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Energy democracy and social movements: A multi-coalition perspective on the politics of sustainability transitions

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ABSTRACT

This study develops research on social movements, political coalitions, and sustainability transitions with a multi-coalition perspective. The perspective begins with a typology of coalitions based on two pairs of goals—general societal change versus the sociotechnical transition of an industry or technological system, and sunrise versus sunset of systems and structures. Mapping the diversity of energy-transition coalitions makes it possible not only to identify the various wings of a broader industrial transition movement in a specified time and place but also to show the dynamics of how coalitions interact and change over time. Drawing on case studies of four energy-transition coalitions in New York State that approximate the four ideal types, the study shows differences in the goals, strategies, organizational composition, and frames of the coalitions. The study then shows the mechanisms that enable integration across coalitions, including the role of bridge brokers and new frames. As the networks of the energy-transition coalitions become more connected, the organizations make use of a wider set of frames, including the newer frame of energy democracy. Thus, the study develops an approach to the study of energy democracy that shows how it can serve as a frame that bridge brokers use to integrate coalitions.

1. Introduction

In some countries incumbent actors in the energy sector have opposed climate-mitigation policies and done so with increasing effectiveness. Incumbents such as electricity utilities sometimes raise legitimate concerns about technical and economic difficulties associated with the scaling up of renewable energy; however, in other cases they demonstrate “regime resistance” [1] based more on the perceived threat of an energy transition to profits and to business as usual. In several countries, most notably the U.S., incumbents in the energy sector have formed alliances with conservative political parties in order to oppose climate-change mitigation policies and environmentally oriented policies in general [2]. Resistance by incumbent industrial actors to sustainability transitions poses an important problem in the study of energy research and social science: to determine the conditions under which governments will strengthen their support for sustainable-energy transition policies. Although this issue is highly salient in the United States, where one of the major parties has opposed climate-mitigation policies, it is also prominent in other countries, including Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, and the U.K. [3–5].

A wide range of factors can lead to increased political support for energy-transition policies, among them an exogenous shock such as an extreme weather event, concern with the security of imported energy,

reductions in the prices of low-carbon energy sources, and pressure to join international climate-change agreements. However, these factors are not enough to motivate support in countries such as the United States, where there is substantial, organized resistance from incumbent industrial actors and allied political leaders. In this context, strong energy-transition coalitions are needed to overcome resistance from regime coalitions. The coalitions consist not only of environmentalists, other civil society actors, and allied political leaders but also of private-sector actors such as renewable energy and energy efficiency (REEE) industries. Other sectors that see opportunities in energy transitions, such as the technology and finance sectors in the case of distributed solar energy, may also join the coalitions [6,7].

Although the field of research on sustainability transitions has increasingly recognized that they are political processes, research on the role that social movements and energy-transition coalitions can play in overcoming regime resistance remains undeveloped, and researchers in the sustainability transitions field recognize the need for more work on this topic [8]. This study contributes to the literature on the politics of sustainability transitions by providing a framework for analyzing the diversity of coalitions and their mechanisms of integration over time. The integration adds strength to the coalitions by bringing in new partners outside traditional alliances among environmental, labor, and sustainable business organizations. As the integration occurs, the frame

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of “energy democracy” becomes more salient as a way to bridge diverse goals and strategies. Although focused on a case in a single state in the U.S., the typology of energy-transition coalitions within a broader industrial transition movement, together with the processual analysis of how coalitions become integrated, has general applicability.

2. Background

2.1. Social movements, coalitions, and the politics of energy transitions

Researchers who study energy transitions recognize that policy guidance plays an important role in the pace and outcome of transitions. Government policy can provide a protective space for niche technologies until they reach a point where they are competitive in existing markets, and government regulations also affect the marketplace competitiveness of different energy sources [9]. Because policy is so important for guiding the form and pace of energy transitions, they are inevitably a combination of political, economic, and technological processes. Research on the politics of transitions has now emerged from a nascent state to have several lines of developing approaches, among them the study of power and agency [10], institutional politics and power [11], and reflexive and democratic governance problems associated with transition management (e.g., [12]). Researchers have also shown that incumbent actors can reverse or slow transition policies [13,14] and form coalitions with political parties or otherwise directly influence governments [7]. In other words, where the niche-regime relationship is not symbiotic and involves potential or actual conflict, the relationship becomes one of challengers and incumbents in an industrial field, and this relationship interacts with conflicting positions in the political field.

