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Learning in Governance

Climate Policy Integration in the European Union

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8 Conclusions on Learning in Governance

This book made three distinct contributions to the earth system governance and public policy literature. The first contribution is to clarify what learning means: what types and categories of learning are we referring to when talking about learning? The second contribution is a framework of how we can identify different learning types—namely, the LGF. Finally, the empirical analyses of learning in European CPI in the areas of agricultural, energy, and transport policy show that learning does occur in policymaking and is interdependent with leadership by policy entrepreneurs. This fact points toward the question of when learning matters in achieving a policy outcome (i.e., is the policy different because learning occurred, or did we arrive at a policy outcome despite learning)? Was learning trivial for the outcome, because it would have materialized anyway due to the dominance of other explanations than learning?

What Role Does Learning Play in Earth System Governance?

Which type of learning occurs on the individual and organizational levels depends on the influence of the sociopolitical landscape and the preexisting beliefs of policy entrepreneurs. The key factors that determine which type of learning emerges in the policymaking context are the previous expertise and knowledge of a decision-maker, the culture of information exchange within the organization, institutional capacity, objectives embedded in the institution, and political interests. Experts involved in developing a policy proposal reflect on information presented to them by external experts and stakeholders. In many cases, however, they are already familiar with the information. By the same token, most experts involved in CPI hold deeper beliefs favoring environmental protection and increasing climate action, which did not change by being involved in the policies being examined.

Yet it is important to include the temporal factor and ask whether these deeper beliefs preexisted or whether they were formed in the 1970s or 2000s, when environmental and energy challenges resulted in shifting perspectives in the sociopolitical landscape. Renewable energy emerged as an energy security objective after the 1970s oil crises and was reframed in the late 1990s and 2000s as a core measure to mitigate climate change. CPI in the CAP is a further development from greening the CAP through the MacSharry (1992) and Fischler (2002–2003) reforms to increase the legitimacy of the subsidies paid to farmers (Feindt 2010; Swinnen 2008a). Its justification was reframed as public money for public goods narrative, of which climate action and environmental protection were the most significant.

The empirical findings indicate that some learning occurred in all cases, especially factual and experiential learning through reflection on new scientific evidence and involvement in policymaking. A few key policy entrepreneurs embedded the greening aspects into the institutional machinery. However, constructivist learning among individuals occurred only as a response to changes in the sociopolitical landscape over the long term, and less via being persuaded by policy entrepreneurs.

Policy entrepreneurs—who learned beforehand—played a crucial role in the negotiation process for the success of the policy proposal, as they had the potential to facilitate learning among other actors. Across cases, policy entrepreneurs were crucial for the success of the policy proposal; however, they used conventional negotiation tactics and strategies. The findings regarding changes in the sociopolitical landscape indicate that learning is a long-term process over several years, even decades, as repeating common sense arguments had a major impact on policy change in both cases. Moving on from Radaelli's (2009) observation that a ten-year time frame is appropriate, one central finding is that learning frequently reaches back further over decades and can resurface twenty, thirty, or forty years later. One major finding on the organizational level is that learning can be confused with the technicalities of policymaking in the EU in general, but especially with the institutional machinery of the European Commission (EC 24). It is crucial to separate learning from bargaining in the negotiations that accompany policymaking in the EU, and from lobbying by the various stakeholders involved (Broscheid and Coen 2007; Klüver 2013; Panke 2012). Decision-makers can learn on the individual level by reflecting on new information and being involved in the process, which can even result in changed beliefs or values regarding the policy. This is frequently not transferred to the organizational level due to the political interests of member states and powerful vested interests.

In conclusion, learning does occur in policymaking. However, it is crucial to separate so-called normal learning in the form of factual and experiential learning, which can be reasonably expected from every individual involved in policymaking as additional information and experience, from constructivist learning, which requires more than a reflection on the input and a resulting increase in knowledge or experience. Furthermore, it requires individuals to change their underlying beliefs. Only if individuals change their beliefs can we talk about learning that goes beyond normal learning. Previous studies rarely explicitly accounted for preexisting beliefs or established a baseline from which knowledge and experience increased or beliefs changed. We can mischaracterize learning easily if the time span, preexisting knowledge, experience, and beliefs are not benchmarked. It is important to take other explanations for learning into account and to include those in the analysis.

