

Horizontal and Vertical Attention Dynamics

Environmental Problems on Executive Policy Agendas in EU Member States

Gerard Breeman and Arco Timmermans

32.1 The Conditional Attention to Environmental Problems

In December 2015, the United Nations Climate Conference in Paris was organized to create a stronger commitment from countries to address the global warming problem. Political attention and policies were seen to lag behind the urgency of the problem. Almost twenty years earlier, in 1997, increasing awareness of the global warming problem made countries sign the international Kyoto Protocol, which came into force some eight years later and led former US-vice president Al Gore to produce the dramatic documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*. The venue change from executive office to cinema helped disseminate a sense of urgency towards the climate change problem. But despite the film's success and broad verbal support of its message, attention waned when the international economic crisis broke out in 2008. Against continuing warnings from international experts such as Nicolas Stern and organizations for environmental policy advice (Scruggs and Benegal, 2012), public and political attention to the economy overshadowed the climate change problem on the national and international agendas.

Similar attention waves for the environment occurred in earlier decades, as in 1972 when the Club of Rome warned with its "The Limits to Growth," and in 1987 when the Brundtland Report "Our Common Future" confronted publics and governments with new warnings about the economic–environmental trade-off (Beder, 2002). Governments in the late 1980s took up the environmental theme, to degrade it again to a lower priority some years later. Public and political attention to environmental problems is always conditional: it depends on what else becomes a matter of concern.

The environment is not unique in showing this pattern of rise and fall in attention and the expanding or narrowing problem definitions connected to it. Attention to other policy problems, such as unemployment, terrorism, and immigration, also rises and spreads, but then drops again to become the business of small communities of specialists and those with ongoing strong beliefs or interests in them (Schattschneider, 1960; Downs, 1972; Cobb and Elder, 1983; Baumgartner and Jones, 1993). Environmental attention has thus gone up and down for the past fifty years in most democracies. While in recent years environmental issues have come to be linked to energy questions to set a new and mobilizing policy agenda, in earlier times we saw attention cycles in which environmental problems were connected to agriculture, water, soil and air quality, and to industry and welfare. For some, environmental protection is a moral matter; for others, it is a luxury good that is related disproportionately to income.

Problems may have attributes that we consider “objective” (even in an era of alternative facts and allegations of fake news), but the sense of urgency around such problem characteristics and even their very recognition is constructed by actors in venues of public and political agenda-setting. Environmental experts everywhere can testify how scientific evidence may quickly become politicized (Weingart, 1999). Shifts in executive office show the pervasive impact of opportunistic problem construction on the top priorities of government. In venues of agenda-setting, attention to a particular problem is always relative to other topics that may attract more electoral support and enable government performance. Issues to be addressed by policymakers are in constant competition.

The idea that issues compete for space and priority on the political agenda has informed studies of agenda-setting. In the past ten years, this phenomenon of issue competition has become a central focus of the Comparative Agendas Project. Analysis of cycles of issue attention on public and political agendas has moved on from studies of national executives, legislatures, media, and so on, to supranational (European Union, see Princen, 2009; Daviter, 2011; Alexandrova et al., 2012) and international organizations (UN etc., see for example Lundgren et al., 2017), and also to subnational levels of governance (states, see Weissert and Uttermark, 2017); provinces (see Foucault and Montpetit, 2014); and municipalities (see Breeman et al., 2014; Mortensen, forthcoming). In all these institutional settings, issues compete with one another and the agenda may evolve from a limited to a broad scope that sets the space for new issues to enter, and then narrows again leading to some problems being sacrificed.

Less is known about the way attention for an issue or major topic travels up and down vertically, from one level of government to another. Such vertical traveling of attention may involve prioritization at different levels of government at similar points in time. Princen (2009), for example, has shown that

for a time, attention to the environment in the institutions of the European Union (EU) ran parallel to how member state governments were addressing this theme. But it also may be that, instead of spilling over, attention enters one level of governance and leaves the other level. In such instances, multi-level agenda-setting may involve a substitution effect in the attention to issues. As political institutions at a level of governance develop and expand their policymaking jurisdictions, problem attention may flow with it. When policy-influencing actors monitor jurisdictional development, they may travel along with it and in this way further strengthen the shift in attention locus. If attention across topics is contingent, it also may be contingent between different levels of government.

Such forces of complimentary or substitutive attention in multilevel agenda-setting may not work equally across political systems, as countries differ in their domestic institutional and political structures and agenda-setting dynamics. The federal or unitary structure of a political system may provide a relevant difference, as may separation of powers between branches of government, the relevant number of political parties, the strength of parliamentarism, and the institutional setup of organized interest that may lead to an acceleration or slowing down of attention and policy change (Green-Pedersen and Wolfe, 2009; Timmermans, 2001). When in 2010, Belgium experienced the longest-ever government formation process worldwide (541 days), European Council president and former Belgian prime minister Herman van Rompuy said that “this episode of prolonged interim government with a minimal policy agenda in my home country is no obstacle to economic and monetary crisis management, as the institutions of the European Union are well placed to take care of it” (*Le Soir*, December 23, 2010). This was a rather optimistic estimate about the capacity of the European Union to reach consensus on economic and monetary policy, but it may illustrate the idea of contingency of agenda-setting and policymaking in multilevel governance, such as in the European Union and its member states.

In this contribution, we analyze multilevel agenda-setting on the environment in the European Union and four of its member states: Denmark, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United Kingdom.¹ We consider how within each of these countries attention to the environment has evolved since the early 1980s and how sensitive this topic has been to the nature of issue competition within the domestic policy agenda. We move from what we call horizontal attention dynamics to analyzing the vertical dimension of multilevel agenda-setting: whether attention to the environment on the national agenda has run parallel or was asynchronous to the pattern of attention to the environment in the European Union.

