10 Agenda setting

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Summary guide

This chapter looks at the formation of the EU's environmental policy agenda. After discussing what is meant by the term 'agenda' and what types of agenda can be discerned at EU level, it presents a theoretical framework for understanding agenda-setting processes. This framework highlights the interplay of issue frames and institutional venues as the main driver of agenda formation. It then discusses seven key characteristics of EU environmental agenda setting, which help to understand why issues come onto the EU agenda and what challenges and opportunities political actors face when they try to push an issue onto it. Although agenda-setting processes are relatively unstructured, agenda-setting processes do exhibit a number of regularities which reflect the characteristics of the EU's political system. It concludes that the analysis of agenda-setting dynamics has implications for the strategies that are used by prospective agenda setters to shape new EU policies.

Introduction

In December 2019, Time Magazine named Greta Thunberg 'person of the year'. Just over a year before, in August 2018, she had started her series of school strikes to increase awareness of climate change. Her actions inspired climate strikes and climate marches around the world, aimed at forcing politicians into greater action. She was not the first to draw attention to the issue. In 2006, Al Gore's movie *An Inconvenient Truth* made climate change the 'talk of the town' in Europe and North America. An issue that had hitherto interested a relatively small circle of experts and environmentally conscious citizens suddenly became a hot topic in public debate. As a result, politicians in several European countries embraced the issue, propelling it to the top of the political agenda in many of them. The issue also received a boost at the EU level, with the launch of new initiatives in subsequent years, eventually leading to a policy commitment to achieve climate neutrality in the EU by 2050 and the launch of the European Green Deal package (see Chapter 16).

The story of climate change as an issue is a story of agenda setting. At any given point in time, some issues are considered important, given serious attention and prioritised by politicians, while other issues are considered less important and hence are neglected. The set of issues that receive considerable attention in a political system

DOI: 10.4324/9780429402333-10

is called the political agenda (Kingdon, 2003: 3). Political agendas change over time. Issues may receive a lot of attention at one point in time (e.g., climate change in the years after 2006), but much less attention in other periods. This is equally true for environmental protection more generally: in some periods, this issue is considered to be politically 'hot', while in others, it is seen as secondary to other concerns. Environmental issues have certainly moved up and down the political agenda over the last 50 years (see Chapters 2 and 4).

Studying (political) agendas is interesting and worthwhile for two reasons. First, being on the agenda is a necessary precondition for policy success. Only when issues receive attention (i.e., when they are being actively considered and policy makers devote effort and time to them) will they be subjected to new policy development (for further details, see Chapter 11). As a result, agendas are politically highly consequential. Second, the content of the political agenda is neither a 'given' nor directly related to objective or scientific measures of the importance of problems. Whether or not an issue receives attention is the result of political processes and political decisions in which some issues are 'played up' while others are 'played down'. Therefore, agenda setting is a fundamentally *political* process.

In this chapter, I will take a closer look at agenda setting on environmental issues in the EU. How are political agendas formed? And what determines whether or not environmental issues come onto the EU agenda? To answer these questions, I will first discuss in greater detail what is meant by 'an agenda'. Then, I will present a popular theoretical framework that can be used to understand agenda-setting processes. On the basis of this conceptual and theoretical foundation, the second part of the chapter will focus on the dynamics of environmental agenda setting in the EU, going through seven key characteristics that may help us understand why and how environmental issues come onto the EU agenda.

Summary points

- The political agenda consists of the set of issues that receive considerable attention in a political system.
- The content of the agenda determines which issues will be subjected to policy making and decision making, and, hence, is politically consequential.
- Which issues are on the agenda at a given point in time is determined by political processes.

What are political agendas?

In the Introduction, the concept of a 'political agenda' was used as if there is only a single agenda in a given political system. However, different types of agenda can be discerned, depending on who is giving attention. The political agenda can be defined as the set of issues that receive attention from politicians and policy makers. In addition, there is also a 'public agenda' (the set of issues that are considered important in public opinion) and a 'media agenda' (the set of issues that receive a lot of attention in the media). These agendas affect each other. For example, one reason why many politicians have embraced climate change as an issue in recent years is that the issue

has become more important among the public, which, in turn, is partly a result of greater media coverage of extreme weather events, the launch of government reports and protests by people such as Greta Thunberg. Nevertheless, they are not identical. At any given point in time, some issues may be important for politicians and policy makers that do not necessarily loom large in public opinion or receive much attention in the media, and vice versa. Therefore, it is important to distinguish between them.

