

Some examples of issue- definitions and their relation to the politics of attention

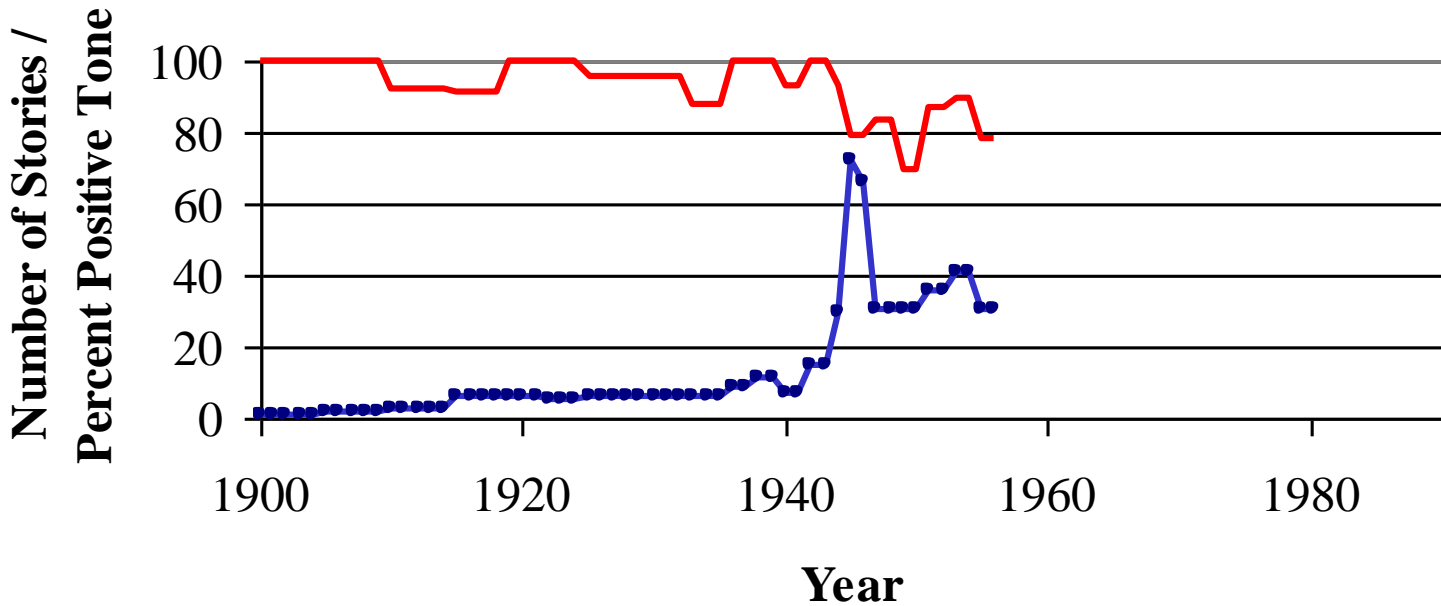
POLI 195

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September 30, 2009

Pesticides: Looking good after World War Two

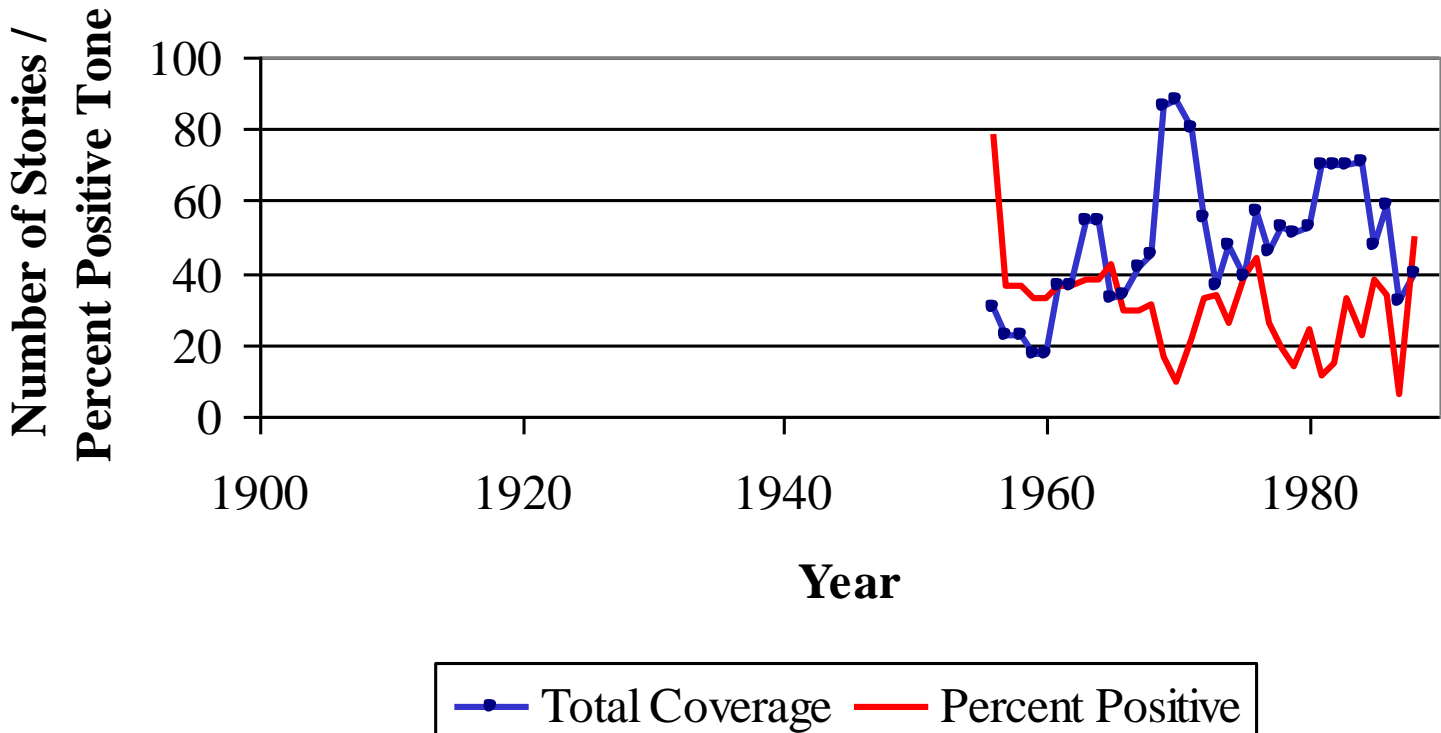
Media Coverage of Pesticides, 1900-1990



—●— Total Coverage — Percent Positive

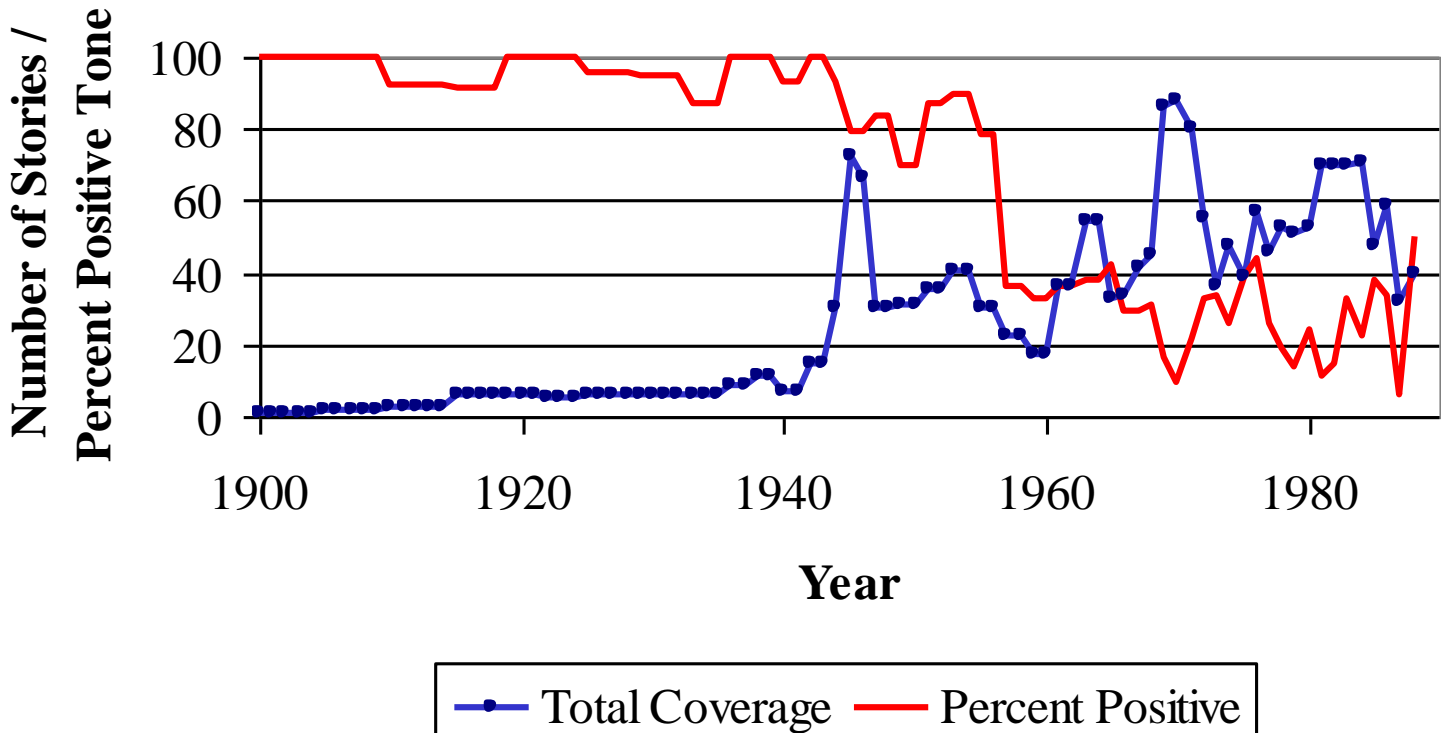
Pesticides: No longer such good news after 1956

Media Coverage of Pesticides, 1900-1990



Pesticides: From green revolution to nobody's baby

Media Coverage of Pesticides, 1900-1990



This type of “lurching” is typical of all policies, not unusual

- No matter if individual policymakers can create these shifts on demand, systems of policymaking may be subject to periods of incrementalism with occasional punctuations.
- Punctuated-equilibrium theory as an explanation of these patterns.

The puzzle: Status quo orientation and occasional disruptions

- What causes large scale policy change?
- What makes policy makers share a consensus on the special value of the status quo policy that makes them repeat it so much?
- A theory of punctuated equilibrium requires explaining both hyper-incrementalism and radical change
- A focus on *cognitive processes*.

