



# Politics, proximity and the pipeline: Mapping public attitudes toward Keystone XL



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Americans are divided on the Keystone XL energy pipeline.
- Attitudes toward Keystone XL are driven by political party identification and ideology.
- Attitudes toward the pipeline are also shaped by attitudes toward the economy and global warming.
- The effect of proximity on attitudes toward Keystone XL is non-linear.
- Spatial proximity to the pipeline attenuates the effect of ideology.

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## ABSTRACT

The politics of oil pipelines have become increasingly salient in American politics in recent years. In particular, debates about economic benefits, energy security and environmental impact have been provoked by the proposed Keystone XL pipeline expansion intended to take bitumen from northern Alberta in Canada to refineries on the Gulf Coast in Texas. Drawing on data from recent surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center, this article asks a series of questions. What levels of support for (and opposition to) the pipeline exist among the American public? What are the roles of political factors (such as party identification and ideology), economic attitudes, environmental attitudes and proximity to the proposed pipeline route in shaping attitudes toward the pipeline? And how do political factors and proximity to the pipeline interact? We find that partisanship and ideology drive attitudes toward the Keystone XL pipeline, and that the effect of ideology is attenuated by proximity to the proposed route. The policy implications of these findings for energy infrastructure siting controversies are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

The United States is covered in an extensive and complex network of energy pipeline infrastructure. The [US Department of Transportation \(2014\)](#) estimates there currently exists over 4 million kilometers of pipelines crisscrossing the country, or enough to circle the world 100 times. While existing energy pipelines usually go without notice, a series of high-profile events – including accidents, spills, and diplomatic lobbying efforts by the Canadian government – have garnered national and international headlines, making the proposed Keystone XL pipeline a lightning rod for controversy. On the one hand, proponents with an economic stake in pipeline projects argue these expanded networks are not only safe, but also essential for creating new jobs, ensuring economic

growth and increasing North American energy security. On the other hand, a growing chorus of environmentalists joined by an interested public staunchly oppose these new projects, questioning the claims of proponents of the economic benefits while highlighting environmental costs related to sensitive environmental areas and global climate change.

At present, the proposal for the northern section of the pipeline crossing the Canada–US border, which was already modified to re-route the pipeline away from the environmentally sensitive Sand Hills area of Nebraska, is still awaiting final review from the State Department. Faced with opposition from many of its Democratic supporters and environmental groups (on one side) and concerted diplomatic efforts by the Canadian government, pressure to approve the pipeline from Republicans along with a contingent of Democrats in Congress (on the other side), the Obama administration has repeatedly deferred its decision on issuing the Presidential permit required for the pipeline to cross into the US from

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Canada. With several Democrat-held seats in the Senate from Keystone-friendly states vulnerable in the 2014 mid-term elections, the Obama administration again deferred its final decision until after the elections. The subsequent return of Republican control of Congress has since ushered in a new commitment from the Republican leadership to press forward with Keystone XL in spite of threats from President Obama to veto any such attempt. These dynamics speak clearly to the importance of mass public opinion and policy attitudes in American electoral politics, as well as in Presidential decision-making on contested issues. Indeed, the siting of infrastructure, including energy generation and distribution infrastructure, but also other projects such as dams and airports, have become a major point of contestation between state agents and civil society in contemporary politics (Aldrich, 2008).

But what are the factors that shape Americans' attitudes toward Keystone XL? Given that this controversy is relatively new, few studies specifically examine the politics of oil pipelines. What research does exist only implicitly acknowledges the role of public opinion in shaping the political landscape. For instance, in an analysis of the politics around five pipeline proposals, Hoberg (2013) argues that government actors are sensitive to public opposition to pipelines without presenting survey data on the strength or extent of such opposition. Other studies providing a more detailed account of mass attitudes toward particular pipeline proposals still fall short of identifying the factors shaping these opinions (e.g., Nanos, 2013). Moreover, this work tends to ignore the role of geographic context in the formation of opinions. To the extent that public opinion helps shape the preferences of key government actors on controversial issues, and to the extent that attitudes may be formed differently in different places, attention to location in a more thorough analysis of public attitudes can shed light on the politics of the Keystone XL pipeline and other energy siting decisions more generally.

