



Panic at the Pump: The Energy Crisis and the Transformation of American Politics in the 1970s

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An authoritative history of the energy crises of the 1970s and the world they wrought

In *Panic at the Pump*, Meg Jacobs shows how a succession of crises beginning with the 1973 Arab oil embargo prompted American politicians to seek energy independence, and how their failure to do so shaped the world we live in. When the crisis hit, the Democratic Party was divided, with older New Deal liberals who prized access to affordable energy squaring off against young environmentalists who pushed for conservation. Meanwhile, conservative Republicans challenged both kinds of governmental activism and argued that there would be no energy crisis if the government got out of the way and let the market work. The result was a stalemate in Washington and panic across the country: miles-long gas lines, Big Oil conspiracy theories, even violent strikes by truckers.

Jacobs argues that the energy crises of the 1970s became, for many Americans, an important object lesson in the limitations of governmental power. Washington proved unable to design a national energy policy, and the inability to develop resources and conserve only made the United States more dependent on oil from abroad. As we face the repercussions of a changing climate, a volatile oil market, and continued unrest in the Middle East, *Panic at the Pump* is a necessary and instructive account of a formative period in American political history.

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Brad B says

This was interesting for me personally, as I lived through these events but was too young to remember much. I felt it took the author 50 pages or so to get into a solid narrative, afterwards I found the book quite interesting and significant in getting a better understanding of how the Reagan/Bush conservatism (which is not as far as some might think from the current extremist GOP) came to power. I would have liked a formal introduction to the structure of the petroleum market at the time. It is astonishing and heartbreaking how the U.S. keeps making the wrong choices regarding conservation and consumption at the individual and corporate levels. This book makes a nice parallel read with Rick Perlstein's The Invisible Bridge: The Fall of Nixon and the Rise of Reagan, which covers a similar time period.

Alex Reneski says

Perhaps of great interest to those who intensely study geopolitics, USA politics and economics. Many, many quotes from the era, but I could not tell whether it was unfocused or trying to be unbiased. Lots of research apparently went into it, but the conclusions seem vague.

However, having lived thru the gas lines and "rationing", alternate days for getting gas, etc., I know one thing: there was a very popular saying and feeling among us common folks - "When gas gets to \$1 a gallon, the shortage will end." The fact is that gas is now over \$2 a gallon, and we have not had, nor can anticipate any shortage in the near future.

Jonathan says

A well-researched book about the impact of the oil shocks of the 1970s on American politics---the ideological composition of the parties (including the balance of power within them), public sentiment toward and trust of government, jockeying of politicians and the sausage-making of legislation, domestic policy (and not just energy policy, because energy resources have a large impact, through the economy, on revenue and thus social programs), and foreign policy (especially the real and perceived power of the American empire). She captures the sense of turbulence or unease during the decade as fundamentals of the economy were in flux, and she highlights the clear relationship between domestic and foreign policy, something that is often overlooked and that is very important in the context of energy. Indeed, one of the most enduring outcomes from the period of turbulence was a more aggressive stance with regard to protecting access to oil in the Gulf.

In some ways, I think that Jacobs overstates the causality of energy politics in the broader political shift, and her high-level look at the collapse of the New Deal consensus among *politicians* ignores the fact that it had not collapsed so clearly among *voters* or the public at large (an issue Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers astutely analyze in their book "Right Turn"). Polls aren't a perfect gauge of public opinion, but I would have liked more attention to them in making statements about the public mood. There also seemed to be a latent hostility toward the New Deal consensus in the book itself that I found off-putting ("old," "throwback," etc.) as well as a subtle hostility toward some left-wing Congressmen. Nonetheless, I think it is well worth a read

for developing a better understanding of how our energy policy, foreign policy, and political ideologies became what they are today.

Beth says

This book was good, but challenging to get through. Lots of information, engaging but dense. As someone born in 1976, there was a lot I didn't understand about the 1970s and this book really enhanced my understanding of that era and the Nixon, Carter and Ford presidencies.

Laura says

3.5 stars.

I am a child of the 70s, literally. I was in preschool at the beginning and in the 8th grade at the end. So I have glimmerings of memory of the political events in the 70s, but not much more. This book was very enlightening on the question of the energy crisis and the Democrats' and Republicans' different approaches to dealing with it. But it was very grim going, and took me quite some time to finish (to the detriment of my Goodreads challenge!).

