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## INTRODUCTION

### Is the trajectory of European Union environmental policy less certain?

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#### Abstract

This contribution lays out the core themes and research questions of this volume, centred on the nature of environmental policy change in the European Union (EU). It presents an original heuristic framework to capture different dimensions, mechanisms and processes of policy change. In order to contextualise the current situation, where EU policy scope has reached maturity and faces an uncertain future trajectory, this contribution divides EU environmental politics into particular eras, looking closely at the nature of change in each period. This volume interrogates the extent to which change has occurred, the conditions or context within which it did/did not take place and the implications arising from stasis or change. The volume contributions are also introduced and placed into the context of the broader trajectory of EU environmental policy.

#### Keywords

Policy change; political change; EU integration; EU environmental history; EU environmental policy

#### Introduction

Since the 1992 *Environmental Politics* Special Issue on European Community Environmental Politics (Judge 1992), it is striking that no journal has produced a systematic, cutting edge survey of European Union (EU) environmental politics and policy. This volume rectifies that omission.

The 1992 Special Issue was published at a time in which the European Single Market was creating renewed optimism about European integration (Weale and Williams 1992), and the Brundtland Commission was placing environmental action at the political cutting edge (Brundtland *et al.* 1987). The contributors to that Special Issue explicitly linked this momentum toward European integration with environmental policy (Hildebrand 1992; Weale

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and Williams 1992; van der Stratten 1992). However, while overall EU integration and environmental protection have moved in parallel and have been mutually reinforcing, they are nevertheless two distinct processes, varying in speed, intensity and accomplishment. Consequently, we cannot presume as to how European integration and environmental politics and policy will interact. Equally, we acknowledge the importance of environmental policy for the integration project (Lenschow and Sprungk 2010): EU elites used environmental policy, the perception of its success and the policy's popularity to legitimise EU integration.

This discussion raises several analytical questions. What is the nature of change in EU environmental policy, and what factors have driven these changes? If EU environmental policy is declining, stagnating or increasing, what does this tell us about wider EU integration? Correspondingly, if European integration is struggling, what are the implications for the EU's environment sector?

Despite our focus on the environment, it is important to acknowledge the uncertainties at work in EU integration as it shapes European environmental politics and policy. EU studies have focused recently on 'post-functionalist' perspectives (there is no longer an expectation that EU integration will ratchet in one direction, e.g. Hooghe and Marks 2009) and crisis (e.g. Laffan 2016). The economic, political and social difficulties (including the Euro crisis) confronting the EU have contributed to differentiated integration between member states (meaning here that certain EU rules may only govern a subset of member states or that individual state implementation varies: Holzinger and Schimmelfennig 2012), and arguably the first case of EU political disintegration (Webber 2014), namely 'Brexit'.

Simultaneously, global dynamics are challenging EU environmental politics and policy. Other global priorities have pushed the environment down the policy agenda: economic recession, migration, managing conflict and concerns over energy security. The nature of contemporary environmental problems has also become more challenging. While

policy governance has dealt with the easiest environmental policy problems, the more politically intractable problems of climate change, overconsumption and diffuse pollution remain. These longer term challenges clash with the reality of electoral politics, where political attention focuses on a much shorter politics and policy time horizon. All these circumstances challenge the ability of the governing elite and the Western democratic state to govern, and to adopt and implement regulatory policies protecting the environment. As these environmental challenges are common to all OECD states, examining the EU has much wider resonance.

### ***Analytical focus***

The 1992 Special Issue of *Environmental Politics* focused on political institutions (e.g. the Single Market), political actors (e.g. European Parliament Environment Committee, environmental groups and the green political movement), issues (e.g. reconciling economic interests and classical economics with environmental values and concerns) and processes (e.g. implementation) that were pushing European environmental integration forward. We focus on a similar range of factors but analytically emphasise questions about the nature of political and policy *change*. We examine how different elements of the EU environmental arena are responding to or driving change. We develop an original heuristic framework for assessing the range of environmental policy change.

This volume brings together leading academics working on the central aspects of EU environmental policy research. Each author addresses a set of core questions:

- Has there been change?
- How significant or extensive has that change been?
- What has been the key driver of or obstacle to change?

- Does the key driver or obstacle to change exist within the EU environmental political realm or does it operate externally to the sector and perhaps even to the EU?
- What does change mean for our understanding of EU environmental politics/policy?

