

Opposition Policy Influence through Agenda-setting: The Environment in Denmark, 1993–2009

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This article addresses the opportunities that the opposition has to influence policy – a topic that has been neglected in existing party policy research. The idea that is developed is applied to a remarkable environmental policy development during the Danish right-wing government in the 2000s. Contrary to its position when it took office in 2001, the right-wing government turned green and adopted a series of green policy initiatives. It is argued in this article that vehement and persistent criticism from the left-wing opposition provides an explanation for this turn. Taking media coverage, public opinion, carbon dioxide emissions and the government's approval ratings into account, the empirical estimation based on unique quarterly data shows that opposition criticism had a systematic impact on the government's pro-environmental policy development. The implications for party policy research are important. If the aim is to understand how parties matter to policy, the opposition should be taken more seriously.

Introduction

Alongside the government, the opposition is a vital part of the political system. The opposition strives to present a viable government alternative to the electorate and has numerous opportunities to raise its profile and set the policy agenda through the media as well as parliament (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen 2010; Thesen 2013; Vliegthart & Walgrave 2011). In its efforts to replace the incumbent government, the opposition constantly challenges its opponent to tackle policy problems. Does this pressure show up in the government's lawmaking? If the government wants to keep the opposition from replacing it at the next election, there are good reasons to think that the government not only talks about the problems raised, but legislates in accordance with the opposition's view on the issue. Due to a lack of research, our understanding of this is limited.

Parties' influence on policy has been studied for decades (Hibbs 1977; Klingemann et al. 1994), but only rarely with the opposition in focus. This is

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not due to a lack of research (for reviews, see Blais et al. 1993; Imbeau et al. 2001; Schmidt 1996), but rather to a lack of interest in the party outside of office. This is understandable. The government is the main force in shaping policy, but this does not make the opposition uninteresting. There is a lot to be learned about how parties formulate policy by taking the opposition more seriously.

In order to address this shortcoming, it is argued here that opposition criticism makes it likely that a government passes legislation that accommodates that criticism. The argument is tested on new and rich longitudinal data on the environmental issue in Denmark in the period 1993–2009. This issue is interesting because the policy development addressed here presents a puzzle to the existing ‘politics matters’ account: Why did the right-wing government that took office in 2001 enthusiastically embrace green values in the latter part of its incumbency after several years of predictable cutbacks and environmental scepticism? Why did the right-wing government extensively adopt left-wing policy on an issue traditionally associated with the left? This is not just a story of minority governance and inevitable compromise to get legislation passed. In this case, the right-wing government along with the Danish People’s Party had a solid majority to maintain its initial course of cutbacks.

This study aims to bolster and advance work on the policy implications of opposition criticism across issues. In a study of the issue of law and order in Denmark in the period 1984–2001, Seeberg (2013) shows how the Social Democratic-led government of 1993–2001 (a working left-wing majority coalition) repeatedly increased the punishment of crime despite publicly announcing its intention to focus on rehabilitation when it took office. This noteworthy policy development took place amid vocal criticism from the right-wing opposition for neglecting to fight crime. This article extends this work in important ways. It tests whether the same logic applies in a reversed situation where a left-wing opposition exerts pressure as well as addresses an issue with different characteristics (Cobb & Elder 1983; Soroka 2002). Crime and environment share many characteristics compared to, say, large welfare domains such as education. Among these characteristics, it is argued that these issues are subject to more frequent and often sensational focusing events than others due to a murder or an incidence of pollution, which makes it easier to politicise the issues. At the same time, crime and the environment also differ in important respects and, as the article will elaborate, this renders the former a more likely case than the latter for opposition policy influence. This is the case even though international climate protocols or supranational legislation like European Union directives may constrict the room for the government to legislate on the environment. Hence, the implications for understanding opposition pressure on the government across issues are important.

Parties and Policy

Different parties in office generate different policy outputs. This is the essence of the ‘politics matters’ thesis often identified with the prominent work of Klingemann et al. (1994). Extending previous research, the authors put forward a mandate thesis, which for good reasons has received a lot of attention. Whereas early scholars expected parties to pass diverging policies because of differences in ideologies (Hibbs 1977), Klingemann et al. argue that the party in office can shape policy because it – based on actual promises in its manifesto – receives a mandate from the majority of the voters to do so.

The party-to-policy correlation has been documented to such a degree that the early argument that policy is just a product of socioeconomic factors appears invalid. Ideology and mandate alike, who governs matters; the alternation of parties in government causes policy changes (Blais et al. 1993, 52; Imbeau et al. 2001, 2; Schmidt 1996, 156). At the same time, the party-to-policy question is not settled. Overall, the thesis finds support, but empirical analysis such as that of Klingemann et al. also leaves a lot of unexplained variation (see also Blais et al. 1993, 54–5; Imbeau et al. 2001, 18–22; Schmidt 1996, 166–7). If anything, this invites further work on how parties matter for policy.

The mixed results may be due to the rather narrow research focus. Studies tend to focus on changes in government at elections, and this concentration on incumbency implicitly makes holding power a prerequisite for parties to have effects on policy (Blais et al. 1993, 49; Imbeau et al. 2001, 9; Klingemann et al. 1994, 31; Schmidt 1996, 155). The government decides policy and to be in opposition is to lack formal legislative power. This viewpoint leads research down an unnecessarily narrow alley. The broad ‘does politics matter?’ question turns into a narrow ‘do differences in the partisan composition of government matter for public policy?’ question (Schmidt 1996, 155). If the opposition is not completely ignored, its policy influence is at the margin of the real issue of concern – namely the extent to which the government party matters for policy, as seen in studies by Hicks and Swank (1992) and Klingemann et al. (1994, 44–7). Although the opposition is incorporated to some extent through such work, its opportunities to not only marginally amend government bills but also in some circumstances influence the government’s legislative agenda in the first place are not accounted for. It is the ambition of this article to remedy this.