This study adopts a theoretical framework to the politics of energy transitions derived from social movement theory in sociology [15]. This approach draws attention to three main elements of the political process: an opportunity structure for policy reform, which can be relatively open or closed and can change in response to mobilization; the agency of movement actors, including their efforts to build coalitions both among other advocates and among industrial and policy elites; and the importance of frames and cultural repertoires that advocacy groups and activists use to gain support from policymakers, the media, industry, and the public. This study focuses on a type of movement termed the “industrial transition movement,” that is, a sustained, multi-organizational, multi-campaign network of mobilizations that seeks to bring about a fundamental transition in an industry when the incumbent organizations are resistant to change [16]. Within these movements the study focuses on the role of policy coalitions that form to develop specific campaigns that target corporate practices and/or government policy. These mobilizations can be characterized as “green-transition coalitions” or, more specifically for the energy field, “energy-transition coalitions.”

The processual approach in social movement theory is broadly consistent with similar approaches in political science, such as the advocacy coalition framework [17]. However, social movement theory can offer some additional insights and a somewhat broader perspective on policy coalitions. First, it recognizes that coalitions can mobilize not only with public policy as the target of change but also with corporations and technological design choices as the target [18–20]. For example, advocates of industrial transitions may mobilize directly against fossil-fuel companies and also create new community solar and low-income weatherization organizations. These interconnections of action in both the political and industrial fields provide a broader scope of analysis than “policy subsystems” in the advocacy coalition framework. Second, social movement theory includes extrainstitutional repertoires of action, such as street protest, that tend to emerge where there are blocked political opportunities and strong inequalities of power between incumbents and challengers. Third, social movement theory also draws attention to strategic framing, cultural repertoires, and mobilized

public opinion rather than the more cognitive dimension of core beliefs and learning. These differences suggest the value of having an analytic framework that examines both the coalition activity within a policy field and the broader dimensions associated with social movement mobilizations.

2.2. The multi-coalition perspective on the politics of energy transitions

This study advances research on the politics of transitions by developing a multi-coalition perspective, which has two main elements: a comprehensive typology of energy-transition coalitions, and an analysis of the mechanisms by which diverse coalitions can become more (or less) integrated over time. The first step of this approach, the typology, is to break down the concept of a broad industrial transition movement (for example, the movement to transition to low-carbon energy in New York State) and to recognize that it is often splintered and divided across multiple coalitions, each of which has its own set of goals, strategies, and organizational partners [16]. One major division involves whether the coalitions are positioned as oppositional or alternative. In other words, do they focus more on the sunset of specific industries and sociotechnical systems (such as coal and natural gas), or do they focus more on developing support for the sunrise of alternative industries and sociotechnical systems (such as renewable energy and energy efficiency, REEE)? Although these categories are typological, they can serve as guideposts when attempting to understand differences among coalition goals and organizational composition. The differences in goals become evident in very different repertoires of action, such as heavy reliance on protest and other forms of extra-institutional action in the oppositional type and greater reliance on more institutionalized policy processes and entrepreneurship in the sunrise type.

The second major division involves the relative emphasis on the goal of sociotechnical change versus societal change. The fields of transition studies and technology studies have drawn attention to the interplay of technological, organizational, regulatory, and consumer changes under the rubric of “sociotechnical” analysis (e.g., [21,22]). In much of transition studies, this approach tends to focus the “socio” on meso-level institutional and technological changes within an industrial sector. The term “societal change” is used here to refer to attempts to transform broader patterns of structural inequality characterized by disparities of class, race, gender, geographical location, and global position. This second dimension is not absent from the transitions literature, and it is suggested by terms such as “inclusive transitions” [23] and “just transitions” [24]. However, it is valuable to distinguish the narrower type of goal that focuses on change within an institutional sector with the broader goal of general societal change that addresses issues of inequality and justice.

In the niche-regime-landscape terminology of the multilevel perspective transition studies [21], the distinction between the two goals of sociotechnical and societal change is similar to the distinction between, on the one hand, changes in the niche-regime or challenger-incumbent relations within an industrial field and, on the other hand, attempts to bring about broader changes involving structural inequality that to some degree can be accommodated under the rubric of the “landscape.” No matter how one characterizes the distinction, it is important to take the distinction into account when studying social movements because differences between narrower sociotechnical change goals and broader societal change goals can be a constraining factor in the integration of coalitions and organizations. For example, there are frequently tensions within environmentalism between social justice orientations and sustainability orientations [25].

Thus, the first main contribution of this study to research on the politics of energy transitions is to develop a multi-coalition perspective on the problem of social movements and sustainability transitions. Based on the pair of goals of sunset-sunrise and societal-sociotechnical change, this approach generates a 2×2 set of typological

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