Policy beyond politics? Public opinion, party politics and the French pro-nuclear energy policy

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Abstract: At first sight, French nuclear energy policy offers a textbook example of how technical, constitutional and economic restrictions, powerful interest groups, and path dependence, constrain democratic responsiveness. This paper uses what might seem to be an unlikely case in order to question explanations of policy choices in terms of technocracy, path dependence, and interest groups, against the background of an underestimated factor: party and coalition strategies. The original data collected on public attitudes towards nuclear energy, and the attention dedicated to this issue in the media, as well as in the parliamentary and electoral arenas, show that the effect of public opinion is conditioned by party incentives to politicize the issue at stake. In other words, parties and coalition-making constraints act as a mediating variable between citizens’ preferences and policy choices. These findings point to the need to integrate this conditional variable into analyses of responsiveness and models of policymaking.

Keywords: Public opinion, party politics, nuclear energy

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In South Korea, a public opinion survey by Gallup found that 70% of voters now oppose the government's phase-out of nuclear energy, which has increased electricity prices, air pollution, and the country's use of coal and natural gas. Around the world, the public and lawmakers express growing concern that their nations will become too dependent on natural gas. I testified before the Ohio legislature four times since 2016 and each time found lawmakers worried that, with coal plants closing, their state might become wholly dependent on natural gas. “Our goal all along has been to save…” At first sight, French nuclear energy policy offers a textbook example of how technical, constitutional and economic restrictions, powerful interest groups and path dependence constrain democratic responsiveness. The original data collected on public attitudes towards nuclear energy and the attention dedicated to this issue in the media, as well as in the parliamentary and electoral arenas, show that the effect of public opinion is conditioned by party incentives to politicise the issue at stake. Public opinion, party politics and the French pro-nuclear energy policy, “Journal of Public Policy, Cambridge University Press, vol. 35(1), pages 137-170, April. Handle: RePEc:cup:jnlpup:v:35:y:2015:i:01:p:137-170_00. French divisions over nuclear were on display this month in a battle over the closure of France’s oldest nuclear power plant, the 39-year-old Fessenheim. Advertisement. Le Pen says ending nuclear energy would be tantamount to France “shooting itself in the foot” — a message that aligns with her views on protectionism and patriotism. Ségolène Royal, the French energy and environment minister...