THE
SOLUTIONS
PROJECT

CONSPIRE
FOR GOOD

RENEWABLE **ENERGY**
NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

January – December 2018

BACKGROUND & KEY FINDINGS

Over the past decade, the dream of 100% renewable energy in the United States has gone from abstract policy proposals to concrete commitments and achievements. Cities, states, and companies across the country have responded to public demand for clean energy and taken advantage of its decreasing cost. As the industry grows, news coverage of the sector has grown along with it—reporting on everything from new solar arrays and technology developments to 100% commitments and clean energy investment.

Since 2014, The Solutions Project has been investing in frontline organizations that are working to make 100% renewable energy a reality in their communities, in such a way that benefits everyone. Our grants and media support have helped elevate local leaders, particularly women and people of color, taking their solutions to scale so other communities can benefit. We've discovered over the course of our work that these local leaders and their organizations are having outsized impact, especially relative to the funding they receive.

While the media has shown interest in these leaders, coverage of their work represents just a drop in the bucket. Here's what our research found:

- Only 21% of the articles quoted a woman as a spokesperson.

- Communities of color were referenced in only 7% of articles.

- 10% of the articles referenced issues related to equity and justice.

Missing from coverage of the sector is a representative collection of voices and stories from the communities most impacted by climate change and fossil fuels, which disproportionately affect poor and low-income communities and communities of color. Those communities understandably feel a sense of urgency and are therefore often the source of the greatest innovations and strongest drives toward 100% renewable energy policies.

Following the November 2018 midterm election, the media was abuzz with stories about the greater diversity of political representatives across the country, declaring the 116th Congress the most diverse in our nation's history. And just as representatives in a democracy should reflect the diversity of their constituents, so too should media aim to reflect the diversity of people contributing to the stories of our time.

We believe the media has a responsibility to accurately reflect this reality, as well as the diversity of leaders working on the front lines of the clean energy movement—women as well as men, communities of color as well as white, male entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley.

How the media covers issues like renewable energy, climate justice, and energy equity matters. Media influences how people think and what they aspire to achieve. It's clear that 100% renewable energy is both possible and happening. And if we look to the frontlines of the movement, we'll see that it's possible to achieve 100% with equity and justice for everyone.

As we've engaged with other philanthropic partners and learned about their strategies for fighting climate change and supporting clean energy, we've become concerned. The lion's share of their money goes to national, often white-led organizations[1] that play well inside the Beltway, but are often disconnected from the solutions designed by and for local communities. Meanwhile, local leaders on the frontlines are operating with razor thin budgets, most without funding for communications.

That's why we embarked on this research: to understand how the media covers renewable energy. In particular, we were interested in uncovering data that might shed light on whether or not these funding gaps in climate philanthropy are also leading to a gap in media coverage of local leaders and innovations. To what extent would articles quote women as spokespeople, reference issues of equity, or talk about communities of color?

As philanthropists and advocates everywhere work to raise awareness about the myriad pathways to 100%, we hope this report offers insight into the national narrative about renewable energy—providing baseline data and metrics against which to measure the impact of their work and track progress over time. The story told in this report indicates where resources must be invested if we want to truly reflect and lift up the 100% solutions and leaders already here.

---

[1] *95% of US philanthropic dollars goes to white-led organizations (Stanford Social Innovation Review).*

