

The Institutionalization of Attention in the US and Denmark:

Multiple vs. single venue systems and the case of the environment

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Introduction¹

From the early 1990s onwards, a remarkable difference between Europe and the United States emerged with regard to environmental policies (Vogel 2003; Vig & Faure 2004). In this period, the European countries, especially the North European ones known as the “pioneers” (Andersen & Lifferink 1997), surpassed the US with regard to comprehensive and stringent environmental regulation.² This policy pattern, which has become very visible in the international debate about reduction of CO₂ emissions with the US refusing to fully participate in the Kyoto framework (Vig & Faure 2004), was in many ways the direct opposite in the 1970s (Vogel 2003).

From a comparative public policy perspective, the recent difference is interesting because it poses a theoretical question about the policy consequences of political institutions. This article addresses this question from the perspective of the policy agenda-setting framework (Baumgartner & Jones 1993; Jones et al. 2006). We argue that while the US political system, with its many venues that are relatively open to internal and external competing forces (Baumgartner and Jones 1993), might be quicker in generating attention to new issues, the institutionalization of attention is also less strong than in a European parliamentary system. In such “single venue systems” (Albæk et al. 2006), the party system is the dominant mechanism of politicization. Party systems may respond less quickly to new issues, but when they do, their response can be just as great, and they are more likely to institutionalize attention when they eventually attend to a new issue. We substantiate this argument with empirics by comparing attention to and policy making for environmental issues in the US to one of the European “pioneers,” Denmark.

By developing policy agenda-setting studies (Baumgartner et al. 2006; Jones et al. 2006) in a comparative direction, this article offers a contribution to comparative public policy

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² Vogel (2003) points to the same policy difference within consumer policies.

more generally. Theories within comparative public policy typically focus on explaining static policy differences, like variation in the size of welfare states (cf. Baumgartner et al. 2006). Dynamic policy patterns like those found in the differences in US-European environmental policy making should be studied using theories of comparative dynamics in addition to comparative statics.³ The policy agenda-setting perspective developed in this article offers both a dynamic and a comparative perspective on public policy.

With regard to the current policy differences between Europe and the US, this paper offers a somewhat different perspective than Vogel (2003, cf. also Kelemen & Vogel 2010), who points to regulatory scandals in Europe, stronger political support for environmental regulation, and growth in the regulatory competence of the EU to explain environmental policy differences between Europe and the US. We argue that these differences are also the result of the varying degree to which issue attention is institutionalized. The institutionalization of attention to environmental issues is stronger in the European party systems than in the US, which with its multiple venue system is more likely to resist attention institutionalization. However, the functioning of the US system also means that attention to environmental issues may surge again and lead to new policy measures focusing on different dimensions. Thus, current differences between the US and European environmental policy should not be seen as reflecting a culturally based American environmental exceptionalism (cf. Bomberg & Schlosberg 2008). Rather, these differences reflect the divergent policy dynamics of different political systems.

Policyagenda-setting and political institutions in a cross-national perspective

The policy agenda-setting tradition, with its core focus on how changes in political attention affect policy making, has been developed by classics like Cobb & Elder (1972) and Kingdon (1985). The

³ Thanks to Bryan D. Jones for pointing to the difference between static and dynamic theories of comparative public policy.

most recent classic is Baumgartner & Jones' (1993, 2009(2nd edition)) *Agendas and Instability in American Politics*. The core idea here is the punctuated equilibrium model, where political attention and policies follow a pattern of long-term stability interrupted by bursts of instability where agendas and policies are radically reshaped before stability emerges again (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). The punctuated equilibrium model that they developed has been widely used to understand policy making (e.g. Cashore & Howlett 2007; Jones et al. 2006; Repetto 2007).

Long-term stability is induced and maintained by policy monopolies (Baumgartner and Jones 1993), which refer to the existence of relatively stable groups of policy makers and nongovernmental interests who share a policy image and whose interactions are organized through political institutions, such as congressional committees and the executive branch. The idea of policy monopolies thus points to the fact that attention and policies become *institutionalized*, which again creates long-term stability.

There are two ways in which policy monopolies are created (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). One is Downsian mobilization, where rising attention – for instance due to focusing events – creates enthusiasm and leads to the creation of a policy monopoly. The other is a Schattschneider mobilization, where competing groups manage to disrupt monopolistic policy making. One of the ways these groups succeed is through venue-shopping (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; cf. also Pralle 2003). Actors seeking to overturn a monopoly may be able to generate attention to an alternative definition or image of an issue by soliciting the participation of a venue that is not part of the existing monopoly, as has been the case with regard to US agricultural policy (Sheingate 2000).

