

11. The Multiple Streams Framework in an autocracy: China's long-awaited Soil Pollution Law

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INTRODUCTION

While the Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) has greatly advanced our understanding of the policy process in democracies (Cairney and Jones 2016), this is much less the case for autocracies (Herweg et al. 2018; Herweg et al. 2022; Zohlhöfer et al. 2015).¹ Since Kingdon's work in the 1980s, hundreds of journal articles have applied the MSF to democracies (Jones et al. 2016). However, a systematic search using Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus, Web of Science, and WorldCat results in only 88 unique English-language peer-reviewed journal articles that use the MSF in the context of autocracies, covering 20 different countries.²

The dearth of MSF studies in autocracies is part of a broader gap in our understanding of the policy process in autocracies. From an applied perspective, this is problematic because, as of 2020, the majority of the world population (68 percent) lives in autocracies (Alizada et al. 2021). Policy decisions taken in such contexts affect the daily lives of billions of people, which in and of itself warrants a better understanding of the policy process in autocracies. Moreover, a better understanding of the policy process across political systems helps us identify ways to monitor, anticipate, explain, and engage in policy-making in autocracies. This is especially important because problems in one country, if left unaddressed, can easily affect other parts of the world (Boin 2019). From a theoretical perspective, the lack of MSF studies on autocracies hampers theory development, especially regarding the framework's external validity and the identification of potentially universal mechanisms that underly the policy process across different political systems. Comparative research contributes to theory and methodological development as it forces scholars to refine hypotheses and to be more explicit in their operationalization.

In response, this chapter applies the MSF to China, the world's largest non-democracy, through a case study of the Soil Pollution Prevention and Control Law. Even though soil pollution had threatened food security (NEPA 1990) and public health for decades and even though 15 other environmental laws were passed during 1979–2009, it was not until 2013 that the Soil Pollution Law was included in the formal legislative agenda of the National People's Congress (NPC) – China's legislature. The law was eventually adopted in 2018. This chapter aims to identify the obstacles to and driving forces behind the inclusion of the Soil Pollution Law in the legislative agenda. The research question is: Why did it take until 2013 for China's Soil Pollution Law Prevention and Control Law to be included in the NPC's legislative plan?

Using qualitative content analysis and a dataset consisting of approximately 200 documents (mostly Chinese-language, including government reports, policy documents, legislative records, and news articles), the chapter argues that lack of soil pollution data and disagreement about the need for a soil pollution law slowed down agenda setting. Initially there was a lack of soil pollution data. Once such data had been collected by the government, it was considered a state secret and data were not released until 2013. Disagreement between the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Environmental Protection about the need for a soil pollution law was overcome after top-level political leaders started to pay serious attention to soil pollution, which happened after the completion of the soil pollution survey. By testing a set of China-specific MSF hypotheses, the chapter illustrates how the framework can be used to gain a better understanding of the policy process in autocracies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Multiple Streams Framework in China

A growing body of literature applies the MSF to China. Since Kingdon's (1984) seminal book, a total of 28 English-language peer-reviewed journal articles on the MSF in China have been published up until 2021.³ This is a small number compared to the English-language MSF literature on North America and Europe. In their literature review, Jones et al. (2016) found that 78 percent of all English-language journal articles on the MSF examine democracies in North America and Europe.

Similar to the broader MSF literature (Cairney and Jones 2016), existing English-language MSF studies on China mainly explain single cases of policy-making (van den Dool 2022). Most articles start by describing a specific policy problem, e.g., HIV/AIDS or education reform, rather than taking the MSF as starting point. Very few English-language MSF journal articles (Van den Dool 2022; Zhu 2008) explicitly aim to contribute to MSF theory development.

To move from merely explaining specific cases of policy change towards systematically deepening our understanding of China's policy process using the MSF, we need to review and possibly refine existing hypotheses to fit China's political context (Zohlnhöfer et al. 2022). China is a closed autocracy (Alizada et al. 2021), meaning that it lacks competitive, free, multi-party elections (Lührmann et al. 2018). The Communist Party controls the appointment of key positions in legislative and executive bodies and thus plays a dominant role in all aspects of policymaking (Saich 2015). Moreover, in authoritarian regimes there is limited space for political mobilization (Linz 2000). Information flows in China are controlled by high-level bureaucratic and political units through, *inter alia*, a licensing system for media outlets, mandatory real-name registration for internet users, blocked websites and platforms (e.g., Google and Twitter), bans on specific content, and (paid) online propaganda commentators (Roberts 2018). Censorship is especially common for issues deemed politically sensitive (Wade 2016). Based on these features, Van den Dool (2022) proposed a set of China-specific MSF hypotheses that build on Herweg et al. (2018) and overlap with expectations for the MSF in autocracies developed by Herweg et al. (2022). To allow for cross-case comparisons and to develop a consistent research program, the same China-focused MSF hypotheses will be used in this chapter. The hypotheses are listed in Table 11.1.

