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Timely climate proposals. Discourse networks and (dis)continuity in European policies

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ABSTRACT
How do discursive fields influence support for climate policies? The European Green Deal (EGD) has gained media attention in part because it was presented as a cross-sectorial strategy aiming to 'transform the European economy'. Our analysis focuses on two specific policy proposals of the EGD: the carbon border adjustment mechanism and the reform for a greener Common Agricultural Policy. By comparing their discourse network structure, we aim to understand policy (dis)continuity introduced with the EGD. We use an original longitudinal dataset and discourse network analysis to map framing dynamics over time and understand how particular frames can gather support in policy networks. Our study shows that two elements favor policy change, namely the resonance of new frames with the discursive field and the presence of brokers connecting previously disconnected actors or coalitions. This paper is relevant for scholars interested in the discursive layer of policy networks as well as (dis)continuity in policy debates.

Introduction

Introducing new policies to address complex and urgent problems, such as climate change, can be challenging due to various factors, including institutional constraints, risk aversion, and path dependency. Nevertheless, the European Union (EU) has launched the European Green Deal (EGD) to reflect its new climate ambition, with a set of policy proposals to 'transform its economy and society to put it on a more sustainable path' (Commission, 2019). While some of the EGD's policy proposals represent a significant departure from past practices, others continue with 'business as usual' approaches.

Scholars have documented how institutional changes cannot be separated from ideational elements: 'as long as institutional changes are not accompanied by a change in policy ideas, environmentally oriented policies will remain unstable and their effectiveness limited' (Alons, 2017, p. 1618). This paper examines the conditions that favor policy change in the context of the EU's climate policies, specifically by exploring the role of discursive fields. We contend that framing and advocacy coalitions are crucial for policy change but cannot be studied in isolation from the broader discursive field within which they operate.

To account for policy change and why some discourses are better received than others, the literature has discussed the importance of *framing* and the role of advocacy coalitions (Benford & Snow, 2000; Boräng & Naurin, 2015; De Bruycker, 2017; Dudley & Richardson, 1999; Lindstedt, 2018; Sabatier, 1998) that support certain frames over others. However, frames are often studied in isolation, with little spatial or longitudinal analysis of the *process* of framing itself. Yet, policy debates are more accurately described as policy *networks* (Leifeld, 2018, 2020; van Hulst & Yanow, 2016). These policy networks are made of many actors, interacting through the discourses they produce on a given issue. This paper contends that networks of discourses are the reflections of a discursive field that can either enable or constrain the ability of political institutions, such as the European Union, to adopt new policy tools. It belongs to an emerging literature focusing on the discursive layer of political networks (Kukkonen & Ylä-Anttila, 2020; Swarnakar et al., 2022; Wagner & Payne, 2017).

We track the evolution of discourse by using an original longitudinal dataset and discursive network analysis. We focus on two different cases with contrasting outcomes. First, we examine how the carbon border adjustment mechanism (CBAM), which initially faced significant opposition, became part of the institutional discourse. Second, we analyze the agricultural sector's resistance to change and how the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy discarded some of the most innovative environmental proposals. While we do not claim that ideational factors determine policy outcomes, we argue that discourse networks reflect the discursive field and that their structure and properties play a crucial role in enabling or constraining policy change. By contrasting our two cases and drawing on the resonance of frames with the discursive field, we demonstrate how specific network properties can shed light on the presence or absence of specific proposals in the EGD.

We start by contrasting our two cases and discussing common explanations for policy continuity and change. Noting that these explanations are insufficient to explain the differences between our two cases, we turn our attention to the network dimension of political debates. We develop an alternative explanation based on frames' resonance with the discursive field and discourse networks. After presenting our method combining

discourse and network analysis, we outline the state of the discursive field in each of our two debates, highlighting contested frames and tracking the support received by new frames. Our findings suggest that well-positioned actors and well-calibrated policy proposals that match the discursive field tend to foster the emergence and rallying around new frames and facilitate policy discontinuity.

Policy (dis)continuity in the European Green Deal: same context, different outcomes

In 2019, the European Commission (EC) announced the European Green Deal (EGD), an ambitious cross-sectoral strategy aiming to 'transform the European economy' and meet the targets set by the European Union (EU) under the Paris Agreement. The EC aims to integrate climate policies with traditional priorities of European governance. However, while some policy proposals are unprecedented, others seem to pursue 'business as usual'. Therefore, the proposals contained in the EGD range along a continuum that varies from drastic policy change to continuity. To understand this variation, we examine two policy debates: international competitiveness and climate policy in the EU and the inclusion of climate considerations in the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).

These cases allow us to variate our sample from low to high values on the degree of policy (dis)continuity (Seawright & Gerring, 2008).

> Only by juxtaposing cases with different outcomes can we gain a better under-standing of how contextual factors may impede or enable entrepreneurs to influence policy and governance. Given the importance of mitigating and adapting to climate change, such knowledge is crucial today. (Boasson & Huitema, 2017, pp. 9–10).

These policy debates led to different outcomes in the EGD: on the one hand, the proposal to implement a carbon border adjustment mechanism (CBAM) is a novel policy solution in the debate between climate and competitiveness. A border adjustment is a policy that aims to level the playing field between taxed domestic products and untaxed foreign goods to avoid competitive-ness issues because of domestic taxation policies (Tamiotti et al., 2009). Therefore, the main rationale for implementing this type of policy tool is to maintain competitiveness and limit so-called 'carbon leakage', which happens when carbon-intensive industries move their production to states with less stringent carbon policies (Tamiotti et al., 2009, p. 100). After years of debates and failed initiatives,[1] the EGD is the EU's first concrete attempt to implement this measure. The CBAM will reflect the carbon price set by the EU Emission trading system (ETS) to account for the 'price on the carbon emitted during the production of carbon-intensive goods that are

entering the EU' (Directorate-General for Taxation and Customs Union, 2023). It has been be provisionally applied since October 2023, but importers will have to purchase 'CBAM certificates' only from January 1st 2026, for selected sectors (Directorate-General for Taxation and Customs Union, 2023). The CBAM is unprecedented since no state has implemented it before, despite it being discussed by various governments.

On the other hand, the EGD proposed a 'green' reform of the CAP that builds on already existing mechanisms and an 'examination of the draft national strategic plans [for agriculture], with reference to the ambitions of the European Green Deal and the Farm to Fork Strategy' (Commission, 2019). Rather than setting a target or binding policies for the agricultural sector, the Commission explicitly mentions a desire to 'shift the focus from compliance to performance' (Commission, 2019). The reform does not set emission reduction targets or plan significant reductions of non-CO2 emissions (such as methane from livestock and nitrous oxide from fertilisers and manure management).[2] As discussed below, this reform reflects political continuity rather than change since it is in line with previous reforms.

