



Coalitions, framing, and the politics of energy transitions: Local democracy and community choice in California

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ABSTRACT

A significant topic of research in the analysis of the politics of sustainability transitions is the role of coalitions. This study builds on previous research that utilizes discourse coalition and framing theories to develop a method for analyzing coalitions that integrates the analysis of three, inter-related changes: the challenger-incumbent relationship, the internal composition of both types of coalitions, and the choices of frames. The study focuses on community choice aggregation (CCA) in California, which is a decades-long industrial transition movement that has contributed to local, democratic control over electricity in the state. The analysis shows how both the CCA-coalition and the utility coalition underwent changes in composition over time and how the changes were connected with frame innovation, with counterframing, and with different types of policy conflicts. Thus, the study develops a general framework for an integrated analysis of coalitions and frames that emphasizes the connected changes of coalitions and frames over time. The analysis shows how the changing discourse of energy-transition politics is connected with coalition composition, ongoing experimentation with counterframing, and the evolving challenger-incumbent relationship. For the pro-CCA coalition, frames regarding pricing benefits recede and are replaced with frames involving energy democracy, good government, and job creation.

1. Introduction

Increasingly, research on energy, policy, and sustainability transitions has recognized that transitions involve political processes that often include conflicts between coalitions [1]. This study contributes to the literature on the politics of sustainability transitions by developing a framework and method for analyzing the relationship between coalitions and framing. Drawing on research on advocacy coalitions, discourse coalitions, and counterframing, this study examines how the emergence of new frames and shifts in the salience of existing frames are related to changes in coalition composition and to the developing challenger-incumbent relationship during the course of an energy transition.

To accomplish this goal, the study examines the history of the movement to support community-choice aggregation (CCA) in California. The history involves a rich, multi-year sequence of coalitions and policy conflicts that provides a good empirical site for addressing the theoretical problem. Under CCA, a local government pools its residential and commercial electricity customers and seeks competitive bids from electricity suppliers in place of the standard offer from the utilities. The electric utilities continue to provide services for transmission, distribution, and generally also billing. This policy development emerged during the 1990s in the context of the restructuring of

electricity markets, and it won political support by building on the promise of restructuring to provide customers with lower and more stable prices. Subsequently, some CCA contracts enabled significant reductions in greenhouse-gas emissions, and in some cases CCA advocates were also able to expand political support by creating local jobs. Thus, the political conflicts involving CCA involved a wide range of frame types such as lower prices, clean energy, job creation, and local control over energy.

In the U.S., CCA is no longer a small niche. Since the mid-1990s, it has been implemented in eight states that represent a total population of 100 million people and a GDP equivalent to that of Germany and France combined. However, from its inception CCA has faced resistance from the utilities, and as CCA has grown and diffused, resistance has mounted. In some cases intense policy conflicts have emerged, and the utilities and CCA advocates have formed opposing coalitions. Although the case of CCA in the U.S. is itself of interest in the field of social science and energy research because it provides an example of how local, democratic control of energy can scale up, the topic is approached here from the perspective of theory development about the relationship between framing activity and coalitions in the politics of sustainability transitions.

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2. Theoretical and policy background

2.1. Theoretical background

Of the many frameworks for examining attempts to transition large technological systems and associated industries in more sustainable directions, one of the most influential is sustainability transition studies [2]. Recognition that sustainability transitions are political processes is evident in the 2017 research agenda for the Sustainability Transitions Research Network, which included sections on power and agency, governance, civil society and social movements, and justice [1]. The study of the CCA movement in California should be of general interest to research on energy politics and the politics of transitions because it combines the goal of a transition to a low-carbon electricity system with aspirations of political change toward greater local, democratic control and ownership. Thus, it provides an opportunity to connect the study of energy-transition coalitions with broader societal change aspirations associated with energy justice and energy democracy [3–5]. Although this study is positioned as a contribution to the theory of coalitions and framing in industrial transitions rather than to theories of energy justice or energy democracy, it will nevertheless have some implications for the understanding of the conditions under which frames associated with justice and democracy appear in episodes of energy policy conflict.

Within the area of research on the political dimensions of transitions, researchers have studied coalitions, framing, and discourse, and within this field, one of the most prominent theories is the advocacy coalition framework (e.g., [6,7]). The framework emphasizes conflicts between competing coalitions comprised of actors who hold core beliefs, which are relatively stable and can include normative commitments, and other beliefs that are more flexible [8]. Change is shaped by factors such as the political opportunity structure, coalition resources, and the action of policy brokers, and it occurs through various pathways, including policy learning and the effects of external shocks or perturbations. The framework assumes that coalition membership is “generally stable over time,” but defections or splits in coalitions can occur, and advocacy coalition theorists warn that stability should not be assumed ([9]: 129).

The analysis that follows will draw on several elements of the advocacy coalition framework, including the focus on competing coalitions in a demarcated policy field (or policy subsystem) and the caution against assuming stability of coalitions. However, because this study will focus on the relationship between coalitions and the symbolic representation of positions in policy conflicts, it will draw more on two alternative perspectives: discourse coalitions and framing. Discourse coalition theory (e.g., [10], [11]) and framing analysis (e.g., [12,13]) have both been used in studies of energy politics and sustainability transitions, and they tend to be aligned with disciplinary differences between political science and sociology. The two approaches use similar concepts: a storyline, or a “condensed statement summarizing complex narratives” ([14]: 69), and a collective action frame, or a scheme of interpretation that can inspire and legitimize collective action and mobilization [15]. Both approaches also can question the assumption of coalition stability. For example, drawing on the discourse coalition theorist Hajer, Fischer argued that the emphasis on stable core beliefs is associated with assumption of the stability of coalitions and that the advocacy coalition framework is consequently better at explaining policy stability than change [16,17]. In a similar way, social movement theorists also draw attention to how frames change as coalitions respond to each other and to public perceptions [15,18]. This study will use the terminology from the framing literature, which has tended to focus more on the dynamics of counterframing, with the understanding that there is significant convergence with the discourse coalition approach.

Framing analysts have long recognized that advocates in a political conflict must construct frames that resonate with widely accepted beliefs and values, including those articulated in explicit political

ideologies [18,19] and those more diffusely shared among the broader public. In other words, framing must take into account cultural resonance among the broad public and the more specific resonance with the values and beliefs of target groups that a coalition may hope to recruit and retain. In the terminology of the framing literature, advocates and opponents of changes act within a system of cultural categories—a “discursive opportunity structure”—that makes it easier to gain adherents with some frames rather than with others [20]. There are various ways to categorize these broader cultural categories, and this study will rely on the institutional logics literature, which draws attention to variation across institutional sectors [21]. Extending this perspective to the framing activity of coalitions, one would expect that coalitions would use frames that resonate with the different institutional logics of the actors who are part of their coalitions. Thus, one way to categorize frames that recognizes the importance of cultural resonance is to group them in broad categories associated with institutional logics, which include both cognitive and normative cultural categories. Examples relevant for the study of CCA in California include cognitive categories and values based on good government (the state), consumer or household protection (the family), a sound economy (the economy), and environmental sustainability (environmental civil society). These relationships are not always one-to-one; in other words, a frame may resonate with more than one institutional logic.

In addition to addressing issues of cultural resonance, framing must also respond to the counterframes of opponents. For example, research drawing on discourse coalition theory has recognized the importance of competing storylines [10,22,11], and the social movement literature has long studied the framing-counterframing relationship [15] and the dynamic coconstitution of frames (e.g. [23,24]). Two studies representing the two theoretical perspectives provide good examples of this approach. In a study of the decommissioning of coal in Ontario, Canada, from 1998 to 2014, Rosenbloom analyzed competing storylines between a coalition that included health and environmental groups and the Liberal Party and a coalition linked to the utilities [69]. Using the frequency of the storylines in media articles as the unit of analysis, the study showed that all six storylines were evident throughout the transition process, but the frequency of storylines changed over the course of the transition in response to a changing political and industrial context and other factors. The second study emphasized the malleability of frames when opponents strategically respond to each other. Esacove provided an example of how framing changed in a dynamic process between abortion rights advocates and opponents over a type of abortion that was framed as “partial birth” abortion [24]. Rather than counting the frequency of a stable set of frames over time, this study used a historical and interpretive method to show how one side adjusted its framing strategy in response to that of its opponents and to broader political events in the federal government.

