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Political Attention to Environmental Issues:

Analyzing Policy Punctuations in The Netherlands

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Introduction

When in 2007 Al Gore toured through Europe to promote his *Inconvenient Truth*, he found an attentive public in the Netherlands. After years of declining attention for the environment, Gore's film on global warming created a spike of interest. Al Gore became so much a hype in this country, that an inconvenient truth about his son caught in the possession of drugs received almost equal media coverage as the film. But attention to the film's message did not persist when the economy went down. In early 2009, opinion polls showed a decline in public concern with the environment, despite an increasing urgency of the global warmng problem reported by international experts such as Nicolas Stern and national organizations for environmental policy advice.

The environment is not unique in this respect. Attention for other policy problems such as unemployment, crime and social tensions over immigration also rises and spreads publicly and politically and then drops and becomes a topic of much smaller communities of actors with professional stakes in the issue. Indeed, rather than unique, the phenomenon of rising and declining attention for the environment is itself related to the attention to other problems. Such patterns of attention become more visible as the time perspective extends to longer periods. A longer time perspective may reveal how different policy themes and more specific subtopics come and go together, or crowd each other out.

Thus, for most issues considered over longer periods of time, broad attention is an exception rather than a rule. While this idea has informed studies of agenda setting in the United States and other countries since the work of Schattschneider (1960), Bachrach and Baratz (1962), Downs (1972), Cobb and Elder (1983) and Kingdon (1984), less is known about how attention for an issue travels from one type of agenda to the other, and how such travelling happens for larger sets of issues at the same time. Moreover, some venues of agenda setting may facilitate dramatization of issues and games of high politics, while others may provide institutional equipment for attempts at depoliticization and formulation of technical definitions of the problem.

The most ambitious and comprehensive approach to study the process and content of agenda setting following this early work is the theory of punctuated equilibrium and the extensive empirical analysis of policy agendas developed by Baumgartner and Jones (1993; Jones and Baumgartner 2005). Typically, this work does not focus on single issues alone, but considers the whole range of problems that publics and governments face, and analyzes how different policy agendas in the spheres of politics, the media and the public expand and contract over time. While initially this approach to policy agendas was confined to the United States, recent contributions focus also on European countries and take a comparative perspective (Baumgartner et al 2006; Brouard et al 2009).

This paper follows this line of theoretical and empirical research on policy agendas and monitors the attention for environmental problems in the Netherlands, a country that has been known as an active agenda setter in this policy domain in Europe. The central question in our analysis is how much attention environmental issues received in public and political arenas in the past two decades, and what conditions rises and declines of attention to this theme. The empirical analysis includes the agenda of the national executive, parliament, the media, reports of expert organizations focusing on environmental issues, and environmental legislation as output. We also map environmental attention relative to other main themes of public policy. From an agenda-theoretical perspective, we analyze mechanisms producing ups and downs in attention to environmental problems over time, and changes from technical problem definitions to more political and dramatic definitions or vice versa. In this theoretical perspective, we include not only policy venues for attention pushing and puilling, but also events and incidents that may trigger agenda dynamics. One part of the analysis contains the long term pattern of environmental attention relative to other main themes of public policy. Then we move on to focusing on more specific issues of environmental policy and analyze how these issues travel through policy agendas, and with what effects in the policy making machinery.

A Theoretical Lens on Environmental Attention

In his early and often cited theoretical model of environmental attention, Downs (1972) posited that attention patterns are cyclical. Writing in the early 1970s, he predicted that the rising prominence of ecology in public and political debates in the United States would be temporal and be followed by a decline. In Down's issue attention cycle, a 'pre-problem stage' is followed by discovery and political actors claiming they are able to solve the problem, and then a stage of decreasing enthusiasm as problems appear to be more intractable than expected or portrayed, and a public that becomes more concerned with other problems. As Downs put it, in this 'post-problem stage', "an issue that has be replaced at the center of public concern moves into a prolonged limbo – a twilight realm of lesser attention or spasmodic recurrences of interest." While attention thus drops after a loss of public and political interest, the problem is latent until events or incidents trigger renewed attention. Attention thus often recycles over a longer period of time.

Not all problems are equally sensitive to such ups and downs in attention. Problems may not be directly visible, effects may 'creep' rather than 'crash' onto the agenda (Princen and Rhinard 2006), and some issues represent deeper social cleavages and are easier to dramatize and keep the public interested than others. Moreover, some problems are external effects of social or economic activities that most people would not readily sacrifice for their resolution. According to Downs, environmental problems have characteristics of issues for which attention is cyclic. In later work mapping environmental attention in the United States until recent times, the prediction of Downs appeared only partly true: public interest has shown clear peaks and declines (Guber 2001), but political attention did not disappear and some stability in environmental policy production occurred after the initial build up of institutions endowed with this task (Baumgartner and Jones 1993: 87; Baumgartner 2006). Downs may have overstated the effects of opportunistic behavior of politicians in response to the public mood, and understated the significance of institutionalization.

Attention levels may depend in part on the nature of the problem, as Down argued, but defining problems is itself a key element of agenda setting (Rocheford and Cobb 1994). As Baumgartner and Jones (1993) say, accounting for attention patterns requires the theoretical and empirical inclusion of different venues. Strategies of agenda access or denial are employed for problem definition. The added theoretical value of Baumgartner and Jones's work is that it links two key elements of attention cycles: the venues of agenda setting, and the constructions of topic and tone made within these venues (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). Policy venues are institutional sites of agenda setting, not only formal political arenas such as legislatures and executives, but also the media, public opinion, bureaucracies, and fora for scientific expertise. Typically, venues and policy arenas have their own rules of access and information, and in this way they may facilitate a particular emphasis on topic and tone in agenda setting. Some may facilitate the spread of a popular and dramatic image of a problem, others lead to more technical approaches to policy problems. Thus rising or declining attention and the substantive portrayal of problems go together with (and are the result of) shifts in prominence of policy venues of high and low politics. Focusing events in the external environment can trigger such shifts, but their impact depends on how actors within arenas attach value and meaning to them (Birkland 1997). For example, scientific alarm over threats to the environment in itself does not provoke immediate political attention – and still less political action. Such signals usually require repeated interaction between experts and policy makers and amplification by the media to transcend what Downs called the 'pre-problem stage' and be taken home onto the political agenda. One reason why some problems are slow to move from low to high politics (or vice versa) is that relevant actors usually do not engage in extensive venue shopping and focus their agenda setting attempts only at particular arenas (Pralle 2003).