How Can We Identify Learning in Policymaking?

Identifying learning is strongly based on what is being regarded as learning. A review of various definitions of learning (e.g., Argyris and Schön 1978; Kim 1993; May 1992; Sommerer 2011; Zito and Schout 2009) identified elements common to most learning conceptualizations. The following definition, also presented in chapter 2, consolidated the diverse understanding of learning and provided an overall conceptual basis for this analysis. For learning to occur, the following must take place:

- (1) a *reflection and judgment* based on an input, experience or detection of error, which leads the individual to select a different view on (2) how things happen, i.e., the acquisition of knowledge or learning facts and (3) what course of action to take, i.e., the reflection on individual or collective experience or advice from others on such previous experiences. (Rietig and Perkins 2018, 491)

The empirical analysis process-traced the development of two best-case examples. These included the RED adopted in 2009 and the 2014–2020 CAP proposal, with its components on mainstreaming climate action and increasing greening aspects. Learning in these policies was process-traced (George and Bennett 2005; Tansey 2007), predominantly via in-depth, elite interviews of the policymakers directly involved in the development, drafting, and negotiation of the policies and supplemented with document analysis. This research was based on seventy-four interviews with sixty-six key decision-makers at the European Commission (DG/Cabinet Agri, DG/Cabinet Energy, DG Env, and DG Clima), in the European Parliament and the

Council of the EU (EU member states), and nonnational actors. To identify learning using the LGF, one needs to determine whether communication among the individuals occurred, whether each individual received information such as scientific studies, and whether the individual reflected on the information and as a consequence experienced an increase in knowledge, added practical experience connected to a specific policy action to their base of experience, and/or changed their underlying beliefs. This process-tracing approach has the advantage that it is well established and accepted in the public policy and governance literature (Rohlfing 2012), as most empirical studies on learning followed a similar interview-based approach (Dunlop 2010; Eising 2002; Farrell 2009; Koch and Lindenthal 2011; Radaelli 2009).

Under What Conditions Does Learning Occur?

Learning occurs in the complex interactions between the individual and organizational levels, which are further influenced by wider developments and major shifts in the sociopolitical landscape. For learning to occur in the policymaking process, the policymaking conditions need to support reflection on input and a change in perspective. This can be hindered by several factors, such as defensive avoidance, bargaining tactics, and power politics. It can also be hindered by an organizational culture that does not support reflection and changing perspective or is not open to changes. Thus, the link between the individual and organizational levels is very important for learning to be transferred into the policy outcome. If there is a disconnect between those two levels, individuals may well have learned, but the organization (and ultimately the policy outcome) do not reflect learning.

It is important to distinguish between preformed deeper beliefs and newly formed beliefs and to control for preexisting beliefs, green or otherwise. Key actors in the CAP and the RED case studies maintained their preexisting beliefs and subsequently tried to align the policy outcome with these beliefs. Therefore, the time frame of the analysis is important. Shifts in the sociopolitical landscape also illustrate the importance of windows of opportunity. These were further conditioned by outside factors such as the economic situation. Many interviewees emphasized that an important window of opportunity for climate policy and CPI closed with the economic and Eurozone crises in 2011–2012 as the EU member states were preoccupied with more immediate economic concerns. Nevertheless, key aspects such as the conditionality of 30 percent of farm payments on compliance

with greening measures and the dedication of 20 percent of the EU's 2014–2020 budget to cobenefits on climate measures were maintained and thus point to the influence of actors and path dependencies of policymaking beyond those windows of opportunity.

