592	0.550	0.748

Standard errors in parentheses, *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Source: Own elaboration

to these issues. These results are consistent with Section 5.4.3 regarding decreasing attention in macroeconomics and agriculture.

The ADL model reveals a few noticeable differences between policy attention and party affiliation. On average, presidents of the PRI allocate greater attention to issues on civil rights and law and crime. The allocation of attention of PRI presidents is less for issues on social welfare, foreign trade and culture. In another example, presidents from PAN — right-wing party — allocate greater attention to social welfare issues than PRI presidents, which have a more centrist ideological view. There is no evidence of instability in policy attention associated with party affiliation. In general, effects for electoral cycles are not considered to be strong in determining dynamics of presidents' issue-attention.

A lack of significant effects of dummy variables measuring differences by administration leads to conclusions that the priorities of the presidents have great continuity over time. The effect of change of presidents on policy attention is only significantly different for the presidency of Carlos Salinas (this is the presidency that the ADL model uses as a point of reference) and the presidencies of Zedillo, Calderón and Peña for issues on macroeconomics, for example. Issues on government operations also show differences by the administration at the 99% confidence level for the presidencies of Zedillo, Calderón and Peña, and 90% confidence level for Fox's presidency. Just a few topics show significant in changes in policy attention because of changes of presidents in government. This supports the argument that policy agendas do not present continuous instability, as the *Unstable Agendas Hypothesis* (**H2**) suggests. The fact that, on occasion, a change of president in government shows significant effects on the nature of issue-attention also leads to the rejection of the *Stable Agendas Hypothesis* (**H3**). These few changes on policy attention provide evidence that the dynamics of policy attention are not fully explained by stasis (incrementalism).

The impact of honeymoon periods has significant negative effects for issues on civil rights, health, labour and transportation, meaning that in general presidents restrict their attention to these topics at the beginning of their administrations. This model does not find significant effects regarding economic crises. Therefore, while the patterns of policy attention show incrementalism or near stasis combined with some punctuations, the effect of crises on policy attention is not strong (at least in the period studied in this thesis).

A panel time series cross-sectional ADL model is also defined to measure effects of variables across the total policy agenda. This model uncovers the relationship between attention in presidential speeches across all topics and the effects of past levels of attention (lagged) and different explanatory variables. The model estimate effects of variables used in the previous model, but drops the variable to measure historical trends ($Time_t$),

Table 5.6: Panel regression autoregressive model for the President's policy agenda

Variables	Panel Regression
L.Speeches (Y_{it-1})	0.774*** (0.0675)
Party ($Party_{it}$)	-1.05e-07 (8.75e-08)
Honeymoon ($Hnymoon_{it}$)	1.28e-08 (4.40e-08)
Zedillo ($Pres2_{it}$)	6.67e-09 (5.21e-08)
Fox ($Pres3_{it}$)	-1.16e-07 (9.43e-08)
Calderón ($Pres4_{it}$)	-8.83e-08 (9.37e-08)
Peña ($Pres_{it}$)	-1.36e-08 (5.56e-08)
Crisis ($Ecocrises_{it}$)	-2.06e-09 (5.38e-08)
Statments ($Statement_t$)	7.16e-11 (1.15e-10)
Constant	1.077*** (0.321)
Observations	546
Number of topic	21
R-squared	0.599

Standard errors in parentheses, *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Source: Own elaboration

as it produces asymmetries in estimation matrices when calculating results for this time series model. The model takes the mathematical form as follows in Formula 5.2:

$$Y_{it} = a_0 + \beta_{1it}Y_{it-1} + \beta_{2it}Party_{it} + \beta_{3it}Hnymoon_{it} + \beta_{4it}Pres2_{it} + \beta_{5it}Pres3_{it} + \beta_{6it}Pres4_{it} + \beta_{7it}Pres5_{it} + \beta_{8it}Ecocrises_{it} + \beta_{9it}Statement_{it} + \epsilon_{it} \quad (5.2)$$

The results in the Table 5.6 confirm the autoregressive nature of the policy attention of Mexican presidents. This finding indicates that past values of topics' attention predict future values of policy attention in presidential policy agendas. The presence of

a crisis does not punctuate the agendas. The rest of the independent variables are non-significant.

5.4.5 Diversity of presidential policy agendas

Finally, the analysis turns to consider the issue of diversity of government attention in the Informe de Gobierno speeches. The measure of diversity can also help to identify gradual and rapid change in presidents' policy attention. The expectation is that changes in agendas occur as presidents mobilise support for policy issues by introducing issues as part of their 'list' or generating change in agendas' diversity.

Agenda diversity weights the attention given to issues relative to one another. The concept includes both describing the distribution of attention to each issue, and the similarity, or lack thereof, in the distribution of attention between all issues (Boydstun et al., 2014). There is the possibility of attention disparities because policy priorities have different importance and this importance changes over time (see Jennings et al., 2011b). It is possible to use a measure of agenda diversity as an indicator of some of the characteristics of the policy agenda.

The allocation of attention within the policy agenda works as a zero-sum game, where if one issue gains attention then another issue loses it. Some issues might dominate the policy agenda, while other issues might only gain access to the agenda when the issues that traditionally dominate become less important. Thus, when the proportion of attention given to dominant issues decreases, there can be a reorganisation of the policy agenda. Agenda diversity refers to the structure of attention. It is a dynamic process that exhibits both periods of expansion and contraction at different time points. A fair representation of various topics in the total agenda will produce high levels of diversification. If the agenda's policy attention expands relatively evenly across a greater number of issues, its diversity increases as well.

The analysis uses entropy scores as a measure of the issue diversity of attention across the policy agenda (see Yoon, 2015; Alexandrova et al., 2012; Jennings et al., 2011b,a). Entropy calculates diversity in the content of the speech by calculating the proportion of attention by major topic. The analysis uses Shannon's H measure to show the degree of concentration of presidents' attention across major topics. This is a probabilistic measure of the spread of observations across some categories (e.g. topics). A low entropy value of Shannon's H suggests a president concentrates attention on a single issue, whereas a high entropy value indicates greater dispersal of attention. The estimate of Shannon's H is the negative sum of the likelihood $p(x)$, where x is share or attention for each particular topic i , multiplied by the natural log of that likelihood. Formula 5.3 for entropy is written as follows:

$$H = (-1) \sum_{i=1}^n p(x_i) \ln(p(x_i)) \quad (5.3)$$

For values of zero, it is not possible to calculate logarithms. By following [Jennings et al. \(2011a\)](#), the calculation assumes that $0 \cdot \ln(0) = 0$ and no policy attention x was given in the speech for a particular topic i for that particular year. The maximum possible entropy value for the twenty-one major topic codes in Table 5.2 is equal to the natural log of 21 (i.e. 3.044). Any value close to 3.044 will indicate a president concentrates on a high number of topics and there is a high degree of entropy. An entropy score of 0 indicates that attention concentrates on a single topic. For calculating entropy values, the analysis uses the percentage of attention given to topic (i) each year.

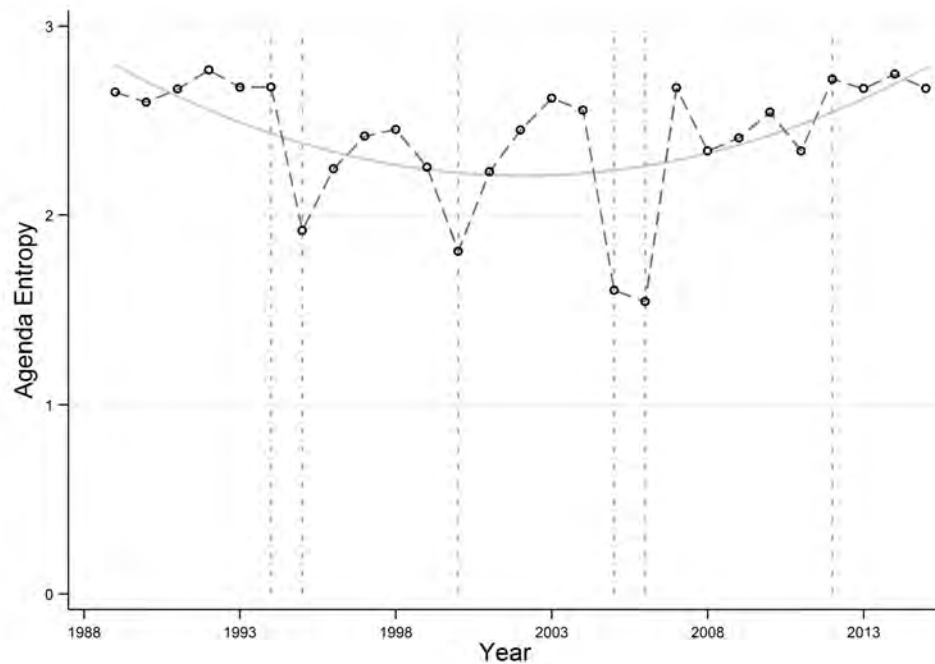
It may be that in Mexico the democratisation processes could be associated with an increase in the diversity of agendas and representation. An information-rich environment allows a greater diversity of opinions in the public agenda (see [McCombs and Zhu, 1995](#); [Chaffee and Wilson, 1977](#)).¹⁹ As the level of information increases, one could expect the levels of diversity will increase (see [Lasorsa, 1991](#)). The presence of opposition views might encourage public debates on important societal issues ([Chan and Lee, 2014](#)). These debates, regarding increasing social demands, can place extra responsibility on representatives and governments. As a result, the diversification of the policy agenda may experience some expansion in its policy attention.

However, all presidents face limitations in their ability to handle information, and there are also limitations on the agenda space when it comes to introducing further issue attention. Moreover, increasing political competition creates extra transaction costs. The political context reduces the ability of all presidents to secure enough political resources for enacting policies. The assessment of the effects of democratisation on presidential policy agendas is not straightforward.

It also can be that the diversity of agendas in a developing democracy faces restriction due to particularities of that democracy's political and economic conditions. In general, presidents in Mexico face high levels of poverty and inequality because of inefficiencies in their economic and welfare systems. Their administrations face pressure to increase universal access to social policy in order to reduce income inequalities and poverty ([Huber and Stephens, 2012](#)). There have been policy initiatives in support of meeting basic needs including education, health and social welfare to develop social programmes. Something similar can happen if a president faces political crises. The scope of the policy agenda that presidents have for allocating attention to a policy they prefer to prioritise certainly faces constraints.

¹⁹The public agenda refers to those issues people think need solving regardless of what they think about their solutions.

Figure 5.6: Diversity of presidential policy agenda, 1988–2015



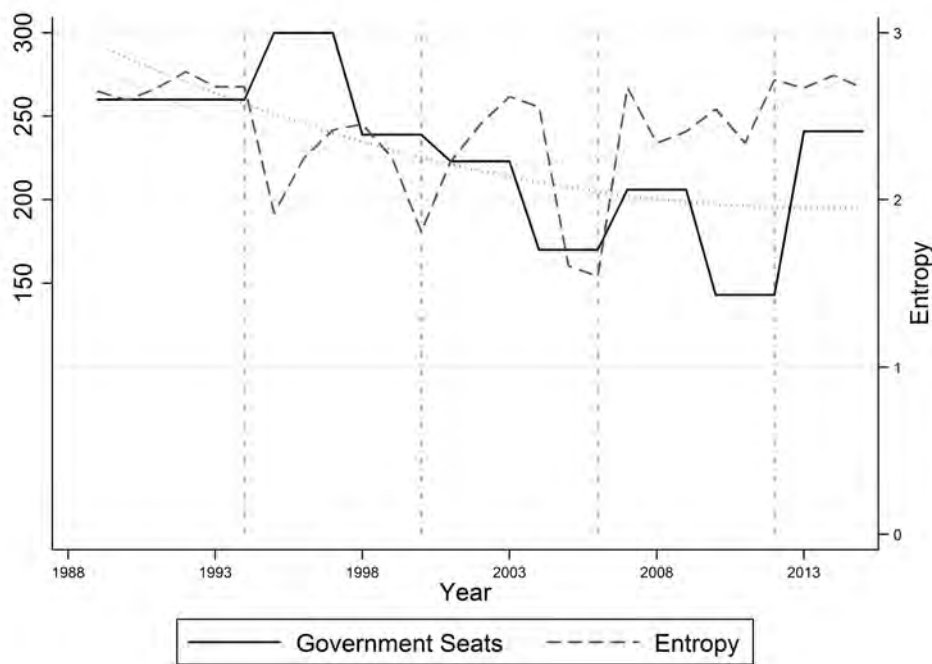
Source: Own elaboration

From the previous analysis, there is no strong evidence regarding the variation of agenda diversity for the Mexican cases. Figure 5.6 exhibits patterns of issue diversity of the Informe de Gobierno for major topics over time from 1988 to 2015. Yet, diversity of agendas fluctuated between continuity and instability.

The average entropy score is 2.417. This plot of issue diversity reveals that the dispersion of the policy agenda drops suddenly after the 1994 economic crisis and also during the presidential election of 2000. The agenda of President Zedillo just after the crisis concentrated on trying to pull the country out of the economic crisis. Meanwhile, President Fox concentrated his policy agenda on introducing a significant proportion of issues related to accountability and transparency. President Fox's last year of office and the first year of President Calderón's term also coincide with a drop of entropy levels. President Felipe Calderón won the presidential election in the middle of an electoral scandal and controversy about the electoral process. Members of Congress prevented the president from being able to access the Congress building and give his state of the union message. The message was delivered in an atmosphere of rejection towards the newly elected president. This had a direct impact on the length of the message and an indirect effect on the diversity of the policy agenda in 2006. After 2007 the level of issue diversity returned to similar levels of entropy as those seen in the early 1990s.

It seems that for the democratisation periods there has been an increase in the complexity of policymaking to deal with social problems and the political environment. The increase of institutional friction may be reducing the capacity of the president to expand

Figure 5.7: Diversity of presidential policy agenda and Government Seats, 1988–2015



Source: Own elaboration

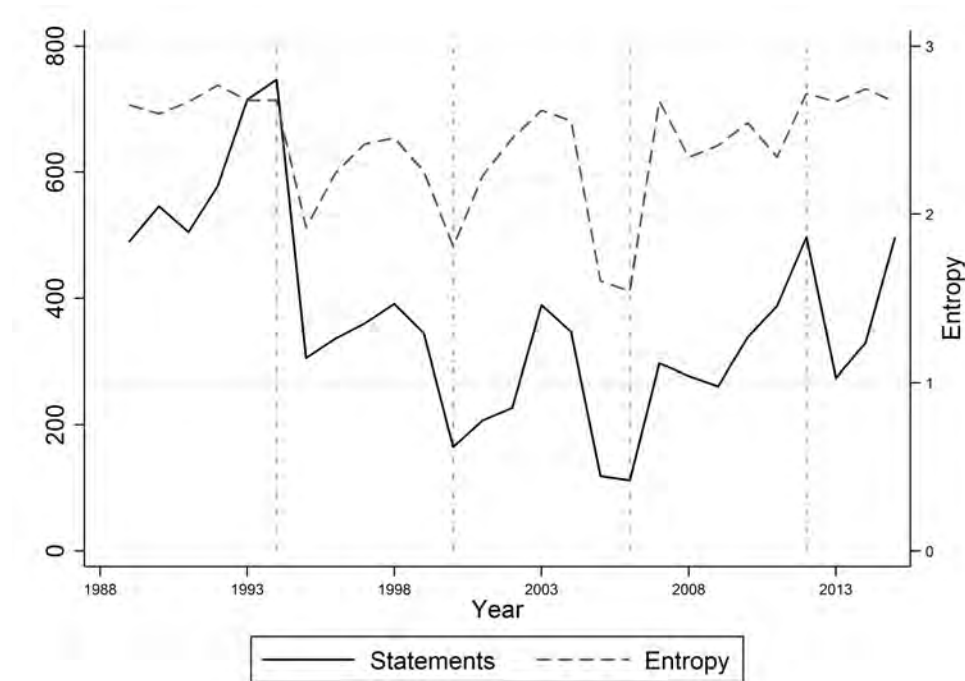
the policy agenda. Therefore, with an increase of political conflict, at times the policy agenda seems less diversified, particularly between the years 1995 and 2006. These are the years where the PAN party occupied office and where presidents have governed under divided governments.

In Figure 5.6, a plotted regression line fits in a U shape that predicts a non-linear relationship between the entropy values of Informe de Gobierno and time. The mean entropy levels between 1988 and 1993 are of 2.674; then it drops to mean levels of 2.246 between 1994 and 2007 and rises again to a mean value of 2.55 from 2008.

Figure 5.7 and Figure 5.8 show entropy levels plotted against government seats and the number of statements in speeches respectively. There is not a strong correlation between the diversity of policy agendas and support in Congress as shown in Figure 5.7. The relevant finding of this plot is that even when there is enough support in Congress, the presence of crises can set limits on president's agendas. This was the case for the 1994 economic crisis (Tequila Crisis) and its impact on agendas diversity in the subsequent year.

Figure 5.8 suggests that there may be some correlation between the length and content of the presidential speeches. An increase in the length of the Informe de Gobierno speech increases the agenda's diversity and vice versa. By looking at the plot, 2006 is the year where the diversity of the policy agenda reaches its lowest level. This is the year in

Figure 5.8: Diversity of presidential policy agenda and number of statements in Informe de Gobierno Speech, 1988–2015



Source: Own elaboration

which the president was impeded in delivering his message to Congress. The highest levels of diversification, by contrast, are when there is a political agreement. This is the case for Enrique Peña's administration and the effect of the Pact of Mexico. The levels of agenda diversity are particularly high between the years 2012 and 2015.

5.5 Discussion and conclusion

The analysis of the presidential policy agenda in Mexico shows that policymaking follows moments when an extended period of stability is observed, and it is interrupted by minor policy changes. The policy agenda of the Informe de Gobierno displays an incremental nature of policy attention that occasionally exhibits abrupt and large increases or decreases in attention for particular issues. This explains a disproportionate distribution of attention that is consistent with the punctuated equilibrium theory. The nature of the presidential policy agenda in Mexico is similar in its processes to other political systems that also show similar 'punctuated equilibrium' patterns of policy change (see Baumgartner et al., 2017; Alexandrova et al., 2012; John and Jennings, 2010; Breeman et al., 2009).

This analysis found that variables like electoral cycles and partisan preferences explain little, or none at all, of the change of attention in presidential agendas (see Baumgartner

et al., 2009c). The presence of strong electoral incentives increases the likelihood of presidents concerns regarding whether or not to include particular issues in the policy agenda (Light, 1999). The president's agenda is likely to exhibit some changes from administration to administration because there are continuous assessments of the possibility to include new policies. These incentives seem to be weaker in this democratisation context where presidents do not necessarily have strong incentives to be responsive. The fact that variables in the model that identify changes by the administration are not statistically significant supports the idea that electoral incentives for Mexican presidents to include some change in policy are relatively low. Therefore, the analysis did not find regular instability in presidential agendas due to changes in government.

The analysis also questioned the possibility of finding instability in presidential policy agendas because of the influence of partisan preferences. The results showed that partisanship does not induce variation in attention allocation in presidential policy agendas. Presidents from the Acción Nacional party did not direct political attention significantly different from presidents from the PRI party (Table 5.3). The Mexican president has had a preference to prioritise issues regarding macroeconomics, which on one hand is consistent with the aim of industrialising the country and privatising state companies and on the other welfare issues with the support of popular programmes to reduce poverty through assistencialism. The presidential policy agendas seem to be in a long-term equilibrium and only a few times experience relatively important changes (punctuations).

In general, the issues of macroeconomy, government operations and law and crime have a dominant effect on capturing the attention of Mexican presidents in their policy agendas. There is a decrease of attention over time on issues such as agriculture and labour. In the case of Mexico, secondary issues like welfare and education issues, are likely to occupy the agenda when main issues lose attention from presidents.

