The Impact of European Interest Group Activity on the EU Energy Policy – New Conditions for Access and Influence?

Abstract

In the energy sector the European Union has to face new realities. The rising threat of climate change and the uneven distribution of energy supplies among countries with its implications for energy security form challenges that require the realignment of conventional strategies. The question of who will determine the content of new objectives and the instruments being suitable to attain these arises. Existing theories on interest group activity often state that especially multinational companies have an impact on the policy outcomes. In contrast to this, here it is assumed that due to the rising importance of renewable energies in regard to both climate change and energy security, new roads for access will be opened to new actors. Based on these considerations, the conditions for access and influence of interest groups representing the renewable energy sector and environmental issues will be examined and compared to those representing fossil energies. First empirical analyses indicated that in regard to actor constellations in the European energy policy the dividing line cannot be drawn between societal and state actors, but that governmental and non-governmental actors form coalitions around shared perspectives in order to pursue a common goal. This impression is reflected in the assumptions of the Advocacy Coalition Framework developed by Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (Sabatier/Jenkins-Smith, 1988; 1999; further: Sabatier/Weible, 2007), which serves as the theoretical foundation of this project.

In the following, I will firstly present an overview on the European renewable energy policy and demonstrate its relevance for the research question. In the next paragraph I will give an introduction into the theoretical framework and name my hypotheses. Finally I draw some conclusion from the empirical findings and hint at open questions for further research.

*Maren Becker is Ph.D. researcher in Political Science at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Vienna, Austria. She holds a Master’s degree in Social Science and a Bachelor’s degree in Political Science and Business Administration. Her research focuses on European Integration, Interest politics, International Relations and Energy policy.

Contact details: Maren Becker, Institute for Advanced Studies, Department for Political Science, Stumpergasse 56, 1060 Vienna, Austria; email: becker@ihs.ac.at.
The European renewable energy policy

One of the European Union’s central aims is to promote the enhanced use of renewable energies. The most important sources are energy from wind, water, solar power and biomass. The renewable energies fulfill three decisive functions: the first is its role in reducing Carbon Dioxide (CO2) emissions and in this way contributing to the combat against climate change. The second important aspect concerns the security of energy supply, as enhancing the share of renewable energies reduces the Community’s dependence on energy imports from other countries. The final argument in favor of an increase in the share of renewable energies is the transfer of technologies and the provision of employment opportunities, especially in rural areas. As the European Commission expects renewable energy sources to be competitive with conventional energy sources in the medium as well as in the long run, the adoption of measures to benefit from the use of renewable energies can be regarded as an inevitable step to ensure sustainable development (European Commission, 23/01/2008).

The summit of the European Council in March 2007 as a decisive step in the development of the European renewable energy policy in general focused on the Lisbon Strategy for growth and jobs, better regulation and an integrated and sustainable energy and climate change policy (Council of the European Union, 09/03/2007). Based on the fact that the climate change is primarily caused by greenhouse gas emissions in the industrialized countries and on the risk of the growing dependence of the Community from energy imports, a concept of an integrated climate and energy policy was designed to realise the following objectives:

⇒ to increase the security of energy supply through diversification of resources,
⇒ to ensure that the European Union is economically competitive and the necessary energy sources are available, and
⇒ to promote environmental sustainability as well as the combat against climate change (Council of the European Union, 09/03/2007).

The European Union is regarded as the central actor whose responsibility it is to promote the enhanced importance of renewable energies. But the question arises of who will determine the content and instruments of this strategy and if there are conflicting interests competing for influence.
2 Theoretical foundation: the Advocacy Coalition Framework

2.1 Definitions and basic assumptions

The Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) is an approach, which was developed by Paul A. Sabatier and Hank C. Jenkins in 1988 in order to explain policy change within a period of ten years or even more. An advocacy coalition can be described as a coalition of various actors within a policy network who pursue a common aim based on a collectively shared belief system.

This belief system consists of three different levels (Sabatier/Weible, 2007): at a broad level are the deep core beliefs, which consist of very general opinions; at the next level are the policy core beliefs, which define how to translate the deep core beliefs into practice; the third level includes the secondary beliefs, which consist of detailed rules and guidelines. In addition a fourth category of beliefs was introduced labelled policy core policy preferences that describe normative beliefs on how the policy subsystem ought to be.

