An Analysis of Media Framing of Water Quality Legislation

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Background

Water quality in Lake Champlain has been a prevalent issue in Vermont with excess phosphorous loading being identified as a strong factor contributing to the degradation of the health of the lake. In an attempt to remedy this problem the federal Environmental Protection Agency set a Total Maximum Daily Load, or TMDL, on phosphorous contamination for Lake Champlain. Vermont's proposal was approved in 2002, but the EPA reevaluated and disapproved the TMDL for the state of Vermont, following a lawsuit from the Conservation Law Foundation. The EPA mandated a new stringent TMDL proposal from the state, or they would take over regulation of this issue. This has motivated me to analyze the evolution of water quality legislation since the disapproval of the EPA established TMDL in 2011, up until the signing of the water quality bill H.35 in the summer of 2015 through tracking the framing of key actors and agents through a content media analysis to identify the use of frames as a political tool.

The role of media content analysis can help reveal public perception around pertinent issue. The way an issue is framed in the news can evolve in systematic and observable ways over time, often prompting shifts in public and/or policy response to the issue (Boydstun, Glazier 2013). Since news media affects formulation of opinions and impressions of events, studying media discourse allows us to understand the influencing forces inherent in media. These forces are often key factors in policy debates and public perceptions of pressing issues, Brandt, N. E. (2014).
This research addresses the following questions:

- How has the media framed the evolution of water quality policy from the EPA disapproval of the TMDL for phosphorous in the state of Vermont, up until the signing of the water quality bill H.35?
- How has the media portrayed key actors and agents that are working on water quality legislation?

Materials/Methods

Data Collection
I began with an extensive compilation of a legislative and media database. I compiled the legislative database through the state legislature website through a combination of search parameters for bills related to water quality. Then I extracted proposed bills between the TMDL disapproval in the 2011-2012 legislative session, up until the H.35 proposal in 2015-2015 legislative sessions. After reading the legislation I identified the key water quality bills with the largest media traction and impact on Lake Champlain and create a timeline of key policy events. The media collection was a multi-method approach requiring the use of ProQuest, LexisNexis, and direct sources databases. After I identified the 5 key news sources in the state of Vermont: Brattleboro Reformer, Burlington Free Press, Vermont Digger, Vermont Public Radio, and WCAX Television, I extracted relevant articles through Bouillon Search parameters such as: *water quality, Lake Champlain, TMDL, lake clean up* , collecting a total of 234 articles during the establish 4 year time span.

