Measuring the Impact of Austerity on European Environmental Policy

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Abstract

As a result of the financial crisis of 2007/08 and the subsequent Eurozone crisis, austerity measures have been implemented across Europe. Efforts to reduce public spending and roll back regulation are likely to affect the environment and environmental policy, yet the measurement of such impacts is a complex task. A number of scholars from a range of disciplines have engaged with the question of the impact of austerity generally and specifically, in relation to the environment, but the field of study is still relatively piecemeal in character with the links between differing approaches under-explored and potential measures under-specified. We identify three principal approaches in the extant literature and suggest that capturing environmental policy change requires a holistic approach that can combine the strengths of each of these measures along with more traditional research instruments. We argue that only through developing a flexible, pragmatic and multi-methodological strategy can meaningful analysis of the relationship between wider economic exogenous shocks and environmental policy goals be developed.

Keywords: austerity, crisis, Europe, environment, policy.

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Introduction

The global financial and Eurozone crises that have afflicted European economies since 2008 have caused radical changes to the economic strategies of many states (Blyth, 2013; Magalhães, 2014; McKee et al., 2012; Russel & Benson, 2014). The replacement of stimulus packages with austerity measures that seek to roll back public spending has dominated the policy agenda since 2010 (Lekakis & Kousis, 2013; McKee et al., 2012). This change in direction has raised significant questions over the durability of environmental legislation at times of economic strain (Crouch, 2015; Lekakis & Kousis, 2013; Rochatte & Mestre, 2012). Prior to the wave of austerity measures, the European Union (EU) had sought to define its international identity by developing ambitious environmental policies, such as the Climate and Energy package that was enacted in 2009, and by taking a lead in international environmental negotiations, for example the United Nations’ Conferences of the Parties to the Framework Convention on Climate Change (Jordan et al., 2011; Kazakos, 1999; Schreurs & Tiberghien, 2007; Wurzel & Connelly, 2011). However, the financial crisis constitutes an archetypal exogenous shock with attendant ramifications for existing environmental governance structures in Europe (see Palley, 2011; Roubini & Mihm, 2011; Stiglitz, 2010). The EU and its member states therefore provide a useful ‘laboratory’ for understanding whether and how financial crises alter existing policy directions. It is easy to assume that the economic downturn will be bad for the environment but determining its effects requires a robust and methodical approach, especially in view of the fact than capturing policy change is widely acknowledged to be methodologically challenging.

Below, we briefly outline the EU’s response to the 2008 financial crisis, and critically review the implications for European environmental policy, and then move on to review extant methods for measuring the impact of austerity upon environmental policy in Europe. Namely: environmental quality indicators; environmental policy budgets; and policy density and intensity (Knill et al., 2009; Jordan et al.,2013). We find that whilst each of these measures has important strengths they also comprise weaknesses, which means that on their own, they are insufficient to capture environmental policy change as a response to exogenous economic shocks. We suggest that taking these measures together alongside a broader analysis of the policy context and the perception of shifts or indeed stasis in that context by key policy-makers offers a comprehensive methodological toolkit that can bring a holistic understanding of the impacts of the crisis upon EU environmental policy and analytical leverage for measuring policy change in the field.
A Pro-Austerity Commission?

Since 2010, the European response to the global financial and economic crises has been dominated by a narrative of austerity, with governments seeking to bolster confidence in their economies by rolling back public spending (Blyth, 2013: 53-92; Krugman, 2012: 191-199). Austerity has been a significant policy challenge for European states and has also become an existential crisis for the EU, as the organisation has sought to navigate competing economic narratives in its member states (Gravey, 2014; McKee et al., 2012). With the decline of US leadership in environmental policy during the 1990s, the EU moved to position itself as a global pioneer of the policy area following the Kyoto Protocol negotiations and throughout the 2000s (Kelemen, 2010; Kilian & Elgström, 2010; Parker & Karlsson, 2010; van Schaik & Schunz, 2012; Vogler, 2009). International leadership in environmental policy provided the EU with a niche in which it could formulate its global identity. However, more recent members of the EU, such as Poland (Baczynska & Lewis, 2012; Skovgaard, 2014), have played an active role in blocking new proposals, as have the previously more ambitious states, such as Germany, which are concerned that EU environmental legislation could affect their economies (Carrington, 2013). As such, 2014 was a pivotal year for the EU, with the election of a new European Parliament and the selection of a new European Commission taking place at a time of austerity across the continent, posing a potential challenge to the EU’s global reputation for pioneering environmental policy.