Compared to the generic hypotheses listed in Herweg et al. (2018), the first China-specific refinement is that whether a condition is considered a problem by policymakers is not just the product of an indicator changing to the negative, a harmful focusing event, or feedback, but is also shaped by the political sensitivity of the condition and subsequent censorship. If individuals try to frame a condition as problematic, but the issue or the frame happens to be or becomes politically sensitive, it will get censored. When this happens, neither policymakers nor other policy actors (including citizens) can publicly acknowledge, monitor, and attempt to address the condition. An example from China is the suppression of news about the adulteration of infant milk powder for several months in 2008, while the number of infants with kidney failure increased over time (Van den Dool 2019).

The second refinement of existing general MSF hypotheses is the need for a policy proposal to be non-regime threatening in addition to being technically feasible, financially viable, and consistent with existing norms and values of policymakers and citizens. Due to China's one-party system, certain policy proposals are off-limits and are likely to be censored quickly. An example is Charter 08, which proposed substantial constitutional change (Shirk 2011).

Third, given the one-party system, policymakers are restricted by the general ideology of the Communist Party. Consequently, I theorize that support by the Communist Party or by the State Council – China's highest administrative authority – contributes to a mature political stream. Likewise, a threat to the

survival of the Communist Party (rather than risk of not being re-elected in democracies) opens a problem window, whereas a political window opens in response to a perceived change in the national mood or leadership change in the Politburo (i.e., the Communist Party elite) or State Council (i.e., the executive elite).

METHODOLOGY

To deepen our understanding of the drivers of policy change in China, this chapter applies China-specific MSF hypotheses pertaining to agenda setting to a case study of the Soil Pollution Law, which was selected for several reasons. First, at the outset, this case showed potential to falsify existing MSF hypotheses as the problem, policy, and political streams appeared mature, yet there was no agenda change. China has experienced soil pollution for several decades (NEPA 1990). Fifteen other new environmental laws were passed between 1979 and 2009, e.g., the Forest Law in 1979, the Marine Environment Protection Law in 1982, the Water Pollution Law in 1984, the Air Pollution Law in 1987, the Solid Waste Law in 1995, the Noise Pollution Law in 1996, and the Desertification Law in 2001. This showed that there was at least some degree of high-level political attention and support for environmental protection throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, yet the soil pollution law was not included in the official decision agenda until 2013 and was not passed until 2018. Consequently, China's Soil Pollution Law can be considered an influential case (Gerring and Cojocaru 2016) in the sense that it has potential to falsify the MSF agenda setting hypothesis. The case also has empirical relevance as soil pollution is a tremendously important problem, threatening health and food security of more than a billion people. Applying the MSF to the Soil Pollution Law helps us understand the politics behind environmental policy-making in China, which may also be relevant for other urgent environmental issues such as climate change.

Data collection on policy processes in autocracies comes with several challenges, which shape the scope of this chapter. First, government transparency is limited: data that is available in democracies is not necessarily available in autocracies. An example is legislative proposals by members of Parliament. In China, only the topic (and sometimes excerpts) of such proposals is available, not the full content. Second, data may have been censored, manipulated, or deleted. For example, on social media, citizens may have discussed a scandal involving soil pollution, but if the content is considered a political threat, it may get deleted by the authors or by the internet platform. Third, while interviews are not impossible, such fieldwork has become increasingly difficult in recent years (Greitens and Truex 2020), especially during the Covid-pandemic which was ongoing at the time of writing this chapter. Fourth, data is often

scattered among different and ever-changing websites and databases, making data collection a time consuming and laborious process. For these reasons, I limit the scope of this chapter to the three streams, the policy window, and agenda setting. I thus exclude the coupling process and the role of the policy entrepreneur, both of which require much more extensive data collection, which goes beyond the resources available for the current study.

Table 11.1 operationalizes the selected hypotheses and lists relevant data. Almost all the data is in Chinese. To analyze the problem stream, I use the following variables and data. First, to identify relevant indicators, I use annual State of the Environment Reports published between 1989–2018, collected from the website of the Ministry of Ecology and Environment. Second, to analyze policy feedback, I rely on legislator complaints (Kingdon 1984) in the form of legislative proposals (*yi'an*), which are expressions of dissatisfaction with existing policies. I collected legislative proposals ($n = 10,644$) put forward by delegates of the National People's Congress (NPC) as documented in annual legislative reports (*daibiao tichu de yi'an de chuli yijian baogao*) and the response to such proposals as documented in the annual reports ($n = 25$) by the NPC Environment and Resource Protection Committee (*huanjing yu ziyuan baohu weiyuanhui*). This is one of the NPC special committees that reviews proposals for inclusion in the NPC legislative plan. Both datasets cover the period 1994 (which is the first year for which this data is digitally available) until 2018 (which is the year in which the Soil Pollution Law was adopted) and were collected through CNKI, which is a widely used database for academic and non-academic periodicals in China. Third, data on focusing events and censorship is sourced from China Digital Times, which is a California-based website that publishes content that “has been or is in danger of being censored in China” (China Digital Times n.d.). I use this source because of the sensitivity of environmental issues in China and soil pollution in particular. Even if sensitive news gets published, it is not uncommon for previously published news on sensitive topics to be no longer available. Therefore, instead of using Chinese newspapers' archives, I use China Digital Times to identify focusing events and evidence of censorship.

