Energy Policy 123 (2018) 670–681

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Energy Policy

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/enpol

"His main platform is 'stop the turbines' ": Political discourse, partisanship and local responses to wind energy in Canada

Chad Walker[a,*], Laura Stephenson[b], Jamie Baxter[c]

[a] Department of Geography and Planning, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada K7L 3N6
[b] Department of Political Science, Western University, London, Ontario, Canada N6A 5C2
[c] Department of Geography, Western University, London, Ontario, Canada N6A 5C2

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Partisanship
Ideology
Politics
Wind energy
Renewable energy
Canada

ABSTRACT

Decades after wind energy has taken hold in many developed countries, social scientists are beginning to understand the complex story of what causes differentiated responses to local development. Transitions in this literature include moving from attitudinal factors, and the infamous Not in My Backyard (NIMBY) explanation, toward place attachment, environmental justice, and how policy development might shape support for wind turbines in rural communities. While this research has advanced our understanding of some of the major questions in this area, the political arena has largely remained implicit or in the background, rather than a specific area of detailed inquiry. Addressing this gap in the literature, we detail findings from our mixed method study of interviews (n = 54) and surveys (n = 240) with local residents, developers, and other stakeholders in Ontario and Nova Scotia, Canada. We focus on the interplay of partisanship and geography, and how together they can powerfully influence attitudes toward wind energy. Specifically, we extend the existing literature and argue that when parties politicize the issue of wind energy — especially within the context of an urban/rural divide — it becomes intertwined with elements of ideology which can amplify responses and further entrench local conflict.

1. Introduction and Literature review

The move toward low-carbon electricity often includes some level of local citizen concern, and even opposition. Through fast-paced wind energy development meant to address climate change, air pollution, and grow a 'green economy' (McRobert et al., 2016), Ontario, Canada has simultaneously installed the most turbines of any province and become a 'hotbed' of the anti-wind movement (see Baxter et al., 2013; Fast et al., 2016; Walker et al., 2014b; Walker et al., 2015). Those studying such social responses to wind energy have cited a variety of concepts meant to understand concerned citizen movements. In Ontario, perceptions of health effects (Baxter et al., 2013), property devaluation (Vyn and McCullough, 2014; Walker et al., 2014a), and injustice through the planning and siting process (Walker and Baxter, 2017a, b) have received the most attention. There is also recent work by Walker et al. (2018) that suggests perceived rural environmental injustice related to unfair development practices in the province. In similar studies in other parts of the world (Ashwood and MacTavish, 2016; Kelly-Reif and Wing, 2016; Sayan, 2017; Schlosberg, 2013) injustice is seen through development that privileges the urban majority and leaves unwanted developments in rural spaces.[1] Combining these ideas with those from Europe and the U.S., researchers have explored a complex set of factors to explain turbine opposition that include personal, cultural, socio-economic, and procedural elements (see Cowell et al., 2011; Pedersen and Larsman, 2008; Thayer, 1988; Rand and Hoen, 2017; Wolsink, 2007; Wüstenhagen et al., 2007).

In terms of political narratives, Wüstenhagen et al. (2007) write about "sociopolitical" dimensions of resistance to turbines. While the framework is well-cited for its discussion of three key dimensions of social acceptance of renewable energy, it is notable here for specific reference to politicians, and by extension their messaging. The paper also stresses that a key challenge for renewable energy will be to gather a "critical mass of acceptance in the political system" (p.2689). Though Wüstenhagen et al. provide much-needed guidance, not much empirical

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: cw135@queensu.ca (C. Walker).

[1] Other forms of climate policy development are said to pit urban and rural communities against each other. That is because especially in the absence of significant and equitable benefits, projects can impose costs on specific rural communities (Stokes, 2016), for the betterment of the broader (mostly urban) society (Aldrich, 2016). Part of this trend may be caused by a disconnect between the political values of urban and rural citizens – a significant cleavage in Canadian politics (Bittner, 2007).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2018.08.046
Received 13 November 2017; Received in revised form 26 July 2018; Accepted 20 August 2018
0301-4215/

work since has studied these ideas in any great depth. Recent research from Europe is showing that worldviews, partisanship and political framing influence opinions of energy conservation (Dharshing et al., 2017), hydro development (Tabi and Wüstenhagen, 2017), and various renewable energy technologies (Sposato and Hampl, 2018), though studies investigating wind energy specifically are still rare. That is, despite great advancements in related fields, there is still a lack of attention to the role of political ideology or partisanship as a predictor of local support for wind energy. Some that have explored a lack of support for wind turbines hint at political ideology (e.g. Devine-Wright, 2005), but not as a primary issue of study. Stokes (2016) provides an exception through a study that shows significant partisan electoral losses near wind energy developments in Ontario. Yet that study does not investigate how turbines, politics, and public responses intertwine on the local level. This work thus fills an important gap in the literature by studying how political dimensions may structure attitudes in rural communities where wind energy projects are located.

1.1. Politicizing attitudes

In this paper, we trace how attitudes toward wind energy can become ideologically charged and entrench division in places near turbines. In doing so, we add to our understanding of social responses to renewable energy by more fully exploring political context and connections to community opinion. Our main objective is to consider the role that politics can and does play in the way wind energy is incorporated into the political agenda in two Canadian provinces.