Content Media Analysis
I used the Two-Tiered Method for identifying trends in media framing of policy issues (Boydstun, Glazier 2013). Through random sampling I extracted a sample of n=10 from each of the five sources. Then I developed a coding frame for key actors, generalizable trends and issue-specific frames. I completed my analysis through coding with HyperRESEARCH Version 3.5.1 and compiled a total 588 codes.
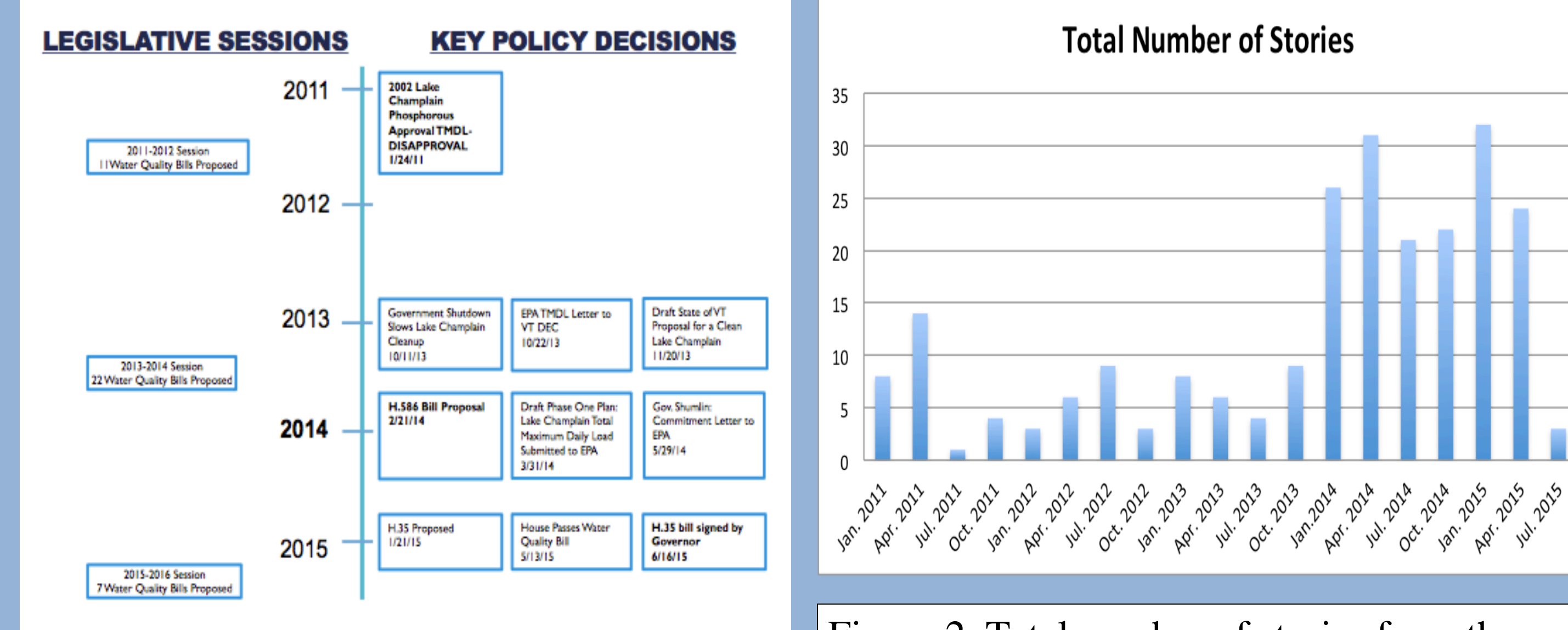
Results

Figure 1. Timeline of key policy decisions occurring in the last three legislative sessions.

Figure 2. Total number of stories from the five selected media sources from the disapproval of the TMDL in Jan 2011 through the signing of H.35 water quality bill.
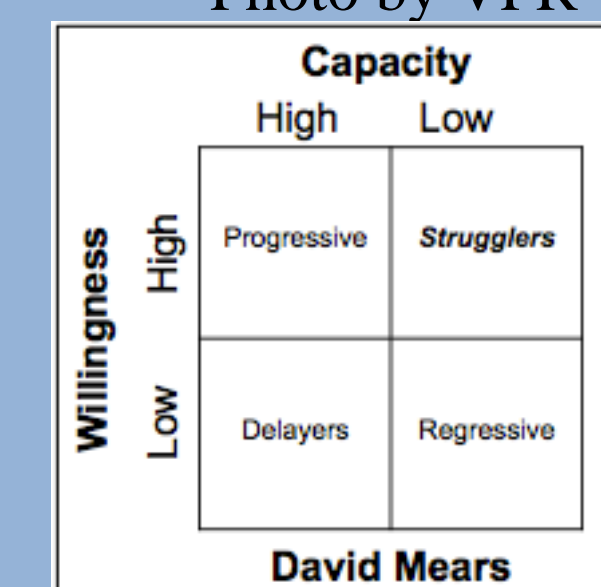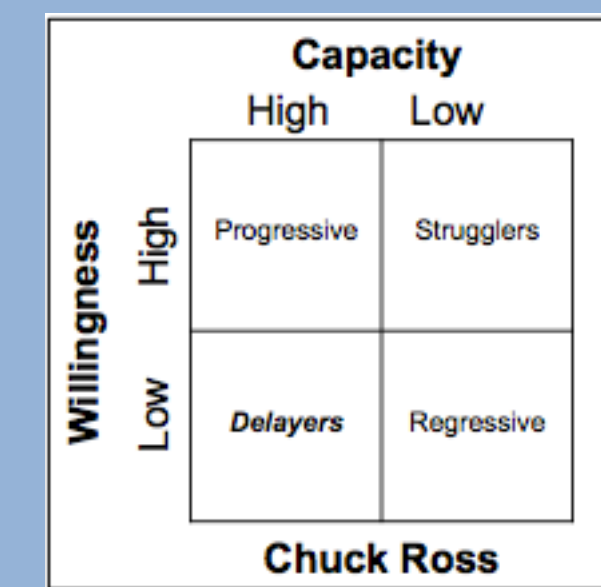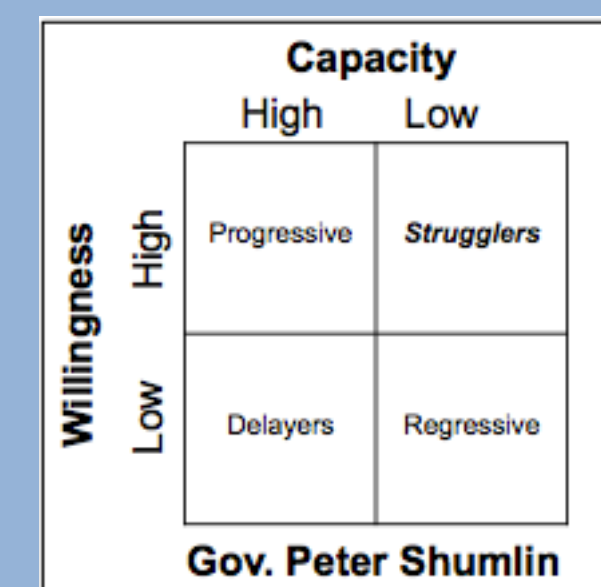
Key Actors

