

# Punctuated Equilibrium and the Criminal Justice Policy Agenda in Britain

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# Context

- What explains upward trend in attention to crime by political elites and the mass public in Britain since the 1960s?
- In particular, the 1990s saw a shift in the level of policy activism on criminal justice (also by Labour governments – where crime was not typically one of its ‘owned’ issues).

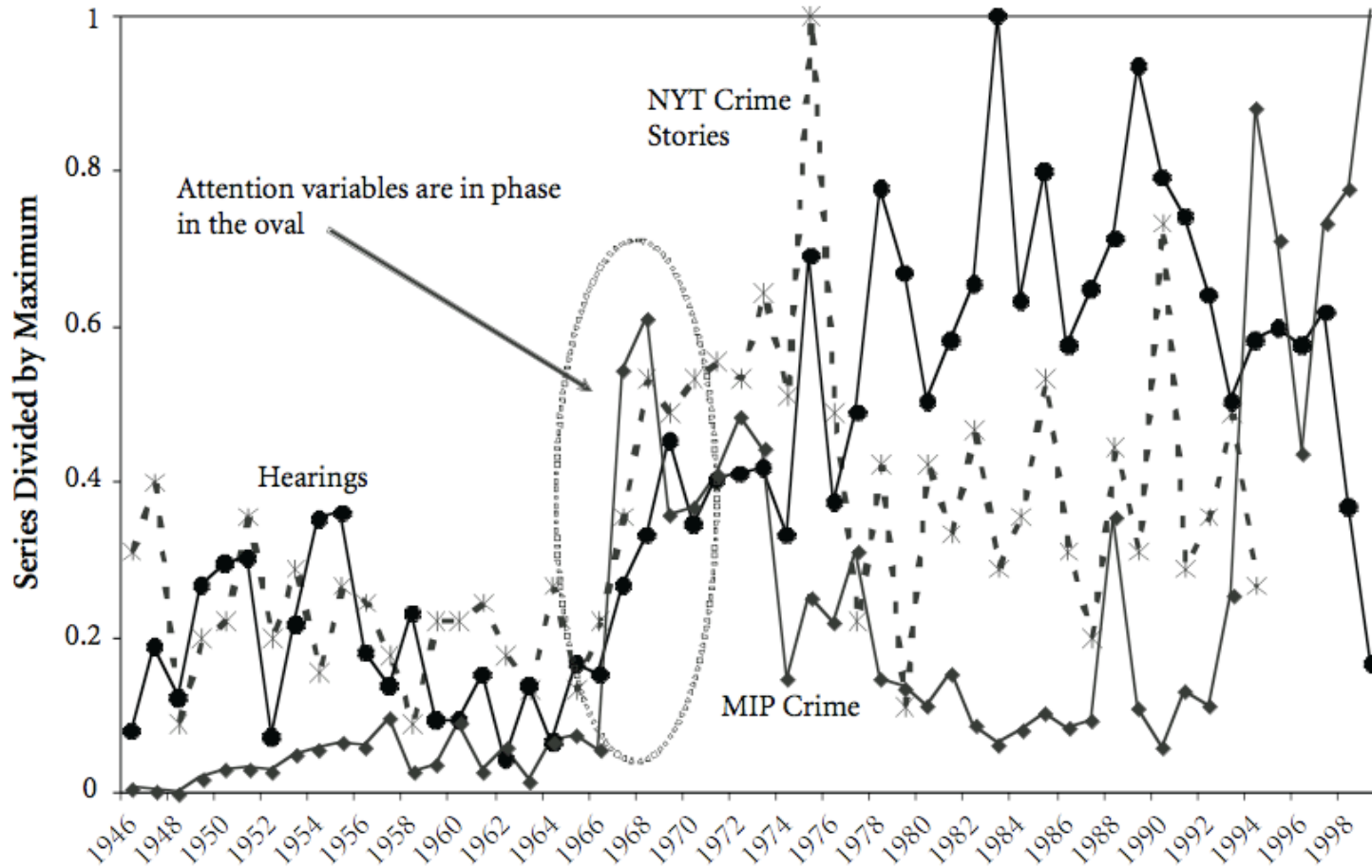
# Punctuated Equilibrium Theory

- Policy monopolies/entrepreneurs
- Issue frames
- Focusing events (also moral panics?)
- Positive/negative feedback processes

# Moral panics defined

- “Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians, and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the object of the panic is passed over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way society conceives of itself” (Cohen 1972: 28).