The Opposition’s Policy Influence through Agenda-setting

The logic of political agenda-setting (Baumgartner & Jones 2009; Cobb & Elder 1983; Kingdon 1995) is applied to understand how the opposition may

influence policy. Work integrating agenda-setting theory and the 'politics matters' thesis has remained limited despite a shared focus on issue attention and the dynamics of policy change. 'Political agenda' refers to the hierarchy of issues to which the relevant actors must pay attention even as they compete about the future content of this hierarchy (Dearing & Rogers 1996, 1–3). The central idea in political agenda-setting is that issues that make it onto the agenda tend also to become the subject of policy change (Baumgartner & Jones 2009). Parties fight to set the agenda not only due to these possible policy implications, but also because the hierarchy of issues has been shown to affect electoral outcomes by profiting the party that has the strongest reputation on the issue(s) on the agenda (Green & Jennings 2012; Petrocik 1996). This logic has implications for the opposition's opportunities to pressurise the government to legislate, as will be elaborated upon below.

The opposition may, like the government, consist of several parties with separate preferences in a multiparty system or just one party in a two-party system. While acknowledging the conflict that may emerge, for instance, between opposition parties in a multiparty system, the important point is that these parties are together in opposition and therefore are all working to remove the government. Insofar as the opposition and the government can be clearly distinguished, the argument of this article will generally apply in multiparty and two-party systems. The theorising focuses on the opposition and the government in a two-party system, and possible differences between a two-party and a multiparty system will be addressed afterwards.

A defining characteristic of the difference between opposition and government is that only the latter can adopt legislation. This may seem trivial and immediately deem the opposition uninteresting in a question of partisan influence on policy. However, to the extent that the government is re-election-oriented, this distinction brings the opposition centre stage when it comes to the political agenda and its policy implications.

With ability to legislate comes responsibility for policy, which makes the government the subject of blame (Weaver 1986). Governing is inherently difficult (Rose 1990), and as Weaver (1986) observes, avoiding blame is a preoccupation of government. The government is not only exposed to blame for terrorist attacks or pollution events (Weaver 1986); it is also blamed for not paying sufficient attention to certain issues (Sulkin 2005). Although often unable to solve such problems effectively, it can be blamed by the voters nevertheless (Rudolph 2003), and its issue-handling reputation can suffer (Petrocik 1996, 828; Green & Jennings 2012). If the blame sticks, the voters will hold the incumbent accountable and punish it accordingly (Marsh & Tilley 2009). Hence, having such problematic issues high on the policy agenda is not electorally fortunate for the government (Budge & Farlie 1983; Rudolph 2003).

As Thesen (2013) shows in a study of media influence on the party policy agenda, the opposition is keen to put the government into this situation. Whereas the government prefers to draw attention to news stories describing a positive development in an issue, the opposition has the opposite preference. It is eager to pick up stories about negative developments in issues, especially if responsibility can be assigned to the government. Along similar lines, Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2010) show that the opposition is in a position to emphasise its preferred issues selectively and push these onto the political agenda. In contrast, although a government aims to set the political agenda through, for example, its coalition agreement, it is more difficult for it to decide its ongoing issue focus as it has to respond to constantly emerging problems on the political agenda to provide the solution that is expected.

Since the opposition is in a position to influence the policy agenda, it has considerable leverage in deciding if the government gets into trouble. Insofar as it pursues a strategy to eject the government, it will try to ensure that voters are aware of problems and the government's role in these problems and in this way induce voters to disapprove of the government and punish it. With a preoccupation to remove the government, undermining its issue-handling reputation in the eyes of the voters is most likely a core concern of the opposition and the access to politicise issues can be expected to be used to this end (Green & Jennings 2012).

From an agenda-setting perspective, such opposition criticism is not trivial but can reach the public and funnel into the next election. Since 'nothing attracts a crowd so quickly as a fight' (Schattschneider 1960, 1), the opposition can, through relentlessly criticising the government, provoke a conflict, which attracts media and public attention to the issue (Cobb & Elder 1983; Baumgartner & Jones 2009, 37). In this way, the public is made vividly aware of the issue.

Even seeing just the contours of such agenda-setting of the issue by the opposition, the government may discern the prospects and respond preventively (Arnold 1990). Although the government has a majority in parliament to disregard any manoeuvres by the opposition, the logical thing to do for the re-election-oriented government would be to avoid unpleasant politicisation. Legislating can become an option for an electorally risk-averse government faced with opposition criticism because it is an effective way to dampen politicisation and potentially silence the opposition. It might be most convenient, and hence most tempting, for the government to ignore the issue or try to talk it off the agenda (Cobb & Elder 1983; Riker 1996), but the only way to firmly remove the underlying reasons for the politicisation is to tackle the problem. When the problem is removed, politicisation implodes according to an attention logic. Not tackling it may signal to the public indifference to the problem or provoke the opposition

further and hence fuel unwanted contestation. By legislating, the government demonstrates commitment and makes it more difficult for the opposition to keep accusing it of neglecting the problem, especially in the more critical phase of an election campaign.

