

Original Research

What Can Arouse Government Attention for Pro-Environmental Public Participation in China? A Fuzzy-Set Qualitative Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

Government attention, the first step toward a policy agenda, has been a political resource contested by multiple actors. However, the interaction of the determinants contributing to government attention remains less explored. Using fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) of 35 pro-environmental public participation cases, this article establishes an analytical framework to investigate the determinants and explores how the determinants combine to arouse government attention. The analysis identifies four configurations and reveals that when the structural distribution of attention is significant, it can successfully arouse government attention under the catalysis of situated attention. The results further indicate that some determinants can produce joint effects, while the role of organizational degree and resource mobilization capability are not significant. In addition, the perception and trade-off of the benefits and risks of decision-makers have greatly influenced government attention. This study enriches the existing studies of government attention in China and provides references for effective public participation practice.

Keywords: government attention, qualitative comparative analysis, pro-environmental public participation, cases in China

Introduction

The rapid expansion of infrastructure development in China has not only facilitated economic growth but also exacerbated pollution issues, leading to heightened public awareness and concern for environmental protection. This increasing environmental consciousness has prompted various forms of pro-environmental

public participation, including attendance at hearings and involvement in environmental impact assessments. However, due to limited legal channels, individuals motivated by ecological values [1] or perceptions of environmental threats [2] often feel compelled to express their demands through more confrontational collective actions, such as petitions, protests, and campaigns. While many Western scholars may view these actions as ineffective, they play a crucial role in shaping environmental discourse [3] and decision-making in China [4].

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In this context, understanding government attention becomes crucial, as it is the premise of decision-making [5], significantly influencing resource allocation and typically operating in a reactive manner [6]. A key question arises: what types of public participation effectively capture government attention and stimulate specific policy actions? This attention can be understood as a process whereby government resources are allocated to particular issues [7], driven by public participation.

Current literature often conceptualizes government attention as a political signal or discourse that varies across different issue domains [8]. Researchers typically measure this attention by analyzing the content of political texts and tracking changes through descriptive analysis. However, while this approach provides insights into governmental preferences, it tends to treat government attention as a static construct. Other studies adopt a management perspective, examining the implications of government attention for policy implementation and local governance [9].

Despite valuable contributions from existing research on government attention, several important gaps remain and require further investigation. Much of the literature is situated within Western contexts and frequently treats government attention as a monolithic concept, leaving the constitutive determinants of its generation largely unexplored. Additionally, there is a growing call within the scholarship to identify the joint effects of multiple determinants that trigger government attention.

This article addresses these gaps by utilizing fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA) to explore the configurational pathways that contribute to the arousal of government attention, providing a more nuanced understanding of the factors influencing this process. Specifically, we identify four distinct modes of government attention arousal in pro-environmental public participation, highlighting the importance of situated attention and structural distribution of attention alongside the focus of attention. Furthermore, we examine how clarity of issues, collective action size, and media coverage work synergistically to enhance government responsiveness while challenging the traditional emphasis on organizational degree and resource mobilization in the Chinese context.

The contributions of this paper are highlighted as follows. First, by employing fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA), the study identifies the intricate configurations of factors that contribute to the arousal of government attention in response to pro-environmental public participation. This theoretical framework not only enriches understanding of how government attention operates within non-Western environments but also challenges the monolithic view presented in much of the existing literature. Second, this research offers valuable practical insights aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of public participation strategies. By identifying critical determinants such as the clarity of issues, collective action size, and the role of media coverage, the study provides actionable

recommendations for citizens and advocacy groups. It emphasizes the importance of aligning public demands with China's broader political and institutional contexts, offering strategic guidance for more effective engagement and interaction with government entities to promote environmental policy changes.

The sections of this article are structured as follows: Section 2 briefly reviews the related literature and proposes an analytical framework for identifying the outcome and variable conditions. Section 3 introduces the research design and methodology that this article employs. Then, sections 4 and 5 describe the results and present the findings. Finally, conclusions are drawn, and implications are summarized.

Literature Review

Government Attention

Attention is fundamental to understanding organizational behavior [10]. Perspectives on attention can be categorized into four primary domains: psychology, economics, sociology, and management. The psychological perspective explains attention by focusing on external stimuli and cognitive information processing [11]. The economic perspective emphasizes the acquisition of benefits through optimal attention allocation [12] and presents the concept of attention economy [13]. The sociological perspective examines the role of social institutions in shaping attention. Since attention theory was first introduced into management studies [14], core issues have included the allocation of attention in business management [15], expert consensus and decision-making attention under uncertainty [16, 17], the dynamics of attention allocation, competition, and selection within organizations [18], and the interplay between attention and policy agenda in public administration [19]. This study specifically investigates government attention, concentrating on how decision-makers allocate their attention in the public administration field.

Government attention plays a pivotal role in the policy process, influencing both information coordination and policy formulation. Variations in government attention affect not only the setting of the policy agenda but also the prioritization of issues within policy discussions [5]. Some scholars argue that attention should be considered central to the decision-making process, suggesting a possible redefinition of traditional decision-making theory as attention search theory [20]. However, in reality, government attention is not always in an active search state. Limited attention resources mean that various social needs compete for priority, forcing the government to make choices and trade-offs. Issues require not only immediate attention to prompt policy responses but also ongoing focus and investment to ensure effective advancement. A lack of

Table 1. Summary of relevant literature on influencing factors.

