When Conservatives Build and Liberals Block: Intra-Ideological Value Conflict in Energy Politics*

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Abstract

Why do some liberals oppose renewable energy projects in their communities while some conservatives embrace them? Existing frameworks explain renewable energy opposition through the lens of partisan polarization and material interests but often do not account for additional intra-ideological tensions that siting conflicts routinely produce. This chapter introduces *policy concretization* as a theoretical framework, describing the process by which abstract policy commitments become operational through local implementation. When a renewable project is proposed, liberals who simultaneously hold climate and conservation-minded values must rank them; conservatives who hold both renewable skepticism and property rights commitments must do the same. Actors who diverge from ideological expectations then engage in *rhetorical shielding*, justifying their positions through the vocabulary of their own tradition rather than the opposing one. I develop this framework through a comparative case study. I conclude by outlining an empirical research agenda evaluating how competing values among elites and the mass public operate under policy concretization, and what this implies about the state of energy transitions moving forward.

Keywords: renewable energy; siting conflict; policy concretization; intra-ideological conflict; value ordering

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"I have no problem with someone being against [wind], but don't tell me I can't have some property rights."
— Bob Walton, Republican Isabella Township Trustee

"The major concern with large-scale solar projects is the potential deforestation that might take place."
— Jane Scanlan-Emigh, Sunrise Movement Amherst

1 Introduction

Beliefs and attitudes towards climate change are structured by partisan identities (Guber, 2013; McCright & Dunlap, 2011). In the U.S., liberals are more likely than conservatives to view climate change as a serious threat, support government actions that rein in climate damage, and believe that human activity is the primary cause (Anthony Leiserowitz et al., 2026). Conservatives tend to be less concerned about climate-induced devastation, more skeptical of the science, and less supportive of policy intervention (Anthony Leiserowitz et al., 2026). Thus, observers might expect liberals to favor renewable energy deployment as a needed response to climate change, and conservatives to oppose it as an unnecessary government-driven intervention. However, when renewable projects are proposed, patterns of support and opposition in local areas can cut across conventional ideological lines. What explains this dynamic?

Several well-developed explanations exist. While partisan polarization accounts for the aggregate divide between liberals and conservatives on energy issues, it cannot explain the systematic variation that emerges within each ideological camp when projects are proposed locally. Material self-interest addresses this, as those who stand to benefit economically from a project may support it regardless of partisan identity, while those bearing costs may oppose regardless of ideological sympathies (David O. Sears & Carolyn L. Funk, 1991). Yet material accounts struggle to explain why those without tangible benefits or costs may nonetheless take strong positions on a project. Ideological multidimensionality stresses that citizens hold distinct and sometimes conflicting values across policy domains, rather than deriving all preferences from a single left-right dimension (Kinder & Kalmoe, 2017; Zaller, 1992). Work on symbolic versus operational ideology reveals persistent gaps between abstract self-identification and concrete policy preferences, suggesting that context shapes which dimension of ideology governs any particular judgment (Ellis & Stimson, 2012). Studies of elite cues and framing effects demonstrate that how an issue is presented can shift which values citizens bring to bear (Zaller, 1992). Growing evidence shows that Republicans and

Democrats find ways to support renewable energy for fundamentally different reasons, even when their bottom-line preferences converge (Gustafson et al., 2020). Collectively, these approaches establish that ideology is multidimensional, that context and framing shape which values are activated, and that the same policy can attract support through divergent value pathways. Yet none specifies the mechanism that determines when and why particular values become salient under conditions of local implementation, nor whether the resulting patterns of intra-ideological divergence are predictable rather than idiosyncratic.

Siting conflict research has tested whether living near renewable facilities increases or decreases support, with mixed results (Mayer, Hazboun, & Howe, 2021; Swofford & Slattery, 2010; Urpelainen & Zhang, 2022). The "green on green" literature treats environmental opposition to renewable projects as a tension between biodiversity and climate goals, rather than a systematic intra-ideological tension (Kahn, 2000; Warren, Lumsden, O'Dowd, & Birnie, 2005). Although numerous studies have identified *inter-ideological* opposition towards renewable projects, empirical work has not systemically explored divergent patterns of *intra-ideological* tension. While policy feedback theory illuminates how policy implementation generates new constituencies and (or political backlash), these accounts are often used to explain opposition in terms of material stakes or policy-induced identity change, rather than the activation values which lead to conflict among nominal supporters or opponents (Campbell, 2003; Pierson, 1993).

I argue that when proposed locally, renewable energy projects force a ranking of value commitments that abstract ideas leave unresolved. *Policy concretization*, defined as the contextual shift of policy from the symbolic to the operational, operates through *value ordering*. Liberals confronting a proposed solar installation on forested land must rank conservation against climate mitigation; conservatives confronting wind turbines on neighboring farmland must rank property rights against renewable energy skepticism. In other words, when policy shifts from a commitment to a community, actors determine which of their values speak the loudest.

