



Original research article

Red states, green laws: Ideology and renewable energy legislation in the United States

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ABSTRACT

We develop a novel, mixed methods approach to examine the relationship between political ideology and support for renewable energy and energy efficiency (REEE) policies. Through qualitative analysis of interviews with state-government legislators in the U.S., we show that when legislators evaluate and justify their support for and opposition to different types of renewable energy and energy efficiency (REEE) policies, they distinguish bills based on frames that are related to ideological differences (e.g., tax decreases, government efficiency, regulation, mandates, government spending). In turn the qualitative distinctions among bills are associated with quantitative differences in levels of support and success for the policies. Using data from a longitudinal analysis of 188 major state-government laws passed from 2004 to 2014 and a cross-sectional set of 709 passed and unpassed laws from 2011 to 2012, we show that REEE policies configured as mandates (e.g., renewable portfolio standards) have consistently lower levels of support than for similar REEE policies configured as tax reductions, reduction of government waste by increasing building efficiency, authorization of local government action, and regulatory reduction. Thus, via both quantitative and qualitative analysis, we show that there are important ideology-associated differences in REEE policy that point to opportunities for more successful policy design.

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1. Introduction

Although there have been multiple opportunities since 1990 for the world's political leaders to develop policies that would slow or reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the resulting policy reforms to date have fallen far short of targets suggested as necessary by climate science. Such policy failures suggest that an important task of social science is to understand the conditions under which governments do and do not respond to environmental and energy problems. The politics of energy governance is now recognized as an important area of research in the social science of energy [1,2]. We argue that a better understanding of political ideology is an important resource for developing a theory of environmental-energy reform and for understanding the practical problem of crafting policy to increase its likelihood of gaining broad political support.

This study focuses on the U.S., where ideological differences with respect to energy policy are currently pronounced. Because the U.S. is a continental country with widespread variation at the state government level on this issue, the scope of the analysis is similar to other “international” studies, such as comparisons across European countries. An important dimension of this variation in the U.S. is the difference between “red” (or conservative) and “blue” (or progressive, also described as “liberal”) states and state legislators. These differences refer to a range of issues, but one of the central divisions involves ideological disagreements over the proper role of government intervention in the economy.

These differences have international implications, not only because of the influence of the U.S. globally but also because of the importance of similar ideological divisions in other countries. Fundamental political differences have increasingly affected energy policy aimed at greenhouse gas reduction, especially in the Anglophone world such as Australia and Canada [3]. More broadly, neoliberal ideology is now influential across a wide range of countries, where market-oriented preferences can be used to justify inaction on decarbonization policies.

We argue that attention to the specific connections between ideology and types of renewable energy and energy efficiency (REEE) legislation can provide insights into the problem of understanding the politics that underline energy policy [1]. Specifically,

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we examine how various frames associated with conservative ideology—e.g., support for tax cuts and deregulation, opposition to government mandates and cost increases, and support for business development—are both explicit points of reference in the discourse of state legislators and are quantitatively associated with differential support for REEE laws in state legislatures.

Although the focus of this study is on REEE legislation in state governments in the U.S., we use this specific research problem to develop a broader contribution to the analysis of the political conditions of environmental and energy reform. In terms of the 75 research questions outlined by Sovacool [1] as central for the energy research and social science field, we utilize a mixed methods approach (questions 1–5) that enables an analysis of ideology and framing (questions 5–10) to develop a better understanding of the underlying principles of energy governance (question 56).

2. Theoretical and policy background: ideology and the sociology of environmental reform

2.1. Theoretical background

This study contributes to the interdisciplinary field of the social science of energy policy with a focus on environmental sociology. The sociology of environmental and energy reform can be divided into the study of the conditions that shape changes in policy and practices (e.g., [4]) and the evaluation of the effectiveness of such changes in ameliorating environmental and social problems (e.g., [5,6]). Although the focus of this project is on the first of the two areas (the conditions that affect reform), we assume that research in the second problem area shows that policy reforms are often less effective at solving environmental problems than originally envisioned [7].

