

Punctuating “Happiness”: Punctuated equilibrium theory and the agenda-setting of the Gross National Happiness (GNH) policy in Bhutan

Lhawang Ugyel¹  | Michael Givel²  | Dendup Chopel³ 

¹School of Business, UNSW Canberra, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory, Australia

²College of International and Area Studies, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma, USA

³CAS-E Center for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences, FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg, Erlangen, Germany

Correspondence

Lhawang Ugyel, School of Business, UNSW Canberra, Canberra, ACT, Australia.

Email: l.ugyel@unsw.edu.au

Abstract

Gross National Happiness (GNH), a concept first introduced by Bhutan, has gained immense traction as an alternate development paradigm to GDP toward achieving wholesome global progress. In this paper, we investigate the origins of the policy of GNH, through the theoretical lens of the punctuated equilibrium theory (PET), and when and how GNH came to the national agenda. By focusing on the year 2008, that is, when Bhutan's Government transitioned from an absolute monarchy to a democratic constitutional monarchy, this paper analyses the key events that serve as policy windows and the policy entrepreneurs responsible for agenda-setting the policy of GNH. We argue there is a major change, such as, the government changing its form from monarchy to democracy, it is a definitive benchmark as to what punctuation means. In addition to providing a definitive meaning of “punctuation” in public policy, we also identify and discuss the key methodological issues in relation PET and offer explanations through Bhutan's policy of GNH to determine policy punctuation and measuring policy change.

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2023 The Authors. *Review of Policy Research* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of Policy Studies Organization.

KEYWORDS

agenda-setting, Bhutan, GNH (Gross National Happiness), PET (punctuated equilibrium theory), punctuation, well-being

INTRODUCTION

The development philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH) was first conceptualized by the Fourth King of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, when he stressed the need to consider “happiness” in addition to the pursuit of Gross National Product (Elliott, 1987; Kaufman, 1980). The concept of “happiness,” synonymously interspersed with the concept of “well-being,” has gained traction globally (Clark, 2018; Dolan & Metcalfe, 2012; Kubiszewski et al., 2013). Even the General Assembly of the United Nations recognized the relevance of happiness and well-being as universal goals in July 2011. From adoration to cynicism, the concept of GNH has received a wide variety of receptions from both the scholarly and practitioner communities. What these reactions often miss out is on actually investigating the origins of this public policy approach. Gross National Happiness was first espoused as a matter of expediency at a time when Bhutan was opening up to modern economic developments while also trying to balance the resulting developmental outcomes with the need for preserving the country’s age-old culture and natural environment.

In this paper, we analyze through the theoretical lens of punctuated equilibrium theory when and how GNH came to the national and international agenda. We examine the main events that serve as policy windows and the policy entrepreneurs responsible for agenda-setting the policy of GNH. Our study focuses on the year 2008, that is, when Bhutan’s Government transitioned from an absolute monarchy to a Democratic Constitutional Monarchy (as per Article 1.1 of Constitution of Bhutan). The new Constitution also had a provision for GNH, and as per Article 9.2, it states that “the State shall strive to promote those conditions that will enable the pursuit of Gross National Happiness.” One of the general discussions from a theoretical perspective regarding the Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET) in public policy is what is the meaning of “punctuation” in public policy. This has not been settled as there is a debate in the research approach toward determining punctuation, that is, whether the research approach has been one of examining communications and/or political advocacy (Desmarais, 2019; Givel, 2017; Robinson, 2019; Robinson et al., 2014). Through our analysis, we argue that when a major change, such as, the government changing its form from monarchy to democracy, it is a definitive benchmark as to what punctuation means. Prior to 2008, it is important to note that GNH was an overarching development philosophy. Under the 2008 Constitution, GNH was codified as an overarching government policy and goal of Bhutan. By doing this, it solidifies the point that GNH as a policy and under Bhutanese law began in 2008, and provides a solid basis to determine punctuation in PET.

In Bhutan, while the essence of GNH and its overall objectives remained the same since its conceptualisation, the components of how to achieve GNH has expanded and changed forms. The 1990s witnessed GNH being defined by four pillars: (1) sustainable and equitable socioeconomic development; (2) environmental conservation; (3) preservation and promotion of culture; (4) and good governance (RGOB, 1999). These four pillars provided the basis for Bhutan’s *Vision 2020* policy document and were the main goals for Bhutan’s 9th Five-Year Plan (2003–2008). Toward the second half of the decade of the 2000s, the concept of GNH expanded to include nine domains: (1) living standard, (2) good governance, (3) education, (4) health, (5)

ecology, (6) community vitality, (7) time use and balance, (8) culture, and (9) psychological well-being (GNHC (Gross National Happiness Commission), 2009). These nine domains are further categorized into 22 indicators. Accordingly, these sets of domains and indicators provided the basis for Bhutan's 10th Five-Year Plan (2008–2013). This study assumes extra significance in view of the fundamental and unprecedented sociopolitical changes that are currently taking place in Bhutan. This paper will apply GNH to PET in understanding and explaining sociopolitical changes in Bhutan, particularly around the well-documented period of 2008 when Bhutan's form of government and governance changed fundamentally.

PUNCTUATED EQUILIBRIUM THEORY AND ITS KEY ISSUES

Punctuated equilibrium theory in public policy is based on the premise that there are long periods of relative public policy stability accompanied by short bursts of sharp, dramatic, and significant public policy change (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009; Jones et al., 2017). Public policy in this paper is defined as what government institutions including executive, legislative, and judicial branches of any government do or do not do. For example, lawmakers in a legislative branch may or may not enact a law in a substantive policy area, for example health care. Policy stability is said to be a state of relative policy equilibrium with relatively little or incremental changes in a current public policy. Public policies are never in complete equilibrium (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009; Jones et al., 2017). Negative feedback loops prevail when a policy is in a relative state of stability.

By contrast, periods of policy instability are when policies are in disequilibrium. Here, public policy change is drastic, sharp, and abrupt. Positive feedback loops rapidly accelerate the enactment of a newly adopted policy. Drastic policy change is also characterized by the “creation and destruction of policy monopolies” (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009; Jones et al., 2017). Policy monopolies in which one interest group dominates are bound by specific institutional governmental structures in legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government. They are maintained by the political imagery and rhetoric of the viability of the policy monopoly linked to specific political institutions. The collapse of a policy monopoly occurs when widespread changes in attention and the reframing of information by interest groups of a current public policy greatly increases (Jones et al., 2017). After a policy punctuation occurs, this is followed, once again, by a long period of relative policy stability (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009).