The two debates are characterised by their institutional similarity. In both cases, trilogues[3] are required between the European Commission, the Council of the European Union, and the European Parliament. Both mobilise well established economic actors, have significant economic importance in the EU, are traditional areas of policy for the EU, and impact almost all EU member states. International competitiveness and agriculture are also quite technical issues, mobilise various types of experts and raise the question of the further integration of climate change considerations in 'traditional sectors' of the European economy. Moreover, both the CAP and the ETS function through periodical reforms that, over time, increased their climate ambition and constitute windows of opportunity for actors to advocate for changes.[4]

Powerful interest groups, such as industries, farmers, and agribusinesses, have high stakes in the trade and agricultural sectors. Their lobbying efforts are well documented (Rac et al., 2020). However, the presence of interest groups is therefore insufficient to explain the variation in outcomes. Both debates have powerful frames challenging the status quo. Several environmental NGOs, supported by the European Green Party, advocated for reducing subsidies to intensive agriculture or more binding measures (WWF et al., 2021). The explanation does not lie in a lack of policy entrepreneurs advocating for a green overhaul of the CAP or the absence of policy alternatives.

The interest of contrasting our cases is understanding why a novel policy proposal such as CBAM gains acceptance in European policy networks while emission reduction policies under the CAP do not acquire the same level of support.

Framing in context: discursive fields and policy networks

Political debates have both a material and an ideational component. To understand how new policy proposals gain support in policy debates, our argument highlights the networked structure of a policy debate, how actors interact with the discursive field, and how policy-makers align their proposals to the discursive field.

Actors participate and interact in policy debates through their discourses: 'discourse is the space where human beings make sense of the material world, where they attach meaning to the world and where representations of the world become manifest' (Holzscheiter, 2014, p. 144). As policymaking involves deliberation, disagreement, and argumentation, discursive interactions are central elements of that process and provide much information (Fairclough, 2013). Through their discursive interactions, actors reflect on the way they perceive a problem, a solution, and their preferences toward certain policy outcomes. They also seek to influence, learn, and teach each other (Leifeld, 2018). This communicative process is called 'framing', where political actors 'promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described' (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Framing is

> a way of selecting, organizing, interpreting, and making sense of a complex reality to provide guideposts for knowing, analyzing, persuading, and acting. A frame is a perspective from which an amorphous, ill-defined, problematic situation can be made sense of and acted on. (Rein & Schön, 1993, p. 146)

Developing an intersubjective and situated understanding of framing (van Hulst & Yanow, 2016, p. 96), scholars have paid attention to how problem definition – among other factors – constrains policy solutions (Rein & Schön, 1993; Schön, 1993). As a result, policy change has often been associated with the successful reframing efforts of advocacy coalitions. The literature has suggested typologies to characterise frames and their functions (Benford & Snow, 2000; Snow et al., 2014; Wonka, 2022) and documented the mechanisms that impact the production of frames and frame strategies. It has, however often neglected the contextual aspects of framing, particularly, 'the discursive contexts in which those frames are embedded and out of which they have evolved' (Snow, 2008, p. 4).

In contrast, this paper builds on the premise that framing contests occur in complex institutional environments (Eising et al., 2015; Snow, 2008; Wallaschek, 2020). Indeed, 'frames develop through highly situated interactional processes of communication' and cannot be studied outside of a particular (inter)action context (van Hulst & Yanow, 2016, p. 95). This 'context in which discourse and meaning-making processes, such as framing and narration, are generally embedded' has been described as a discursive field.

Discursive fields are not fixed in time, they can emerge, evolve and shift (Snow, 2008, 2022). A discursive field can arise in response to a specific event or issue and is often related to a specific debate. Therefore, discursive fields are limited by boundaries that reflect a specific debate and its framing. A discursive field 'establishes the limits of discussion and defines the range of problems that can be addressed' (Wuthnow 1989, 555 quoted in Snow, 2022). The reception and diffusion of a novel diagnostic or prognostic frame[5] in a political debate should be influenced by the discursive field and its evolution over time. According to Alons, 'domain-specific justificatory discourses' are necessary to successfully reframe a debate towards more environmental terms (Alons, 2017, p. 1619). Some studies have shown that frames that resonate more with the discursive field are more likely to be successfully deployed by discourse coalitions (Ferree, 2003; Schotel, 2023). Some frames can also be perceived as more threatening than others, and 'which frames are mainstream and which are marginalized depends on the way they align with the broader discursive field' (Schotel, 2023, p. 13).

By focusing on the evolution of discursive fields, our analysis concentrates on the *context* in which framing takes place rather than on the content of the frames themselves. This is particularly relevant because there have been few systematic mappings of how individual-level framing effects spill over to the macro level of policy debates (De Bruycker, 2017). Lindstedt (Lindstedt, 2018, p. 3) remarks that 'while scholars routinely speak to the emergent and contingent character of frames and framing, methodological limitations have led many to study these constructs as though they are products that exist independently of their contexts and circumstances'. To bridge the gap between levels of analysis and between agency and structure in framing analysis, network analysis offers an interesting approach:

> Studying the process of framing only at the individual level has little chance of elucidating collective-level changes in framing. At the same time, researchers focusing only on aggregate level framing will be unable to understand the forces that led to the collective frame without recognizing the micro-level forces that are at play. (Baumgartner & Mahoney, 2008, p. 436)

We conceptualise political debates as networks of actors connected by their ideas. By visualising discourse networks, we aim to understand how the structural characteristics of a discursive field can promote or hinder support for novel policies in the European Union. This allows us to understand how the context (the discursive field) and discourse interactions lead to collective-level changes that can foster policy change. In these networks, we track how actors respond to new diagnostic and prognostic frames by identifying the different conceptual elements that compose selected frames and how they vary across time and actors.

We also anticipate that how actors and frames are connected will affect their ability to influence the debate. Influence in a network can be related to the type of connections that actors share, and the relative centrality of actors in a policy network (Patty & Penn, 2018). The concept of a broker is interesting in this regard. A broker is a node that links different communities together, and they are important in network theory for explaining influence and the diffusion of information (Patty & Penn, 2018, p. 151). Brokers may facilitate or impede the spread of novel frames in a policy network (Padula, 2008). Collaborative brokerage can facilitate the emergence of novel frames as well as limit their diffusion or use by other actors in a network (Fleming et al., 2007). We expect that the presence of brokers bridging the gap between distinct discourse coalitions will facilitate the reception of specific policy frames. Alternatively, these actors could strategically exploit the discursive field and prevent the diffusion of novel frames if they support a status-quo coalition.

