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"Focusing Events" and Public Attention to Climate Change in Australia

Christopher Crellin and Robert MacNeil*

Abstract

This research note investigates the range of "focusing events" that have driven public attention to climate change in Australia over the past two decades. While scholars have widely recognized the significance of focusing events for catalyzing stronger climate action, few studies to date have sought to assess the specific categories of events that drive the greatest public attention to the issue. Focusing on Australia, this study analyzes Google Trends data from 2004 to 2022 to identify the highest spikes in national "climate attention" over that period and attempts to correlate these moments with relevant events that may have driven these upticks. In so doing, the study aims to provide policymakers and activists with insights into the sorts of events that provide the most fruitful opportunities to push for stronger policy action.

Keywords: Climate policy, focusing events, public attention, extreme weather, environment, Australia

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This study aims to understand which types of events drive the greatest public attention to climate change. Many scholars have cited the importance of sudden, attention-grabbing occurrences, known as *focusing events*, as potential triggers for achieving stronger policy action (Birkland 1998; Busby 2008; Kingdon 1984). During these instances, it has been suggested that activists and policymakers may have a brief opportunity to significantly amplify their message, construct stronger narratives, and ultimately capitalize on heightened public demand for government action by advancing new legislation and policy measures. While there is a growing body of research on the role that focusing events can play with regard to climate change (see, e.g., Herrnstadt and Meuhlegger 2014; Konisky et al. 2016; Sisco et al. 2017), few studies have empirically assessed the relative impact that different *types* of events tend to have on this public attention. Understanding this could prove vital in allowing climate advocates to better position themselves to capitalize on these momentary, unpredictable opportunities as they arise. These dynamics relate closely to what Downs (1972) famously described as the "issue attention cycle," in which public

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concern around complex problems tends to spike suddenly and then fade as other issues crowd the agenda or the limits of policy response become apparent.

In Australia, public opinion on climate change has been shown to be shaped by a range of ideological, psychological, and demographic factors, including political identity, personal values, media exposure, and trust in science (Hughes et al. 2020; Leviston et al. 2013; Pietsch and McAllister 2010). Much of this research has relied on surveys and polling data, which offer valuable insights into baseline attitudes but tend to capture opinion at fixed points in time. For example, Pietsch and McAllister (2010) identified strong partisan divides in climate concern, while Leviston et al. (2013) showed that misperceptions of public opinion can shape individual attitudes. More recently, Hughes et al. (2020) found that direct experience with extreme weather events was associated with higher concern about climate change. Together, these studies suggest that while attitudes are often stable, they can be influenced by shifting contexts. Far less attention, however, has been paid to how discrete, real-world events trigger short-term spikes in public attention and how these fluctuations might complement or disrupt longer-term patterns of climate opinion. This study seeks to help fill that gap by identifying the events that appear to drive the highest levels of national climate attention in Australia over the past two decades.

To that end, this study regressed Google Trends Intensity Index data for the search terms "climate change" and "global warming" in Australia over the eighteen years spanning 2004 through 2022 to establish a viable proxy for national attention to climate change during that period. After determining the thirty highest months of national "climate attention" across this time span, we undertook web searches for news stories corresponding to those months to determine the climate-related events that may have been prompting these upticks.[1]

Although previous research has examined the relationship between extreme weather events and public attention to climate change in Australia (Crellin and MacNeil 2023), this study extends that analysis in two important ways. First, it significantly expands the range of event *types* (bringing in political developments and climate advocacy activities) to allow for a more comprehensive examination of the kinds of incidents that most effectively capture public attention to climate change. Second, it offers a preliminary typology of climate-related focusing events and explores how different categories compare in their impact and duration on public climate attention. In doing so, the study seeks to inform both scholarly understanding and practical strategies for leveraging moments of heightened public interest to advance climate action.

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1. We opted for publicly available web searches over proprietary databases to align our methodology with publicly observable information. Our goal was to simulate the kind of event exposure an average news consumer might experience through general search behavior. Given that our analysis is based on Google Trends data, this approach ensured greater consistency between how events were identified and how public attention was measured.

