

GOVERNING THROUGH STRATEGIES: HOW DOES FINLAND SUSTAIN A FUTURE-ORIENTED ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY FOR THE LONG-TERM?

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1. Introduction

Many of the most pressing policy issues in contemporary societies require future-oriented decision-making, but policymaking for the long term is difficult for democratic policymakers. Environmental issues are a case in point. The vast majority of European citizens consider climate change a serious problem, suggesting that democratic publics are currently pressuring decision-makers to address this particular issue (Eurobarometer, 2017).

However, all major industrial countries have failed to meet their promises to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the single most significant contributor of climate change. One significant reason, as in the case of the Convention of Biological Diversity (1992), is that national governments cannot fulfil the obligations they have made in international conventions (Victor et al., 2017). In fact, environmental policies rank lowest in a comparison of the effectiveness of EU policy implementation across different policy domains (Knill & Liefferink, 2007).

Success of international agreements depends on the capacity of national governments to impose regulations, and perhaps more importantly, make them endure over time. Democratic institutions, which operate within electoral cycles and planning horizons of only four or five years, are not ideal for addressing long-term policy concerns and national-level policy-making obstacles remain mostly unknown (Sprinz, 2012, p. 68). So far, most studies have approached the topic theoretically, trying to suggest factors that might hinder or enhance long-term decision-making in national contexts (Hovi et al., 2009; Underdal, 2010; Jacobs, 2011; 2016). Empirical accounts are few and they have had a policy-specific focus on societal questions, such as pension reforms (Jacobs, 2008; 2011).

There are, however, significant differences between countries in how they succeed in conducting environmental policy for the long term. Finland is one of very few industrialized democracies that consistently performs well in future-oriented environmental policy. Since entering the EU in 1995, Finland has been considered one of the ‘forerunners’ or ‘pioneers’ in environmental policy (Knill & Liefferink, 2007, p. 210–211). According to Sommerer (2014), Finland has advanced from a laggard in the 1970’s to a high performer in environmental protection in the 2000’s (see also Wurzel et al., 2013, p. 98). Using a comprehensive index of environmental performance, Jahn (2014) ranks Finland among the top performers in a comparison between OECD countries. Offering concrete proof of commitment to future-oriented environmental policy, Finland was one of only three EU countries in 2006 to have reached the agreed levels of emission reductions in the Kyoto agreement (Lenschow & Sprungk, 2010, p. 149). While the other Nordic countries and the Netherlands are also consistent high-performers, Finland is unquestionably among those countries, which in comparative studies of environmental regulation regularly stand out as particularly successful.

Using empirical evidence from Finland, this study advances our understanding of how long-term environmental policy can be successful within a democratic system of governance. Unlike previous studies, we examine long-term environmental policy. Compared to e.g. pension reforms, environmental issues have greater global implications and are more complex in terms of political commitments. Currently, environmental policy is arguably the most intensely debated topic in politics, putting policymakers under much more public scrutiny and pressure than less impactful policies. Instead of concentrating on factors that cause democratic myopia, we focus on facilitators of success in long-term policymaking. While Jacobs (2011; 2016) and MacKenzie (2013), for example, have mainly concentrated on obstacles to long-term policy, we focus on what works. With 24 in-depth interviews of key individuals in the Finnish environmental policy process, we are able to get a very intimate view of how precisely successful long-term policy is formulated. Despite some influential comparative studies, which have assessed successful environmental policy at the macro-level (eg. Jahn 2016), scholars have called for more detailed analyses of how long-term environmental policy really is made (Jordan & Moore 2020, p. 8).

We address one broad question: what are the main facilitators for long-term environmental policymaking in Finland? Following Jacobs (2016), our theoretical framework focuses on structural features of representative democracy. The approach is inductive and exploratory. By exhaustively interviewing the leading architects of Finnish environmental policy in the parliament, ministries, research facilities, third sector, pressure groups and businesses, we offer empirically grounded additions to existing theoretical models and provide a stronger basis for subsequent comparative work. We find that an approach that focuses on the institutional mechanisms of representative democracy is insufficient for explaining success in future-oriented policy, at least in the realm of environmental policy.

2. Long-term policy-making

Although most policies arguably have far-reaching consequences for society, not all policies can be considered ‘long-term’. According to Sprinz (2012, p. 68), long-term policies are *public policy issues that last at least one human generation, exhibit deep uncertainty exacerbated by the depth of time, and engender public goods aspects both at the stage of problem generation as well as at the response stage*. For Sprinz, the term ‘human generation’ refers to a 25-year period, during which time an issue may have major (adverse) consequences but a solution may also be developed within this timeframe. ‘Deep uncertainty’ characterizes the sheer complexity of such problems. It is hard to determine which factors will affect the outcome, and how. The public goods aspect in Sprinz’s definition relates to the various intertemporal trade-offs that arise in the handling of long-term problems. For example, past decisions, which have caused extensive greenhouse gas emissions, have brought financial benefits to some people, at the expense of many others who now struggle with the effects of climate change (Büchs et al., 2011). Attempts to solve the problem, e.g., by reducing emissions, creates another conflict by placing serious costs on present beneficiaries in order to secure the wellbeing of future generations (Sprinz, 2012 p. 68).

Jacobs (2016) provides another angle into the definition of long-term policy by emphasizing the intertemporal trade-off between immediate and protracted policy

rewards. For Jacobs (2016, p. 434–435), uncertainty does not seem to be a central characteristic of a long-term policy choice, or policy investment as he calls them, because long-term gains always exceed short-term gains in policy trade-offs. For him, the main variable is the timing of the return. The complex nature of long-term policy is in the trade-off, which imposes high short-term costs (relative to the current level of spending), in order to attain benefits that materialize many years later. Policy investments decrease utility in the short-term, in order to improve expected long-term utility, such as environmental sustainability. Whereas Sprinz and others focus on uncertainty and the epistemic nature of long-term policy, Jacobs considers it in terms of policy costs and benefits.