Participants of an advocacy coalition can be members of political parties, elected political representatives, interest groups, researchers or journalists. It is assumed that within a subsystem in general one dominant advocacy coalition exits, while other advocacy coalitions play only a minor role (Sabatier/Jenkins-Smith, 1988). The ACF was revised in 1993 and 1999. Due to the criticism the earlier versions had to face and to the results of various case studies made by the authors themselves or by other researchers, in the succeeding years additional important modifications have been introduced. In my following remarks I will concentrate on the version of 1999, including the most important revisions made since then.

The basic assumptions are (Sabatier/Weible, 2007: 191-192):

1. “A macro-level assumption that most policy-making occurs among specialists within a policy subsystem but that their behaviour is affected by factors in the broader political and socio-economic system.”
2. “A micro-level ‘model of the individual’ that is drawn heavily from social psychology.”
3. “A meso-level conviction that the best way to deal with the multiplicity of actors in a subsystem is to aggregate them into “advocacy coalitions”.”
2.2 Advocacy coalitions and policy change

The question arises of how policy change can be achieved on the basis of the model outlined above. The ACF originally assumed (Sabatier/Jenkins-Smith: 1988) that it is unlikely to initiate major changes from within the system, as deep core beliefs and policy core beliefs are relatively stable and constant over time and a change in the secondary beliefs would not initiate major policy change. According to the early version, only two possibilities existed that could, if applicable, lead to major policy change: policy-oriented learning and external perturbations (Sabatier/Weible, 2007: 198). In the later version of the ACF (Sabatier/Weible, 2007: 204) the authors added two new factors as potential causes for policy change: internal shocks and negotiated agreements. As the precondition for policy change they point to “a degree of belief change among some of the policy participants or a replacement of a dominant coalition by a minor coalition” (Sabatier/Weible, 2007: 198). In the following part I will present a short summary of all of the four variables mentioned above and their impact on policy change.

Policy-oriented learning is defined as “relatively enduring alternations of thought or behavioral intentions that result from experience and/or new information and that are concerned with the attainment or revision of policy objectives” (Sabatier/Jenkins-Smith, 1999). But policy-oriented learning can rarely be achieved in regard to the deep core beliefs and policy core beliefs, and thus is a process mainly referring to the change of secondary beliefs. In contrast, external perturbations or shocks like changes in the socio-economic conditions, shifting power proportions within a government, or a catastrophe might have an impact on the policy core beliefs of a dominant advocacy coalition and make the members reconsider their original targets and strategies. However, as Sabatier and Weible describe it, the “most important effect of external shocks is the redistribution of resources or the opening and closing of venues within a policy subsystem, which can lead to the replacement of the previously dominant coalition by a minority coalition” (Sabatier/Weible, 2007: 199). In addition, the authors came to the conclusion that not only external, but also internal shocks, that means developments inside the policy subsystem, could result in major policy change (Sabatier/Weible, 2007: 204). They argue in reference to Birkland (2004), that internal (as well as external) shocks function as “focusing events“ that “attract public attention, highlight policy vulnerabilities, failures, or neglect, and bring new information into the policy process. This has the potential to tip the balance of power among policy participants, providing the potential for major policy change”. Internal and
external shocks potentially lead to a reallocation of resources in the sense of public or financial support, which in consequence influences the distribution of power among coalitions. The last factor having an influence on policy change is defined as negotiated agreements. This was introduced in order to “identify the conditions under which – in the absence of major external or internal perturbation – agreements involving policy core changes are crafted among previously warring coalitions” (Sabatier/Weible, 2007: 205).

In regard to the impact advocacy coalitions have on the European energy policy, the factor external perturbations seems to be most suitable for the analysis of policy change, as empirical findings indicate that the sector, indeed, experienced basic modifications. In order to figure out who can influence the policy outcome and in this way contribute to the combat against climate change as well as to an enhanced security of energy supply, one has to ask for the determinants of actors’ influence. Due to the assumption that external perturbations result in a reallocation of resources and the opening and closing of venues, the question of the function of coalition resources in connection with coalition opportunity structures comes up, which has only insufficiently been analyzed in the literature so far. Sabatier and Weible (2007) emphasize that much research “has focused on the content of belief systems [of advocacy coalitions], but virtually none has focused on coalition resources” and their implications for policy change (Sabatier/Weible, 2007: 201).