Materials and Methods

Data Collection

To examine the effects of climate-related focusing events on public attention to climate change, our study used the Google Trends Intensity Index to establish a viable proxy for national attention to climate change. It is assumed that when people's attention to climate change increases during and/or after a particular focusing event, they are more likely to research it on Google (Stephens-Davidowitz 2014). The Google Trends Intensity Index tracks the frequency of given search terms used on Google across varying demographics relative to all other searches during a particular period, revealing social patterns while remaining cautious of possible inconsistencies.

Google Trends was chosen over other potential data sources, such as social media activity or polling data, for several reasons. First, Google Trends offers a consistent, longitudinal data set dating back to 2004, allowing for a broad analysis of public attention over the past two decades. Second, it captures spontaneous, individual-driven behavior (specifically, active searches for information), which may be less influenced by external framing or survey design than polling data. Finally, its granularity at the state-month-year level facilitates geographic and temporal comparisons while maintaining anonymity, reducing concerns over privacy and representativeness. While social media data, such as Twitter or Facebook trends, could offer additional insights, these platforms are more susceptible to algorithmic biases, platform-specific user biases, and shifting usage patterns over time (see later for the limitations associated with Google Trends).

To determine the relative frequency and intensity of attention to climate change and how it varies over time, we summed the frequency scores for the search terms "climate change" and "global warming" at the state-month-year level from 2004 to 2022. Measuring attention at the state level mitigates population differences across Australia's states and territories. The relative search frequency standardizes measures of attention occurring within a state, facilitating accurate comparisons across periods and locations (Herrnstadt and Meuhlegger 2014). January 2004 was selected as the starting date, as this is the earliest date the index covers.

Identifying Focusing Events

We then undertook web searches for news stories corresponding to the months with the thirty highest moments of national climate attention. Given the exploratory nature of the article, a broad conceptualization of focusing events was adopted (Baumgartner and Jones 2009; Birkland 1997). Focusing events were included in the analysis if they were considered sudden, attention-grabbing occurrences that could include disasters and important social and political

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Table 1
Categorization of Focusing Events

Categories of Focusing Events	Examples of Events in Each Category
Political events	UNFCCC COPs
	National elections
	State elections
Extreme weather events	Major bushfires
	Coral bleaching events
	Major storms
	Floods
Advocacy events	Major climate protests
	Publication of IPCC Reports

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developments (Baumgartner and Jones 2009; Birkland 1997) and if the events contained direct or indirect climate implications, such as an impact on the environment (extreme weather events) or an (in)direct change in climate policy (elections, conferences, protests) (see Supplementary Material).

On the basis of these selection criteria, focusing events were identified and categorized into three broad topical groups (see Table 1). The first group included climate-related political events, such as national and state elections, and international conferences like annual UNFCCC COPs. Political events, including elections and international climate conferences, have long been recognized as windows of opportunity in the policy process, where agenda-setting dynamics may shift rapidly and open space for new policy initiatives (Allan 2017; Kingdon 1984). In the climate domain, such events often serve as flashpoints for public and media debate over government action or inaction, particularly during leadership contests or international negotiations (Birkland 1997). The second group included extreme weather events, particularly bushfires, coral bleaching events, major storms, and floods.[2] Extreme weather events have been widely studied as natural focusing events that elevate climate salience by making risks more immediate, visible, and personal (Konisky et al. 2016; Sisco et al. 2017). The third and final group included major climate advocacy events like the release of IPCC assessment reports and major climate protests. Advocacy events, such as mass protests and the publication of major scientific reports, have likewise been shown to mobilize civil society and generate media narratives that frame climate change as urgent and morally salient (Boykoff and Goodman 2009; Doyle 2011). These events can play a key role in shifting the

2. Long-term events like droughts were omitted, as their start and end dates are difficult to identify, and thus it is hard to specify their influence on attention to climate change.

public discourse and making climate issues more emotionally resonant and politically contested.

Although each of these categories can trigger spikes in public attention, they do so through distinct pathways (political, experiential, and discursive) and may differ in their effectiveness and longevity.[3] This typology draws inspiration from both policy studies and media research on public engagement with climate issues. While the categories offer a useful way to distinguish broad types of events, they are not mutually exclusive and inevitably involve judgment calls. For example, while IPCC reports are scientific documents, their release is often strategically timed, highly publicized, and framed in the media as calls to action. For that reason, we include them in the "advocacy" category, while acknowledging their hybrid character.