For policies to become punctuated, they must overcome institutional political “friction” or overcome the current rules of the game such as current legislation. Additionally, PET advances the notion that political decision-making is based on bounded rationality or the lack of ability to comprehend all the benefits and costs from a decision (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009; Jones et al., 2017). The concept of bounded rationality mostly limits decision-making to be incremental and stable with relatively little change to a current public policy (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009). One common approach to measure punctuated policy change is gauging the relative degree of media focus on a particular public policy (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009; Jones et al., 2017). This has customarily been determined by the number of authoritative articles that appear over a set period related to a public policy. Usually, punctuated policy change is also measured using the statistical approaches of kurtosis and l-kurtosis (Desmarais, 2019; Flink, 2014; Kaplaner & Steinebach, 2021; Westfall, 2014). As noted by Kaplaner and Steinebach:

Kurtosis is defined as the fourth moment of a distribution. Contrary to the first three moments (mean, variance, and skewness), the interpretation of kurtosis is the object of debate. It is often wrongly interpreted as the peakedness of a distribution. (Kaplaner & Steinebach, 2021)

Furthermore, Westfall makes the important point:

Kurtosis tells you virtually nothing about the shape of the peak—its only unambiguous interpretation is in terms of tail extremity, that is, either existing outliers (for the sample kurtosis) or propensity to produce outliers (for the kurtosis of a probability distribution). (Westfall, 2014)

Kurtosis is incorrectly emphasized as the peakedness of a distribution. This description has been common among several punctuated equilibrium theorists (Baumgartner et al., 2009; Jones et al., 2019). Kurtosis is actually a measure of the degree, heaviness, and tailedness in a distribution. As Desmarais (2019) points out, “... if the constant input variance assumption is relaxed, finding high kurtosis is not sufficient to reject an incremental model of policymaking.” The implication of this, of course, is just because a policy change occurs with seeming peakedness in the distribution, it does not necessarily mean that the change is large and it can even be nonpunctuated and incremental. Methodological issues with the kurtosis and l-kurtosis approach to determining punctuations in public policy are several. This includes how to determine what are the exact degree of policy changes using the media analysis approach that indicate a policy punctuation (Robinson, 2019). A second issue is the key question of scale. Any policy change whether large with widespread and significant societal impact or small with relatively small societal impact can be characterized as “punctuated” (Robinson, 2019). Given this, falsifying an assertion that a policy is a significant and highly impactful event and thus punctuated has been problematic (Robinson, 2019). Falsification, of course, is at the center of the scientific method to test scientific hypotheses, theories, and laws (Platt, 1964; Popper, 1959).

Another issue with PET is the period required to characterize a punctuated policy change as a sudden and drastic policy change has not been entirely determined. Finally, the fourth key issue with PET is the means with which a punctuation is measured. One approach, as noted earlier, has been to count publication mentions of a particular public policy. Another approach to determine drastic policy change has been to analyze policy outputs or the actual language of written laws and regulations related to an adopted public policy by a government institution (Givel, 2017). This is performed to determine whether there has been a new or almost totally new and sudden change in the intent and purpose of a given public policy. The theoretical lens of PET is useful to determining the agenda-setting of the policy of GNH in Bhutan's national and international context. Through the four key issues in relation to PET, we apply the case of the GNH policy in Bhutan to determine policy punctuation and measuring policy change.

METHODS

In our study, we measure punctuated policy change by gauging the relative degree of media and scholarly focus on the policy of GNH. Normally, such measures are determined by the number of authoritative articles that appear over a set period. We argue that the punctuation of the GNH policy also occurs when the political events took place in Bhutan in 2008. This will be accomplished by using Google Trends that displays the search interest over time on a particular topic

(in this case “Gross National Happiness”) by assigning numbers ranging between 0–100 with a value of 100 representing peak popularity for the term. While Google Trends presents the data starting from 2004 onwards, we focus on the period 2005 to 2022. This is because Google Trends shows a search interest value of 100 for the month of January 2004, and this, we have treated the data for 2004 as an outlier in our analysis. Another important database that we used to determine the number of publications and trends in the development of the policy of GNH over a period of time were from Web of Science and Scopus. To start with, we used the search term “gross national happiness” in each of the database. This is a more appropriate term as opposed to other similar terms, such as “GNH” (which appears to be a commonly used acronym, particularly in the field of health and natural science), “well-being” (this would include a wider topic that goes beyond Bhutan), and “Bhutan” (as it would generate other publications not related to the concept of GNH). Scopus generated a total of 294 publications and the Web of Science database generated 288 publications as of December 2022. Based on the Web of Science database, the largest number of articles were in Economics, Education, and Environment (with 35 publications in each of these subject areas), followed closely by development studies). In Scopus, the subfields of social sciences were lumped together, which has the largest number of articles (147 publications) followed by business-related field (52 publications) and economics (52 publications).

For the gray literature, we used the information collected by Wangdi (2012) of a list of all materials related to GNH. The bibliography generated as a result contains “gray literature,” such as book chapters, reports, key newspaper articles, and audio-visual contents. Even though the materials are only till mid-2012, we have included the 344 materials generated in our analysis as it covers components that Web of Science and Scopus have not included. In addition to the data sources from the academic and nonacademic databases, we also examined the legislation passed through Bhutan’s parliament from 1998 to 2008 to determine policy outputs associated with GNH. For the period 1998 to 2008, the National Assembly of Bhutan’s website contains a repository of 43 Acts. We scoured each of these legislation to see whether the term “gross national happiness” was included in them, and none of these 43 Acts contained the term. This is consistent with what some scholars have reported. Through an extensive review of policy documents, newspaper reports and academic works published since the 1970s, Munro (2016, p. 77) claimed: “Bhutanese and international sources from this period do not mention GNH. Media reports around the time of the fourth king’s ascension to the throne contain no mention of GNH either.” This contrasts to some others, such as, Givel (2020), who in his study points to numerous accounts of legislation, including the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan, that was adopted since 2008, and made direct links to GNH as a national objective and policy.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows some of the key descriptive statistics of the data generated from Google Trends, Scopus, and Web of Science. The years examined for all three datasets are the same, that is, 2005 to 2022, to ensure similar unit of analysis for comparison. The total count for Google Trends includes the search interest for a total of 216 months. The mean value for Google Trend dataset is 11 with a range from 0 to 35. For Scopus and Web of Science, the data include the number of publications for 18 years. Table 1 is also helpful in explaining some of the distribution of the three datasets. The distribution of the data for Google Trends is close to a normal distribution with equal mean and median (a search interest value of 11), low standard error from the mean and in an acceptable range, as is the confidence level at 95%. Although the Scopus dataset also

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics of data on GNH based on Google Trends, Scopus, and Web of Science Since 2005.

