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

## **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 pressurizing 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 to 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).

The success of international agreements depends on the capacity of national governments to impose regulations, and perhaps more importantly, to ensure that they endure over time. Democratic institutions, which operate within electoral cycles and planning horizons of only four or five years, are not ideal in terms of addressing long-term policy concerns, and national-level, policymaking obstacles remain mostly unknown (Sprinz, 2012, p. 68). To date, 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 have had a policy-specific focus on societal questions, such as pension reforms (Jacobs, 2008; 2011).

There are, however, significant differences between countries in relation to 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’ with regard to environmental policy (Knill & Liefferink, 2007, p. 210–211). According to Sommerer (2014), Finland has advanced from a laggard in the 1970s to a high-performer in terms of environmental protection in the 2000s (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 of 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 level of emission reductions, specified 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 regulations regularly stand out as being 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, placing 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 policies that work. With 24 in-depth interviews with key individuals in the Finnish environmental policy process, we have been able to obtain an accurate view of precisely how successfully long-term policy has been formulated. Despite certain influential comparative studies, which have assessed successful environmental policy at macro-level (e.g. Jahn, 2016), scholars have called for more detailed analyses of how long-term environmental policy is actually formulated (Jordan & Moore, 2020, p. 8).

We address one broad question: what are the main facilitators for long-term environmental policymaking in Finland? In accordance with Jacobs (2016), our theoretical framework focuses on the 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 in terms of explaining success in future-oriented policy, at least in the realm of environmental policy.

## **2. Long-term policymaking**

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 difficult 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 certain 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 in relation to 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. Long-term perspectives can be manifested as overarching societal goals, as broadly defined objectives for an entire system of governance, or as more narrowly defined viewpoints within one policy domain (Van Assche et al., 2020). In this study, we focus on the latter alternative as we take a closer look at the way in which long-term policies are formulated within the environmental sector.

### *2.1. The constraints of future-oriented policymaking*

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 in relation to political matters but they have more knowledge of current affairs than future matters. They are likely to be more attentive to current 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 democracies 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 the incentive 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. Should 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 especially 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 policymaking, the inclusion of organized interests often results in 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 be biased towards short-term solutions in relation to policymaking.

## *2.2. The enablers of future-oriented policymaking*

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. Boston and Stuart (2015, p. 63), referring, e.g., to the Parliamentary Committee for the Future (as in Finland) and a Parliamentary Commissioner for Future Generations (as in Hungary) 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 favor 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 awareness of future policy consequences and fragmented authority, such as coalition governments over long-term policies, which dampen the effects of political losses, as a means of lowering institutional hurdles, facilitating investment in future wellbeing.

Jacobs’ theoretical account focuses primarily on the logic behind policymaking in a pluralistic, representative democracy, in which 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 policymaking from this perspective, political scientists tend to place particular emphasis on the institutions and actors embedded in representative democracy.

A technocratic version of democracy that has increased in strength among advanced democracies in the 2000s, offers an alternative theoretical account as to how democratic policymaking might work (see, e.g., Caramani (2017)). Much like Boston and Stuart, this alternative account constitutes a departure 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 policymaking, 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 which looks beyond voter-representative interaction and representative institutions. Before engaging this question empirically, we first describe the political-institutional context for the analysis.

### **3. Environmental policymaking in Finland**

Environmental rights and responsibilities have a long history in Finland, which traditionally, has prided itself on its nature-centric culture. Finnish environmental legislation and policy were initiated as 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 waters in the early years of 20<sup>th</sup> 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 concerns at municipal level, to national level and to concerns relating to the Anthropocene.

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 the agenda of mainstream politics in Europe, several major political and institutional changes occurred in Finland, which supported the development of political compromises and acted as a buffer to abrupt policy turns, including environmental policy. After the historical national income policy agreement between trade unions, peak business organizations and the state in 1968, a consensual political spirit emerged, which began to dampen inflamed, inter-party relationships. By the turn of the 1980s, the weakening of the Soviet Union allowed parliamentarism to increase in strength and parties gained a more significant 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 the 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 the power of parliament to a mere rubberstamp. This was a policymaking culture emphasizing widely accommodating interparty cooperation and consolidating stability and continuity (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 peak business 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 is supported by 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. In relation to complex economic and EU matters, decision-making policies, in particular, have rarely differed significantly from the public officials’ drafts (Murto, 2014).