To ground this framework empirically, I conduct two comparative case studies selected to demonstrate the symmetric logic of policy concretization. In conservative-leaning Isabella County, Michigan, farmers, business interests, and local officials embraced large-scale wind development, prioritizing property rights and economic autonomy over climate skepticism. Meanwhile, in the liberal stronghold of Amherst, Massachusetts, residents and environmental activists proposed a temporary ban on solar development to protect forested land, revealing tensions between local conservation and global climate mitigation. These cases are not intended to be representative or establish the prevalence of intra-ideological siting con-

flicts. The cases instead serve to (1) demonstrate that policy concretization is an empirically tractable phenomenon and (2) establish the foundation of an empirical research agenda set on evaluating the effects of competing intra-ideological values in siting conflicts.

This chapter proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews existing frameworks for understanding climate and energy attitudes. Section 3 develops the theoretical framework of policy concretization. Section 4 describes the case selection logic and analytical approach, and Section 5 presents the case studies and analysis. Section 6 concludes with implications for energy transitions and outlines a future research agenda.

2 Ideology and Climate and Energy Preferences

In the absence of direct exposure to renewable facilities, public attitudes toward climate change and renewable energy are largely shaped by pre-existing ideological commitments (Anthony Leiserowitz et al., 2026). Understanding the forces shaping policy concretization first requires situating contemporary liberal and conservative positions on the environment and climate change. Then, it is necessary to explore existing frameworks that explain why, in some cases, abstract ideological commitments diverge from revealed preferences.

2.1 Contemporary Ideological Positions

In line with recent scholarship on ideology, this chapter treats ideologies not as logical constraints that determine all downstream preferences (Converse, 1964), but as historically contingent bundles of issue positions, moral commitments, and group identities (Kinder & Kalmoe, 2017). This distinction matters; if ideology were a fixed deductive system, any divergence from expected positions would indicate weak constraint or cognitive failure (Converse, 1964). But if ideologies are bundles, then divergence may reflect the internal complexity of ideology. The question then becomes not whether citizens are ideological, but which elements of citizens' ideological bundle take priority when circumstances induce a trade-off between competing values.

Conservatives bundle together several values which may influence their attitudes towards renewable energy and climate change: skepticism toward government regulation and centralized mandates, preference for market-based solutions and private property rights, prioritization of economic growth and energy independence (McCright & Dunlap, 2011), and skepticism toward climate science (Oreskes & Conway, 2010). In most contexts, these values align comfortably; opposing climate regulation simultaneously expresses skepticism of government, defends industry, and rejects regulation.

Liberals tend to believe that climate change is an urgent threat (Guber, 2013), government intervention can be trusted to solve problems through regulation (Dunlap, McCright, & Yarosh, 2016), and social and environmental justice issues are crucial to tackle. Liberals also adhere to principles of environmental preservation and conservation, traditions that emphasize protecting specific places, ecosystems, and species. In the absence of concrete trade-offs, these principles generally align, particularly when preservation and conservation are viewed as complementary efforts to combat climate change.

The critical observation is that both ideological traditions contain latent tensions that rarely surface in national-level opinion formation. When survey researchers ask whether the government should fund renewable energy research, whether climate change is happening, or whether carbon emissions should be regulated, they are measuring positions in the symbolic register (Ellis & Stimson, 2012). At this level, ideology predicts attitudes powerfully and consistently. Using data from the General Social Survey (GSS), Figure 10.1 shows that partisan gaps in environmental spending support were modest through the early 1990s but have widened dramatically since. Indeed, the partisan gaps on climate beliefs have widened steadily since the mid-2000s, and ideological identification remains the single strongest predictor of climate policy preferences in surveys.