The idea of venue-shopping effecting change clearly reflects the development of policy agenda-setting research, including the work of Baumgartner & Jones (1993), as originating from the U.S. To be sure, policy agenda-setting studies of countries other than the US are not uncommon (cf. Mortensen 2007; Daugbjerg & Studsgaard 2006; Walgrave & Varone 2008;

Howlett 1997; Dudley & Richardson 1996). These studies demonstrate that the punctuated equilibrium theory can be applied to attention dynamics and policy making in a number of different countries and settings (Mortensen 2005; John & Margetts 2003; Baumgartner et al. 2009). However, there remains a dearth of systematic cross-national studies of policy attention and policy changes, despite the expectation that differences in the number and character of political venues should lead to diverging patterns of policy attention.

The US political system as one with multiple venues, such as the Congress, the Presidency, the court system and the states, creates a political landscape that is relatively open to novel and redefined issues. The multiple venues system in the US means that new or redefined issues can be picked up at the beginning of the generation of political attention. As implied in the idea of policy monopolies, a political system like the US also contains powerful mechanisms for institutionalizing issue attention. The system of congressional committees is one such mechanism (cf. Sheingate 2006 a&b; Jones, Baumgartner & Talbert 1993). Unlike what Downs (1972) argued with regard to public attention to the environment, attention to issues in a political system like the US does not disappear after an initial punctuation. Various mechanisms like the Congressional committee system institutionalize attention. The question, however, is how powerful these mechanisms are in comparative perspective?

Studies of attention dynamics in *parliamentary systems* point to the crucial role played by party politics over other political institutions (cf. Green-Pedersen 2007; Walgrave & Varone 2008). Parliamentary systems are often “single venue systems” where the dominant mechanism of generating attention to new issues is political parties (Albæk et al. 2007). Party politics in parliamentary systems is organized through well-established lines of conflict (Mair 1997). The character of these lines determines party incentives to take up new issues as well as provide a powerful mechanism of institutionalizing political attention. Differences in party conflict lines have

thus been shown to explain variation in attention to political issues across parliamentary systems (Green-Pedersen 2007; Green-Pedersen & Krogstrup 2008).

The existing literature within the policy agenda-setting tradition thus points to different mechanisms of institutionalizing attention in party-dominated parliamentary systems vs. multiple venue systems like the US. However, what remains an open question is whether these differences in the mechanisms institutionalizing attention also makes a differences for the degree of institutionalization of attention at the system level? The few policy agenda-setting studies that compare the US with European countries suggest that the US system, with multiple venues, is more open to rising issues, such as tobacco control and the dangers of nuclear energy, than their European counterparts (Baumgartner 1989; Albæk et al. 2007).

Building on this idea, one should expect that parliamentary systems display stronger institutionalization of attention due to the dominance of party systems as the mechanism of institutionalization. Party systems are, if not the single political venue in parliamentary systems, then at least clearly the dominant one. Conflict lines in party systems are also very stable over time (Mair 1997), so if an issue can be attached to one of them, attention becomes strongly institutionalized. The attention of party systems is harder to catch but once party systems take on certain issue, the fact that they have something like a monopoly on political attention and are structured around very stable lines of conflict also means that they provide a very powerful mechanism of institutionalizing attention. A system like the US one with multiple venues is more open towards new issues. There are many ways for an issue and its advocates into the system, but this also implies that competition is hard with regard to securing attention after an initial breakthrough. Various venues have their mechanisms of institutionalizing attention, but the competition from other venues makes them less powerful.

Partisan politics also plays a crucial role in the US and, as pointed out by Baumgartner and Jones (2009, pp. 1-2), mandate elections (Grossback, Peterson & Stimson 2006) may cause policy punctuations. However, partisan politics in the US is strongly interweaved with institutional dynamics like competition between the Presidency and the Congress and partisan policy positions are not just determined by partisan competition, but also very much by internal party dynamics. US parties themselves serve as venues for different groups. The ability of new Christian groups to dominate the Republican Party is for instance a key factor in the politicization of morality issue in the US (Layman et al. 2006).

A final theoretical issue deserving attention is the relationship between attention and policy. The interest in political attention within the policy agenda-setting tradition of course comes from observing the policy consequences of attention shifts, amplification and attenuation. In this regard, it is worth noting that the policy consequences of differences in institutionalization of attention are most likely to appear with regard to new policy initiatives rather than resulting in the role-back of previously adopted policy measures. There is ample research showing that reversing earlier policy initiatives is very often an exercise in “blame avoidance” (Weaver 1986; Pierson 1994) and therefore not very likely to happen. Differences in attention are therefore much more likely to matter with regard to the adoption of new policy measures.

Attention to Environmental Issues in the US and Denmark

To investigate the argument about differential institutionalization of attention, the following section provides a comparative study of attention to environmental issues/problems and policies in Denmark and the US during the last 45 years.

The environment as an issue is chosen as a case because of its relatively broad and long-term character. It is an issue of considerable relevance to any political system and one that has

been around long enough to study its cycle - its breakthrough and institutionalization of political attention. The environment is also an issue where focusing events – environmental disasters like the Exxon Valdez oil spill in 1989 or the Bhopal, India disaster at the Union Carbide plant in December of 1984 – often play a key role in policy. They often generate international attention and thus provide the same potential for environmental mobilization in the two countries.

