

Building Winning Climate Coalitions: Evidence from U.S. States

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Abstract: Enacting strong decarbonization policies to accelerate the clean energy transition depends on a combination of mobilizing pro-climate coalitions and fracturing fossil fuel opposition. Opportunities for both have increased with the growth of clean energy and the rise of mass mobilization on climate. We leverage stakeholder interviews to study climate policymaking in Colorado, Illinois, and New York in the aftermath of Democrats taking unified control of these state governments in 2018, paying close attention to coalition-building and opposition-fracturing efforts. These contexts shine a light on coalitional politics in major states when passing ambitious policy was feasible, and also demonstrate how fossil fuel interests responded to politically adverse situations. Generally, ambitious policies depended on the formation of broad pro-climate coalitions that included both professionalized and grassroots environmental groups. Clean energy industry played a less prominent role. In terms of fracturing opposition, designing bills that brought industrial labor unions and electric utilities to positions of support or neutrality was critical in reducing the capacity of fossil fuel coalitions to block policy enactment. Overall, our analysis indicates the emergence of powerful opportunities to build broad pro-climate coalitions and pass ambitious decarbonization policies, but also raises questions about the implications of broad climate coalitions for policy effectiveness.

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1. Introduction

Fossil fuel business interests often block decarbonization policies that would benefit the public interest. Yet, despite these challenges, the past decade has witnessed considerable success when it comes to adopting policies aimed at accelerating decarbonization in the U.S., particularly in liberal-leaning states (Ricketts et al. 2020, Basseches et al. 2022, Bergquist and Warshaw 2023). Much research points to the role of climate coalitions in advocating for policy adoption. A central question is when such alliances become “winning climate coalitions” (Meckling et al. 2015) that can overcome the political power of fossil fuel coalitions.

Enacting ambitious policy depends on a combination of building broad pro-climate coalitions and fracturing fossil fuel opposition. Opportunities to do both have grown. The rise of mass mobilization on climate and environmental justice (EJ), combined with the growth of the clean energy industry, has increased the resources of pro-climate coalitions that have traditionally relied on professionalized environmental groups. The growing economic competitiveness, and trajectory towards dominance, of renewables has also increased opportunities to fracture and weaken fossil fuel opposition. Challenges, of course, remain, and both building broad coalitions and fracturing opposition require strategic organizing and strategic policy design.

This paper studies the interest group politics of climate in the U.S. states. We leverage stakeholder interviews to explore climate policymaking in Colorado, Illinois, and New York in the aftermath of the 2018 Democratic wave, paying close attention to coalition-building and opposition-fracturing. In 2018, each of these states went from split control of government to Democratic trifectas, where Democratic lawmakers control all three branches. Each enacted ambitious climate policies in the next four years. Studying Democratic trifectas provides a window into climate coalition-building and coalition-maintenance in a setting where strong policy was highly plausible, helping to illuminate challenges even under some of the most auspicious political circumstances.

Our study highlights the difficulties of managing broad pro-climate coalitions in contemporary politics—but also the enormous potential in successfully doing so. Coalition leaders had to navigate the varied priorities of professionalized environmental groups, grassroots groups, industry (including clean energy), and labor. Generally speaking, successful coalitions included both professionalized groups and grassroots groups, each bringing different strengths to the legislative process. Success depended to a lesser extent on mobilizing the clean energy industry, which engaged more narrowly on provisions that would have a direct effect on business.

Fracturing fossil fuel opposition was also critical to legislative successes. In particular, we found that successful coalitions were able to bring electric utilities and industrial labor unions to positions of neutrality or support by delivering them economic benefits through targeted policy design. Both types of actors have strongly opposed ambitious climate policy in the past. Even in contexts of Democratic control, strong bills likely would not have been enacted if they had faced

unified fossil fuel opposition, particularly due to the power of industrial labor unions. At the same time, our analysis suggests fracturing fossil fuel opposition has become more feasible as some firms (particularly electric utilities) and unions shift strategy to accommodate a decarbonized future.

This study contributes broadly to our understanding of the political economy of decarbonization. Existing literature emphasizes the power of fossil fuel industry and fossil fuel labor to block meaningful climate policies (e.g. Stokes 2020, Mildenberger 2020, Downie 2017). It also shows how the resources of environmental groups pale in comparison to those of fossil fuel business (Brulle 2018). Our study shows the staying power of the fossil fuel lobby, but also demonstrates shifts in the interest group politics of climate, driven primarily by clean energy growth and the rise of mass mobilization on climate. As pro-climate groups gain in number and resources, navigating priorities to build and maintain strong coalitions becomes more critical. We provide in-depth analysis of the possibilities and challenges of coalition-building. We also demonstrate how climate advocates were able to leverage shifts towards clean energy to expand their coalition and fracture fossil fuel opposition—particularly by designing policies to gain some support, or at least neutrality, from industrial labor groups and electric utilities.

Our analysis has several implications for policy design and political strategy for building winning climate coalitions, which we discuss in the concluding section. These center around 1) making long-run investments in broad coalitions, and 2) using policy to fracture fossil fuel opposition, while balancing concerns of policy effectiveness, and 3) experimenting with new strategies for politically mobilizing elements of the clean energy industry.

2. Building winning climate coalitions

Much of the existing literature conceptualizes the interest group politics of climate as a contest between owners of fossil fuel capital with a vested interest in blocking climate action, and a “Baptists and bootleggers” coalition of environmental groups and clean energy firms. For instance, Brulle (2018) computes “relative power ratios,” comparing lobbying expenditures of environmental organizations and renewable energy firms to expenditures from fossil fuel business interests. Both qualitative and quantitative studies show that fossil fuel interests tend to have a huge political advantage in resources and influence compared to pro-climate coalitions (Brulle 2018, Trachtman and Meckling 2022, Stokes 2020).

Existing research also emphasizes the breadth of fossil fuel coalitions beyond firms directly involved in fossil fuel powered industry. Many firms are embedded in large and complex supply chains, and even firms that do not directly own fossil fuel assets might incur costs from policies targeting carbon-intensive firms downstream or upstream in the supply chain. Cory et al. (2021) show that firms embedded in fossil fuel intensive supply chains tend to join obstructionist coalitions alongside owners of fossil fuel assets. Fossil fuel coalitions can also extend beyond business to labor. Historically, industrial labor unions have, in many cases, aligned with fossil fuel interests in opposing climate and clean energy policies that might threaten their employment (Obach 2004). Mildenberger (2020) shows how fossil fuel interests are

“double-represented” by business and labor, with labor unions tending to play a greater role blocking climate policy when liberal governments are in power.

However, despite these challenges, political and economic developments over the past several decades offer opportunities for building broad pro-climate coalitions and for fracturing obstructionist coalitions (Vormedal and Meckling 2024). For one, the cost of renewable energy has fallen dramatically, and the size of the clean energy economy has risen steadily (Bond et al. 2023). This means that clean energy firms have greater resources to act as countervailing forces to the political power of fossil fuel interests (Aklin and Urpelainen 2013, Trachtman 2023).

Political changes are also increasing the potential to build broad pro-climate coalitions. The past decade has seen the rise of greater mass mobilization around climate change. Groups like the Sunrise Movement and 350.org aim to exert influence through pressure campaigns, and leverage federated structures to engage across levels of government (Nilsen 2019). Grassroots, and often highly localized, EJ groups have also become critical members of pro-climate environmental coalitions, particularly in the U.S. states (Skelton and Miller 2023, Basseches et al. 2022). In addition, philanthropists are increasingly prioritizing climate change. This in turn has allowed professionalized environmental organizations (“grasstops”) to devote more resources to promoting climate and clean energy policies (Vartabedian 2023).