After describing the heuristic framework in the next section, we deploy this framework to briefly trace and reinterpret the evolution of EU environmental policy. We discern 4 distinctive eras of EU environmental politics and policy: the first (1967-1984) focuses on the initial experimentation and the rise of social movement interest; the second (1985-1999) covers the growth of environmental politics operating in a context of accommodating the market and the ideology of neoliberalism; the third (1999-2008) sees the growing recognition of the reality of intractable problems and the questioning of the regulatory state; the fourth (post-2008) period encompasses the current challenges facing the EU. In the discussion of the fourth era, we introduce each contribution to the volume, using the findings to assess the EU's future trajectory.

### **Theoretical approaches to change**

We offer a heuristic framework for understanding change (summarised in Table 1), which, generated from a range of literatures, highlights an array of possibilities without the expectation that our authors, who will also pursue their own theoretical concerns, employ all of them. In order to capture the range of possible change dynamics, our framework speaks to two distinct dimensions that do not necessarily correspond to each other: the key dynamics that are involved with change in the system; and how the process of change develops, and whether it represents continuity or discontinuity compared to the *status quo*. To avoid proliferating new concepts and jargon, we synthesize our framework using already extant analytical constructs. Given the vast theoretical literature on political and policy change we acknowledge only some of the more prominent and useful works. Our framework shares

some characteristics of Capano and Howlett’s (2009) special issue on policy change, but differs in significant aspects (i.e. taking a more eclectic approach to the theoretical approaches assessing the change dynamics and concentrating on how the actors within the EU environmental sector have had to interpret and respond to external circumstances [Real-Dato 2009]).

**Table 1: Analytical framework for understanding policy change**

Dimensions of Change	Process Dynamics of Change
<p><i>How do actors view and assess the world?</i> Learning and discursive changes.</p> <p><i>Which actors occupy the political decision-making arena?</i> Changes in the dominant elite, government, network and/or coalitions in the arena.</p> <p><i>How has the arena changed?</i> Changes in institutions, operating culture, political opportunity structures.</p>	<p><i>No change</i> <i>Status quo</i> is preserved.</p> <p><i>Incremental change</i> <i>Status quo</i> tends to remain in place over time but accumulation of change can occasionally overthrow it.</p> <p><i>Punctuated equilibrium</i> <i>Status quo</i> largely stable except for particular moments when significant change is possible.</p> <p><i>Rapid and repeated episodes of disequilibria</i> Multiple challenges to the old <i>status quo</i> and the creation of a new one.</p>

***Dimensions of Change***

We derive three essential questions from the literature on political and policy change: how do actors view the world while operating in the EU environmental policy area; which actors control the key political arena; and how have the parameters of this arena changed? A considerable number of the analytical frameworks combine elements of these dynamics (see below)

A range of explanations focus on how ideational and discursive dynamics shape politics. On the more empiricist and behaviouralist side are studies of learning and lesson drawing. Learning in these various manifestations involves individuals or groups making a judgment based on an experience, a new way of thinking or some other input inducing actors to articulate a different view of how things happen and how actors should respond (Zito and Schout 2009; May 1992). On the post-empiricist side is the focus on discourse and other elements of power. Hajer (2005, 299) defines the discursive approach as how the 'definition of a problem relates to the particular narrative in which it is discussed'. Influenced by thinkers such as Foucault, these approaches often focus on the manner in which long-term social structures arise out of human interactions, and the means by which power can act at a distance (Latour 1986, 264). Applying some EU examples, the former approaches capture how European thinking about how acid rain and its mitigation has shifted over time, whilst the latter would focus on the language and discourse surrounding sustainable development or on the narrative about the EU's central role in environmental policy (Lenschow and Sprungk 2010).

Some prominent approaches share elements of both tendencies, such as policy framing where actors confront situations where their understanding is uncertain and problematic, and develop insights to enable assessment and action (Schön and Rein 1994). Also notable are neo-Gramscian arguments about dominant ideologies governing what is possible, and limiting the potential for change so as to benefit particular elites (Levy and Newell 2002).

In contrast to ideational/learning/discursive approaches are those that assess who controls power within a political arena. Schattschneider (1960) argued that politics was the question of who was involved in the processes of conflict: those in control of the arena restrict the number of other political actors involved in making political choices. Those

political actors inside the arena dissatisfied with the political *status quo* and those actors marginalized from decision-making have an interest in getting the ‘scope of conflict’ expanded by bringing in new voices or holding elections enabling a wider range of views to shape and disrupt the political arena. For example, Donald Trump’s election has affected both United States (US) environmental policy and the global environmental arena in which the EU operates. While Schattschneider focused on group theory, the institutionalist argument about who controls the political system’s ‘veto points’ raises related concerns (Tsebelis 1990). This approach asks which actors in the decision-making process have the ability to pass or block initiatives using powers given by the system. Changes in who controls veto points may affect policy outputs. Thus, granting the European Parliament co-legislative powers with the Council of Ministers made the Parliament a stronger veto player in EU environmental policy.