Furthermore, when the government legislates to contain the opposition, it may adopt policy changes that directly accommodate the opposition's criticism in order to remove not only the problem, but also the conflict that may have motivated the blame. Thereby, the government may prevent the issue from occupying a future campaign agenda (Sulkin 2005). Studies of party behaviour show that parties, and governing parties in particular, do resort to such drastic responses if warranted and adapt to changes in their immediate environment despite ideological constraints (Hellwig 2012; Greene 2015). Hence, despite manifest risks associated with such legislation – for example, rebellion and defection in the party ranks – co-opting the opposition's policy suggestions is a possible government response because it provides an opportunity to rhetorically turn the issue into an issue of agreement and, hence, an issue largely free of contestation (Riker 1996). As conflict fuels politicisation according to Schattschneider's (1960) logic, the absence of conflict may eventually depoliticise the issue.

This dynamic, whereby the government responds to opposition criticism, can be expected to apply in particular to situations where the opposition is said to have issue ownership because this not only reflects a party's special interest in an issue, but also its particular competence and appealing policy position on the issue in the eyes of the electorate (Petrocik 1996). The opposition will be particularly keen to pursue this issue (Vliegthart & Walgrave 2011), and its traction in the electorate offers stronger credibility when criticising the government and pressurising it to legislate (Thesen 2013).

To sum up, the opposition is more important to policy change than previously held in the party policy literature. It should be possible to observe situations where the government adopts legislation that accommodates the opposition's policy position – legislation that certainly would not have been adopted had it not been for the opposition's criticism – especially when the opposition has issue ownership.

The Issue of the Environment in Denmark, 1993–2009

The argument about the opposition's policy influence is tested on the environmental issue in Denmark in the period 1993–2009 because it provides an appropriate and important test case. It is appropriate because the opposition and the government are clearly discernable. Denmark is known for its multiparty minority governments relying on one or more opposition parties

to pass legislation. However, this is not the case with the environment in this period because the right-wing government, consisting of a coalition between the Liberals and the Conservatives from 2001 to 2011, enjoyed a *de facto* legislative majority due to the loyal support of the Danish People's Party. Of principal interest to the test of the argument, this situation whereby the Danish People's Party is counted as part of the *de facto* government resembles a two-party system such as the Westminster system with regard to the political competition structure in which the opposition working to replace the incumbents is clearly separated from the government (Green-Pedersen & Mortensen 2010). To reflect the theoretical part of the argument, which focused on the contestation between two parties, the empirical part will not focus on dynamics between opposition parties or among the governing partners but rather on the main parties of the left and right – that is, the Social Democrats and the Liberals.¹

This case study is important because policy development on the environment is puzzling in a 'politics matters' perspective: in the latter part of its incumbency, the right-wing government went against its persistent, outspoken environmental scepticism and enthusiastically embraced a green profile. This resulted in a series of green policy initiatives and culminated in the hosting of the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Summit. These policy changes are far from trivial, and it is difficult to explain the development within a conventional 'politics matters' account according to which a right-wing government should focus on the issues on which it is elected (typically not the environment) and pursue the material interest of its constituency (typically not environmental protection). The right-wing government did neither. Hence, this is a peculiar case, which a 'politics matters' account should confront.

Furthermore, the environment is used because it adds to prior research on opposition influence in central ways. Whereas this current study of the environment focuses on the policy implication of criticism on an issue where the left-wing traditionally has owned the issue (Seeberg 2015; Petrocik 1996), a recent study has investigated how a right-wing opposition with its issue ownership of crime (Seeberg 2015; Petrocik 1996) can pressurize a left-wing government to be tough on crime (Seeberg 2013). Focusing on the same country in approximately the same time period allows a test of the extent to which the argument applies generally to issues owned by right-wing and left-wing oppositions.

Another feature of this comparison is the variation in issue characteristics. Crime and environmental problems often involve a dramatic and unpleasant story, to which it is easy to understand and relate. A person is assaulted and the perpetrator must be apprehended and punished (Estrada 2004), animals suffer in an oil spill or citizens flock to tank trucks to pick up non-polluted drinking water (Birkland 1998). The story can often be told in

simple terms (Soroka 2002): There is typically a guilty offender and an innocent victim. With ‘real’ people as problem makers instead of, for instance, a complex tax system, condemnation and grievance can be energised on these issues. Due to these properties, the media can be expected to infuse attention on these issues at the slightest opportunity, and the public can be expected to pick up and follow this infusion (Cobb & Elder 1983; Soroka 2002). Hence, the issues share a sensational characteristic that makes it relatively easy for the opposition to put pressure on the government. At the same time, the opposition may be waiting longer on the environment for relevant events to occur, leaving it with fewer opportunities to influence policy.

Moreover, as another central characteristic, the largely shared type of recipient group of legislation renders government reaction relatively more likely if opposition criticism arises. Whereas consumers of public health and education comprise the bulk of the electorate for instance, the policy target groups of crime and environment are much smaller. The government may be more hesitant to legislate if it disturbs an important part of the electorate, as in, say, the areas of health and education (Schneider & Ingram 1993). On crime and environment, inaction by the government may even generate more controversy in the electorate than the act of tightening policy if the target group has attracted bad publicity. At the same time, it may take more for the government to impose restrictive regulation on companies and farmers to uphold higher environmental standards than to tighten penal policy towards a residual and marginalised group of citizens – namely criminals. This makes policy change from opposition criticism less likely on the environment than on crime.