Finally, recent years have seen a greater mobilization of organized labor in support of “just transition” policies (e.g. Bolet et al. 2023). Whereas industrial labor unions have often mobilized to block decarbonization policies in the past due to the potential effects on workers (Mildenberger 2020), unions are increasingly advocating for policies that both promote decarbonization and benefit workers. “Blue-green” alliances between environmental groups and labor unions have emerged (Gearino 2023)—which have the potential to both broaden pro-climate coalitions (by incorporating unions) and fracture fossil fuel opposition (by reducing opposition from industrial labor unions).

Opportunities for fracturing fossil fuel opposition extend beyond incorporating industrial labor unions into climate coalitions. Falling costs for clean energy means that firms traditionally firmly embedded in fossil fuel supply chains have legitimate options to invest in cleaner sources of power—potentially reducing their opposition to climate action. Indeed, much existing literature demonstrates how opposition from fossil fuel firms is not monolithic, but rather highly contextual. Kennard (2020) shows that whether firms stand to benefit or lose from climate policies depends on the relative (versus absolute) carbon intensity of their capital assets. Because they can gain market share, even polluting firms might stand to profit from climate policies that impose costs on dirtier competitors (Meckling 2015). Thus, depending on the portfolio of assets they own, some fossil fuel interests might support certain types of climate policies, or at least take a neutral position.¹ As a result, as more firms invest in renewable energy, often in addition to

¹ For instance, while coal companies unanimously opposed the Waxman-Markey Bill proposed during Obama’s first term, electric utilities were split—and whether utilities supported or opposed depended largely on the degree to which their capital assets (electricity generation) used coal or natural gas for fuel (Downie 2017).

existing fossil fuel investments, more opportunities arise to design policies that fracture obstructionist coalitions (Vormedal and Meckling 2024).

For instance, electric utilities have historically leveraged their immense power in both federal and state politics to block climate policies (e.g. Stokes 2020, Grumbach 2015), but recent research suggests they are likely to be critical swing interests in the contemporary period—given that electricity production does not inherently rely on fossil fuels (Culhane et al. 2021, Basseches 2023). Indeed, some electric utilities are adapting their business models for an electrified, decarbonized economy, and shifting their policy positions in a pro-climate direction in accordance with those investment plans (Trachtman and Meckling 2023). In addition to economic developments, political shifts have also changed the calculus of opposition for many electric utilities. For utilities operating in liberal-leaning states, opposing climate action can damage their relationships with policymakers, threatening long-run performance and profitability (Trachtman and Meckling 2023).

Though developments over the past several decades have likely increased opportunities to build broad pro-climate coalitions and fracture fossil fuel opposition, this process is not automatic—it depends on organizing and policy design. The broadening of pro-climate coalitions introduces potential challenges managing competing priorities. Even within the clean energy industry, research suggests that groups rarely present a united front. They tend to defend parochial interests, versus uniting around broad decarbonization policies (Culhane et al. 2021). Within environmental groups, professionalized groups have tended to be more concerned with broad-based emissions reductions, while grassroots, EJ-oriented groups have been more concerned with reducing negative effects of pollution and targeting benefits to communities that have been disproportionately exposed to environmental harms (Bullard 2005, Skelton and Miller 2023).

When it comes to fracturing obstructionist coalitions, we expect policy design to shape the positions of different types of business and labor interests. Businesses whose profitability is existentially threatened by decarbonization like coal and oil companies are likely to oppose any climate action (Colgan, Green, and Hale 2021). The positions of other economic interests like electric utilities and industrial labor unions depend more on policy specifics. Bills that draw unified opposition from a broad obstructionist coalition are unlikely to be enacted. Thus, bills crafted to “pick off” certain organized interests conventionally aligned with fossil fuel coalitions might fracture the opposition, broaden supportive coalitions, and lead to greater chance of enactment.

3. Evidence from Illinois, New York, and Colorado

State governments have played a major role in developing, enacting, and implementing policies promoting decarbonization over the past two decades. The most common clean energy policy instrument over this period has been the renewable portfolio standard (RPS), which requires electric utilities to procure a specified percentage of power from renewable sources (Basseches et al. 2022). But, as climate change has become more salient, Democrat-leaning states in

particular have broadened to a wider suite of policies targeting specific greenhouse gas reduction goals (Bergquist and Warshaw 2023).

The political drivers of state climate policy have also changed. Many of the clean energy policies adopted by state governments in the early 2000s were pushed forward by bureaucrats and passed into law by bipartisan coalitions. They were generally framed not in terms of mitigating climate change, but rather in terms of the economic and environmental benefits (Rabe 2008). Over time, climate and energy issues have become more polarized in the U.S., a process that accelerated during the Obama administration (Tyson et al. 2023). Regardless of potential economic or environmental benefits, whether a state leans liberal or conservative has become a much stronger predictor of the climate and clean energy policies it adopts (Trachtman 2020). Some conservative states have rolled back pre-existing clean energy policies (Stokes 2020), while many liberal-leaning states have ratcheted policies up (Grumbach 2018). By 2019, one energy analyst went as far as claiming that electing Democrats had become a “weird trick for passing clean energy policy” (Roberts 2019a).

3.1 Research Design

Our empirical analysis explores the interest group politics of decarbonization in three large states in the aftermath of Democrats winning full control of government in 2018: Colorado, Illinois, and New York. Studying states under Democratic trifectas allows for a clearer view of tensions within generally pro-climate coalitions in a context of developing policies with a meaningful chance of being enacted. And studying states that switched from split control to unified Democratic control provides a window into how fossil fuel interests responded strategically to a change from a moderately politically adverse situation to a highly politically adverse situation. Finally, we selected relatively large states since policies in these states would have greater effects on the broader energy transition.² Large liberal-leaning states under Democratic control are likely to play a particularly important role in continuing to drive decarbonization, serving both as models and catalysts for broader national and international policy action (Trachtman 2019).

The analysis draws primarily from in-depth semi-structured interviews with 32 individuals involved in the respective policymaking processes, but also, to a smaller extent, on local news articles. We selected initial interviewees based on organizations and individuals identified in news articles (Basseches et al. 2023). We used “snowball sampling” to expand the initial interviewee pool, asking our interviewees to identify other individuals that were closely involved with the policy process or represented influential interest groups. Section 7.1 in the Appendix describes in greater detail this data collection process. In addition, Section 7.2 in the Appendix provides details about the particular pieces of climate legislation adopted in Colorado, Illinois, and New York during our study period.

² Maine, Nevada, and New Mexico also went from split control to unified Democratic control.

3.2 Illinois

Illinois became a Democratic trifecta in 2018 with Governor Pritzker (D) replacing ex-Governor Rauner (R). The Illinois legislature also shifted left, as several retiring moderate Democrats were replaced by more liberal Democrats. After negotiations failed to produce a bill for two sessions, the Democratic coalition, with some Republican votes, passed the landmark Climate and Equitable Jobs Act (CEJA) in 2021. Advocates leveraged a unique political moment—with electric utilities disempowered due to scandal, and labor unions and nuclear plant owners seeking subsidies to keep plants open—to pass a broad and ambitious bill. Business opposition to the bill was relatively fractured, so maintaining the environment-labor coalition was the most difficult challenge to enactment. At the same time, building decarbonization was left off the table in part to avoid opposition from powerful gas utilities.

3.2.1 Struggling Nuclear Plants, a Utility Scandal, and a Leftward Lurch

Before CEJA, Illinois was not known for its climate and clean energy policies, nor for its wind and solar development. Where Illinois has long stood apart is in its legacy nuclear generation.³ Illinois' nuclear plants provide the state with abundant baseload carbon-free power, but they are increasingly struggling to compete on cost with other sources of power—particularly natural gas, wind, and solar.

Nuclear cost concerns have been an important backdrop to the politics of climate and clean energy in Illinois. Both labor (for the jobs) and environmental groups (for the carbon-free power) are intent on keeping nuclear plants open, despite the plants' economic woes. The Future Energy Jobs Act (FEJA), which was passed by a Democratic legislature and signed by Republican Governor Rauner in 2016, funneled \$235 annually in ratepayer-funded subsidies to two struggling Exelon-owned nuclear plants, in addition to strengthening Illinois' RPS program and expanding energy efficiency programs.

