The Politics of Climate Change in Europe: From Protest to Effective Policy (...or rather not)?

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Cruising: A case study

Emitting four times more CO2 than flying per passenger (0.40 vs. 0.11 kg per kilometer)

Emitting at least 150 tonnes of fuel a day

CO2 of 1 large cruise ship = 83,678 cars

Yet cruise ship industry’s growth is enormous every year: the largest growing industry in Europe

Cruise ships: An unregulated emissions industry in European harbours and seas, producing vast amounts of sulphur dioxide, carbon dioxide and other particulars

A (well-known) problem

Climate change is real.

UN Framework Convention on Climate Change was adopted in May 1992 (EU following suit), yet...

Earth Overshoot Day:
1970: 29 December
2019: 29 July

Effect of current pledges and policies

Global greenhouse gas emissions

Source: Climate Action Tracker
Political protest and the law

It's the law (at least in the Netherlands): The government must cut carbon emissions faster or breach its duty of care [a victory of 886 citizens and the NGO “Urgenda” who sued the Dutch government in 2015, confirmed in appeals court in 2018], yet policies are still lagging behind...
The Puzzle

• Why is the difference between scientific knowledge about climate change/public awareness and actual (local, national, European, global) policies against climate change so vast?
The Argument

It’s not primarily about the economy, not about technological capacities, not even about a change of life-styles... *political factors are key to explain the gap.*
Demand Side
Emerging climate consensus in public opinion faces mixed policy prioritizing among voters

Political-Economic Actors
Economic stakeholders, organized business interests, lobby groups → deregulation, globalization and growth paradigms

Supply Side
Parties act as reluctant political agents in the policy-making process
Demand: Emerging Consensus

No longer a polarizing issue in polarized times?

- 93% of Europeans see climate change as a serious problem.
- 93% of Europeans have taken at least one action to tackle climate change.
- 92% of Europeans agree that greenhouse gas emissions should be reduced to a minimum in order to make the EU economy climate neutral by 2050.

Source: European Commission 2019
No significant gender divide on climate change
Policy preference: “Regulate carbon dioxide as a pollutant”?  
79% of women say “yes”  
73% of men say “yes”  

(Ballew, Marion, Lelsrwitz, Malbach 2018)
What are the issues which made you vote in the recent European Parliament elections? Firstly? And then? (% - EU)

- Economy and Growth: 44%
- Combating climate change and protecting the environment: 37%
- Promoting human rights and democracy: 37%
- The way the EU should be working in the future: 36%
- Immigration: 34%
- Social protection of EU citizens: 29%
- Fight against terrorism: 26%
- Combating youth unemployment: 25%
- Security and defence policy: 25%
- Protection of external borders: 21%
- Consumer protection and food safety: 20%
- Protection of personal data: 12%
- Other (spontaneous): 8%
- None/you are not interested in these elections (spontaneous): 3%
- Refusal (spontaneous): 1%
- Don’t know: 3%

Source: Eurobarometer Post-European Election Survey 2019
Powerful political-economic actors, organized business interests and their lobby groups have limited incentives to “green the economy”

Narratives about “our economy is at risk” if regulations become strict vs. “a climate-neutral economy is possible” (Schnabel 2019)

→ Globalization, deregulation & growth paradigms
European party platforms reflect slow policy change and second-order priorities among relevant parties catering to heterogeneous constituencies.
1. Can the political playing field be adjusted to create more effective climate policies?

2. Is climate policy forced to change slowly in a representative democracy?