



## Review

# What is energy democracy? Connecting social science energy research and political theory.



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## ABSTRACT

In recent years the term ‘energy democracy’ has become increasingly popular, especially in the context of aspirations for a low-carbon transition that include wider socio-economic and political transformation. The emergence of ‘energy democracy’ is thus part of a broader trend in research and practice which has sought to foreground the ‘stuff’ of politics. Yet, unlike the more academically developed concepts of energy justice and energy citizenship, energy democracy is a concept that emerged largely from social movements. This has resulted in a body of literature with little connection to established academic debates and theories. The growing popularity of the concept calls for a critical evaluation of the term and how it is used. By reviewing existing energy democracy publications and bringing these in conversations with more theoretical literature, we are seeking to address four issues; the rationale for pursuing energy democracy, the people and stakeholders involved and excluded, the proposed material focus of energy democracy, and the geographical focus of energy democracy. In the subsequent discussion we draw connections between energy democracy, the growing body of social science energy research and political theory, and identify avenues for further research.

## 1. Introduction

The term ‘energy democracy’ (ED) has gained significant popularity in recent years. The trouble is, when applied, ‘democracy’ often becomes a slippery term [1]. It is evident from the energy democracy literature that use of the term is often vague and uncritical [2]. The aim of this review paper is therefore to analyse the ED literature to date, and connect this with key conceptual debates in political theory in order to contribute to development of a critical, conceptual understanding of how this term is understood and mobilised; is it mainly a tool for political change or does it represent a particular, coherent vision of future society? What kind of restructuring of current energy systems does it imply? And what form(s) of democracy does it promote? Deeper academic engagement with energy democracy as a movement and a concept is important to understand not only how the passing of the fossil fuel era can open up the possibility of a more democratic future [3], but also to better understand what *type* of democratic future is being sought.

In relation to existing research, we identify three areas with a scope for further development. Academics have started to take up the term energy democracy, but there is an identified need to consider its use in practice in more critical detail (see also [4]). Secondly, the seemingly adjacent concepts of ‘energy citizenship’ [5] and ‘energy justice’ [6–8]

are now the focus of extensive academic enquiry. There is thus a need to examine if ED merits similar attention as a stand-alone concept, and how it relates to (the literature on) energy citizenship and energy justice. And finally there is the need to engage with political theory literature as well as comparing notes with other ‘adjective democracy’ [9] debates related to resources and technologies, such as environmental democracy [10], innovation democracy [1,11], water democracy [12,13] and food democracy [14–16] in order to understand the type(s) of democracy that the energy democracy literature alludes to.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we chart the origin of the term energy democracy and provide an overview of the academic and grey literature published to date. Subsequent sections of the paper analyse the literature through the following four questions; Why is ED promoted? Who is (supposed to be) involved in ED? What is the material (and energy) focus of ED? And finally; where is ED pursued? These findings are then brought into conversation with extant literature on the various forms and aspects of democracy, enabling us to synthesise what type of democracy tends to be implied by ED. Finally, we draw the findings together in a discussion about the academic questions surrounding energy democracy as a concept and as a social movement, and establish an agenda for further research.

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## 2. The energy democracy literature

A search for the term ‘energy democracy’<sup>1</sup> on Google Scholar and Scopus yielded no mentions from pre-2010, while a wider Google search only yielded a small number of mentions (e.g. [17,18]). Table 1 lists all publications we found that made more than single reference to ED.<sup>2</sup> Any publications found through this search were read, with references followed up to identify the origin of the concept. While we could not find a unique single origin for the term, it appears that in its early stages ED was primarily used by non-governmental groups and researchers in the US (see [17,19–21]), before gaining ground in Europe, i.e. the UK, Poland, and especially Germany [22].

What was noticeable through this search is that early mentions of energy democracy primarily appeared in the ‘grey’ literature, e.g. reports or articles published by non-governmental organisations, think tanks and policy groups. This early dominance of grey literature is especially notable as we used academic search engines during our search. While there are mentions of ED in the academic literature prior to 2015, the most substantive contributions were made by organisations outside academia.

It is only in the most recent years that (peer-reviewed) academic papers have made substantive contributions on this topic. In particular, we wish to acknowledge a number of notable recent contributions that have been published while this paper was under review. In particular, Burke and Stephens [23] and Van Veelen [24] both expand the evidence base for how ED is realised in practice, albeit at different ‘levels’ of governance. Whereas Burke and Stephens [23] show which policy instruments could help to achieve greater energy democracy, Van Veelen [24] shows the challenges encountered by community and co-operative energy groups in practicing democratic governance within their projects. Recent conceptual reviews by Burke and Stephens [25] and Szulecki [4] show that there is a need to strengthen the conceptual foundations of energy democracy. Here, we build on this work by explicitly asking the question ‘what kind of democracy is energy democracy?’, a question we investigate by analysing energy democracy in the context of three conceptualisations of democracy: associative, deliberative and material.