Building on this previous research, the present study examines an issue that tends to be recognized only in passing in the previous studies: the interactions of coalition composition, strategic frames, and the changing challenger-incumbent relationship over a series of related policy disputes. This study argues that attention to these relationships can help to explain the conditions under which new frames emerge and existing frames undergo changes in emphasis, salience, and meaning. Thus, this study adopts a “multi-coalition” perspective on energy-transition politics, which emphasizes the relationship between variation in coalition composition and variation in frames [25]. Four basic principles are central to this perspective:

- 1 In any given set of related policy conflicts, the composition of the coalitions (their member organizations) and goals is not assumed to be stable.
- 2 For a specific policy conflict (i.e., a mobilization of challengers and incumbents over a single proposed policy), the frames are not necessarily identical across the partners within each coalition.
- 3 For opposing coalitions, frames do not necessarily map neatly and

consistently across policy disputes onto one side or another of a coalition. Instead, similar frames may be used by both sides, and one side may appropriate the frames of the other side.

- 4 In a sequence of policy disputes, new frames may emerge in response to various factors that include changes in coalition partners, counterframing by opponents, and broader institutional changes.

In the analysis that follows, different energy-transition coalitions and incumbent coalitions emerge, then recede, for each episode of policy conflict in the history of CCA policy conflicts in California. There are changes in coalition composition and changes in frames, which may be shared or unevenly distributed across members of a coalition.

It is important to emphasize that the perspective developed here does not view coalition composition, counterframing, and the changing challenger-incumbent relationship as the only factors that explain changes in the configuration of frames over time or across policy conflicts. Historical causality is always complex, and other factors such as structural conditions (exogenous shocks), political and discursive opportunity structures, and coalition resources are also part of the causal mix. Thus, this study is not intended to provide a full explanation of why a particular configuration of frames appears in a particular policy dispute; instead, the goal is to develop an approach to the analysis of the semiotic dimensions of coalition conflicts that clarifies the complex relationship among coalition composition, counterframing, and the changing challenger-incumbent relationship.

To develop and implement this approach, the empirical research that follows will focus on two research questions:

- 1) How does composition of the coalitions (both pro-CCA and pro-utility) change during the quarter-century of the history of the development of CCAs in California?
- 2) How are changes in the frames of the challenger coalition (the pro-CCA or energy-transition coalition) related to changes in the organizational composition of the challenger coalition, to changes in counter-framing by the incumbent coalition, and to changes in the challenger-incumbent relationship?

This study will argue that over time the pro-CCA or challenger coalition has tended to downplay frames related to consumer protection, especially pricing benefits, and to highlight economic and political frames such as job creation and energy democracy. The change in frames occurs partly as a strategic response to counterframing by the utility coalition, with its growing reliance on partner organizations (labor unions and then other civil society groups) to discredit the CCA movement and to the utility coalition's use of frames associated with job creation and good government. But the changes also correspond with the decreasing centrality of consumer organizations in the pro-CCA coalition, the increasing institutionalization of CCAs, and the expansion of the size of the pro-CCA coalition. Thus, the study shows how shifts in coalition composition along with changes in the challenger-incumbent relationship can contribute to multifactorial explanations of why frames change over time and why new frames emerge.

2.2. Policy background

There is a variety of terms for government-sponsored aggregation of electricity customers across the seven states that have laws supporting CCA. "CCA" is selected for this study because it is commonly used in California, although even in California there are variants, such as "community choice energy." Organizationally, aggregation may be administered by a department of a local government or by an independent public entity such as a joint powers authority. In practice the term "CCA" is used to designate both the policy of aggregation and the organizational unit that administers the program, and this terminology will be used here. Aggregation of customers has also been applied to natural gas, but the current analysis will be restricted to electricity.

The CCA movement in the U.S. emerged in the crucible of changes in the electricity industry brought about by state-level restructuring policy during the 1990s. The pattern of restructuring varies and can include divestment of generation ownership and/or the development of retail competition among electricity supply companies. Except in California, CCA laws coincide with retail competition, which means that retail electricity service providers may compete with both CCAs and utilities for customers. California suspended its restructuring process after the electricity crisis of 2000–2001; hence, there is no retail competition except for the market segment of non-residential customers.

From its inception, the idea of CCA had connections with aspirations of greater democratic control over the electricity system. Paul Fenn, a founder of CCA, began to develop the idea of community choice while he was a graduate student studying social democracy and the centralization of power in Germany during the early twentieth century [26]. His interest in democracy is important because the empirical analysis that follows will show how arguments about democracy reappear in frames used to defend CCA in California. Fenn began his advocacy work in the Massachusetts state legislature, which in 1996 included CCA in its restructuring legislation, and he subsequently moved to California to lead the development of CCA there.

The Massachusetts law contained the crucial "opt-out" provision for CCA, in which customers are automatically enrolled in the CCA program but are allowed to opt out during the specified period. If they exercise the "opt out" provision, customers can remain with the utility as the electricity provider or select another retail provider if there is retail competition. In contrast, the "opt in" type of law requires the CCA to gain permission from each individual customer before switching them over to the CCA. Where the "opt in" type of CCA has been authorized, it has proven impossible to implement successful programs because of the cost and difficulty of convincing customers to switch their provider.

CCA in the U.S. is a state-level policy. A coalition called Ratepayers for Affordable Green Electricity (RAGE), founded by the consumer organization Public Citizen (associated with Ralph Nader), led a failed national campaign for a CCA law in Congress. In 1998, U.S. Congressman Dennis Kucinich of Ohio introduced HR 4798, which included a CCA provision. However, reform efforts at the federal-government level were not successful, and as with many other energy-transition policies in the U.S., policy development was left to state governments. By 2018, seven states had approved CCA laws or rules with an opt-out provision: Massachusetts (1997), Ohio (1999), Rhode Island (2002), California (2002), New Jersey (2003), Illinois (2009), and New York (2016). The estimate of the number of CCAs varies by inclusion criteria and the time of the estimate. One estimate is that as of 2017 CCA was offered in over 1300 communities across the country and served over 5% of the electricity power demand in the U.S. [27]. However, in states with retail competition such as Illinois, some CCAs were inactive or had reverted to the utilities' standard offer.

This study is limited to California because CCA is most developed in this state, the utility opposition is the strongest, and the play of framing and counter-framing is most evident. A report by the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) estimated that by 2025 85% of the electricity load in the state could be provided by CCAs and direct-service providers [28]. Although there is conflict between CCA advocates and the utilities in other states, it is much more evident in California. Whereas the other six states with opt-out CCA have retail competition, in California the absence of retail competition has meant that the growth of CCAs directly erodes the utility's customer base. The state has three large investor-owned utilities, and they tend to work together on policy issues, including their opposition to CCAs. In states where there already is retail competition, CCAs are a part of the existing market of retail competition, and they do not pose the same level of threat to utilities that they do in California. Furthermore, because the utilities are not required to divest of generation assets in California, and because the

CCAs in California can acquire long-term contracts that enable the development of generation, CCAs in California have increasingly supported local development of renewable energy construction and energy-efficiency improvements, both of which enhance the risk of stranded assets and load management difficulties for utilities. Because of these unique conditions, the history of CCA in California provides an excellent natural laboratory for the exploration of coalitions and framing in a sequence of energy-transition policy disputes.

3. Method

For both research questions, the unit of analysis is a policy conflict, that is, a dispute over a proposed law, a ballot proposition, a CCA implementation process, or a resolution by the state government's public utilities commission. In each policy conflict, there is an incumbent coalition, associated with the utilities, and a challenger or "energy transition" coalition that is associated with the CCA advocates.