2.1. The constraints of future-oriented policy-making

On a practical level, many institutional or structural factors embedded in the democratic process pose obstacles for future-oriented policy (see Jacobs (2016) and MacKenzie (2013)). Firstly, voters are typically poorly informed on political matters but they possess more information on present matters than future ones. They are likely to be more attentive towards present concerns, than long-term problems. Consequently, to secure re-election, politicians need to emphasize short-term issues at the expense of long-term matters. However, politicians are also affected by informational problems. Since the length of the daily political agenda is finite, salient issues have a natural predominance. As Jacobs (2016, p. 439–440) explains, *problems whose consequences have not yet emerged are less likely to emit attention-generating signals and are thus at a disadvantage in the competition for elite cognitive investment.*

Secondly, the fragility of political alliances in representative democracy makes committing to long-term policies uncomfortable for politicians. If the composition of government changes after the next election, there is no guarantee that the next government will continue to support the same policies and new, more salient issues may capture the political agenda at any time (Jacobs, 2016, p. 440). Moreover, voters, who realize that governments change, lack incentives to believe in such commitments, further encouraging politicians to emphasize short-term policies (Jacobs & Matthews, 2012).

Thirdly, opposition from well-organized interest groups may also hinder long-term policy goals. Especially if such policy proposals entail a shift in costs and benefits across two different sectors, say, from heavy industry to the IT sector, opposition from the sector that has been affected negatively will be strong. However, in vertical trade-offs where the same sector that pays in the short-term also enjoys future benefits, there could be support for the policy (Jacobs, 2016, p. 440–442). From the viewpoint of democratic policy-making, the inclusion of organized interests nevertheless often means further obstacles, as powerful influencers seek to impose their (selfish) interests.

From the perspective of representative democracy, the basic dilemma is that it is much easier for politicians to make policy promises to voters, than it is to impose costs on organized interest groups (Victor et al., 2017). All governments deal with a wide array of external demands from various stakeholders and constituents. They face complex policy alternatives and possess only a limited amount of political capital (Hovi et al., 2009, p. 25–28). Both institutional obstacles and myopic voters seem to bias policymaking towards short-term solutions.

2.2. The enablers of future-oriented policy-making

If almost everything in the democratic process contributes to short-termism, what institutional arrangements could make democracies more future-oriented? Boston and Stuart (2015, p. 63) suggest four ways:

- 1. Insulating decision-making from short-term democratic pressures;*
- 2. Incentivizing elected decision-makers to give greater priority to long-term considerations;*
- 3. Enhancing the capacity of elected decision-makers to think about and plan for the long term and*
- 4. Constraining the policy choices available to elected decision-makers, especially in relation to issues with significant long-term impacts.*

Realizing these goals, as they argue, may require shifting the decision-making authority from elected bodies to actors that stand outside the immediate control of representative democracy. Referring e.g. to the Parliamentary Committee for the Future (as in Finland) and a Parliamentary Commissioner for Future Generations (as in Hungary), Boston and Stuart (2015, p. 63) suggest that future-oriented policies can be institutionalized within existing democratic structures.

Jacobs (2016, p. 443), on the other hand, stresses the importance of electoral designs, which favour incumbents, and thus discourage short-sighted policy. This would make it possible for politicians to claim the credit in the long run. Paradoxically, Jacobs also suggests term limits for 'neutralizing' short-term policy considerations. Additionally, Jacobs advocates deliberation within institutions to increase a sense for future policy consequences, and fragmented authority like coalition governments over long-term policies to dampen the effects of political losses, as methods for lowering institutional hurdles for investing in future wellbeing.

In Jacobs' theoretical account, the focus is mainly on the logic behind policymaking in pluralistic, representative democracy, where policies stem from the interplay between politicians and voters, whose preferences are reflected in the actual policy output, and for whose support political elites compete. Approaching future-oriented policy-making from this perspective, political scientists especially tend to put emphasis on the institutions and actors embedded in representative democracy.

A technocratic version of democracy that has strengthened throughout advanced democracies in the 2000s offers an alternative theoretical account of how democratic policy-making might work (see e.g. Caramani 2017). Much like Boston and Stuart, this alternative account departs from the idea that representative democracy mediates the preferences of the public into policy, and replaces it with the idea that technocratic democracy produces policy for the common good by virtue of expertise. In the technocratic model of policy-making, the key factors are not related to voters and politicians, but to highly specialized policy expertise, which exist outside the control of representative, party-based democracy.

Whether success in long-term policymaking is driven by factors related to a representative or to a technocratic model of governance, is unclear. There is surprisingly little evidence looking beyond voter-representative interaction and

representative institutions. Before engaging this question empirically, we first describe the political-institutional context for the analysis.

3. Environmental policy-making in Finland

Environmental rights and responsibilities have a long history in Finland, which has traditionally prided its nature-centric culture. Finnish environmental legislation and policy were initiated as the side effects of different uses of land during the country's rapid industrialization and urbanization period in the mid-1900s. Urbanization brought the need to protect coastal-near waters in the early years of 20th century. The Water Act (264/1961), which can be considered the first environmental law, organized municipalities, corporates and communities in watershed areas to voluntarily monitor and act on water quality. Since then, Finnish environmental law and policy has gradually developed from the municipal level concern to the national level and then up to the Anthropocene concerns.

Before the 1970s, the Finnish political system was prone to conflict and short-termism. The highly fragmented party system was organized into clearly defined and opposing ideological camps with little room for broad political compromises. In the 1970s, when environmental grievances started to penetrate into the agenda of mainstream politics in Europe, a few major political and institutional changes occurred in Finland, which supported the development of political compromises and cushioned against abrupt policy turns – also in environmental policy. After the historical national income policy agreement between trade unions, business peak organizations and the state in 1968, a consensual political spirit emerged and started to dampen the inflamed inter-party relationships. By the turn of the 1980s, the weakening of the Soviet Union allowed parliamentarism to strengthen, and parties gained a stronger role in government formation.