Mapping the discursive field in policy networks: a discourse network analysis (DNA)

To analyze networks of actors and ideas, we employ discourse network analysis (DNA), which combines discourse analysis and network analysis. This method involves a manual coding process and enables visualisations and quantitative analysis of discourse networks.

Data collection

We collected data from media articles, which provide a useful source for identifying actors' discourse and have been used in previous DNA studies (Hurka & Nebel, 2013; Leifeld et al., 2022; Wallaschek, 2020). Media statements are particularly relevant to DNA as they reflect attempts by state and non-state actors to express ideas, problems, solutions or persuade audiences about policy issues. Therefore, the nature of these statements makes them good elements to assess the shared understanding of the actors as well as the discursive field (for an example, see D. A. Snow et al., 2007). To limit a possible media bias, we applied the 'quality press' criterion (Leifeld, 2016, p. 130 , referring to Vogt 2009) and identified three press agencies: Agence France Press (English), Associated Press International, and Agence Europe. These agencies meet the 'quality press' criterion as they are not ideologically oriented and can be considered 'centrist' press agencies. Moreover, they offer a good representation of discourse from the EU and its institutions. In our analysis, we only access European actors' discourse in the public sphere and their attempts to convince the public about the appropriateness of specific policies. We acknowledge that our analysis is necessarily limited to actors'

communicative discourse (Schmidt, 2008). We do not pretend to analyze the EU's international coordinative discourse.

Using Nexis Lexis, we inductively and deductively identified a list of search strings to target relevant articles in the two debates. To analyze discursive interactions specifically related to the EGD, we focused on the period following the Paris Agreement (June 2015 – May 2020).[6] In our analyses, we paid particular attention to two periods: the year before the EGD (June 2018-May 2019) and after the Commission's proposal of the European Green Deal (June 2019 – May 2020). The Paris Agreement signals increased attention to European climate leadership. We end our analysis in May 2020, since the European Green Deal has already been introduced, debates have started to crystallise, and this is before the discussion has shifted because of the coronavirus pandemic. As shown in Table 1 below, there is a discrepancy between the number of statements and actors coded for each debate. These disparities reflect the difference in the number of articles that were identified. However, we are confident that our selected sources allowed us to identify the main frames used in the two debates. Since our focus is on the structure of the networks and the discourses shared by the actors, rather than the number of interactions, this difference does not prevent us from comparing our cases.

Coding process

We used the DNA software to manually code each selected article. In line with the DNA method, we identified and coded (1) the actor that made the statement, (2) its organisation, (3) the date of the statement, (4) the idea expressed by this statement ('claim') and (5) a dummy variable to signal 'agreement' or 'disagreement' with the idea. We aggregated ideas expressed by actors in their statements into 'claims', which represent justifications or narratives developed by actors, and may pertain to a specific understanding of a policy problem or solution (see Figure 1).

Our coding scheme was first developed deductively, drawing insights from the literature to identify a list of 'claims' that actors were likely to refer to and arguments used in previous iterations of our debates or likely to be used in the context of the EGD. Then, we added claims inductively during coding whenever the idea expressed by an actor was relevant but did not correspond to any listed claim. The coding scheme evolved to reflect accurately

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the two cases (June 2015–May 2020).

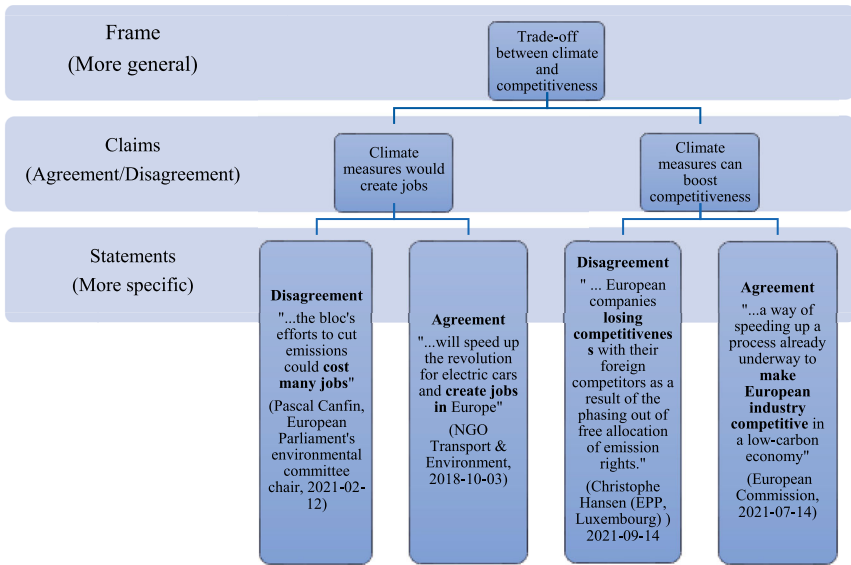|	CBAM	CAP
Number of articles (excluding false positives)	160	342
Number of statements coded	868	5004
Number of organisations coded	147	142

Figure 1. Coding process and aggregation strategy: from specific statements to general frames.

the diversity of frames and discourses in our empirical cases. Coders were supplied with a codebook that provided a precise definition for each claim and examples of 'agreement' or 'disagreement' with the claim. We also specified the boundaries of our debates and what should not be coded. As the concept of a border adjustment directly stems from the idea of protecting competitiveness, we did not limit the coding to frames discussing the CBAM. Other policy proposals and frames discussing climate mitigation and competitiveness were coded to gain a broader understanding of the origin of the debate and competing frames. In addition, other considerations – such as the impact of CBAM on multilateral negotiations or its compliance with trade law – were also included in the scope of claims coded. For the debate around the reform of the CAP, we excluded claims about adaptation in the agricultural sector because we wanted to focus on climate change mitigation. And for the debate around the CBAM, we focused on the discussions related to international competitiveness and climate mitigation.

