

The Issue Attention Cycle Model and Corruption Issues in Canada and Kazakhstan

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DOI:10.13165/VPA-16-15-2-06

Abstract. *The present research paper attempts to apply the issue attention cycle model of Anthony Downs to corruption issues in the contexts of Canada as a democracy, and Kazakhstan as a soft authoritarian regime. The major contributions to the existing body of knowledge include: 1. replicating the Down's model to analyse the corruption issue across the two countries; and 2. attempting to observe cycle variations depending on the nature of political regimes, and thus holding the regime as an independent variable as applied to the Down's model.*

Keywords: *attention cycles, Anthony Downs, political regime, Kazakhstan, Canada, corruption*

Raktažodžiai: *dėmesio ciklai, Anthony Downsas, politiniai režimai, Kazachstanas, Kanada, korupcija.*

I. Introduction

Policy attention tends to wax and wane. The notion of corruption may be subject to an “issue attention cycle” (De Sousa et al. 2009). Arguably, one of the most cited models developed within the context of American public policy discourse is a systematic “issue attention cycle” of Anthony Downs (Downs, 1972). Based on this model, each of the majority of important domestic political issues that momentarily leap into public view tend to remain there for certain time, and then gradually fade from public attention. The development of American attitudes toward environmental quality sets an example of this model. The “issue attention cycle” comprises the following five stages:

1. **The pre-problem stage.** This preliminary stage marks the existence of a highly undesirable social condition, which has not become under wide public attention yet, though certain experts may already be aware of it. Primary examples are *racism, poverty and malnutrition* in the US.
2. **Alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm.** Dramatic series of events lead to public awareness about the repercussions of a particular problem. This sudden awareness is accompanied with *euphoric enthusiasm* about the social ability to solve the issue within a short time framework.
3. **Realizing the cost of significant progress.** This stage assumes gradual realization that the cost of ensuring the resolution of a certain issue can be very high, both in financial terms and substantial sacrifices by larger social groups. An example would be the problem of traffic congestion is primarily caused by intensifying use of cars. At the same time, however, mobility of people increases as they purchase more vehicles.
4. **Gradual weakening of intense public attention.** As people eventually understand how difficult and costly it may be to solve the issue, they simply tend to become discouraged, positively threatened by contemplating the issue, or become bored at the end. Thus public attention toward this particular issue wanes. At the same time, a new issue enters the 2nd stage consequently claiming more public attention.
5. **The post-problem stage.** An issue that has now been replaced by transitions into a “prolonged limbo” – less attention or irregular express of interest.

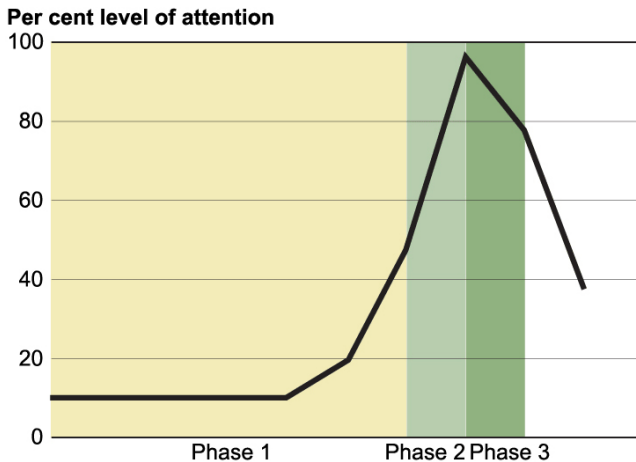


Figure 1. The phases of the Issue Attention Cycle Model

Source: UNEP.ORG (<http://www.unep.org/ieacp/iea/training/manual/module3/1061.aspx>)

The policy problem is to improve efficiency of the government by analysing corruption issue attention cycles to allow the government to use its limited resources, e.g. time and human resources etc., more efficiently. As a spike in interest from social media is anticipated based on historical patterns, the government could use its resources to better craft anti-corruption measures and/or policy in order to satisfy or even exceed social expectations with regard to the corruption problem. Similarly, when a “quiet” cycle of issue attention is anticipated, the government could use this “window of opportunity” to divert its limited resources toward other important issues, such as unemployment, healthcare, education etc.