The idea that different venues of agenda setting facilitate or promote a particular conception of a policy problem is crucial to the evolution of environmental attention and the cyclical pattern that may (or may not) become visible over time. As Baumgartner and Jones (1993) argue in their theory of punctuated equilibrium, the stabilization and destabilization of

'policy monopolies' happens within and between venues. If we say that venues facilitate a particular type of policy conception, this means that these venues have institutional properties conducive to the replication and aggregation of particular problem frames. These institutional properties thus may produce a degree of friction in the responses to input signals, so that it takes time before policy attention becomes visible and formal and priorities change (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). Issue attention in political systems at large or in smaller policy subsystems requires the transfer of individual to collective frames (Baumgartner 2007). Institutional conditions within policy venues regulate how particular individual frames of actors are turned into collective frames, just as institutions structure collective perceptions and social behavior more generally. When such shared frames resonate in other venues, a cascading of topic and tone takes effect.

For analyzing environmental policy agendas, the distinction between technical and dramatic frames is particularly useful. This distinction was presented by Nisbet and Huge (2006) in their analysis of the role of the media in framing agricultural biotechnology. It connects well to the concepts of limitation and expansion of the scope of conflict in Schattschneider's original work (1960), and to the more institutional notions of 'low' and 'high' politics and the venues of attention associated to them. Technical frames stress rational and expert-oriented approaches to problems, and facilitate their decomposition for resolution. They downplay or ignore political and emotional dimensions and present policy talk that is limited to a group of experts and professionals with direct stakes in the issue. By contrast, dramatic frames play on collective emotion and expanded public and political debate over normative arguments and causal stories of disaster, they link rather than disconnect sensitive issues, and they involve broad mobilization of popular support, for which the media are an important venue.

The theoretical lens in this paper thus combines a long term view of evolving environmental attention and the institutional sites where this attention is produced and frames for problem definition are applied and reproduced. As noted, analysis of the United States in the thirty

years after Downs shows punctuated equilibria in environmental attention, but with more emphasis on policy consolidation and frequent public upsurges than on steep declines (Baumgartner 2006). As in the United States, the policy history of environmental attention in the Netherlands is more recent than the legacy of political attention in some other main policy fields. The analysis below provides systematic data on environmental policy agendas in order to see how attention has developed and whether technical and dramatic frames have become visible in the portrayal of issues of ecology. More specifically, the data are used to determine whether, as in the United States, policy punctuations in the Netherlands are most visible in upward movement, and are followed by periods of institutional consolidation.

The hypothesis on this is that institutional consolidation is visible through the production of environmental policy even at times of declining public and media attention. This hypothesis not only draws on empirical findings on the United States but also on the institutional literature in which the Netherlands is characterized as a country with a tradition of political accommodation and depoliticization and corporatist policy making structures and closed policy networks (refs.). This literature suggests that political responses after 'alarmed discovery' involve systematic attempts at depoliticization and limitation of the scope of debate.

Empirical Patterns of Environmental Attention

Media Attention

Figure 1 shows the changing attention for environmental issues in one the Dutch prominent newspapers: the NRC. On average, the attention for environmental problems is 1.8 percent of all articles in our sample, but more interesting is the development visible in the figure: first a steady decline since 1990, and since 2006 a clear spike. No surprise, this rise in 2006 was caused by the presentation of *An Inconvenient Truth*. Media attention only started to take off

after the premiere of the film in the Netherlands. Earlier presentations of the film in the U.S. or in Cannes hardly had effect on attention.

Figure 1 here

The general trend is clear and shows one major policy change, which was triggered by a major focusing event: a dramatizing film. The film was coded as a climate change subtopic and the disaggregated graph shows clearly that this particular subtopic accounts to the overall increase of the attention for environmental issues. However, this has not been the only major increase of attention over the period 1990-2007. Figure 2 shows all changes in percentages between environmental subtopics from year to year. The high peak in the centre indicates that attention for many subtopics did not change much from one year to the next. The graph's tails show the major changes in attention: the left tail represents declining attention, the right rising attention. Thus, there have been more major shifts, other than the two year increasing attention of climate change, which was triggered by Al Gore's film.

Figure 2a here

Figure 2b here

More important than changes in subtopics within the main theme of environmental policy are changes in attention for the environment relative to other themes reported in the NRC. Figure 2b shows this proportional attention. There has been, for instance, one major shift of 1.5 percent, which was the increased attention between 2006 and 2007 due to Gore's film. The kurtosis is 2.90, which means that the distribution is somewhat peeked (a normal distribution has a kurtosis of 0). One can also do the same at disaggregated level, which means that all changes per subtopic are calculated against the total amount of newspaper articles per year. In that case the kurtosis is 3.28 (n=270).

In punctuated equilibrium theory, kurtosis is used as an important indicator. Characteristic for periods with long term policy stability are the large numbers of incremental policy changes. This results in high spikes in the middle of a frequency distribution. The periods with major policy shifts, the punctuations, on the other hand, result in small numbers of large percentage changes on either side of the spike (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). Hence, higher kurtosis means that policies do not change easily (due to different types of friction), but if they change, this is drastic.