To analyze the policy stream, I rely on two datasets. To identify proposals, I use the abovementioned dataset of legislative proposals. To assess whether proposals were perceived as financially viable, technically feasible, and consistent with existing norms and values of policymakers, I rely on the annual NPC-ERPC reports and official legislative records pertaining to the Soil Pollution Law, including the official justification of the bill (NPC-ERPC 2017a), reports on the drafting progress (NPC-ERPC 2017b, 2018), and two drafts (NPC 2017a, 2017b).

To analyze the political stream and to identify political windows, I rely on Government Work Reports (*zhengfu gongzuo baogao*) and State Council

Legislative Plans from 2000–18, both of which are available on the State Council website. To assess Party support, I analyze reports presented at the five-year Party Congress in 2002, 2007, 2012, and 2017. I complement this with the abovementioned annual reports by the NPC Environment and Resource Protection Committee to unpack the legislative process and identify obstacles that prevent the Soil Pollution Law from inclusion in the formal legislative agenda.

To identify problem windows, which are theorized to open if a condition puts the survival of the Communist Party at risk, I analyze the official problem description by legislators, government, and the Party. I do so using the aforementioned NPC delegate proposals, the annual NPC-ERPC reports, China State of the Environment Reports, Government Work Reports, and Party Congress reports.

While it is difficult to verify the accuracy of the information in the documents listed in Table 11.1, given the nature of MSF hypotheses and the case study as well as the data collection strategy, there is limited risk that this will affect the chapter's conclusions. As pointed out by Zohlnhöfer et al. (2022), in analyzing the problem stream, the focus is on how the problem is *perceived* by policymakers. Therefore, the fact that we cannot verify the exact scale and nature of soil pollution in China does not matter for this chapter. Second, the case study does show disagreement regarding the making of the Soil Pollution Law, which signals that it was possible to criticize or object to this proposal, at least to some extent. Third, for data that is likely to be censored, I use China Digital Times to identify focusing events and evidence of censorship.

FINDINGS

Problem Stream: Policymakers Acknowledge Severe Soil Pollution

The annual State of the Environment reports show that policymakers in China considered soil pollution to be a problem at least as early as 1989, when the National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA) published the first State of the Environment Report. Throughout the 1990s, the reports stated that 6–10 million hectares of farmland suffered from industrial and urban waste pollution, which accounted for 6–10 percent of China's total farmland. This is considerable given that some of the reports also mentioned that China's population far exceeds its available arable land. Soil pollution was described as “increasing in severity day by day. It has become a restriction for the sustainable development of China's rural economy and society” (SEPA 2007, 83). However, in the 2000s, these reports no longer specified the hectares of polluted land.

Table 11.1 Operationalization of MSF hypotheses⁴

Hypotheses	Variables (and data)
<i>Problem stream</i> A condition reaches the policymaking agenda if an indicator changes to the negative, a harmful focusing event occurs, or if a government program does not work as expected, unless the condition is politically sensitive and censored.	Indicator(s): China State of the Environment Reports 1989–2018 (<i>Zhongguo huanjing zhangkuang gongbao</i>). Policy feedback: NPC delegate proposals (<i>yi'an</i>) and NPC-ERPC reports (1994–2018). Focusing events: China Digital Times (2004–18). Censorship: China Digital Times (2004–18).
<i>Policy stream</i> A proposal reaches the policymaking agenda if the proposal is non-regime threatening, financially viable, technically feasible, and consistent with existing norms and values of policymakers.	Proposals: NPC delegate proposals (<i>yi'an</i>) and NPC-ERPC reports (1994–2018). Tone surrounding policy proposals: NPC-ERPC reports (1994–2018) and legislative records (i.e., official justification of the law, drafting reports, and drafts).
<i>Political stream</i> A policy proposal reaches the policymaking agenda if it fits the general ideology of top leaders in the Communist Party or the State Council.	Identification of support from the State Council and the Communist Party: Government Work Reports (2000–18), State Council Legislative Plans (2000–18), Party Congress reports (2002, 2007, 2012, 2017).
<i>Problem window</i> A policy window opens in the problem stream if a condition puts the survival of the Communist Party at risk.	Tone of problem description and proposals: NPC delegate proposals (<i>yi'an</i>) and NPC-ERPC reports (1994–2018); China State of the Environment Reports 1989–2018; Government Work Reports; Party Congress Reports.
<i>Political window</i> A policy window opens in the political stream as a result of a perceived change in the national mood or leadership change in the Politburo or State Council.	State of the Environment Reports, annual speeches by high-level political leaders.
<i>Agenda-setting</i> An issue reaches the agenda if (a) a problem or political window opens; (b) the streams are ready for coupling; and (c) a policy entrepreneur promotes policy change.	See above-mentioned datasets for problem and political windows as well as the three streams. Note: policy entrepreneur and coupling are not included in the analysis due to limited data availability.

