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Connecting the dots: a closer look at the linkage between EU implementation experiences and EU policy change

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ABSTRACT

EU policy studies typically treat implementation and policy formulation as distinct stages. As a result, we lack a systematic understanding of the impact of implementation experiences on EU policy change. Insights on the feedback of implementation experiences to the EU level, however, are important to further the debate about the resilience, responsiveness and problem-solving capacities of the EU. The aim of this article is to develop a research agenda which facilitates more systematic studies on the impact of implementation experiences on EU policy change. Based on a review of EU implementation and policy change studies, various theories of the policy process and an analysis of the EU policy setting, several expectations and research questions are formulated about which factors explain when implementation experiences are mobilized, gain access to the policy process, are used by policymakers at the EU level and what effects this may have on policy change.

KEYWORDS

Policy process;
Implementation; Feedback;
Policy change

Introduction

In most EU studies the policy implementation and formulation stages are treated as distinct stages (but see Zito and Schout 2009; Breeman and Zwaan 2009). As a result, we lack a systematic understanding of the impact of implementation experiences on EU policy change. In practice, the importance of implementation experiences for future policy developments is increasingly acknowledged by EU policymakers. Guided by its Better Regulation programme, the European Commission aims to improve the quality, legitimacy, simplicity and practicability of EU legislation by learning from practical implementation experiences (European Commission 2017). However, it cannot be assumed that this learning will be automatic: with a multitude of domestic actors involved in the implementation of EU policies and a great distance between them and policymakers in Brussels, feedback of implementation experiences will be complex (Young 2010, 64).

In part because of this, the European Commission relies increasingly on structured moments of feedback via (ex-ante and ex-post) evaluations and consultations to 'close the

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regulatory cycle' (Mastenbroek, van Voorst, and Meuwese 2016; Radaelli 2018). The Commission's consultation regime has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Scholars, for example, have analysed its evolution (e.g. Saurugger 2010; Bunea 2017), as well as the participation of different types of stakeholders in consultations (e.g. Klüver 2013; Rauh 2019). Next to other sources of information, consultations are used in the context of assessing and evaluating EU legislation. In its impact assessments, the Commission, for example, must report about its consultation strategy and which policy options are supported by various stakeholders (European Commission 2015, 242). Consultations are also a source of information in ex-post legislative evaluations. Mastenbroek, van Voorst, and Meuwese (2016) show that in 50% of the ex-post legislative evaluations carried out by the Commission stakeholders were involved to provide empirical data on the functioning of legislation.

While these studies expose important aspects of the feedback process, they tend to focus on the demand-side of implementation experiences. A bottom-up perspective is required as well to shed light on the supply side of implementation experiences and to find out why actors participate in consultations/evaluations, what type of information about implementing EU policies they provide, and if and when they use other access points. In addition to this, we must focus more on how feedback on implementing EU policies is actually being used and possibly changes existing policies. This is hardly addressed in the extant literature.

Understanding how implementing experiences are mobilized and responded to at the EU level is especially important in a time in which the European integration is becoming increasingly politicized, the democratic character of the EU is questioned, and tensions between domestic and EU governance rise (Laffan 2016; Saurugger 2016). Insights on the feedback of implementation experiences to the EU level can help to further the debate about the resilience, responsiveness and problem-solving capacities of the EU (cf. Falkner 2016). The aim of this article is therefore to develop a research agenda which facilitates more systematic studies on the impact of implementation experiences on EU policy change.

We do so by first taking stock of what is written in EU studies about the link between EU implementation experiences and EU policy change. A review of this literature confirms that the relationship between EU implementation experiences and policy change is hardly addressed. To fill in this gap, we turn to several theories of the overall policy process and translate these to the EU setting. Based on this discussion, we formulate several expectations and research-questions about which factors explain *when* implementation experiences are i) mobilized; ii) gain access to the policy process; and iii) are used by policymakers at the EU level, and what effect this has on policy change. These expectations and questions require further testing and research in order to find out under which conditions implementation experiences impact policy change.