Besides the increasing attention to climate change policies triggered by Gore's film, also UN climate conferences and specific dramatic events were relevant. The spike in 1991/1992 was caused by the (preparations of the) conference in Rio de Janeiro. The increased attention in 1995 was caused by widespread protests of Dutch farmers against manure policies. The relative spike in 1997 was triggered by the Kyoto conference. The elevated attention during the period 1999-2000 was induced by the UN climate change conferences in Bonn (2000) and The Hague (2001). The rising attention in 2003 was caused by a couple of incidents in that year with polluted asbestos vessels. And the attention in 2005 was a result of law suits of an environmental NGO against the government for not solving the problem of the most polluted street in the Netherlands, which was the city of The Hague, the location of the national government.

These observations support the expectation that media attention is triggered largely by events that are easily dramatized, as the film and the following hype around Al Gore , the asbestos incidents, and the air pollution events at local level illustrate. In addition, we also observe that attention for environmental issues in the media was triggered if Dutch political personalities took a leading position in international conferences. Figure 3 shows the total amount of attention in the NRC to U.N. conferences, showing that the less important conferences in Bonn and The Hague were displayed more extensively in the national media than the broad and ambitious climate change conferences in Rio de Janeiro, Kyoto, and Bali. Bonn and The Hague obtained more attention in the Dutch media because they were chaired by a former Dutch minister of development aid, Jan Pronk.

Figure 3 here

Punctuations and Stability in Political Attention

Characteristic of punctuated equilibria in political attention and policy is the alternation between periods of stability and short episodes of relatively drastic change. The analysis in the previous section has shown how media attention for environmental issues follows this pattern of periodic punctuation. Below we move on to analyzing the level of punctuation of the political agenda.

Figure 4 shows the results of the proportion of attention to environmental issues in coalition agreements between 1963 and 2007. Coalition agreements are are written at the beginning of a new governmental term, and in case a government collapses, a new agreement is made (since 1967 this always goes together with new parliamentary elections). The early agreements did not mention the environment, 1971 was the first year in which a new govenment devoted attention to it, largely in response to the international emergence of issues of environment and nature on the agenda. This appeared to be an isolated spike, however, as the following government displayed far less policy ambition at the outset – that is, when it began its term in office in 1973. The agreement of 1977 carried the effects of the first oil crisis and also made reference to the report *Limits to Growth* by the Club of Rome. The main political attention spike however occurred in 1989, a key year in the history of Dutch environmental policy, and it resulted from the presentation of the first National Environmental Plan, a coalition crisis over an environmental policy issue, and the first UN climate change conference in the Netherlands. But again attention slipped away from the next government formation table in 1994, nor did it reach the level of 1989 in following years. The ups and downs were modest, shifting between some 1 and 3 percent of total policy attention in coalition agreements. In 1998 and 2003 there was some increased attention for CO2 problems and climate change.

Figure 4 here

Figure 5 shows the results of the amount of attention for environmental issues in Queen's speeches presented annually and containing also plans for governmental action. The figure shows three spikes of attention in the 1970s, one major rise in 1989/1990, and a period of increased attention between 1995 and 1998. After the initial neglect in the 1973 agreement, a series of focusing events in the 1970s led to increases in attention which however did not persist. A period of low key attention in Queen's speeches occurred from the late 1970s to the late 1980s. As noted above, the sharp rise high in attention in the late 1980s peaking in 1989 was the result of different national and international events, and so was the rerising attention in the mid 1990s. After 2000, political attention expressed in annual Queen's speeches remained rather low key. This point is taken up further below.

Figure 5 here

The Legislative Agenda

Figure 6 shows an increased attention in law production for the environment in 1992, 1995, 2004 and 2007. The increased attention in 1992 consisted of a set of new taxes on fuels and other environmentally harmful products. In 1995, the government instituted new environmental agencies and introduced several bills for protecting open waters against oil pollution. In 2004 the international trade system for emission rights was accepted and in 2007 the Dutch government accepted a series of EU directives on environmental policy. While there are ups and downs, legislative attention between 1990 and 2007 appears to drop not a low as environmental attention in governmental policy plans.

Figure 6 here

Figure 7 shows the extent to which in this body of environmental legislation explicit reference was made to European environmental policy, and the figure indicates this explicitness has grown with the relative increase in environmental legislation as a proportion of all legislative output. The government does not talk much about the European Union, but in environmental legislation European influences are acknowledged.

Figure 7 here

Analyzing the ups and downs in environmental attention on different policy agendas such as the media, the government and the legislative output it produces shows that the attention cycle posited by Downs is visible, but environmental problems do not entirely disappear from the agenda in the Netherlands. Moreover, legislation on this theme became more important in relative terms when the policy talk was fading. The distributions of changes in attention suggest that some venues in agenda setting are more sensitive to focusing events than others. Below we analyze this point further, by considering what drives ups and downs in environmental attention. The conditions we consider relate to party influence, the flow of alarming signals and their spread into agenda setting venues, and the role of the European agenda in this domain. We also discuss how rises and declines in attention in public and political arenas relate to the type of frame used for portraying environmental problems.

Is Environmental Attention Programmatic or Reactive?

Despite frequent attempts by governments to portray ambitious goals of economic growth or recovery and ecological sustainability as compatible, the Netherlands is no exception to the general phenomenon that environmental attention follows the economic trend. If the economy goes down, environmental issues become less prominent on public and political agendas. Environmental attention thus seems to be in part a matter of economic affordability. Further,

compared to other main policy themes that made their way in public and political arenas since the 1960s (social affairs, health, education, rights and immigration), the ups and downs for environmental attention are quite profiled. This pattern suggests that mechanisms of trade off are operative. But what factors actually drive the up- and downward trend in political attention?