	Google Trends	Scopus	Web of Science
Mean	11	15.9	15.6
Standard error	0.4	2.3	2.8
Median	11	15.5	12.5
Mode	6	7	n/a
Standard deviation	5.6	9.7	12
Sample variance	31.7	94.9	143
Kurtosis	1.7	−1.3	0.3
Skewness	0.7	0.0	0.9
Range	35	32	43
Minimum	0	1	1
Maximum	35	33	44
Sum	2372	287	281
Count	216	18	18
Confidence level (95.0%)	0.8	4.8	5.9



FIGURE 1 Google Trends on “Gross National Happiness” Since 2005.

has similar mean and median values (approximately 16 publications), in the Scopus and Web of Science dataset, the standard error and the confidence level at 95% statistics having a wider range compared with Google Trends. However, all three datasets report a kurtosis similar to that of a normal distribution, which is an important point in connection to our arguments (pursued in the Discussion sections later) and related to the methodological issues with the l-kurtosis approach to determining punctuation in PET.

A helpful visualization of our findings is the presentation of the datasets by year. [Figure 1](#) presents the monthly data generated by Google Trends from 2005 to 2022 as two-year moving average. From the year 2005 onwards, there was a slight interest in the years prior to 2008 ([Figure 1](#)). Since 2008, the search interest in GNH has seen a marked increase peaking in the years of 2010

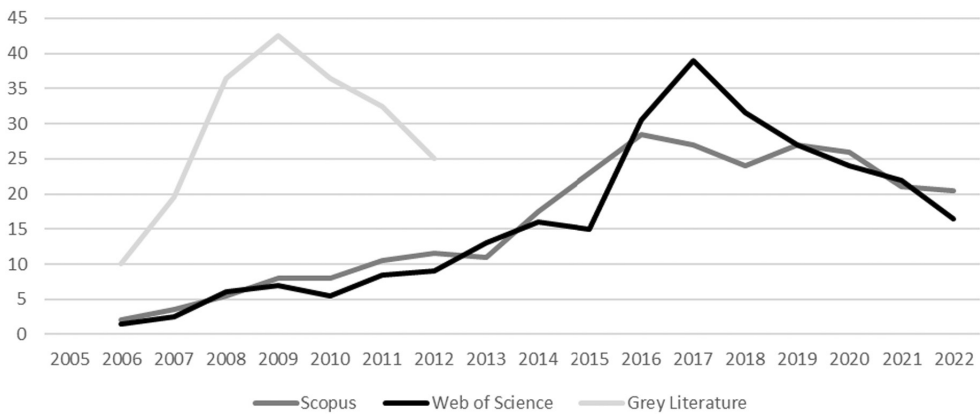


FIGURE 2 Publications Related to GNH Since 2005.

and 2011. Figure 2 shows the number of publications (again presented as two-year moving average over a period of time from Web of Science and Scopus). Since 2008, the number of academic publications related to the topic of GNH has been increasing steadily. Although the number is relatively small, given that academic research on Bhutan in general tends to be minimal, there has been a continuous rise since 2008 (peaking in 2016–17). Figure 2 also includes the number of publications for the gray literature for the period 2005 to 2012 as two-year moving average. With the gray literature, the rise of publications in 2005 and 2007 can be attributed to the number of book chapters and conference proceedings following the major international GNH conferences conducted in those particular years.

THE UNDERLYING PHILOSOPHY AND CONCEPT OF GNH

Happiness and well-being of both human and nonhuman inhabitants within the purview of the state is ingrained in Buddhist policy consideration. This is articulated in the personal value of the founder of the Bhutanese state, *Zhabdrung* Ngawang Namgyel (1594–1651) (Givel & Figueroa, 2015): “The happiness of sentient beings is dependent on the teachings of the Buddha, whereas the teachings of the Buddha, too, are dependent on the happiness of the world.” This value also found resonance in the public policies that he propounded in the Legal Code of 1729 as the basis of governance in Bhutan: “if the government cannot create happiness for its people, then there is no purpose for government to exist” (Givel & Figueroa, 2015). These sensibilities and values informed the views of successive kings of the Wangchuck dynasty, which has ruled Bhutan since 1907. However, it was the Fourth King, who had to make the expedient decision to more widely incorporate these wider concerns for the “more-than-human world” into modern governance as Bhutan shed years of reticence and sought to engage in modern development (Tsing, 2013). These needed harvesting and exploitation of the country’s resources while also having to deal with the equitable and sustainable distributions of the development gains. This is the background against which GNH first entered the policy consciousness in Bhutan.

The exact phrase of GNH was only sporadically used in the first decade of its coinage. Some scholars and observers believe the Fourth King flying back from Havana, Cuba, from a Non-Aligned Nation conference, mentioned GNH as more important than GDP in an interview with an Indian journalist at the Bombay, India airport in 1979. However, no authoritative citation or

quotation confirming this interview has been produced as of this writing. Other scholars and observers have argued that the Fourth King said GNH is more important than GDP in 1972. Again, there is no definitive or authoritative direct source citation of this as of this writing. It was first reported in a global outlet when Tyler (1980) reported Bhutan as saying in the Los Angeles Times that: "We'll modernize, but at a pace the Bhutanese people can keep up with. Gross National Happiness is just as important to us as Gross National Product." Similarly, reporting for the Weekend Financial Times, John Elliott (1987) quoted the Fourth King as saying:

We are convinced that we must aim for contentment and happiness. Whether we take five years or ten to raise the per capita income and increase prosperity is not going to guarantee that happiness, which includes political stability, social harmony, and the Bhutanese culture and way of life.