Key concepts

Before turning to our assessment and integration of the literature, we start by defining the concepts of EU implementation, implementation experiences, feedback, and policy change. The implementation of EU policies refers to 'the process of translating [EU] policy into action' (Barrett 2004, 251). This involves both the formal (transposition stage) and the

practical implementation (application and enforcement stages) of EU policies at the member state level. During the implementation stage, domestic actors interact with a policy, leading to experiences and knowledge about the implementation and impact of the policy on the ground. This type of experiential knowledge may inform policymakers about 'how policies actually work at the street level and how implementation problems can be solved effectively' (Haverland and Liefferink 2012, 7) and about the potential impact of alternative policies (Sabatier 1978, 397). Building upon this definition, we define implementation experiences as: all knowledge, expertise and information acquired by actors during, or as the result of the practical implementation of EU policies. When we talk about the feedback from implementation experiences, we refer to the process through which these experiences are mobilized, and brought into the process of EU policymaking.

In the literature, policy change is used to refer to a wide range of phenomena. Below we describe policy change along two dimensions: its order and process. First, the order of change, refers to the degree to which a policy is altered. Hall's (1993) demarcation between three orders of changes is well-known, although other scholars have added more fine-grained demarcation, reducing the risk of mixing up different forms or elements of policy change (e.g. Cashore and Howlett 2007, 536). First order change, in the framework of Hall, refers to adjustments in the settings of a policy instrument. Second order change is characterized by adjustments in the policy instruments themselves, and third order change involves shifts in policy goals and objectives.

With regard to the process of change, scholars mostly differentiate between incremental and radical change. Incremental change has been described as 'transformation without disruption' (Streeck and Thelen 2005, 4). Radical change is regarded to be abrupt, and displays more impactful or disruptive transformations to a policy within a short time span. Over the long term, incremental changes, however, may also result in large policy change (e.g. Coleman, Skogstad, and Atkinson 1997). Incremental processes of change are often associated with first and second order policy change; radical change processes with third order change.

EU policy implementation and policy change literature

To develop our research agenda we first turned to the literature on EU policy change and EU implementation. We started by analyzing the literature on EU policy change.¹ Based on 38 papers, published in English in peer-reviewed journals between 1945 and 2015 with EU policy change as dependent variable, we were able to distinguish several factors that explain EU policy change: i) the actions of policy entrepreneurs (e.g. Palmer 2015; Sheingate 2000); ii) specific windows of opportunity (e.g. Parker 2015; Tosun, Wetzel, and Zapryanova 2014); iii) challenging new information and beliefs entering the policy process (e.g. Radaelli and Schmidt 2004; Béland 2009); and iv) specific institutional settings or decision making procedures (e.g. Parrish 2001). While these factors are each relevant for explaining and understanding the link between EU implementation experiences and EU policy change, our review shows that no explicit reference to this link is made (a notable exception is Daugbjerg 2009, 339).

Similar conclusions can be drawn about EU implementation studies, based on several existing reviews of this literature. These reviews show that EU implementation literature typically focuses on explaining how domestic administrations deal with EU policies, how

EU policies impact member states or why implementation varies across member states (Treib 2014; Mastenbroek and Kaeding 2006). While the cyclical nature of the EU policy process has been mentioned by some EU implementation scholars (e.g. Lenschow 2006), the impact and importance of implementation experiences on the subsequent EU policy process is not systematically addressed in this literature (Adam 2016, 163).

Reviewing the EU implementation and policy change literature confirms that there is little systematic attention for the link between implementation experiences in EU policy-making. While sometimes recognized, it is not theorized when or how implementation experiences are mobilized, gain access to the policy-makers, how they are used or what type of change they may contribute to, and under which conditions this is the case.