Author(s)	Key Focus/Contribution	Method
Su & Meng (2016)	Examined the responsiveness of online public demands in authoritarian contexts	text analysis; sentiment analysis
Weible & Sabatier (2009)	Analyzed coalitions and belief change in policy subsystems	survey analysis
Hawkes (2017)	Discussed the role of sharing and collective action in resource mobilization	theoretical analysis; case analysis
Perera (2022)	Investigated interest group governance and its impact on policy agendas	case analysis
Nownes (2021)	Explored the influence of celebrities on political agenda setting	survey analysis
Harvey (2018)	Analyzed celebrity influence in politics and advocacy	text analysis; case analysis
Feezell (2018)	Studied agenda setting through social media and its effects on political behavior	longitudinal experiment
Kingdon & Stano (1984)	Introduced the concept of agendas and alternatives in public policy	theoretical analysis; case analysis
Walgrave et al. (2018)	Investigated the effects of issue framing on political elites' attention	quantitative experiment
Baumgartner & Jones (2010)	Discussed agenda dynamics and instability in American politics	case analysis
Van Hulst & Yanow (2016)	Proposed a dynamic approach to framing in policy analysis	theoretical analysis
Olson Jr. (1971)	Provided foundational insights into collective action and public goods theory	theoretical analysis
Stone (1989)	Analyzed causal stories and their role in policy agenda formation	theoretical analysis
Lawrence (2023)	Examined media's role in constructing narratives around police brutality	historical analysis; text analysis
McCombs & Valenzuela (2020)	Explored the relationship between mass media and public opinion in agenda setting	theoretical analysis
Luo et al. (2021)	Investigated the impact of media coverage on government subsidies in China	regression analysis
Gilardi et al. (2021)	Analyzed policy diffusion and the issue-definition stage in political science	text analysis
Arney (2017)	Discussed venue shopping in decision-making processes	case analysis
Zhou et al. (2019)	Reviewed participation mechanisms in public projects	comparative analysis
Chan et al. (2021)	Explored elite bargains and policy priorities in authoritarian regimes	comparative analysis
Liu & Chan (2018)	Developed a framework for crisis-induced agenda setting in China	case analysis
Chen et al. (2016)	Investigated sources of authoritarian responsiveness through field experiments	online field experiment
Ocasio et al. (2018)	Proposed an attention-based view of strategic change in organizations	theoretical analysis
Bali & Halpin (2021)	Discussed agenda-setting instruments and strategies for managing policy demands	theoretical analysis
Allwood (2018)	Analyzed agenda setting and blocking in the context of EU policy on prostitution	text analysis; process tracing
Rossiter (2022)	Measured agenda setting in interactive political communication	topic modeling
Our paper	To investigate configurational paths of influencing factors that can trigger government attention	fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis

sustained attention can diminish policy effectiveness or lead to long-term neglect of certain issues [21].

Current research primarily examines the evolution of policy issues by analyzing shifts in government attention. Some studies investigate how various strategies and channels—such as public protests,

media exposure, and social movements—affect the government's agenda and policy priorities [22]. These studies highlight the significant impact of public opinion and social mobilization on government attention [23]. Other research focuses on how attention is distributed within the government based on its preferences,

interests, and political strategies [24]. This approach explores how government departments and decision-makers prioritize competing issues and allocate resources, providing insight into how internal politics, administrative processes, and resource limitations shape government attention.

Despite these advances, research remains limited on the factors arousing government attention and the mechanisms driving its processes, particularly concerning the competition and allocation of attention at the organizational level. Furthermore, existing studies often focus on individual cases or specific time points, with a notable lack of systematic comparative research across various policy areas and political systems. Filling these gaps will help to more comprehensively understand the generation and allocation of government attention and its impact on policy outcomes, thereby providing policymakers with stronger theoretical support and practical guidance.

This article extends the exploration of government attention by combining bottom-up competition and top-down allocation. It investigates how external factors, such as crises and media reports, elevate issues to the level of government attention and how the government allocates attention to these issues based on considerations like political interests and resource constraints. Consequently, the study integrates both the external stimuli driving attention and the internal decision-making processes, offering a thorough analysis of how public participation can effectively capture government attention.

Influencing Factors of Government Attention

Research on how public participation can arouse government attention is scattered throughout policy process research (Table 1). Some studies believe that organizations' structural attributes impact the actors' ability to express their demands [25]; therefore, actors resort to building alliances or networks [26] since isolated individuals cannot exert effective scale pressure on the government. Additionally, large-scale public participation often involves cost-sharing [27], which enhances resource availability and operational effectiveness. Thus, the organizational degree of public participation plays a crucial role in shaping public preferences and contributing to agenda-setting [28]. Moreover, actors need resources as well as the capacity to mobilize them. A small number of elites, especially those with political or social resources, can facilitate demand aggregation, frame issues, enlarge conflicts, and even mobilize broader public participation [29]. These elites often act as "spotlights" [30], capturing the attention of decision-makers and advancing agenda-setting [31].

In addition to actors' organizational and individual features, the strategies they employ should also be considered. Actors can deliberately define issues as important or urgent [32] and may strategically use time

pressure to capture government attention [33]. Since government issues are often obscured by a vast array of complex and disorganized information, issues with less prominent signals may be ignored. Thus, the actors' strategies can make the hidden problems visible [34], affecting government attention and agenda-setting.