The US and Denmark also share a number of similarities with regard to the environmental issue, which makes them comparable. Both countries are thus characterized by long-term and relatively stable pro-environmental attitudes. (Bosso & Gueber 2006; Togeby 2004, 130-144). Both countries have also been characterized by strong business opposition to environmental regulation. In the US, this has been very obvious with regard climate policy, where the oil industry has been central to establishing a counter-discourse, thus drawing political attention away from the issue (McCright & Dunlap 2003). In Denmark, environmental regulation has been met by strong opposition from agricultural interests attempting to avoid environmental regulation. Drawing on agriculture's role as the most central export sector in Denmark, agricultural interest organizations, especially during the mid 1980s, fought a fierce public battle against environmental regulation. This battle – which agricultural interests largely lost due to the strong party political pro-environmental attention in this period (see below for an in-depth discussion) – was very much about causes and means in environmental regulation (Andersen & Hansen 1991), as has been the case with the US climate debate. Thus, the nature of “business” opposition varies across the two countries, but both have been characterized by a battle between a pro-environmental public and strong “business” opposition towards the basic even scientific premises of environmental regulation.

These similarities in the nature of the environmental issue allow us to focus on investigating the effects of differences in political institutional structures on the way political attention is institutionalized. The US and Denmark are clear examples of a multiple venue system

versus a party dominated parliamentary system. Parliamentary systems, of course, vary significantly with regard to the number of political parties. Denmark has been chosen because of its multiparty nature and the importance of coalition politics following from it. This is general to the majority of West European countries (e.g. Scandinavia, Benelux countries, Germany). However, the variation in the nature of parliamentary systems obviously raises the question of generalizing the Danish findings, which will be addressed in the conclusion.

A comparison of the US and Denmark may be seen as an example of a most different systems comparison since the two countries differ with regard to a number of characteristics of their political systems (role of political parties, federalism, political role of courts etc.) (cf. Frensdreis 1983). However, when seen from the perspective of the policy agenda-setting approach, which focuses on processes, and the political venue logic, it is essential that the political systems are not broken down into a number of variables, but instead to focus on the political system as a whole; thus in effect treating it as one variable. The effect on political attention is a result of the logic of the political system as a whole, not of the individual characteristics of system when analyzed as separate variables.

With regard to the Danish case, the growing role of the European Union in environmental policy making from the mid 1980s (Knill & Lifferink 2007) constitutes a complicating factor, which will be discussed in detail below. However, it is worth stressing from the outset that the growing role of the European Union in environmental regulation has not implied that the environment has disappeared from the agenda of national politics in Denmark - and other member countries - which would make the comparison with the US problematic. The fact that EU plays an important role in the actual policy making does not imply that the issue does not receive political attention as the national level. As Princen (2009) shows, attention to the environment at the EU level has developed in parallel to attention at the member state level rather than replacing it.

The first step in the empirical analysis is to study the development of political attention to the environment in the two countries over the last 45 years. Baumgartner & Jones' work (1993) has not only been influential because of the punctuated equilibrium model but also because of the policy agendas datasets they have developed to test the theory (Baumgartner, Jones & Wilkerson 2002, cf. also www.policyagendas.org). These datasets contain different measures of political attention to various issues, through for instance congressional hearings. They are all based on a content coding system with 19 major topics and more than 220 subtopics, which cover the entire policy agenda (op. cit.). The environment is one of the major topics in the coding system and contains subtopics such as waste disposal, drinking water safety, species protection, recycling, air pollution and global warming, and land conservation. All aspects of the environment as an issue are captured within the subtopics. What is more, mutually exclusive major and subtopic policy codes enable clear distinction of the environment from other topics like energy, which is a separate topic with its own subtopics.

In Denmark, similar datasets have been developed based on the policy agendas coding system. Of course the use of the system outside the US context raises a number of challenges, mainly with regard to subtopic generation and comparability. To set up a coding system that covers all environmental attention in Denmark, a number of new subtopics were created by subdividing original US categories (cf. Green-Pedersen 2005). These subtopics cover environmental issues relating to agriculture and environmental planning. This procedure allows for modification of the original US coding system, while making comparison possible through aggregation of subtopics.⁴

The comparison of the US and Denmark also raises the question of which indicators to use. In the US case, the number of congressional hearings related to a topic was the measure of political attention at the macro-level originally used by Baumgartner & Jones (1993), and will also

⁴ The Danish data are described on www.agendasetting.dk. The Danish data are available from the author on request.

be used as the main US indicator. To make cross-national comparison possible, we use relative agenda share, i.e. the percentage of total number of congressional hearings. Using proportions is also consistent with the idea that each government body is limited in the number of issues it can attend to at any given time, so capturing relative differences in attention is paramount to this study. An alternative US indicator, which has been used in cross-national comparisons (cf. Green-Pedersen & Wilkerson 2006), is the number of bills introduced in Congress, which have been coded in a related project using the same coding system (cf. www.congressionalbills.org). For the period 1961-2003, the correlation between environmental agendas shares based on the number of hearings and number of bills introduced is 0.81.