Governments and Policy Planning

Governments, and certainly those in parliamentary systems, usually develop programs and plans for their legislative term. While in a coalition system such as the Netherlands, these government programs may not always follow electoral mandates as even the composition of these governments is sometimes hard to predict from elections, they may however reflect the priorities and preferences of participant parties. In this way, governments may be expected to act on preformulated party platforms, and thus give more or less emphasis to problems and issues as their platforms indicate. This is the central premise of mandate theory and median mandate theory (McDonald and Budge 2005). While ecology is not a onedimensional concept, political parties in a multiparty system such as the Netherlands can be mapped on an environmental policy dimension from left to right (refs.). This leads to the hypothesis that parties of the left lay more emphasis on this theme than parties of the right. As all Dutch coalition governments since 1945 contained at least one center party, the relevant distinction here is between center-left and center-right governments. When relating these types of governments to the pattern of attention visible from our data on coalition agreements, the environmental attention trend does not appear to correspond to the left or right swings of governments over time. The first spike of attention occurred when a center-right government took office in 1971, and when the most leftist government since 1945 took office, in 1973, this involved a sharp drop in attention in the governmental program. This recurred in the early 1980s and in the 1990s and beyond, when a low level of attention existed during both types of governments. The only clear instance of a change in government composition involving an attention shift was 1989, when the Christian Democrats (CDA) changed the Liberal

Conservatives (VVD) for the Social Democrats (PvdA). But even this specific attention rise in the coalition agreement of 1989 actually followed after this theme had acquired prominence in the previous center-right government, which launched an ambitious and path-breaking National Environmental Policy Plan but later collapsed over an environmental issue. Incidentally, that government had started out in 1986 with the lowest expression of environmental interest of all governments since the theme had appeared on the political agenda. In the Netherlands, issues triggering coalition collapse usually receive broad attention during the formation of the next government.

Annual policy agenda correction for which Queen's speeches may be used also does not consistently display the hypothesized ups and downs connected to center-left and center-right governments. The rise of attention in the late 1960s happened during a more conservative government than that actually placing the environment on the coalition agenda in 1971. A correction did happen during the center-left government in office between 1973 and 1977, but this was just a one year spike in 1974. As said, the low initial interest in environmental problems in the 1980s gave way to annual corrections leading to the high peak of 1989. But the decline in following does not testify to an image of a center left government promoting continued environmental attention. Likewise, the annual levels of attention during following governments show some correction, but this attention correction itself went both up and down within similarly composed coalitions (1994-1998, 1998-2002). Particularly striking is the ongoing decline in the 1990s down to the level of the 1960s, when environmental problems were just being discovered by politicians. Thus both indicators of policy programming by Dutch governments do not speak to a clear direct effect of government composition, the programmatic hypothesis has to be rejected. This conclusion fits a more general pattern in which the allocation of attention in coalition agreements and annual Queen's speeches in the Netherlands does not clearly relate to new government's beginning a term in office (Breeman et al 2008; Breeman et al 2009).

Political Attention as National Reaction

The intrusion of new information may alter attention to environmental problems, and the lack of support for the programmatic attention hypothesis suggests this happens across governments of different party political orientation and at irregular intervals. Thus the rival hypothesis expects environmental attention to be much more reactive, following the flow of information signals. How does this information find its way into policy venues and change priorities in agenda setting? The discovery of environmental problems in the late 1960s was preceded by scientific alarm in what Downs called the pre-problem stage, and analysis of the delivery of scientific reports on environmental issues between 1995 and 2006 suggests this time element remained typical to the attention pattern in the Netherlands since those early years (Breeman and Timmermans 2008). In this sense, the agenda effect of environmental indicators produced by expert organizations includes considerable delay in discovery and is mostly indirect. The production of what expert organizations would qualify as 'scientific facts that none can deny' thus is not a sufficient stimulus to public and political attention. Agenda setting always involves information selection and ignorance, and only in a few cases do alarming indicators receive immediate attention. Moreover, expertise may not only feed expansion of debate and a rise in agenda prominence, it also is used to limit participation and transfer problems away from political and public arenas. While expert organizations may acquire primacy in environmental policy making, our analysis suggests this happened more often in periods of declining attention than when issues spiralled up in public and political arenas. This pattern is more widespread across other policy domains (Timmermans and Scholten 2006).

Attention spikes thus must involve other factors than the release of expert knowledge. Alarming environmental indicators or other information find their way onto the political agenda when linked to major events and reported by the media. The occurrence of focusing events and the development of media attention over time relate closely to the upsurges in political attention since the 1960s. Thus the media are important amplifiers of information and play a central role in attention cascades within this policy domain – much like they do in other policy domains. The continous competition for attention in the media however also leads to

short pront page attention waves. Further, within the space of the media agenda for the environment, specific suptopics also compete for primacy in attention. Events such as the presentation by the government of the first National Environmental Policy Plan (1989), conferences over environmental problems such as climate change, new provocative actions by pressure groups, or events such as the premiere of An Inconvenient Truth have lead to broad attention to the issues to which they were connected. Particularly the problem of climate change and the international events organized for mobilizing attention received media coverage in recent years, and crowded out attention for other environmental issues. In short, the findings in this study provide empirical evidence for the hypothesis that governmental attention to environmental problems rises mostly in reaction to information signals, and is much less a matter of party political programming.

Of course, the distinction between programmatic and reactive attention to environmental problems should not be overstated. Political parties in government *do* react to information signals. Coalition agreements or annual policy plans are not cast in stone, not are environmental issues usually decisive when forming and maintaining governments (the coalition breakdown in 1989 over an environmental issue was an exception – it followed shortly after the first national environmental policy plan was presented). But the pattern of rising and declining political attention suggests two things: one, governments do not typically steer a party political course in this, and two, when they change attention towards the environment, they do not consolidate this attention within the political arenas but soon move to other matters instead.

Legislative Productivity by Stealth

The relative volatility of environmental attention in arenas of political agenda setting differs from the pattern of legislative productivity in this domain. Taking into account a time lag of about three years in producing legislation after bills are proposed, the rise of legislative production since 2000 contrasts with the decline in attention in governmental programs presented every four years (coalition agreements) and annually (Queen's speeches). This

rising regulatory activity does not seem to be a response to national political attention. The only national agenda to which this recent trend corresponds is the media agenda. The legislative agenda also shows much more attention to specific environmental issues such as effects of agriculture, chemical and nuclear waste, water quality, coastal areas, soil and air pollution. This attention distribution emerged in the 1970s and institutionalized in what is referred to as 'sectoral' environmental policy: regulation is divided into separate components addressing soil, water and air issues in environmental policy. As with the policy talk, the pattern of legislative output does not reflect any particular government type and thus underlines the reactive nature of environmental attention in the Netherlands.