If we move from the approaches concerned with overarching systems, considerable literature focuses on party competition and changes in government (e.g. Brady 1978); the rise of the German Greens and its effect on German and other European electoral politics is one important example. Much public policy literature examines the role of policy networks. Such analysis often speaks to two dimensions: the degree to which a particular network controls a decision-making process, or more internal parameters such as the position of individual actors within the network (Rhodes 1990). These networks may coalesce informally/formally, as in the EU Network for the Implementation and Enforcement of Environmental Law. Other scholars have focused on the presence of political and policy entrepreneurs who advocate a particular policy or political position and invest skills, knowledge and other resources to bring about change (Kingdon 1994). In the EU context, scholars have credited the European Commission, specifically DG Environment officials, with championing particular policy problems and solutions.

Network and party analyses often (but not always) focus on national and sub-national dynamics, but other approaches also study transnational systems such as the EU as a political arena. Moravcsik's 1993 liberal intergovernmental approach to European integration studies how a dominant national set of political and economic actors shapes a member state's approach to EU negotiations. Depending on the power of the interested states, and the degree of interest each member state takes, certain states will drive this arena and the direction of integration. The discussion about which states are EU environmental leaders, such as Denmark, taps into this discussion (see Wurzel *et al.* 2019 – this volume).

The last explanation of change considered here concerns changes to the actual structure and rules of the game. To save space, we discuss only two dynamics: institutionalist and cultural. March and Olsen (1989) refocused political science on the structures of rules and norms shaping actor behaviour over time. Historical institutionalist models focus on the incentives institutions create rendering radical change difficult to adopt. At the start of the process, there are a number of potential outcomes, but seemingly minor events, as long as they occur at a propitious moment, can have lasting and, sometimes, self-reinforcing effects that normally inhibit policy reversals (Pierson 2000).

March and Olsen's perspective, particularly the logic of appropriateness (where institutional norms steer how actors view the world and behave), shares aspects of a cultural approach. Thompson *et al.* (1990, 2-5) suggest that human cultures limit the range of possibilities for how norms drive behaviour. How individual members behave reflects the degree to which the wider societal group incorporates the individual (greater incorporation giving greater scope for the group to define the individual's choices) and the degree to which externally imposed prescriptions govern the individual. Expectations of both institutional and cultural approaches are that substantive change is less likely in the short term, but the implications of that change may become profound over time. An example is the path

dependent impact of the Common Agricultural Policy in creating institutionalised decisions and cultural norms that have proved difficult for green values and priorities to modify (Lenschow and Zito 1998).

### ***Process dynamics of change***

Our second array of dynamics focuses on the process of change and the degree to which the *status quo* changes. To assess the degree to which the *status quo* changes we should analyze the directionality of that change and also whether changes accumulate towards a new and different equilibrium (Howlett and Cashore 2009, 41).

The first framework scenario (Table 1) is where no change happens; the *status quo* remains. This is not the same as saying that there is no politics. There may be a strong exertion of political power and ideas to maintain the *status quo* for a given set of political and policy choices. Incorporating ideational thinking, Edelman (1985) suggested that much of democratic politics, certainly in the US context, reflected an effort by the political elite to shape public perceptions of politics by often deploying empty symbols. A key dynamic was the deployment of symbolic language and appeals to emotion to distort or conceal political realities. The scenario we focus on is one where actors evoke symbols, rhetoric and discourses with no actual goal and prospect of change, often to obscure and conceal the lack of change. The EU's effort to create a 'green' agriculture in the 1980s and 1990s is one example where the rhetoric of a green reform has been stronger than the actual mitigation of negative environmental externalities of the Common Agricultural Policy (Lenschow and Zito 1998). A different scenario with the same result is the notion of cyclical patterns of change, where substantial change can occur but with an eventual return to the *status quo* over the longer term (Capano 2009).

The second process of change is incremental, suggesting that change happens gradually. This volume demonstrates that there is an analytical question about whether incremental change is likely to lead to a significant change in the *status quo* and when. Certainly, significant change is possible but it more likely happens over a substantial time-period.

