

Ansolabehere, Stephen, and David M. Konisky. 2014. *Cheap and Clean: How Americans Think About Energy in the Age of Global Warming*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

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Few environmental impacts are as consequential as the way energy is produced: energy production affects local environmental quality as well as global climate change, and the siting of power plants and other electrical generation facilities also impacts local land use. The United States now faces a number of critical choices about how it will meet its future energy generation needs. These choices include whether and when to build new power plants, construct electricity transmission lines and oil and natural gas pipelines, and how much to invest in new technologies for producing oil and natural gas, wind “farms,” and fields of solar panels.

The purpose of this important book is to describe and explain how the American public thinks about these choices. It is based on the assumption that public opinion has played and will continue to play an important role in shaping policy outcomes in this space—especially as many new energy-related technologies will be located near population centers. Drawing on extensive public opinion polling data, the book seeks to answer two critical and related questions: “what sort of energy do people want and why” (p. 8). The authors argue that it makes little sense to ask people about their energy preferences in the abstract, as previous surveys have done, for instance by soliciting general thoughts or opinions about nuclear or solar power.

Instead, what really matters politically is how members of the public judge the *relative* desirability of real-world energy production alternatives. It turns out that Americans think about all energy sources in the same way. What matters to them, as the book’s title reveals, is energy that is both clean and cheap. If forced to make a trade-off, however, the public has a strong preference for energy that is cleaner. People are very concerned about the local or immediate environmental impacts of the way energy is produced.

Americans want to rely less on coal and oil and more on solar and wind power. Strikingly, the public mistakenly believes that the latter energy sources are less expensive than the former, although that is clearly not the case. But the authors suggest that Americans have become so concerned about the negative health and environmental impacts of burning fossil fuels that even if they knew the correct relative costs, they would still prefer solar and wind power. In other words, when it comes to what matters to the public more, cleaner or cheaper, the data indicate that the answer is “cleaner.” Accordingly, the public would be pleased to accept higher-cost coal if it were cleaner.

But while there is substantial public demand for energy use that protects environmental quality, this does not translate into public support for measures to address the issue of global climate change. An important and original contribution of this book is to explain why climate change has had so little political

traction among much of the public. The reason, the authors argue, has to do with its relatively low political salience. Not only has environmental protection rarely been ranked as one of the most important issues confronting the country, but more important, when asked to rank the importance of various environmental challenges, the public consistently ranks global climate change substantially *below* all other environmental problems, such as air and water pollution. Notwithstanding all the media attention to global warming, the latter gap has continued to increase.

The good news is that the public does like solar and wind power, which is helpful for addressing the risks of global climate change. But based on a careful analysis of polling data, the authors argue that the public does not prefer these energy sources *because* of their impact on carbon emissions. Rather, it values them because they are perceived as “cleaner,” in that they produce less local pollution. What the public most cares about are immediate, local health and environmental harms and benefits. Global climate change does not fall into this category, since the effects of policies to directly address it are too remote and indirect to the average American.

This insight has important and challenging implications for attracting public support for future public policies to address the risks of global climate change. Policies that focus too narrowly on reducing greenhouse gases are unlikely to succeed politically, as they do not address the local and immediate health, safety, and environmental concerns of citizens. Rather, we need to formulate energy policies that can be justified by their immediate health, safety, and environmental benefits—and that also reduce carbon emissions.

Revealingly, the reason Americans are more supportive of a cap on carbon emissions than on cap and trade is that they see a clearer and more causal connection between the former and a reduction of air and water pollution, due to reduced use of fossil fuels and greater reliance on alternative energy sources.

This book can be challenging to read, as it is filled with detailed analyses of polling data from previous surveys as well as from an original one commissioned by the authors, but it is well worth the effort. *Cheap and Clean* is an important and original contribution to our understanding of one dimension of the politics of climate change, namely public opinion toward energy production.