In each of these main types of agenda, different sub-agendas can be discerned. If we limit ourselves to the political agenda in the EU, there may be an overall set of EU priorities (the EU's political agenda), but each of the EU's institutions also has its own agenda. Thus, the European Parliament's agenda may not be identical to the agenda of the European Council or the European Commission. And within those institutions, even further subdivisions exist. Within the European Commission, for instance, the agenda of DG Environment will be different to DG Trade's (for details, see Chapter 6). Hence, what we have is not one 'agenda', but a range of partly overlapping, partly hierarchically ordered agendas, which affect each other, but also have their own internal dynamics.

In addition to the variety of agendas, it is also important to bear in mind that 'the agenda' is not a fixed set of issues. According to the definition given above, an issue is 'on the agenda' if it receives 'serious' or 'considerable' attention, i.e., if it does not, it is 'off the agenda'. In reality, the dividing line between being 'on' and 'off' the agenda is not always clear. Moreover, attention for issues that are said to be 'on the agenda' may also differ, with some receiving more attention than others or specific levels of attention varying over time (as we saw for climate change, see above). Hence, rather than trying to define some (arbitrary) threshold to distinguish between issues that are on and issues that are off the agenda, it is more useful to think of an agenda as a continuum, with issues ranging from less to more attention. The main political struggle over agendas is concerned with moving issues up or down that agenda.

Summary points

- Different types of agenda can be discerned, including the political agenda, the media agenda and the public agenda.
- Within the EU's overall political agenda, specific agendas can be identified for each of the EU's institutions and also for sub-units within them.
- Agenda processes revolve around attempts to move issues up or down agendas.

Frames and venues in agenda setting

Why do some issues go up the agenda while others go down or are ignored altogether? This section presents a theoretical framework that can be used to answer that question. It is based on the work of two American political scientists, Frank Baumgartner and Bryan Jones (in particular Baumgartner and Jones, 2009). Although it was developed in the context of domestic (i.e., US) agenda setting, it has been shown to be equally applicable to agenda setting in the EU (cf. Princen, 2016).

The basic idea of their theoretical framework is that the rise and fall of issues on the political agenda are determined by the interplay of two factors: issue frames and institutional venues. By using or manipulating these two factors, policy actors seek to

affect the scope of participation on an issue by involving actors who are supportive of their cause and keeping out their opponents. In that way, they try to reach the most receptive audience for their claims.

The first element in agenda setting is framing. Framing is the process of defining an issue, and the problem underlying it, in certain terms. Framing is important because most issues can be framed in different ways. Take the example of genetic modification in food crops, an issue that has waxed and waned on the EU agenda over the past few decades. What is at stake in this issue? Depending on one's point of view, possible answers include:

- Developing more efficient methods of growing crops in order to increase the competitiveness of the agricultural sector;
- Creating better tasting or more nutritious crops that improve the health of consumers;
- Finding ways to increase agricultural production in developing countries, thus decreasing hunger and poverty in the world;
- Misleading consumers by inserting artificial genes into their food, whose long-term effect on human health maybe uncertain;
- Creating novel crops that have the potential to crowd out other species and thereby reduce biodiversity;
- Tampering with Nature in a show of human hubris vis-à-vis the natural order of things.

All of these perspectives on genetic modification have been highlighted by participants in the debate on the technology. They represent many different frames of 'the issue' of genetic modification, which have informed a number of EU policies, including Directive 2001/18, concerning the deliberate release into the environment of GMOs. Note that the political tone of the six frames presented above is very different. The first three frames stress the positive potential of genetic modification, whereas the final three frames emphasise the potential negative consequences.

Much of the debate on this issue has revolved around attempts by proponents and opponents to promote their frame at the expense of others. In doing so, frames are used to stir up (or, as the case may be, dampen) interest in an issue and thus to alter the balance of proponents and opponents around it. When environmental NGOs evoke the specter of health threats and a large-scale loss of biodiversity, they hope to achieve two things. First, they hope to raise interest in the issue among people who are not (yet) concerned about it (for other examples, see Chapter 9). Second, they hope to convince people to oppose the technology by making the negative potential consequences more salient. Proponents of the technology adopt exactly the opposite approach: they try to convince people there is little to worry about ('the technology is scientifically tested and safe in our hands') and they try to give it a positive connotation ('cheaper, healthier food for all'), e.g., by promoting so-called 'golden rice', which is genetically modified to contain more vitamin A.

Frames are politically significant because they have very different policy implications. The first three (positive) frames all imply a wider use and further spread of genetically modified crops. The other three (negative) frames, by contrast, imply a containment of or even a ban on using genetic modification in food crops. Therefore, once a certain frame becomes dominant and is not seriously contested, it largely determines the type of policy to be pursued (Rochefort and Cobb, 1994).

The effect of framing is both mediated and reinforced by the second element in the theoretical framework: the existence and characteristics of institutional venues. Policy making does not take place in an institutional void. In modern political systems, policy making takes place within distinct institutional loci, such as government departments and parliamentary committees. These are called policy-making 'venues'. Venues differ in terms of the types of issue they are likely to take up; generally speaking, they focus on issues that tie in with their institutional remit (Princen, 2009: 35).

