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Articulating Place: A Contradictory Coalition Against Offshore Wind on the Eastern Shore

Transitioning away from fossil fuels requires the astonishingly rapid build-out of renewable energy and, in doing so, the transformation of economic geographies. But this wave of industrial restructuring is increasingly resisted across the country, supported by fossil-fuel funded denialist organizations and recently emboldened by the White House. On Maryland's Eastern Shore, a protracted and acutely litigious conflict over developing an offshore wind (OSW) farm is underway, the stakes of which are billions of dollars, Maryland's renewable energy targets, and ultimately the mitigation of climate change.

The epicenter for this conflict has been Ocean City, a tourism-centered beach town located in a politically red county of the very blue state of Maryland. Offshore wind proponents in the region tout the project's contribution to fighting climate change and the benefits of clean energy, and—like some strands of scholarship—chalk up resistance to misinformation, ignorance, and partisanship. Project opponents have, meanwhile, stitched together a strong local coalition of diverse people who oppose OSW for different reasons. This includes downtown business owners, realtors and property owners who fear loss of property values and tourism revenue; watermen who worry about their fish catch; and a variety of local residents who have minimal material stake in the conflict but express concern about the local environment, "viewshed," and way of life. Together, they have formally incorporated an anti-offshore wind coalition; endangered one of the project's state permits; and filed a lawsuit challenging its federal permits. So far, despite the state having first passed legislation to promote OSW in 2013, no turbines have been built offshore.

While survey-based studies have previously catalogued and measured the many reasons coastal residents oppose offshore wind, this paper uses participant observation and 27 in-depth, semi-structured interviews to answer a different question: how have OSW opponents stitched together such robust coalitions of people who oppose it for different, and very contradictory, reasons? And why are OSW proponents unsuccessful in doing the same?

We argue that offshore wind opponents successfully created an internally contradictory yet functionally unified anti-offshore wind coalition by *articulating* diverse material interests and misinformation with an appeal to place loyalty. It is the latter, we will show, that provides the glue for a coalition that appeals to diverse interests and concerns, many of which are not reducible to misinformation. Theoretically, we expand upon existing research on place-based beliefs and attachments in the siting of renewable energy infrastructure (Bidwell 2017; Devine-Wright and Howes 2010; Firestone et al. 2018) by combining Stuart Hall's theory of articulation with Doreen Massey's theory of place.

Literature: Siting Offshore Wind Energy

A robust social science literature explains why people oppose or support infrastructural projects generally, and offshore wind specifically. This scholarship, which relies heavily on survey research, typically goes under the rubric of "siting." Having long debunked not-in-my-back-yardism (NIMBY) as a useful analytic for such opposition (Devine-Wright 2005; Wolsink 2000), it takes seriously the contextual reasons and project characteristics that influence opposition to, or support for, land use changes. Scholars have emphasized how perceived risks, health concerns,

and economic interests affect attitudes (Bush and Hoagland 2016; Klain et al. 2018; Korein et al. 2025) and have identified individual-level correlates of OSW perceptions. Age, education level, income, and partisan affiliation, as well as home distance to shore, have been foregrounded; however, the relationships to OSW perceptions are frequently insignificant and inconclusive, with opposite effects across different projects and studies (Bates and Firestone 2015; Firestone and Kempton 2007; Ladenburg 2010). This scholarship has also given great weight to project characteristics, primarily the perceived inclusivity and fairness of planning and decision-making processes (Cohen & Durrant 2019; Loginova & Wilson 2020; Reilly et al. 2016; Ryder et al. 2023). A recent trend in this scholarship emphasizes the role of misinformation in anti-OSW activism and poses the question of the relationship between organized fossil fuel industry actors and local mobilization (Kwestel 2025; Slevin et al. 2025).

The great strength of both the siting and OSW-specific scholarship is to have identified the many correlates of individual-level attitudes, as well as the project characteristics. Its weakness, which stems from a heavy methodological reliance on surveys, is its inability to understand how political actors intervene into this subjective terrain to construct alliances for or against proposed projects. People do not hold beliefs and attitudes as itemized lists, but in relation to one another. And some are combined and made salient by political actors, while others are not. If people oppose projects for a great variety of reasons, or put differential weight on different concerns, how do these isolated individuals get mobilized into powerful coalitions against offshore wind despite having different reasons for opposition? And why do anti-OSW activists appear to be winning local opinion in so many cases?

Methods

The need to better understand the inner structure of a political movement, how anti-OSW activism is organized and motivated, warrants ethnographic research (Katz 1997). The development project off the coast of Maryland functions as an exemplary case for ethnographic study due to its emergent and ongoing politics. Through initial identification of key agitants and immersion in the field, we embedded in anti-OSW circles concentrated in one town and several nearby coastal localities. During 2025, we conducted 27 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with local government officials, business owners, realtors, fishermen, workers, union members, and residents. Through participant observation in shops, restaurants, and bars along beaches and boardwalks, and at local hearings and events organized by pro- and anti-OSW advocates, we spoke with another 104 local and regional actors.

Articulating Place

Understanding current political blowback to OSW requires explaining how these different elements identified by existing scholarship—including misinformation, project characteristics and a variety of concrete concerns rooted in everyday life—come together to forge anti-renewables coalitions. We will argue that Stuart Hall's theory of articulation—the conditional suturing of "distinctions within a unity" (Hall 2016: 122)—provides a compelling way for understanding precisely how political actors combine diverse ideological elements into "stitched" (Ibid.: 182) coalitions, incorporating distinct material interests. For example, misinformation shapes offshore wind opposition; but rather than being an inevitable force, misinformation becomes potent when it articulates external intellectual justifications alongside concerns about the threats of OSW that are grounded in people's everyday life.

We will also, however, demonstrate that Hall's theory of articulation is insufficient for understanding the particular emotional valence arising from place, which we argue provides the ur-element that glues together the other ingredients. The theory of how opposition to OSW becomes articulated requires a theory of how people's consciousness emerges through grounded, affective spatial relations (Massey 2005).

By *articulating place*, OSW opponents are able to blur diverse and even conflicting material interests and make misinformation effective by appealing to an emotion-laden—though narrow and selective—construction of place. The threatened restructuring of the space of Ocean City from tourism to energy production generated a defensive politics of place, one that seeks to bound and fix its identity in opposition to a liberal renewable energy transition. This is, of course, uneven—waitresses and Lyft drivers see the place differently from real estate developers—but the banner of place has the ability to suture together cross-class coalitions.

Implications of our argument for renewable energy transition include that its proponents would likely do better to connect with, and rearticulate, place-based identities than to harp on misinformation. OSW proponents' macro-level focus on information and science, and their dismissal of local concerns as NIMBY, appear to lead to a failure of articulation. It is not that the usual recipes for project siting—such as project benefits agreements and an inclusive consultation process—are unimportant. Rather, it is that these recipes are more likely to be effective when combined with compelling visions of renewable energy as an extension of—rather than imposition upon—current placed-based identities. While much research on climate change and energy transition remains at a high-level of abstraction, or buried in the euphemistic and reductive notion of "stakeholder consultation," the current contentiousness of renewable energy—not only in the United States—underscores the importance of sociology. In conclusion, this work points towards the critical potential for ethnography to deepen our understanding of the politics of energy transition.

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