In the Danish case, the length of parliamentary debates (measured in columns) related to the environment will be used as an indicator of political attention. Parliamentary debates in Denmark may relate to bills as well as interpellations, parliamentary resolutions, and governmental policy accounts. As Baumgartner (1989) argues, parliamentary debates constitute a powerful agenda-setting weapon in such a system. This indicator also captures party system attention very well because long debates in parliament about a certain issue only arise when many or all parties find it important to address, and thus does not merely reflect that one or a few parties want to draw attention to an issue (cf. Green-Pedersen 2006). An alternative measure for the Danish case would be the number of questions asked to the minister, which has also been used in similar comparative studies (cf. Green-Pedersen & Wilkerson 2006; Albæk et al. 2007). For environmental agenda shares based on length of debates and number of questions, the correlation from 1961 to 2003 is 0.6.⁵

⁵ Questions to the minister are, however, mainly asked by opposition parties which makes it a less attractive indicator.

Figure 1 compares political attention to the environment as a share of the macropolitical agenda in the US and Denmark from 1961 to 2005 based on US hearings and Danish parliamentary debates – the two most preferable attention indicators.⁶

Figure 1 about here

The policy agenda-setting approach and the punctuated equilibrium model lead one to expect a pattern of a sudden increase in attention to the environment when the issue makes its breakthrough onto the macro-agenda, followed by an institutionalization of attention, which results in lower levels of attention compared to the period of punctuation but higher than before the punctuation. This pattern is found in figure 1. In both countries, the environment received relatively little attention during the 1960s, but the US experienced a surge of environmental attention in the early 1970s. After this, attention to environmental issues in the US remained at a level higher than previous decades, and until the mid 1980s, also at a higher level as compared to Denmark. The US then experienced another surge in the late 1980s, followed in the 1990s by a return to the level of attention in 1970s. Denmark experienced a surge in the mid-to-late 1980s, followed by an institutionalization of attention at a higher level than before. In sum, the arguments about political institutional effects above suggest that the US system is more open, but less stable. This is supported by our data in the sense that the US has experienced two surges of environmental attention, the initial one 15 years earlier than the surge in Denmark.

Following this institutional logic, these surges in environmental attention should be due to an increase in attention to the environment across a range of environmental issues and not

⁶ The US data are based on calendar years. The Danish data are based on parliamentary years, which run from October 1 to September 30. To match the data as well as possible, 1961 for instance refers to the calendar years 1961 for the US data, and the parliamentary year 1960-1961 for the Danish data. The figure covers the years as close to today as data exists.

just due to rising attention to a single environmental issue, as would be expected if focusing events or similar external forces were the main catalyst in the process. This is in fact the case.

The surges in US environmental attention during 1970-1971 resulted in 144 Congressional hearings. The issue receiving the most attention in this period was coastal water pollution with 22% of the hearings, while general environmental issues generated 16%, and both drinking water safety and hazardous waste generated 15% each.⁷ The second surge of attention to environmental issues in the US took place during the period 1988-1992 and resulted in 706 Congressional hearings. Again, coastal water pollution was the issue receiving the most attention with 20% of the hearings, while species and forest protection generated 19%, hazardous waste 16%, and air pollution 13%. During the Danish attention surge from 1985-1988, the length of all debates on the environment sums up to 3,328 columns. General environmental issues took up 31%, air pollution 17%, and agricultural environmental issues took up 12%.

Turning to the differences in the degree of institutionalization of attention, the period after the punctuation of attention in Denmark is the relevant point of comparison. Table 1 compares the average environmental agenda share for both attention measures across the two countries from 1990 onwards. The two most preferable indicators are Danish debates and US hearings and here the difference is 1.61 with the environment receiving the most average attention in Denmark. An independent sample t-test shows that this difference is statistically significant at the 0.01 level. However, for all combinations of indicators independent sample t-tests show that the difference between the US and Denmark is significant with the environment receiving more attention in Denmark

Table 1 about here

⁷ The coding system and US figures can be downloaded from www.policyagendas.org. “General” refers to policy items that cover multiple environmental topic or general regulation of the environment

In sum, the attention patterns match well with the expectations developed above based on the arguments about the effects of political institutions on the institutionalization of attention and the punctuated equilibrium model generally. However, these patterns of course only produce a very general picture. The question still remains whether the patterns were generated by the mechanisms suggested above and what the policy consequences have been. This requires a more detailed look at environmental politics and policy processes in the two countries.

Partisan Politics and the institutionalization of environmental attention in Denmark

The environment slowly emerged as a political issue in Denmark during the 1960s. Thus, the late 1960s and early 1970s was the first period with some politicization of the issue. The Ministry of Environment was established in 1971 and the first comprehensive environmental act was passed in 1973 (Christiansen et al. 2004, 192-195). As indicated by figure 1, passage of this law did generate some political attention. However, political interest disappeared again when economic issues came to dominate Danish party politics during the 1970s (Green-Pedersen 2006). Danish environmental politics after the early 1970s was characterized by limited partisan interest and the dominance of traditional corporatist structures, not least in relation to the industry (Christiansen 1999). This, however, changed radically in the mid-to-late 1980s, which, as indicated by figure 1, was a period of intense partisan issue conflict and attention to the environment.

