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Strong political agenda-setting and weakening journalism? The case of renewable energy coverage in Portugal

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# The project

- Title: **Socio-technical consensus and controversies regarding renewable energies**
- Institutions: ICS-Univ. Lisbon, Univ. Aveiro, CRIA
- Funding: FCT - Foundation for Science and Technology (PTDC/CS-ECS/118877/2010)
- Duration: March 2012-August 2014
- Main aim: to understand social attitudes towards macro-generation of renewable energies, namely solar and wind power plants, by examining the social consensus and controversies around these technologies in Portugal.
- Main tasks: analysis of the political, social and scientific framework of renewable energy production in Portugal; media and public opinion analysis; case studies of wind farms and solar power plants

# Introduction: the press-government balance and the economic crisis

- Relationship between journalists and their political sources is often considered symbiotic - both are dependent on one another (Stromback & Nord 2006)
- Two main views (Bennett & Livingston 2003):
  - the shift toward ratings-driven news, combined with technologies that free journalists to cover events independently of official minders, results in greater journalistic autonomy;
  - less space for hard news content and declining audience attention results in more sophisticated news management operations, enabling officials to retain control of key political messages.
- Influence of the economic crisis: cost reductions in newsrooms, jobs cuts, increasing time pressure in news production...

## Some facets of the Portuguese media system

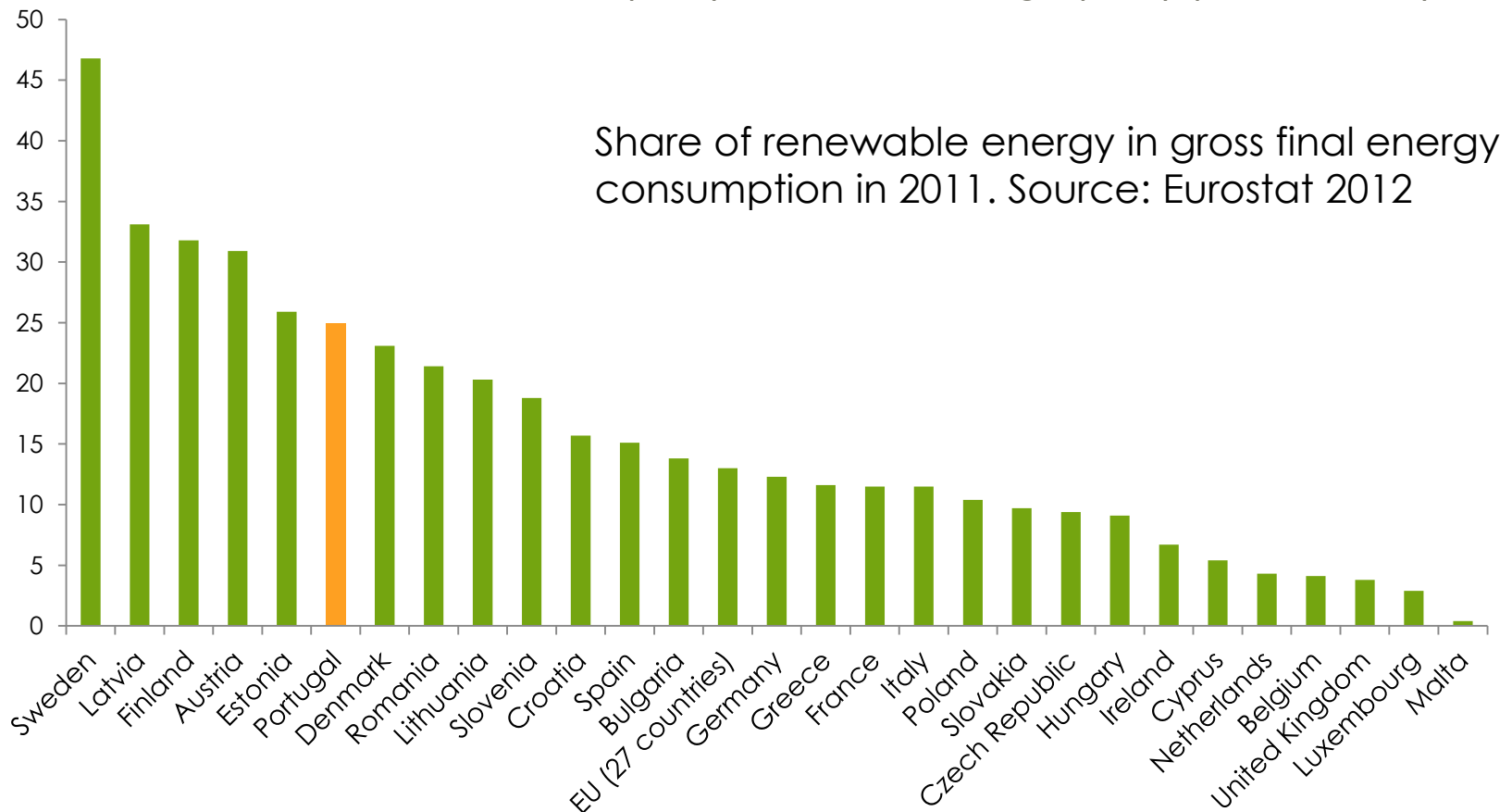
- Traditional economic fragility of the press industry
- Current economic crisis accentuates internal media organization constraints
- Weak interaction between newspapers and the general public (small numbers of readers)
- Historical subordination of the media to the state
- Few reporters have specialized knowledge, particularly in a field such as environmental issues
- Portuguese newspapers do not traditionally adopt overtly political positions