# The case of the U.S.

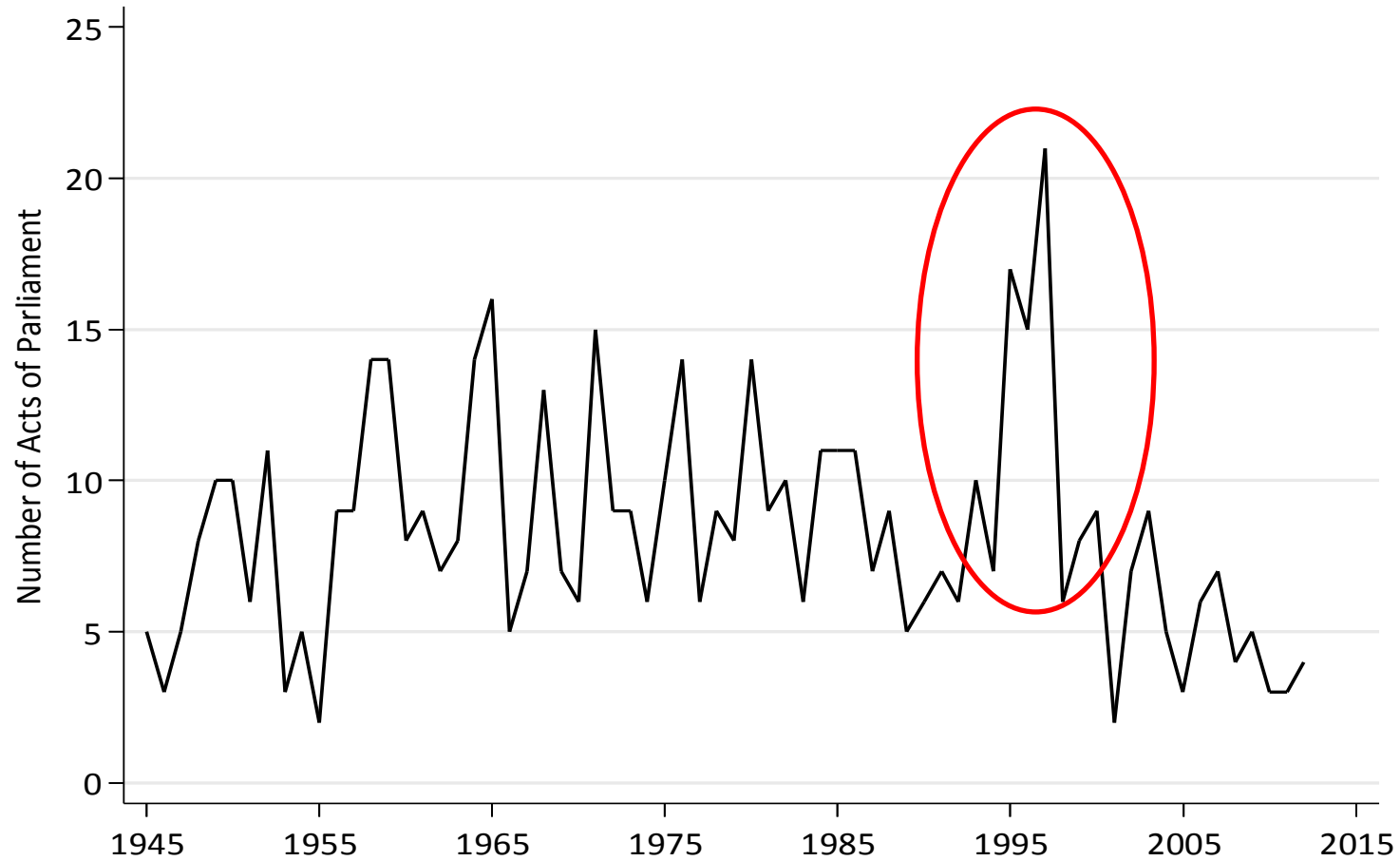


Source: Jones and Baumgartner (2005)