In this light, opposition policy influence is possible on both issues, but more so on crime than on the environment: The former offers the opposition better opportunities to criticise and the government stronger incentives to legislate than the latter. Thus, this article aims not only to enforce a stronger test of the opposition’s policy influence compared to Seeberg (2013), it also aims to advance our understanding of how issue characteristics affect parties’ policy influence.

To sum up, if the argument laid out in the theoretical section applies to the specific case of the environment in Denmark in the period 1993–2009, it is expected that government legislation is systematically related to opposition criticism, but probably especially so when the party with issue ownership is in opposition – that is, when the left-wing parties are in opposition after 2001.

Before testing this argument, I will briefly present the puzzling development on the environment issue after 2001 in Denmark as well as highlight instances where the government seemed to respond directly to opposition criticism. Initially, the policy changes that followed the government shuffle

in 2001 were much in line with the ‘politics matters’ thesis. As anticipated, the new bourgeois government fundamentally broke with a decade of expansion under the previous Social Democratic-led government (Green-Pedersen & Wolfe 2009; Christiansen et al. 2004). These cutbacks were in line with the right-wing parties’ announcements on the issue in the years before they took office. In the late 1990s, the right-wing parties vocally objected to consecutive pro-environmental government initiatives. The Liberal Party leader, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, was reluctant, if not sceptical, of putting the environment over companies’ and farmers’ production costs (Fogh Rasmussen 1997; 1998).

In its first years, the right-wing government was able to justify and frame its cutbacks as natural adjustments to years of Social Democratic over-spending.² Eventually, however, the environmental cutbacks became too much for the green advocates in opposition: the Social Democrats and the Socialist People’s Party. The government came under increasing fire alongside polls indicating that it had lost touch with the public on the issue, which further bolstered the opposition’s ownership of the issue (Andersen 2003; Thastum & Kuula 2014).

As a reaction to opposition criticism, the government sacked its scientific ambassador, Bjørn Lomborg, and replaced Hans Christian Schmidt, the unpopular Minister of the Environment, with the popular television news reporter, Connie Hedegaard. The government announced that the environment was a top-five priority (Fogh Rasmussen 2004; 2005) and the Prime Minister personally embarked on building a green image.³ From a ‘politics matters’ perspective, this turnaround is highly noteworthy, not only in the light of the right-wing’s previous hostility to ambitious environmental targets, but also in the light of its absence as a campaign issue in the 2001 and 2005 elections (Andersen 2003).

That the right-wing government was put under pressure by the opposition is also expressed in policy developments. The government adopted laws to (further) protect wetlands (L326 in 2003), drinking water (L324 and L332 in 2003), beaches (L348 in 2004), forests (L339 in 2004) and cities (L391 in 2006) from pollution. It established national parks (L408 in 2007), made ‘green costs’ a required assessment in the preparations of public construction programs (L340 in 2004), subjected public and private buildings to energy-saving initiatives (L356 in 2005), and further regulated the sale of electronic devices (L371 in 2005 and L392 in 2006).

The purpose of this legislating activity could be to accommodate or match the left-wing parties’ environmental position. In fact, several of the initiatives resemble consecutive resolutions tabled by the left-wing opposition preceding the laws – for example those on pesticides (B66, B67, B69, B70, B83, B192 in 2003–4; B19, B61, B83, B84, B130 in 2004–5), nature preservation (B65, B195 in 2003–4; B48 in 2004–5) and particle filters for vehicles

(B56 in 2002; B176 in 2003). Sometimes, the legislative response appears very obvious, as in the preamble to a law tightening rules on scrapping ships (L112 in 2006). In this, the Minister of the Environment states that it follows from the heated debate with the opposition arising from the two Danish ships that were sent to breakers in India to circumvent strict Danish environmental regulations.

Farmers' use of nitrogen and phosphorus drew much attention in the early 2000s, and it may illustrate how opposition criticism can pressurise the government to legislate to protect the environment. Several Danish fjords suffered from fish death due to oxygen depletion, which gave rise to opposition criticism through questions to the minister, hearings,⁴ motions⁵ and interpellations⁶ in 2004–5 on agricultural use of fertilisers. A lot of the questions directed attention to one of the worst fish death incidents in Mariager Fjord (e.g., S725, S1681 and S2567 in 2005; S2577 and S6978 in 2006; S3206, S3219 and S5034 in 2007) and the use of fertilisers to raise pigs (S2579, S2966 and S3465 in 2005; S4180, S4081, S5594 and S5589 in 2007). Meanwhile, newspaper coverage of oxygen depletion intensified in 2002 and 2003 and again in 2006, especially in the autumn where oxygen depletion peaks. Total biannual newspaper coverage in the period 1998–2008 in *Jyllands Posten*, *Politiken* and *Berlingske* typically amounts to 5–10 articles, but it reached 78, 17 and 24, respectively, in the period covered by this case study. Opposition criticism drew attention to the issue. Although the Liberal Party traditionally has been considered the party of the farmers, the government introduced more scrutiny in the procedure to authorise fertilisers (L441 in 2003), and subsequently enacted rather far-reaching environmental regulation on the license to raise livestock in 2006 (L1572).

There is a striking match between the content of the motions tabled by the opposition and the final laws adopted by the government. The opposition calls for the government to stop water contamination from agrarian production (B61 in 2005) and advocates specifically for stronger measures for licensing livestock production (B105 in 2006). Whereas such a direct line from opposition criticism to government legislation is probably rather unusual, it seemed to have played out equally vividly in the case of legislation to protect local water drills (L1150 and L1151 in 2003; L1402 in 2008) after the drinking water contamination in Køge, a mid-sized Danish city, and in the case of legislation against oil dumping by ships in Danish waters (L261 in 2002; L474 in 2006; L173 in 2008).