The background for the explosion of party conflict around the environment was the change in government in 1982, where a center-right minority coalition took over, and center-right governments ruled Denmark until 1993. This government was very focused on restoring the Danish economy, and had the support from the entire right-wing or “bourgeois” bloc in the Danish parliament to implement the necessary measures (Green-Pedersen 2001). This majority included the

Social Liberals, whose move away from the left wing bloc had originally caused the change in government in 1982. However, support from the Social Liberals did not include non-economic issues like the environment and on these issues the government was constantly defeated. This practice of “alternative majorities” caused much trouble for government, but it accepted due to the need of sustaining the majority behind the economic restoration policy (Damgaard & Svensson 1989).

In opposition after 1982, the Social Democrats were looking for issues on which to attack the government, and the environment was a perfect one. The Danish Social Democrats had developed a very Green profile (Goul Andersen 1990), and this combined with the position of the Social Liberals and the practice of “alternative majorities,” made the environment an attractive issue for the Social Democrats. The issue became even more attractive due to an internal disagreement within the government where the small Christian Democratic Party, which leader was Minister of Environment, tried to develop a “green” profile as well (Andersen & Hansen 1990).

In sum, after 1982 the issue fits perfectly with the intense left-right conflict with the twist provided by the left-wing orientation of the Social Liberals on the environmental issue and the internal disagreement in the government. The party system was waiting for the right spark to light the environmental fire and this came in the autumn of 1986 in the form of the environmental consequences of intensive farming in Denmark. In the autumn of 1986, severe oxygen depletion in coastal waters causing fish death were blamed on intensive farming and provoked a fierce debate about policy measures (Andersen & Hansen 1990). The Social Liberals first indicated that they were willing to support the more radical proposals from the left-wing parties, but after intense conflicts, ended up supporting the less demanding measures proposed by the government (op cit.). As indicated by figure 1, the period from 1986 is a clear and fitting example of a Downsian mobilization.

Intense partisan conflicts also led to several significant policy initiatives, especially to combat oxygen depletion in coastal waters (Andersen & Hansen 1990), but also within nature restoration (Pedersen 2006). It also meant an end to corporatist inclusion of agricultural and industrial interest in Danish environmental policy making (Christiansen 1999). In 1988, the Social Liberals joined the center right government which killed the “alternative majority”, but it remerged again after they had left the government again in 1990. This was especially important with regard to the introduction of a CO2 tax for industry which the alternative majority forced the government to accept after intense conflict (Daugbjerg & Pedersen 2004). When the Social Liberals changed sides again and joined the Social Democrats in a coalition in 1993, the process of institutionalizing environmental attention in Danish politics was complete.

When the new government took over in 1993, the environment had become an established part of left-right conflict in the Danish party system (Andersen 1990; Daugbjerg & Svendsen 2001, 59-62). The center left-wing government had a clear “green profile” and clear issue-ownership (Goul Andersen 2003). The government also managed to involve environmental organizations in policy making. The institutionalization of environmental attention had thus implied a remarkable shift in the inclusion of interest groups into Danish environmental policy making (Christiansen 1999).

Conflicts over the environment with the right-wing opposition was mainly focused on the two questions that had also driven environmental politics during the punctuation in the mid 1980s, namely regulation for farming and the use of Green taxes. The right-wing opposition was against many of the policy measures suggested by the left-wing government, but also found itself in a dilemma as strong confrontation with the government could revoke the high level of attention to the environment of the late 1980s, a development which would clearly benefit the government due its issue-ownership. Therefore, the right-wing opposition actually supported some of the

environmental policy suggestions of the government. For instance just before the election in 1998, the Liberals supported a new “aquatic action plan” which focused on stricter environmental regulation of the agricultural (Daugbjerg 1999).

In 2001, a Liberal/Conservative government took over, which unlike other right-wing governments, was not dependent on the Social Liberals. The new government used this opportunity to make significant cutbacks in the environmental administration in Danish government, and the government showed little preoccupation with the environment. However, even in times of limited public interest in environmental issues, this strategy was also risky in light of continuing Social Democratic issue ownership (Goul Andersen 2003). Before the 2005 election, the government started to accommodate the left-wing environmental position by replacing the Minister of Environment. The initiative to host the 2009 Climate Summit is the latest element of this strategy, which has also involved a broad political agreement to combat climate change (Klima og Energiministeriet 2008).

In sum, the Danish case underlines the importance of the conflict structure in the party system for understanding both the breakthrough of an issue like the environment in politics but also the institutionalization of attention. The environmental issue has become an established left-right conflict in Denmark and party conflicts provide the main explanation for the major policy initiatives like the first aquatic action plan in 1987. The institutionalization of attention in the party system also implied that when climate change emerged as an important question in the 1990s, it was automatically added to the environmental conflict and backed by policy measures.