The purpose of this research proposal is to study the applicability of the Down’s model to corruption issues in Canada as a democracy and Kazakhstan, as a soft authoritarian regime, over an 18-year time span (1997–2014). The ontological approach is the *critical realist*, given the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods (please refer to Section III for the research methods employed). In terms of epistemology, the combination of *empiricism* and *constructivism* (in a sense that the selection of particular scandals depends on the researcher’s subjective perceptions) is employed.

The scope of research is to analyse corruption issue attention cycle trends across the two countries – Canada and Kazakhstan **along the political and administrative dimensions of corruption including both central and territorial governments**. The concept of corruption will embrace the following major policy areas: education, health, social policy, defines and national security, and economic policy (including PPP, government involvement in the private sector etc.). It is also important to highlight possible difficulties to analyse trends in specific regions across Kazakhstan due to political reasons, as well as limited access to the Internet, thus possibly causing constraints in terms of access to data, and provinces in Canada, due to the language constraint as in the province of Quebec.

The research question is as follows: does the Down’s issue attention cycle model apply to studying corruption issues across two countries – Canada and Kazakhstan? The expected outcome will be convergence with or divergence from the model (See Section IV). **Particularly, the research will aim to test whether the two analysed countries produce patterns as suggested by the Down’s model.** The study offers both theoretical and practical significance. From the theoretical standpoint, the Down’s model has certain gaps. First, it was developed rather in an anecdotal fashion, lacking sound empirical-based evidence analysis (Howlett 1997). For instance, when data from the Canadian context was incorporated along two policy issues – nuclear energy and acid rain – based on using cross-correlation coefficients, that failed to reveal the significant lagged pattern to be expected under the Downsian model. Second, the model was primarily constructed around US domestic environmental issues without taking the cross-national comparison perspective into consideration, thus with limited replicability.

To address these gaps, this study will seek to analyse the applicability of the Down’s model using a more robust research methodology (please refer below),

with a greater degree of replicability and comparability. Next, in terms of practical significance, the analysed cycles should allow observing certain patterns in the level of attention from social media over a period of time. The proposed study contributes to the existing body of knowledge primarily in two ways. First, it replicates the Down's model to analyse the corruption issue across the two countries. Second, the study will attempt to observe cycle variations depending on the nature of political regime, in this case democratic versus soft authoritarian regimes.

II. Defining major concepts and typology

Public attention implies scarce resources, such as time, that citizens willingly allocate to contemplating about a public issue (Ripberger 2011). Public attention can be measured either in terms of relative intensity, e.g. the amount of resources employed per time unit, or resources employed towards a particular policy issue vis-à-vis another one competing for attention. Finally, public attention is viewed to change quickly reflecting on fluctuations in political reality without the need for change in public belief structures or values.

Agenda-setting is the first and possibly the most important stage of the policy cycle (Howlett, 2009). This stage has a decisive impact on the entire policy cycle stages that follow. The manner and form of how issues are defined and recognized largely determine whether and how these will be ultimately addressed by policy experts.

Corruption can be broadly defined as the abuse of public power for private gain (Rose-Ackerman & Truex 2012, Shah & Schacter 2004); “misuse of entrusted power” (Transparency International 2014); it is a kind of “seismograph” measuring the level of legality and morality in the society (Banciu 2007). Corruption has also been identified as a costly diversion of limited resources; it is a symptom of deeper problems of ways in which political leadership manages key financial functions (Heilbrunn 2004).

III. Research Design Methodology and Data Collection

The major rationale for this research paper is the inherently “intuitive appeal”^a that quite well applies to the operationalization of the Anthony Down's *Issue attention cycle* model. Furthermore, the initial model did not incorporate much empirically tested findings, but rather generic observations and anecdotal evidence. Equally important is that the model's construction exclusively within the domain of environmental issues in the US context. It is therefore important to develop a series

^a As coined in the course of the Workshop “On the Future of the Multiple Streams Framework: Moving Policy Theory Forward”, October 16, 2014, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, NUS Singapore.

of empirical findings related to an alternative area still meeting the basic criteria set by the model and also to encompass various country contexts for the purpose of comparability and replicability.