To find possible answers to these questions, we turn to several more general approaches to the policy process below: policy feedback approach, multiple streams framework (MSF), punctuated equilibrium theory (PET), policy learning approach and the advocacy coalition framework (ACF). Together, these five approaches offer a broad account of the policy process, in which the importance of experiences with past policies for future policy developments is recognized. Some reflect the insights of historic institutionalism and view the policy process as relatively rational and linear, like PET and policy feedback literature. Others, such as MSF, policy learning and ACF, have a more dynamic, processual and actor-oriented notion of the policy process.

EU implementation and policymaking setting

These approaches to the policy process provide us with a broader perspective on the relationship between implementation experiences and policy change. We must keep in mind, however, that most of them have been developed for implementation and policymaking settings that are different from the EU (Heidbreder and Brandsma 2018, 814; Zahariadis 2013). Before turning to the approaches, we therefore first shed light on several general features of the EU implementation and EU policy-making setting.

In studying the relation between implementation experiences and policy changes, it is important to highlight that European policies frequently have a cyclical nature: there are built in moments of review, which can lead to policy adjustments, and even during the implementation of a EU policies at the domestic level there can be smaller feedback loops in which policies are adjusted (e.g. Newig and Koontz 2014). Feedback from implementation experiences may play an important role in this process.

However, as mentioned when it comes to adjustments to EU policies, there is a great distance between policymakers at the EU level and the various actors involved in the implementation of the policy on the ground, who come from different administrative traditions and have different policy (implementation) styles. Experiences with implementation may therefore differ considerable across actors and member states, especially in the case of framework legislation.

The responsibility of overseeing the implementation of EU legislation lies with the Commission. To monitor all implementation activities in all member states, however, the Commission lacks the resources and must rely on external information (e.g. Greer 2005, 168; Peterson 1995). As mentioned, the Commission may do so via consultations or evaluations, but governmental actors and stakeholders are also frequently invited to contribute to so-called working or expert groups. The input of organized interests has

also been recognized as influential in many EU policy fields (e.g. Coen and Richardson 2009; Klüver 2013). Aside from the Commission's policy assessment tools, there are other ways through which implementing experience may feed back to the Commission. Implementing actors may also reach out to the Commission themselves; for example, through administrative networks (e.g. Mastenbroek and Martinsen 2018) or forms of informal lobbying (e.g. Coen and Katsaitis 2013).

Implementing actors may also reach out to other institutional actors: the policymaking setting in the EU is characterized by a large number of policy- and decision-making arenas. Most legislation is initiated and drafted by the Commission and co-decided upon by the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union (Copeland and James 2014). Multiple veto-players are thus involved in the EU policymaking process (Beyers and Trondal 2004, 929). In fact, the actual number of veto-players is much higher, as the Council consist of different member states (e.g. Tsebelis and Yataganas 2002), who, in turn, have to deal with domestic veto-players, for example within their national parliaments (e.g. Kaeding 2006). The large number of decision-makers and decision-making arenas, makes it difficult to reach policy changes, but also means that it is relatively easy to obtain access to the EU policy process. Consequently, there is a large number of competing interests seeking for influence (e.g. Princen 2010; Zito and Schout 2009).

After a discussion of the various policy process approaches below, we connect the described features of the EU implementation and policy-making setting to these approaches. Based on that we develop a research agenda for studying the role and impact of implementation experiences in EU policy change.

Policy feedback

The first general approach we turn to is the policy feedback approach, which explicitly addresses the impact of existing policies on future policy developments (Saurugger and Terpan 2016). Following this approach, experiences concerning the costs and benefits of a policy serve as an important motivation for stakeholders to mobilize, either in favour of or against existing policies. The (perceived) openness of a policy subsystem is assumed to be related to the actual mobilization of these experiences. More open subsystems offer greater opportunities for successful mobilization (Pierson 1993). Shock events (e.g. sudden crises) or formal moments of policy review may open a window of opportunity for actors to mobilize their implementation experiences (Parker 2015; Radaelli and Schmidt 2004; Tosun, Wetzel, and Zapryanova 2014). The literature on policy feedback mainly looks at what triggers actors to mobilize for policy change or continuation. How these experiences find their way in the policy process, and how they are used are not a central concern (e.g. Mettler and SoRelle 2014).