An increasingly central aspect of Danish environmental policy making is the role of the EU. Starting in the 1970s and more pronounced after the passing of the Single European Act in 1987, the EU has gained considerable formal influence on European environmental policy and has often pushed for more stringent regulation. (Knill & Lifferink 2007). These changes in policy

making authority raise the question of the interplay between the EU and its member states with regard to political attention to environmental issues. Princen (2009) documents increasing EU attention to the environment since the mid 1970s, but sees this as a parallel development to political attention at the national level. Climate policy constitutes a fine example of this. With regard to policy making authority, the EU is central, especially with regard to international agreements (Sbragia & Damro 1999), but as discussed above this has not prevented the issue from receiving considerable attention in Danish national politics and other member states. In sum, the central role of the EU with regard to authority over many aspects of environmental policy is indisputable, but this does not imply that attention to the environment disappears at the national level. In Denmark, the institutionalization of environmental attention in Denmark came *despite* parallel passing of important decision making authority to the EU level. Further, as the climate example shows, attention at the national level is also important to understand member state behavior, which is still a central factor in EU environmental policy making (Knill & Lifferink 2007).

Attention surges and environmental policy in the US

Like in Denmark, attention to environmental issues in the US emerged during the 1960s. This process was linked to several public events like the publications of Rachel Carson's seminal book *Silent Spring* in 1962 and the first Earth Day in 1970 (Layzer 2006; 30-32; Kraft & Vig 2006, 12-13). As Downs (1972) described, the environment became a major public concern in the US and as shown by Baumgartner & Jones (1993, 93-100), it was period where an entrenched issue like pesticides became visible and whose image shifted from positive to almost solely negative as evinced through public debate.

Clearly visible from figure 1, the US political system reacted strongly to public attention in the late 1960s and early 1970s, best described as a Downsian mobilization. The surge in political attention was not least driven by competition between the Presidency and Congress. President Nixon tried to ride the environmental wave by declaring that the 1970s was “the environmental decade” and presented a special environmental address to Congress. The most visible Congressman was the chairman of the Public Works Committee, Edmund Muskie, who also tried but failed to become the Democratic Presidential candidate (Kraft & Vig 2006, 12). The competition was centered on the question of air pollution control, where President Nixon and Congress, led by Muskie, competed through increasingly stringent suggestions of air-pollution control, including car emissions (Lundqvist 1980, 51-60). In other words, the multiple venue nature of the US political system reinforced the public concern into a punctuation of attention. The policy consequences of this were significant.

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) was passed in 1969, followed by the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). This was followed by a considerable growth in federal spending on pollution control (Baumgartner 2006, 33) and a series of policy initiatives continuing through the 1970s and the Carter administration. This resulted in more stringent environmental regulation within areas such as air and water pollution, toxic chemicals, and species protection (Kraft and Vig 2006, 13).

When Ronald Reagan became president in 1980s, the swells from the intense political attention to the environment in the early 1970s were gone and environmental policies were strongly affected by the “Reagan revolution” with its focus on economic restoration and its attack on big government. Reagan did not so much attack environmental policies directly but instead attacked its administrative infrastructure. For instance, the EPA had its budget cut by a third and Reagan’s key appointments in environmental agencies were strongly driven by his agenda (Vig 2006, 104-106).

Congress was characterized by internal gridlock on environmental policy and mainly reacted defensively with regard to the Reagan initiatives (Kenski 1985).

The US public, however, did not support Reagan's anti-environmentalist agenda and during the 1980s the environment became an increasingly salient public issue (Mitchell 1990). This public reaction against the Reagan policies became the foundation of another surge in US environmental policy attention in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Congress became more active on the environmental issue during the second Reagan term (Kraft 1990), and when George HW Bush campaigned for Presidency he promised to be an "environmental president" (Vig 2006, 106). The following period was thus again characterized by competition between the Presidency and Congress in terms of supporting stringent environmental regulation. Among the most significant policies passed in this period was the Clean Air Act Amendment in 1990 (Kraft 2006; 133).

The election of Bill Clinton and not least his Vice President Al Gore, who already then had a powerful environmental image, ironically meant the end of the second surge of environmental attention. Though Clinton strengthened the environmental administration, among other things by giving Gore a key role in it (Vig 2006, 108), attention quickly shifted to mainly economic matters. When the Republicans further came in control of Congress, the environmental issue lost further momentum and the US entered the period that produced the marked difference in environmental policy compared to European countries. This is not so much the result of existing environmental legislation being dramatically altered. Congress was characterized by gridlock, which did not make major policy reversals possible (Kraft 2006, 134), but at the same time only very few new environmental policy initiatives had taken place (Vogel 2003, 577-578). Climate policy is a clear example of this with an intense struggle between the Clinton administration and a Republican Congress. As a result, climate policies were mainly supported for further research (Hempel 2006).