Regarding the methodology, the present paper includes time series in the following two country cases – Kazakhstan and Canada. The data analysed will be collected using the two following sources:

1. The Google search engine, with the time span from January 1, 1997 to November 25, 2014. The goal of using this tool is to generate data with regard to the overall number of mentions of the term “corruption” as applied to each of the two countries by year. For instance, to find the number of mentions for 1998, the Google search parameters would include the time period from January 1 to December 31, 1998.

Ripberger (2011) developed a new indicator on public attention based on using Internet search tools. The vast volumes of real-time information and data on the Internet may serve as a close proxy about how mass communication and the public interact in political systems. In particular, the Google search engine, being the most popular search tool across the globe, appears to be a valid indicator of public attentiveness.

One specific drawback of using Internet search should be emphasized. It is estimated that 77% of adults are viewed as Internet users. With regard to representation, these are more likely to be young, white, well educated, wealthy people. The primary concern, therefore, is about minority population, the elderly, poor, and uneducated who are more likely to be systematically underrepresented when using this tool, leading to potentially biased findings and data.

Specifically, the following Internet search techniques will be employed:

- the words “*corruption*” and “*Canada*” will be searched using the Google engine to generate data and draw conclusions on the Canadian context, with the corruption concept embracing political and administrative corruption, but not *corrupt morale* and *noble cause* corruption.
- The words “*korruptsia*”^b and “*Kazakhstan*” will be searched using the Google engine to generate data and draw conclusions on the Kazakhstan context,
- Both domestic and international web-sites and other e-sources will be analysed that mention specific corruption-related issues related to Canada^c and Kazakhstan,

^b This word denotes “corruption” in both Kazakh and Russian languages

^c Canada is an interesting case, as numerous international sources (inc. BBC) raise instances of Canadian corporations involved in bribery scandals in developing nations such as Lesotho, China etc.

- Academic publications, such as books and articles^d, are excluded from the search, except for those publications that are issued on the web-sites of certain NGOs and/or political organizations on “hot” and very recent corruption issues which appeared in the same year.
- When using the Google search engine, entries with exactly the same title(-s) will be recorded once only, to avoid the inaccuracy which would otherwise be caused by repetition. Particularly, given the rapidly growing role of social media and an increasing number of online news web-sites and blogs, it is reasonable to expect that more repetitions will be expected as time passes. It is not uncommon to observe online articles with exactly the same title and/or content published by various news agencies.

2. Parliamentary legal database, with the time span from January 1997 through November 2014 in the context of Kazakhstan, and from January 2001 to November 2014^e in Canada, with the purpose to generate data on the number of corruption-related laws adopted over the period in each country context. In the context of Kazakhstan, the legislation database offered by the www.adilet.kz web-site is employed first, to generate data on the overall number of all legal and normative acts, presidential decrees and other ministerial documents related to corruption, and second, to aggregate data on the number of corruption laws and legal acts specifically to ensure greater comparability with Canadian data sets (Adilet, 2014). In the context of Canada the major source of corruption-related legislative database is *LEGIS info* (Parliament of Canada, 2014 a). Furthermore, the number of court-processed cases with corruption mentioned will be analysed using the court case database offered by <http://caselaw.canada.globe24h.com/> (Figure 4).

The data collected from both sources will then be aggregated to observe either convergence with or divergence from the Down’s model. Particularly, the following hypotheses will be tested:

1. The Down’s model is expected to hold true in the context of Canada, as this nation maintains a democratic regime, similarly to the US, and thus the role of social media is assumed to play a significant role in shaping corruption policy agenda.
2. The Down’s model is not expected to hold true in the context of Kazakhstan given its soft authoritarian regime. The role of social media, though increasingly important, is not expected to play a sufficiently significant role to impact corruption policy agenda.

^d Most books and articles published in a certain year tend to reflect on earlier issues, and if so included will lead to an inaccurate analysis of data.