As a result, venues will tend to give attention to issues that are framed in terms that relate to their remit and ignore issues that are framed in terms that have nothing to do with their remit. This offers room for moving issues between venues. After all, as we saw above, whether or not an issue is an 'environmental issue' or an 'economic issue' depends on the way it is framed. If genetic modification is seen as a relatively risk-free technology that has great economic potential, policy making will most likely take place in an economic policy venue, such as the European Commission's DG Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs (also known as 'DG GROW'). But if genetic modification is seen as an inherently risky technology that may adversely affect the environment, then policy making will likely take place in an environmental venue such as DG Environment. Hence, if an issue is framed in a certain way, it is more likely that it will be taken up by some venues and not by others. Therefore, the choice of venue significantly also affects subsequent policy processes (for some examples, see Chapter 11).

An important part of agenda setting consists of attempts to steer an issue towards a certain, more receptive venue. Actors within a venue may do this for themselves, for example, when they try to gain a foothold over policy making in a certain field. It may also be a strategy by outside actors, a role often played by environmental NGOs in the EU, who frame an issue in a certain way in order to target the venue that they believe is most favourable to them. The latter strategy is called 'venue shopping' (Baumgartner and Jones, 2009: 36).

In the end, agenda setting revolves around the interplay between framing and venues. By framing issues in a certain way, it becomes more (or less) likely that a given venue will pick up that issue. Conversely, when a certain venue deals with an issue, it is likely to define it in terms that fit its pre-existing remit and preoccupations. As long as there is one dominant issue frame and a stable set of venues dealing with it, an issue will not gain much attention and be low on the agenda. However, when an issue frame is contested and/or attempts are made to shift policy making from one venue to another, the issue will become more salient and rise up the political agenda.

This theoretical framework applies to the EU in two ways. First, the EU as a whole can be seen as a venue vis-à-vis the member states and other international organisations. One can then analyse how and why issues move from those other venues to the EU and vice versa, thus exemplifying multilevel governance. Second, the EU, in turn, consists of a range of venues (the institutions and units within those institutions). One can think of the European Commission (Chapter 6) and the European Parliament (Chapter 8) as distinct policy venues in the EU. Agenda setting in the EU can also be understood in terms of the dynamics between these and other venues, such as the Council and the Court (see Chapters 5 and 7, respectively).

Summary points

- Agenda setting can be understood in terms of the interplay between different issue frames and institutional venues.
- Framing consists of attempts to define an issue in certain terms, so as to stir up or deny attention for that issue and thus change the balance of political support and opposition.
- Institutional venues are more receptive to issues that relate to their core remit. They will engage more actively with issues that are aligned with it.

The characteristics of agenda setting in the EU

In the previous section, a general theoretical framework for understanding agenda-setting processes was presented. In the remainder of this chapter, we will take a closer look at the dynamics of environmental agenda setting in the EU. This discussion will be structured along the lines of seven key characteristics of EU environmental agenda setting:

1 The EU as a multilevel system;
2 The interlinkages between the EU and other international organisations;
3 Agenda setting amidst variety;
4 The limited role of public opinion;
5 The role of focusing events;
6 Links with other policy areas;
7 From new issues to ongoing concerns.

Together, these characteristics provide a way to understand the context in which agenda setting on environmental issues takes place, and of the kind of challenges and opportunities that political actors face when they try to bring environmental issues onto the EU's agenda.

The EU as a multilevel system

The EU is part of a multilayered system of governance, which is often described as a system of 'multilevel governance' (Hooghe and Marks, 2001). A crucial characteristic of multilevelled systems is that issues are dealt with at several levels simultaneously. Thus, the different levels of government do not simply specialise in specific issues; rather, the same can be taken up at different levels at the same time.

Chapter 20 concludes that EU environmental policy is an area of multilevel governance *par excellence* (Fairbrass and Jordan, 2004). One reason for this is that many environmental issues occur at multiple geographical scales, which are often intertwined. For instance, air pollution is partly a local problem, with a large variation in air quality between parts of Europe and local sources of pollution (such as car emissions). Yet it is also linked with other parts of the continent and even the wider world because pollutants are carried over long distances from this original source to other regions.

Hence, the effects and causes of environmental issues are sometimes local, sometimes European and sometimes global. Moreover, cause and effect are sometimes closely linked geographically (more household waste leads to more pollution on local garbage dumps), but sometimes, they lie far apart (pollution of a river in one country leads to poorer water quality in another country). Where one level begins and another ends is often unclear, hence the continuing debate about task allocation in the EU (for a flavour of it, see Chapters 2 and 4).