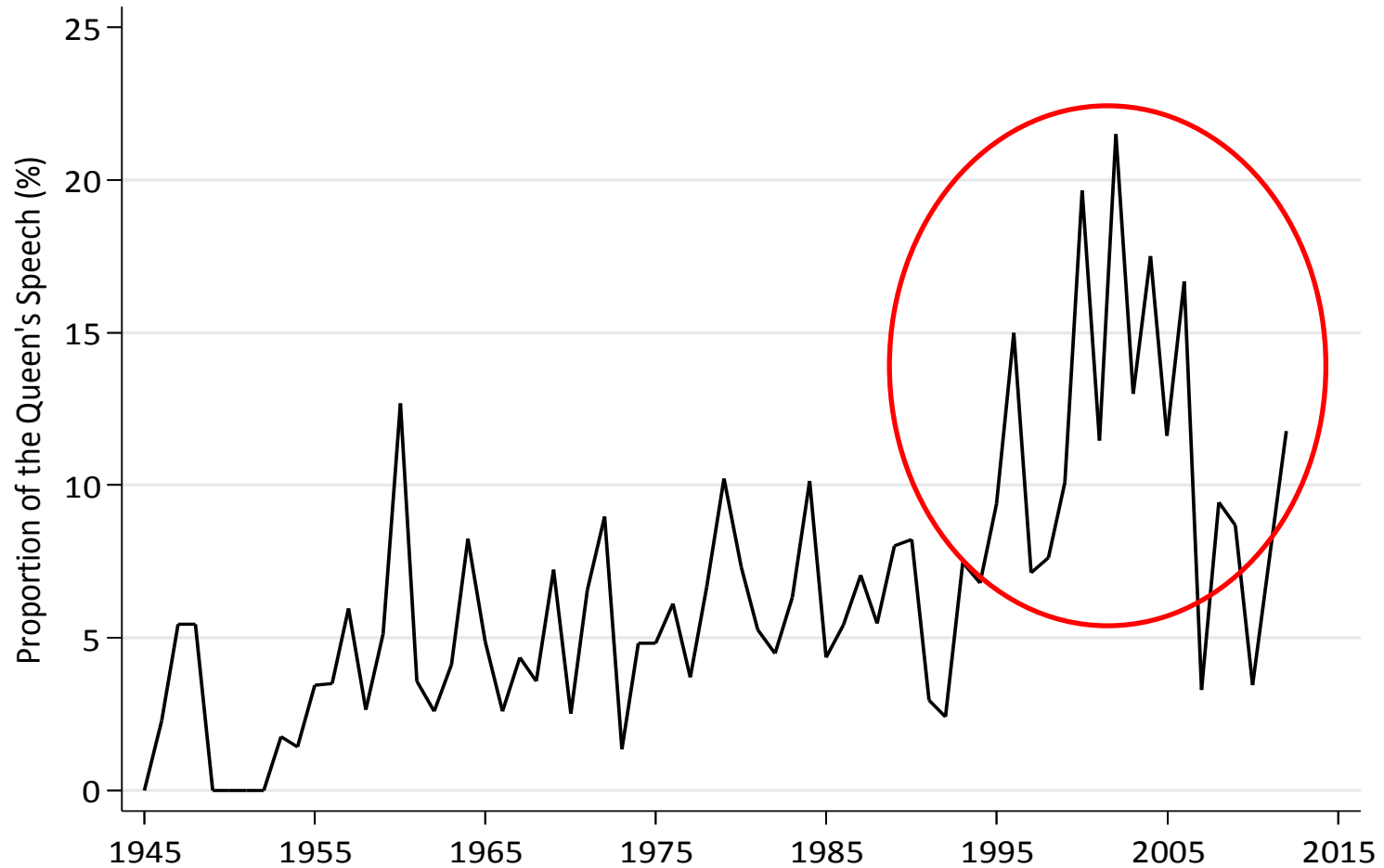
# The case of Britain

- Rise of crime on the policy agenda one of the notable long-term shifts in the focus of British politics since 1945.
- In the immediate post-war period, given little attention by government or parties.
- Started to change during 1960s, as parties started to mention it in election manifestos.