Finland’s EU membership in 1995 marked a crucial change in the way in which 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 are directly applicable. The exact wording of the national legislation does not have to match that of the directives, however, 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 an ideal negotiating partner (Lindholm & Sairinen, 2006) and a diligent forerunner in terms of implementation (Knill & Liefferink, 2007). In addition to EU regulations, 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). At the start of the 2000s, Finland had already ratified the UN's Kyoto Protocol for climate change mitigation and the Paris Agreement.

These actors and agreements played an instrumental role in helping Finland meet the challenge of the Kyoto Protocol and reducing carbon emissions. The solution formed the core of Finland's long-term climate policy and is still in operation. It was based on the cooperative interplay of significant economic and political interests. As already mentioned, Finnish environmental policy has traditionally been characterized by its practical nature with economic undertones. It stems from the country's historical dependence on export-oriented and energy-intensive industries, such as the forestry and steel industries. Even several 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 meet 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 the National Coalition (1995-2003) was under pressure to find energy sources that could reduce the country's carbon emissions. In a preparatory process that was managed by the Ministry of 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, parliament authorized the building of a fifth nuclear power plant in Finland to secure industries' energy demand – and to fulfil the 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 provided the 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). Climate strategies had already been forged in the first decade of 2000s, under the guidance of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (Kerkkänen, 2010). The bioeconomy strategy was released in 2016, the updated forestry strategy in 2019, the

newest energy and climate strategy in 2016, etc. This trend towards strategic policymaking 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 a means to co-opt and smother any real opposition (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 policymaking in Finland at national level. Consistent with the research objective, we focused on formal and informal policymaking 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 four interviewees from the Environment Committee at the Parliament of Finland, seven from all policy departments of the Ministry of the Environment, three from the Prime Minister's Office, which monitors the execution of government policy and manages the strategic foresight activities of governmental departments, including sustainable development, three from the Finnish Environmental Institute, which is the official environmental research agency, two from major industry trade associations, two from environmental advocacy groups, two from major business conglomerates and one from the Committee for the Future at the Parliament of Finland. 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 relating to this subject, representing the viewpoints of a wide variety of the most important actors involved in the process, not just the official government perspective. The interview data provide a unique opportunity to examine

the way in which the top-tier of environmental policymaking 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, to maintain the general institutional viewpoint, we avoided policy-specific questions and focused on the broader structures, processes and mentalities that underline policymaking. 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.

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, three such categories), occasionally (in five to 14 interviews, four such categories) and sporadically (in less than five interviews, nine such categories).

The categories mentioned most often reveal a distinct ‘Finnish style’ of environmental policymaking, which enables the linking of long-term 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 policymaking elite)’ (10 mentions), ‘societal and environmental interest groups’ (nine mentions) and ‘broad representation of interests and consensus-seeking political culture’ (eight mentions). This latter set of factors reflects the wide formal participation and representation of interests that is also typical of the Finnish policymaking 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 the way in which the aforementioned factors contribute to the persistence of Finnish environmental policy.

## **5. Findings**

The summaries are presented in the aforementioned order: 1) ‘international commitments’, 2) ‘public officials/administration’ and 3) ‘inclusive consultation of stakeholders’. The order not only reflects 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 is exerted on subsequent national governments and it 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 is likely to turn around, pushing policy input from distinct policy networks through public administration to the EU organs. However, in this case too, the independent role of

public officials who coordinate preparation processes and manage information flows is likely to be much greater 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 direct the country along a specific climate policy path in the late 1990s, strengthened during the first decade of the 2000s (Ruostetsaari, 2010). It is thus not surprising that according to the vast majority of our interviewees, Finnish environmental policy today 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). Certain interviewees estimated that currently almost 90% of Finnish environmental legislation is based on the regulative acts of the EU; only land use, forestry and natural resources remain largely in the hands of national governments, though the related EU regulations constrain the leeway of national policymaking. As will be shown below, the public administration coordinates and oversees the regulative processes diligently through its semi-autonomous expert position. It is probable that its position rests, at least implicitly, on the harmony between 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 is consolidated, it is difficult to overturn. Once a regulative act has been enacted, the public administration takes a leading role in its coordination.