This increasing legislative responsiveness during a period of declining political attention is related to the European environmental policy agenda. In the 1990s, national environmental legislation contained relatively few references to European policy (never more than in 25 percent of the cases), but in recent years this changed to more than 50 percent of environmental legislation mentioning European policy – either formally in situations of transposition of directives, or more informally when European impulses were mentioned. This corresponds to findings in other research, where estimates are that today some 65 percent of national environmental regulation follows from European policy (the higher percentage in this last study may stem from a measurement difference: we counted only explicit references) (Asser Institute 2006).

The salience of the European Union to national environmental legislation may explain both the rise in legislative output and the decline on the governmental agenda: issues so strongly connected to European influence have become matters of high political risk since European integration politicized in the Netherlands. Not only for environmental issues but for all main topics of public policy on the governmental agenda, references to Europe declined to the lowest level in 25 years.

Alternating Problem Frames

Environmental laws thus do not appear at high tides of political attention, and they seem to have become less related to national attention more generally. In recent years, frequent references to Europan policy indicate an external source of attention that is mostly reactive, and in earlier years, legislation mostly ensued with a time lag after an attention spike. This pattern of rise and decline has its own expression in tone: political agenda setting and issue expansion involve a dramatic frame, amplified by media attention mentioning focusing events, whereas legislative production and its institutionalization since the 1970s speak more the language of a technical frame, employed by professionals and experts in a policy community. These two frames not only alternate over time with the rise and fall of attention in political arenas, they also exist in parallel but with changes in primacy. The spikes in political attention discussed in the previous section showed dramatization, but competition from other issues made that political alarm talk soon died out and was replaced by the more technical language in which environmental legislation became institutionally locked in. The alarmed rediscovery of global warming in recent years induced policy entrepreneurs such as environmental NGOs to try and expand issue attention and advocate a comprehensive 'climate law'. The continued decline in political attention however suggests this is a national siren call.

Conclusion

Interest in environmental issues in arenas of governmental agenda setting is triggered largely by national and international events receiving media coverage. Alarmed discovery of environmental issues is not usually a matter of scientific information per se; media attention propels such discovery after what Downs called the 'preproblem stage'. The pattern of attention to environmental problems shows ups and downs over time, but the fall of public and overt political attention in 'high politics' which mostly occurs soon after its rise involves a shift to a sphere of 'low politics' in which legislative production takes place. Since the

1970s, this legislative production has institutionalized and it has become less and less driven by domestic public and political attention, and increasingly determined by European environmental policy. This Europeanization has further increased the discrepancy between overt attention and national policy production in this domain. Since the rejection by national referendum of the European Constitutional treaty on 1 June 2005, national politicians avoided European topics, especially in public venues such as government formation in which coalition agreements are negotiated and annual Queen's speeches presented to the Joint Houses of Parliament. Even when Al Gore hit the media headlines in 2007, political attention in the aforementioned venues remained relatively low key.

While these political and institutional forces are characteristic of the Dutch case, the overall pattern of attention produced in the different venues of agenda setting displays punctuated equilibria. This means that in a political system that differs from the U.S. polity with its formal separation of powers and multiple venues related to federalism, the same basic mechanisms seem to be operative in directing environmental attention and the legislative agenda. The findings in this analysis of the Dutch case suggest that different in institutional arrangements can have similar effects. This conclusion however is preliminary, and it needs further systematic analysis including a broader range of policy topics.

References: PM

Figures

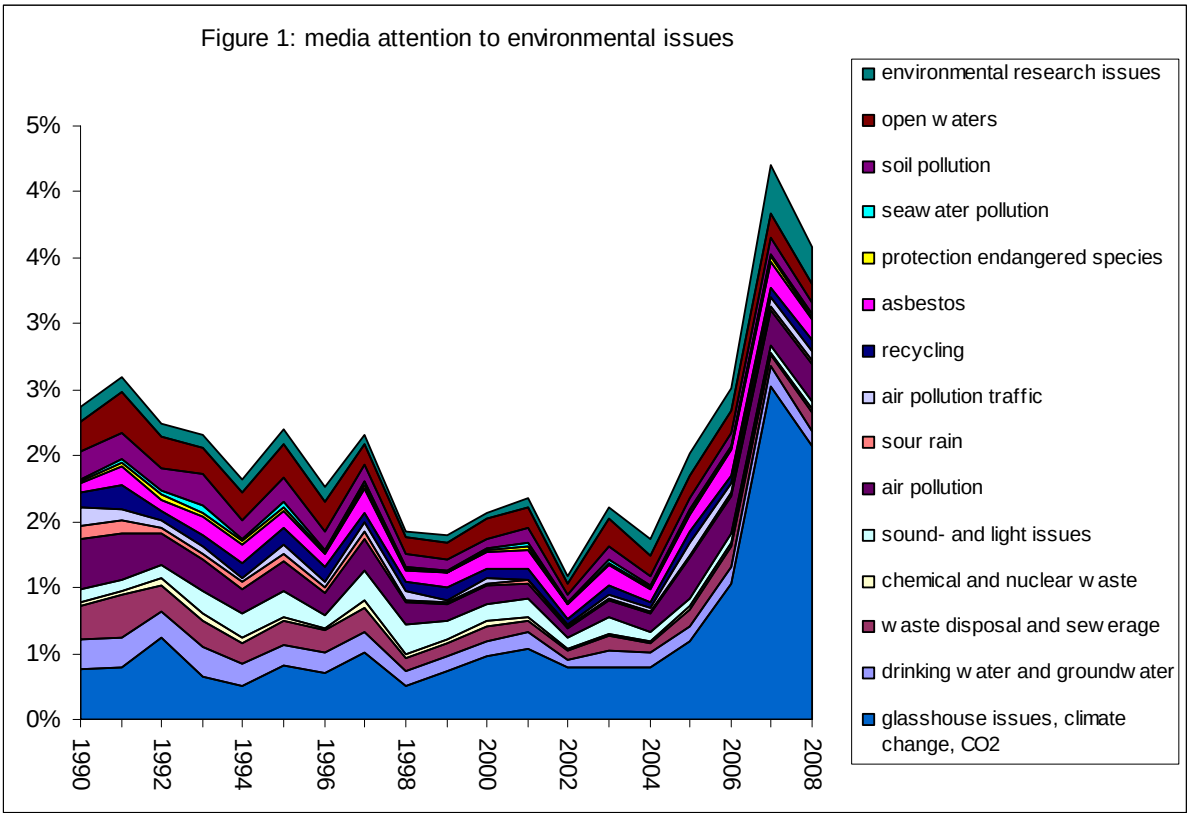
Figure 1: media attention to environmental issues
5%
4%
4%
3%
3%
2%
2%
1%
1%
0%
1990
1992
1994
1996
1998
2000
2002
2004
2006
2008
environmental research issues
open waters
soil pollution
seawater pollution
protection endangered species
asbestos
recycling
air pollution traffic
sour rain
air pollution
sound- and light issues
chemical and nuclear waste
waste disposal and sewerage
drinking water and groundwater
glasshouse issues, climate change, CO2