Measuring Attention to Climate Change

We then used the results to construct panel data to examine the correlation between attention to climate change and the various types of climate-related events across multiple states and territories over time. Events are separated by state, month, year, and type of event to capture attention to climate change in a state, during a given month, and during/following a certain type of event within that state. Owing to the nature of data availability and consistency, events were recorded at one-month intervals instead of more sensitive ones like daily or weekly intervals.

To denote the events, "1" is noted for each month that an event occurs, and "0" is noted for months with no event. Events that continued for more than one month (or, for example, began toward the end of the month and crossed over into the next month) are noted with a "1" for each month that the event occurred on the basis of the dates indicated from the data source. For example, the Black Summer Bushfires occurred across consecutive months of 2019–2020.

The baseline statistical model is

$$\begin{aligned} Y^0_{smt} = {} & X^0 + \beta^0_1 \text{UNFCCC COPs}_{smt} + \beta^0_2 \text{National Elections}_{smt} \\ & + \beta^0_3 \text{State Elections}_{smt} + \beta^0_4 \text{Bushfires}_{smt} + \beta^0_5 \text{Coral Bleaching}_{smt} \\ & + \beta^0_6 \text{Storms}_{smt} + \beta^0_7 \text{Floods}_{smt} + \beta^0_8 \text{Protests}_{smt} + \beta^0_9 \text{IPCC Reports}_{smt} + \alpha^0 s \\ & + \delta^0 t + \tau^0 m + \varepsilon^0_{smt} \end{aligned}$$

3. While we categorize extreme weather events as "experiential," we recognize that most people do not directly experience events like coral bleaching or distant bushfires. Rather, the "experience" of these events is typically mediated by the media, which plays a key role in constructing them as personal or collective threats. This is consistent with literature showing that mediated exposure to climate-related disasters can still influence attitudes and attention, particularly when framed as severe, unusual, or emotionally resonant (Hughes et al. 2020; Sisco et al. 2017).

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where s indexes states, m indexes months, and t indexes years. Y is concerned with Google search intensity for climate change and global warming. The fixed effect for states and territories is α, δ is a fixed effect for years, τ is a fixed effect for months, and ε is the error term.

The study is also interested in how attention to climate change alters in the months following the event. To measure this, the panel data are modeled with a temporal lag at one-month intervals and up to six months following an event. To determine the temporal lag (zero to six months) of attention after a focusing event, the following statistical model was used:

$$
\begin{aligned}
Y^{i}_{smt} = X^{0} + \sum_{k=0}^{i} \big[& \beta^{i}_{1k}\text{UNFCCC COPs}_{st,m-k} + \beta^{i}_{2k}\text{National Elections}_{st,m-k} \\
& + \beta^{i}_{3k}\text{State Elections}_{st,m-k} + \beta^{i}_{4k}\text{Bushfires}_{st,m-k} + \beta^{i}_{5k}\text{Coral Bleaching}_{st,m-k} \\
& + \beta^{i}_{6k}\text{Storms}_{st,m-k} + \beta^{i}_{7k}\text{Floods}_{st,m-k} + \beta^{i}_{8k}\text{Protests}_{stm-k} \\
& + \beta^{i}_{9k}\text{IPCC Reports}_{stm-k}\big] + \alpha^{i}_{s} + \delta^{i}t + \tau^{i}m + \varepsilon^{i}_{smt}
\end{aligned}
$$

To ensure that the estimated lagged impact of the initial event is not confounded by events that may have taken place during the lag period, the model includes controls for the occurrence of all events in the subsequent months between t and $t + i$. The model substitutes 0 for i, where i denotes the number of months after a focusing event ($i \in 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6$). The model also includes a summation term that covers all events occurring at time t ($k = 0$) as well as any subsequent events in the lag period up to $t + i$ ($k = 1–i$). Thus k denotes each month within the lag window. This allows us to test for a lag in Google search intensity after m months.

