



Renovation realities: Actors, institutional work and the struggle to transform Finnish energy policy

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ABSTRACT

Transitions research argues that destabilizing current carbon-intensive regimes is necessary for transforming energy systems. In this study, we analyze how both new and established energy policy actors seek to influence energy transitions in a relatively stable institutional context. Our empirical focus is on Finland, where the governance of energy policy has been characterized as closed and stagnant and is increasingly challenged by novel actors. The analysis is based on expert interviews (n=24), completed with existing literature and other documentary material. We examine the different forms of institutional work actors undertake. Our analysis shows how the existing institutional setting conditions actors' choices over the endeavors that are worth pursuing. We show how the institutional work approach adds nuance to studying actors' activities in regime destabilization processes. We find that actors focus on creative institutional work and avoid disruptive activities. While our results confirm a strong commitment to carbon neutrality, the focus on creative institutional work and a lack of disruption point to incremental changes in energy policy and networks.

1. Introduction

The energy sector is considered to be one of the central areas for addressing climate change and dedicated action is needed to change the ways energy is produced, consumed and transferred [1,2]. Path dependencies and lock-ins to unsustainable energy regimes are well-known mechanisms that restrict transforming energy systems [3,4]. However, the tenacity of current energy regimes amidst widespread calls for change and the development of novel practices, policies and technologies, should not be taken as a given. How and which parts of current energy regimes are changed, while others remain in place, is a pertinent question for research on energy transitions.

Recent research on sociotechnical transitions has focused on responding to the call for rapid and deep decarbonization [2]. A significant shift in sociotechnical transitions research has been the move from analyzing the development of niche innovations to examining how to actively destabilize unsustainable regimes [5,6]. As a result, there is a growing body of literature on regime destabilization as well as on the potential for innovations to disrupt current practices [6–9]. Regime destabilization refers to systemic changes in the regime or the replacement of specific regime elements, such as technologies, actors or

institutions, with novel ones [10–13]. In the destabilization literature, the destabilization of energy sources and technologies, such as coal or electricity generation, have been examined in several empirical studies [14,15]. At the same time, destabilization is a complex process that different actors seek to influence in order to advance their own aims and to improve their positions in energy policy.

Consequently, researchers have called for an in-depth examination on the role of agency and politics in energy transitions and destabilization processes, and there is a growing literature that attends to the “political turn” in transitions research [16–19]. Regime destabilization studies on the role of agency and politics have focused especially on the role of discourse and framing to understand different actors' strategies [7,8]. A key insight from this research is that actors actively construct meaning for observed sociotechnical changes and aim to frame them for their own benefit [7,8,20]. As sustainability has become a mainstream concern, actors defending current sociotechnical regimes have not questioned its importance, but have instead sought to frame their own activities and policy proposals as contributing to advancing sustainability [7,8]. In this context, in which discursive commitments to action on climate change are widespread, it is relevant to assess the type of activities actors undertake to change and maintain current energy

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regimes.

We propose that the concept of institutional work offers a fruitful way to examine ongoing energy transitions, in which widespread calls for change are coupled with stable and entrenched energy systems, practices and policy networks [21,22]. Institutional work assesses how actors aim to influence their institutional environments through individual and collective work [23]. The concept highlights the embedded nature of actors: actors seek to influence the structures around them while also being constrained by those same structures [23]. Institutional changes occur as actors strive to sustain and improve their positions through institutional work that creates, disrupts, maintains or defends institutions [23,24]. Through an analysis of the different forms of institutional work at play in Finnish energy policy, our objective is to assess how actors seek to influence ongoing energy transitions in a relatively stable institutional context. Connecting institutional work to discursive justifications and potential changes in energy policy highlights the possible tensions between widely shared common goals and the divergent means and work carried out to pursue these goals.

Finnish energy policy functions as a relevant case study on the tenuous relationship between change and stability in energy transitions. As with most EU member states, Finland is committed to climate change mitigation and transforming its energy system towards carbon neutrality. This commitment has recently been sharpened with the Finnish Government's ambitious declaration to be carbon neutral by 2035 [25]. While Finland has a high proportion of renewable and nuclear energy production, significant changes are nonetheless required to meet this target [26]. At the same time, both the Finnish energy system and its governance have been described as relatively stable, consensus-oriented and controlled by a small group of actors [27–29]. Recent studies on Finland show few policies aimed at creating the type of disruptions that would significantly alter policy networks [30,31]. However, these stable institutional arrangements have been challenged by novel groups and networks of actors [32]. The case study on Finland sheds light on the difficult process of energy transitions in a country with a strong commitment to carbon neutrality, yet a relatively entrenched policy system.

In this study, we undertake an analysis of the different forms of institutional work and their discursive justifications in the context of Finnish energy policy. To do so, we ask: how do different forms of institutional work contribute to envisaged energy transitions in Finland? We base our analysis on expert interviews, complemented with an analysis of documents and secondary literature. Our results demonstrate that actors in Finland are broadly committed to carbon neutrality. Despite this, actors take part in diverging forms of institutional work, creating incremental pressures for change. In a consensus-seeking policy setting, actors favor creative work, and disruptive work is avoided due to constraints formed by the existing institutional context.

Our study makes two contributions to ongoing debates on regime destabilization and energy transitions. First, we demonstrate the potential of the institutional work approach for understanding the complexities related to regime destabilization in the context of a strong discursive commitment to carbon neutrality. The concept of institutional work underlines the difficulties of changing institutional arrangements in entrenched policy systems. Second, the particular case study shows how actors enact prevailing institutional conditions by focusing on the creation of new institutions and avoiding the disruption of existing practices, leading to incremental changes. Incremental change is not only produced by incumbents focusing on creative institutional work, but also because of challengers opting for or drifting into a focus on creative institutional work. The concept of institutional work diversifies the picture of regime challenging actors and allows to examine how challengers might undermine some of their own efforts through the kind of institutional work they perform.

Our article proceeds as follows: in the next section, we provide an overview of studies on regime destabilization and outline the contribution of institutional work to these debates. The third section presents

the particularities of Finnish energy policy and our research design. In Section 4, we present the results on different forms of institutional work in Finnish energy policy. Section 5 provides a discussion of the interrelations between different forms of institutional work, while Section 6 concludes.

2. Regime destabilization and institutional work

To ground our empirical case study on Finland, we outline recent research on regime destabilization and the role of incumbents in transitions [7,8,33–36]. We highlight contributions from the discourse and framing literature in energy research [8,18,20]. Subsequently, we present the institutional work approach and its contribution to studying actors and agency in ongoing energy transitions [21,23].