In the policy feedback, implementation experiences are typically related to (relative) policy stability. Experiences with the implementation of a policy may, it is argued, contribute to vested interests; actors become accustomed to a way of doing things, and allocate their resources in favour of the status quo (e.g. Béland 2009; Pierson 1993; Skocpol 1992). A high number of veto-points and veto-players further hamper change, and frustrate adjustments to (new) policy challenges that may emerge from implementation experiences (Tsebelis 2002).

Based on this approach we expect that implementation experiences serve as a motivation for actors to mobilize in the EU. When this mobilization affects change, this will largely be with path-dependent and incremental.

Multiple Streams Framework (MSF)

In comparison to the policy feedback tradition, the MSF takes a more dynamic and actor-centred approach to the policy process (Kingdon 2014). The basis of the MSF consists of three independent streams that flow through a constantly evolving policy system: problems, policy solutions, and politics (Zahariadis 1992). Moreover, the MSF makes three important assumptions about the policy process (Ackrill, Kay, and Zahariadis 2013). First, policymaking takes place under time pressure, so not all issues can be addressed and practical solutions are often chosen over optimal solutions. Second, there is a lot of uncertainty about the (potential) effects or outcomes of policies. Third, ambiguity is omnipresent across policymaking institutions, particularly in the EU, with its multileveled structure (Pollack 1997). Together, these conditions allow policy entrepreneurs to manipulate policymakers. Various actors may take the role of entrepreneur in the policy process, including those involved in policy implementation, who may use their experiences (from the implementation of policies) as strategic resource to steer the direction of the political debate (Saurugger and Terpan 2016). Entrepreneurial strategies, skills, resources, and networks, determine the success in mobilizing implementation experiences, the coupling of policy streams and opening windows for policy change (Herweg, Huß, and Zohlnhöfer 2015; Zahariadis 2007).

Similar to the policy feedback approach, attention is paid to the number of decision making arenas, offering channels and venues to be explored by policy entrepreneurs to mobilize implementation experiences in attempts to alter the course of a policy. Following Kingdon's original work, the best mobilization opportunity for policy entrepreneurs, and the strongest incentive for policymakers to respond to implementation experiences, occurs when the implementation of policy programmes brings along unforeseen negative consequences, which provides them with an urgency to act (Kingdon 2014, 103).

The MSF complements the policy feedback approach by pointing out that experiences are not only an incentive for mobilization, but also a resource to create access to the policy process, while including other resources required for successful mobilization. The presence of multiple veto-points and veto-players is not a central concern to the MSF, but can be seen as a part of the political stream. However, since the MSF focusses mostly on agenda-setting, it is hard to formulate clear expectations about the actual changes associated with implementation experiences.

Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET)

Like the policy feedback approach, PET distinguishes between positive and negative feedback. New information, such as implementation experience, is regarded an important source for these different forms of feedback (Lindblom 1959, 1979). Actors within policy systems are expected to respond to implementation problems by mitigating these issues (Baumgartner and Jones 2005; True, Jones, and Baumgartner 2007).

As in the policy feedback approach, negative feedback is triggered by positive experiences, and mechanisms of path-dependency. This effect is strengthened when policies are made in relatively closed circles of experts in which actors share fundamental policy assumptions, resulting in policy stability (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Princen 2010; True, Jones, and Baumgartner 2007). The main difference with the policy feedback approach comes from the understanding of positive feedback, which may lead to moments of change, also referred to as punctuations. Positive feedback, based on negative experiences, may result in small changes. The occurrence of positive feedback, is more likely in policy subsystems which are open to new participants and information. These are seen as necessary conditions for disruptive policy changes which can be reinforced, instead of being counterbalanced by closed circles of experts (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Princen 2013).