Besides the importance and urgency of issues, framing is another important strategy for arousing government attention [33]. Individuals may use framing to interpret issues according to their own preferences, assign specific meanings to certain issues [35], and even shift the focus of the issues. The relevance of individuals' interests determines whether they can mobilize more actors and maximize collective action [36]. Another effective strategy is precisely defining an issue, as issues are considered ready for government action only when framed with clear and limited causality [37]. Therefore, actors' strategies to define issues and set the frame of causality profoundly affect the effectiveness of public participation.

To arouse government attention, public participation or conflict needs to be extended. The media is a key agent in highlighting the significance of issues [38]. Both traditional media and the Internet play vital roles in disseminating information, creating public issues, and fostering participation from diverse social groups [39]. Therefore, the media coverage of certain issues greatly affects government attention to public events [40]. Multiple-venue shopping is another strategy to broaden the conflict. The results of public participation often depend on the scope of issue diffusion [41], prompting actors to engage multiple venues to advocate their demands [42] and expand their influence. By doing so, they turn their preferences into public opinions, exert pressure on the government, and compete for limited attention resources.

Though much research has examined how actors and their strategies influence government attention, some studies suggest that the ability of these demands to be integrated into the institutional system should be primarily determined by the government [43], especially in China [44, 45]. The procedural communication structure set by decision-makers determines which issues are capable of arousing government attention [46, 47]. Relevant studies have examined the role of communication channels, such as advisory committees, public surveys, and citizen juries, in serving as procedural mechanisms for advancing public issues onto institutional agendas [48]. It is undeniable that certain issues are allowed to enter the institutional process while others are ignored or excluded [49]. This may be attributed to the role of the procedural communication channels in adjusting the relationship between public preference and policy output [50]. Therefore, the effectiveness of public participation in capturing government attention largely depends on the communication channels set by governments.

Existing literature explains why certain public demands can break through and arouse government

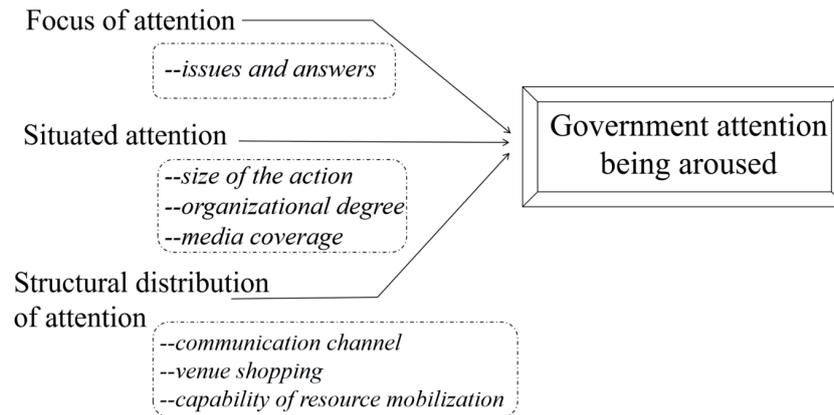


Fig. 1. Analytical framework.

attention by examining the organizational structure of actors, resource mobilization strategies, the role of media, and procedural communication. This provides us with in-depth insights into what influences government attention. However, further exploration is still needed to analyze the configurational effects among influencing factors and examine different countries' institutional contexts and theoretical adaptability for a more comprehensive understanding of how government attention is generated and allocated.

Analytical Framework

Based on the literature, organizational attention is an intermediary between external stimuli and decision-making behavior [14]. Therefore, studying government attention requires considering both the context created by external stimuli and the structural constraints decision-makers face. Moreover, the distribution of organizational attention is greatly influenced by the composition of actors and the organizational structure of decision-making [20], so the nature of actors involved in public participation and the institutional structure to absorb the participation must be considered. Ocasio [51] has further advanced the understanding of the attention phenomenon at the organizational level by proposing that organizational attention is a multi-level structure comprising focus of attention, situated attention, and structural distribution of attention, which is affected by the issues, context, and structural elements, such as the organizational rules, resources, and social relations.

Inspired by these insights, this article explores how government attention can be effectively aroused from these dimensions and constructs an analytical framework (Fig. 1). The rationale for adopting this framework is twofold. First, unlike other studies that offer a general holistic analysis of attention, the attention-based view of organizations attempts to dissect attention and has been widely applied in empirical research on organizational behavior. Second, in the complex decision-making context, a single analytical perspective cannot fully

capture the impact of various factors on government attention. Ocasio's model provides a structured and systematic framework for understanding how the government adjusts its focus in response to different issues, contexts, and structural elements. Furthermore, this framework is highly adaptable to multiple case studies. It emphasizes the interactions among focus of attention, situated attention, and structural distribution of attention, while multiple case studies can provide rich details, thereby helping to reveal the specific manifestations and interactions of these factors and identify general patterns or specific factors.

The analytical framework of this paper encompasses three dimensions: focus of attention, situated attention, and structural distribution of attention. The focus of attention addresses whether the attributes of an issue and the specificity of alternatives impact government attention to public demands. Situated attention examines the context of public participation, including size of action, organizational degree, and media coverage. This dimension analyzes whether large-scale public participation prompts governmental action, how participation's coordination and systematic nature influence effectiveness, and the impact of media coverage on setting the agenda and attracting government attention. Structural distribution of attention investigates communication channels, venue shopping, and resource mobilization capability. The communication channel studies how the internal and external channels affect the flow of information and decision-makers' attention. Venue shopping explores whether the strategic behavior of the public seeking policy responses from different departments can increase the possibility of their demands being taken seriously. The capability of resource mobilization analyzes whether the social status of actors can enhance the influence and visibility of the demands, thereby arousing government attention and prompting policy response.