In addition to nuclear plants' financial struggles, another element of critical context was the utility scandal unfolding around the start of the 2019 legislative session. Following an investigation, ComEd, Illinois' largest utility, confessed to seeking to influence legislative decisions by providing jobs, contracts, and payments to associates of long-time House Speaker Michael Madigan over the course of nearly a decade. The scandal led to a major political shake-up, including Madigan's resignation in 2021. It also meant that ComEd, normally a major player in Illinois politics, was largely disempowered during the CEJA process—since few legislators were willing to engage with their lobbyists (Lydersen 2021, Interview 4, Interview 6).

Environmental (including environmental justice) groups, organized labor, and clean energy industry all brought their own agendas to the 2019 legislative session. Each recognized the opportunity for new policy with the shift in partisan control of the Governor's office, the leftward shift in the legislature, and the growing salience of climate change in the public (Interview 4, Interview 6).

³ Illinois has the largest nuclear fleet in the country, generating more than half of its total electricity from nuclear power as of 2023.

While environmental groups, unions, and clean energy groups saw an opportunity, fossil fuel interests were concerned by the new political situation. It wasn't just that Republicans were out of power. There was also a sense that fossil fuel interests had less sway in the Democratic coalition than in the past—when they could influence centrist Democrats representing districts with significant fossil fuel-related jobs. As the rural-urban partisan split becomes more dramatic, fewer and fewer members of the Democratic caucus represent down-state districts with fossil fuel plants, and even those Democrats with fossil fuel economic interests in their district have been increasingly willing to support climate and clean energy policies (Interview 5).

3.2.2 The Uneasy Alliance Between Labor, Environment, and Clean Energy

There were two coalitions at the helm of the effort to enact CEJA: IL Clean Jobs Coalition (ICJC) and Climate Jobs Illinois (CJI). ICJC was a broad coalition led by environmental and environmental justice organizations, and CJI was a coalition of labor unions.

With an ally now in the Governor's office, organized labor was determined to take a more proactive approach than they had in the lead-up to FEJA, which ended up lacking strong pro-labor provisions. The Illinois chapter of the AFL-CIO partnered with the national AFL-CIO and the Climate Jobs National Resource Center to assemble a coalition of 12 Illinois-based unions. Affiliates included several energy-related groups like IBEW, ironworkers, and carpenters—but also included the SEIU and the teachers union. This was a difficult coalition to manage. Unions sought to protect fossil fuel jobs with high salaries and good benefits. At the same time, leadership recognized that these jobs would eventually disappear as the energy transition continues, so unions also sought to promote provisions that would require union labor be used to build new renewable generation (Interview 7).

The power of organized labor in Illinois politics is longstanding, but the power of the environmental coalition represented by ICJC is newer.⁴ ICJC had started to organize in 2014. ICJC was led by environmental justice groups and professionalized environmental “big greens”, but also included representatives from the faith community, the Citizens Utility Board (representing utility ratepayers), and also some labor and business groups. ICJC's motto was “no climate, no equity, no deal”, and they generally sought to balance climate and equity concerns. Similar to organized labor, environmental justice groups were galvanized by the leftward shift in Illinois politics, and also sought to take a more proactive approach than they did in the FEJA process (Lydersen 2021). One environmental advocate stated that: “the environmental and environmental justice community that came together in response to FEJA grew into one of the most unique and diverse coalitions in the country” (Interview 2).

Both the environmental and labor coalitions desperately wanted to pass a major bill, and both parties knew they'd need the support of the other to do so. Labor, in particular, was deeply concerned about the job losses that would occur if Exelon closed its nuclear plants—which the company had threatened to do if a bill wasn't passed (Interview 4, Interview 5). At the same

⁴ As one environmental policy expert said: “Three years ago it would have been unheard of to have an environmental coalition at the negotiating table with labor.. We were no longer just these environmentalists tying themselves to trees” (Interview 2).

time, the labor coalition was *a/so* concerned about the job implications of provisions proposed by environmental groups aimed at speeding up timelines to close coal plants and reaching 100% clean energy.

Interviewees and news coverage largely agreed about the importance of the organizing power of ICJC for pushing the bill to enactment (Roberts 2021, Spengerman 2022). Their strength came from the breadth of the coalition. They had a strong grassroots presence that could be readily mobilized, a communications team with a social media presence and the capacity to place editorials strategically, and the funding to deploy a number of lobbyists (Interview 1). As one advocate said: “We had like 15 lobbyists on our side, whereas before it would have been like 3 fighting against like 50 on the other side” (Interview 4). A critical step was winning the support of Governor Pritzker. They targeted Pritzker in media campaigns, and also demonstrated support by busing people to the capitol. Ultimately, Pritzker decided to proactively involve his office in the design of the legislation (Interview 4).

According to our interviews, the clean energy industry played a smaller role in the development of CEJA compared to labor and the environmental coalition. Their relative lack of political power likely stemmed from the fact that deployment remains small relative to fossil fuel infrastructure, even if that is slated to change in the coming years—and with it change the balance of political power. Even if they lacked significant sway, large wind developers and also smaller solar developers (organized as Path to 100) participated in the design of the updated renewable portfolio standard, and the other provisions like job training programs that would directly affect the industry.

Some tensions arose between elements of the clean energy coalition and both ICJC and CJI. Though new clean energy development was necessary to achieve the core goals of the bill, wind and solar developers were concerned that the significant equity goals and labor standards included in the bill could harm their profitability (Interview 4, Interview 6, Interview 7). At the same time, there was agreement between clean energy interests and environmental groups regarding renewable build-out targets (Interview 7). Generally, environmental groups recognized that, with liberal Democrats in power, they would have to devote significant attention to labor and workforce development issues to pass a major bill (Interview 5).

3.2.3 Weakened and Fractured Business Opposition

Broadly speaking, traditional fossil fuel and utility interests were disempowered or relatively disengaged in the CEJA process. In the context of Democratic control, fossil fuel businesses’ greatest influence in this period was by proxy—through the alignment of their interests and the interests of industrial labor unions. Some fossil fuel interests sought to cultivate closer ties with industrial labor unions representing fossil fuel workers as a strategic response to the context of Democratic control (Interview 6). For labor’s part, the union lobbyist we spoke with stressed that

the relationship between fossil fuel business and labor was in play long before CEJA, and that the interests of the two sometimes aligned, but also sometimes diverged.⁵

Electric utilities, which in normal times would have been deeply engaged in major clean energy legislation, played a relatively small role in CEJA (Roberts 2021). Due to its bribery scandal, ComEd had little political capital, and indeed, legislators were wary of working with lobbyists from *any* electric utility. But in addition, our interviews also suggested that the electric utilities were not overly concerned about the strong clean energy targets written into CEJA. As one said, ComEd in particular is aiming to be a “utility of the future”, embracing the potential economic benefits of decarbonization—particularly the electrification component (Interview 4).

With electric utilities taking a neutral stance, the major business interests pushing against an ambitious CEJA were fossil fuel generation owners and industrial electricity consumers like manufacturers, who sought to frame the bill as a job-killer and a corrupt handout for nuclear plant owners (Olsen 2021, Nowicki 2021, Interview 5). However, the ability of business interests to stymie the bill was weakened in part by the fact that opposition from broad-based business coalitions like the Illinois Chamber of Commerce and the Illinois Manufacturers Association was relatively tepid (Interview 6). This reflects the growing importance of renewables in the state (Interview 6). Some manufacturers, concerned that the bill would increase electric rates, were “pounding on the door trying to get in” (Interview 4) to block elements of the law. Though they were able to affect some changes on the margin, manufacturers and other large electric users did not have much sway in the context of Democratic control.