Source: Herweg et al., 2018; Van den Dool, 2022.

In addition to NEPA and the State Environmental Protection Administration (NEPA's successor), delegates to the National People's Congress (NPC) – China's legislature – repeatedly raised the problem of soil pollution. Evidence of this is provided in annual reports of proposals put forward by NPC delegates and by the annual reports of the NPC Environment and Resource Protection Committee. In the context of the MSF, these proposals serve as government feedback in the sense that legislators supposedly bring forward societal concerns (Kingdon 1984). NPC delegates first raised soil pollution in 2006, when several delegates stated that “China's soil pollution situation is already quite severe” (NPC-ERPC 2007a, 89). In 2007, delegate Jinglong Yu stated that

“soil pollution in China is intensifying, seriously threatening ecological safety, food safety, and human safety” (NPC-ERPC 2007b). Likewise, in 2008, delegate Xihua Huang stated that “along with population increase and rapid economic development, China's soil pollution problem is rather prominent and already threatens human health and life safety. It seriously impacts rural industrial production and land resources usage. It restricts the sustainable development of the economy, society, and the environment” (NPC-ERPC 2009, 121). From 2011 until 2018, every year, NPC delegates stretched the severity of soil pollution in China and the number of delegates involved in expressing these concerns grew over time (see Figure 11.1).

In response to these proposals, the NPC Environment and Resource Protection Committee repeatedly acknowledged the severity of soil pollution. In 2006, the committee stated that “China's soil, especially rural areas, is exposed to multiple pollution threats and is not yet subject to law” (NPC-ERPC 2007a, 90). In 2008, the committee wrote that soil pollution prevention and control was a “weak link in China's environmental protection work” (NPC-ERPC 2009, 121). In 2011, the committee stated that “the overall situation of China's soil pollution is severe and should be paid attention to” (NPC-ERPC 2012, 112). In 2014, the committee argued that “the soil pollution problem is a key difficulty of deep societal concern and a concern of the people” (NPC-ERPC 2015, 112). Likewise, in 2015, the committee stated that “China's current soil environment situation is not hopeful. Pollution incidents are frequently occurring, which constitutes a threat to the people's health and the nation's ecological safety” (NPC-ERPC 2016, 169).

There have been multiple incidents involving soil pollution that fit the definition of focusing events as sudden, rare, harmful events that are concentrated to a specific area and known to national-level policymakers and the public virtually simultaneously (Birkland 1997). During the 2000s, the State of the Environment Reports included statistics on the number of “soil pollution incidents”. The number fluctuated between 0 and 16 per year. However, the reports do not provide details regarding the scale, location, or nature of these incidents. Nevertheless, the China Digital Times dataset includes several focusing events. In May 2013, government authorities in southern China's Guangdong province found excessive amounts of cadmium in rice from Hunan province, which sparked widespread concern over food safety (China Digital Times 2013a). In August the same year, news media reported that over the course of just a few years, 26 people had died from cadmium poisoning in a village in Hunan province (China Digital Times 2013b). In 2016, state media reported that hundreds of children at a school in Changzhou, Jiangsu province, fell ill due to soil pollution (China Digital Times 2016).

The 2013 soil pollution focusing events may have contributed to increased attention from NPC delegates to soil pollution. The number of proposals

for a soil pollution law increased from two (supported by 69 delegates) in 2013 to seven (supported by 215 delegates) in 2014. However, the 2013–18 legislative agenda was approved in September 2013. Hence, the increase in proposals in 2014 cannot explain legislative agenda setting. Moreover, the NPC Environment and Resource Protection Committee reports and legislative records pertaining to the Soil Pollution Law do not refer to any specific soil pollution incident.

Importantly, although soil pollution was widely considered a problem, for a long time there was no consistent indicator that captured its scale, nature, and severity. Therefore, in 2005, the State Environmental Protection Administration launched a national soil pollution survey. In the years during which the survey was ongoing, rather than sharing survey results, the State Environmental Protection Agency included the number of soil samples taken in its annual State of the Environment Reports. While the survey was finished in 2010 (Ministry of Environmental Protection 2010), the results were not published.