In this multilevel attention dynamic, three patterns may occur: the environment may have been up and down on the domestic and EU agenda in

parallel; the national agenda may display earlier attention rises compared to the European Union; or the European Union may have been the forerunner in addressing environmental problems, with member states following. This analysis has an exploratory purpose to indicate directions of studying attention politics in a multilevel context.

The theory and empirical analysis presented here build on earlier work on attention dynamics and on environmental agenda-setting by Sheingate (2000, 2006), Baumgartner (2006), Knill and Liefferink (2007), Princen (2009), Green-Pedersen and Wolfe (2009), and Keskitalo et al. (2012). Our central question is: In what way has multilevel governance, with its similar or overlapping policy jurisdictions at different layers of government, had an effect on the rise and decline in attention to the environment? In focusing on the environment as a major topic, we also consider the more specific subtopics—issues—that may enter or leave the agenda over time. Further, as attention and problem definition are fundamentally constructed in the real world of political pushing and pulling, we include linkages of environmental issues to subjects that may formally belong to a different policy domain (energy, agriculture, etc.—see Appendix 32.1.A). We also consider how attention to the environment is in competition with another major topic, the economy. We do this because policy entrepreneurs in countries and in the European Union couple or decouple issues in order to mobilize attention towards or away from environmental matters. Our empirical data come from the country teams within the Comparative Agendas Project and the group analyzing policy agendas in the European Union, in particular the European Council, which is the supreme agenda-setting institution of the European Union (Foret and Rittelmeyer, 2013).²

In the next section we present our theoretical perspective on attention dynamics of issue competition and multilevel agenda-setting. Then we discuss our measurement and data, followed by the analysis of patterns since 1982 in the executive agendas of Denmark, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United Kingdom in relation to attention cycles on environmental issues on the agenda of the European Council. We end this contribution with our main conclusions, the possibilities and limits of generalization, and indicate how theoretical and empirical work on multilevel attention dynamics may be developed further.

32.2 Horizontal and Vertical Attention Dynamics

32.2.1 Horizontal Attention Dynamics: Issue Competition

In his early and often-cited theoretical model of (environmental) issue 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 Downs' issue attention cycle, a "pre-problem stage" is followed by a phase of discovery and political actors claiming they are able to solve the problem, and then a stage of fading enthusiasm as problems appear to be more intractable than expected and portrayed, and a public that becomes more concerned with other problems. Later in time, attention to the same problem then may recycle. While the bird's eye view of environmental attention in fifty years given in the introduction of this chapter may indeed exhibit such cycles, work done after Downs also led to a qualifier of his model: Public and political interest evolves in rises and falls, but environmental policy built up since some starting point produces a legacy—attention does not drop to as low as it was whenever it began (Guber, 2001). Also in other policy domains dealing with entirely different issues, political attention does not disappear and a degree of stability in policy production occurs after the initial build-up of institutions endowed with this task, for which Baumgartner and Jones introduced the concept of policy monopoly (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Baumgartner, Green-Pedersen, and Jones, 2006). Downs overstated the effects of opportunistic behavior by politicians in response to the public mood, and understated the significance of institutionalization of a policy domain and the constant generation of attention to problems within it.

The most ambitious and comprehensive approach to studying the process and content of agenda-setting following this early work is the theory of punctuated equilibrium, and the extensive empirical analysis on policy agendas developed by Jones and Baumgartner (2005). Typically, this work does not focus on single issues but considers the whole range of problems that governments face, and analyzes how different agendas constructed in the spheres of politics, the media, and the public are related. Agendas may expand and contract over time as issues are scheduled for attention or intrude unexpectedly. While initially this approach to policy agendas was limited to the United States, an international Comparative Agendas Project was launched in order to facilitate large-scale empirical analysis of political attention to problems over a long period of time (Baumgartner, Green-Pedersen, and Jones 2006). A central notion in this emerging work was (and still is) that issues are in constant competition for space on the agenda, and certainly for a top priority position. We call this phenomenon of issue competition horizontal attention dynamics, in which "horizontal" refers to the way in which agenda-setting at certain moments in time involves trading off between issues. The most drastic way this may happen is that one issue is neglected and the other receives full attention. Agenda capacity limits may enhance such competitive processes. At different points in time, cross sections of the same policy agenda will thus

show varying levels of attention to issues, some of which may reach prominence, and others may be kept low or even left out.

Thus far, issue competition has been considered mostly for the entire policy agenda in political systems, with no focus on any specific issue placed in its competitive context within the agenda-setting venue. Jennings et al. (2011), for example, employ an entropy measure to analyze the diversity of the domestic policy agenda in European countries, and find that three core functions of government (measured at the main topic level) condition the space for other issues: running the economy, securing international relations, and maintaining or reforming government and administration. Likewise, Alexandrova et al. (2012) analyze the evolution of the political agenda of the European Council, the most prominent agenda-setting institution in the European Union. In these analyses, it appears that the varying distributions of attention to issues involves both a narrowing and a widening of the scope of the agenda.

Given the core functions of governments and the competitive nature of attention, attention to environmental issues is conditioned, and thus not only depends on the nature of environmental problems themselves, but also on the overall structure of political concerns of governments. This kind of horizontal, or cross-sectional, attention dynamic, may vary not only between types of policy agendas and venues within countries, but also between similar venues and policy agendas produced in them in different countries.

Venues have institutional properties conducive to the replication and aggregation of particular problem frames and they also have their own institutional properties that lead to more or less agenda capacity, inducing problem expansion and dramatization or narrowing the circle of participants and facilitating depoliticization. The media have different dynamics of attention and problem portrayal from legislative committees, and regulatory agencies with specific professional target groups differ in the way they address issues when presenting their policy priorities to the general public.