All in all, it appears difficult to account for the right-wing government's surprising environmental policy in the 2000s without including the opposition. This will be put to a test in a quantitative analysis of quarterly observations on opposition criticism and government legislation in Denmark in 1993–2009. This period covers the main interval of interest for comparison – namely the incumbency in 2001–9 of the Liberal Prime Minister Fogh

Rasmussen, as well as the preceding government headed by Social Democrat Poul Nyrup Rasmussen in 1993–2001.

Data

For the dependent variable, all legislation (a total of 131 pieces of legislation across the 61 quarters of analysis) within the environmental domain has been read and manually coded by the author (accessed through the Danish legislative database, *Retsinformation*). In each of these pieces of legislation, each change to the environmental code has been counted by the author, amounting to 173 changes across the 131 Acts of Parliament. The count is intended to capture significant changes to the *status quo* policy. Examples of such changes are (further) regulatory steps to avoid oil dumping in open sea, the requirement of authorisation to introduce a chemical to the market, a direction to electronic manufacturers to collect and process discarded products, and increased punishment for pollution. As these examples highlight, such changes often come without new appropriations in the budget; they simply consist of, for example, changing a word or two in the regulations for industrial production or the building code. In other words, regulation is at the core of this issue. Hence, coding the content of changes to the environmental code is preferable to common alternative measures such as public expenditures (e.g., Klingemann et al. 1994) and the length of word changes to the law (Huber et al. 2001, 336–7) because these measures would not capture some of the most profound policy changes.

Some of the changes are most likely spurred by EU legislation. In about 10 percent of the cases, a reference is made to an EU directive. However, even though these changes stem from EU initiatives, it is well-known that governments delay or over-implement such common legislation due to strategic calculations (Masterbroek 2005), and opposition criticism may shape such decisions. Hence, excluding them would limit the analysis.⁷

Furthermore, to evaluate if opposition criticism is associated with policy change, it is necessary to see if this criticism not only makes the government legislate, but also makes it adopt changes that draw policy in the direction of the opposition's policy stance. For this assessment, all substantial, concrete promises or statements advertised in the two main parties' manifestos (the Liberals and the Social Democrats, see discussion above) and the speeches delivered by their leaders to the annual party conference have been extracted by the author. Although more information could be taken into account, a coding of the statements and promises made in these documents presents a central and dynamic issue-specific measure of parties' policy positions.

The direction of each policy change is gauged by comparing its content to the information gathered in the party manifesto and party leader speeches.

Does the change refer back to the content of either of the two parties' last manifestos or last speeches? A change can refer back to the opposition, the government, both, or neither. To make the dependent variable as precise and directional as possible, only changes that fall exclusively in the first of the four categories are used. This approach offers a way to evaluate if the right-wing government adopts pro-environmental legislation in reaction to criticism from the left-wing opposition. The number of accommodative changes per quarter (in which several laws may be approved) varies from 0 to 19 with an average of 1.26 per law, and totals 82 changes in the entire period (see Table 1). Generally, the task of coding changes was rather straightforward.⁸

The opposition's criticism is measured as the percentage of all questions addressed to the Minister of the Environment on the environmental issue (applying the Policy Agenda Project's codebook; data extracted from Green-Pedersen [2005] and coded by the author using the Danish Parliamentary Archive). This has proven to be a good indicator of the opposition's issue emphasis (Green-Pedersen 2005; Green-Pedersen & Mortensen 2010). Only questions asked by the 'true' opposition working to replace the incumbents are used. For the period before 2001, this group of parties includes the Liberals, the Conservatives and the Danish People's Party. For the period after 2001, it includes all other parties apart from these three right-wing parties. Here, the Danish People's Party does not qualify as a 'true' opposition party due to its official support of the Liberal-Conservative coalition government.

To rule out a spurious relationship, a number of societal factors are included as controls in the analysis in addition to the government's approval rating (Thomsen 2014) and a count variable since the last election. Among the non-political factors suggested by others as possibly influencing the agenda for policy change are the media, the public's concern with policy and real world developments (Baumgartner & Jones 2009; Soroka 2002). Media coverage is perhaps particularly important to include since it can work as a proxy for the pressure on the government that may arise from, say, pollution events, natural disasters or the external pressure from interest groups, which newspapers typically report.

Media attention to the environment is measured through keyword searches⁹ in three major Danish newspapers (*Politiken*, *Berlingske* and *Ekstra Bladet*, which together represent the Danish media market) to identify stories of at least 200 words on the environment as a proportion of all stories (assessed through the Danish media database *Infomedia*). The public's concern is measured through the standard 'most important problem' question (Green-Pedersen 2005). Real world development – in this case, the state of the environment – is indicated by the total emission of carbon dioxide in million tons on a national level. To get a measure of the scope of

Table 1. Summary of Data for the Environmental Issue in Denmark, 1993–2009 (in quarters)