The focus of transitions research has increasingly been on how to challenge current practices in the energy sector and destabilize unsustainable regimes [9,11,12,14]. This entails examining the role of incumbents or those actors that have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo and who act from a privileged position within the system [6,33]. Incumbents in the energy sector are often politically powerful, well-resourced and societally authoritative [34]. Efforts at regime destabilization are likely to meet severe resistance from incumbent actors, who seek to ensure the reproduction of the existing system [6]. Likewise, disruptive innovations may not fill their potential as incumbent actors work to hinder disruptive activities [6,21,35].

However, the picture of incumbent actors as merely resisting change is evolving and recent research acknowledges a variety of strategies incumbent actors use to shape transition processes. For example, Apajalahti et al. [36] demonstrate how incumbent energy companies engage in new technological fields at an early stage to influence the development of norms and practices to their own benefit. Incumbents may also act as hybrid actors or intermediaries that facilitate or enable change, for example, through building legitimacy and support for specific technologies [37,38]. These studies contribute to increasing subtlety and nuance in energy transitions research and moving away from a simplified image of regime challenging actors struggling against regime maintaining incumbents [21,38]. At the same time, most of these studies have examined specific technologies or sectors and there remains scope to assess actor roles and practices in wider policy processes and practices related to energy transitions.

A recent review identifies discursive approaches, referring to the wide body of studies that draw on discourse analysis, framing and narrative analysis, as a promising way for analyzing actors, institutional change and policy processes in energy transitions [39]. In the context of regime destabilization, discursive studies show how actors attempt to influence transitions through multiple agendas, diverse coalitions and framing struggles [7,8]. Different actors interpret and frame broader calls for change in accordance with their own specific priorities to justify and legitimize practices [20,40]. Spaces for innovation develop through actors' abilities to link the content of specific innovations, such as their cost and performance, with the broader context these innovations are embedded in [41]. Recent research takes this further by arguing that not only do actors connect innovations to the broader landscape, but they also actively engage in discursive work to shape the selection environment and translate pressures to change in accordance with their own priorities [7,20]. Likewise, regime defending actors engage in discursive work to justify a lack of action or to delegate responsibility to another level [8]. These studies point to the importance of language and discourse in creating legitimacy for practices and policies [42].

Meanwhile, empirical analysis on energy transitions in several European countries finds a widespread discursive commitment to sustainability and addressing climate change [8,42]. An analysis of German coal phase-out debates shows how both regime destabilizing and regime maintaining actors argue that climate change is a relevant concern, but frame it differently to assign responsibility to different levels and actors [8]. Similarly, Antal and Karhunmaa [40] show how two distinct

interpretations of the German *Energiewende* in Finnish media debates disagree over the *Energiewende*'s means to address climate change, not the commitment itself. In summary, contributions from the literature on discourse and framing demonstrate how actor coalitions aim to frame efforts at addressing climate change in beneficial terms for themselves. We think that it is necessary to address these collective discursive efforts in conjunction with approaches that focus on actors' practices and activities in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of how actors seek to influence transitions. Such cross-overs have been suggested in several recent reviews on discursive approaches [39,42–44], all of which posit that while discursive change is highly important for understanding processes of change, it is rarely the sole explanatory factor. We therefore suggest combining the analysis of actors' justifications for action with descriptions of their practices and activities through the concept of institutional work.

Within institutional theory, the concept of institutional work has been deployed to understand how actors and their practices contribute to change. Analysis of different actors' activities aimed at creating, disrupting, maintaining and defending institutions forms the basis of the institutional work approach (see Table 1). A key point is that actors are institutionally embedded and thus guided by the institutional structures they seek to influence [23,45]. Embedded actors may endeavor to break from existing practices, norms and rules and strive to institutionalize alternative practices [46]. However, their ability to do so is influenced by surrounding institutional arrangements, which can vary significantly according to national contexts [47]. Processes of change can be facilitated by disruptions [48], but can also take place gradually, through building tension with existing institutional arrangements [49].

Institutional work is analytically proximate to the literature on sociotechnical transitions, as both focus on processes of change and how different actors may influence these [45]. It is suited for the analysis of regime destabilization since institutional work highlights actor strategies aimed at altering or sustaining current institutional conditions. Since regime destabilization in the field of energy policy is likely to be a discrete and fragmented process with actors committed to broad and ambiguous goals, institutional work helps to clarify what activities different actors undertake in such conditions. Rather than promoting actors' abilities to foster disruptive events or transformative activities [see also 50], accounts of institutional work place the agency of actors within an institutional structure that is responsive to the surrounding environment [22,51]. Zietsma & McKnight [52], for example, show how actors may simultaneously attempt to discredit previous institutions

Table 1
Types of institutional work, compiled from Lawrence and Suddaby [23], Maguire and Hardy [24] and Fuenfschilling and Truffer [45].

Type of institutional work	Meaning	Forms of institutional work
Creating	Establishing new institutions by reconstructing, extending, and/or elaborating old structures and rules.	Advocacy; defining; vesting; constructing identities; changing normative associations; constructing normative networks; mimicry; theorizing; education
Disrupting	Criticizing or undermining existing institutions and members' compliance with them	Disconnecting sanctions; disassociating moral foundations; undermining assumptions and beliefs
Maintaining	Supporting or rebuilding the means that ensure institutional compliance	Enabling work; policing; deterring; valorizing and demonizing; mythologizing; embedding and routinizing
Defending	Reacting consciously and strategically to counter disruptive institutional work	Denying problematizations; discrediting; creating counter-narratives and alternative interpretations

while creating and promoting their own, in an iterative process that may continue for years. As a part of this process, actors adapt their institutional work according to the demands made by both the supporters and the challengers of their ideas [52]. Institutional changes are thus shaped by both active and strategic action as well as more pragmatic, subtle and gradual responses [51].

In contrast to destabilization studies that examine changes in technological pathways [e.g. 15], institutional work prioritizes agency and actors' individual and collective work. The institutional work approach highlights the need to look at the embedded everyday practices in which current institutional arrangements are maintained and which can contribute to gradual changes in energy systems [21]. It is thus a response to calls in transitions research to assess agency and the routine interactions between different actors [53]. In the context of a broad commitment towards transforming energy systems, it is important to look at the routinized and legitimate ways different actors can maintain and defend current institutions, avoid disruptive practices and create subtle changes in institutions [21]. In summary, the concept of institutional work allows us to analyze institutional change in a deeper sense than merely as a battle between incumbents and challengers, since institutional work pays attention to distributed agency, the effort required for institutional change, and the contingency of outcomes [54]. Institutional work contributes to and extends energy social science research to be more nuanced, contextual and attuned to specific governance contexts [55].

