



Participative environmental policy integration in the Irish energy sector

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the implications of participation for Environmental Policy Integration (EPI), through the window of Irish energy policy, employing concepts of ‘energy democracy’ and ‘energy citizenship’. Our analysis of a consultation process on energy policy identifies distinctive narratives, with different idealisations of energy citizens. We distil the implications of consequent, emergent institutional innovations examining imagined citizens, communication, participation and decision-making linked to policy. We adapt and operationalise the analytical framework of discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2008), using explanatory factors for EPI (Runhaar et al., 2017). Relocating the specific consultation in the wider process preceding and following its outcomes we examine the degree, and conditions under which participation advances EPI in the sector. We suggest that energy citizenship constructs and processes of energy democratisation remain highly contingent on context. Nevertheless, ‘principled priority’ (Lafferty and Hovden, 2003) though often involving trade-offs in practice, ought not be decoupled from processes of democratisation that may underpin its sustainability.

1. Introduction

Governments increasingly stress the importance of participation in energy policy as part of a transition to a low-carbon society (EC, 2011; European Parliament, 2016). While the extent to which society should be included in forming energy policy and its implementation, is highly contested, there is broad agreement that energy policy can no longer be the exclusive concern of public institutions and utilities. This has provided the stimulus for an emergent discourse around the relationship between citizens and the energy system, centred on the concept of ‘energy democracy’ (Burke and Stephens, 2018).

Energy democracy emerges due to increased urgency regarding climate change and growing societal demand for accountability and democratization in the energy sector, previously regarded as not requiring public involvement (Szulecki, 2018). In the transition debate, there are two competing narratives. The first, labelled techno-economic, denotes an economic perspective that sees society as a source of consumer demand. The second, labelled energy democracy, challenges the techno-economic narrative, emphasizing inclusion of the public as stakeholders. The activist interpretation of energy democracy is often opposed to the liberal, constitutionalist and representative practices of democratic polities favouring ‘the active processual involvement and engagement of citizens in deliberation as subjects and political agents’

(Szulecki, 2018, p.28). As such, individuals have a crucial role to play, not just as consumers but also as citizens indirectly by accepting, supporting or resisting changes and thus influencing other policy actors or directly by consenting or refusing policy options in democratic decision-making processes (Defila et al., 2017). There is also a tension between individualist and communitarian versions of energy democracy, the liberal prosumer (producer-consumer) vs. collective forms of production and participatory governance. Energy democracy has several relevant characteristics:

- 1 it can be normative (the goal of decarbonisation and energy transformation), or descriptive (with respect to examples of decentralized, civil society initiatives) (Szulecki, 2018);
- 2 it can be multi-scale connecting the individual citizen with the national polity at all levels of governance (*ibid.*);
- 3 energy democracy is a form of sociotechnical governance and a political claim informing its constituting element of energy citizenship (Burke and Stephens, 2018).

Energy citizenship conjoins rights and responsibilities, underpinned by sustainability principles of participation, local action, equity, justice and the remediation of poverty facilitated by procedural mechanisms supporting the co-production of responses to contemporary challenges

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(Devine-Wright 2007). Energy citizens are ‘products of a scholarly symbolic fabrication of new collectives’ and the ‘public perception of these phenomena is still being formed’ (Vihalemm and Keller, 2016). A key question then is ‘what kind citizen are (energy) citizens invited to be?’ (Escobar, 2017). Is it citizens as occasional voters and/or members of interest groups and decision-making is confined to politicians and experts through ‘representative democracy’ (p.440)? Is it ‘collective association, collaboration, struggle and civic education’ where citizens participate in ‘planning, coordinating and enacting collective futures’ (pp.418–423) through civic and official processes? Alternatively, is the emphasis on ‘discursive participation’ (pp.424–8) where deliberative citizens represent diversity, rather than a specific social group? We suggest that energy citizenship is best approached as a discursive field that actors are attempting to shape in accordance with their interests.

Although governments have the final responsibility to make policy decisions, participatory democracy may contribute to better informed, more acceptable outcomes (Knudsen and Lafferty, 2016, p. 361). The new emphasis on public participation in the energy policy process has important implications for Environmental Policy Integration (EPI), or the incorporation of environmental concerns into sectoral policies outside the traditional environmental policy domain (Runhaar et al., 2014). EPI is normally conceived in state-centric terms but little attention has been given to exogenous participation in policy-making (Chaney, 2016).

Processes of policy formation and implementation are rarely achieved through consensual means and change is more often as a result of dynamic contradictions, competing ideologies and active agents (Warren et al., 2016). While energy democratization might well provide opportunities to advance EPI, it may also pose challenges where democracy and sustainability collide (Lafferty and Hovden, 2003). Despite the urgency surrounding the necessity for an energy transition, elements such as renewables deployment may be frustrated, delayed or prevented through existing democratic procedures (Burke and Stephens, 2018).