Figure 2a: distribution of changes between environmental issues in media attention
(Kurtosis 6.49, N=255)

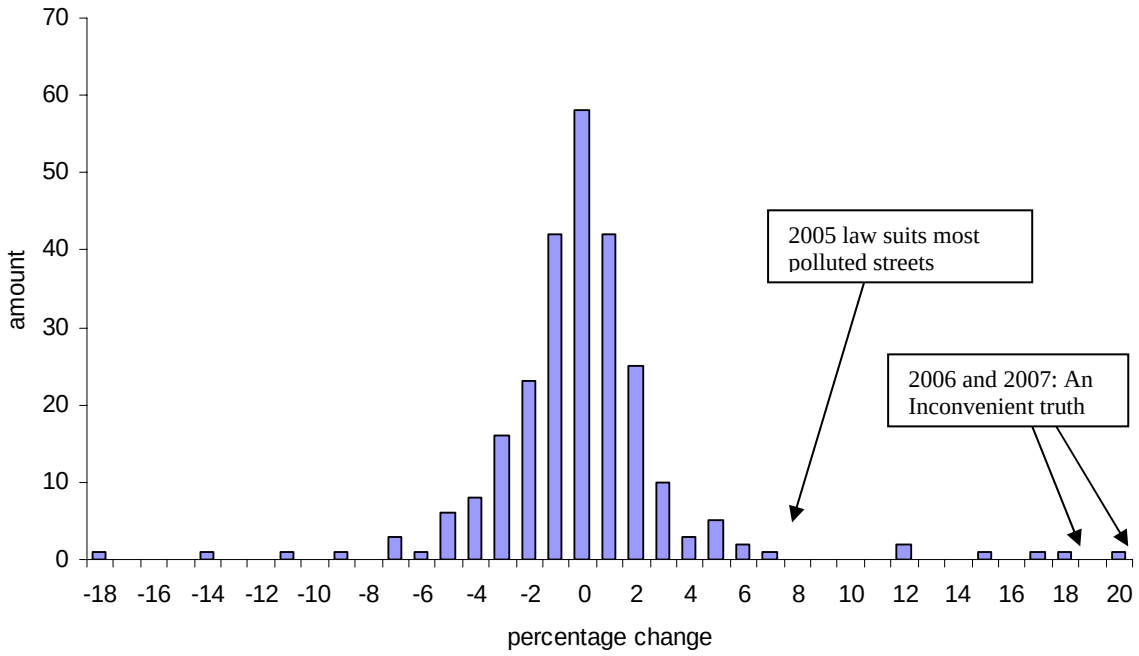

Figure 2b distribution of changes in attention to the envrionment related to all topics in the media (1990-2008; N=18; K=2.90)