3. Research context and design

3.1. Calls for change in the stable Finnish energy sector

The Finnish energy sector stands out in the European context for several reasons. First, Finland has a diverse energy supply, with wood fuels, oil and nuclear energy as the largest sources of primary energy consumption [56]. While the proportion of renewable energy in total energy consumption is rather high, renewable energy relies heavily on bioenergy developed as a by-product of the pulp and paper industries, with solar and wind energy development accelerating only in the 2010s [57,58]. Second, Finnish per capita energy consumption is particularly high and energy-intensive industry, including the forestry, chemical and metal industries, is one of the main energy users (ca. 45%) [59]. Third, decision-making in energy policy has been concentrated in the hands of a closed elite [60–62], and these actors have remained relatively unchanged for decades [27,29,61].

The Finnish energy sector has been described as relatively stable, upheld by a tradition of consensus politics that has contributed to consolidating the position of powerful stakeholders [28,60]. In the context of Finland, consensus politics refers to extensive and regular consultation between government and interest groups to find solutions all stakeholders can agree with. This process involves the personalization of relations within and between individuals representing various elites, such as elites in politics, public administration, business and other organizations [28,63]. The state has an active role in regulating markets and selectively intervening to secure markets for new technologies [62]. In energy policy, consensus politics has been combined with an emphasis on market-based competition following Finland's entry to the European Union (EU) and the deregulation of the Finnish energy market in the 1990s [27]. While deregulation is promoted for breaking the ties between utilities and government, in the context of Finland, these ties have been rearranged to benefit large-scale actors [64]. For example, feed-in-tariffs for wind energy were set to be cost-efficient and market-driven, thus restricting the ability of small-scale producers to benefit from them and consolidating the position of dominant actors [28]. This shows the power of a "core regime level alliance" [65] or "energy elite" [27], in the Finnish energy sector. Central groups include: interest groups from the energy industry and energy-intensive industry, relevant ministries, and individual large firms in the energy sector. While diverse

in their aims, these groups have generally promoted market-based regulation, technology and export-driven growth, and employment as key contributors to social welfare [60,62,66]. They have succeeded in creating an institutional environment that favours economies of scale and emphasizes the importance of affordable energy and the security of supply [67].

A counterforce to industry has traditionally been provided by the Finnish Green Party and environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as the Finnish Association for Wildlife Conservation, World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and Greenpeace, which have questioned the growth imperative and opposed nuclear power and logging operations [32]. While NGOs have increasingly been incorporated into formal decision-making processes since the 1990s, their influence over policy processes and outcomes has not increased at the same pace and the role of NGOs has been limited in comparison to other Scandinavian countries [68–70]. Especially in the context of nuclear energy, the exclusion of NGOs from formal regulatory debates has led to them adopting a confrontational and antagonistic approach [69,71]. The Green Party has supported decentralized renewable energy (such as wind and solar) consistently, while most of the larger political parties (the Social Democrats, the National Coalition Party and the Centre Party) have supported nuclear and/or bioenergy due to their links with industry, forestry and agriculture [32].

Our analysis focuses empirically on developments in the 2010s as this period witnessed several interesting policy processes and an increasing diversification of energy policy actors. Key developments in the 2010s have included reaffirming a commitment to nuclear energy production [69], heated ongoing debates on the sustainability of bioenergy [72,73], the formulation of two new Climate and Energy Strategies and the development of a law to ban the use of coal in heating and electricity generation (initiated in 2016, consolidated in 2019¹).

New actors and initiatives that have sought to challenge the practices and content of current energy policy have also emerged in the 2010s. On the side of industry, new actors include renewable producers' associations, such as the Finnish Clean Energy Association (FCEA, formed in 2013). In addition, previously formed wind power and heat pump associations have become more visible in the public arena as they have actively lobbied for policy changes [32,74]. New actors also include a variety of NGOs, networks and organizations. New NGOs taking a wider science- or business-based approaches to climate change include the Ecomodernists (formed in 2015) and the Climate Leadership Coalition (formed in 2014).

New types of temporally bound networks consisting of loosely knit groups of individuals were also formed in the 2010s. Of these groups, particularly the Energy Renovation Group (formed in 2015) and the Professor Group on Energy Policy (formed in 2013) publicly challenged policy practices during 2013–2017, but have since stepped back from the public arena [32,75]. The Professor Group consisted of ten professors from a range of disciplines who carried out several public interventions criticizing Finnish energy policy during 2014–2015 [76]. They promoted renewable energy and decentralized options, the utilization of domestic resources and increasing transparency and openness in policy processes [77]. The Energy Renovation Campaign was a citizen's movement that aimed to: "lead Finland into making the decision to transform itself into a country with a completely sustainable and renewable energy [system] and to initiate this change right now"². The movement comprised approximately 100 volunteers who campaigned to influence the 2015 parliamentary elections. Following the elections, a

Parliamentary Energy Renovation group was formed, which brought together members (approx. 45–50) from all parliamentary parties to discuss energy policy and how to facilitate "a fast separation from fossil fuels and moving towards a renewable Finland"³. Although energy policy was not the central theme of the 2015 parliamentary elections, civil society action and public debate on energy policy heightened in the run-up to the elections, indicating that the elections created an opportunity for new actors to engage in energy discussions. In summary, new groups have broadened the scope and representation of actors in debates over energy policy and transitions and as a result critique on energy policy has become more public [32,67,72,74].

3.2. Materials and methods

With our research design we assess various forms of institutional work, their justifications vis-à-vis the actors' and organizations' role in the institutional realm and the potential and realized changes in energy policy. Our primary empirical material consists of expert interviews, complemented with documents and the academic literature on Finland. The interviewees were selected to represent different types of organizations with expertise in the energy sector (see Table 2). We selected interviewees from both established organizations and new groups, and interviewed several actors from each stakeholder group to ensure diverse views were represented. We conducted 24 interviews, in person or through Skype, by one or two of the authors during June 2016 – May 2017. The interviews lasted from between 31 and 109 min with a mean duration of 51 min. All interviews were conducted in Finnish and transcribed by a professional transcriber. All direct quotes displayed in the article have been translated by the authors. The quotes are labelled using the relevant stakeholder groups (Table 2) combined with our analysis on the actor's position in energy policy (see Table 3 in Section 4.1), in order to present as much information on the actors' roles while avoiding the identification of individual actors. This approach allowed the interviewees with more freedom to discuss and comment on other actors' activities in the stable energy policy context of Finland where actors know each other well. Two interviewees explicitly required confidentiality for sharing information. All interviewees agreed to this approach and have had the opportunity to review quotes used in an article draft.

