

Making Solar Great Again

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Ariana Brocious: I'm Ariana Brocious.

Kousha Navidar: I'm Kousha Navidar.

Ariana Brocious: And this is Climate One.

[music change]

Ariana Brocious: Hey Kousha, there was some good news last week.

Kousha Navidar: Nice! Do tell.

Ariana Brocious: In May, the sun provided more electricity than coal in the U.S., according to the energy think tank Ember, which tracks government data.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah, I saw that headline in a bunch of places. People must be hungry for good news!!

Ariana Brocious: To be fair, solar only beat coal by about half a percent, but it's still being heralded as a noteworthy achievement especially considering how much the Trump administration has worked to undermine solar and wind while boosting oil, gas and even coal. I mean, he's rolled back and defunded a ton of programs that were subsidizing or supporting the solar industry, so it's facing new headwinds.

Kousha Navidar: And yet, it appears that Trump's stance on solar differs from the one held by many conservatives, even Republicans who broadly support the president. In a poll of voters across

Arizona, Florida, Indiana, Ohio, and Texas, 75 percent of Trump supporters agree that QUOTE “solar energy should be used in the US to strengthen and increase our energy supply.” And that poll was conducted by Kellyanne Conway, a former advisor to President Trump.

Ariana Brocious: And recently other leading conservative voices have been public about their support of solar energy. In January, former house speaker Newt Gingrich wrote an [op-ed arguing](#) for an all-of-the-above energy strategy. He wrote, solar and wind power are popular.... In the right areas, they make a ton of sense.”

Kousha Navidar: In addition to that all-of-the-above argument, many conservatives like solar for its off-grid and resilience potential. To illustrate that point, Here’s Tucker Carlson reading an ad for a solar and battery backup system:

Tucker Carlson: So if the grid does go down, you need power you can trust. There's no gasoline, no noise, no emissions. You just plug it in, charge it from the wall, from your vehicle, or from the included 200-watt solar panel and keep going day after day. Taking care of yourself and the people you love is solely up to you.

Kousha Navidar: To give some perspective, that was the very first ad read during Carlson’s very controversial interview with far right commentator Nick Fuentes.

Ariana Brocious: Political commentators aside, the renewable energy industry is getting behind this messaging too.

Kousha Navidar: Right. A memo distributed earlier this year revealed that the American Clean Power Association launched a campaign to engage Kellyanne Conway and conservative influencers like Katie Miller “to amplify the benefits of solar energy” and “note the harm that could result from reckless trade policy.” I talked about this with Kelsey Brugger, the Politico reporter who broke the story.

Kousha Navidar: So you obtained a confidential strategy memo from the American Clean Power Association. What was in the memo?

Kelsey Brugger: Yeah. So the memo basically said ACP launched America Energy First to amplify the benefits of clean energy, but it's not like officially associated with it. So it's kind of this like nebulous tie, that, kind of, you know, broadly laid out how they want to reach out to conservative influencers. You know, sometimes you see trade groups try to work with influencers all the time, to try to get them to speak to a certain audience.

Kousha Navidar: American Clean Power says we're gonna set up this group that is affiliated but not really affiliated with us, and its purpose is to pump up solar on the right. Is that fair, like a summary there? Okay, what's the big deal about that?

Kelsey Brugger: I think what was interesting at the time was there were a lot of questions circulating in the sort of energy universe, because Katie Miller was posting a lot on social media about solar energy. So people were like: "What's going on? Is she getting paid? At the same time, there was this polling, from Kellyanne Conway's firm that showed that, like, solar was actually popular among conservatives. So I think that this memo, it was just sort of, like, well-timed, that it kinda got at, like, oh, okay, so the American Clean Power Association is, behind this in, in some capacity, right? There have been efforts by this trade association, which has become kind of a powerhouse in Washington. There have been efforts of them to reach out on, on the Hill to talk to, Republicans to sort of promote solar energy, clean energy, wind energy. but this was just kind of a

new avenue.

Kousha Navidar: And you mentioned Katie Miller, the American podcaster and wife of Stephen Miller, who's Trump's deputy chief of staff. So you see this confidential memo about this kind of like blueprint to pump up solar on the right through, right influencers. What was your first reaction when you read it?

Kelsey Brugger: It's a really politically interesting story. I think it's just, it's surprising to see it all laid out, I guess. This is something that we've seen like dribs and drabs of. but when you see the American Clean Power Association has grown a lot in, in Washington DC. We've-- There's long been the American Petroleum Institute, which has been, politically just sort of the like oil and gas lobby powerhouse, right? And so to see like American Clean Power Association try to kind of like grow and flex and, try different approaches, it's just, it's just kind of interesting, right? For a long time, clean energy has been associated with Democrats, with liberals. But the Clean Power Association has taken these steps to kind of like distance themselves from environmental groups, to distance themselves from Democrats. And so to have it all spelled out like, "We wanna pay MAGA influencers," at a time when the Trump administration has, really put the thumb on the scale in favor of oil and gas,, is an interesting political story.