As a result, a very flexible coalitional practice and a strong reliance on wide 'extra-surplus' coalitions developed in the 1980s. The system was supported by a lack of a dominant party, and characterized by government stability. Since 1983, core

coalitions have always served the full term – and opposition lost its political relevance. The highly stable governments took over policy development entirely, diminishing parliament to a rubberstamp. A policymaking culture that emphasises widely accommodating interparty cooperation, stability and continuity consolidated. (Paloheimo, 2005; Karvonen, 2014) Another significant change that resulted from the 1968 agreement between work life organizations and the state was the development of a strong corporatist ethos that has characterized Finnish policy processes ever since. Trade unions and business peak organizations have since been included in all policymaking, including environmental policy. Corporatism has been suggested as a key driver of progressive environmental policy (Christoff & Eckersley, 2011), an expectation that seems to get support from the Finnish case. Finally, in the 1970s, during the era of coordinated planning of the welfare state, public administration assumed a strong, almost ‘semi-autonomous’ role that has since then characterized Finnish policymaking process. Although politicians ratify decisions, public officials, who possess superior expertise, prepare them. Especially in complex economic and EU matters, decisions have rarely diverged significantly from the public officials’ drafts. (Murto, 2014)

Finland’s EU membership in 1995 marked a crucial change in how environmental policymaking was understood and practiced in the country. According to McCormick (2001, p. 71–72), EU regulations are binding in their entirety in all member states and directly applicable. The exact wording of the national legislation does not have to match that of the directives but the purpose and spirit of the EU regulation shall not be in doubt. The harmonization game between Finland and the EU on land use and environmental policy has been ongoing for 25 years (Hiedanpää & Bromley 2016, p. 163–188). Due to its practical ethos, Finland has been considered as an ideal negotiating partner (Lindholm & Sairinen, 2006) and a diligent forerunner in terms of implementation (Knill & Liefferink, 2007). In addition to EU regulation, several international environmental treaties and agreements have constrained Finnish environmental policy since the 1990s. For instance, Finland and the EU are members of the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) of 1992, which seeks to ensure the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity (Viñuales, 2015). Already in the turn of the 2000s Finland ratified UN’s Kyoto Protocol for climate change mitigation and Paris Agreement.

These actors and agreements played an instrumental role in the forging of Finland's solution to the Kyoto Protocol's challenge to reduce carbon emissions. The solution formed the core of Finland's long-term climate policy and it is still in operation. It was based on the cooperative interplay of significant economic and political interests. As was already mentioned, Finnish environmental policy has traditionally been characterized by being practical with economic undertone. It stems from the country's historical dependence on export-oriented and energy-intensive industries, especially that of forest and steel. Already decades ago, an informal coalition between political parties, business organizations, trade unions and agricultural interest groups, key ministries and mainstream media started to campaign for nuclear power to overcome industries' energy demand. In the wake of Finland's EU membership (1995) and the enactment of the Kyoto Protocol (1997), the government coalition that was led by Social Democrats and National Coalition (1995-2003) was pressed to find energy sources that could reduce the country's carbon emissions. In a preparatory process that was run by the ministry for the environment, potential solutions were scaled down to two: nuclear power or natural gas. Through its vast power network the so called 'nuclear coalition' defeated the opposition and in 2002, the parliament authorized the building of a fifth nuclear power plant to Finland to secure industries' energy demand – and fulfil EU's emission restrictions. The 'nuclear coalition' continued to dominate Finnish environmental policy in the 2000s while the opposition was largely co-opted (Ruostetsaari, 2010; Kerkkänen, 2010; Teräväinen et al., 2011; Gronow & Ylä-Anttila, 2019; Gronow et al., 2019).

Later, the spirit of consensus and corporatism has provided conditions for soft governance and strategic thinking. Strategic thinking has permeated all policy domains in Finland. In policy design, strategies have come to substitute the idea of social engineering and comprehensive planning theories (Freedman 2013). First climate strategies were forged already in the first decade of 2000s – under the guidance of the ministry of economic affairs and employment (Kerkkänen 2010). Bioeconomy strategy was released in 2016, the updated forest strategy in 2019, the newest energy and climate strategy in 2016 and so on. This trend towards strategic policy-making is not only associated with procedures for public participation, access to information and governmental deregulation, but also with direct democracy

initiatives, such as civil society participation in policy co-creation. While the objective sounds noble, it has also been suggested that the very inclusive preparatory processes can also be used as means to co-opt and smother any real opposition (for example, Teräväinen et al., 2011).

4. Materials and methods

To examine the macro-level forces that contribute to the longevity of these strategies, we interviewed 24 individuals who hold leading posts in environmental policy-making in Finland at national level. Consistent with the research objective, we focused on formal and informal policy-making structures, processes and shared mentalities, not on issue-specific policy processes.

We employed two analytic approaches to ensure a comprehensive view. Firstly, we sought to include all relevant viewpoints by interviewing experts from all organizations that play a central role in the development of Finnish environmental policy. These included the Environment Committee at the Parliament of Finland (4 interviewees), all policy departments from the Ministry of the Environment (7), the Prime Minister's Office, which monitors the execution of government policy and manages the strategic foresight activities of governmental departments, including sustainable development (3), the Finnish Environmental Institute, which is the official environmental research agency (3), major industry trade associations (2), environmental advocacy groups (2), major business conglomerates (2) and the Committee for the Future at the Parliament of Finland (1). All interviewees (notwithstanding the three MPs) held a manager-level position at the time of the interview (Spring 2018), linking them specifically to the formulation of national environmental policy. Together, they possess the greatest expertise on this subject and they represent a wide variety of the most important actors involved in the process, not just the official government perspective. The interview data provides a unique opportunity to examine how the top-tier of environmental policy-making in an industrialized democracy perceive the 'big picture' of long-standing and successful future-oriented policy. To guarantee anonymity, the names of the interviewees are not

disclosed. The combined duration of the interviews was approximately 23 hours 52 minutes, almost one hour per interview.

