

COUNTY COMMISSIONERS' PERCEPTIONS ON CLEAN ENERGY

Environmental Polling Consortium – March 2025

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Objective

ACE conducted **qualitative interviews** and a **national survey** to understand county commissioners':

- **Perceptions** of utility scale wind and solar
- Baseline **attitudes** towards siting and permitting, political pressures, and constituent concerns
- **Trusted messengers** and desired resources

Multi-method approach **increases confidence** about our learnings



Our Four Key Learnings

- County commissioners are **not a resistant target audience**.
- We need to be **realistic and authentic** to these local communities.
- Commissioners learn best from **examples from their peers** and peer communities.
- This population is best served **in-person** and on the ground.



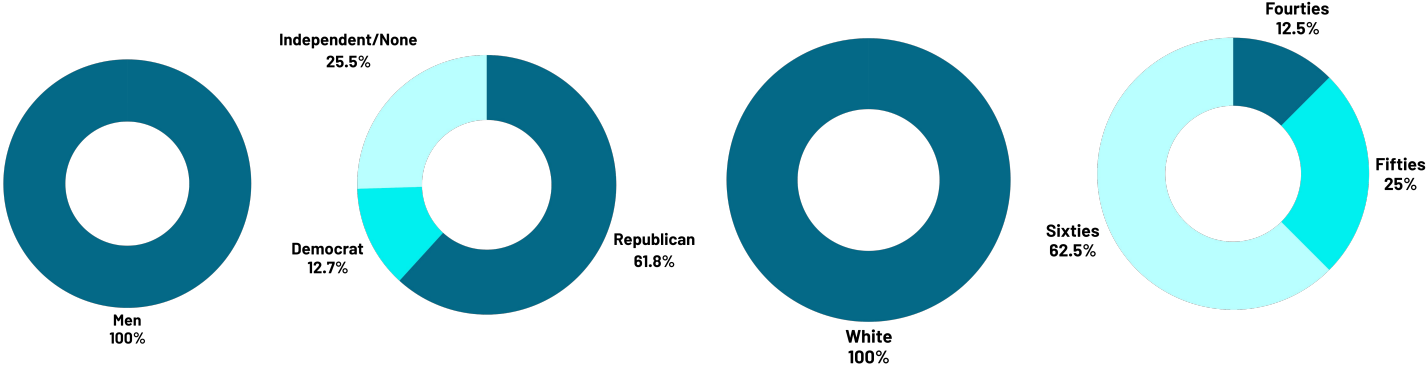
Participants

Ethnographic Interviews

[Hivemaker Studios]

N = 8

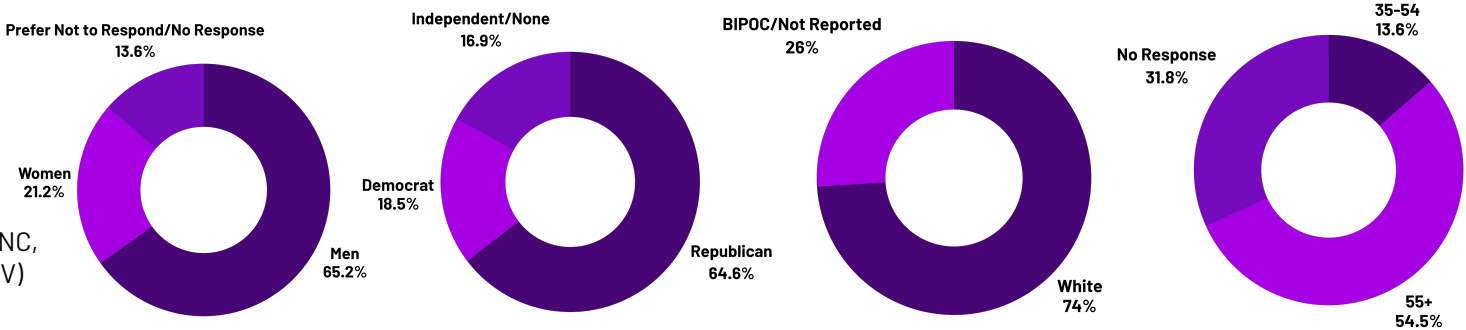
(CO, MN, IL, ND, TX)



Surveys

N = 66

(AL, CA, CO, FL, ID, KS, MI, MT, NC, NV, OH, OR, TN, TX, UT, VA, WV)



**County commissioners are not
a resistant target audience.**

Takeaway #1



Surveys: There was a range of support for clean energy.

- Nearly **40% were "neutral" ...but still some support** for clean energy:
 - **36% for solar** [+14 Dem, -7% Rep, +7 Ind]
 - **27% for wind** [+11 Dem, -16% Rep, +1 Ind]
 - Most had no opinion on offshore
- Only 26% of commissioners perceived **support among constituents** (vs. 33% who perceived constituents did not)



Interviews: Commissioners' Three Approaches

Protector [Resistant]: Stabilize their community by guiding budget and state mandates.

Amplifier [Open]: Engage communities by keeping tax rates low and investing in services with clear metrics.

Developer [Most Open]: Grow their communities by crafting policies that make it attractive for businesses to enter the county.



Interviews: Differences in Perceptions

Resistant commissioners...

- Perceive clean energy is not a concern for rural, local communities (“urban problem”)
- Perceive threat to rural rights
- Perceive a risky policy to oversee

*“Clean energy companies pushing renewables tells me they just want to **take advantage of rural areas**. Green energy is an **urban desire** and a rural knife in the back... A lot of pollution happens in the urban area, and it’s **being forced** on the rural community without their consent.” (Kent V.)*

*“Who knows **what’s going to happen** with these things in 20 years? What if it’s not maintained the way they say it will be?... Who is liable? (Benjamin Y.)*



Interviews: Differences in Perceptions

Converted commissioners...