^e Canada’s Parliament database “*LEGIS info*” allows analyzing data beginning January 2001. <http://www.parl.gc.ca/LegisInfo/Result.aspx?SearchText=corruption&BillIntroduction=2001-01-01%202012-12-31&Language=E&Mode=1>

3. The cycles which result from analysing parliamentary legal databases are expected to be in parallel with the cycles that emerge from analysing social media, i.e. Google search, though with a certain shift in time, both in Canada and Kazakhstan. It is natural to observe a time gap between a spike in interest among social media and the moment parliaments begin to respond with new laws.

Thus, the key variables are:

- the independent variables: time and the political regime,
- the dependent variable: the issue attention cycles.

The present research proposes “country” as the unit of analysis: the total number of mentions will be aggregated on an annual basis over the 18-year time span in order to observe an overall pattern of trends in issue attention cycles.

IV. Analysis and key findings

In this section, data on the total number of “corruption” mentions have been collected both for Canadian and Kazakhstan contexts. The search time span runs from January 1, 1997 through November 25, 2014 for both countries. The data collected have been plotted into a graph using the *Graph* software^f.

First of all, it is interesting to observe smooth and exponentially growing patterns of corruption-related issues appearing throughout the Internet social media in the Canadian context, which seems quite plausible given the democracy regime in place (Figure 2). The increasing numbers of “corruption” mentions over the time span can be well attributed to the growing role of social media in political and social lives. Findings from Figure 4 support a spike in attention to corruption issues: the number of cases heard in Canada’s courts with “corruption” mentioned more than doubled from 4 in 2009 to 9 in 2010.

Furthermore, it appears to roughly coincide with the first two stages of the Down’s model: stage 1 – from 1997 to 2010 (arbitrarily if the cut-off value of 50 mentions is used); and then stage 2 – since 2010 through 2014, moving into stage 3 until a tipping point is reached, after which gradual weakening of public attention (stage 4) is anticipated. Given the time constraint, the research paper only encompasses 18-year span, so more time is needed (around 12-15 more years) to fully observe the issue attention cycle completely. However, the findings already seem to support the validity of the first two stages of Down’s model in Canada’s democracy regime settings. Due to the nature of this pilot study, more research is needed to analyse a larger number of democracies with a wider time span. Therefore, **hypothesis 1 has been found to hold true.**

^f This easy-to-use software is available for free download: <https://www.padowan.dk/download/>

It may appear surprising, however, to observe a lack of parallel issue attention cycles that emerge from analysing (legislation) parliamentary databases in Canada (please refer to Figure 3 for the graph and Annex 3 for the data utilized). As the analysis suggests, the number of corruption-related bills introduced over the period from 2001 to 2014 has actually slightly declined from 4 bills in 2002 and 5 in 2004 to 3 and 2 in 2013 and 2014, respectively. This can be plausibly explained by a lack of pressing incentives on the part of the legislative branch to increase the number of legal bills introduced as a response to a spike in attention to the issue, due to the federative nature of Canada’s government. Thus, **hypothesis 3 does not hold true in the Canadian context.**

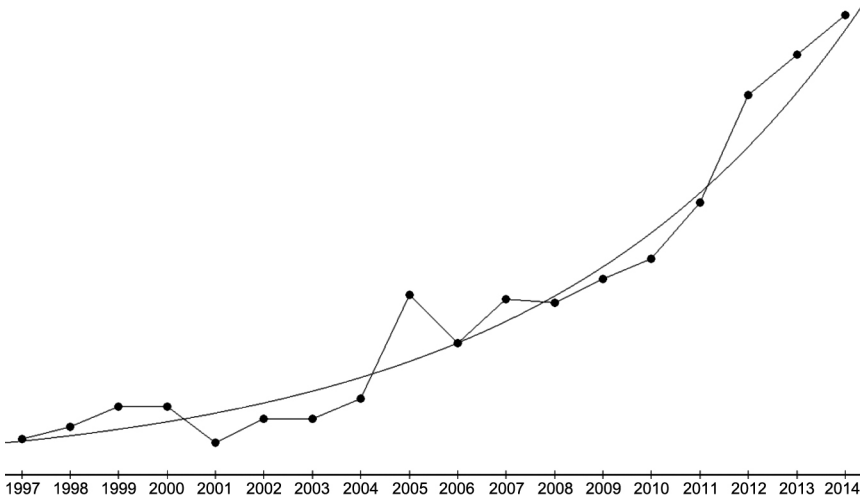


Figure 2. The total number of “corruption” mentions from Google Search, Canada, from January 1997 through November 2014