An influential explanation for how European integration might proceed is neofunctionalism. Haas (1958) hypothesised that European integration followed gradual, ratcheting trajectories involving self-reinforcing dynamics. He adopted the term ‘spillover’ to describe the dynamic: successful policy achievements in one area of integration create a political recognition of the value of the achievement (and consequently of the organisation that produced this political good), and the incentive/political pressure for actors to enhance this extant integration by extending it into new areas. Linking this analysis to the first part of our framework, part of the causal explanation of the neofunctional approach is a learning dynamic, but certain institutional actors and economic interests also figure, using their influential positions to drive this process.

Over time, neofunctional change is likely to be substantive in transforming politics within the system, but may not necessarily do so at each spillover movement. The focus of neofunctionalism is on incremental steps, but certain of these steps may be significant in their own right (e.g. the EU Emissions Trading Scheme adoption within EU climate change policy). Significantly, this perspective allows for the possibility of integration reversing itself: the term ‘spill-back’ involves actors retreating from integration *status quo* and diminishing the scope of integration (Schmitter 1971).

As noted above, especially historical and sociological institutionalist perspectives focusing on path-dependency and the logic of appropriateness (which is rooted in deeply anchored normative structures and traditions) tend to see change occurring gradually in a way

that does not alter the *status quo*. Nevertheless, these institutionalist schools see scope within such a mechanism for substantial, cumulative change, although the expectation is that it occurs gradually over an extensive time-period. Streeck and Thelen's (2005, 18-31) typology outlines different scenarios in which the gradual evolution of institutions may nevertheless generate significant, long-term political/policy change. They isolate five potential phenomena: displacement (one minor element in the system ends up dominant), layering (additional elements are added to an existing system over time and change its nature), drift (elements of the system gradually deteriorate over time due to deliberate neglect), conversion (transformation of an existing system to a new purpose involving active redirection), and neglect (the system's gradual disintegration).

The punctuated equilibrium concept implies that political systems generally maintain stasis over time, but that there are occasions/crises when changes occur producing 'large-scale departures from the past' (True *et al.* 1999). Political and policy choices and events follow on from past practice, usually incrementally (Baumgartner and Jones 2010). Nevertheless, circumstances occasionally occur where the current political and policy paradigm for governing and governance is challenged, potentially opening a wider range of available choices. The causal dynamic is likely to involve changes in who controls the decision-making process but also changes in paradigms and ideas. These moments of punctuated equilibrium trigger greater interest from political actors and the general public in what happens in specialised sectors such as the environment (expanding the scope of conflict). There is potential for sharp changes in political and policy direction, although those seeking to uphold the *status quo* will fiercely resist them (True *et al.* 1999). This change in the *status quo* may seem abrupt even if challenges have been building over time: e.g. German energy policy changed significantly after the 2011 Fukushima disaster, but debates and proposals in Germany concerning nuclear power had existed decades previously.

The most extreme change involves the possibility that a range of events occurs that destabilises the political process and policymaking. Focusing more on cultural dynamics, Eckstein (1988, 794) described the possibility of the persistence of novel situations that may lead to institutional and policy discontinuity. Contextual changes (e.g. global economic crises, national emergencies) could be so ‘considerable or rapid or both’ that political systems are unable to deploy their *status quo* maintenance or to be sufficiently flexible to have the *status quo* adjust to this change, despite strong societal desire to maintain the stability of their perspectives and values (Eckstein 1988, 796). Examples include cases of rapid industrialisation with the resulting political, economic and social consequences, or the situation facing interwar Germany where war, the peace settlement and economic traumas created shattering political consequences (Eckstein 1988; Huntingdon 1971). The buffeting change leads to situations where it takes time for a society to establish a new continuity, often at considerable social cost.

### **Findings: the eras and trajectories of EU environmental policy**

The next four sub-sections provide a new analysis of EU environmental policy’s evolution, its stages and various political and policy changes. We organise each time-period around significant types of policy changes, making use of Hall’s 1993 framework. We focus on changes to: policy paradigms (major, substantive change or transformation in political values and their prioritisation contained in the policy approach), policy programmes (array of instruments and approaches responding to particular political issues and concerns), and selection of particular policy instruments/tools that achieve policy goals. Inherent in this approach is the distinction between evolutionary and revolutionary changes (Capano and Howlett 2009). The scholarly expectation is that changes at the micro (instrumental) level

will be more evolutionary, but we do not rule out the potentially revolutionary role of instruments such as the EU Emissions Trading Scheme.