- See a personal rights and fiscal issue
- See a rural business opportunity
- Leverage regulations and resources to develop a custom clean energy plan

*"Water is a fundamental issue here, so that's how I present [climate issues]. How do we **support local** food productions? How do we make a **more resilient** local food system?" (John K).*

*"The production tax **helps the townships**. The maintenance side of wind production has given the **young people** in our area a very good job." (Dennis W.)*



We need to be realistic and authentic to these local communities.

Takeaway #2



Perceived Benefits across Both Studies

- Commissioners in both studies were excited that clean energy projects can **generate revenue for their communities**
 - Revenue outside of property taxes
 - Revenue that can improve community services
- They also noted that it can help **address climate change**, specifically reducing air and water pollution (in their community)!



Additional Perceived Benefits

- **Interviews:**
 - **Preserves land rights:** Farmers keep their land
 - **Improve technology:** Benefits of innovation
 - **Successful land use negotiations:** Witnessing success negotiating setbacks, decommissioning fees, and installation
- **Survey:** 49% of commissioners noted reduced energy costs was an important benefit.



Comments from Commissioners

*"I believe the technology is always developing, and **over time, I think it's going to be cheaper** power."
(Dennis W.)*

*"We worked out the decommissioning fees...We've approved 20,000 acres of solar...We didn't want to **lose energy companies to other counties.**" (Gordon W.)*



**However, not acknowledging
the constraints can be
“suspiciously positive”.**



Interviews: Commissioners' Concerns

*"It's rainbows and unicorns...When you **peel back the onion, it's not as good** as [energy companies] say...I would like a counterview. I would like to [hear], 'Okay, here are some of the **concerns we can plan for.**' "*

(Benjamin Y.)

- **Energy waste or unreliability:** Concerns energy is not properly produced, stored, or distributed
- **City and state overreach:** Perceived policy is "forced" on rural communities
- **Revenue risks:** Concerns tax credits, government subsidies, and abatements means clean energy is not actually profitable



Interviews: Commissioners' Concerns

- **Damaging or losing farmland:** Concerns about what is left or if clean energy damages lands
- **No management plan:** Concerns panels will not be maintained, repaired
- **Noise and eyesore:** Ugly, noisy, and produce a glare

Please **present the good and the bad** so [I] can make that call. There's nothing worse than buyer remorse. If you can give a commissioner that heads up right off the bat, you put him in a **better place to go back to his constituents** because those are concerns that will come up."
(Jason C.)



Surveys: Commissioners' Concerns

- Perceived **public opposition** (42%)
- Perceived **lack of interest** or demand (36%)
- The **cost or lack of funds** for development (24%)



Commissioners learn best from examples from their peers and peer communities.

Takeaway #3



Showing rather than telling is important.

- Commissioners had increased confidence when **learning from similar counties' draft policies**
- Over 50% of survey respondents wanted to hear **success stories** from other commissioners and counties



Comments from Commissioners

*"We **copycatted a lot of surrounding counties...** We had nothing to follow. That's when I went to different county websites... We **took pieces of each one**, together, and talked about it. We don't like that, but we do like this..."*
(Gordon W.)

*"You rely on the other Commissioners who probably **went through something similar** to [you]. We **call each other** back and forth and bounce some ideas off of them."*
(Dennis W.)



Showing rather than telling is important.

- **Interviews**

- Concerns they do not know the blind spots
- Preference to discuss *plans* rather than just hearing benefits

- **Surveys**

- Technical experts on the local impacts (wildlife, property values, sound levels, etc.) would be helpful
- Funds or grants for public engagement and planning
- FAQ sheets as the most helpful



**This population is best served
in-person and on the ground.**

Takeaway #4



Commissioners heavily relied on in-person resources.

- **Interviews:**

- Most commissioners engage with constituents at **in-person events and hearings** (not online)
- Rely on **packets of information** provided by staff or conference associations
- Completed **limited personal research** (Google, county websites, some news, some conferences)



Commissioners heavily relied on in-person resources.

- **Surveys:**

- **Local governments** who have successful projects are the most trusted source (59%)
 - Much less interest in nonprofits, federal agencies, or private energy companies
- Most were very engaged with **political news, especially with local news** (65%+ followed local news “very” closely)
- Only **one-third had social media** (Facebook is top platform)



Limitations of Research

- **Election season:** Many were up for re-election and were concerned about constituent perceptions, time to complete interview
- **Forms were unfamiliar and off putting:** Market research terms made them uncomfortable, need to adapt language
- **Phone call > video call:** Video calls were advanced for commissioners
- **Phone Calls and Peer-to-Peer Texting:** Responsive to calls and texts for recruitment, could answer follow up questions



Our Recommendations

- *County commissioners are not a resistant target audience.*
 - Learn more about **conflicting priorities** that cause resistance.
- *We need to be realistic and authentic to these local communities.*
 - Develop **messaging around the counterarguments or “cons”** rather than ignore them.
 - Develop messages **specific to the needs of the community** versus a “one size fits all” approach.



Our Recommendations

- *Commissioners learn best from examples from their peers and peer communities.*
 - Identify **“peer communities” to partner** with to share their process and be the messengers for other commissioners.
 - Provide **financial support** for technical experts, public engagement, and planning and legal services.
- *This population is best served in-person and on the ground.*
 - **Build grassroots, in-person relationships** – Opportunities for booths and sponsorships at local conferences.
 - Partner with **rural-focused research centers and organizations** to establish credibility.





Thank you!

Email leeann@acespace.org with questions!