The diversity levels of presidents' agendas in Mexico do not show a decline in the importance of dominant issues in the policy agenda. There is no opportunity to introduce new topics of public concern. For example, issues on immigration, environment and technology are still issues that do not catch presidents' attention. Apparently, the increase of electoral competition and the end of the single-party regime has not given rise to political forces able to increase diversification of the president's policy agenda. In addition, the political landscape seems to be affecting agenda diversity with a tendency to concentrate the attention on particular topics in particular moments of time. This is the case, for example, in the first year in office of president Calderón when he focused on issues of law and crime due to the increasing problems with organized crime and drug-trafficking.

A lack of change in many policy areas in Mexico could be explained by the presence of political gridlock that block changes occurring in presidential policy agendas. This gave

the possibility to test *Stable Agendas Hypothesis* (**H3**)²⁰ regarding that the dynamics of presidential policy attention could exhibit stable patterns of change. The fragmentation of the political system because of the rise of a multiparty system might explained political paralysis, which as a consequence could be generating substantial policy continuity. Yet, findings in this chapter (and Chapter 4) showed that incrementalism (near stasis) are not exhibited by presidential policy agendas.

After the 2000 presidential election, it became evident that Mexican presidents increasingly experience political paralysis (see Section 5.3). Presidents have been able to produce relevant policy reforms by relying on the formation of political coalitions. For example, this was the case with President Enrique Peña Nieto, who signed a political pact with the leaders of the three major parties in Mexico to enact reforms in the energy, telecommunications and education sectors. By accommodating preferences for similar policy priorities, presidents can generate change in policy agendas.

The Mexican president is not considered to be an autocratic decision-maker able to generate continuous instability in policy agendas. The analysis rejects the *Unstable Agendas Hypothesis* (**H2**)²¹ that states that the dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit abrupt and radical change. While much of policymaking in Mexico is still in the hands of political elites, the Mexican president do not remain to be an actor deciding independently the course of the nation. The Mexican president is not an actor that can freely decide on policymaking, and thus policy instability does not emanates from presidential agenda-setting authority.

The methodological approach followed in this analysis provided evidence of punctuated equilibrium theory. The CAP coding scheme helped to identify policy priorities in governments' speeches. The use of statistical and time-series (econometrics) analysis confirmed 'ebb and flow' patterns in policy attention, which usually are seen in policy attention with the presence of 'punctuated equilibrium' in policy agendas. The database on presidential speeches used for this analysis gives access to data able to identify those relevant issues discussed by Mexican presidents. As was mentioned in the introduction these data provide information about the everyday business of Mexican presidential policymaking.

²⁰ *Stable Agendas Hypothesis* (**H3**): The dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit stable patterns of change.

²¹ *Unstable Agendas Hypothesis* (**H2**): The dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit repeatedly abrupt and radical change.

Chapter 6

Presidential priorities, budgetary attention and policy congruence

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter described some of the characteristics of presidential policymaking in Mexico. The concluding remarks in Chapter 4 suggest that there is a mechanism producing a positive feedback of policy change. This is evidence consistent with punctuated equilibrium theory for Mexican presidential policy agendas. It indicates that policymaking undergoes a negative feedback process where friction increases because of political fragmentation. However, the policy agenda can shift when presidents are able to accommodate different interests so as to be able to enact reform thus producing a positive feedback process. Based on the theoretical framework explained in Chapter 2, these negative and positive feedback processes generate disproportionate patterns of policy attention. These processes exhibit policy stability (incrementalism), mainly associated with political fragmentation, and radical policy shifts (punctuations) if political cooperation is possible through the creation of alliances between the president and some members of Congress.

Finding evidence of asymmetries (e.g. periods of near stasis combined with periods of radical change) of attention within policy agendas and between policymaking stages will show further evidence to support *Punctuated Equilibrium Agenda Hypothesis* (**H1**).¹ This chapter investigates whether punctuated equilibrium patterns of attention are present at different stages of the policymaking process. In order to prove *H1*, evidence needs to be found of institutional friction affecting policy decisions at different policymaking stages i.e. agenda-setting, policy enactment, resource commitment and implementation (see Jones et al., 2003). The presence of institutional friction has effects

¹*Punctuated Equilibrium Agenda Hypothesis* (**H1**): *The dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit both incremental patterns of change and abrupt change (punctuations).*

on the similarities between policy priorities at different stages of policymaking. The more institutional friction there is, the more difficult it is to translate signals into policy decisions in a particular policymaking stage.

Yet, a weakly institutionalised setting, where horizontal accountability is low, might suggest that presidents are able to influence decision-making at different stages of the policymaking process. The president can authoritatively define policy priorities at different stages of the policymaking process. If presidents can affect other policy stages, it may be argued that priorities at the presidential agenda-setting stage will also be present in the resource commitment and implementation stages. This chapter will examine this argument more extensively.

The misappropriation of public funds has been argued to be one of the main problems for public finances in Mexico and in other Latin American governments (Langbein and Sanabria, 2013; Clifton, 2000; Weyland, 1998; Geddes and Ribeiro Neto, 1992; Morris, 1991). The literature has sometimes identified autocratic tones in the use of public resources by Mexican presidents (Whitehead, 2000). Presidents are often considered to have extensive budgetary powers. In the policy implementation stage, budgetary rules do not always block presidents' use of public resources and give them enough political power to use public resources to benefit individual political and economic interests (see Weyland, 1998, p. 109). The effect of these political conditions on budgetary powers is that the presidents might face little or no political obstruction when deciding budgetary expenditures. Filc and Scartascini (2007) argue that most Latin American presidents have the ultimate authority over budgetary proposals and expenditure. There are few counterbalancing powers able to block presidential actions. The president can modify the allocation of funds approved initially by Congress and make a discretionary use of public resources.

Presidents are also considered as able to exercise power at the implementation stage by reducing penalties for budgetary deviations (Bonvecchi, 2010). The conflict between the president and Congress is not thought of as characterising budgetary processes. The budgetary processes seem to be hierarchical with inputs only coming via the executive (Filc and Scartascini, 2007). Arguments about autocratic forms of presidential policymaking will be supported if presidents are shown to have strong budgetary powers (see Section 2.7.4). The literature also supports these viewpoints. For example, Filc and Scartascini (2007) consider presidents as frequently able to modify the allocation of funds approved by Congress, with almost no restriction on discretionary allocation of public resources. A president can produce shocks to the policy process by freely deciding on agenda-setting and policy formulation as well as on policy implementation. If findings suggest that presidents can transfer their priorities into other stages of the policymaking process, and that they can forcefully re-prioritise programmes and public

resources there will be support for the *Unstable Agendas Hypothesis* (**H2**).² Although, this hypothesis has been discharged by Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, this chapter presents the opportunity to extend further tests on **H2** but this time by looking to other stages of the policymaking process.

The understanding of budgetary decision patterns has not yet been fully explored for the case of Mexico. From the literature, it is not clear to what extent the president can intervene in policy attention at different policy stages. Therefore, this chapter examines the following question: ‘how strong is the relationship between priorities at agenda-setting stages (i.e. speeches) and policy implementation (i.e. budgets)?’ This question refers to whether issues that the president emphasises during the first stages of policymaking are also present during later stages of the policymaking. The focus is to analyse how agenda-setting in presidential agendas affects issue selection at other stages of the policymaking process.

Yet, the democratisation process in Mexico has raised questions about the capacity of the president to exercise power over budgetary commitments. The power of the president over policymaking might be constrained vis-à-vis congressional capacity to enact resource commitments. The effects on budgetary powers of an emergence of a multiparty system and an increase in political fragmentation may include greater obstruction for the president when deciding policy expenditures. According to Casar (2013) and Nacif (2006) there has been increasing legislative activism in Congress, which might affect the dynamics of budgets’ resource allocation. For example, in Mexico, President Vicente Fox (2000–2006) faced a constitutional crisis when Congress passed a budget that limited funding for several government departments controlled by the president, and the president later presented the case to Mexico’s Supreme Court (Ackerman, 2013; Langston, 2011). This demonstrates that a president can face gridlock when trying to negotiate budgetary allocations and presidential policy agendas can manifest continuity. Finding evidence of continuity of policy supports the presence of the *Stable Agendas Hypothesis* (**H3**).³

This chapter examines the extent to which policy budgets (the policy implementation stage) can capture presidents’ priorities (the agenda-setting stage). Following Jones et al. (2009), the analysis uses a correlation analysis for understanding the extent of policy similarities between agenda-setting priorities and budgetary expenditures. The analysis shows that the president has some influence over budgetary decisions relative to other political actors for the Mexican case.

² *Unstable Agendas Hypothesis (H2): The dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit repeatedly abrupt and radical change.*

³ *Stable Agendas Hypothesis (H3): the dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit stable patterns of change.*

From the perspective of the punctuated equilibrium theory, it is expected that bounded rationality and institutional costs reduce the effectiveness of the transmission of presidential policy from a policymaking stage to another stage. Therefore, this relationship is expected to be less than perfect, regardless of the political power of the president. There are constraints on making priorities that are present in early stages of policymaking (i.e. agenda-setting) that will be present in the later stages as well (i.e. budgets). As this thesis looks into the nature of issue-attention, it will identify patterns regarding the prioritisation of budgetary resources and presidents' policy priorities. The agenda-setting approach offers advantages in data collection and theory for understanding decision-making with a dynamic examination of issues over long periods of time, as explained in previous chapters (Chapter 1 and Chapter 2).

This chapter organises the argument into the following sections. The first section explains some of the characteristics of the budgetary process in Mexico and some of the expectations of this analysis about issue convergence between institutional agendas. Then, Section 6.2.2 explains the possibility of using a correlation analysis⁴ for understanding the extent to which policy priorities in presidential agendas are convergent with policy priorities in budgetary expenditures. Section 6.3 moves onto explaining the data used for the analysis, methods and results.

6.2 Presidential priorities, budgetary policy and agenda convergence

In Chapter 3, it was explained that there are arguments that support that the Mexican president had almost absolute power to use national resources during the hegemonic regime (1929–2000). Nonetheless, a viewpoint also considers that the democratisation of the political system has changed both the role of presidents and Congress in their decision-making processes (see Langston, 2011; Nacif, 2006; Rubio, 2004). The resultant institutional configuration is quite different from the friction in decision-making experienced during the PRI's hegemony. Therefore, the extent to which presidential priorities can affect budgetary decisions is investigated in the following sections.

6.2.1 Presidential priorities and budgetary resources in Mexico

The emergence of divided governments in Mexico increased the propensity of presidents to struggle in agreeing on policy solutions and to spend much time in bruising political battles. The constitution allows the bureaucracy and the Executive branch to start the appropriation proposal in the policymaking process, but the final decision relies on

⁴This analysis is a measure of the strength of a relationship and the connection between variables (e.g. Jones et al., 2009).

Congress. [Weldon \(1997a\)](#) argues that the *poder de bolsillo* (pocket power) is a constitutional power that the Mexican Congress has over governmental budgetary resources. This power can allow Congress to exercise control over the policy activities of the executive, particularly in the context of a divided government. It is likely that Congress could create disputes against the president and the Executive branch by questioning decisions on revenues and public expenditure.⁵ The presence of a minority government in a democratisation context can, therefore, bring political gridlock that in turn blocks presidents' capacity to influence policymaking. The policy decisions concerning budgetary expenditures can be subject to a process with a high possibility of obstruction ([Carpió Cervantes, 2013](#)).

For the Mexican case, [Nacif \(2006\)](#) argues that the Mexican constitutions do not provide the president with any strong constitutional powers. In minority governments, the weakness in the constitutional agenda-setting power of the president became evident. This political context can reduce the capacity of the president to generate policy change and to be able to exercise some power over other stages of the policymaking process, i.e. policy implementation.

However, some authors share a different viewpoint which considers weakly institutionalised contexts, as is the case in Mexico, to provide the president with great budgetary powers ([Heo and Hahm, 2015](#); [Blanco and Grier, 2009](#)). For the Mexican case, there was a metaconstitutional practice of policymaking, particularly during the single-party regime. [Díez \(2012\)](#) argues that features of Mexican politics still allow the president to concentrate power, including the control of the ruling party and other aspects of national life like the allocation of public resources. Having this political power is believed to create instability in presidential agendas as the president has the leeway to change policy ([Williams, 2002](#)). This political power is also argued to give presidents a broad capacity of decision-making over the whole policymaking process i.e. policy definition, implementation and assessment [Díez \(see 2012\)](#). In addition, others have argued that the costs of transactions in decision-making have increased because of recent reforms imposing restrictions on presidents' capacity of policymaking that aim to balance agenda-setting powers between branches of government (see [File and Scartascini, 2007](#)). Therefore, it is pertinent to analyse the extent to which presidents can influence policymaking at other stages of policymaking and produce instability in policy agendas as they are able to radically shift the allocation of resources or re-prioritise governmental programmes.

⁵President Vicente Fox (2000–2006) was the first president to veto a budgetary bill. Fox vetoed the budget as he refuted the legislative outcome of opposition votes in Congress and their substantial modifications to the original budget proposal. Legislators considered this an unconstitutional act and refused to consider the veto. The president has the authority to initiate legislation, and these initiatives go through the same legislative procedure as any other initiative. Initiatives can be originated in the Congress or the Senate, but need to be approved by both Houses. For a veto to be overridden, either of the Chambers needs two-thirds of the total of votes. The budgetary bill is the only legislative initiative that is revised and approved solely by Congress. According to the Constitution, the president can veto amendments to initiatives that follow the bicameral legislative process. The fact that president Fox did veto the budget bill in 2005 has generated great academic debate about the capacity of presidents to generate budgetary policy.

Table 6.1: Legislative terms and party coalitions in Mexico, 1988–2015

Term	Election Year	Party	Prop. Seats (Congress)	President
54 th	1988–1991	PRI	52%	Carlos Salinas
55 th	1991–1994	PRI	64%	Carlos Salinas
56 th	1994–1997	PRI	60%	Ernesto Zedillo
57 th	1997–2000	PRI	48%	Ernesto Zedillo
58 th	2000–2003	PAN PVEM*	42% 3%	Vicente Fox
59 th	2003–2006	PAN PVEM	30% 3%	Vicente Fox
60 th	2006–2009	PAN	41%	Felipe Calderón
61 st	2009–2012	PAN	28%	Felipe Calderón
62 nd	2012–2015	PRI PVEM	42% 6%	Enrique Peña

*Partido Verde Ecologista de México (PVEM) refers to the Green Party

Source: Own elaboration using data from Congress (<http://www.congreso.gob.mx/>)

A third explanation is that presidents will face moments of gridlock and therefore their agendas will remain more or less in stasis but also there will be moments where shifts are possible. In Chapter 4 the analysis describes the formation of political coalitions as a positive feedback process of change. The end of the single-party regime and start of divided governments have pushed presidents and their staff to create informal mechanisms for political cooperation. An entrepreneurial capacity of presidents to form political coalitions through informal negotiations increases the likelihood of breaking a political stalemate and producing policy change. This creates a strategic interaction

between the president and the legislature. This capacity to overcome gridlock can also influence policy attention, not just at the agenda-setting stage but also at later stages of the policymaking process.

Table 6.1 shows the proportion of government seats in Congress. In minority governments, presidents from the PAN party had been able to negotiate some policies and generate party alliances on some particular issues. For example, president Calderón was able to pass reform on pensions and taxation by gaining support in Congress from the PRI party. Because of its ideological position, the PRI is a pivotal party, which has shown it can build agreements with both the right-wing party — the PAN party — and the PRD from the left. The Pacto por México is an example of a presidential negotiation tool that President Peña Nieto from the PRI built to agree on policy reforms with both the PAN and the PRD parties (see Section 4.3.3 in Chapter 4). By contrast, President Fox experienced more difficulties in trying to negotiate his policies. Because he was the first non-PRI president, Fox distanced his administration from old structures of the PRI party. Moreover, his ideological position on the right excluded the possibility of negotiating policy with the PRD. The formation of political coalitions is much needed as a mechanism able to produce policy change.

6.2.2 Presidential policy priorities, budgetary priorities and correlation analysis

This analysis aims to measure the distance between budgetary priorities and the priorities of the president. It takes budgetary policy as the dependent variable and proxy of policy commitments. The presidential speeches are taken as an indicator of the president's priorities. Presidential speeches are a measure of an independent variable of the president's capacity to exercise power over other stages of policymaking. The speeches are an instrument through which the president can give signals about his policy priorities. The president splits attention into different priorities within the presidential speeches. The same happens with the policy attention given to different issues in budgets.

This chapter uses correlation analysis in the task of assessing the distance between budgetary priorities and the priorities of the president. Empirical research has looked into policy representation with a focus on agenda-setting by analysing policy attention (see Jones and Baumgartner, 2005a). Jones and Baumgartner (2004) find that congruence between the priorities of the public and the priorities of Congress (i.e. hearings) and lawmaking across time. Similarly, Chaqués Bonafont and Palau (2011) analyse seven policy domains in Spain. This research also measures the correlation between governments' priorities and public priorities. The findings suggest that institutional friction explains the divergence between policymaker responses and information inputs. This research applies a congruence analysis based on entry correlations between issues relevant

to the public and policy action from governments on those same issues (Chaqués Bonafont et al., 2014; Chaqués Bonafont and Palau, 2011; Jones and Baumgartner, 2005a, 2004). These results indicate that mandate responsiveness varies across issues, which is not necessarily consistent with the party mandate theory (see Section 5.2).

Also using correlation analysis, Borghetto et al. (2014), in a longitudinal and cross-sectional approach, measure the extent to which party priorities correlate with legislative policy priorities measured by legislative production in Italy. The analysis finds evidence of a low correlation between legislative agenda and mandate policy attention during the First Republic where pre-electoral agreements were not stipulated. Overall, Borghetto et al. (2014) finds a post positive and statistically significant association between partisan ideology and the legislative agenda. Meanwhile, using correlation analysis, Timmermans and Breeman (2014) measure the extent to which there are changes in correspondence between coalition agreements and legislature agenda over time for the Netherlands. Correlation between agendas shows variation between legislative priorities and partisan priorities as each of these is a response to the political and social environment. There is a pressure from changing contexts in which political criticism and economic pressures make lawmakers to reconsider their policy priorities and thus ideological distance may converge more or may converge less with the content of legislative agendas over time.

A common finding in these empirical analyses is that institutional friction affects the capacity of policymakers to translate inputs into outputs. As was discussed in more detail in Section 2.3, “[i]nstitutional friction [...] refers to formal institutional structures that introduce decision and transaction costs” (Jones et al., 2009, p. 281). Formal and informal institutional rules set the space of policy actions and the level of conflict in policy agreements. For example, some constitutional rules restricting the capacity of the executive to modify appropriations create costs for the Mexican president when trying to change policies. Therefore, presidents will encounter restrictions when trying to transfer their policy priorities from the agenda-setting stage to the implementation stage.

The use of correlation analysis is straightforward and useful for understanding the extent to which two policy agendas have some similarities. In correlation analysis, values range between -1 and $+1$ and quantify the strength of the linear association between two different variables. The positive or negative sign of the correlation coefficient indicates the direction of the association. The value indicates the strength of the association, where close to -1 is highly negative and $+1$ highly positive. A correlation analysis sets a basis for robust regression analysis.

This approach is sufficient for measuring the relationship between agenda-setting and budgetary priorities. It allows conclusions to be drawn regarding the directionality of attention that these agendas follow in their policy attention. The presence or lack of

correlation will give some description about the capacity for decision making at the level of the presidency. A strong agenda capacity would be expected to produce a high positive correlation between these institutional agendas.

The analysis looks into the extent to which the budgets reflect the policy priorities of the president. Institutional friction is a concept helping to explain whether agendas converge or not. In any case, policy convergence may be explained by a decrease in levels of institutional friction.

6.3 Measuring presidential and budgetary policy

The analysis uses databases constructed using the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) framework and follows, a uniform approach to content analysis using this coding scheme. One dataset takes the budgetary expenditures of information published by the Mexican ministry of finance between 1990 and 2015. A second dataset takes the Informe de Gobierno speeches, which also were used in the previous analytical chapter. This dataset has speeches from 1990 to 2015 with a unit of analysis at the level of sentences. The data on presidential speeches are also content-coded under the CAP coding scheme.