Governor Peter Shumlin
Photo by John Herrick/VTDigger

Agriculture Secretary Chuck Ross
Photo by John Herrick/VTDigger

Former VT DEC Commissioner David Mears
Photo by VPR

Chris Kilian, Vermont director of the Conservation Law Foundation
Photo by John Herrick/VTDigger

Rep. David Deen- House Committee on Fish, Wildlife and Water Resources
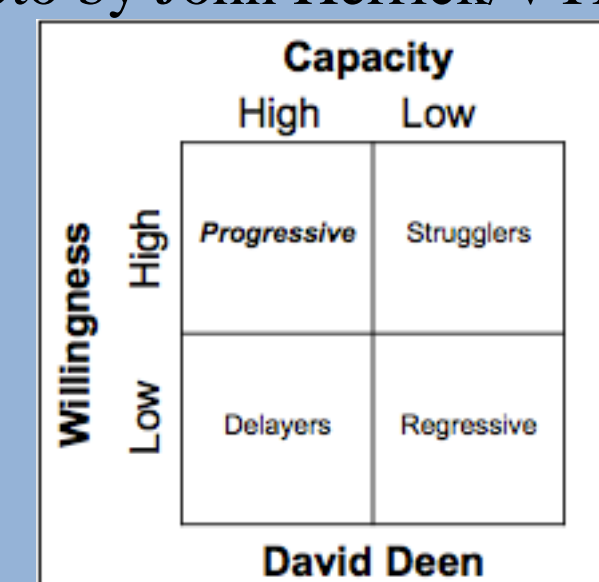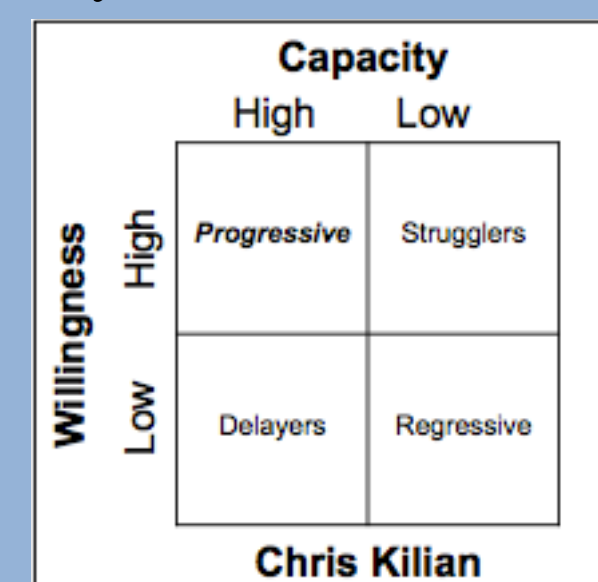Photo by John Herrick/VTDigger

Figure 3. This figure charts the way the media has frames the five key actors, according to four classifications. Lester, J. P. (1994).

