

Opposition to energy transition projects driven by local concerns rather than right-wing populism, finds study

September 1 2025



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Proposals for new wind power infrastructure frequently face opposition in affected communities. While right-wing populists are often among the

opponents, the question remains: are they actually driving these protests?

A [study](#) by researchers at the Research Institute for Sustainability concludes that resistance is more often led by local initiatives and that dissatisfaction with decision-making processes outweighs populist attitudes. The study is published in the journal *Energy Strategy Reviews*.

To increase public satisfaction, political decision-makers need to take the concerns of the population more seriously. According to the authors of the study, this would prevent right-wing populists from co-opting local initiatives.

"The energy transition enjoys widespread support among the population in Germany. Nevertheless, [renewable energy projects](#) often meet with local resistance. Our research aimed to gauge the influence of right-wing populists on these protests. After all, at the national level, it is only the AfD and other right-wing populist groups that fundamentally oppose efforts to expand renewables," explains lead author Jörg Radtke.

The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 36 local stakeholders from politics, local government, and civil society. They also analyzed a nationwide survey that compared and linked attitudes towards the energy transition and right-wing populism.

Concerns focus on landscapes, the environment, and health

The conflicts analyzed in the study center on five wind energy projects and two grid expansion projects in six federal states. None of the projects have been completed to date, as they have met with considerable resistance from local citizens' initiatives and supra-regional networks.

In all of these cases, right-wing populists, in particular the AfD, sought to co-opt and capture local protests for their causes. However, this was largely unsuccessful, as local initiatives were generally unwilling to collaborate with [political parties](#) and had reservations about the AfD in particular. Instead, initiatives focused on immediate, local concerns, often centered on landscapes and environmental and health issues.

Populist rhetoric is nevertheless omnipresent among opponents of the energy transition projects, according to the study. The core components of classic populism—anti-elitism, anti-pluralism and a focus on the "common man"—manifest in specific ways in the context of the energy transition.

Anti-elitism, for example, is evident in widespread resentment towards political and economic elites, who are perceived as exploiting energy projects for their own personal gain.

Survey data shows that majorities in rural populations believe that they bear the burden of urban energy consumption and that city-dwellers are ignorant of the practical problems of rural life.

Closely tied to anti-elitism is anti-pluralism—the belief in a homogenous national community whose unified will should directly determine the course of the energy transition.

"We see this, for example, in our case study from Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, where citizens are calling for referendums on energy projects and denouncing an alleged 'sham democracy' in which their concerns and objections are ignored," says co-author David Löw-Beer.

The demand that the people should take center stage is also a recurring theme. In this view, "the average citizen" is considered inherently virtuous and the burden of the costs of the energy transition unjust.

Politicians must take concerns seriously

According to the researchers, the populist tendencies of local protest initiatives offer considerable potential for right-wing populist actors to establish connections. This potential is heightened by inadequate political responses to such protests—especially when projects proceed unchanged or are stalled by prolonged delays.

The researchers advise political decision-makers to take citizens' concerns seriously, particularly in relation to social and environmental justice.

Constructive engagement with criticism, meaningful public participation, and genuine consideration of community concerns are essential for enhancing the societal legitimacy and long-term sustainability of [energy transition](#) projects.

More information: Jörg Radtke et al, Unpacking local energy conflicts: Drivers, narratives, and dynamics of right-wing populism and local resistance to energy transitions in Germany, *Energy Strategy Reviews* (2025). DOI: [10.1016/j.esr.2025.101844](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esr.2025.101844)

Provided by Research Institute for Sustainability Potsdam

Citation: Opposition to energy transition projects driven by local concerns rather than right-wing populism, finds study (2025, September 1) retrieved 3 October 2025 from <https://phys.org/news/2025-09-opposition-energy-transition-driven-local.html>

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