Another mechanism that was often highlighted in the interviews was the fact that the EU monitors and sanctions the implementation of its regulative acts. Certain 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 the EU, through its departments and court system, monitors the implementation carefully and sanctions members that fail to meet set goals, by imposing substantial fines. Countries may nonetheless try to avoid the directives and as is well known, significant differences exist in relation to the way in which member states implement EU regulations (Knill & Liefferink, 2007).

Finland was already an avid environmental protector before its EU membership (Sairinen, 2003). Immediately after joining, Finland united with ‘the green bloc’ of EU countries in which it has remained 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, on occasions, it has been passive in influencing EU policy especially at the Commission level, Finland has often adopted stricter policies than those required by the EU (Ollikainen, 2014). Our interviews indicate that Finland’s great capacity to implement EU regulations rests on the key role played by its public administration, and a general tendency to act as ‘the good pupil’ among EU countries. From the EU’s perspective, Finland has been conceived as an ideal negotiating partner, because its interests run parallel with the interests of the EU and it has approached environmental matters from a pragmatic viewpoint, emphasizing 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, certain interviewees raised the question of declining coherence within the EU, and its potential effect on Finland’s future willingness to comply. EU regulations, like national regulations, ultimately rest on the political will of the majorities, which may change over time. Currently, however, a broad acceptance of 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 period of time. 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. Finland typifies a case where policy strategy seems, to some extent, to conceal difficult decisions from ordinary day-to-day politics, because it is so deeply embedded in the policymaking institutions (see also Van Assche et al. (2020)).

However, this is not to say that contingent political desires play no part in the way in which EU regulations affect Finland. Despite the thorough and inclusive preparation process that enhances policy legitimacy (see below), the regulations often invoke public criticism, especially from industry and landowners, which consider the costs too high and the regulations 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 regulations is nowadays more or less a given, and the Finnish policy elite share a broad vision of environmental sustainability, all governments experience significant political pressure to ‘make their mark’ on the policies. Besides negotiating in the EU organs, governments try, and often succeed in affecting the implementation of EU regulations that travel through national legislation to cater for the interests of important stakeholders. Since comprehensive agreements set future objectives 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 significantly limited national space in environmental policy, on a more detailed level, different parties, even those not belonging to a dominant coalition, can still make a difference, which is important for their supporters. As previously noted by the



interviewees, however, the ‘big picture’ mainly develops outside national borders 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, the Finnish policymaking process is characterized by the strong role of public administration. Over the course of Finland’s EU membership, the significance of public officials’ expertise in preparatory processes has strengthened (Murto, 2014). Several interviewees noted that the complex supranational policymaking context also enhances long-term environmental policy 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, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (until 2008, the Ministry of Trade and Industry) has, overall, been the dominant ministry in Finnish environmental governance. It has been closely assisted by the Ministry of Finance, which controls the resources. The Ministry of the Environment (formed in 1983) has primarily focused on the non-industrial aspects of environmental policy. Its role became more significant in the 2000s when climate policy penetrated its policy sectors (urban planning, energy saving strategies, etc.). In environmental policy, too, the powers of ministries have increased since the 1990s, when the EU forced national polities to adapt to its fast, reactionary style of policymaking, which is now largely run by the ad hoc working groups of the ministries (Ruostetsaari, 2010).

Kerkkänen (2010) has explained in detail the crucial role that public officials played in the development of Finland’s first three 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 significantly affected by their considerations.