# The case of Britain: Legislation



# The case of Britain: Queen's Speech

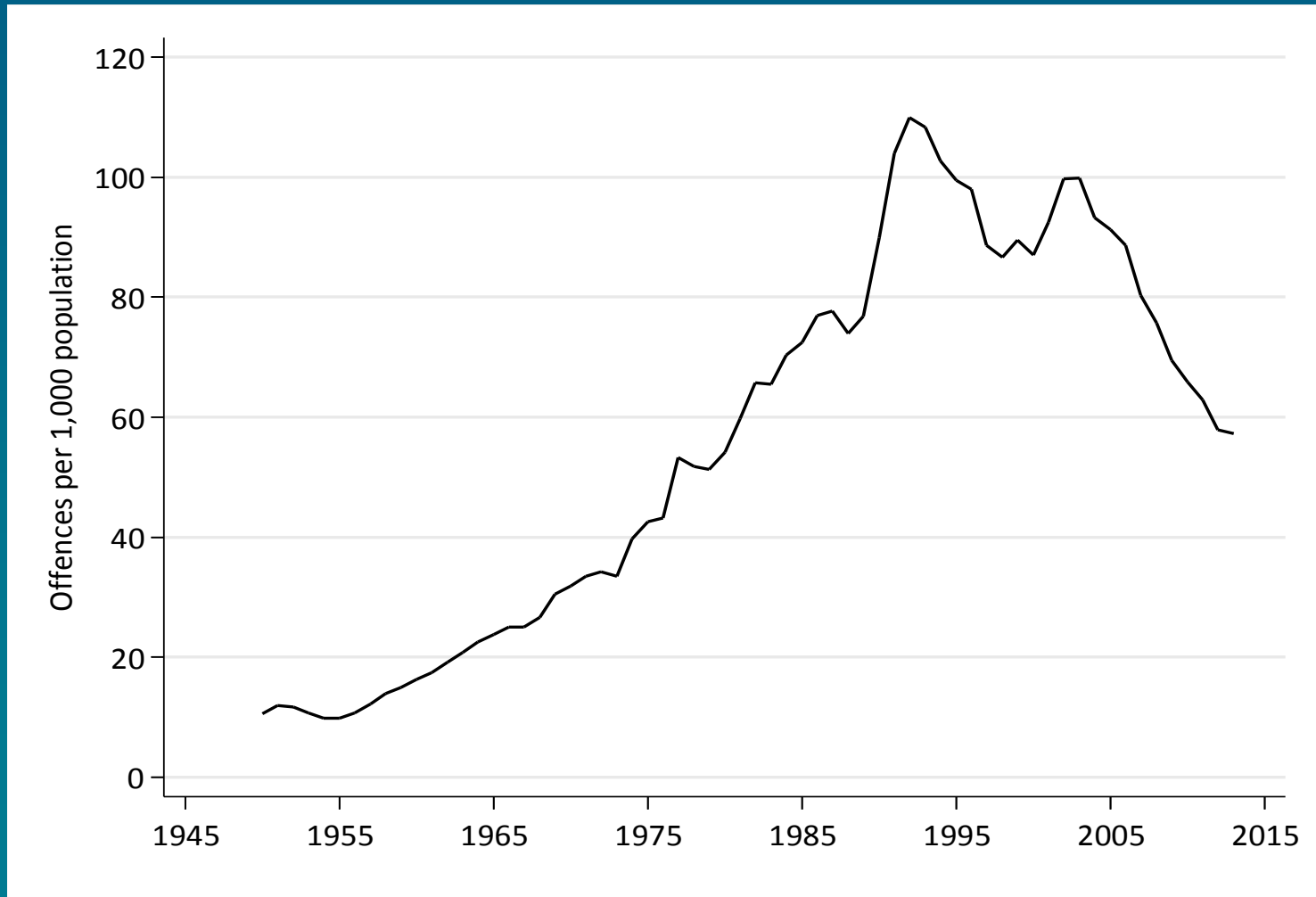




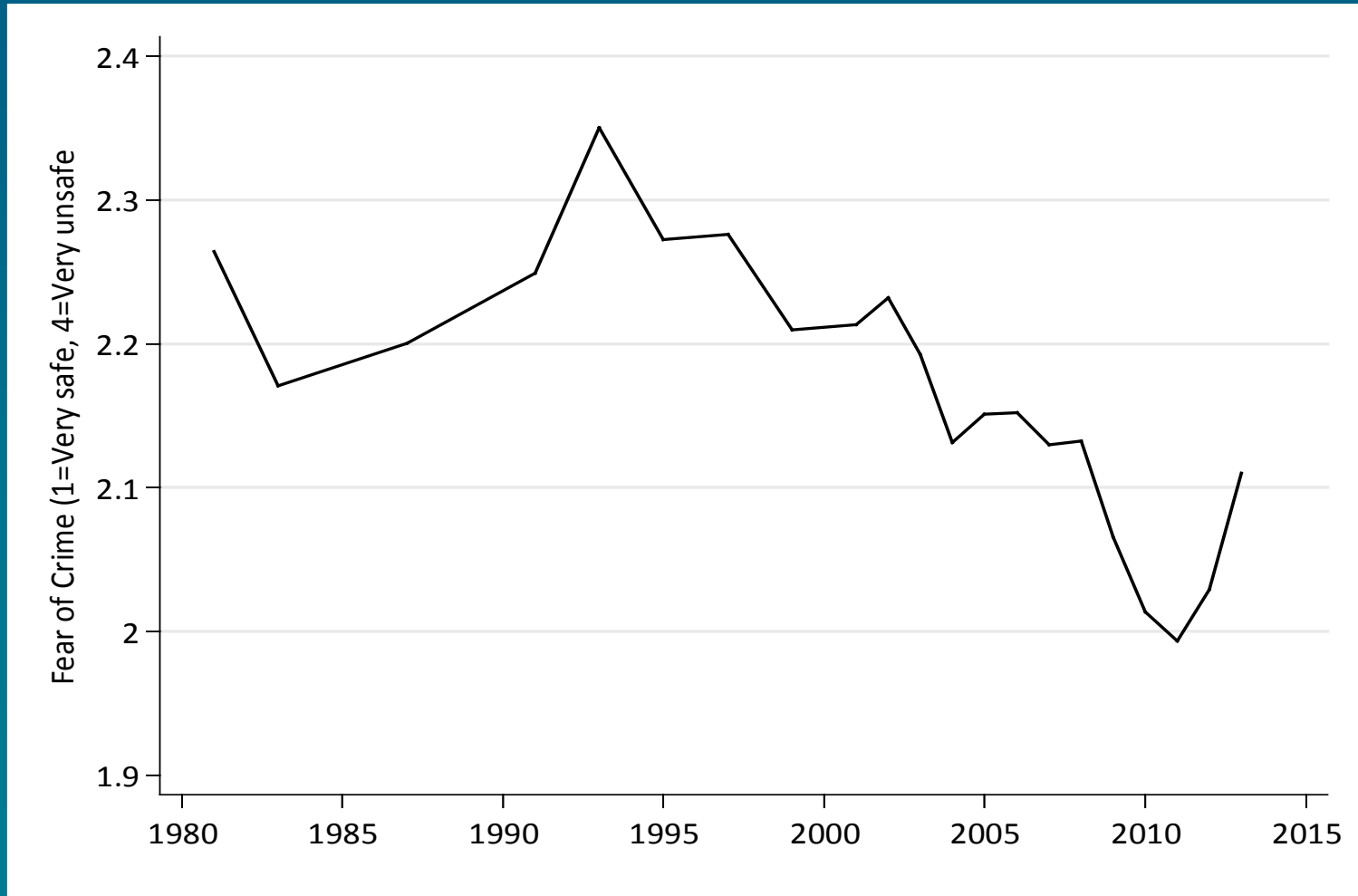
# (1) Policy problems and the public

- Rising rate of recorded crime – peaked in 1992 (parallel trend in the British Crime Survey).
- Rising fear of crime – peaked in 1991/2.
- Rising public attention to issue of crime – peaked much later in 2007, well after the crime rate had started to fall.
- Growth of media interest - jump in 1991.

