

Clean-energy transition will hurt some communities more than others, so inclusive policy and investments are crucial

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Dustin Tingley. Credit: Jon Chase/Harvard Staff Photographer

Thanks largely to the Inflation Reduction Act, U.S. policy has finally become a force in the clean-energy transition. By one estimate, the \$369 billion law has already created more than 140,000 jobs in the renewable energy sector since its passage last summer. Another analysis puts the legislation on track to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 29% to 41% by 2030.

It's still not enough. The U.S. must reduce emissions by 50% to fulfill its commitments under the Paris Climate Agreement and to help halt environmental disaster. "It can feel like for every four headlines heralding the success of the Inflation Reduction Act, there's one headline talking about state-level policies and others to neutralize it," said Dustin Tingley, a professor of government and co-author of a new book on accelerating the transition with more inclusive policymaking.

In "[Uncertain Futures: How to Unlock the Climate Impasse](#)," Tingley and co-author Alexander F. Gazmararian provide a ground-level view of the energy transition, surveying the fits and starts of decarbonization in areas historically dependent on fossil fuel employment. The book offers [best practices](#) for building consensus on green policy and public investment, and we asked Tingley to discuss some of its most salient ideas. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

GAZETTE: I see the book as something of a tool kit for reformers, stakeholders, and policymakers at all levels of government. How do you hope readers

receive it?

Tingley: I hope people use it as a tool kit. But I hope it's a tool kit born out of listening rather than solely expertise. It's very easy to demonize people working in fossil fuels, but they are uncertain about their futures. We would be similarly obstructionist if we were uncertain about our futures.

The book is an appeal to finding common ground while not letting up on the reality that we need to change the way we consume and produce energy in this country. Otherwise, we're going to fry the planet.

At the very beginning of 'Uncertain Futures,' readers are reminded that our country's last major environmental statute was the 1990 Clean Air Act Amendments.

Tingley: It's sad because there was a lot of progress on environmental issues: the Clean Water Act [1972], the original Clean Air Act [1963], the 1990 Clean Air Act amendments ushered in by a Republican president and supported in a very bipartisan way.

The 1990 amendments targeted, among other things, high-sulfur coal mining to reduce acid rain. What lesson does this history offer us today?

Tingley: The first is to remember what a profound success that legislation was. We can pass excellent bipartisan legislation to combat environmental problems!

However, anytime you make big changes for the greater good, some

communities will be negatively impacted. The big lesson here is that the commitment to compensating and investing in these communities was tenuous. The Senate couldn't pass a substantial piece of funding for economically impacted regions. And to the extent that there was money, it was essentially eliminated several years later. Discontinuing promises that way is problematic. It can lead to frustration, resentment, feelings of being left behind.

You and your co-author conducted interviews and public-opinion surveys across the country, with a focus on workers, policymakers, union organizers, and youth in communities with economic ties to fossil fuels. You identified two big challenges slowing the clean-energy transition in these places. Talk about the first one: credibility.

Tingley: We did not come into this project thinking, here's our academic hook on credibility. Instead, people told stories that sounded to us like credibility problems. If a government passes a law, it can always be changed later. That's a huge challenge for the clean-energy transition, because it's going to take decades. How do we enact policy and make changes that will be long-lasting?

Credibility also comes up when we say to communities: "Hey, we're going to help you transition to clean energy." It's very destructive if that partnership, that assistance, is short-term—some bureaucrats helicopter in, and two years later they're out.

How do we pass more durable policy?

Tingley: There's a big political science literature, with various ideas, on

passing legislation that will be more durable. One of those ideas is to make it bipartisan. What happens when the other side simply won't cooperate? The Inflation Reduction Act did not have a single Republican vote. But thought was given to benefiting parts of the country that have traditionally opposed policies like it. When I read about Form Energy opening a battery plant in West Virginia, I just smile.

That dovetails with the second challenge. What more can be done to boost local benefits as we transition to clean energy?

Tingley: Once a solar field is installed, the maintenance is relatively low. Ironically, it's low precisely because it's clean. So, one idea is co-locating manufacturing alongside these renewable energy installations, creating a real ecosystem of clean jobs. Iowa has traditionally taken advantage of that.

Another is the use of transparency provisions to document whether people from the community are being used to build clean-energy projects. It turns out, if people think their cousin or their neighbor is actively involved, they're more likely to be supportive.

The book has a great example of this from Minnesota.

Tingley: There's a union there that represented workers both in fossil fuels and in the renewable energy sector. And the union said, wait a second, all our jobs in fossil fuels are serviced by locals while a lot of the renewable energy jobs are serviced by non-unionized people from out of state. They weren't in a business and government environment where they could mandate that workers had to be local. Instead, they got the Public Utilities Commission to insert a requirement saying companies have to report on the share of local labor.

What about assistance for displaced fossil fuel workers?

Tingley: Our country struggles with preparation, with job training. Hence, people start working in lower-skill jobs than they could be. We talk in the book about the German model, which tries to anticipate these changes. People aren't put out of work with two weeks' notice. They really consider what it takes to get a family through this kind of transition.

This book has its roots in southwest Pennsylvania, where you and your co-author were independently conducting research when you met. What did you learn from residents of that region?

Tingley: There are so many people there with great skills, but many others have left due to the decline of coal and the boom-and-bust cycles of hydraulic fracturing. It's a reminder that [fossil fuels](#) aren't necessarily an economic panacea.

The focus on building and supporting communities over a long-term transition is so important. People shouldn't feel like they need to leave for their family to be successful. That's why, for example, there need to be resources flowing into local public goods and schooling. Fossil fuel companies figured this out long ago. They will often say, "We built this football stadium" or "We helped build the library." We've got to have the green energy version of that!

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