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Power Politics: Renewable Energy Policy Change in US States

Addressing climate change requires societies to transition towards renewable energy resources. In the United States, most states have passed renewables portfolio standards (RPS), creating goals for electricity's share of renewables, and instituted net energy metering (NEM) policies, compensating individuals and organizations for supplying distributed energy to the grid. Why have some states, like California, successfully expanded their policies, while others, have failed to enact higher RPS targets or a NEM policy? Why have some states weakened their policies, while others have staved off retrenchment attempts?

Typical explanations for policy change include shifts in partisan control, shifts in public opinion and bureaucratic learning. Leah argues that shifts in the balance of power between supportive and opponent interest groups best accounts for variation across states in repeal efforts' success. Through policy feedback, policy design structures interest groups' relative power. Retrenchment attempts are more likely to succeed when renewable energy opponents are greater in number, profitability or political influence. By contrast, policy expansion is more likely to occur when renewable energy advocates become disproportionately empowered compared to their opponents.

Drawing on comparative case studies, Leah uses process-tracing to construct policy histories, examining how policymaking and implementation shaped later rounds of policy revision. The study compares six cases of renewable energy policy change in US states, developed through over 100 semi-structured interviews with politicians, political staff, utilities, bureaucrats, and interest groups. Advocates and opponents use several strategies to try to change policy. Politicians often come to support or oppose policies as a function of their ties to interest groups. Still, public support for policy matters; accordingly, interest groups construct and present public opinion strategically to try to shape politicians' actions. Finally, how the policy is designed, including its timing and visibility, may condition its capacity to expand or contract over time. In this way, my argument draws from and contributes to policy feedback theory.