While I am not a fan of the unfettered market forces the Republicans pushed and implemented beginning in 1980, my conclusion from reading this book is that the Democrats relied too heavily on price controls and other mechanisms that may have been necessary in the 1930s and 1940s, but were not well-suited to address the energy crisis, and did not try to create imaginative and new approaches to dealing with the energy crisis. Neither party nor the populace embraced conservation, environmentalism, and the search for new energy sources (like solar and wind). One thing the book did illustrate was the dogged determination and staying power of the environmental movement.

I felt that the author could have devoted time to discussing the Three Mile Island nuclear disaster. It was a very important and epochal crisis of the time, which affected the willingness of the public to explore and exploit nuclear power (the only form of alternative energy Reagan was willing to support). But the author only alludes to it here and there, it is always off-stage, never on.

Two things that my parents did in the 1970s, to address the energy crisis I now see, that I still do, were keep the thermostat down and wear layers of clothes.

Daniel Farabaugh says

This was a solid and sturdy examination of the gas crisis of the 1970s. It was a built dry in places but did a really good job with the complex legislative aspects.

James Crabtree says

I only got to page 21 before I had to put this book down. The author begins by looking at oil (and criticizing free market economies in the process) and George H.W. Bush (although the way she writes I'm not sure if she thinks she's writing about George W. Bush) but the worst part was where she as much as said something to the effect that Republicans realized in the 1960s "that race baiting wouldn't get them the policies they wanted in regards to oil legislation." Considering that LBJ needed Republican votes to get Great Society legislation through this is absurd. Thank goodness I didn't spend money on this book. This book was received as a Goodreads Giveaway.

Yunis Esa says

it is interesting how different factors are reasons to the solution, but the only thing that people see are the obvious solutions to the problem. a lot of the problems barriers are not in the control of the commander and chief. It seems that if the problem is not solved immediately by federal government, or the problem becomes worst not because of the actions of the Commander and chief. The Nation is ready to throw in the towel and to a solution from the other side.

Damian says

I grew up watching movies about Vietnam in the 60s. I was born in the 80s and found my music and culture in the 90s. In the noughties I came of political age, watching planes fly into towers on TV and Bush Jnr, Rumsfeld and Cheney 'liberating' the Middle East.

But there was always a gap between the history shown in the movies and the here and now of the nightly news. The 1970s were too recent to be the focus of 'history' and too old to be contemporary.

It wasn't until I read Meg Jacobs' *Panic at the Pump* that I could link those two periods together. *Panic at the Pump* retraces the history of the oil shocks of the 70s, its political ramifications both domestically and abroad. Jacobs shows how Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld cut their teeth during the crises. She shows how and why domestic politics pushed, and perhaps keeps, the US military entwined in the Middle East. She shows how the free market ideas of Reagan didn't spring out of the blue in 1980, but were the product of evolving public opinion which witnessed several very public failures of government intervention in the domestic energy market during the 1970s. Every chapter was filled with an 'ah-ha!' moment, exclaiming to myself as I understood why such-and-such happened some decades later, why ABC institution exists, or why X army is now based in Y country. It is an illuminating read for anyone, like me, born too late to live through the 70s but too early to have learned about it in the classroom.

Reflections on the narratives in Jacobs' work

Here are a few of the ideas that reading *Panic at the Pump* prompted:

Is America's presence in the middle east a choice of the American people? Rather than, say, the unilateral action of the Bush administration, or the neoconservative band? Jacobs' narrative certainly pushes in that direction. The basic premise is that successive administrations, from Nixon, Ford and then Carter, had

all been destroyed at the ballot box because of voters concerns about energy. Every suite of domestic energy policies (price controls, rationing, investment in alternate energy, regulating, monopoly and anti-trust regulations) had failed. The only policies to which the electorate didn't seem to object was foreign military intervention. Jacobs closes the penultimate chapter with observations from James Schlesinger, the then energy zsar, with seeming approval: *"As a society we have made a choice to secure oil by military means... It's a hell of a lot easier and a lot more fun to kick asses in the Middle East than make sacrifices and practice conservation."*

Obviously no explicit choice had been put to the American people. There had not been a referendum asking whether the voter would prefer that the US Government attempt to keep gas prices low by (A) regulating the domestic market, or by (B) foreign military intervention. However, the American voters, collectively and repeatedly, sent signals to the political class in favour of option (B). It is inevitable that sooner or later the political class would respond. When Bush Snr was presented with that choice in 1991, with the memory of the 1970s still in the minds of politicians and voters, he acted.