The soil survey results were initially considered a state secret. A lawyer named Zhengwei Dong requested the survey results under China's Government Information Openness Regulations in January 2013 (Dong 2013a), but the Ministry of Environment denied the request, stating that the data were state secrets. Dong subsequently filed an Administrative Reconsideration Request. However, in May 2013, the Ministry responded that the data were "temporarily managed as state secret" because it needed more time to verify the data, without providing a timeline for data release (Dong 2013b).

When some of the soil pollution data were finally released, the indicators were worse than previously reported. In December 2013, the State Council (i.e., China's highest executive government organization) held a press conference on the survey, during which it was revealed that 3.33 million hectares were affected by medium or severe soil pollution (State Council Information Office 2013). However, when the official soil pollution report was finally released in April 2014, the problem turned out to be even larger. The report stated that 16.1 percent of all soil samples and 19.4 percent of *farmland* samples exceeded pollution standards. The report described this situation as "not optimistic, with rather serious pollution in some areas. The soil environment and quality of farmland are bleak" (Ministry of Environmental Protection 2014, 1). Yet, the five-page report only provided a general overview of the survey and did not detail the severity and type of pollution per location.

Additional research is needed to explain why the Ministry of Environmental Protection changed its attitude towards the data as being a "state secret" to "temporary state secret" to partial release. Several plausible explanations are worth exploring further. First, there was societal pressure to release the data. The aforementioned lawyer announced in news media that he considered filing

an administrative lawsuit to force the government to release the data. Second, under China's existing legal framework, there was no legal basis for classifying the survey results as a (temporary) state secret. Third, if the reluctance of the Ministry of Environmental Protection to release the data was due to survey verification issues, these may have been addressed over time, increasing the willingness of the Ministry of Environmental Protection to release the data.

In sum, the severity of soil pollution in China has been known and acknowledged by ministerial-level government officials at least since 1989. However, compared to other environmental problems such as water pollution and air pollution, as evidenced by the annual State of the Environment Reports, the issue of soil pollution received relatively little government attention. This and the fact that soil pollution is not as easy to notice as other forms of pollution may have slowed down the agenda setting process. Members of the legislature had raised the issue of soil pollution since 2006. However, there was no consistent indicator for soil pollution and soil pollution was considered a politically sensitive problem. It was not until 2013–14 that some basic data about the scale and nature of the problem was released.

Policy Stream: Proposals for a Soil Pollution and Prevention Law

To address the problem of soil pollution, since the mid-2000s, proposals have been made to draft a new law on the issue. The making of a soil pollution and prevention law has been proposed by NPC delegates at least as early as 2007. As shown in Figure 11.1, delegates submitted proposals for such a law in 2007, 2008, and yearly from 2011 until 2018. The number of proposals (displayed as column) and the number of delegates (displayed as line) supporting these proposals increased over time.⁵ No proposals for a soil pollution law were put forward in 2009 and 2010.

Based on the MSF, the likelihood of a policy proposal to reach the agenda is shaped by the proposal's financial viability, technical feasibility, and consistency with existing norms and values. In the context of China, an additional requirement is that a proposal needs to be non-regime threatening. The fact that proposals for a soil pollution law were included in publicly available records of the NPC shows that it is not considered regime threatening. Perceived financial viability, technical feasibility, and consistency with existing norms and values can be assessed by reviewing records of the legislative process. Based on the legislative history of the law, several general themes are apparent.

A theme that emerged prior to and throughout the formal legislative process was who should be responsible for soil pollution and soil restoration. Before the draft was reviewed by the NPC, in academic publications, scholars had proposed to hold polluters responsible for pollution, which would require a clear scope of responsibilities, standards, and penalties (e.g., Hu 2008). During the

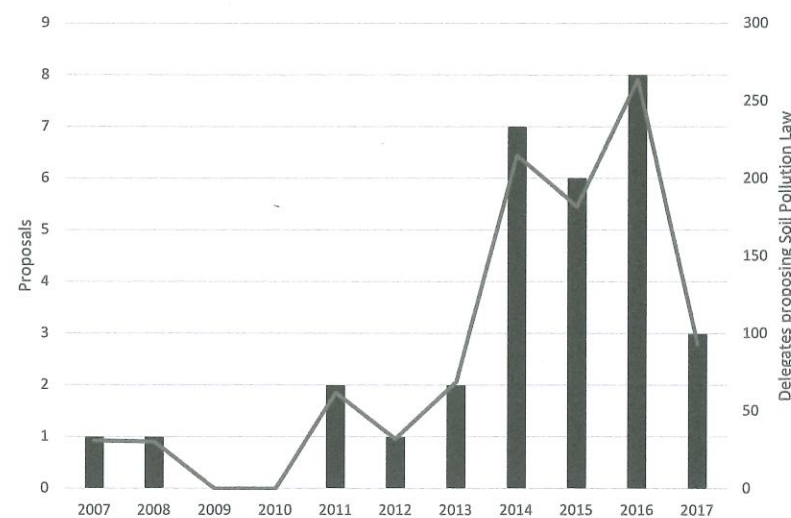


Figure 11.1 Proposals (columns) by NPC delegates (line) to draft a soil pollution law (2007–2017)