### 2.3 Coalition resources and coalition opportunity structures

Various authors agree on the importance of resources for actors’ access to and influence on the European institutions. Nevertheless the definition of relevant resource types varies. Sewell (2005) uses the ACF to analyze coalition behaviour in the negotiations on the Framework Convention on Climate Change in the United States, the Netherlands and Japan. He especially focuses on the resource dependency of advocacy coalitions. In order to find out which influence resources have on the role of an advocacy coalition in the subsystem – that means if it has a minor or a dominant position – he in accordance with Kelman (1987) defines a set of five resource types that are tested for their relevance as sources of political power. On the basis of the way policy change is achieved he claims to be able to make assumptions on the success of the implementation process at the national level. From the perspective of the organizational theory, Eising (2007) aims at a more comprehensive explanation of what determines the access to the European institutions. He
states that not only the resource-dependencies and the institutional context matter, but also the “organizational structures and strategic choices”. Sabatier and Weible (2007) also developed a typology of those resources relevant to actors’ influence in the policy negotiations. The identified coalition resources can be divided into two categories: the first one encompasses authority, information, financial resources, and skilful leaders and describes those factors that are inherent to a coalition. The second category consists of public opinion and mobilizable troops and refers to the necessity of an advocacy coalition to have societal support in order to initiate policy change. Due to its generally unquestionable relevance the variable coalition resources is adopted here as one independent variable for advocacy coalition influence, though the specific resource types will be reconsidered in the following.

As the early version of the ACF had to face various criticisms in regard to its pluralist assumptions - it was assumed that interest groups are well organized, political parties are weak and that a variety of access possibilities existed to influence the policy-process (Sabatier/Jenkins-Smith, 1988; Sabatier/Weible, 2007) - the typology has been revised in order to meet also the characteristics of European corporatist regimes. A new variable was introduced labelled coalition opportunity structures, which - in accordance with Lijphart (1999) – describes “the degree of consensus needed for major policy change” and “the openness of political systems” (Sabatier/Weible, 2007: 200). The first aspect implies that if a high degree of consensus is required, a coalition ought to include as many actors as possible. In so doing, conflict can be minimized and compromise easier be achieved. The second addresses the variety of decision-making venues and their accessibility. Related to that, Princen (2007) asks for the impact of multi-level governance structures on the relations between the state and the society. He argues that the internationalization opened up political opportunity structures that facilitated the actors’ access to the international institutional environment, as international organizations became more receptive to different issues. The importance of opportunity structures is also regarded as being decisive for the research question approached in this paper. It can be assumed that new developments in the international and European energy policy enhanced the institutional receptiveness to new arguments and opened up new venues. Thus, the variable coalition opportunity structures is adopted here as the second independent variable for advocacy coalition influence.
As coalition resources and coalition opportunity structures are quite abstract terms, they have to be defined more precisely: I suggest an approach that differentiates between four kinds of resources that are labelled *expertise, financial resources, dominance, and public support*. *Expertise* indicates that the advocacy coalition possesses expertise knowledge on the negotiated issue. As the European Commission in many cases is dependent on experts with detailed knowledge on technical questions or the costs and benefits of a certain project, expertise knowledge can serve to open access paths to the European institutions and, thus, to influence the policy outcome. The second resource type, the *financial resources*, are an essential part of the strategic alignment of an advocacy coalition, as its strategy either to represent its interest only at the national level or rather internationally hugely depends on its financial endowment. The variable *dominance* refers to the position of an advocacy coalition within the subsystem. As Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1988) assume that within one subsystem there usually exist one dominant and several minor coalitions, dominance plays a major role in interest mediation. The last coalition resource regarded here is the *public support*, which means that the endorsement of a coalition’s interests by the society is crucial for its influence on the policy outcome. As the European Commission for reasons of democratic accountability tends to incorporate those interests that are widely acknowledged in the public, public support will help a coalition to promote its matters.

As second independent variable determining a coalition’s ability to influence the policy outcome I selected *coalition opportunity structures* as generic term for several sub-ordinate variables. I assume that the *coalition opportunity structures* consist of the following components: *degree of consensus, venues, membership, and receptiveness*. I decided to use the term *degree of consensus* to describe the homogeneity of an advocacy coalition’s interests in contrast to the heterogeneity of the coalition. This meets the requirements of successful interest mediation in the sense that the European institutions are only able to react to homogenous interests and not to those that are articulated in an ambiguous way. What Sabatier and Weible describe as the *openness of the political system* is here labelled as *venues*. These venues point to the different access paths that are open to interest groups and coalitions in order to influence the decision-making process. Closely related to that is the variable *membership* that describes if members of the European institutions belong to an advocacy coalition and in this way actively support the coalition’s interests. The last variable *receptiveness* indicates to what degree the European institutions demonstrate
openness to the coalition’s interest that is content-related. The receptiveness of the European institutions is partly dependent from their own agenda. The argument of receptiveness is also pursued by Princen (2007: 20) who emphasizes the effect institutional receptiveness has on the advocacy coalition’s ability to successfully advocate its interests.