Like the MSF, PET stresses the importance of policy entrepreneurs. However, PET emphasizes stable patterns of decision-making instead of adopting the 'garbage can' model of the MSF, in which policy legacies are less relevant (Schlager 2007). Similar to the MSF, the resources, capacities, and preferences of entrepreneurial actors strongly affect the ability of actors to acquire and mobilize implementation experiences (Palmer 2015; Sheingate 2000).

The possibility to explore new venues and target these with different strategies increases the chances of positive feedback (Radaelli and Kraemer 2008; Ripoll Servent and Tauner 2014). Accordingly, an important insight from PET is that actors are expected to seek out and attend the most promising venues to favour their issues and ideas (Pralle 2003; True, Jones, and Baumgartner 2007). Furthermore, shock events or crises, are put forward as exogenous variables which may lead to an increased demand for implementation experiences by policymakers (Saurugger and Terpan 2016).

In sum, PET further shows that actors should be assumed to behave strategically for the mobilization of implementation experiences and that such behaviour is affected by their capacities and preferences, and institutional features of the policy system. The majority of these factors contributes to stability in the policy process (negative policy feedback). However, under some conditions, implementation experiences can trigger more disruptive changes (positive policy feedback). These conditions, such as institutional openness, and a multitude of access channels are also clearly present in the EU (e.g. Princen 2007), making these insights very useful for understanding the role of implementation experiences.

Policy learning

The three previous approaches highlight the role of mobilization of actors, how interests and information enter the policy process, and what changes this brings about. What happens in between gaining access and changing the policy remains under-exposed. The literature on policy learning can help shed light on this. The concept of policy learning is largely based on the idea that certain experiences may lead to moments of learning in which ideas and beliefs regarding a policy are updated. Updated beliefs with policymakers may trigger various sorts of policy change (Dunlop and Radaelli 2013). A common distinction exists between simple and complex, or single- and double-loop learning (Argyris and Schön 1978; Hecló 1974). Simple, or

single-loop learning, is linked to new beliefs about the adequacy of existing policy programmes and settings, and can lead to what Hall (1993) refers to as ‘first order change’. This type of learning and change is assumed to allow implementation experiences to play a key role, as they offer new insights on how policy instruments work in practice. Double-loop learning refers to more fundamental learning about the core beliefs behind a policy and subsequent changes towards policy objectives and underlying preferences (Nye 1987). This type of learning is expected to lead to more radical ‘second or third order’ policy change, such as changes to the goals and objectives of policies (Argyris and Schön 1978; Hall 1993). The role of implementation experiences for this sort of change appears to be limited, as it is often driven by more far-reaching ideas with a broader scope than the policy itself.

An important mechanism of learning is that of trial-and-error. Here policy administrators (such as implementing agencies) play an important role. Implementation experiences can enter the policy process directly through bureaucrats involved in administering policy programmes (Hall 1993; Bennett and Howlett 1992). Other actors, such as decision-makers, often learn indirectly. Therefore, actors who obtain experiences first-hand may have to take upon themselves a role as teacher in order for other actors in the policy process to learn (Bennett and Howlett 1992). Whether actors are successful in teaching policymakers depends in several elements: certification of the mobilizing actors, openness of policy system, and uncertainty surrounding a policy or instrument (Dunlop and Radaelli 2013). Actors enjoying high certification by policymakers are more likely to contribute to policy learning, as their input is regarded to be more legitimate. Recurring and repeated interactions between teachers and policymakers are also thought to improve such learning relations (Zito and Schout 2009). Finally, policymakers are argued to be more likely to learn from expertise when it helps to reduce uncertainty about how a policy works in practice. Again, in open policy subsystems, the chances of policymakers learning from experiences is assumed to be higher, as are the chances of this resulting in policy changes (Zito 2001).

