

1 Motivation and Introduction

Climate change produced by greater atmospheric CO₂ concentrations [1] from human activity has led to increased exposure to hazards worldwide and domestically: increased storm severity, rising sea levels, more extreme temperatures, hotter summers, and rising sea levels to name a few [2]. Without immediate action to reduce carbon emissions, these impacts will worsen [3]. Specifically, it is primarily our societal dependence on fossil fuels to support our expansive economies and energy systems that contributes the most to rising carbon dioxide levels (along with other greenhouse gases (GHGs)) [4]. Therefore, to achieve the almost universally shared goal of halting and reversing the effects of climate change [5], our globalized society must transition away from fossil fuels to clean energy technologies such as nuclear and renewable energy and switch our transportation systems to electric or hydrogen powered vehicles [6].

Naturally, the importance of modeling energy systems to gain insight and form strategies to achieve this transition has grown. Especially since the spatial and temporal complexities are also expected to grow with greater penetration of variable renewable energy (VRE), such as solar and wind energy — two energy sources that are spatially diffuse and temporally challenging to predict. A class of tools called energy system optimization models (ESOMs) are the most common method for understanding our energy systems. However, while climate change may be the most immediate existential threat to society [7], it is a focusing issue that brings challenges of equity and disproportional impacts to the fore. These latter challenges have been always been concomitant with our energy system, but energy system modeling has largely ignored the ways energy systems mediate socio-political power alongside transporting electrons and fuel. For example, fossil fueled power plants have always been associated with air pollution and worsened health for nearby communities — commonly poorer and black communities, which are already marginalized, evincing a violation of fairness and justice principles [8]. Studying these consequences of our energy choices historically belonged to domain of the environmental justice literature [9], [10] but has developed further into the discipline of energy justice [11].

The energy transition will require a great expansion of our energy infrastructure to build replace fossil-fueled energy with clean energy and additional transmission networks to carry electrons. Although the technology to accomplish this transition is mature, there is still local public opposition to many energy projects [12]. Particularly in empowered and affluent communities [13]. ESOMs cannot capture these “human dimensions” of energy systems despite some awareness of their importance [14]. This is because they only optimize a single objective — cost (or some other aggregated economic metric). People have and express preferences over many dimensions simultaneously. Further, even in the absence of climate change, incorporating social context into the practice of energy modeling remains beneficial since doing so will create substantively better decisions [15]. The solution for enclosing this feature of energy system design proposed in this thesis is two-fold. The first is to develop an ESOM capable of multi-objective optimization. The benefits of multi-objective optimization have

been understood for some time, yet only recent advances in computing power have made them a practical method for energy modeling. Hobbs (1995) wrote:

Multi-objective methods are more appropriately used to help people to understand the problem better, explore their feelings, form a coherent, defensible set of values, and understand the implications of those values for the decision. [...] In reality, people’s values are often uncertain and incoherent. During the course of a planning exercise, people’s attitudes will evolve in response to new information, interactions with other people, and viewing the problem from different perspectives [16].

This leads to the second major proposal for this thesis, which is to validate the multi-objective ESOM developed within by conducting a case study in the Champaign-Urbana region involving interviews with local energy planners and incorporating their feedback to develop a planning process that encourages greater participation by the community members. Altogether, this work will allow “non-technical” perspectives to be incorporated into a rigorous modeling framework leading to greater perceptions of legitimacy through an iterative articulation of values and priorities involving the public as key deliberators. The result is a step towards a holistic integration of energy justice and energy system engineering.