Additional windows of opportunity opened in 2015 ahead of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as in 2019, when public pressure through the Fridays for Future youth protests and weather extremes pushed climate change back to the top of the political agenda. Whether learning is transferred to the policymaking process, and ultimately to the policy outcome, depends on the political feasibility of actors' new beliefs within the dominant coalition. If these actors use a window of opportunity to gather the necessary political support for their policy proposal, the learning is likely to be reflected not only in the policymaking process, but also in the policy outcome. However, this also illustrates that constructivist learning should be free of any normative judgment regarding its desirability and that preheld deeper beliefs could have a strong influence on the policy outcome. As a consequence, constructivist learning of individuals needs to be benchmarked against the deeper beliefs of individuals, not against externally imposed objectives. Constructivist learning on the individual level can have an impact on the policy outcome and can be identified based on how well the policy outcome reflects the individual's and the organization's beliefs.

Policy Implications

A number of policy implications emerge from the empirical findings. There is a danger that these findings on learning could be misinterpreted as a lack of learning in European policymaking or earth system governance in general. In fact, one policy-relevant key lesson is that much learning is happening in places where we might not expect it, but learning is also not always as relevant in arriving at a policy outcome, as some of the literature or a general tendency to praise the importance of mutual learning may suggest. However, learning can speed up the policymaking process by reducing the number of incremental reform steps necessary to arrive at a policy outcome that does not immediately reform the policy and withdraw central outcomes. Especially the reliability of policy outcomes is a major concern to industry, business, and the financial sector providing necessary investments in renewable energies as the likelihood of changing economic incentives and regulatory regimes means high uncertainty and financial risk to them. Thus, it would be desirable to arrive at a policy outcome that

provides a certain stability, with low likelihood of major changes within a short time frame (Rietig and Laing 2017).

In particular, the biofuels component of the RED introduced uncertainty for actors in the biofuels industry, who planned their investments and business operations based on the expectation of a 10 percent target of renewable energy in transport that includes first-generation biofuels from food crops (Dunlop 2010; Sharman and Holmes 2010). The expectations generated from the 2009 RED made a subsequent reform movement toward discouraging first-generation biofuels more difficult, as the original directive created a considerable lobby of biofuel producers who have a vested interest in maintaining the current policy regime. Here, the policy reform meant significant economic risk and potential loss to their investments, which were based on expectations of policy stability.

This also explains the outcome of the reform to the RED in 2015 on indirect land use changes, which limited the ability of countries to include first-generation biofuels in their count of their individual targets for renewable energy in transport to the 2015 level of 7 percent (the European Commission proposed a 5 percent limit, as this was the share at the time), protecting existing investment, while requiring the additional 3 percent to be based on second-generation, waste-based biofuels and other renewable energy in transport, such as electric cars (EU 2015). The 2018 recast of the RED (EU 2018) and the subsequent delegated act on sustainability criteria and indirect land use changes (EC 2019) sent a signal to industry that existing investments in first-generation biofuels would be protected, while also indicating that future expansion of food-crop-based biofuels should be discouraged by EU member states, as they do not contribute to CPI and are increasingly regarded as any other fossil fuel (EC 29; EC 30).

The weak reform that took place ten years after the original RED was adopted highlights how missed opportunities created political and economic path dependencies and lock-in effects that are difficult to reverse, given the increasingly strong vested interests in maintaining the status quo. Thus, learning can facilitate a policy outcome that reduces the likelihood of frequent, incremental reforms if a policy outcome that satisfies the majority of key actors is achieved in the first instance. In the case of the RED, this could have been achieved by more strongly taking into account the emerging scientific evidence, or at least the uncertainty regarding the mixed climate-mitigation capabilities of first-generation biofuels during the policymaking process via adhering to the precautionary principle.

The key issue in the RED was that sufficient scientific evidence on the mixed performance of biofuels became available only after the heads of

state decided on the target of 10 percent renewable energy in transport by 2020, which, given technological limitations, became a de facto 10 percent target of first-generation biofuels (Sharman and Holmes 2010). A policy implication resulting from the biofuels case would be to create mechanisms that allowed key actors to back up when they cornered themselves in so-called one-way streets—that is, to admit that they acted without having considered all information or that the situation changed following the formation of significant scientific doubts, so that in light of new scientific evidence or experience, a change of course was acceptable. This would allow them to save face without negative consequences for their careers.