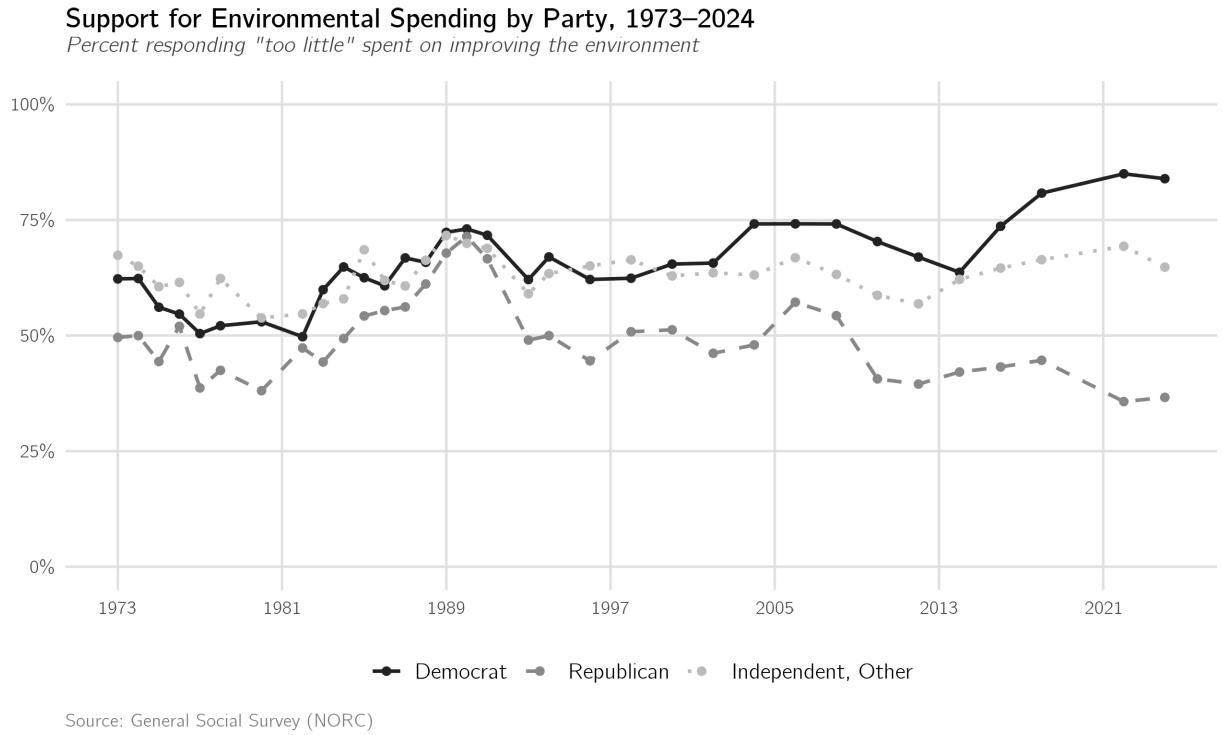

Figure 10.1: Support for Environmental Spending By Party, 1973–2024

2.2 Ideology, Values, and the Symbolic-Operational Gap

But what happens when abstract policy commitments become concrete realities? Some political scientists maintain that most citizens lack coherent ideological belief systems (Converse, 1964). Others have shown that citizens hold distinct, sometimes conflicting values that can pull in different directions depending on context (Kinder & Kalmoe, 2017; Zaller, 1992). The tension between these views is partly resolved by attending to levels of abstraction. Lloyd A. Free & Hadley Cantril (1967) first identified the paradox of Americans who simultaneously endorsed conservative symbolic principles (e.g., small government, individual responsibility) while supporting operationally liberal policies (e.g., public programs and federal regulation). Ellis & Stimson (2012) show that a large share of Americans are symbolic conservatives but operational liberals.

While Ellis & Stimson (2012) explain why the symbolic-operational gap exists at the aggregate level, they do not specify what triggers individual citizens to shift from one register to the other in response to specific policies. Elite framing influences which considerations are activated in particular settings, but framing research likewise leaves under-specified the conditions under which policy implementation (rather than elite communication) drives the shift from abstract to concrete reasoning (Zaller, 1992).

2.3 Social Acceptance and the Proximity Puzzle

Studies increasingly point to instances of local opposition against utility-scale renewable projects, stemming from perceptions of financial risk, visual and environmental impacts, local norms, and low levels of trust in developers or governments (Devine-Wright, 2005). As illustrated in Figure 10.2, more than 450 counties and municipalities across 44 states have adopted restrictions on siting wind and solar projects (Eisenson et al., 2025).

In general, support for renewables is shaped by economic benefits, project scale, and community ownership, while opposition often intensifies where landscape impacts are visible (Gadzanku et al., 2025). When ideology or partisanship are studied in this literature, they tend to be used as explanatory variables predicting support or opposition. Here, aggregate differences between liberals and conservatives are compared against one another.

Proximity to renewable facilities is another variable of interest in this literature, with earlier frameworks predicting that those living closest to renewable sites would be more opposed than those further away. In recent work, the role of proximity in shaping attitudes is contested. Studies find mixed effects of proximity on attitudes toward renewables: some find nearby projects increase opposition (Swofford & Slattery, 2010), others find they increase