The time-periods are more indicative than fixed as many dynamics and trends of one era leach into succeeding eras, making hard and fast determinations analytically difficult. Our analysis differs from Hildebrand (1992), McCormick (2001), and Knill and Liefferink (2007) in that it compares eras systematically using concepts of change. Second, similar to Delreux and Happaerts (2016), we explicitly acknowledge the global linkages and processes that EU environmental politics and policy have shared.

#### ***Establishment and early growth: 1967-1984***

Although Hildebrand (1992) and others reasonably assess EU environmental policy from the original 1957 treaty formation, we view the European Communities (EC) environmental programme as requiring a significant framing of the environment as a political/policy problem. The 1967 wreck of the oil tanker *Torrey Canyon*, impacting the UK and France, contributed to a European awareness of the pollution problem. Such events punctuated the political equilibrium, giving momentum to a worldwide social movement in advanced industrial states to frame the environment as a problem. Diverse governments, such as the conservative Nixon White House joined European governments such as the West German Brandt coalition in co-opting or embracing the global progressive politics including environmental protection, and creating legislation and institutions. The Commission and European Community (EC) level processes shared this shift in world-view but had a primary political aim of protecting and enhancing the Common/Single Market. The spillover dynamic of finding linkages between extant integration and new policy areas asserted itself as the Single Market created pressures to harmonise potentially diverging national legislation and to address the threat of national environmental legislation becoming *de facto* barriers to trade

and member state competitiveness (Weale 1999). Simultaneously, however, EC treaties gave EU environmental policy its foundations, with significant institutional implications. The path dependent linkage of environmental policy to Single Market dynamics (for a substantial part of its political impetus and the bulk of its legal justification through EC Treaty Articles 100 and 235) meant that the imperatives of the single market framing also featured in environmental policy (Hildebrand 1992; Rehbinder and Stewart 1985).

Thus, the early 1970s reveal two processes of change colliding in a way that boosted environmental policy: the integration spillover dynamic of the Single Market intersected, influenced, and was influenced by a punctuated equilibrium dynamic that reached its disequilibrium moment in 1972-1973. By the early 1970s, EC decision-makers in the Council and Commission were conscious not only of the social discourse on environmental concerns but the increasing potential spillover implication of member state legislation coming into force. This culminated in a strong shift in the EC political and policy programme without having explicit mention in the original EC treaties.

From 1973-1984, the EC environmental programme focused on developing legally binding acts (200 by 1985 according to Knill and Liefferink 2007). This reflected the lack of alternative tools (e.g. very little budget to try incentives such as subsidies and no power to create environmental taxes) and the reality that much of the environmental field was steering member state environmental protection around the protection of the Common Market. The main regulatory instrument was the directive, giving EC member states scope to tailor how they achieved the directive objectives to specific domestic legal and policy circumstances. As with 1970s member state legislation, EU policy had a focus on specific environmental media (i.e. the components of the natural environment) regulations, focusing on air and water pollution in particular (Wurzel 2002).

### ***Reconciling market and environmental policy impulses: 1985-1999***

Ratified in 1986, the Single European Act (SEA) had generated by 1985 a political excitement for the European integration project with profound implications for all EC areas, including environmental policy. There was a surge in the spillover dynamic where a confident Commission and member state governments shared an interest in enhancing member state economic performance. The SEA explicitly recognised the environmental policy aims with three new articles, reflecting an independent political valuation of environmental protection as an important EC goal (European Communities 1986). High profile 1980s international diplomatic efforts helped generate another significant legal recognition, with the EU gaining status in international environmental negotiations, separate from recognition given to member states (Vogler 1999; Delreux and Happaerts 2016).

Equally important was the idea of sustainable development, integrating economic growth with environmental concerns, gaining visibility through the Brundtland Commission and other efforts (Brundtland *et al.* 1987). The continued desire to fulfil both ambitions led to a sometimes explicit, often implicit effort to reconcile environmental protection with neoliberal prioritisation of market values and solutions and concern about the consequences of regulatory approaches. Environmental damage became framed as a distortion within the market with environmental costs needing to be internalised in the market (Jachtenfuchs 1996). This framing gave greater scope to consider other forms of environmental policy instruments, but also safeguarded neo-liberal assumptions (Machin 2019 – this volume). Nonetheless, the EU repertoire of policy tools largely remained binding regulatory legislation. Efforts to create a carbon-energy tax failed (Zito 2000). Information campaigns played a comparatively minor role although there were successful programmes including the ecolabel Blue Flag (Blue Flag 2016) and creation of the European Environment Agency.