In sum, scholars of policy learning point to the importance of practical expertise for policymakers. Openness of policy subsystems, recurring interactions between actors, policies surrounded by uncertainty and certification of ‘teachers’ are expected to affect how implementation experiences lead to changed policy beliefs.

Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF)

The ACF largely builds upon ideas of policy learning (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993; Zito and Schout 2009). Advocacy coalitions, consisting of a wide range of actors such as scientists, policymakers and media, are assumed to compete over policy outcomes (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2014, 191). The binding factor in these coalitions is their shared belief system. In this belief system, deep core beliefs are fundamental, and hard to change. Auxiliary beliefs are more applied to specific policies, while secondary beliefs are even more specific and applied a policy domain (Sabatier and Weible 2007). For these coalitions, practical implementation experiences are an important input for understanding how policies work, and what should be changed. Technical information, in particular, may trigger changes in the secondary beliefs of actors (Sabatier 1986; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1988).

Changes in secondary beliefs may be reflected in policy change, when a coalition has the power to do so. The degree of consensus required for policy change increases the competition between coalitions, and makes policy changes harder to achieve (Sabatier and Weible 2007). In order to reach consensus between coalitions, some actors may have to act as policy brokers, mitigating differences between coalitions. Consequently, policy change caused by learning is assumed to take place when policy preferences can be aligned with changes in beliefs about how policies work (Moyson 2017).

ACF shows that actors mobilize their experiences within coalitions of actors with shared beliefs, or have to act as policy brokers, when an advocacy coalition lacks the power to make policy changes. Successful mobilization of these experiences, or brokerage, is affected by resources of these actors, and the level of competition between coalitions.

Discussion

The five approaches to the policy process provide largely comparable and complementary insights about the link between implementation experiences and policy change. In all approaches implementation experiences are seen as a factor leading, or contributing, to changes in actors' policy preferences, which may lead to policy changes. We find that all approaches, to different extents, break up the link between implementation experience and policy change in distinct stages. Following the review, a distinction can be made between three stages: i) (bottom-up) mobilization; ii) gaining access (and exchanging experiences); and iii) use of implementation experiences. Although this distinction simplifies a process that is far messier and less linear in practice, it helps to systematically address which factors affect the feedback of implementation experiences.

Based on the approaches' insights about these stages and the settings of the EU implementation and EU policymaking process, different expectations and questions can be formulated about what processes and factors affect the impact of implementation experiences on EU policy change. Below these stages are discussed and a research agenda is formulated for testing several of these expectations and exploring further avenues of research.

Mobilization

The first stage which links implementation experiences to policy change relates to how and by whom implementation experiences are mobilized, and the motivations to do so. When we turn to the whom question, we find that the different policy approaches are actually not very specific about which actors collect particular experiences, although both PET and the policy learning approach point out that experiences from (implementing) bureaucrats offer an important source of feedback. As these actors are largely overlooked in studies on EU policy change, further research should, first of all, include these actors, and assess their role in the process of EU policy change.²

The conditions under which the mobilization of implementation experiences is preferred over other possible responses to EU policy demands is a second issue that requires further investigation. Vested interests, high implementation cost, or a misfit between EU policies and domestic policies may lead to mobilization of experience in favour of

changing existing policies. However, it remains unclear when actors pursue this strategy, instead of, for example, non-compliance, or muddling through. We expect the perceived need or felt obligation to somehow act in line with EU legislation to play a role here (Zwaan 2012).

We must also pay attention to the resources and capacities of actors in order to understand how and when they mobilize. All approaches acknowledge to some extent, that well-endowed actors are more likely to mobilize because they have better networks, organizational backbones, and financial resources that put them in a better position to mobilize their experiences and to explore multiple venues simultaneously. The question to what extent actors, which try to upload specific implementation experiences, have these resources and capacities is an important one, especially when we consider that implementing actors are likely to provide this kind of information. Questions can be raised about their capacity and resources to mobilize their implementation experiences to the EU level.

