



## The internal and external face of Dutch environmental policy: A case of fading environmental leadership?

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Environmental policy  
Implementation  
EU Directives  
Europeanisation  
Environmental governance  
Leadership

### ABSTRACT

With regard to European Union (EU) environmental directives, member states seem to show a discrepancy between external ambitions as expressed in the European arena, and realisation of these ambitions at home. Depending on the level of their internal and external ambitions, states may ideal-typically take four positions: laggards, symbolic leaders, pioneers or pushers. Furthermore, the actions of member states can be characterised with the help of different types of leadership: structural, cognitive, entrepreneurial and exemplary. Taking the case of the Netherlands, we hypothesise that there is an external face, operationalised with reference to the Dutch role in the formation process of four major environmental directives (air quality, nature conservation, agricultural pollution by nitrate and water quality), and an internal face, observed through the practices of domestic implementation of those directives. Looking at environmental policy processes over time, the gap between external and internal faces actually widened as practical implementation evolved. We conclude that the overall development of the Netherlands as an environmental leader was influenced not only by changes in the wider political and societal environment, but also by an increasing awareness of the discrepancy between the country's external and internal faces. In the more recent cases, especially water quality, the focus of leadership shifted from substantive to governance ambitions. Despite a waning implementation record, the Netherlands still shows forms of entrepreneurial and, particularly, cognitive leadership.

### 1. Introduction

In the literature on environmental policies of the European Union (EU) and its member states, a fascinating issue has regularly surfaced: who are the leading or pioneering states? This is often combined with questions like: what constitutes a leader or pioneer, and why do member states act as they do? In this discussion, the conceptual meaning of the terms used is as important as observing the development of environmental pioneers and leaders. We would like to contribute to this debate by elaborating the perspective of an 'internal' and an 'external face' of an individual member state. This perspective raises questions on where and when member states are leading or pioneering and for what purpose and audience.

Various terms are used interchangeably for ambitious states (or other actors) in environmental policy. In a recent conceptual contribution, Liefverink and Wurzel (2017) define leaders as actors explicitly seeking to attract followers, while pioneers are 'ahead of the troops' without the ambition to attract followers. Next to these roles, Liefverink et al. (2009) suggest to think of distinct internal and external 'faces' of member states. Liefverink and Wurzel (2017) combine these

insights on roles and faces by distinguishing between the visible and active stance of member states in environmental policy in the *European and international arena* (showing ambitions externally) and the visible and active stance of member states at home, in their *domestic environmental policies* (showing ambitions internally). Depending on the level of their internal and external ambitions, states (or other actors, for that matter) may ideal-typically take four positions: laggards, symbolic leaders, pioneers or pushers. Furthermore, the actions of member states can be characterised with the help of different types of leadership or pioneership: structural, cognitive, entrepreneurial and exemplary. This conceptual framework will be further explained in Section 2.

To elaborate these ideas on the internal and external faces of a country while giving a comprehensive analysis of different policy fields within the environmental domain, we limited ourselves to one EU member state, the Netherlands. This country was one of the early environmental pioneers (Andersen and Liefverink, 1997; Liefverink and Andersen, 1998; OECD, 2015; Hoogervorst and Dietz, 2015). The Dutch embraced leading environmental discourses such as reflected by the 'Limits to Growth' report (Meadows et al., 1972 – half of all copies worldwide of this famous report were sold in the Netherlands) and the

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concept of sustainable development propagated by the Brundtland Commission at the end of 1980s. The latter concept was promptly integrated into a very influential report on the Dutch environment (Langeweg, 1988).

However, when implementing core EU environmental directives, the Dutch built up an increasingly problematic track record. The Dutch encountered problems with the implementation of Natura 2000, the Nitrates Directive and the Air Quality Directives, and have difficulties to live up to new expectations in water quality and renewable energy. When we delve into the formation processes or ‘uploading’ of environmental policies and their implementation or ‘downloading’ (Börzel, 2002), it looks as if the Netherlands has indeed two different faces. This is what we would like to further investigate. What pattern of behaviour do we find when looking more closely to the formation and implementation of different EU directives? Is there a discrepancy between both policy stages? The time dimension could be an important factor in this analysis, as discrepancies as well as responses to such discrepancies may develop over time. Therefore we include in our analysis the development of these faces over the years and reflect on the Netherlands’ long term ambitions in environmental policy.

Securing a broad view on EU environmental policy, four major domains were selected: nature conservation (Natura 2000, i.e. the Birds and Habitats Directives), agricultural pollution (Nitrates Directive), air quality (Air Quality Directives) and water quality (Water Framework Directive). We scrutinised the Dutch role in the formation of these directives to understand the country’s external face, and we investigated the implementation to get a good impression of the Netherlands’ internal face. In addition, we assessed what types of leadership the Netherlands were practising. We further explain this in Sections 2 (Theory) and 3 (Methods). Section 4 briefly sketches the background of Dutch environmental policy, followed by an analysis of the four selected domains. Section 5 compares the cases and provides conclusions.