Secondly, for maintaining the general institutional viewpoint, we avoided policy-specific questions and focused on the broader structures, processes and mentalities that underline policy-making. We first asked the respondents to describe actors and institutions they considered important in enhancing the future-oriented perspective of Finnish environmental policy. Once a respondent named an actor or institution, (s)he was asked to describe in more detail exactly how that actor or institution worked.

The transcribed interviews were submitted to a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA. The segments that describe individual factors (actors and institutions that enhance long-term policy) were extracted from the texts by marking them with codes that were developed as the coding process progressed. The final coding system combined the coded segments from separate texts into factor-specific categories, such as all segments that identified ‘public officials’ as major sources of policy endurance, for example.

The initial analysis produced 20 different factor categories. After re-assessment, four categories were integrated into other categories, due to conceptual proximity. Then, based on the frequency of segments that were coded under specific factor categories (i.e., the number of interviewees who mentioned a particular factor such as ‘public officials’), the 16 factor categories were divided into three classes: those that were mentioned often (in over 15 interviews, 3 such categories), occasionally (in 5–14 interviews, 4 such categories) and sporadically (in less than 5 interviews, 9 such categories).

The categories mentioned most often reveal a distinct ‘Finnish style’ of environmental policy-making, which enables the linking of long perspectives to strategic, multi-sectorial governance. The factors mentioned most often were ‘international agreements and commitments’ (mentioned in 20 interviews) and ‘public officials and administration’ (mentioned in 19 interviews). As we show below, the close connection between external commitments and a decision-making culture that is characterized by the integral role of semi-autonomous public administration, is essential for the longevity of Finnish environmental policy. The relevance of the factor mentioned third most often, that of ‘businesses’ (mentioned in 17 interviews),

should be understood in connection with the factors mentioned subsequently in order of frequency, ‘science-based consensus (within the policy-making elite)’ (10 mentions), ‘societal and environmental interest groups’ (9 mentions) and ‘broad representation of interests and consensus-seeking political culture’ (8 mentions). This latter set of factors reflects the wide formal participation and representation of interests that is also typical of the Finnish policy-making processes.

For a more detailed understanding, we now present summaries of the statements extracted from the coded segments. Although the interviewees obviously did not give identical answers, their responses produced a robust and relatively coherent picture of how the aforementioned factors contribute to the persistence of Finnish environmental policy.

5. Findings

The summaries are presented in the above-mentioned order: 1) ‘international commitments’, 2) ‘public officials/administration’ and 3) ‘inclusive consultation of stakeholders’. The order does not only reflect how often each factor category was mentioned in the interviews, it also reflects our broad understanding of the relative causal importance of the factors in *maintaining* future-oriented policies. After a piece of international legislation (regulation, directive, etc.) has been enacted in a supranational body like the EU council or commission, its impact exerts over all subsequent national governments and thus operates as the primary driver of longevity for that policy. Public officials play an integral role in the process by re-interpreting, moderating and monitoring the fulfilment of the agreements. At this stage of the process, inclusive consultation mostly relates to details and legitimation. However, when a new policy package begins to *develop*, the process likely turns around, pushing policy input from distinct policy networks through public administration to the EU organs. Yet, here, too the independent role of public officials who coordinate preparation processes and manage information flows is likely much larger than the simple implementer model of public administration assumes, as the example of the ‘nuclear coalition’ and the subsequent findings show.

5.1 International commitments

The EU's impact on Finnish energy policy, which helped to set the country into a specific climate policy path in the late 1990s, kept strengthening in the first decade of the 2000s (Ruostetsaari, 2010). It is thus not very surprising that according to the vast majority of our interviewees, today Finnish environmental policy rests firmly on commitments the country has made with the United Nations (UN) and especially the EU. It was noted that while the UN only makes non-binding 'monitoring agreements' (like the Paris Agreement), its resolutions – which the EU often negotiates as a whole – tend to be adopted by EU states in a more binding form through the regulative framework of the EU. Before Finland joined the EU in 1995, its environmental policy was mostly a national affair (Lindholm, 2002). Some interviewees estimated that now almost 90% of Finnish environmental legislation is based on regulative acts of the EU – only land use, forestry and natural resources remain largely in the hands of national governments, though the related EU regulation constrains the leeway of national policy-making. As will be shown below, public administration coordinates and oversees the regulative processes diligently through its semi-autonomous expert position. Quite likely, its position rests, at least implicitly, on the blessing of the 'nuclear coalition' of main parties, interest groups and ministries.

The interviews revealed two basic interactions between the regulative framework of the EU and the Finnish governance structure, which develop a strong foundation for national long-term environmental policy strategy. Firstly, underlying most statements is the simple fact that after a new regulation has been ratified in the EU organs, it becomes difficult for individual countries to evade it. Only EU organs can re-negotiate the agreements, and therefore the system can supersede changes in the composition of national governments, which, according to theories of future-oriented politics are the most common political threat to long-term policy at national level. This is probably why Finnish governments and organized interests have strived so hard, often jointly, to influence the result of EU-level negotiations. After the preference of a specific coalition consolidates, it is hard to overturn. After a regulative act has been enacted, public administration takes a leading role in its coordination.

Another mechanism that was often highlighted in the interviews was that the EU monitors and sanctions the implementation of its regulative acts. Some acts, such as

regulations, become binding immediately after enactment, exerting similar pressure on all member states. Most environmental regulative acts, however, emerge as directives: general objectives that individual countries fulfil with methods of their choosing. The interviewees stressed that through its departments and court system, the EU monitors the implementation carefully, and sanctions members that fail to meet the goals by imposing substantial fines. Countries may nonetheless try to avoid the directives and, as is well known, significant differences exist in how well member states implement EU regulation (Knill & Liefferink, 2007).

