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Climate Change Policy in the European Union and the United States.

Federal and Sub-federal Initiatives in Multi-level Systems

When it comes to climate change policy, the United States and the European Union would appear to represent completely opposite poles: while the European Union is considered a pioneer, the United States is regarded as a laggard. However, this transatlantic perspective neglects some important factors, namely national differences within the European Union and within the United States. It is the main thesis of this paper that states matter when climate change policies in the United States and the European Union are compared. The institutional design of the American political system and, in particular, the country's rather unique form of federalism, allows the US states to take the lead and push the federal government to join them. In terms of climate change policy, the following questions arise in this context: Do state initiatives in the area of climate change policy show a similar pattern? Will the states take the lead in climate change policy? And what does this mean for the comparison of climate change policy in the European Union and the United States? The paper compares climate change initiatives in European Union and the United States at both federal and sub-federal level. It starts by considering climate change policy in multi-level systems. The subsequent sections describe climate change policy in the European Union and in the United States in detail. Finally, three different perspectives are presented: First, from the international perspective, the status of the Kyoto Protocol demonstrates the severe consequences for an international regime when its most important player disappears. Even if the Europeans go ahead and implement their climate protection plans (including the emissions trading system), the climate change problem simply cannot be solved without radical change in the United States. Second, from the federal perspective it can be concluded that European leadership in the climate change area is a direct consequence of the absence of any serious activity at federal level in the United States. Thirdly, from the sub-federal perspective, it seems that the US states have started to take the lead after years of federal government inaction. However, the adoption and implementation of a comprehensive climate change policy in the United States will depend on actions and initiatives at federal level. State initiatives should not be viewed as a substitute for a comprehensive national policy that includes mandatory measures.