Note: 1997-9, 1998-12, 1999-17, 2000-17, 2001-8, 2002-14, 2003-14, 2004-19, 2005-45, 2006-33, 2007-44, 2008-43, 2009-49, 2010-54, 2011-68, 2012-95, 2013-105, 2014-115.
(Annex 1)

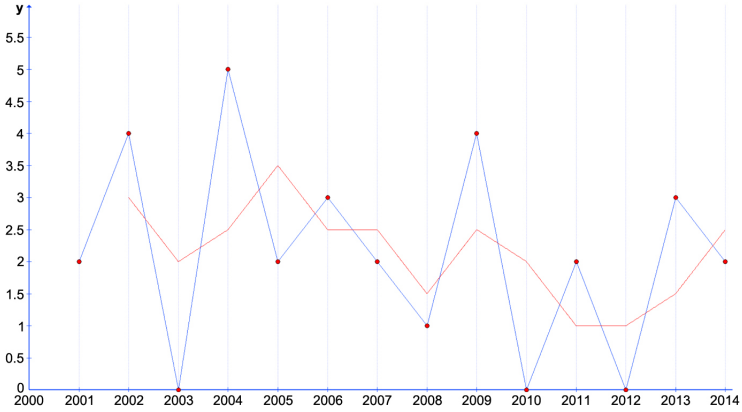


Figure 3. The total number of corruption-related bills adopted in Canada, 2001–2014

Adopted from: LEGIS info, Parliament of Canada
 (Please refer to Annex 3 for a table of data)

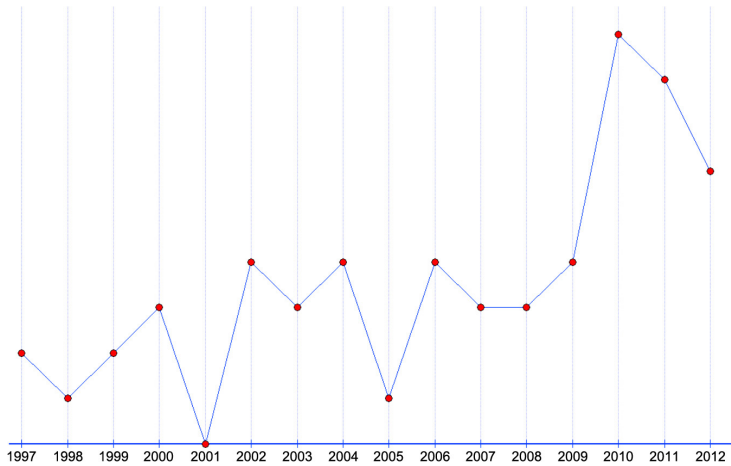


Figure 4. The number of cases with corruption mentioned in Canada's courts, 1997–2012

Adopted from: <http://caselaw.canada.globe24h.com/>

Note: no data for 2013 and 2014 found. Refer to Annex 4 for a table of data.

Second, regarding the context of Kazakhstan, it presents somewhat similarly exponential growing patterns as in the first country analysed (Figure 5). However, unlike the smooth patterns observed in the Canadian context, Google search patterns

for Kazakhstan over the observed period demonstrate “a jump” in the number of mentions from 77 in 2009 to 114 in 2010, or 48% increase, with another “jump” from 174 mentions in 2012 to 249 in 2013, or 43% increase. In terms of the Down’s Issue Attention Cycle model, the analysed period from 1997 to 2009 represents stage 1, while 2009–2014 fall under stage 2. Thus, **hypothesis 2 has not been found to hold true**.