Every year, world leaders meet to discuss plans to address climate change at the COP summit. In 1995, world leaders established a set of targets with the Kyoto Protocol [17] and again with the 2016 Paris Climate Agreement [5]. Every few years, the United Nations releases a report from the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) assessing the current impacts of climate change and forecasting future scenarios. Most of the world understands that anthropogenic climate change is an existential threat to society. Indeed, many studies in the ESOM literature begin with a statement about the urgency of climate change. This chapter reviews the extant literature for both quantitative and qualitative analyses of the problem considered in this thesis — primarily bridging the gap between feasibility or planning studies to address the climate crisis and the current pattern of missed targets and growing carbon emissions. First, I draw from the risk assessment literature to characterize and situate the problem of climate change and demonstrate the necessity of a holistic analysis. Second, I build upon the central issue of disproportionality of climate change risk by reviewing the energy and environmental justice literature. Third, I develop an encompassing definition of an “energy system” using technical and social perspectives. Finally, I review the energy system literature for gaps in conventional modeling practices and identify previous attempts to incorporate social science and justice concepts into energy system models.

Energy justice is a conceptual and analytical tool regarding the ethical or normative dimensions of energy systems and addresses the systemic causes of burdens, and inequities [11].

There are many conceptions of justice; however, the most popular framework for understanding justice is a three-faceted approach originating from

David Schlosberg: distributional, recognitional, and procedural justice [18]. Distributional justice relates to the fair distribution of resources, burdens, and responsibilities. Studies on distributional justice seek to address the normative question: how should a just society distribute the benefits it produces and *the burdens required to maintain it* [19]. Additionally, distributional justice considers *how* poor distributions are created [18]. Procedural (in)justice is defined as the presence of (un)fair and (in)equitable institutional processes of the state [18]. In other words, how decisions of societal import are made and who is involved in those decisions. Sovacool and Dworkin (2015) outline four elements of procedural justice: transparency, meaningful participation, impartiality, and avenues for redress [11]. Justice of recognition is the vaguest of the three tenets of justice and is frequently reduced to a component of either distribution or procedural justice [18], [20]. A common argument for this consolidation is that recognition is a precondition for achieving distributional justice or that achieving procedural justice necessarily includes recognition [18]. However, recognition is unique from distributive and procedural justices because it is concerned with a different family of injustice, namely, *misrecognition* [20]. van Uffelen (2022) suggests a nuanced definition of recognition justice as “the adequate recognition of all actors through love, law, and the status order” [20]. Sovacool and Dworkin (2015) offer a framework for assessing energy policies from a justice perspective.

Although Sovacool & Dworkin do not explicitly discuss recognition justice, it is a unique aspect of justice that can still be useful for contextualizing their recommendations. For example, due to the psychological pressures introduced by a lack of access to energy, either due to infrastructure or cost, interrupts relational well-being and is an injustice [20]. Further, (un)sustainable policies may be considered a misrecognition of the humanity of future generations.

Next, I examine the specific ways the social science literature understands how energy systems and their infrastructure (artifacts) contribute to the distribution of burdens.

Previous work defined energy systems in purely technical terms as spatially, temporally, and topologically complex machines that coordinate the supply and demand of energy, especially electricity [21]. However, this definition neglects the ways energy systems may be used to construct and maintain power relations that contribute to inequitable distributions of burdens. Energy access is necessary to support complex modern economies and therefore possesses political power [22], [23]. The literature on the political economy of energy infrastructure locates this political influence in five distinct ways [23]. First, energy infrastructure affects competition and collaboration among nation-states in the geo-political sphere. The current situation in Ukraine makes this especially salient [24].

The second subset of the literature focuses on the process of energy infrastructure development and how these processes create social inequities. For example, energy policies that subsidize residential solar panels have not led to more equitable adoption of solar energy, with greater adoption in areas with higher income, among other social indicators [25]. Other popular arguments in favor of renewable energy assert that these energy sources are necessarily more egalitarian because the Sun and the wind cannot be (or have not yet

been) privatized. Another is the urgency of climate change. Although these arguments have merit, they ignore or minimize the potential environmental and social consequences of energy planning that does not consider energy justice [22]. Large-scale energy projects in the Global South have already led to the dispossession of nearby indigenous communities and other key actors [26], [27].

Third, the development of energy infrastructure is not simply conducted via policy measures, but also in the manner governments activate the public imagination in favor of these policies [23], [28]. Jasanoff and Kim (2009) articulate this concept as ‘socio-technical imaginaries,’ which are simultaneously descriptive and prescriptive of possible energy futures established by governments in the national zeitgeist [28]. This concept is demonstrated by the discourse surrounding nuclear energy in the United States and South Korea [28] as well as in Japan [29]. Governments can employ ‘grand narratives’ related to national security, climate change, or modernization to enhance public support while minimizing genuine participation [23].