Because framing refers to a higher level of ideas and perceptions, we aggregated claims that express similar frames together. For example, climate and competitiveness issues have sometimes been framed as a 'trade-off', meaning they are presented as conflicting policies (Kuik & Hofkes, 2010). Actors may object to this diagnostic frame and argue that '[a particular climate measure] creates jobs', but they still engage with this frame to emphasise the synergy that can exist between climate and competitiveness. Therefore, we analyze statements coded in agreement or in

disagreement with claims such as 'climate measures would create jobs' or 'climate measures can boost competitiveness' as *instances of contestation* over the same 'trade-off' frame (see Figure 1 for an example).

Using this database, we map the *discursive field* and its evolution over time and observe how actors *interact* in the debate through their discourse. We use the Visone software to visualise discourse networks and discourse coalitions and the rDNA package developed by Leifeld (2013, 2020) to quantitatively analyze the structure of these networks (clustering and centrality measures).

The Commission's CBAM proposal: a timely answer to a well-defined problem

After the Paris Agreement, the EU aimed to meet most emissions reduction targets by strengthening the emission trading system (ETS). For example, in October 2015, Carole Dieschbourg, president of the Environment Council, expressed that

> EU environment ministers have once again expressed their full support for the EU emissions trading scheme (ETS) as a key instrument in the fight against climate change [and would engage in a] long-term revision of the ETS to increase its effectiveness. (Agence Europe, 2015a)

Subsequently, the reform of the EU ETS was debated in several EU institutions. However, member states were divided on whether to strengthen climate commitments by limiting the allowance of free emission quotas for energy-intensive industries exposed to trade or to maintain the status quo to protect European businesses' competitiveness. This tension was also linked to international developments. Some actors felt that the Paris Agreement did not provide sufficient emissions reduction commitments for other countries, putting the EU at risk of competitiveness impact and carbon leakage if it pursued an ambitious climate mitigation plan. For example, The Visegrad Group, comprising Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, wanted to wait for 'the outcome of COP 21 to see whether they guarantee a level playing field for all and to build this outcome into the ETS reform' (Agence Europe, 2015a). The perceived negative impact of the EU's high climate ambition increased when Donald Trump announced in May 2017 that the United States would no longer be part of the agreement. Therefore, from June 2017 to May 2018, the discursive field was monopolised by framing related to the fairness of the Paris Agreement and, to a lesser extent, framing related to a perceived 'trade-off' between climate policies and international competitiveness (Blair, 2017, p. 764).

The 'trade-off' framing increased in importance and became dominant in the discursive field the year before the introduction of the Green Deal, as

shown in Figure 2 below. These concerns were not solely expressed by member states and were not only related to the ETS (cf. Figure 3). For example, in October 2018, during the trilogue negotiations for new CO_2 targets for automakers, the European auto industry association claimed that the proposal 'risks harming auto workers and their companies' competitiveness' (Associated Press International, 2018). Meanwhile, the European Commission argued that this measure would result in operators saving on fuel and 'would also create 120,000 jobs by 2030, save 170 million tonnes of imported oil and create the conditions for Europe to attract investment' (Associated Press International, 2018). Some environmental non-governmental organisations (ENGOs), like Transport & Environment, also reacted to this framing but argued that these types of targets 'will speed up the revolution for electric cars and create jobs in Europe' (Agence Europe, 2018). Our data reveal this fragmented discursive field. Figure 2 shows the number of statements coded for each claim present in the discursive field between June 2018 and May 2019, with a threshold of two statements.

We analyzed actor congruence networks, where nodes represent organisations and edges reflect their shared ideas on specific claims. Actor type is indicated by node colour and node size reflects the frequency of their interventions. We used clustering analysis based on the Girvan Newman algorithm to identify discourse coalitions (shown in shades of blue in the networks). To control for the repeated presence of the same statement in multiple media or articles, congruence networks were normalised by average activity, and duplicate statements in the same article were excluded. Therefore, even if the three press agencies reported the same statement from the same actor, it is not counted as three different statements.

Figure 3 illustrates how actors were linked through their support for similar claims. The coalition in the center is formed of business representatives and right-wing European parties who were concerned about the impact of climate targets on EU competitiveness, business, and jobs. The top coalition
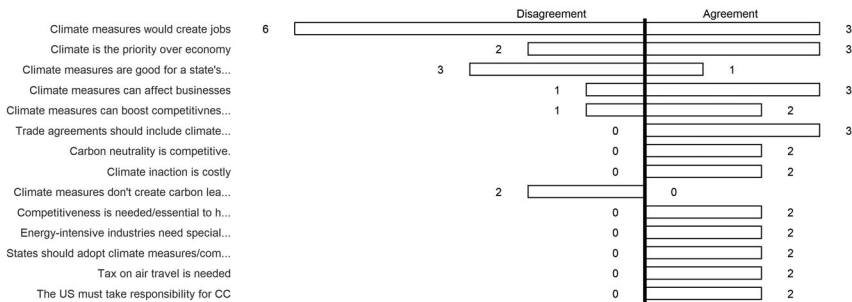

Figure 2. Most discussed elements (claims coded more than once) from June 2018 to May 2019.
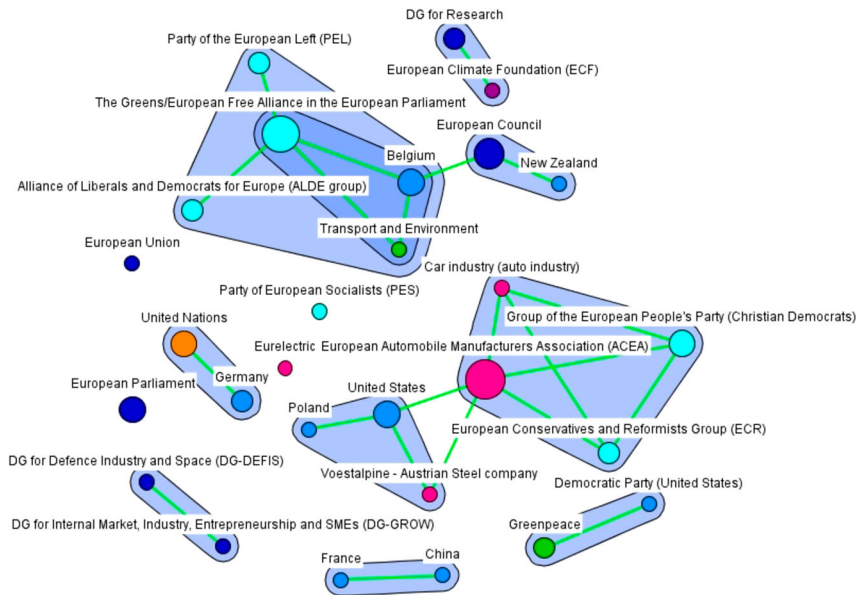
Figure 3. Network of organisations, Girvan Newman modularity clustering, node area by frequency, from June 2018 to May 2019.

supported frames emphasising the importance of high climate ambition and its positive economic impact.