The main source of data is documents, which include the following types: press releases, media reports, policy testimony, legislative bill analyses, testimony for legislative or utility commission proceedings, and position statements on organization web sites. Identifying the relevant documents required reading a much larger set of potentially relevant documents that were obtained from the following sources:

- 1 A virtual archive of media reports, press releases, and documents for the history of CCA in California (N = 300; [29]).
- 2 For the state ballot proposition (Proposition 16 of 2010), the documentation at ballotpedia.org and in the "yes" and "no" campaign sites (N = 200). For bills, multiple bill analyses and lists of supporters and opponents at the California State Legislature were reviewed for each of the bills [30].
- 3 Media reports based on repeated searches on Proquest News and Newspapers using keywords associated with the five policy disputes for research question 2 (N = 605).
- 4 Targeted searches for statements about specific policy conflicts and lists of coalition members on the organization web sites of core coalition actors and on the CPUC web site (N = 200).

The interpretation of the documents draws on significant background knowledge, which is essential for understanding the broader context, of over a decade of research on energy transition politics in state governments in the United States, including in California. The broader project includes many sources, among them media analyses, interviews, observations of video testimony and conferences, and quantitative analysis conducted by the author and his students.

The most relevant primary source documents were copied and compiled into a single document (or downloaded and stored as larger files where this was not possible) to create a searchable data set of about 140,000 words. For research question 1, all major policy conflicts at the state-government level were identified for the history of CCA in California. Information about policy disputes at the local level for the two initial CCA implementation processes (Marin County and San Francisco) were included in the analysis for research question 1 because they provided important background information for the state government laws and for the analysis of frames for research question 2. For each policy conflict, documents were identified that contained information about the composition of the coalitions. Research stopped when a saturation point was reached of adequate information about the coalition composition for both coalitions for each policy dispute [31].

For research question 2, five of the policy conflicts were selected for more detailed analysis of framing. The conflicts represent different periods of the history that involve significant changes in the coalition composition and the increasing institutionalization of CCA: the passage of the authorizing law in 2002 (used as a baseline for coalition composition and framing), attempts to end CCA as implementation was spreading (Proposition 16 of 2010 and AB 2145 of 2014), and attempts

to weaken CCA as it was becoming more institutionalized (AB 1110 of 2016 and Resolution E-4097 of 2017–2018). For each of the five policy conflicts, statements were identified from the data set by actors representing coalition organizations and affiliated policy leaders. Statements or positions by journalists, editorial boards, or by individuals not representing an organization were not included. A statement is a set of arguments that includes diagnoses and prognoses of benefits and harms of a proposed policy. The statements associated with research question 2 were assembled for coding by frame into a separate document of 28,000 words. Although some of the coalitions were claimed to be large (e.g., 200 organizations in two campaigns), many of the members provided endorsements rather than fully developed statements. The number of unique organizations or political leaders that made public statements in the media was 92 across the five policy conflicts.

Coalition size varied across the policy disputes. Two policy disputes involved attempts to end CCA (Prop 16 and AB 2145), and they prompted large mobilizations of over 100 supporting organizations. In these cases, the statements of the core coalition partners are distinguished from peripheral partners in the manner also used by Rosenbloom et al. [10]. Core coalition partners for the pro-utility coalitions are defined as the utilities, bill sponsors, and main supporting organizations, and for the pro-CCA coalitions they included the CCA organizations, government leaders, and organizations that the umbrella groups listed as playing a central role in the coalition.

Across statements, a recurring diagnostic, prognostic, or motivational argument about a general benefit or harm from the proposed policy was classified as a frame (e.g., lower prices, greenhouse-gas reduction). Generally, the frames were the same across the statements of a single actor for a single policy dispute, but if there were multiple statements by the same actor and if additional frames were included in additional statements, statements were amalgamated for the actors, and all frames deployed by the organization were counted as part of the frames used by the organization for the policy conflict. For all five policy disputes, a total of 15 frames were identified. Frames were grouped into four main categories based on the institutional logics described above: consumer protection, good government, sound economy, and environmental sustainability.

Although this method does enable some quantification of the frames, quantification is not the primary goal of the project because it can risk missing the dynamic and dialogical process of frame innovation and counterframing. This study adopts a more historical and interpretive approach, which is appropriate for the task of understanding why some frames appear in some conflicts and do not appear in others and why there is innovation of frames over time [32]. This method focuses on identifying the set of frames in use in a specified policy dispute and how the set of frames is related to the composition of the coalition, the frames of opponents, and the progress toward the institutionalization of the industrial transition.

4. Results

The policy conflicts cover the period from 1996 through early 2018. The results are divided into two sections that correspond with the two research questions.

4.1. Historical review of changing coalitions

In answer to the first research question, the coalition composition did not remain stable over the two-decade period, and instead it underwent significant changes. A summary of the major policy disputes and the coalition composition is presented in Table 1, which shows both similarities and differences in coalition composition across the policy disputes. In summary, the CCA coalition began with strong support from consumer groups and local governments, but over time the coalition composition tended to include more support from environmental

Table 1
Coalition Composition at the State Government Level.

Policy Description	Pro-CCA Coalition	Anti-CCA Coalition
1996: AB 1890, restructuring with no opt-out CCA	Consumer groups, environmentalists, natural gas industry	Utilities, large energy consumers, two mainstream environmental organizations, municipal utilities
1998: Proposition 9, repeal consumer transfers to utilities for stranded assets as stipulated in AB 1890	Consumer groups, taxpayer groups, progressives, Sierra Club (\$1.4 million total)	Utilities, two mainstream environmental organizations, two investment banks (\$38 million total)
2002: AB 117, opt-out CCA	Consumer groups, local governments, some environmental groups	Utilities
2003-2004: CPUC R. 03-10-003 and R. 01-10-024, proposals for contracts unfavorable to CCA	CCA advocates, local governments, community groups, environmentalists, consumer groups	Utilities
2010: Proposition 16, restrictive voting for CCA authorization	Consumer groups, real estate, manufacturers, Sierra Club, municipal utilities (\$144,000)	Pacific Gas and Electric, California Chamber of Commerce, utility union, taxpayer association, NAACP (\$47 million)
2011: SB 790, prohibits utilities from marketing against CCAs	Sierra Club, local governments, consumer group TURN	Utilities, utility union
2012: AB 976, restrictions on CCA contracts	Environmental organizations, local governments, consumer group TURN, CCAs	Utilities, utility employees, other labor organizations, some local chambers of commerce
2014: AB 2145, change the default service to utilities	CCA advocates, CCAs, local governments, environmentalists, RE firms	Consumer group TURN, some unions, Sierra Club, Vote Solar
2016: AB 1110, consumer reporting of greenhouse-gas emissions, unfavorable to CCAs	CCA advocates, CCAs, local governments, municipal utilities	Utilities, consumer group TURN, wind energy association, some unions
2017: SB 618, requires CCAs to provide integrated resource plans	CCAs, local governments, local sustainability/ environmental groups	Utilities, utility union, veterans, ethnic minority groups, small businesses, seniors
2018: CPUC E-4907, freeze on new CCAs	CCA advocates, CCAs	Utilities, consumer groups
2017-2018: CPUC R. 17-06-026, exit fee on CCAs	CCAs	Utilities, consumer groups

groups and the CCA organizations themselves. At one point (the dispute over AB 1110), the leading consumer organization and the CCAs were on opposing sides. The utility coalition also underwent changes. It increasingly relied on its affiliated labor union, but by 2018 the utility coalition also developed support from a broad range of civil society organizations. The remainder of this section provides a historical overview of the significant policy disputes between 1996 and 2018 and a brief discussion of some of the changes in the coalition composition.

The first policy that directly involved CCA was California's restructuring law (AB 1890), which was approved in 1996. The utilities were initially opposed to restructuring, but they became supportive when provisions were included to require consumers to compensate the utilities for stranded assets that might result from restructuring. The utility coalition included large industrial consumers, local governments, and two mainstream environmental organizations, and the opposition coalition included consumer groups, trade associations associated with the natural gas industry, and some environmentalists [33]. Advocates of CCA were opposed to the law's provision that allowed only opt-in CCA.

