



# **Brain Politics: Comparative Issue Definition in Autism Related Policy**

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## **Presentation Outline**

- I. Comparing the Construction of Public Problems**
- II. Autism as Public Policy: When Mercury Mattered**
- III. Legislative Discourse**
- IV. Media Attention**
- V. Discussion and Next Steps**

## Comparative Construction of Problems

- The construction of public issues is a political exercise.
- Issue definition involves the formation of interests.
- Nationally specific issue definition represents cultural and social agency.
- Interaction of scientific evidence and public policy can be differently experienced, interpreted, and politicized.

## Why Autism?

- Disability policy is an emergent, civil rights based, arena
- Surge in recorded incidence
- No one *really* knows what autism is
  - The definition is behavioral
  - The cause is unknown
- Thimerosal was a sleeper issue
  - Mercury used in childhood vaccines for several decades
  - Science was unclear throughout period of analysis

## Method

- **Comparative case study: Australia, Canada, United Kingdom, USA**
- **Examined legislative discourse**
  - References to thimerosal in hearings, discussion
  - Bills (mostly federal level)
- **Analyzed media attention**
  - Coded a sample of 413 article titles
  - Coded and examined full text of subset of 226 articles

## Legislative Discourse

- **Most present on the institutional agenda in the US**
  - Hearings before House and Senate Committees (starting in 1999)
  - Homeland Security Bill Rider
  - 7 states with bills
- **Also found in United Kingdom and Canada**
  - Requests from written answers (UK)
  - Discussion in Scottish Parliament
  - Canadian Standing Committee on Health (Feb 2003)

## Article Titles Were Coded for the Following:

Government Action	Courts	Experts
Federal Agency	Subfederal Government	Evidence/Study
Executive Branch	Elections	Title Tone
Legislative Branch	Interest Groups	Characterization of Causal Link

## Content Was Examined for the Following:

- Discussion of scientific evidence
- Mention of other countries
- Discussion of children's or parent's rights
- Quotes from those who believed in causal link
- Quotes from those who did not believe in causal link
- Quotable quotes



## **Mercury Rising: Different Nation, Different Temperature**

- **No Australian fever**
- **In Canada, more systemic than institutional discussion**
- **In the United Kingdom, focus is on government (in)action**
- **In USA, uniquely defined security issue**
- **Interpretation of null findings highly politicized**



## **Concluding Thoughts**

- **USA often cited, rarely cites**
- **Politics of science appear to be nation specific**
- **Mercury issue defined independently of disability policy arena**