Between June 2018 and May 2019, the discursive field was characterised by high division and limited frames. While the number of actors involved was limited, they were quite diverse. Some of the disconnected smaller coalitions were discussing less popular claims in relation to the trade-off frame. For example, DG for Defence Industry and Space and DG for Research supported the claim that climate measures could boost technology development, and the United Nations and Germany supported the claim that climate inaction is costly. Few actors were discussing internationally related frames. For example, China and France were discussing the idea that states should adopt climate measures/commitments negotiated under a multilateral regime.

This discursive field perfectly set the stage for the European Commission to propose a CBAM, which addresses concerns around carbon leakage, loss of jobs and competitiveness while increasing EU climate ambition and replacing free emission quotas. The CBAM proposal met the demands of all the European actors in the discursive field at the time. This assessment is supported by the discourse network for June 2019 to May 2020, which includes the presentation of the Green Deal (Figure 4).

The network above illustrates the importance of the European Commission for this period. The European Commission acts as a broker between different actors and coalitions, as this network and its betweenness centrality
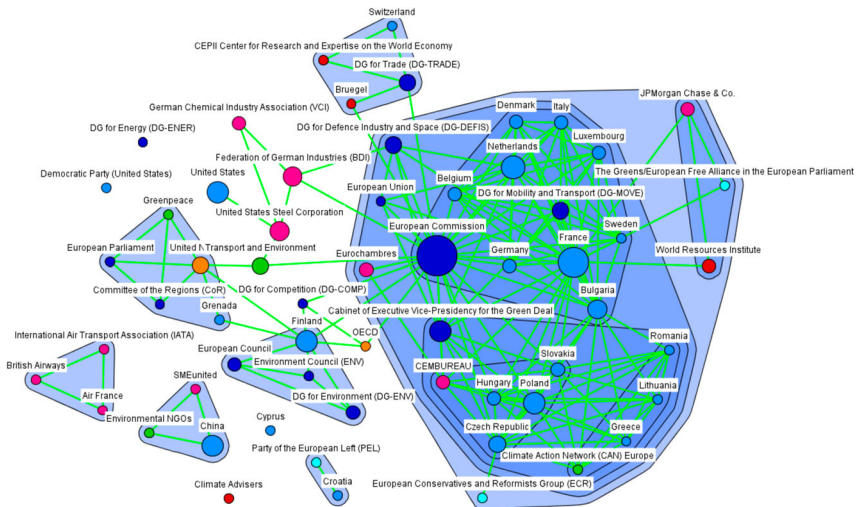
Figure 4. Network of organisations, Girvan Newman modularity clustering, node area by frequency, from June 2019 to May 2020.

show (see Online Appendix A). The centrality measures were calculated to identify the most central nodes and the presence of brokers.[7] While the EC was part of a coalition supportive of increased climate ambition, it also maintained links with member states like Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary, which were concerned about the impact of climate policies on competitiveness. In addition, the EC managed to engage with business representatives and ENGOs, despite the latter being less numerous. Different DGs were also part of the network and seemed present in various sub-coalitions. The CBAM proposal bridged coalitions supporting higher climate ambition with those advocating for the protection of the EU economy and competitiveness in the main coalition. For instance, in November 2020, the German minister of economy and energy, Peter Altmaier, emphasised 'the importance of a carbon border adjustment mechanism at the EU's borders to prevent European industry from facing unfair competition from non-Member States' (Agence Europe, 2020c). The European cement industry association, CEMBUR-EAU, also supported 'the idea of a carbon border mechanism as an opportunity to create a level playing field for carbon, provided certain principles are respected' (Agence Europe, 2020b). Moreover, France and the Visegrad Group 'expressed support for measures to penalise products imported into the EU with a higher carbon content than European products' (Agence Europe, 2019b).

The CBAM case illustrates how this policy proposal responded to diagnostic frames expressed in the previous year regarding the competitiveness and climate debate in the EU. Because this debate was framed as a 'trade-off',

implementing a tax at the EU border for imported products was an appropriate solution to address this framing and limit the negative impact perceived by businesses. Indeed, it allows the EU to protect the competitiveness of certain sectors while decreasing the allowance of free emission quotas in the EU-ETS (Directorate-General for Taxation and Customs Union, 2023). This CBAM's brokering position as a tool to increase climate ambition and protect EU competitiveness is demonstrated by Ursula von der Leyen's statement in October 2019 where she stressed

> to the leaders of the Twenty-Eight the importance of the EU as a front-runner in the transition to climate neutrality, a European Green Deal and a balance between the fight against climate change, a competitive European industry and energy supply. She also mentioned the carbon tax at the borders for a level playing field. (Agence Europe, 2019a).

'Greening the CAP': how the controversy over the responsibility of the agricultural sector prevented substantial policy change

The European Union's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has been in effect since 1962. Reforming the CAP is not a trivial matter since the budget allocated to the CAP is estimated at 387 billion euros for 2021–2027. Over the years, several reforms have attempted to integrate environmental and climate considerations into the policy. In 1992, the introduction of Agri-Environment Schemes aimed to incentivize farmers to voluntarily commit to preserving the environment. The Fischler reform in 2005 brought in the concept of 'cross-compliance', which required farmers to adhere to environmental protection and Good Agricultural and Environment Condition (GAEC) obligations; otherwise, they risked a reduction in payment. In 2013, the Ciolos reform introduced a green scheme accounting for 30% of Pillar I funding, and requirements such as crop diversification and Ecological Focus Areas. The articulation of agricultural issues, in particular, the reform of the CAP, with environmental considerations is not a new element as such[8] and has been discussed in the literature (Alons, 2017; Coleman, 1998; Daugbjerg & Feindt, 2017; Dupraz & Guyomard, 2019; Greer, 2017; Himics et al., 2020; Kay, 2003; Lynggaard, 2007; Zwaan et al., 2022). However, the literature agrees that successive reforms of the CAP have not drastically reduced agricultural emissions in the European Union. In 2018, agricultural emissions accounted for 10.1% of total EU emissions (Eurostat 2021).