## The case of renewable energies coverage: a controversial government flagship

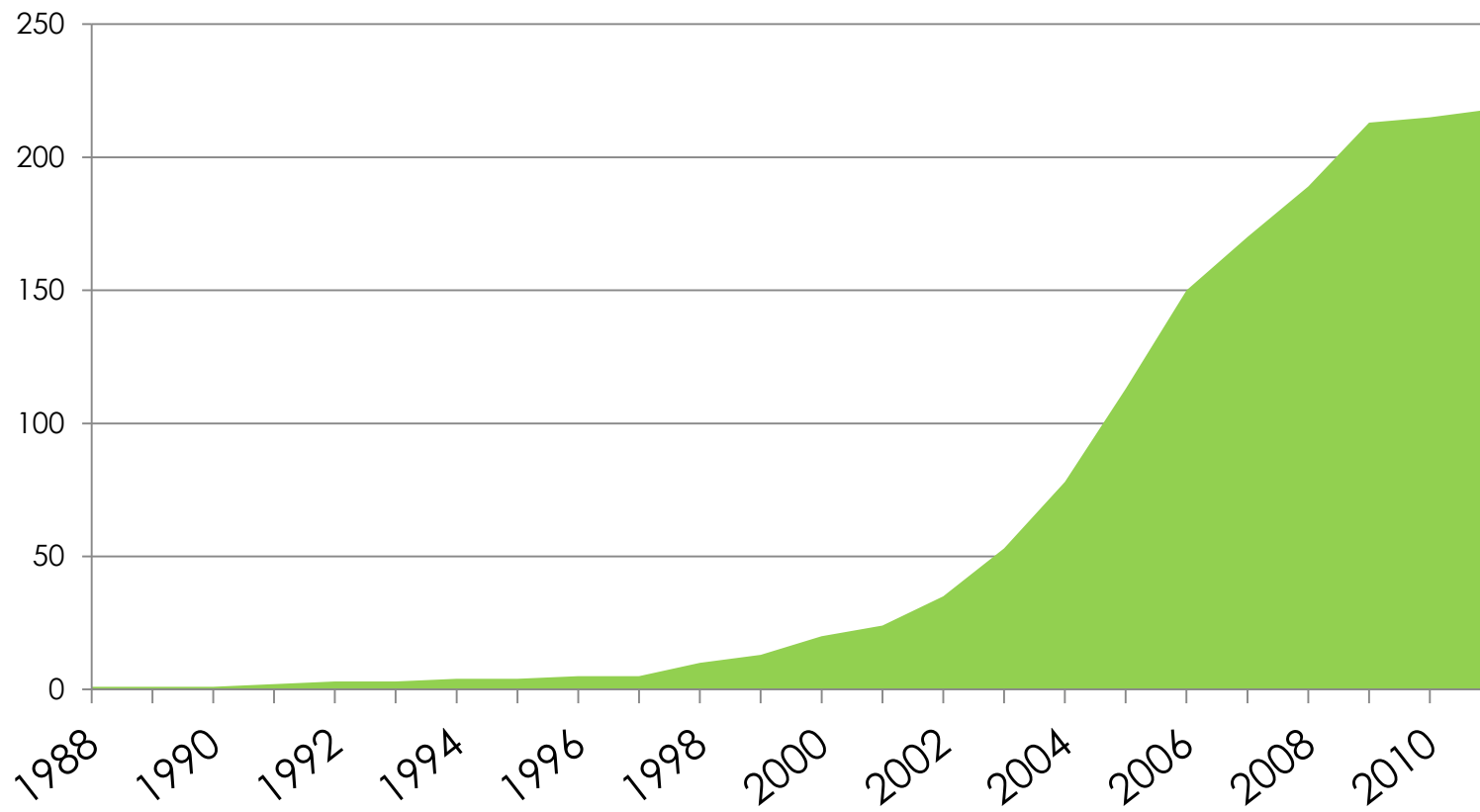
- Portugal has made, during the last decade, a massive investment in renewable energy (RE) generation, particularly through wind power.
- This investment was a flagship of the previous government (2005-11).
- Environmental organizations are ambivalent towards RE: they support the development of clean energy but also show concerns over its negative environmental impacts.
- Other voices criticize the feed-in tariff system (strong financial incentives for the production of wind energy meant extra costs of RE compared to market prices), while consumers are paying higher prices and taxes on electricity.