SEARCH TERMS

RENEWABLE **ENERGY**

CLIMATE **JUSTICE**

CLEAN **ENERGY**

JUST **TRANSITION**

CLIMATE **EQUITY**

ENERGY **DEMOCRACY**

2348 ARTICLES REVIEWED

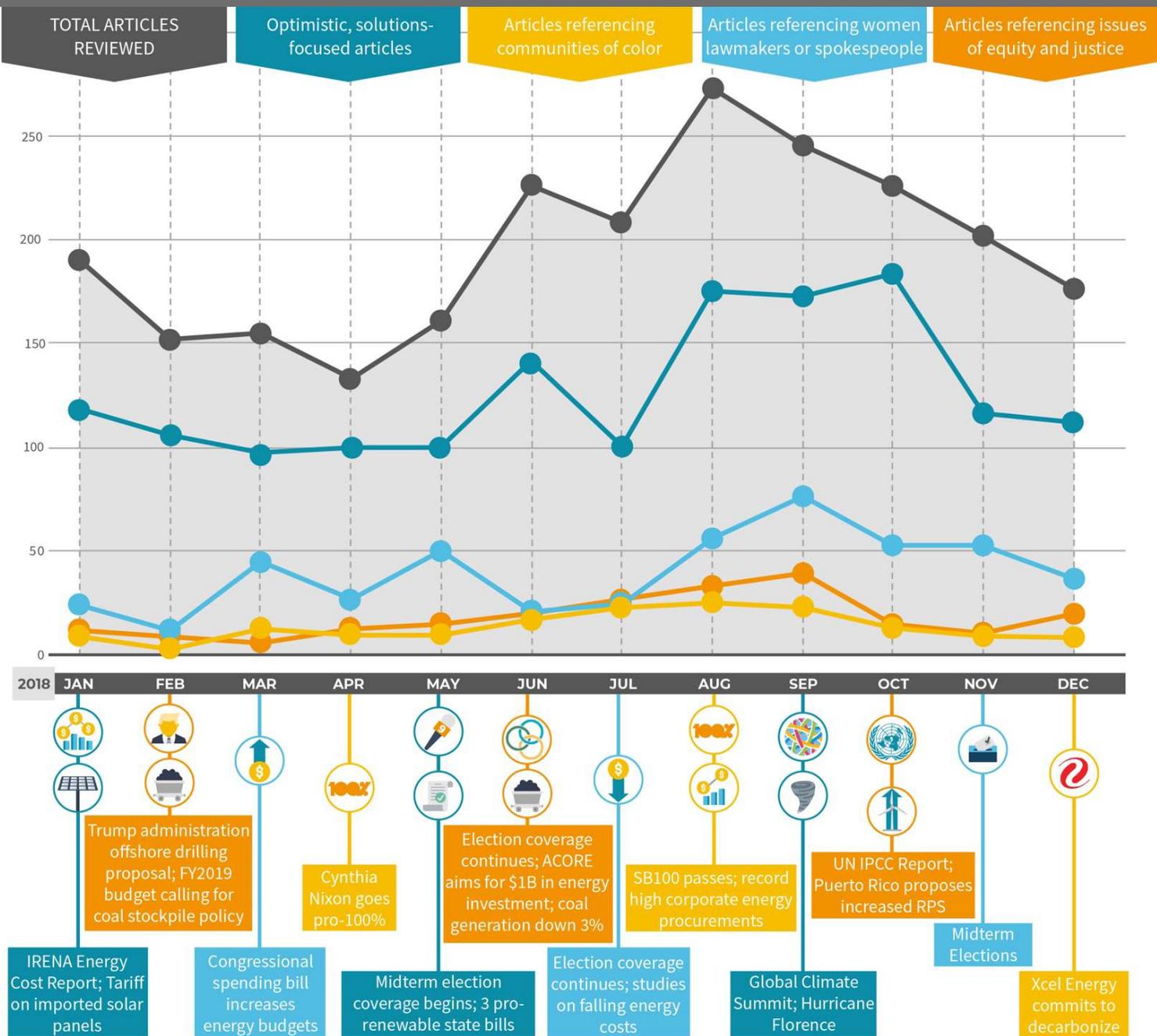| Articles that reference equity or justice	Articles that include women as spokespeople or lawmakers	Articles that reference communities of color	Optimistic, solutions-focused articles
10%	**21%**	**7%**	**65%**

2018 — JAN | FEB | MAR | APR | MAY | JUN | JUL | AUG | SEP | OCT | NOV | DEC

Trump administration offshore drilling proposal; FY2019 budget calling for coal stockpile policy

Cynthia Nixon goes pro-100%

Election coverage continues; ACORE aims for $1B in energy investment; coal generation down 3%

