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Book Review

Elin Lerum BOASSON, Merethe Dotterud Leiren, & Jørgen Wettestad (Eds.), *Comparative Renewables Policy: Political Organizational and European Fields*

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Comparative Renewables Policy: Political Organizational and European Fields

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How can we look beyond power structures and economic influence to explain the ways in which policy is shaped? A seemingly simple task, but one that perpetually confounds policy scholars. *Comparative Renewables Policy: Political, Organizational and European Fields* recognizes that, despite the ubiquity of theories on the policy process, we regularly conclude that resources explain why big business interests shape energy policy more often than not. Boasson, Leiren, & Wettestad (Eds.) believe that we can do better. The aim of *Comparative Renewables Policy* is to create a unifying framework that explains renewable energy mixes between innovation-driven approaches, termed “technology-specific”, that create space for technology development, and government-driven approaches, termed “technology-neutral”, that create stable market conditions that favor the least costly technologies. The framework in the book aspires to fuse several theories of the policy process. This is a monumental task and, despite understandable criticism that sometimes artificial distinction between theories creates competition among those theories, there may be a valid reason why a unifying framework has not yet been developed. The policy process is a wide field and trying to capture the entirety of institutions, actors, organizations, norms, rules, and much more is perhaps too much for any one framework to handle.

To explain outcomes in the renewable energy mix, much of the existing literature relies on economic and technological factors, such as the cost of renewable technology or infrastructure investment. The editors assert that these explanations are incomplete and that there is a need for a framework built on a “dynamic multi-field approach” that better incorporates political and social factors. There are three fields that influence policy developments, each with its own distinct characteristics and institutional conditions: the European environment, the domestic organizational field, and the domestic political field. Policy process scholars might recognize these fields as other related concepts, similar to policy subsystems or issue networks. The authors are transparent that their unifying framework draws on many existing theories of the policy process: polycentricity, institutionalism, agenda-setting, and the Advocacy Coalition Framework are prevalent among others.

The framework is tested through six comparative qualitative case studies using process tracing. This is not simply an edited volume; *Comparative Renewables Policy* is a coordinated effort that combines an expanse of information and evidence on one of the most puzzling issues facing scholars and governments alike: how to efficiently regulate while encouraging innovation. The editors and authors are more than qualified on the issue of renewable energy as well as policy scholarship. The theoretical and empirical work of the book was vetted throughout the research process and at various academic and practitioner conferences. The scientific merit of the authors cannot be denied and is one of the strengths of the work, as is the dedication to valid and transparent research design.

Yet another strength is that all chapters use the same guiding questions, centered on the ways in which the eponymous fields affect the development of renewable support mixes and how changes in one field influence changes in another. The systematic comparison yields some interesting findings. Not surprisingly, the European environment often has a strong effect on domestic policy choices, but there is marked variation based on the circumstances under which the level of that influence fluctuates.

The country applications are all well done and rigorous in their assessments of the framework. The chapter on “Europeanization of renewables support” by Boasson is an excellent coverage of the progress of the European environment in regard to renewable energy policy. Boasson traces the region from disaggregation prior to 1999 through more recent trends of harmonization and state-centered action. She follows this with chapters on Norway and Sweden that stand

out for their treatment of technology-neutral approaches. The Norwegian case follows the fascinating development of one of the “least-generous support-scheme mixes in Europe” (p. 139) in a country that was already approaching 100% renewable electricity production three decades prior. The Swedish case appears largely to hinge on its actions in following the EU in the late 1990s but detached since from the influence of Europeanization. Leiren and Reimer focus on how Europeanization has influenced German policy in their chapter and conclude that, in the highly politicized context of Germany, the domestic political field is perhaps most explanatory for renewable mixes. Szulecki’s treatment of Poland fulfills a special role as the one case with significantly different economic and political conditions, marked most often by instability, in comparison to the other cases in the book. We learn that the influence of supranational bodies can be sizeable and long-lasting, even before formal oversight authority.

The authors note that they look forward to applications of the framework in other countries, to understand more about the generalizability of the findings, particularly as regards the organizational field and, to a lesser extent, the political field. In both cases, the research recognizes that domestic conditions – formal and informal – play an outsized role in explaining the shape of policy. It is perhaps here that the lofty goal of the book falls somewhat short, in that initial promises of a unifying framework do not quite pan out. Ultimately, *Comparative Renewables Policy* may be the victim of the same criticism it hoists upon existing theories – it delivers too little substantively that is transportable across domains. How should this framework be applied outside of the European context? There is vast potential here for application in the United States, for example, where renewables policy varies state to state. There isn’t a European field to account for, so how is that replaced? Much of the book relies on Europeanization and associated mechanisms to account for the influence of a supranational body. This may be a limiting factor in application outside Europe. The potential of the framework would be enhanced with consideration about the transportability of the approach and findings beyond Europe. However, theory development on the role of Europeanization is discussed at length and there is still ample opportunity for application in Europe, nonetheless. In addition, the case insights on domestic organizational and political fields may provide some fodder for application in other regions.

Comparative Renewables Policy is suited for policy scholars interested in exploring the ways in which policy development might be considered from a top-down theoretical orientation. The work should be commended for its treatment and inclusion of many disparate theories of the policy process and the attention to detail in developing a testable framework. In addition, the book serves as methodological inspiration for researchers aspiring to develop a wide-scale comparative approach across many differing contexts. Finally, *Comparative Renewables Policy* is unparalleled in the depth of knowledge about renewable energy policy in Europe. However, given its substantial theoretical focus, it is less accessible to a general practitioner audience as a topical resource.