After the law was passed, the opposition coalition organized a ballot initiative campaign in 1998, Proposition 9, which opposed the surcharge that would be levied on consumers for the utilities' stranded assets. The opposition coalition included consumer, taxpayer rights, progressive organizations, and the Sierra Club (an environmentalist organization). The utilities outspent the coalition by a rate of 30 to 1, and the proposition was defeated [34]. The passage of restructuring in California set the stage for the state's energy crisis of 2000, which occurred because the deregulation of wholesale prices enabled market manipulation that led to high spot market prices for the utilities. Because the utilities could not pass the price increases on to consumers, they faced a financial crisis and sent the state into rolling blackouts. The state government had to step in and provide financing, and taxpayers ended up paying the bill.

The restructuring disaster opened opportunities for a renewed effort in support of CCA (AB 117 of 2002). The pro-CCA coalition composition at this time included the anti-restructuring organizations and some local government organizations. In this year the state government also approved the renewable portfolio standard (SB 1078), which required 20% renewable energy from utilities by 2017. This law and the subsequent cap-and-trade law (AB 32 of 2006) provided an opportunity for advocates to link CCA development to the state's energy-transition goals, therefore creating opportunities for the pro-CCA coalition to

include more environmental and sustainability organizations.

The first major effort to implement CCA in California occurred in San Francisco, and here a coalition of progressives and environmentalists led efforts to bring about public ownership of renewable energy. Prior to passage of the state law, in 2001 the city's voters considered two ballot propositions that would have enabled municipalization of electricity, but the utility for the area spent heavily against the two measures in 2001 and against a similar measure in 2002, and the initiatives were defeated. However, voters did approve two other propositions in support of renewable energy construction. Ultimately the city leaders decided against additional municipalization efforts and began the long process of developing a CCA for the city, and in 2004 the city council passed a supporting ordinance (86-04). Thus, local support for CCA in this city emerged after a failed attempt at municipalization and amid broad support for a renewable-energy transition.

After defeating municipalization, the utilities attempted to undermine the implementation of CCA in various ways. At the state government level in 2003, they sought approval from the CPUC (R. 03-10-003 and R. 01-10-024) to lock in five-year, long-term procurement contracts. CCA advocates argued that the rule would tilt the economics against them, and again the pro-CCA coalition included consumer groups, environmentalists, and local governments. In 2004 the state commission ruled in their favor.

At the local level, the utilities also tried to undermine political support for CCA implementation. They worked with their political ally Willie Brown, the mayor of San Francisco from 1994 through 2004 and a major force in the city's politics after he left office, to undermine CCA implementation in San Francisco. During this period a shift in the utility strategy and coalition became evident with the prominent role of the utility union in opposing CCA implementation [35]. In 2010, the electrical workers union associated with the utility, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 1245, opposed the city's planned contract with Shell Energy North America to supply the electricity. One of the points of contention that the pro-utility union raised was the inclusion of unbundled renewable energy credits (RECs) in the contract, which the union argued would not help local job creation. In response, the pro-CCA coalition, which included the Sierra Club and 15 unions, supported the contract as a step toward long-term local control of San Francisco's energy. This policy incident raised the visibility of unions as coalition partners on both sides, and the development of the coalitions had important implications for framing strategies that are

discussed below.

The same utility-affiliated union local also sponsored a citywide ballot measure in 2010, Proposition G, to prevent the CCA from claiming that unbundled RECs from out-of-state sources could count as clean energy [36]. The electrical workers' local later agreed to a compromise measure, Proposition H of 2010, which asked the emerging San Francisco CCA to limit the use of unbundled RECs and to provide information to customers. The opposition slowed the development of CCA in San Francisco, where the first neighborhoods were not switched over to CCA until 2016. Instead, the first operational CCA in the state occurred in Marin County, a suburban area north of San Francisco. In 2008, Marin County and several towns and cities joined Marin Power Authority, a joint powers authority [37].

Opposition based on the claim of threats to jobs and the use of unbundled RECs was not the only strategy pursued by the anti-CCA coalition at this time. To oppose further development of CCAs, in 2010 the utility Pacific Gas and Electric provided most of the funding for Proposition 16, a statewide ballot initiative that would have required local governments to gain a two-thirds voter majority before initiating a CCA program. The pro-utility "Yes on 16" coalition expanded support from the utility union to include a taxpayer advocacy group, one civil rights organization, and some chambers of commerce. In contrast, the "No on 16" campaign (pro-CCA) included 200 organizations and represented a significant diversification of the coalition beyond the consumer-environmental-local government core that had originally backed CCA. The competing coalitions are analyzed in more detail in Section 4.2.2. The pro-CCA coalition managed to defeat the ballot measure, and the legislature subsequently approved SB 790 of 2011, which called for guidelines for utility relations with CCAs and prohibited utilities from marketing against CCAs unless it was through a separate entity.

After these two defeats, the utilities and their allies in the state legislature continued with other efforts to undermine the implementation of CCAs in the state. In 2012, the legislature approved AB 976, which would have prohibited consultants to CCAs from bidding on a contract with the CCAs at some later point in time. CCA advocates argued that because there were few companies that provided such services, it would effectively prohibit CCAs from receiving advice during the formation period. The Sierra Club, other environmental organizations, several local governments, CCA advocates, and the consumer group TURN (The Utility Reform Network) opposed the bill. Although the bill passed both houses, Governor Jerry Brown vetoed it. Two years later, the Assembly approved AB 2145, authored by Assemblyman and former utility executive Steven Bradford. The 2014 bill would have changed the default service to the utilities, effectively ending the crucial opt-out provision of the 2002 law. The direct threat to the existence of CCAs sparked another large, statewide mobilization, which is described below (Section 4.2.3).

At the local level the anti-CCA coalition continued to attack CCA implementation based on job loss concerns. By 2014, Marin Clean Energy was confronting criticism from the utility union, which again opposed the use of unbundled RECs because they sent renewable energy payments to other areas of the state or country [38]. In response, Marin Clean Energy steadily lowered the level of purchases of unbundled RECs and began investing more in local renewable energy and energy efficiency development. CCA advocates claimed that the purchase of unbundled RECs may be necessary during the start-up phase of a CCA, but increasingly CCA advocates veered away from this mechanism for meeting renewable energy goals.

Despite the opposition, by 2016 and 2017, CCAs were in formation throughout the state, and in response to the growing threat of institutionalization of CCA, the utility coalition developed new strategies. AB 1110 of 2016 introduced a labeling standard that appeared to be politically neutral to the CCA-utility conflict. This bill brought about a

new configuration of opposing coalitions, with the pro-CCA coalition now facing its former allies, the consumer group TURN and the Sierra Club. This important split in the pro-CCA coalition composition for this issue is discussed in more detail below (4.2.4). Amid the instability in the pro-CCA coalition, the six CCAs in operation in 2016 formed a trade association, the California Community Choice Association, to represent the interests of CCAs, especially in the state government. This development marked a shift in the core of the pro-CCA coalition to the CCAs themselves.

In the next year, Senator Bradford introduced SB 618, which required the CPUC to approve, rather than merely certify, integrated resource plans submitted by CCAs. Integrated resource plans are required of all load-serving entities in order to ensure that state government goals of reliability, renewable-energy mix, and affordability are met. Again, the 2017 bill involved a split between the pro-CCA coalition and organizations that formerly had sided with them. The bill was supported not only by the electrical workers union and some other unions but also by the state's wind energy association and the consumer group TURN. CCAs, local sustainability groups supportive of CCAs, and local governments opposed the bill; they argued that CPUC approval was required only for IOUs as for-profit entities, not local governments. They also argued that putting approval of the integrated resource plans in the hands of the CPUC would be prejudicial to CCAs because the CPUC had a longstanding bias against CCAs and a close relationship with utilities. After hearing objections from the pro-CCA coalition, the legislature made amendments, and the bill was passed.