Opposition from owners of fossil fuel generation was also relatively weak and fractured. Most coal plants owned by private actors were already planning to close for economic reasons on timelines consistent with those specified in the bill (Interview 7). Where environmentalists had to compromise was on closure of natural gas generation and municipally-owned coal plants (Olsen 2021). But this was mainly due to opposition from labor unions concerned about job losses.

3.2.4 Interest Group Conflict and Compromise

Negotiations continued through the 2019 and 2020 sessions, and CEJA was finally passed in 2021, just days before a major nuclear plant was slated to close. Overall, CEJA was seen as a major success for both the environmental coalition and the labor coalition (see Appendix 7.2 for details on bill provisions). Interviews suggested that the success of the process came down to the power of the environmental coalition combined with a weakened fossil fuel coalition. As one environmental advocate said, contrasting this policy episode with prior ones, “we designed the bill, they [utilities and fossil fuel interests] didn’t” (Interview 4). In addition, interviewees stressed the importance of having multiple legislative sessions to make the compromises needed (Interview 5), and also having moderate Republicans on board (mainly representatives with nuclear plants in their districts) so that full Democratic support wasn’t necessary (Interview 5).

⁵ They stated: “Fossil generation [business] would like to be left alone and close on whatever timeline maximized profits. Labor wanted to decarbonize in a reasonable way that would lead to stronger employment.”

At the same time, compromises were made to hold the pro-CEJA winning coalition together—and policies critical to the broader energy transition were taken off of the table due to aspects of the interest group politics. One of the biggest sticking points in negotiations was the timeline for the closure of Prairie State Energy Campus, a massive municipally-owned coal plant (Olsen 2021, Nowicki 2021, Interview 6). Because the plant was financed through municipal bonds, the implications of early closure for municipal electricity rates were unclear. The retirement target for Prairie State was ultimately moved further out than the environmental coalition preferred. By lobbying alongside labor, owners of natural gas generation were also able to relax their closure timelines (Interview 1). Interestingly, since constructing new natural gas generation is more labor intensive than operating existing plants, unions also lobbied for new natural gas generation buildout provisions. These were ultimately included, in part because electric system modeling exercises suggested they would be needed to meet electricity demand. Finally, earlier drafts of the bill included provisions relating to building electrification, but these were later removed. This was driven by concern about the political power of gas utilities, and also concerns that building electrification provisions could add costs to customers already struggling to pay bills, leading to backlash (Interview 1).

Overall, one environmental advocate stressed that, in the context of Democratic control, “the most important hurdle for strong climate policy was strong labor” (Interview 4). However, the environmentalists’ hand was strengthened by the fact that failing to pass a bill would *also* be a bad outcome for labor—since it would lead to nuclear plant closures and union job losses. This kept the labor coalition coming back to the negotiating table. Broadly speaking, interviewees suggested that clean energy was certainly a winning issue for Democrats in Illinois, so long as they could hold their coalition together.

3.3. New York

In 2019, New York passed the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act (CLCPA)—hailed as one of the most progressive pieces of climate policy in the U.S. Climate advocates leveraged the new Democratic trifecta to push forward a bill that targeted both the power sector and building decarbonization. Fossil fuel business interests responded to this more broad-based approach with more unified opposition than in Illinois. The pro-CLCPA prevailed in the face of fossil fuel opposition in part due to the strength of the environmental coalition, which was bolstered by the grassroots power of environmental justice organizations that mobilized strongly in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy in 2014. Another factor was that pro-labor and EJ provisions in the bill brought several labor unions on board, and even industrial unions that have historically opposed climate policies largely adopted neutral positions.

3.3.1 The 2018 Democratic Wave Paves the Way for Justice-Oriented Climate Policy in New York

The CLCPA built on more than a decade of climate and clean energy policymaking in New York. In 2005, New York joined other northeastern states in establishing the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI)—the first market-based program for controlling greenhouse gas emissions in the U.S. In 2011, Governor Cuomo announced the NY Sun Initiative which provided

incentives to homeowners and businesses for solar installations, and the Charge NY Initiative, which provided rebates for electric vehicle and plug-in hybrid purchases. New York also adopted a clean energy standard in 2015, known as “50 by 30”, which required that 50% of electricity consumed in New York be generated from renewables by 2030.

Though many saw New York as a leader on climate, prior to the passage of CLCPA, New York’s progress on climate policy was criticized by environmental justice organizations for lack of ambition in emissions reductions and lack of provisions targeting benefits for marginalized communities (Soto 2017). Given these perceived policy limitations, climate activists in New York had been seeking to pass a CLCPA-like bill for several years. Even with the Senate nominally under Democratic control in 2016 and 2017, earlier versions had failed due to opposition from a group of Democratic Senators, called the Independent Democratic Conference, which caucused with the Republicans (Interview 8, Interview 16, Interview 17, “Statement re: Senate Failure” 2017)

In the 2018 midterm elections, most members of the Independent Democratic Conference were replaced by liberal Democrats, shifting Senate control to the Democrats. This put Governor Cuomo in a critical position as the likely veto player. Fossil fuel industry actors in turn directed greater attention to trying to influence the Governor, and pivoted lobbying contributions to Democrats (Interview 8, Interview 16). In addition, some sought to strengthen political ties with unions, particularly pipefitters, plumbers, and utility workers (Interview 9, Interview 10, Interview 20).

3.3.2 Environmental Justice Organizations Form the Core of a Broad Pro-CLCPA Coalition

New York differs from the other two states we study in several ways, and these factored into the composition and priorities of the coalitions for and against the CLCPA. By 2020, it had no active coal-fired power plants or oil refineries, minimal natural gas extraction, and most of its legacy nuclear plants were already in the process of decommissioning. This meant that the environmental coalition did not have to negotiate with coal mining communities or coal plant workers. However, this also meant that any ambitious decarbonization plan would have to target building electrification, and thus threaten the natural gas industry and providers of propane and fuel oil (Interview 11). Secondly, New York’s experience with Hurricane Sandy in 2014 increased the salience of disaster preparedness and adaptation as a climate policy focus. Third, relative to the other states we study, New York had a more developed ecosystem of environmental justice groups with years of multiracial grassroots organizing.

Efforts to develop and pass the CLCPA were led by one such group: NY Renews, a coalition representing environmental justice organizations, clean energy advocates, community organizations, labor unions, and faith-based groups that had originally coalesced in the aftermath of the People’s Climate March of 2014. Clean energy advocacy organizations such as Alliance for Clean Energy, New Yorkers for Clean Power, and Renewable Heat Now also joined the NY Renews coalition in their legislative efforts (Interview 17). While the grassroots environmental justice oriented members of the coalition maintained a strong advocacy push, clean energy organizations focused on the more technical aspects (Interview 11).

On the labor side, certain unions such as the SEIU, Communications Workers, New York State United Teachers, Teamsters and the Transit Workers supported the CLCPA and joined NY Renews in its advocacy efforts, particularly in shaping the details of the Just Transition Working Group provision. The positions of industrial unions involved in the energy sector on the CLCPA were less straightforward. Some of them participated in the Climate Jobs New York coalition, a labor coalition that generally supported the CLCPA, and advocated for the inclusion of labor standards and apprenticeship programs for renewable energy projects. This coalition was particularly active in the implementation phase (Interview 18, Interview 19). Some, though, also participated in coalitions opposing the bill, even if they did not directly voice opposition. For instance, the New York chapter of IBEW was affiliated with New Yorkers for Affordable Energy, a group organized by fossil fuel businesses and utilities to oppose climate legislation in New York. Interviews suggested that, even though the CLCPA included “just transition” provisions and both IBEW and AFL-CIO supported them in principle, the same unions had a guarded position due to concerns about the uncertainty of potential job losses for their members (Interview 16; Interview 20).

