

Illinois clean energy transition excludes key constituents in energy justice equation, study argues

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Illinois has made transitioning to clean energy a major priority in recent years with the passage of the Future Energy Jobs Act (FEJA) in 2016 and the Climate and Equitable Jobs Act (CEJA) in 2021. Both pieces of legislation prioritize an equitable transition, aiming to avoid and address

historical wrongdoings associated with environmental injustice.

However, a [recent study](#), published in *Political Geography* by the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, suggests the state, in attempting to redress historical wrongs, used an overly narrow lens to define equity in CEJA, which led to perceived injustices for rural, often white communities.

The study suggests the state prioritized historically marginalized communities when allocating the benefits (low energy costs) of renewable power, but wasn't intentional enough in considering the burdens (infrastructure and [land use change](#)) that fell to [rural communities](#). This has led to claims of injustice in these communities, especially around [wind turbines](#).

"There are a lot of ways you can define justice. People understand it very differently depending on their circumstances," said study author McKenzie Johnson, assistant professor in the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences in the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences (ACES) at Illinois.

The study, co-authored by Johnson's former master's student Shannon Anderson, mapped wind development patterns in Illinois, categorized by whether zoning protocols were regressive—trying to stop wind power; progressive—trying to attract it; or neutral—allowing the market to drive zoning decisions around wind.

"We found that after the first wind boom in 2007, a lot of downstate counties decided they really didn't want wind coming in with their massive turbines," Johnson said. "So you started seeing a lot of regressive zoning with sharp boundaries and restrictive regulations that basically made it impossible for developers to construct wind farms."

Johnson and Anderson followed the response from the state, showing it scaled up its authority over time from offering zoning guidance to completely overriding county-level zoning in order to achieve the goals set out in CEJA.

"Prioritizing communities that have experienced environmental harms can be a just outcome," Johnson said. "But when a state unilaterally takes away power to achieve its goals, even if it is the most desirable, equitable goal you can think of, that's not justice."

CEJA doesn't actually define "energy justice" as part of the statute, but Johnson says the legislation relied on conventional environmental justice metrics—especially race -- that recognize how downstream effects of polluting industries have disproportionately impacted Black, brown, low-income, immigrant, and urban communities. That differs from the indicators used in energy justice definitions, which include energy availability and access, affordability, and inter- and intra-generational equity. Energy justice also prioritizes representative and impartial energy decision-making.

Johnson said if CEJA had included energy justice metrics that considered rural counties' perspectives, the [wind power](#) rollout might have gone very differently. Instead, feeling left out of the process, white rural communities largely rejected wind.

That outcome has led to some unintended consequences.

"We argue that the shifting scales of energy governance reinforced perceptions of energy as a partisan political issue," Anderson wrote in the article. "Rural, heavily Republican communities contend that Democrats unfairly used energy legislation to distribute benefits to urban voters without ensuring similar benefits for rural areas. This increased antipathy toward renewable projects already perceived as undesirable,

and exacerbated perceived political divides between urban and rural Illinoisans."

Johnson was surprised the state didn't anticipate the opposition.

"I think it's because they thought the markets would have a stronger influence on where wind showed up in the state," she said. "But I think the huge lesson out of this research is that if you really want to be truly inclusive, there's going to be conflict. That's not necessarily bad. But you have to anticipate it and be able to address it when it arises."

The backlash and ensuing lawsuits are slowing progress. That's another reason Johnson said it would have been better to engage rural communities at the outset of the legislative process. Although listening sessions might have taken time, lawsuits take longer and tie up more resources.

"To be fair, making a just energy transition happen is really difficult. It's easy for a researcher to be critical about what's happening, but I do think it's really important to point out some of the paradoxes that emerge when you're trying to pursue a just transition," Johnson said.

More information: Shannon R. Anderson et al, The spatial and scalar politics of a just energy transition in Illinois, *Political Geography* (2024). DOI: [10.1016/j.polgeo.2024.103128](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2024.103128)

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