These differences in venues, and thus also in the policy agendas produced in them, have been studied systematically in the Comparative Agendas Project. Work produced in the last decade has shown that changes in agendas and in policies over time can indeed be better understood when venues and policy agendas are compared. Input agendas overall appear to involve lower levels of friction to change than output agendas, such as laws or budgets, which are costly to overhaul (Baumgartner et al., 2009).

32.2.2 *Vertical Attention Dynamics: Multilevel Agenda-Setting*

A comparative perspective thus can help our understanding of the working of venues and the dynamics of policy agendas between countries, for the agenda at large or for specific topics. But the dynamics of attention within a country

may result not only from domestic issue competition or domestic venue change. It also may be influenced by venues and policy agendas outside the country, in particular at a level of governance that is linked institutionally (and legally) to it, such as the European Union in relation to its member states. This is the vertical dimension, which may involve formal hierarchy, but even if enforcement of attention “down” from above is not strict or weak, it may influence domestic attention. This is multilevel agenda-setting, which becomes more important as agenda-setting happens at different levels of governance with similar or overlapping jurisdictions for the same issue or topic.

Multilevel governance is described as “a system of continuous negotiation among nested governments at several territorial tiers—supranational, national, regional, and local” (Hooghe and Marks 2003: 234). This means that the boundaries between different levels of policymaking are blurred and different patterns of interaction and power games are played. It also means that member states lose part of their sovereignty and in this process lose some (or even much) of their capacity to set the policy agenda—they are no longer able to monopolize the domestic agenda on issues in the relevant policy domain (Braun and Santarius, 2008; Marks et al., 1996).

While in theory, multilevel governance is seen to influence agenda-setting dynamics at both the national and the EU level, empirical analysis of the interplay between levels of governance in the European Union is still scarce. Does the expansion of a policy jurisdiction at the EU level go with rises in attention at the national level (Princen, 2009; Princen and Rhinard, 2006)? Or is there evidence that, as Rhodes (1994) argues, multilevel and vertical governance hollows out the national state, and domestic actors with stakes in a topic move their venue shopping to the higher level, such as to the institutions of the European Union? If this shift occurs, it may imply a decline in attention for a policy topic within national-level institutions. Agenda-setting at one, higher level then substitutes rather than drives or reinforces agenda-setting at the other, lower level.

In short, the vertical dynamics of multilevel agenda-setting may involve similar or dissimilar directions of issue attention at the relevant levels of governance. Member states in the European Union are not simply mechanically connected to the EU institutions, but have their own institutional setting that may be more or less conducive, and likewise, (party) political conditions may favor the domestic tracking of the EU policy agenda or they may push attention flows towards very different issues. The institutionalization of attention to a topic in a political system for example may vary with the extent to which a leading political party (or a majority coalition of parties) promotes such institutionalization (Green-Pedersen and Wolfe, 2009).

Domestic political parties are important actors in setting the national policy agenda, making constant trade-offs for attention to issues, and this is also

where in multilevel agenda-setting the horizontal dynamics of issue competition may come into play. While the literature on EU policymaking considers institutional, political, and cultural reasons for member states to stay close to or deviate from the European policy agenda (and its implementation), domestic issue competition has not received much space in theory and empirical analysis thus far.

In this contribution, we focus on the way in which vertical attention dynamics of multilevel governance may, at the domestic level, be influenced by the horizontal dimension, the competition between policy topics for national agenda priority. We consider one specific type of policy agenda, the executive agenda of the European Union and the executive agenda in different EU member states. The central topic in our analysis is environmental policy, a field of shared competences of the European Union and its member states, and on which the European Union has developed a strong policy legacy. Environmental problems are typically seen as matters addressed in a multilevel governance system (Pollack, 2000; Hooghe and Marks, 2001; Marks, Hooghe, and Blank, 1996). Studies of environmental policy also indicate that the European Union has become a global leader in setting the environmental policy agenda (Keleman and Vogel, 2010). Further, a characteristic of the environment as a domain of regulatory policy in the European Union is that costs of policy and implementation are carried to a significant extent by the member states (Fairbrass and Jordan, 2004).

Based on the possibilities for environmental attention dynamics to develop, we present two hypotheses. The first hypothesis follows the argument in the agenda-setting literature that attention in one venue triggers and increases attention in another venue. This cascading effect has been found for media and political venues (S. Pralle, 2006; S. B. Pralle, 2006; Walgrave and Vliegthart, 2010). Also from a multilevel perspective, attention at one level of governance may spark attention at the other level (Collinson, 1999). In studying environmental policy, Princen (2009) observes a parallel development in attention within EU institutions and member states. We expect that environmental issues discussed at the EU level will be followed by an increase of attention at the member states level. Thus our first hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 1 on vertical, multilevel dynamics:

If attention to the environment rises or declines on the EU agenda, then attention in member states rises or declines as well.

The horizontal attention dynamics we incorporate by looking at—according to the literature—a strongly competitive topic to the environment: the economy. Some scholars even argue that the environment is a luxury good to which attention rises only at times when the economy is high and incomes

develop positively. Conversely, in this line of argument, when economic problems rise, domestic attention to the environment declines.

Hypothesis 2 on horizontal, issue competition dynamics:

If attention to the economy rises, then attention to the environment declines, and if attention to the economy declines, then attention to the environment rises.

