

Vogel, David. 2012. *The Politics of Precaution: Regulating Health, Safety, and Environmental Risks in Europe and the United States*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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Despite comparable economic conditions and interests, complex bureaucracies, and risks to public health and safety, the last two decades have revealed a marked and contrasting shift in the environmental policy approaches of the United States and European Union. David Vogel endeavors to explain why the United States (once arguably the global leader in consumer safety and environmental standards) has largely abandoned the precautionary principle—become reluctant to regulate pollution-generating activities when the actual impacts on public health and welfare remain inconclusive—and has instead appealed to this scientific uncertainty to justify its less stringent policies. Concurrently, he strives to explain why the EU has, conversely, embraced this uncertainty to justify its more demanding precautionary policies, emerging as the world's foremost and influential proponent of “more stringent and comprehensive” risk regulations (p. 4).

In analyzing this curious policy divergence, Vogel propounds three chief causal variables. These are (1) *public pressure*: aggregate perceptions of “credible and unacceptable” environmental risks (p. 34), the strength of this prevailing public opinion and its demand for stricter risk regulations, and its subsequent ability to shape public policy; (2) *convergence of policy-makers' preferences*: both the willingness of individual officials to endorse more stringent precautionary measures, and also their collective capacity and willingness to work across partisan lines; and (3) *how policy-makers approach risk management*: whether scientific uncertainty is believed to justify the adoption or the rejection of precautionary policies, and whether it is believed that regulatory agencies (or industries) bear the responsibility to prove that exposure to particular risks pose (or do not pose) credible threats of harm.

Vogel further clarifies that public risk perceptions and opportunities for reform are commonly conditioned by “unfortunate events” (p. 40)—environmental catastrophes and the like (such as the 2010 Deep Horizon oil spill, the 1996 “mad-cow” scare in the U.K., etc.) that reveal the inadequacy or failure of status quo environmental policies and erode the public's trust in government's ability to insulate them from harm. Moreover, the preferences of policy-makers and their attitudes toward risk assessments and cost-benefit analyses are also shaped by public opinion. Among the central premises of *The Politics of Precaution* is that political leadership is responsive to the interests of constituents.

The shift in the United States from precautionary regulations to policies grounded in formal risk and cost-benefit assessments is purportedly caused by three factors. First, there is a general absence of public opinion that status quo environmental policies are failing to protect citizens from credible threats of harm (unfortunate events and opportunity for reform notwithstanding); and,

thus, a lack of demand for stricter risk regulations. Second, there is little pressure on policy-makers to champion precautionary reform and, hence, the opportunity for corporate interests to successfully lobby their own policy preferences (which further undermined the potential for bipartisanship in Congress after 1994). Lastly, the increased legitimacy of formal risk assessments, and policy-makers' growing "demand for greater scientific evidence of actual risks of harm" (p. 35) were motivated by advances in the science of toxicology and, hence, by our improved capacity to ascertain unsafe levels of exposure to pollutants. These developments paralleled greater judicial scrutiny of regulatory standards and the swell of criticism that previous precautionary policies had been founded on "phantom or exaggerated risks," whose costs exceeded any discernible benefits, and which had, consequently, "often undermined public welfare" (p. 262).

This well-researched and approachable comparative case study offers a rich historical context of the social, economic, environmental, and political factors that have shaped the evolving regulatory policies of the United States and the EU, examining the foregoing tripartite causal argument in a broad series of issue areas. The numerous examples of landmark policy decisions that Vogel details effectively substantiate the plausibility of his familiar but nevertheless innovative causal explanation. The principal problem with Vogel's analysis (aside from the possible overstatement of this transatlantic policy divergence) is that it neglects to provide a compelling explanation of the causal mechanism that motivates the enactment of more or less strict risk regulations. While the text is littered with descriptive explanations of how particular actors have had the incentive and opportunity to lobby for their respective policy preferences, and contains myriad hints at how risk management decisions have been influenced by public pressures, the actual politics of precaution remain obscure.

Who, for instance, are the individuals and groups that constitute the "influential segments" (p. 37) of the public that incite reform? Vogel rightly implies that not all risk perceptions and policy preferences translate into substantive pressures for reform. Yet, he consistently conflates the perceptions and preferences of average American and European citizens with those of "influential" actors who not only have the incentive and capacity to effectively lobby for regulatory reform but who actually do mobilize and influence risk management decisions. Moreover, how do these actors mobilize around their risk perceptions and policy preferences? And how do they, in fact, lobby for reform? Which policy-makers or agencies do they target, how do they frame their messages, and when are their lobbying efforts efficacious? Also, if "ill-informed" (p. 265) opinions of the public can deter the political leadership from taking these misguided policy preferences seriously, how do policy-makers judge which risk perceptions and calls for reform merit consideration and which warrant being discarded?

With few exceptions, these necessary details are overlooked. Nevertheless, Vogel closes his discussion with important insights about the international diffusion of policy decisions, and the implications of his (tentative) findings on the future of risk regulation. He notes, for example, that some U.S. firms have

voluntarily implemented more stringent European environmental standards, which speaks to a promising extension of this study. While his theory still requires further justification, given the ostensible capacity of domestic economic actors to shape national policies, Vogel provides the groundwork for an alternative, “firm-level” understanding of how traditional interstate collective action problems may be overcome, and how international policy convergence and the mitigation of complex global environmental risks might be achieved.