In this paper, we seek to explain patterns of support and opposition to the Keystone XL pipeline. To our knowledge, this is the first study that focuses on the politics of this specific pipeline proposal. As evidenced by the attention devoted to Keystone XL by the news media, this issue is highly salient. Moreover, pressure to find new ways of accessing markets for energy surpluses in North America is likely to remain an issue for as long as demand for fossil fuels exists. In this context, we set out to answer the following questions. To what extent are socio-political variables relevant in shaping public attitudes toward the construction of Keystone XL? To what extent does proximity to the proposed pipeline route drive support for the pipeline? Which factors are most important, and how might proximity and politics interact?

To answer these questions, we draw on the large literature that exists on the formation of mass public attitudes toward policy issues. Scholars interested in various types of policy attitudes have long gravitated toward a common set of predictors, including partisan and ideological predispositions, economic values, and in the case of energy and the environment, proximity to pollution or technology source (Smith 2002; Michaud et al., 2008; Aldrich, 2013). Our study deals with the effects of these and other factors on attitudes toward the Keystone XL pipeline. We are interested in the relative magnitude of these different effects, but also how they interact. For instance, we are interested in the role of ideological predispositions in shaping attitudes toward pipelines, but unlike previous studies, go further and seek to explore whether the impact of ideology is conditioned by proximity to a particular site. The empirical bases for our study are recent surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center seeking to gauge American public opinion on the Keystone XL pipeline.

We begin with an outline of the political context surrounding Keystone XL. We then review previous research from the political behavior and environmental attitudes literatures that bear on the

topic before outlining our theoretical expectations. Next, we describe our data and methods before discussing our key findings. We conclude by reflecting on the implications of our findings for long-standing debates on public opinion on energy and environmental issues in the US and elsewhere (Lachapelle et al., 2012; Van der Horst, 2007). The implications of these findings for energy infrastructure siting controversies are also discussed.

### 1.1. *The politics of pipelines the United States*

At present, six major crude oil pipeline projects are now being considered to transport oil from Alberta's oil sands to various ports and refineries across North America. These end points include refineries on the US Gulf Coast and ports in the province of British Columbia. Of the six major crude oil pipeline projects that have been proposed, the TransCanada Keystone XL pipeline intended to ship an additional 830,000 barrels of Alberta bitumen per day to refineries on the Gulf Coast is likely the most controversial and well-known. Originally proposed in 2008, the Keystone XL proposal became an important electoral issue in 2012. Supported by a large portion of Republicans in Congress, arguments in favor of the proposal center on job creation (Huber and Bowe, 2014). These arguments have been buttressed by those who have argued that Keystone XL is good policy from an energy security perspective: as a stable democracy and US ally, importing Canadian oil is preferable to relying on imports from less stable and less friendly governments in Venezuela and the Persian Gulf. On the other hand, most – though not all – Democrats oppose the proposal, aligning themselves with a number of environmental groups who have mobilized around the issue – including the No Tar Sands Oil Coalition, Greenpeace, Sierra Club, National Wildlife Federation, and Friends of the Earth – who argue that Keystone XL would increase greenhouse gas emissions while placing local communities and aquifers at risk of contamination from pipeline spills (Parfomak et al., 2013).

This issue framing is key. Like public policy, policy issues can either be framed as relevant for a particular group or location, or widely diffused (Hoberg, 2013). Depending on the distribution and concentration of costs and benefits, issues will take on different political and geographic characteristics. Political issues that promise geographically concentrated benefits to the local workforce, for instance, will have different political effects than issues that impose diffuse risks to a broader community.

### 1.2. *Theory and hypotheses*

What factors explain attitudes toward Keystone XL at the level of the mass public? Scholarship in political psychology and public opinion has repeatedly found that the average voter has little interest in or information about politics (Converse, 1964; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1993). Given the cost of acquiring and processing new information, citizens will remain rationally uninformed on issues that fail to affect them directly (Downs, 1957). For non-pocket book issues, most citizens are 'satisficers' or 'cognitive misers' who lack the incentives to form sophisticated opinions on the issues of the day, relying instead on a range of heuristic devices and mental shortcuts to process new information, form attitudes, and make decisions (Popkin, 1991; Sniderman et al., 1991).

#### 1.2.1. *Political party identification*

Partisan cues provide one type of heuristic allowing individuals to form policy attitudes with minimal cognitive effort and while remaining relatively uninformed. This idea dates back to the seminal work of Campbell et al. (1960) who argued that party identification could act as a perceptual filter through which individuals perceive issues. According to this view, people will adopt

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