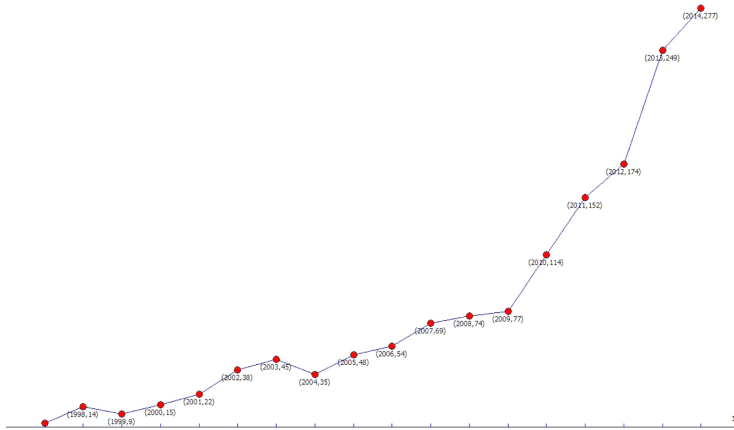


Figure 5. The total number of “corruption” mentions from Google Search, Kazakhstan, from January 1997 through November 2014

Note: 1997-3, 1998-14, 1999-9, 2000-15, 2001-22, 2002-38, 2003-45, 2004-35, 2005-48, 2006-64, 2007-69, 2008-74, 2009-77, 2010-114, 2011-152, 2012-174, 2013-249, 2014-277 (Annex 2).

In terms of analysing legislation database in Kazakhstan, both the overall number of legal and normative acts, orders and presidential decrees (Figure 6) and the number of more specific laws and legal acts (Figure 7) have been analysed. It is quite surprising to observe somewhat parallel cycles with spikes in attention which resulted from Google search, despite the nature of soft authoritarian political regime. The Kazakh legislative system has been found to be more “attentive” to the corruption issue than Canadian legislature. This phenomenon can be explained due to two primary reasons. First, under the federative government it appears more challenging to make the legislative branch “attentive” to policy issues due to its independence from the executive branch, while the presidential unitary state does not appear to face this issue. Second, Canada as a well-established parliamentary democracy had not experienced large numbers of corruption cases for a long time until 2004 and then 2010, when a surge of corruption scandals (such as Edmonton and Toronto police force scandals in 2003–2004 and the SNC-Lavalin corporate scandal in 2010) entered

public attention). Kazakhstan, on the other hand, is a newly independent state that is on its way to build a democracy, with new institutions. Therefore, **hypothesis 3 in the context of Kazakhstan has been found to hold true.**

In overall, the Kazakhstan context appears more “interesting” research-wise vis-à-vis Canada, as this country is on its way to shifting away from authoritarian towards a democratic nation, somewhat with the Asian flavour. The Kazakh government, while taking profound measures to further liberalizing the telecommunication market with skyrocketing Internet penetration rates, has also intensified its control over Internet space (Open Net Initiative 2010), selectively applying political and social filtering techniques (The Guardian 2014). Nevertheless, as the number of “corruption” mentions continues to grow generally in an exponential pattern, suggesting that people are increasingly able to express their sentiments toward corruption, a *tipping point* should be reached within the relatively near future⁸. Considering that stage 1 of the Down’s model should be the longest, it is reasonable to assume that the corruption issue should be addressed in one way or another (e. g. either the government takes solid measures to eliminate the evil, or attempt to manipulate it so that it gradually evades public attentiveness) within 5–7 year span both in Canada and Kazakhstan, largely due to the role of social media.

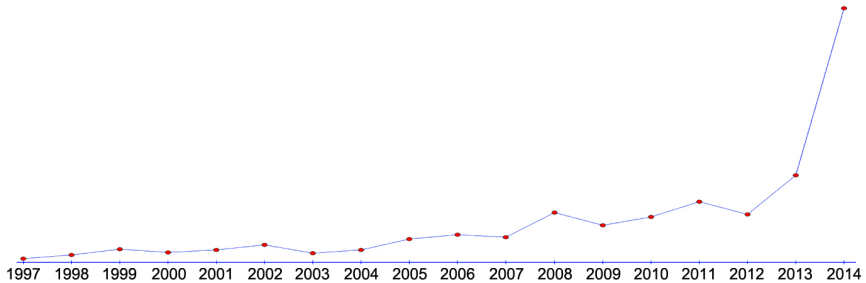


Figure 6. The total number of corruption-related legal and normative acts, orders, president decrees, and other acts adopted in Kazakhstan, 1997-2014

*Adopted from: Adilet database (adilet.zan.kz)
Please refer to Annex 5 for a table of data*

⁸ Intuitively, exponential growth is unlikely to continue over a very long time span. People are increasingly becoming aware of the danger that corruption presents to social and economic growth, understanding that something needs to be done about this.