The final major conflicts for this period occurred in 2017–2018, when two significant policy issues were under consideration at the CPUC, both of which were prejudicial to the CCAs. The utilities sought a substantial increase in the power charge indifference adjustment fee, an exit fee that utilities charge CCAs when they take customers out of the bundled services. The utilities were concerned with stranded assets from investments that they had made before the exodus of customers to CCAs. In turn, the CCA advocates claimed that utilities had over-invested in unnecessary electricity generation partially because they had hoped to create economic barriers to CCA growth. The other issue, Resolution E-4097, was a proposal to implement up to a two-year waiting period on the formation of future CCAs and is discussed below. At this point a significant new development occurred in the anti-CCA coalition: the utilities recruited a list of civil society organizations including veterans, ethnic minority groups, small businesses, and seniors. They were now able to move beyond support from affiliated unions and to mobilize their own network of civil society organizations in support of this and other efforts to undermine CCAs. Likewise, the pro-CCA coalition was largely reliant on the CCA trade association to defend the CCAs in these fairly technical hearings.

In summary, in answer to the first research question, coalition composition shifted across the policy issues. As the CCA movement became institutionalized and as CCAs were implemented in cities and counties throughout the state, the core of the pro-CCA coalition diversified from the consumer-progressive organizations to the CCAs themselves, local government partners, some unions, and generally environmentalists. However, on some issues the formerly supportive consumer group TURN and some environmental organizations were opposed to the pro-CCA coalition, and increasingly the core of the coalition was driven by the CCAs themselves and their local government partners. Likewise, the utilities diversified their support from affiliated unions, taxpayer rights groups, and chambers of commerce to a broad network of civil society organizations. Thus, this section shows that composition for both the pro-CCA and anti-CCA coalitions changed over time, a finding that establishes the basis for the analysis in the next section of how these changes were linked to the development of framing strategies.

Table 2
Prominent Frames Used by Core Partners in Five Policy Disputes.

Frame Type	Frame	AB 117	Prop 16	AB 2145	AB 1110	E-4907
Consumer Protection	Lower prices	P	P	P	P	
	Reliable Service	P	P			A
	Transparency		P	A	P, A	
	Fairness in pricing	A	P			A
	Consumer choice		P	A	A	
Good Government	Voter rights		A			
	Government spending		A			
	Corporate power and influence		P, A	P		P
	Local autonomy		P			P
	Due process		P			P
	Democracy		P	P		P
Sound Economy	Job creation or loss	P	P	P	P	P
	Fair competition	P, A	P	P	P	
Environmental Sustainability	Reduced greenhouse gases	P	P		P, A	
	Clean energy	P	P	P		

Key: P = Pro-CCA coalition. A = Anti-CCA coalition.

4.2. Frames and coalitions in the conflict incidents

In response to the second research question, this section reviews frames in five episodes of conflict over CCA-related policy in California. The analysis shows that the frames vary from one policy conflict to another, that there is innovation and appropriation of framing, that there is variation in framing within a coalition, and that in some cases both pro-CCA and pro-utility actors use the same frame. As CCA becomes more institutionalized and as the coalition becomes more reliant on CCA organizations, the pro-CCA coalition tends to shift from consumer-oriented frames, such as lower prices, to good government frames such as corporate power and influence, local autonomy, due process, and democracy. The anti-CCA coalition tests a variety of frames, including an alternative set of consumer protection frames (transparency and consumer choice), but as it expands to include civil-society organizations, it highlights the distributive justice frame of fairness in pricing. The pro-CCA coalition tends to emphasize environmental frames more than the anti-CCA coalition, but the latter also tests environmental framing in the fourth policy issue (AB 1110) discussed below. A summary of the results is presented in Table 2.

4.2.1. The approval of the CCA law

The authorizing legislation for opt-out CCA in California was developed in 2001–2002 in the midst of the electricity crisis described above. The bill went through several versions (AB 48x, AB 9-XX, AB 117) before being approved. The utilities were in no position to mount a broad opposition campaign because they were immersed in the energy crisis, and one of the utilities was in the midst of bankruptcy and litigation by the state attorney general [39]. As bill sponsor and Assemblywoman Carole Migden noted with respect to the opportunity structure, the failure of deregulation in the state “created a receptive climate for AB 117” [39].

One utility proposed changes in the law, including a change that would require exit fees for customers who decide to leave the default utility service and reentry fees for customers who decide to return to the utility service [40]. In his veto message for AB 9-XX, Governor Davis developed these considerations into the frame of fairness in pricing; in other words, the initiation of a CCA would constitute “a significant and unfair cost burden” for customers who remain with the utility [41]. After the governor’s veto in 2001, the CCA advocates returned in 2002 with another bill (AB 117) that included modifications, and the governor signed this version.

The bill did not attract the media attention that occurred in some of the subsequent policy issues, and the size of the coalition in support of it was also smaller in comparison. The bill’s author Paul Fenn listed the following types of supporters: consumer groups, environmental groups,

local governments, and local government associations [42,43]. Statements by Fenn [42], Migden [44], and the San Francisco Board of Supervisors [45] mostly used consumer and environmental frames. For example, Fenn pointed to how the implementation of CCA in Ohio had led to lower prices and reduced greenhouse-gas reductions [42]. He also introduced the sound economy frame of economic competition when he defended the right of local governments to administer state energy efficiency and conservation funds “directly in competitive bidding contests” [42]. Assemblywoman Carole Migden brought up the consumer frame of reliable service and the environmental frame of clean energy: “The objective of my bill was clear: to enable municipalities to invest in cleaner, more efficient sources of energy such as solar and wind power and to reduce their exposure to volatile energy markets” [44]. The resolution of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors also emphasized prices, volatility, and clean air and energy [45]. In summary, at this initial stage the coalition consisted of consumer, local government, and environmental groups, and the framing emphasized three corresponding concerns of salience to the coalition members: prices, energy reliability, and clean energy.

4.2.2. Ballot measure to halt CCA

By 2010 the first CCA in Marin County was being implemented, and one of the utilities attempted to defeat the implementation of CCAs through Proposition 16. The ballot proposition was originally named “The Taxpayers Right to Vote,” an indication of the primary frame that the utility coalition would use. However, Attorney General Jerry Brown deemed the title deceptive and ordered it renamed as “New Two-Thirds Voter Approval Requirement for Local Public Electricity Providers.” The proposition would have required two-thirds voter approval before local governments could enter the electricity business (i.e., start a CCA), a hurdle that pro-CCA advocates thought was nearly impossible to achieve. The proposition was primarily supported by the utility Pacific Gas and Electric, but it gained additional endorsements from some chambers of commerce, the California Taxpayers Association, the utility union, the National Association of Colored People (a civil rights group), and Willie Brown (the former mayor of San Francisco and a pro-utility politician). The utility spent \$46.5 million in support of the proposition, and no other donors are recorded for supporters [46].

In contrast, the “No on 16” campaign spent only \$128,868 [46], with funding from the consumer group TURN. Many other organizations and individuals joined the widespread opposition to Proposition 16, including the state’s Democratic Party. There were hundreds of endorsements of the No on 16 campaign that were grouped into the following categories: news media; chambers of commerce and business associations; labor unions; energy leaders; elected officials; local governments; local public electricity organizations; and a range of civil

society organizations that included environmental and consumer groups [47]. Hundreds of editorial comments and articles by journalists expressed outrage at the expenditure of ratepayer funds, and voters rejected the proposition.

In the Yes on 16 campaign, the utilities used two primary frames: voter-taxpayer rights and government spending, which the coalition claimed was “out of control” [48]. A statement by a core partner of the coalition, the California Taxpayers Association, also focused on government spending and argued that government-controlled CCAs would reduce tax revenue to the state government. Another core partner, the utility union, added the argument that large corporations were shaping the development of CCA. To correct the problem, “Proposition 16 would make such a stealth attack by big oil—or a big bank, in the case of the San Joaquin valley CCA effort—subject to voter approval” [49]. This corporate power and influence frame made reference to the contract with Shell Oil to develop electricity supply for a CCA, and it was used to counter the same frame that was central to the CCA coalition, which focused on the huge spending by a single utility to influence the ballot proposition process. Thus, both sides were using variants of the same corporate power and influence frame.

