Brain Politics:
Comparative Issue Definition in Autism Related Policy

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Presentation Outline

I. Comparing the Construction of Public Problems

II. Autism as Public Policy: When Mercury Mattered

III. Legislative Discourse

IV. Media Attention

V. Discussion and Next Steps
Comparative Construction of Problems

- The construction of public issues is a political exercise.
- Issue definition involves the formation of interests.
- Nationally specific issue definition represents cultural and social agency.
- Interaction of scientific evidence and public policy can be differently experienced, interpreted, and politicized.

Why Autism?

- Disability policy is an emergent, civil rights based, arena
- Surge in recorded incidence
- No one really knows what autism is
  - The definition is behavioral
  - The cause is unknown
- Thimerosal was a sleeper issue
  - Mercury used in childhood vaccines for several decades
  - Science was unclear throughout period of analysis
Method

- Comparative case study: Australia, Canada, United Kingdom, USA
- Examined legislative discourse
  - References to thimerosal in hearings, discussion
  - Bills (mostly federal level)
- Analyzed media attention
  - Coded a sample of 413 article titles
  - Coded and examined full text of subset of 226 articles

Legislative Discourse

- Most present on the institutional agenda in the US
  - Hearings before House and Senate Committees (starting in 1999)
  - Homeland Security Bill Rider
  - 7 states with bills
- Also found in United Kingdom and Canada
  - Requests from written answers (UK)
  - Discussion in Scottish Parliament
  - Canadian Standing Committee on Health (Feb 2003)
Article Titles Were Coded for the Following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Government Action</th>
<th>Courts</th>
<th>Experts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Federal Agency</td>
<td>Subfederal Government</td>
<td>Evidence/Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive Branch</td>
<td>Elections</td>
<td>Title Tone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legislative Branch</td>
<td>Interest Groups</td>
<td>Characterization of Causal Link</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Content Was Examined for the Following:

- Discussion of scientific evidence
- Mention of other countries
- Discussion of children’s or parent’s rights
- Quotes from those who believed in causal link
- Quotes from those who did not believe in causal link
- Quotable quotes
Mercury Rising: Different Nation, Different Temperature

- No Australian fever
- In Canada, more systemic than institutional discussion
- In the United Kingdom, focus is on government (in)action
- In USA, uniquely defined security issue
- Interpretation of null findings highly politicized

Concluding Thoughts

- USA often cited, rarely cites
- Politics of science appear to be nation specific
- Mercury issue defined independently of disability policy arena