Finland was an avid environmental protector already before its EU membership (Sairinen, 2003). Immediately after joining, Finland united with ‘the green bloc’ of EU countries where it has remained as one of the forerunners (Lindholm, 2002; Knill & Liefferink, 2007). While Finland’s climate policy has recently lagged behind other Nordic countries (Gronow et al., 2019) and sometimes it has been passive in influencing EU policy especially at the Commission level, Finland has often adopted stricter policies than required by the EU (Ollikainen, 2014). Our interviews indicate that Finland’s high capacity to implement EU regulation rests on the key role played by its public administration and a general tendency to act as ‘the good pupil’ among EU countries. From EU’s perspective, Finland has been conceived as an ideal negotiating partner, because its interests have paralleled with EU’s interests and it has approached environmental matters from pragmatic viewpoint, emphasising facts and technology over ethics and politics (Sairinen & Lindholm, 2006). The interviewees recognized the lesser commitment of ‘Italies’, but stressed Finland’s diligence in the execution of the directives. However, some interviewees raised the question of declining coherence in the EU, and its potential effect on Finland’s future willingness to comply. EU regulation, like national regulation, rests eventually on political will of the majorities, which may change over time. Currently, however, a broad acceptance for active climate change mitigation exists among Finnish parties. Only the nationalist-populist Finns party opposes it openly. (Tiihonen & Vadén, 2019)

According to the interviewees, while EU regulations only provide the backdrop, it is difficult not to implement them without facing significant political consequences. The pressure seems considerable, but at the same time politically liberating, as it divides the burden over a long time span. As one interviewee pointed out, the EU policy cycle from preparation to implementation takes years, or decades, to complete. During that

time, several governments become involved and ‘policy ownership’ escapes strict political responsibility. The slow and complex multilevel decision-making process seems to enhance the long-term environmental policy strategy by dismantling the traditional political chains of responsibility at national level. To some extent, the process conceals difficult decisions from ordinary day-to-day politics.

However, this is not to say that contingent political desires play no part in how EU regulation affects Finland. Despite the thorough and inclusive preparation process that enhances policy legitimacy (see below), the regulation often invokes public criticism, especially from industry and landowners, which consider the costs too high and the regulation as too bureaucratic (Ollikainen, 2014). As these interests are strongly organized, the grievances also make their way to the execution phase. A view that was often repeated in the interviews is that while the grand scheme that is based on EU regulation is nowadays more or less given and the Finnish policy elite shares a broad vision of environmental sustainability, all governments experience strong political pressure to ‘make their mark’ on the policies. Besides negotiating in the EU organs, governments try, and often succeed, to affect the implementation of EU regulation that travels through national legislation to cater the interests of important stakeholders. Because large agreements place objectives into the future and reduce immediate rewards provided by the politicians, governments may try to delay execution and instead focus on issues that are more pressing. While the EU has strongly limited national space in environmental policy, on a level of detail different parties, even those not belonging to a dominant coalition, can still make a difference, which is important for their supporters. *As was noted earlier, the*. The ‘big picture’, however, mainly develops outside the national borders, as the interviewees maintain, and the largest threat to the current system is the waning political support for the EU.

5.2 Public administration

As was noted in section 4, Finnish policymaking process is characterized by the strong role of public administration. During Finland’s EU membership, the significance of public officials’ expertise in preparatory processes has strengthened.

(Murto, 2014). Several interviewees noted that the complex supranational policy-making context enhances long-term environmental policy also through technocracy, i.e. by emphasizing the expert role of non-elected public officials. Ministry officials manage policymaking processes for several years, often far beyond single electoral and governmental terms. They play a central role in every step of the process, from the preparation of the proposal by the European Commission and Finland's official response to it, to final implementation.

Due to the economic-industrial background of the Finnish climate policy, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (until 2008, Ministry of Trade and Industry) has been, overall, the dominant ministry in Finnish environmental governance. It has been closely assisted by the Ministry of Finance, which controls the resources. The Ministry of Environment (formed in 1983) has focused more on the non-industrial aspects of environmental policy. Its role strengthened in the 2000s when climate policy penetrated to its policy sectors (urban planning, energy saving strategies, etc.). In environmental policy, too, ministries' powers have enhanced since the 1990s after the EU forced national polities to adapt to its fast, reactionary style of policymaking, which is now largely run by ministries' ad hoc working groups (Ruostetsaari, 2010).

Kerkkänen (2010) has thoroughly demonstrated the crucial role that public officials played in the development of Finland's three first national climate strategies (2001, 2005, 2008). Despite the seeming openness of the preparatory processes, ministry experts dominated them due to the complexity and broadness of the policy, which cut across several traditional policy sectors. Cabinet ministers participated, but due to the broadness of the topic and other commitments, they usually participated in the confirmation phase. As the strategies build on work done by public officials in various ministries, the agenda was strongly affected by their considerations.

However, it needs to be underlined that the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, which led the preparation processes and has also directed Finland's emissions trade in the 2000s (Ruostetsaari, 2010), is a core member of the aforementioned dominant coalition (for example, Gronow & Ylä-Anttila, 2019). Thus, it seems likely that dominant political forces have at least implicitly supported the preparative work. The ministry's powerful position as one of the few 'super ministries' may merely reflect the historical powers behind it.