Finally the following table summarizes the variables relevant for this study:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coalition resources</th>
<th>Coalition opportunity structures</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Expertise: knowledge on the negotiated issue and on the other coalition’s interests</td>
<td>• Degree of consensus: homogenous/heterogeneous organization of interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Financial resources: own financial resources and financial support by the Commission</td>
<td>• Venues: access, e.g. integration into the decision-making process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Dominance: if a coalition plays a minor or dominant role within the subsystem</td>
<td>• Membership: are members of the European institutions integrated in a specific coalition? If this is the case, what kind of institutions?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Public support: support of interests by the society</td>
<td>• Receptiveness: receptiveness of the European Commission and the European Parliament</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 1: Coalition resources and coalition opportunity structures

2.4 Advocacy coalitions’ influence on policy change

One of the central questions of this project is how to define and how to measure the coalitions’ influence on the policy outcome. Dür and de Bièvre describe the relation between power and influence as follows: “We use the term ‘influence’ to denote control over political outcomes. Our approach regards actors as being powerful if they manage to influence outcomes in a way that brings them closer to their ideal points” (Dür/de Bièvre, 2007: 3). This definition shall be adopted here, while power is equated with influence on the policy outcome. In regard to this project, to find out if an advocacy coalition indeed was able to exert influence, one has to imagine what the policy outcome would have been like without the participation of the same advocacy coalition in the decision-making process. But the problem remains that this hypothetical question is difficult to answer, as a quasi-experiment is not possible in social science. Dür and de Bièvre (2007) stress that various studies have dealt with the conditions of access strategies of interest groups, but only a few have moved beyond this point and tackled the question of influence. They
emphasize that access may not be confused with influence, as the mere access to the decision-making process does not guarantee the influence on the policy outcome. In addition, it is difficult to equate the positions articulated by coalitions with their real preferences, as the articulated position might be exaggerated in order to have a certain margin for concession toward the opposite side. Thus, “a relatively large discrepancy between final policy outcomes and the positions voiced by some interest groups does not necessarily serve as an indication of their weakness.” (Dür/de Bièvre, 2007: 7; see also: Ward, 2004). A third difficulty exists in regard to the division between the winners and the losers of a decision-making process. In most negotiations the dividing-line cannot be clearly drawn between those who won and those who lost. The negotiations can rather be described as an exchange relationship between different kinds of actors (Woll, 2007). Nevertheless on the basis of the premise that conflicting interests exist, it can be assumed that mostly one participant dominates the other one. This assumption is consistent with the Advocacy Coalition Framework, which concludes that in a subsystem there generally exist one dominant and several minor coalitions.

Related to that, one way of how to overcome the problem of measuring influence is to concentrate on the question of who dominates the subsystem. Dominance within a subsystem can be measured in terms of resources and access. Of course, access to the European institutions, as already stated, cannot be equated with influence. But if one includes not only the access, but also the resources of an advocacy coalition as independent variable, while influence constitutes the dependent one, influence can at least be operationalized indirectly. The access to the European Union is a factor that often can easily be realized by interest groups, as the European Commission favours the inclusion of various non-governmental groups (NGOs) to enhance the legitimacy of its decisions. But once interest groups are integrated into the decision-making process, it depends on their resources if they are really able to initiate policy change. Woll (2007) stresses that research on lobbying should concentrate on "elements of power such as resources and access, instead of trying to work on power and influence directly” (Woll, 2007: 59). Further value is added if one uses not only access as independent variable, but enhances the concept by selecting coalition opportunity structure as determinant. As indicated above, coalition opportunity structures comprehend degree of consensus, venues (that means access), membership, and receptiveness. In enhancing the concept of mere access and including the
variable coalition resources, the dilemma of measuring influence could indirectly be resolved.

2.5 Hypotheses

In the following paragraphs I will present the hypotheses that have been formulated in accordance with the theoretical framework.

Hypothesis 1:
If an advocacy coalition has the necessary resources and coalition opportunity structures for being dominant within the subsystem, then the advocacy coalition will be able to actively participate in the decision-making process and finally to influence the policy outcome.

The question arises, what the most important resources of an advocacy coalition and the relevant coalition opportunity structures are that have an impact on the ability of the coalition to influence the policy outcome. In order to answer this question two subordinate hypotheses were developed. The first deals with the effects external perturbations have on coalition resources. By analysing in what way resources change, assumptions on how a reallocation of resources influences the potential of an advocacy coalition for policy change become possible.

