



Community Responses to Large-Scale Energy Projects

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Promises from the Trump administration to invest in infrastructure under the supervision of a business-friendly cabinet suggest that the United States will soon renew large-scale energy projects. Under President Obama, the country has seen rapid growth in domestic energy production, but at the same time officials have offered some openings to local communities and regional or national movements opposed to big new projects such as the Keystone XL and Dakota Access pipelines, as well as to smaller projects such as the Jordan Cove liquefied natural gas export terminal and pipeline. Under Trump's leadership, regulatory approvals of such projects are likely to be accelerated, amplifying what the Energy Policy Act of 2005 has already accomplished. Many applications are already coming from companies anticipating a business-friendly administration, even if actual construction may await favorable market conditions.

How will communities and regional opponents respond to new waves of proposed big energy projects? My research with colleagues has examined past community responses to proposed U.S. energy facilities and has identified factors that shape protests and outcomes.

Factors Influencing Community Responses

Communities can respond to big energy projects in a range of possible ways – from open-armed acceptance or solicitation to widespread, strident opposition. Most proposals experience little if any opposition and large-scale protest is rare. Our research has identified four factors that matter: perceptions of risks and benefits to communities; political opportunities for opposition; resources; and specific community contexts.

- **Risks** posed by a particular project are often related to potential impacts on health, social ties, and the environment, while benefits are usually understood as potential economic gains. Both risks and benefits are largely in the eye of the beholder – with different communities and individuals within communities assessing risks and benefits differently, depending on their demographic characteristics and worldviews, political leanings, lived experiences, and the surrounding context. For example, residents of communities long dependent on resource extraction for their economic existence will view the risks and benefits associated with a proposed energy project very differently than residents of communities with little experience with energy production – or residents of communities that have experienced negative events, such as large accidents. Beyond reactions to the project itself, people also perceive risks and benefits associated with mobilizing for or against a proposal – such as risks of facing government repression or opportunities for political advancement if an oppositional campaign succeeds.
- **Political opportunities** include the relative openness of existing governance structures and officials to the claims made by active groups. Procedures for public consultation and participation provide opportunities for people to express their opinions about a particular proposal, network with likeminded

individuals, and perhaps influence the outcome. In addition, sympathetic government officials can serve as important allies. Events can also create windows of opportunity – for example, an explosion at a similar type of facility can create an opportunity for opponents of a newly proposed one. When proposals are initially assessed, trust in government institutions, companies, and active groups may encourage citizen acceptance with a degree of input. Conversely, breaks in trust – sparked by secretive negotiations between project sponsors and government officials – may spur oppositional campaigns.

- **Resources** from within and beyond affected communities shape possibilities for protests – not only financial resources, but also people experienced at navigating and influencing complicated regulatory processes, people who know how to network and build movements, and scientific and technical experts. People with such resources may be accessed informally or through formal channels, such as from a state-level organization linked to a local chapter. However, the mere existence of financial and human resources is not enough. They must be drawn into the cause via personal connections, persuasive framing of the issue, and/or supportive public opinion.
- **Community context** in many ways influences the impact of all three of the above factors. Whether a community needs economic development, has past experience with energy facilities, has people who know how to mobilize, or has a significant percentage of residents employed in related industries – all of these factors and more influence how residents will tend to view the risks and benefits of a proposed new energy project, as well as how they will view available resources and opportunities for mobilization. We have found community contexts to be more important than objective assessments of a facility's risks in shaping residents' responses.

The Future of Opposition to Large-Scale Energy Projects

We find that well-resourced communities are particularly effective in mobilizing against unwanted energy projects – an unsurprising fact that nevertheless explains why less privileged communities are especially susceptible to environmental harms. However, when communities face risky projects in contexts that facilitate push-back, vibrant oppositional movements can appear even in communities with relatively few resources.

Does opposition matter? Market conditions affect how and when projects go ahead, so it is not always easy to tell. Overall, opposition does not necessarily block projects, especially when outsiders take the lead, but projects remain free to proceed when not opposed at all. We know that business-friendly federal officials who decide to streamline regulatory approvals encourage new commercial energy ventures and make it harder for communities to oppose them, especially in localities and states that lack their own review requirements. During the Obama years, oppositional groups have benefited from a degree of federal responsiveness. They are unlikely to get similar encouragement from the Trump administration, but the connections and resources they previously amassed may carry over to some degree. In the future, as in the past, the community resource and contextual factors we have identified will continue to encourage, or discourage, local attempts to protest big energy ventures.

Read more in Doug McAdam and Hilary Boudet, *Putting Social Movements in Their Place: Explaining Opposition to Energy Projects in the United States, 2000-2005* (Cambridge University Press, 2012); Rachel A. Wright and Hilary Boudet, "To Act or Not to Act: Context, Capability, and Community Response to Environmental Risk." *American Journal of Sociology* 118, no. 3 (2012): 728-777; and Hilary Boudet, Dylan Bugden, Chad Zanocco, and Edward Maibach, "The Effect of Industry Activities on Public Support for January 1, 2017 <https://scholars.org>

'Fracking.'" *Environmental Politics* 25, no. 4 (2016): 593-612.