We used a semi-structured interview guide to organize the interviews around the themes of the past, present and future of energy policy in Finland. The interview guide was slightly modified with each inter-

Table 2
Interviewees by affiliation.

Interview category	Number of interviewees
Environmental NGOs	3
Citizen activists	1
Industry groups representing energy industry (renewable and incumbent) and energy-intensive industry	6
Ministry representatives working with energy policy	3
Politicians from three different parties	3
Academics active in public energy policy debates	4
Actors working in multi-stakeholder initiatives such as science-policy initiatives and business-research coalitions (referred to as "Other")	4
TOTAL	24

¹ This was first suggested in the national Energy and Climate Strategy in 2016. In March 2019, the government implemented a law to ban the use of coal in electricity and heating generation by 2029. This law was in preparation at the time of the interviews and our analysis is based on comments on the preparation of the law.

² <http://energiaremontti2015.fi/mika-energiaremontti/>

³ <http://energiaremontti2015.fi/parlamentaarinen-energiaremonttiryhma/>

viewee but always contained questions on: the interviewees' ideal envisaged energy system; aims regarding future energy systems; their own position in the field of energy policy; cooperation with other actors; attempts to influence energy policy; and practices related to openness and participation in energy policy. The themes for the interview were chosen based on previous literature on energy policy in Finland [e.g. 27,32,63]. The interview questions were open-ended and allowed the actors to raise the developments they considered most important. Depending on their experience in the field, actors reflected on recent and more long-term changes. All interviewees discussed developments from 2010 onwards, with a focus especially on the years 2013–2017, which are marked by the publication of a Climate and Energy Strategy (2013), the negotiation of a new strategy (initiated in 2016), and parliamentary elections (2015).

The empirical material was analyzed by all three authors in an iterative process. The material was first coded in Atlas.ti individually by two researchers using a bottom-up coding scheme. The coding focused on identifying relevant topics from the material for further analysis based on the existing literature on energy policy in Finland and actors and agency in energy transitions. The analysis and research questions were modified in response to topics arising from the interviews [78]. Next, the topics were summarized in an Excel document to facilitate comparison between different actors' stances. The Excel document covered the actors' views on: ideal envisaged energy systems; their resources, activities, limitations and successes; policy and policy mechanisms; decision-making processes; as well as views on actors' roles and the roles of other actors. Following the first round of analysis, we decided to focus on the different forms of institutional work that could be identified in the actors' accounts. To do this, we used the Excel document, consulted the interview materials, and iterated between theory and empirical material to assess what types of institutional work actors describe engaging in.

We used documentary material and the academic literature on energy policy in Finland to complement the interviews. This material provided important contextual information and was used to validate and triangulate the interviews and to deepen our understanding of actors' institutional work [79]. The documentary material consists of relevant policy documents, press releases and newspaper articles that are referenced in the results section, when used. The material consists of 87 documents that were gathered between January–April 2017, using search words such as (in Finnish): “decentralized energy”, “wind power”, “professor group”, “peat”, “bioeconomy”, “solar power”, “energy strategy”, “energy transition”, “energy renovation 2015”, “clean energy association”. The aim of this selection was to capture key trends in Finnish energy policy and transitions. During the analysis, the material was used to verify statements presented in the interviews, particularly on policy processes as well as on the standpoints of other actors. For example, when an interviewee mentioned either frequent or low participation in specific policy processes, we used relevant reports to verify who had participated.

In addition to analyzing different forms of institutional work, we were interested in actors' discursive justifications for their activities. While actors describe similar types of institutional work, their motivations for taking part in it may differ. To assess the different motivations, we focused on how institutional work is framed and justified. Focusing on discourse requires interpretative analysis on the context of actors' statements and examining the use of expressions, terms and style [80,81]. For example, we were interested in why some actors want to increase the openness of policy discussions in Finland. To assess this, we focused on how the openness of policy processes was framed with regards to the existing situation and what alternative proposals were made.

Further, our analysis examined how actors' institutional work is linked to ongoing developments in energy policy. To this end, we highlighted relevant changes in energy policy based on the interviews, documentary materials and more recent developments since the

completion of the interviews. During the interviews, we asked actors about their most significant achievements in energy policy. For example, one interviewee mentioned the establishment of the Parliamentary Energy Renovation Group as a sign of increased openness in policy discussions. We do not claim that these changes occurred solely or even primarily due to the institutional work we observed, and the research design did not seek to measure the impacts of institutional work. Rather, the discussion on observed changes contextualizes the analysis on institutional work with recent developments.

We acknowledge limitations in our research design. First, we analyzed a single-country case study. While this limits the generalizability of the results, the approach is necessary for in-depth analysis of a specific institutional context. We offer reflections on similar dynamics in other contexts in Sections 4–6. Second, our empirical results rely largely on expert interviews. Expert interviews pose their own set of challenges with regards to gaining access to interviewees, ensuring their confidence and minimizing bias [82]. In our practical experience, the interviewed experts were willing to make time for us, share their thoughts and critique their own and others' approaches. We gained the interviewees' confidence by assuring them of the confidential nature of the interviews and that they would get to read a draft of the article prior to publication in order to check quotes. We sought to minimize potential bias by complementing the interviews with documentary material and relevant literature.

4. Results: Actors focus on creative work in seeking to influence institutions

4.1. Carbon neutrality sets the stage for institutional work

All actors acknowledged an imperative to transition the energy system but did not think such changes had begun in Finland or indicated they were only commencing at the time of conducting the interviews (in 2016–2017). Almost all actors envisaged a carbon neutral future energy system⁴, demonstrating the broad commitment to carbon neutrality in Finland [83]. This ideal was conveyed with different nuances, expressed using terms such as carbon-neutrality, emissions-free, zero-emissions, low-carbon and truly emissions-free.

While all actors agreed that renewable energy should play a significant role in the future energy system, our analysis distinguishes between three actor groups (Table 3). These differ in terms of their views on carbon neutrality as well as their position and abilities to influence energy transitions. We base the groupings on the interviews, supported by documentary material and existing literature on Finnish energy policy [e.g. 27,32,61,62,66]. We named the three groups “traditional actors”, “carbon neutral actors” and “renewable supporters”. The actor groups are used to present the results and discuss the different forms of institutional work in the empirical material. While we acknowledge that the groupings are not flawless and some actors could have been categorized in several groups, the groupings are necessary for understanding the context of actors' institutional work.

First, we distinguished actors who envisaged an energy transition towards 100% renewable energy from those actors who discussed a broader conception of carbon neutrality that included nuclear energy and/or bioenergy. The actors who envisioned a transition towards 100% renewable energy were mainly novel actors in the field of energy policy or actors that held a marginal position in policymaking. The three politicians from different political parties were also classified as renewable supporters since they belonged to the Parliamentary Energy Renovation Group, a novel group, and their stances show support for a transition towards 100% renewable energy.