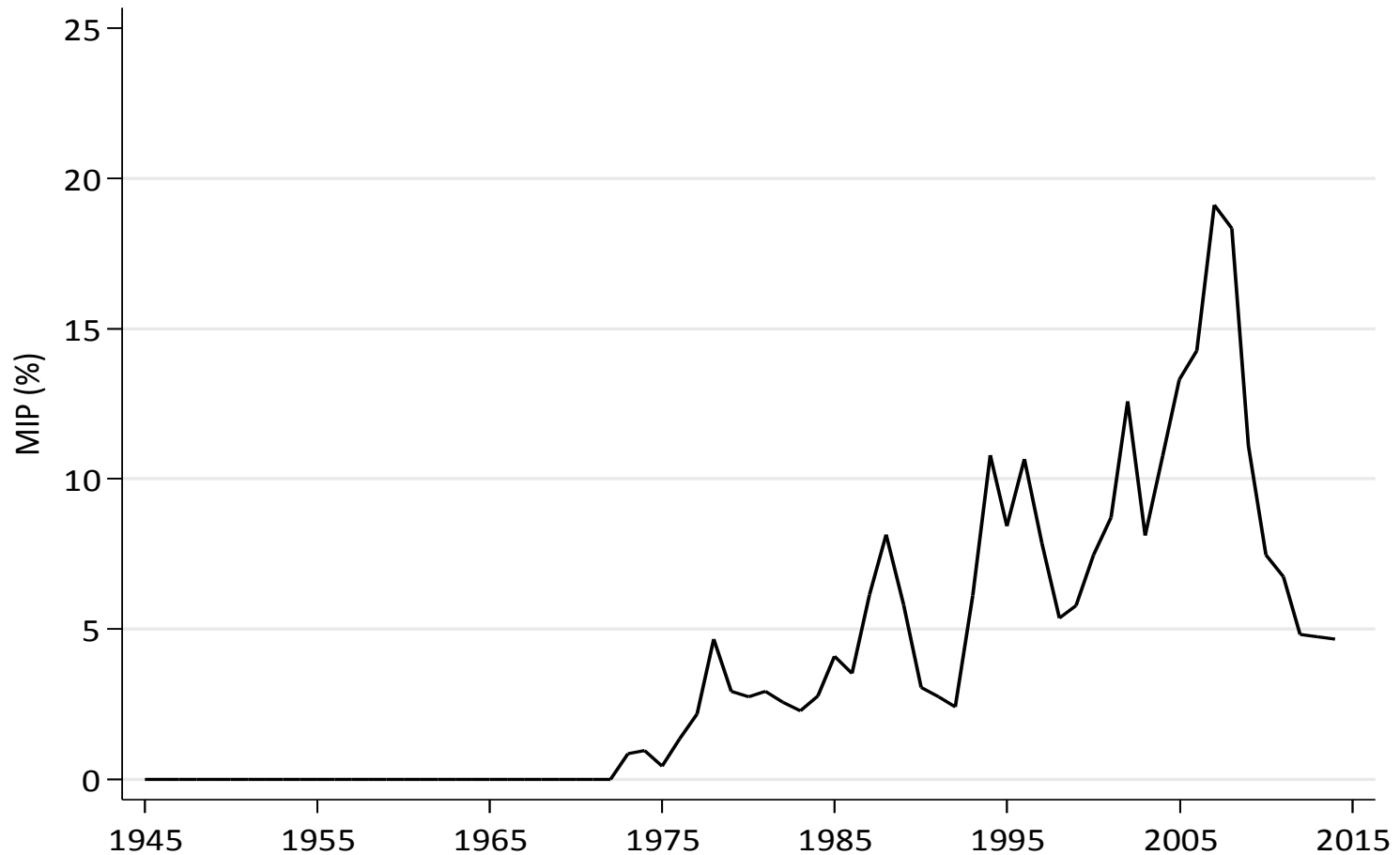
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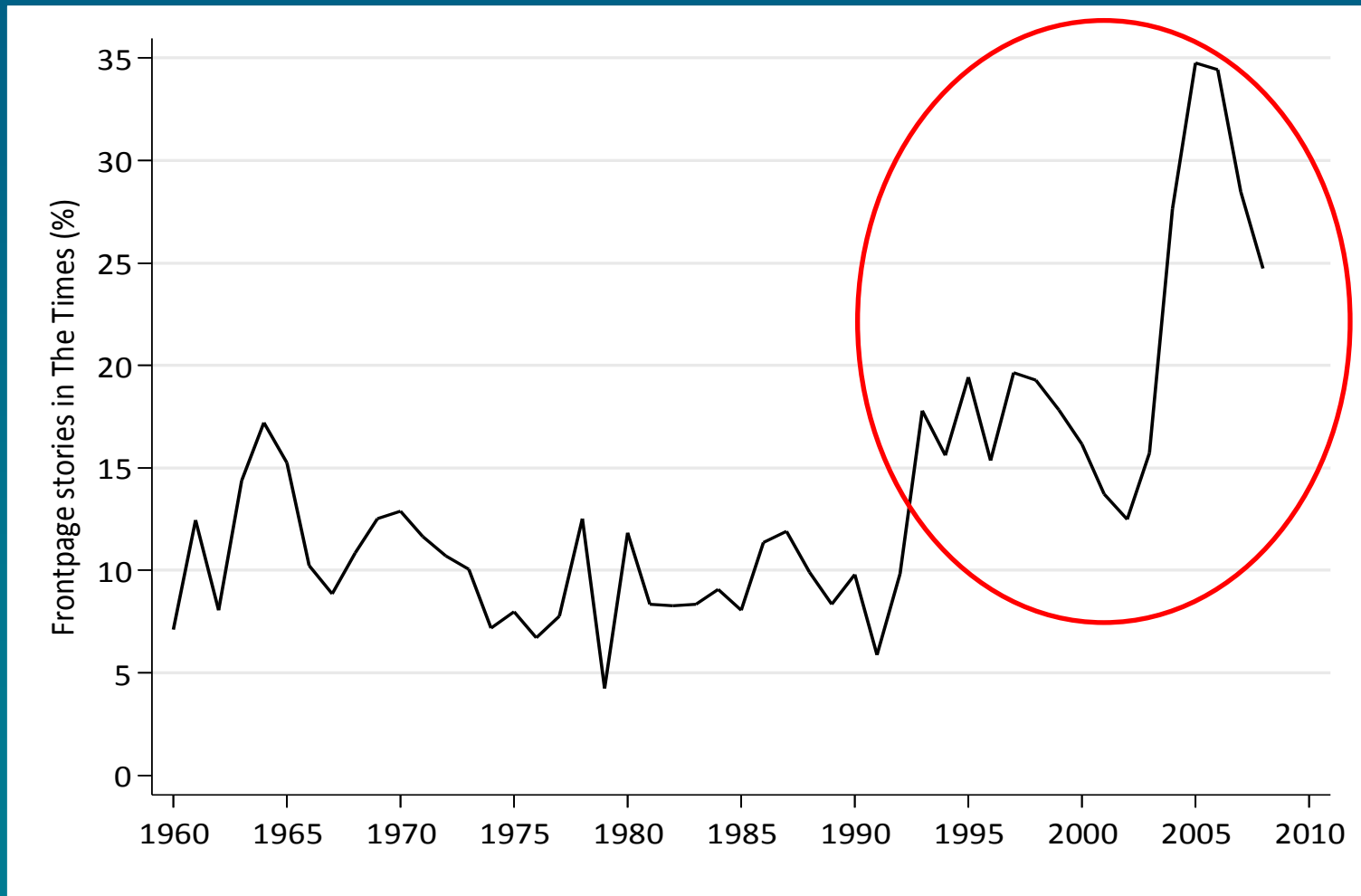
# (1) Policy problems and the public