Gross National Happiness has been discussed in relation to progressive global agendas, such as, subjective well-being (SWB) and most commonly with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. It is commonly claimed that there is a high level of integration between the imperatives of SDG and GNH. Of the SWB, Adler et al. (2017, p. 22) claim that "the notion of subjective well-being is currently the dominant conception of happiness in psychological literature." Subjective well-being is currently considered to be a multidimensional construct, referring to distinct but related aspects that are often treated as a single property called "happiness." Specifically, SWB these days tends to encompass how people evaluate their own lives in terms of both affective (how we feel and emotive) and cognitive (what we think) components of well-being. Similarly, Diener and Tay (2017, p. 90) argue that:

For many years scholars equated happiness with hedonism – where the experience of pleasure is an end in itself. Happiness was thought to be a desirable thing because it felt pleasurable. Research now shows that high levels of subjective well-being go beyond hedonism. This is because the experience of happiness accompanies the fulfillment of needs that are congruent with people's values and goals. For instance, having basic necessities and a sense of freedom are associated with greater happiness, as are environmental factors such as clean air.

Therefore, there is also growing recognition that achieving well-being can be achieved only with fundamental structural changes in our socio-economic and political organization. Thin et al. (2017, p. 39) say that "past economic growth has helped to bring great progress in the global reduction of illness and poverty, in the extension of human lives, and in the reduction of some important forms of inequality. But the dominant model for pursuing happiness today is at best inefficient and unsustainable, favoring resource-intensive lifestyles that are unlikely ever to be available to all of humanity. To continue on the current path not only condemns much of humanity to deprivation in the present; it risks catastrophic environmental harms that will undermine future happiness in all nations. We cannot defer forever the encounter with environmental limits. We need to find more efficient, less costly ways of pursuing happiness." Furthermore, they explain that:

"Regarding definitions of happiness, we can distinguish two types: philosophical and operational. A philosophical definition specifies the essence or nature of happiness: what happiness is, such that certain things contribute to it or can be seen as indicators of it. An operational definition specifies what, in practice, we focus our

attentions on. What do use as our gauge of happiness? People from widely varying philosophical perspectives might still agree on an operational definition of happiness, for instance because they agree that things like health are crucial indicators of happiness, even if they disagree about why health ultimately matters... From an operational standpoint, this [they define] happiness in terms of the nine domains of GNH.”

Frey (2017, pp. 80–81) analyses why happiness matters in policy, and praise Bhutan's leading global role in this regard:

“Governments have paid great attention to the results of happiness research, thus marking one of the rare instances when politicians actually react to insights from academia. A happiness policy has been explicitly proclaimed in countries such as Great Britain, France, Germany, and even China. The Kingdom of Bhutan was a forerunner in this respect. The objective of government policy is no longer taken to be development in terms of a growing Gross National Product (GNP), but it rather consists in raising, if not maximizing, a National Index of Happiness.”

There is not only a policy, but also a political aspect of GNH in Bhutan. Hirata et al. (2017, p. 331) corroborate, “Now, GNH conceives of two of the four major aspects of good governance to be matters of ‘political participation’ and ‘political freedom’ (Ura et al., 2012, pp. 25-26), and these may be understood to be desirable in themselves, at least to some degree. They are not deemed to be relevant to wellbeing simply as a means. Although it is sensible to think of good governance as being good for its own sake to some degree, other domains, such as community vitality and psychological wellbeing, are valuable in that way to a much more noticeable degree.” Political freedom and wellbeing of people depend on their place in the community. Conway et al. (2017) argues that empirical studies identify the community to be one of the most significant determinants of well-being for individuals and families. Social capital also affects people's learning and health. Therefore, GNH policy should focus on vitalizing communities and make reciprocity of goodwill and support important. Conway (2017, p. 349) further argues that “reciprocity can be defined as —being the equality of perceived investments in and out from a relationship relative to the person's own internal standards. People pursue a balance between what they ‘invest’ in a particular relationship (for example, time, skills), and what they receive in return from it (for example, appreciation, self-esteem).” With this broad assessment of the origin of GNH and how various national and global considerations shaped its evolution, we will now discuss the policy entrepreneurs who set the policy agenda of GNH in national governance.

GNH POLICY AGENDA-SETTING, POLICY WINDOW AND POLICY ENTREPRENEURS

It is not only that the origin of the concept and philosophy of GNH that is contested, but how and when GNH as a policy was introduced into Bhutan's policy-making process. To this effect, there are various claims that hypothesize how and when GNH became a policy agenda in Bhutan. For instance, See (2022) identifies four factors that played a fundamental role in establishing GNH as a development paradigm and a nation building strategy: Buddhism, the character of the Bhutanese economy, the monarchy, and the international context into which GNH unfolded.

Munro (2016, p. 71) claims that GNH is an “invented tradition” and that it was only in 1996 that any mention of GNH was made in any Bhutanese government publication (in this case it was the 1996–97 National Budget). Both Munro (2016) and See (2022) present a similar argument that Bhutan’s ethnic domestic problem in the late 1980s and early 1990s was the key reason that led to the introduction of GNH as a policy and nation building strategy. While Munro’s argument is compelling, the purpose of this section is not to engage in this debate as Masaki and Tshering (2021) in their study have focused entirely on refuting Munro’s claims. Essentially, Masaki and Tshering (2021) counter-argue that GNH is deeply rooted in the country’s tradition of Mahayana Buddhism, the Bhutanese Government considered the broader international debate on development and that a historical analysis of the five-year plan documents since the 1980s show the gradual process of elaboration of GNH. Our study, to a certain extent, conforms to the findings purported by Masaki and Tshering. In the policy discourse, one of the earliest to use this compound phrase was Thakur Singh Powdyal (1988) who wrote, “The success or failure of our five-year plans will be measured by the level of contentment and happiness of the Bhutanese people.” Furthermore, the 6th Five-Year Plan (1988–1992) said the outcomes of the plan will be “evaluated based on whether it had brought *gakid* (happiness) to the people.” Similarly, the 8th Five-Year Plan stated that economic growth is useful only to the extent that they can contribute to “Gross National Happiness.”