The main statement of the No on 16 campaign included the lower price and clean energy frames that had characterized support for AB 117, but the pro-CCA coalition now highlighted the corporate power and influence frame and its connections with consumer choice, prices, jobs, and environmental sustainability:

Prop 16 is the worst special kind of special interest ballot initiative, paid for by a single corporation to benefit a single corporation... Without a choice, customers will be forced to accept:

- PG&E’s high rates instead of the lower rates of non-profit utilities
- Even higher rates in the future- PG&E has over \$6 billion more in rate hikes currently pending at the CPUC.
- PG&E greenwashing instead of real green energy and real green jobs [50].

The core partner TURN made similar arguments, alleging that the ballot proposition would “lock in its [the utility’s] high rates and lock out community choice forever,” which would violate the consumers’ “right to choose for themselves” and could make it more difficult for them to get “clean, green, and affordable power” [51]. Across all 26 organizations for which full statements for the No on 16 campaign were identified, consumer-related frames appeared 17 times and environmental frames 12 times, which is consistent with the framing strategies for AB 117. However, a new cluster of frames also appeared with roughly equal frequency: good government frames of corporate power and influence and local autonomy (13 times) and the sound economy frame of fair competition (10 times). Among the six organizations identified by the coalition as the core partners, the frames of lower prices, corporate power and influence, and fair competition appeared most frequently. However, there was also diversity across the No on 16 coalition organizations. For example, the Sierra Club’s statements focused only on the clean energy frame, and the California Association of Realtors focused on the lower price frame.

In summary, the frames had changed significantly from the passage of the 2002 law. Both sides expanded their frames to include a group classified in Table 2 as “good government” frames associated with a political-state institutional logic rather than a consumer or environmental logic. This does not mean that the previous pro-CCA frames of lower prices and clean energy disappeared, but they became part of a much broader set of arguments about the proper role of government and the excesses of corporate power.

4.2.3. Attempt to end opt-out CCA

There was so much general outrage at the use of ratepayer revenue to fund a ballot proposition measure that the legislature responded with SB 790 of 2010, which blocked utilities from using their funds to oppose CCAs. Thus, the utilities were not overtly involved in their next initiative, and instead they remained backstage to more public actors. Assemblyman Steven Bradford, the former utility executive, introduced AB 2145 of 2014 with a new framing that returned to a consumer logic and backed away from the failed good government logic used to defend Proposition 16. He introduced the bill modestly as a “mid-term correction” in order “to promote consumer choice and transparency for future community choice aggregators” [52]. The framing of the bill as a pro-consumer initiative also appeared in statements by the utility Pacific Gas and Electric and the utility union, which announced support for AB 2145. For example, the union called on CCAs “to tell the truth when marketing energy services to potential customers” [53]. International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers 1245 Business Representative Hunter Stern commented:

A few decades ago phone companies were switching people’s long distance provider without telling them. It was called slamming. We don’t think it’s appropriate for CCAs to be switching people’s electric service unless the customer agrees to it—knowingly [53].

Thus, the union appropriated the consumer logic that had been used previously by the pro-CCA coalition and now positioned itself as the defender of consumers, but it used different frames from the lower price and reliable service frames that the pro-CCA coalition had used. Instead, the anti-CCA coalition framed AB 2145 as needed to “protect customer choice,” a term carefully selected to counter the term “community choice” [53].

The proposed law did more than provide some consumer protections for CCA customers; it also included a proposed change in the decision-making process of CCA formation from an opt-out to an opt-in configuration. As described above in the background section, opt-in CCA was generally recognized as an impossible hurdle. Even at the initial introduction of the bill in the Assembly, there was a large coalition in opposition to the bill’s poison pill [52]. The initial list of 50 groups that officially registered opposition with the legislature included local governments, solar industry companies, environmental organizations, community organizations, and consumer organizations. The “No on 2145” campaign grew to include over 200 organizations that opposed what they called “the utility monopoly power grab of 2014” [54].

For the 25 organizations that made independent, public statements in the dispute, the same set of frames that appeared in the No on 16 campaign was evident. However, there was also consistent use of the job creation frame, which had appeared in the overarching No on 16 coalition statement but was not widely used by other coalition organizations in the No on 16 campaign. In the central statement of the No on 1245 coalition, job creation was highlighted along with greenhouse-gas reduction: “AB 2145 would dangerously undermine California’s efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to create thousands of local clean energy jobs” [54]. Other supporters underscored the combination of jobs and clean energy framing. For example, Ann Hancock of Climate Protection Campaign, a core partner of the coalition, noted that CCA “provides local economic benefits and greenhouse gas reductions,” and Nile Malloy of Communities for a Better Environment, another organization listed as a core partner, added that CCAs “directly reduce pollutants in our neighborhoods while providing vital new jobs” [54].

One might ask why the job creation frame had become more salient in this policy dispute for the pro-CCA coalition. To some degree, the “green jobs” frame was still in general circulation because it had appeared centrally in the 2008 presidential campaign, when candidate

Barack Obama promised to create five million green jobs in response to the economic recession. But the frame had receded at the federal government level by 2014. It is more likely that the frame was in response to the inclusion of 17 unions in the pro-CCA coalition. Their participation was important because the pro-CCA coalition was now aligning CCAs with local renewable energy job creation in response to the bruising attacks by the utility-affiliated union on unbundled RECs that were described above. Given the importance of the utility union in this policy dispute, the pro-CCA coalition could weaken the credibility of its opponent by showing that CCAs, rather than the union, were more concerned with jobs and actually had the support of numerous unions.

Another innovation occurred in this policy dispute: the emergence of the energy democracy frame. The value of local democratic control over energy democracy had long been part of the movement, and as noted above, it had been part of Fenn's original motivation for developing the policy. However, democracy as an explicit framing strategy was more implied than explicit in the previous policy conflicts, which focused more on corporate power and influence than on the idea of energy democracy. In the No on 2145 campaign, some of the organizations began to highlight the energy democracy frame more explicitly. For example, the Local Clean Energy Alliance, a core coalition partner, described the CCA victory as follows:

This is ultimately about energy democracy. The question is will the power to decide what kinds of energy we use and who benefits from the system be in the hands of a small group of powerful players, as it has been for the past hundred years, or will the power be in the hands of the people? [55].

The frame of “energy democracy” also appeared in statements by the umbrella group Californians for Energy Choice, the Sustainable Economies Law Center, and the Green Party. This frame was resonant with the environmental justice groups, which were listed as members of the core alliance, but it was also appearing nationally in other mobilizations that involved diverse coalitions in support of community energy, green jobs, and energy justice [25,56].

In summary, whereas in this policy dispute the utility coalition focused on the consumer logic of the transparency and customer choice frames, the pro-CCA coalition countered with their continued use of the lower prices and clean energy frames. However, the pro-CCA coalition was also innovating with the energy democracy frame and with greater salience for the job creation frame. These frames reflected the composition of the pro-CCA coalition (including unions, many local governments, and environmental justice groups); the battles with the utility union over job creation claims; and the institutionalization of CCAs, with their growing attention to local job creation with renewable energy and energy efficiency project development.

4.2.4. Labeling rules for retail providers

The policy conflict involving AB 1110 of 2016 is of special interest because it shows how the composition of the pro-CCA coalition changed in response to a carefully crafted bill that involved environmental-sustainability and consumer-benefit frames. AB 1110 was introduced by Assemblyman Phil Ting, a Democrat from San Francisco who claimed that the reporting of greenhouse-gas emissions was unregulated and that consumers needed a “truth in labeling standard” [57]. Thus, this bill represented a continuation of the transparency frame used by the anti-CCA coalition in the AB 2145 conflict. However, the bill also linked the consumer frame to the environmental frame of greenhouse-gas emissions reductions. The bill required all electricity retail suppliers, including CCAs and public utilities, to report the greenhouse-gas intensity of their electricity sources and to report on unbundled RECs. This was in addition to pre-existing reporting requirements on the sources of electrical power generation. To some degree, the bill might be characterized more as pro-consumer bill than an anti-CCA bill, and the linkage of consumer and environmental frames in this bill was typical of a pro-CCA framing strategy. However, in this case the CCA

advocates found much to dislike in the bill.