# (1) Policy problems and the public



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## (2) The policy monopoly

- Stable set of policy-making arrangements, with Home Office at centre, combined with broad liberal-progressive consensus among political parties (Downes & Morgan 1997).
- Came under pressure in 1980s, but limited to popular punitive rhetoric.
- Critical appointment of an outsider, Michael Howard, as Home Secretary, and the policy entrepreneurialism of shadow, Tony Blair.

## (2) The policy monopoly

“There was a prevalent view among the criminal justice establishment which was that you shouldn’t really send people to prison unless you absolutely have to. And they were reinforced by the Treasury which didn’t like spending money on prisons. And so you had a kind of conspiracy under the Thatcher years to keep people out of prison.” (Michael Howard, Interview)

### (3) The focusing event/moral panic

- The abduction and murder in February 1993 of toddler James Bulger – by a pair of 10-year old boys, Robert Thompson and John Venables – in Bootle, a deprived part of Liverpool.
- Constituted a ‘signal crime’, which came to act “...as a point of condensation for wider social anxieties” (Hay 1995: 199).



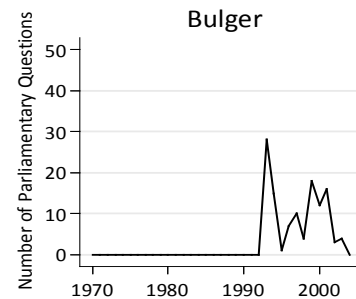
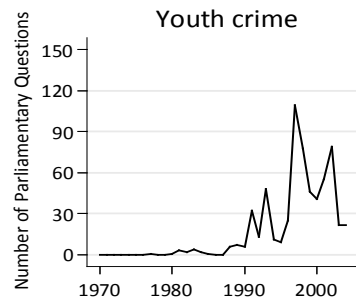
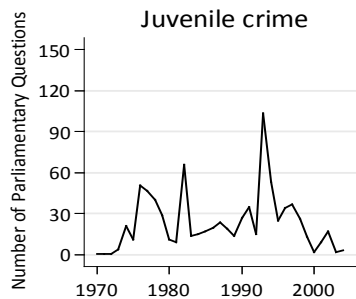
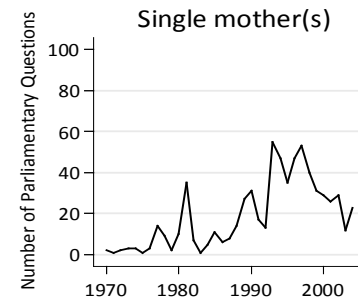
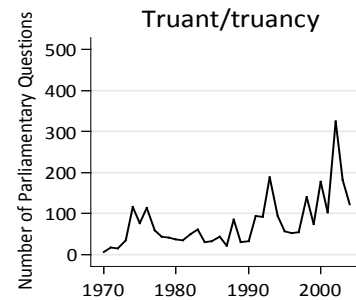
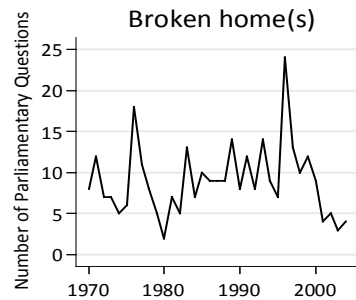
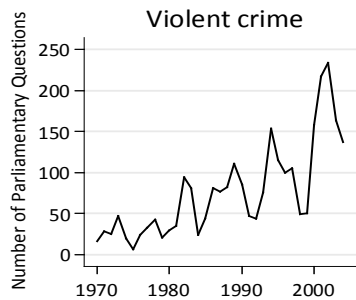
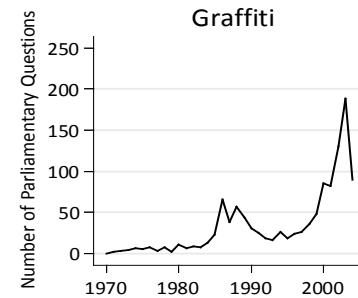
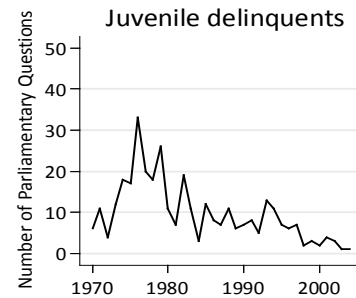
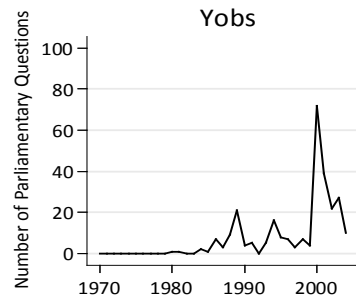
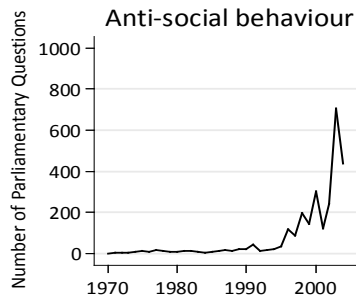
### (3) The focusing event/moral panic

- Led to unprecedented media coverage and substantial attention from politicians.
- Quickly was linked to wider trends in social breakdown and juvenile delinquency (e.g. the killers had been playing truant, one was from a single parent family, were alleged to have watched a 'video nasty' on the night before the murder).

## (4) Issue (re)definition

- Moral panic over the Bulger murder linked to wider shift in issue frames around crime and social problems.
- Led to a spike in parliamentary attention to many issue frames associated with broader social anxieties – ‘single mothers’, ‘truancy’ (or truants), ‘broken homes’ and ‘yobs’.
- Mentions of juvenile/youth crime, truancy, single mothers spiked *in 1993 specifically*.