In sum, the analytical framework comprises seven conditional variables (Table 2): issues and answers (IssueA), media coverage (MediaC), size of action (SizeA), organizational degree (OrganizationD),

Table 2. The notation list for the variables.

Variable	Notation	Description
Government Attention being Aroused	GAaroused	To measure government response based on methods used to express attention to public issues
Issues and Answers	IssueA	To focus on the clarity of public appeals and proposed alternatives
Media Coverage	MediaC	To assess the involvement of different media types (official, market-oriented, self-media, etc.)
Size of Action	SizeA	To evaluate public participation scale by number of involved people
Organizational Degree	OrganizationD	To evaluate structured division of labor or cooperation among participants
Venue Shopping	VenueS	To assess the level at which demands are directed (local to central government)
Capability of Resource Mobilization	ResourceM	To indicate the involvement of different elite types (political, social, or economic)
Communication Channel	CommunicationC	To examine formal government mechanisms for public interaction

venue shopping (VenueS), capability of resource mobilization (ResourceM), and communication channel (CommunicationC). From a configuration perspective, the effects of different conditional variables on the three dimensions (i.e., focus of attention, situated attention, and structural distribution of attention) are not independent of each other but have mutually reinforcing effects through various conditional combinations that affect government attention being aroused (GAaroused).

Methodology

FsQCA

FsQCA analyzes the configurational paths of public participation that successfully attract government attention. Based on set theory, this method focuses not on the net effect of individual variables but on the different combinations of conditions that can produce the desired outcome [52]. Since fsQCA can be applied to evidence-based typology, it helps observe various configurational paths of public participation that can successfully arouse government attention.

Qualitative comparative analysis encompasses various techniques, including crisp set qualitative comparative analysis (csQCA), fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA), and multi-value qualitative comparative analysis (mvQCA) [53]. This article applies fsQCA for several reasons: First, it is difficult to judge government attention being aroused from a single net effect, so fsQCA helps us to observe the outcome resulting from the combination of conditional variables. Second, considering the case sample size ($N=35$), traditional quantitative statistics may not provide robust results, whereas fsQCA is suitable for handling an intermediate number of cases [54]. Third, many variables have many levels and are not binary, making fsQCA a better choice for determining the level

of each variable. Finally, we are interested in within-case complexity by observing the configuration paths (or recipes) affecting government attention, and fsQCA facilitates cross-case comparisons to achieve this.

Data Collection and Case Selection

Case data were collected from various sources, including journal articles and media coverage (2001–2020) from the CNKI database of significant Chinese newspapers, as well as original documents from websites and blogs. First, pro-environment public participation cases from 2001 to 2020 were selected from academic journals and major newspapers in the CNKI database as candidate cases. Second, each case was triangulated to exclude those that could not be mutually verified. Finally, based on the availability of information, the time span of events, and differences in regions and outcomes, 35 cases were selected that met the criteria of typicality, representativeness, and diversity. See Appendix 1 for the selected cases.

Data Calibration

Following established protocols [53], fsQCA is recognized as an effective comparative method for medium-sized case studies. The conditional and outcome variables are conceived as sets, where cases exhibit varying degrees of membership. A four-value calibration scheme [52] is adopted to determine case membership, as it accurately captures the diversity within raw data and avoids the “false” precision that can arise from dichotomous calibration and systems with more than four values [55, 56]. Further, this calibration scheme aligns with operationalizing the outcome and conditional variables by allocating scores of 0, 0.33, 0.67, and 1 to represent non-member, more non-member than member, more member than non-member, and full member categories, respectively. Table 3 demonstrates

Table 3. Calibration rules for variables.

Conditional Variable	Variables (Abbr.)	Indicators	Assignment criteria			
			1	0.67	0.33	0
	IssueA	Issues and answers	Clear appeal and alternatives	Alternatives without clear appeal	Clear appeals without alternatives	No appeals and alternatives
	SizeA	Number of people involved in action	>5000	1000-5000 with cross-regional engagement	1000-5000 without cross-regional engagement	<1000
	OrganizationD	Structural looseness	With a clear division of labor			Without a clear division of labor
	MediaC	Attributes of media involved	More than two types of media	Two types of media	Single media	No media involved
	CommunicationC	Communication channels	Multi-channel communication	Two-way communication	One-way communication	No channel
	ResourceM	The identity of actors	More than two types of elites	Two types of elites	A type of elite	Only local residents
	VenueS	Location of venue shopping	Central government departments	Provincial government departments	Local government	No venue shopping
Outcome Variable	GAaroused	Degree of government response	More than two ways of response	Two ways of response	One way of response	No response

how the conditions and outcomes discussed in the analytical framework are transformed into indicators with multiple degrees and how the membership scores are assigned to cases.

The Outcome Variable

This article uses government attention being aroused as the outcome variable. Since it is a complete process combining attention competition and allocation, values are assigned based on the extent of government response after an outbreak of public participation. Government responses indicate attention to a specific issue without a final decision, reflecting the allocation of government attention. Responses may include informal statements from leaders, newspaper notices, or announcements at conferences or on television. The more ways the government employs to respond, the more involved the government is. Thus, the outcome of government attention being aroused can be assessed by how the government expresses its responses. Scores are assigned, ranging from 0–1 to the cases according to the degree of response (0=no response; 0.33=one way of response; 0.67=two ways of response; 1=more than two ways of response).