The analysis presents descriptive statistics and then applies a more intensive research design for analysing attention congruence. This analysis tests its framework by using a congruence analysis of budgetary data following [Jones et al. \(2009\)](#) and [Jones and Baumgartner \(2005a\)](#). Thus, in relating presidential agenda-setting to policy commitments, the analysis makes observations regarding agenda dynamics for more than two decades of Mexican presidential politics. The theoretical expectations imply that strong presidential power may be reflected in policy at the agenda-setting stages and the resource commitment stage. Therefore, a correlation between agendas should be positively high. In other words, this congruence refers to the degree of issue overlap — issue convergence or divergence — among policy commitments (i.e. policy implementation) and presidential agenda-setting.

Congruence analysis consists of comparing the agendas' levels of attention to each issue through correlation measurements between budgetary priorities and priorities at the agenda-setting stage. The following sections develop this analysis by using the share of attention on each major issue in a given year as an indicator of policy priorities. The results report the different values of correlations between the proportion of all budgetary policy that focused on a particular topic each year and the proportion of all presidential attention in the same issue and given year. [Jones and Baumgartner \(2004\)](#) define these values as *congruence scores*. This congruence occurs when the president and Congress attend to the same issue at the same time when passing the budgetary bill. A perfect positive relationship between the policy priorities of these two agendas would

be represented by a value of 1 for each policy issues, indicating a complete alignment between presidential policy priorities and policy priorities in budgetary agendas.

The following section begins by mapping the general dynamics of these policy agendas with findings at the aggregate level and by policy domains. By examining the distribution of attention and policy priorities, this section analyses the dynamics of budgetary policy as a potential proxy for presidential policy implementation to be understood (see [Soroka and Wlezien, 2005](#); [Wlezien, 1996](#)). Research indicates that budgets are a significant indicator of the dynamics of policy commitments. The data from budgets are employed as a proxy of potential presidential influence over expenditures as budgets portray the resources to be managed in bureaucratic activity. The speeches gauge presidential policy attention on an operational basis as the allocation of resources shows presidential policy priorities. The following section provides further details about these datasets.

6.3.1 Measuring budgetary policy attention

The president might have considerable influence over spending as a result of having great power over the definition of budgetary appropriation. In Mexico, through the appropriations bill, every administration presents the amount of budgetary authority every governmental department will need to have for expenditure on different programmes. This bill can be taken as a proxy for the policy priorities of the president. These appropriations show categories of resource expenses. Meanwhile, budgetary expenditures show how exactly resources are spent in an administration. This spending can sometimes lag behind appropriation decisions while on other occasions spending can be higher than original budgetary estimations. The data on budgetary appropriations are often not publicly available.

Every year the Mexican government publishes all budgetary appropriations in the Federal Official Gazette, however, these data are not fully available in online public datasets. Data on expenditures, which measures the amount that was spent by an administration, by contrast, are available via the Treasury and Ministry of Finance. Due to data availability, the data on expenditures are used even though using appropriations would be a better indicator of budgetary priorities⁶ ([Soroka and Wlezien, 2005](#); [Wlezien, 1996](#)). The analysis relies upon data from Estadísticas Oportunas de Finanzas Públicas y Deuda

⁶I conduct a correlation analysis on available data for appropriation for years 2010–2015 in online public databases and expenditure data for the same time span. The analysis shows a correlation of 0.9713. This correlation value suggests that the overall analysis is not significantly affected by the fact this analysis uses expenditures as an indicator of budgetary priorities.

Table 6.2: Comparative Agendas Project codes and Budget Categories

CAP Major Topic codes	Budget Category
Macroeconomics (Topic 1)	Hacienda y Crédito Público
Health (Topic 3)	Salud
Agriculture (Topic 4)	Agricultura
Labour (Topic 5)	Trabajo y Previsión Social
Education, Culture, Technology and Science (Topic 6, 17, 23)	Educación, Cultura, Tecnología y Ciencia
Environment (Topic 7)	Medio Ambiente
Energy (Topic 8)	Energía
Transportation (Topic 10)	Transporte
Social Welfare (Topic 13)	Seguridad Social
Commerce and Foreign Trade and Affairs (Topics 15, 18, 19)	Comercio y Turismo
Defence (Topic 16)	Defensa
Government, Migration, Crime and Rights (Topic 2, 9, 20, 12)	Presidencia, Gobernación, Migración Crimen y Derechos Humanos
Land and Housing (Topics 21, 14)	Desarrollo Agrario, Urbano y Vivienda

Source: Own elaboration using CAP coding scheme and budgetary categories from the Ministry of Finance

Pública.⁷ In general, data reliability is a problem for the Mexican case. Some data from official sources for the same object (e.g. budgets) may have statistically significant differences depending on the information sources. Similar to other studies using budgetary data, this necessitates the computation of as much information as possible from the same source. This is done by using data on budgets from the Ministry of Finance.

These data report yearly public spending by administrative category (or by Ministry category). The administrative classification is the official category of expenditure that refers to budget elements for governments' programmes. This classification shows the expenses allocations of each governmental unit, dependencies and entities of each administration. This budgetary classification of expenditure is officially called "Institutional Budget".⁸ The major topics from the Comparative Agendas Project scheme are used to

⁷Data are available from <https://datos.gob.mx/busca/dataset/cuenta-publica>. The data from these resources are the same as the data from Cuenta Pública with the budgetary data from Centro de Estudios de Finanzas Públicas (CEFP) available from the Congress of Deputies website in <http://www.cefp.gob.mx/>. These data are the same as for the variable "Presupuesto Pagado" from the dataset Presupuesto por Programa from the Ministry of Finance.

⁸In Mexico the budgets are classified into different types of categories. This analysis uses the administrative category of the budget. The amount of the total budgets that lies within this category is between 30% and 40% of the budget and refers to those resources allocated to government ministries and entities which are responsible for the implementation of different public programmes. Other large proportions of public resources go to a category named *Ramo 23*. Ramo 23 is an instrument of budgetary policy that allows the fulfilment of the obligations of the Federal Government using resources that do not correspond to governmental entities and ministries but usually go to a different project developed at

equate topics from this administrative category of budgetary expenditures. The classification of budgets has fewer categories than the CAP has in its coding scheme. Table 6.2 shows the categories that were used in this analysis.

This analysis includes five administrations: Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–1994), Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León (1994–2000), Vicente Fox Quesada (2000–2006), Felipe Calderón Hinojosa (2006–2012) and Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–2015). The period of analysis that considers the start and end year is a total of twenty years between 1990 and 2015. Note that for Enrique Peña Nieto’s administration the time series is shorter as he still is in office (2012–2018). Limiting the analysis until 2015 was a question of research design rather than data availability (see Section 5.4.1). Budgetary data are not readily accessible before 1990. Thus 1990 is the starting year of this analysis.

Figure 6.1 displays the main issues, namely those issues that receive the most significant proportion of budgetary policy attention over time: macroeconomics, health and education issues. These issues attract a substantial proportion of policy attention, 30% (average) of the total budgetary expenditures. The dynamics of attention show irregular patterns of fluctuation that ensure the actions of decision makers to not conform to gradual patterns of change.

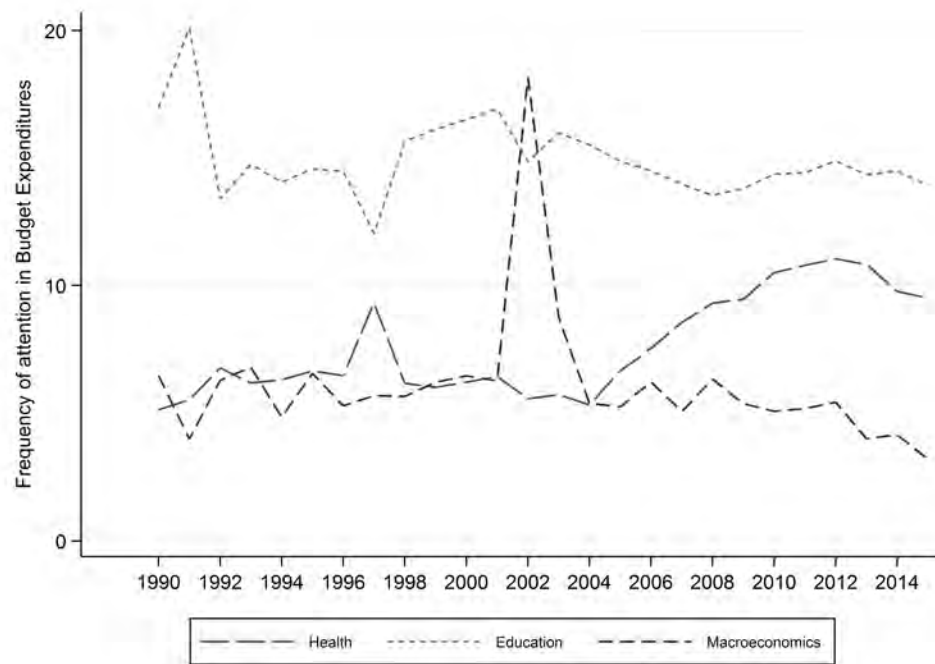
A large peak at the centre of the plot shows a significant increase in macroeconomics attention that goes from 6.2% of the total attention in 2001 to 18.2% in 2002. This peak between 2001 and 2002 responds to the interests of the Mexican government in pushing economic stability after dotcom crisis of the late 90s and 2000 and the events of September 11th 2001. The rest of the series remains very stable with attention values for macroeconomics issues that varies between 4% and 6%.

6.3.2 Measuring the priorities of the president

Figure 6.2 shows the main content of the presidential agenda at the agenda-setting stage. Macroeconomics, social welfare and government and crime attract most of the total attention with almost 70% share of the total agenda. Social welfare and macroeconomics have a more stable pattern of attention than the topics of government and crime. There are two peaks for macroeconomics issues due to economic events. The first refers to 1994’s economic crisis while the second is linked with the dotcom crisis and the democratic transition in Mexico in 2000. Government and crime issues show a rising trend between 1996 and 2006. The considerable amount of policy attention in these issues is due to the interest of Mexican presidents in issues of government accountability and the ‘war against drugs’ and issues regarding security.

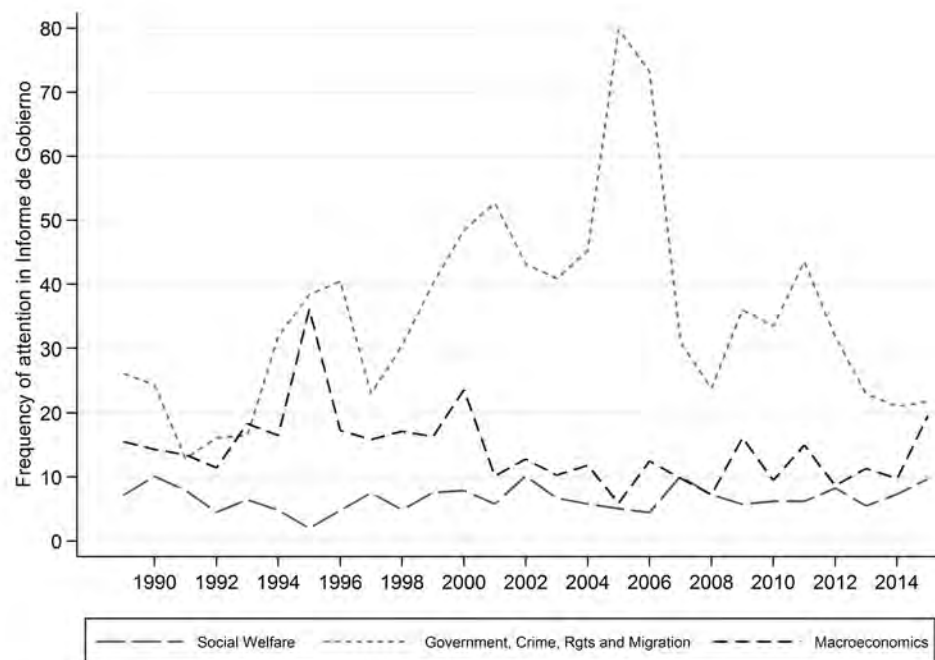
the subnational level. The Federal Government can exercise discretionary allocation of these resources. Therefore, this resource in Ramo 23 had become a tool for the Mexican president to gain political support. The remaining budgetary resources are classified into budgetary categories that refer mainly to state companies. These have a general category and an autonomous category, dependent on the type of institution funded.

Figure 6.1: Content of main topics in budgetary agenda, 1990–2015



Source: Own elaboration using data from the Ministry of Finance

Figure 6.2: Content of main topics in Informe de Gobierno speeches, 1990–2015



Source: Own elaboration using data from Informe de Gobierno speeches

6.4 The president's priorities and budgetary policy

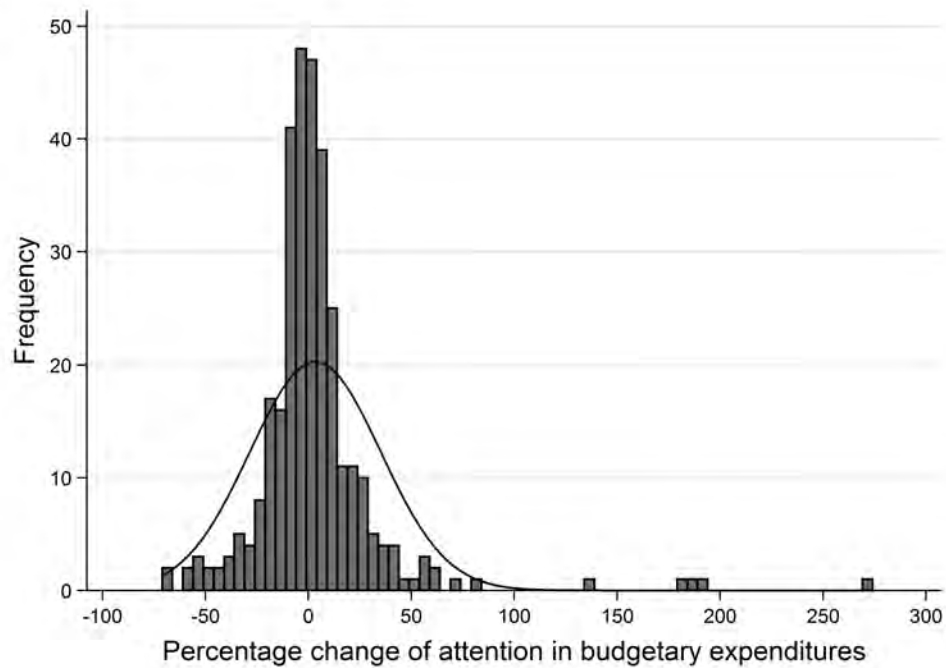
6.4.1 Institutional friction, budgets and presidential agendas

Based on this evidence regarding the policy priorities of presidential speeches and budgetary expenditures it appears that presidents find some difficulties in influencing other policy stages in government's policymaking processes. The differences that emerge are because the priorities of budgets differ from the priorities of presidents in their speeches. This section further measures the policy congruence between policy attention in presidential speeches and budgetary policy. It relies on distributional analysis following the methods developed by [Jones and Baumgartner \(2005b\)](#) for understanding the extent to which frictions affect policymaking processes. As such it assesses the pattern of change in policy attention for each of these stages in the policymaking process.

It might be that different institutional venues offer a particular policy tool that tends to be used to communicate a certain sort of policy. For example, the budget is a policy instrument that through the allocation of public resources, might be the best lever for affecting welfare and health policies. The definition of budgetary expenditure usually requires policies to be about changing the direction of policy rather than whether or not to allocate resources on a particular issue ([Bevan and Jennings, 2014](#)). Meanwhile, in presidential speeches, a president needs to emphasise and clearly communicate priorities. The executive speeches are more useful for symbolic politics and are a better instrument to impact issues on human rights, macroeconomics, law and order, and defence or foreign policy, for example (see [Bevan and Jennings, 2014](#); [Hobolt and Klemmensen, 2008](#); [Whitford and Yates, 2003](#); [Cohen, 1995](#)). The president's rhetoric has proven to change in relatively short periods of time as the context changes and presidents realise they need to change tactics if their standing with the public goes into decline and the opponent's electoral fortunes improve ([Villalobos et al., 2012](#)).

As explained in section Section 2.3, friction and bounded rationality of policymaking are argued not to produce incremental patterns of policy change. The punctuated equilibrium model implies a non-normal distribution of the attention in the presidential speeches. The distribution follows one that has a central peak that corresponds to long periods of stasis, weak shoulders showing small changes in agendas' attention and fat tails that represent sporadic disturbances. This distribution indicates the bounded character of budgetary policymaking. It also is a product of the of cost of decisions emerging from institutional friction. There will be evidence in support of punctuated equilibrium theory if the distribution takes the expected form of a non-normal distribution, a leptokurtic distribution of policy attention.

Figure 6.3: Relative distribution by topic (Budgets), 1990–2015



Source: Own elaboration

This analysis explores shifts in the priorities of budgetary policy by looking into the general distribution of year-on-year changes in policy attention. The use of stochastic-process methods provide insights on the dynamics of budgetary expenditures by examining the shape of budgetary attention distribution for all topics shown in Table 6.2. The analysis also calculates the related distributional statistics for changes in the relative attention given to policy issues. Attention is first measured by calculating the annual percentage of spending on each category. Budget expenditures are then transformed into a score of change using a formula of percentage change of attention the percentage-percentage method⁹ (John and Bevan, 2012; John and Jennings, 2010). The analysis uses percentage change in attention as a measure to adjust budgets through time. The approach taken here is sufficient for testing the research hypotheses regarding policy stability and instability (i.e. the degree to which policy is subject to incremental or large shifts in attention).

Figure 6.3 corresponds to the theoretical expectations about agenda distributions. The

⁹This is the change values in the attention given to each of the policy topics from one year to the next (Alexandrova et al., 2012). The percentage change of attention of topic (i) is calculated by computing the percentage share of attention given to topic (i) each year and then computing the difference from the percentage in the preceding year ($t - 1$). The equation shows as follows in Formula 6.1:

$$p_{it} = 100 \cdot \left(\frac{x_{it} - x_{it-1}}{x_{it-1}} \right) \quad (6.1)$$

The possible presidential policies or budgetary attention equals 100% in each year; each president distributes his attention between various topics of the total agenda.

Table 6.3: Statistical measures of distribution of Budgets, 1990-2015

Descriptive statistics for percentage change	
Mean	8.602
Variance	5463.799
Standard Deviation	73.917
Skewness	9.609
Kurtosis	108.988
L-kurtosis	0.528
N	325
Test of normality for percentage of attention	
Kolmogorov-Smirnov D Statistic	0.308
Shapiro-Wilk W Statistic	0.293

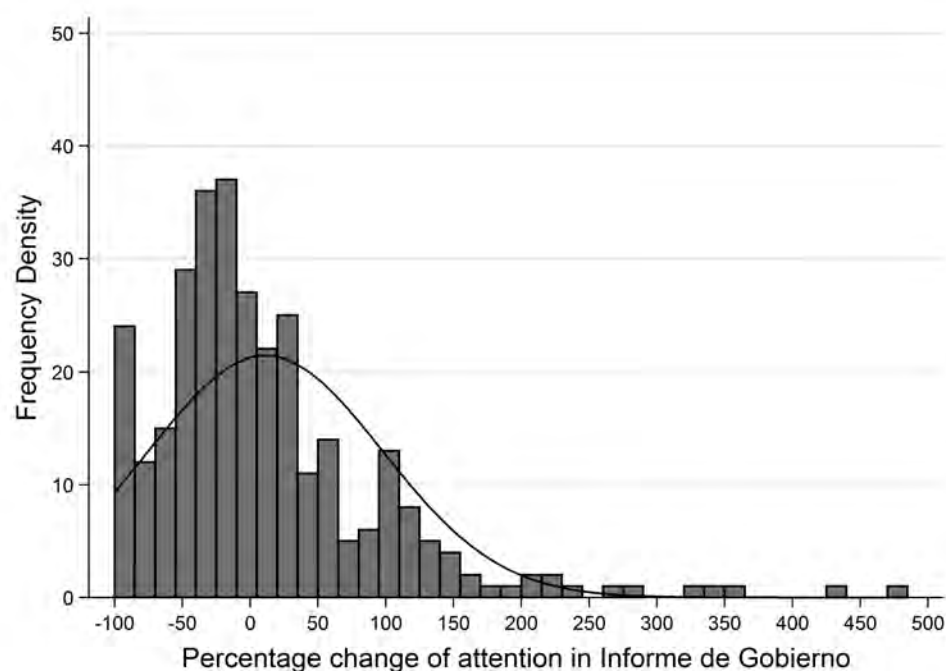
Source: Own elaboration

budgetary agenda in Mexico consists of expenditure decisions that most of the time follow a gradual pattern of change in policy attention (concentrated around the tall slender peak of the distribution), but sometimes undergo punctuations (a disproportionate number of large changes in the tails of the distribution). Figure 6.3 plots a histogram of the relative distribution plot for the budget overlaid with a hypothetical normal distribution. This hypothetical normal distribution is based on the mean and variance of this budgetary data. The histogram reveals that distribution of change in budgetary attention in Mexico does not follow a normal distribution. Section 2.3 mentioned that the literature on agenda-setting uses values to test the normality of distribution to find evidence of punctuated equilibrium in issue-attention. The leptokurtic distribution of policy change shown by the histogram is consistent with the punctuated equilibrium model of policy change.