While the focus of this section is not to engage in the debate as to whether or not GNH was an invented tradition, it is important to identify the first time that GNH as a policy was brought to the agenda in definitive legal form in Bhutan. Even though GNH’s first usage as a policy was in 1996, Munro (2016) himself concludes that mentions of GNH took off only in the Tenth Five-Year Plan (2007–2013). Thus, providing emphasis of the prominence of the year 2008 as a significant period in the agenda-setting of GNH as a policy in Bhutan. It was in these years that Bhutan’s transition from absolute monarchy to democracy took place, and the lead up period from 1998 onwards was important towards the political transition. The period 1998–2008 represents a period when major political changes took place in Bhutan (see Figure 3 for a time line of the major institutional and policy changes during this period). Substantial changes in the political system took place in 1998 when the Fourth King devolved his executive powers to a council of ministers

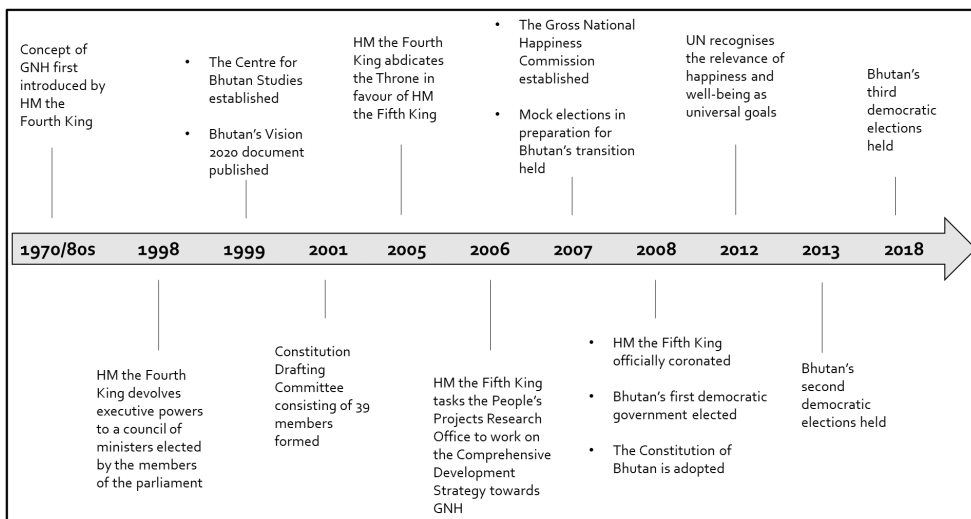


FIGURE 3 Time line of Key Events in Bhutan.

elected by the members of the parliament (refer to [Figure 3](#) for time line). Subsequently, the process of establishing a democracy was started in 2001 with the drafting of the Constitution and the first democratic parliamentary elections was held in 2008 (refer to [Figure 3](#) for time line). In the case of Bhutan's 1998 to 2008 transition in governmental form from an absolute monarchy to a Democratic Constitutional Monarchy, the change was voluntaristic (Sinpeng, 2007; Turner & Tshering, 2014). As a result of the policy events from 2001 to 2008, the rapid change in governmental form from an absolute monarchy to a Democratic Constitutional Monarchy happened on July 8, 2008, when Bhutan adopted its new Constitution. To reemphasize, this is when there is a definitive legal provision in the 2008 Bhutan Constitution providing for GNH, which is the beginning of GNH as public policy codified in law and constitutional provision. In addition to these major political transformations, there were substantial institutional and policy changes that influenced the policy of GNH in Bhutan. For instance, in 1999, the Planning Commission was reconstituted to mainstream happiness in national policy and the Centre for Bhutan Studies (CBS) was established as its research think tank (see [Figure 3](#) for a time line). The period 1998 to 2008 provided a "policy window" for the agenda-setting of GNH as a major policy in Bhutan. According to Kingdon (1993), policy windows present an opportunity for policies to be included as an agenda, and these policy windows stay open only for limited periods. Some of the key policies and events that are directly related to the policy of GNH are highlighted in [Figure 3](#). One of the first documents to clearly specify GNH as a major policy framework was the "Bhutan: Vision 2020" document that would guide the country's development for the next two decades. This document for the first time elaborated five central tenets of GNH, namely: (i) balanced and equitable socio-economic development; (ii) environmentally sustainable development; (iii) human development; (iv) culture and heritage; and (v) governance. The culmination of this policy articulation of GNH occurred in the country's first written constitution adopted in 2008.

Ever since Bhutan became an absolute monarchy in 1907, Bhutan's monarchs have played a crucial role in Bhutan's survival as an independent sovereign nation. The monarchy in Bhutan has been a leading force of change contrary to other monarchical states, which have resisted democratic changes (Mathou, 1999). Bhutan's transition to democracy was clearly initiated by the monarchy (Corbett et al., 2017), and its successful process can be attributed to the presence of a strong and transformational leadership (Turner et al., 2011). The Fourth King, who at that time was at the peak of his authority with widespread support (Kaul, 2008), not only initiated the process of democracy but also voluntarily gave up his powers as an absolute monarch in favor of his son the Fifth King, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, in December 2006. In this respect, both the fourth and fifth kings of Bhutan were key policy entrepreneurs. Mintrom and Norman (2009) contend that policy entrepreneurs display elements of social acuity and change the current way of doing things.

In ascending the throne, the Fifth King was mainly responsible for the successful conduct of the elections for the first democratically elected parliament. The National Council (upper house) elections were conducted in December 2007 and the National Assembly (lower house) elections in March 2008. The other main responsibility that the Fifth King took upon himself was to ensure that plans and policies were in place for the new democratically elected government to implement. These policies also marked a departure from previous ones and was reflected in the national policy of GNH. The Fifth King set up a team to work on a set of strategies to operationalize the vision of GNH for the country. A key outcome of the initiative was a report, the "Comprehensive Development Strategy towards Gross National Happiness," that was to develop a vibrant economy for Bhutan. This document was used by the new democratically elected government to form the basis for the Tenth Five-Year Plan, which determined the programs and

activities to be implemented for the period 2008–2013. From just seven mentions of GNH in the Ninth Five-Year Plan document, the number of mentions increased to 80 in the Tenth Five-Year Plan document and to 260 in the Eleventh Five-Year Plan (2013–2018) document (Munro, 2016). It was also during the Tenth Five-Year plan that the four pillars of GNH were expanded to nine domains to facilitate a strategic perspective and framework to operationalize GNH (Montes & Bhattarai, 2018). Furthermore, it was to ensure that the concept of GNH as Bhutan's developmental philosophy was integrated into normal policy making. This responsibility was entrusted to the Gross National Happiness Commission (GNHC), which was established in 2007 by subsuming the erstwhile Planning Commission Secretariat and the Department of Aid and Debt Management from the Ministry of Finance. The mandate of GNHC was also enhanced to act as the central government body responsible for coordinating and spearheading policy, review and endorse the nation's five-year development plans, mobilize and allocate resources for the activities of the five-year plans, and to review the progress and outcomes of the development policies and plans. Toward institutionalizing and operationalizing the policy of GNH as Bhutan's developmental philosophy, and to integrate GNH into normal policy making, the role of GNHC was crucial. As a basis to review and approve the policies and programs implemented across Bhutan, GNHC uses the GNH Policy and Project Screening Tool which, as of July 2020, comprised of 22 variables across nine domains (that is, living standard, good governance, education, health, ecology, community vitality, time use and balance, culture, and psychological well-being). Each of these 22 variables are provided a score between 0 and 4, and the consolidated score which is an average of the total score is used to determine whether or not a policy is to be approved. The policy screening tool was developed based on the first GNH survey undertaken by the CBS in 2007–2008 (Penjore, 2008).