SB100 passes; record high corporate energy procurements

UN IPCC Report; Puerto Rico proposes increased RPS

IRENA Energy Cost Report; Tariff on imported solar panels

Congressional spending bill increases energy budgets

Midterm election coverage begins; 3 pro-renewable state bills

Election coverage continues; studies on falling energy costs

Global Climate Summit; Hurricane Florence

Midterm Elections

Xcel Energy commits to decarbonize

100% COMMITMENTS

Ann Arbor, Michigan – 100% by 2035 • Fayetteville, Arkansas – 100% by 2050 • Longmont, Colorado – 100% by 2030 • Encinitas, California – 100% by 2030 • Consumers Energy – 40% by 2040 • Denton, Texas – 100% by "as early as 2020" • Heineken – 70% by 2030 • Summit County, Colorado – 100% by 2035 • Hayward, CA – 100% ASAP • Tempe, Arizona – 100% for city operations by 2035 • VISA – 100% by 2019 • Grupo Bimbo – 100% ASAP • New Jersey – 50% by 2030 • Procter and Gamble – 100% by 2030 • Minneapolis, Minnesota – 100% by 2030 • Connecticut – 40% by 2030 • Kennett Township, PA – 100% by 2050 • Norman, OK – 100% by 2050 • DTF Energy, Consumers Energy – 25% by 2030 • Vermont Coffee Company – 100% now • Samsung (US, China, Europe facilities) – 100% by 2020 • Vodafone Group – 100% by 2025 • Hawaii – 100% by 2045 • Great River Energy (Duluth, Minnesota) – 50% by 2030 • Samsung (some facilities) – 100% by 2020 • Iron Mountain (global data storage company) – 100% by 2050 • Denver, Colorado – 100% by 2030 • Concord, New Hampshire – 100% by 2030 • Michigan – 30% by 2027 • Largo, FL – 100% by 2040, 50% by 2035 • Traverse City, MI – 100% by 2040 • Facebook – 100% by 2020 • Tesla (Gigafactory) – 100% by 2019 • State of California (Carbon-Free) – 100% by 2045 • Boston University – 100% by 2025 • McKinsey & Company – 100% by 2025 • Sony – 100% by 2050 • TetraPak – 100% by 2019 • University of California System – 100% by 2025 • WeWork – 100% by 2023 • Fort Collins, CO – 100% by 2030 • East Bradford, PA – 100% by 2035 (electricity) and 2050 (heat and transportation) • Haverford, PA – 100% by 2035 (electricity) and 2050 (heat and transportation) • Gainesville, FL – 100% by 2045 • Wake County, NC – 100% by 2050 • General Motors-Arlington Plant – currently at 100% • T-Mobile – 100% by 2021 • Sony – 100% by 2030 (Update from previous goal) • Redmond, WA – 100% by 2021 • Albuquerque, NM – 100% by 2022 • Rimini Street – 100% renewable energy at data facility in Switch's Data Centers • Cincinnati, OH – 100% by 2035 • Dunedin, FL – 100% by 2050 • Evanston, IL – 100% by 2030 • Washington, D.C. (Utilities) – 100% by 2032 • Xcel Energy (Carbon-Free Electricity) – 100% by 2050

SUMMARY OF ANALYSIS

2018 saw significant movement in renewable energy policy, growth, and investment. Of the 2,348 articles we reviewed, 65% were positive or solutions-focused. In addition, 21% of articles quoted women as spokespeople, 10% referenced issues of equity and justice, and 7% referenced communities of color.

Despite a federal government keen on stymieing the industry, clean power generation has grown, as has its popularity and underlying infrastructure. Amid lower costs, companies, cities, and states across the country committed to renewable energy goals. Advocates' pushes at the local level have given way to state-level clean power commitments: four states—New Jersey, California, Massachusetts, and Connecticut—increased their renewable portfolio standards in 2018. Among them, New Jersey and California made 100% renewable energy commitments and over 50 local communities made renewable energy pledges.