Table 6.3 reports values of kurtosis and l-kurtosis measures as 108.988 and 0.528 respectively. The kurtosis measures is a descriptor of the shape of a probability distribution of budget change. L-kurtosis is an alternative measure of kurtosis that also helps to measure positive excesses of kurtosis. L-kurtosis score is also a measure of the shape of the distribution; yet this measure is less sensitive to extreme values (Breunig and Jones, 2011). A normal distribution has a kurtosis of 3 and an l-kurtosis of 0.123. These values of normal distribution, if present, will indicate proportionate patterns of change (these are a large number of small changes in policy priorities). The distributions show values higher than normal and are said to be leptokurtic. Kolmogorov-Smirnov D and Shapiro-Wilk W statistics are statistically significant for non-normal distributions tests with respective values of 0.308 and 0.293.

Similarly, Figure 6.4 shows a leptokurtic distribution of change in policy attention in

Figure 6.4: Relative distribution by topic (Speeches), 1990–2015



Source: Own elaboration

presidential speeches between 1990 and 2015. The distribution of attention in the histogram represents the frequency density of a scale of percentage between -100% and 500% . There is a peaked distribution consisting of a disproportionate number of small, incremental changes and large punctuations. Similar, to budgetary policy attention, the distribution of change in speeches' attention shows patterns of change that are leptokurtic (see Alexandrova et al., 2012).

Table 6.4: Statistical measures of distribution of Informe de Gobierno Speech, 1990–2015

Descriptive statistics for percentage change	
Mean	24.246
Variance	16985.7
Standard Deviation	130.829
Skewness	4.042
Kurtosis	27.824
L-kurtosis	0.319
N	315
Test of normality for percentage of attention	
Kolmogorov-Smirnov D Statistic	0.193
Shapiro-Wilk W Statistic	0.652

Source: Own elaboration

Table 6.4 reports values for kurtosis and l-kurtosis for presidents' speeches between 1990 and 2015. The mean change of attention from one year to the next in absolute terms is 24.246% with a standard deviation of 130.829. The kurtosis score of 27.824 (i.e. >3) confirms the theoretical expectation that presidential policymaking exhibits patterns of stability and instability. The value of l-kurtosis in Inform de Gobierno speeches is 0.319. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests further confirm that Mexican policymaking is subject to a combination of long periods of incrementalism (near stasis) and an occasional burst of large changes. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test generates a D statistic of 0.1717 with a confidence level of 99%, while Shapiro-Wilk confirms the non-normal distribution of the attention with a W statistic of 0.652 significant at a 99% confidence level. This allows supporting the *Punctuated Equilibrium Agenda Hypothesis* (H1)¹⁰ not just for patterns of policy attention in presidential speeches but also for budgetary policy priorities.

The kurtosis and l-kurtosis values indicate that both speeches and budgetary expenditures have high levels of leptokurtosis. Kurtosis levels are higher when compared to other countries for budgetary priorities. For example, Baumgartner et al. (2017) examine democratic periods in Russia (2004–2006 and 2010–2014), and Turkey (1973–1978) and find kurtosis and l-kurtosis values of 98.49 and 0.515 and 95.39 and 0.657. For Brazil (2002–2010) values are 231.39 and 0.321 respectively. For the U.S. case, budgets show a kurtosis value of 56.04 and l-kurtosis of 0.54 between 1800 and 2007. Budgets in Belgium have a value of 57.75 and 0.64 of kurtosis and l-kurtosis between 1971 and 2007. The Mexican case is close in values to the case of Russia and Turkey, but it seems that institutional structures generate patterns of attention in budgetary priorities that differ to those in the U.S. and Belgian cases.

Kurtosis and L-kurtosis values for executive speeches priorities have not been calculated for many political systems but some comparative analysis is still possible. For executive speeches, John and Jennings (2010) show a value of kurtosis of 19.21 for the Queen's speech between 1940 and 2005 for the United Kingdom.¹¹ For the U.S. State of the Union Address, Jones et al. (2009) find kurtosis and l-kurtosis levels of 9.93 and 0.26 correspondingly between 1956 and 2002. The Mexican case exerts much higher values of kurtosis and l-kurtosis, which are 27.824 and 0.319 respectively between 1988 and 2015. In general, the values of kurtosis and l-kurtosis for budgets and speeches suggest there are differences in the policymaking process in each of these political systems, which gives rise to distinct patterns for policy change.

The Mexican president exercises some political power in rearranging the policy agenda. The fact that issues can be subject to a complete loss in attention (-100%) means that the presidents can remove an issue from the policy agenda at a particular moment of

¹⁰ *Punctuated Equilibrium Agenda Hypothesis (H1): The dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit both incremental patterns of change and abrupt change (punctuations).*

¹¹ John and Jennings (2010) do not calculate L-kurtosis values for the Queen's speech between 1940 and 2005.

time. Sometimes, this can signal an increase of policy actions elsewhere as the attention to one issue is reallocated to other issues. The peakedness of the distribution shows that a great proportion of presidents' policy attention shows relative continuity. There is a concentration of attention around -50% and 50% showing a continuity of policy for extended periods of time. The right-hand side of Figure 6.4 shows reallocation and expansion of policy issues.

Similarly, budgetary priorities follow dynamics of attention when many expenditures are a continuity of previous policy expenditures. However, despite this continuity other issues exhibit a reallocation of attention. The distribution of budgetary attention compared with presidential attention is more stable and does not have as many instances where issues are removed from the agenda. This is because it is more difficult for policymakers to reduce the monetary resources from a policy programme. This relates to historical legacies that are "policy legacies" (path dependency) inherited by past policy solutions implemented by previous administrations (see Pierson, 1995). To drop a programme might pose a high social cost that policymakers might not be willing to take.

The right-hand side of Figure 6.3 has fewer negative changes in budgetary expenditures than are found for presidential speeches (Figure 6.4). This relative continuity of the resource implementation stage (i.e. budgeting) is likely caused by high decision costs and institutional friction affecting policy change. Friction makes policy changes less likely, especially in relation to spending cuts. These results offer evidence that each of these agendas follows a different process of decision-making. This friction will always ensure policy congruence does not fully correspond between these different stages of policymaking.

6.4.2 Policy congruence, agenda-setting and policy implementation

The findings of the previous sections are consistent with the punctuated equilibrium theory. The results show the complexity of policymaking in agenda-setting and resource commitment stages. The presence of institutional friction and limitations in the capacity of individuals and institutions to process large amounts of information creates inefficiencies in their decision-making processes. Therefore, the correspondence of priorities between different stages of the policymaking process is unlikely to be perfect (i.e. $\neq 1$ measured with correlation values). There may of course be points in time when this relationship is stronger (or weaker). Therefore, it is relevant to identify some factors that increase the degree of policy convergence through different stages of the policy process.

In contrast, the fact that these institutional agendas are not convergent will provide evidence of the effects of decision costs and institutional friction on policy decisions that make it costly to transfer signals from a context in which there are political and economic pressures into policy solutions. Finding that presidential speeches and budgets are not

congruent suggests that president's policy priorities have little or no effect on budgetary policy priorities. This is because the series of actions taken in order to prioritise a particular issue at the agenda-setting stage are different from those actions needed to prioritise expenditures. This difference in processes within stages of policymakings demonstrates that agenda-setting and policy implementation simply follow two different decision processes and thus are two different things (see Dowding and Martin, 2017). This section presents an assessment of the level of congruence between presidential priorities and the budgetary agenda by controlling by topic.

Figure 6.5 shows the proportion of attention to different topics in both the presidential speeches and budgetary commitments. These plots help to answer the following question: to what extent these agendas move together in the same direction? Policy convergence can be associated to with a personalistic form of government because of presidents having great formal constitutional powers and but less informal less institutionalised agenda-setting powers.¹² If there are autocratic actions in presidents' agenda-setting powers, then they will be able to control resource commitment and define budgetary priorities. A way to measure this is by controlling for changes in government and thus assess the extent to which each president has the power to control the agenda at different policy stages. In the time period between 1988 and 2015, there are presidential elections in the years 1994, 2000, 2006 and 2012.¹³

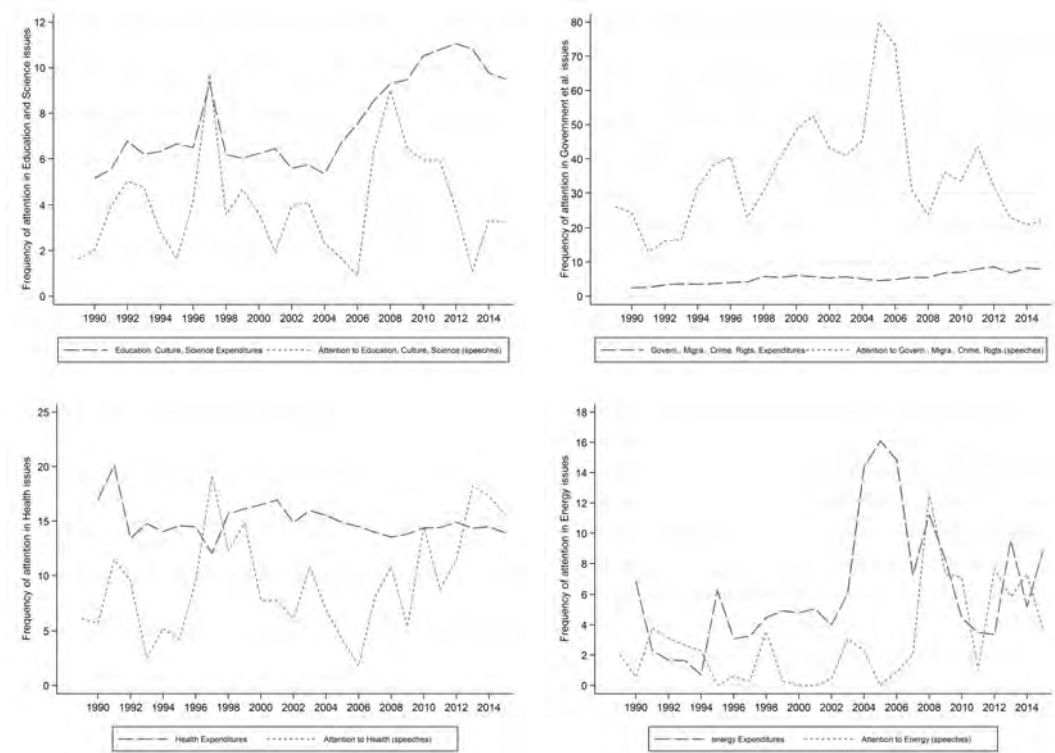
By examining trends for major topics of presidential priorities and budgetary commitments, it seems that the priorities of these institutional agendas follow distinct trends. Of the policy topics that are illustrated in Figure 6.5 the correlation is highest for attention to education policy. Similarly, issues regarding energy seem to follow similar directionality in both speeches and budget priorities. There is an increase of attention in speeches just after the moment expenditure commitments show increases. Appendix D¹⁴ shows graphs for the rest of the policy topics that were coded following Table 6.2. Apart from energy and education issues, the rest of them do not appear to converge in their policy attention on presidents' priorities and budgetary expenditures. The fact that presidents' priorities on issues of education and priorities of education expenditures are converging is explained by the relevance that issues of welfare and education have gained with democratisation (see Section 5.4.2). Meanwhile, issues on energy have gained urgency as reforms in this sectors have started to be considered as relevant for the economic development of the country. This might be explain the convergence of policy priorities between stages (see Section 5.4.3). Convergence on these particular issues may also be due to political interests in reforming the energy sector and education policy in Mexico during this period (1988–2015).

¹²See Section 2.7.4 for how personalistic politics and leadership are defined in this thesis.

¹³The data for the year 1988 are missed when calculating the percentage change of attention. The year 1988 is also an electoral year.

¹⁴Appendix D shows comparative plots of attention in budgets and the Informe de Gobierno for the issues of labour, transportation, public land and housing, macroeconomics, social welfare, commerce, trade and international affairs and defence.

Figure 6.5: Plots for education, health, government and energy comparing budgetary expenditure and presidential attention, 1990–2015



Source: Own elaboration

This correlation between presidents' priorities and budgetary expenditures offers evidence of convergence in the policy priorities of these institutional agendas. [Mendez \(2018\)](#) explains that reforms in the energy sector in Mexico went through a period of paradigmatic change followed by a period of gradual change that was brought about by a more strategic presidential behaviour. President Peña (2012–2018) and his staff showed a greater capacity to pass legislation in Congress, as compared to that of President Calderón (2006–2012), by reaching a political coalition with a legislative pact, the Pacto por México (see Section 4.3.3). The situation in the energy sector has been considered to be critical in terms of productivity and investment since the 1990s. This sense of urgency and a framing of the issue about an energy reform needed for fostering economic growth and employment increased the likelihood of these reforms being passed in Congress. Similarly, for education reforms a sense of urgency regarding the necessity of increasing the quality of education up to international standards increased the likelihood of measures passing in Congress (see [Ramírez, 2017](#)). The sense of urgency, the political context and the perception of a policy problem are considered to be relevant for policy change but can not fully explain these reforms ([Mendez, 2018](#)). In 2012, reforms on education and energy were a result of accepting a political coalition before the start of the administration and quickly promoting a common legislative agenda. The formation of political alliances increases the positive correlation between the priorities at different stages of policymaking (i.e. presidential speeches and budgetary expenditures). This is evidence that over time a president is able to have similar priorities to those of actors at other policymaking stages.

A low policy convergence is consistent with the complexity in policymaking at each of these stages. Both budgetary structures and the presidents' office deal differently with the allocation of attention to various issues because there are different processes and institutional capacities in both institutional agendas. The president can more easily give attention to some issues, or take away attention from some others than make budgetary compromises. The president has a larger leeway in his policy instruments (i.e. presidential speeches) to adjust his policy attention. For generating budgetary policy, by contrast, decisions follow a more complex and complicated process. Actors responsible for producing the budget usually require longer periods of decision making for estimating, formulating, adopting and executing public resources. As a result, some mismatches in policy attention are expected because institutions add costs as policy decisions move through each stage in the policymaking process: in this case from agenda-setting (i.e. presidential speeches) to policy implementation (i.e. budgets) (see [Jones, 2003](#)).

The difference in attention between the presidential speeches and budgets is because the president responds to issues with more flexibility through rhetoric than budgetary priorities respond to citizens' needs. Presidents show the public that they care about the issues that are important. Therefore, a president decides that a large percentage of attention will be given to issues regarding macroeconomics and welfare, for example.

This shows that these issues are important to the public and that is why the president is choosing to focus attention on them¹⁵ (see [Chaqués Bonafont et al., 2015](#); [Chaqués Bonafont et al., 2014](#); [Jones et al., 2009](#); [Jones and Baumgartner, 2004](#)). Speeches contain topics central to building government legitimacy and confidence because they are potential sources of electoral support. In contrast, budgetary decisions are slow in adapting to public concerns because of the increasing cost of decisions through the policymaking process. The budget offers a particular policy instrument that tends to be useful to change social behaviour from individual to environmental conduct. This usually implies a definition of public policies that moves from the distribution to redistribution of social benefits (i.e. from defining land policies of subsidies and tariffs to formulate policies on Federal Reserves controls of credits) (see [Lowi, 1972](#)).

These institutions display a dynamic of policy attention independent from one another. Table 6.5 shows the descriptive statistics for both Informe de Gobierno and budgets, which shows differences in how these institutions allocate attention to policy topics. First, the president tends to concentrate his attention on particular issues more than others. For example, from looking at the mean values (of the share of attention) it is evident that macroeconomic (14.244), education, culture and technology and science (9.618), commerce and international (11.153) and government, migration, crime and human rights (35.500) issues dominate presidents' policy agenda. For budgetary policy attention, a high level of attention (of greater than 10%) is only observed for education, culture, technology and science issues with a mean value for policy attention of 29.935. Second, there are fewer instances where budgetary attention (i.e. spending) drops to zero (i.e. the minimum values never equal zero) — whereas some speeches ignore certain policy topics completely (i.e. minimum values of zero are observed for eight out of 13 topics).

To further look at the differences in policy attention between presidents' priorities and budgetary expenditures, Table 6.6 shows descriptive differences in the share of policy attention. Mean values of the difference in attention close to zero indicate policy convergences. This measure highlights where presidential priorities correspond, on average, closely to budgetary priorities. The table shows dissimilarities in attention for the main issues of macroeconomics (Topic 1), education, culture, technology and science (Topics 6, 17, 23) and government, migration, crime and human rights (Topics 2, 9, 20, 12) with mean values of differences of 8.149, -20.898 and 30.103 respectively. Issues on macroeconomy have a proportion of attention at an average of 8% points more in speeches

¹⁵Gómez Vilchis (2013) and Gómez Vilchis (2012a) observe that the perception of Mexican citizens regarding the economy affects presidents popularity (see also Gómez Vilchis, 2012b,c). Some presidential studies show that presidents' popularity can affect presidents' behaviour and responsiveness to citizens' policy priorities (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2005; Canes-Wrone and Shotts, 2004; Edwards, 1997; Edwards et al., 1995). Studies assessing representation and agenda-setting and the extent public priorities are transferred into governments' priorities are still missing in politics literature in Mexico. Yet, there is the possibility of considering that in an increasing democratic context presidents will have at least some electoral incentives to be responsive as some may want their parties to remain in power.

Table 6.5: Mean and standard deviation by topic of Informe de Gobierno speeches and budgetary expenditures, 1990–2015

Topic code	Category	Informe de Gobierno				Federal Budget			
		Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
1	Macroeconomics	14.244	6.057	5.882	36.066	6.095	2.699	3.202	18.160
3	Health	4.082	2.211	0.893	9.722	7.616	1.973	5.152	11.049
4	Agriculture	3.838	2.913	0	10.070	9.438	1.860	6.454	13.687
5	Labour	1.962	1.651	0	6.111	0.660	0.297	0.381	1.280
6, 17, 23	Educ., Culture, Tech, Science	9.618	4.815	1.786	19.167	29.935	3.072	24.078	40.201
7	Environment	2.779	2.562	0	9.091	4.175	2.019	0.351	6.565
8	Energy	3.012	3.206	0	12.635	6.232	4.129	0.690	16.095
10	Transportation	2.851	3.427	0	15.884	8.205	2.227	5.560	17.121
13	Welfare	6.628	2.012	1.967	10.132	7.949	2.699	4.490	13.157
15, 18, 19	Commerce, Foreign Trade and Affrs.	11.153	8.165	0	28.028	4.625	3.452	2.259	15.621
16	Defence	1.417	0.786	0	3.347	8.591	1.247	6.804	11.435
2, 9, 20, 12	Gov., Migration, Crime and Rghts.	35.500	16.062	12.871	79.832	5.396	1.707	2.505	8.589
21, 14	Land and Housing	2.917	2.056	0	7.541	1.045	0.591	0.536	2.291

Source: Own elaboration

Table 6.6: Share-attention difference between budgetary expenditures and speeches, 1990–2015

Topic code	Category	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
1	Macroeconomics	26	8.149	6.635	−5.384	29.487
3	Health	26	−3.534	2.375	−9.729	0.407
4	Agriculture	26	−5.491	3.062	−9.366	1.727
5	Labour	26	1.302	1.618	−0.907	5.127
6, 17, 23	Educ., Culture, Tech, Science	26	−20.898	5.311	−29.112	−5.573
7	Environment	26	−1.397	2.974	−5.164	3.902
8	Energy	26	−3.220	5.024	−16.095	4.281
10	Transportation	26	−5.354	4.364	−17.121	9.263
13	Welfare	26	−1.321	3.830	−10.040	5.260
15, 18, 19	Commerce, Foreign Trade and Affrs.	26	6.530	6.200	−2.894	19.144
16	Defence	26	−6.532	2.787	−12.007	−2.919
2, 9, 20, 12	Gov., Migration, Crime and Rghts.	26	30.103	16.038	10.278	75.301
21, 14	Land and Housing	26	1.871	1.849	−0.083	6.412

Source: Own elaboration

than in budgets. In presidential speeches, education and science issues receive 20% less attention than in budgets. The difference in the share of attention is not as large for labour (Topic 5), environment (Topic 7), welfare (Topic 13) and land and housing issues (Topics 21, 14), being equal to less than 2% on average. In general, issues that do not tend to involve (re)distributive policy domains like macroeconomy (Topic 1), domestic commerce, foreign trade and affairs (Topics 15,18,19), and government operations, migration, crime and human rights (Topics 2, 9, 20, 12) are more likely to be discussed in speeches than budgets. There is a larger proportion of attention given to these issues in the presidential speeches than in the budgets.

