

## ENERGY POLICY

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Policy decisions are characterized by periods of stability followed by abrupt changes. This behaviour, called punctuated equilibrium, has been successful in explaining many macro-political events such as the legislation in the aftermath of 9/11. The punctuated equilibrium theory (PET) literature has been directing its attention towards focusing events that spark major changes in status-quo policies. However, less attention has been paid to why major events sometimes fail to determine dramatic change. Luke Fowler and co-authors in the US close this gap by combining theories of cultural change with PET applied to energy policy in the US and find that only events able to penetrate the existing cultural construct are able to cause a policy reaction.

Fowler and colleagues define cultural changes as situations when the predominant patterns of values and norms within a community (in a specific time and space) experience disruptions. According to their analysis, in the period 1952–2000 there have been 6 major historical events related to energy policy in the US able to generate significant market fluctuation or having important socio-economic implications. They are: the Suez Canal crisis in 1957; the Arab oil embargo in 1967; the first energy crisis in 1973; the second energy crisis in 1974; the oil glut in the 1980s and finally the Gulf War in 1991. The researchers measure the occurrence of 26 keywords related to 3 main energy domains (domestic energy policy, international energy policy and energy technology) in published material collected in the Ngram viewer, which searches more than five million books and 500 billion words, as a proxy for the cultural penetration of these concepts. Their results show that there has been a similar pattern in the three domains, showing a situation of stasis in energy policy — even through two major energy-relevant events — until 1972. After 1972, and until 1982, there was a strong increase in cultural penetration in the 3 domains and this has determined important policy and institutional changes. Subsequently the cultural penetration has returned to a lower level, but with different trends in the various constructs. This study confirms how energy is increasingly becoming embedded in our socio-cultural construct, with implications for the degree of freedom allowed to policymakers when they operate in this important domain.

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