The EU's multilevel character, coupled with the almost intrinsic multilevel character of environmental problems, has a number of consequences for agenda setting on EU environmental issues. These consequences involve both challenges and opportunities for actors who want to place an environmental issue on the EU agenda. The main challenge revolves around the question: why should this issue be dealt with at the EU level? In a unitary political system, as one finds in many EU states, it is self-evident that the central government can take up any issue it wishes to. But in a system of multilevel governance, by contrast, the allocation of issues to different levels is not self-evident and in fact is often deeply contested.

Within the EU, the general rule for allocating issues is given by the principle of subsidiarity found in the founding treaties. It states that the EU can only act if the issue cannot be dealt with at least equally well by the member states. However, this is far from a hard and fast rule. After all, when is an issue 'better' or 'equally well' dealt with at the member state level? How does one measure this and what is the threshold for saying the EU does a better job than member states? Nevertheless, the subsidiarity principle does provide an argumentative challenge for prospective agenda setters, and it provides ammunition for actors opposed to the inclusion of an issue on the EU agenda. Therefore, interest groups who want to place an issue on the EU agenda have to make a convincing argument that the EU is a suitable level for dealing with their issue (for examples, see Chapter 9). In other words, they have to frame it in European terms because of the EU's institutional remit (Princen, 2009: 39–40). For some issues, this is fairly easy, in particular if the causes and/or effects of the environmental problem can be argued to be cross-border. For other issues, however, such a link is more difficult to make. Box 10.1 gives an example of how the European Commission dealt with this argumentative challenge in its proposal to ban certain disposable plastic products.

Having said this, the EU's multilevel character also offers incentives to and opportunities for political actors who want to place an issue on its agenda. Since issues are often dealt with at multiple levels, actors who are unsuccessful at one level may try again at another level, i.e., attempt a form of venue shopping. The EU level is particularly attractive for actors (e.g., politicians, civil servants and interest groups) who have difficulties getting things on agendas and/or having their preferred policies adopted domestically. Throughout the history of EU environmental policy, environmental NGOs have been attracted to Brussels for this very reason. If the political context is more receptive to their issue at the EU level than at the domestic level, such actors can use the EU to bypass domestic resistance and have policies considered or even adopted at EU level that would be unfeasible domestically. In the Europeanisation literature, this is known as uploading (see also Chapter 4) (Beyers and Kerremans, 2011). This strategy is particularly powerful because the distinction between what 'belongs' at the EU level and what is 'better' dealt with at the member state level is often fuzzy, leaving room for pushing issues at either or even both levels. This has been one of the drivers of agenda-setting dynamics on environmental (and other) issues.

Box 10.1 Framing the issue of disposable plastics

On 28 May 2018, the European Commission presented a proposal for a directive to ban certain disposable plastic products, such as cotton buds, cutlery, plates and straws made of plastic, and restrict others (European Commission, 2018). In the explanatory memorandum, it sought to frame the issue in such a way as to make it acceptable to as wide a set of actors as possible. To this end, it used several lines of argument:

- This was a serious problem: single-use plastics make up about 50% of all marine litter found on European beaches and it damages sea life.
- This was European (rather than a domestic) issue because: (1) marine litter moves across borders; and (2) in the absence of EU-wide rules, individual member states would adopt their own measures, which would cause barriers to trade within the EU.
- Banning disposable plastics ties in with several international commitments undertaken by the EU, such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- A ban on plastics would be good for the economy, stimulating innovation in alternatives and thereby increasing the competitiveness of European businesses (another longstanding objective of EU policy).

These lines of argument not only served to show that the proposal would have significant benefits, but also to substantiate the claim that the EU (rather than individual member states) should be taking these measures. To that end, the proposal employed a mix of environmental, institutional and economic arguments. This is typical of framing strategies around new EU policy initiatives. Although their success varies. In this case, the proposed approach was successful – it was adopted on 5 June 2019 (as Directive 2019/904).

The interlinkages between the EU and other international organisations

The multilevel character of environmental issues is not restricted to the EU. Many environmental issues are also dealt with at the global level (see also Chapters 3, 15 and 16). As a result, the EU is part of an even larger system, which includes many levels – local, regional, national, European and global. Many of the dynamics that were described above also apply between the EU and global levels. Political actors can strategically and selectively 'plug' issues in global institutions in order to have their voice heard domestically (Keck and Sikkink, 1998) or at EU level.

Chapters 3 and 15 show how the global level has been an important driver of the EU's political agenda. As a result, an important part of the EU's environmental policy agenda is a result of international developments, including the negotiation and conclusion of international treaties. The direction of influence goes both ways, however. While international developments affect the EU agenda, the global environmental agenda is, in turn, shaped by the activities of political actors from within states and regions, including the EU.