# Share of renewable energy in the EU

- Portugal's electricity production from renewable energies comes mainly from hydropower (43%) and wind energy (42%) (DGEG 2012).



# Number of wind farms in Portugal



Source: INEGI 2011

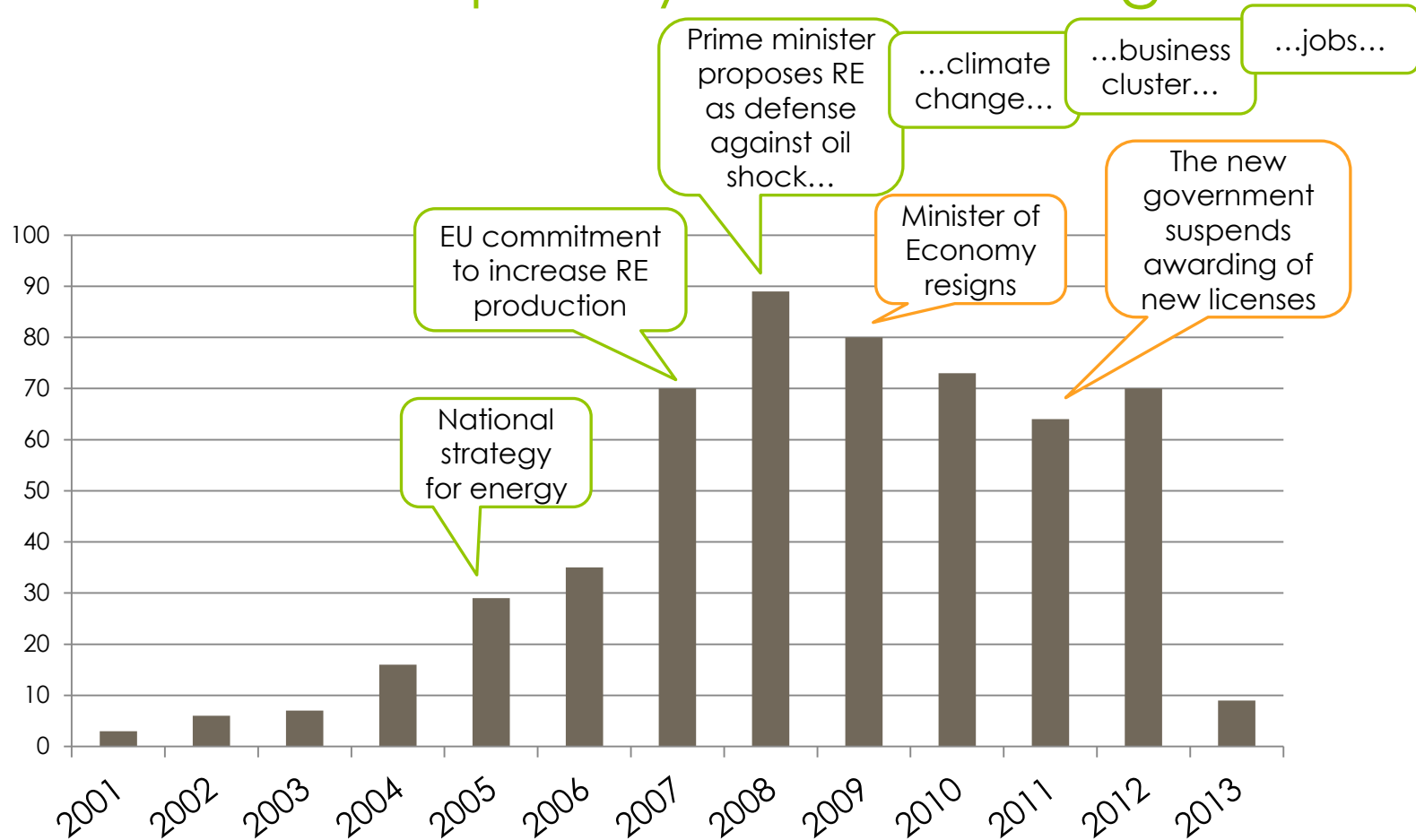
## Method and data

- Selection of all news items by searching for the keywords “renewable”, “wind”, “solar”, “photovoltaic”
- From 2001 to February 2013