However, it should be clarified that the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, which led the preparation processes and also directed Finland's emissions trade in the 2000s (Ruostetsaari, 2010), is a core member of the aforementioned dominant coalition (Gronow & Ylä-Anttila, 2019). Thus, it seems likely that dominant political forces have 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 regulations, on the long-term, 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 managerial level. During that time, they are likely to have developed a rather significant awareness of the right kind of policy, as well as a great degree 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 even able to successfully challenge 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. The 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 likely to face over the coming years. The ministries also manage policy programs, which were set in motion years ago, and they possess a broad historical knowledge of legislative motions, which are used as a basis for new legislation. When a new government begins to draft its program, public officials inform the government of prior commitments and courses of action. All new policies build on old material. Instead of a *carte blanche*, politicians are presented with detailed preparatory material that experts have been developing over many years. According to one interviewee, politicians merely 'ice the cake', i.e., insert details for political showcasing for the purposes of the public and stakeholders. As noted previously, in environmental policy, new governments affect the means as a rule, rather than the ends.

The second key role of public officials is to keep the 'train on the tracks'. Public officials *manage preparatory processes* by monitoring political commitments and process schedules. They also run the ministries' preparatory committees and working groups, where government policy and other political regulations, such as 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 should 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 of public officials is that they 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 the processes closely. Overall, the technical complexity of the environmental regulations gives public officials the advantage (also Kerkkänen, 2010).

These three roles strengthen public officials in relation to newly elected politicians in three ways. Firstly, unlike politicians who have several simultaneous duties and very limited *time*, public officials immerse themselves in policy detail. Secondly, 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 staff have strong personal beliefs with regard to environmental issues. It is likely that the same applies to the senior clerks of other relevant ministries, despite their somewhat varying viewpoints. 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. Firstly, previous research has shown 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. Secondly, the interviews also revealed that there is a strong impact of path dependence, or ‘legacies from the past’, as Van Assche et al. (2020) explain. Despite such dependencies, parties of new governments often succeed in leaving a mark on policies to convince both the public and the stakeholders. However, instead of affecting ‘the big picture’ that rests on international agreements, ministries’ strategies and political consensus among established parties and interest groups, governmental impact on environmental policy materializes through specific emphasis on the means of implementation, that favors certain sectors over others. During the past decade, depending on their political composition, governments have emphasized either regulation, oversight and sanctioning or openness, responsibility and market mechanism. As previously noted, the capacity of the system to accommodate the variation in political leanings is very likely to have contributed to the persistence of 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; others have simply toed the party line.

Thirdly, the Finnish administrative culture is particularly ‘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, the power of public officials is best conceived as a means of affecting politicians' opinions. It echoes Bachrach and Baratz's (1962) 'second face of power' – an actor's capacity to mold the agenda in such a way that only certain options seem feasible, or are allowed to surface in the first place; 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 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 led to one-sided solutions that appeared 'optionless' (Kerkkänen, 2010, p. 259-260). In the 2010s, public administration, with the assistance of the EU, has sometimes opposed progressive initiatives from firms and landowners (Ollikainen, 2014). The interviewees who represented these interests also mentioned the stubbornness within the Ministry of the 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 growing support for nationalist movements which oppose technocratic (environmental) governance, the role of the public administration may begin to weaken.

### *5.3 Inclusive consultation of stakeholders*

The third institutional factor, which 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 was consolidated in the 2000s (see also Vesa & Kantola, (2016)).

Alongside the bargaining practices of multiparty coalitions, public officials formally invite views on legal initiatives from all relevant, extra-parliamentary stakeholders, including trade unions, peak business 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, such as the National Commission on Sustainable Development, to focused preparatory organs in the ministries and parliamentary committees. ‘Consultation rounds’ in which 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 the 2010s, various online platforms were also developed to make the hearings accessible to ordinary citizens (Vesa & Kantola, 2016). Our interviewees noted that the weight of the hearing generally depends on its nature. They may merely facilitate mutual understanding and goodwill by developing shared concepts and frameworks, which often happens in the wider assemblies, or they may foster real political influence, should public officials and politicians find methods of incorporating 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. Trade- and capital-related economic interests, in particular, are typically highlighted during the hearing processes (Paloniemi et al., 2015; Vesa & Kantola, 2016). Environmental and other ‘alternative’ lobbies seem less significant. 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 in which no opposition groups or recognized experts exist outside the state apparatus. While the

presence of ENGOs' in preparative organs has continued to increase in the 2000s, this may primarily serve as a legitimizing function (Ruostetsaari, 2010; Hiedanpää & Bromley, 2013).