The final part of this section seeks to determine whether policy agendas are converging or diverging over time in their policy prioritisation for all policy domains. The analysis calculates the correlation values as follows in Formula 6.2:

$$p_{it} = \frac{N \sum X_{it} Y_{it} - (\sum X_{it} \sum Y_{it})}{\sqrt{[N \sum x_{it}^2 - (\sum x_{it})^2][N \sum y_{it}^2 - (\sum y_{it})^2]}} \quad (6.2)$$

The analysis examines the total agendas and measures Pearson's correlation values. Figure 6.6 shows the yearly correlation of attention to all topics between these two institutional agendas. This graph shows that *congruence* between policy agendas varies over time. Correlation values reach their highest positive values in the years 2007 and 2013 with Pearson's correlation values of approximately 0.30 for each year. For the presidency of President Zedillo (1994–2000), the correlation values are very stable between 1994 and 1997 with a negative correlation of approximately 0.20 for each year. The presidential rhetoric after the 1994 economic crisis was very different from the government's implementation of policy. This lack of convergence shows the difficulties that President Zedillo faced in trying to transfer his priorities into policy implementation (i.e. budgetary priorities). Something similar happened during the presidency of President Calderón (2006–2012), although he did not experience an economic crisis but a context in which there was a great deal of pressure being generated by political criticism. President Calderón took office under the allegation of winning by committing an electoral fraud that created difficulties to legitimising his administration. Similarly, President Fox (2000–2006) lost congressional support with the results of the 2003 mid-term elections, and the PAN party representation in Congress lost significant political powers including a capacity to veto legislation approved by Congress.

There are no convergence patterns for election years (1994, 2000, 2006, 2012) providing evidence that supports a hypothesis concerning autocratic behaviour on the part of the president (*Unstable Agendas Hypothesis (H2)*)¹⁶. As this thesis argues, if a president has enough political power there are no incentives to cooperate, and thus they control the

¹⁶ *Unstable Agendas Hypothesis (H2)*: The dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit repeatedly abrupt and radical change.

policy process and further their individual political benefits and priorities. Also, there is no evidence of presidents being more successful in introducing policy at the beginning of their administrations and achieving greater policy convergence between agenda-setting and policy implementation.

The patterns from Figure 6.6 indicate that there are moments when agenda convergence is likely to happen. There are peaks and troughs in agenda congruence (correlation) and this correlation fluctuates between values just above 40% (0.40) to even negative values of under -10% (-0.10). The average level of agenda congruence ranks between values of 5% and 15%; this indicates a weak degree of convergence overall. The highest agenda correlation is found between the years 2008 and 2014. It may be that this suggests that presidents Felipe Calderón (2006-2008) and Peña Nieto (2012–2018) that their priorities were more in line with budgetary agendas. Mexican presidents have experienced similar policy conditions under divided governments and the success of some presidents has been associated with increased capacity to negotiate with Congress.

Figure 6.7 shows the correlation values between speeches and budgets by legislatures. The highest congruence values are observed for the 61st (2009–2012) and 62nd (2012–2015) legislatures. By controlling for the number of the legislature, the effects of coalition formation in policy congruence can be analysed (see Table 6.1). The newly elected President Peña Nieto managed to build political agreement through the Pacto por México (Pact for Mexico) to pass major policy reforms. These reforms pushed the government to increase expenditures on some issues where reforms were passed. Meanwhile, President Calderón's strategy involved trying to pass one high-priority bill — on public security — in Congress with other minor policy initiatives i.e. fiscal and tax reform (Mendez, 2018). The literature shows that every president in minority government has been pushed to form political coalitions for forming agendas (Casar, 2013, 2008). Gaining support in Congress may reduce the costs and friction on presidential decisions. This mechanism helps political cooperation and has allowed presidents to implement policy, which was particularly the case for the 60th, 61th and 62nd legislatures.

Table 6.7 shows the values of the congruence of presidential speeches and budgetary policy attention for the same topic. These values most directly indicate the correlation between these two agendas.¹⁷ From the total of thirteen topics, only three show a significant positive correlation: health (Topic 3), commerce, foreign trade and affairs (Topics 15, 18, 19) and, land and housing (Topic 21, 14). By dividing significant correlation values by the total number of topics the probability of significant correlation can be discerned, i.e. $3/13 = 0.23$. This value shows that a positive correlation is observed for 3 out of 13 topics, that is for just over 20% of topics between 1990 and 2015.

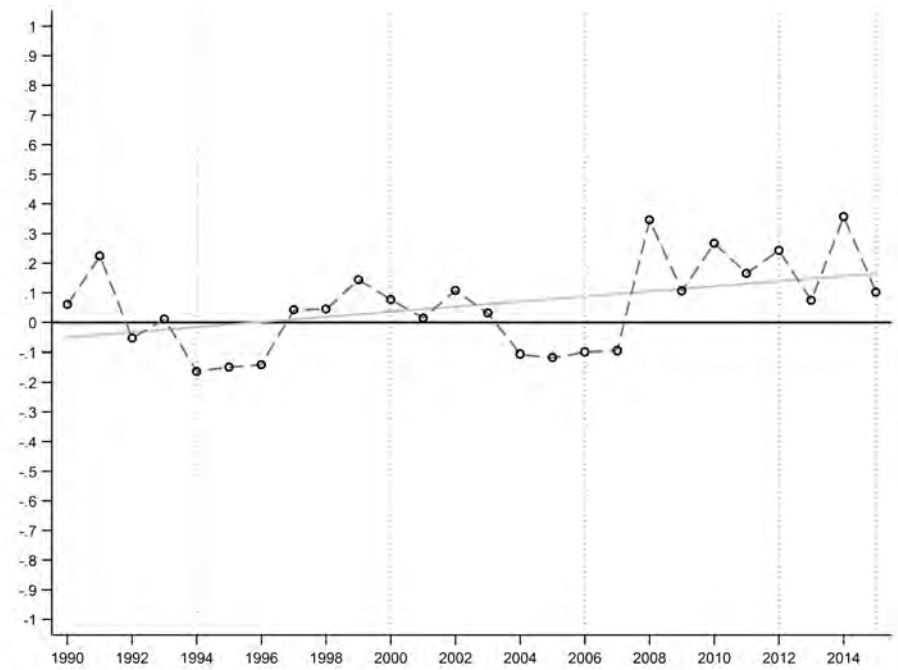
¹⁷This method has been used for measuring agenda representation and the congruence between the attention of the public and policy agendas, but it is the first time it is applied for measuring congruence between institutional agendas but without representation and public opinion (see Jones and Baumgartner, 2004; Jones et al., 2009; Chaqués Bonafont and Palau, 2011).

Table 6.7: Correlation between Informe de Gobierno Speech and budgetary priorities, 1990–2015

Policy Topic	Informe-Budgets	p-value
Macroeconomics	−0.002	0.994
Health	0.360	0.070
Agriculture	0.225	0.268
Labour	0.202	0.320
Educ., Culture, Tech, Science	−0.140	0.495
Environment	0.173	0.397
Energy	0.078	0.704
Transportation	−0.152	0.455
Social Welfare	0.306	0.127
Commerce, Foreign Trade and Affrs.	0.710	0.000
Defence	−0.225	0.267
Gov., Migration, Crime and Rghts.	0.066	0.746
Land and Housing	0.474	0.014

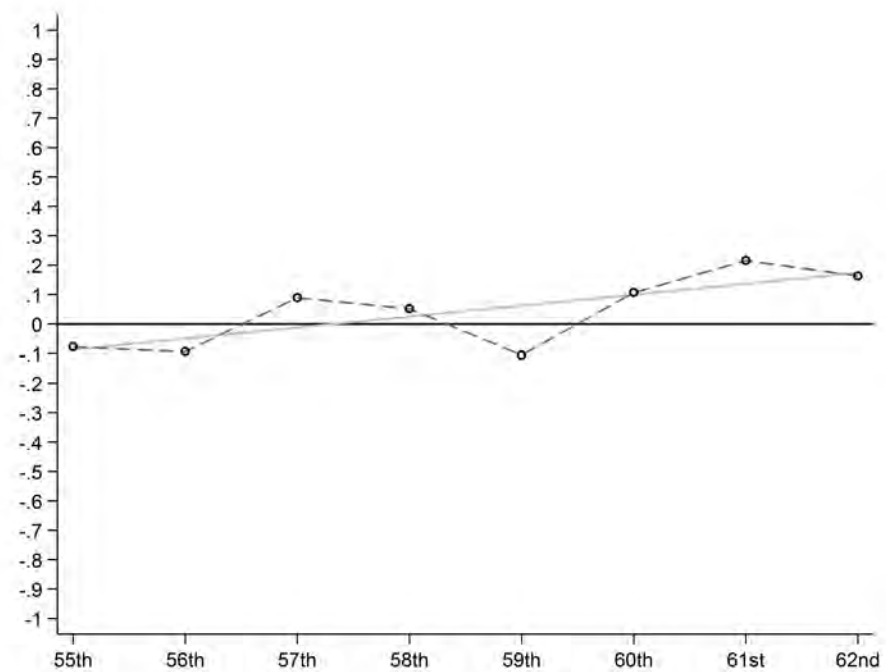
Source: Own elaboration

Figure 6.6: Correlation by legislature between budgetary expenditures and speeches, 1991–2015



Source: Own elaboration

Figure 6.7: Correlation by legislature between budgetary expenditures and speeches, 1991–2015



Source: Own elaboration

6.4.3 Issue-attention and agenda structure

In the previous section, it was explained that differences in the capacity of each policymaking stage (for example, agenda-setting, policy implementation, etc.) to generate policies might be a factor affecting the degree of congruence between policy attention. Jones and Baumgartner (2004, p. 19) name this as ‘carrying capacity’ and explain that the Congressional agenda has a larger capacity to deal with issues because activities can be specialised within the Congress’s committee structure, for example. In the Mexican case, the budget and budgetary process are formal institutions, with a division of activities in departments within the Ministry of Finance and a structure with the capacity to process various issues simultaneously. The presidential speeches also deal with different issues but this agenda is much simpler in its process and capacity to deal with policy issues (Chapter 5). The carrying capacity of each policy agenda affects the structure of policy attention; thus, congruence between budgets and presidential speeches is not expected to be convergent.

This section moves to examine the structure (i.e. the capability of the agenda to include a certain number of issues) of each of these institutional agendas. The analysis explores the extent to which these structures are congruent in how they allocate attention to different issues. It shows whether policy issues are located in similar positions in these institutional agendas: presidential speeches and budgetary expenditures. These institutional agendas may be following such a different policy process that comparison across them could be meaningless.

A multidimensional scaling (MDS)¹⁸ procedure can demonstrate how issues correlate with each other in each institutional agenda. The MDS is a statistical technique that allows the observation of the relationship between the entire set of correlations among policy issues and reveals a structure that can account for interactions between policy issues (Jones and Baumgartner, 2004). The approach treats correlations among issues as Euclidean distances and recovers the structure for the expenditure commitments and Informe de Gobierno speeches.¹⁹ For this analysis, MDS creates a map that displays the relative positions of topics based on the CAP coding scheme (see Table 6.2) and provides a table of the distances between objects. This table is known as the proximity matrix. This is a metric MDS and it reproduces the distances between objects (i.e. policy issues/topics) to measure similarities between these objects (topics). The analysis takes the years between 1988 and 2015 as subjects where each policy area is a value *frate* based on a measure using the share of policy attention given to each topic. These twenty-seven subjects (years between 1988 and 2015) *rate* the similarities of fourteen different issues from Table 6.2. The ratings of these policy areas are an average across subjects (i.e. each year). MDS provides with a scatter plot of the fourteen policy areas that results in

¹⁸For further reference see also Shepard (1980) and STATA software guidance from <https://www.stata.com/manuals13/mvmds.pdf>

¹⁹See Appendix E shows details of the multidimensional scaling (MDS) procedures.

a visual summary of the structure of the policy agenda. This map shows the perceived differences between these policy areas for each institutional agenda: presidential speeches and budgetary expenditures.

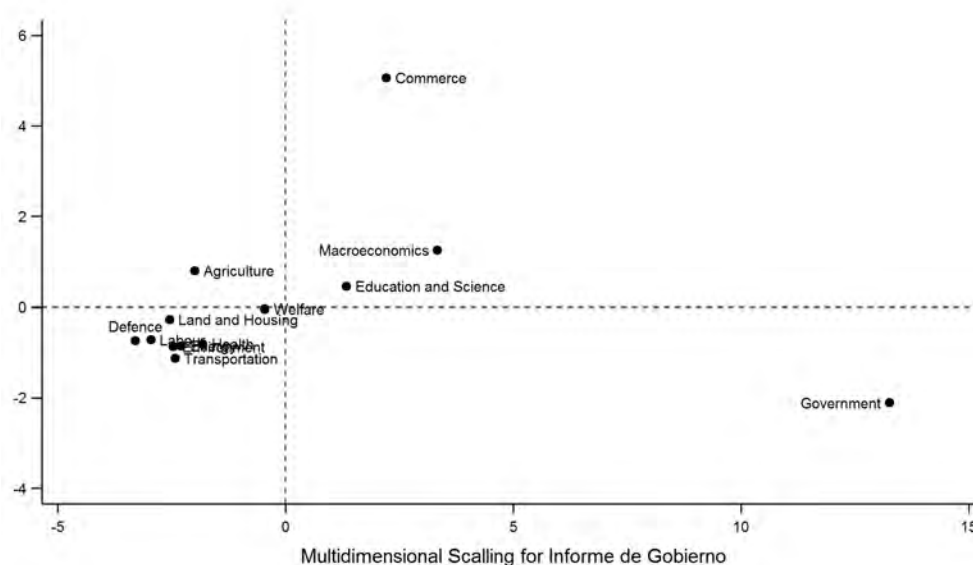
Looking at Figure 6.8 and Figure 6.9 one notes that there are both similarities and differences between these institutional agendas. For example, there are similarities in health (Topic 3) and agriculture (Topic 4) issues. However, these institutional agendas exhibit some major differences on very important issues. The locations of issues in each institutional agenda shows differences in main topics like issues on macroeconomics (Topic 1), government operations and other domestic issues, including crime and law and human rights (Topics 2, 9, 20, 12), and education, culture and science issues (Topics 6, 17, 23).

In examining the presidential speeches there is a cluster on the left side of Figure 6.8. There are four issues that depart from the rest and sit on the right side of the map issues on education and science, domestic commerce, macroeconomics and government.

Issues occupying different poles of the y-axis lose attention when the issues on the opposite side gain attention. For example, when issues like domestic commerce and international commerce (Topics 15, 18, 19), macroeconomics (Topic 1), education and science (Topics 6, 17, 23) and government operations and domestic issues (Topics 2, 9, 12, 20) gain attention, they make issues such as agriculture (Topics 4), labour (topics 5), defence (Topics 16) to lose attention in presidential agendas. This is consistent with the findings of Chapter 5 regarding certain issues like land and housing, agriculture and housing as not being very popular in policy attention within Mexican presidential agendas. The issue of government operations has clearly occupied a relevant space in the agenda since the democratisation of the Mexican political system, which coincides with the start of the time period covered by the data (1990–2015). Issues on government operations and other domestic issues (i.e. law and crime) gain great attention from presidents and seem to be more unstable in their pattern of attention if compared to macroeconomics issues, for example.

Meanwhile, the budgetary agenda exhibits slightly better fit in the prediction of the distances between policy issues. Figure 6.9 is similar in dimensional structure to the presidential speeches in the location of agriculture, health and domestic commerce issues. The budgetary priorities are more evenly split apart in the available content of this institutional agenda. The budgetary structure shows some particularly compelling cases: education and science, and energy issues. A gain in attention to issues on energy does not take attention from neglected issues but extracts attention from main issues. Meanwhile, it seems that issues like land and housing (Topics 14, 21), labour (Topic 5) and domestic and international commerce (15, 18, 19), are taking budgetary attention from issues on education and science.

Figure 6.8: Informe de Gobierno agenda content and correlation between topics



Source: Own elaboration

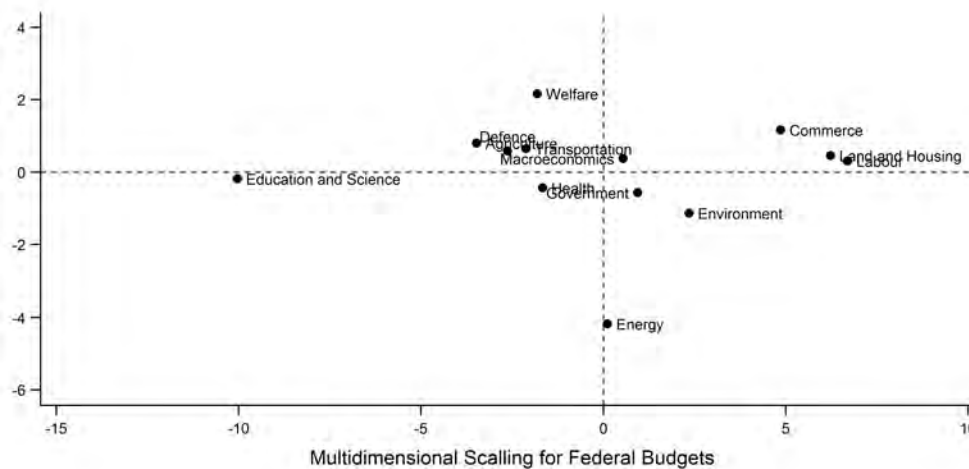
In the structure of the presidential speeches, issues on agriculture gain attention when all other issues on the right-hand side of Figure 6.8 lose attention. By contrast, agriculture is better represented in the budgetary structure. Meanwhile, the similar position of issues on health and domestic commerce reveal that these issues have broadly similar relative importance in both presidential speeches and budgetary agendas.

Figure 6.8 and Figure 6.9 show a continuity of policy attention in those issues that cluster and have a smaller proximity between each other. This cluster is observed in Figure 6.8 for welfare, land and housing, defence, labour, health and transport issues. Meanwhile, budgets show that issues regarding transportation, macroeconomics, defence, health and government tend to form a cluster in Figure 6.9. Those issues that are not creating clusters are issues that have been shown to change frequently or to change more abruptly in their proportion of attention.

These institutional agendas operate differently. The convergence between presidential policy priorities and budgetary commitments is small as these institutions follow different policymaking processes. If the president can affect policy decisions in other policymaking stages, this particular approach does not reveal that influence.