- A random sample of 25% of the articles published by each newspaper was selected from a total of 2201 news items and subject to quantitative content analysis.

Newspaper	Type of newspaper	Number of articles	Articles (%)
Público	Daily quality	112	20,3
Correio da Manhã	Daily popular	120	21,8
Jornal de Negócios	Daily economic	230	41,7
Expresso	Weekly quality	89	16,2
Total (sample)		551	100,0

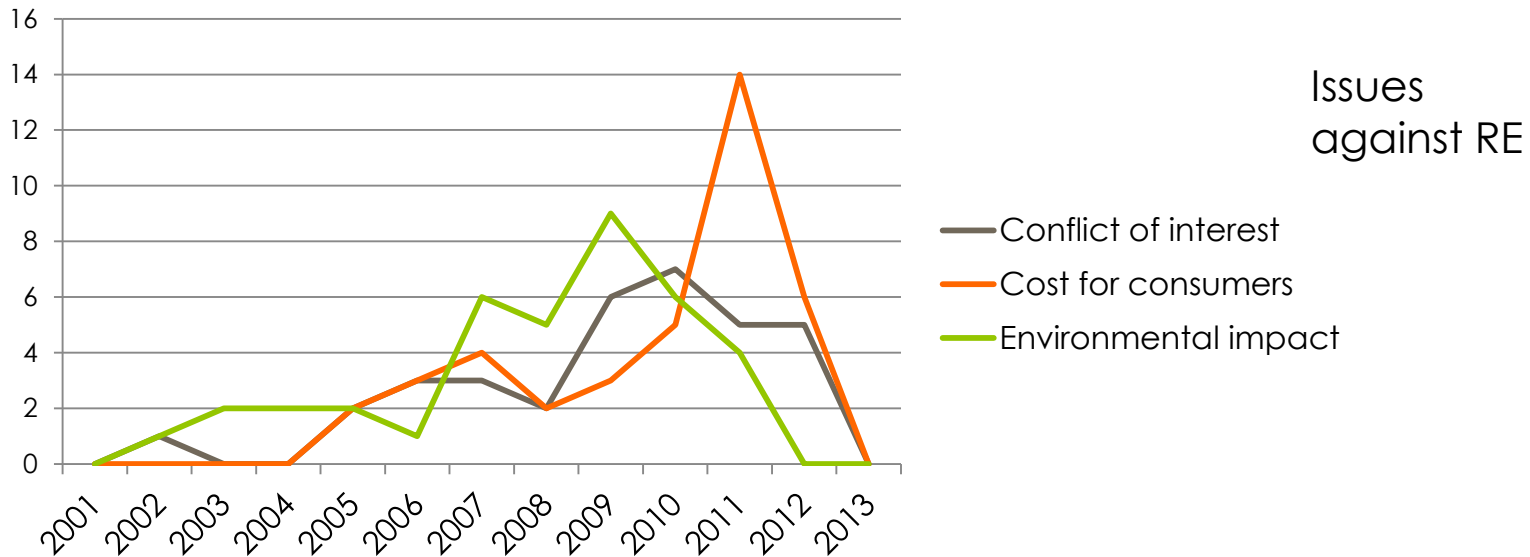
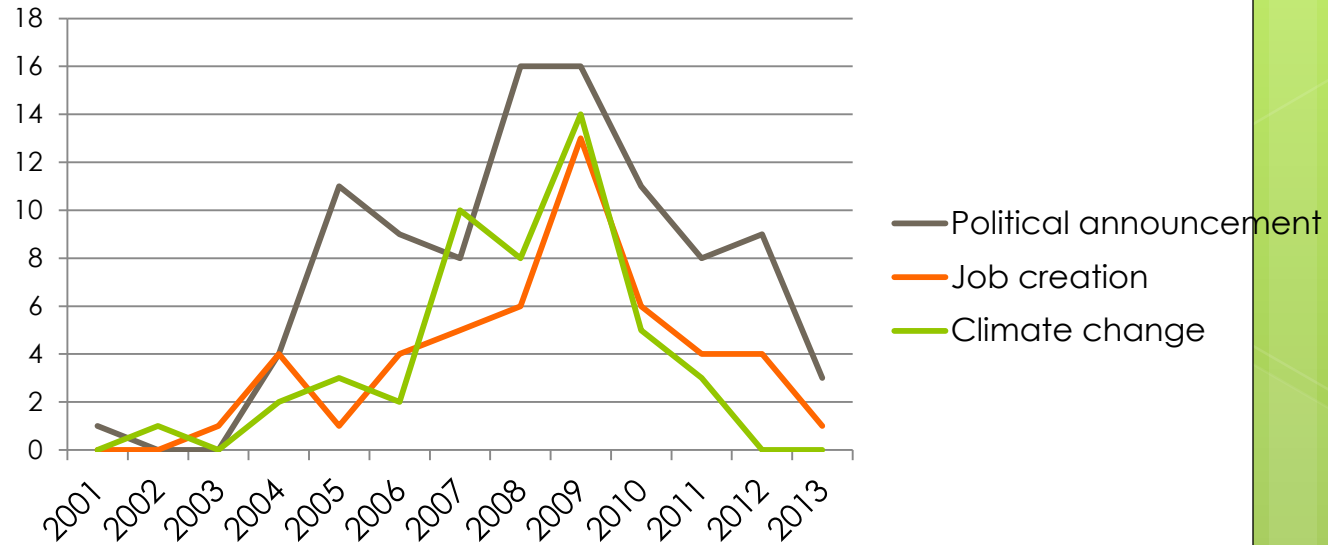