The question is how these dynamics relate to each other. Do EU member states show both dynamics at the same time? Or do some member states show a stronger pattern for the horizontal dynamic while other member states for the vertical dynamic? Within EU member states, the trading off of the environment for economy on the agenda may be reinforced by the institutionalization of environmental policymaking in EU institutions, which is among the most developed of all policy domains in the European Union (Princen, 2009). The expectation then may be that the multilevel dynamic will be more dominant than the issue competition dynamic. However, an alternative argument is that small countries with an open economy are more likely to show a horizontal dynamic rather than a vertical pattern, which means that attention to the environment is more dependent on the levels of attention to the economy.

The empirical analysis that follows includes four countries. For these countries, executive agendas have been content coded. Similarly, the policy agenda was coded for the European Council. In our hypotheses, we do not include different expectations for the four countries. The aim of the present analysis is to explore how attention dynamics may work for one venue type and one topic in a multilevel governance context. We thus take an open empirical view on the two types of agenda-setting dynamics in the four countries, and consider the extent to which patterns between them are similar or different, and what this may mean for our understanding of the evolution of attention to a major policy topic.

32.3 Data and Method of Analysis

A key feature of policy agendas research is the use of a similar codebook containing nineteen main topic categories such as macroeconomy, international affairs, and health, and nearly 250 subtopic categories for more specific subjects, such as income tax, international human rights, and the regulation of medicines (Baumgartner and Jones 2002; Jones and Baumgartner, 2005; John and Margetts, 2003). In this chapter, we focus on the political attention given to environmental issues. This includes topics as different as solid waste recycling, climate change, water pollution, or asbestos. We extended the original set of subtopics on environment in the coding system to energy issues and some other

subtopics from different topic categories that also relate to the environment. Appendix 32.A.1 gives a detailed list of the (sub)topics included in this research.

The data for this analysis were collected in different national policy agendas projects, mapping attention to problems across all policy fields in different venues over varying periods (John and Jennings, 2012). The coding protocol has been comparable in all countries. All entries are double coded until an intercoding reliability was reached of 85 percent on the main topics and 80 percent on the subtopics. We included two small (Denmark and the Netherlands) and two larger EU member states (the United Kingdom and Spain) in our analysis. Besides having data available on these countries, these member states also represent the entire spectrum of forerunners in environmental policymaking (Denmark and the Netherlands), a middle of the road country (the United Kingdom), and a latecomer (Spain) (Lieverink and Andersen, 1998). Appendix 32.B.1 provides an overview of the major trends and topics about the environment in the four member states studied.

We use executive speeches as an indicator of government attention on the national level and the European Council Conclusions as an indicator of attention to problems at the Union level. The executive speeches are given at the opening of the parliamentary year. In these speeches, governments communicate their plans for the coming year. Previous research found that speeches are a valid indicator of executive attention (Breeman et al., 2009; Jennings, Bevan, and John, 2011; Mortensen et al., 2011). The European Council Conclusions contain the main statements produced in European summits, which are organized four to six times per year. All heads of state or government of the European Union take part in these summits and they discuss general policy concerns, intentions, and outlooks on future topics of interest to the European Union. Council Conclusions are comparable to executive speeches—a formal agenda at a high political level, displaying the most important policy plans for the coming period. We aggregated the data on the European Council Conclusions to be able to make year-to-year comparisons with the executive speeches. Table 32.1 summarizes the data used.

The annual executive speeches are coded per sentence or quasi-sentence.³ Dutch Speeches of the Throne are read by the Monarch at the 3rd Tuesday in September when the annual budget is presented, but they are written entirely by the government (Breeman et al., 2009). The British Queen reads the speech in October or November at the opening of the parliamentary year, except after an election (Jennings et al., 2011). This speech is also written by the government. The Danish executive speech is read by the prime minister on the first Tuesday in October during the opening ceremony of the parliament (Mortensen et al., 2011). Finally, the Spanish speech is presented by the prime minister who has more discretion in setting the moment compared to the other countries (Mortensen et al., 2011).

Table 32.1. Data sources of executive speeches

	Period	Statements in total	Statements about environment (absolute value)	Statements about environment (proportion)
United Kingdom	1982–2012	2,293	66	2.9%
Denmark	1982–2012	9,964	310	3.1%
The Netherlands	1982–2012	5,484	244	4.4%
Spain	1982–2012	10,424	101	1.0%
European Council conclusions	1982–2012	42,436	1,901	4.5%

Source: Comparative Agendas Project—United Kingdom, Spain, the Netherlands, and Denmark

32.4 Empirical Patterns in Four Member States and the European Union

To understand the relationship between attention to the environment at EU level and at member state level, we compare the trends of attention at both levels and also analyze the specific contents of these trends. Typical of the punctuated equilibrium pattern in political attention and policy changes is the alternation between periods of stability and small changes interrupted by more drastic shifts. Figure 32.1 shows the development in attention to environmental problems over time in the different executive speeches relative to the pattern in the European Council. A look at these four figures shows considerable variation between domestic attention distributions over time.

The United Kingdom has clear spikes of attention in 1989, 2001, and 2009. Spain shows, as expected, late-starting attention to the environment but with spikes upward in 2001 and 2009. The Netherlands displays one clear spike of attention in 1989 and two waves of attention between 1987 and 1992 and between 1995 and 1999, and some rise also in 2009–10. Denmark shows a number of separate spikes of attention, in 1988, 1994, 1997, 2010, and 2012. The European Council Conclusions show attention spikes around 1990, 2002, 2007, and 2009.