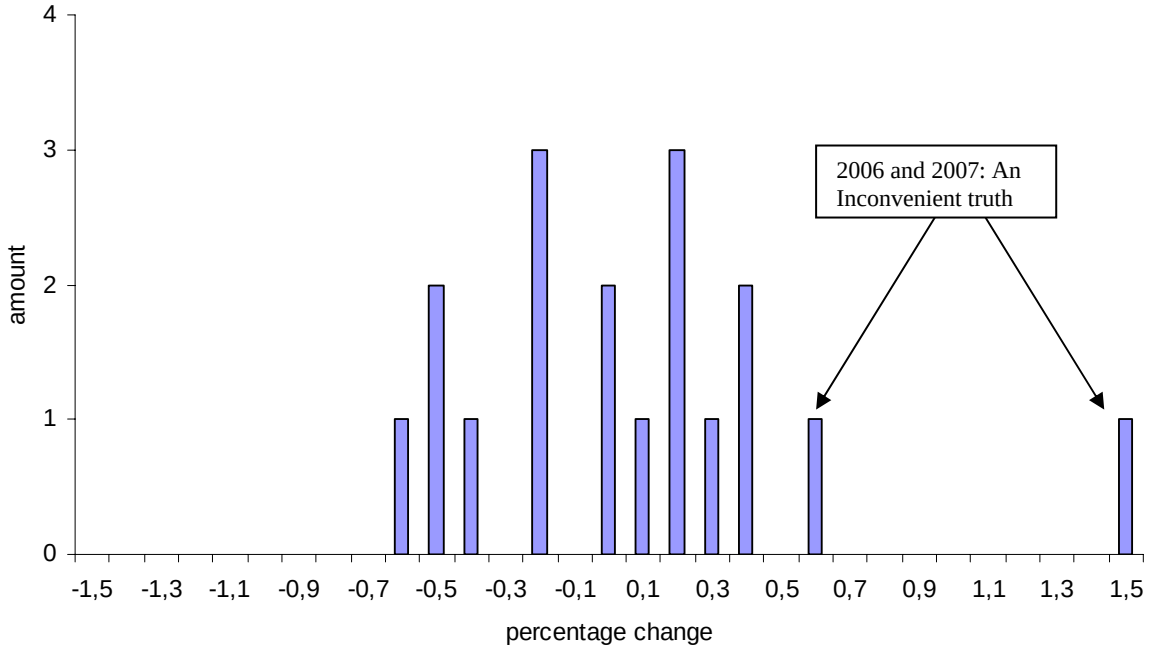

Figure 3: references to UN climate conferences in the media (N=264)

