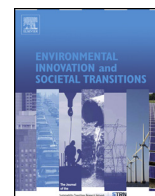




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Original Research Paper

## Local matters: Political opportunities, spatial scale, and support for green jobs policies

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### ABSTRACT

Research on the politics of sustainability transitions can benefit from more attention to the political opportunity structure and its variation at different levels of spatial scale. The study focuses on policy conflicts in the U.S. as represented in the media during the Obama administration years of 2007–2013, when the opportunity structure became increasingly closed. Energy-transition policies were often framed as green jobs and green economic development to overcome opposition from regime actors and conservative politicians. We show that media reports of the policies at the national and global level are less positive than at the local and state-government level. Furthermore, articles that quote from business leaders tend to be more positive. Scalar variation in political opportunities is of general interest for the politics of transitions, especially in countries where conservative parties control national governments and oppose sustainability policy development.

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## 1. Introduction

Because efforts to develop and deepen policies in support of sustainability transitions often encounter opposition from actors associated with the incumbent organizations of an industrial regime, researchers have increasingly recognized the importance of studying transitions as political processes (Meadowcroft, 2011). The study of the politics of transitions has to date developed several dimensions of transition politics, including analyses of the resistance of regime organizations, the role of social movements and countervailing industry groups, and the importance of policy advocacy coalitions both for and against transition policy proposals (Elzen et al., 2011; Geels, 2014; Hess, 2014; Markard et al., 2016). However, an important but not yet well explored aspect of the politics of transitions is the analysis of political opportunities and their relationship to spatial scale.

In this study, we develop the case for including the analysis of the political opportunity structure in the emerging field of the politics of transitions. Although the concept has been used before in transition studies (e.g., Elzen et al., 2011), this project develops a more systematic theorization and a mixed-methods analysis. Political consensus for sustainability transitions remains strong in some countries, and approaches to transitions that focus on implementation and management remain important. However, there is a growing breakdown of consensus in other countries, and where this occurs, the analysis of political opportunities becomes especially salient.

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We further argue that a complete analysis of political opportunities requires attention to differences across levels of spatial scale. Like the politics of transitions, the topic of spatial scale has received growing attention in the recent literature (Hansen and Coenen, 2015; Raven et al., 2012; Truffer et al., 2015). This attention comes as a corrective to the first wave of transition studies, which “can be criticized for being spatially blind and for (implicitly) overemphasizing the national level at the expense of other geographical levels” (Truffer and Coenen 2012: 3). Although our focus is on the politics of transitions rather than on their geography, we suggest some ways forward for bringing these two streams of research into conversation.

In the empirical research that follows, we study one type of transition policy in one country to develop several insights of general interest. The project brings the concept of political opportunities into the literature, develops a strategy for analyzing the scalar dimension of opportunities, and demonstrates the value of a quantitative multilevel methodology that is especially appropriate for this type of problem. In addition to the theoretical and methodological contribution, we also suggest that the topic has broad practical implications. In the developed Anglophone countries, there are increasing signs of opposition to transition policies from mainstream conservative political parties (e.g., Carter and Clements 2015; Young and Coutinho 2013), and this opposition is also evident in conservative and right-wing parties in continental Europe. When these parties are able to block policy development at one level of spatial scale, it becomes especially important to understand how the opportunity for transition policy support may be different at other levels and indeed may interact across levels.

## 2. Conceptual framework and methodological strategy

### 2.1. Conceptual framework

We advance the politics of transitions theoretically by examining the intersections of spatial scale and the political opportunity structure. Although we draw on the geography of transitions literature as a point of reference for our focus on spatial scale, we do not review the literature here, partly because good reviews are already available and partly because our primary focus is on the politics of transitions (Coenen et al., 2012; Truffer et al., 2015).

Various researchers have indicated the need for transition studies to have more adequate analyses of their political dimensions (e.g., Meadowcroft, 2011; Shove and Walker, 2007). One important area of research on the politics of transitions is resistance to policies from regime actors (Geels, 2014). Another area of research draws attention to coalitions of actors in the political field—including elected officials, advocates from civil society organizations, business groups, researchers, and journalists—that emerge to support transition policies, while other coalitions emerge to oppose them (Markard et al., 2016). Broadly conceived, we will understand the term “politics of sustainability transitions” to refer to the conflicts that occur in the political field over the pace, direction, and depth of efforts to make industrial and technological systems less environmentally harmful and more sustainable.

Researchers who examine the politics of transitions have drawn on a wide range of theoretical frameworks, including theories of advocacy coalitions, institutional logics, governmentality, structuration, and practices (Avelino et al., 2016). We consider the structural perspective developed here to be complementary to approaches that focus on agency and coalitions (e.g., Hess, 2014; Markard et al., 2016), on the analysis of systems of meaning such as institutional logics (e.g., Feunfschilling and Truffer, 2016), and on technological design and readiness (e.g., Elzen et al., 2011). All perspectives are important dimensions of a comprehensive theoretical framework that recognizes agency, meaning, materiality, and structure.

The term “political opportunity structure” is widely used in sociology and political science in the study of advocacy, social movements, and policy. In the original formulation, Eisinger (1973) included the factors that make a government more open or closed to citizen participation, but definitions have varied in the subsequent literature (Meyer, 2004). In the context of the politics of transitions, we understand the term to mean the institutional factors that affect the openness of a government to proposals for policies supportive of a sustainability transition in one or more industries or technological systems. The main value of the concept, like that of the landscape in transition studies (Geels, 2014), is to bring a structural counterbalance to analytical frameworks that might otherwise emphasize actors, meaning, and material design. The political opportunity structure may be considered as a dimension of the landscape in the multilevel perspective of transition studies (Geels, 2014).

As with any type of structural concept, the configuration of political opportunities in a time and place may be treated as a stable exogenous variable. However, over time the opportunities change as a result of action, such as mobilizations of extra-institutional social movements and of intra-institutional advocacy coalitions (Meyer, 2004). The most obvious example of a shift in political opportunities occurs when a new coalition of political parties is elected, and the new parties bring with them promises of sweeping change. In addition to variation and change over time, political opportunities also vary by spatial scale. A well-known example is the case of advocates for change who are blocked at a national government level but succeed in shifting the national political opportunity structure by mobilizing foreign governments and transnational actors (Sikink, 2004). Conversely, advocates may also shift to lower levels of geographical scale. Thus, scalar differences in the political opportunity structure are important because they can be used strategically to reopen closed opportunities.

As noted above, the definitional scope of the political opportunity structure varies across analysts. One approach is to focus on the organizational structure of the government, such as the independence of the legislative body or the judiciary, coupled with the more ephemeral configurational structure of parties in power. A more expansive approach, which we adopt, is to include the institutional field or institutional environment of a government (Barley, 2010; Eisinger, 1973). This approach includes factors other than government or party structure, such as the configuration of foreign relations, the presence or absence of an economic crisis, and the influence of the media or other institutions.

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