## Salience: frequency of RE coverage

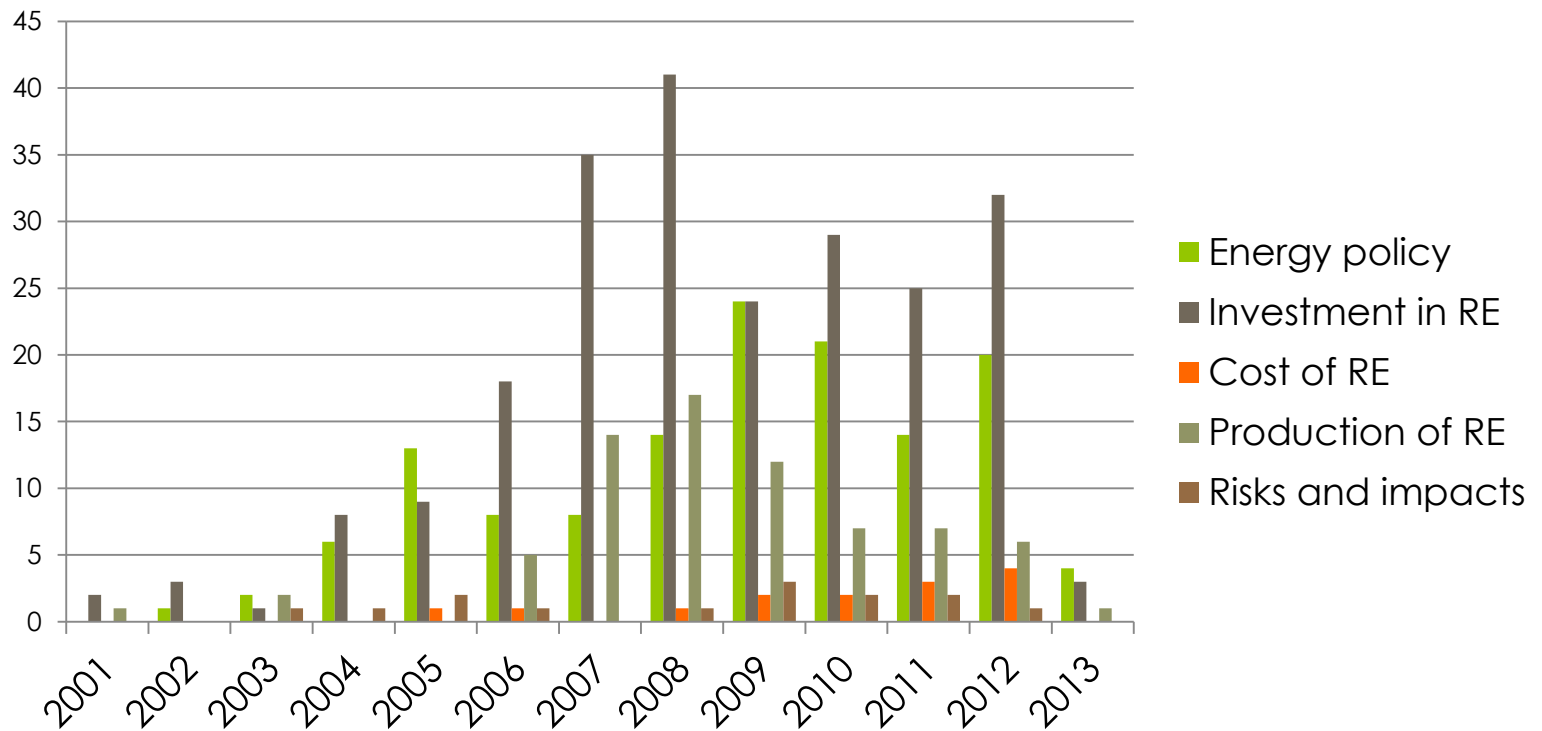


# Type of issues