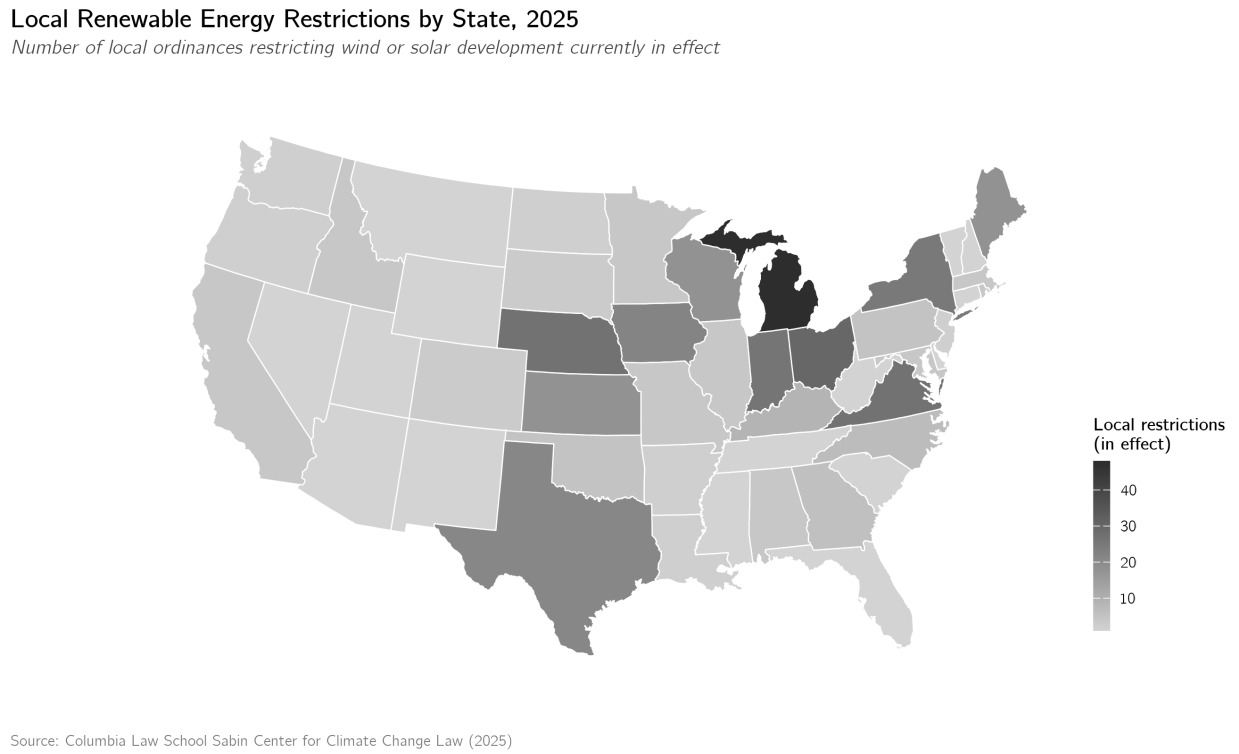

Figure 10.2: Local Renewable Energy Restrictions by State, 2025

support (Urpelainen & Zhang, 2022), and some find no effect (Mayer et al., 2021). This level of inconsistency suggests that proximity does not exert a simple, uniform effect on attitudes. Under the framework outlined in this chapter, proximity is viewed as a catalyst that activates values within an ideological tradition that were dormant in the symbolic setting. In this sense, proximity does not independently determine attitudes, but conditions which elements of an ideological tradition are brought to bear.

2.4 Intra-Ideological Conflict in Renewable Energy

On the political left, intra-ideological conflict over renewable energy siting has been indirectly documented by the "green on green" literature, which centers on the tension between biodiversity and climate goals. Kahn (2000) and Warren et al. (2005) discuss the ways environmentalists may oppose renewable projects that threaten habitats. Although suggestive of intra-ideological value conflict, this literature treats the tension as a domain-specific clash between environmental goods rather than as a systematic expression of competing values within ideological traditions.

For the political right, a growing body of work has also begun to identify the conditions under which conservatives support renewable energy development. The literature converges

on two frames: economic benefits and resource stewardship. Gustafson et al. (2022) show that Republicans respond positively to renewable energy when presented with information on cost savings, while Hazboun, Howe, Layne Coppock, & Givens (2020) and Horne & Huddart Kennedy (2019) find that renewable energy support is compatible with conservative values like stewardship, self-sufficiency, and free-market enterprise.

2.5 The Role of Policy Feedback and Self-Interest

This value-based account of siting conflict articulated here does not operate in a vacuum. Concrete siting decisions simultaneously activate latent value tensions and redistribute material stakes, creating economic winners and losers whose interests may reinforce or oppose their ideological priors. The policy feedback and self-interest literature offer a parallel set of mechanisms that help specify when and why these apparent divergences from partisan baselines occur.

Specifically, policy feedback focuses on the ability of policies to create their own constituencies by reshaping who has material stakes in outcomes (Campbell, 2003; Pierson, 1993). Policies act as "resources" that reinforce personal stakes, with self-interest often prevailing when benefits are directly experienced, driving political mobilization or opposition (David O. Sears & Carolyn L. Funk, 1991). This suggests that divergence from ideological baselines need not reflect genuine value ordering; they may instead reflect the straightforward operation of material self-interest. This chapter does not dispute that mechanism. Instead, it treats material self-interest as a necessary rather than sufficient account of the full pattern of divergence. If concretization were simply a function of proximity and material activation, we would expect the structure of opposition and support to scale with direct economic stakes. Yet local siting conflicts routinely pull in actors whose positions are not predicted by material exposure, and whose alignments track ideological and value-based cleavages rather than economic ones (Devine-Wright, 2005).

3 Theoretical Framework

3.1 Core Claim

Policy concretization is the process by which a policy shifts from the symbolic register to the operational register. When renewable energy shifts from an abstract idea to local, concrete siting decisions, it forces actors to rank now competing values that were previously unconstrained, which I refer to as *value ordering*. Importantly, concretization does not always or even typically produce ideological divergence. The theoretical contribution being made here

lies in specifying the structural conditions under which a predictable subset of liberals and conservatives will express divergent concrete preferences and what rhetorical strategies actors will use to reconcile this divergence.