The decision to mobilize implementation experiences will also depend on the perceived openness of the policy-making setting. This is a third issue that requires attention. The openness may differ per policy, actor, or type of implementation experience. As a consequence, actors are expected to seek out a venue in which policymakers are most interested in their experiences (e.g. Ackrill and Kay 2011). For actors mobilizing implementation experiences, this venue is most likely the Commission, because of its need for technical expertise (e.g. Peterson 1995), in particular for the formulation of second and third order policy changes (changes to policy instruments and their settings). In this sense, implementation experiences are an access good (Bouwen 2002). For this purpose, formal procedures for feedback are likely to be used, but there are other venues for mobilization, such as administrative networks, that need to be studied as well (e.g. Mastebroek and Martinsen 2018). The question whether actors make use of these other venues, next to the formal procedures, to upload their implementation experiences is a fifth issue that will require further research. We expect that formal channels are more accessible to actors that are more detached from the policymaking process, while informal routes may be more suitable for actors with closer ties to the Commission, or with more exclusive expertise. Here lies an important link to the next stage: gaining access.

Access

A second stage linking implementation experiences to policy change relates to the process of gaining, or creating, access to policymakers. Therefore, it is important to not only analyze which venues actors turn to for sharing their implementation experiences, but also to analyze which channels and venues are most receptive to this type of expertise. The five approaches show that gaining access to policymakers largely depends on meeting the policymakers' demand for information. The first question in this regard is therefore which venues are most receptive to implementation experiences?

As mentioned, we expect the European Commission to be especially interested in implementation experience as the (output) legitimacy for the Commission is much based on the policies it delivers (Scharpf 2009). It is important for the Commission to understand the impact of a policy in order to minimize adverse effects. As the Commission has only limited expertise about how policies work out in the various member states, it needs input

from experts in the implementation of EU policies from its member states. Moreover, the Commission offers numerous consultation and evaluation moments through which stakeholders have the possibility to present their implementation experiences. However, we expect the Commission to be also receptive to implementation experiences outside of these procedures, especially when there is uncertainty about how a policy should be implemented, or when policy issues are too technical to be addressed via these procedures. We therefore expect the Commission to be open to information about policies which are hard to monitor in detail, or which grant much room for maneuver to the member states.

Besides providing much needed information, our review shows that it is also helpful when actors are seen as legitimate or enjoy certification by the relevant policymakers. For implementing agencies and policy administrators, who play an important role within the policy process, we expect that their position provides them with a high degree of legitimacy.

In order to test these expectations, we need detailed studies on how the Commission responds to actors with implementation experiences in terms of granting them access. Next to researching how the Commission invites actors to share implementation experiences consultations, impact assessments, and ex-post evaluations, we also need to look at how receptive the Commission is for experiences mobilized in more informal ways (e.g. Polman 2018).

Use by policymakers

Finally, when actors have mobilized implementation experiences, and have gained access to policymakers, there are still a number of factors that affect whether these experiences are actually used in policymaking. Aside from the legitimacy of the (actors that provide) implementation experiences, various political factors are expected to play an important role in this stage. First of all, there is the amount of veto-players involved, and the accessory issue alignment. A larger number of veto-players is associated with fewer changes, especially when there is conflict between veto-players. When there is little conflict about the direction of policy, we expect more room for implementation issues, and policymakers to be more open to input.

The use of implementation experiences is also expected to be affected by the role of organized interests in the process of policymaking. Input from a large number of societal interests may make it more difficult for implementation experiences, as a form of technical knowledge, to compete with. In this light, we expect that policymakers are better suited to learn and make use of bureaucratic expertise when there is not too much societal pressure involved (as suggested by Hall 1993). Therefore, we expect more use of implementation experiences in more technical changes, such as the settings of policy instruments. Which, in the EU, are often dealt with in specific implementing and delegated acts. For these acts there are usually less organized societal interests, and also less veto-players involved.