The actors that envisaged a broader energy transition towards

⁴ One industrial organization representative was willing to include a small share of fossil fuels to ensure the security of supply.

Table 3

Actor groups in Finnish energy policy. The groups are based on actors' views on an envisaged energy system and their position in energy policy.

Actor group	Number and type of actors included ¹	Envisaged energy transition	Position in energy policy
Traditional (T)	Ministry	3	Carbon neutral energy sector; willing to include bioenergy and/or nuclear power. One actor would even allow for a small share of fossil fuels
	Incumbent industry	3	
	Total	6	
Carbon neutral (CN)	Industrial organization	2	Carbon neutral energy sector; willing to include bioenergy and/or nuclear power
	ENGO	1	
	Other, i.e. multi-stakeholder initiatives	2	
	Academic	1	
	TOTAL	6	
Renewable supporters (RS)	Industrial organization	1	Transition towards 100% renewable and emission-free energy system
	ENGO	2	
	Activist	1	
	Politician	3	
	Other, i.e. multi-stakeholder initiatives	1	
	Academic	3	
TOTAL	11		

The number of actors (n = 23) is smaller than the number of interviews (n = 24), since one actor could not be classified. This interviewee did not present a clear view on an envisaged energy transition and is therefore not classified in the table.

carbon neutrality can be distinguished into two groups. Traditional and carbon neutral actors are both willing to include nuclear energy and/or bioenergy in envisaged energy transitions but differ in terms of their position in the energy sector. Traditional actors have a secure position in the energy sector, whereas carbon neutral actors represent either recently established groups or groups that have not had significant institutional influence in energy policy. As our categorization of traditional actors includes both ministries and industrial organizations, we distinguish between these two types of actors in presenting the results. We refer to interviewees from industrial organizations who were classified as traditional actors (see Table 3) as incumbents, i.e. representing large-scale industrial companies and their interest groups [33,34]. This is because our empirical material also included interviewees from industrial organizations and interest groups that were classified as renewable supporters and carbon neutral actors (see Table 3).

Renewable supporters envisaged significant changes in the energy system and the transformation of energy sources towards 100% renewable energy by 2050. In contrast, traditional and carbon neutral actors were willing to include nuclear and/or bioenergy in the energy mix and highlighted the importance of emissions reductions. Nuclear energy was promoted for reducing emissions and referred to as a carbon neutral option, as one interviewee stated: “[to] promote low-carbon energy production and that of course implicitly includes nuclear energy” (CN, Industry group, November 2016). Nuclear energy was framed as more affordable than other solutions, particularly renewable energy. The actor groups also differed in their views on bioenergy. At the time of

conducting the interviews, the sustainability of bioenergy and the government's plans to increase logging were heatedly debated in both the media and research [e.g. [84–86]], which explains some actors' objections to bioenergy. Since conducting the interviews, the debate on the sustainability of bioenergy has intensified and recent research highlights the negative climate impacts of increasing bioenergy usage in Finland [73,87]. Traditional actors were the most supportive of bioenergy, whereas carbon neutral actors and renewable supporters were cautious regarding its future role. Renewable supporters, in particular, criticized bioenergy and called for “*courage to look at other [renewable] sources, those really emissions-free ones*” (RS, ENGO, November 2016).

The commitment to a carbon neutral energy system provides a broad goal for energy transitions that unites Finnish energy policy actors. At the same time, carbon neutrality is an interpretatively flexible term that accommodates several views on how to attain it [88,89]. Actors' stances differ regarding the inclusion and exclusion of specific energy sources. The views indicate that, within the frame of carbon neutrality, actors would like to see energy transitions take different directions and are likely to engage in conflicting forms of institutional work to garner or erode support for their views.

4.2. Actors and various forms of institutional work

The next few sections describe the different forms of institutional work present in our empirical material. Our interviewees placed considerable importance on energy policy and tended to highlight their institutional work in this area in contrast with working to influence everyday practices, consumer choices or business models. This is partially explained by our choice of interviewees as experts working in or seeking to influence energy policy, as compared to experts working in other areas, such as energy markets or municipalities [e.g. 90]. Table 4 summarizes the activities actors described themselves as participating in, the types of institutional work these represent, and how the activities are discursively justified. We also link the actors' activities to potential and realized changes in energy policy.

4.2.1. A focus on creative institutional work

Creative institutional work was the most prominent form of institutional work in the empirical material. All the actor groups highlighted taking part in creative institutional work and placed considerable importance on these activities. This type of institutional work focused on i) advocating for new regulation ii) advancing the means to participate in existing institutions and iii) creating new spaces and alliances to discuss energy policy and promote renewable energy in Finland.

Advocacy for new regulation was limited to renewable supporters and carbon neutral actors. Renewable supporters advocated strongly for more ambitious targets and policy measures to facilitate the spread of renewables in Finland. They argued that renewable energy, particularly decentralized renewable energy, was at a competitive disadvantage and needed additional institutional and financial support. Renewable supporters advocated for increased state intervention in energy markets and were more critical about current market mechanisms than carbon neutral actors. However, both renewable supporters and carbon neutral actors were supportive of a law banning the use of coal in electricity and heat generation. They considered the law valuable in solidifying the phase-out of coal to future institutional arrangements and demonstrating a strong commitment to carbon neutrality [see also 73].

Renewable supporters and carbon neutral actors also both agreed that the EU ETS should be modified. The EU ETS was seen as insufficient to facilitate the development of renewable energy, as commented on by a carbon neutral actor: “*one of the messages has always been that the EU ETS is not functioning and it does not further [renewable energy] investments. So, we were justifying in those discussions why it's necessary to continue with these support mechanisms [for renewable energy]*” (CN, Other, December 2016). As renewable supporters and carbon neutral actors were strongly advocating for the restructuring of the EU ETS, they were frustrated with

Table 4
Actor descriptions of their activities and forms of institutional work identified.