This also means that global environmental institutions offer opportunities for European actors to influence the EU environmental agenda. By placing an issue on the global agenda, actors can put pressure on EU policy makers to take up that issue as well. An example of this is how the rise of the concept of 'biodiversity' in global environmental politics, and the conclusion of the Convention on Biological Diversity in 1992, led to a greater role for environmental considerations in EU fisheries policy. By framing overfishing in terms of the (globally developed and accepted) concept of 'biodiversity', European environmental NGOs were able to involve EU environmental policy makers into a policy area that had hitherto been dominated by fisheries interests (Princen, 2010). Another example was the original UN conference held in Stockholm in 1972 (see Chapter 2).

Agenda setting amidst variety

Agenda setting revolves around identifying and defining problems. In environmental politics, much depends on one's perceptions of actual environmental conditions and the relative importance of environmental protection as compared to other values and objectives. On both accounts, great diversity exists across the EU, because of differences in natural conditions, levels of economic development, cultural understandings of environmental issues and political systems between (and sometimes within) individual member states.

As a result, the overall importance attached to environmental protection as well as the attention for specific environmental issues vary across the European continent, much more so than in any of its member states (but more similar to what can be found in the USA or Canada). Since actors from the EU member states (be they politicians, civil servants or interest groups) play an important role in defining the EU agenda, this has also affected the EU agenda.

Traditionally, the literature on environmental policy making in the EU distinguished between a number of (Northern European) 'environmental leaders' (most notably Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands) and another set of (Southern European) 'laggards' (Sbragia, 1996: 237; Liefferink and Andersen, 1998: 254) (see also Chapters 2 and 5). Agenda-setting dynamics around environmental issues were then explained in terms of the struggle between these blocs, and in particular, the initiatives taken by the 'green' member states. Although this North–South divide has become less marked since the mid-1990s, differences between more and less environmentally conscious member states continue to exist (see Chapter 5 for more details). Environmentally conscious member states exert a particular influence on the EU's environmental agenda because they are both more willing and able to invest time and effort in developing an issue. They tend to concentrate on those issues that are closest to their interests and ignore issues they care less about. Moreover, it is easier for political actors in those states to play an active role on an issue if they have sufficient expertise and person power. The member states that have the most progressive environmental policies are often those that have the most experts working on environmental issues. As a result, in most cases, only a subset of member states is actively involved in the process of agenda setting, such as the member states that form the Green Growth or Visegrad groups. These tend to be those member states for which a particular environmental issue is particularly important.

Despite the important role of member states in environmental agenda setting, one should not focus exclusively on the differences between member states. Equally

significant are the differences within member states. For instance, right-wing parties and left-wing parties within a particular state normally have very different ideas about the relative importance of environmental protection and specific environmental problems. The same is true for environmental groups and industrial interests within a member state. These different approaches can also be found within the EU institutions. As we saw above, the Commission is not a unified institution, but consists of different DGs, each with its own institutional interests and agenda. In actual policy-making processes, the crucial political dividing line is therefore often between competing 'advocacy coalitions' (Jenkins-Smith et al., 2018), which bring together like-minded actors. One advocacy coalition may consist of DG Environment, the EEA, a number of environmentally minded MEPs and environmental policy makers and NGOs from a number of member states. Another may consist of DG GROW, trade-oriented MEPs and economic policy makers and interest groups from those same member states. This arrangement changes the political playing field compared to a situation in which single member states (rather than broader advocacy coalitions) are pitted against each other.

The limited role of public opinion

In democratic domestic political systems, public opinion is an important source of agenda setting. When an issue becomes important to the public, it is likely also to move higher up the political agenda. Our running example of climate change is a good case in point. The reason for this is that politicians have an incentive to respond to public opinion. If an issue is important to citizens, they can gain public support by taking up that issue. This, in turn, may improve their chances of success in the next elections.

In the EU, public opinion arguably plays a smaller role when compared to each of its member states and other democratic countries (see Chapter 18). There are two reasons for this (Imig and Tarrow, 2000; Princen, 2009: 37–38). The first reason is that EU decision makers are less dependent on public opinion than are domestic politicians. Unlike governments in presidential or parliamentary systems, the Commission is 'elected' neither directly nor indirectly. Ministers in the Council of Ministers (and heads of government in the European Council) answer to their parliaments and voters, but because there are 27 participants, it is very difficult to hold individual participants to account for what is decided. The European Parliament, finally, is directly elected, but studies of voting behaviour show that European elections are decided on national issues, not European ones (e.g., Schmitt and Toygür, 2016) (see Chapter 8). All in all, therefore, the EU's political system is structured in such a way that EU decision makers do not need to be as attentive to public opinion as domestic politicians.