Throughout the two EU Commissions led by José Manuel Barroso from 2004 until 2014, the Commission was known for its relatively ambitious approach towards environmental legislation. The EU Climate and Energy Package, with its 20-20-20 targets (a 20% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions on 1990 levels, 20% of energy to be sourced from renewables, and a 20% improvement in energy efficiency), was a notable centrepiece. At the launch of the 20-20-20 proposals, in 2008, Barroso claimed confidently that the targets were the most ambitious in the world (Barroso, 2008), while the Europe 2020 strategy placed sustainable growth at the heart of its thinking (Leschke et al., 2015: 295). Moreover, the separation of the Commission’s Environment and Climate Change briefs in 2010 enabled Janez Potočnik and Connie Hedegaard, respectively, to push their remits onto the global political agenda, raising still further the profile of the EU as a global environmental pioneer in the process (Jordan et al., 2011; Schreurs & Tiberghien, 2007; Wurzel & Connelly, 2011). Towards the end of his time as President of the Commission, Barroso increasingly flirted with the concept of ‘green growth’, arguing explicitly during a speech in Vienna, Austria, in January, 2013, that “[t]he terms ‘green’ and ‘growth’ are not a contradiction” (Barroso, 2013). The 2030 Framework for Climate and Energy Policies of October, 2014, forged an ambitious 40% greenhouse gas emissions reduction target for 2030, on
1990 levels (European Commission, 2014). However, the Barroso Commission ended on the 31st October 2014, with a new Commission selected in a new context of European austerity.

Jean-Claude Juncker, the new Commission President, touted climate change leadership and green growth among his key messages when he was seeking election during the summer of 2014, and has made personal calls for energy efficiency to remain high on the policy agenda (see Shankleman, 2014). Juncker was previously the Prime Minister of Luxembourg, but his pro-austerity leadership as President of the EuroGroup between 2011 and 2014 suggests that he will continue to favour austerity measures via his new position as Commission President. Indeed, upon the announcement of the new structure of the European Commission, concern was expressed about its lack of environmental focus by civil society organisations, certain MEPs and even the President of the European Parliament (see Bonaccorsì, 2014).

The new structure of the Commission appeared to weaken its ability to prioritise environmental issues in a number of ways (see Čavoški, 2015). First, the decision made by Barroso in 2010 to create two separate and specific Commissioner Briefs for both Environment and Climate Change was reversed by merging the Environment brief with Fisheries and Maritime Affairs, and Climate Change with Energy Policy. Moreover, the merged Climate and Energy portfolios were placed under a Vice President for Energy Union, suggesting that climate issues were only a secondary concern. Second, the mandate of the Commissioner-designate for Environment, Fisheries & Maritime Affairs, Karmenu Vella, appeared to prioritise deregulation, by calling for a review of all of the major initiatives already underway but not yet complete, such as the Circular Economy proposals that sought to facilitate increased resource efficiency (Crisp, 2014). In addition, Vella was tasked with considering changes to the existing EU Nature protection legislation, posing a potential threat to biodiversity (Caserta, 2014). Thirdly, none of the Vice Presidents held a responsibility for sustainability, suggesting that the issue had been neglected at the upper echelons of the Commission’s structure. Finally, the new Climate Action and Energy Commissioner, Miguel Arias Cañete, has held well-known links to the fossil fuel industry (Čavoški, 2015: 4).