That push was complemented by massive private sector demand. The Climate Group's RE100 campaign reached over 100 corporate renewable energy commitments during 2018. And utilities are taking notice, buying and building more clean power than ever before to meet growing demand. Last year, non-utility companies in the United States contracted 8.5 gigawatts worth of renewable energy, nearly triple the 2.9 gigawatts contracted in 2017.

Much of this public and private demand for clean power has to do with the low cost of generating renewable energy. Nearly 50 articles from our 2018 sample included messaging about renewable energy's cost-effectiveness. As with any market-driven decision making, the effects, though positive, have undeniably been driven by financial opportunism:

We're investing in [renewable energy] because of the tremendous economic value it brings to our customers. [It] is saving our customers billions of dollars in fuel savings.

— Benjamin Fowke, CEO of Xcel Energy

The choice to make the switch has not necessarily come from a desire to do good for the environment.

We have also seen a major shift in the conversation about the viability of renewable energy. In the middle of 2017, conversations about clean energy were much more focused on whether or not it was possible to achieve 100% renewable energy at scale. For example, 26 articles in August 2017 contained messaging questioning the viability of renewable energy as a widespread power source. Compare that to one year later in July 2018, when 82 articles in our sample referred to concrete renewable energy progress, whether through commitments, construction projects, procurement, or new policy. And the last four months of 2018 all included coverage of Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the Green New Deal, creating a steady drumbeat into 2019. Due to the plummeting costs of renewable power and a marked spike in demand and procurement, the media appears much more interested in renewable energy's thriving present than in the still unknown future.

This means the challenge ahead has largely moved from a question of viability to a question of implementation: renewable energy is happening now, so who gets it first, how, and on whose backs?

DOMINANT NARRATIVE TRENDS

Distinct from the key metrics shown above, the following narrative trends attempt to measure the overall tone of the conversation. They also offer nuance. For example, an article may mention a community of color but not talk about equity. Or, a spokesperson who is a woman may be quoted in an article that is not positive about renewable energy.

We have broken down the renewable energy narrative into three major parts:

Positive	Shaped by stories and spokespeople that endorse one or more aspects of the renewable energy movement's vision for the future: 100% is possible, 100% is happening, 100% is equitable.
Neutral	Contains messages that may support an aspect of the positive narrative but detract or could detract from another, e.g. corporate renewable energy commitments prove 100% is possible and already happening, but may not always be equitable.
Negative	Message trends that either directly oppose the positive narrative or compete for attention, e.g. we need new technologies to make renewable energy viable.