Limitations

This methodology does not allow us to claim that we have completely isolated the specific role that any one climate-related focusing event played in influencing the attention cycle around climate change. Moreover, additional caution must be taken regarding the study's use of Google Trends data. While Google Trends offers a consistent and accessible data source, there are inherent limitations to its use. Changes in internet penetration rates, search behavior, and platform accessibility over time may influence data consistency, particularly in earlier years of the data set. Additionally, Google Trends does not provide demographic breakdowns, meaning variations in attention among subgroups, such as age, gender, or socioeconomic status, cannot be directly assessed. These limitations should be kept in mind when interpreting the results, as they may introduce biases that are not fully captured in the analysis (see Cebrián and Domenech 2023). Last, given that the focus is on identifying and examining the relations between events and attention to climate change, the research note

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is limited in analyzing the variation in attention at the subnational level. However, this is seen as a fruitful avenue for future research.

Data Description

Figure 1 illustrates the Australian public's attention to climate change across the eighteen-year period from 2004 through 2022 as captured by the Google Trends Intensity Index. During this period, the average intensity score was 15.9 out of a possible 100.

Drawing from this, Table 2 depicts the ten months across the eighteen-year period that featured the highest levels of climate attention in Australia and provides examples of the types of major events occurring during that month that may have driven the increase in public attention observed.

Figure 2 illustrates the duration of the observed attention spike following selected focusing events, showing the changes in attention in the months immediately following the onset of the event (see Supplementary Material for regression results).

Advocacy Events

Major climate protests appeared to have the most significant and longest-lasting effect on climate attention in Australia during this eighteen-year period. The unprecedented number, size, and consistency of protests throughout 2019 (which included the rise of the student climate strikes and the mounting prominence of groups like Fridays for the Future, Extinction Rebellion, and Blockade Australia) corresponded with a sustained level of heightened attention that lasted throughout the entire calendar year. This pattern aligns with media and communication research showing that visible acts of protest and public mobilization tend to frame climate change as an urgent and morally charged issue,

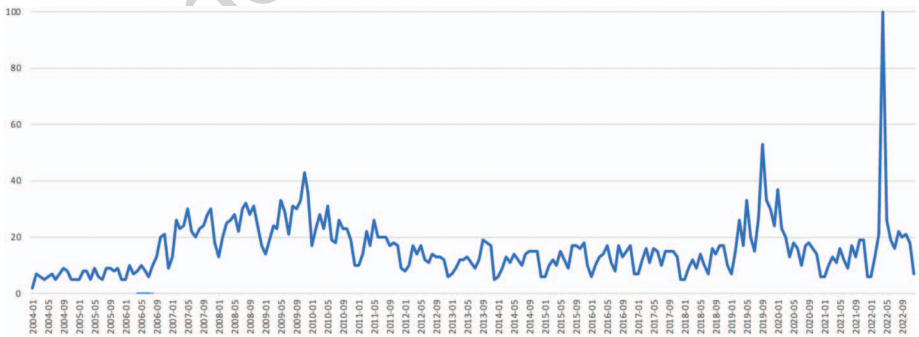

Figure 1
Australian "Climate Attention" as Measured by Google Trends Intensity Index, 2004–2022.

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Table 2
Climate Attention in Australia (Ten Highest Months), 2004–2022

Month Rank	*Highest Intensity*	*Intensity Score*	*Examples of Major Climate Events Occurring During This Month*
1	Apr 2022	100	IPCC Sixth Assessment Report released (dubbed "a code red for humanity")
2	Sep 2019	53	Student climate strikes; onset of "Black Summer" bushfires
3	Dec 2009	43	COP15 in Copenhagen; Liberal leadership spill over climate policy; CPRS rejected in Senate
4	Nov 2009	37	"Climategate" controversy; major bushfires in Australia; lead-up to COP15
5	Jan 2020	36	"Black Summer" bushfires; major climate protests across the country; "climate emergency" declarations
6	Oct 2019	33	Student climate strikes; "Black Summer" bushfires
7	May 2019	33	Federal election; school climate strikes; "climate emergency" declarations
8	Aug 2008	32	Garnaut Climate Report published
9	Feb 2009	30	"Black Saturday" bushfires in Victoria
10	Nov 2007	30	Federal election; Bali Climate Conference; Garnaut Climate Review launched

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thereby becoming more likely to sustain engagement over longer periods (Boykoff and Goodman 2009; Doyle 2011).