Knowledge asymmetries

- Communities of Experts
 - May be homogeneous, shared interests
 - Or heterogeneous, conflicting interests
 - No matter what, they share a language, professional understanding of the details of a single policy area
 - All policies have communities of experts
- “Outsiders”
 - Anyone else: public, mass media, government
 - Do not have the detailed knowledge
 - Use “cognitive shortcuts”

Reasons for policy stability

- Policy works well
- Policy works less badly than in other areas
 - Crises in other areas use up agenda space
 - Scarcity of space on “page one” or public agenda
- Dominant paradigm among experts
- Negotiated settlement among experts
- No consensus on alternative policy
- No sense that the status quo is in crisis
- Prestige, autonomy of experts
- (Note: “Policy works well” is rarely the reason)

Reasons for dramatic change

- Crisis
 - Unintended consequences of s. q. policy
 - Demographic, social, economic changes accumulate
 - Events, stochastic shocks occur
- New policy opportunities
 - New technologies, new policy solutions emerge
 - Lower cost options emerge, economic shifts
 - New political leadership
 - Generational shifts among experts: new paradigm
 - Other problems recede (space on policy agenda)

The problem of attention scarcity

- “Prime Minister’s portfolio”: everything imaginable
- Division of labor allows governments to do many things simultaneously, unlike individuals
- However, high-level attention remains scarce
 - Prime Minister’s time
 - Space on Page One of newspapers, TV, radio
 - Election platforms of parties and candidates
 - Public concern
- Most policies, most of the time: expert communities
- Any policy, occasionally: a crisis or opportunity allows or demands “outsiders” to become interested
- Usually, this implies that the experts “failed”
- Justifies dramatic shifts from the unsuccessful sq policy

A threshold model of attention

- Threshold of “urgency”
 - Determined by space, how many problems can be on the agenda, and competition, how many other problems are already there
 - Severity of the problem itself may be less important than the rise and fall of other problems
 - Example of the US war in Iraq
 - 40 percent of the front page of the NY Times is used up
 - That much less space for other policy issues

A cost of war: Agenda space



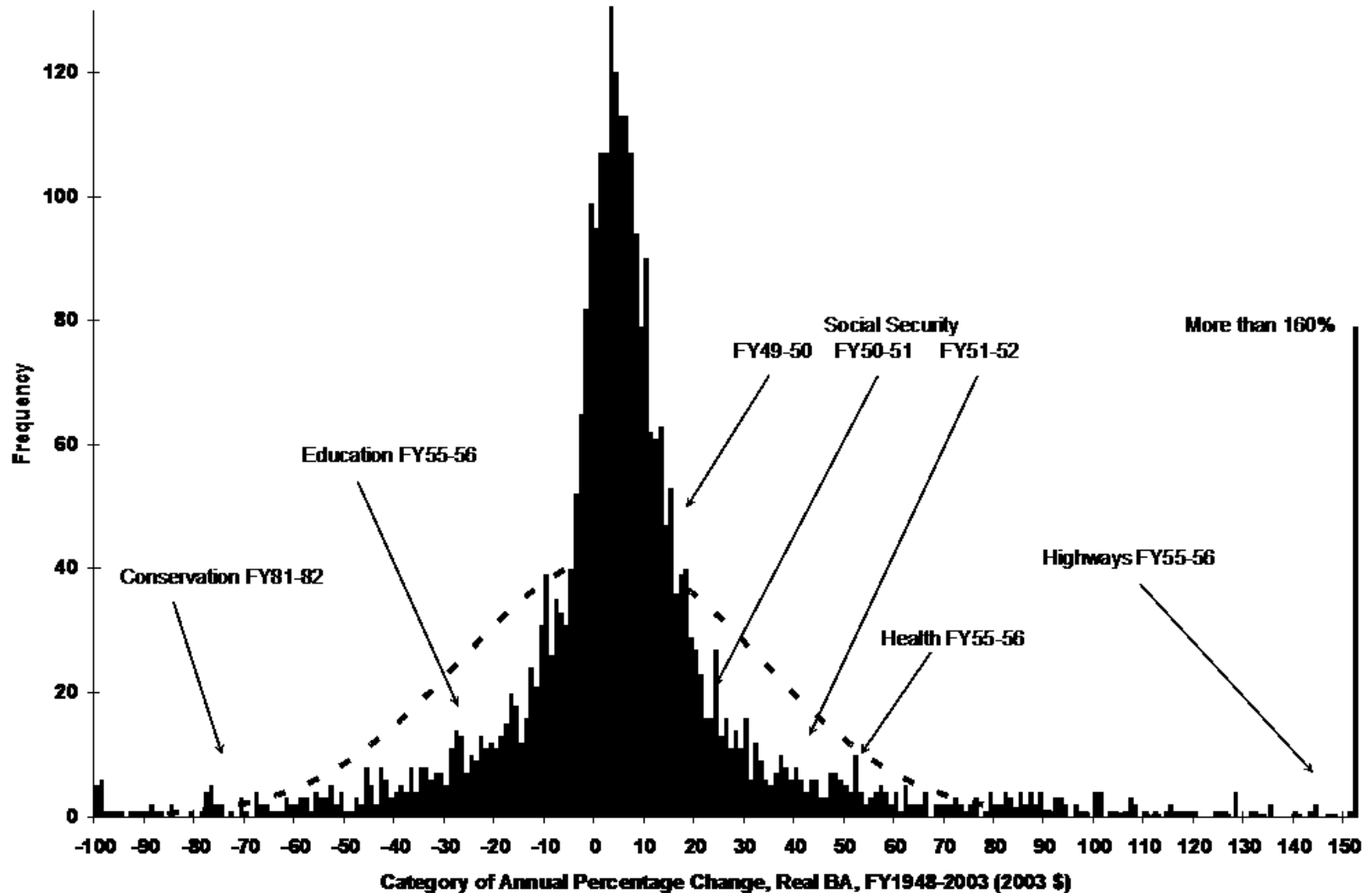
A threshold model of attention

- Below the threshold: Under-response
 - No reason to call into question dominant paradigm
 - Status quo policy rubber-stamped
 - Only marginal responses to emerging trends in the severity of underlying problems
- Expectation: Stability, hyper-incrementalism