In response to the initial outline of the new Commission, a ‘Green 10’ of environmental NGOs wrote an open letter in October 2014 (Caserta, 2014), highlighting their concerns with the new approach taken by the Commission. The Juncker Commission took steps to respond to these concerns immediately, most significantly by allocating responsibility for sustainability to Vice President Franz Timmermans (see Sanderson, 2014). However, with the other concerns still unaddressed by November 2014, Gerben Jan Gebrandy MEP warned that Juncker was endangering the
jobs and growth agenda by diluting green policies, citing research that suggested a shift to a circular economy would be expected to save EU industry more than €600bn annually (see Shankleman, 2014). By December 2014, the Commission had outlined plans to scrap its flagship Circular Economy package and weaken proposed air pollution rules (Crisp, 2014; Neslen, 2014). Although it is usual for a new Commission to take stock of the policy landscape, the direction and focus of the new Commission – in place until 2019 – appears to replace the narrative of green growth with austerity measures and a retrenchment of environmental policy. But how do we capture whether this broad rhetorical shift has policy substance?

**Methods for Measuring Environmental Policy Change**

There are three principal approaches that have been used by scholars seeking to analyse the impact of economic downturns upon environmental policy change generally, and also specifically in a European context: environmental quality indicators; changes to budgetary allocations; and analysis of changes in the number and quality of environmental policies brought forward (policy density and intensity).

**Environmental Quality Indicators**

Existing studies analysing environmental quality indicators (EQIs) in the immediate aftermath of economic downturns suggest that in the short term economic crises are generally good for the environment. Thus, Siddiqi (2000) examined changes in air and water pollution in Asia following the economic crisis of 1997, finding that there were short-term environmental benefits. However, he also suggests that the crisis led many Asian countries to cut back their investment into environmental protection in the long-term. Elliott (2011) in her examination of the impacts of both 1997 and 2008 financial crises on the environment in East Asia finds the impacts to be ambiguous at best, but negative on the whole. Lekakis and Kousis (2013) also assess changes in air and water pollution to analyse the impact of austerity policies on the environment in Greece and note that levels of sulphur dioxide, carbon dioxide, phosphorus and nitrogen fell between 2007 and 2010, in line with reductions in economic productivity. However, like Siddiqi, they posit that these environmental gains may be short-term in nature, noting the creation of unexpected smog in Greek cities. For Peters et al. (2012), any global reduction in CO₂ emissions as a result of the financial crisis had ended a year after the crisis, as developing states rapidly increased their emissions despite the global crisis.

Measures that assess changes in environmental quality via emissions clearly provide useful snapshots for understanding how financial crises can affect the environment. However, it can be difficult to identify whether the
obtained results represent short-term changes; once the economy improves and productivity increases, environmental degradation is likely to worsen again (see Lekakis and Kousis, 2013; Siddiqi, 2000). Indeed, in the long-term, environmental degradation may be exacerbated by financial crises, as efforts to strengthen the economy dominate government policy objectives, to the cost of other policy areas (Tienhaara, 2010). As such, in order for such analyses to be effective, a longitudinal study comprising several decades may be more beneficial, such that longer term trends may be identified. But even then it is clear that there is a range of confounding factors that can have an impact upon environmental quality indicators independent of economic growth. For example, the UK ‘dash for gas’ in the 1980s – which was driven by the government’s ideological desire to disempower the miners’ unions and to liberalise energy markets – had a beneficial but unintended consequence upon British CO₂ emissions (Lorenzoni et al., 2008: 104). The resultant reduction in emissions was the result of policies that were not directly related to the climate, highlighting the complexity of disentangling causation when analysing EQIs. As such, whilst EQIs can provide an interesting snapshot of potential environmental impacts they cannot be used in isolation.

Environmental Budgets

Using changes in budgetary allocations to determine policy change is a well-established methodology within public policy (e.g. See Baumgartner et al., 2006; 2009; Citi, 2013). Increases in spending or sharp downturns can be taken as an indication of punctuated equilibrium (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993) and it has been suggested that budgetary changes can act as a key indicator for determining the influence of austerity upon EU policies (Gravey, 2014). Certainly at the European level budgetary allocations to national environmental projects have been central drivers of environmental policy developments in poorer states and any cuts to such budgets are likely to have a detrimental impact. Interestingly when the economic crisis initially broke there was a general call globally for more green investment and the pursuit of an environmental transition to a low carbon society was identified as a potential vehicle for growth via a new green deal (e.g. see inter alia Green New Deal Group, 2008; Obama, 2009; UNEP, 2009a; 2009b), as exemplified by the Barroso Commission’s making the goal of a sustainable EU a central plank of its recovery plan (see European Commission, 2010 and also see discussion above). However, with cuts to high profile publicly-funded sectors, such as healthcare and education, policy-makers are likely to reduce environmental spending in line with – or, to a larger degree than – other budgets. Lekakis and Kousis (2013) use budgetary changes to highlight the potential impact of the financial crisis on the environment. They review green investments between 2005 and 2011, such as organic farming, biomass for biofuels and Renewable Energy Supplies,
alongside the number of projects in operation, the total investment cost, the total subsidy and the number of new jobs created. By highlighting previous spending, the authors underline the importance of green stimulus measures to the Greek economy, and the potential economic damage caused by reducing public investments in these areas. However, they do not directly analyse the impact of austerity upon environmental spending.