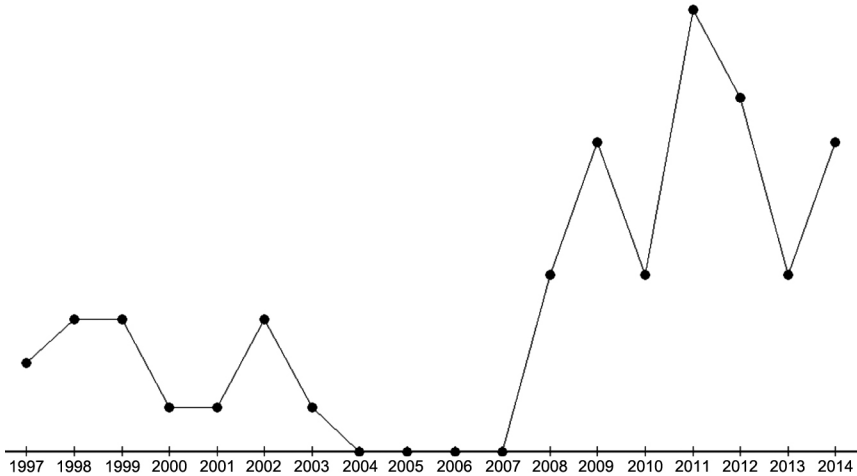


Figure 7. The number of corruption laws and legal acts adopted in Kazakhstan, 1997–2014

*Adopted from: Adilet database (adilet.zan.kz)
Please refer to Annex 6 for a table of data*

Conclusion

Both contexts of Canada and Kazakhstan appear to demonstrate patterns and coincide with the first two stages of the Down's Issue Attention Cycle model. The initial hypothesis that the Canadian context would converge with the Down's model has been found true. Surprisingly, the context of Kazakhstan has also been found to converge with the model. What is different between these two country contexts is the degree of smoothness: while Canada has shown somewhat smooth and exponentially growing patterns in the number of "corruption" mentions, Kazakhstan has produced rather steep transitions at two points of the 18-year time period observed – in 2009–2010 and 2012–2013.

Considering the differences that exist between the two countries in terms of political regimes and forms of government, i.e. federal versus unitary, the following hypotheses for further research can be developed:

1. It may be expected to observe relatively smooth transition throughout corruption issue attention cycles in democratic nations and relatively steep transition in hybrid regime nations, holding the political regime and time as independent variables.
2. Legislation cycles should be expected to be less "attentive" in federal government nations and more "attentive" in unitary government states, thus holding the form of government and time as independent variables.

As a final note, as more countries are analysed while holding either the political regime or the form of government as an independent variable, new models of issue attention are more likely to emerge, which have not been observed yet.

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**Dėmesio problemoms ciklo modelis ir korupcijos problemos
Kanadoje bei Kazachstane**

Anotacija

Šiame tyrime A. Downso dėmesio problemoms ciklo modelį siekiama pritaikyti korupcijos problemų sprendimui Kanados, kaip demokratinės valstybės, ir Kazachstano, kaip švelnaus autoritarinio režimo valstybės, kontekste. Pagrindinis tyrimo indėlis praplečiant jau turimas žinias yra: 1) Downso modelio pritaikymas siekiant analizuoti korupcijos problemas dviejose šalyse; 2) siekis apžvelgti ciklo variantus, atsižvelgiant į politinių režimų pobūdį, režimą laikant nepriklausomu Downso modelio kintamuoju.

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Straipsnis įteiktas 2016 m. sausio–vasario mėn., recenzuotas, parengtas spaudai 2016 m. kovo–birželio mėn.