Previous research has documented several clusters of important conditions that affect the opportunities for reform, among them the role of interests, such as the mobilization of social movements [8,9] and the extent to which industries are divided and accustomed to regulatory intervention [10]; and the role of institutions, such as diffusion dynamics and institutional isomorphism, including for renewable portfolio standards [11,12], and variance in government structure, such as the strength of the executive appointment powers over government agencies [13]. Our focus is on another important factor: the role of ideology, which is frequently a strong or even the strongest predictor of attitudes and outcomes related to environmental issues. Ideology has been linked to the perception of threat to catastrophic change [14], attitudes toward government spending on environmental protection [15], and REEE policy adoption [11,16–18].

Our contribution to this literature is to examine variation in the level of support across REEE policy types from the perspective of ideology. Unlike some of the studies in political science and policy, we do not treat ideology as a single variable (such as a measure of citizen ideology) and then use it in a multivariate model to predict policy adoption. Instead, we are interested in how policy design distinctions are related to meaningful ideological distinctions that in turn inform how legislators view, evaluate, and support different types of REEE policy. Recent research has shown that political differences over environmental policy vary across issue type and may fluctuate over time [19], and in a study of the California legislature it was shown that differences between types of green-energy laws are related to ideological differences [20]. However, to date no research has explored the connection between ideology and REEE policy type in a systematic way across a broad range of REEE policies.

The concept “political ideology” is understood here as a broad system of models of and for action that informs both political

attitudes and policy adoption and implementation [21]. An ideology becomes meaningful through its contrastive relationship with other ideologies. In the U.S. and many other advanced industrial countries, the primary ideological opposition is between “conservatism,” which prefers market-based policy instruments when necessary and low government regulation of markets where possible, and “liberalism,” which focuses on the role of government in remedying market imperfections related to inequality, unemployment, environmental destruction, health, and safety. Other ideologies are important in some circumstances (such as developmentalism and socialism), but our focus here will be on the right-left contrast that is described in the U.S. as conservative versus liberal ideology. As we will show in the qualitative analysis, these conflicts are often explicit points of reference in debates over the proper role of government with respect to markets and energy reform.

Unlike an approach to ideology that keeps in it a “black box” as either a binary variable of conservative versus liberal or as a continuous variable, we develop a more fine-grained approach to the study of ideology and legislation by using the concept of frames that can be attached to policy differences. Frames are related to ideology as “innovative amplifications and extensions of, or antidotes to, existing ideologies or components of them” [22,23], but frames also serve as meta-communicative signals to allow actors to understand what “game” they are in, such as cooperation versus conflict [24]. Thus, we treat ideology as a broad system of meaning (e.g., conservatism) that includes a variety of frames (e.g., reduce government spending, reduce regulation, cut taxes) that actors use to evaluate and negotiate policy proposals. In turn, the use of frames and ideologies is part of a strategic political process of producing coalitions among actors in order to affect political outcomes [25,26]. Articulating a frame is a social process that requires amplification and communication, as our interviews of state legislators show.

To develop this approach of the analysis of ideologies, frames, and policy types, we use a mixed-methods approach. This strategy allows us to show how legislators draw on and articulate the frames as they evaluate, criticize, or defend bills. It also allows us to develop hypotheses about potential differences in the level of support within the REEE policy field across different policy designs. This approach has the benefit of providing a novel theoretical contribution to the analysis of ideology and policy outcomes and of offering potential practical insight into the problem of building broad political support for REEE legislation.

2.2. Ideology and conflict in the REEE policy field

There is a documented tendency for attitudes toward environmental policy to become more polarized in the U.S. especially after 1990 [15]. In turn, the polarization on environmental policies is part of a broader political polarization on a range of issues [27,28]. In addition to issue polarization, there is also a trend for both houses of a state legislature to be controlled increasingly by one party [29]. This party polarization became especially pronounced after the 2014 elections, when the number of partisan state legislatures controlled by Republicans reached 68 out of 98, the highest level in the party’s history [30]. In 24 states Republicans controlled both houses of the legislature and the governor’s office, whereas Democrats had complete control of the three bodies in only six states [30]. The increasing control of legislatures by Republicans, and the influence of the conservative “Tea Party” wing within that party, has coincided with issue polarization in the legislatures with respect to REEE.

At the state government level, by 2015 the conservative American Legislative Exchange Council included about one-quarter of state legislators among its members [31]. ALEC has worked with state legislators to reverse central REEE policies such as renewable

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