The publication of major scientific and economic reports also positively correlated with heightened climate attention for approximately two months—particularly major IPCC reports and domestic publications like the Garnaut Report. While this was generally the case for these reports throughout the eighteen-year period we assessed, the publication of the IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report in April 2022 stands out as the largest single spike in Australian climate attention over the eighteen-year period. This appears to have been driven by the national media's extensive coverage of the report, which depicted it as the starkest warning yet of the irreversible impacts that climate change is having on human civilization—or as UN Secretary-General António Guterres (2022) dubbed it, "a code red for humanity."

Political Events

While certain UNFCCC conferences correlated with an uptick in climate attention (particularly COP13 in Bali in 2007, COP15 in Copenhagen in 2009, and

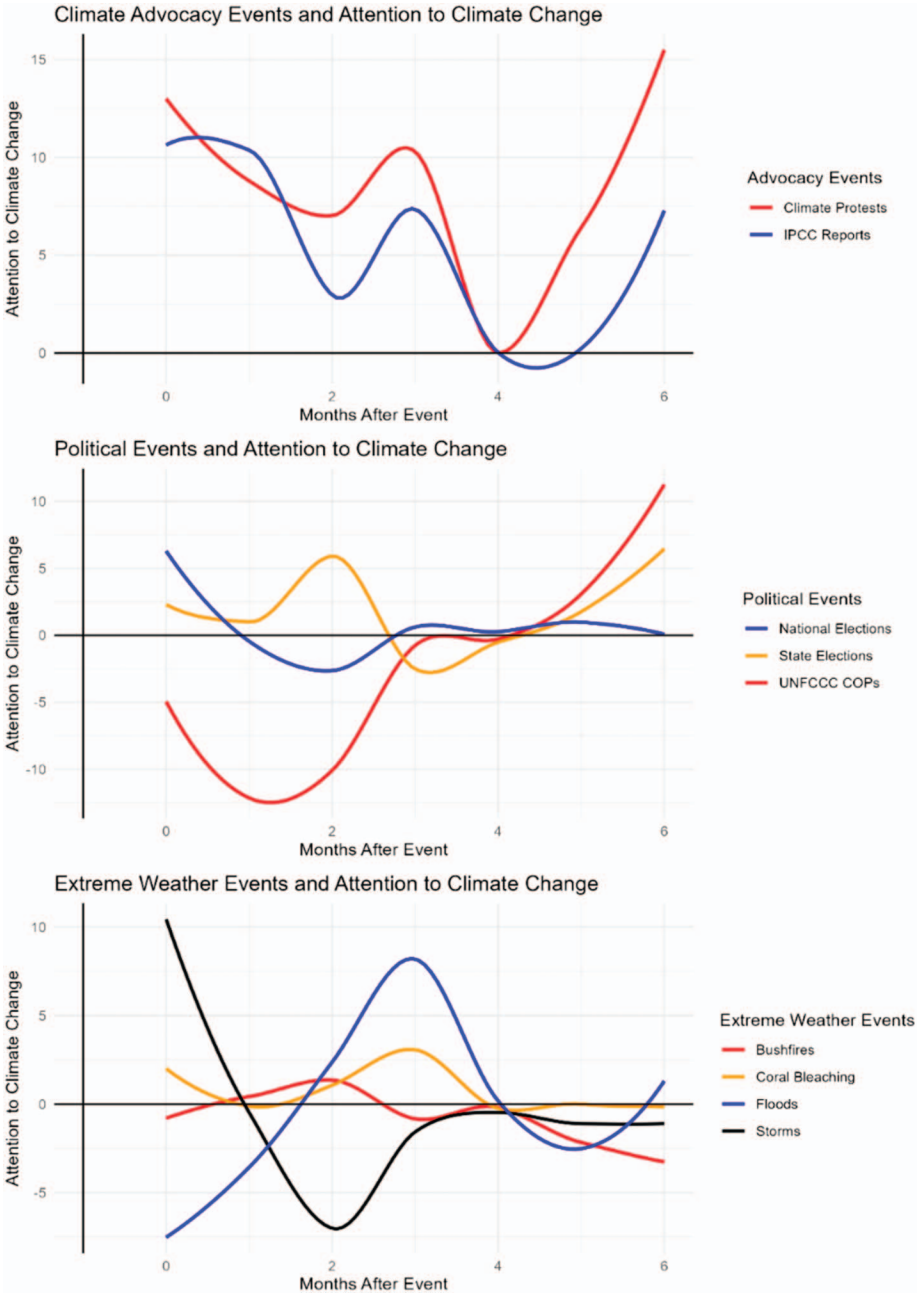

Figure 2
Attention to Climate Change in Australia After Selected Focusing Events (Six-Month Lag).

