



Climate policies in the U.S. at the stakeholder level: A case study of the National Football League



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HIGHLIGHTS

- The article analyzes the role of stakeholders in influencing climate policy-making in the U.S.
- A case study of the National Football League (NFL) and their 32 franchises is carried out.
- The research identifies pioneering teams and describes their actions.
- The motives of pioneering action are identified.
- State and non state actors that were involved in innovation and diffusion of green programs in the NFL are pinpointed.

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes how stakeholders are able to influence climate policy-making in the U.S.; emphasis is placed upon the most popular sports league in the United States, the National Football League (NFL). An empirical analysis of the 32 NFL franchises identifies pioneering clubs that have introduced ambitious green programs that include the utilization of renewable energies, the adoption of energy efficiency measures and carbon offsetting policies, as well as the facilitation of public transport and electric cars. Apart from environmental concerns, this paper identifies several drivers for pioneering actions: economic motives, pressure exerted by the local environment, public relations, and political incentives such as the promotion from the federal government's stimulus package. Finally, this article investigates the role that state actors, such as the Environmental Protection Agency, and non-state actors, such as the Natural Resources Defense Council, play in the innovation and diffusion processes of environmental programs in the NFL.

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1. Introduction

This article analyzes the role of the professional sports sector in the United States in combating climate change; in particular, a case-study on the most popular sports league in the U.S., the National Football League (NFL) and its 32 franchises is conducted. The main research questions of this work are: what efforts are made to reduce greenhouse gases in the NFL and what motivates the clubs for pioneering in fields such as using renewable energy, energy efficiency measures, and carbon offsetting?

The assumption of this work is that main stakeholders such as professional sports teams are able to influence policy-making in large U.S. cities and states. The article seeks to contribute to the academic debate about bottom-up processes in U.S. climate policy

as a result of the absence of climate governance at the federal level. For Rabe (2011, p. 496), “the possibility of a federal takeover of this arena seems unlikely to occur in the near future.” The existence of a divided government at the federal level is one of the main reasons for this assumption; a divided government is defined as one in which “one major political party controls the presidency and the other controls Congress” (Schmidt et al., 2011, p. 363). Upon the completion of this research paper, the Republicans controlled the House of Representatives and the Democrats controlled the Senate and the presidency. Even if one party controls the presidency and both houses, it is difficult to achieve a majority for environmental legislation. For example, in the first two years of Democrat Bill Clinton's presidency, the Democrats also held a majority in both houses; nevertheless, his effort to introduce carbon taxation failed. There is no unanimity among Democrats and Republicans; factions within the same party also exist along constituency lines. Members of Congress from the Rust Belt Region usually oppose climate legislation. The Rust Belt, also known as

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the Manufacturing Belt or the Factory Belt, is situated within parts of the Northeastern United States, the Mid-Atlantic States, and portions of the Eastern Midwest.

Taking the difficulties for policy change at the federal level into account, authors such as Selin and VanDeveer (2011, p. 295) are “calling for more regionally focused empirical research and analysis.” Policy change in the U.S. often starts at the stakeholder, local and state levels. They serve as a “laboratory” (Aulisi et al., 2007), and proven success might spill over to the federal level: “The evolving reality of climate change policy development, in the U.S. and abroad, relies heavily on sub-national initiative” (Rabe, 2011, p. 494). According to Derthick (2010, p. 58) U.S. climate change politics is better understood as “compensatory federalism”: “Sub-national entities are compensating for a lack of meaningful federal action. ... This leaves room for more ambitious policy action at the supranational level as well as for collaborative initiatives by groups of states and provinces or transnational networks of cities and private actors” (Selin and VanDeveer, 2011, p. 297).

The domination of the sub-national level started in 1998 after the United States had signed the Kyoto Protocol but the Senate failed to ratify it. In 2001 the Bush Administration decided to withdraw formally from the treaty. For Rabe (2011, p. 499) “this recognition, alongside the continued inability of Congress to advance serious climate policy created an open intergovernmental field for state government engagement.” A race for climate-friendly economic development thus started at the stakeholder, local and state levels (Mintrom, 2009; Rabe, 2011, p. 501). Selin and VanDeveer (2011, p. 298) argue that policy experiments at the sub-national level provide avenues of policy diffusion and learning: “North American policy leaders in the public, private, and civil society sectors also already work to disseminate their policy initiatives and lessons to other jurisdictions and across national boundaries.” The networks that contribute to the horizontal diffusion of green programs among NFL franchises and other professional sports teams are identified further below in this work.