Activity	Actors	Type of institutional work	Justification employed by energy policy actors	Changes in energy policy
Deterring additional financial support to renewables	Traditional actors	Maintaining	Government should set emission targets, but leave companies to decide how to achieve them. No overlapping regulation with the EU ETS (EU Emissions Trading System) is needed.	Reinforcing a strong institutional tradition for market-based policy, which supports dominant technological solutions.
Deterring additional regulation by criticizing the ban on coal	Traditional actors	Maintaining	Regulation is unnecessary (as coal will be phased out anyway) and sets a dangerous precedent for state interference.	Law to ban coal use in heating and electricity from 2029 onwards was accepted in March 2019 and formalized as an institution.
Embedding existing power asymmetries by consolidating an expert policy advisor role	Traditional actors	Maintaining	It is necessary to provide decision makers with practical information based on long experience in the energy sector.	Expert policy advisor role has been widely accepted by other actors and created a practice of including industrial actors as permanent experts in ministry working groups and as regular invitees to parliamentary sessions.
Discrediting new actors by criticizing their new roles	Traditional actors and carbon neutral actors	Defending	Actors should stick to their institutional positions and areas of expertise.	Reinforcing the existing institutional arrangements and delegitimizing new actors and novel arenas for policy-making.
Advocating for regulation, more ambitious targets and increased financial support to renewables	Renewable supporters	Creating	Current markets do not support the development of renewable energy sufficiently and state intervention is needed.	100% renewable energy scenario included into energy strategy for the first time. Law banning the use of coal in heating and electricity approved. New government programme of 2019 sets ambitious carbon neutrality target by 2035.
Advocating for increased openness and inclusiveness	Traditional actors and carbon neutral actors	Creating	Everyone should be included so everyone can agree on the results.	Increased public conversation on energy policy. New mechanisms for hearing the public, such as online consultation, trialled with the 2018 Climate and Energy Strategy. Increased inclusion of renewable supporters into working groups.
	Renewable supporters		Important to create spaces for new ideas, but openness can be used instrumentally to increase acceptability.	
Changing normative associations by employing new concepts	Renewable supporters	Creating	Focus on the positives of renewable energy and make no negative statement about other energy options.	New frames facilitate public discussion and new alliances in energy policy. Avoiding negative statements could reinforce existing institutional arrangements.
		Disrupting	There is a need for a "new energy policy" in contrast to the old one.	Orienting public discussion on energy policy antagonistically around "new" and "old" solutions.
Constructing new identities and alliances by distancing from other groups in energy policy	Renewable supporters	Creating	Focus on growth and employment, need to distance from earlier ENGO justifications related to climate change.	Parliamentary Energy Renovation group created after 2015 parliamentary elections.
		Disrupting	Questioning the dominance of current policy actors and paradigms.	Extending discussions on openness of policy processes (e.g. regarding working groups, energy scenarios, power relations and actors roles)

traditional actors' unwillingness to reform the ETS. One renewable supporter referred to it as "hobby horsing": "*This emissions trading argumentation sometimes feels like a hobbyhorse. This weird slowing down, being hung up on the idea of 'well, we have this emissions trading' while at the same time acknowledging that it doesn't work*" (RS, ENGO, November 2016). Similar arguments regarding the inability of the ETS to promote technological change have been voiced in Germany [8] and by renewable energy advocates in the EU [91].

All interviewees discussed activities focused on bringing a new level of openness in energy policy-making and political discussion as positive developments. However, different actors' groups highlighted different forms of creative institutional work. Renewable supporters highlighted institutional work that sought to change normative associations by employing new terms and distancing themselves from old conflicts in energy policy. Renewable supporters focused on the positive aspects of renewable energy and strived to avoid any negative connotations that could arise from criticizing existing arrangements. They created new concepts, such as "Energy Renovation" to support this approach. As one renewable supporter explained: "*Never use the opponent's rhetoric or concepts. So the Energy Renovation concept was created. It was one day, one moment, [we thought] what is the concept we want to bring to Finland that is somehow different from these, energy revolution? Nobody wants a revolution, it's unpleasant. But a renovation, that is...*

Q: Everyone does renovations.

A: Yeah, everyone does renovations and there's a good vibe." (RS, Other, June 2016). Constructing a positive normative association with renewable energy was a deliberate choice. This strategy involved avoiding the disruption of current structures by remaining silent on the possible negative effects of other options. One renewable supporter explained the approach: "*There is no negative message about nuclear power, no negative message about peat or what is potentially challenging, but all the messages that are sent tell you how superior or how much better or how good renewable energy is.*" (RS, ENGO, November 2016). By using new concepts and avoiding criticism of existing energy sources, renewable supporters sought to distance themselves from old conflicts in energy policy, such as those related to nuclear energy.

Traditional actors emphasized their willingness to have conversations with all actors who wish to take part in energy policy. In line with a Finnish tradition of consensus politics [63], traditional actors viewed that it was necessary to include all relevant actors in policy-making to ensure actors' commitment to policies. However, this approach mainly relied on using existing channels of inclusion and is further discussed in Section 4.2.3 on maintaining institutional work. In addition, traditional actors highlighted the creation of new mechanisms for hearing the public such as conducting an open online consultation in preparation for the 2016 Climate and Energy Strategy.

A positive development in energy policy that was brought forward by renewable supporters was the inclusion of a 100% renewable energy scenario in the 2016 Climate and Energy Strategy preparation. This was the first time such an inquiry was conducted during strategy preparation, which renewable supporters viewed as a significant achievement. Another achievement discussed by both carbon neutral actors and renewable supporters was the formation of the Parliamentary Energy Renovation Group. Although the group does not have political power in parliament, it serves as a learning and meeting forum for parliamentarians interested in energy policy.

The motivation to take part in creative institutional work differed for the actor groups. For renewable supporters, it was essential for developing new institutional spaces for discussing energy policy. For traditional actors, creative work functions primarily as a strategy to accommodate other actors' demands for inclusion in policy processes and secure their own position in future policy arrangements [52]. This is demonstrated by traditional actors' undermining and criticism of parts of new actors' creative work, which is discussed further in Sections 4.2.3 and 4.2.4.

4.2.2. Minor disruption of existing institutions

Disruptive institutional work was not very prominent in our material and it was limited to individual interviewees and groups that do not correspond to our categorization of traditional actors, carbon neutral actors and renewable supporters. Only around half of the renewable supporters we interviewed engaged in active disruptive work by undermining the assumptions behind current policy processes and using new concepts antagonistically.

While new concepts were utilized for creative institutional work, they were also employed to disrupt existing institutional arrangements. This was most notable in the reports of the Professor Group on Energy Policy, which called for a "new energy policy" in Finland and questioned the legitimacy of the current, or "old", regime [77]. The Professor Group sought to reframe the concepts of growth and employment, which have been prominent in Finnish energy policy [62,66], around renewable energy as a global trend that Finnish technology companies and exporters can benefit from. The Professor Group criticized current policies for adhering to "old ways" and failing to promote growth and employment [77]. The reports also criticized current policy practices for a lack of transparency and openness.