Russel and Benson (2014) analyse green budgeting practices, in the USA and UK, comparing the period from 1940 to 2009 against policy decisions made after 2009. However, they concentrate upon explaining the drivers of spending changes during periods of austerity, rather than measuring the impact of austerity on budgets. As such, there remains a significant gap in the existing literature analysing whether and how environmental budgets change as a consequence of economic downturns, even though this indicator could be a highly effective tool for tracking changes to the importance accorded to environmental protection. For example, a key indicator of reduced government spending in the UK has been cuts to local authority spending (Butler & Jowit, 2014), with local government being a key vehicle for implementing environmental policy. However, disentangling environmental spending from cognate areas is challenging, especially in the EU where environmental budgets are mainstreamed across all areas, with only small percentage of the budget dedicated to the EU’s environmental LIFE+ programme (Withana et al., 2014). Moreover, whilst the Commission can allocate funds to particular budget headings expenditure is generally carried out at the Member state level and there again disentangling EU funds from particular budget headings from national funds becomes complex (Medarova-Bergstrom and Schiellerup, 2010; Withana et al., 2014), data maybe patchy (e.g. see Soroka et al., 2006), and determining what counts as environmental requires careful consideration.

For example, is investment in new energy sources ‘environmental’? If so, which energy sources? Drilling for gas may reduce emissions if a state is currently dependent on coal but claiming that the expansion of gas procurement and the development of fracking are environmental expenditures is debatable. Whilst determining the extent to which expenditure is ‘environmental’ is potentially challenging it is not insurmountable. Clear benchmarks or definitions of what would and would not be considered as environmentally friendly can be deployed. Few would argue that investment in fossil fuels is environmentally friendly (for an exception, see Epstein, 2014), while support for solar and wind electricity generation would be considered by most as environmentally friendly. Thus, once an actor’s energy context is considered, investments in, for example, gas, may be deemed environmentally friendly in the event that such a policy approach reduced overall greenhouse gas emissions production. Similarly, it is possible to develop a typology for coding legislation or, in this case budget-lines, in terms of their overall environmental impact or intent (for example, see Burns & Carter, 2010). Finally, even if large portions of the environmental budget are accorded to
specific projects, such as the Common Agricultural Policy, by conducting a longitudinal study and tracking whether there are significant changes to the financial support given to these ‘constants’ an insight into changes to priorities can be determined. As such, while careful and transparent coding decisions would be crucial, budgetary changes could provide an effective indicator of the impact of austerity on environmental policy, particularly when conducted in conjunction with other measures.

*Policy Density and Intensity*

Measuring policy change by reviewing the amount of legislation produced (policy density) and the content of legislation (policy intensity) is a significant feature of the emerging literature on policy dismantling. First coined in Pierson’s (1994) *locus classicus* on welfare state reform, the term ‘policy dismantling’ was introduced to highlight that while governments may claim to cut spending and roll back policies, significant obstacles such as public pressure, ensure that a range of strategies are needed in order to enact policy changes. For example, as rolling back existing policies is likely to run into opposition, one response is to reduce the amount of new legislation brought forward, which in turn may involve letting existing policies wither on the vine by failing to update them, or changing the style of regulation used to reduce the burden on the state (i.e. going down the route of voluntary or market based instruments) (Jordan *et al.*, 2013: 796). Thus, Bauer and Knill (2012: 35) define policy dismantling as “a change of a direct, indirect, hidden or symbolic nature that either diminishes the number of policies in a particular area, reduces the number of policy instruments used and/or lowers their intensity”.