In general budgetary expenditure seems to lag behind or to ignore the presidential speeches. The distribution of attention in presidential speeches adjusts more quickly to political and economic contexts, as agendas contain rhetoric that is salient to the public. The president can freely decide and define the policy issues to talk about in his public

Figure 6.9: Budgetary expenditures agenda content and correlation between topics



Source: Own elaboration

events. For example, if a topic becomes more relevant to the public, the president can almost immediately start to discuss it at public events and in speeches. This punctuation may not happen in expenditures because it is always more challenging to make changes to the resourcing of existing programmes. The stickiness (path dependence) of budgetary decisions makes this process slow to adapt. There is a delayed reaction that leads these issues to have small correlations. Additionally, [Jones and Baumgartner \(2004\)](#) argue that the complexities of political systems block the possibility of translating the policy priorities of the citizens into policy action (see also [Dowding et al., 2015](#)).

6.5 The president and the use of public resources

For the Mexican case analysing budgetary decision-making presents challenges regarding access to data. The analysis of the extent to which the Mexican president can influence the allocation of public resources is not straightforward. Moreover, problems with accountability in the use of public resources must be acknowledged in this chapter. This topic relates to one of the most considerable problems in the Mexican political system: high levels of corruption. Academic research identifies corruption and a lack of accountability as major problems ([Gómez Vilchis, 2012c, 2013](#)). Including the discretionary use of public funds and corruption in a robust analysis would require extra research resources and does not necessarily relate to what this thesis aims to present and argue.

Table 6.8: The presidential public resources and Ramo 23

Year	Total Budget	Admin. Cat. (AC) ^a	Ramo 23	Proptn. AC	Proptn. Ramo 23
1990	112,676.28	46,200.56	6,070.01	41%	5%
1991	143,666.79	58,037.85	10,896.32	40%	8%
1992	170,704.35	60,764.27	11,819.23	36%	7%
1993	201,678.36	75,839.59	13,059.00	38%	6%
1994	242,970.51	95,944.97	16,823.35	39%	7%
1995	282,107.52	115,270.92	15,250.34	41%	5%
1996	394,391.60	155,256.17	22,342.31	39%	6%
1997	513,800.92	210,301.34	41,557.52	41%	8%
1998	594,177.39	198,096.60	57,219.53	33%	10%
1999	703,005.89	221,802.23	65,935.57	32%	9%
2000	852,029.30	257,631.01	100,590.58	30%	12%
2001	925,257.21	278,270.61	88,712.55	30%	10%
2002	1,060,771.77	354,976.25	102,918.39	33%	10%
2003	1,216,023.22	364,365.17	153,208.83	30%	13%
2004	1,317,011.09	417,380.62	173,860.11	32%	13%
2005	1,458,540.05	480,111.35	197,487.69	33%	14%
2006	1,656,937.99	541,575.91	246,528.85	33%	15%
2007	1,894,952.92	617,506.61	350,094.99	33%	18%
2008	2,210,197.01	720,224.90	414,284.88	33%	19%
2009	2,436,548.82	793,814.23	344,990.95	33%	14%
2010	2,618,907.38	823,444.44	414,552.87	31%	16%
2011	2,860,941.33	917,002.03	465,909.37	32%	16%
2012	3,102,197.75	994,309.64	489,158.72	32%	16%
2013	3,316,608.68	1,079,438.22	561,166.77	33%	17%
2014	3,577,753.37	1,170,404.57	627,514.26	33%	18%
2015	3,826,603.52	1,274,140.70	734,094.56	33%	19%

Source: Own elaboration with data from the Ministry of Finance in

<https://datos.gob.mx/busca/dataset/cuenta-publica>

^aThis is the category used in the previous congruence analysis between budgetary commitments and presidential speeches

A particular budgetary category, the ‘Ramo 23’, has been used as a political tool by Mexican presidents (see Gómez, 1996). Congress approves this budgetary category as ‘programmable expenditures’ and as if this were a similar category to those included in administrative categories.²⁰ The Federal Government usually takes discretionary decisions about the use of Ramo 23 resources, which do not require extra congressional approval if this amount exceeds original budgetary appropriations. Consequently, as

²⁰Administrative categories refers to resources that go to each of the government entities.

any president can exercise great power in this resource allocation, it is argued that the strength of the executive should not be based on his leadership but on his capacity in distributing monies. Such resource expenditures are not easily traceable.

Table 6.8²¹ shows the total amount of expenditures for the three values: total budgetary, administrative and Ramo 23. There are years in which the president can exercise discretion with almost 20% of the total budget. With the combination of Ramo 23 and expenditure under the administrative category, the president sometimes can exert control over more than 50% of the total budget (Administrative Category (AC) and Ramo 23). This occurred in 2013, 2014 and 2015. The support for a viewpoint on a strong presidential control over budgets may be pushing to accept arguments of the presence regarding autocratic forms of decision-making and policymaking in Mexico. It is the contention of this thesis, this influence is somehow limited, particularly in an increasingly democratising context as presidents face institutional checks that compels them to negotiate policy with other elites and organisations (See Chapter 4). Therefore, this political control is perceived to be less than complete. In fact, from the agenda-setting perspective, there is institutional friction that limits decision-making. All these factors affect budgetary attention and attention distributions.

From the previous congruence analysis, while findings of the extent to which the president influences budgetary commitments look limited, conclusions about the dynamics of attention in budgetary policy can be drawn. The budgetary process is a complex structure that imposes cognitive and institutional costs, where agenda-setting priorities do not necessarily translate into policy commitments. This is consistent with the punctuated equilibrium theory (H1),²² where convergence of policy priorities between stages in policymaking is possible if political actors overcome a force against the status quo and agree that there needs to be a move from discussion to policy implementation.

6.6 Discussion and conclusion

In general, from this analysis it is possible to conclude that the agenda-setting and implementation stages in policymaking follow different processes. Some institutional structures can help the president to enhance his capacity to deliver policies. Although some presidents can significantly influence budgetary decisions, these policy expenditures may experience changes due to exposure to national and international factors. The budgetary policy processes involve complex processes of information processing and responses to political and economic factors. The agenda-setting stage of policymaking also involves complexity when defining priorities. While presidents have some leeway

²¹The analysis looks at the proportion of change in budgetary expenditure by administrative category (AC) therefore conversion for currency is not needed for Table 6.8.

²²*Punctuated Equilibrium Agenda Hypothesis (H1): The dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit both incremental patterns of change and abrupt change (punctuations).*

when setting priorities in their institutional agendas, like the presidential speeches, these institutional agendas still have a limited capacity to contain a specific amount of policy priorities.

The presidential agenda, as a proxy of the agenda-setting stage, tends to be more flexible in its adjustments of policy priorities. The centralisation of decision-making in the agenda-setting stage provides the flexibility to adjust information more quickly. But it also tends to concentrate more attention on fewer issues than a budgetary policy can hold. The greater carrying capacity of budgets allows this institution to deal with a higher number of issues at a time. The budgetary decisions process is usually divided in different substructures. A government, to create and approve budgetary policy, needs the use of a structure composed of different departments to assist with the preparation and adjustment of budget estimates and allocations. Therefore, the budgetary process is imbued with greater complexity than the process whereby the president decides priorities in a practically independent fashion.

For the case of Mexico, policy priorities at the agenda-setting and implementation stages of policymaking are shown to be divergent. However, policy priorities seem, at times, to be diverging by a smaller proportion. These results indicate that institutional friction is an important variable for explaining issue congruence (or lack of it) and that the priorities of the president and budgetary priorities converge at a point where institutional friction decreases. In particular, the argument suggests that the formation of political coalitions can increase the possibility of convergence between priorities at different stages of policymaking. This mechanism bolsters the presidents' capacity of decision-making and sometimes improves the possibility of influencing decision processes. Mexican presidents are shown to rely on strategic actions to generate successful policymaking (Mendez, 2018; Casar, 2013). The formation of political coalitions is a tool that aids presidents in reducing political blockage: in the terms of the punctuated equilibrium theory, presidents are able to reduce friction against policy change.

However, the congruence analysis developed in this thesis demonstrates that convergence of policy prioritisation does not hold across all policy domains. Institutions and policy areas vary in their complexity — and institutional friction — which may be affecting the way in which priorities are translated into priorities at other stages of the policymaking process (see Epp and Baumgartner, 2017). Those policy areas in which presidents are able to raise concerns about the urgency of attending issues and have shared understanding regarding solutions to issues, for example the energy sectors in Mexico, are more likely to experience reforms (See Section 6.4.3). A president, as a policy entrepreneur, seizes the opportunity to generate policy change in particular domains and to be successful in delivering policy solutions. Entrepreneurial presidents “lie in wait in and around government with their solutions in hand, waiting for problems to float by to which they can attach their solutions, waiting for a development in the political stream they can use to their advantage” (Kingdon, 1984, pp. 165-166). This

is a strategic action from the presidency where experience and knowledge regarding the policy process are used to further support for the president's own policy priorities. This analysis showed that the Mexican president is shown to be a policy entrepreneur able to exploit a 'window of opportunity' and shifts in levels of attention given to issues by other political actors. Thus presidents can promote their own policy priorities. However, if these shifts happen, they sometimes can produce rapid and abrupt changes in the policy priorities of different institutional agendas, both at the agenda-setting and implementation stages of policymaking.

Chapter 7

Conclusions

The previous chapters presented theoretical contributions and empirical analyses of presidential policy agendas, particularly for the case of Mexico but also more generally for presidential systems moving to democracy (as seen in various Latin American countries). This chapter moves to present some concluding remarks in order to summarise this thesis's findings and the theoretical argument. It reflects on the importance of examining what captures the attention of presidents as a way to better understand presidential decision processes. This thesis suggested the use of an agenda-setting approach to examine the nature of issue-attention in presidential policy agendas. This chapter explains the theoretical contributions which made possible the use of an agenda-setting approach and the application of the punctuated equilibrium theory in a democratisation context. The chapter presents some sections that explain the possibilities of developing future research in policy agendas for Mexico and Latin America.

7.1 Concluding remarks on the study of presidential policy agendas

This thesis contributes to the study of agenda-setting as a means of understanding decision processes and the manner in which policy agendas manifest policy priorities *verbally* (i.e. presidential speeches) and *tangibly* (that is, in material terms i.e. policy implementation through budgetary expenditures). By looking at agenda-setting it was possible to test whether the punctuated equilibrium theory is present in presidential policy agendas (presidential speeches) and government expenditures. The principal conclusion is that the punctuated equilibrium theory does explain presidential policymaking. This finding sustains the universality of the application of this theory.

This thesis finds that periods of policy continuity and moments of radical change are present in presidential policy agendas. A mechanism generating a positive feedback

process for changes, explained by the accommodation of a preference for similar policy priorities, increases the likelihood of policy change. This process generates shifts in policy priorities after overcoming political gridlock. The main argument is that presidents are shown to be able to overcome political gridlock by negotiating policy reforms with other political actors. The formation of political coalitions helps to overcome a negative feedback process (that is, a negative friction against policy change) that usually results from having reduced incentives for political cooperation.

In Mexico, presidents have relied on the formation of political coalitions for enacting policy reform since the start of divided governments in the late 1990s. Section 2.7.3 suggested that a sense of urgency, a common rhetoric, the exchange of public funds and policy entrepreneurship are some elements that are present in the formation of these political coalitions. As such, Chapter 4 provided evidence regarding the formation of these political alliances led by the Mexican president. These alliances proved to be a mechanism for helping to overcome obstruction against policy adjustments in presidential agendas. This explained the positive feedback process of policy change based on the theoretical framework, outlined in Chapter 2.

For the case of Mexico, the understanding of presidential agenda-setting is done in terms of considering policymaking as a strategic action. This thesis argues that the prioritisation of policy issues by the president is contingent on political and economic contexts. For example, President Zedillo needed to re-adjust his presidential policy agenda in face of the Tequila Crisis, and thus he focused most of his policy attention discussing macroeconomic issues. President Zedillo's political actions were almost fully focused on trying to stabilise the Mexican economy. Yet, the President still needed to deal with other issues (i.e. social welfare, education, health, etc.) and balance resources to be responsive to issues other than the economy. During this presidency it was the first time in seven decades that the *Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) party lost its majority in Congress (in 1997). The emergence of a multiparty system in Mexico posed additional political challenges to President Zedillo's presidency. It was no longer evident that a president could secure support for presidential priorities in Congress. The president needed to transform the corporatist decision processes, seen in presidential policymaking during the single-party regime, into actions that require securing political cooperation from other political actors.

However, not everyone considers coalitions to be a crucial aspect of the Mexican presidency. In Section 2.7.4, it was explained that literature on Latin American and Mexican presidential systems consider the possibility of an autocratic style of governance from some presidents as explaining unstable patterns of decision-making. If a president has enough political capacity for agenda-setting through having overriding constitutional powers complemented by a weak institutional context, the agenda might suffer continuous shifts — shocks — as presidents are able to deliver change at any given point in time. This will produce continuous instability in the patterns of decision-making. In

the Mexican case, in Section 3.4.1, it was explained that the political research has accounted for an autocratic form of policymaking and viewpoints consider that this can produce instability in presidential agendas. Thus, it was a concern of this thesis to test whether patterns of decision-making were explained by the presence of continuous instability. If evidence had proven to support this viewpoint it would have contributed to the literature that considers autocratic forms of policymaking to be present because of hyperpresidentialism in Mexico, even after the start of democratisation (Negretto, 2013; Gargarella, 2013; Edmonds-Poli, 2006).

Yet, an assumption regarding hyperpresidentialism in Mexico, has been questioned by literature in Mexican politics (see Chapter 4). Ortega Ortiz (2017) argues that the country became a moderate pluralistic society where electoral competition is possible and left behind an authoritarian political system. In the developing pluralistic society, clientelism is still strong; however, citizenship is gaining importance as there has been increasing recognition that citizens have a right to pursue autonomy from Mexican institutions in way to democracy (see Fox, 1994). Also, the president started to face a more rebellious Congress and weak presidency after the end of the single party regime (Rubio, 2004). Hernández-Rodríguez (2003, p. 123) observes since the first alternation of governments in the presidential election of 2000, pluralism “put an end to the compulsory discipline under the executive and enabled both the legislative branch and the governorships to become efficient political counterweights to balance the executive and revitalize federal.” As a result, after the end of the single-party regime in the late 1990s, as explained in Section 3.4.2, the capacity of presidents’ decision-making seems to have been diminished decision-making because of increasing pluralism. This pluralism is considered to generate political stalemate and bring about politics “with the prospect of indefinite minority government rule of one sort or another and a huge backlog of unfinished policy business” (Pastor and Wise, 2005, p. 155). For example, Fukuyama (2008) acknowledges that Fox’s presidency did not command a majority in Congress, and he was unable to put together a coalition in favour of major reforms. This thesis is in agreement with the point of view that considers the president as, despite maintaining significant bargaining powers, faces increasing political gridlock. Therefore, arguments developed in this thesis considered that a key aspect of the Mexican presidency and the formation of presidential policy agendas is the ability to find processes to overcome political paralysis.

According to this viewpoint, the Mexican president is an actor whose capacity to deliver policy reform is blocked. It was interesting to observe from this literature that some authors considers presidents to have always faced some sort of political obstruction even during the single-party regime (Smith, 1977; Purcell, 1975; Glade and Anderson, 1963; Vernon, 1963). For example, Gillingham (2012) observes that during the single-party regime presidential powers could be counterbalanced by powers of local actors like governors and majors. This often threatened the president with social unrest at the

subnational level. This viewpoint considers that after the end of the single-party regime, and even during it, there is a generalised inability from presidents to overcome political obstruction. In this scenario, agendas, therefore, would tend to remain in permanent stasis or be predetermined because ongoing activities of government and politics would force the president to address certain issues. The inability of presidents to generate and deliver policies, thus, is argued to always favour policy equilibrium (Jaime, 2004; González Gómez, 1998). Taking into account this theory, it was also a concern of this thesis to test for the possibility of presidential decisions being in a continuous stasis.

Yet, by following punctuated equilibrium theory, this thesis raised another possible explanation concerning the nature of prioritisation of policies. It is suggested that there is a combination of periods of policy continuity in presidential policy agendas (stability/stasis) and moments of radical policy change (instability/punctuations). There are some decision costs that emerge because of the presence of particular institutional structures and political powers preventing a change from occurring in presidential policy agendas (i.e. multipartism and political fragmentation). These costs encourage policy decisions to maintain the policy status quo. However, while policymaking usually appears to be stable, there are occasions where it also experiences radical change. This thesis suggested that the Mexican president would be able to produce reform only when successful in reducing political obstruction.

It was necessary to test these different hypotheses throughout this thesis, as arguments were not conclusive about which patterns of policy attention were exhibited by the Mexican presidential policy agendas (see Chapter 3). This thesis suggested that punctuated equilibrium theory provides an explanation regarding patterns of policy prioritisation. There were alternative hypotheses to explain changes in policy agendas. A hypothesis on continuous instability in issue attention as a result of presidents having the possibility to act independently and sometimes able to concentrate political power, which allows them to deliver shocks to the policy agenda was also tested. The analysis tested another hypothesis for presidential policy agendas exhibiting patterns of policy continuity as presidents face substantial limitations in their ability to enact policy reform. Following these arguments, it was possible to generate and test the following hypotheses:

Punctuated Equilibrium Agenda Hypothesis (H1): The dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit both incremental patterns of change and abrupt change (punctuations).

Unstable Agendas Hypothesis (H2): The dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit repeatedly abrupt and radical change.

Stable Agendas Hypothesis (H3): The dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit stable patterns of change.

Testing these hypotheses has improved the understanding of the processes of decision-making behind presidential policymaking and the nature of issue-attention in presidential policy agendas. However, a lack of theoretical development of the punctuated equilibrium theory in a democratisation context required this study not only to provide evidence concerning the presence of patterns of ‘punctuated equilibrium’ in policy change but also to develop a theoretical contribution on this theory.

The contributions of Latin American scholars on institutionalism and coalition formation were particularly relevant for the development of an innovative theoretical understanding of the punctuated equilibrium literature. The institutional characteristics of the Mexican political system, with increasing pluralism and multipartism, can sometimes produce political paralysis. There are protracted moments of no response, principally because, as a result of rent-seeking, political actors have little incentive to seek policy agreements with the president. However, presidents sometimes demonstrate substantial ability to generate political agreements between political actors. In particular, analysis from Chapter 4 supports this theoretical contribution. From a methodological perspective it was possible to understand decision processes by empirically examining the manner in which policy agendas manifest policy priorities. This research studied presidential policy agendas through coding policy instruments to measure policy priorities. The demonstration of the presence of ‘punctuated equilibrium’ patterns of change gives a novel understanding of presidential politics in Mexico. This was evident from analysis conducted in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 as will be discussed further in the following section.

7.2 A review of the research design

In Section 1.7, it was explained that the design of this project involved an embedded single-case analysis of the Mexican presidency. It looked at decision processes in different presidential administrations. The analysis built a cross-case difference analysis between presidencies. The comparative component in this research project allowed contrasts between administrations to be examined and provided some comparisons with other countries as well. The research design principally examined issue-attention — a focus on policy priorities — and avoided limiting the analysis to the level of studying particular presidential policies or a particular administration. The analysis examined presidential agendas across five administrations including the presidencies of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1989–1994), Ernesto Zedillo (1994–2000), Vicente Fox (2000–2006), Felipe Calderón (2006–2012) and Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–2018).¹

The Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) coding scheme was useful for examining policy priorities in presidential policy agendas in these five administrations. At the time

¹Analyses in this thesis stopped in 2015 by design and covers from 1988 to 2015.

of writing there are no precedents in Latin American studies regarding literature focusing on how presidents discuss issues in their policy agendas. This research gap led to the suggestion of using the agenda-setting approach to better understand presidential politics, in contrast to institutionalism viewpoints. The novelty of the agenda-setting approach is that it focuses on examining how issues catch the attention of the president and the impact of this in policy agendas. Embracing the agenda-setting approach in a case study of Mexico gave an opportunity for the CAP to expand knowledge regarding policy prioritisation outside industrialised democracies (i.e. Western democracies).