### 2.1. Why energy democracy?

The energy democracy literature primarily frames ED as a response to the current energy regime experienced in many Western countries (e.g. [2,26,27]). This is notable as these countries are generally regarded as democratic, and have (near) universal access to energy. As such, the drivers for ED should not be understood in terms of access to energy, but as a response to both the limitations of

‘public ownership, with its highly attenuated (representative) democratic control over arm’s-length and centralised public corporations, and privatisation, with its illusory promise of individual empowerment through shareholder democracy and consumer sovereignty ([2], p. 314).

Beyond this, however, there is a lack of clarity about the aims in the energy democracy literature: is ED the outcome or the process? Is it ‘a future utopia to be won’ or ‘an ongoing series of multiple struggles over who owns and controls energy and how, where and for whom energy is produced and consumed’ ([28], p. 4)? A number of reports on ED appear to ascribe to the first view: in both the US [29] and Europe [30] energy democracy has been framed as an end-state to move towards, as ‘the answer’ ([29], p. 43). Framed this way, energy democracy represents a

blueprint for an ideal world where energy systems are more decentralised and socially controlled [31,32], access is equitable and benefits dispersed [29], and energy consumption and production harms neither people or environment [33,34].

These examples show that, while framing energy democracy as an ideal end-state, they combine a procedural and outcome dimension, where decentralised forms of energy governance contribute to more equitable outcomes. This combination of process and outcome is also evident in other literature on resource democracies. For example, Shiva [12] conceptualises water democracy as a process of both a deepening of democracy and a defense of genuinely democratic structures, in order to achieve a more equitable distribution of resources. Thus, participation in democratic governance of resources is seen as a means of placing power in the hands of ordinary citizens, enabling them to break down entrenched inequalities (also see [35], p. 7).

Such a framing, however, raises the question what distinguishes ED from energy justice. Theories of democracy and justice have a long history, but have often been approached from different directions: where theories of justice have historically been the remit of philosophers, theories of democracy have been more rooted in political science. Barry’s definition of democracy as ‘the procedure for capturing the views of citizens and translating them into outcomes’ (cited in [36], p. 5), illustrates that the use of the term democracy often implies a focus on the procedures and mechanisms associated with decision-making. Viewed this way, democracy is primarily considered to play an important instrumental role in discovering and implementing demands for justice [37,38] (Table 2).

For some, such as ([28], p. 4), this means a series of struggles, over ‘who owns and controls energy and how, where and for whom energy is produced and consumed’. Here, for democracy to have any practical progressive meaning it should enable ‘access by the least powerful people and communities to the capacities for challenging the directions of the innovations that affect them’ ([1], p. 9). Thinking about democracy this way means it must thus be viewed as a process of reshaping social relations, rather than achieving particular categories of outcomes [1].

For many others, however, achieving just outcomes are a natural outcome of democratic procedures. What shines through in some accounts of ED is the vision that democratic participation is thought to promote solidarity by enabling those who participate to recognise, and act for, the collective good [35]. This notion that participation benefits the collective or public is one that is central to ED. For example for both Cumbers et al. [45] and Angel [49] energy democracy is based on having a participatory energy system that works in the public interest, while Powell [50] argues for the need to restore public purpose. In order to ensure an energy system that provides more equitable outcomes Cumbers et al. [45] have argued that a more co-operative and consensual approach to the development of energy strategies is required.

However, this presumed relationship between democratic procedures and just outcomes has been contested in the wider justice and democracy literatures (e.g. [35–37]). In particular, it raises a number of additional questions, such as who can or should participate; what form does/should this participation take; and at what scales? It is to these questions, and how they are addressed in the ED literature, that we turn next, before discussing these findings in light of the wider political philosophy theory in Section 4.

### 2.2. Energy democracy by and for who?

A key focus of the ED literature is on the participatory dimensions of democratic governance, with many arguing for a need to reform how decisions around energy are made. For example, Kunze and Becker [41] argue that ‘the greatest number of people directly affected by a project should hold as large a power of initiative and decision-making as possible’. What is noticeable from the literature is that there is a strong focus on direct participation, and that it highlights the multiple ways in which

<sup>1</sup> A limitation of this approach is that by searching for the English term, we have limited ourselves to sources from the English-speaking world, and/or sources that were referenced by English language literature.

<sup>2</sup> The literature review was completed in July of 2017.

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