32.4.1 Vertical Attention Dynamics: Multilevel Agenda-Setting

Comparing the trends of the member states and the European Union, we observe that, after 2000, the average level of attention to the environment in the European Union was systematically higher than in the four member states. This shows institutionalization at the EU level, where environmental policy is a strong domain of supranational competence and where, since the Lisbon Treaty of 2009, increased jurisdiction in energy policy provided issue connection possibilities. As a venue of high politics in which member states

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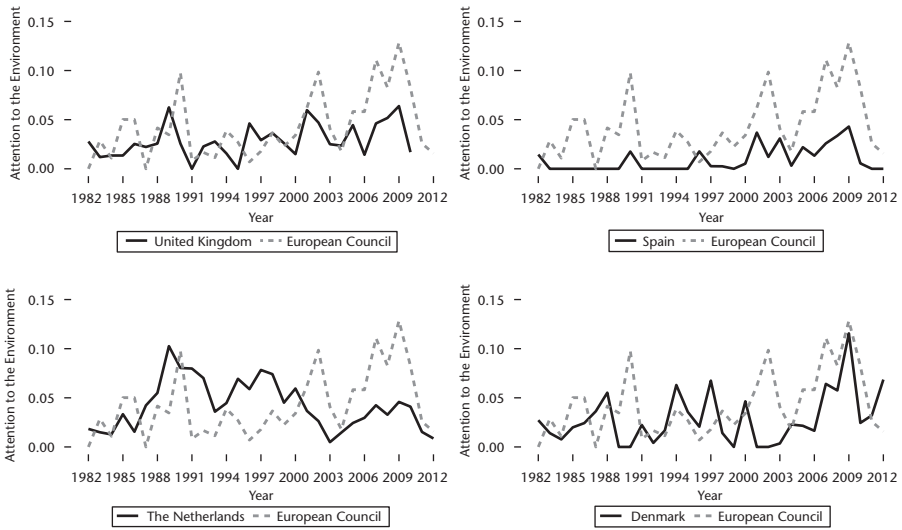


Figure 32.1. Attention to the environment at national and EU level

Source: Comparative Agendas Project

are directly represented, the European Council agenda not only followed national attention patterns but has also taken a leading agenda-setting role in the timing of attention to environmental problems.

When comparing the trends in the United Kingdom and Spain on the one hand and in the Netherlands and Denmark on the other hand we observe that the speeches of the United Kingdom and, to some extent, also in Spain follow the same pattern of attention as observed at the European level. The trends in Denmark and the Netherlands rather suggest that national attention to environmental matters follow a different pattern. If we correlate the attention of all the four countries with the attention at the EU level, we also find support for these observations (see Table 32.2).

Correlations in the United Kingdom and Spain are higher and significant compared to those of the Netherlands and Denmark. The regression analysis (linear) between attention to the environment of the two governance levels further confirms that the United Kingdom and Spain are more strongly related to the EU attention dynamic than the Netherlands and Denmark are. We found this pattern in both directions, whether the European Union was taken as dependent or independent variable. Thus, for the United Kingdom and Spain, we find evidence for Hypothesis 1: the rise and decline in attention at the national level to environmental issues follows the pattern of attention in the European Council. Note, however, that we cannot draw conclusions about the direction of this relation. From our analysis one cannot conclude

Table 32.2. Vertical mechanism: Multilevel effect

	UK 1982–2012 N = 31	SP 1982–2012 N = 31	NL 1982–2012 N = 31	DK 1982–2012 N = 31
Correlation	R = 0.46380566	R = 0.644978	R = 0.002848	R = 0.270876
p-value	p = 0.008587***	p = 8.97E-05***	p = 0.98787	p = 0.140505
EC taken as the independent variable	Regression coeff.= 0.241127316	Regression coeff.= 0.246759334	Regression coeff.= 0.002116018	Regression coeff.= 0.216041
EC taken as dependent variable	Regression coeff.= 0.892125	Regression coeff.= 1.685837	Regression coeff.= 0.003832	Regression coeff.= 0.33963

Note: Regression between the relative attention per year for the environment in the executive speeches of four member states and the minutes of the European Council meetings.

Source: Comparative Agendas Project—United Kingdom, Spain, the Netherlands, and Denmark

whether these two member states are responding to the European Union or that the European Union is responding to the member states.

Why are the Netherlands and Denmark following their own pattern and the United Kingdom and Spain are not? First of all, because Denmark and the Netherlands were early agenda-setters on environmental issues. Paradoxically, from a qualitative analysis summarized in Appendix 32.B.1, we learn that, in dealing with environmental issues, Denmark and the Netherlands were referring to the European Union earlier than the British and Spanish governments. During the first peak of attention, both Denmark and the Netherlands emphasized the importance of the role of the European Union in environmental policymaking, particularly for those issues that cross domestic borders. This speaks to the analysis of EU environmental policy development by Keleman and Vogel (2010), who argue that EU institutions provided crucial venues of support and institutionalization for those member states where domestic environmental standards were already quite strict—and who thus would benefit from environmental policy diffusion driven by the European Union “down” to the other member states. At the same time, both countries were building institutions to deal with environmental issues. In Denmark, the environment was being linked to socio-economic welfare policies, while in the Netherlands monitoring systems for specific sectoral environmental policies were being developed.

Compared to Denmark and the Netherlands, governments in the United Kingdom and particularly in Spain referred much less to environmental policies in their executive agendas. When the United Kingdom was referring to the environment at all, it was mainly related to the creation of its national institutions without much reference to the EU level. The focus was on setting up river boards and environmental agencies for England, Wales, and Scotland. Spain had a different starting position compared to the other countries as it

became a member state in 1986 after its national democratization process had come on track. This country started to build environmental institutions in the 1990s, and made increasing reference to the European Union at the turn of the century and in following years.

The forerunner position of Denmark and the Netherlands pushed their attention to the environment to higher levels compared with the United Kingdom and Spain. It also explains why they followed their own agenda dynamic, different from that of the European Union. The United Kingdom and Spain only caught up when, and if, the European Union was discussing environmental issues.

