

## REVIEWS

**Stephen Ansolabehere and David M. Konisky**

***Cheap and Clean: How Americans Think about Energy in the Age of Global Warming***

Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2014

ISBN 978-0-262-02762-5 (HB) £24.95. 261pp.

*Cheap and Clean: How Americans Think about Energy in the Age of Global Warming* is an impressive work by acclaimed authors Stephen Ansolabehere and David M. Konisky, who have published extensively on matters of United States politics, policy and public opinion. Whilst a range of studies have explored the attitudes of Americans toward either energy production and consumption or anthropogenic climate change, the novelty and intrinsic benefit of this book lies in the coupling of these societal challenges. As a rationale for this research, the authors highlight not only the recent re-emergence of energy as a key policy challenge following years of neglect and a lack of firm leadership or direction, but also the growing importance of appreciating and understanding the environmental risks and impacts (local to global) associated with different forms of energy production. In seeking to contribute to these priorities, the authors present a compelling case for collecting extensive and long-term survey data from the American public on opinions about energy provision and associated environmental impacts: ‘Understanding in which direction the American public wants to go is vital to understanding which energy technologies will have a ready consumer market and which technologies might face relatively less local political opposition in their deployment’ (p. 5).

Contextualisation of the research challenge leads to an insightful and critical discussion of energy choices and the role of technologies in determining the degree to which consumer desire for cheap, safe, reliable and clean energy may be achieved. Refreshingly, chapter two avoids a somewhat descriptive and limiting fuel-by-fuel comparison, instead focusing on the attributes of energy provision and the complexities of determining acceptable balances between the economic and social (including environmental) costs of power generation. Whilst acknowledging the value of economic and technical research on the future of US energy generation, the authors rightly highlight that understanding public perspectives is a more important consideration, as it is society that will ultimately determine an acceptable level of social cost in these matters. In exploring this further, chapter three draws together a range of research to provide the reader with a good understanding of how consumer attitudes to energy alternatives have changed through time, who people trust to lead change in the energy sector, and the power of NIMBYism as a measure of public attitudes. Combined, these chapters provide a comprehensive foundation to guide the reader on to the empirical research to follow.

Chapters four, five and six provide an accessible account of the research into energy choices and what lies behind such consumer attitudes. The MIT/

## REVIEWS

Harvard study represents a clear departure from the traditional framing of economy *versus* environment to ask respondents about individual fuel types and how people perceive each energy source. The research reveals a general aversion to coal, oil and nuclear power despite them being staples of US energy generation, and an affinity for solar and wind power generation. Yet despite having some sense of the economic and social costs of different energy sources, the majority of people surveyed mistakenly believed that solar and wind power were comparatively cheap. The study indicates that providing information to consumers on the real cost of these renewables caused a shift away from support for these sources. The aggregated public opinion data in this study provide a very clear illustration of the trade-off between the pull of cheap, affordable energy and the push in the opposing direction of pollution. Consumers demonstrated an understandable hostility to power generation that would increase health risks through air and water pollution and other forms of environmental degradation.

With these findings in mind, the authors turn their attention from the local to the global scale by tackling the question of anthropogenic climate change in the energy debate. Chapter seven concludes that whilst there are significant levels of concern for atmospheric warming and its impacts, in comparison with other issues in society it is not considered by many to be a priority, remaining distant as a threat and vague in nature. 'Energy is a climate problem, but climate is not an energy problem' (p. 154). Both the disconnect between energy and climate change and the recognition that local and not global environmental concerns have significantly greater political traction indicate the need for a radical shift in the way future energy provision is viewed. Chapter eight addresses this challenge and argues that unlike carbon taxes and cap and trade, regulation may provide an appropriate way forward, since many Americans connect greenhouse gas limits to other positive energy and environmental developments. The establishment of Federal Government limits on GHG emissions would have positive and discernible impacts on the local environment as well as promoting growth in the use of renewable energy sources. The argument is concluded in chapter nine with a very measured and insightful examination of potential ways forward, placing emphasis on the likely continuation of the 'cheap and clean' narrative as a driver for energy demand.

Overall, this book provides a valuable contribution to the debates on energy and climate change and is an excellent resource for a range of disciplines, including politics, economics, psychology and geography. The arguments presented are well-structured, largely accessible in nature and the authors use a range of figures and statistics to help illustrate their discussions. Furthermore, the recent change of US administration arguably makes this contribution even more relevant than ever before. President Trump's Energy Independence policy seeks to lift restrictions on the American energy sector and the administration have promoted growth of the fossil fuel sector. At the same time, government

## REVIEWS

funding for the Environmental Protection Agency, and its organisational remit, are threatened. With a clear shift in policy which focuses on the economic aspects of energy, this research raises interesting questions about the balance of economic and social costs in energy provision and the power and influence of public opinion on energy policy and development.

EWAN J. WOODLEY

Geography, College of Life and Environmental Sciences  
University of Exeter