POLICY PUNCTUATION AND ADDRESSING KEY ISSUES IN PET

The formulation and implementation of the policy of GNH in Bhutan provides an appropriate basis to examine various aspects of PET. One major aspect is the change of the political system from an absolute monarchy to democracy in 2008, which provides a clearer perspective as to what we mean by “punctuation” in the PET in public policy. We see a clear “punctuation” occurring in 2008 (refer to Figures 1 and 2), and the policy outputs represented by the number of publications and search interests can be complemented by the number of key political, institutional, and policy events (as indicated by Figure 3) that take place in 2008 with the adoption of the new Bhutanese Constitution. Another aspect of the analysis of PET is through a deeper examination of the conceptualization and the implementation of the policy of GNH in Bhutan. Our study identifies and addresses some of the key methodological issues to determining punctuations in public policy. The four issues that we identify are as follows: first, determining the exact amount of policy changes that indicate policy punctuation; second, the question of scale, policy significance, and impact; third, determining the period required to characterize policy change; and fourth, means of measuring punctuation. Table 2 shows the four methodological issues related to determining and measuring policy change, and in a separate column the table points to indicators and highlights of the GNH policy that relate to the issues. We merge these four issues into two and discuss them in this particular order: (1) means of measuring punctuation and period required to characterize policy change; (2) determining the exact amount of policy change, question of scale, policy significance and impact.



TABLE 2 Measuring policy change—GNH and PET.

Punctuated equilibrium theory	Gross National Happiness Policy
Issue 1: Determining the exact amount of policy changes that indicate policy punctuation.	Key policy changes in Bhutan: • In 2008, government transitioned from absolute monarchy to democratic constitutional monarchy. • New Constitution includes provision for national promotion of GNH. • Establishment of the GNH Commission in 2007. • Development of GNH Policy Screening tool in 2008
Issue 2: Question of scale, policy significance and impact.	GNH as a: • National agenda where GNH policies are included in legislation and policies since 2008. • Global agenda where the UN adopts the policy of “happiness” as an agenda in 2012.
Issue 3: Period required to characterize policy change as a sudden and drastic policy change.	Policy change is not directly related to the amount of time, but the change in itself (i.e., the change in government system which was initiated between 1998 and 2008).
Issue 4: Means of measuring punctuation.	Through the counting of GNH-related publications and policy outputs in the form of written laws and regulations.

As described earlier in this paper, under PET, there are long-term and relatively stable policy changes. This is followed by “dramatic,” “explosive,” and short-term policy changes (Givel, 2012). PET in public policy processes is based on policy changes over time stemming from and influenced by past policy sequences and trends. Reversals in policy sequences and trends can occur in PET (Howlett & Rayner, 2006). As noted in the scholarly literature regarding the time taken, for example, for political revolutions to occur, political revolutions may occur in a “...short period, long period, or not at all” (Givel, 2015; Goldstone, 2001). In other words, political revolutions may and usually do contain a longer period of sequential policy events before the actual punctuation or political revolution happens. Thus, a benchmark to determine whether a public policy or change in governmental form is punctuated is not necessarily related to the amount of time that sequential policy events before the policy or governmental change occurred. Rather, the benchmark for analysis on whether a punctuation has taken place is on whether a policy or governmental transition entirely or almost entirely changed the previous policy or governmental (or policy) form. In the case of Bhutan’s 2008 transition in governmental form from a hereditary monarchy to a constitutional monarchy, the change was voluntaristic (Turner & Tshering, 2014). The change in a democratic form was initiated and implemented due to a royal decree from the Fourth King of Bhutan. As a result of the policy events from 1998 to 2008, the rapid change in governmental form from a hereditary monarchy to a constitutional monarchy happened on July 8, 2008, when Bhutan adopted its new Constitution. This is a straightforward illustration of what a punctuation looks like as it relates to a dramatic and explosive change in governmental (or policy) form. In our analysis of the data based on Google Trends, Scopus, and Web of Science (refer to Table 1), we do not observe l-kurtosis as an indication of punctuation in PET in any of the datasets. Thus, confirming the point that any apparent peakedness (large or small) in media communications might be deemed or appear to be a punctuation. But is it? In our study, the peakedness of the distribution does not occur in the period we determine as the “punctuation,” that is, in the year 2008. The highest number of search interest of GNH on Google Trends occurs in

2011 and for academic publications the largest number of publications is in the years 2016–2017. Given some of these challenges in incorrectly using kurtosis to determine punctuation, we argue that an equally important or better way to double check or confirm punctuation is through the scale and amount of punctuated policy change.

The amount of policy change and its scale, significance and impact can be determined by examining the numerous changes in the institutions and policies in relation to GNH. As discussed earlier, a substantial policy change due to events that took place between 1998 and 2008 is the transition of the governmental form from absolute monarchy to democratic constitutional monarchy. We include two other determinants of policy change that indicates policy punctuation here: the establishment of the GNH Commission in 2007 and the development of the GNH policy screening tool in 2008. The process of conceptualization of the GNH was the establishment of the CBS in 1998. The task of turning the general philosophy and principles of GNH into measurable and practicable policy instruments was achieved through a series of scholarly international conferences that attracted contributions from scholars and practitioners working in this field from around the world. The conferences were organized at fairly regular intervals after the first was held in Thimphu in 2004. The second took place in Canada in 2005, third in Thailand in 2007, the fourth in Thimphu in 2008, the fifth in Brazil in 2009, sixth in Paro in 2016, and the latest and seventh was held again in Thimphu in 2017. Apart from these major international conferences, which saw hundreds of leading global participants, there also occurred a critical workshop and seminar in 1999 and 2001, respectively, in Bhutan and the Netherlands, which set the agenda of GNH and helped form the initial policy and scholarly statements on GNH.

