Fukushima’s effects on nuclear policy in Germany and the UK

The Fukushima accident in Japan has sparked international debate on nuclear energy. A new study has identified five factors which may have influenced the contrasting energy policy responses to the incident in the UK and Germany. Following the disaster, the UK is continuing to back nuclear power generation, whilst Germany is withdrawing support.

When disaster hit the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant following the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami in 2011, political debate on the future of nuclear energy came to the forefront worldwide. Interestingly, there were very different responses in EU Member States, illustrated by this study which compares reactions of the UK and Germany to the event.

In the UK, policymakers have stood firm on their decision to increase nuclear power generation, whereas in Germany, the federal government has decided to at least temporarily shut down older nuclear reactors and to re-evaluate the safety of all nuclear power facilities. As with all political responses, these decisions were not made in a contextual vacuum and the study identified five possible influences that are likely to have affected policymakers’ choices in these two countries.

1. Imminent Elections. Germany was set to have two regional elections only two weeks after the Japanese earthquake, which meant that national policy response would directly affect voter-popularity of the regional candidates. In the UK, there were no elections so there was no need to appease voters in the short-term.

2. Intensity of media reports. The Fukushima incident dominated German headlines for weeks and media reports provided in-depth scientific explanations. The public were therefore well informed on nuclear energy and able to demand greater transparency. In the UK, media reports were initially frequent but were soon eclipsed by reports on the conflict in Libya, which directly involved UK troops.

3. Trust in renewable energy innovation. Germany is an established leader in the technology and generation of renewable energy, creating new jobs, economic wealth and public support. With renewables as a viable player in the energy market, there is less dependence on nuclear energy than in the UK. The uptake and development of renewable energy in the UK has been much slower, and is still seen as high-cost, thus nuclear energy appears a more attractive option.

4. History of nuclear resistance. Germany has a stronger history of public resistance to nuclear energy and more organised activism than in the UK. Much of this has stemmed from its anti-nuclear weapons sentiment since the Second World War, whereas nuclear weapons are considered a necessary deterrent in the UK.

5. Perceived cultural proximity. Despite being geographically distant, Germany and Japan are culturally similar as they both rebuilt their infrastructure after the Second World War and are proud of their engineering prowess. As such, Germany could have felt that, if the Fukushima accident could happen in Japan, a similar incident (although not triggered by earthquakes) could occur in Germany due to unforeseen failures in engineering and quality control. As the UK’s historical experience is not so similar to Japan, perhaps it could not conceive that a similar series of events could occur in the UK, focusing more on the earthquake than on the issues with engineering infrastructure.

It is clear that the Fukushima incident has affected public and policy reactions to nuclear energy and that this response varies from country to country. This has implications for energy companies working internationally. There are also lessons to be learnt for policymakers should similar environmental incidents occur in the future, specifically an awareness of the contextual factors that influence public and policy response.


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