3.3.3 Keeping Lawmakers in Line Despite Fossil Fuel Opposition

Opposition to the CLCPA was led by a coalition of fossil fuel and utility interests. The coalition included investor-owned utilities, federal fossil fuel business organizations like the American Petroleum Institute (API), natural gas pipeline companies, and natural gas generation owners. Some corporate interests set up astroturf organizations to galvanize opposition in the public. Notwithstanding the variety of actors within the opposing coalition, our interviews also suggested a division within the usual fossil fuel coalition, including in the utility sector. Consolidated Edison was largely supportive of the CLCPA, as its electric-heavy portfolio would not be severely impacted by the bill. New York’s other major utility, National Grid, which had a larger natural gas business, strongly opposed enactment and implementation due to the bill’s electrification components (Interview 10, Interview 11). The bill was more at risk of being voted down in the Senate than Assembly, and opposition groups targeted swing-district state Senators in particular (Interview 12, Interview 13, Interview 17).

Winning support from Governor Cuomo was a major challenge for CLCPA advocates. Fossil fuel groups had intensified their lobbying efforts in the Governor’s office (Interview 8). The Governor was also more inclined to work with larger, more established environmental organizations on moderate proposals, and skeptical of more ambitious policy promoted by the environmental justice advocates (Interview 17). Our interviews and news coverage suggest that winning the Governor’s support depended in large part on a powerful and sustained pressure campaign (McKinley and Plumer, 2019). Representatives from NY Renews mentioned that they played on the Governor’s concern for his image and his sensitivity to media campaigns by emphasizing broad-based support for the bill—including from both chambers of the legislature (Interview 11, Interview 14).

3.3.4 Key Compromises and Initial Implementation Battles

The CLCPA set very ambitious clean energy and decarbonization goals: 70% renewable electricity by 2030, 100% carbon-free electricity in the state by 2040, and 100% economy-wide net-zero GHG emissions by 2050. In terms of environmental justice, it mandated that a minimum of 35% of revenue streams from the state's climate programs be invested in disadvantaged communities. With regard to implementation, the bill appointed a 22-member Climate Action Council required to lay out a scoping plan to implement the net-zero emission targets. And it called for the creation of a Climate Justice Working Group to implement the justice provisions.⁶ Finally, the bill created a Just Transition Working Group, chaired by the Commissioner of Labor, to advise state agencies on training and workforce-related issues.

Ultimately, the coalition organized under NY Renews got most of what they wanted in the bill. Bill provisions were negotiated mainly between the environmental coalition, state regulators and the Governor's office (Interview 11, Interview 14), without a strong fossil fuel industry or utility presence. These negotiations mainly had to do with technical feasibility. The most significant compromise advocates made had to do with the eligibility of nuclear power towards the state's zero-emission goals (Interview 8, Interview 11, Interview 17). In addition, environmental justice groups initially targeted 40% of program benefits to disadvantaged communities, but settled on a minimum of 35% of benefits, with 40% as a goal. The 35% minimum was still considered a major success and led to companion bills in later years dealing with the details for those investments.⁷

The influence of industrial and other labor unions ultimately led to the inclusion of "just transition" provisions—versus compromises on greenhouse gas reductions ambition. For instance, IBEW and AFL-CIO's advocacy efforts starting in 2016-2017 and their ongoing communication with the NY Renews coalition culminated in the inclusion of a Just Transition Working Group in an advisory role to the Climate Action Council (Interview 19). However, a requirement for project labor agreements for renewable energy projects was struck from the bill in the Governor's office. One representative from Climate Jobs New York mentioned that, in retrospect, industrial labor unions perhaps could have played a more influential role had they joined the supporting coalition earlier (Interview 19).

Though fossil fuel interests had limited ability to influence the content of the CLCPA, they actively engaged to influence implementation, especially during the public comment period of the scoping plan, which would precede rulemaking by the Climate Action Council. New Yorkers for Affordable Energy continued their consumer-facing campaign, with natural gas utilities encouraging customers to contact representatives to complain about negative effects of building electrification on utility bills and on reliability (Interview 10, Interview 17). National Grid also mobilized their workforce to testify at the Capitol regarding the bill's effects on utility jobs (Interview 8). In addition, three representatives from industries that lobbied against CLCPA were

⁶ The group was tasked with developing criteria for determining the disadvantaged communities that would benefit from climate investments.

⁷ The language was also weakened to suggest investment "to the benefit of communities" as opposed to direct investments "in communities". However, the Climate Justice Working Group later readjusted this based on the conclusion that the bill's definition was not helpful (Interview 8).

appointed to the 22-member Climate Action Council, with approval from both Republican and Democratic Senate leaders alike (Galbraith 2022). Despite these efforts, the final scoping plan approved in December 2022 was celebrated by the NY Renews coalition (Aronson 2022, “NY Renews Coalition” 2022).

3.4 Colorado

2018 elections swept a Democratic trifecta into government in Colorado, with the state Senate shifting to Democratic control. Climate advocates passed two climate-focused bills—one targeting fossil fuel extraction industry, and one targeting decarbonization of the power sector. The politics varied significantly. Even with strong support from grassroots environmental organizations, key compromises were made to pass SB181, the extraction-targeted bill, in the face of industry opposition. On the other hand, professionalized environmental groups organized a broad coalition in support of decarbonization of the power sector. Most influential electric utilities supported the bill, leaving the opposition fractured and weak.

3.4.1 Pressures to Go Green in a Fossil Fuel Producing State

Climate politics in Colorado has long been animated by a tension between driving towards clean energy and environmental goals on the one hand, and supporting the state’s fossil fuel resource and extraction economy on the other. Even as the clean energy economy grows, Colorado, much more so than the other states we study, has continued to foster significant fossil fuel extraction. Fossil fuel industry has long been a major political force due to the role of fossil fuels in the state’s economic development strategy (Interview 23).

This tension has been particularly difficult for Democratic lawmakers, concerned with both the climate and the economy, to navigate. Before the 2018 midterm elections, former Democratic Governor John Hickenlooper supported closing coal plants and transitioning to a clean energy economy, but also did not act strongly to curb oil and gas extraction. During Hickenlooper’s two-term tenure, the environmental coalition failed to push their main legislative priorities across the finish line: Three efforts to pass economy-wide emissions reductions bills failed to pass the legislature. A public-health oriented ballot initiative that would increase setback requirements for oil and gas wells was also narrowly voted down (Interview 27).

Democrats picked up two Senate seats in the 2018 midterms, giving them a bare majority. In addition, Hickenlooper was replaced by Democratic Governor Jared Polis in 2018, who had campaigned on more ambitious clean energy policy.⁸ According to multiple interviews, fossil fuel industry actors anticipated greater policy risk with Polis replacing Hickenlooper and the Senate in Democratic hands. In response, actors in the fossil fuel industry and utilities sought to forge ties with moderate Democrats in the legislature, communities located near fossil fuel plants, and fossil fuels related industrial labor unions (Interview 30).

⁸ Polis’s campaign messaging included both rapidly transitioning to a clean energy economy, including a zero-emission vehicle program, and increasing environmental and public health standards for the oil and gas industry. Notably, though, Polis did not advocate for dramatically reducing oil and gas drilling on decarbonization grounds (“Polis Administration’s Roadmap” 2019).

Environmental organizations, on the other hand, saw possibilities with the new Democratic trifecta. Leading climate advocacy organizations such as the Sierra Club and Conservation Colorado started organizing immediately after the midterm elections towards two policy goals which had already been on their agendas: 1) imposing stronger regulations on oil and gas extraction and 2) setting statewide greenhouse gas emissions reduction goals.

3.4.2 Grassroots Groups Drive SB-181 Forward Over Oil and Gas Opposition

Efforts to impose stronger regulations on oil and gas extraction were directed into SB181. SB181, motivated by the public health concerns of communities living near oil extraction sites, was designed to alter the mission and structure of the Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission (COGCC) and give local governments land use authority to restrict extraction. The SB181 push was driven by a wide coalition of environmental, environmental justice, and community groups, including Conservation Colorado, Colorado Rising, 350 Colorado, Green Latinos, LOGIC (League of Oil and Gas Impacted Coloradans) and WildEarth Guardians (Interview 21).