Second, it is more difficult to mobilise public opinion at EU level than within a single member state. As we saw above, member states vary in the overall importance attached to environmental issues and to the specific environmental issues they worry about. In addition, it is difficult to mobilise public opinion in all member states at the same time because the EU's public sphere is highly fragmented, if only because media systems are organised along national lines. As a result, it is rare for a single issue to become important in most member states at the same time. Climate change has been an example of such cross-border public mobilisation, but it is quite exceptional in this regard and even then, public sentiment has not been equally strong in all parts of the EU.

This is not to say that public opinion plays no role at all in the EU. However, its effects are more indirect and, when it comes to environmental issues, occur most strongly around issues that have widespread appeal in a large number of member states.

The role of focusing events

Apart from general swings in public opinion, environmental issues can also be propelled up the political agenda in response to highly salient, much-publicised events that draw attention to a given issue. The quintessential example in environmental policy was the Chernobyl disaster in 1986, which drew strong attention to the risks of nuclear energy. Other examples were the large-scale oil spill caused by the sinking of the oil tanker *Prestige* off the coast of Spain in 2002 and the major industrial accident in a chemical plant near the Italian town of Seveso in 1976. Each of these disasters eventually led to EU responses and legislation, as documented in Chapter 2.

These events have left an indelible mark on policy. For instance, the chemical accident in Seveso led to a directive aimed at the prevention of industrial accidents and limiting their impact, which is still known as the 'Seveso Directive'. Likewise, the 'Erika Package', consisting of a range of directives and regulations aimed at improving the safety of oil transport by sea, was adopted after a major oil spill in the Bay of Biscay caused by the oil tanker *Erika* in 1999. It was further strengthened after the *Prestige* accident.

Such events have been dubbed 'focusing events' by the American scholar John Kingdon (2003: 94–100) (see also Birkland, 1998). Focusing events are powerful because they put one particular (aspect of an) issue in the spotlight, while simultaneously detracting attention from other (aspects of) issues. As they increase the awareness of a particular problem, so people will tend to give greater priority to that problem. For a (brief) period of time, that problem seems to be much more important than other problems, catapulting it up the political agenda as calls for action to remedy it mount.

Focusing events do not speak for themselves. An important role in interpreting framing events is played by political actors who seek to frame them in such a way as to support their preferred cause. For political actors, crises and disasters are opportunities that they can use to sway the opinion of (other) policy makers and the general public in their direction. To that end, they actively try to frame events in ways that fit with their own interests. Lobby groups in particular devote huge amounts of their time to framing problems.

They can do this because the causes, consequences and implications of major crises are not always clear. To give another nuclear energy-related example: what were the implications of the meltdown in the Fukushima nuclear power plant in Japan after the tsunami of March 2011? Did it show that nuclear energy is inherently unsafe and should therefore be phased out in Europe? Or did it merely show that nuclear power plants should not be built in earthquake-prone areas, of which there are relatively few in Europe? During and after the crisis, it was exactly this type of political debate that was being waged, with different actors in different countries promoting arguments that best fitted their interests and preconceived positions.

Focusing events may lead to activity at EU level because domestic politicians can use EU action as a way to address the concerns of their (domestic) constituencies. Moreover, large-scale environmental disasters have the potential to focus attention and public opinion in a wide range of member states at the same time, overcoming the

limits of the EU's fragmented linguistic and media landscape. As a result, focusing events can affect the public agendas of a large number of member states simultaneously, which pushes the issue onto the EU agenda.

Links with other policy areas

Environmental issues are closely linked with other policy areas, not just in the EU but elsewhere. For instance, if one wants to reduce air pollution, any policy proposal one can conceivably come up with (e.g., switching from fossil-fuelled power plants to renewable energy sources, taxing the use of cars or strengthening emission standards for trucks) will have implications for other areas, such as economic development, urban planning and transport. Often, these implications are negative: higher taxes on fossil fuels may hamper economic development, make it more expensive for people to use their cars or require costly investments by government (e.g., development of alternative energy sources) or firms (e.g., installing new pollution-abatement devices).

In the EU, the many links between the environment and other issue areas both pose challenges and offer opportunities for would-be agenda setters. The main challenge consists of gaining attention for the environmental aspects of an issue vis-à-vis other aspects, in particular, economic development. In the EU, this struggle is reinforced by the EU's institutional remit. The EU started as an economic union, and economic issues still form the core of the EU's *raison d'être* (see Chapters 1–3). Institutionally, it is reflected by the fact that the Commission's economic DGs (Competition, Economic and Financial Affairs, GROW, Trade) are considered the most important and powerful within the Commission (see Chapter 6 for details). Since promoting the economic development of its member states is a core task for the EU, issues and arguments that relate to economic development have a much greater chance of reaching the EU agenda than issues and arguments that do not.