The scale of policy impact of GNH extends beyond Bhutan's borders to the international policy arena. The UN General Assembly in its 65th session held on July 19, 2011, adopted "Happiness: towards a holistic approach to development" as a resolution (UN, 2011). The UN recognized that the pursuit of happiness is a fundamental human goal, and it also recognized that GDP did not adequately reflect the happiness and well-being of the people. The resolution passed by the UN General Assembly welcomed the offer of Bhutan to convene during the following session of the General Assembly a panel discussion on the theme of happiness and well-being. In April 2012, the Royal Government of Bhutan convened the high-level meeting on "Wellbeing and Happiness: Defining a New Economic Paradigm" (RGOB, 2012). There were more than 800 participants that included prominent people from various governments, international organizations, media, business, scholars, and spiritual leaders. In her welcome remarks during the inaugural session of the high-level meeting chaired by Helen Clark (who at that time was Administrator, UNDP and a former Prime Minister of New Zealand), she stated that (RGOB, 2012, p. 25):

Bhutan's longstanding pursuit of Gross National Happiness (GNH) could inform the development of a new economic paradigm because this approach integrates inclusive economic development with "strengthening communities, protecting the environment, providing universal access to health services and education, and preserving traditional culture and heritage."

CONCLUSION

Through the analysis of the policy of GNH in Bhutan, our paper provides a definitive and concrete benchmark of the meaning of "punctuation" in PET. We demonstrate that the transition of Bhutan's Government from monarchy to democracy indicates policy punctuation.

This policy punctuation provides the policy window for the agenda-setting of GNH policy in Bhutan. The policy of GNH was conceptualized during the period of 1998–2008 when major political changes were being introduced in Bhutan. We argue that policy change is not directly related to the amount of time but the change in itself that is important (thus addressing the issue of determining the period required to characterize policy change). More specifically, we identify four key methodological issues in relation to PET and offer explanations through Bhutan's policy of GNH. First, in determining the exact amount of policy changes that indicate policy punctuation, we highlight some of the key policy conceptual trends and institutional changes leading to GNH in Bhutan that took place in the period 1998 to 2008. In addition to the transition of the government from a monarchy to democracy, the new 2008 Constitution included the provision for national promotion of GNH. The adoption of GNH in the 2008 Bhutan Constitution is the year the definitive and actual sharp burst of punctuation and policy change happened. And institutions such as the GNH Commission and the CBS were established with mandates to develop a policy framework for GNH. Second, on the question of scale, policy significance and impact, GNH accompanied a major change. In fact, a new policy linked to a change in governmental form that was accorded key agenda at the national level. As a national agenda, GNH policies were included in all major legislation and policies since 2008. As a global agenda, the UN adopted the policy of “happiness” in 2012. Third, the period required to characterize policy change was clearly specific in the case of leading up to the constitutional adoption of GNH, that is, 1998 to 2008 when the conceptualization process of GNH was initiated and implemented. Fourth, with the means of measuring punctuation in PET, through the counting of GNH-related publications and policy outputs in the form of written laws and regulations, we were able to demonstrate what exactly was meant by “punctuation.” This was accomplished through the observation of the surge in the mentions of the term “Gross National Happiness” in Google Trends since 2008 and the increase in the number of academic publications related to GNH in the same period. Within Bhutan, the numerous accounts of legislation adopted since 2008 that makes direct links to GNH as a national objective establishes the fact that it was not until the adoption of GNH in the 2008 Constitution that it became a codified and definitive legal policy.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Open access publishing facilitated by University of New South Wales, as part of the Wiley - University of New South Wales agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

All authors certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or nonfinancial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

ORCID

Lhawang Ugyel  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1260-5827>

Michael Givel  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3829-6666>

Dendup Chopel  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2648-4491>

REFERENCES

- Adler, A., Boniwell, I., Gibson, E., Metz, T., Seligman, M., Uchida, Y., & Xing, Z. (2017). Definitions of terms. In *Happiness: Transforming the development landscape* (pp. 21–39). The Centre for Bhutan and GNH Studies.