The independent significance of public officials in contemporary strategic environmental governance stood out clearly in our interviews. Although seldom expressed explicitly, the power of public officials *vis-à-vis* politicians of newly selected governments stems from the simple fact that only politicians have to renew their mandate in elections every four years. Most interviewees stated that the continuity of Finnish environmental policy rests, alongside EU regulation, on the long, secure careers of public officials. It is very important to underline that the operative basis of Finnish public administration differs significantly from the Anglo-Saxon model where leading public officials are reshuffled when a new government takes office. In Finland, ministry officials are tenured professionals who are legally obligated to follow specific procedures and practices. Their preparative and administrative work, which is fundamental for all policy development, is protected by law. Therefore, instead of confronting politically appointed officials, Finnish politicians are faced with experienced experts, who have worked on the same topic for years, or even decades at the managerial level. During that time, they are likely to have developed a rather strong sense of right policy, and a significant amount of prestige to be able to hold their ground in disputes. According to the interviewees, secretary generals, who lead ministries, can establish a very secure position from which they are able to successfully challenge even cabinet ministers.

The interviewees highlighted three special roles and tasks of public officials, which allow them to influence the content and timeline of Finnish environmental policy. First is their *content-related expertise*. Finland is internationally well known for its highly developed national strategic foresight system (Boston, 2017) where public administration does not just passively wait for politicians' initiatives. Ministries constantly develop and maintain strategies that summarize the main challenges their administrative branch is facing in the coming years. The ministries also manage policy programmes, which have been set in motion years ago, and they possess broad historical knowledge of legislative motions, which are used as a basis for new legislation. When a new government begins to draft its programme, public officials inform it about prior commitments and courses of action. All new policies build on old material. Instead of a *carte blanche*, politicians face detailed preparatory material that experts have developed for years. According to one interviewee, politicians then merely 'ice the cake', i.e., insert details for political showcasing for the public and

stakeholders. As noted earlier, in environmental policy, new governments more often affect the means rather than the ends.

The second key role of public officials is to keep the train on its tracks. Public officials *manage preparatory processes* by monitoring political commitments and process schedules. They also run ministries' preparatory committees and working groups, where government policy and other political regulations, like EU directives are developed into legislative bills. The officials also monitor the lawfulness of the processes, and as legally protected experts, they enjoy a firm legal backrest if disputes arise. Although they do not have a direct influence on policy content, public officials are able to oversee the work of politicians and become involved if policies diverge too far from the institutionalized forms of action.

The third role is that public officials are *legally responsible for presenting prepared motions* for governmental authorities and government bills to MPs in parliamentary committees. In terms of expertise, MPs are even more disadvantaged than cabinet ministers and their aides, who at least follow processes closely. Overall, the technical complexity of environmental regulation gives advantage to public officials (also Kerkkänen, 2010).

These three roles strengthen public officials in relation to newly elected politicians in three ways. First, unlike politicians who have several simultaneous duties and very limited *time*, public officials immerse themselves in policy detail. Second, due to the longevity of a tenured position, public officials develop deep *expert knowledge* in their field of administration and legislation, giving them formidable agenda-setting advantages, especially in times of 'evidence-based politics'. The third power resource, *motivation*, also relates to the professional nature of Finnish public administration. For example, climate change was a major reason for founding the Ministry of the Environment in 1983. Recruitment to the ministry has been based on expertise, experience and motivation, and many among the staff have a strong personal conviction for environmental issues. Likely, the same applies to the senior clerks of other relevant ministries, despite their somewhat varying viewpoint. Several interviewees stated that the ambition and perseverance of long-serving public officials is a major contributor to the longevity of Finnish environmental policy.

However, this does not mean that Finnish politicians are irrelevant. First, earlier research shows that organized political forces, especially the ‘nuclear coalition’, were instrumental in choosing and institutionalizing the framework for Finnish climate policy, which is the single most important component of overall environmental policy. Second, the interviews also revealed that despite the strongly path dependent nature of the policy framework, parties of new governments want and often succeed to leave a mark in policies to convince the public and stakeholders. However, instead of affecting ‘the big picture’ that rests on international agreements, ministries’ strategies and on political consensus among established parties and interest groups, governmental impact on environmental policy materializes through specific emphasis in the means of implementation that favours some sectors over others. During the past decade, depending on their political composition, governments have emphasised either regulation, oversight and sanctioning or openness, responsibility and market mechanism. As was noted earlier, the capacity of the system to accommodate the variation in political leanings has very likely contributed to the persistence of the long-term strategies. The effectiveness of the measures depends partly on a minister’s competence, motivation, and willpower. Some ministers have gained a powerful and respected position through their expertise and experience; some have simply toed their party’s line.

Third, the Finnish administrative culture is highly ‘law-abiding’, meaning that if a politician decides to take action, public officials cannot (and will not) interfere. As most interviewees explicitly stressed, the roles are strictly codified and followed in practice. Therefore, as Murto (2014, p. 292) has noted, public officials’ power is best conceived as power to affect politicians’ opinions. It reminds of Bachrach and Baratz’ (1962) ‘second face of power’; an actor’s capacity to mould the agenda in a way that only certain options seem feasible, or surface in the first place. For example, the way in which Finland took on the Kyoto Protocol’s challenge on carbon emissions was based on this strategy (see Teräväinen et al., 2011). Due to their expert role, Finnish public officials who work with environmental policy have been able to enhance the durability of the existing and relatively progressive environmental strategies despite shifts in political power. To a certain extent, the long-term Finnish environmental policy seems to ‘lead its own life’, far away from everyday partisan struggles.

However, administration-driven practices also induce risks for long-term governance. The closed and expert-driven preparation process of the first national climate strategy lead to one-sided solutions that appeared ‘optionless’ (Kerkkäinen, 2010, p. 259-260). In the 2010s, public administration, with assistance of the EU, has sometimes opposed progressive initiatives from firms and landowners (Ollikainen 2014). The interviewees who represent these interests also mentioned the stubbornness in the Ministry of Environment to reform their regulation mechanisms. The existing system is supported by a wide-ranging consensus among established parties and organized interests, who share a positive leaning towards the EU. If support for the EU falters, perhaps along with the growing support for nationalist movements who oppose technocratic (environmental) governance, the role of the public administration may begin to weaken.