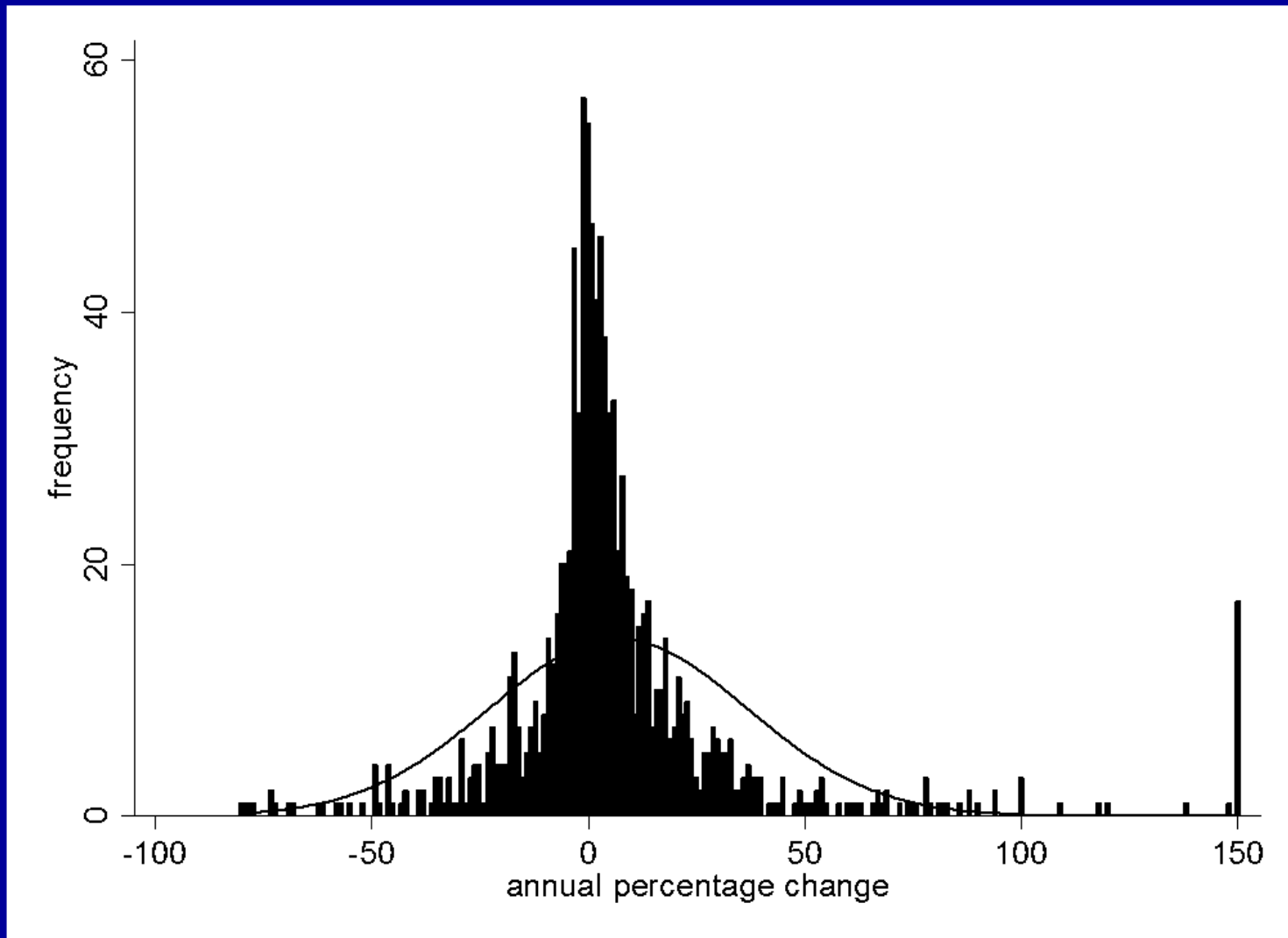
A threshold model of attention

- Over the threshold: “Alarmed discovery”
 - SQ policy obviously demands reconsideration
 - Core policy assumptions may be challenged
 - “Outsiders” will depend on experts for an understanding of the causes of the crisis
 - Among experts, previously dominant coalition may be discredited, challengers may gain power, credibility
 - Both sides must communicate with outsiders
 - “Outsiders” will use stereotypes