As displayed in figure 1, the election of George W. Bush and September 11th meant a further decrease in attention to the environment, and the issue hardly played a role during the 2004 presidential election campaign (Vig 2006, 111-117). The Bush administration had a clear non-environmental agenda, which was visible in the rapid US withdrawal from the Kyoto framework. However, Congress blocked many policy initiatives from the Bush administration like the “Clean Skies” amendments of the Clean Air Act in continuation of the policy gridlock of the 1990s (Kraft 2006).

In sum, the multiple venue nature of the US political system has created a pattern of environmental attention, where attention has seen two significant punctuations, in the early 1970s and late 1980s. In both cases, intense competition between the Presidency (Nixon and Bush the elder) and Congress, both wanting to signal a strong pro-environmental profile, produced considerable surges in political attention to the environment as seen from figure 1. However, at the same time, especially the more recent years, show that environmental attention is weakly institutionalized in the US political system compared to a party-dominated European parliamentary system like Denmark.

With regard to policies, the results of these punctuations in attention have been the adoption of significant measures pushing US environmental policy in a more stringent direction. From that perspective, it is not surprising that studies of US environmental policy making draw heavily on the agenda-setting-approach (Kraft & Vig 2006; Layzer 2006; Repetto 2006). Periods of limited attention produce very few new policy initiatives as the climate policy cases shows. However, neither has it meant rolling back earlier legislation. Periods of low attention have mostly been accompanied with policy gridlock in Congress (Kraft 2006) where few new initiatives pass, but also where few existing policies are reversed or repealed.

For the comparison with Denmark, it is worth noting that the focus on the multiple venue nature of the US political system does not imply that partisan conflict is unimportant for US environmental policy making. The Democrats have consistently been more pro-environment than the Republicans and in this sense they “own” the issue (cf. Keleman & Vogel 2010). However, as Shipan & Lowry (2001) show, partisan positions on environmental issues are driven by the questions of which factions and individuals come to dominate the parties and much less by the dynamics of party competition. The parties themselves thus function as venues for varying environmental interests. In the US case, the two surges in attention to environmental issues were also driven by institutional dynamics, i.e. competition between the Presidency and Congress, and partisan politics.

Conclusion

As Baumgartner et al. (2006) argue, comparative public policy literature is often very static in its perspective. It focuses on explaining cross-sectional differences, like differences in welfare state efforts. A clear example of static studies of political institutions is the veto players approach developed by Tsebelis (2002). Based on the argument that more institutionally defined veto players tend to increase policy stability, such perspectives are powerful when it comes to explaining stable cross-national policy differences. However, such a perspective has significant limitations in explaining cross-national policy patterns that are dynamic over time as is clearly the case with US-European environmental policy.

Thus the argument that more institutionally defined veto players increase policy stability, which is central to most explanations about policy effects of political institutions, is too narrowly focused on only one effect of political institutional structures. When applied to the case of US policy making on the environment, the veto players approach captures the policy dynamics in

periods of gridlock well. However, as revealed above, there are also periods with surges in political attention where policy gridlock is noticeably absent and where the US political institutions have very different policy effects. Explaining cross-national policy differences in a dynamic perspective is the strength of the policy agenda perspective developed in this article. Political institutional differences have played a key role for shaping both US and European environmental policies, but the effects can only be understood when focusing on both comparative dynamics and temporal dynamics of attention as policy agenda setting approach does.

A rare example of such a dynamic perspective on comparative public policy was presented by Lundqvist (1980). Focusing on reactions to the rising environmental issue in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Lundqvist described the US system as a “hare” that starts quickly but then becomes tired (and distracted) due to the competitive nature of its political system. He described corporatist Sweden like a tortoise, which reacted slowly and steadily. The description of the US system has many similarities with a policy process based on a political landscape with multiple venues for shopping around ideas *and* with multiple venues competing for issues. The pattern of US environmental policy making looks like one with periods of equilibrium interspersed with surges of attention. However, the discussion above differs from the description of policy developments in party-dominated parliamentary systems as the movement of a tortoise, i.e. incremental. Danish environmental policy in the mid 1980s was certainly not incremental. Lundqvist’s focus on Swedish corporatism downplayed the role of party conflicts, which was exactly what shaped Danish environmental policy making in the mid 1980s. A better description of a party-dominated system like Denmark may thus be that of a car that is difficult to start, but once started goes at a high and constant pace.

This article is only a first attempt to explore the question of the institutionalization of attention to political issues. What it offers is an initial empirical investigation of the effects of

differences in political institutions. It is of course limited by the fact that it deals with one issue in two countries. In other words, studying the question of institutionalization of attention across more issues and covering more countries is necessary to provide a robust test of the argument.

