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# A just transition for coal miners? Accountability frames, community economic identity, and just transition policy support among local policy actors

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## ABSTRACT

The U.S. energy system is currently undergoing significant transition as unconventional drilling technologies have drastically increased the volume of natural gas and oil produced domestically, the cost of renewables has declined, and coal production has plummeted. Scholars and activists have increasingly argued for a just transition policy framework to assist displaced coal miners. In this analysis, we consider support for just transition policies among local policy actors in the Mountain West region, focusing on the role of accountability and community economic identity. Results suggest that policies to assist displaced coal miners enjoy broad support among local policy actors, indicating that comprehensive program to assist communities and workers negatively impacted by the energy transition might be politically possible.

## 1. Introduction

In the energy sector, change is inevitable. Energy systems are constantly undergoing processes of evolution and transition (Verbong and Geels, 2010; Geels, 2014; Smil, 2010). In the United States, the energy system has changed markedly since the mid-2000s because of several converging trends. Due to the combination of unconventional technologies like directional drilling and hydraulic fracturing, domestic natural gas production has increased some 70% between 2000 and 2016 while oil production has increased some 65% (EIA 2017a,b). Concurrent to these trends has been a major uptick in the deployment of renewables; as of 2016, wind power provided about 8% of all generating capacity in the U.S.—this figure was near zero in the early 2000s (EIA, 2017c). Similar trends persist for solar, which grew from 0.1% of all generating capacity to 1.4% between 2000 and 2010 (SEIA, 2017).

A side-effect of these trends has been a move away from coal, and subsequent declines in coal production. The transition away from coal raises several questions of energy justice as miners are displaced and rural places historically dependent upon coal shoulder the economic burden of the transition. In this paper, we consider public support for “just transition” policies to assist displaced coal miners using a sample of local policy actors in two inter-mountain west states—Colorado and Utah. We choose these states because, compared to places like oft-studied West Virginia, they have dynamic, growing economies, rapidly expanding populations, and hence may offer more possibilities in terms of just transition. Secondly, both states have been significant beneficiaries of coal’s primary substitutes—natural gas and renewables. We ask how accountability frames—defined as mental models describing what entities are responsible for changes in the energy system, and who should be held accountable—and factors like community economic identity

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and perceptions of local economic conditions translate into support for transition policies.<sup>1</sup> Hence, this analysis is a response to Meadowcroft's comment that researchers have focused extensively on sustainability policy and policy design, but not given enough attention to "the political circumstances that make the adoption of such policies likely" (pg. 73). Further, following [Faller \(2016\)](#) and [Healy and Barry \(2017\)](#) we articulate supply side and spatial challenges of the energy transition, as ongoing changes in the energy system have largely unexplored impacts on natural resource dependent communities. In the next section, we describe the concept of a "just transition" for fossil fuel workers.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. A just transition for coal miners

The notion of a "transitions" in energy regimes emerged from research on "socio-technical" transitions ([Geels, 2005](#); [Geels and Schot, 2007](#)). Socio-technical transitions are foundational, structural changes in complex systems (e.g. energy production and consumption, transportation, etc.) across technology, policy, infrastructure and human behavior ([Smith et al., 2005](#); [Geels, 2010,2012](#); [Lawhon and Murphy, 2012](#)). Generally, socio-technical transition scholars have been especially interested in transitions that facilitate sustainability, more efficient resource use, and reduced environmental degradation. Scholarship on energy transitions identifies several historical transitions—such as the move from wood fuels to coal ([Fouquet, 2010](#); [Allen, 2012](#))—while also wrestling with the implications of ongoing changes in the energy system in places like Western Europe and the United States ([Hess, 2013](#); [Hess, 2016](#); [Bridge et al., 2013](#)). Increasingly, it is recognized that socio-technical transitions, while often promoting sustainability, raise serious questions of equity and social justice, leading to calls for a "just transition" ([Evans, 2007](#); [Meadowcroft, 2011](#); [Newell and Mulvaney, 2013](#)).