It was possible to generate a database of presidential speeches using the coding scheme and thus this thesis has made further data available within the CAP community. This database consist of twenty-seven speeches of Informe de Gobierno with a total number of sentences of 13,109 between 1988 and 2015. The CAP scheme was also used for coding budgetary expenditures. This database on budgetary expenditures is not as extensive as the database on presidential speeches. Therefore it was only possible to code expenditures by using the principal administrative category of the budget, which refers to expenditure allocated to each ministry in the governmental structure rather than for each social project.² Yet, these data consist of 1,692 items for budgetary expenditures between 1990 and 2015. It was possible to generate data to measure policy agendas and to identify patterns of attention within both presidential speeches and budgetary expenditures. This measure of policy agendas also helped to examine how presidential policy looks over time and the amount of time presidents devoted to attend to issues (see [Dowding and Martin, 2017](#)). In general, the data allowed the development of descriptive analysis as well as analysis with different data-visualisation techniques. These data were used in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6.

The research design involved a mixed methods approach in its development. The use of a qualitative approach helped this project to gain more detailed knowledge regarding the process of presidential policymaking. It provided evidence regarding a process generating change in presidential policy agendas. The thesis considered it relevant to investigate decision processes and describe a mechanism helping to overcome this resistance against policy change. The analysis from Chapter 4 more deeply explored the details of the processes explaining change in the patterns of issue-attention in policy agendas. Moreover, the use of elite interviews for understanding policymaking processes, and not just examining historical facts concerning particular events or presidential administrations, examined the political entrails of Mexican presidential politics. The analysis conducted seventeen interviews with political elites that provided substantial data regarding presidential politics. The decision regarding a mixed methods design followed a complementary focus in the development of this thesis.

²According to official sources by Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social (National Council of Evaluation of Social Programmes; hereafter CONEVAL) there is estimated of five thousand social programmes operating nationwide in Mexico (in 2016). Yet, detailed data on all social programmes is not publicly available.

As these conclusions will show in Section 7.3, findings in this thesis are robust and demonstrate a model of agenda-setting explained by punctuated equilibrium theory. The hypotheses were tested in Chapter 4, Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 and findings in each of these chapters complement the analysis to support the presence of *Punctuated Equilibrium Agenda Hypothesis (H1)* that states that *the dynamics of presidential policy attention exhibit both incremental patterns of change and abrupt change (punctuations)*.

7.3 Key findings

A key motivation in the development of this thesis was to develop an explanation regarding processes producing obstructions to changes and also an explanation of the processes that promotes abrupt changes in presidential policy agendas. Chapter 4 explained Mexican presidents are political actors who usually experience obstructions in their capacity to deliver policy and enact reforms (see Section 2.7.5). The capacity of presidents to deliver change and re-prioritise issues is largely explained by presidents' ability to build political agreements with other political actors. The corporatist structure of the state helped Mexican presidents to achieve a great capacity for agenda-setting during the single-party regime. Yet, in a democratisation context the ability to reach political agreements for policy reform is largely explained by presidents' capacity to build political coalitions in Congress. The literature review in Chapter 2 described how coalition building is a common practice for Latin American and Mexican presidents to enhance their capacity of decision-making. Chapter 4 provided extra detail of coalition formation as processes explaining the dynamics of presidential agendas in Mexico. Some of the important elements that lead to the formation of political coalitions and help to produce policy shifts are a sense of urgency and a shared understanding regarding particular issues.

Chapter 5 had a particular focus on examining policy priorities, that is, a focus on all relevant issues a president discusses in their policy agendas. The analysis showed that the distribution of attention of Mexican presidents places particular emphasis on issues that have previously gained attention within policy agendas. Policy decisions from the past clearly explain attention and decisions in the future. It is rare that Mexican presidents allocate attention to entirely new topics over time. Issues like macroeconomics, law and crime, health and education occupy most of any president's agenda content. Meanwhile, issues such as culture, science and technology and immigration have not become popular in presidents' agendas during the period studied in this research project.

The research noted that there are some main issues that consume a vast amount of attention. Issues on macroeconomics, health and education represent the core functions of governments and are major priorities within presidential agendas (see Jennings et al.,

2011b). A relevant finding was that even though presidents decide to allocate less attention to core issues of government, those issues that are the least popular in their agendas (i.e. culture, science and technology and immigration) do not receive more attention. Mexican presidents allocate their attention to secondary issues such as social welfare, agriculture and health. There are domains that never attract presidents' attention, thus, this denotes possible problems with representation in a context that is trying to move to democracy. These are issues like human rights and immigration that are shown not be relevant priorities in presidents' agendas (see Table 5.3).

The Mexican presidential agendas show that policy priorities have a general decline in attention in issues of agriculture and labour. These issues have become less important over time and attention has been shifted mainly to issues of crime and law as the descriptive analysis in Chapter 5 demonstrated. This gives an insight into the shifting conditions of political life that push presidents to focus attention on particular issues. For example, organised crime has encouraged Mexican presidents to be responsive to pressures generated by this increasing social problem (see Section 5.4.2). The fact that agriculture and labour issues have waned indicates a trend regarding these issues becoming less important for presidents (see Figure 5.5). This decrease in policy attention could be explained by factors such as that in the last decade the Mexican economy has moved into the manufacturing sector, particularly since the start of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in the early 1990s (see Centeno, 2010; Domínguez, 1997). It can also be related to the fact that other issues, like social welfare, education and health, became more important in presidential policy agendas as part of an aim to improve development in Mexico (see Table 5.3 that showed differences in presidential policy priorities by administration and total).

In Mexican presidential agendas, attention is also given to health and social welfare issues. There has been a particular interest from presidents in making provisions for the needy and to improve the health sector. Something similar has happened for welfare and education issues. The Mexican government has been implementing large conditional cash transfer programmes to families in the poorest economic strata of the country since the early 1990s. One of the conditions for receiving cash transfers is the enrolment and attendance at school of children in the beneficiary families (see Pardini, 2004). This social policy has been redefined on some occasions as part of a nationwide policy for ending with poverty, which includes national education policy as well. Therefore, issues regarding education have received much more attention from presidents (see Section 5.4.3).

Issues relating to government operations and law and crime are policy domains that have shown an increase in attention in presidential policy agendas. One of the biggest problems for Mexican governments relates to having high indexes of corruption. Corruption in Mexico is a problem present in many different segments of society, which has greatly affected the country's legitimacy and democratic development. The increase of

presidents' attention on issues relating to government operations is a response to this social problem and an attempt to tackle problems with transparency and accountability. Mexican presidents have also been forced to be responsive to problems related to crime and domestic security (see [Tromme and Otaola, 2014](#); [Gómez Vilchis, 2012b](#)). Therefore, law and crime is a policy area that has received increasing attention from Mexican presidents. Similarly, issues on energy have become relevant in presidential policy agendas. There has been an increase in the perception of political elites on the relevance of reforming the oil and energy sectors as a booster of economic growth and development in Mexico. A particular interest from Mexican presidents to undertake reforms, particularly for the privatisation of the energy sector, reflects the increase of attention on these issues.

The analysis also examined the extent to which presidents' priorities are similar (or not) to policy priorities at other stages of the policymaking process. Chapter 6 showed differences and similarities between those issues presidents discuss in presidential speeches and governments' budgetary priorities as an indicator of actual policy actions (i.e. implementation stage). In general, executive attention does not lead to similar budgetary priorities. There is a difference between governments' policy implementation and those issues that presidents 'talk about'. A mismatch between presidential agenda-setting and policy implementation is explained by the difference between decision processes in each of these stages. There is a particular form of prioritisation of issues and politics in each of these stages of policymaking. The definition of priorities in presidential policy agendas follows a more straightforward process as decisions usually are concentrated in the hands of the president (and his closest members of staff). Meanwhile, the definition of priorities in the budgetary agenda is a process that requires a *division of labour* that splits the budgeting process into different tasks and stages. These generate costly decision-making processes for institutions involved in the budgetary process. Therefore, it is more costly for budgetary institutions to end a social programme than for the president to stop 'talking about' an issue. In this sense, prioritisation of issues in the agenda-setting stage can be inequitable as issues can easily be dropped from the policy agendas. Yet, prioritisation of policy tends to be more uniformly distributed in later stages of policymaking — i.e. budgetary agendas — than in the early stages of policymaking — i.e. agenda-setting stage — because it is more costly to drop attention from issues. The findings in Chapter 6 reflect that policy implementation and agenda-setting are simply two different things as [Dowding and Martin \(2017, pp. 17-18\)](#) suggest.

The earlier discussion notes which issues dominated the Mexican presidential policy agenda between 1989 and 2015. In general, issues like macroeconomics, government operations, law and crime occupy most of content in presidential policy agendas. These issues were referred to as the main issues in presidential policy issues. It seems that policy attention given by Mexican presidents to these issues is recurrent and thus causes policy prioritisation to appear similar from administration to administration. The fact

that policy attention exhibits substantial similarity between administrations has been argued to be because presidents adapt attention in many small, gradual changes instead in large adjustments. Incrementalism is an approach explaining this stickiness (path dependence) in presidential policy attention. However, on occasion, presidents' policy attention displays large jumps. These have been considered as radical changes in the form of punctuations. As the analysis showed the agenda displays 'punctuated equilibrium' patterns of change. At times, issues such as social welfare, health, education, foreign affairs gain more attention but many times this is temporary. The analysis in Section 5.4.4 and Section 6.4.1 supports the presence of the punctuated equilibrium theory in policymaking for the Mexican case.

The empirical examination of the manner in which policy agendas exhibit change over time suggests that policy prioritisation experiences abrupt shifts (punctuations) in combination with processes of gradual policy change (near stasis). Thus, there is evidence of the punctuated equilibrium theory, and it is possible to positively answer the research question that this thesis raised before: *Does the general distribution of attention in presidential policy exhibit patterns of continuity and change?* The presence of 'punctuated equilibrium' patterns of change set the comprehension of presidential decision processes in terms of being explained by a dual process with the presence of both a positive process of change — a positive feedback process (positive friction) — and an opposing process of change — a negative feedback process (negative friction). In the case of Mexico, this thesis argues that to overcome a resistance to presidential policy priorities (that is, overcoming a negative friction), the president needs to manifest strategic decision-making. The president needs to become a policy entrepreneur able to reach agreement with other political actors and generate a sense of urgency regarding the (re-)prioritisation of policies. During the single-party regime, the corporatist structure of the Mexican state provided an institutional structure in which the president could bargain policy reforms. In a democratisation context, Mexican presidents rely on the formation of political coalitions to be able to reach cooperation and accommodate different policy priorities from different political actors. The Mexican president is an actor incapable of exerting an independent authority in terms of the definition of presidential policy agendas.

7.4 An understanding of friction in a democratisation context

This thesis develops a particular understanding of institutional friction in the context of democratisation of political institutions. In Baumgartner and Jones's original theoretical development about punctuations, the presence of veto players explains policy gridlock and increases public attention. Additionally the actions of a policy entrepreneurs changing policy images — rhetoric — which explains shifts in policy agendas (Baumgartner

and Jones, 1993). However, because of weak institutionalisation, a developing democracy is argued to find more difficulties in adapting decision processes and in responding to the signals of a changing political environment (Spiller and Tommasi, 2007). In this thesis, weak institutionalisation is considered to create political fragmentation that in consequence reduces incentives for political cooperation. The presence of fragmentation increases the costs of the processes of decision-making as actors find more difficulties in reaching political agreements.

This thesis contributes to agenda-setting analysis and scholarship by arguing that the presence of friction (decision costs), other than U.S. pluralism, produces a punctuated equilibrium pattern of change (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993). The contribution of a Latin American case study is that it shows that political cooperation and accommodation of particular policy priorities between political actors through coalition formation and informal negotiations explains most of the institutional friction.

A case in point was Mexico. Since the start of divided governments in the mid-1990s, every presidential administration has relied on the formation of political coalitions for generating policy change and reform. Chapter 2 explained the possibility of relying on a mechanism to accommodate preferences for similar policy priorities and generate a process of policy change. This process helps to overcome political forces favouring the policy status quo. For example, Chapter 4 showed evidence that a mechanism for building alliances like the Pact for Mexico was useful for generating major policy reform in different sectors during President Peña Nieto's administration (2012–2018). The 'punctuated equilibrium' patterns of change are explained by the capacity of presidents to oppose an obstructing friction by reaching political agreements and promoting political cooperation with other political actors. Chapter 2 argued that elements such as a sense of urgency and a shared understanding regarding an issue at stake were relevant for the formation of political coalitions.

An example of the relevance of coalition formation as a driver of policy change is the case of the Mexican energy and oil sectors. Section 5.4.3 showed in Figure 5.5 an increase in attention to energy issues by Mexican presidents. Also, Section 6.4.2 examined presidential priorities and priorities in budgetary expenditures, finding that there are moments in time when priorities of these different institutional agendas positively converge. As Mendez (2018) argues, there was a change in the paradigm regarding the relevance of reforming the energy sector. The problem with a lack of reform in the energy sector was formulated in terms of the relevance of improving economic development and growth in Mexico. The political debate centred on finding an end to the oil monopoly from *Petróleos Mexicanos* (PEMEX), the Mexican state-owned petroleum company, and increasing competitiveness in the sector. Yet, a strategic action from the president was needed to enact a major reform for the privatisation of oil in Mexico. As Mendez (2018) also points out, President Peña could secure political support through the Pact for Mexico. The fact that the president can form agreements increases the likelihood of reform

and of policy priorities to be transferred into later stages of policymaking. The Mexican president proves to be capable of forming coalitions, in other words a the role that reflects a particularities of presidential politics in a presidential system that among other institutional characteristics has a multiparty system.

The inclusion of the Mexican case in agenda-setting studies generates knowledge regarding the politics behind the formation of agendas in a young democracy. The case suggests that presidents are strategic political actors who need to adjust their behaviour to changing political and economic environments. The president is a political actor that needs to look for opportunities to produce changes in policy priorities. It requires the identification of moments where obstruction to policy change can be overcome. The study of the formation of policy agendas required conceiving decision-making as something where institutional processes affect the capacity to deal with information flows and adjust policy responses. There is still a need for further investigation into the sources of friction in a democratisation context that affect the configuration of presidential policy agendas.

7.5 Further research avenues regarding policy agendas and issue-attention

These final remarks consider that research on presidential policy agendas and issue attention could be expanded by comparing different presidential systems or by contrasting different policy domains. A comparative analysis can focus on understanding decision processes and their impact on the ‘punctuated equilibrium’ nature of issue-attention in different presidential systems including countries outside industrialised democracies (i.e. Western democracies). Meanwhile, analysis at the level of subsystems will broaden knowledge regarding the nature of ‘punctuated equilibrium’ patterns of policy change in different policy domains. The opportunity to develop research at the level of political systems or subsystems will provide a better understanding of the impact of the costs of decision-making (*friction*)³ in policymaking.

The contribution of this thesis, with data from presidential speeches for the case of Mexico, can be particularly useful for developing analysis regarding policy attention in comparison to other political systems (presidential or parliamentary). There is available data for executive speeches in the CAP community for countries including Australia, Denmark, Hungary, Italy, France, the Netherlands, United States, United Kingdom and Spain.⁴ The use of descriptive statistics and graphs can help for comparing these data. This analysis could raise a number of questions: Which issues gain more policy attention?

³See Section 1.4.1 and Section 2.3 for further reference to the concept of friction and institutional friction.

⁴Budgetary data is not fully available for many countries in the CAP community. Although there is data for the United States, Brazil, Turkey, Russia and Hungary

Do these issues also gain substantial attention in other political systems? Are policy priorities different in industrialised and developing democracies? How does ‘punctuated equilibrium’ differ between political systems? It is also possible to formulate other questions regarding policy priorities and party preferences, electoral processes and/or particular institutional characteristics (i.e. presidential vs. parliamentary systems) that can help to generate further knowledge on agenda-setting.

This project also provides the opportunity to develop further research analysis through understanding agenda-setting processes in particular policy areas. The quantitative data provided can develop case-specific research into individual policy areas — i.e. energy, education or welfare sectors — in order to identify some of the different institutional factors explaining friction (i.e. decision costs). A focus on policy case studies can provide an overview regarding the differences between particular policy subsystems that monopolise policymaking and their processes for processing information. The punctuated equilibrium theory can show differences in the amount and level of punctuations these monopolies exhibit for each policy domain. It might be that policy domains that require programmatic planning — i.e. education and health — will experience less frequent changes when compared to other policy areas that are prone to exhibit greater instability — i.e. macroeconomics and social welfare (see [Epp and Baumgartner, 2017](#)). Further analysis could examine the particular elements of policymaking that cause differences in ‘punctuated equilibrium’ patterns of change between policy areas.

Process tracing is a research method used for tracing causal mechanisms within case analysis that can be used for developing further research by selecting particular case study. This method can shed light on generalisable causal mechanisms and link causes and outcomes within similar cases (see [Bennett and Checkel, 2015](#)). The analysis of particular policy areas could also use methodologies applied in comparative politics approaches (see [Caramani, 2017](#)). Another possible approach would be to use a most-similar-systems design to make a comparison between similar cases. It is possible to identify independent variables explaining the presence of punctuated equilibrium theory. If the analysis finds differences in the dependent variables, a different theory rather than punctuated equilibrium theory will be needed to explain decision processes and policy prioritisation (e.g. incrementalism).

The experience gained with this study in terms of elite interviewing can be used as a research tool for developing further case study research. Yet, it will be relevant to design a research project with further detail regarding the development of comparisons between particular policy cases. The study of these policy cases will contribute to the study of comparative studies by focusing on analysis of public policy (see [Peters, 2018](#); [Matt, 2017](#)).

7.6 The future of presidential studies in Mexico and Latin America

Some studies on the Mexican political system include analysis regarding the presidency. But the presidency and the president have not been particular objects of research. The study of the president develop from examining institutional transformations of the presidency to forming an understanding of the behaviour of the president in terms of issue prioritisation. As this chapter referred before, an aim is to move into adopting an agenda-setting approach for the understanding of presidential policymaking, in contrast to the institutionalism viewpoint. The focus of future research, therefore, can be placed on the various decision processes that result in the selection of particular policies instead of others. This thesis already has made a contribution to this task exploring presidential behaviour through the study of presidential agenda-setting in Mexico.

In the last decades, in Latin America the literature on presidents has increased significantly and analysis has dealt with examining particular aspects of presidential administrations, ideas and beliefs, presidential initiatives and other aspects of presidential activities with case studies as the principal method of analysis. The contribution of this literature includes developing an understanding of the role of presidents as heads of states, international actors, party leaders, electoral campaigners, legislative initiators and veto players. However, there is the opportunity to promote further comparative research, particularly with regard to how presidents set their policy priorities. The focus is to encourage further production of knowledge regarding the impact of institutional processes and politics on presidential policy agendas. In [Jones and Baumgartner \(2005a\)](#), the authors focus on studying governments' processes in carrying out policy decisions about a variety of issues and addressing problems. This politics of attention, as they call it, is something could be applied to the study of presidential decision processes. The study of these processes for the president and the process of dealing with a variety of issues, therefore, is something that it is possible to start referring to as the *politics of presidential attention*.

The further study of these *politics of presidential attention* needs to be centred on examining the impact of institutional processes on the reaction of presidents to information signals from the political environment. This needs to be done by considering the particular institutional characteristics of Latin American democracies. The presence of contexts often characterised by political fragmentation is a setting that produces a reduction in the capacity of decision-making — or the efficiency — of presidents. There are difficulties in reacting to changing political and economic environments. A key aspect for understanding presidential politics in this sense would be finding evidence regarding the processes by which presidents are able to increase efficiency in their decision processes. This concerns to identifying the type of mobilisation a president embraces to overcome political obstruction for setting policy agendas and radically altering the interests that

protect the prevalence of the status quo. Thus, this agenda-setting approach introduces a novel view regarding the political role of the president that is, a function that relates to seizing political opportunities. The president is seen as capable of being a policy entrepreneur.

7.7 Comparative Agendas Project for Mexico and Latin America

A strength of the Comparative Agendas Project is that it allows comparability, classifying policy under a single and standard scheme (Jones, 2015, p. 35). It measures the content of policy instruments (i.e. speeches, bill, laws and budgets) and observes changes in policy over time. This coding scheme helped to generate data in the form of a long-term reliable time series. According to Jones (2015, p. 41–42), this coding scheme “was explicitly established to build the data and measurement infrastructure of policy studies.” In this thesis, it has been proven that by adding Mexico as a new case, it is possible to contribute to research in this worldwide academic project. This thesis provided a dataset to measure policy priorities in presidential speeches that are available for the use of the CAP community and wider political scholarship.