An initial review of policy activity at the European level indicates that there was a significant drop in EU legislative activity post 2009 compared to the preceding ten years (see for example, EUROPOLIX, 2015), and this appears to be true for all policy sectors. This finding is potentially significant as it calls into question the general assumption underpinning our understanding of EU environmental policy that it is expansionist in nature. However, it is important not to draw hasty conclusions: as Grant and Kelly (2008: 306) argue, “simply counting laws without accounting for their content is likely to produce measurement error when attempting to measure policy production”. Thus, some kind of qualitative evaluation of policy content (intensity) is also required.

The concept of ‘policy intensity’ can be used to express the strictness, or generosity (often in the case of welfare policies) of a given policy (Knill *et al.*, 2009). In other words, policy intensity conceptualises the ‘ambition’ of policy. Jordan *et al.* (2003; 2005) note that policies may remain substantively the same in their goals and objectives despite appearing to be deregulated, by changing the policy instruments involved. Bauer and Knill (2012) expand the
conceptualisation of policy intensity further, by including the ‘scope’ of the policy intervention. Here, the scope generally changes in line with the number of cases or target groups addressed by a certain policy. Thus, the number of factories emitting pollutants addressed by a particular environmental policy, or the age at which people are eligible for retirement benefits, would be considered as the scope of a policy (Bauer and Knill, 2012: 34). Policy intensity is therefore a useful companion to analysis of policy density as it provides additional and rich data that can be used to determine broader legislative trends. For example, by using both in combination it may be possible to determine that a decline in the number of policies has occurred but that the scope and ambition of those policies has increased. Equally, an increase in legislative outputs may not indicate a strengthening in environmental legislation, as new laws may significantly weaken extant rules or shift the mode of regulation towards more voluntary instruments. Only through rigorous analysis of the content of environmental outputs can we judge the scope of their ambition. Policy intensity is also an important accompaniment to analysis of environmental quality indicators, for as discussed above a principal finding has been that whilst environmental quality may improve in the short term, one impact of economic downturns can be a downgrading of environmental considerations and a weakening of legislation.

However, as with environmental budgets these measures raise some methodological challenges. First, to evaluate the density and intensity of environmental policy requires a clear understanding of what counts as environmental. In their study of European Parliament (EP) amendments to EU environmental legislation Burns and Carter (2010; also see Burns et al. 2013) suggested that environmental policy could be selected by analysing those policies dealt with by the Environment Committee in the European Parliament, which they determined using the Parliament’s legislative database (the OEIL\(^1\)).\(^2\) However, this approach potentially excludes agricultural and energy policy developments that have important environmental dimensions. As with the budgetary measures a clear set of criteria for including and excluding different policies from consideration is required that can be used by other scholars seeking to replicate results. One possible approach is to use the Commission’s own coding of policies on Prelex\(^3\) where policy areas are given a number code (environment is 13), however this again raises problems with both overlap and potential omissions. The environment category includes consumers and health protection, which whilst interesting and

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\(^1\) [www.europarl.europa.eu/oeil](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/oeil)

\(^2\) They explicitly excluded health and consumer protection legislation that falls within the committee’s brief from their dataset (See Burns and Carter 2010; Burns et al. 2013).

important are beyond the scope of this study. There are also separate codes for energy, agriculture, fisheries, internal market and transport, all of which may include important environmental dimensions.\(^4\)

Another key drawback with the analysis of policy intensity in particular, is that a reduction in the number of new policies being produced may be explained by the presence of existing policy solutions. If an actor is already responding effectively to an environmental challenge then there is little need to develop new policies. In such a situation, we would expect to see a decline in policy outputs over time, but this reduction would not necessarily suggest a diminution in ambition. A further methodological challenge then is to account for the evolution of knowledge about environmental threats and solutions over time both of which can clearly affect the ambition and scope of policies. For example, the severity of an environmental problem may be worse than expected, thus requiring more ambitious policies. Likewise, if an environmental threat is being mitigated effectively already, there is little need for more ambitious policy goals. Both of these issues weaken the analytical utility of the policy intensity approach, however, this weakness can be mitigated by taking into account the wider environmental and policy context within which legislation is proposed.