3.2 From Abstraction to Concretization

Table 10.1 illustrates how we should expect liberals and conservatives to act on abstract and concrete preferences. In the abstract, liberals will tend to support and conservatives oppose, for the reasons identified in Section 2.1.

	Abstract Preferences	**Concrete Preferences**
Liberals	**Support (Expected)** Climate action priority Decarbonization as policy imperative	**Most: Support project** *Subset: Oppose project* Local conservation > global climate Habitat/ecosystem protection Procedural justice concerns
Conservatives	**Oppose (Expected)** Opposition to mandates and regulation Preference for fossil fuels Climate skepticism	**Most: Oppose project** *Subset: Support project* Property rights/autonomy > skepticism Economic benefits/autonomy

Table 10.1: Intra-Ideological Conflict in Renewable Energy Siting

With a concrete siting decision, however, a subset of liberals may oppose a project if it jeopardizes local conservation. Similarly, conservatives may be wary of efforts to limit landowner property rights and economic autonomy, providing consistent reasoning for supporting a project. Figure 10.3 illustrates these core theoretical dynamics. The left panel shows how most actors maintain their expected ideological position when moving from abstract to concrete preference, while a predictable subset expresses divergent concrete preferences. The right panel identifies why: policy concretization triggers value ordering, forcing actors to rank previously co-equal commitments. This forcing occurs because concrete siting decisions make previously compatible values simultaneously operative and mutually constraining, closing off the ambiguity that abstract opinion formation leaves uncontested.

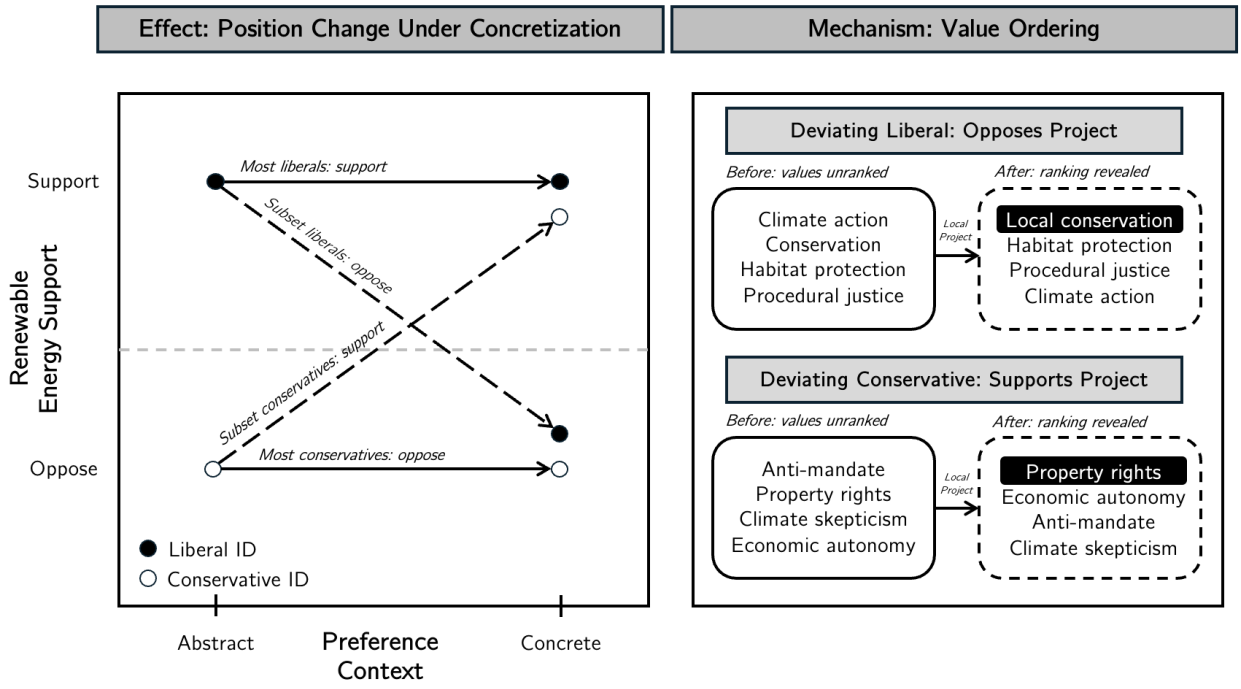

Figure 10.3: Value Ordering Under Policy Concretization

3.3 Value Ordering and Rhetorical Shielding

Whether value ordering surfaces a genuinely new conflict or reveals a latent hierarchy the actor had never been required to articulate, the observable output is the same: a concrete preference that diverges from partisan expectations, expressed through the vocabulary of one's own tradition.