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COP25 in Madrid in 2019), overall they do not appear to have driven consistent or significant attention to climate change in Australia. By contrast, domestic elections corresponded with notable upticks in climate attention (federal elections more so than state ones), though any attention generated was short-lived, with attention levels rapidly declining in the month following election day.

These findings are consistent with research showing that international negotiations, such as the COP meetings, rarely generate strong or lasting domestic public engagement. Studies of media coverage have found that such events are typically framed in technocratic and elite terms, making them less accessible and emotionally resonant for general audiences (Boykoff 2011; Painter 2013; Schäfer 2012). From a political science perspective, it also reflects the two-level nature of climate politics, in which global agreements must be filtered through national political systems to become relevant to citizens (Putnam 1988). These findings suggest that for most people, climate change remains anchored in domestic political debates, electoral stakes, and familiar political identities, rather than in distant multilateral processes.

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Extreme Weather Events

Extreme weather appears to play a key role in driving attention to climate change, but the level of attention is different depending on the type of extreme weather.[4] As depicted in Figure 2, extreme storms generated the most attention, though this rapidly faded in the succeeding weeks. The publication of major governmental reports about mass coral bleaching events likewise corresponded with notable attention increases, though these spikes also rapidly declined within a single month. Major bushfires corresponded with somewhat more muted attention increases, though of all the weather events we assessed, they appeared to hold the public's climate attention for the longest duration, remaining heightened for up to three months following the onset of the blaze in question. Finally, across our analysis, major flooding events did not appear to have any statistically significant impact on climate attention in Australia, underscoring the idea that Australians typically associate climate change with hotter, drier weather rather than wetter conditions (Crellin and MacNeil 2023). These findings are consistent with previous research showing that while extreme weather can temporarily raise public concern about climate change, these effects are often short-lived, context-dependent, and mediated by prior beliefs (Konisky et al. 2016; Sisco et al. 2017).

4. Much of the existing literature on extreme weather and climate opinion has found that while major events can raise awareness and concern, the effect is often contingent on political affiliation, personal experience, and media framing. For instance, Hughes et al. (2020) showed that individuals who experienced heat waves or drought were more likely to express concern about climate change, but only if those events were perceived as unusual or severe. Similarly, Sisco et al. (2017) found that extreme events had stronger effects on those already predisposed to climate concern.

Discussion

This research note investigated the range of focusing events that drive public attention to climate change in Australia, using Google Trends data as a proxy for attention levels. Our analysis identified three main categories of focusing events (advocacy events, political developments, and extreme weather occurrences) and highlighted their varying impacts on public attention to climate change. Among these, advocacy events, such as large-scale climate protests and the publication of major scientific reports like the IPCC's *Sixth Assessment Report*, were found to produce the most significant and sustained increases in public attention. Our findings complement previous work on climate change attitudes in Australia (e.g., Hughes et al. 2020; Leviston et al. 2013; Pietsch and McAllister 2010) by drawing attention to the role of temporal and event-based dynamics, which can interact with or temporarily override longer-term ideological and identity-based determinants of climate opinion.

This study makes contributions to two overlapping bodies of literature. First, it adds to the growing field of research on focusing events and public attentiveness by highlighting how different types of events vary not only in the intensity of attention they generate but also in how long that attention is sustained. While previous studies have typically assessed the salience of individual disasters or climate-related incidents (e.g., Crellin and MacNeil 2023; Sisco et al. 2017), our typology and comparative approach offer new insights into the differing rhythms of public climate attention in response to political, advocacy, and environmental triggers.

Second, this analysis contributes to the literature on climate change opinion in Australia by showing how public attentiveness fluctuates in relation to discrete, real-world events. Existing studies have identified a range of factors shaping Australian attitudes toward climate change, including political orientation, values, media consumption, and psychological predispositions (Hughes et al. 2020; Leviston et al. 2013; Pietsch and McAllister 2010). By examining momentary spikes in attention over an eighteen-year period, this study suggests that public engagement with climate issues is not solely a matter of stable attitudes but is also shaped by contextual, event-driven dynamics that open brief windows of opportunity for reframing or mobilization.