legislative process, the NPC Environment and Resource Protection Committee (2017a) stated that the law should “clarify the responsibility of each party” and “solve and assign expenses for prevention and cure”. Nevertheless, experts and delegates advocated for further clarification of responsibility, especially in case of pollution of agricultural land (NPC-ERPC 2017b; NPC-ERPC 2018). Moreover, there were requests for increasing the monetary penalties for soil pollution. A related point of contention was funding for soil remediation. Given that soil pollution threatens food security and food safety, it is important to restore polluted farmland, but doing so is costly. Early drafts of the law contained an article on funding. However, during the NPC reviews, some NPC delegates and the Ministry of Finance requested changes to the funding mechanism.

Other themes that were discussed before and during the legislative process include standard setting and coordination between different government actors. Standard setting is important if polluters are to be held responsible and if public health is to be protected, yet local variation in soil conditions and soil pollution made standard setting difficult. Because soil pollution is a complex issue that involves government agencies working on environment, agriculture, land management, and other areas, delegates called for clarifying implementation and enforcement tasks.

Thus, despite some substantive challenges, NPC delegates and the NPC Environment and Resource Protection Committee repeatedly advocated for the drafting of a soil pollution law. None of the challenges encountered seemed unsolvable or decreased the enthusiasm for the creation of a soil pollution law. Moreover, scholars actively searched for solutions to these challenges, especially through comparative research of other legal systems elsewhere in the world, especially Japan, the US, and European countries. Some of these solutions later emerged in the draft law, e.g., the polluter pays principle and government funding for soil remediation.

Political Stream: Support by Top-level Leaders After Completion of Soil Pollution Survey

As theorized above, agenda setting is more likely if a policy proposal fits the general ideology of top leaders in the Communist Party or the State Council. In China, most laws are drafted by the State Council and national-level ministries and commissions (Van den Dool 2019). The State Council is chaired by the premier and consists of the heads of national-level departments (which includes ministries and commissions), most of whom are Communist Party members. To assess the degree to which the proposed soil pollution law was consistent with the general ideology of the State Council and the Communist Party, I analyzed Government Work Reports (2000–18), State Council Legislative Plans (2000–18), and official reports presented at the National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (2002–17).

Based on Government Work Reports and State Council Legislative Plans, the State Council started to pay serious attention to soil pollution from 2012. Government Work Reports (*zhengfu gongzuo baogao*), which summarize government activities of the past year and identify tasks for the coming year, mentioned environmental pollution throughout the period 2000–20, but it was not until 2012 that *soil* pollution was briefly mentioned. Soil pollution was subsequently mentioned in the Government Work Report every year from 2012–18. Likewise, the State Council Legislative Plan does not include the Soil Pollution Law until 2012.

One plausible explanation why it took until 2012 for increased State Council attention to the issue of soil pollution is disagreement among the departments under the State Council about the necessity of a soil pollution law. Initially, the NPC Environment and Resource Protection Committee supported proposals for a soil pollution law. In fact, as early as 2004, the Committee proposed that “relevant departments strengthen research on soil pollution prevention and control legislation” (NPC-ERPC 2005, 80). In 2007, the Committee stated that the State Environmental Protection Administration had established a drafting group and that legislative work was ongoing (NPC-ERPC 2007b). Moreover,

it proposed to include the soil pollution law in the official legislative plan. This is significant because the majority of bills in the NPC legislative plan is passed at some point (Van den Dool 2019). In 2008, the Committee reported that the State Environmental Protection Agency was conducting research on drafting a soil pollution law and it proposed that the relevant State Council department put forward relevant legislative suggestions (NPC-ERPC 2009). In 2009–10, no proposals for drafting a soil pollution law were reported and the issue was not mentioned in the NPC Environment and Resource Protection Committee reports.

However, in 2011 and 2012, the Committee reported that the Ministry of Environmental Protection and the Ministry of Agriculture disagreed about the need for a soil pollution law (NPC-ERPC 2012, 2013). The former supported the drafting of a dedicated law on soil pollution, but the Ministry of Agriculture argued that “although strengthening soil pollution is very necessary and important for ensuring the quality and safety of agricultural products and the sustainable development of agriculture”, it disagreed about how to address the issue (NPC-ERPC 2012, 111–12). It argued that “the key to prevent and control soil pollution is to make great efforts to manage the different sources of pollution” and therefore the ministry proposed to “seriously enforce supervision and improve relevant rules” and to “not formulate a soil pollution law” (NPC-ERPC 2012, 111–112).