Thirdly, alignment between experiences and existing beliefs of the policymakers are relevant. Close alignment between how experiences are presented and the belief system of the policymakers will make it more likely that experiences are used.

Fourthly, under conditions of uncertainty about policy effects and outcomes, actual use is also expected to be more likely. Implementation experiences can play an important

role in reducing uncertainty, as they provide policymakers with information about practical issues where a policy needs to be adjusted (Polman 2018).

In sum, it is assumed in the literature that implementation experiences can contribute to policy change. However, there is only limited attention for when implementation experiences are able to trigger processes of change. By and large, the various approaches do not seem to treat implementation experiences as a sufficient condition for policy change by itself, unless they highlight major flaws in a policy. Nevertheless, when mobilized by the right actors, and under the right conditions, implementation experiences should be treated as important input for (EU) policymakers, contributing to incremental changes to policy instruments and their settings.

Conclusion

We started this paper by reviewing the EU implementation and policy change literature to take stock of our insights about the link between EU implementation experiences and EU policy change. We found that little is known about this link. To fill in this gap we turned to five approaches of the policy process and translated their insight to the EU implementation and policy-making setting. Our review of these approaches resulted in breaking up of three stages that link implementation experiences with policy change, about which we formulated a number of questions and expectations. These need further testing and research to gain a more systematic and detailed understanding about how implementation experiences feed back to the EU level.

While doing so will help us to connect the dots between EU implementation experiences and EU policy change, there are also some limitations to our agenda. The most important analytical limitation is that we focus predominantly on instrumental use of implementation experiences, i.e. the direct application of knowledge in policy formulation and decision-making processes. Studies on knowledge use show that technical knowledge and practical information which contribute to clarifying an issue or solving a problem are in particular relevant for instrumental use, but implementation experiences can also be used in more strategic or conceptual ways (e.g. Boezeman 2015; Rich 1975).

Another drawback is that we pay only limited attention to more normative questions. One of these question is how the Commission should deal with various forms of input, and whether formal and systematic modes of feedback should be preferred over more informal and less systematic feedback.³ To further the debate about the resilience, responsiveness and problem-solving capacities of the EU such normative questions about the link between implementation experiences and policy change must clearly also be addressed.

Notes

1. See [appendix 1](#) and [2](#) for an overview the search strategy and the articles reviewed.
2. Implementing actors are studied in bottom-up implementation literature, however, mainly in relation to explaining how policies are implemented, and not how policies are changed (e.g. Matland 1995; Sabatier 1986).
3. We would like to thank reviewer 2 for pointing this issue out.

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Appendix 1. Overview of search strategy for the literature review on articles explaining EU policy change

For this review we have used the following search terms for selecting relevant papers in three academic search engines in January 2016 (*Web of Science*, *Google Scholar* and *Scopus*): 'Policy Change' AND EU, 'Policy reform' AND EU, 'Policy Adjustment' AND EU, 'Policy Feedback' AND EU, 'Amendment' AND EU.

Based on an analysis of abstract and title, relevant papers were selected for a full-text review. Criteria were a) published in peer reviewed journals, b) written in English and c) topics considering policy change from a European perspective, whether or not in relation to policy implementation. This led to an initial set of 286 papers, after an second selection on basis of abstracts we came to a set of 74 articles which actually explained EU policy changes, other papers focused on domestic changes as the result of European policies, or were otherwise irrelevant at closer inspection. Based on a further analysis of the full text, we came to a set of 38 papers explaining EU policy change (n = 38).

Appendix 2. Overview of the literature reviewed explaining EU policy change

Béland, Daniel. 2009. 'Ideas, Institutions, and Policy Change.' *Journal of European Public Policy* 16 (5): 701–18.

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Citi, Manuele. 2013. 'EU Budgetary Dynamics: Incremental or Punctuated Equilibrium.' *Journal of European Public Policy* 20 (8): 1157–1173.

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