The EGD proposal highlighted the existing challenge of integrating climate considerations into the agricultural sector. The CAP reform was introduced before the EGD. It builds on existing mechanisms, such as conditionality and voluntary eco-scheme measures. Still, Member states are now required to propose their own national Strategic Plans that address climate mitigation and demonstrate a higher level of ambition. A new green

architecture based on enhanced conditionality is introduced.[9] However, food production and income support remain the CAP's main priorities, as evidenced by the budget allocated to Pillar I.[10] The reform faced criticism for lacking quantified objectives at the EU level: although the EGD includes specific targets for chemical pesticides or nutrient losses, the agricultural sector has no corresponding climate indicator (European Commission, 2020). The reform, adopted in November 2021, provoked strong tensions between environmentalists, farmers, and the agricultural industry (Rac et al., 2020).

However, our analysis of discursive networks since 2015 reveals that there were already discussions about policy proposals that departed from current policies and previous reforms of the CAP. Specifically, some actors were advocating for (1) an emission reduction target in the agricultural sector and highlighting the (2) responsibility of livestock and chemical fertilisers for their emissions. These frames were highly central and polarising in the network between June 2015 and May 2016 (see Online Appendix B). Business actors such as COPA-COGECA, representing the farming industry, frequently opposed this problematisation and these solutions (Agence Europe, 2015b). Years later, the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) called for: 'a 30% reduction compared with 2017 in greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture in the Member States' (Agence Europe, 2019c). The European Court of Auditors even 'invite[d] the Member States to establish a target for reducing greenhouse gas emissions from their agricultural sector' (ECA, 2021).

However, the CAP reform adopted in November 2021 did not include any climate change targets for agriculture, nor did the performance monitoring and evaluation framework (PMEF) adopted in December 2021 (Fortuna & Foote, 2021a, 2021b).

Our analysis of actor congruence networks reveals that between the onset of the CAP debate and the presentation of the EGD, the debate became increasingly polarised. Rather than seeing the creation of bridges between coalitions as the debate progresses, the figures below show how a 'segregated' network in 2018–2019 (Figure 5) gives way to a more polarised network in 2019–2020 (Figure 6). In a segregated network, discourse coalitions 'talk past each other and follow different policy paradigms, without antagonism ("segregation")' (Leifeld, 2020, p. 181). In contrast, the polarised discourse network in the later period is structured by two discourse coalitions disagreeing on important aspects of the CAP debate.

Figure 5 illustrates a 'segregated' network with six discourse coalitions (depicted as blue shapes) shaping the debate. These coalitions exhibit distinct focuses on climate mitigation and do not engage with each other. For instance, the largest discourse coalition comprising various European parties and institutions unanimously supports making the CAP greener.
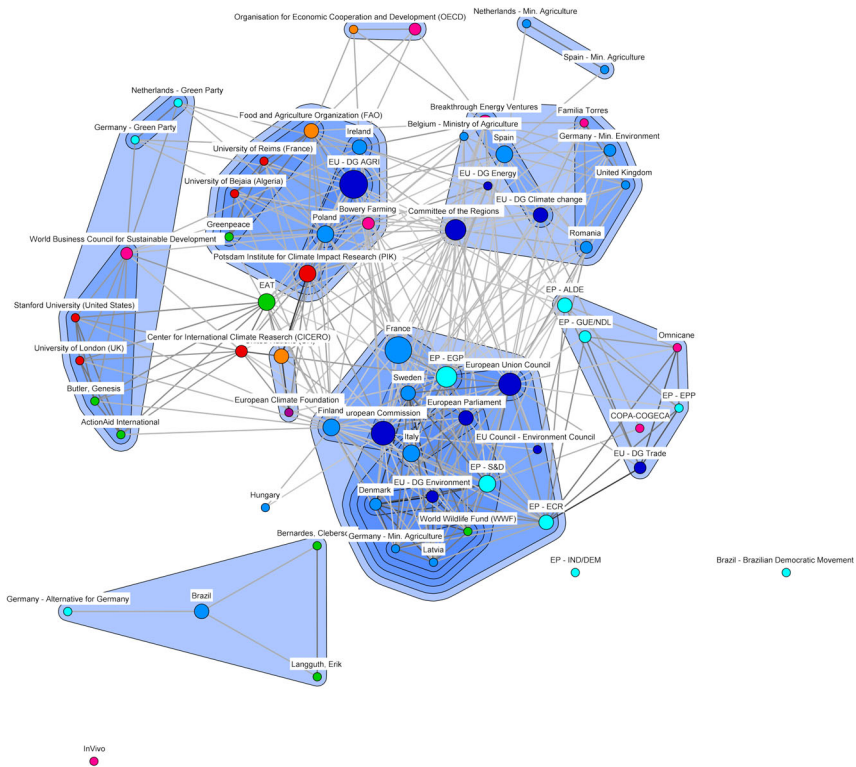
Figure 5. Network of organisations, Girvan Newman modularity clustering, node area by frequency, threshold: edge weights ≥0.2, from June 2018 to May 2019.

This stance faced little opposition in European debates from 2015 to 2020 (see Appendices, Figures 11–19). The second and third largest coalitions, located at the top, in the middle, and on the right in Figure 5, are connected respectively to endorsing emission targets and non-intensive farming practices, but few actors oppose these frames during the period (see. Online Appendix B, Figure 17).[11]

To understand why this debate became more polarised (see Figure 6), we analysed the corresponding affiliation network (Figure 7). Figure 7 shows both organisations (square nodes) and claims (circle nodes), and whether an actor agrees (green edge, consensual claims), disagrees (red edge, most debated claims), or avoids mentioning a claim.