OF ARTICLES
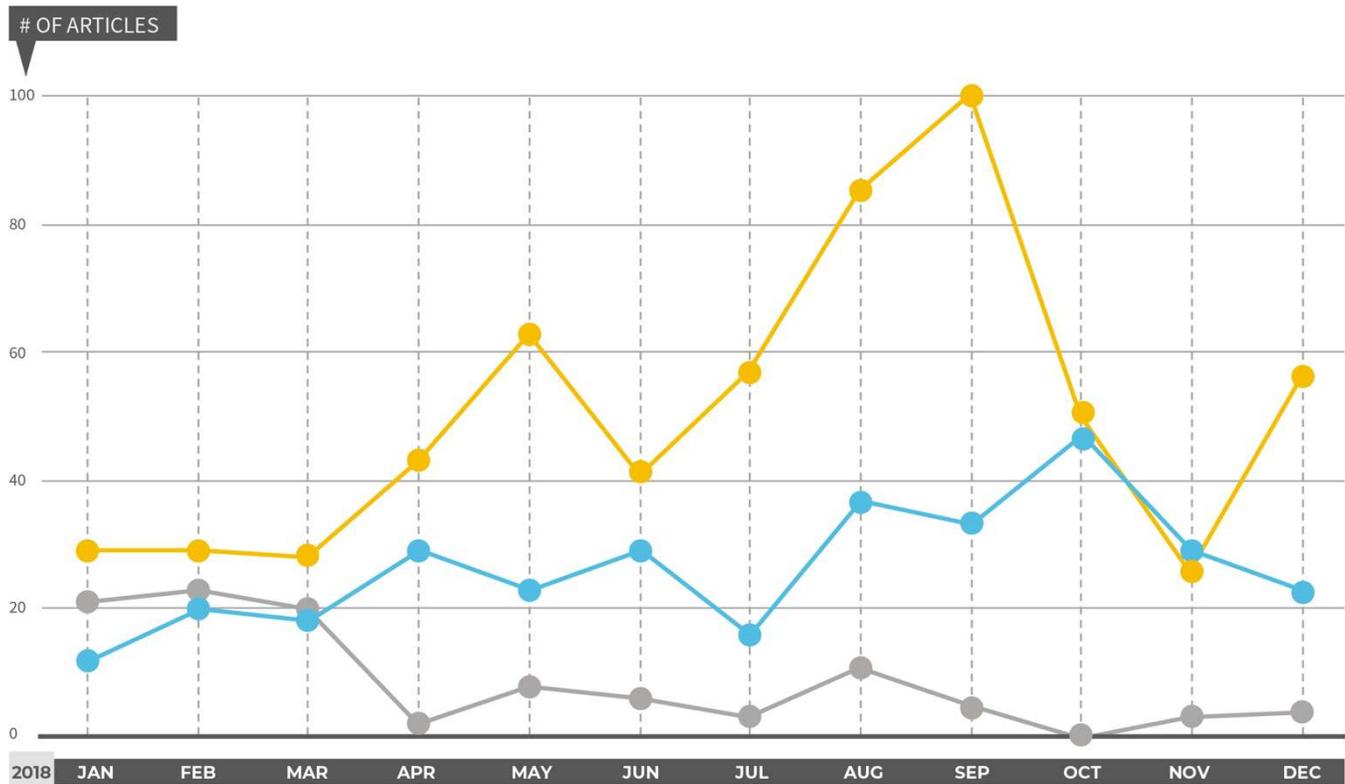
POSITIVE NARRATIVE

Of the three overarching narratives we identified, the positive was most dominant. Recent peaks resulted from coverage of pro-renewable energy policy decisions in California, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Massachusetts, and Hawaii's strides toward its existing 100% renewable energy pledge—all elevating messaging around clean energy growth.

Message Trend CLEAN ENERGY IS GROWING AND ACCELERATING

In 2018, California passed a 100% renewable energy bill, and New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy signed an executive order calling for development of a 100% masterplan. Connecticut and Massachusetts also increased their renewable portfolio standards, and over 50 local communities have made renewable energy pledges. November's elections meant more governors and state legislatures with public commitments to clean power are poised to take further action in 2019. Corporations and utilities are buying renewable energy at an increased rate, which has spurred ample coverage while leading utilities and cities to invest in new clean power production and transmission infrastructure. Peak coverage was September 2018, which saw 59 articles in our sample covering ongoing renewable energy commitments and projects, cementing the transition in messaging from viability to execution.

Message Variations
- Clean energy is growing
- States are powering clean energy growth
- Local governments are powering clean energy growth
- Utilities are the gatekeepers of clean energy growth
- Renewable energy is cheap, healthy, and easy
- Renewable energy will overtake fossil fuels
- Renewable energy is in more states than ever

Message Trend RENEWABLE ENERGY'S FUTURE SHOULD BE JUST AND EQUITABLE

Where late 2017's energy equity discussions were spurred by the aftermath of Hurricanes Harvey and Maria, the UN's Global Climate Summit, Peoples Climate March, and October 2018 IPCC report served as a center of gravity for conversations about equity. Discussion around equity and resilience converged in the national conversation over how to rebuild Puerto Rico's grid, which started in 2017 and carried throughout 2018. And in the ramp up to November's midterm elections and numerous climate and energy demonstrations, conversations about climate and environmental justice found their way back into the mainstream: from our sample, 41 articles in September 2018 focused on equity, up from a slump in March of 6. After the elections, the activist-led Green New Deal received mainstream coverage thanks to Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who has become a key proponent of the movement.

The growing renewable energy job sector, too, is kindling conversations about the role of justice in employment. Jobs-related articles accounted for about 2% of our overall article sample. In coverage, spokespeople placed the burden of transition work in one of two ways: either as being within the purview of philanthropists and activists, or as the responsibility of renewable energy companies.