Conditional Variables

The analytical framework lists the key conditional variables. Within the focus of attention perspective, the conditional variable of issues and answers [51] is assessed based on the clarity of the public appeals and proposed alternatives. A score of 1 is assigned if the public explicitly expresses their demands and puts forward clear alternatives; 0.67 if the public explicitly presents an alternative but fails to make a clear appeal; 0.33 if the public expresses a clear appeal without suggesting possible alternatives; and 0 if the public merely protests a decision by the local government without providing any clear appeals or possible alternatives.

The situated attention perspective evaluates three conditional variables: Size of action, organizational degree, and media coverage. Size of action is computed based on the number of people directly involved. According to the classification standards for major emergencies issued by the State Council of China, scores are assigned as follows: 1 for more than 5,000 people involved; 0.67 for 1,000 to 5,000 people with cross-regional engagement; 0.33 for 1,000 to 5,000 people without cross-regional engagement; and 0 for fewer than 1,000 people.

The organizational degree is assessed based on the division of labor within public participation. Given the challenge of quantifying the extent of labor division or cooperation, this article treats the variable as dichotomous. A score of 1 is assigned if there is evidence of a structured division of labor or cooperation among participants. Conversely, a score of 0 is assigned if the public merely assembles to express their intention

to protest without any organized division of labor or cooperation.

Media coverage is evaluated based on the number of media types involved. Depending on their relationship with the government, media can be categorized into official media, market-oriented media, self-media, and others. A score of 1 is assigned if more than two types of media are involved in an event; 0.67 if there are two types of media involved; 0.33 if there is only one type of media (possibly self-media) involved; and 0 if the role of the media is not evident in the event.

The structural distribution of attention perspective measures the conditional variables of communication channel, venue shopping, and the capability of resource mobilization according to their features in each case. Communication channel refers to formal mechanisms established by the government for interaction with the public, such as advisory committees or expert panels. Scores are assigned as follows: 1 if multiple communication channels are available; 0.67 if there are two communication channels; 0.33 if there is only one communication channel in a one-way direction; and 0 if no channel is present.

The capability of resource mobilization is usually associated with a leader's identity [57]. Individuals or groups that hold a disproportionate share of resources—such as power, wealth, or privilege—are typically categorized as elites. They can be further classified based on their areas of influence, such as political, social, or economic elites. To prevent overlap in classification, this article designates intellectual elites as social elites. The classification criteria are as follows: A score of 1 is assigned when more than two types of elites are involved; 0.67 is given when two types are present; 0.33 is applied when only one type of elite exists; and 0 is assigned when participants are local individuals lacking political or social resources.

Venue shopping refers to the strategic choice of locations by actors to voice their demands, with the level of the chosen venue significantly influencing the success of their advocacy efforts [58]. Scores are assigned as follows: A score of 1 is given when the public directs their demands to the central government; 0.67 is given for appeals made to the provincial government; 0.33 is given for pleas directed at the local government; and 0 is assigned when protests occur solely within neighborhoods or in venues lacking official authority.

Results

Necessary Condition Analysis

The operational practice of fsQCA stipulates that cases should first be analyzed to examine the necessary conditions for the outcome [53], thereby clarifying the function of individual conditional variables. A consistency level exceeding 0.9 [59] indicates a strong relationship between a conditional variable

Table 4. Necessary condition analysis for government attention being aroused.

Variables (Abbr.)	Consistency	Coverage
IssueA	0.803182	0.771801
SizeA	0.608132	0.659425
OrgD	0.393636	0.742222
MediaC	0.881556	0.724806
CommC	0.648203	0.892133
CapaRM	0.568651	0.906103
VenueS	0.549794	0.823478

and the outcome. However, as shown in Table 4, no conditional variables meet the threshold of 0.90 or above, suggesting that none of the conditional variables independently contribute to government attention being aroused. Instead, the outcome appears to arise from the interactions among multiple determinants. Therefore, the collaborative mechanism of these conditional variables, particularly concerning the focus of attention, situated attention, and structural distribution of attention, should be further explored.

Configuration Analysis

Sufficient configurations of conditional variables help determine which factors are significant for the outcome and facilitate understanding the configuration

logic [60]. The operation of fsQCA can yield three solutions, with the intermediate solution normally preferred due to the balance between the coverage and simplicity of the solutions [61, 62]. As presented in Table 5, there are nine distinct paths for arousing government attention. The solution consistency value is above 0.95, showing that 95% of the cases aligned with these paths successfully aroused government attention. Additionally, the solution coverage value is approximately 0.81, meaning that the nine paths account for about 81% of the cases that captured government attention. Based on the configuration paths, we can specifically identify the interactions of the conditional variables.

This article employs counterfactual analysis to investigate how the presence or absence of specific conditions for public participation may contribute to arousing government attention. Core conditions for each solution are identified by examining the nested relationship between the intermediate and parsimonious solutions. Conditions present in both solutions are defined as core conditions of the solution, while those that appear only in the intermediate solution are considered marginal conditions. The results of the configuration analysis are as follows.

Table 5 shows that issues and answers, size of action, and communication channels are crucial for arousing government attention in China. Among the nine identified pathways, at least one of the three variables appears in conjunction with the other conditions, collectively stimulating the outcome. While an organizational degree is absent in four paths, it appears

Table 5. Configuration paths for government attention being aroused.