### ***Challenging 'normal' environmental governance: 1999-2008***

In 1999, 11 member states adopted the Euro as their common currency. Although EU environmental goals continued to be touted loudly, sometimes prominently, in such negotiations as Kyoto and its ratification efforts (promoting the image of the EU as a key global environmental leader, Oberthür and Dupont 2011), after 1999 the priority of safeguarding national economies and their competitiveness shifted the environment down the agendas of the EU and member states. The 2000 Lisbon Process enshrined sustainability in its goals, but the Process' evolution over a 10-year period is telling evidence of an increasing focus on economic achievements and environment's gradually decreasing prominence (Interview, Commission official, 10.1.17).

1999 is also the year that EU Commission President Santer and fellow Commissioners resigned, denting the Commission's prestige, creating a leadership vacuum and shift in policy focus (Cini 2008). Much of the scandal focused on whether the EU could manage programmes effectively in the wake of the Delors Commission's integration expansion. Thus, the EU's claim to legitimacy through the creation of effective public, including environmental policies, was open to challenge (Knill and Lenschow 2000). The Commission's reaction was not to row back on environmental policy, but its ambitions were reigned in and there was greater focus on improving processes (Interview, Commission official, 10.1.17). During this period, the EU also faced the great political and economic demands of integrating a large body of new, often poorer states; juggling closer economic convergence with expansion shifted the EU's focus and the attention of EU processes.

There is no evidence of punctuated equilibrium, discontinuity or spill-back changes in this process as there was no strong re-direction, reversal or spill-back of environmental policy. The function of valuing and protecting the environment did not change as an EU priority. EU organisations, programmes and policy instruments remained in place;

furthermore, the EU could highlight some global leadership efforts especially in climate change but also in areas such as biosafety (Delreux and Happaerts 2016). This outcome suggests a process of incremental change where other EU priorities displace environmental protection, which perhaps loses direction. The annual adoption rate of EU environmental legislation dropped between 2002-2007, recovered somewhat and then dropped again in the 2010s (Haigh 2011; Wurzel *et al.* 2013).

There was also a push to make regulation less onerous, and more flexible. The Commission proposed less intrusive legislation such as framework directives that gave greater scope for member state implementation, and non-legislative instruments based on the principle of shared responsibility (Jordan, 1999). Since the mid-1990s, all Commission environmental proposals are required to incorporate a cost-effectiveness statement (Wurzel *et al.* 2013).

### ***The uncertain future: 2008 and beyond***

In August 2007, BNP Paribas made its hedge fund announcement (Dealbook 2007); the global financial crisis and resulting economic crisis soon followed. This was not the only challenge facing the EU: in 2008 Russian actions in the breakaway republics in Georgia, a country with which the EU was building closer ties, created a new security and foreign relations reality for the EU. In relatively quick succession, the European Sovereign Debt Crisis from 2009 onwards was followed by Syrian refugee migration starting in 2011, and the UK voted to leave the EU in 2016.

Of the myriad issues these events raise, we concentrate on three. First, the events challenge the direction and fundamental viability of the European integration project across political, social and economic grounds. Second, it is a long-term empirical question as to whether this represents a period of disequilibria (Eckstein 1988) that will fundamentally

change the EU's nature. Third, whilst still speculative it is also timely to assess how far such disequilibria affect the integration process and the EU environmental sector. A growing scholarship suggests that the EU may not be dismantling its environmental policy, but there is a greater rhetorical drive to 'fight red tape' and moderate environmental ambitions that may have long-term consequences (Burns and Tobin 2016; Gravey and Jordan 2016; Steinebach and Knill 2017). The contributions assembled here explore the nature and trajectory of EU environmental policy in this more uncertain context.

*The contributions introduced* From different starting points, the contributors engage with all three of these aspects of public policy: the framing role of ideas and discourse, institutional actors and arenas, and the evolution of policy implementation in the EU context.

Machin (2019) focuses on the evolution of ecological modernisation, one of the core ideological principles and discourses in the EU, exploring how ecological modernisation at the paradigmatic and instrument levels, as made manifest in EU strategic documents and the prototypical environmental policy instrument (the Emissions Trading Scheme), has evolved incrementally towards giving pre-eminence to the market's role and position. In doing so, this discourse constrains politics and excludes alternative ideas to improve policy and policy implementation.