Two factors are decisive here: the institutional culture and arriving at a learning organization (Coopey 1995; Easterby-Smith and Lyles 2005), which should not be confused with organizational learning (Easterby-Smith 1997; Lyles 1985). The organizational culture is a key determinant, as all actors and their actions are embedded in the organizational culture and judged against this norm. While in the Anglo-American culture, failure of entrepreneurs at their first business and subsequent learning from failure are regarded as constituting a badge of honor of sorts, Asian (and, to a large extent, continental European) cultures regard admitting to an error as a loss of face, with subsequent loss of reputation and credibility. They strive not to repeat such mistakes in the future. This organizational culture is not set in stone, however; rather it is lived every day (Easterby-Smith and Lyles 2005). In addition, it can be changed if key individuals begin to embrace a culture of reflection and learning from mistakes in a sense of lessons learned or lesson drawing (Rose 1991, 1993). This could happen via debriefings and nonjudgmental reflections on the policymaking process instead of immediately moving on to the next project, as suggested by a key actor in the biofuels case study (EC 9).

This is where the learning organization could be a useful model. The case studies examined here illustrated that individuals engage in learning that is not trivial as they reflect on their policymaking experience and come to change their willingness to do things differently in the future. This adds up to an institutional memory of lessons learned from what the organizational culture widely regards as mistakes (Easterby-Smith and Lyles 2005). If, however, the individuals involved move on to other positions after a few years, either in other directorate generals, in their member states, or when they retire, this institutional memory is lost. Currently, information is rarely systematically collected or stored by individuals involved in policymaking so that they could easily pass it on to their successors. This could be achieved via debriefings that enter experiences of previous policymaking into a database. This way, it is likely that mistakes that happened in the past

are not repeated as the origin of the incident is recorded and it is no longer unclear to the successors why and how the incident occurred. Currently, there is frequently not enough knowledge to reflect on how the situation was handled in the past and why actions led to the known result. Therefore, it would greatly facilitate learning in the European Commission and other organizations involved in policymaking, as well as improve accountability, if a feedback and debriefing loop were introduced at the end of a policy-making initiative. This could record and encourage reflection on the experiences, how scientific input was handled, and who had decisive influence in shaping the outcome and the rationales behind this. At the same time, individuals in leadership positions need to actively support an atmosphere of collegiality and openness that is nonjudgmental and focused on improving the policymaking process in the future, instead of punishing individuals for their actions in the past.

Learning also has a normative aspect: the use of the institutional machinery to arrive at the biofuel component of the RED could be labeled “bad” learning, as it is opposed to the environmental coalition’s beliefs, but whether this is actually bad depends on the value judgments of the actors affected by the policy. In any policymaking process, there are winners, such as farmers, large agri-business, and the biofuels industry, as well as losers, such as environmentalists and small-scale/organic farmers. Each group has a different cost-benefit calculation and value system to judge whether the policy is good or bad for them and their key interests.

The findings on policy entrepreneurs’ power and lack of learning point toward a seemingly democratic and accountability deficit in the European Commission. However, some of the research results presented here should not be interpreted as generalizable illustrations of a democratic deficit in the European Commission. It does have large powers based on its particular institutional role and knowledge base, but this type of power is also necessary to design policies that serve the public good with a longer time horizon than the next election or currently popular demands.

A total of 99.5 percent of the cases in policymaking benefit from the medium- to long-term horizon and political neutrality of policy officers and civil servants at the European Commission and their ability to act as policy entrepreneurs (EC 12). The biofuels case study, however, represents the remainder, where the ongoing disagreements between actor coalitions result in the overall conclusion that there is a democratic deficit in the EU due to its closed-door decision-making and the large power of policy entrepreneurs, who were very persuasive to their hierarchy and held a negotiation advantage based on their expert knowledge. Thus, it is necessary to have checks

and balances that hinder civil servants from playing defining roles that may lead to unintended consequences and to allow for correctional mechanisms in the case of defensive avoidance.