Message Variations
- We need more justice
- Activists call for just recovery for Puerto Rico
- Activists emphasize environmental justice policy guidance
- Environmental policy needs to think of communities of color
- Clean energy should be affordable for everyone
- Renewable energy should go first to communities affected by pollution
- Clean energy can help build up communities
- Social justice is part of renewable energy transitions
- Renewable energy is a job creator
- People support renewable energy projects because they create jobs

Analysis: Renewable energy action is being driven from the bottom up

Over the past year, one of the most significant themes in coverage reviewed was local-level renewable energy action, with nearly every month seeing at least one new locality commit to 100% renewable energy. In the middle and latter halves of 2018, this local momentum helped propel state-level action in places like Massachusetts and California, even after California's 100% bill floundered in the 2017 assembly session.

NEUTRAL NARRATIVE

As corporate renewable energy procurement ballooned, this narrative has seen its highest sustained numbers in the past few months.

Message Trend **FOSSIL FUEL WORKERS NEED JOBS**

One of the most divisive elements of the coal vs. renewable power debate is that of jobs: what happens to communities whose economies are sustained by the fossil fuel industry? Does renewable energy create the same union-backed jobs that coal once did? And whose responsibility is it to ensure that those who lose their fossil fuel jobs get re-trained and placed in new jobs? Articles about fossil fuel job loss show up in our article sample because the job loss is often discussed in the context of renewable energy job growth. For example, when Clean Jobs Midwest published their August report on job growth in the region, all 9 articles covering this issue contrasted renewable energy job growth with fossil fuel job decline.

Message Variations
- Fossil fuel jobs are dying
- Fossil fuel industry hemorrhages jobs; renewable energy creates them
- Failed fossil fuel projects are leaving people behind

Message Trend **CORPORATIONS ARE BUYING MORE CLEAN ENERGY THAN EVER**

Corporate renewable energy procurement is currently the fastest-growing force behind renewable energy growth: coverage peaked at 44 articles in October 2018, in publications like Forbes, Businesswire, and Bloomberg. One result of significant private sector investment is that companies like Facebook and Google end up dominating news coverage, while activists' messages get eclipsed. In the latter half of 2018, the emphasis on corporate procurement coverage switched to focus on utilities switching their power mixes to include more renewable energy, in part to respond to this corporate demand. September-December averaged 12 articles per month on this topic. And throughout the year, an average of four articles per month had a primary focus on renewable energy's affordability.

Message Variations
- Renewable energy is a good investment
- Renewable energy is a smart investment
- Companies are buying renewable energy
- Investors and businesses are investing in renewable energy, reaping rewards
- Cheap energy projects are good investments for businesses

RENEWABLE ENERGY IS INCREASINGLY BIPARTISAN

Over the past year, pro-clean energy Republicans have grown from an insurgent few to a notable minority, with state-level pro-renewable energy GOP groups emerging across the country. 28 articles from our 2018 sample alluded to increasing GOP acceptance of renewable energy. The media "poster city" for this phenomenon continues to be Georgetown, Texas, whose Republican mayor has pushed the town toward 100% renewable energy because of its cost savings. The town enjoyed coverage in more than 7 articles in 2018. While fiscal responsibility is an easy sell to the GOP, the true challenge will be convincing a party with an entrenched opposition that renewable energy's values are Republican values, especially given newly-elected House Democrats' push for Green New Deal legislation.

Message Variations
- Renewable energy aligns with republican values
- Despite broad party opposition, republican groups begin to support renewable energy
- Conservatives tout renewables while Trump props up coal
- Cheap renewable energy continues to appeal to conservatives

NEGATIVE NARRATIVE

The negative narrative has been relatively quiet, save for early 2018, when the Trump Administration's action on solar tariffs and the EPA's so-called coal "stockpile" proposal prompted the characterization of environmentalists' actions as responses to federal pro-coal moves, rather than initiatives in their own right.