	Left government		Right government		Both governments	
	1993–2001		2001–2009		1993–2009	
	Mean (standard deviation)	Range	Mean (standard deviation)	Range	Mean (standard deviation)	Range
Accommodative policy changes	0.22 (1.02)	0–6	2.55 (4.74)	0–19	1.26 (3.43)	0–19
Questions to the minister	4.38 (2.44)	0.5–10.7	5.61 (2.04)	2.5–10	4.93 (2.34)	0.5–10.7
Media attention	12.61 (0.75)	10.9–15.6	12.24 (1.20)	10.1–14.3	12.44 (0.99)	10.1–14.6
Public attention	7.82 (2.11)	4.6–14.8	5.49 (1.11)	4–7	6.78 (2.09)	4–14.8
Real world indicator	0.14 (0.01)	0.12–0.16	0.12 (0.01)	0.11–0.13	0.13 (0.01)	0.11–0.16
Government's approval rating	49.02 (1.77)	45.7–53.3	50.65 (1.49)	47–53	49.8 (1.84)	45.7–53.3

the problem, these annual figures are calculated in relation to the OECD average (extracted from the OECD.stat database). If Denmark is well above the average, this may be a signal to decision makers to react. Since carbon dioxide emission is only published once a year, the data has been linearly interpolated to fit the quarterly observations. All variables are summarised in Table 1. Multicollinearity does not appear to be a problem for the test (not reported), though the variables in the model are naturally connected.

Model Specification

The opposition's ability to make the government change policy is estimated using a zero-inflated Poisson regression to fit the highly skewed distribution of counts of policy changes with an excessive amount of zero observations (Long & Freese 2006). This statistical approach is commonly used in related settings (e.g., Vliegenthart et al. 2011). The inflated version is used because it seems plausible that the zeros are generated in two ways. The first way has to do with the opposition according to the proposed model. Here, zero policy changes may be registered in some quarters because the opposition and hence the government do not attend to the issue or because the government does not respond to the opposition's criticism (against the expectations of the model of opposition influence). The zeros may also come in another way unrelated to the opposition. The government does not legislate on an issue for structural reasons, for example, it may want to respond to the opposition but it is hindered in doing so. Such a situation may arise due to an international crisis, for instance. In such situations, the score of zero in policy changes throughout the quarter is certain. By statistically separating the two processes in which zeros are produced, as the zero-inflated version of the Poisson regression can do (Long & Freese 2006, 294–6), it becomes possible to focus on the former part of the data in which the observations are not certain – here only the propensity of the government to respond to the opposition when it actually has a choice is considered. A simple estimation by the intercept is used in the logit model to predict the systematic zero observations. In the Poisson model, all independent variables are included in order to test the opposition influence model.

An alternative way to handle the over-dispersion is to use the negative binomial distribution rather than the Poisson distribution. This method is not used in the current setup because it treats the over-dispersion as a matter of heterogeneity in the zeros rather than as a matter of systematic processes in the generation of the zeros. As argued above, ignoring the latter possibility does not seem appropriate. To ensure robustness of the results, negative binomial estimation is also reported.

To test the argument, a dummy variable ‘left-wing opposition’ is introduced. It takes the value 0 for all quarters before the right-wing government came into office in November 2001, and the value 1 after that time. The contention that accommodative policy changes triggered by opposition criticism take place predominantly in 2001–9 when left-wing parties are in opposition can be tested by multiplying the questions variable and this dummy variable.

With the longitudinal data, the independent variables may enter the model with lags. Choosing the lag time is difficult, and conclusive answers are few (Freeman 1989). Thus, the choice of lags rests on substantial considerations. Since the laws in the analysis passed through parliament in 4.6 months on average – that is, less than two quarters from the bill’s introduction to its vote – questions precede policy by four quarters in the analysis. This seems to be a realistic assumption on the drafting and approval of a bill in this area. Moreover, this time span establishes the most direct link between opposition criticism and the government’s legislative reaction. The connectedness enhances the certainty that legislation is in fact a reaction to the criticism. Hence, keeping in mind that reality is surely more complicated than can be expressed in this simplified specification, it appears to be the best choice. Moreover, to rule out spurious findings, the societal factors precede questions by another two lags. This ensures sufficient time to see if opposition criticism and government legislation simply trail the societal factors (Baumgartner & Jones 2009). As indicators of the robustness of the findings, results based on shorter and longer lags are reported.

Results

As a first step, the average effect of opposition criticism on government legislation across the entire time period is estimated in the first and second columns in Table 2.¹⁰ The estimates are insignificant. This is no surprise since party differences – that is, the fact that the left-wing has a special interest in criticising the government on this issue and a reputation among the public for doing so – are not taken into account. The effect of opposition criticism on accommodative policy changes is, hence, not constant across governments. This is comforting news since it would be surprising to see the government permanently appeasing the opposition.

This picture changes when the dummy for left-wing opposition is included in columns 3, 4 and 5 in Table 2. The coefficient for the two-way interaction between questions and left-wing opposition in the third row of these columns is positive as expected. Whereas the coefficient is statistically significant in column 3 without controls and in column 5 with controls for distance to election and government approval rating, the p-value increases to 0.125 in column 4 when the societal controls are included. Although it

Table 2. Predicting the Number of Policy Changes to the Environment in Denmark, 1993–2001