As a starting point, we acknowledge that support or opposition to local wind energy development is driven by residents weighing (perhaps unconsciously) the perceived costs and benefits of living in the vicinity of turbines (Zoellner et al., 2008; Stigka et al., 2014). Locals may be more supportive of local turbines and broader renewable energy policy if they benefit (or perceive they will benefit) (Wilson, 1980). Benefits can be personal and direct or generalized and diffuse. However, when it comes to large, multi-turbine wind energy developments, the utility of a cost-benefit analysis for determining attitudes breaks down due to the scales at which costs and benefits are distributed (Wolsink, 2000). Whereas the benefits of traditional energy development tend to be power, royalties, and employment, added to these for renewable energy are the environmental benefits of cleaner and low-carbon energy. There is an added twist for wind turbines, however, in that at the local level, landowners leasing space for turbines reap economic benefits while their immediate neighbours often do not (especially in Ontario; see Walker and Baxter, 2017a), and any costs (e.g., noise) are borne by all of those who live in areas where wind turbines are built.

While the general idea of cost-benefit analysis has value in predicting local support for renewable energy, we must be cautious in assuming that perceived benefits go beyond the pecuniary – they may have little to do with *environmental* benefits. For example, in communities of west Texas, the thriving wind energy industry does not rely on the environmental leanings of landowners (Fremeth and Marcus, 2016). Residents there are said to resent environmentalism and do not trust in the science of climate change (Jepson et al., 2012). Support is instead deeply rooted in conservative values of property rights and the economic benefits from turbines enable a rational, financial decision (see also Shukman, 2010). This case shows that the framing of 'environmental' issues can powerfully shape how costs and benefits are assessed in different places. Indeed, communicating messages that identify with the politics of local populations can help increase acceptance of policy (Druckman, 2011; Feinberg and Willer, 2013; Madrian, 2014).

Since individuals generally do not actually (or consciously) perform cost-benefit calculations, the stances of political parties can act as information shortcuts. If citizens are not personally affected, they may lack awareness or be uninterested, and the complexity of an issue tends to subvert any rational mental equation (Richards et al., 2012; Stigka et al., 2014). Seeking an answer, the stances of political elites can guide voters to support or oppose a policy based on their partisan or ideological orientations (Converse, 2006; Kam, 2005; Sniderman and Bullock, 2004). However, in order for political cues to take effect, a party must take a clear public stance on the issue. The effectiveness of a political cue is said to also vary by the cohesiveness of the party (Brader et al., 2013; Merolla et al., 2008) and for an issue to be truly politicized, each party must have a stance that distinguishes it from others.

There is some evidence to suggest that these processes associated with party cues and opinion formation are more prevalent among those with conservative views. Jost et al. (2009) explain this may be due to the fact that it is easier to establish common ground with the status quo (than many possible alternatives). Conservatism may also have a 'psychological advantage' in that it more internally consistent and less subject to ambiguity (Rokeach, 1960; Tetlock, 2007). Further, Thorisdottir (2007) write that conservative policies have special appeal for those exhibiting 'closed-mindedness' and resistance to change.

1.2. The environment and partisan divides

There are a number of examples of how political leanings influence how people view environmental issues but it is not clear to what extent renewable energies — including wind energy —are politicized. In the US, many studies have looked into the widening Democrat-Republican divide in terms of environmentalism and climate change (Guber, 2013; Hahnel and Brosch, 2016; Jones, 2010; Weber and Stern, 2011). A Pew Research Poll (2016) found that almost 70% of Democrats but less than 25% of Republicans agreed that climate change is mainly the result of human activity.[2] Hornsey et al. (2016) present meta-analyses of the determinants of climate change opinions across 171 studies in 56 countries which show ideologies, worldviews and political orientations are the most powerful predictors. The authors conclude that evidence is "searched, remembered and assimilated in a way that dovetails with people's own political loyalties" (p. 625).

There have also been surveys in the US and elsewhere that have shown a political gap on other, more specific environmental questions, such as the use of biofuels, automobile regulations, efficiency requirements, and energy policy (Cacciatore et al., 2012; Dietz et al., 2013; Hahnel et al., 2018; Mayer, 2017; McCright et al., 2014). Bolson et al. (2014) show how *partisan motivated reasoning*[3] (see Taber et al., 2009) can increase support (or opposition) for American energy law when a political endorsement is present. Concerning large-scale wind energy development in the USA and the UK, recent research has found that opposition is driven by conservative political attitudes (Bidwell, 2013; Carter and Clements, 2015). Looking at retrospective voting in Ontario, Canada, Stokes (2016) found that the incumbent party (the Liberals) received 4–10% fewer votes from those living within 3 km of a turbine compared to similar areas without turbines. She suggests that the concentrated costs of wind turbines were creating "policy losers [which then used] electoral institutions to amplify their voice" and vote against the sitting Liberal government (p. 958).

Despite recent trends in the US and other mostly western countries, environmental issues do not necessarily fit into the neat left-right dimension of political competition. Historically, in Canada, the environment was an issue that cut across ideological lines. For example, the federal conservative party government of Brian Mulroney actually created the Canadian Environmental Protection Act. Through a more

[2] A 2018 Gallup poll may provide more evidence that U.S. climate change opinion is strongly driven by political affiliation. The 'opinion gap' between Democrats and Republicans is widening under Republican President Donald Trump (Marcin, 2018) — a leader who has denied climate change and withdrew the U.S. from the United Nations Paris Agreement on climate change (Meyer, 2018).

[3] Kunda (1990) writes that this kind of reasoning involves 'selective information processing', which motivates people to reach conclusions that are consistent with their existing opinions.