Our findings reflect these views but add an important nuance. According to the vast majority of our interviewees, businesses – both independent and within peak business 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 regarded as doing (e.g. Jacobs, 2016), the interviewees emphasized their relevance as *facilitators* of long-term policy. Public officials include big businesses in hearings precisely because they are usually directly affected by environmental regulations, and as a result of their size and relevance, they may greatly hinder or enhance policy processes. While big businesses can sometimes cause significant difficulties, they also have diverging interests and many of them have valid reasons for participating in the policy preparation processes. This is also the rationale behind exercising strategic policy design (Freedman, 2013).

The interviewees, who include representatives of large firms and business organizations, pointed out that companies make significant investments for the long term and environmental regulations are a major factor with regard to 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 by implementing technical innovations, that are non-political, i.e., they bear no political costs. Sometimes companies drive more progressive policies than governments to develop a competitive edge, as 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 the involvement of businesses.

Interestingly, another key group that the interviewees recognized, albeit to a significantly lesser extent, was that of 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 the 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 on environmental 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 in 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, the role of ENGOs exceeds mere legitimization.

Echoing the somewhat covert nature of the 'nuclear coalition', the interviews also revealed that powerful industry lobbies, in particular, also employ several, less conventional ways of impacting 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. Close links to certain parties have been established, thus lobbying effects also pass through ordinary representative political processes. Sometimes, powerful lobbies that finance parties, manage to 'infiltrate' powerful cabinet positions, such as those of ministerial aides, who direct the policies of the ministries on behalf of the ministers.

The recent formalization of the inclusive consultation process, however, places certain limitations on 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 players gain a disproportionate edge, the legitimacy of the system can be brought into question. 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*

Previous research has shown that the strategy relating to the current, Finnish, long-term, environmental policy had already been established in the 1990s by a powerful coalition of the 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 people in contemporary Finnish environmental policy, a consensual style of decision-making was institutionalized in the 2000s and is now being protected by a combination of institutions and practices that operate largely outside the framework 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, many political decisions are still played out at every step of the policy process. Parties, governments and interest group lobbies invest significant amounts of resources in influencing 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 lasting policies in a representative democracy? Long-term policies have been considered problematic for representative democracies because they operate within short electoral cycles, with frequently changing political majorities. Perhaps in no other policy area has this problem been 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, certain 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 strategy of Finnish environmental policy would not have materialized and persisted without the political institutions that heavily support fragmented authority, which according to Jacobs (2016) ought to 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 solid ground for strategic policy development. According to our interpretation, these practices have been especially important for the initial development of long-term policies, which later became 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. In addition, intra-elite inclusion seems to foster deliberation, as suggested by Jacobs (2016). However, while the non-majoritarian technocratic actors and institutions operate in accordance with the (passive) approval of elected officials, they have clearly developed a 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 emphasizing the impact of technocratic/expert knowledge on the *institutionalization and sustainment* of long-term policy strategies. By placing emphasis on the semi-independent role of public officials, we also broaden our understanding of the determinants of institutionalized policy programs, which have traditionally highlighted 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 within a policy network to enable lasting political strategies. Finland illustrates a case where commitment to long-term perspectives has become embedded in institutions that produce environmental policy. In this system, success emanates from strategies with a ‘systematic linkage to long-term perspectives’, as Van Assche et al. (2020) argue in the introductory article to this special issue. Without a joint interest – and a lucky institutional change that was Finland’s EU membership, as well as 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, we nevertheless emphasize that while the continuing joint interest has relevance in sustaining the strategy, public officials have developed a significant independent agency through EU regulations, which is likely to be even more important for the survival of the strategies.

However, as a caveat, we also wish to underscore 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, peak business organizations and agricultural unions (Gronow & Ylä-Anttila, 2019). However, 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, within which 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 its widespread popular support is transformed into policymaking power in the environmental sector, its influence on 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 it is at variance with the wishes of the 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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