The two discourse coalitions shown in Figure 6 disagree on how to conceive the problem. Diagnostic frames conceptualising agricultural emissions as an issue of 'responsibility'[12] are the most discussed but are highly contested (see the large red node on the right in Figure 7 and Appendix B, Figure 19). Figure 7 shows that ENGOs, DG-Environment, and the European Green Party support this frame (green edge) while Member states (Spain)
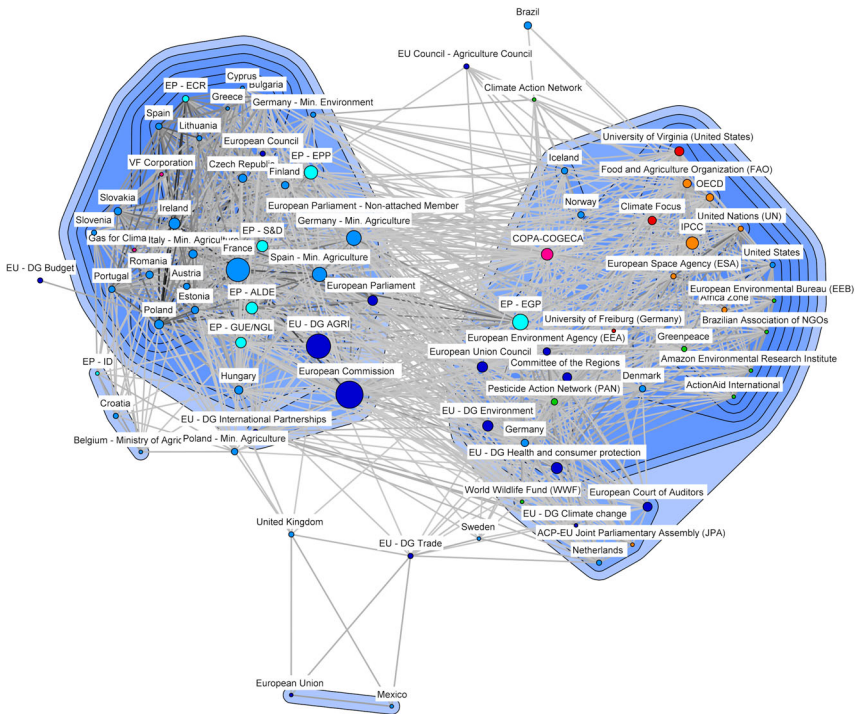
Figure 6. Network of organisations, Girvan Newman modularity clustering, node area by frequency, threshold: edge weights ≥0.15, from June 2019 to May 2020.

and the European People's Party oppose it (red edge). Consequently, the corresponding prognostic frames (setting an emission reduction target, aiming for carbon neutrality in the sector, see green node on the right side in Figure 7) remain marginal. They are only mobilised by a small coalition of ENGOs, civil society and the European Green Party. These frames seem to generate consensus, but it is because proponents of the status quo do not engage with these prognostic frames and propose other ways of framing problems and solutions in the debate.[13]

Moreover, another frame became central in the debate in 2019–2020: a coalition of EU Member States opposed cutting subsidies (green node at the top left of the network above). This frame becomes more salient in reaction to the discussion on the overall CAP budget:

> Wojciechowski [DG AGRI Commissioner] promised Luke Ming Flanagan (GUE/NGL, Ireland) that he would 'defend the agricultural budget' […] 20 EU agriculture ministers are calling for the agricultural budget to be maintained at the current level for the period 2021–2027. (Agence Europe, 2020a)

Indeed, the Agricultural Commissioner has also linked the success of the EGD to a budget increase in the agricultural sector. This suggests that

Figure 7. Salient frames in the debate on the reform of the CAP, organizations-claims affiliation network (2019–2020). Node area by frequency. For ease of interpretation, only the names of the most important nodes have been specified.

economic concerns are far from gone, even if expressed through other frames. For instance, the discourse of COPA-COGECA in the period 2018–2021 was notably characterised by the conviction that 'trade and economic development should remain a priority over environmental concerns' (see red node on the left in Figure 7), a firm opposition to any reduction of agricultural subsidies, and a rejection of the agricultural sector's responsibility.

Moreover, actors increasingly articulate a concern for their sovereignty in agricultural policy, reactivating old debates in the European Union about the appropriate degree of subsidiarity and whether legally binding targets are appropriate (see red node at the bottom in Figure 7). This tension between climate and agricultural priorities is reflected in the following statement made by the French Minister of Agriculture: 'The national strategic plans are not the declination of the "European Green Deal", but are the declination of the CAP […] The CAP should not contribute alone to the objectives of the 'European Green Deal' (Agence Europe, 2021).

In this institutional and normative context, the idea that Member States would have to specify how their strategic plans would contribute to the EU's Green Deal was particularly contentious and abandoned by the

Commission. Agricultural Commissioner Janusz Wojciechowski recalled that the Green Deal was not legally binding, asserting in a press conference that it was not likely that a plan would be refused if it did not align with the European Union's climate targets (Foote 2021). Although DG-AGRI holds a strategic position in the network and leads the CAP reform, it did not incorporate the diagnostic and prognostic frames proposed by ENGOs into its discourse.

Whereas in the case of CBAM, European institutions brokered a deal between the different discourse coalitions by appealing to their respective problematisation of the issue, DG-AGRI does not play this role in the debate about the climate impact of agriculture. ENGOs that argued for a more ambitious CAP, whose discourse was mostly taken up by the European Green Party in the Parliament, remain on the fringe of the debate on the climate impact of agriculture. The analysis of their discourse networks reveals that environmental actors failed to create a strong advocacy coalition able to broker an agreement and shape the discursive field.[14]

Discussion and conclusion

This paper examines the evolution of the debate surrounding two important policy areas of the European Green Deal: economic competitiveness and agriculture. We compared the underlying structure of discourse networks for two policy proposals included in the European Green Deal. Contrasting our two cases also permits evaluating our theoretical explanations in cases where policy change is apparent (CBAM) and where continuity prevails (CAP). We showed how both actors and structures shape the discursive field. Our study shows that two elements, namely the resonance of new frames with the discursive field and the presence of brokers connecting previously disconnected actors or coalitions, can favour policy change. In contrast, when the discursive field is highly polarised, policy discontinuity is unlikely.

Our cases corroborate our theoretical explanation that for the CBAM, the previous debates paved the way for the successful integration of this innovative policy into the European Green Deal. Indeed, the European Commission presented a policy proposal that alleviated fears of competitiveness loss while maintaining a level of climate action and leadership (Oberthür & Dupont, 2021). The way the discursive field was focused on specific diagnostic frames promoted by different actors (EU member states, European Parliament parties, and business groups) set the table for the CBAM. Because the CBAM proposal did not challenge other frames in the discursive field (primarily supporting climate ambition), it managed to bridge previously divided coalitions. Since part of the EC discourse is also linked to its willingness to increase other States' ambition[15], it will be interesting to follow future debates about initiatives like climate clubs.[16]

In the case of the CAP, the necessity that arose in 2019 to integrate this reform more clearly with the Green New Deal proposal exacerbated existing tensions around the responsibility of the agricultural sector (particularly livestock) in climate mitigation. In the absence of a consensus on the definition of the problem before the Commission's proposal, it was politically difficult for the European Commission to bridge the gap and support the binding emission reduction targets proposed by the environmental actors. The alternative was to 'shift the focus from compliance to performance', resort to flexibility, subsidiarity, and supporting Member States in achieving a 'fairer and greener CAP' (Fortuna & Foote, 2021b).