Kousha Navidar: I'm thinking of Kellyanne Conway's firm that does a lot of polling, and Kellyanne Conway, of course, is the former counselor to President Trump in his previous administration. So her firm conducted a poll that found solar was surprisingly favorable to even those on the right. And there's a quote here that I wanna read. It says, "Solar, unlike wind, is not viewed through a partisan lens. It is seen as a means to an end." So do you think that framing reflects a genuine ideological shift on the right?

Kelsey Brugger: I mean, proponents of solar energy certainly think it does, you know? I think, there have been some examples lately of, like Donald Trump clearly hates offshore wind with, like, a fiery passion, and he kind of is more reserved when it comes to solar energy, right? So that matters, right? People pick up on that. People hear that. Maybe they don't know that explicitly, but if you're a big Trump supporter you have kind of absorbed some of that, right? So, yeah, solar has kind of always been, you know, it's, it's always been a little bit like unclear exactly how Trump supporters, MAGA folks feel about this, this power source. I think a clean energy proponent was, was, you know, oftentimes will point to like, you know, the war in the Middle East and say, "Okay, people are starting to realize that we can't be so reliant on oil and gas." And as people are talking more about affordability, and are just hyper-aware of gas prices and their utility bills, like there is maybe more of an appetite for, for solar and wind energy.

Kousha Navidar: The thing I wanna pick up with what you said there is the, external environment in which these folks who are voting live lends itself potentially to the increased appetite in solar that you're saying, versus these MAGA influencers and this blueprint campaign of pushing the narrative forward. So it might be, it might be that, we don't know, but it certainly stands to reason that the increased pressures on oil prices from the outside world is contributing as well. So it's hard to parse that out. Is that a fair summary?

Kelsey Brugger: Yeah. Yeah, I think that makes sense.

Kousha Navidar: So, you know, at first Katie Miller denied having a paid partnership with ACP but the memo specifically names her as a target for the campaign. Do you have any sense of what Miller is saying now that the memo has been publicly reported on for a while? Has she changed her tune?

Kelsey Brugger: So, you know, publicly, no. both entities have said there's no paid partnership. I

think, reading between the lines there, like what that memo spells out is, like, this is a potential. So maybe down the road they'll come out and, like, have some announcement, but they haven't made it yet. But she, you know, was certainly a target, a target for them.

Kousha Navidar: So Miller is a former aide to Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency, and, and Musk's Tesla produces solar panels. So how much did the Musk angle factor into this story?

Kelsey Brugger: Yeah, I think, I mean, I think that that's a really good question, right? that was part of a lot- what a lot of people were wondering, when she was posting all of this stuff, which was, which was like, was Elon kind of in her ear? Was she doing this, as some sort of favor or something? and, you know, ultimately, that's hard to say. So yeah, it's certainly a connection worth pointing out.

Kousha Navidar: I'm also thinking about Trump signing an executive order calling on the Interior Department to end preferential treatment for wind and solar. As you mentioned, he hates wind. and the Energy Department dissolved its renewable division. So I'm just thinking about pragmatically, like how realistic is it that a social media campaign featuring conservative influencers can meaningfully move the needle inside this administration?

Kelsey Brugger: Yeah, I think that's, that's a fair question. I mean, there have been efforts to kind of at least stall progress of major clean energy projects since the beginning of this administration. There were a bunch of projects out west that were kind of caught up in, in these, long reviews and, you know, if you talk to people in the Trump administration at Interior, they say it's pretty standard for a new administration to come in and say, like, "We're gonna review everything that the past administration has done."

And so they're just doing that. You know, I think critics would be like, "Okay, this is taking forever. This is kind of absurd." Like, obviously, Donald Trump has talked about oil as liquid gold. You know, he hasn't been shy about saying that he loves fossil fuels, right? So I think any administration is not one person or necessarily one ideological view, right? There's definitely a situation where you have competing views, different agencies, different people within, um, the White House even, right? Within the White House, there's the National Energy Dominance Council, which has kind of talked about being all of the above, right? All of the above is this kind of term in energy that has meant a lot of different things over time. But all of the above currently means that, is a nod to being pro clean energy.

Kousha Navidar: Oh, you know what I found super interesting? In the weeks after your story was published Interior Department officials confirmed the agency was reviewing more than 20 commercial-scale solar projects that had been stalled in the permitting pipeline. What do you make of that timing?

