

# Political Issues and Social Policy in the E.U.

*Professor John Wilton*

## **Lecture 4**

### **Environmental policy**

*Additional source:*

Skovgaard, J. (2014) 'E.U. climate policy after the crisis', in *Environmental Politics*, Vol. 23, February, no.1, pp. 1-17.

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### ***CONTEXTUAL ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK***

1. Brief historical development of E.U. environment policy;
2. The theoretical perspective
3. E.U. environment policy within the context of the defining characteristics and underlying principles of E.U. social policy

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### 1. The historical development of E.U. environment policy

- change in political views at Council of Ministers meeting, Paris, Oct. 1972
- 1973 EEC Environment and Consumer Protection Service set up
  - attached to Industrial Policy Directorate-General

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- 1973 first E.C. Environmental Action Plan adopted
  - but no clear legal basis for E.C. action on environment
  - no strategy or coordinated policy programme

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Three significant changes in 1980s:

A) 1981 – reorganisation of European Commission – environmental responsibilities transferred to new Directorate-General responsible for environment, nuclear safety and civil protection

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### B) 1982 – Third Environmental Action

Programme (EAP) (1982-1986) – emphasised  
need to take **PREVENTIVE ACTION** to  
protect environment

- instead of just **RE-ACTING** to problems

+ EAP stated that environmental  
concerns should be **INTEGRATED**  
into all E.C. policies

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C) 1985 European Court of Justice  
decision argued that environmental  
protection was “one of the European  
Community’s *ESSENTIAL*  
objectives”



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## Single European Act, 1986

- gave E.C. legal competence in environmental matters
- stated that the European Community's goals were to include the preservation and protection of the environment

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### Maastricht Treaty, 1993

- Article 2 – fundamental goal of the E.U. “sustainable and non-inflationary growth respecting the environment”
- stressed importance of ‘precautionary principle’ (E.U. should take action if suspicion of environmental harm)

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1985 – creation of CORINE

(Coordinating Information on the  
Environment)

1994 – foundation of European

Environment Agency (EEA), based  
in Copenhagen (not policy maker or  
implementor, but generates and provides  
data)

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April 1986 – Chernobyl nuclear power  
station accident/disaster

- gave impetus to E.C. Environment  
policy development
- Demonstrated that environmental  
problems didn't respect national  
boundaries, therefore transnational  
policy responses necessary

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### 2. The theoretical perspective

- E.U. uniquely placed to deal with environmental problems at transnational level
- after 1986 became clear at several levels that a transnational response required to environmental problems

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- A) Many problems – such as air and water pollution – are not limited by national frontiers;
- B) Individual country responses might incur costs undermining economic competitiveness;
- C) Costs of taking environmental action offset by across-E.U. economic benefits

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- D) Richer E.U. countries could help poorer countries address environmental problems through funding assistance and by sharing technical knowledge;
- plus, over longer term, benefit to richer E.U. countries as fewer factories and businesses likely to move to E.U. states with lower environmental standards

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- demonstrates ‘spillover’ functional process in operation between E.U. environment policy and economic policy, and the operation of the E.U. market
- E.U. Environment Action Plan – ‘Environment 2010: Our Future, Our Choice’ stated “Economic, social and environment policies are closely integrated”.



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- environmental policy and E.U. integration  
closely linked
- European integration has been good for the  
environment, and environmental  
protection

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### 3. Environmental policy and the characteristics and principles of E.U. social policy

- environment policy is area that most requires greatest degree of *harmonisation and convergence?*

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‘Goals’ of E.U. environmental policy in various treaties and in the EAPs are broad:

- a) the improvement of the quality of the environment;
- b) the protection of human health;
- c) the prudent use of natural resources;
- d) increased environmental efficiency (i.e. improvements in efficiency of resource use, so that consumption is reduced

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- e) the promotion of measures at the international level to deal with regional or global environmental problems
- In general, E.U. environment policy has predominantly focused on problems that are better dealt with jointly (harmonised?) than nationally

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- and these have been in areas where
  - ‘harmonisation’ is more easily achieved, i.e.
- a) the control of chemicals in the environment;
- b) the reduction of air and water pollution;
- c) the management of waste;
- d) fisheries conservation (of fish stocks);
- e) control of pesticides
- f) regulations and requirements on heavy goods vehicles

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E.U. has also been active, in terms of policy harmonisation, in areas not normally defined at the national level as 'environmental', i.e.

- noise pollution control
- control of genetically modified organisms

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E.U. tended to take ‘mutual recognition’ approach on environment policy on issues with more ‘local’ or ‘regional’ basis, i.e.

- a) protection of eco-systems (at local level);
- b) protection of natural habitats (wild life);
- c) the management of natural resources, such as forests and soil;
- d) the promotion of energy conservation and alternative sources of energy

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Underlying principles of E.U. environment policy:

- a) *Sustainable development* – renewable natural resources such as air, water and forests should be used in such a way as to ensure their continued availability for future generations;
- b) *Integration* – environmental protection **must** be a component of all E.U. policies that might have an environmental impact



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- c) *Prevention* – action to prevent the emergence of environmental problems, rather than just responding to problems as they arise;
- d) *Subsidiarity* – the E.U. restricts itself to issues that are best dealt with jointly;
- e) *Derogation* – Member states that are unable to bear economic burden of environmental protection given longer deadlines, lower targets, financial assistance in transition

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### SUMMARY:

1. By early 1980s E.C. had switched to focus on environmental management as basis of economic and social development;
2. Environmental factors actively considered in other policy areas from mid-1980s, e.g. agriculture, industry, energy, transport  
- environmental factors no longer subordinate to goal of building single market

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- and in 1990s E.U. adopted the principle of sustainable development

i.e. agreed that no economic development should take place without careful consideration of its potential impact on the environment

3. E.U. approaches to environment policy provides illustrations of forces operating in process of European integration

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### **8<sup>th</sup> Environmental Action Programme 2022 to 2030**

([www.environment.ec.europa.eu](http://www.environment.ec.europa.eu))

### *Objectives*

The **long-term priority objective** is that, by 2050 at the latest, Europeans live well, within planetary boundaries and in a well-being economy where nothing is wasted. Growth will be regenerative, climate neutrality will be a reality, and inequalities will have been significantly reduced.

It identifies 6 priority objectives to 2030

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### *Enabling framework*

Sets out the enabling conditions needed to achieve the priority objectives. Among others, it highlights the need for

- a full **implementation** of existing legislation
- significantly **decreasing** the Union's **material and consumption footprints**
- achieving **environmental fairness**
- boosting **sustainable finance**
- using **economic and tax incentives** to facilitate the sustainability transition
- **phasing out fossil fuel subsidies**
- **cooperation** at all levels of policy-making between different levels of actors
- harnessing the potential of **digitalisation**
- ensuring that policy action is firmly anchored in **latest science and knowledge**

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### **Monitoring and reports**

The Commission, supported by the European Environment Agency and the European Chemicals Agency monitors, assesses and reports annually on progress on the priority objectives. Based on selected headline indicators, the EEA assesses progress towards the 8<sup>th</sup> EAP objectives in annual reports published every December, from 2023 onwards.