

Article Critique: “Shifting Winds: Explaining Variation in State Policies to Promote Small-Scale Wind Energy”

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Tomas Koontz and Joshua Wiener’s case study analysis considers the extent of variance among three states regarding their particular small-scale wind energy policies (Koontz and Wiener 2010, 634). Studying how states adopt alternative energy policies is vital when examining the future of renewable energy in the United States. It will take more than one single over-arching policy from the federal government to free this nation from reliance on fossil fuels. Although every state will vary in the way they adopt wind energy policies, as more research is completed new policy patterns and models will be found. These patterns and models can in turn be used to create wind energy policy generalizations, and further the understanding of wind energy policy adoption.

**Methodology**

Koontz and Wiener’s comparative research focuses on two models of studying state policy adoption, internal determinants and regional policy diffusion (Koontz and Wiener 2010, 632-633). These two models have been used extensively in previous research to better estimate how state policy is adopted. One depiction of the two models describes internal determinants as “internal characteristics” within the state itself, and regional policy diffusion as the imitation of neighboring state policies based on their successfulness (Matisoff 2008, 528). The internal determinants were studied in each state as follows, the “level of state commitment to environmental protection and innovation; citizen ideology; level of personal wealth; the price of

electricity; interest group strength;” and legislative professionalism (Koontz and Wiener 2010, 645).

The three cases that were chosen for this study were Oregon, Ohio, and Oklahoma. Each state was chosen specifically for their similarities of per capita wealth and average retail price of electricity. All three states have a different citizen ideology ranging from liberal Oregon; to conservative Oklahoma; and moderate Ohio. The wide ideological range was chosen study the full spectrum of small-scale wind energy policy through the eyes of completely different states (Koontz and Wiener 2010, 635). Interviews were completed in each state over an eight month span totally 33 (12 in Oregon, 10 in Ohio, and 11 in Oklahoma), and 26 of the 33 interviews were done via telephone. The interviewees included government staff, environmental advocacy group members, as well as members of wind turbine firms (Koontz and Wiener 2010, 635).

### **Research Findings**

Following the interview case study, Koontz and Wiener found that each state had multiple variables that explained the extent of their small-scale wind policy. Oregon had the highest number of wind energy policies including, tax incentives, grants, loans, and a Renewable Portfolio Standard (RPS). An RPS is the specific percentage of electrical production that the state government deems must come from renewable sources of energy. Oregon was most influenced by their history of state commitment to environmental protection and innovation, with interest group strength and the citizen’s liberal ideology coming in second and third respectively (Koontz and Wiener 2010, 637, 644).

Ohio had a surprising amount of small-scale wind energy policies in place, including everything Oregon had instituted except for tax incentives. The possibility of economic development potential was the most influential internal determinant for Ohio’s wind energy

policy, followed closely by that state's commitment to environmental protection. In third came regional policy diffusion, with Ohio's policy mimicking neighboring states, arguably because of interstate competition between the states (Koontz and Wiener 2010, 640, 644).

By far the most conservative of the three states, Oklahoma, lacked a competitive number of wind energy policies. The top two internal determinants were the strength of the fossil fuel industry, which has been historically the biggest economic force in Oklahoma, followed by the conservative citizen ideology that exists there. Oklahoma has the smallest amount of wind energy policy among the three states, but ironically they also have the highest amount of wind resource, which is for the most part going to waste (Koontz and Wiener 2010, 643, 644).

Among the three case studies performed, the strongest of the variables was state commitment to environmental protection or lack thereof. This internal determinant was within the top two of each of the three case studies performed and this finding indicates that the notions of environmental protection play an enormous role in the outcome of wind energy policy among states. This research is very useful in understanding the possibilities of further wind energy policy in the states, but changes can be made to enhance the research in numerous ways.

### **Critique**

There are several questions that can be raised regarding this research by Koontz and Wiener, including the time period of the research, the type of interview study completed, the variables used to select the case studies, and some conflicting data with other research on the adoption of state policy.