In terms of country generalizability, parliamentary systems of course vary quite significantly, and comparative studies of agenda setting focusing on party dynamics as in this article have mainly focused on countries like Denmark, Sweden, Belgium, and the Netherlands, characterized by multiparty systems and thus on the importance of coalition politics (Green-Pedersen 2007, Walgrave & Varone 2008; Green-Pedersen & Krogstrup 2008). To what extent this focus remains valid for other parliamentary systems remains an open question. This relates both to countries like the UK, where coalition politics plays no role and to countries like Germany, which combines a multi-party system with a political system with multiple political venues. Systematic comparisons of political attention to issues in countries where the political systems differ less fundamentally than Denmark and the US thus seem a promising way forward for understanding the effects of political institutions on how attention is institutionalized. Further ahead, this will hopefully provide the foundation for more generalizable theory.

The difference between Europe and the US with regard to environmental policy, which has become very visible with debates on climate change, provided the inspiration for this article. In explaining this difference, Vogel (2003, cf. also Kelemen & Vogel 2010) pointed to the stronger political support for environmental regulation in many European countries and the role of the EU.⁸ What this article offers is a theoretical explanation for broad and enduring political support for stringent environmental regulation found among European countries, which Vogel (2003) pointed to. It reflects the way European countries have institutionalized political attention to the environment. This is not in disagreement with the factors highlighted by Vogel (2003) or the focus

⁸ Vogel (2003) also points to regulatory scandals in Europe, but mainly within food safety like the mad-cow disease scandal.

on “domestic politics” by Kelemen & Vogel (2010), but it offers a more theory-based explanation for the development of these factors.

In terms of the future development of US environmental, and especially climate policy, the point of this article is that exactly because the current policy differences are not rooted in for instance an exceptional American lack of environmentalism (cf. Bomberg & Schlosberg 2008), a US-Europe policy comparison in ten years might look quite differently. The argument is not that cultural differences do not exist – the US might tend to favor more market-based solutions in climate policy (e.g. Gough & Scackely 2003, 335). However, if such an ideological explanation is not combined with an understanding of the policy dynamics of different political systems, the expectation of policy stability becomes far too simplistic. Thus, the US is actually showing the first signs of changes in its climate policy. Recent initiatives to reduce CO₂ emissions at the state level including California (Bang et al. 2007) combined with the new administration seem likely to generate broader political attention to the issue.

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Figure 1: Percentage of the agenda related to environmental issues in the US and Denmark 1960-2005

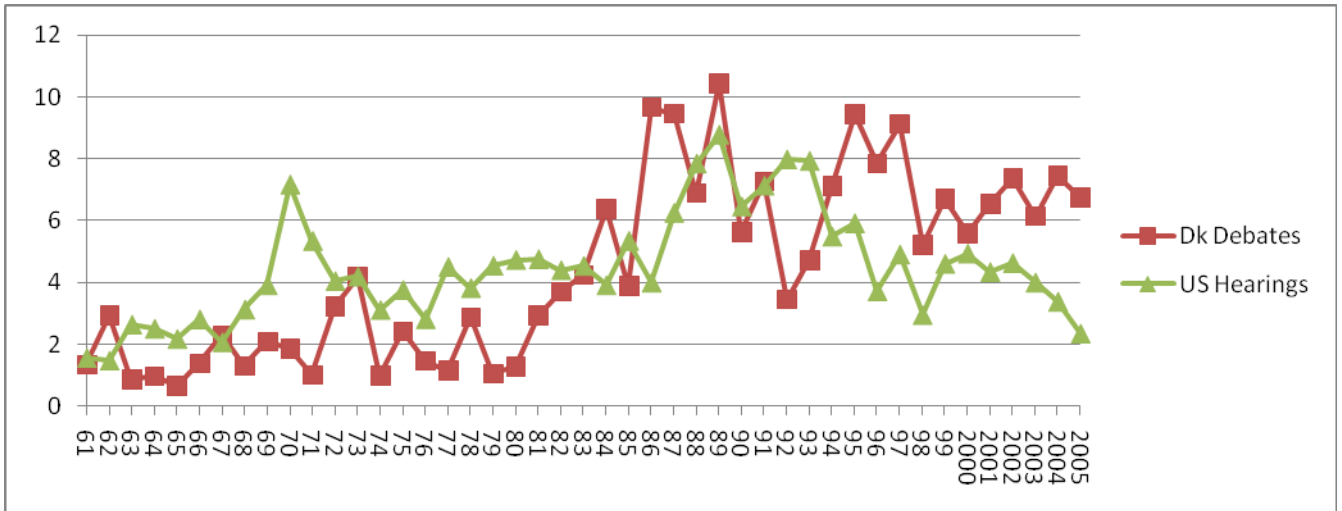


Table 1: US-Danish differences in average agenda share of environmental issues across different indicators, 1990-2002/2003/2005.

	Danish Debates (1990-2005)	Danish Questions (1990-2003)
	6,65	6,64
US Hearings (1990-2005) 5,04	1.61***	1,60***
US Bills (1990-2002) 5,59	1.06*	1,05**

Significance tests from independent sample t-tests: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < .05$ *** $p < .01$ (two-tailed)