The second reason why Denmark and the Netherlands do not line up with the EU attention dynamic comes forth when we consider the question of why the executive agendas in Denmark and particularly in the Netherlands show no continued rise but rather conditional attention to the environment after 2000.

In the Netherlands, this may be because of the ever-closer regulatory regime set at the EU level. Talking about the environment usually implies referring to EU rules. And with declining voters' appreciation of the European Union, politicians have become anxious to mention EU policies at all. In the last decade, it has even become a political risk to talk about EU policies. Green-Pedersen and Wolfe (2009) found that, in Denmark, the institutionalization of environmental attention came despite the transfer of important decision-making authority in this domain to the European Union, and the pattern in our findings indicate a recent catching-up with EU policy in this country (see the rise in from 2006 to 2008).

The increasing executive attention in the United Kingdom and Spain following the rise of the EU environmental policy agenda remained at a lower level compared to the early attention waves in Denmark and in the Netherlands. This may signify that executive attention in the United Kingdom and Spain increased to a level just sufficient for the European Union-mandated domestic policy development. Another driving condition for this rising attention in the late-coming countries United Kingdom and Spain may be that, when their national executives were catching up with EU policy initiatives, the environment was expanding into a broader global theme—more pressing on the domestic executive agenda as other international and global themes or focus events also have such an agenda effect (Birkland, 1997).

32.4.2 Horizontal Attention Dynamics: Issue Competition

A third reason for the different patterns between the United Kingdom and Spain compared with Denmark and the Netherlands brings us to our second hypothesis. It is a classic pattern in agenda-setting that attention to one policy

topic is contingent on the amount of attention other policies get. This is why in the theory section above we started with issue competition. In multilevel agenda-setting, issue competition (or, as we called it, horizontal attention dynamics) has remained under-considered. Here, we focus on economic issues relative to environmental issues. Downs (1972) already indicated that the environment is negatively associated with the economy. Breeman and Timmermans (2008) also showed this relation to be true for the Netherlands. Hence, we analyze how much domestic attention to the environment and the increasing role of the European Union have been pushed up or down by the salience of economic issues on the domestic agenda.

Figure 32.2 shows the cycles of attention to the environment and to macroeconomic issues. The general pattern that may be observed in the attention given to macroeconomic topics is a declining trend (except for Spain) with attention increasing from 2009 onwards (except for Denmark). The declining line in the United Kingdom is more erratic than in the Netherlands and Denmark. For the entire period all four countries exhibit higher levels of attention for the economy; the economy is simply considered more important on the executive agenda than the environment, and even when facing no major economic trouble, attention to environmental issues is still conditioned by the amount of space on the agenda.

When we relate the trends between the economy and the environment and compare the four countries, different patterns emerge. Both the United Kingdom and Spain are rather erratic and there seems to be no meaningful pattern

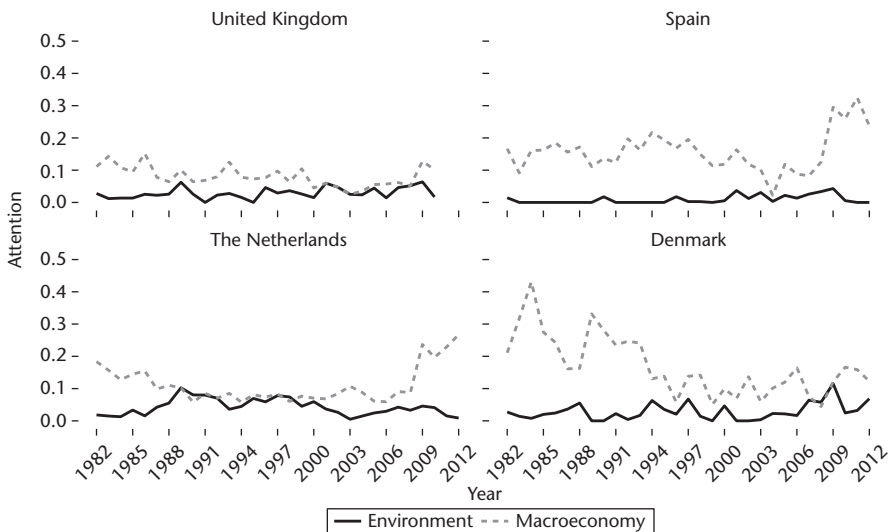


Figure 32.2. Attention to the environment and macroeconomy at national level

Source: Comparative Agendas Project

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Table 32.3. Horizontal mechanism: Issue competition

	UK 1982–2012 N = 31	SP 1982–2012 N = 31	NL 1982–2012 N = 31	DK 1982–2012 N = 31
Correlation	R = 0.079911	R = -0.050425	R = -0.446266	R = -0.336558
p-value	p = 0.669141	p = 0.787632	p = 0.011855**	p = 0.064128#
Economy (topic 1) taken as independent variable	Regression coeff.= 0.041493	Regression coeff.= -0.01031	Regression coeff. = -0.19569	Regression coeff. = -0.0981
Economy (topic 1) taken as dependent variable	Regression coeff.= 0.1539	Regression coeff.= -0.24668	Regression coeff.= -1.01772	Regression coeff.= -1.15469

Note: Regression between relative attention per year to macroeconomic topics and the environment *within* four EU member states.

Source: Comparative Agendas Project codebook, the Netherlands—United Kingdom, Spain, the Netherlands, and Denmark

in the graph presented in Table 32.3. For the Netherlands and Denmark, however, we see almost a mirror image between the two topics, especially in the Netherlands. Consider the years 1986, 1993, 2003, and 2012. In all these years, attention to the economy went up and attention to the environment went down.