The aforementioned 2012 shift in State Council attention to soil pollution is most likely the result of the soil pollution survey results. In October 2012, the State Council convened a meeting on the soil pollution survey results, during which it was stated that “China’s soil environment situation must give rise to high level attention” (State Council General Office 2012). From late 2012, top-level political attention to the development of a soil pollution law increased. An official drafting group consisting of environmental and legal experts was established in November 2012 (Cheng 2013). In January 2013, the State Council General Office (2013) released a soil protection work plan, which opened by referring to the soil pollution survey and which included as one of the main tasks to “research and draft specialized legislation on soil environmental protection”.

The Soil Pollution Law was subsequently included in the NPC legislative plan (2013–18). In 2014, the NPC Environment and Resource Protection Committee – which was in charge of overseeing the drafting process – reported that legislative work was making progress and that the Committee would “earnestly listen to opinions from different sides, actively take in views and suggestions from NPC delegates, and finish the drafting work as soon as possible” (NPC-ERPC 2015, 109). The Committee also requested that selected provincial governments develop local-level legislation, which would serve as input for the national-level soil pollution law (NPC-ERPC 2015, 109).

While the data show a State Council attention shift in 2012, there is no evidence of a similar shift of attention within the Communist Party. Soil pollution was very briefly mentioned in President’s Hu Jintao’s report to the National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2007. However, in his 2012 report presented at the National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, soil pollution was briefly mentioned again, with almost identical phrasing, suggesting that there is no evidence of increased attention by the Party Congress in 2012.

Regarding the political window, there is no evidence that a leadership change triggered increased attention for the soil pollution law in 2012. The Ministry of Environmental Protection – and its predecessor the State Environmental Protection Administration – was headed by Shengxian Zhou from 2005 until 2015. Under Zhou, especially during 2006–08, the ministry increased its attention to soil pollution, which is evidenced not only by more text dedicated to soil pollution in the annual State of the Environment Reports, but also by the launch of the first soil pollution survey and the establishment of the aforementioned legislative drafting group. While the Ministry of Agriculture did change leadership in 2006 and 2009, there is no evidence that leadership change triggered increased attention to soil pollution. In 2006, Zhengcai Sun became Minister of Agriculture. There is no evidence that Sun paid attention to soil pollution during this appointment. His successor Changfu Han initially barely mentioned “soil” or “pollution” in his annual reports, but this changed in 2012, when he mentioned “pollution” five times, including heavy metal soil pollution.

Eventually, the draft law was submitted to the NPC Standing Committee (NPC-SC) for review. In China, consistent with the Legislation Law, most laws are deliberated three times before voting. The NPC-SC usually meets every other month. Figure 11.2 shows how the draft moved through the NPC. It was reviewed in June 2017, December 2017, and August 2018 and adopted in August 2018.

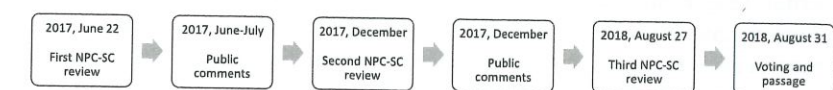


Figure 11.2 Review of the Soil Pollution Law by the NPC Standing Committee (NPC-SC)

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This chapter applied a set of China-specific MSF hypotheses to a case study of China’s Soil Pollution Law to illustrate how the framework can be used in

an autocracy while providing insight into China's policy process. In particular, the chapter aimed to explain why it took until 2013 for the Soil Pollution Law to be included in the official legislative plan. The chapter identifies obstacles to and driving forces of legislative agenda setting by China's National People's Congress. I use the Multiple Streams Framework because it provides a systematic approach and considers a wide range of explanatory factors, including indicator deterioration, focusing events, feedback on government policy, availability of feasible solutions, party ideology, national mood, and leadership change.

Through document analysis, the chapter showed that although the problem of soil pollution had been acknowledged by policymakers since the 1990s and by legislators since the mid-2000s, it was not until 2013 that the Soil Pollution Law was included in the official legislative agenda. The case study identifies obstacles to agenda setting. First, initially there was a lack of soil pollution data. Once such data had been collected by the government, it was considered a state secret. Data were not released until 2013. Second, there was disagreement between policymakers at the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Environmental Protection about the need for a soil pollution law. This impasse was overcome after top-level political leaders started to pay serious attention to soil pollution, which happened after the completion of the soil pollution survey. Table 11.2 summarizes the findings.