	Path 1	Path 2	Path 3	Path 4	Path 5	Path 6	Path 7	Path 8	Path 9
IssueA	●		⊗	●	●	●	⊗	●	⊗
SizeA		●	●	⊗	●	●	●	●	⊗
OrgD		⊗	⊗	⊗	⊗	●	●	●	●
MediaC	●	●	●	●	⊗	⊗	●	⊗	●
CommC	●	●	⊗	●	⊗	●	●	⊗	●
CapaRM	●	●	⊗	⊗	⊗	⊗	⊗	●	⊗
VenueS	●	●	⊗	⊗	●	⊗	⊗	⊗	●
Raw coverage	0.3536	0.0984	0.2145	0.0784	0.0784	0.0784	0.0784	0.0784	0.0395
Unique coverage	0.2557	0.0200	0.1367	0.0395	0.0395	0.0200	0.0200	0.0395	0.0200
Consistency	1	1	0.9169	1	1	1	1	0.8012	1
Solution coverage	0.8055								
Solution consistency	0.9539								

Note: Frequency cutoff=1, consistency cutoff=0.898; ● represents the presence of a condition; ● indicates core conditions; ⊗ represents the absence of a condition; ⊗ represents the absence of the core condition; no icon means the presence or absence of the condition is not important.

in four others without serving as a core condition. In the remaining path, its presence or absence does not affect government attention being aroused. Similarly, the function capability of resource mobilization deviates from the current literature, which suggests that it significantly impacts the result of public participation [63]. In fact, it is absent in six paths and does not function as a core condition in the remaining three paths. This may be because resource mobilization is mainly reflected in institutional participation rather than non-institutional participation or collective conflicts. Additionally, venue shopping is another element that diverges from existing studies [58, 64], as it plays a core role in only two paths, while in the other seven, it is either a non-core condition or does not exist. One possible reason is that venue shopping chiefly focuses on Western political practices, which may not apply to the Chinese context.

Robustness Test

After the analysis, the robustness test is conducted on the configuration paths of government attention being aroused to validate the reliability of the results by adjusting the consistency levels and selecting logically redundant prime implicants [53]. First, adhering to robustness testing procedures outlined in previous research [65], we raise the consistency level from 0.80 to 0.85 and find that the core conditions of the paths are basically consistent (see Appendix 2). Second, we change the selection of logically redundant prime implicants, as recipes are influenced not only by consistency level but also by the researchers' knowledge in selecting these implicants. This adjustment of logically redundant prime implicants primarily yields the same configuration paths, further confirming the robustness of the findings.

Discussion

Based on the results of the necessity and configuration analysis, three major findings can be drawn.

The first finding is that there are four distinct modes for government attention being aroused in the field of pro-environmental public participation (Table 6). From the key conditions of the first two modes, it can be concluded that focus of attention alone cannot trigger government attention; it requires the support of situated attention and structural distribution of attention (e.g., Case 3, 8, 19, 26), similar to how the problem stream needs to be combined with the policy stream and the political stream to create an opportunity for the policy window [32]. Previous research has also indicated that situated attention amplifies these incidents [66], thereby exerting responsive pressure on the government. However, the other two modes show that both situated attention and structural distribution of attention play critical roles in arousing government attention. Each

can serve as a key driving factor, even in the absence of focused attention. Contrary to the extant literature [67, 68], the importance of focus of attention is not reflected in these two modes (e.g., Case 21, 29, 33, 35). This may be attributed to the fact that the government typically retains the authority to interpret and encode information in a political system like China. Consequently, even in the absence of a clear focus, the government may respond if situated attention and structural distribution of attention are sufficiently pronounced. Conversely, the relatively weak situated attention and structural distribution of attention in cases that failed to elicit government attention (e.g., Cases 2, 6, 9, and 10) further illustrate this.

In pro-environmental public participation, government attention being aroused is not solely determined by the focus of attention. The distribution of situated attention heavily depends on the structural distribution of attention. This implies that when the public seeks to arouse government attention, the focus of attention may not be sufficient to stimulate a response. Instead, integrating situated attention with the structural distribution of attention can more effectively arouse government attention. For example, the government is more likely to respond when environmental issues are closely linked to the political landscape or policy changes. Therefore, when participating in pro-environmental initiatives, the public should consider the broader context and align their efforts with the current political climate to enhance the effectiveness of public participation.

The second finding indicates that certain determinants can produce joint effects, while the roles of organizational degree and resource mobilization capability need to be reconsidered. On the one hand, issues and answers greatly influence government attention, but they need to work in conjunction with other factors. Consistent with agenda-setting literature [68], this finding confirms that when the public clearly articulates issues and answers, there is a high possibility for the government to focus its attention on certain issues. Thus, the size of the action and media coverage can mutually reinforce each other in arousing government attention, as both may reflect the level of public concern. The more attention an incident garners, the more likely it is to arouse government attention [31]. A sufficient number of participants or onlookers can pressure the government to respond. In addition, communication channels and venue shopping can yield combined effects in arousing government attention, which aligns with previous studies highlighting that the government's attitude towards an issue is dominated by institutional structure [69]. On the other hand, the organizational degree of public participation and resource mobilization capability are not that important in arousing government attention in China. Previous studies on organizational behavior have assumed that these two factors significantly affect organizational performance [70], suggesting that a higher degree of organization and

greater resource mobilization increase the likelihood of arousing government attention. However, the results show that this fails to take effect unless there are numerous participants and communication channels within the structural procedures.