Also focusing on more intangible qualities that drive change, Rietig (2019 – this volume) examines how the EU Commission has shaped its climate change strategy, focusing explicitly on the Commission's entrepreneurial effort, arguing that it has seized advantage of external opportunities and compatible beliefs across policy sectors to develop a substantial EU renewable energy policy programme. When the Commission satisfied external international commitments and exploited compatible policy values in the other related policy sectors and general societal receptivity, rapid spillover occurred, producing the Renewable

Energy Directive. The absence of these external conditions and lack of agreement within the Commission leadership limited the scope for Commission entrepreneurship in the area of climate policy integration with respect to the EU budget.

Focusing more centrally on the role of member states, Wurzel *et al.* (2019) also tackle the question of programmatic leadership in another important EU environmental arena, the Council of Ministers and the European Council. Using a leadership framework, they distinguish how the environmental role of the two bodies has incrementally evolved, emphasising that the substantial transformation of enlargement has changed the alliance and leadership dynamics within and between the two bodies. More significant has been institutional change, with new coalition building (including a post-enlargement coalition of East European states that have differed with the leading ‘green’ EU states on environmental ambition) and an increasing role for the European Council, although only manifesting itself in limited areas such as climate change.

One EU event that many expect to produce a major transformational change in EU integration and environmental policy is Brexit. To assess the environmental ramifications, Burns *et al.* (2019 – this volume) develop the concept of de-Europeanisation to identify how the UK leaving the EU potentially affects the capacity and resources of actors involved in UK and EU environmental policy. They conclude that, in the short to intermediate term, the path dependent dynamics created by decades of Europeanisation and generally favourable public opinion towards the environment are more likely to lead to drift and limited programmatic change, with major policy change, either in the form of dismantling or innovation, being less likely.

Emphasizing the multi-level governance dimensions of the EU and the significant part various territorial actors play in EU environmental policy, Domorenok (2019 – this volume) studies how the design and operational logic of a voluntary policy instrument, the Covenant

of Mayors (CoM), created the conditions for potential learning and mutual coordination for local authorities. Examining UK and Italian local authorities, Domorenok finds that, under certain conditions and with often varying motivations, the CoM has gradually empowered local authorities and induced them to play a larger climate change governance role. This effect has, however, been markedly greater in Italy, where the state has been a laggard on climate and energy issues, than in the UK, which has been a leader and which had already charged local government with responsibility for action on energy efficiency.

Focusing more on policy implementation, Börzel and Buzogány (2019 – this volume) examine the roles of member states and the Commission, arguing that the Commission has conducted a successful strategy steering accession states towards compliance and constructing new instruments to achieve this. This contribution also underlines the major environmental policy expansion and wider European integration accomplished through enlargement.

Assessing changes in the enforcement of EU environmental law, Hofmann (2019 – this volume) finds a gradual and significant departure from centralised enforcement, reflecting a more general withdrawal by the Commission from its role as the central enforcer of EU law. The Commission instead supports a move towards improved private, decentralised enforcement of EU law by citizens and nongovernmental organisations. The increasing inclusion of procedural provisions in EU environmental legislation has enabled the EU's individual rights regime to operate in a policy area where it has traditionally been absent; nevertheless, cross-national variation in access to courts and the outlook of civil society actors within each member state delimit the efficacy of this strategy.

This volume highlights important research being carried out on the evolution of environmental policy implementation, but the question of how the EU shapes future environmental policy remains understudied. Schoenefeld and Jordan (2019 – this volume)

contend that an important new development in EU environmental policy programme is the gradual rise of *ex post* policy evaluation. They postulate that many motivations may have triggered its gradual growth: they assess the possible role of learning but also argue for examining the notions of accountability and political actors seeking to alter political opportunity structures in their favour.

## **Conclusions**

EU environmental policy has witnessed substantial and significant change since 1992 and especially since 2007. The contributors to this volume suggest that the change has been incremental and rhetorical, despite the major EU changes and crises occurring outside the EU environmental policy sector since 2007. Transformations, such as the enlargements of the 2000s, have seen a continued path dependency of environmental policy and a relatively mixed story concerning implementation, as demonstrated by the decreased Commission ambition (Hofmann) combined with some successful entrepreneurship to boost national capacity (Börzel and Buzogány). New ideas have been generated, legislation such as the Renewables Directive has been approved, soft power continues to be exerted beyond EU borders, and the multiple levels of governance in the EU continue to work on their capacity to contribute to the implementation of EU environmental objectives. Many of these stories have been driven endogenously by dynamics within the policy sector. The impact of Brexit has not altered this picture, certainly in the short term; sustained environmental disequilibria and punctuated equilibria have not happened. This finding is in keeping with those of recent policy dismantling research on the environmental sector (e.g. Gravey and Jordan 2016).