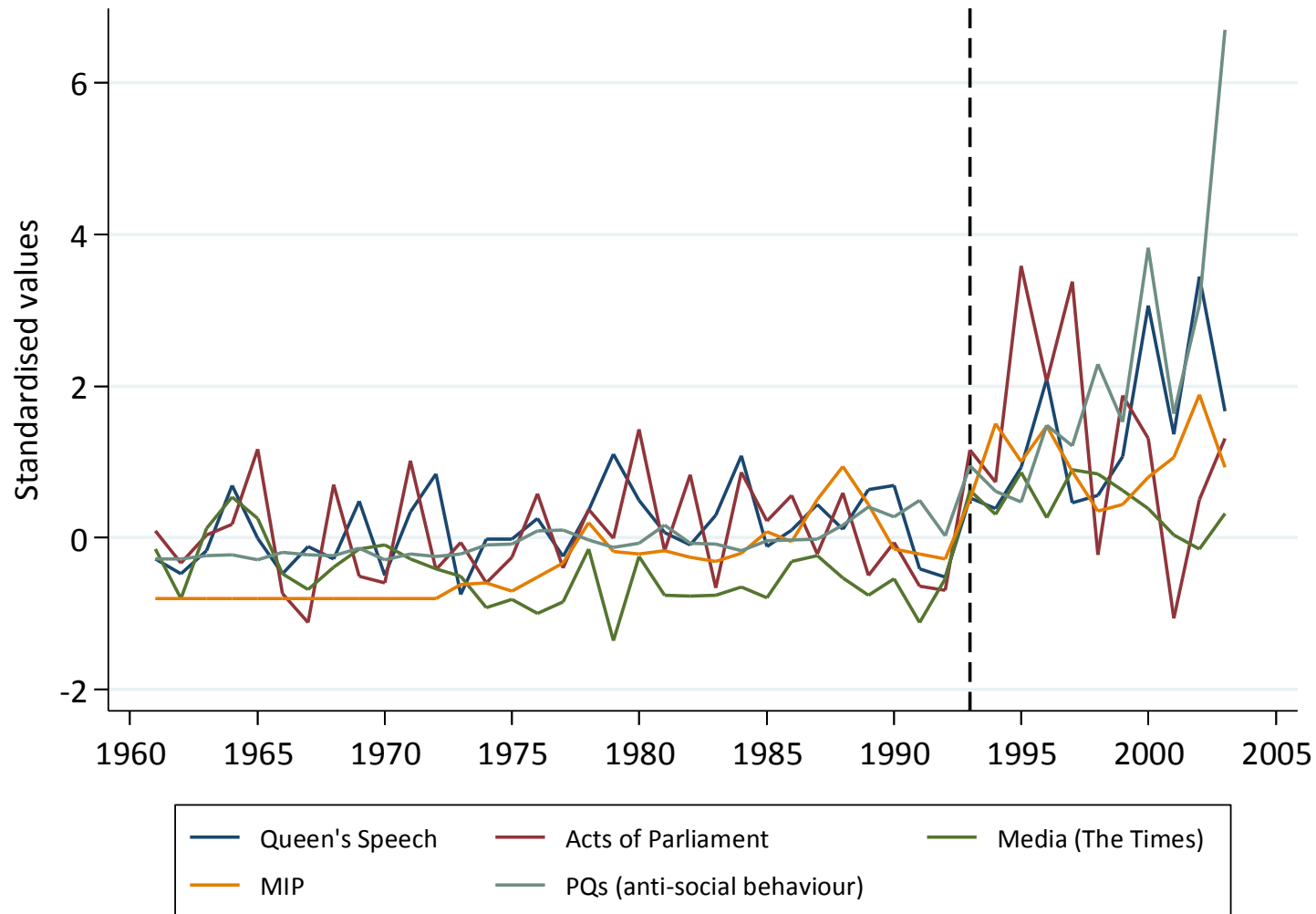
# (4) Issue (re)definition



# Punctuated Equilibrium in Criminal Justice Policy in Britain

- Fit with PET? Growing social problem, public concern and media interest.
- Bulger murder led to a moral panic and crystallised redefinition of issues of crime and social breakdown/disorder.
- Breakdown in established policy monopoly (liberal Home Office consensus), disrupted by pair of opposing policy entrepreneurs – Michael Howard and Tony Blair.

# Punctuated Equilibrium in Criminal Justice Policy in Britain



# A unified model

$$\text{AGENDA}_t = \alpha_0 + \beta_1 \text{MIP}_{t-1} + \beta_2 \text{MEDIA}_{t-1} + \beta_3 \text{PQS(SOC)}_{t-1} \\ + \beta_4 \text{PQS(BULGER)}_{t-1} + \beta_6 \text{CRIME}_{t-1} + \mu_t$$

Fitted with Prais-Winsten method:

$$\mu_t = \mu_{t-1} + \varepsilon_t$$

$\text{MIP}_{t-1}$

Lag of most important problem

$\text{MEDIA}_{t-1}$ ,

Lag of media coverage in The Times

$\text{PQS(SOC)}_{t-1}$

Lag of PQ mentions of social breakdown

$\text{PQS(BULGER)}_{t-1}$

Lag of PQ mentions of the Bulger case

$\text{CRIME}_{t-1}$

Lag of recorded rate of crime rate

# A unified model

	Queen's Speech	Acts of Parliament	PQs (Anti-social behaviour, jobs, single mothers, truancy, broken homes)
MIP <sub>t-1</sub>	0.537 (0.239)*	0.818 (0.322)*	7.897 (9.927)
MEDIA <sub>t-1</sub>	-0.035 (0.129)	0.351 (0.176)+	-13.207 (4.619)**
PQS(SOC) <sub>t-1</sub>	0.012 (0.004)**	-0.018 (0.005)**	
PQS(BULGER) <sub>t-1</sub>	0.184 (0.091)*	0.122 (0.124)	0.303 (2.933)
CRIME <sub>t-1</sub>	-0.028 (0.025)	0.007 (0.033)	2.993 (1.719)+
ACTS <sub>t-1</sub>			8.874 (2.860)**
QS <sub>t-1</sub>			-0.934 (4.241)
Intercept	5.808 (1.835)**	9.059 (2.489)***	-75.280 (121.775)
N	45	45	45
R-squared	0.68	0.51	0.32
Adjusted R-squared	0.64	0.45	0.22
Durbin-Watson statistic	2.087	1.902	1.808
Rho	-0.293	-0.351	0.719
Start	1960	1960	1960
End	2004	2004	2004

+  $p < 0.1$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

# Conclusion

- Punctuated equilibrium provides a plausible explanation of the criminal justice policy agenda in Britain.
- Benefits of mixed-methods approach.
- Emphasis on ‘moral panics’ as particular type of focusing event may help account for particular sort of agenda-setting processes.
- More scope for methodological innovation?



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