related to RE

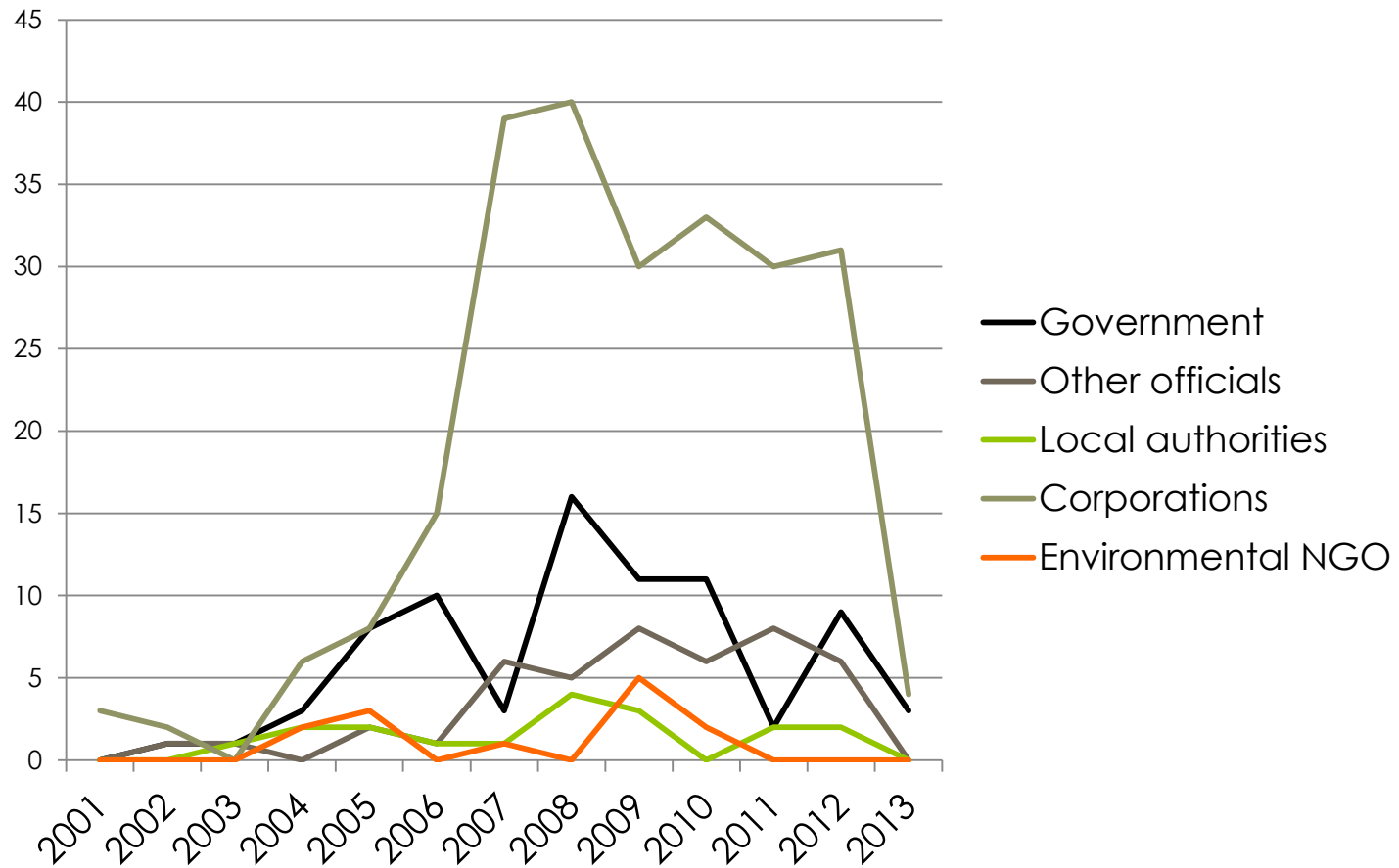
Issues supporting  
a pro-RE  
perspective



