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## NIMBYism – A re-examination of the phenomenon



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### ABSTRACT

NIMBYism is the idea that citizens will oppose the siting of facilities in their neighborhood for selfish reasons. Using a new treatment – type of facility rather than geographical proximity to a particular site – the paper explores two rarely researched manifestations of NIMBYism: that people are so sensitive to nuisances that they oppose the siting of *all* facility types in their neighborhood; and that people will adjust motivations for resistance to appear public minded. Results from both observational and experimental studies support the basic claims of NIMBYism.

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### 1. Introduction

The siting of public facilities constitutes a dilemma for democracies. On one hand, government must maintain societal infrastructure by replacing aging technology and institutions with infrastructure that is more viable in the long term. On the other hand, when public facilities are sited, small groups of citizens disproportionately experience negative externalities through changes in the local environment and the presence of new risks. The preferred outcome of facility siting decisions is, of course, the informed consent of those directly affected by them.

A potential obstacle to achieving the preferred outcome is NIMBYism (Not In My Back Yard). The core idea of NIMBYism, which gained prevalence in the 1980s, is that citizens oppose the siting of facilities in their neighborhood for self-interested and parochial reasons (e.g. [Hall, 1989](#)). More formally, [Wolsink \(2000: 53\)](#) defines NIMBY as “people that combine a positive attitude and resistance motivated by calculated personal costs and benefits”. If NIMBYism is strong, as is argued by frustrated developers whose plans are hindered by citizen protests, facility siting authorities face insurmountable difficulties in their effort to gain acceptance from local residents.

Scholars specializing in facility siting decisions find only weak empirical support for NIMBYism (see [Lake \(1993\)](#) for an early example and [Devine-Wright \(2005\)](#) for a review of the literature with regard to wind power installations). Instead, the favored explanations are more understanding towards protesters: that protests are driven by ideological values concerning social justice and ecological sustainability (e.g. [McAvoy, 1998](#); [Wolsink, 1994, 2000, 2007](#)), and that protests are the result of failed planning processes in which planning authorities break the line of trust between themselves and affected citizens (e.g. [Kraft and Clary, 1991](#); [Groothuis and Miller, 2005](#)). Additional literature emphasizes the social character of protests; rather than being a simple reflexive response of individuals who are concerned about their own well-being, protest reactions are socially constructed ([Kraft, 1996](#); [Benford and Snow, 2000](#)).

While facility-siting research demonstrates that protests are generated by a multitude of factors, theory suggests that self-interest is indeed a strong driving force for reactions towards siting decisions. Specifically, from a social-psychological perspective protest for self-interested reasons is the expected outcome of situations with the potential for negative conse-

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quences in which a person has a strong personal stake (Thornton and Knowx, 2002; and, more generally, Crano, 1995). In the light of theoretical expectations, the paper offers a re-examination of the NIMBY-phenomenon. The re-examination identifies new manifestations of the NIMBY-idea, suggests a methodological approach for the empirical study of these manifestations, and applies the suggested approach on an original set of data.

### 1.1. Manifestations and methodological approach

NIMBYism implies that individuals resist the location of a facility, which they otherwise find useful, in their vicinity. To examine this, empirical studies typically estimate the extent to which geographical proximity determines peoples' reaction towards various public facilities. The primary treatment, thus, is geographical distance to a specific facility site. The recurrent finding is that proximity is weakly and inconsistently related to attitude towards the facility in question.

In contrast, this paper examines reactions towards the siting of a wide variety of facility types while holding geographical distance to the location constant at a low level. The treatment, thus, is facility type rather than geographical proximity. As developed below, this approach allows for the examination of two rarely researched manifestations of NIMBYism: (i) that people are so sensitive to nuisances that they oppose the siting of all facility types in their neighborhood; and (ii) that protesting individuals, when given the opportunity, adjust motivations for their resistance to appear more public minded.

The paper furthermore contributes with regard to methodology. Facility research is dominated by observational methods. To better sort out causal relationships, the paper suggests that observational and experimental data should be combined. The relevance of the suggested mixed-method approach is tested on an original set of data. The observational study focuses citizen reactions towards a large number of facility types in a given geographical context (a Swedish metropolitan area). The experiment tracks individuals' reactions, and motivation for reactions, when they read a fake letter about government plans to site various types of facilities in their neighborhood. To enhance external validity, experimental treatments are based on findings from the observational study.

The paper proceeds as follows. Initially, two theoretical sections expand upon the logic of the new manifestations of NIMBYism and how they link to theories on the role of self-interest for opinion formation in the political domain. The following sections present the setting of the empirical studies and findings from the observational and experimental studies, respectively. Contrary to expectations of frustrated planners, results show that people are not equally likely to protest all types of facilities in their neighborhood. However, results also show that differentiation between facility types is reduced when individuals are aware about the siting (when the choice is clear), and that individuals stress the most public spirited motivation for protest that is available to them. On the basis of these findings, a final section concludes that NIMBYism is a relevant factor in siting processes.

## 2. Type of public facility as treatment variable

Siting decisions are controversial because public facilities have unwanted consequences for those immediately affected by them. With reference to psychological risk analysis and economic cost-benefit analysis, the siting literature identifies a number of negative externalities associated with public facilities: health concerns; environmental concerns; place attachment; and material concerns such as property values (e.g. Mansfield et al., 2001; Boholm, 2004; Wester-Herber, 2004; Farber, 1998; Devine-Wright, 2009).

When examining citizen reaction towards facility sitings, scholars in the field typically focuses high-profile facilities with strong negative externalities. Examples in kind are constructions for energy supply such as windmill farms and offshore drilling for oil (e.g. Wolsink, 2005; Devine-Wright, 2005); for the handling of waste products such as landfills and incinerators (e.g. Minehart and Neeman, 2002; Futrell, 2003; Groothuis and Miller, 2005); and for transportation such as bridges, railways, and airports (e.g. Burningham, 2000; Suau-Sanchez et al., 2011). Another, smaller, strand of the literature targets controversial human service facilities such as homeless shelters and criminal justice facilities (e.g. Takahashi and Dear, 1997; Takahashi, 1997; Colon and Marston, 1999; Oakley, 2002; Cameron and Crewe, 2006; van Alphen et al., 2012). In general, protested siting decisions are oversampled in this research.

While motivated from a substantive point of view, a focus on high-profile facilities and protested decisions limits possibilities to identify NIMBY-effects. To see why, consider that many facilities under study are controversial in the sense that they, in the words of a frequently cited article by Freudenberg and Pastor (1992: 40), "are likely to inspire spirited opposition in virtually all of the local contexts where they are proposed." If indeed most individuals would protest the siting of a certain facility in their vicinity, it is difficult to argue that resistance is driven by narrow NIMBYism. Furthermore, studies on facilities associated with strong negative externalities for personal health, the environment, and place aesthetics risks confounding self-interested concerns and the value-based motives to resistance advanced by facility scholars. For example, when controversial technologies are targeted, affected individuals are invited to emphasize principled and high-minded values as motives for protest reactions.

To gain analytical leverage, this research considers not only high-profile facilities but also more mundane types of public facilities which are essential for a well-functioning society and as such should be principally embraced by everyone. Examples of mundane public facilities are school buildings, play grounds, bike lanes, and transformer stations for local electricity supply. Importantly for the current research, also mundane facilities are associated with nuisances (negative externalities).

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