Although there might be a possibility of adding Mexico to the list of twenty countries that, at the time of writing, are part of the global project, some considerations need to be made regarding the official introduction of this case to the CAP community. The coding process for this thesis followed a double-blind coding process with the help of a research assistant. Yet, it still requires a review of the coding process within the CAP coding procedures for guaranteeing further data consistency. Whether a master code for the Mexican case is necessary requires assessment. The Master Codebook Project must provide a guide for the adjustment of the code for the Mexican case if necessary. For this doctoral project, a moderate position was taken in the coding of the president’s speech. It uses the master code for coding presidential speeches and does not add country-specific subtopics.

For the Latin American case, there are individual projects for the cases of Mexico, Ecuador and Colombia currently run by postgraduate students. The Chilean case has a history of working under an agenda-setting approach and the comparative coding scheme with presidential speeches. Although there are academic publications for the Chilean example, the project has not been developed as a country-chapter within the CAP research group. The case of Brazil is the project most integrated into this research community. Yet, Brazil even when researchers have worked with data on legislation, presidential speeches and budgetary priorities, access to data has been limited and it is not fully available in the CAP website.⁵ In general, all these new country projects have

⁵Comparative Agenda Project website: <http://comparativeagendas.net>

shown limitations in their capacity to code public policy instruments in terms of volume and amount of available data.

For the development of individual projects, there is a need to discuss the feasibility of each of these projects to be part of the CAP research community. The coding of different government instruments requires resources and the capacity to build large datasets. This is one of the factors that affects the viability and sustainability of each of these individual projects. To expand research regarding issue-attention and following the agenda-setting approach in this region will require this research community to contribute with experience, knowledge and other resources for the success of these individual projects.

7.8 The study of agendas and policy implications

The agenda-setting process is one of the policy stages in the policymaking process. Agenda-setting refers to the process that identifies why issues become important. Individuals and organisations have a collection of issues that are available for discussion and each of these political actors follow particular processes to select those issues. The development of agenda-setting studies helps to understand the process of assigning priority to policy, whatever the configuration, democratic or otherwise, of political systems.

Therefore, the relevance of studying agenda-setting for the policymaking process is that it contributes to the understanding of some of the factors that bring policy issues to the attention of policymakers, including the president. The examination of how and why issues come to the attention of political actors provides understanding regarding some of the characteristics of particular political and decision processes (i.e. institutional structures, fragmentation, constraints, centralisation, etc.). Therefore, a requisite task in studying agendas is the identification of the factors that determine prioritisation and selection of different policy issues.

The process of decision-making at the start of policymaking — presidential agenda-setting — can affect later stages of policymaking (implementation stage). Issues that are identified as relevant to a government can affect the definition and policy implementation at later stages of policymaking as these issues can guide political action. For example, in the U.S., President Trump by focusing in general on border security — i.e. travel bans — and in particular on the border wall with Mexico, made immigration issues a policy priority. The administration claimed that an immigration crisis has affected the security of American citizens. The widespread of criticism can always support further presidential action, as was the case for the 2018 zero-tolerance policy⁶ regarding the separation of families on the Mexico border and, a policy that later President Trump was forced to modify. In the case of Mexico, presidents have also shown the capacity to

⁶For further reference to the zero-tolerance policy <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/25/opinion/zero-tolerance-immigration.html>

make particular topics a major policy concern. Since 2006, the president supported a policy on the Mexican war on drugs, the issue of drug-related violence and security has become a major priority for Mexican governments. In 2014, the forced disappearance of 43 students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers College shifted discussions from supporting continued action against drug crimes with security measures to considering drug legalisation and focusing on corruption in Mexico.⁷ This event changed the focus of presidents policy attention.

The form in which presidents indicate their policy preferences is relevant for understanding the course of the nation. The last remark of this thesis asserts the importance of democracies for developing policy instruments able to track the fluctuation of policy priorities over time. The identification of policy priorities can help to assess whether presidential adjustments and re-prioritisations of issues have links to the independent interests of the president or if they answer to political-programmatic interests. If they seem to be responding to political-programmatic interests, this might be an indicator of a system moving towards democracy. A move into democracy will also increasingly allow citizens to influence and shape agenda-setting with issues that are important to them. Transparency becomes a necessary element in agenda-setting as citizens can ensure that they can influence the policy agenda and thus democracy is increasingly strengthened.

⁷For further references to the 43 students disappearance see [Zagato \(2018\)](#), [Harlow et al. \(2017\)](#) and [Jimenez \(2016\)](#).

Appendix A

The interviews with experts and characteristics of the informants

Table A.1: Interviews and characteristics of the informants

No.	Code	Professional Background	Presidents
1	S161212	Party leader and Academic	President Salinas to President Peña
2	M161108	Ex-cabinet Minister	President Calderón
3	H161005	Government Minister	President Peña
4	A161004	Congress Adviser (Opposition)	President Peña
5	J160830	Academic	President Salinas to President Peña
6	B161006	Ex-cabinet Minister	President Salinas
7	K161006	Chief of Staff	President Salinas and President Zedillo
8	I161020	Pollster and Consultant	President Salinas to President Peña
9	Q161130	Lawmaker and Academic	President Fox and President Calderón
10	L161102	Government Minister	President Salinas and President Zedillo
11	D161013	Academic	President Salinas to President Peña
12	F161018	Government Minister	President Calderón
13	O161106	Pollster and Consultant	President Salinas to President Peña
14	G161018	Chief of Staff	President Fox
15	R161207	Speech Writer	President Calderón
16	N161103	Pollster and Consultant	President Salinas to President Peña
17	P161129	Senate (Opposition)	President Peña

Appendix B

Questionnaire for interviews with experts

POLICY CHANGE AND PRESIDENTIAL AGENDAS Interview Guide	
Name of the Interview:	Date
Institution:	
Division:	Area/Department:
I.PRESIDENTIAL AGENDA-SETTING	
How does the president decide on which topics to include in his agenda?	
Whom does he listen to for building his agenda?	
To what extent do interest groups, social movements, political parties and elites influence the presidential agenda?	
How does he process all these policy preferences?	
Is there information that he avoids giving attention?	
II.POLICY CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN PRESIDENTIAL AGENDA	
What determines his preference for particular topics?	
Are there topics that have been part of the president's agendas?	
Are there some issue that abandon the agenda?	
Are there some topics that are not usually part of the agenda?	
Is he a follower of public opinion?	
Does the media influence his decisions?	
To what extent is his ideology important?	
III.PRESIDENTIAL AGENDA	
Is the definition of presidential agenda different between administraitons?	
What is your definition of presidential agendas?	

AGENDA PRESIDENCIAL Y CAMBIO DE POLITICA PUBLICA Guía de Entrevista	
Nombre del entrevistado: Institución: División:	Fecha Area/Departamento:
I.ESTABLECIMIENTO DE AGENDA PRESIDENCIAL ¿Cómo define el presidente los temas de su agenda? ¿A quién estucha el presidente para formar su agenda? ¿Qué tanto afectan los grupos de interés, movimientos sociales, partidos políticos y elites en la definición de la agenda del presidente? ¿Cómo toma encuesta todas estas preferencias? ¿Evita algun tipo de información en su toma de decisiones?	
II.CONTINUIDAD DE POLITICA PUBLICA Y CAMBIO EN LA AGENDAS DEL PRESIDENTE ¿Qué determina su preferencia por ciertos temas ? ¿Hay temas que siempre ocupan su agenda? ¿Hay temas que dejan de ocupar su agenda? ¿Hay temas que por lo general no ocupan su agenda? ¿Sigue la opinion pública? ¿Los medios influyen su decision?Does the media influence his decisions? ¿Qué tan importante es su idelogía para la definición de la agenda?	
III.AGENDA PRESIDENCIAL ¿La definición de la agenda varía de una administración a otra? ¿Cómo define agenda presidencial?	

Appendix C

Panel regression autoregressive model by topic, 1988–2015

Table C.1: Panel regression model by topics, 1988-2015

Variables	2. Civil Rights	3. Health	4. Agriculture	5. Labour	6. Education	7. Environment	8. Energy	10. Transportation
L.Speeches (Y_{t-1})	0.123 (0.133)	-0.111 (0.163)	-0.149 (0.186)	-0.512*** (0.189)	0.139 (0.198)	-0.190 (0.129)	-0.0944 (0.192)	-0.280** (0.136)
Time ($Time_t$)	1.355*** (0.312)	0.244 (0.259)	-0.392* (0.232)	0.213 (0.185)	0.0704 (0.531)	-0.110 (0.188)	0.222 (0.377)	0.222 (0.310)
Party ($Party_t$)	4.703* (2.664)	-2.261 (1.959)	0.637 (1.882)	0.802 (1.549)	2.373 (4.132)	-1.164 (1.421)	0.601 (2.712)	-1.497 (2.437)
Honeymoon ($Hnymoon_t$)	-2.680* (1.580)	-3.512*** (1.210)	-0.478 (1.140)	-1.840* (0.946)	-3.003 (2.496)	-1.045 (0.918)	-1.396 (1.790)	-3.967*** (1.508)
Zedillo ($Pres2_t$)	-10.56*** (2.727)	0.549 (2.015)	-0.0291 (1.958)	0.473 (1.516)	4.835 (4.090)	-1.219 (1.653)	-2.609 (3.182)	-4.754* (2.632)
Fox ($Pres3_t$)	-8.809* (4.515)	-4.788 (3.693)	0.688 (3.526)	-4.393 (3.178)	1.689 (8.113)	-1.549 (2.899)	-3.258 (5.544)	-6.895 (4.612)
Calderón ($Pres4_t$)	-23.68*** (6.046)	-2.895 (4.883)	0.775 (4.812)	-4.028 (3.975)	1.977 (10.87)	5.280 (3.619)	0.451 (7.078)	-2.494 (5.973)
Peña ($Pres5_t$)	-32.60*** (7.617)	-6.028 (6.149)	4.016 (5.710)	-7.130 (4.609)	3.254 (12.42)	1.225 (4.539)	-1.187 (8.762)	-2.748 (7.398)
Crisis ($Ecocrises_t$)	3.580** (1.494)	2.434** (1.176)	-1.702 (1.153)	0.945 (0.880)	3.130 (2.298)	0.940 (0.944)	4.133*** (1.600)	6.888*** (1.431)
Statements ($Statement_t$)	-0.00994* (0.00520)	0.00310 (0.00359)	0.00434 (0.00350)	0.000159 (0.00260)	0.00183 (0.00699)	0.00170 (0.00263)	-0.00155 (0.00496)	-0.00722* (0.00437)
Constant	-2,695*** (620.9)	-480.7 (514.6)	787.0* (462.3)	-421.8 (368.0)	-138.3 (1,055)	223.5 (373.7)	-439.9 (750.2)	-432.8 (615.9)
R-squared	0.805	0.609	0.790	0.624	0.498	0.844	0.635	0.745

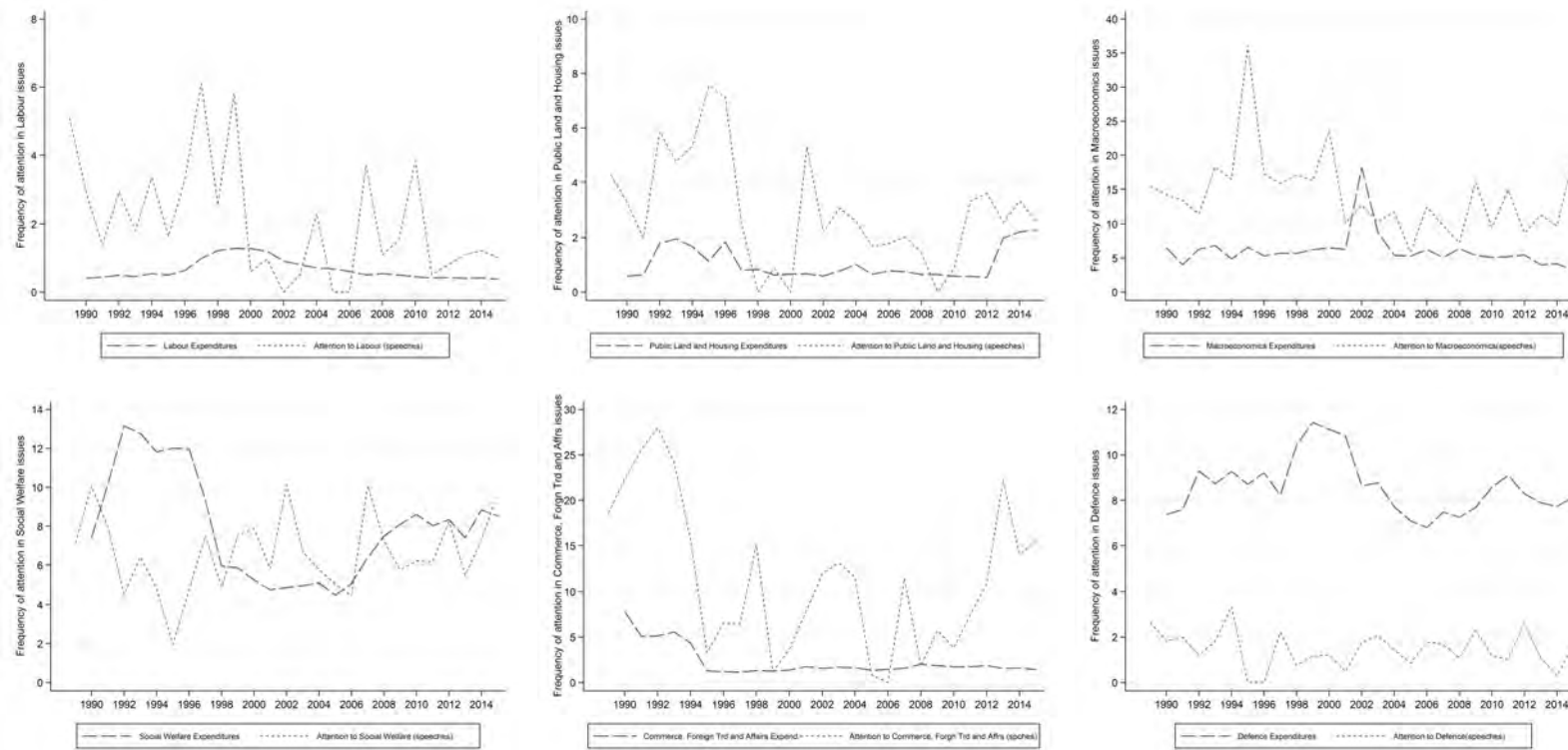
	13. Social Welfare	14. Housing	15. Domestic Commerce	16. Defence	18. Foreign Trade	19. Foreign Affairs	21. Public Land
L.Speeches (Y_{t-1})	-0.0663 (0.220)	0.116 (0.206)	-0.379* (0.199)	-0.187 (0.133)	-0.0544 (0.0930)	-0.303 (0.201)	0.108 (0.183)
Time ($Time_t$)	-0.331 (0.299)	0.0482 (0.108)	0.361 (0.450)	-0.0220 (0.0900)	-0.464*** (0.137)	-0.716** (0.280)	-0.746*** (0.227)
Party ($Party_t$)	-5.195** (2.647)	0.669 (0.950)	0.194 (3.256)	0.0353 (0.712)	-3.261*** (1.102)	-2.529 (2.219)	1.555 (1.712)
Honeymoon ($Hnymoon_t$)	-0.393 (1.478)	0.141 (0.595)	-2.986 (2.066)	0.901** (0.420)	0.745 (0.651)	-0.635 (1.458)	2.219** (1.009)
Zedillo ($Pres2_t$)	1.377 (2.538)	-0.901 (0.902)	-3.211 (3.643)	-0.378 (0.739)	-3.130*** (1.180)	-3.439 (2.699)	5.914*** (2.027)
Fox ($Pres3_t$)	0.193 (4.457)	-0.0781 (1.606)	-3.602 (6.347)	0.494 (1.293)	-1.707 (1.999)	-0.292 (4.320)	11.63*** (3.434)
Calderón ($Pres4_t$)	2.669 (5.902)	-0.0611 (2.152)	-9.106 (8.856)	0.652 (1.733)	1.964 (2.657)	2.496 (5.889)	14.36*** (4.436)
Peña ($Pres5_t$)	9.195 (7.236)	-0.913 (2.627)	-2.895 (10.54)	0.139 (2.150)	5.861* (3.288)	13.53* (6.907)	17.03*** (5.459)
Crisis ($Ecocrises_t$)	-1.087 (1.512)	-0.499 (0.512)	-1.415 (1.917)	0.0304 (0.420)	-1.840*** (0.676)	-3.468** (1.553)	-0.145 (1.006)
Statements ($Statement_t$)	0.00591 (0.00436)	0.00234 (0.00156)	0.0112* (0.00592)	0.00240* (0.00128)	0.00748*** (0.00199)	0.0107*** (0.00408)	0.00455 (0.00326)
Constant	667.8 (595.8)	-96.04 (215.8)	-716.7 (896.1)	44.51 (179.1)	930.5*** (272.8)	1,436*** (556.7)	1,483*** (451.4)
R-squared	0.263	0.515	0.553	0.582	0.915	0.828	0.537

Source: Own elaboration

Appendix D

Trends of policy attention in speeches and budgetary expenditures

Table D.1: Comparative plots of policy attention by policy areas between Informe de Gobierno Speech and budgetary expenditures, 1990–2015



Appendix E

Multidimensional scaling results

This analysis uses a Shepard-Kruskal's version of multidimensional scaling. The calculations take correlations among issues over time as interval data with a dataset that considers topics as different observations and years as a set of variables on which topics are compared in a dissimilarity matrix. Stata package *mds* is used for this calculations. The *mds* algorithm measures the empirical correlations among issues and compares the distance values from a hypothesised space.

The multidimensional scaling algorithm also generates a measure of goodness of fit. This value is the Squared Correlations (RSQ) that accounts for the correlation between observations and explains some of the same variance of the criterion. The variance of the scale data is the distance in the disparities between the share of attention of each topic over time.

The derived values have a coordinate of two dimensions for presidential preferences in Informe de Gobierno with Kruskal Stress 1 value 0.056 and RQS 0.995 in Table [E.1](#).

The derived values have a coordinate of two dimensions for budgetary policy with Kruskal Stress 1 value 0.094 and RQS 0.9937 in Table [E.2](#).

Table E.1: Multidimensional scaling results for Informe de Gobierno speeches

Topic code	Category Speeches	Dimension 1	Dimension 2
1	Macroeconomics	3.342	1.250
3	Health	-1.804	-0.810
4	Agriculture	-1.982	0.797
5	Labour	-2.948	-0.720
6, 17, 23	Educ., Culture, Tech, Science	1.348	0.450
7	Environment	-2.455	-0.871
8	Energy	-2.285	-0.853
10	Transportation	-2.419	-1.132
13	Welfare	-0.450	-0.046
15, 18, 19	Commerce, Foreign Trade and Affrs.	2.216	5.061
16	Defence	-3.283	-0.740
2, 9, 20, 12	Gov., Migration, Crime and Rghts.	13.257	-2.110
21, 14	Lands and Housing	-2.537	-0.273

Source: Own elaboration

Table E.2: Multidimensional scaling results for budgetary expenditures

Topic code	Category budgets	Dimension 1	Dimension 2
1	Macroeconomics	0.540	0.375
3	Health	-1.663	-0.436
4	Agriculture	-3.477	0.803
5	Labour	6.697	0.308
6, 17, 23	Educ., Culture, Tech, Science	-10.035	-0.183
7	Environment	2.353	-1.134
8	Energy	0.113	-4.179
10	Transportation	-2.120	0.645
13	Welfare	-1.815	2.166
15, 18, 19	Commerce, Foreign Trade and Affrs.	4.862	1.162
16	Defence	-2.625	0.588
2, 9, 20, 12	Gov., Migration, Crime and Rghts.	0.939	-0.569
21, 14	Lands and Housing	6.232	0.455

Source: Own elaboration

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