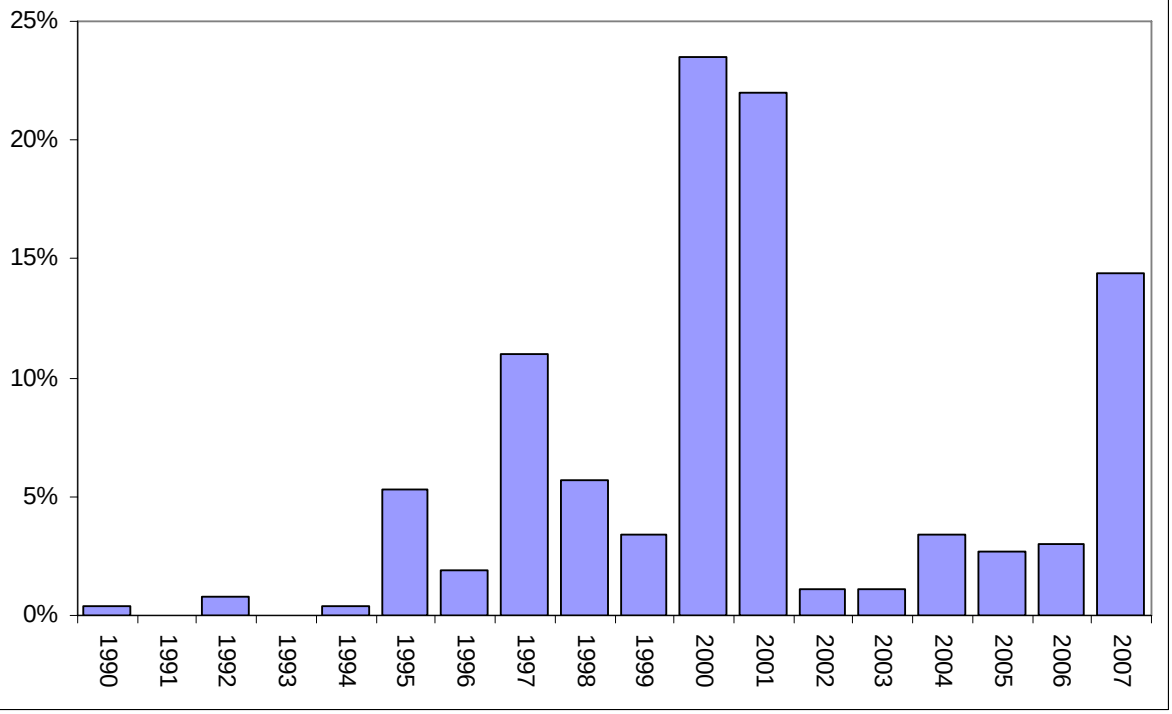

Figure 4: attention to environmental issues in coalition agreements

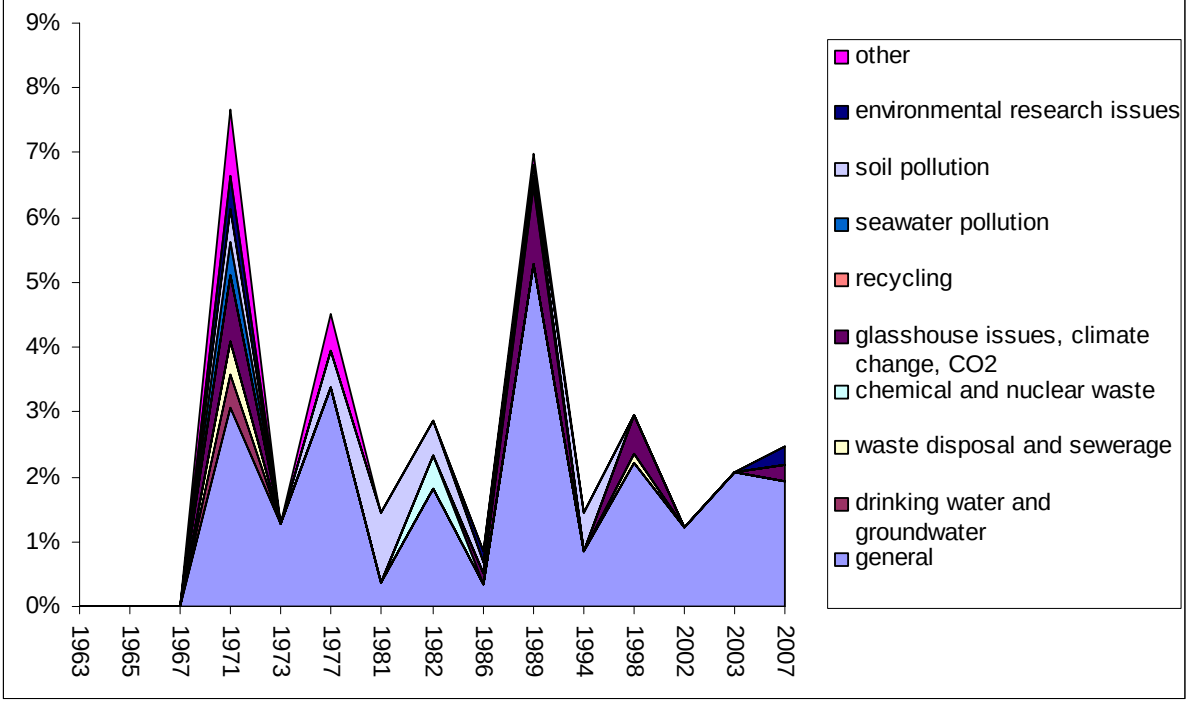

Figure 5: attention to environmental issues in Queens' speeches

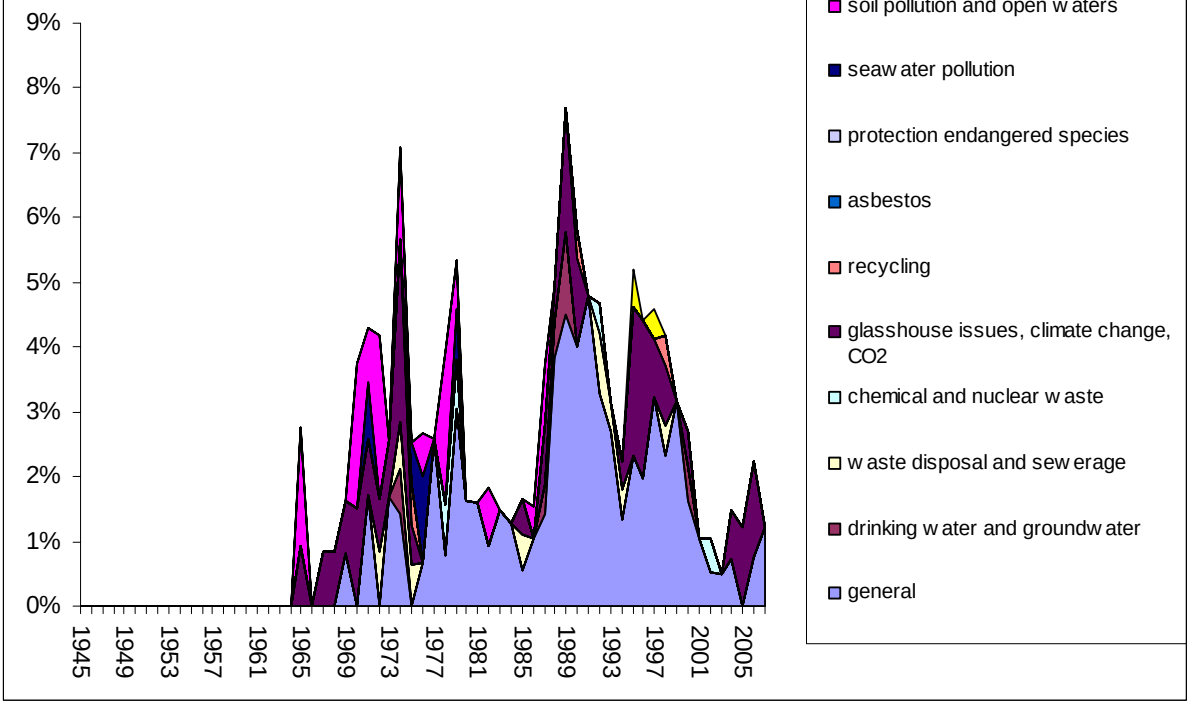

Figure 6: attention to envrironmental issues in laws

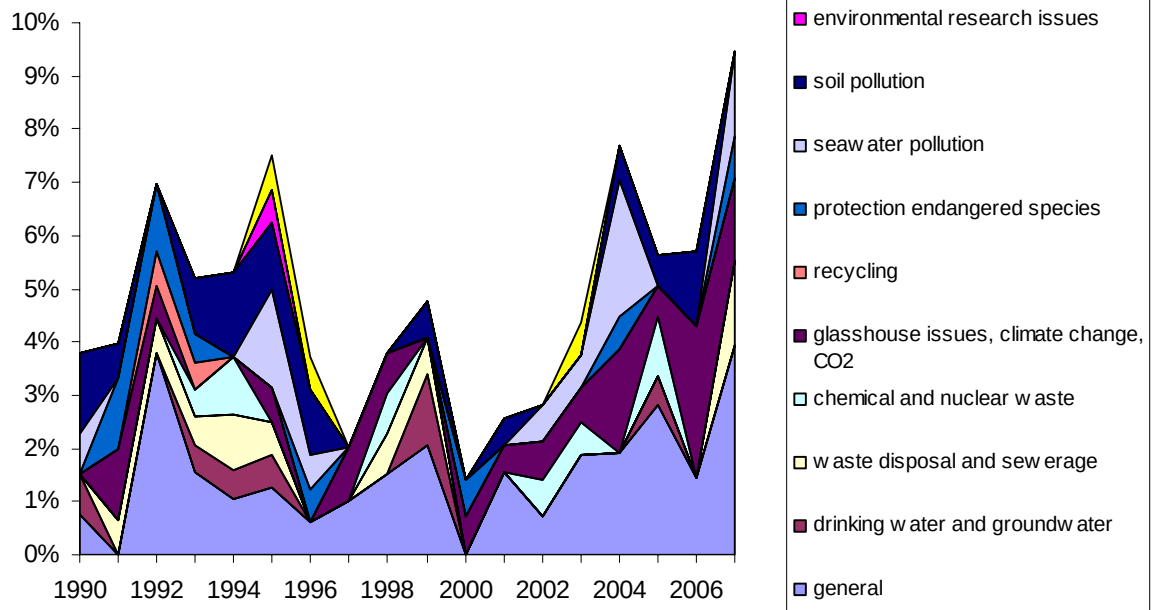

Figure 7: environmental laws in the Netherlands