This pattern is referred to as *rhetorical shielding*. Liberals who oppose solar projects invoke conservation and procedural fairness, not climate skepticism. Conservatives who support wind projects invoke property rights and economic autonomy, not decarbonization. Rhetorical shielding is not exclusive to actors whose concrete preferences diverge from partisan expectations. Rather, it is a general feature of ideological reasoning under concretization. This produces the framework's most distinctive prediction: the same value can be mobilized in opposite directions by actors within the same tradition. Value ordering does not produce categorical opposition to renewable energy among liberals, nor categorical support among conservatives. A liberal whose conservation values take precedence over climate urgency in a specific conflict may simultaneously support renewable deployment elsewhere. The position is context dependent, which is precisely what distinguishes intra-ideological value divergence from cross-ideological conversion: underlying value commitments remain intact; only their expression changes when a concrete tradeoff forces a ranking.

3.4 Scope Conditions

Three scope conditions bound the framework's applicability. First, for value ordering to occur, a policy must create a situation where actors within an ideological tradition cannot satisfy all of their relevant values simultaneously. Where no such conflict exists, concretization may occur without producing intra-ideological tension.

Second, concretization unfolds along a spectrum rather than at a single moment. In renewable energy siting, both the proposal and operational stages represent points at which the shift from abstract to concrete occurs, and opposition may crystallize at either. The relevant question is not whether concretization has happened, but how far along the spectrum a given conflict has traveled.

Third, the framework applies to both mass and elite opinion, though with different baseline conditions. For ordinary citizens, the distance between abstract and operational preference is typically large, because most individuals have little occasion to form or articulate operational views before a project arrives (Zaller, 1992). For political elites, that distance is smaller, as they have usually already taken public positions and face reputational costs for visible divergence. As a result, intra-ideological conflict among elites is more likely to be suppressed, as open value reversal carries negative political costs.

4 Case Selection and Analytical Approach

4.1 Case Selection Logic

To assess whether predictions about patterns within ideologies in response to policy concretization are empirically plausible, and to illustrate the mechanism the theory proposes, I employ a comparative case study design focused on local conflicts over large-scale renewable energy siting. I adopt a most-different-systems design (Adam Przeworski & Henry Teune, 1970), selecting cases that vary sharply on conventional community-level predictors of renewable energy support, including partisan composition, educational attainment, rural-urban character, and economic structure, while holding the policy domain constant. Both cases involve proposals for utility-scale renewable energy projects that generated sustained local backlash. The analytical leverage comes from selecting cases at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum and examining whether the framework's predictions hold symmetrically across both. If the framework's predictions hold symmetrically across both settings, this is consistent with value ordering operating as a general mechanism activated by policy concretization, rather than an artifact of any particular partisan or geographic context.

4.2 Analytical Approach

My case analysis draws upon publicly available documents generated during each siting conflict, including local news coverage and planning commission and town council records. I supplement these with contextual data on electoral patterns and demographic composition to establish the baseline ideological conditions in each community.

The case evidence is suited to test two observable predictions: (1) that liberals whose concrete preferences diverge from partisan expectations oppose projects using conservation and procedural frames rather than climate skepticism, and (2) that divergent conservatives support projects using property rights and economic autonomy frames rather than environmental ones. Both are visible in the archival record and require identifying whose concrete preferences diverged from our expectations and what justificatory vocabulary they deployed.

5 Policy Concretization: Two Cases of Intra-Ideological Conflict

5.1 Case Context

Isabella County, Michigan is a predominantly white, largely rural county with a poverty rate of 20.3% that is significantly higher than the state (13.5%) and national average (12.2%). Outside the county seat of Mount Pleasant, which is home to Central Michigan University, the landscape is dominated by farms and small unincorporated communities. In 2024, Donald Trump won 53% of the county-wide vote, a substantial 7.5-percentage-point margin given the presence of a large public university. Since 2016, the county has voted more Republican than the statewide margin in every presidential election.

On the opposite end of the political spectrum sits Amherst, Massachusetts, which no Republican presidential candidate has carried in modern electoral history. The city is relatively diverse, affluent, and highly educated, home to both University of Massachusetts Amherst and Amherst College. Median household income exceeds $80,000, and Amherst consistently ranks among the most liberal voting municipalities in the country. In 2024, Kamala Harris won 87% of the vote.

Despite clearly distinct demographic and partisan pictures, both communities have had renewable energy projects quickly succumb to backlash. In 2016, Apex Clean Energy proposed in Isabella County what would become Michigan's largest wind project, with 136 turbines across seven townships. In the face of opposition from the wind-skeptic group Isabella Wind Watch, farmers, business interests, and local conservative politicians banded together in support of wind energy in Isabella County, portraying it as a matter of economic development,

individual autonomy, and stewardship responsibility.

In Amherst, developers put forward a plan in 2021 to develop an 11-megawatt solar project in a wooded lot that would clear 45 acres of forest. Residents, liberal local officials, and environmental activists from the Sunrise Movement responded to the proposed project by championing an 18-month moratorium on large-scale solar projects, concerned with the project's impact on local conservation. Other residents and officials countermobilized in opposition to the moratorium, prioritizing global climate action.