Statistical analysis supports this observation. The Netherlands and Denmark show a stronger negative correlation compared with the United Kingdom and Spain. The regression between the two topics further confirms that both topics are more strongly related in the Netherlands and Denmark than in the United Kingdom and Spain. Thus, we found a pattern opposite to that in the multilevel dynamics of attention. For the Netherlands and Denmark, we find support for Hypothesis 2: the rise in attention to the economy comes together with a decline in attention to the environment. We cannot, however, draw conclusions about the direction of the relationship.

Competition between the two main topic categories did not play much part in the United Kingdom and Spain, but it did in Denmark and particularly in the Netherlands. As we saw in the United Kingdom and Spain the multilevel dynamic occurred much more strongly between the domestic agenda for environmental issues and that of the European Union. Our findings thus suggest that in Denmark and the Netherlands attention given to environmental problems was sacrificed to that of the economy and that, conversely, the environment acquired more agenda space when the economy did not call for attention in these countries.

In Spain and the United Kingdom, such trading off did not happen to any significant degree. Though not statistically significant, in the United Kingdom

a weak positive relationship existed between the attention to economic and environmental issues. Apparently, over time, in Spain and the United Kingdom attention to the environment developed in a way that was less dependent on the space on the agenda relative to economic issues, and can be seen more as catching up with the expanding European policymaking activities on environmental issues. These countries follow the attention rhythm of the European Union more than Denmark and the Netherlands.

These findings inform us about the different ways in which multilevel agenda-setting may happen for one and the same major policy topic, and within countries that all are EU member states. While attention to the environment exists in the European Union and member states, at the same time, the trends differ between the countries. This means that existing conclusions about agenda-setting on environmental issues in European countries need a qualifier: countries appear not equally sensitive in time to EU initiatives nor are they all taking frontrunner positions in agenda-setting on environmental issues. Further, domestic issue competition for attention also varies in the impact on the level of attention to environmental issues.

32.5 Conclusion

Issues that spill over across territorial and political borders also impact agenda-setting on all sides of these borders. While attention to problems within countries has become a major subject of study in the past decade, also in comparative work the multilevel dynamics of problem attention is still relatively understudied. This contribution builds on literature on multilevel governance and aims to connect such work more explicitly to agenda-setting over a long period of time. Its empirical focus is on environmental problems, a major topic that receives attention in all countries and at all levels of governance, but typically does so in quite different proportions over time.

In the European Union, the multilevel governance of environmental issues has become strongly institutionalized. We consider how this growing institutionalization and the build up of a policy legacy at the EU level relates to domestic agenda-setting. Do member states of the European Union track attention levels in the European institutions, do they seek “uploading” of their own environmental issues to the EU level, or do they shift towards other major policy topics instead? Competition between issues may reinforce the substitution of attention.

We presented two hypotheses to explore how multilevel agenda-setting on environmental issues may happen over a period of thirty years in different

countries, namely Denmark, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United Kingdom, and all compared to the European Union. Our first hypothesis was that attention for the environment between the levels over time is corresponding, which speaks to the idea that the European Union and its member states must constantly connect on their policy agendas. In our second hypothesis, we moved on to horizontal attention dynamics, and stated that the environment must compete with the economy for space on the policy agenda. This in turn influences the openness of a national agenda to attention in multilevel agenda-setting on the relevant topic.

We used data on the executive agendas of the governments in these countries and the European Council. Our quantitative analysis of executive agendas has shown that in Spain and the United Kingdom attention to environmental issues mostly went up when the attention level within the European Council was also rising. In Spain, this happened increasingly over time, which indicates institution building in this policy domain after the country became a EU member in 1986. The United Kingdom shows this attention-following pattern over the entire period of thirty years. These findings support our first hypothesis on complimentary attention dynamics between the two levels of agenda-setting. In contrast, environmental agenda-setting in Denmark and the Netherlands follows a more domestic pattern and at several points in the thirty-year period even traveled in an opposite direction to that of the European Union. For these two countries, we found empirical evidence of competition for attention on the national executive agenda between the environment and the economy. At times of salience of economic issues (that is, economic hardship), the space on the executive agenda for environmental policy was reduced, and at times the topic almost entirely disappeared from the agenda. Issue competition thus may drive attention to the environment down when this topic is also addressed extensively at the EU level.

These latter findings differ from those of Green-Pedersen and Wolfe (2009) and Princen (2009), who found that there is no substitution effect, and that, particularly in Denmark, attention to the environment increased in parallel to the European Union. We can account for this by the difference in policy venues analyzed. Green-Pedersen and Wolfe analyzed attention to the environment in Denmark in parliamentary debates, not the executive agenda. This may mean that, in multilevel dynamics, different venues and policy agendas can have varying roles in promoting or downplaying attention to issues. There can be increasing levels of attention in parliament—with multiple parties—for political reasons, and for the same reasons executives may choose to keep a topic lower key. The imprint of the European Union on environmental policy may be a disincentive for the executive to pay much attention to it in the face

of a public that is sceptical towards the European Union. This reason may also have played a part in the Netherlands, where since the early 2000s EU policy has become more controversial. In the Eurosceptik UK, rises in attention often followed broader international agenda-setting, in which the European Union is only one of the drivers of this attention. On the executive agenda of the United Kingdom, attention to the environment moved more in parallel to this topic becoming a major concern of global governance.

For a time, both Denmark and the Netherlands were forerunners in environmental policy (Lieverink and Andersen, 1998). We see this in our findings for the 1980s and 1990s (the 1970s are outside the period analyzed, but also show sharp attention rises for environmental problems, see Liefferink and Andersen, 1998: 159). Conversely, Spain came from an entirely different starting position on this issue in the early 1980s. Spain was building up its own institutional capacity on the environment and was catching up when the attention at EU level started to rise. Hence when the attention to the environment started to rise, it also did at the national level.