At first sight, these results do not seem very different from what we expect to see in democracies. First, the case study illustrates the importance of data, or indicators, in the context of the MSF. As shown by DeLeo and Duarte (2021), while worsening indicators can lead to agenda setting, increased politicization decreases attention from policymakers. The case of China's Soil Pollution Law is similar in the sense that soil pollution data was perceived by policymakers to threaten their interests. As a result, such data was not released, which facilitated high-level political leaders to ignore the issue and contributed to the lack of sustained high-level political attention. Second, the case study shows internal disagreement among policy makers that likely slowed down the Soil Pollution Law from being included in the NPC legislative agenda. Like in democracies, such impasses are not uncommon in China (Truex 2018). One of the reasons for such gridlocks in China is departmentalism (*benwei zhuyi*), i.e., a tendency to and even an expectation that government departments focus on their own mission and agenda (Shirk 1993; Tanner 1994).

However, a major difference with democracies is that, generally speaking, in democracies, there are multiple ways for news media, industry, citizens, NGOs, and other non-official policy actors to either collect data themselves or request access to government data. As shown in the case study, soil pollution was considered a politically sensitive issue and the soil pollution survey results were treated as state secrets. Although the soil pollution survey started

Table 11.2 Case study results: Hypotheses and evidence

Hypotheses	Evidence
<i>Problem stream</i> A condition reaches the policymaking agenda if an indicator changes to the negative, a harmful focusing event occurs, or if a government program does not work as expected, unless the condition is politically sensitive and censored.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Soil pollution law included in legislative agenda in 2013. • Indicator: In the 1990s, 6–10% of farmland reported as polluted; 2014 survey results show 19.4% of farmland samples exceed standards. • Focusing events: In the 2000s, 0–16 incidents/year; 2013 cadmium rice; 2016 Changzhou soil pollution incident. • Policy feedback: Concerns expressed by legislators in 2006–2008 and 2011–18. • Censorship: Soil pollution survey from 2005–10, results not released until 2013–14; results treated as state secret.
<i>Political stream</i> A policy proposal reaches the policymaking agenda if it fits the general ideology of top leaders in the Communist Party or the State Council.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy proposal included in the legislative agenda in 2013 after expression of high-level support. • Ideological fit: High-level attention to soil pollution from March 2012 when issue is mentioned in Government Work Report.
<i>Policy stream</i> A proposal reaches the policymaking agenda if the proposal is non-regime threatening, financially viable, technically feasible, and consistent with existing norms and values of policymakers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposal did not reach legislative agenda until 2013, despite meeting the policy stream criteria. • Non-regime threatening: Since mid-2000s, soil pollution law discussed in publicly available legislative reports. • Financial viability and technical feasibility: Substantive issues, but not discussed as insurmountable. • Value consistency: Law proposed by policymakers and legislature, but resistance by Ministry of Agriculture.
<i>Political window</i> A policy window opens in the political stream as a result of a perceived change in the national mood or leadership change in the Politburo or State Council.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No political windows have been observed. • Leadership change: Leadership change in 2013, but shift in attention happened in 2012.
<i>Problem window</i> A policy window opens in the problem stream if a condition puts the survival of the Communist Party at risk.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No problem windows have been observed. • Soil pollution described as severe, but no evidence of threat to Party survival.
<i>Agenda-setting</i> An issue reaches the agenda if (a) a problem or political window opens; (b) the streams are ready for coupling; and (c) a policy entrepreneur promotes policy change.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Soil Pollution Law reached the decision agenda in 2013. • No open window. • Streams all mature: severe problem, soil pollution law proposal, high-level political support. • No evidence of policy entrepreneur.

around 2006, partial results were not released until late 2013. If more effective

mechanisms had existed that allowed the public to either collect data or exert pressure to get access to government data, it is plausible that the Soil Pollution Law would have reached the official NPC legislative plan several years earlier.

This case study is among the first to systematically test China-specific MSF hypotheses developed in Van den Dool (2022). Although the case study's findings contribute to a better understanding of China's policy process, the chapter does have limitations. Most importantly, due to lack of data, I have not examined policy entrepreneurship and coupling. Future studies could explore this through network analysis using policy documents, news articles, social media data, and/or journal articles. Moreover, given that this is a single case, additional studies are needed to establish the generalizability of the findings, especially regarding the role of data (i.e., indicators) and censorship in policymaking.

NOTES

1. I have presented this chapter at several conferences. I am grateful for comments that I received on these occasions. This research project has benefited from research assistance provided by W. Zhang, which has been funded by the Undergraduate Studies Office Summer Research Scholars Program and the Center for the Study of Contemporary China at Duke Kunshan University.
2. Search conducted in May 2022.
3. Search conducted in May 2022, using Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus, Web of Science, and WorldCat. Search terms: "multiple streams framework", "multiple streams analysis", and "multiple streams approach".
4. Except from some data collected from China Digital Times, all documents are in Chinese. Quotes used from these documents in the findings section have been translated to English by the author.
5. The total number of NPC delegates varies slightly over time, but is just below 3,000 individuals.
6. Except from some data collected from China Digital Times, all documents are in Chinese. Quotes used from these documents in the findings section have been translated to English by the author.

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PART III

Subnational and international levels