



Obstacles in energy security: An analysis of congressional and presidential framing in the United States



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HIGHLIGHTS

- A content-analysis of congressional hearings and presidential speeches was conducted.
- Executive and legislative branches have been generally unified in how they frame the issue of energy security.
- Both have avoided overreliance on sensationalized frames.
- Both do not focus enough attention on energy efficiency and intensity.

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ABSTRACT

Despite decades of policymaking, the U.S. has only recently made significant strides in becoming a more energy secure nation. With a focus on the executive and legislative branches, this paper investigates two possible political obstacles to achieve this policy goal. The first question it asks is whether or not the two branches have been defining energy security in the same way. As the concept itself has no universal definition, it is possible that the branches have been focusing on different aspects of the term. Results from a content analysis of presidential speeches and congressional hearings suggest that no such division has occurred. The subsequent question asks whether or not the two branches, in tandem, are providing the foundation for sound policy. Results suggest that Congress and presidents have defined and discussed energy security in a generally balanced, comprehensive and internally non-conflictual way. What policy emerges from these discussions should be the subject of future research.

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1. Introduction

Energy policy has been a topic of political discussion and debate in the U.S. for over a century. From the government's court ordered breakup of John Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company monopoly in 1911 to the ongoing debate between President Obama and Congress over the Keystone XL pipeline, U.S. presidents and Congress have been advocating for and creating policies to conserve energy and otherwise affect how it is used and by whom. A particular subset of energy policy, energy security policy, however, has had a comparatively shorter lifespan as a focus of political debate and scholarly research. Related discussions only begin to appear with consistency in the 1970s and early 1980s (Deese and Nye, 1981; Stoff, 1980; Szyliowicz and O'Neill, 1975; Yager and Steinberg, 1974).

In spite of a surge in popularity among academics/researchers and policymakers in the 2000s (Barton, 2004; Deutch et al., 2006; Kalicki and Goldwyn, 2005; Rutledge, 2005), the U.S. has made only incremental advances towards attaining energy security (Barton, 2004; Sovacool and Brown, 2010). Energy prices are volatile, infrastructure is

aging, the country's dependence on foreign oil continues to constrain foreign policy, and current methods of energy production and transportation continue to disturb ecosystems and pollute the environment. While becoming energy secure admittedly is no small feat, it is no less crucial a goal and working to better understand the apparent obstacles (apparent in their presence, but not in form) may aid the country in making greater strides towards that goal.

One place to investigate possible stumbling blocks is within the halls of government and among federal policymakers. As national policy is made primarily by the president and Congress, this paper focuses on policy discussions in the executive and legislative branches. In the U.S., legislation can originate in either chamber of Congress (the House of Representatives or Senate), but must be passed by both chambers before making its way to the president. The chief executive can then choose to sign the bill into law or veto it, sending it back to Congress.¹ The president can also initiate bills that are sponsored by a member of Congress. In this way, both the

¹ Legislation most often originates with federal legislators, but can also be suggested by constituents or the president. There are no restrictions as to which chamber a bill must originate except that all bills to raise revenue must originate in the House.

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executive and chief legislator must approve of legislation before it becomes official policy. Presidents, however, are able to circumvent the executive branch by exercising their right of executive orders. Functioning like a decree, these orders carry the full weight of the law, but only have jurisdiction over actions in the executive branch. For instance, an executive order can affect hiring practices in or limit emissions from federal agencies. As opposed to making policy via the executive branch, however, the use of executive orders and the scope of their impact are comparatively limited.

Therefore, given the shared responsibility in creating national policy, it is likely that more bills will be passed when both branches are furthering the same ideas, when the legislative and executive branches concur on policy objectives and, more importantly, content. In other words, the greater congruence between branches, the more likely that energy security-relevant policy will become law and work to address the nation's energy security concerns. However, as presidents and legislators can have different objectives (both political and policy-oriented) and as the definition of energy security is both broad and complex and, thus, open for interpretation, it is possible that the two branches have been working in opposition. Therefore, the first question this paper poses is whether or not the two branches have been employing the same definition of energy security. Results could suggest a unity or disunity in policymaking, and thus point to a possible obstacle. However, the results from a content analysis of presidential speeches and papers and Congressional hearings over the last decade suggest that there is not a huge divergence between branches. This sets up a subsequent inquiry. If both actors are defining the issue similarly, could it be that the obstacle is not *what* they talking about, but *how* they are talking about it? In other words, if they are discussing similar policies are they united in advocating for inappropriate or inadequate policies?