Fourth, the political power of energy infrastructure can be traced further to the cultural values and policy choices embedded in the design and operation of seemingly technical systems [23]. In other words, the design and implementation of energy infrastructure may be used as a vehicle for apparently unrelated agendas, a form of “policy-making by other means” [23], [30]. Edwards and Hecht (2010) refer to the co-constitution of technological and political order as ‘*technopolitics*,’ demonstrating the tangible material and political outcomes of technological systems [31].

Finally, energy systems and their infrastructure possess a unifying quality through which new political identities may evolve [23].

From these various perspectives, we can observe that confining an energy system to its technical characteristics is woefully incomplete. I propose that an energy system is a spatially, temporally, and topologically complex machine that coordinates the supply and demand of energy and resources and acts as an important mediator of burdens that influence risks (such as risks from climate change). This thesis takes the important step of analyzing energy system planning and policy with this expanded definition.

ESOMs have broad utility, including forecasting future quantities, generating insight for policy development, or energy system planning for scheduling and acquisition [32], [33]. However, analyses using currently available ESOMs seldom consider the role of energy systems in creating and maintaining inequitable distributions of burdens. ESOMs vary significantly by the energy sectors they choose to model, the degree of physical detail, uncertainty quantification, and forecasting capabilities.

Observing the dissonance between the awareness of anthropogenic climate change and policy actions to mitigate the effects of climate change is one of the key motivators for this work. Further, in instances where action is being taken — such as the construction of renewable energy projects following government subsidies, for instance — what drives public opposition? I will elucidate this question by incorporating literature from social movement theory [34], [35] into this thesis. Importantly, the literature shows that not-in-my-backyard (NIMBYism)

is not the primary driver of public opposition to energy projects [36], rather, support for these energy projects is more strongly conditioned on genuine public participation in the decision-making process [27], [37]–[40]. For this proposed addition, I will develop a substantive theoretical basis for the argument I advance in this thesis — that a flexible and transparent ESOM is useful for improving procedural outcomes, whereas the current manner in which they are used and their results communicated further alienates the public [41] and delegitimizes energy planning processes

Open source multi-objective energy system framework (**Osier**)’s primary purpose is to translate policy preferences of the public into actionable energy visions for a given municipality. The idea is that if decision-makers used a tool like **Osier** to support their decisions and incorporate ideas from their constituents — ideas that may be distinct from the preconceptions of decision-makers themselves — then stronger actions toward addressing climate change may be taken with more just outcomes. Consider the following. If structural uncertainty is addressed by generating a set of solutions, either by searching the near-optimal space or considering the options along a Pareto Front, how should the ultimate solution be chosen? Answering this last question raises another source of normative uncertainty. Additionally, a result from social choice theory, Arrow’s Impossibility theorem, states that one cannot construct a utility function that maps individual preferences onto a global preference order without violating principles of fairness [42]–[44]. Thus, the only way to address normative uncertainty produced by the process of deciding among equally valid alternatives, is to involve the public in a deliberative process [45]. Modelling energy systems with this understanding would allow energy system modelers to advance the causes of recognition and procedural justice, rather than hinder them. The last, and arguably most important, component of this thesis is to validate **Osier**’s usefulness in this regard. I propose validating **Osier**’s usefulness with a case study of the energy visioning processes of three municipalities: Urbana, Champaign, and the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). The research question is then: “Do decision-makers or energy planners perceive that **Osier**, or tools like it, would be useful in enhancing collaboration between decision-makers and their constituents?” Although this case study focuses on a small sample, these paradigmatic cases could be used to generalize the usefulness of **Osier** to other locales [46]. The precise formulation of this research question (or questions) is subject to change between now and the beginning of this study. Since this research involves human participants it must be reviewed by an ethics board.

References

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