## 2. Theory

There are different reasons why member states show ambition in environmental policy. On the one hand, states may introduce stricter or more demanding policies mainly for internal reasons, e.g. with a view to improving the health of the population or the quality of life within their territory. In this case, attracting followers is not the primary aim, although others may nevertheless choose to follow the example (see below). Building on Liefferink and Wurzel (2017), we define states which are ‘ahead of the troops’ without being particularly interested in attracting followers as *pioneers*. The classical example is the Danish ban on metal beverage containers, introduced in 1982 for purely domestic purposes, but unexpectedly having a considerable impact on EU policy (Liefferink and Andersen 1998: 257). On the other hand, states may actively seek to lead the way and to push others, e.g. other states, the EU or international organisations, to adopt more ambitious policies. One can think of Germany in the 1980s in relation to acidification or, more recently, the UK and Denmark in climate policy (Rayner and Jordan, 2016). In this case, states can be characterised as genuine *leaders*. Table 1 systematically presents the four possible combinations of low vs. high *internal* ambitions and low vs. high *external* ambitions.

The combination of high internal and low external ambitions (field b) leads to the position of an ideal-typical *pioneer* as described above. The bottom row of the figure depicts the two possible cases of high external ambitions and can thus be associated with *leadership*. High external ambitions combined with high internal ambitions turn a state into a *pusher* (field d). However, efforts to push others can also go hand in hand with low internal ambitions, which results in little more than *symbolic leadership* (field c). The matrix is completed by the position of a *laggard* (field a), which is characterised by low internal and low external ambitions.

Within the *pusher* category (field d) a further sub-division needs to be made. A *constructive pusher* pursues its internal ambitions

**Table 1**

Ambitions and positions of states in domestic and EU/international environmental policy (adapted from: Liefferink and Wurzel 2016).

External ‘face’	Internal ‘face’	
	Low internal environmental ambitions	High internal environmental ambitions
Low external environmental ambitions	(a) Laggard	(b) Pioneer
High external environmental ambitions	(c) Symbolic leader	(d) Pusher – constructive – conditional

irrespective of its success in attracting followers. It often presents its domestic policies as examples to others. A *conditional pusher* acts more cautiously. It will actually adopt its ambitious internal policies only if other states take similar measures.

It is important to stress that the positions in Table 1 present ideal types. In the actual policies of countries, various shades between the positions may be expressed. In this paper, we will use this heuristic model for ‘mapping out’ the general pattern as well as the shifts in the Dutch position over time. Another necessary remark relates to the fact that member states may choose to go beyond the requirements of a directive (so-called ‘gold-plating’) for domestic reasons. This does not necessarily mean that the country is a leader across the board. Even laggards may choose to do so on specific aspects of the directive for specific, often legal reasons (Squintani, 2013).

In order to scrutinise the roles played by leaders and pioneers, it is useful to explore the different ways in which they exert leadership/pioneership. Building particularly on Young (1991), Wurzel and Connelly (2011) and Liefferink and Wurzel (2017), we distinguish four types of leadership:

- Structural leadership is often associated with military power (Nye, 2008), but may also involve economic strength or a state’s relative contribution to a particular environmental problem (e.g. China in the case of carbon dioxide emissions).
- Cognitive leadership refers to defining or redefining ideas and concept, cause-effect relations and possible solutions by providing scientific knowledge or practical experience (cf. Haverland and Liefferink, 2012).
- Entrepreneurial leadership involves the use of diplomatic and negotiating skills with a view to brokering compromises and agreement (Young, 1991).
- Exemplary leadership (or leadership by example) refers to setting examples to others. In the case of a pioneer, this may happen largely unintentionally. In the case of a constructive pusher, domestic policies are intentionally put forward as models to be followed by others.

The different types of leadership may be combined. A state can for instance invest in coalition-building around a particular issue (entrepreneurial leadership), support these efforts by providing scientific expertise (cognitive leadership) and at the same time set an example to others (exemplary leadership). The mix of types of leadership employed by a state may vary across issues and evolve over time.

Our approach complements other perspectives and approaches to EU policy implementation. First, EU compliance theories often focus on legal implementation (transposition) and not on practical implementation (Treib, 2014). Second, these theories very often stop at the initial phases of compliance and do not have a long term perspective to domestic implementation (Liefferink et al., 2011). With our approach we intend to ‘map’ changes in one country’s implementation behaviour across different domains in order to detect possible patterns.

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