5.3 Inclusive consultation of stakeholders

The third institutional factor that according to our interviews has significantly enhanced the longevity of Finnish environmental policy is the consensus-seeking political culture and especially the inclusive and participatory policy preparation process that consolidated in the 2000s (see also Vesa & Kantola, 2016). Alongside the bargaining practices of multiparty coalitions, public officials now formally invite views on legal initiatives from all relevant extra-parliamentary stakeholders, including trade unions, business peak associations, environmental and other interest groups.

To commit relevant players and enhance the quality and smooth enactment of the laws, public officials employ an eclectic set of hearing measures (Vesa & Kantola, 2016). According to our interviews, the consultative hearings take place in various formal and semi-formal assemblies, ranging from large cooperative forums like the National Commission on Sustainable Development to focused preparatory organs in the ministries and parliamentary committees. ‘Consultation rounds’ where a ministry draft is circulated for stakeholders’ comments are also employed. In addition, informal communication between public officials and stakeholders occurs frequently, along with informal workshops and surveys. In 2010s, various online platforms have

also been developed to broaden the hearings to ordinary citizens (Vesa & Kantola, 2016). Our interviewees noted that the weight of the hearing generally depends on their nature. They may merely facilitate mutual understanding and goodwill by developing shared concepts and frameworks, which often happens in the wider assemblies, or foster real political influence if public officials and politicians find ways to incorporate participants' interests in a meaningful way.

Although the environmental policy processes may be very inclusive, influence does not seem to be evenly distributed. The participation of the central industrial-economic lobbies in the 'nuclear coalition' was integral for the formation of contemporary Finnish climate policy (Ruostetsaari, 2010; Kerkkänen, 2010; Teräväinen et al., 2011; Gronow & Ylä-Anttila, 2019; Gronow et al., 2019). According to recent studies, larger and more resourceful central organizations continue to receive more attention from the policymakers. Especially trade- and capital-related economic interests typically become emphasised during the hearing processes (Paloniemi et al., 2015; Vesa & Kantola, 2016). Environmental and other 'alternative' lobbies seem weaker. In the battle over Finland's energy and climate policy, environmental lobbies were effectively sidelined and marginalized, despite their formal inclusion (Ruostetsaari, 2010). According to Teräväinen et al. (2011) the Finnish tradition of broad inclusiveness has led to a situation where no opposition or recognized expertise exists outside of the state apparatus. While ENGOs' presence in preparative organs has continued to increase in the 2000s, it may mostly serve a legitimizing function (Ruostetsaari, 2010; Hiedanpää & Bromley 2013).

Our findings reflect these views but add important nuance. According to the vast majority of our interviewees, businesses – both independently and through business peak associations – are the most significant extra-parliamentary actors in the preparation of Finnish environmental policy. However, instead of hindering future-oriented policymaking, as businesses are typically assumed to do (e.g. Jacobs, 2016), the interviewees emphasised their relevance as *facilitators* of long-term policy. Public officials include big businesses to hearings exactly because they are usually directly affected by environmental regulation and through their size and relevance, they may greatly hinder or enhance the policy processes. While big businesses can sometimes cause significant friction, they also have diverging interests and many of them have

good reasons to participate in the policy preparation processes. This is also the rationale behind exercising strategic policy design (Freedman 2013).

The interviewees, which include representatives of large firms and business organizations, pointed out that companies make significant investments for the long-term and environmental regulation is a major factor determining the risks and profitability of those investments. Thus, companies need to keep track of how a particular regulation is developing. Moreover, while representative party politics often creates instability that increases risks, businesses actively work towards predictable regulation through their participation. Businesses may help solve problems by finding solutions that also enhance their business opportunities, or through technical innovations, that are non-political, i.e., they bear no political costs. Sometimes companies even drive more progressive policies than governments to develop a competitive edge, although traditional policy processes can be too slow for them. Usually, however, companies have a good sense of ‘where the world is turning’ and therefore politicians and public officials also benefit from their involvement.

Interestingly, another key group that the interviewees recognized, albeit to a significantly lesser extent, was environmental pressure groups. Although not as important economically, politically or technologically as industrial stakeholders, by holding an *ex officio* seat at preparatory committees and having resources to maintain permanent lobbying, large environmental organizations are *integral in keeping ‘the nature’s interest’ on the political agenda*. Their strength stems from a lack of economic and scientific obligations, as well as the motivation of their staff, who typically have a long history of working with the same issues. Reflecting the defining ethos of the Finnish ‘administrative leviathan’ that builds legitimacy and ‘hugs extremes to death’, public officials are keen to include even radical environmentalists into formal preparatory processes. While ENGOs do not impact policy as much as industrial lobbies, the process would be more one-sided without their involvement, which, as Gronow et al. (2019) have also noted, still bears a distinct environmentalist message. Thus, ENGOs role exceeds mere legitimization.

Echoing the somewhat covert nature of the ‘nuclear coalition’, the interviews also revealed that especially powerful industry lobbies also employ several less conventional ways to impact policy, often successfully. Through their vast resources

and thoroughly institutionalized position, interest organizations lobby at every level of policy preparation, from EU processes to government negotiations and ministries' preparative groups. After decades of active engagement, they have established dense informal networks and direct connections with key public officials. Connections to certain parties are close, and thus lobbying effects also pass through ordinary representative political processes. Sometimes, powerful lobbies that also finance parties, manage to 'infiltrate' their people to powerful cabinet positions such as those of ministerial aides, who direct ministries' policy work on behalf of the ministers.

The recent formalization of the inclusive consultation process, however, places some limitations to direct influence, as it increases openness and transparency and strengthens public officials' legitimacy over the process. The small players know who the big players are and if the big ones gain a disproportionate edge, the legitimacy of the system can be questioned. This system, too, is eventually based on the voluntary engagement of political interests. Despite the apparent unevenness of influence, the administration-driven system has thus far managed to satisfy even the weaker participants, as they continue to take part in the process.