For this reason, a classic strategy in EU agenda setting – and interest group lobbying more generally – has been to present an issue in economic terms (see also Chapter 9), even when it is not overtly economic in nature. The key thing is to frame a given issue as making a contribution to economic development. An example is the argument that stricter environmental protection measures will yield economic benefits because they create an incentive for firms to develop and invest in innovative technologies, which will strengthen their position on world markets vis-à-vis competitors from outside the EU. This was also part of the arguments given by the Commission in its proposal for a ban on single-use plastics, highlighted in Box 10.1 above. Another example was the report published by DG Environment in April 2019, which claimed that the costs of not implementing EU environmental law amounted to €55 billion per year. Together, such arguments are part of a wider discourse that has been termed ecological modernisation (see Chapters 4 and 9).

Whether or not these are actually valid arguments, what is important for understanding agenda-setting processes is to recognise the strategic value of employing them in policy processes. By presenting environmental protection not (just) as a benefit to the environment but as a contribution to the economy ('ecological modernisation'), the potential trade-off between environmental protection and economic development is reversed. This makes the issue appealing to the policy makers operating in venues that are chiefly interested in economic development, which, in turn, increases the chances of it climbing up the political agenda.

Above, we saw how linking environmental protection to another issue area can both present a hurdle (when environmental protection is perceived to go against another cherished political objective) and offer opportunities (when environmental protection is perceived to contribute to another cherished political objective). This type of strategic issue linkage can also occur with other areas than economic development. A classic strategy, often employed by the Commission, for bringing issues to the EU agenda has been to link them to the internal market (see Chapter 2). The argument then is that an issue needs to be dealt with because it involves barriers to trade. This argument was particularly important in the early years of EU environmental policy, before a separate legal basis was included in the Single European Act. Even today, however, links to the internal market can be used strategically to increase the chances of agenda access for an environmental issue (as we also saw in the case of the ban on single-use plastics in Box 10.1), or to promote environmental policy integration (see Chapter 12).

From new issues to ongoing concerns

EU environmental policy in the 1970s and 1980s was marked by the rapid buildup of a body of legislation that covered a range of issues previously not dealt with at EU level. Since the 1980s, new issues have been taken up, but in addition, an increasing proportion of the environmental agenda has been taken up by debates on the revision of existing legislation. As a result, the proportion of EU environmental legislation that amends previous laws has steadily increased over time (see McCormick, 2001: 64, for the period 1973–1999). The systematic evaluation and updating of existing legislation has been institutionalised as part of the European Commission's better regulation agenda, which includes impact assessment, and the evaluation and 'fitness checking' of existing directives and regulations (for more details, see Chapters 6, 14 and 19).

As a result, agenda-setting processes have taken on a somewhat different character. For most environmental issues, the key question no longer is: 'should the EU be involved?' but 'what should the EU be doing?' And the point in getting the issue on the EU agenda is no longer to make the EU take it up, but to change existing policies (strengthening or weakening them, depending on a political actor's objectives). This change in both the stakes of and the key struggles in agenda-setting strategies marks a shift from 'new issues' to 'ongoing or recurring concerns', in turn, raising new analytical challenges for EU scholars (see Chapter 19).

Some debates on existing legislation concern fundamental aspects of an issue. Most amendments, however, concern very specific and often highly technical updates of existing regulatory standards. Table 10.1 gives a sample of official Commission documents (so-called COM documents – or 'COM docs') published in the first six months of 2019 for which DG Environment was responsible. It includes 8 out of the 16 COM documents published by DG Environment in that period. These give a feel for the kind of environmental issues that are currently on the EU agenda (besides climate change, which falls under a separate DG for Climate Action).

Crucially, almost all the documents relate to issues that were already subject to EU policies and legislation. Some documents concern issues that are relatively broad and strategic in scope, such as the report on the Seventh Environment Action Programme and the review of the green infrastructure strategy. Most, however, deal with narrower issues such as the report on (waste) batteries and accumulators or the proposal to list methoxychlor in Annex A to the Stockho Pollutants. Related to this, most documents

Table 10.1 A sample of COM documents from DG Environment (published between 1 January and 30 June 2019)

COM number	*Title*
COM(2019)82	Proposal for a Council Decision on the submission, on behalf of the European Union, of a proposal for the listing of methoxychlor in Annex A to the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants
COM(2019)85	Report on the exercise of the power to adopt delegated acts conferred on the Commission pursuant to Regulation (EU) No 1143/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 October 2014 on the prevention and management of the introduction and spread of invasive alien species
COM(2019)95	Report on the implementation of the Water Framework Directive (2000/60/EC) and the Floods Directive (2007/60/EC) Second River Basin Management Plans First Flood Risk Management Plans
COM(2019)128	Communication on the European Union Strategic Approach to Pharmaceuticals in the Environment
COM(2019)146	Proposal for a Council Decision on the position to be taken on behalf of the European Union at the 18th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES CoP18)
COM(2019)166	Report on the implementation and the impact on the environment and the functioning of the internal market of Directive 2006/66/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 6 September 2006 on batteries and accumulators and waste batteries and accumulators and repealing Directive 91/157/EEC
COM(2019)233	Report on the evaluation of the Seventh Environment Action Programme
COM(2019)236	Review of progress on implementation of the EU green infrastructure strategy

Source: Eur-Lex database (2019).

deal with the implementation, evaluation and further specification of existing legislation, rather than the development of new legislation.