2. Obstacles considered: definitional and divisional

Aside from possible technological, economic and cultural obstacles, the most substantial barriers to improving energy security are most often political (Bielecki, 2002; Jacobson and Delucchi, 2009). These could take the form of institutional barriers (i.e., overlapping or under-lapping jurisdiction, inefficient or outdated bureaucratic rules and procedures), unfunded federal mandates, or a general lack of political will. Another possible obstacle, conceptually anterior to a number of the aforementioned, stems from definitional ambiguity. It is possible that the two most important actors in formulating U.S. energy security policy are using not only different, but conflicting, definitions. This is a probable hypothesis given that there is no universal definition of the term despite years of use by energy specialists, scholars, journalists and politicians (Hughes, 2009; Kruyt et al., 2009; Sovacool et al., 2012).

The vagueness of the term and the subsequent definitional variation suggest that how one conceptualizes energy security is relative, context-dependent, and a matter of perception. For example, the definition of energy security is different for developed and developing nations; energy importing and exporting nations; when looking at short-term and long-term perspectives; and from different individual, small group, national and regional perspectives. In the end, energy security is not a static concept nor is it a one-size-fits-all concept (Barton, 2004). It can be interpreted in a number of different ways by different stakeholders in different situations and at different times. In other words, "one size assuredly does not fit all" (Barton, 2004, p. 8).

Discussions of energy security in the U.S. are no exception. From his in-depth case study on U.S. energy security policy,

Stagliano (2001) argues that different policy actors utilize very different definitions. Free market advocates defined energy security in terms of reducing economic vulnerability to supply disruptions and price shocks. Environmentalists saw the road to energy security paved with reduced oil consumption. Energy producers looked to increased domestic production to attain energy security. Thus, the term had "no consistently understood meaning in the United States" (Zillman and Bigos, 2004, p. 146).

This is not to say that the definition is entirely void of guiding principles. What most scholars and policymakers have agreed to for decades is that in order to ensure energy security a state must not only have an adequate supply of energy, but must have the ability to deliver energy to a variety of end-users at an affordable price. There must be a secure and reliable energy infrastructure that provides users with energy they can reasonably pay for. Though a seemingly basic definition, there is ambiguity. What is considered an "adequate" supply, a "secure and reliable" infrastructure, and "affordable" price are left a matter of interpretation. They can, and often do, take on different meanings for different actors.

Aware of the difficulties in working with the definition of energy security, a number of scholars make the argument for a condensed list of four to five dimensions that most accurately depict what it means to be energy secure (Kruyt, et al., 2009; Löschel et al., 2010; Sovacool and Brown, 2010; Sovacool and Mukherjee, 2011). The most common dimensions include affordability, availability, efficiency, technological development, sustainability and regulation. The practical intent is to create standardized indicators that can be used to measure a country's level of security. Such indicators are also beneficial theoretically as they help to resolve some of the complexity in the definition by providing comparable and simplified classifications. The dimensions and indicators have been constructed largely via analysis of energy policy literature and surveys of energy experts/specialists. While federal policymakers have been included in some studies (i.e., Sovacool et al. 2012), emphasis is placed on those with expertise in the field. The indicators, therefore, represent a consensus among experts but are not necessarily representative of the definitions used by policymakers. Presidents and congressional representatives, for example, are rarely energy specialists. Though the definitions policymakers employ can be based on expert advice, policymakers are subject to a number of external forces that can greatly impact their personal definition of what it means to be energy secure. Lobbyists, industry, media, and, most importantly, constituent interests have some of the greatest impacts and, as Sovacool et al. (2012) found, there is a disparity between what energy experts deem crucial to energy security and what the general public sees as important. Thus, while there is likely considerable overlap between expert definitions and those of policy makers, it is unlikely that they are identical. Indicators should be seen as subjective metrics that must be interpreted within real world contexts (Kruyt et al., 2009).

These exogenous pressures often force politicians to over or underemphasize different indicators. One such example is a possible over-emphasis on the international aspects of energy availability, particularly the perceived dependence on oil from the Middle East. The events of 9/11 and both Iraq wars have notably spurred this (re)emphasis as well as the accompanying link between energy policy and national security. Though scholars (Yager and Steinberg, 1974) and some political advisors (Stoff, 1980) were already drawing this connection decades ago, the upsurge of destabilizing events in the region has forced politicians (often via media and, thus, public opinion) to focus heavily on energy independence.² A number of books and

² While Kalicki and Goldwyn (2005) write that this combination of energy policy and high diplomacy has been a recent advancement and Deese (1979–80) and Deese and Nye (1981) similarly argue that international factors were overlooked in early conceptualizations of energy security, others argue that the addition is not entirely new. Energy scholars recognized the unavoidable reality decades ago

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