The implications of this finding are more complex than this pronouncement suggests, however. While the findings indicate that the environmental policy sector will continue to be one of the ‘success’ stories of European integration and held to be such, this picture is less

positive for those pushing an environmental agenda, seeking both material and ideational change. Our research suggests a retreat of EU ambition and an inability to consider more demanding alternatives within the EU sector. This may be masked by the creation of new sustainability concepts and statistics about environmental activity and implementation. The contributions suggest that valuation of other policy priorities is higher on the agenda, and this constrains new initiatives and ambitious reformulation. In institutional terms, this is most visibly articulated in the EU Commission's approach to policy formulation and implementation. Exogenous factors such as enlargement and the economic crisis drive processes and relations between actors, with the creation of new alliances and new challenges to the aim of bringing environmental sustainability into the thinking of other EU policy areas.

Comparing this volume with Judge's 1992 Special Issue, we do not see radical differences in either the trajectory of environmental policy or the theories to study it. It is interesting to note that it proved difficult to recruit studies of political parties to link with the study of public policy. While there are researchers working in this field and political party approaches to environmental issues remain important, this reinforces the impression of a policy sector where mainstream (as opposed to green) political parties are not actively positioning themselves with respect to particular policy issues, but where general environmental protection remains a valence issue (Carter 2013). The environmental sector is at a stage where there is a focus on consolidation and improving implementation. The importance of implementation was highlighted in the 1992 issue, but it is significant of contemporary policy developments that much of the present volume's research focuses on implementation and assessment. A related focus different from 1992 is the question of the role of policy instruments, with a number of our contributors highlighting how the selection of instruments and their design have the potential to alter EU politics and policy. There is an

ambiguity in this development, with some contributions suggesting that these instruments signify the withdrawal of EU competence while other instruments might indicate expansion.

One dimension that has developed strongly since the 1992 Special Issue is the idea of the EU as a global environmental leader. Particularly in the area of climate change, several of our contributors emphasise the importance of this context for shaping policy choices. Our contributions also show evidence of how climate change has come to dominate also the internal environmental agenda in the past decade. At least one of the contributions (Rietig), however, raises cautions about the trajectory of this leadership. Nevertheless, in an era where the exact leadership role of China and the US is unclear, the EU internal and external policy stances continue to have global significance.

In terms of theoretical perspectives, the contributions do not constitute a radical change from those in Judge's volume. There is a continuing focus on ideas, institutions and alliances. Network analysis did not feature prominently in this volume; discursive analysis features more, but this hardly signifies a trend. One theoretical shift is a greater emphasis on implicit or explicit learning as an explanation of changes, but importantly the authors have tended to combine learning approaches with other perspectives to gain a wider sense of how actors deal with conflicting values and interests, thereby extending our understanding of change and its processes.

In linking the theoretical overview of Table 1 to the findings, one contributor (Hofmann) finds a change in the institutional arena due to international treaty obligations, but generally the contributions focus on changes in ideas, knowledge promoting capacity through instruments and other means, and entrepreneurship. Of the four different eras and policy change over time, the moment of punctuated equilibrium has only arisen with the initial framing of the environmental policy problem in the 1960s-1970s. For the rest of the EU environmental policy evolution (including 2007-2017), policy has tended to follow

incremental and path dependent lines. This is surprising especially in light of the magnitude of the Eastern enlargement. Spillover was an important dynamic in the 1970s-1990s although the changing overall EU policy agenda suggests that this dynamic is now more partial and limited to specific areas than it was before. This incrementalism should not lead us to overlook the fact that significant changes of values have happened over time, with for instance the increasing dominance of neo-liberal thinking (Machin 2019).

Our last reflections concentrate on the broader trajectory of EU environmental policy and EU integration. Our contributors' findings suggest that the EU policy sector has reached a plateau where innovations and ambitious new policy programmes are likely to be limited and constrained for the intermediate term. The state of EU integration suggests that the EU's political agenda will be focused elsewhere. Nevertheless, the brief history of EU environmental policy suggests that environmental problems can effectively seize this agenda and mobilise the public and elites. Such alarms are likely to continue to enlarge the scope of and innovation in environmental policy. In doing so, environmental policy will also remain one of the bedrock policies underpinning EU integration.

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