Message Trend **RENEWABLE ENERGY NEEDS NEW TECHNOLOGY**

Early 2018 in particular saw recurrent coverage in the vein of "this new technology will revolutionize renewable energy!": 41 articles from our sample over the course of 2018. Coverage like this diminishes the idea that wind and solar are already revolutionary technologies; wave power or nuclear fusion isn't necessary to achieve 100% renewable energy. This type of messaging has been on the decline in 2018, but it's worth keeping an eye on.

Message Variations
- Renewable energy needs new technology to work
- Renewable energy needs new tech to grow
- New battery technologies are necessary for renewable energy to take off

Message Trend **THE TRUMP EFFECT: NEEDLESS DIVISION**

Beginning in September-October 2017 after the Trump Administration proposed massive cuts to the EPA, any pro-environment action was covered as a response to Trump: the "Trump Effect." This framing characterized environmental progress as a counterpoint or reaction to federal pro-coal policy. This trend resurged in January 2018 after Trump levied tariffs on imported solar panels. Overall, the Trump Effect was described in 65 articles in 2018. Messages around Trump's energy policies have, however, changed in the intervening months, with headlines proclaiming the coal industry's inevitable death, no matter what Trump does; renewable energy is just too inexpensive to overcome.

Message Variations
- "Trump effect" intensifies state and local movement on renewable energy
- States take "Trump Effect" action on renewable energy

SPOKESPEOPLE TRENDS

Women

Our methodology assesses an article that includes a woman as a spokesperson or lawmaker, not each individual mention. In our data, articles referencing these women make up 21% of the total coverage and 26% of the news coverage. While this metric certainly implies a gender-related media bias, some climate and energy news fails to quote any spokesperson at all. In other words, 26% of coverage including women as a spokesperson does not necessarily mean that 74% of coverage included only men as spokespeople.

METHODOLOGY

We source articles from Google News and Feedly using the below search terms. Both of these sources include authenticity filters, which only surface articles from publications with a certain publication history and/or circulation threshold, and specifically filter fake news websites. Because of this, our pool of articles does not represent an exhaustive list of all available articles, but a representative sample of high-circulation, high-value coverage. We took direction from The Solutions Project for local outlets and trade publications to follow for relevant topics.

FREQUENTLY REVIEWED OUTLETS

NATIONAL
Associated Press
Bloomberg
Chicago Tribune
CNBC
Forbes
The New York Times
LA Times
Time
Reuters
USA Today
Vox
Washington Post
US News & World Report

STATE
Albany Times Union
Atlanta Journal Constitution
Austin American-Statesman
Baltimore Sun
The Buffalo News
Crain's
Dallas Morning News
Denver Post
Hartford Courant
East Bay Times
Sacramento Bee
San Francisco Chronicle
St. Louis Post-Dispatch
Las Vegas Sun

TRADE
Clean Technica
Greenbiz
Greentech Media
Energy News Network
EcoWatch
Solar Industry Magazine
PV Magazine
Utility DIVE

SEARCH TERMS

ORGANIZATIONS & CAMPAIGNS
100% Campaign
Asian Pacific Environmental Network OR APEN
Beautiful Trouble
California Environmental Justice Alliance OR CEJA
Catskill Mountainkeeper
Community Power Network
Consultative Group Biological Diversity (CGBD)
Fighter Fund
Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement
Leadership Fund
Native Americans in Philanthropy
Native Organizers Alliance
Neighborhood Funders Group
New York Energy Democracy Alliance OR NY EDA
Partnership for Southern Equity OR PSE
Point Community Development Corporation (The POINT CDC)
PUSH Buffalo OR People United for Sustainable Housing
SCOPE LA
Solidaire
Solutions Project
Southeast Climate & Energy Network (SCEN)
Sungwatogda "Fearless Horses"
Winneshiek Energy District

ISSUES
Clean energy (including 100%)
Climate equity
Climate justice
Energy democracy
Just transition
Renewable energy (including 100%)
Renewables

DEVELOPED BY:

THE
SOLUTIONS
PROJECT

CONSPIRE
FOR GOOD