After Democrats gained the trifecta in 2018, Conservation Colorado began organizing other professionalized groups and community groups to advocate for new legislation regulating oil and gas extraction by changing the structure and mission of COGCC (Interview 21). Incorporating organizations with grassroots presence allowed bill proponents to draw on experiences of people directly experiencing the harmful public health effects of oil and gas extraction (Interview 25). The public health claims were supported by hours of testimony from impacted citizens that were brought together by the grassroots environmental justice organizations (Interview 26, Interview 28).⁹ Advocates also pointed to the political benefits of public health versus climate-oriented focus of the bill. Indeed, legislators made a strategic choice to keep SB181 as a public health bill separate from broader GHG reduction goals (Interview 25).

Oil and gas industry led the opposition campaign to SB181, but sought to forge alliances with other groups. According to one environmental lobbyist, “They [oil and gas producers] are playing on moderate Democrats, acting with Black religious communities and pipefitters as advocates of community interests” (Interview 24). The industry also supported a number of non-profit groups to advocate against the bill, including Protect Colorado, Coloradans for Responsible Energy, and Coloradans for Energy Access, and mobilized some of their workforce to oppose it (Interview 21).

Even while industry groups were able to bring workers to testify against the bill, organized labor took a neutral position—in part because of efforts from Democratic leaders and environmental groups to mitigate their concerns. The pipefitters union had developed a close relationship with Governor Polis’s office going back to the Democratic primaries, and Polis ended up appointing a member of the union to the AQCC to allay union concerns (Interview 21, Interview 26).

⁹ These included Green Latinos, Colorado Rising and League of Oil and Gas Impacted Coloradans (LOGIC).

When asked how SB181 passed given oil and gas opposition, interviewees pointed to years of grassroots pressure (see, also, Mosberger-Tang, 2019), the Governor's support,¹⁰ and the Democratic trifecta. Though industry actors were unable to prevent SB181 from passing, they were able to include amendments that ended up weakening it (Interview 25, Interview 26).¹¹ These included a "necessary and reasonable" clause, which required local governments to justify regulatory actions restricting extraction with significant evidence linking extraction to significant public health hazards. The ability of the oil and gas industry to negotiate for compromises stemmed directly from its political power. Astroturf organizing and narratives about how the regulation would threaten state revenues, increase energy costs, and reduce jobs (among other things) led some moderate Democrats to negotiate—versus passing the bill as initially designed (Interview 25).

3.4.3 Professionalized Environmental Groups Work with Utilities and Labor to Craft HB-1261:

While SB181 targeted oil and gas extraction, HB1261, the Climate Action Plan to Reduce Pollution, would set economy-wide emissions targets for Colorado. As part of the statewide emission reduction goals in HB1261, electric utilities would be required to submit electric resource plans to the Public Utilities Commission (PUC) to reduce emissions from electricity generation by 80%, from 2005 levels, by 2030. Bill-crafting of HB1261 was led by two large, professionalized environmental groups: Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) and Western Resource Advocates. They worked closely with investor-owned utilities in designing the legislation. In addition, Conservation Colorado led efforts to build ties with labor and environmental justice groups.

Investor-owned utilities sought regulatory certainty regarding emissions timelines and their role in the energy transition. Xcel, in particular, wanted to ensure it would benefit from new renewable generation being developed in the state (Interview 27). As one interviewee said, "the bill made it clear that they [Xcel] would not face unexpected regulation beyond the 80% emission reduction and would be compensated for the cost of transitioning" (Interview 27).

In addition to being supported by investor-owned electric utilities, HB1261 was also Colorado's first climate bill to be supported by an industrial labor union: the Colorado AFL-CIO (Interview 31). Labor's demands were directly written into the legislation, and into two sister bills passed in the same session (Interview 21). Language in HB1261 specified that the AQCC consider the economic and employment costs of transitioning for fossil-fuel communities in its rulemaking. A sister bill, SB236, required utilities to include Workforce Transition Plans and Community Assistance Plans when retiring coal generation.

Unions were more receptive to HB1261 in part due to support from the environmental coalition for sister, pro-labor, bills that were also being introduced (Interview 21). Labor also supported

¹⁰ The Governor supported the bill, in part to avoid another ballot initiative campaign that would occur if regulation was not put in place via legislation (Interview 26).

¹¹ As one interviewee pointed out, "Oil and gas industry figured out that 181 was gonna pass; they made some smaller changes to it, and started working on the implementation— that is the rulemaking" (Interview 26).

provisions in HB1261 encouraging utility ownership of new renewable energy infrastructure, since utilities tend to rely more on unions labor than renewable energy developers (Interview 21). Our interviews also suggested the important role of the nationwide efforts at aligning labor and environment (e.g. the Blue-Green Alliance) in bringing labor to the table in the Colorado context. In Colorado, environmental groups were very attentive to gaining industrial unions' support (Interview 21). Opposition from labor, according to our interviews, would have led to HB1261's failure (Interview 31).

With investor-owned utilities and industrial unions on board, the main opponents of HB1261 were coal-intensive rural electric cooperatives and natural gas producers (Interview 27). Most notably, Tri-state Generation and Transmission, which relies heavily on coal generation, opposed rural electric cooperatives' inclusion in the bill (Interview 27). In the end, rural electric cooperatives were exempted from the bill's mandates, but given an opportunity to opt-in (and access incentives for decarbonizing), which several have since taken.

Overall, opposition from fossil fuel actors was relatively weak. Our interviewees suggested one reason for the limited opposition was the vagueness of the bill. As one said, "It wasn't a specific policy or specific regulatory strategy. It was more of a blank directive to the regulators to take regulatory action consistent with these targets. So the opposition had a hard time getting traction" (Interview 29).

The HB1261 coalition did have to make concessions to win support from the Governor. Polis, according to several interviews, resisted provisions that might threaten his focus on economic development, generating conflict between the Governor's office and the legislature. Initially, the bill included a "timely promulgation of regulations" component that would set a hard timeline for agency rulemaking. The Governor's office removed this requirement, which, according to one environmental advocate, eroded the stringency and effectiveness of the legislation (Interview 29). In addition, contrary to the preferences of the environmental community, the Governor was determined to make the statewide emissions reduction a goal versus an enforceable mandate (Interview 29).

3.4.4 Concessions Lead to Implementation Issues

The concessions made to bring SB181 and HB1261 to enactment have influenced the impact of the bills, according to advocates. With respect to SB181, one pointed out that the bill did not lead to a reduction in fracking permits in the year following enactment (Interview 23; Woodruff 2022).¹² Our interviewees provided several explanations for this limited impact. Most notably, despite the legislation, the composition of the COGCC (later re-named Energy and Carbon Management Coalition) did not significantly change, with oil and gas interests maintaining positions. Further, one environmental advocate pointed out that legislation dramatically reducing drilling was never on the table—since Governor Polis's economic roadmap suggests the state would continue to rely on fossil fuel development (Interview 23, "Polis Administration's Roadmap" 2019).

¹² On the other hand, some local governments have leveraged powers under SB181 to deny new drilling permits (Booth and Jaffe, 2021; Interview 26)

Political conflict on oil and gas extraction and public health has continued. In the aftermath of SB-181's passage, oil and gas industry actors proposed several ballot measures aimed at rolling it back, despite claiming that they would not do so during the legislative process (Interview 21). A former state senator who was among the bill's sponsors mentioned that the AQCC and COGCC were moving very slowly on assessing cumulative impacts as mandated by the bill, and a former state representative added that the legislature had "walked away from trying to enforce the bill" (Interview 26). Due to the limited effect of the bill on drilling permits (only one was denied by the COGCC in the year following SB-181) and the lack of oversight from legislators on implementation, grassroots environmental justice organizations are also considering a ballot measure to limit permitting (Oldham 2023, Interview 26).