These case studies were done from December of 2008 to July of 2009, but why does this matter? In November of 2008 Barack Obama, a democrat, was elected president of the United States, quite a change from the previous administration under President Bush. Not only was the

new president a democrat, but an influx of democratic congressional members arrived at both the state and federal level. These happenings lead to liberal government workers and staffers becoming more involved in the government as well. Those who are interviewed during this time may have a notion to follow what the new administration would desire, and could cause slight partiality, when simply one year prior that might have not occurred. Especially with those who were interviewed toward the end of their research period, when we already saw environmental policy change at both the state and federal level. Political leanings have to be examined and discussed as a possible bias toward environmentalism, but this problem was seemingly ignored by the authors. Another aspect to look at is the interview study conducted by the authors; it too has flaws that could have been fixed.

The sheer number of interviews was quite small for a case study of three states. Not only was there only a total of 33, but each state did not have an even number of interviewees, which should be a priority in the future. A number closer to 25 or 30 from each state would have created a much more full and complete case study, as well as given the research a good backbone to make conclusions from. The larger the number of interviewees which can be practically done, the better the research will become.

Koontz and Wiener did not use an equal interview style for each person interviewed either, which can cause unbalanced research. Twenty six of the 33 interviews were done via the telephone, but the other seven were done in person. Human nature can cause people to say many different things depending on the environment they are being interviewed in. Although it is a possibility that this did not play a factor, it must be addressed. Those seven people that were interviewed in person may not have given as useful information as those on the phone. To ensure

that biased research does not occur simply conducting the same type of interview style for each person would have left no question about uneven interviewing.

Adding experts of environmental policy and state policy adoption could have been another useful tool in broadening the extent of information that was received through the interview process. Deserai Crow (2010) found in her research, “Not only were experts far more involved in promoting policy change than citizens or elected officials, those experts were generally more effective doing so within local communities (161).”

The number of case studies done by Koontz and Weiner was relatively low if you compare it to the entire population of the country. Although three case studies is a rather small number, finding another practical way of doing this research and getting the specifics they did would be difficult. One way of reaching more of the population would be studying the same amount of states with a possible addition of one or two, and choosing more populated states, that would hopefully add a whole new perspective on wind energy policy and expand the research to more people. Altering other variables that were used in the research regarding state selection may create disparate outcomes that would add another level to state policy adoption.

One of the variables that used in choosing the states was citizen ideology, of which the authors chose three separate ideologies, liberal, moderate, and conservative. Another interesting take would be to choose states with identical ideologies and compare the different internal determinants and regional policy diffusion for their particular wind energy policy.

Koontz and Weiner also mentioned that Oklahoma, while having the highest wind resource of the three states, are far from utilizing that resource, and actually have far less wind energy policy than Oregon and Ohio. Daniel Matisoff found some contradictory findings in his research of state policy adoption of wind energy. Matisoff stated that states with a high wind

resource have are more prone to adopting RPS (2008, 544), which Oklahoma has not adopted. This contradiction creates an interesting exception that could be studied further.

### **Conclusions and Discussion**

This research provides valuable information regarding how states chose whether or not to adopt small-scale wind policy and policy adoption in general. Although this research was completed on a small scale, it is still quite useful, and having too many case studies may bog down the research that is found. Future research could focus on one specific type of wind policy, such as the Renewable Portfolio Standard and why certain states may or may not adopt it, like in the Oklahoma scenario discussed previously.

A great next step for wind power research would be to expand on what was done here with new approaches and discussions of the authors' findings. More specifically one idea could involve comparing our nation and state policy adoption of wind energy to foreign policy adoption in the same area. This may give us useful information about how we should approach our policy adoption research strategies. The answers to questions regarding wind energy policy adoption may not solely lie within our own borders. Any and all research areas including comparative studies with foreign nations could turn out to be quite fruitful in producing higher quality research studies.

### References

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