

Local Political Economy of Wind Energy Development: Evidence from Wyoming

Partisanship is a strong predictor for attitudes towards the energy transition among American voters, and support for climate policy is polarized along party lines among lawmakers in the US (Pierson and Schickler 2020; McConnell, 2023; Meyer and Smith, 2023). The literature on the political economy of climate change based on the case studies from US focuses on coalitions at the high level of state politics, and has found strong “home state effects” in energy policy (Rabe, 2004; Trachtman, 2020; Meckling and Trachtman, 2024; Stokes, 2020; Basseches et al., 2020). The so-called “blue states”, which have historically demonstrated high rates of support for the Democratic party, have been climate policy leaders at the subnational level throughout years of federal climate policy gridlock. Scholars have also placed heavy emphasis on the incumbent fossil fuel industry’s role in climate obstruction and found that their political power is less contested in states governed by Republican majorities (Basseches, 2022; Hall et al., 2024; Meckling and Trachtman, 2024). Even in states that rank very high in wind energy generation in the US such as Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas, the influence of fossil fuel interest groups on partisan legislatures have successfully rolled back existing incentives (Stokes, 2020).

In contrast to the literature on climate and energy policy, interdisciplinary research in social acceptance of wind energy which focused on the community responses at the project level found little evidence for the effect of partisanship. In a survey of wind energy developers in the Midwest, Bessette and Mills (2021) found that community level Republican partisanship was negatively correlated with opposition to wind farms, whereas the presence of an alternative land use that wind development would block such as natural amenities was positively correlated with opposition. Stokes et al. (2023) found that not partisanship, but economic wealth of local

communities was a stronger predictor of local opposition to wind farms in the US and Canada, with poorer communities in support of wind energy infrastructure. Sociological literature on local responses to different types of energy infrastructure also found that local economic benefits can overpower environmental concerns or personal partisan affiliations in shaping attitudes towards liquefied natural gas and fracking infrastructure (Jerolmack, 2021; Jerolmack and Walker, 2018; McAdam and Boudet, 2012).

I propose building a sociology of energy politics from the ground up by shifting the focus from the statehouses to rural towns and communities. The distributional consequences as well as conflicts around wind energy infrastructure development play out most visibly at the local level, with the involvement of hosting communities and property owners in the permitting and planning process. For wind energy developers, friendly landowners and local governments are the main political factor in siting (Bolster, 2004). In some places, associations of landowners who try to benefit from the wind rush become important political actors in shaping the future of wind energy in a county and beyond. When there is the potential for extensive wind energy infrastructure, county governments also have to face the task of revising local ordinances related to industrial land use and economic development.

This paper also goes beyond the economic interests and political ideology in the local political economy of wind energy development, and explores the meaning of wind energy vis-a-vis existing land use regimes. In some places where attachment to rural landscapes and wilderness are part of the cultural fabric, the economic benefits to be gained from wind energy can become a source of conflict (Boudet, 2019). Different moral orders of land and nature such as techno-modernism, ecological conservation, and utilitarianism interact with property regimes and other political-regulatory institutions in creating different outcomes in support for or in opposition to

energy infrastructure (Ferrell, 2015). These institutions and moral orders are also contested to varying degrees at different levels of politics (local, state, regional, federal) (Sayre, 2017). To explore how these factor into local attitudes towards wind energy infrastructure in a polarized context, I focus on wind energy development in Wyoming, which both has the strongest onshore wind resources in the country, and is one of the most conservative states by several measures with a strong fossil fuel lobby and heavy dependence on revenues from fossil fuel exports.

Data and Methods: I draw on various archival and digital resources as well as ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews to understand the meanings of wind energy infrastructure and their impact on stakeholders' advocacy for or against wind projects. Building on Farrell (2015) and Dokshin (2022), I use a lexicon based computational content analysis public hearing transcripts of 23 wind projects permitted between 2009 and 2024 to categorize stakeholders' various concerns and claims in support of or in opposition to wind farms in 6 counties in the Southeastern part of the state. To understand the influence of local actors on state level policymaking, I review recordings of legislative hearings about relevant bills between 2020-2024 to identify their position and activities. In addition, 6 months of fieldwork in Southeastern Wyoming in 2024 includes wind farm visits, participation in relevant meetings such as energy conferences, town hall meetings about energy infrastructure and public hearings about wind energy projects starting. I supplement these observations with 35 in-depth interviews with landowners, small business owners, county commissioners and mayors, lawyers, community members and members of chambers of commerce. My recruitment strategy for in-depth interviews relies on identification of important actors based on local news and permitting documents, connections made during fieldwork, and snowball sampling based on other interviews with stakeholders.

Findings and implications: In contrast with the literature on partisan energy politics, I find that ranchers, local business associations and local politicians have become advocates of renewable energy in a state controlled by one of the most conservative legislatures in the country, and successfully blocked policies that disincentivize wind energy projects. Wind projects not only responded to an economic need in times of declining profits from other agricultural operations for landowners, but also contributed to a sense of pride in housing wind turbines as symbols of techno-modernism and in being part of the future. However, I also find that the strong link between private property rights, private investment and renewable energy buildout have resulted in a missed opportunity for building a broader coalition towards a more sustainable political-economic transformation. I argue that strong private property rights coupled with conservative cultural values including anticollectivism and free market environmentalism both helped stop wind energy development and prevented a stronger push towards an energy transition in the state.