Thus, multilevel agenda-setting on environmental problems has a different meaning in countries depending on the institutional and political relationships of these countries with the level above. To fully understand multilevel governance, comparative multi-venue analysis must also be involved. The forces of complimentary or substitutive attention in multilevel agenda-setting may work differently across countries, with their variation in institutional and political structures, numbers of relevant parties, and other policy entrepreneurs seeking venue access. Such institutional and (party) political factors can add to our understanding of attention dynamics when systematically compared, with a special focus on the way they condition multilevel agenda-setting.

Our final point of discussion in this contribution is how generalizable our findings and the possible driving factors of attention dynamics may be outside the domain of environmental policy. At the outset we gave a broad view of attention dynamics in order to identify and analyze different possible routes of attention in multilevel governance. Horizontal and vertical attention dynamics may work simultaneously or interact in different ways across countries as EU member states. Our findings indicate there is not one single and simple mechanism that leads national governments to allocate attention to a major topic in the same way over time. Also, our findings indicate that in some countries, particularly those of a smaller size and open to international economic or political developments, the competitive nature of issue attention impacts on the space for problems. Not only environmental issues but also other matters may receive lower levels of domestic attention if the core

functions of government are at stake (Jennings et al., 2011). The environment is unlikely to be the only theme addressed conditionally according to the space for diversity on the agenda. This possibility may be investigated by studies focusing on other domains, such as social policy, education and culture, immigration, and law, order, and crime issues, and relating them to the other core functions of government, that is, foreign relations and the structure and organization of government and administration. Analyzing the more or less competitive relationship between topics and these core functions can inform us about the thresholds for issues to get on to the policy agenda.

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Appendix 32.A.1: Subtopics included in the data

Table 32.A.1. Subtopics included in the data

700:	General (includes combinations of multiple subtopics)
701:	Drinking water safety
703:	Waste disposal
704:	Hazardous waste and toxic chemical Regulation, treatment, and disposal
705:	Air pollution, global warming, climate change, and noise pollution
707:	Recycling
708:	Indoor environmental hazards
709:	Species and forest protection
710:	Pollution and conservation in coastal and other navigable waterways
711:	Land and water conservation (this includes code 407 from NL, DK, and EC: Environmental problems caused by agricultural activities. SP and UK did not split up this code)
798:	Research and development
799:	Other
806:	Alternative and renewable energy
807:	Energy conservation
1614:	Environmental problems caused by military activity
1902:	International resources exploitation and resources agreements and global environmental problems
2103:	Use of public natural resources such as lands and forests

Source: Comparative Agendas Project—United Kingdom, Spain, the Netherlands, and Denmark

Appendix 32.B.1: Summary of attention to environment in four countries

Table 32.B.1. Summary of attention to environment in four countries

	1970s–1988	Peak attention 1988/9	1990–4	Peak attention 1994/5	1995–2012
Denmark	National focus on specific issues: –Spatial planning –Water issues –Recycling	National focus but related to other policy domains: –Environment defined as welfare problem –Jobs creation through environmental policies –Win-win situation businesses and environment	Focus on (with EU references): –CO2 emissions –Greenhouse gasses –Air quality in general	Integrated policy focus (EU and national): –Using environment to create new jobs –Integrate environment into other policy domains	National and EU/international focus on: –Water quality in rivers and streams (national) –CO2 and climate change (international)
The Netherlands	National focus on specific issues: –Water quality (due to manure surpluses) –Soil quality –Air quality –Waddenzee	International focus: –UN climate change conference National focus: –New environmental monitor tool: national environmental policy plan –Broad environmental programs	Focus on (with EU reference): –Water and soil quality –CO2 emissions –Traffic and car emissions –Waste reduction	National and EU focus –Environmental balance sheet –CO2 emissions –Sustainable production –Air quality	National and EU/international focus on: –Climate change conferences (international) Monitoring environmental regulations (national) –Sustainable energy –Pollution by cars/traffic
United Kingdom	National focus on specific issues: –(Sea) water quality –Oil drillings –Country and wildlife policies –Coastline	National focus: –Establishing National Rivers Authority –Wildlife –Countrywide	National focus on: –Landscape policies –Pollution and waste policies –Building national institutional capacity: –Environment planning agency –Environmental agencies in England, Wales, and Scotland	<i>No peak attention</i> , national focus on –continue same topics of previous period	National and International focus: –Hunting with dogs (national) –Kyoto Protocol –Climate change/CO2 –Long-term energy supply –Linking environment to poverty –Cooperating with G8/G20

Spain	<p>National focus: –Relation between consumers and environment</p>	<p>National focus: Building institutional capacity: –Ministry of the Environment –Zoning policy</p>	<p>National and EU/ International focus on: –Environmental liability act (national) –Forest and mountain policy –<i>Prestige</i> oil tanker disaster –Kyoto –CO2 –Climate change –Marine policy (national) –Rural development –Pollution by industries and transport</p>
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Source: Comparative Agendas Project—United Kingdom, Spain, the Netherlands, and Denmark

Notes

1. Spain became an EU member state in 1986, and the period analyzed ends before Brexit politics started.
2. All datasets are available at: <http://www.comparativeagendas.net/>.
3. A quasi-sentence is identified when two full sentences are linked together with for instance the word “and” or with a semi-colon and different topics are addressed in these separate quasi-sentences. Enumerations in a sentence that show equal stress on each topic also are split up into separate entries and coded as such.

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