

Policymaking in Times of Crisis: Discursive Dynamics in U.S. Congress, 1945-1990

Hendrik Erz <hendrik.erz@liu.se>

Institute for Analytical Sociology (IAS)
Linköping University

February 25, 2024

Crises can provide shocks to social systems by rendering existing frames of reference useless. In such a state, individuals engulfed in crisis are left with confusion, until the crisis has been resolved and new means of action have been developed. This paper traces such a crisis for U.S. economic policymaking using Congressional speech transcripts. It uses a mediation design to analyze how the crisis of stagflation has affected Congressional economic policymaking. It tracks the salience of policy instruments in Congressional speech which are extracted using an Active Learning approach. Existing strategies of action could not solve the crisis, which resulted in the reference frames for the representatives breaking away. This paper makes the following contributions: (1) It shows that representatives orient themselves mainly along party line and committee membership as reference frames for which policy instruments matter. (2) In times of crisis, these reference frames break away, leaving the representatives unsure as to what policy instruments are helpful in solving it. (3) Large Language Models are capable of extracting small subsets of speech along theoretically meaningful linguistic dimensions and thus help analyze speech data quantitatively.