*Summary and Future Directions*

We have identified three principal approaches for capturing policy changes in response to the economic crisis. However, we have highlighted a number of methodological challenges associated with deploying each of these measures, but by deploying all three within a framework that seeks to capture the different dimensions of environmental policy a holistic analysis of the potential impacts of austerity upon environmental policy can be achieved.

Hence EQIs can capture short term changes in response to economic downturns. Each EU state provides reports on a range of environmental quality indicators to the European Union, and the European Environment Agency publishes regular state of the Union reports (*see* EEA, 2015). It is therefore relatively straightforward to get a sense of state of general trends in environmental quality over time. However, EQIs cannot be used in isolation, as previous analyses have suggested that a key impact of economic shocks is a downgrading of environmental policy on the political agenda and a weakening of legislation. Thus, a wider consideration of changes in policy instruments over the longer term needs to be undertaken.

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\(^4\) We are grateful to colleagues at Sciences Po, Paris for an invitation to a workshop for their project EUROPOLIX where we discussed these issues. For more detail see: [http://blogs.sciences-po.fr/recherche-observatory-european-institutions/category/the-project/](http://blogs.sciences-po.fr/recherche-observatory-european-institutions/category/the-project/).
Allocations of spending are a well-established tool for capturing policy change but become challenging at the European level due to the mainstreaming of environmental spending. However, investigating budget allocations at the national level within European states maybe more amenable to analysis. A key challenge with this measure, as well as with policy density and intensity, concerns the definition of what counts as ‘environmental’. How should we determine which budget lines and policies should be included in an analysis? In order to determine what should be included in a review of legislative activity we plan to use a combined approach reviewing legislation from existing datasets (e.g. the OEIL and Prelex), including consideration of cognate areas such as energy and agriculture but we will also review the Commission’s work programme to cross-check our initial selection and we will publish the list of legislation included along with the selection necessary criteria used.

With policy density and intensity two further issues need to be considered. First, the pattern of change must be taken into account. If there is a decline of policy it is important to determine if it represents a longer term gradual trend. If there is a sharp drop or increase in policy activity then again it is important to investigate how and why that has come about. Second, and relatedly, analysis of density and intensity require consideration of the wider policy context. Crucially the views of representative policy practitioners (makers and shapers) should also be taken into account, and findings should be triangulated against contemporaneous media, corporate and non-governmental organisation (NGO) material, in order to get a sense of the wider policy context. Thus, if there is a drop in policy density for example, policy-makers may suggest that is due to policy saturation rather than a deliberate scaling back in response to wider exogenous shocks. Equally a change in patterns of policy may reflect other exogenous factors such as international agreements, so a clear understanding of the wider policy context is essential.

**Conclusion**

Whilst much work has been conducted on measuring the impact of austerity on economic growth (see Blyth, 2013: 53-92; Krugman, 2012: 191-199; Zezza, 2012), the impact upon environmental policy has so far been neglected. The identification and usage of methods for measuring the impact of austerity upon environmental policy are crucial for understanding the extent to which environmental policy is ‘future-proofed’ against exogenous shocks. If environmental policy remains static – or, more significantly, is rolled back – during times of economic strife, then environmental problems are unlikely to be addressed effectively. Indeed, such exogenous shocks may even exacerbate environmental problems. With many environmental issues, such as climate change, requiring long-term solutions, the
goals and policy mechanisms that are developed in the mid-to-late 2010s are likely to be vital (Tienhaara, 2010). However, if these policies are weakened as a result of their formulation in a context of austerity, severely adverse environmental outcomes may result for decades to come. As such, it is vital to ascertain the impact of austerity upon environmental policy by measuring any and all changes as accurately as possible. The article has sought to develop a robust means for doing so by evaluating existing approaches for assessing policy change. Whilst each of these measures provided useful indicators of how austerity may impact upon the environment, they all comprise weaknesses. In order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the impact of austerity, therefore, it is argued that the measures be employed in combination in order to develop a holistic perspective.
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