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Opposition criticism _{t-4}	-0.056 (0.070)	-0.010 (0.070)	-0.348* (0.179)	-0.263 (0.170)	-0.367** (0.191)
Left-wing opposition (2001–2009 = 1)		1.416 (0.751)	-1.346 (1.123)	1.208 (1.512)	-1.455 (1.295)
Criticism _{t-4} x Left-wing opposition			0.347* (0.189)	0.289 (0.183)	0.357* (0.208)
Media _{t-6}	-0.165 (0.166)			-0.252 (0.163)	
Public _{t-6}	-0.027 (0.135)			0.358** (0.154)	
Real world indicator _{t-6}	-0.000 (0.007)			0.029*** (0.011)	
Count to election		0.059 (0.095)			0.036 (0.034)
Government's approval rating _{t-6}		0.031 (0.034)			0.003 (0.107)
Intercept	4.192** (1.694)	0.316 (0.995)	3.297*** (1.071)	1.198 (2.673)	3.209*** (1.202)
<i>Logit regression</i>					
Intercept	1.159*** (0.307)	0.968 (0.935)	1.189*** (0.306)	1.022*** (0.323)	1.142*** (0.311)
LR-test (Wald Chi ²)	5.85	11.64***	14.73***	15.08***	16.08***
Adj. R ² (McFadden's)	-0.04	-0.00	0.03	0.02	0.01
Observations (1993–2009, in quarters)	59	59	61	59	59

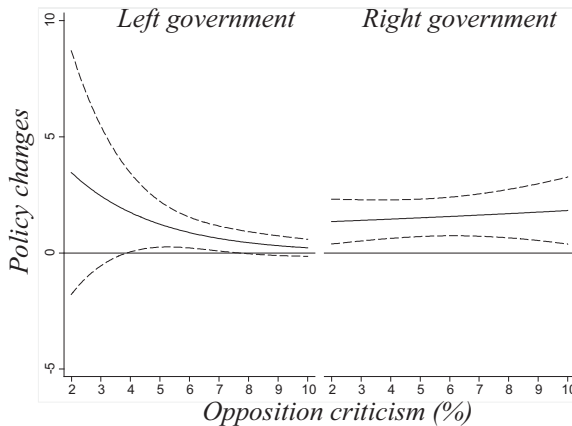
Note: *p < 0.10; **p < 0.05; ***p < 0.01 (two-tailed). Zero-inflated Poisson regression.

borders conventional levels of statistical significance, it still has clear merits given the small *n* in the estimation and the list of control variables in the model. Hence, the result indicates that criticism from the left-wing opposition systematically affects right-wing government legislation. In opposition, right-wing parties do not have the same interest in and reputation on the issue and, hence, impact on policy.

The left-wing opposition’s influence on accommodative policy changes is independent of political and societal factors; the effect remains substantively intact when media attention, public concern and the relative CO₂ level as well as the distance to the next election and the government’s approval rating are included in the model in columns 4 and 5. Reassuringly, the independent effect of the societal factors comes out much as expected. Deteriorating levels of CO₂ emission are related to the government’s propensity to legislate. The same applies for the public agenda: as the public profile of the issue rises, so too does the propensity of the government to tackle the problems. It is somewhat surprising that media attention is unrelated to government legislation.

A visualisation of the result is illuminating. Figure 1 displays the effect of an increasing proportion of questions to the minister (on the horizontal axis) on the predicted count of accommodative policy changes (on the vertical axis). In the left-hand graph, during the left-wing government before 2001, criticism diminishes the likelihood of an accommodative policy change. This is in contrast to the right-hand graph portraying the right-wing

Figure 1. Prediction of the Number of Accommodative Policy Changes to the Environment in Denmark, 1993–2009.



Note: Based on Table 2, holding other variables to their mean.

government after 2001. Here, criticism from the left-wing opposition makes an accommodative policy change more likely. This enhancing effect is not negligible. Whereas 1.3 accommodative changes to policy are expected when the left-wing opposition directs 1 percent of its questions to the environment, two changes are predicted when the left-wing opposition in particular instances devotes considerable attention to the issue, here operationalised as 12 percent, which is close to the maximum observation of opposition criticism. Over time, such accommodative legislative steps by the government in response to opposition criticism can accumulate.

As expected, the identified impact is not as pronounced as on crime in Denmark in 1993–2001, where Seeberg (2013) estimates about two accommodative policy changes as the proportion of questions to the minister on crime reaches a level of about 1 percent in a three-month period, and about four changes when the level climbs to 1.5 percent.

As tests of robustness of the results, the estimations are carried out in a negative binomial regression and at alternative lags. In a zero-inflated negative binomial regression, the identified influence of opposition criticism on government legislation is reproduced. Using other lags than the lag four used in Table 2, the influence of opposition criticism on government legislation remains unchanged at lags two and five, but the coefficient turns negative and statistically significant at lag three. This switch is surprising and should give some cautiousness for the conclusions. At the same time, such instability across various alternative estimations is not entirely surprising given the limited number of observations for the analysis. Moreover, when choosing the lag structure for the analysis, lag four was found to provide the most realistic time frame for the natural delay between opposition criticism and a legislative response by the government. Hence, it remains fair to take the results at the least as provisional evidence that the opposition needs to be taken into account in order to understand important policy changes. It is the task of future studies to further enforce the evidence on the opposition's policy influence.

Conclusion

Opposition criticism is a more important force in understanding policy than hitherto recognised in the 'politics matters' literature. Whereas existing scholarship tends to downplay the opposition as merely a moderator on the government's policy implementation, this article puts the opposition centre stage and argues that its ability to politicise problems and its interest in overthrowing the government in combination with the government's exposure to problems and vulnerability to blame create a scenario where the opposition puts the government in situations where legislation accommodating the opposition is hard to escape.