A "just transition" is a deliberate pushback against more managerial and apolitical approaches to transition scholarship ([Goldthau and Sovacool, 2012](#)). This notion is rooted in the environmental justice tradition as it is concerned with the social distribution of the positives and negatives of the energy transition. Thus, just transition scholars are not focused solely upon promoting sustainability, but instead ask who benefits and who is harmed by the changes in the energy system. For instance, [Finley-Brook and Holloman \(2016\)](#) argue that non-whites are under-represented in the solar industry, and parts of the industry rely on a potentially inequitable two-tier wage system. More specific to coal, labor unions—especially outside the U.S.—have advocated for policies to assist displaced miners ([Evans, 2007](#); [Stevis and Felli, 2015](#)) and scholars have increasingly argued that more research is needed on the "upstream" implications for energy justice with the move away from coal ([Healy and Barry, 2017](#)) and advocated for policies to assist miners who have been displaced due to recent destabilization.

In this vein, several policies have been proposed to assist miners who have lost their jobs, or who stand to lose them as the energy system changes. Although prominent politicians hone in on repealing regulations to promote the livelihoods of coal miners, there is little reason to believe that blunting public health and environmental regulations will cause mining firms to hire more employees in large numbers ([Krupp, 2017](#); [Morris, 2016](#)). [Pollin and Callaci \(2016\)](#) review and evaluate several policies to assist displaced miners ranging from job guarantees in the clean energy sector to pension protections. They report that the cost to deliver these policies is modest and suggest that a combination of programs to help miners could form the basis of a comprehensive just transition program.

### 2.2. Accountability frames and transition policy support

A vast literature documents public opinion about environmental issues and energy policy. However, to the best of our knowledge no research has examined viewpoints on transition policies to assist displaced miners. [Sovacool and Dworkin \(2015\)](#) note that "Economics is concerned with accounting for efficiency, justice with accountability." (pg 437). Here, we argue that a potentially significant factor in support for just transition policies is what we call "accountability frames". Informed by foundational works on framing ([Goffman, 1974](#)) and mental models ([Bostrom et al., 1992](#); [Bostrom et al., 1994](#)) we argue that accountability frames are mental models that actors use to make sense of the factors that drive socio-economic change and identify responsible parties to be held accountable.<sup>2</sup> Broadly, it's not known how the causal frames assigned to coal's decline—that is, who or what people think is responsible for changes in the coal sector—translate into support, or lack of support, for transition policies. However, in areas as diverse as climate change beliefs ([Spence and Pidgeon, 2010](#); [Myers et al., 2012](#)), public opinion around criminal justice issues ([Hurwitz and Peffley, 2005](#)) and attitudes towards sexual harassment ([Galesic and Tourangeau, 2007](#)), researchers consistently observe framing effects wherein presenting different information about equivalent phenomenon elicits divergent responses from study participants.

The reasons for coal's decline are complex, yet our reading of public discourse (e.g. [Burnett 2017](#); [Dockrill, 2017](#)) and the relevant

<sup>1</sup> Our reading of the literature on coal and coal miners indicates that, at least in the U.S., a significant majority of this research has focused on Appalachian communities and states (e.g. [Bell and York, 2010](#); [Bell, 2016](#); [Lewin, 2017](#)) with relatively less research examining Western coal mining—for a notable exceptions see [Smith \(2008\)](#). Thus, studying Colorado and Utah extends research conducted in different locales.

<sup>2</sup> We are not the first researchers to use the term "accountability frames". This term has occasionally been invoked in the media and communication literatures (e.g. [Bardoel and d'Haenens, 2004](#); [D'Angelo and Esser, 2003](#); [Davis, 2009](#); [Harlow and Johnson, 2011](#); [McQuail, 1997](#)). For instance, [Harlow and Johnson \(2011\)](#), in their study of New York times coverage of the 2007-2008 financial crisis, define an accountability frame as "suggesting there is a consensus that an issue is wrong and in need of changes or oversight/monitoring" (pg. 1364). Thus, the way that this concept is used in other literatures is similar, but not entirely identical, to what we propose.

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