The lesson can be applied across policies and electorates. Take Australia's treatment of refugees. In 2007, the Rudd government openly expanded access to Australia by boat and softened its treatment of refugees. That policy position was, at that time, vastly different from the recently departed conservative Liberals, who consistently advocated harder border protection. But in the years following, the Labour government was punished again and again by the electorate for the perception that it had a 'softer' stance on immigration than the Liberals. In response to those ballot box signals, the parties inevitably end up converging so that in recent years we are left with little to distinguish between the two major parties on the migration issue. Despite the lamenting public, the indistinguishable policy positions of the two major Australian parties on immigration is in many respects the result of choices made by the Australian people at the ballot box over the preceding decade.

We should not be surprised. Politicians, like everyone else, learn hard lessons by experience. Knowledge of bitter political defeats linger long in the memories of individuals, and even longer in the political parties collective memory. As voters, we should expect that if we repeatedly vote out a party with a particular view, that view will disappear. The old adage 'we get the politicians we deserve', is perhaps truer than I ever realised.

Political platforms, parties and personalities don't just appear out of thin air. They are a product of the events that precede them. The clear example in Jacobs' work is the explanation of how the 'sudden' appearance of Reaganomics in 1980 was in fact not so sudden at all. Reagan's policies of small government, privatisation and the dominance of the free market, were, indeed, a radical departure from anything that had preceded it since FDR's New Deal some 50 years earlier. But despite their ostensible 'sudden' appearance, Jacobs shows how the government's policy adventures into the energy market in the 1970s were essential in laying a foundation for Reagan's political success. Throughout the 1970s, the American public was repeatedly told that the federal government could 'solve' the energy crisis and that it had to 'do something' whenever the prices rose. But government price controls and rationing didn't solve the problem - they were too hard to enforce and led to long queues at the gas station. Neither the Republicans Nixon and Ford or the Democrat Carter could solve the problem.

In the public's eye, it was not party politics, but government itself, which was the problem. Reagan's solution was to get the government out of the market all together. Reagan was only able to sell that story because of the political failures of his predecessors. He couldn't have sold that story in 73 or 77. The political groundwork had to have been laid first.

In 2016, Trump surprised most commentators. But no doubt history will show that he did not appear out of thin air either. He was a product of a generation which grew up with an attention deficit, adoring tweets and reality TV. He leveraged a political climate of division and antipathy to full effect. He spoke to an economic underclass which had been taken for granted by the establishment and finally felt like enough was enough. Those undercurrents had been brewing for years, and all came to a head in 2016. Trump wouldn't have won in 2008, or 2012. But in 2016, enough forces had coalesced for him to secure victory.

The question is how we identify which forces are at work right now and what personalities and policies will be 'of their time' in 2020.

The greater the proximity of a problem to the day-to-day life of the voter, the more powerful the political dynamite. My favourite quote in Jacobs' book comes only a few pages into the Introduction: *"A resident of Fair Lawn, New Jersey, complained: 'What's worse than Watergate and all the various charges against the President? The gas crisis in Bergin Country.'"*

Voters care more than anything else about issues which touch their day to day, immediate lives. Gas prices, the prime example, permeate lower and middle class lives. They are flashed before their eyes on huge billboards on every road in the country. They determine what's left in the bank account for groceries and vacations. They spark scorn to bitterness. They cannot be avoided at the water cooler, the kitchen table or the op ed pages.

So if gas prices move beyond the level that the public 'expects' them to remain at, both the political opportunities and the political danger are escalated. Gas prices will overtake any other issues of the day. Just like the weather, it strikes close to the hearts, minds and lives of the everyday voter. No doubt if the public ever became convinced that the government could control the clouds, we would find politicians forced to campaign in the farmlands on the promise of rain, and in the suburbs on the seduction of sunshine.

Peter McLoughlin says

As John Updike said in his novel *Rabbit Run* in the seventies it seemed like the American ride was coming to an end. The postwar prosperity built in large part on cheap oil came to an end in the seventies when Americans got a rude awakening in the 1973 Arab Israeli war when OPEC cut oil production. The disarray of liberals along with realignments breaking up the new deal coalition gave the new right which was very busy in this period an unprecedented opportunity to smash the New Deal experiment and smash it they did with the happy warrior Ronald Reagan. The post mortem on the death of the post war consensus and the rise of the new right has been written about before but the emphasis here is on the oil shocks and the responses to it from liberals and the conservative calls for letting the market decide and deregulation. The oil shocks especially the one in 1979 were the push that put Reagan in the white house in 1980 and scrapped any attempts for energy independence entwining us more and more in the volatile middle east and of course tax cuts, deregulation, destruction of unions, the dismantling of the new deal and skyrocketing inequality which we take for granted today. I think the lessons of this era and the lost opportunities should be in the front of the public's mind this year.