Punctuated equilibrium in the US budget: Annual percent changes, 1948-2003



Annual percent changes in spending by 10 French ministries, 1868-2002



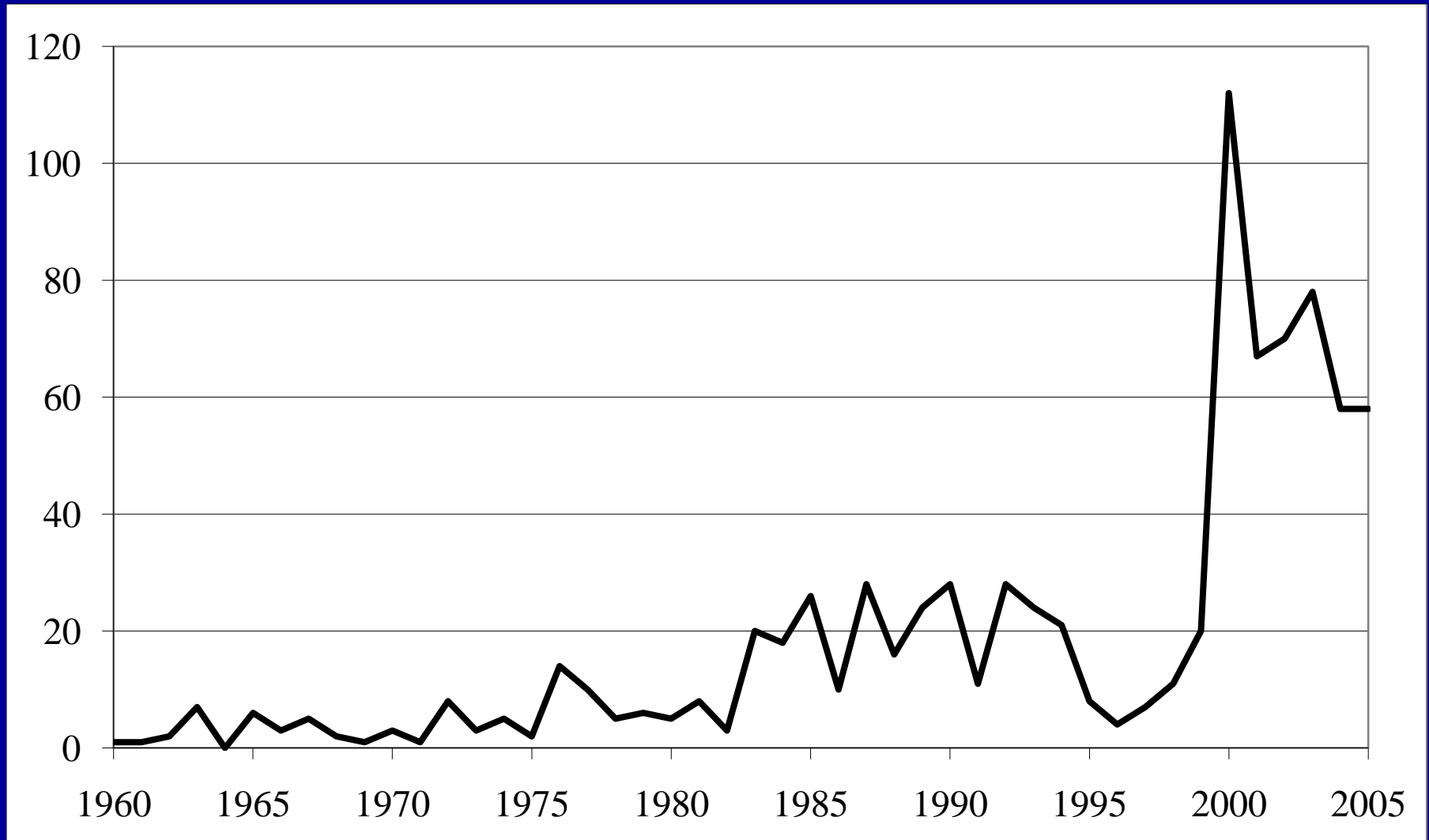
How does this work in particular cases?

- Pesticides: You already saw
- Nuclear power:
 - “Atoms for Peace” and “electricity too cheap to meter” in 1950s
 - Radiation, waste, NIMBY
 - Shift occurred earlier than most people realize, late-1960s in US
- Smoking and tobacco
 - Who would have thought, 20 years ago, that you could not smoke in a French café, a British pub, or a New York workplace?
- Financial regulations
 - Does not take a PhD to suggest that regulatory structures are likely to be revised, given the crisis: old paradigm has no credibility among non experts

The “discovery of innocence”