Discussion/Conclusions

Figure 4. This table offers example of arguments of each core frame.
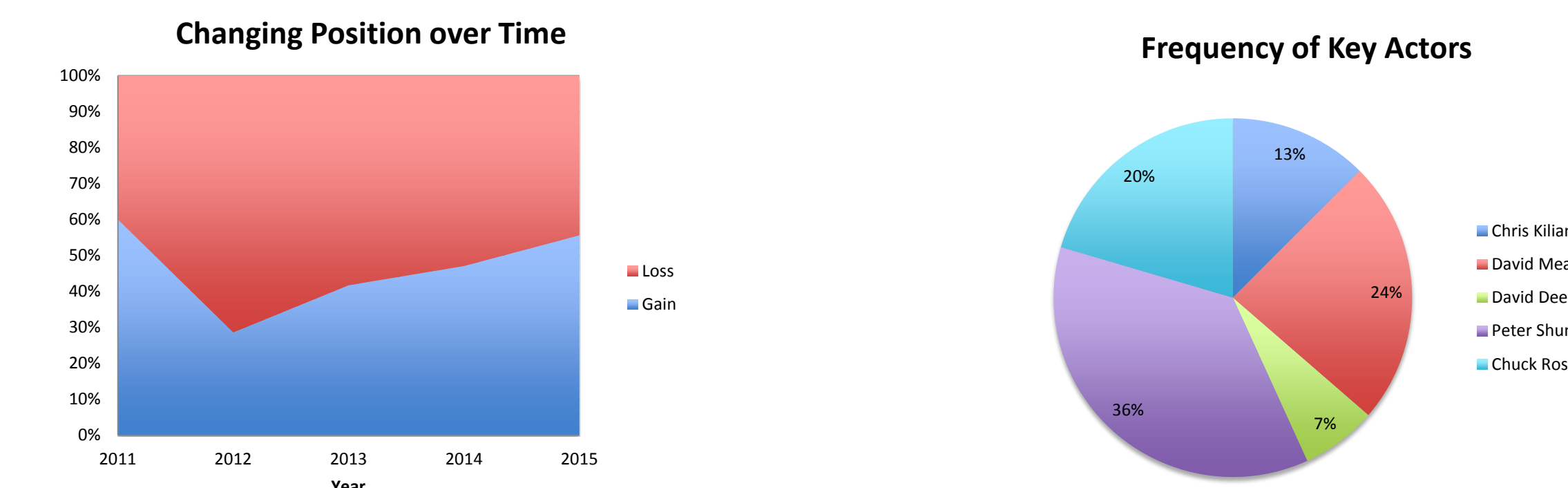
Figure 5. Changing positions code over time shifting from loss to gain.

Figure 6. Total occurrence of Key Actors in the media sources.

The results reveal clear trends in media's framing of the water quality debate affecting Lake Champlain. It is important that the media is covering this environmental policy debate since "research on prospect theory clearly demonstrates that when individuals are in the domain of losses—a placement that can be influenced by framing—they are more risk-accepting" Boydstun, A. E., & Glazier, R. A. (2013). There is currently a positive transition and it is important to track these changes in the future to watch the way that public opinion continues to with the prevalent frames in the news.

Literature Cited

- Brandt, N. E. (2014). Changing Actors and Discourse: An Analysis of Ten Years of Media Coverage In Vermont's Wind Power Debate.
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- Lester, J. P. (1994). A New Federalism? Environmental Policy in the States. *Environmental Policy in the 1990s, 51-67.*

Acknowledgements