

Global Partners France Regional Alliance Mini-Grant Project Report

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Project Description

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have consistently attempted to influence public policy in the United States and European countries, especially in the nuclear energy sector, but their efforts have produced varied results. Comparing the U.S. and France is particularly interesting and informative in this respect. The two nations are the world's top two producers and users of nuclear energy, yet at the same time, over the past twenty years, governments of the two countries have adopted markedly different policies. While no new nuclear plants have been built in the U.S. since the mid-1980s, France has continued to add to the number of its existing facilities. Differences in public sentiment regarding continued reliance on nuclear power have also been quite dramatic. The American public, by and large, has held a negative view of nuclear power industry, fueled by concerns over health and environmental safety issues. In France, unlike in the United States, nuclear energy is accepted, even popular. There were some protests in the early 1970s, but since then the nuclear program has been largely non-controversial. These comparisons invite an obvious question: what can account for the differences between the two nations?

Some explanations presented in the U.S. and other countries – that the French are simply complacent and poorly informed about negative aspects of nuclear power production – are neither analytical, nor helpful. They are grounded in skewed or incomplete understandings of French political culture, policy process, and dynamics of popular participation. They largely ignore the role of broad networks of civil society organizations in France, including activism of environmental groups. Instead of reiterating flawed generalizations, my study addresses several key and interrelated questions. What historical conditions necessitated development of nuclear energy industry in France and the United States? What factors later contributed to the U.S. changing its policy? Were the same factors present in France? What differences between French and American political cultures and policy processes can help explain different outcomes? What role have civil society organizations, particularly environmental NGOs, played in these developments?

This study is about NGO participation in the domestic policy process. It focuses on interactions of environmental groups with governments as well as national and local publics. In my view, there are some important differences in how French and American environmental groups have approached matters of nuclear energy governance, and these have resulted in significant policy differences. The Global Partners grant enabled me to conduct field research for the France case. Interviews with staff of several French public and private agencies, including NGOs, working on nuclear energy issues, took place during the last week of May 2006. The purpose of the

interviews was to identify key aspects of NGO interactions, formal and informal, with others actors involved in the nuclear energy policy process. Interview data was supported by documentary evidence, such as policy memoranda, operational directives, and other intra-organizational communications. Respondents included management and research staff of the Nuclear Safety Authority (ASN), Institute for Radiological Protection and Nuclear Safety (ISRN), French Nuclear Energy Society, Greenpeace France, Friends of the Earth France, and Network to Phase Out Nuclear Energy (RSN).

Project Findings

My interviews were structured around a set of basic questions about the role of NGOs in French nuclear energy policy, their relationship with government agencies, and their position in the public debates on nuclear issues. Initial processing of responses and documentary data yields the following general conclusions:

1. While any and all kinds of NGOs are free to express their opinions on nuclear energy in the French public arena (and frequently do so), direct policy participation – in the form of policy or expert advice – is mostly limited to “scientific” NGOs (as opposed to “environmental advocacy” types).
2. On balance, French “scientific” NGOs tend to support nuclear energy production and use, compared to “environmental advocacy” groups which are more likely to oppose it.
3. Opposition to nuclear power among French NGOs is largely focused against nuclear waste disposal, in contrast to the U.S. where both the nuclear energy production cycle and disposal are frequent objects of concern and opposition.
4. French environmental NGOs tend to place higher value on nuclear energy as an alternative to technologies producing “greenhouse” emissions (at least in the short term), as opposed to U.S. environmentalists that are more likely to see it as a suboptimal solution to the problem of global warming.
5. “Scientific” NGOs have strong links to both public and private research institutions, relying on them not only for funding but also as career advancement options for their members. In France, “technocrats” and “engineers” (i.e. those of “scientific” background) are viewed as having valuable public service skills – much like lawyers in the U.S.
6. Through joint ownership and management networks, France has created a unique fusion of government and business in the nuclear energy sector – through agencies such as EDF (France’s semi-private energy monopoly), AREVA (consortium of related nuclear energy companies), and others – resulting in a situation where public and private interests in developing nuclear power and technologies have become virtually indistinguishable.
7. In early debates (at the time of the first oil crisis in the 1970s), the French political elite presented nuclear energy as key to the nation’s independence. Emphasizing the lack of any significant domestic fossil fuel deposits, successive French governments have maintained that nuclear power guarantees national sovereignty, considerable economic benefits, and international prestige – all of which traditionally resonates well with the French public.
8. Trust in the “technocratic” approach to governance, as well as the fact that France has not experienced anything like Chernobyl or Three Mile Island, help explain the widespread belief that such accidents are impossible in France.

Follow Up

Over the next few weeks, I intend to complete my analysis of the collected interview and documentary data. My purpose will be to take a closer look at the different patterns identified in the initial conclusions, and develop cause-and-effect linkages among them. My research has already revealed what may be important differences between French and U.S. NGO participation in the domestic policy process, but further comparisons with U.S. case data is necessary. Once my analysis is complete, the results of the comparative case study will be posted on my Centre College website, and also included in my Comparative Environmental Governance course next spring, as well as presented at the International Studies Association annual conference.