

To lead or not to lead:

The Nordic countries in international forums on clean energy

Christin Heinz-Fischer, Elin Lerum Boasson and Jale Tosun

Since the 1990s, research on environmental policy has put forth the argument that there exist leaders and laggards (Underdal 1998; Andersen and Liefferink 1999). This body of research became developed further over the years (Liefferink 2009; Liefferink 2017; Wiering et al. 2019; Wurzel et al. 2019), both theoretically and empirically. What has remained constant is the claim that the Nordic countries qualify as environmental leaders, which provides the point of departure of this analysis. Considering that most research has investigated environmental leadership in the European Union, we consider it potentially insightful to broaden the empirical perspective and to assess how the Nordic countries participate in two global forums on clean energy: The Clean Energy Ministerial (CEM) and the Mission Innovation (MI). These two forums provide apt cases for two reasons. First, they are relevant since at the COP28 the governments of the G20 attributed them the role of being the main platforms for delivering on the Paris Agreement. Second, these organizations follow the distributed leadership model, which means that all members can propose clean energy projects and the other members can decide whether to follow. This provides us a natural laboratory for investigating whether Nordic countries are leaders in relation to clean energy. How active are the Nordic countries in proposing initiatives in the CEM and the MI? Who follows the initiatives of the Nordic countries? How can we explain the role of Nordic countries in these two clean energy forums? These three research questions lie at the heart of this study. We address them by using an original dataset of all initiatives proposed in the two forums of interest adopted between the year of their creation (CEM: 2010; MI: 2015) and 2021. Our findings show notable differences among the Nordic states and their (aspired) leadership in these organizations. We consider these insights to add some nuance to the literature on environmental leaders.

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