All renewable supporters and one carbon neutral actor concurred with the critique on a lack of openness in current policy practices. Critics pointed especially to the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment's unwillingness to present the assumptions behind the scenarios used in the Climate and Energy Strategy as an example of the lack of substantive change in policy processes. As a renewable supporter commented: "*Participation is ostensible. And then this, that a ready and already decided strategy is the one that becomes public. And none of the assumptions behind the Excels [scenario calculations] are shown... The same bad style has been going on for years*" (RS, ENGO, November 2016). This critique continued despite a supreme administrative court case in which it was ruled that opening the data and calculations underlying the energy scenarios to public scrutiny was not necessary, as the document could be considered to be a continually-modified draft rather than a public record document⁵.

We do not note substantial changes in energy policy related to disruptive institutional work. Disruptive work has brought forward obstacles in terms of participation in policy and broadened discussions on power relations in policy processes. All renewable supporters and at least one carbon neutral actor credited the professor group for opening new discussion areas for energy policy and paving the way for other groups. At the same time, at least two carbon neutral actors discredited

the group for its antagonistic approach. The lack of substantive engagement in disruptive institutional work is due to the preference for focusing on creating new institutions and areas for collaboration. The implications of this are further discussed in Section 5.

4.2.3. Traditional actors maintain institutions

Unsurprisingly, institutional work aimed at maintaining current institutions was limited to traditional actors. Maintaining took two main forms in our empirical material: i) maintaining current policy frameworks and ii) embedding existing policy networks. Incumbents promoted the maintenance of existing policy tools and frameworks and wanted to maintain the existing level of state intervention for renewable energy. They lobbied against increased financial support for renewables and argued that state intervention should be limited to setting emissions reduction goals, while allowing companies time to adjust and find the means to meet these goals. Consequently, incumbents resisted technology-specific regulations and policies, such as the law to ban the use of coal. The proposed law was seen as both unnecessary due to the low financial viability of coal and disruptive due to it setting a dangerous precedent for government intervention. As one industry actor commented: "*there would have been no need to regulate it with a law, because our old coal power plants are going out of use all the time [...]. It is one technology that is being banned, you might wonder that at some point another technology might be banned*" (T, Industry group, February 2017). A similar argument, which calls for technology-neutral regulation and frames the coal ban as unnecessary additional regulation, has been used by incumbents in Germany [8]. Incumbents in Finland have also previously used the "setting a dangerous precedent of regulation" argument to oppose feed-in-tariffs for specific energy sources, such as wind [28].

In terms of changes in energy policy, incumbents' criticism of the law to ban coal was unsuccessful, as the law was passed in 2019. Efforts to reinforce existing market mechanisms have been more successful and current policy approaches continue a strong tradition of market-based policies in Finland [57,62]. Traditional actors agreed with carbon neutral actors and renewable supporters that the EU ETS was not functioning as intended and the price of emissions certificates was too low to drive significant changes in the energy sector. Despite this, incumbents framed the EU ETS as the primary policy tool for emissions reductions and used it to oppose additional policy measures to support renewables [see also 70].

All traditional actors discussed activities that were aimed at embedding and strengthening existing policy networks. Due to the relatively stable nature of the energy sector in Finland, traditional actors hold powerful positions, from which they are able to influence energy transitions. Further, traditional actors have more freedom to define actor roles in energy policy [28,61,65]. For example, incumbents have engaged in maintaining work by extending their role to function as expert policy advisors [see also 65]. As one industrial actor explained: "*We are trying to make sure that decision makers have information about the topic – that is the main function of lobbying, to distribute information about how things are, what happens, if we do this or that and relationships between cause and effects. Politicians are not usually very well aware of this*" (T, Industry group, March 2017). The expert role of incumbents was confirmed in an interview with a politician, who correlated lobbyists with scientists rather than other interest-driven groups: "*I would say that in Finnish energy policy discussions, the role of the lobbyists is emphasized here in the Parliament as well as in public discussions. We might not always be able to make the distinction between scientists and lobbyists*" (RS, Politician, May 2017).

In addition, incumbents have embedded themselves into current policy processes. This is reflected in their position in ministerial working groups, which are central arenas for negotiating policies [92]. Although the emphasis on openness and inclusiveness has increased the hearings with renewable supporters in policy working groups, incumbents are routinely appointed as permanent experts, while new actors have had to settle for the role of visitors. This role was taken as given by an industry

⁵ See the court case (in Finnish): <https://www.kho.fi/fi/index/paatoksia/muitapaatoksia/muupaatos/1445336804630.html>

representative: “as part of the strategy, there are always some official working groups and we are almost always in them” (T, Industry group, March 2017). The motivation to preserve current practices is embedded in routinized processes that have continued despite the criticism of novel actors.

4.2.4. Defending institutional work discredits new actors' roles

Defending institutional work aims to counter or discredit disrupting activities and is a more straightforward response than maintaining [24]. Traditional actors, especially incumbents, defended existing institutions by discrediting new actors and their activities that challenge current institutional arrangements. For example, traditional actors expressed doubts on the political impact of the Parliamentary Energy Renovation Group, as it did not abide by the traditional lines of government and opposition: “What do they [Parliamentary Energy Renovation Group] do there, they cannot really push for a specific energy policy across party boundaries, it does not work like that in a government-opposition arrangement” (T, Industry group, March 2017). Traditional actors and one carbon neutral actor were concerned that novel groups lacked institutional accountability, as they did not abide by existing, formalized structures. Similarly, traditional actors sought to discredit and downplay the significance of renewable supporters' aims. For example, the 100% renewable energy scenario was discussed as a symbolic gesture and political nod to ENGO demands that was not comparable to other scenarios used for policy preparation. This demonstrates how existing routinized ways of drafting policies can be defended, while making some concessions to challenger demands [see also 52].

Criticism of new actors' roles was extended to the Professor Group on Energy Policy that was discredited on the basis of academics moving beyond a linear model of policy advice and stepping into politics [see also 76]. The asymmetrical power relations between actors are demonstrated in the lack of similar doubts regarding the claims made by incumbents. Arguments made by incumbents were considered to be valid based on their extensive practical experience and knowledge of the energy sector [see also 64]. Defending institutional work has contributed to upholding current policy networks and has made the entrance of new actors more difficult, as their contributions are questioned based on their role and position in the current regime. Traditional actors are motivated to respond to disruptive institutional work that has directly challenged them and framed defensive institutional work as the unproblematic maintenance of current well-functioning institutional arrangements [21,24].

5. Discussion

Our results confirm a broad commitment to carbon neutrality in Finland [74,83]. This demonstrates how the gravity and urgency of responding to climate change and transforming energy systems has been acknowledged amongst expert stakeholders in Finnish energy policy. Since the empirical material was gathered, the commitment to carbon neutrality has been advanced to 2035 and set into the newest Government Programme [25]. In response, Finnish Energy (the energy producers' association) has announced its aim to halve their CO₂ emissions by 2030, relying heavily on the introduction of new nuclear power plants [93]. Meanwhile, the use of renewables, particularly wind energy, has also accelerated rapidly [94,95].