5.4. Main findings

Earlier research has shown that the current Finnish long-term environmental policy strategy was set onto its path already in the 1990s by a powerful coalition of largest political parties, their closest extra-parliamentary allies (i.e. major interest groups) and the central ministries who were responsible for environmental governance (Ruostetsaari, 2010; Kerkkänen, 2010; Teräväinen et al., 2011; Gronow & Ylä-Anttila, 2019; Gronow et al., 2019).

According to our analysis of the 24 in-depth interviews of the key persons in contemporary Finnish environmental policy, a consensual style of decision-making has institutionalized in the 2000s and it is now being protected by a combination of institutions and practices that operate largely outside of the ordinary cycle of everyday representative politics. The slow, path dependent and supranational EU policy process that now regulates almost every aspect of Finnish environmental policy is heavily curated in terms of content and practice by experienced semi-autonomous

public officials. Participatory preparatory processes that engage all significant stakeholders create process legitimacy, foster a sense of mutual achievement, and exclude relevant opposition from the preparatory processes through co-optation.

Naturally, due to the heavy economic burden of environmental regulation, plenty of politics is still played out at every step of the policy process. Parties, governments and interest group lobbies invest significant amounts of resources to influence policy. The big picture, however, has not changed very much since the consensual style of decision-making came about. Political ‘waggle’ only appears to affect the details of implementation, at best.

6. Conclusions

We began this study with a classic question in mind: how to make future-oriented and well-lasting policies in a representative democracy? Long-term policies have been considered problematic for representative democracy because it operates on short electoral cycles with frequently changing political majorities. Perhaps in no other policy area this problem has been and is more acute than in environmental policy, as the shortcomings of the Kyoto Protocol (Sunstein 2008) and the Paris Agreement (Victor et al. 2017) have shown. To curb democratic shortsightedness, some scholars have suggested solutions aimed directly at the features of representative political institutions that produce short-termism (Jacobs, 2016). Others have moved beyond the voter-elite nexus, suggesting that important long-term decisions should be insulated from ordinary democratic pressures (Boston & Stuart, 2015).

Overall, our findings conform to *both* arguments, presenting a curious combination of (a specific type of) representative institutions and non-majoritarian technocratic governance. It seems rather clear that the long-term Finnish environmental policy strategy would not have materialized and persisted without political institutions that heavily support fragmented authority, which according to Jacobs (2016) ought be a central institutional driver of political long-termism. The tradition of very broad and ideologically diverse but stable coalition governments coupled with strongly corporatist decision-making practices has hidden political blame effectively and provided good grounds for strategic policy development. According to our

interpretation, these practices have been important especially for the initial development of the long-term policies, which later institutionalized into strategies..

For the sustainment of the strategies, the factors that operate outside immediate day-to-day political forces, i.e. non-elected public officials who manage international policy commitments through professional expertise and inclusive preparative processes, seem more important. Finnish public officials clearly possess some of the qualities referred to by Jacobs (2016), such as permanence and lack of short-term incentives due to their tenured positions. Also, intra-elite inclusion seems to foster deliberation, as suggested by Jacobs (2016). However, while the non-majoritarian technocratic actors and institutions operate under (passive) confirmation of elected officials, they have clearly developed strong independent authority through experience and expertise, which allows them to significantly constrain the policy choices available to elected decision-makers, as Boston and Stuart (2015) maintained.

Our main contribution relates to this dynamic. The impacts of expert information on *policy choices* have been studied extensively in several policy fields (see Dunlop & Radaelli 2020). In the field of environmental policy, technocratic influence has been connected, for example, to public attitudes (Lahsen 2005) and the framing of climate policies (Ojha et al. 2016). This paper adds to these important discourses by emphasising the impact of technocratic/expert knowledge on the *institutionalization and sustainment* of long-term policy strategies. By placing emphasis on public officials' semi-independent role, we also broaden our understanding of the determinants of institutionalized policy programs, which has traditionally emphasised traditional political coalitions (see Gronow & Ylä-Anttila 2019; Gronow et al. 2019).

For this special issue, our first contribution is to show the importance of building a shared long-term perspective among key groups in a policy network for enabling lasting political strategies. Without a joint interest – and a lucky institutional change that was Finland's EU membership and the enactment of the Kyoto Protocol after the mid-1990s – the 'nuclear coalition' would not have succeeded in forming the climate policy, which evolved into an embedded strategy. Secondly, however, we emphasise that while the continuing joint interest has relevance in sustaining the strategy, through EU regulation public officials have developed significant independent agency, which is likely even more important for the survival of the strategies.

However, as a caveat, we also want to emphasise that representative institutions such as parties, parliaments and governments still matter and their impact may change, even increase, in the future. The power of the ‘nuclear coalition’ has been based on the overlapping interests of the forces that have dominated Finnish politics in the post-war era, the three large parties (SDP, NCP, Centre) and their extra-parliamentary allies, trade unions, business peak organizations and agricultural unions (for example, Gronow & Ylä-Anttila 2019). But consensus-seeking motivation among the elite might be withering. The attitudes of both citizens and the elite regarding climate change have polarized rather recently across established democracies (e.g. Dunlap et al., 2016). In Finland, the nationalist-populist Finns Party, where attitudes questioning climate change and expert-driven policymaking are commonplace (Tiihonen & Vadén 2019), has grown rapidly and become one of the largest parties in the country. If their widespread popular support is transformed into policy-making power in the environmental sector, its influence on the consensual culture may be negative. Despite a strong legal framework that supports the independence of public officials, the system cannot sustain old coalitions and strategies indefinitely if they are at variance with the wishes of political majorities. Paradoxically, the same system that has allowed Finland to become ‘a forerunner’ in environmental policy may carry the seeds of its own demise, as the system is distinctly elite-driven. Leaning heavily on the EU, the Finnish model is a very convenient target for populist rhetoric.

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