5.2 Isabella County: When Conservatives Build

Wind energy in Isabella County attracted support from an improbable constellation of actors. Robert Walton, a farmer and local Republican official who was initially skeptical of wind energy, drew his support for the project from his high regard for private property rights and individual autonomy. Walton framed turbine leasing as an exercise of personal freedom, asserting that landowners should have the right to contract and benefit from their property without interference from neighbors opposed to turbines (Kerson, 2024). The framing is telling: his justification never invokes climate, decarbonization, or environmental benefit. Instead, it invokes ownership.

Procedural fairness and equitable distribution of benefits also emerged as central considerations. Matt Graham and Tracy House, also farmers, described how local stakeholders organized steering committees and facilitated transparent agreements to ensure all participants received fair compensation (Anthony F. Pipa, 2024). House, who at first had a negative reaction towards wind, felt as though her concerns were ameliorated after speaking with other farmers hosting turbines. This shift was articulated not in environmental terms but in terms of community benefit and neighbor relations.

Advocates cast turbines as a reliable source of income, describing them as the "most profitable crop you could ever raise" (Cat Strumlauf, 2017). Township officials and school administrators, including William Chilman of Beal City Schools, stressed the project's fiscal benefits, noting that it generated over $10 million in new tax revenue without raising local taxes (Chilman, 2023). Walton repeatedly linked turbines to local economic development, observing that wind revenue financed new agricultural buildings and infrastructure (Kerson, 2024). James McBryde, president and CEO of the pro-business Middle Michigan Development Corporation, made similar claims, noting that the benefits from wind included "temporary and permanent jobs, tax revenue for local municipalities, and security for the local energy grid" (Ware, 2021). George Green, former Republican county commissioner in

Isabella County, did not mince words in emphasizing his support for the project, stating "I've got three words: wind is free" (Mike Mikus, 2021). In all these instances, actors rhetorically shielded their support for wind behind economic autonomy and community prosperity.

Beyond economic arguments, stewardship and intergenerational responsibility offered a complementary moral frame. Walton and other supporters described themselves as caretakers of the land, balancing economic utility with care for future generations. "We don't really own this land," Walton remarked, "we're just the caretakers" (Cat Strumlauf, 2017). When consulting his grandchildren about the project, Walton noted that they encouraged him to support the project because "we need energy" (Kerson, 2024). In this way, pro-wind support blended economic pragmatism with conservative moral principles, reframing wind development as consistent with broader ideological commitments rather than antithetical to them.

Opponents, led by residents LouAnn Mogg and Carolyn Berger of Isabella Wind Watch, also invoked property rights in their campaign against the project. However, they did so in a different register, arguing that turbines imposed externalities on non-consenting neighbors, including shadow flicker, noise, and safety hazards (WCMU, 2019). Here, both conservative supporters and opponents drew on property rights, but towards opposite conclusions.

Despite some mobilization against the project, supporters rallied to ensure its completion. In 2021, Isabella Wind became the largest wind project in Michigan, powering over 670,000 homes across the state (DTE Energy, 2021). A material victory for the pro-climate movement? Absolutely. A win for pro-climate values? Perhaps not. In Isabella County, conservative support was galvanized by drawing upon traditional conservative values of property rights and economic autonomy, economic opportunity, and stewardship. Renewable energy opposition was subordinated to property-based rationales when a tangible project appeared. In other words, conservatives did not arrive at support for wind energy through an embrace of environmentalism. They arrived through the internal logic of their own tradition. As Bob Walton put it, "if it wasn't for us conservatives in this county, [liberals] wouldn't have got this [project]" (Kerson, 2024). In this instance, conservatives chose to build.

5.3 Amherst: When Liberals Block

Amherst is often associated with the Latin motto *terras irradient*, or "Let them enlighten the lands." When a developer proposed a solar project covering 45 acres of forested land, residents found themselves in sharp disagreement over what that enlightenment required in practice. What should take precedence: protecting a local forest or advancing efforts to address global climate change?

Opposition to the solar project emerged primarily from liberal actors emphasizing conservation and place-based environmental stewardship rather than partisan skepticism of renewable energy itself. To prevent the project from moving ahead, town council members, individuals on the planning board, and environmental activists proposed an 18-month solar moratorium. These actors framed their positions around careful deliberation, procedural safeguards, and the conservation of forested lands—choosing decidedly liberal frames over property rights, regulatory overreach, or economic burden.

Pat DeAngelis, town councilor, noted that while "Amherst residents care about sustainability and renewable energy . . . the town needs a bylaw that can set conditions for the appropriate placement of these projects . . . [to] make them safer for the environment" (Merzbach, 2022). Janet McGowan, a member of the planning board, described the conflict as "environmentalist versus environmentalist", stating that it felt "viscerally wrong and counterintuitive . . . to cut down a forest to put up a solar facility" (Simon, 2023). Former Select Board member Gerry Weiss emphasized that large-scale solar on former forest lands represents a trade-off between short-term carbon gains and long-term ecological integrity (Gerry Weiss & Johanna Neumann, 2022). Jane Scanlan-Emigh, representing the youth climate organization Sunrise Movement, noted that "the major concern with large-scale solar projects is the potential deforestation that might take place", despite her organization championing renewables nationwide (Merzbach, 2022). Across these statements, each speaker affirms liberal environmental credentials before arriving at a restrictive conclusion, framing opposition not as a departure from the tradition but as its more rigorous application. The restriction of renewable energy is in each case presented as better environmentalism, not less of it.