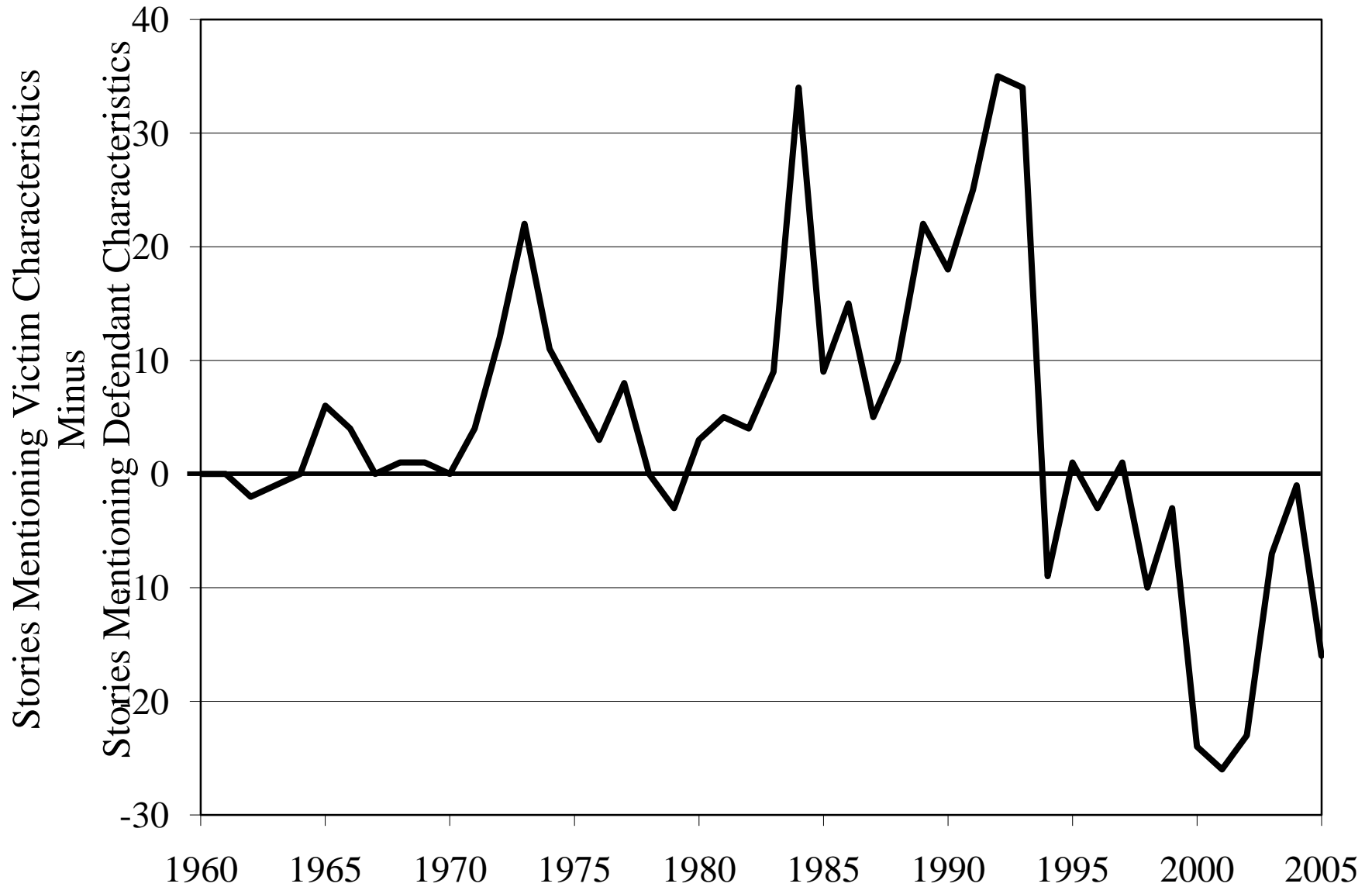
- US death penalty
- Morality, religious views
 - More Americans have a religious view in support of “an eye for an eye” than one supporting forgiveness, redemption
- Bureaucratic incompetence, errors, mistakes
 - What are the odds of a single error occurring, given that there are almost 4,000 individuals on death row and over 1,000 have been executed since 1976?
- The answer is obvious, but attention never focused on the question until the late-1990s
- The “discovery” of something that has always been there was dramatic and has reversed a public policy

The rise of the “innocence frame”