Therefore, organizational degree and capability of resource mobilization may affect the effectiveness of public participation in some cases, but the clarity of questions and answers, size of action, and media coverage, as well as effective communication channels and venue shopping within the institutional structure, are even more critical factors. The problem’s clarity and the alternatives’ specificity help the government understand and evaluate their feasibility. The connection between the size of the action and media coverage can increase the exposure of pro-environmental actions. Additionally, effective communication channels and venue shopping enable the government to accurately obtain public demands. The public can effectively arouse government attention and promote policy changes through these strategies.

The third finding is that government attention is not a static pattern favoring certain issues but reflects perceptions and trade-offs based on the benefits and risks. Previous studies have highlighted that the operational mode of government attention and the synergistic effect of institutions and preferences can rearrange priorities, forming the so-called “politics of attention” [19]. However, the characteristics of the political system in China differ significantly from those in Western countries, meaning that theories of attention based on party politics cannot fully explain government attention in China. Some studies have demonstrated that local governments face intense competition for attention [71]. According to the principle of organizational rationality, the leading officials in local governments are more likely to allocate their attention to areas that can promote their occupational advancement [72]. This study shows that many cases of pro-environmental public participation are linked to infrastructure construction projects. Compared with other insignificant

public service initiatives, local governments are more motivated to promote such projects, which may lead them to deprioritize pro-environmental actions. Moreover, recent measures from the central government, including environmental inspections and accountability systems, create vertical institutional pressure on local governments to respond to public demands. Therefore, understanding government attention hinges on the perception and trade-offs associated with the benefits and risks of promoting specific projects. As some cases in this study illustrate, when the agglomeration effect of public action is not large enough, government attention is not easily aroused.

Therefore, the public needs to identify and leverage these influencing factors to enhance the agglomeration effect of public actions and increase their visibility. Additionally, they should utilize the central government’s policy framework to encourage local government responses or strategically align their initiatives with the career development of local officials. By formulating targeted action plans, they can effectively arouse government attention.

Compared with the existing literature on government attention and public participation, this research offers a significant advancement by integrating both bottom-up competition and top-down allocation mechanisms. While previous studies, such as those by Zhou et al. [43] and Chan et al. [44, 45], have primarily focused on the structural attributes of organizations and the role of elite actors in shaping government responsiveness, our study goes further by systematically analyzing the interplay between external stimuli—such as crises and media coverage—and internal decision-making processes within government. Unlike earlier works that often examine isolated cases or specific time points, our research employs a comprehensive framework that captures the dynamic nature of government attention across various cases. Furthermore, while existing studies have highlighted the importance of procedural communication channels in facilitating public demands [46, 47], our analysis emphasizes the configurational

Table 6. Modes of public participation for government attention being aroused.

Mode	Solution	Conditions		Typical case
		Common condition	Unique condition	
Mode 1	Path 1	IssueA*CommC	MediaC*CapaRM*VenueS	Case 1,3,4,7,8,12,14
	Path 4		~SizeA*~OrgD*MediaC*~CapaRM*~VenueS	
Mode 2	Path 5	IssueA*SizeA*~MediaC*~CapaRM	~OrgD*~CommC*VenueS	Case 5, 19, 26
	Path 6		OrgD*CommC*~VenueS	
	Path 8		OrgD*~CommC*~VenueS	
Mode 3	Path 3	SizeA*MediaC* ~IssueA	~OrgD*~CommC*~CapaRM*~VenueS	Case 29, 35
	Path 7		OrgD*CommC*~CapaRM*~VenueS	
Mode 4	Path 2	CommC * VenueS	SizeA*~OrgD*MediaC*CapaRM	Case 21, 33

effects among influencing factors, providing a more nuanced understanding of how public participation can effectively capture government attention. By addressing these gaps, our research not only enriches theoretical discourse but also offers practical insights for policymakers seeking to enhance the effectiveness of public engagement strategies. This holistic approach positions our study as a superior contribution to the field, advancing both academic understanding and practical applications in the realm of public administration.

Conclusion and Limitations

This article explores whether the configurational paths of public participation can successfully arouse government attention. Based on the literature, seven conditional variables contributing to the desired outcome are identified. This article employs fsQCA and systematically summarizes nine paths that facilitate the arousal of government attention. Through path comparison and analysis, our analysis reveals four configurations: issue-communication-driven government attention, issue-size-driven government attention, size-media-driven government attention, and communication-venue-driven government attention. Each configuration possesses unique characteristics that may promote government attention arousal. Notably, certain determinants, such as issues and answers, size of action, and media coverage, can produce joint effects, while the roles of organizational degree and capability of resource mobilization are less significant in China. In addition, the process that arouses government attention is affected by the perception and trade-off of the benefits and risks.

Two theoretical implications can be drawn from this article. First, it examines government attention through the lens of constitutive determinants. While previous research has largely treated government attention as a singular entity [73, 74], our analysis delves into the mechanisms underlying how government attention can be effectively aroused, specifically from the perspectives of the focus of attention, situated attention, and structural distribution of attention [51]. The findings suggest that the focus of attention alone is insufficient to trigger government responsiveness. Instead, when situated attention or structural distribution of attention is sufficiently strong, government attention can be effectively aroused, as situational or institutional pressures compel the government to address specific issues and respond promptly.

