

Governing Plastics in Europe: Evolution, Frictions, and the Politics of Waste since the 1990s.

Grégory De Boe¹

UCLouvain, Louvain Research Institute in Management and Organizations, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium
gregory.deboe@uclouvain.be

ABSTRACT:

Plastic, rooted in a linear economic model, has become central in sustainability debates, prompting European and national policymakers to accelerate circularity through targeted regulations. This paper examines how key policies, perceived as most influential by stakeholders in the food packaging industry – a huge end-user of plastic – shape circularity-related decisions within the European-national policy mix. Drawing on 19 qualitative interviews with food packaging stakeholders in Spain and the United Kingdom – two countries that recently adopted national plastic packaging taxes – the study reveals a governance pattern where command-and-control regulation dominates at the European level, while market-based instruments prevail nationally. Crucial European policies include the Single-Use Plastics Directive, the Regulation on recycled plastics in food-contact applications, the Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation, and Extended Producer Responsibility schemes. Nationally, Spain's and the UK's Plastic Packaging Taxes, alongside upcoming reforms in the UK such as Extended Producer Responsibility, Deposit Return Scheme, and Simpler Recycling initiative, are pivotal. Despite Brexit, the UK remains aligned with European circularity goals, though fragmented governance complicates implementation. Stakeholders identified drivers such as regulatory clarity and business demand-pull incentives, as well as barriers including limited tax scope, weak enforcement, and insufficient support for upstream innovation and reuse. The analysis highlights a policy mix characterized by strong consistency, growing coherence, politically contingent credibility, and low comprehensiveness. This paper contributes to policy mix theory by applying it to packaging circularity, offering empirical insights and outlining implications for designing coherent, credible, and innovation-friendly policy frameworks.

KEY WORDS

Circular Economy; Plastics; Food packaging; Policy mix; Regulation; Tax

INTRODUCTION

Plastic is omnipresent, especially in packaging, due to its affordability and versatility (Andrady, 2011). Its linear “take-make-dispose” production model has driven exponential growth in consumption since the 1950s (Rhodes, 2018; Zhu et al., 2022), with projections suggesting a fourfold increase by 2050 (Guglielmi, 2017). This trend exacerbates global environmental challenges such as plastic pollution, habitat degradation, and greenhouse gas emissions (UNEP, 2022).

As the largest plastic end-user in the European Union (EU), the packaging industry faces significant pressure to transition toward circularity. The circular economy (CE) is defined as a regenerative system that minimizes resource input, waste, emissions, and energy leakage through strategies such as reuse, repair, recycling and long-lasting design (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017). Yet