The argument has been tested on the environmental issue in Denmark in the period 1993–2009. The analysis demonstrates that government legislation that moves policy in the direction of the opposition is systematically more likely when the opposition owns the issue and criticises the government on it. In this study, this was the case after 2001 when the left-wing parties entered opposition. This impact can accumulate into substantial change to policy. Yet, the estimated impact was smaller than that identified in a similar study of crime in Denmark in 1993–2001 with right-wing parties in opposition (Seeberg 2013). The analysis thereby shows how opposition policy influence through criticism may vary with issue characteristics. Whereas crime and the environment share many characteristics, crime appears as a more likely case especially due to a higher frequency of policy problems to politicise by the opposition and a more marginalised target group (criminals) of government legislation.

The intention of this study is not to question the government as the major force in shaping policy; it is merely to remedy an unwanted neglect of the opposition as a possible second actor in driving policy change. By taking the opposition more seriously, our understanding of how parties matter for policy is significantly strengthened. Without taking the opposition into account, a ‘politics matter’ explanation may falsely attribute important policy changes to shifts in the government party’s ideological position, when in reality the government maintains its ideological position but is pushed by the opposition to legislate in a certain way. Still, there is much more to be learned on this important mechanism of policy change.

Whereas the opposition may be motivated by and draw on issue ownership to criticise the government, as suggested in the analysis, it probably cannot pick an issue from thin air. It needs actual, objective, real world problems to see a politicisation with policy implications. Even if the opposition seeks to manufacture a problem, the government cannot be expected to react. Irrespective of how rude the opposition is, the government needs to realise the stakes involved in order to take part. Such signs may come from raw statistics like the unemployment rate or from public sentiment, but more importantly it may probably also come from the media by its selection and promotion of small and big problems in society (Soroka 2002). This not only means that the intensity of opposition criticism and government response will vary over time on an issue depending on the real world circumstances, but also that it may vary between issues.

Since most political systems offer procedures for the opposition to raise problems and hold the government to account in the legislature, such as the right to propose bills, hold hearings, ask questions and table interpellations (Green-Pedersen 2010), there are obvious reasons to expect that the opposition can pressurise the government to some degree in other political systems than Denmark. Whereas opposition criticism probably is a general

phenomenon, its impact will certainly vary. The opportunities for the opposition to pressurise the government will, for instance, most likely increase with the resources for staff provided by the parliament as well as the formalised access to speak from the floor of the legislature, and these factors may cause cross-country variation in opposition policy influence. For instance, the rather prominent, televised 'Prime Minister's Question Time' in Britain may provide the means for stronger opposition pressure on the government compared to the Danish case with less public exposure of the questions to resort ministers. Moreover, if the opposition and the government are re-election-oriented, their incentives to criticise and respond to criticism, respectively, will be shaped by the country-specific party competition structure. In multiparty systems like the Danish one, pivotal centre parties in opposition may rely on a current government party to form the next winning coalition and hence be careful in its issue politicisation in order not to burn bridges. This is rarely the case in the Westminster system and therefore suggests that opposition influence is greater in, for example, Britain than in Denmark.

There may be an additional source of cross-country variation due to inter-party dynamics only present in multiparty systems. In the case of the environment, one could, for instance, imagine that a green party such as the Danish far-left Red-Green Alliance may exert a separate pressure on the government apart from the main opposition party, the Social Democrats, as well as pressurise this party to take up the environmental issue. At the same time, government responsiveness on the environment could decline if a right-wing party has maintained strong ties to farmers, unlike the Danish Liberal Party, and is part of the coalition. Hence, in political systems other than Denmark without a niche party with a strong green profile but with a liberal party with a strong agrarian constituency, opposition policy influence through criticism could be less. A comparison with, say, Germany or Austria may be fruitful. Hence, future studies would bring new insight on the policy implications of opposition criticism by appreciating these additional layers of complexity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Earlier versions of this article have benefited greatly from comments from Christoffer Green-Pedersen and Peter Bjerre Mortensen as well as panelists at the 2014 CES conference in Washington, DC.

NOTES

1. The Liberal Party was by far the largest party in the coalition and it held the office of Prime Minister. So, even though the Minister of the Environment was Conservative, the dominance of the liberals in the coalition and the Prime Minister's personal interest in the issue (see below) give reasons for this conscribed focus on the main party.
2. 'Miljø: Miljø som før Auken', *Jyllands Posten*, 13 January 2014.
3. 'Foghs miljøsyn har flyttet sig', *Jyllands Posten*, 27 January 2014.

4. Hearings in the environmental council on 1 March 2005 and 7 June 2007.
5. B83, B61, B49 in 2004; B19 in 2005; B105 in 2006.
6. F9 in 2005; F40 in 2006.
7. Excluding these changes from the analysis does not change the results.
8. Since this study of the environment is part of a larger project covering several other issues in Denmark and the United Kingdom, the reliability test has been conducted across a random sample of 74 acts of parliament on four issues (education, health and asylum/immigration in the United Kingdom in the period 1992–2005, and law and order in Denmark in the period 1984–2001). For this testing, a student coder was trained to independently identify changes in this sample of laws. It returned a Krippendorff's alpha of 0.94 – that is, at an acceptable level (Hayes & Krippendorff 2007). Since an identical coding procedure has been applied across all issues, nothing suggests that this high level of reliability does not apply also to the environment.
9. This search string was used (at least one of the following terms): 'drinking water', 'minister of the environment', 'greenhouse', 'nitrate', 'pollute', 'pollution', 'chemical waste', 'sewage', 'wastewater', 'depollution', 'global warming', 'oil spill', 'Kyoto', 'water environment', 'CO₂', 'climate debate', 'pesticide', 'air pollution', 'oxygen depletion' (author's own translation from Danish).
10. Controls are added to the model in two steps due to the limited number of observations and, hence, room for variables in the model.

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