Opponents of the moratorium framed the debate through the lens of global climate urgency. They highlighted the need to accelerate renewable energy deployment to mitigate climate change, arguing that a local moratorium, while well-intentioned, would slow the town's contribution to decarbonization. These actors also engaged in rhetorical shielding, but in the opposite direction: their shield was urgency rather than ecology. By foregrounding the global climate emergency, they implicitly characterized moratorium supporters not as bad environmentalists but as environmentalists with a misaligned sense of scale.

One resident, Steve Roof, noted that "it is urgent to stop burning fossil fuels . . . moratorium is too blunt an instrument . . . it will just put us farther behind on our global goals." Another resident, Elisa Campbell, stated that her concern was that humanity is "in a global crisis, and Amherst is contributing to not solving the problem" (Merzbach, 2022). Dwayne Breger, a member of the planning board, commented on the tension directly by stating that in his mind "'sacrificing' a small percentage of [open land] to solar is a small price to pay for

contributing what we . . . need to address climate change" (Merzbach, 2022). Rhetorically, all three statements are structured to preempt the charge of indifference to local ecology. Roof conceded the moratorium was "well-intentioned", Campbell framed her concern at the scale of humanity, not the developer, and Breger directly acknowledged ecological cost. Neither dismissed the forest; they simply argued that the climate side of the ledger should take precedence—a claim that is itself a recognizably liberal environmental argument about scale and collective obligation.

In 2022, the town council failed to pass the moratorium because it fell short of the required two-thirds majority, despite an 8-–5 vote in favor (Keene, 2022). In the midst of this debate, the developer withdrew the project over public controversy, illustrating how disagreements in a heavily liberal community can prevent the siting of renewable energy projects. Here, liberals chose to block.

6 Conclusion

The presence of renewable energy facilities is increasingly becoming a fact of everyday life for many Americans, with renewables now supplying roughly 24% of total U.S. electricity generation and solar capacity alone projected to grow by nearly 50% between 2024 and 2028 (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2025). This rapid infrastructure rollout will likely further a stark geographic divide, where rural counties host almost 90% of renewable capacity while containing just 12% of the population (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2025). While this pattern partly reflects land use constraints and economic necessity, research shows that renewable development disproportionately targets communities that are less educated, have lower labor force participation, and are more rural (Ashwood & MacTavish, 2016).

In many cases, conservative areas will disproportionately bear the local costs of the energy transition. Understanding how communities respond requires moving beyond simplistic frameworks like NIMBYism, which flatten heterogeneous opposition into a single category of self-interested, selfish obstructionism. The politics of renewable energy siting are not simply a story of red communities resisting a green agenda. They are a story of communities navigating genuine value conflicts that abstract politics never forced them to confront.

The framework presented here offers a theoretical account of why renewable energy siting produces predictable patterns of intra-ideological conflict. Policy concretization—the process by which abstract ideas become concrete realities—triggers value ordering, by which actors are forced to rank previously co-equal commitments. Intra-ideological value divergence is the result: a subset of liberals oppose while some conservatives support.

The logic of policy concretization is not limited to renewable energy, and is applicable to any policy domain characterized by diffuse collective benefits, concentrated local costs, and ideological traditions containing multiple potentially competing values. Empirically speaking, furthering this agenda requires, above all, individual-level measurement of the value hierarchies that policy concretization is theorized to activate. Understanding how citizens order competing commitments before and after exposure to concrete siting decisions is the foundational empirical task. Survey experiments are particularly well-suited to this, as they can manipulate the concreteness of a policy proposal while holding partisan cues constant, isolating the value ordering mechanism from elite framing effects. Qualitative case comparison can trace rhetorical shielding at sufficient resolution to detect whether actors invoke their own tradition's vocabulary or the opposing one. At the elite level, analyses of legislative voting records on climate and siting-related bills can examine whether the patterns observed at the community level extend to legislator behavior. Together, these approaches can distinguish and link individual-level value hierarchies to the structural features of specific siting decisions.

The energy transition is a story about how abstract commitments get translated into concrete local realities. Who hosts the infrastructure, who bears the costs, and whose values get prioritized in conflict? The success of renewable energy deployment depends on a greater awareness of the distance between what citizens support or oppose in principle and what they are willing to accept in practice. The framework developed here suggests that this gap is a structural feature of how people's value systems encounter concrete decisions. Rather than dismissing local conflict as obstruction or explaining it away as partisanship, we must find new ways to explore, understand, and build around the value tensions that the energy transition will increasingly force communities to confront.

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