- Baumgartner, F. R., Breunig, C., Green-Pedersen, C., Jones, B. D., Mortensen, P. B., Nuytemans, M., & Walgrave, S. (2009). Punctuated equilibrium in comparative perspective. *American Journal of Political Science*, 53(3), 603–620.
- Baumgartner, F. R., & Jones, B. D. (2009). *Agendas and instability in American politics* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press.
- Clark, A. E. (2018). Four decades of the economics of happiness: Where next? *Review of Income and Wealth*, 64(2), 245–269.
- Conway, R., Boniwell, I., & Metz, T. (2017). Community vitality. In *Happiness: Transforming the development landscape* (pp. 347–378). The Centre for Bhutan and GNH Studies.
- Corbett, J., Veenendaal, W., & Ugyel, L. (2017). Why monarchy persists in small states: The cases of Tonga, Bhutan and Liechtenstein. *Democratization*, 24(4), 689–706.
- Desmarais, B. A. (2019). Punctuated equilibrium or incrementalism in policymaking: What we can and cannot learn from the distribution of policy changes. *Research and Politics*, 6, 1–6.
- Diener, E., & Tay, L. (2017). A scientific review of the remarkable benefits of happiness for successful and healthy living. In *Happiness: Transforming the development landscape* (pp. 90–117). The Centre for Bhutan and GNH Studies.
- Dolan, P., & Metcalfe, R. (2012). Measuring subjective wellbeing: Recommendations on measures for use by National Governments. *Journal of Social Policy*, 41(2), 409–427.
- Elliott, J. (1987, May 2, 1987). *The modern path to enlightenment*. *Weekend financial times*.
- Flink, C. M. (2014). *Punctuated equilibrium theory: Methodological and theoretical extensions* [Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation]. Office of Graduate and Professional Studies, Texas A&M University.
- Frey, B. S. (2017). Happiness and public policies: Fundamental issues. In *Happiness: Transforming the development landscape* (pp. 80–89). The Centre for Bhutan and GNH Studies.
- Givel, M. (2012). Nonpunctuated and sweeping policy change: Bhutan tobacco policy making from 1991 to 2009. *Review of Policy Research*, 29(5), 645–659.
- Givel, M. (2015). The paradox of explosive and gradual policy change in political revolutionary times. *Interdisciplinary Description of Complex Systems*, 13(3), 405–419.
- Givel, M. (2017). U.S. Federal Tobacco Control Policy from 1964 to 2013: Were punctuated and significant public health reforms enacted? *Social Theory & Health*, 15(4), 1–20.
- Givel, M. (2020). Evolution of the Meaning of Happiness in Modern Bhutan from 2008 to 2019. *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, 43, 47–60.
- Givel, M., & Figueroa, L. (2015). Early happiness policy as a government Mission of Bhutan: A survey of the Bhutanese unwritten constitution from 1619 to 1729. *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, 31, 1–21.
- GNHC (Gross National Happiness Commission). (2009). Tenth five-year plan (2008–2013) Main document.
- Goldstone, J. (2001). Toward a fourth generation of revolutionary theory. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 4, 139–187.
- Hirata, J., Metz, T., Verma, R., & Zencey, E. (2017). Good governance. In *Happiness: Transforming the development landscape* (pp. 329–346). The Centre for Bhutan and GNH Studies.
- Howlett, M., & Rayner, J. (2006). Understanding the historical turn in the policy sciences: A critique of stochastic, narrative, path dependency and process-sequencing models of policy-making over time. *Policy Sciences*, 39(1), 1–18.
- Jones, B., Baumgartner, F., & Mortesen, P. (2017). Punctuated equilibrium theory: Explaining stability and change in public policymaking. In C. W. P. Sabatier (Ed.), *Theories of the policy process* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Jones, B., Epp, D. A., & Baumgartner, F. (2019). Democracy, authoritarianism, and policy punctuations. *International Review of Public Policy*, 1(1), 7–26.
- Kaplaner, C., & Steinebach, Y. (2021). Why we should use the Gini coefficient to assess punctuated equilibrium theory. *Political Analysis*, 30(3), 450–455.
- Kaufman, M. T. (1980, November 16, 1980). The Remote Kingdom of Bhutan. *New York Times*, p. 1.
- Kaul, N. (2008). Bearing better witness in Bhutan. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 43(37), 67–69.
- Kingdon, J. (1993). How do issues get on public policy agendas? In W. J. Wilson (Ed.), *Sociology and the Public Agenda* (pp. 40–50). Sage Publications Inc.
- Kubiszewski, I., Costanza, R., Franco, C., Lawn, P., Talberth, J., Jackson, T., & Aylmer, C. (2013). Beyond GDP: Measuring and achieving global genuine progress. *Ecological Economics*, 93, 57–68.
- Masaki, K., & Tshering, J. (2021). Exploring the origins of Bhutan's gross National Happiness. *Journal of South Asian Development*, 16(2), 273–292. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09731741211039049>

- Mathou, T. (1999). Political reform in Bhutan: Change in a Buddhist monarchy. *Asian Survey*, 39(4), 613–632.
- Mintrom, M., & Norman, P. (2009). Policy entrepreneurship and policy change. *The Policy Studies Journal*, 37(4), 649–667.
- Montes, J., & Bhattarai, S. R. (2018). Buddhist biopower? – Variegated governmentality in Bhutan's gross national happiness agenda. *Geoforum*, 96, 207–216.
- Munro, L. T. (2016). Where did Bhutan's gross National Happiness Come from? The origins of an invented tradition. *Asian Affairs*, 47(1), 71–92.
- Penjore, D. (2008). *GNH screening tool: Frameworks for integrating gross National Happiness into planning process*. Centre for Bhutan Studies.
- Platt, J. (1964). Strong inference. *Science*, 146, 347–353.
- Popper, K. (1959). *The logic of scientific discovery*. Hutchinson.
- Powdyal, T. S. (1988, July 30, 1988). Gross national happiness: A tribute. *Kuensel*.
- RGOB (Royal Government of Bhutan). (1999). *Bhutan 2020: A vision for peace, prosperity and happiness*. Planning Commission.
- RGOB (Royal Government of Bhutan). (2012). *The report of the high-level meeting on wellbeing and happiness: Defining a new economic paradigm*. Office of the Prime Minister.
- Robinson, S. (2019). Punctuated equilibrium models in organizational decision making. In G. Morcol (Ed.), *Handbook of decision making*. Routledge.
- Robinson, S. E., Flink, C. M., & King, C. M. (2014). Organizational history and budgetary punctuation. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory: J-PART*, 24(2), 459–471.
- See, H. (2022). The two faces of gross National Happiness: Can Bhutan's nation-building strategy also Be a sustainable alternative development paradigm? *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 52(3), 452–470.
- Sinpeng, A. (2007). Democracy from above: Regime transition in the Kingdom of Bhutan. *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, 17, 21–47.
- Thin, N., Haybron, D., Biswas-Diener, R., Ahuvia, A., & Timsit, J. (2017). Desirability of sustainable happiness as a guide for public policy. In *Happiness: Transforming the development landscape* (pp. 39–59). The Centre for Bhutan and GNH Studies.
- Tsing, A. (2013). More-than-human sociality: A call for critical description. In K. Hastrup (Ed.), *Anthropology and nature* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Turner, M., Chuki, S., & Tshering, J. (2011). Democratization by decree: The case of Bhutan. *Democratization*, 18(1), 184–210.
- Turner, M., & Tshering, J. (2014). Is democracy being consolidated in Bhutan? *Asian Politics & Policy*, 6(3), 413–431.
- Tyler, M. (1980, April 27, 1980). Tiny Bhutan emerging – at own pace. *Los Angeles Times*, p. A21.
- UN (United Nations). (2011). *Happiness: Towards a holistic approach to development*. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/715187>; <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/715187>
- Ura, K., Alkire, S., Zangmo, T. & Wangdi, K. (2012). *A Short Guide to Gross National Happiness Index*. The Centre for Bhutan Studies.
- Wangdi, K. (2012). *Bibliography of gross National Happiness*.
- Westfall, P. H. (2014). Kurtosis as Peakedness, 1905–2014. *R.I.P. The American Statistician*, 68(3), 191–195. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00031305.2014.917055>

How to cite this article: Ugyel, L., Givel, M., & Chopel, D. (2023). Punctuating “Happiness”: Punctuated equilibrium theory and the agenda-setting of the Gross National Happiness (GNH) policy in Bhutan. *Review of Policy Research*, 00, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ropr.12559>