These findings provide insights for climate advocates and policymakers about the sorts of events that provide the most fruitful opportunities to drive stronger policy action. In particular, the results suggest that advocacy events, especially large-scale protests and the release of major scientific reports, are more likely to generate pronounced and sustained spikes in public attention than either routine political developments or extreme weather events. These advocacy-driven events are often choreographed to maximize media resonance and symbolic impact, and our findings suggest that they do indeed succeed in holding public focus for longer periods.

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For climate advocates, this highlights the importance of strategically planning mobilization efforts around key moments of heightened salience, when public concern is already elevated and discourse space is more open. These moments offer rare opportunities not only to reach broader audiences but also to reframe political narratives, shift perceived norms, and signal collective urgency. Rather than simply reacting to the political cycle or the disaster calendar, advocates may benefit from proactively anticipating these attention spikes and positioning their campaigns to ride the wave of heightened visibility.[5]

For policymakers, the findings point to critical windows in which public awareness and concern about climate change are already high—moments when more ambitious or controversial policy action may be met with greater receptiveness or legitimacy. Rather than treating public concern as a constant or background condition, this study suggests that public attention to climate change is episodic and event driven and that acting during these episodes may improve the traction of policy initiatives. The temporal dimension is especially important here. While extreme weather and political events may capture short-lived bursts of attention, advocacy moments often sustain engagement for weeks or even months. This extended window may offer more time for building consensus, consulting stakeholders, and introducing substantive measures.

Although this analysis focuses on Australia, its broader implications may extend to other advanced democracies where media coverage, political partisanship, and fossil fuel interests influence the rhythms of climate attention. At the same time, Australia's political economy remains distinctive. The country's heavy dependence on coal and gas exports, adversarial climate politics, and direct exposure to extreme environmental events combine to create a uniquely volatile landscape for climate discourse. These conditions may intensify the temporal and event-based dynamics observed here, amplifying both the peaks and the declines of public attention. Future comparative research could usefully explore whether similar patterns occur elsewhere or whether Australia represents a particularly revealing case of how national context shapes the relationship between public attention and climate politics.

Ultimately, the study reinforces the idea that climate politics is not only about long-term trends in public opinion but also about seizing fleeting opportunities created by the uneven rhythms of attention. Knowing when public concern is rising (and what kinds of events tend to spark or sustain that concern) may be just as important as knowing what policies to propose. As such, timing

5. While our findings highlight the strategic value of aligning climate action with moments of heightened attention, it is important to acknowledge that not all policy change depends on public visibility. In some cases, quieter periods may offer greater flexibility for enacting technically complex or politically sensitive reforms without triggering strong opposition. This insight aligns with research on "quiet politics," which suggests that policymaking can also occur effectively under conditions of low salience, especially where expert consensus is high and electoral incentives are limited (Culpepper 2011). Recognizing this distinction can help advocates determine when to amplify visibility and when to work more discreetly, depending on the nature of the intervention.

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and narrative framing should be seen as essential tools for both political strategy and policy design in the climate space.

Nevertheless, the study's limitations (including the inability to fully isolate individual event impacts and the potential influence of overlapping factors) suggest the need for further research. Future studies could examine the behavioral and policy impacts of these attention spikes, explore demographic differences in responses to focusing events, investigate how media platforms and framings amplify or diminish attention to climate issues, or assess how the patterns observed in this study compare with other national contexts. By addressing these types of questions, future research can further unpack the relationship between focusing events and public engagement with climate change, deepening our understanding of the pathways through which public attention can translate into positive policy change.

Christopher Crellin is a PhD student in political science at ISPOLE, UCLouvain, and a Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique (FNRS) Aspirant. His current research interests focus on environmental policy processes and politics, coalitions, the European Union, and political networks.

Robert MacNeil is a senior lecturer in environmental politics at the University of Sydney, where he is known for his contributions to the study of climate politics in the Anglosphere. His research examines the cultural, ideological, and institutional dynamics shaping climate inaction, denial, and delay in countries like Australia, Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

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Uncorrected Proof