We explore what participation means for EPI, and how EPI may be enabled or transformed. We filter this through an example of public participation in policy formation, the consultation process on the *Green Paper on Energy Policy in Ireland* (DCENR, 2014).¹ This offers an opportunity to study how energy policies are shaped by multiple actors as the arena expands beyond the limits of public institutions, and understand the implications of this process for EPI. While the consultation on the Green Paper centred on outputs, the impact of enhanced participation on EPI extends through all stages of the policy cycle and alters the conditions in which it unfolds.

2. Theoretical framework

Two broad approaches have been adopted to EPI, characterised respectively as ‘principled priority’ and ‘positive approaches’ (Persson, 2007). The first provides a *normative* orientation to the process of policy-making for sustainable development, giving EPI priority over other objectives (Lafferty and Hovden, 2003). The second focuses on the *positive* question of how EPI is conceptualised and implemented in everyday political and policy settings (Persson, 2007).

The original formulation of ‘principled priority’ stresses that ‘the ultimate trade off attaching to EPI is that between existing democratic norms and procedures on the one hand, and the goals and the operational necessities of sustainable development’ (Lafferty and Hovden, 2003). Nevertheless, principled priority will have to be determined through ‘the appropriate decision-making procedures in order to establish legitimacy’ (Oberthür, 2009) and differs depending on domain e.g., climate change and biodiversity might create critical environmental parameters for renewable energy policy (Knudsen, 2009). The

only requirement of EPI as ‘first principle’ is to guarantee that ‘every effort is made to assess the impacts of policies’ and to limit or qualify those impacts that represent unacceptable risks (Knudsen and Lafferty, 2016, p.355).

Alternatively, EPI is rooted in notions of a rational process dissolving contradictions, reducing redundancies and exploiting synergies between policies (Persson, 2007). We have been tasked with addressing three degrees of policy integration viz., coordination (i.e., avoidance of contradictions), harmonisation (i.e., environmental and sectorial objectives accorded equal value), prioritisation (i.e., environmental objectives seen as a guiding principle) (Persson et al. 2018, this issue, p.3). EPI is about much more than rational decision-making, consisting of context specific interpretations involving a large number of actors continually reframing problem definitions and understanding (Hogl and Nordbeck et al., 2012). EPI involves ‘an internal process of establishing and enacting specific activities’ and an ‘external framing process of communicating those efforts to a public or constituent groups’ (Haywood et al., 2014).

2.1. EPI and participation

Recognising that EPI is inescapably political opens up potential for a constitutive, constructive and proactive role for citizens advancing an integrated approach to sustainability. Although some have challenged the idea that EPI requires strong participation (Humphreys, 2016), there has been little attention to ‘the constitutive nature of public participation exercises and how discursive structures and practices construct both social issues and social subjects’ (Carvalho et al., 2016). Energy transitions are strongly influenced by the interplay of interests, institutions and ideas (Warren et al., 2016), where: interests are a proxy for an actor oriented approach; institutions are the arrangements that govern and shape the policy process; and, ideas refer to the shared concepts and categories through which meaning is given, rather than shared interests or goals (Hajer, 1993). The importance of context is highlighted by participative EPI where the inclusion of citizens can also contribute to the framing and structuring new institutional arrangements (Chaney, 2016).

2.2. Discursive institutionalism and the factors influencing EPI

Discursive institutionalism transcends, but includes, institutionalist, political and social learning perspectives, characterised as a triad between ‘coordinative discourse’, ‘communicative discourse’ and formal institutional context (Schmidt, 2008). The institutional context equates to the institutional contours of the polity; coordinative discourse is located in the ‘policy sphere’ where policy actors attempt to stabilise a mainstream policy narrative; and communicative discourse occurs in the political sphere consisting of the presentation, deliberation and legitimisation of political ideas to the public. Energy citizenship is thus an incipient coordinative discourse, through which a variety of actors attempt to stabilise a mainstream narrative of an energy transition, and the centre of a discursive opportunity creating possibilities for participation, as diverse actors attempt to communicate their preferred meanings. This suggests that, [1] varieties of participation are not solely conceptual, but also contextually orchestrated constructions amenable to re-construction; [2] these constructions are productive, regarding models of participation or imagined energy citizens; and [3] these are not merely discursive spaces, but materially consequential interventions with respect to continuity and change (Chilvers and Longhurst, 2016). Discursive institutionalism provides an effective way of situating the evolving institutional context of energy citizenship, its meaning, role and relationship to the factors influencing EPI in the energy sector (Runhaar et al., 2017).

Derived from the drivers and barriers identified by Runhaar et al, we can discern a set of factors, internal and external to the policy process shaping EPI in Irish energy policy. Internal factors refer to the

¹ Henceforth, ‘Green Paper’

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