Community Power via Community Power: Pueblo’s Campaign for a Municipal Utility

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Research Focus

Many types of environmental transitions, from energy transitions (Welton, 2018) to urban transitions (Luque-Ayala, 2017), and from climate adaptation to mitigation (Shi et al., 2016), are increasingly recognized as not only monumental technical and market changes, but also as potential catalysts for political and social transitions. In this milieu, a grass-roots campaign for electric utility municipalization in Pueblo, Colorado offers insights on the manners in which transitions can be cast as equally, or perhaps even primarily, social and political changes. In particular, the campaign in Pueblo makes a notable movement synthesis between energy justice, democrazation and contestation, and renewable energy.

Methodologies

Why: An active group of citizens were mobilizing around energy and municipalization issues, and serious municipalization efforts are rare in the United States. Pueblo was also chosen because it represents a mid-sized city struggling with legacies of fossil-fuel powered manufacturing and episodic economic development.

What: Semi-structured interviews and gray literature (primarily government documents and newspaper articles)

When: Preliminary research in Spring 2019, interviews conducted over the summer of 2019

How: Interviews were conducted primarily in-person, a few over the phone, government documents were accessed through the City of Pueblo website, newspaper articles primarily through Pueblo Chieftain archives

Who: Interviews included citizen advocates, city officials, state lawmakers, and the incumbent utility

In recent years local political scales have been recognized as appropriate, necessary, and even prime jurisdictions for climate justice policymaking. Simultaneously, however, cities face critique as jurisdictions that lack the necessary capacity to deliver just responses to climate change. This paper investigates a citizen-driven attempt to reshape a city’s approach to energy justice and climate mitigation via electric utility municipalization in Pueblo, Colorado. A qualitative method of semi-structured interviews with citizen advocates, city officials, state lawmakers, and the incumbent utility along with usage of gray materials such as government and advocacy documents informs this study. With reference to Pueblo, the paper discusses the movement’s synthesis between low-income advocates focused on high rates and shut-off policies, climate advocates focused on renewable energies, and economic development advocates focused on retaining and attracting employment centers. In doing so, this paper argues for a characterization of municipalization as a possible energy justice strategy made feasible by falling wholesale electricity prices, including renewables, and by recasting energy as ripe for democratic contestation.

Utility Municipalization Efforts in Pueblo, Colorado

The City

The Movement

The push for municipalization did not begin with a municipal as its goal; it consisted of low-income advocates, directors of homelessness and housing nonprofits, and others protesting consistent electric utility rate hikes (seen below in the timeline). It originally focused on reforming the incumbent utility, but eventually pivoted to municipalization. Ultimately, the group Pueblo’s Energy Future formed with the “three-legged stool” of energy justice for low-income customers, business competitiveness, and renewable energy.

Bibliography