Implications for Theory and Further Research

The LGF contributes to the literature by clarifying the role of learning in the policymaking process. Overall, the facilitating conditions for learning are the following:

- The existence of policy entrepreneurs in leadership roles who try to educate the other actors and convince them of the soundness of their position
- Windows of opportunities due to a favorable public mood
- Demand for a policy outcome based on policymakers' perceptions of shifts in the sociopolitical landscape
- Shared deeper, policy design, and policy detail beliefs across coalitions
- An institutional machinery that encourages individuals to reflect on their experiences and critically evaluate knowledge-based input

The likelihood of a policy outcome increases if key individuals are convinced that a policy objective is the right thing to do; if they are in powerful positions or capable of influencing powerful actors; if they actively engage in the policymaking process by strategically putting together coalitions with decision-making powers; and if they possess the necessary knowledge to play a leadership role based on their expertise (Owens 2010, 2012). However, constructivist learning neither always occurs nor needs to occur. If policy entrepreneurs were also to take on the role of teachers and convince other actors of their policy objectives (Bomberg 2007) instead of using strategies and power politics to realize their political objectives (Kingdon 1995; Moravcsik 1993; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993), wider learning on the organizational level could occur as more actors change their beliefs instead of following orders from these policy entrepreneurs.

A key question for further research is the role of the European Commission as a policy entrepreneur *qua* treaty. In the Treaty of Lisbon (Craig 2010) and previous European treaties, the European Commission plays a central role due to its privilege of proposing legislation. Yet empirical findings in European policymaking indicate that the Commission can be regarded as a political actor in its own right, with its own political objectives (Braun 2009; Krause 2003; Laffan 1997). Furthermore, it can hardly be seen as a

single unitary actor, but rather as multiple actors in the various directorate generals and cabinets of the European commissioners (Koch and Lindenthal 2011) where bureaucrats find opportunity structures to take on the roles of individual policy entrepreneurs.

In combination with the finding that the learning of policymakers in the EU and in the US is fairly similar (Montpetit 2009), the question emerges as to the extent that learning in the European Commission and between the European institutions remains a special, unique case, and whether there are wider lessons for intergovernmental institutions or national administrations. In this sense, the especially powerful role of the European Commission can be regarded as a feature of the EU's particular organizational culture, which also includes its constitutional foundations. To answer the emerging questions about the extent that the organizational culture matters, and the extent that these findings on learning are generalizable for agency (Betsill, Benney, and Gerlak 2020) beyond earth system governance in the EU with regard to climate change, comparative case studies across other areas of earth system governance and polycentric governance would be useful, such as in natural resource and urban governance (Berardo and Lubell 2016; Carlisle and Gruby 2019; Hendrigan 2020; Schröder 2018; Thiel, Blomquist, and Garrick 2019). It would also be interesting to explore how learning matters in networked, hybrid and private transnational governance in the absence of a strong policy entrepreneurial actor with policymaking powers such as the European Commission (Bloomfield 2018; Park and Kramarz 2019; Partzsch 2020). The case of the European Commission is particularly useful, as it provides a bridge within multilevel and polycentric governance between policymaking in a national and supranational context with federal elements (van Zeben and Bobic 2019) and the role of secretariats of international organizations and international bureaucracies more widely.

The other question that remains is whether the findings are specific to the area of CPI, and I would argue that they are not. CPI is a fairly wide area; it theoretically includes all policy fields that are not primarily targeted at reducing greenhouse gas emissions but whose activities contribute to climate change or will be affected by its consequences. However, comparative studies of policy areas within the EU would be helpful to gain a better understanding of the specificity of these findings. If CPI is seen as inherent learning process (Nilsson 2005), there should be less learning in other policy areas. The conflict in the biofuels case study, however, suggests that CPI is a more difficult terrain than single-purpose policies due to competing competencies and possibly conflicting policy objectives of short-term

economic growth and long-term sustainability. This makes it a field of crucial importance to addressing climate change and strengthening long-term sustainability. However, it also requires key actors that are willing to teach the other actors and invest their political capital:

We did extremely well. But it was the high point. I think 2011 was an extremely good year for mainstreaming in the Commission. But I also used a lot of political capital getting it. And I am now the most unpopular guy in Brussels. . . . Because I am interfering with other people's portfolios, telling them how to do their job. People don't like that. So it's difficult. But I can survive. (EC 15)

