

ENERGY TRANSITIONS

Changing frames

Energy Res. Soc. Sci. **50**, 38–50 (2019)

As with any period of change, the energy transition faces many political struggles and conflicts between groups with varying interests. Understanding the dynamics of these tussles could teach us more about how transition proponents can overcome incumbent interests. The community choice aggregation (CCA) movement displays all the hallmarks of such disputes: arising in the United States in the 1990s, the CCA movement aimed to offer communities more democratic control over their energy system but faced strong resistance from the more powerful utilities. Now, David Hess at Vanderbilt University has analysed the composition of coalitions for and against CCAs in California and the choices of framing adopted by both sides over policy decisions across the history of the movement.

Looking at policy conflicts arising in the state between 1996 and 2018, Hess created a database comprising media reports, testimony, legislative documents, organizational statements and more. Analysis of these documents revealed that both coalitions underwent considerable changes throughout this period. While those in favour of CCAs started out with a core of consumer groups and local government, the coalition subsequently gathered environmentalists until the CCAs were established enough to support themselves. Alongside utilities, those opposing the CCAs initially included affiliated labour unions, some environmental organizations and chambers of commerce, but shifted later to encompass a wide array of civil society groups including some consumer groups. Some organizations switched coalitions over some issues. Exploring a subset of the policy disputes, Hess found that the choice of framing adopted by coalitions also changed over time, with each coalition trialling different approaches, sometimes using the same framing as each other or even appropriating from the opposing side. Those in support of CCAs have increasingly come to focus on issues of job creation, corporate power, local autonomy and democracy, while those against CCAs have centred more on fairness in pricing as a key argument, highlighting distributive justice issues. The study underscores the dynamic nature of policy conflicts, both in terms of the actors involved and the framing and counter-framing employed to win over support.

Nicky Dean

Published online: 14 January 2019

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41560-018-0322-x>