Second, this article extends the literature on the effectiveness of pro-environment public participation. While previous research has verified the importance of issues and answers [68], this article indicates that clearly defined issues and answers are not always prerequisites, especially when the structural distribution of attention primarily influences government attention, since the government often defines issues and selects alternatives

according to its own preferences. Moreover, we find that the organizational degree of public participation and resource mobilization capability are not as important as the previous studies suggested [29, 44], largely due to organized action and the elites' consideration of their own interests.

The findings of this research have practical implications. Effective public participation should focus on amplifying the visibility of issues within specific contexts and enhancing the structural influence of appeals. Additionally, a deeper understanding of the dynamic characteristics of government attention, local government motivations, and the institutional pressures from the central government can enable the public to engage in public affairs more strategically. By employing targeted actions, the public can leverage these factors to increase the likelihood that the government will recognize and address their demands. While this study concentrates on cases of public participation in the environmental domain, its insights are also relevant to the study of government attention in non-environmental fields. The mechanisms for arousing government attention are universal, influenced by various constraints such as the nature of issues, social contexts, and internal institutional structures across different policy areas. Therefore, this research provides valuable guidance for understanding and effectively engaging with the mechanisms that arouse government attention.

Our study has several limitations. First, while we have classified more than 80% of the cases into nine paths, nearly 20% remain unexplained. This is because many factors affect the outcome, but only the most critical factors can be chosen for fsQCA analysis, which may result in the neglect of some factors and the exclusion of certain cases. This limitation could be partly alleviated by increasing the sample size. Second, there are multiple levels of government attention. This article mainly focuses on the local government level, while the relationship between local government attention and central government attention needs to be studied in the future. Third, though we have identified the configurational paths of causal conditions, more interviews need to be added to enrich the context of cases when conducting a cross-case analysis.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Cases selected for fsQCA analysis (N=35)

No.	Case	Location	Year
1	Environmental Public Welfare Campaign of Jinsha River	Yunnan	2002
2	Arsenic Factory Incident	Fuchuan, Guangxi	2003
3	Yangliu Lake Project	Dujiangyan, Sichuan	2003
4	Anti-dam Movement on the Nu River	Yunnan	2003
5	Chemical Pollution Incident	Dongyang, Zhejiang	2005
6	Chemical Pollution Incident	Xinchang, Zhejiang	2005
7	Anti-PX Project Incident	Xiamen	2007
8	Anti-construction of Waste Incineration Power Plant Incident	Chaoyang, Beijing	2007
9	Anti-PX Project Incident	Chengdu	2008
10	Anti-construction of Waste Incineration Power Plant Incident	Wujiang, Jiangsu	2009
11	Cadmium Pollution Incident	Liuyang, Hunan	2009
12	Blood Lead Incident	Fengxiang, Shaanxi	2009
13	Anti-construction of Waste Incineration Power Plant Incident	Panyu, Guangdong	2009
14	PM 2.5 EIA Incident	Beijing	2010
15	Aluminum Plant Pollution Incident	Jingxi, Guangxi	2010
16	Anti-PX Project Incident	Dalian, Liaoning	2011
17	Chemical Pollution Incident	Haining, Zhejiang	2011
18	Anti-PX Project Incident	Ningbo, Zhejiang	2012
19	Discharge Pipeline Incident	Qidong, Jiangsu	2012
20	Anti-PC Project Incident	Binhai, Tianjin	2012
21	Coal Power Plant Incident	Ledong, Hainan	2012
22	Molybdenum Copper Project Event	Shifang, Sichuan	2012
23	Anti-PX Project Incident	Kunming, Yunnan	2013
24	Anti-construction of Nuclear Waste Plant Incident	Jiangmen, Guangdong	2013
25	Anti-construction of Waste Incineration Power Plant Incident	Guangzhou	2013
26	Chemical Pollution Incident of Battery Factory	Shanghai	2013
27	Chemical Pollution Incident	Putian, Fujian	2014
28	Anti-PX Project Incident	Maoming, Guangdong	2014
29	Anti-construction of Waste Incineration Power Plant Incident	Yuhang, Zhejiang	2014
30	Thermal Power Project Incident	Pingjiang, Hunan	2014
31	Anti-construction of Waste Incineration Power Plant Incident	Xiantao, Hubei	2016
32	Anti-construction of Waste Incineration Power Plant Incident	Qingyuan, Guangdong	2017
33	Anti-construction of Waste Incineration Power Plant Incident	Jiujiang, Jiangxi	2018
34	Anti-construction of Waste Incineration Power Plant Incident	Anshan, Liaoning	2018
35	Anti-construction of Waste Incineration Power Plant Incident	Yangluo, Hebei	2019

Appendix 2. Robustness test.

Core conditions of the configurational paths	Consistency level (0.80)			Consistency level (0.85)			
	Raw coverage	Unique Coverage	Consistency	Core conditions of the configurational paths	Raw coverage	Unique Coverage	Consistency
IssueA*CommunicationC	0.530	0.039	0.965	IssueA*CommunicationC	0.530	0.059	0.965
IssueA*SizeA*~MediaC	0.313	0.040	0.889	~IssueA*SizeA*MediaC	0.332	0.079	0.851
~IssueA*SizeA*MediaC	0.332	0.079	0.851	IssueA*SizeA*~MediaC*~CapabilityRM	0.254	0.020	0.867
CommunicationC*VenueS	0.452	0.020	0.959	CommunicationC*VenueS	0.452	0.020	0.959
Solution coverage	0.825			Solution coverage	0.805		
Solution consistency	0.914			Solution consistency	0.912		