## Thematic frames of RE news

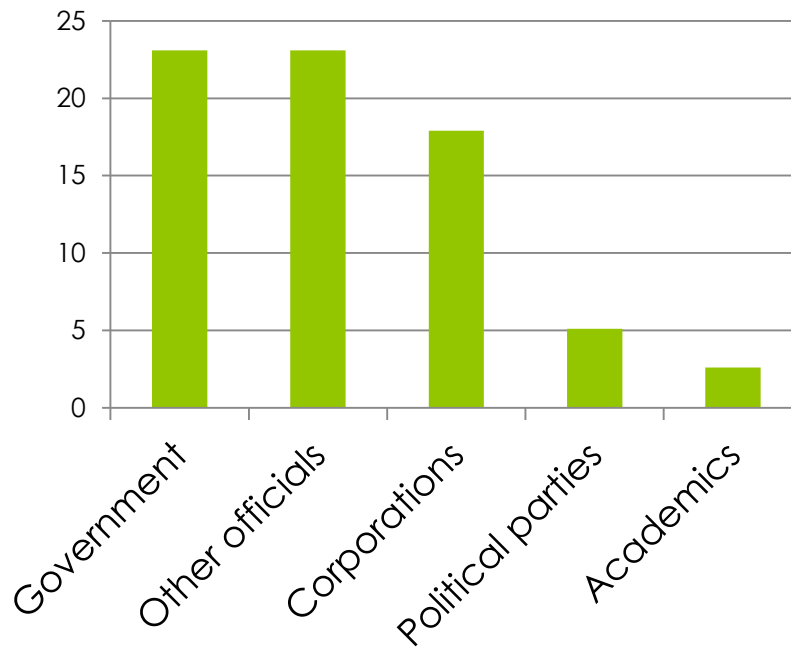


## News sources

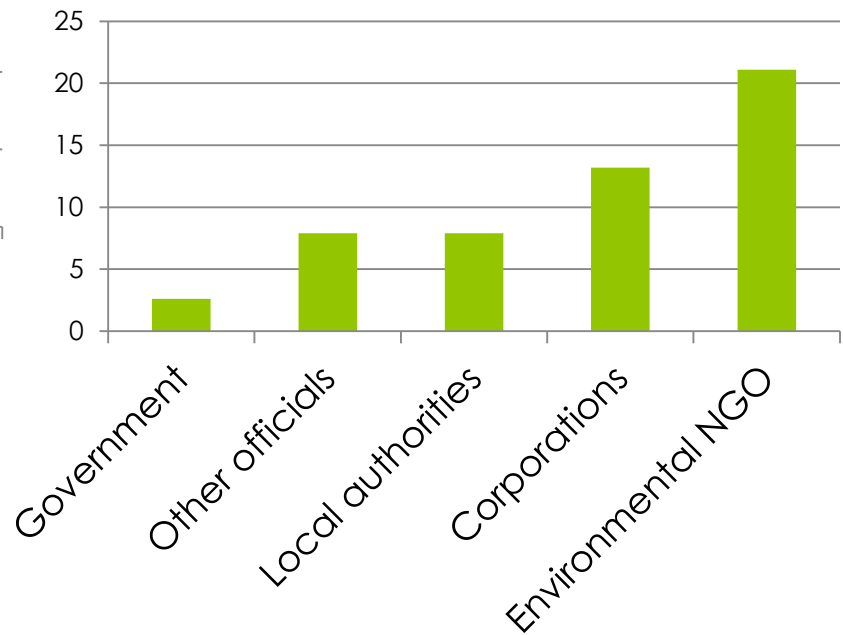


# Main news sources

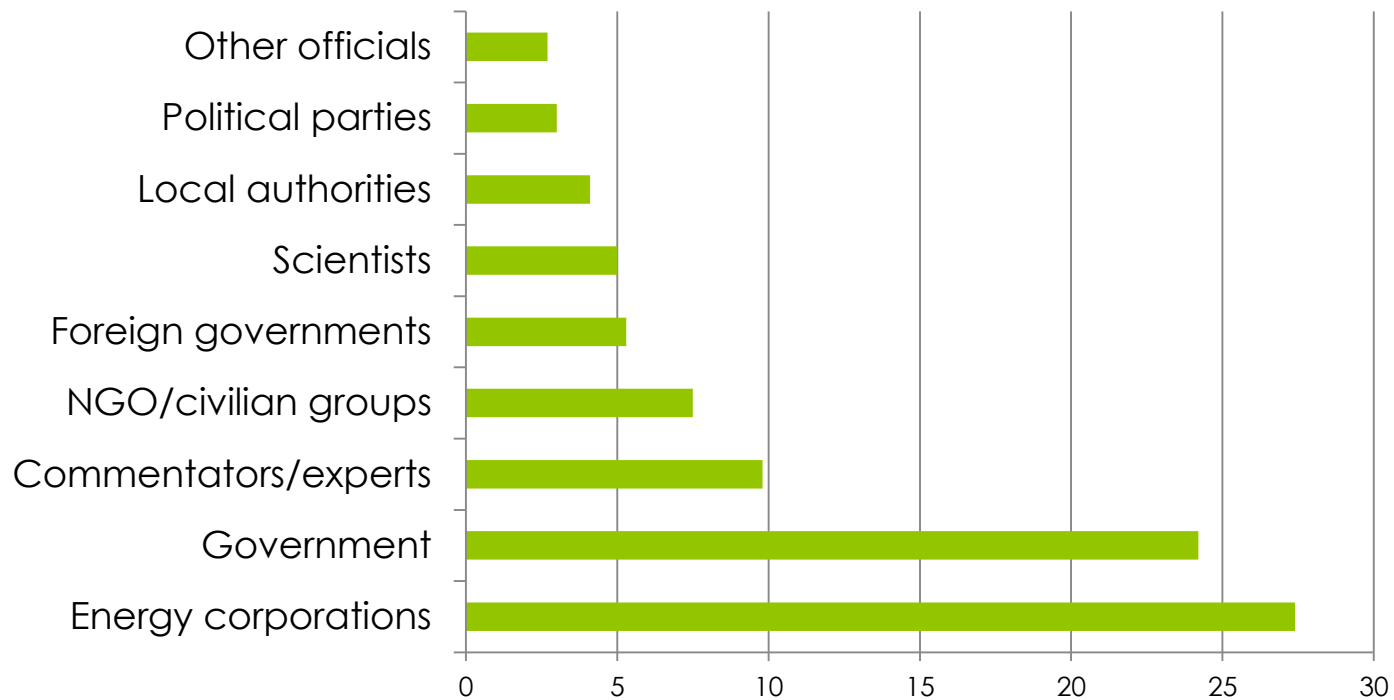
Type of issue:  
cost for the consumers



Type of issue:  
environmental impact



## Main quoted actors



## Discussion

- Heavy reliance on two main news sources: corporations and government, both with strong vested interests (business and political)
- Reduced debate and controversy, except when promoted by elites
- Scarce representation of environmental NGO's and other citizen groups; absence of the general public
- Creation of a positive image of the country's energy production (clean, endogenous, low impact, inexhaustible) that may be misleading

*"There is a big dogma that this [renewable energy] is the solution (...); there is absolutely no problem with this. And I think that sometimes even the media end up not making a very thorough search of what are the negative impacts associated with this, and, above all, what are the alternatives."* (Interview with environmental NGO, 2012)



Thank you  
for your attention!

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