The bill was supported by organizations that had supported CCA in other policy disputes, namely, the consumer group TURN, the Sierra Club, and Vote Solar. In an editorial in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, a representative of TURN argued that the bill supported the state's efforts to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions but also protected consumers from “a bewildering array of options” [58]. He added, “If California is going to lead, it needs world-class consumer protections like those included in AB1110 to rein in the proliferation of misleading marketing claims and ensure that the real impact of clean energy product matches the hype” [58]. The Sierra Club, which also supported the bill, predictably framed its argument in terms of greenhouse-gas emissions: “While California has a long and storied history of protecting the environment, the disclosure of the GHG emissions associated with end use electricity consumption is entirely unregulated” [57]. The utilities were largely absent from the public face of the dispute, but the bill had the support of the utility union.

The pro-CCA umbrella organization Californians for Energy Choice pointed to the high campaign donations to Assemblyman Ting from utility unions. The organization added that he “may be doing the bidding of the monopoly utilities to protect them from local, community-based clean energy competition” [59]. Consequently, the policy dispute is a good example of how coalitions are not always stable, and it shows how a frame that had consistently been used to support CCA—greenhouse-gas reduction—could be appropriated in a bill that the CCA advocates found prejudicial.

Opponents of AB 1110 included pro-CCA advocacy organizations, municipal utilities, and some local governments. The pro-CCA coalition did not reject the frame of improving greenhouse-gas emissions, nor did it reject the frame of transparency for consumers. In this case, rather than having competing frames, the frames of reduced greenhouse-gas emissions and increased consumer transparency were shared across the opposing coalitions. However, the pro-CCA coalition raised other problems with the bill. For example, the Cities Association of Santa Clara Counties reintroduced the “lower prices” frame when it noted that the accounting rules of the bill could “inadvertently increase the cost of renewable energy products to California consumers” [60]. The association also turned the transparency frame back on the bill's supporters by arguing that the bill unfairly allowed utilities to treat unbundled RECs as equivalent to bundled RECs, which created distortions in the bill's goal of more transparent reporting of greenhouse-gas emissions. The California Alliance for Community Energy noted that the bill mandated technical rules that would inflate greenhouse-gas emissions for some types of energy and undercount them for other types, but in both cases “the reporting is biased in favor of investor-owned utilities and against community choice energy programs” [61]. Californians for Energy Choice made the stronger claim that AB 1110 “masquerades as an environmental bill” that would be a “solar job killer” [59]. In addition to using the jobs frame by arguing that the bill would undermine rooftop solar, the organization also used the same greenhouse-gas reduction frame by arguing that the bill would lead to the undercounting of the greenhouse-gas emissions from the utilities' natural-gas operations [59]. The Californians for Energy Choice statement emphasized the fair competition and clean energy frames: “It allows the fossil fuel heavy monopoly utilities to falsely claim that they sell cleaner energy than far superior local community providers” [59].

After receiving comments from CCAs opposed to the bill, the senate passed amendments that removed some of the more prejudicial provisions to CCAs, and the final bill provided a more general directive to the California Energy Commission to develop guidelines for the reporting of greenhouse-gas emissions. The amended bill was approved and signed into law. Although this incident did not involve a prolonged conflict with a sustained, widespread public mobilization campaign similar to those of the previous two policy disputes, it is significant for the study of coalitions and frames because it shows how the pro-CCA coalition ended up opposing the consumer group TURN, which voiced a

consumer transparency frame similar to the one used by the pro-utility coalition for AB 2145, and the Sierra Club, which articulated a greenhouse-gas reduction frame that up to this point had been largely used by the pro-CCA coalitions. These same frames also appeared in the reply by pro-CCA organizations, which not only rearticulated their environmental frames but were now drawn into using consumer transparency frame by showing that the proposed law would create non-transparent reporting biases for the utilities. Thus, rather than suggesting that opposing coalitions have a different set of frames or storylines, this policy conflict shows how frames can be shared across the different coalitions but with different arguments about which side's approach better implements the goal or value associated with the frame. But not all frames were shared: the pro-CCA coalition also rearticulated its frames of lower prices, fair competition, and corporate power and influence.

4.2.5. Freeze on new CCAs

On December 8, 2017, the CPUC introduced Resolution E-4907, which called for a freeze on the development of new CCAs and the right of a local jurisdiction to join an existing CCA until specified criteria were met. The pre-holiday resolution would have affected several CCAs in formation that covered large parts of southern and central California. The policy dispute also took place in a venue that offered a more favorable opportunity structure for the utilities because of the support that they had from commissioners.

The resolution identified a problem with the growing defection of customers to the CCAs from the default service of the utilities. Utilities had completed load purchases based on the assumption that customers would remain with the utility, but the utilities were responsible for the cost of the previously procured load when customers shifted to a CCA. (The responsibility applied to short-term costs of less than one year; longer-term contracts were accounted for under a provision known as the power charge indifference adjustment, which was also being contested in the commission.) To remedy the problem, CCAs under formation were required to meet a new timeline: complete all registration requirements by January 1 in order to begin operation on January 1 one year later.

In framing arguments in support of this proposal, the commission noted, "Costs are borne by bundled customers, potentially resulting in millions of dollars annually of stranded cost" [62]. This argument returned to an objection raised by Governor Davis in his veto message of the original community-choice authorization law, but there were several changes that made this frame particularly relevant. First, the rapid growth of CCAs across the state meant that customer shifts from utilities were no longer the hypothetical problem that they were in 2002 but a threat to the utility customer base because of the large numbers of customers shifting to CCAs. Second, the utilities had now mounted a broad coalition of civil society organizations that could be brought into the testimony in support of the frame of fairness in pricing. Third, utilities had been experimenting, and often with success, with the fair pricing frame throughout the country in their parallel battle with the solar industry over net metering laws, which the utilities argued resulted in an unfair displacement of costs onto non-solar customers [63].

To support the fair pricing frame, the three investor-owned utilities introduced to the CPUC a coalition of organizations called Equitable Energy Choice for Californians, which supported E-4097 [64]. The term "equitable" signaled a shift within the consumer logic from transparency and choice frames used in previous battles to a distributive justice concern embedded in the fair pricing frame. This pro-utility coalition claimed that the current rules would leave "those customers who remain with their utility as a power supplier responsible for picking up the tab for power that was purchased for those now served by another provider" [64]. Supporters of the petition included the utilities and 40 organizations representing seniors, ethnic minority business groups, electrical union workers, veterans, and chambers of commerce. Far beyond support from the electrical workers in the AB 2145 incident, the utilities had now found common cause with broader range of civil

society organizations, of which several appear to have been recipients of utility funding [65]. With this coalition, the utilities had successfully broadened their support by shifting from consumer choice (the allegation of slamming) and the need for consumer transparency in previous disputes to a new concern with the lack of social fairness for customers remaining on the grid due to the exit of most customers to CCAs. The new pro-utility coalition appeared similar to the display of diverse organizations that the pro-CCA coalition had mounted in the No on 16 and No on 2145 campaigns, and it would be difficult for the public to distinguish which civil society coalition better represented the broad public interest and low-income citizens.

The new trade association for the CCAs, the California Community Choice Association, wrote a long reply to the proposed resolution that urged the CPUC to withdraw it [66]. The trade association's comments were of a technical nature intended more for consumption by the commission's board, and they addressed numerous factual issues. However, the testimony also emphasized numerous "violations of due process" in the timing and procedures for the resolution [66]. Although the term "energy democracy" did not appear, the proposed ruling was clearly framed as a threat to local government autonomy. For example, the trade association underscored the "right of local governments to implement CCA" [66].