Moreover, the CBAM debate shows that institutional brokers developed a message that resonated with the discursive field. They were able to bridge the gap between previously opposed and disconnected coalitions. European institutions played that role in arbitrating the debate on climate and competitiveness but did not relay novel prognostic frames about the CAP reform. For some ENGOs, this reflects an 'acceptance of high emissions from agriculture', in direct contrast with the 'Farm to Fork' and biodiversity strategies of the EGD, which both set out ambitious targets for reducing nutrient loss and chemical fertiliser use (2021). This reflects the tensions that can occur between different DGs of the Commission and can limit climate ambition. This happened during the first attempt to discuss a CBAM in 2006.[17] Moreover, our conclusions echo current debates and confirm agricultural policy's difficulty in developing into a post-exceptionalist stage (Alons, 2017; Daugbjerg & Feindt, 2017; Greer, 2017; Zwaan et al., 2022).

This paper also contributes to an emerging literature that mixes qualitative and quantitative analysis to shed light on the framing process. Using discourse network analysis, we combined discourse analysis and (social) network analysis to study frames in context and over time. We also operationalised further the concept of 'discursive field' which is often mentioned in the literature on framing but rarely precisely described or mapped. Referring to the agent/structure debate, discourse network analysis allows us to document how discourses, in the plural form, shape the discourse on climate policies in Europe. In turn, we also showed that the discursive field constrains the trajectory of policy debates and, ultimately, the possibility of policy change. Although various factors contribute to policy change, we believe the availability of a favourable discursive environment is crucial. Without such an environment, garnering support for policy proposals and frames deviating from the status quo becomes more challenging. Additionally, without a basic level of agreement among actors, it is improbable that the European Commission would adopt new policy frames as part of a policy proposal.

While the European Green Deal is often portrayed as a window of opportunity, our analysis confirms that this is not sufficient to guarantee the success of pro-climate discourse coalitions, promote novel policies or paradigm shifts

(Eising et al., 2015; Hurka & Nebel, 2013; Surel, 2000). Our analysis further indicates that additional conditions are needed to ensure that *novel* frames gain support in policy networks. As the EU is about to present its Green Deal Industrial Plan and competitiveness issues come to the fore (European Commission, 2023), learning from policy successes, and developing a better understanding of the conditions under which novel ways of framing problems and solutions gather support is essential.

Beyond the public discourse we studied, some phenomena we observe, such as internal tensions within the Commission, could be explained by observing how Directorate Generals coordinate support on policy ideas (Candel et al., 2023; Schmidt, 2008). To better understand the causal mechanisms underlying the changes identified within these networks, further research will need to delve into the discourses produced by policy actors through textual analysis or conduct interviews with the actors themselves. Conducting interviews could provide a deeper insight into what motivates alignment shifts, especially among actors who have traditionally been portrayed as antipreneurs who support the status quo (Bloomfield, 2016). In particular, actors' perception and interpretation of the discursive field, whether it was 'accurate' and how it influenced brokers' framing strategies remain underexplored.

Notes

1. For example, in 2006, French Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin suggested to implement a carbon border tax. In 2008, the EU adopted a directive providing that from 2012 onwards, the aviation sector would be included in the EU ETS. Therefore, all flights that landed or took off in the EU, regardless of their origin or destination, were subject to the directive (Wu & Salzman, 2014). In light of an important push back by some EU trading partners, the EU changed its regulation in order to cover only flights within the European Economic Area arguing that it would allow to 'support the development of a global measure by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO)' (European Commission, 2016).
2. Although not required as part of the EGD, some Member States (Bulgaria, the Netherlands, Ireland and Italy) have chosen to target livestock in their eco-schemes policies but have been faced with fierce opposition from farmers (see Runge et al., 2022).
3. Trilogues have become an integral part of legislative procedures in the European Union (see for example Brandsma et al., 2021, and other articles in that special issue).
4. The ETS is in its fourth phase, while the CAP has undertaken 4 major reforms since 1992 when environmental considerations were first introduced.
5. Diagnostic frames refer to ways of framing problem while prognostic frames relate to ways of framing solutions (a distinction initially established by Entman, 1993).
6. For our two debates, the dataset covers a period from 1997 to 2021, inclusively. This is because this study is part of a larger research project that investigates

how specific statements emerge in policy debates, by whom they are proposed, and how they are more broadly diffused into the public arena.

7. Betweenness centrality indicates 'the centrality of an actor is proportional to the degree that the network structure is more connected (or efficient at transmitting information) with the actor present in the network than it would be if the actor were removed from it' (Patty & Penn, 2018, p. 150).

8. While 'Greening the CAP' is frequently encountered in this policy debate, it is not a novel frame. It is a recurring argument when the debates about the reform of the CAP are resumed and a very consensual frame over time (see Online Appendix B).

9. Under Pillar I, MS will fund environmental measures using 'eco-schemes' and Pillar II will continue to offer agri-environment-climate payments. MS are now obliged to earmark at least 30% of Pillar II funding for environmental and climate measures (European Commission, 2020).

10. Direct payments and market measures (Pillar 1) represent 76.8% of agricultural appropriations (European Parliament, 2023).

11. Other actors resort to employing polarising claims (i.e. claims that provoke agreement or disagreement among actors in the debate, see Figure 17 in the Online Appendix). However, these claims do not garner enough support from various actors to significantly influence the discourse network structure.

12. This frame implies an urgent need for action (whether it is the responsibility of a particular sector such as livestock, pesticides, or large farms).

13. Conditionality of subsidies, references to the potential of farmlands as carbon sinks or resorting to R&D in the agricultural sector are quite popular and consensual ways of framing the problem.

14. It is therefore not surprising that amidst the Ukraine war's economic necessities, the environmental gains from the reform quickly eroded as food production took priority, leading to derogations from environmental measures (Fortuna & Foote 2022).

15. For example, in January 2020, the EC president said: 'a carbon border tax on imports could be necessary, but [she] would instead prefer that the bloc's global partners match the EU commitments' (Associated Press International, 2020).

16. In December 2022, 'The Heads of State and Government of the G7 decided […] to establish an open and cooperative international Climate Club. The G7 invites interested states that pursue an ambitious climate policy to join the Climate Club […]' (G7, 2022).

17. While the idea of a CBAM was supported by Industry Commissioner Verheugen in 2006, Trade Commissioner Mandelson publicly opposed the idea (see Euractiv, 2006).

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