Little publicised as they may be, these issues are an important part of the EU environmental agenda – and they form an increasingly large part of it. As a result, the agenda dynamics around EU environmental policy have become focused more on updating existing policies than on building up the EU's role in environmental policy (the standard focus of the EU integration literature) (for a more detailed summary, see Chapters 4 and 19).

Summary points

- Agenda setting on environmental issues in the EU takes place within a multilevel system, which spans local, regional, national and global levels.
- Environmental agenda setting in the EU is strongly affected by the EU's specific geographic, institutional and political characteristics.
- Over time, the EU's environmental agenda has focused less on completely new issues and more on the revision of existing policies and legislation.

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced and highlighted the dynamics of agenda setting in EU environmental policy. It has sought to provide an understanding of how and why (certain) environmental issues come onto the EU's political agenda. Agenda setting is a relatively fluid stage of the policy-making process, because issues and participants have not yet crystallised. In fact, agenda setting is exactly about determining what issues will be dealt with, when and by whom. This makes agenda setting an elusive phenomenon, which is strongly affected by idiosyncratic factors, such as the occurrence of sudden media 'hypes' and unexpected focusing events.

Nevertheless, there is order in these seemingly chaotic processes. As this chapter has shown, environmental agenda setting in the EU reflects the institutional and political characteristics of the EU's political system. As a result, agenda-setting processes in the EU show similarities with agenda-setting processes that can be observed elsewhere. Nonetheless, there are a number of specificities that flow from the way the EU has been organised and operates, such as the EU's multilevel character, the variety of perspectives on environmental protection among its member states, the relatively limited role of public opinion in EU decision making and the EU's institutional remit and decision-making procedures.

Although it remains extremely difficult to predict precisely which issues will be on the top of the EU (environmental) agenda a few years from now, the order in EU agenda-setting processes can help to understand what is happening now and why. In addition, the analysis of agenda-setting dynamics presented in this chapter has clear implications for the kinds of agenda-setting strategies that political actors such as environmental NGOs decide to use and the challenges they face when employing them (see also Princen, 2011). As a result, attempts to influence the agenda, either by bringing issues onto it or by keeping them off, have become an integral part of the activities of actors in EU environmental policy making.

Summary points

- Since agenda-setting processes are relatively unstructured, their outcome is often difficult to predict in advance.
- Nevertheless, EU agenda-setting processes show a number of regularities and recurring dynamics, which reflect the characteristics of the EU's political system.
- The analysis of agenda-setting dynamics has implications for the strategies that are used by prospective agenda setters and their strengths and weaknesses.

Key questions

1 Why is an understanding of agenda-setting processes so important for comprehending environmental policy making in the EU?
2 How do issue framing and institutional venues affect the likelihood that a given issue will come onto the EU's political agenda?

3 What consequences does the multilevel character of environmental policy making have for agenda-setting processes in the EU?
4 Under what conditions would you expect public opinion to play a small/large role in agenda setting on environmental issues in the EU?
5 What does the shift from new issues to ongoing concerns mean for agenda-setting processes related to EU environmental issues?
6 Overall, do you think it is easier or more difficult for environmental issues to come onto the EU's political agenda than it is for them to come onto the political agenda of the country that you live in?

Guide to further reading

- Kingdon (2003) has written one of the most influential books on agenda setting. It proposes a framework based on three interacting 'streams' of policy making.
- Baumgartner and Jones (2009) develop and apply an agenda-setting theory based on the interplay of frames and venues.
- Princen (2011) gives an overview of the various strategies used by political actors to bring issues onto the EU agenda.
- Princen (2016) provides an overview of the development and state-of-the-art on EU agenda setting, with references to the wider literature.

Online resources

- For new and upcoming policy initiatives, you can take a look at the European Commission's webpage for public consultations: https://ec.europa.eu/info/consultations_en
- The EU's Environmental Action Programme, which identifies priority issues for a period of multiple years: https://ec.europa.eu/environment/action-programme
- The EU Policy Agendas Project, an academic project aimed at studying policy agendas in the EU: http://www.policyagendas.eu

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