With respect to HB1261, early signs suggest the bill has been successful at promoting decarbonization in the power sector, but less successful at promoting emissions reductions outside of the power sector. Utilities are on track to reduce their emissions as mandated with less effect on costs than anticipated due to the decreasing cost of renewables. And some of the state's rural electric cooperatives that were exempted from HB1261 have opted in to gain access to incentives for emissions reductions ("Tri-State's Commitment" 2022). Outside of the power sector, though, the Governor's reluctance to put deadlines on HB1261 rulemaking led lawmakers to pass a companion bill (SB96) tasking the AQCC with proposing cost-effective rules by mid-2020. And several environmental organizations, led by the EDF, have sued the Polis administration and the AQCC for failing to take action on rulemaking to meet the overall emissions reductions targets of HB1261 (Wilson 2023).

4. Discussion

Interest group politics varied across the states in our study, but some key patterns of coalition-building and opposition-fracturing emerged. Successful coalitions generally combined the expertise and lobbying resources of professionalized environmental organizations with the people-mobilizing capacity of grassroots, EJ-oriented organizations. As demonstrated by Table 1, coalitions in New York and Illinois featured both "grassroots" and "grasstops" groups. Grassroots groups were less prominent in HB1261 in Colorado (power sector regulation), where professionalized groups featured strongly—but more critical for SB181 (oil and gas regulation). Our interviews suggest that grassroots mobilization was particularly important for winning support from Democratic Governors, who were hesitant to sign ambitious bills with potentially disruptive economic impacts.¹³ This was less of a concern for HB1261 in Colorado, which drew significant industry support.

Table 1: Summary of Interest Group Politics for Four Climate Bills

¹³ The relatively conservative position taken by Governors, which we observed in each of the three states, aligns with other recent research on how, even in an environment of great partisan polarization, economic concerns can surpass ideological ones for Governors (Hertel-Fernandez, Skocpol and Lynch, 2016).

State	Bill	Key opposing groups	Key neutral groups	Key supporting groups
IL	Climate and Equitable Jobs Act	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natural gas producers • Municipal coal plants • Illinois Manufacturers Association 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Electric utilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nuclear plant operators • IL Clean Jobs Coalition (environmental coalition) • Climate Jobs Illinois (labor coalition) • Renewable energy industry
NY	Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Yorkers for Affordable Energy (including oil and gas industry, natural gas utilities, natural gas infrastructure owners, fuel oil and propane industry) • Business Council of NY State • Energy Coalition • Independent Power Producers of NY 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consolidated Edison • IBEW • AFL-CIO • North America's Building Trades Unions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NY Renews Coalition (including environmental and clean energy advocates, environmental justice organizations, service-sector unions, grassroots community groups)
CO	SB-181: Protect Public Welfare Oil and Gas Operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Colorado Oil and Gas Association • Colorado Alliance of Mineral and Royalty Owners • Coloradans for Energy Access • Coloradans for Responsible Energy Development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • United Association of Pipefitters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conservation Colorado • League of Oil and Gas Impacted Coloradans • Colorado Rising • 350 Colorado • Green Latinos
CO	HB-1261: Climate Action Plan to Reduce Pollution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural cooperative electric associations • Coal mining interests • Natural gas producers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IBEW • United Association of Pipefitters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EDF • Western Resource Advocates • Conservation Colorado • XCel Energy • AFL-CIO • Interwest Energy Alliance (clean energy)

Overall, elements of the clean energy industry were relatively less important to pro-climate coalitions than professionalized environmental and EJ groups, though they were generally involved in shaping provisions that would directly affect them. This is consistent with recent findings describing clean energy businesses generally as advocating for their own narrow interests— versus broad climate progress (Culhane et al. 2021). Some interviews also suggested another potential factor. Due in part to the need to win support from EJ groups and labor, the pieces of legislation we study ended up including significant pro-labor and environmental justice provisions—in addition to fossil fuel retirement timelines and renewable energy support. Pro-labor and EJ provisions, depending on their design, can be costly for the clean energy industry if they, for instance, require that union labor is used in renewables buildout, or require investments in EJ communities. This contrasts with the early days of clean energy advocacy, when clean energy firms could ally with environmental groups in Baptist-and-bootlegger coalitions. The mobilization of labor unions and EJ groups thus poses new challenges to the engagement of the clean energy industry in climate policy.

Outside of environmental groups and clean energy, our cases show support for climate legislation extending to somewhat unlikely places: electric utilities and labor unions. Much existing literature has explored the way these groups impede climate progress. The picture that emerges in the cases studied here is nuanced. Most utilities and industrial labor unions ended up neutral or supportive. However, their lack of opposition often depended on the inclusion of provisions that would provide them with economic benefits—for instance, project labor requirements on renewables buildout (for labor), and compensation for transition costs (for utilities). This was particularly the case for industrial labor.

Across the cases, the only electric utility that engaged strongly against climate legislation was National Grid in New York, since the CLCPA's electrification components threatened its retail natural gas business. The other major electric utility in New York, Consolidated Edison, which had a much smaller gas business, largely supported the bill. The major utilities in Colorado supported HB1261, since it would compensate them for transitioning to renewables, and help to ensure their continued ownership of generation assets. And the major utilities were largely disempowered in Illinois due to scandal, but interviews suggest they did not strongly oppose CEJA, regardless.

Support or neutrality from industrial labor generally depended on bills targeting economic benefits to workers. Industrial labor played a major role in the CEJA coalition in Illinois, but their support was highly conditional. In particular, in addition to subsidies to keep nuclear plants operating, the bill included pro-labor provisions on renewables buildout, relaxed some timelines for fossil fuel retirements, and allowed for new natural gas generation buildout. Labor unions were less central to pro-climate coalitions in New York and Colorado, but, as demonstrated by Table 1, were largely brought to positions of neutrality in both states due to pro-labor provisions. In contexts of Democratic control, our interviews suggest that these bills would not have passed if they had been fully opposed by labor.

Thus, fracturing fossil fuel opposition, in addition to building broad coalitions of environmental groups, was critically important to policy enactment. None of the bills we studied faced unified

fossil fuel opposition—and likely would have failed to be enacted if they had. Avoiding unified opposition was often a strategic decision. In Illinois, pro-climate advocates, already dealing with headwinds from industrial unions and owners of fossil fuel generation, excluded building decarbonization provisions that would have also drawn opposition from natural gas utilities. And as discussed above, provisions were included in each state to seek to win support or neutrality from electric utilities and industrial labor.

Finally, the increasing economic competitiveness of clean energy also helped fracture fossil fuel opposition. Both utilities and industrial unions recognized the unavoidable shifts towards renewables and electrification, and sought to balance protecting current interests (often in fossil fuels) with ensuring their future position in a renewables-powered and electrified economy. The economic context, we believe, also reduced the breadth of fossil fuel opposition, in some cases more than in others. In Illinois, coal plant owners largely accepted retirement timelines. The bill's timelines were generally consistent with their own, based on existing regulations and economic models. In Colorado, however, the oil and gas industry, expecting many more years of profitability, strongly opposed regulations on extraction proposed in SB181 that would raise costs. In general, we found that bill enactment depended to a greater extent on grassroots mobilization where fossil fuel opposition was stronger and more unified.

5. Conclusion and Policy Implications

Overall, this study demonstrates the potential to both build broad and powerful pro-climate coalitions and fracture fossil fuel opposition in contemporary climate politics. These were both critical ingredients for enacting ambitious policy in the states we studied. We found that professionalized environmental organizations were adept at designing bills and moving them through the legislature, but grassroots pressure was critical for winning support from relatively conservative Governors in Democratic trifectas. At the same time, the increasing cost-competitiveness of clean energy made it more feasible to bring powerful electric utilities and industrial labor unions to positions of support or neutrality. In a context of Democratic control, fossil fuel business interests often sought to maintain influence by leveraging their relationship with industrial labor, but pro-climate coalitions were able to soften labor opposition through policy designs that offered unions benefits.