Most research on climate change has focused “on the international level as the primary locus of climate change governance” (Betsill and Bulkeley, 2007, p. 448). According to Rabe (2008, p. 105), “climate change has conventionally been framed as an issue that would be addressed by an international regime established through negotiation among nation-states.” This article seeks to contribute to the academic debate about “bottom-up American climate policy” (Rabe, 2008, p. 107) and to the examples of actions being undertaken at the local level, a topic that has become accepted as a legitimate area for research over the past decade (Betsill and Bulkeley, 2007, p. 448). There is a “significant role many authors have attributed to local governments and communities in putting sustainable development into practice” (Betsill and Bulkeley, 2004, p. 489).

Betsill and Bulkeley (2007, p. 448) emphasize that “partnerships between public and private actors around particular projects are becoming a key feature of local climate change policy.” Examples for such partnerships between public and private actors related to this research are, among others, building new, environmentally friendly sports venues, encouraging fans to come to the matches by public transport, and carbon offsetting the emissions from away-games travel.

For this work the NFL was chosen as a case study because it is not only the most watched sports league in the U.S., but also holds the record for the largest average sports league attendance in the world. Along with English Premier League, the NFL leads in TV viewing rates and revenues (Dietl et al., 2009, p. 60).

Previous research on cities and climate change identified “a gap between words and action” (Betsill and Bulkeley, 2007, p. 452). According to Betsill and Bulkeley (2007, p. 454) the reason for this gap is the lack of financial resources, technical capacity and staff to

develop and implement local climate change policies. This research focusing on climate policies in the NFL shows that there are significant opportunities for action to address local concerns if cities partner with major local stakeholders such as professional sports teams that possess significant administrative and financial capacities. Contrariwise, stakeholders such as professional sports teams need approval and support for many measures (for example for planning stadiums and the infrastructure around them) by the local authorities. Therefore, there is a two-way dependency between stakeholders and local politicians. However, the NFL teams hold powerful positions because they can threaten to move away to other locations if their demands are not met. Werner and Wilson (2008, p. 361) analyze the opportunities American federalism provides for businesses by stating that “politicians, regardless of ideology, eager for re-election will ward off this catastrophe by giving business what it wants and will do so.” The identified “privileged position” of business is particularly strong in American Football with only 32 NFL franchises and far more cities interested in hosting a team in the country's most popular sports league. However, taking responsibility for societal problems (such as climate change) by NFL clubs is important for being accepted locally, as most fans attending the matches are from the host city and state.

Due to the large crowds attracted, every NFL game creates a significant environmental impact. Apart from the direct impact on the environment, this article assumes that significant indirect effects also exist: if the popular NFL clubs were to adopt green policies, they might motivate their fans and other stakeholders at the local level to imitate their actions and thereby help local policy makers to achieve their environmental goals.

Recent publications in this journal have dealt with energy and climate policy legislation at the federal level (see Bang, 2010; Cheah and Heywood, 2011; Dixon et al., 2010; Harris, 2009; Morrow et al., 2010; Skodvin, 2010); other articles have compared the energy policies of different U.S. states (Carley, 2009; Delmas and Montes-Sancho, 2011); two articles have compared U.S. and German energy policies (Laird and Stefes, 2009; Portman et al., 2009); Bang et al. (2007) have focused upon U.S. participation in international climate change agreements. Other articles have examined energy intensity in U.S. commercial buildings (Andrews and Krogmann, 2009), jobs in the U.S. clean energy industry (Wei et al., 2010), innovations in the wind energy industry (Berry, 2009), and energy consumption by the U.S. electric power sector (Gil-Alana et al., 2010). Nevertheless, an article that deals with the relationship between climate policy and the professional sport sector in the U.S. (or any other country) is new for this journal and the academic debate on U.S. climate policy.

The article proceeds as follows: the next section discusses the methodology adopted throughout the paper and explains the reason behind studying the professional sports sector in the U.S.; it explains the structure of this article as well as its research questions and the sources used for the data collection. In addition, a literature review on issues related to this research is presented. A study of the green programs adopted in the National Football League (NFL) follows the methodology, and an analysis of the drivers behind these programs is conducted. Then a section on the actors involved in the innovation and diffusion processes of green programs in the NFL is presented. Finally, concluding remarks are made.

2. Methodology

An academic research of the National Football League's green programs could study the garbage produced on match days and

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