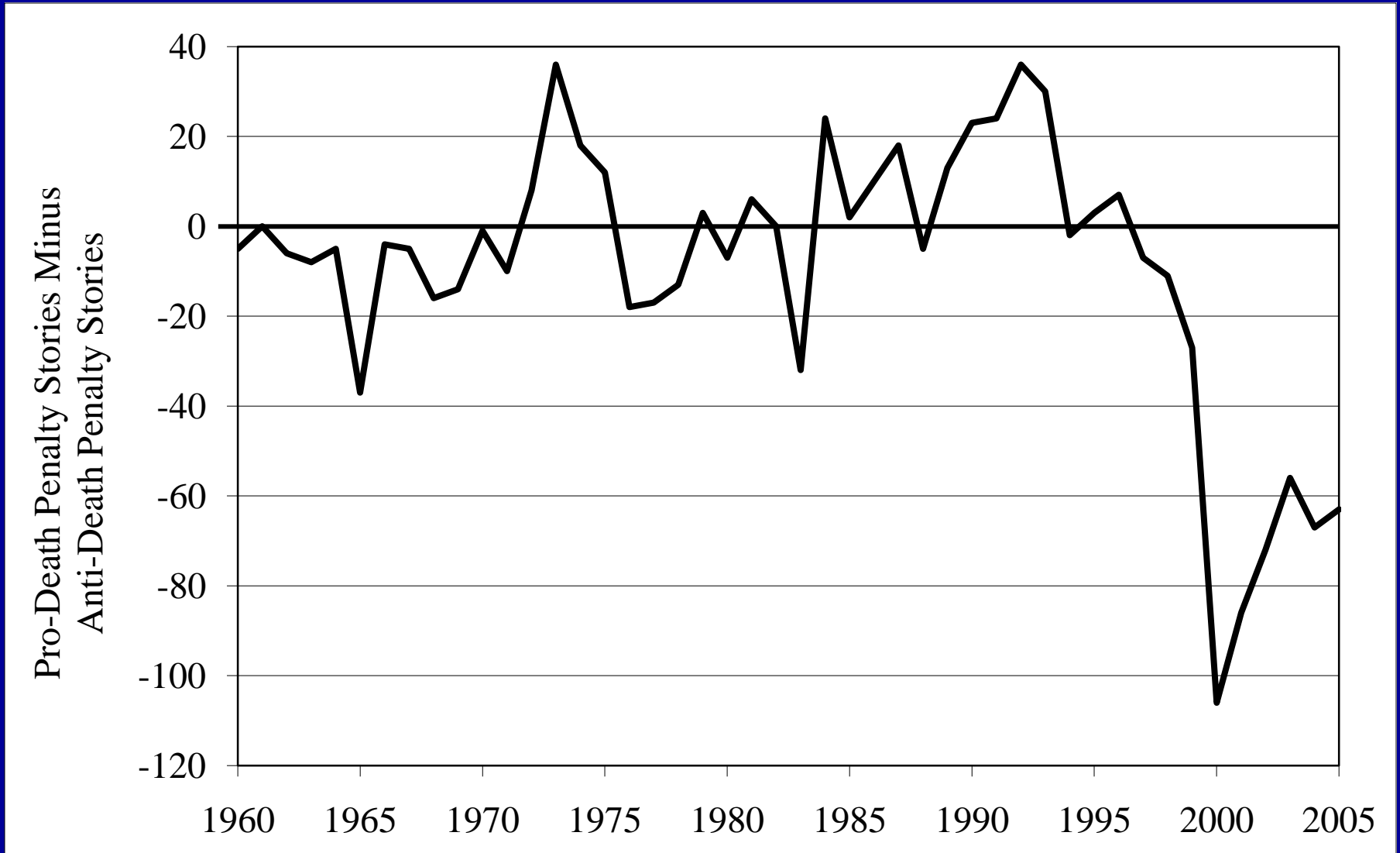


Includes: Innocence; Evidence; System-is-Broken; Mention of the Defendant

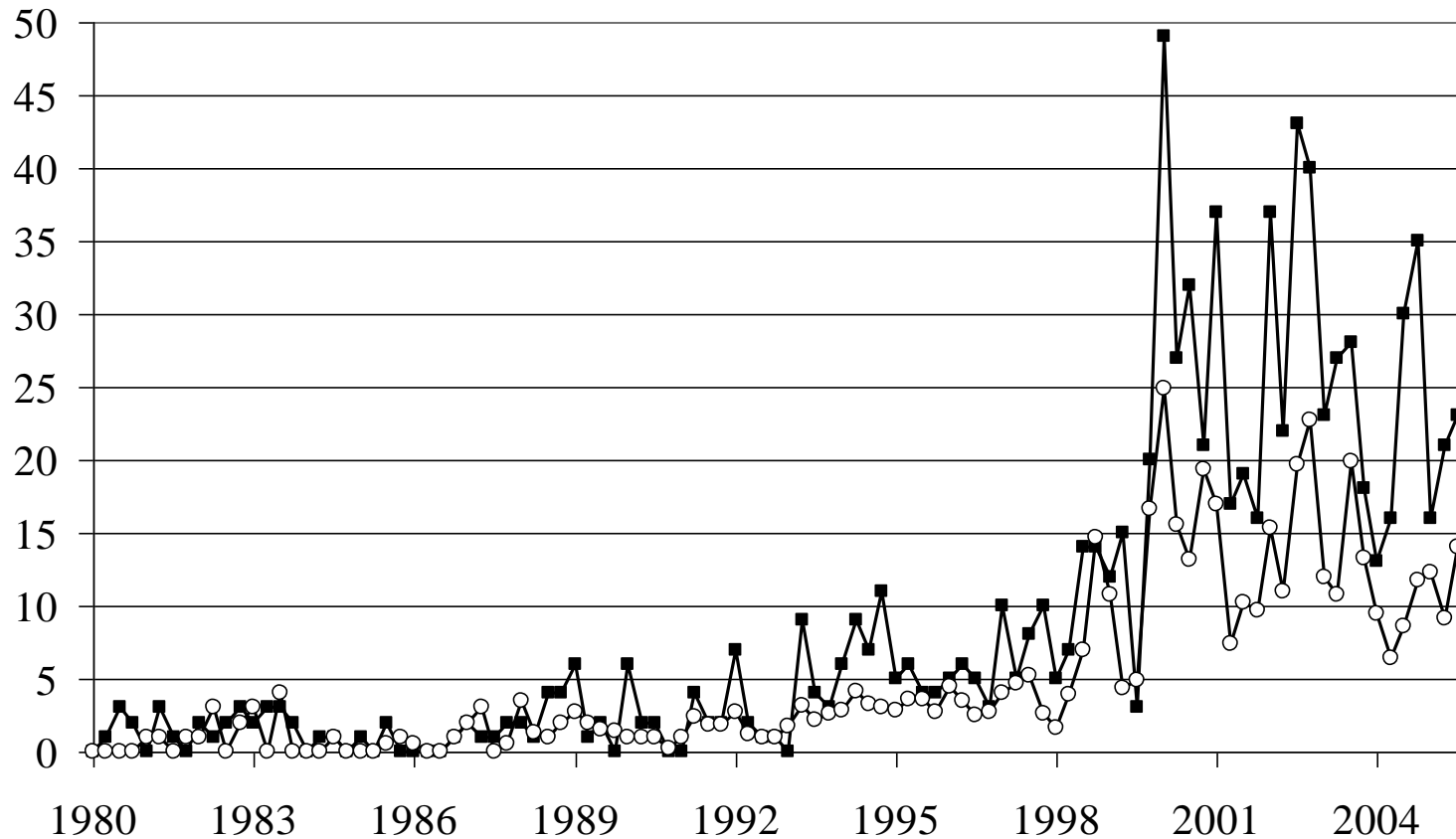
From the Victim to the Defendant



The “net tone” of NYT coverage, 1960–2005

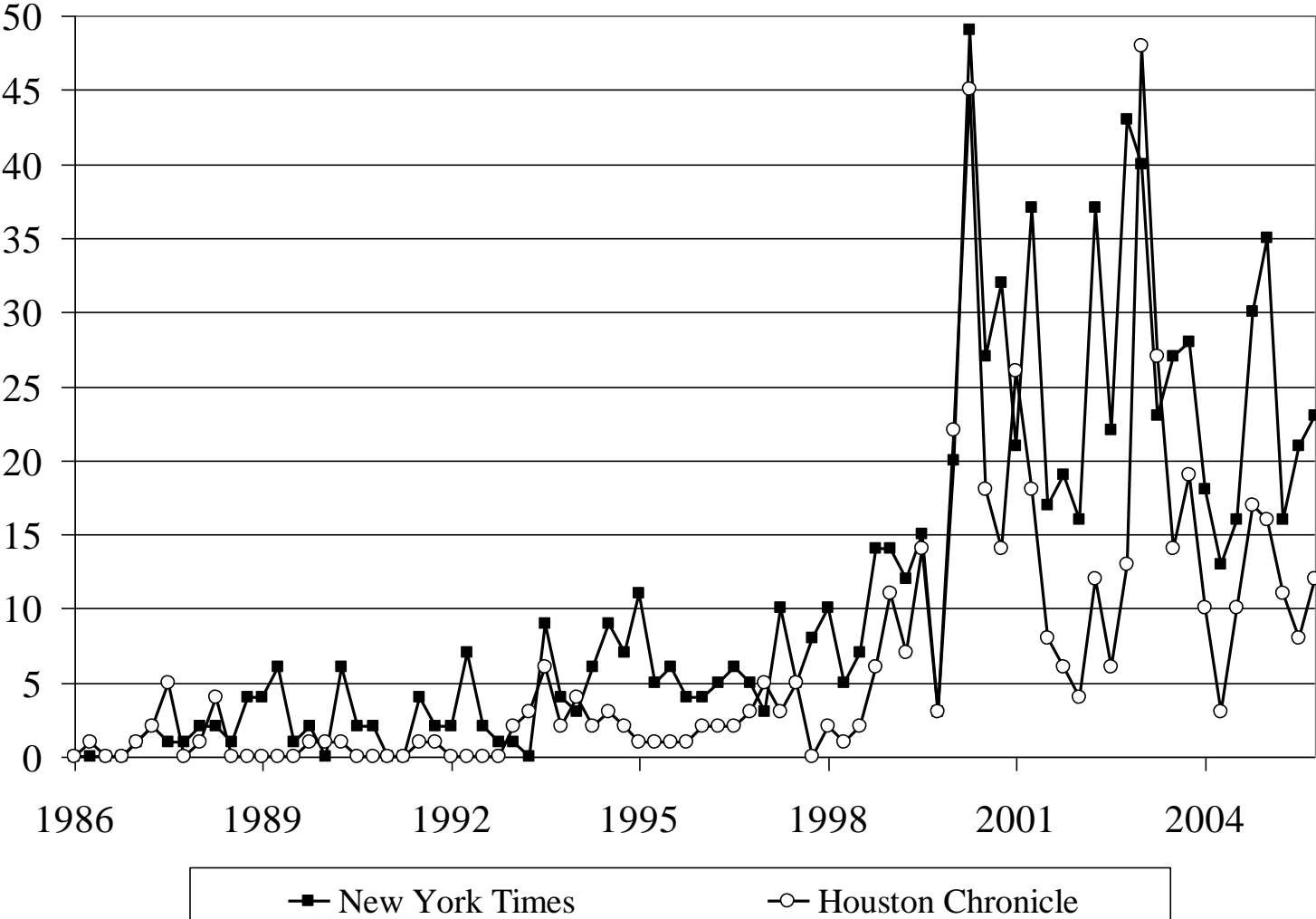


“Innocence” in the NYTimes v. Other Papers



■ New York Times
○ Average of Boston Globe, Chicago Sun Times, Denver Post, Houston Chronicle, LA Times, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Seattle Times, and Washington Post

“Innocence” is in the Houston Chronicle too



Public discussion of public policy

- Extremely frustrating to experts to understand how oversimplified their policies will be in public discussion
- Not simply a question of “public relations”
- Virtually any policy can be explained in a manner that engages the public imagination
- The slow accumulation of changing circumstances will not lead to proportionate public response
- Rather, there will be little response for many years
- Suddenly during periods of heightened attention dramatic changes can be justified
- Important to be ready for these periods of heightened attention and to understand how the discussion will change

Punctuated equilibrium is inevitable

- Cognitive reasons for it: we can't pay attention to everything, all the time
- It is frustrating because it means that policies will always be inefficient: they will not adjust smoothly and in proportion to the severity of underlying problems
- However they do change, and sometimes dramatically
- No guarantee, however, that the direction of change will be what one wants, or that the timing of it will be when one wants
- Need to be prepared for the inevitable periods of dramatic change in all policy areas

Relations to Health Care

- First, why now? Certainly a crisis, but not really more of one than in previous years. Leadership, credible argument that it is a crisis, but not obviously so in the sense that a single event occurred.
- Second, is the status quo being strongly defended? No. All agree that important changes need to be made.
- Third, what kinds of changes might then ensue? This is why the lobbying is so intense – anything is possible!
- Fourth, does any single actor in the process control which issue-definitions will emerge as the most prominent? No, that is why they are all trying so hard.