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The role of politics in sustainable transitions: The rise and decline of offshore wind in Norway

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ABSTRACT

This paper studies how political conditions and external events influenced the rise and fall of offshore wind on the political agenda in Norway between 2005 and 2012. In this sense, the paper contributes to recent debates about the role of politics in sustainable transitions. Key findings are that changes in government posts combined with a need for the offshore petroleum industry to diversify created favourable conditions for offshore wind. However, offshore wind as a solution to articulated problems was insufficiently developed when the window of opportunity opened up. The analysis then shows how a recovery in the offshore petroleum industry and new changes inside government closed the window of opportunity. The paper concludes that we should attend more to the interests of government actors, and conflicts inside government, in the analysis of energy transitions.

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1. Introduction

Studies of sustainable transitions seek to understand how the introduction and development of more renewable energy technologies can be promoted. Since many of these technologies are immature, the introduction of technology-specific policies that protect these technologies from competition is often necessary (Sanden and Azar, 2005). Because different technologies require different types of policy intervention, a growing body of literature has employed a technological innovation system (TIS)

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framework to help identify barriers for technology development, which then can be used to design technology-specific policies (Hekkert et al., 2007; Jacobsson and Bergek, 2011). A related approach focuses on the need to nurture immature innovations through strategic niche management (Kemp et al., 1998). Both approaches recognise the importance of technology-specific policies for technology development. However, overly attention to the effects of policy on technology development can lead to a neglect of the political processes that bring about policy change. In recent years there has therefore been an increased attention in the transitions literature to the formation of policy (Weber and Rohracher, 2012, p. 1040). An emphasis on niche empowerment (Smith and Raven, 2012, p. 1030), or the strengthening of the process of legitimation in the innovation system (Jacobsson and Lauber, 2006), does provide opportunities to study influences on the policy-making process. However, much analysis has still tended to neglect the *political* circumstances that make the adoption of certain policies likely (Meadowcroft, 2011, p. 73). Because a successful transformation of e.g. the electricity system is not only about a technological but also a political challenge (Kern, 2010, p. 20), studies of transition processes therefore need to put more emphasis on the role of politics and the complexity of the policy formation process (Flanagan et al., 2011, p. 704; Jacobsson and Bergek, 2011, p. 55).

This paper seeks to explore the role of politics in transition processes by analysing attempts to secure public support for the introduction of policies for offshore wind in Norway. On the one hand, Norway has the potential to contribute significantly through its impressive offshore wind resources (Energirådet, 2008) and technological competencies related to the offshore oil and gas (O&G) industry (Steen and Hansen, 2014). On the other hand, an electricity sector dominated by hydropower and a reliance on cost-efficient policy measures has provided few opportunities for immature energy technologies over the past two decades. Nonetheless, between 2007 and 2009, the government signalled that it had big ambitions for offshore wind in Norway, hence leading to large public and industrial R&D initiatives. Despite the political ambitions for the development of offshore wind, coupled with substantial private and public investments, only 2.3 MW of capacity has so far been constructed off the Norwegian coast. The empirical objective is to study how offshore wind could rise so prominently on the agenda in Norway and why the big ambitions for the development of offshore wind have not been realised. In this way, the main justification for the study is to shed more light on the political processes exerting an influence on the development of renewable energy technologies.

In the following section, I provide a brief review of how the development of niche technologies can be studied with a theoretical point of departure in the sustainable transitions literature. Here, I propose an agenda-setting model as a useful framework for providing a better understanding of the role of politics and agency in the development of renewable energy technologies. Section 3 presents the agenda-setting model in more detail. In Section 4, I trace the development of offshore wind in Norway, with an emphasis on political and industrial events. Using the framework presented in Section 3, I distinguish between different periods in the agenda-setting process, and outline how this may explain what can broadly be called “the rise and fall” of offshore wind development in Norway. Section 5 sums up the findings and proposes some implications for further research.

2. Theoretical background: understanding the development of niche technologies

From ideas of path-dependency and carbon lock-in (Unruh, 2000), we know that established technologies often hold many advantages over new technologies. An important contribution in the literature on sustainable transitions has therefore been made by exploring how the creation of protective markets and technology-specific policies for new renewable energy technologies such as offshore wind (e.g. Kern et al., 2014) can counteract the effects of path-dependency and lock-in. With the attention to policies comes the need to understand how policies are shaped. Simply put, policies are shaped through negotiations between both interested state and non-state actors (Smith et al., 2005). Actors have different opportunities to negotiate the policy process (Smith and Raven, 2012, p. 1031), and these opportunities are influenced by the institutional environment (Jacobsson and Lauber, 2006). This asymmetrical distribution of opportunities is often self-reinforcing through positive feedback processes.

The concept of regimes can be useful for understanding the role of path-dependency and how new paths can be created (Hanson, 2013). Although there is little coherence in the literature on the

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