To highlight the commitment to carbon neutrality, energy policy actors have focused on presenting positive narratives of creative institutional work and have largely avoided the disruption of current institutional arrangements. Building on a convention of consensus politics [63], traditional actors have responded to calls for increasing participation in policy debates by highlighting their willingness to include all actors through online consultations or invitations to working group hearings. At the same time, traditional actors are able to influence who participates in policy processes and in which form [92]. Few actors are explicitly excluded, but challenging views can be disregarded or

marginalized [see also 64], as seen in incumbents' undermining the views of novel groups. While traditional actors speak positively about increased openness in policy, the embedded and routinized practices of policymaking have led renewable supporters and carbon neutral actors to claim that current efforts are not sufficient.

Renewable supporters and carbon neutral actors criticize the practice of inviting incumbent organizations as permanent experts in working groups and not opening up the statistics and scenarios used for policy preparation [see also 92]. In response, traditional actors emphasize the routine, unproblematic and effective nature of current practices [24]. This demonstrates the need to analyze how different forms of institutional work are interrelated: while traditional actors take part in creating new practices related to openness, they are simultaneously working to maintain and embed current policy networks. This points to the need for further analysis on how traditional actors can strategically use concepts such as participation to fend off criticism and maintain existing structures [96]. Recent research has diversified the picture of incumbents as seeking to participate in novel technological fields and shape these for their benefit [36,37,65]. Our results extend this finding to policy practices, where incumbents seek to respond to the broader societal trend of increased stakeholder inclusion through promoting participatory practices, which nonetheless do not endanger current institutional arrangements.

The limited amount of disruptive institutional work is in line with studies suggesting that stable institutional arrangements create constraints for disruption [22]. However, our results extend this finding by showing how disruptive institutional work is purposefully avoided as a strategic move by regime-challenging actors. The results highlight two approaches regime-challenging actors take to disruptive work. Individual groups, such as the Professor Group, took part in disruptive work and sought to reframe energy policy. Other renewable supporters commended the Professor Group's disruptive work, but purposefully opted for creative institutional work themselves and refrained from disruptive activities. These actors discussed how previous ways of influencing policy had not worked, making it necessary to create new alliances and distance themselves from old conflicts. This reflects institutional work that is sensitive to the surrounding environment, refraining from opening old conflicts and instead focusing on potential areas for collaboration [52]. The Energy Renovation campaign and Parliamentary Energy Renovation Group exemplify this approach, as they sought to create an open and apolitical space for learning and building new alliances.

The focus on creative institutional work can constrain the roles new actors adopt. To be included into policy-making processes, new actors have had to adopt the role of positively promoting new technologies and finding areas for collaboration with incumbent actors [32]. Focusing on the positive aspects of renewable energy in contrast to criticizing existing energy production reflects a strategy of “hegemonic accommodation”, in which actors compromise in order to incorporate new institutional arrangements into the existing institutional context [97]. This approach is distinct to Germany where regime-challengers focus on increasing alarm and creating negative framings around current practices, such as coal use [8].

As new actors sought to delegitimize “old” practices in the field of energy policy (as done by the Professor Group), they simultaneously limited the opportunities of new actors to engage in “old” debates, such as those related to nuclear energy. This maintains the existing institutional context as nuclear energy becomes embedded into the energy mix. Renewable supporters take part in continuing a tradition of nuclear “non-exclusion” in Finnish energy policy [60] as they refrain from employing strategies used previously by ENGOs to oppose nuclear energy [69,71,98]. This approach of “taking what the system gives” or taking part in maintaining institutional work by embedding current solutions, has been noted previously as a tactic for dealing with powerful actors [46].

New actors consider their creative institutional work to be their most

significant contribution, since they have succeeded in creating more space for discussing energy policy. Meanwhile, the endurance of new actors' creative work is uncertain. Since the collection of our empirical material, the Energy Renovation campaign has ended, the Professor Group and the Parliamentary Energy Renovation Group have not been publicly active, and the websites of these initiatives are no longer in use. Given the prevalence of consensus-seeking in policy and the sustained importance of working groups in Finnish policy-making [92], it is likely that the long-term impacts of renewable supporters' policy-focused creative and disruptive work will remain modest.

6. Conclusions

The objective with this paper was to assess how energy policy actors seek to influence ongoing energy transitions in a relatively stable institutional context. To this end, we have analyzed the different forms of institutional work energy policy actors in Finland discuss engaging in and show how these activities are discursively justified. Our results show that creative institutional work is prevalent and favored by all actors, that disruptive work is scarce, and that maintaining and defensive work are downplayed by traditional actors (see Table 4). All actors show an awareness of the surrounding institutional context and tailor their activities in response to prevailing institutional conditions and other actors' activities.

Our analysis makes two contributions to the study of regime destabilization. First, the concept of institutional work allows for stepping beyond the idea of challengers and incumbents and assessing the interrelated activities and practices different actors undertake to influence energy transitions. This is particularly useful in the context of a widespread commitment to a broad and ambiguous goal, such as carbon neutrality. In the context of Finland, we have observed how the outward agreement on carbon neutrality can assist in discrediting any disrupting institutional work and make it seem unnecessary due to a shared goal. This calls for a more nuanced debate on carbon neutrality, including both the use of more refined terms [73,99] as well as discussion on how sociotechnical visions like carbon neutrality legitimize policy practices and institutionalize actor positions [89,100,101]. Second, the case study shows how actors are strongly conditioned by prevailing institutional arrangements and opt for institutional work that is assumed to produce results and drive changes in policy. In the context of Finnish energy policy, this means that new actors have focused on creative institutional work and avoided disruptive activities, whereas traditional actors have emphasized their willingness to include new actors. This has resulted in increased collaboration but has come at the expense of accepting and embedding current institutional arrangements. As a result, changes in the energy sector in Finland are likely to take place incrementally, through modification of the existing field of energy policy and by integrating newly-created elements.

While our analysis is confined to a single country case study, we consider our results to be relevant for other national contexts that exhibit a broad commitment to addressing climate change yet demonstrate limited changes in policy networks, such as the UK [15]. Future research could examine other political contexts in which regime-challenging actors deliberately avoid disruption and favor creative institutional work. We suggest that similar dynamics are possible and merit research in other entrenched policy areas in which regime-challenging actors are seeking new strategies of influence, such as forestry, agriculture and urban planning.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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