Hypothesis 1.1
If perturbations external to the subsystem occur, they will lead to a reallocation of the resources of the advocacy coalitions within the subsystem and thus enable the former minor coalition to become the dominant and more influential one.

The second subordinate hypothesis is about alterations in the coalition opportunity structures due to external perturbations. Here the same logic had to be applied: The analysis has to integrate a point in time before and after a change in the coalition opportunity structures by that the influence on the policy outcome was facilitated or impeded.
Hypothesis 1.2
If external perturbations occur, they will lead to a change in the coalition opportunity structures. Thus, new conditions for access to and influence on the European institutions will be established.

The following diagram simplifies the mechanism underlying policy change on the basis of external shocks and their effects on resource allocation, the coalition opportunity structures, and finally the policy outcome:

![Diagram 1: Mechanism of policy change](generated by the author following Sabatier/Weible, 2007).

These hypotheses are to be tested for their validity. As cases the negotiations on specific directives were selected that dealt with the future role of renewable energies. Following directives or rather proposals for a directive can be considered as relevant:


In each of these directives the need for a greater protection of the environment through a reduction of greenhouse gases, for the security of energy supply through the diversification of available resources and for the compliance with the targets of the Kyoto Protocol are described as priorities for future Community action. They have to be compared to directives adopted at earlier points in time to be able to evaluate if a change in the coalition resources and the coalition opportunity structures due to external perturbations has taken place.

3 Empirical findings

In accordance with the theoretical framework of the analysis it is of peculiar interest, if the energy sector underwent such serious changes that met the conditions for external perturbations.

In regard to the impact external perturbations have on coalition resources and coalition opportunity structures, the EU renewable energy policy seems to be an appropriate field of research, as the sector, indeed, underwent profound changes during the last years, which originated mainly in the external surrounding of the subsystem. Eberlein (2008) emphasizes the enhanced importance of ecological concerns and the question of security of energy supply during recent years. These issues were primarily brought up at the international level with the most prominent example of the Kyoto Protocol as only one treaty mentioned here and are reflected in the action plan for the period 2007 until 2009 published in the aftermath of the Brussels European Council on 8/9 March 2007 (Council of the European Union, 2007). The Assessment Reports of the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2007) additionally demonstrated the already existing change in the worldwide climatic conditions and predicted a dramatic rise of average global temperatures. It has to be analyzed if these external perturbations led to a redistribution of coalition resources within individual subsystems and a change in coalition opportunity structures.

In regard to the existence of advocacy coalitions the first impression after the initial steps of research on the topic affirmed the assumption that indeed advocacy coalitions existed in the field of energy policy – which was considered as a precondition of the study. This indicates that negotiations do not take place in the form of a confrontation between state
actors on the one side and non-state actors on the other side, but in a more cooperative manner. It can be assumed that different advocacy coalitions exist, which consist of societal representatives as well as members of the European institutions. On the one hand the European Parliament in cooperation with The European Association for Renewable Energy (EUROSOLAR) seems to be an active participant of the advocacy coalition supporting the enhanced use of renewable energies, while the European Commission tends to be more in favour of the companies representing fossil energy sources.

As a result of empirical research it is assumed that the external perturbations in the field of the European energy policy resulted in a shift between the dominant and minor coalitions within the subsystem. As in former years renewable energies often did not receive the attention they actually deserved, in recent times their significance as alternative energy sources has considerably increased. One factor being responsible for this development could be the enhanced receptiveness of the European institutions toward the renewable energy sector. The receptiveness – here defined as one component of coalition opportunity structures – opened up new possibilities for the interests of the renewable energy sector to influence the policy outcome. In addition, a shift in the resources might have supported this advancement.

4 Conclusions

In this paper I asked for the conditions of the influence of interest groups on the European energy policy. As a clear dividing line cannot be drawn between state and non-state actors, I decided to adopt the assumptions of the Advocacy Coalition Framework developed by Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith. Hence, the responsibility for combating climate change and securing the supply of energy lies in the hands of different kinds of actors, whose cooperation is a challenging task for a sustainable energy policy. Additional value could be added to the theoretical assumptions of this project through the integration of other approaches, like institutionalism or organizational studies. Especially in regard to the selected variables – coalition resources and coalition opportunity structures – these approaches could deliver fruitful information on the causal relations. Future research especially concerns a more detailed analysis of existing actor constellations and the determinants of their influence on policy change.
Literature