Although rule-making processes are often technical and require the attention of professionals such as representatives of the trade association Cal-CCA, some of the CCA advocacy organizations also became involved and used a broader set of arguments in their attempt to mobilize their networks to oppose the resolution. The California Alliance for Community Energy responded to the resolution with similar due process frames but in a more strident language [67]. For example, they called the draft resolution "an abuse of power," an "end-run around normal public proceedings," and "another instance in an orchestrated effort by the CPUC over recent years to undermine Community Choice energy" [67]. They noted that the holiday resolution gave the public only until January 4 to file comments and required the CCAs in formation to file implementation plans by the end of the year 2017, that is, within weeks. The Alliance also invoked the corporate power and influence and democracy frames: "What emerges is a clear picture of a CPUC dedicated to protecting the interests of the monopoly utilities from the democratic will of California's residents and businesses to pursue Community Choice energy" [67]. The alliance concluded (again with explicit use of the word "democratic"), "Community Choice represents the possibility, through the creation of democratic public agencies, to develop local renewable energy resources to meet the environmental, economic, and social justice needs of our communities" [67].

Despite opposition from CCA advocates, who gathered in Sacramento on February 8, 2018, the commission approved it. Opposition from CCA advocates did manage to bring about a change in the resolution that enabled CCAs currently in formation to gain a waiver after going through a complicated process, but otherwise the resolution remained intact. The CPUC issued a press release that disingenuously claimed that the resolution "safeguards energy reliability" for CCA customers, a framing that had not been part of the controversy [68]. The outcome did not pose an existential threat to CCAs, but it did put more power in the hands of the CPUC, which CCA advocates viewed as a largely captured government agency. Later that year, the City and County of San Francisco applied for a rehearing of the resolution, but the utilities issued statements against the proposal, and the CPUC denied the application.

In this case the utility coalition had expanded to include a broad network of civil society organizations, and the framing had a sharp focus on fairness in pricing. The utilities also chose the less visible and less publicly accountable policy field of the rule-making processes of the CPUC. In response, the pro-CCA coalition used a variety of good government frames that included corporate power and influence, local autonomy, and due process, and it continued to develop the democracy

frame. The more standard pro-CCA frames of lower prices and clean energy were not salient. Although one can see the pairing of opposing frames as part of a framing-counterframing process, this interpretation is made more complete by including the changing composition of the coalitions: namely the growth of civil society support that the utilities were able to develop to enhance the credibility of the fair pricing frame. The name of the utility-led civil society coalition Equitable Energy Choice for Californians also included the term “equitable,” and the title was also very similar to the pro-CCA coalition Californians for Energy Choice. Thus, the appropriation of similar framing seen in previous cases was now being extended to the development of a confusingly similar name for the anti-CCA civil society coalition.

5. Conclusion

In the history of CCA in California, the utilities moved from a situation of near bankruptcy and political weakness in 2002 to a position of recuperated financial and political power, with a coalition that included diverse civil society organizations and powerful allies in the state government. The utilities and their partners tested different frames and political strategies in their efforts to oppose CCAs, from good government in the Proposition 16 battle to consumer transparency to fair pricing. By 2018, the utilities had assembled a large coalition of civil society groups, and the utility coalition had become the defender of energy justice in the sense of highlighting the frame of fairness in pricing for customers who remained with the utility.

During the same multi-decade period, the pro-CCA coalition grew from core support anchored in consumer groups and progressives that had opposed the restructuring law of the 1990s to a large network that included many environmental, governmental, labor, civil society, and renewable energy organizations. With institutionalization, the pro-CCA coalition composition changed as the CCAs themselves became increasingly important players. They formed their own trade association and mobilized local governments and local sustainability organizations. As the organizational composition of the pro-CCA coalition changed, the institutionalization of community choice as a model of local democracy and its capacity to create jobs became more prominent in the framing strategies than consumer price benefits. However, the value of CCA as a vehicle for reaching the state’s greenhouse-gas and clean-energy goals remained relatively consistent over time.

The rapid growth of the CCA model in California is itself of general interest in the field of energy studies given the growing amount of research at the intersections of energy politics, justice, and democracy [4]. The growth of CCA provides a good model for understanding one process by which democratic aspirations can become embedded in a broader policy goal of a sustainability transition to low-carbon electricity. The case also shows how broad institutional logics involving consumer protection, good government, a sound economy, and environmental sustainability are mobilized in framing contests. However, the analysis also points to the flexibility of the framing strategies and how the utilities contest a movement for democratic, local control over energy. In the final policy dispute examined above, one even sees how the values of distributive justice (in the anti-CCA coalition with its emphasis on fairness in pricing) and procedural justice and democracy (in the pro-CCA coalition with its emphasis on the need for more democratic and accountable decision-making) are paired off by the opposing coalitions.

But beyond understanding CCA as an interesting development in energy politics and policy, there are general implications for research on discourse, frames, and the politics of transitions. This study draws on the advocacy coalition, discourse coalition, and framing literatures to develop a method for analyzing the relationship between changes in coalitions, the challenger-incumbent relationship, and framing across multiple policy disputes. The study suggests the value of examining changes in frames in a systematic way along with changes in coalition composition and with the institutionalization of an industrial transition.

Framing contests are examined from a dynamic perspective that does not assume stability in either the composition of coalitions or the set of frames or storylines used by coalition organizations over time. Likewise, although there is evidence of learning from one policy dispute to the next, it is less a cognitive type of learning associated with the advocacy coalition framework and more a political and strategic learning that emerges from the testing of different frames and policy proposals for their resonance with the broader public and with policymakers. The study draws attention to a dynamic process involving the interaction of coalition composition changes across policy disputes, counterframing strategies that sometimes entail the appropriation of opposing frames, and innovation in frames rather than merely a change in the frequency of a set of frames.

One might argue that the analysis of changing coalitions and frames is unique to the case of CCA in California and that the portability of the method of this study is limited. Although this concern can only be resolved with additional research, the study of CCA transition politics in California does enable the generation of hypotheses that may be more generally applicable to other cases in the study of the politics of energy transitions. A few of the more general hypotheses that emerge from this study are as follows:

- 1 Framing and counterframing activity is designed not only to maintain support among one’s coalition partners but also to drive wedges in the opposing coalition. Thus, changes in framing can involve the appropriation of opposing frames, and the changes can be connected with shifts in the coalition composition and defections of coalition partners.
- 2 Both industrial incumbents and challengers will attempt to expand their coalitions by attracting a wide range of industrial, civil society, and government partners. As they do so, there will be innovation of framing and shifts in the meaning and salience of existing frames, especially in directions that are appropriate for a large and diverse coalition.
- 3 Frames may differ across members of a coalition for the same dispute and by the same organization across different policy disputes, but they may be also shared by opposing coalitions. Attention to the variability in framing is important for understanding the connection between framing and coalitions.
- 4 Where a transition becomes institutionalized, challenger coalitions may become more reliant on the new organizations associated with the transition, and the challenger coalitions may develop frames that defend the legitimacy of the institutionalization process. In general, both challengers and incumbents will develop frames that respond to the institutionalization process and to its benefits and threats.

These hypotheses for future research suggest how the analysis of the changes of frames and coalitions could be extended to other cases in the study of the politics of energy transitions. The approach also suggests a way to ground research on justice, democracy, and the politics of transitions in the coalition conflicts and framing strategies that may make explicit or implicit reference to these values.

In summary, because transitions are multi-decade processes, it is valuable to have a framework that can track how coalitions can emerge for specific policy disputes and then recede into abeyance but also how each mobilization creates memory and learning for a subsequent policy dispute and framing strategies. Each new mobilization may lead to innovations in frames, shifts in coalition composition, and the appropriation of frames by opponents. By opening up the black box of the changing composition of coalitions and frames across policy disputes and changing institutional contexts, it becomes possible to elucidate research into the conditions under which energy-transition coalitions can sometimes gain favorable policy responses even when faced by powerful coalitions of incumbents.

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