Our analysis highlights, first, the importance of sustained organizing to build broad pro-climate coalitions. In each of the states we studied, the organizations and coalitions at the center of climate legislation had spent years organizing and coordinating before winning policy victories. Investing in organizations is critical to being able to take advantage of windows of opportunity—in this case the onset of unified Democratic governance—to pass ambitious policies. We suggest that philanthropists and advocates invest in building organizations and developing coalitions that can engage productively and mobilize over the long term.

Second, our analysis suggests that strategic policy design—particularly providing economic benefits to key swing interests—can be a powerful mechanism for fracturing fossil fuel opposition. Fossil fuel opposition, in our analysis, was not an immovable barrier to strong climate policy. But, at the same time, fracturing fossil fuel opposition sufficiently to move policy

forward required compromise. This raises questions about the costs of enacting politically feasible policies that avoid unified fossil fuel opposition. Strong labor standards on renewables buildout protect workers and can help win support from industrial labor unions, but, if they are designed poorly, they could markedly increase project costs and slow down the energy transition. Likewise, promoting electric utility ownership of renewable energy assets can help win support from powerful utilities, but could also work to propagate centralized models of electricity production that are potentially poorly suited to a system with significant renewables penetration and distributed energy resources (Roberts, 2019b). Researchers should continue to study the public policy tradeoffs generated by building and maintaining winning political coalitions, and advocates should take these tradeoffs into account when designing policy and coalition-building.

Third, our analysis echoes existing work on the relatively weaker role of elements of the clean energy industry in supporting broad climate action. Political engagement of the clean energy industry continues to lag the industry's economic gains. It is unclear when or whether clean energy will become a climate protagonist and strongly countervail fossil fuel power. Our study provides one rationale for limited support. In contexts of Democratic control, broad climate legislation tends to include pro-labor and EJ provisions applying to renewable energy buildout that can be burdensome for the clean energy industry. Policymakers and advocates should seek to develop and experiment with strategies to mobilize stronger engagement. Political strategists working in the clean energy industry might explore ways to align their interests with priorities of organized labor and EJ groups. It is also plausible that coalitions that include clean energy industry, EJ groups, and labor will prove to be unstable. Indeed, for this reason, clean energy may end up playing a more important political role, and mobilizing the industry may be more critical, in less liberal states where EJ groups and labor groups are weaker (Trachtman and Meckling, 2022).

Moving forward, we suggest researchers continue to explore dynamics of coalition-building and opposition-fracturing in the development and enactment of decarbonization policies. We suspect that our core results also apply to contexts of liberal government outside of the U.S., but comparative research can deepen and broaden the analysis reported here. In addition, it is important to better understand how interest group dynamics play out in politically contested or Republican contexts. Broad, ambitious, emissions reductions policies like those studied here are generally not politically feasible in these contexts, but this has not prevented rapid renewable energy growth. What sorts of interest group politics enable this growth, and what are the political threats to its continuation?

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7. Appendix

7.1 Details on interview data

Our interviewees consisted of 18 climate and environmental advocates, 8 labor representatives, 3 government officials and state representatives, and 3 others. These interviews took place on the phone or over Zoom between March 2022 and November 2023 and lasted generally between 30 minutes and 1 hour. We sought to interview a cross-section of individuals representing different types of organized interests, including environmental groups, labor unions and coalitions, legislators and state government officials. The interview template varied somewhat between interviewees depending on their particular role.

Table A1: Composition of interviewees in each state

State	Environmental groups*	Labor Unions and Labor Coalitions	Government officials	Other	Total
IL	5	1	0	1	7
NY	9	2	1	1	13
CO	7	2	2	1	12
Total	21	5	3	3	32

*Includes both professionalized groups and grassroots environmental justice organizations

Table A2: List of interviewees

State	Type of organization	Role	Date	Interview #
IL	Consumer interest	Advocate	3/30/2022	1
IL	Environmental	Policy expert	4/4/2022	2
IL	Environmental	Organizer	4/4/2022	3
IL	Environmental	Lobbyist	4/13/2022	4
IL	Environmental	Lobbyist	4/22/2022	5
IL	Clean energy (formerly environmental)	Lobbyist	8/5/2022	6
IL	Labor union	Lobbyist	8/10/2022	7
NY	Environmental	Advocate	4/28/2022	8
NY	Environmental/clean energy	Advocate	4/20/2022	9
NY	Environmental/clean energy (formerly legislature)	Policy expert	6/8/2022	10
NY	Environmental	Policy expert	7/8/2022	11
NY	Environmental	Advocate	9/20/2022	12
NY	Environmental/clean energy	Advocate	9/23/2022	13
NY	Environmental (formerly Governor's office)	Policy expert	10/17/2022	14
NY	Regulator (formerly environmental)	Policy expert	10/27/2022	15
NY	Environmental	Advocate	10/21/2022	16
NY	Environmental	Advocate	11/02/2022	17
NY	Labor union	Advocate	5/23/2023	18
NY	Energy (formerly labor coalition)	Staff	6/21/2023	19
NY	Labor union	Advocate	10/24/2023	20
CO	Environmental	Advocate	5/17/2022	21
CO	Environmental	Advocate	10/4/2023	22
CO	Environmental	Advocate	5/19/2022	23
CO	Environmental	Lobbyist	5/19/2022	24
CO	Legislature	Former senator	9/2/2022	25
CO	Legislature	Former Representative	10/24/2022	26
CO	Environmental	Advocate	11/30/2022	27

CO	Environmental	Advocate	3/21/2022	28
CO	Environmental	Advocate	4/4/2023	29
CO	Renewable energy	Lobbyist	4/5/2023	30
CO	Labor union	Advocate	6/28/2023	31
CO	Labor union	Advocate	11/8/2023	32

7.2 Bill content details

Table A3: Key provisions in enacted bills

State	Bill	Key Provisions
IL	Climate and Equitable Jobs Act	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Updates Renewable Portfolio Standard • Imposes timeline for closure of fossil fuel electricity generation • Subsidies for renewable energy projects and expansion of rooftop solar program • Establishes a Green Bank to fund renewable/EV projects • Labor provisions in renewable energy projects such as Project Labor Agreements and prevailing wage requirements • Establishes Clean Jobs Workforce network hubs program • Equity provisions for procurement and renewable/EV projects • Nuclear subsidies to keep plants open • Utility rate reform and consumer protections • States goal of 1 million electric vehicles (EV's) by 2030, alongside boosted EV rebate and EV infrastructure funding
NY	Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 70% and renewables in the power sector by 2030; 100% carbon-free power sector by 2040 • Economy-wide net zero emissions by 2050, with specific guidelines on building electrification, and higher-level provisions on other sectors • Establishes a Climate Action Council for implementation • Establishes Just Transition Working Group and Climate Justice Working Group to support • 35% of the benefits from the state's climate programs to be invested in disadvantaged communities, eligibility determined by Climate Justice Working Group
CO	SB-181: Protect Public Welfare Oil and Gas Operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes mission of Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission from fostering to regulating oil and gas industry to prioritize public health, safety, environmental concerns; restructures the commission to include more environmental and public health experts and fewer industry representatives • Gives state agencies and local governments authority to regulate oil and gas more strictly than state regulations • Air Quality Control Commission to adopt additional air quality rules to minimize emissions from extraction
CO	HB-1261: Climate Action Plan to Reduce Pollution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 50% economy-wide GHG emission reductions by 2030; 90% by 2050 (from 2005 levels) • Regulated utilities to submit a clean energy plan for 80% GHG emission reductions by 2030 to Public Utility Commission (Optional for cooperative electric associations and municipally owned utilities) • Implementation delegated to Air Quality Control Commission