Kelsey Brugger: Yeah. No, I mean, it is, it is interesting. I don't know if we can say causation of, like, this, this campaign to reach out to, like, the MAGA universe had any impact.

Kousha Navidar: Much less than a couple weeks too, right? Like that's a very fast campaign.

Kelsey Brugger: Yeah. Yeah. I, uh, so but I think what was also happening at the same time was happening on the Hill. And there were negotiations for permitting reform, like a big bipartisan package to speed up permits for projects of all kinds. It would include benefits for all kinds of industries, and it's something that the industry has really been pushing for for a long time. I think the White House wants to make changes to judicial review and in how people can sue on projects. I think some people in the White House started being like, "Oh, we really wanna cement the legacy of Donald Trump and some of the stuff that he's been able to accomplish," in terms of like restarting an

oil, you know, pipeline or something, right? And so I think some people in the White House are like, "Oh, well, you know, we don't want the White House to flip in a few years and everything we've done just been reversed by a Democratic administration kind of picking up the same playbook that we've just written for them," right? So they kind of started to engage a little bit more with efforts on the Hill to codify some of these changes to, like, environmental statutes, basically to kind of like streamline things, shorten the time period where someone can sue, just generally make it easier and faster to build projects of all kinds.

Kousha Navidar: So your piece came out in February of this year. It's been five, six months since then. Has solar made any more impact in the conservative media space since your reporting was published?

Kelsey Brugger: I haven't seen a ton, and I have kinda gone back, and tried to do a little bit more, reporting on this since then because like I said, I mean, I just think it's an interesting storyline. I haven't seen these new polling numbers, but I think Kellyanne Conway has kind of continued to do her polling on this topic. And so, would be curious to see if she's gonna release any of that. I would assume that it's kind of showed, um, that it's been pretty consistent and, what I've heard from people is that, like, that they have heard, this kind of narrative building around, like pro-solar based on the war effort. We've seen factions of MAGA be very anti-war, right? and so I could see some overlap there.

Kousha Navidar: Zooming out, what does this story say about the clean energy industry and how it has had to reinvent its playbook under the second Trump administration?

Kelsey Brugger: The energy industry broadly has to find out, like, what their identity is, especially if you're a trade group and you're growing. If you grow and grow and grow, you kind of like, you can't really be the trade group for everyone, right? Like, you, you risk, like, losing some power if you get to be too big, I think. but I think they are certainly still trying to figure that out. I mean, historically, clean energy has been more aligned with Democrats, Democrats broadly, I think, are not as, like, gloves off and, like, are, you know, politically not as robust in their campaigning sometimes. And what I mean by that is, we have seen, like, clean energy donors, link up with, like, uh, the solar industry, clean energy industry to make this PAC that has been going after right-wing, Republican candidates. We saw this with Chip Roy. We just saw this with Ralph Norman. They have been attacking them, propping up their opponents. It's hard to say if, like, the solar clean energy PAC has taken out right-wing candidates who have opposed their tax credits, but, like, it's a possibility, right? We've seen this, like, willingness of this sort of once democratically aligned group kind of take their gloves off.

Kousha Navidar: I wanna point out for listeners: Chip Roy, US representative in Texas, Ralph Norman, US representative in South Carolina, midterm fights over election, and energy became an issue, correct?

Kelsey Brugger: Yeah. If you have the resources and the money, you can make anything an issue. And this group suddenly had ads. If you have ads on every TV, talking about this, then, then yeah, you can, you can argue. I, I don't know that if you asked Chip Roy, like, "Was this why you lost?" He would concede that or he would agree with that. But, one of his first tweets after he lost was pushing back and saying, like, you know, "I have more to do when it comes to slashing clean energy benefits," you know. And so he's gonna still be in office for another six months. I don't know how successful or how serious he was or exactly what he even meant by that. But that was one of the first things he tweeted after he lost.

Kousha Navidar: So zooming out, am I hearing you correctly in saying that a trend that you are

seeing is potentially a more gloves off, to use your phrase, approach that solar or clean power generally is taking under this new, like, political landscape where they have to be a bit more forceful, they have to be a bit more, antagonistic, I guess, um, play more of the political game than they might have in the past versus just, standing on the moral ground of, of being better for the planet? Is, is that-- Am I hitting that right or am I being too reductive?

Kelsey Brugger: I think that's-- I think there's definitely something to that, you know? I think we're all existing in this political environment. Clean energy is existing in Donald Trump's America, right? Like I

Kousha Navidar: Yeah, I mean, you said dominance was a legacy.

Kelsey Brugger: Yeah, right, exactly. So, so we even have seen like little examples of this where like the solar energy industry was up on Capitol Hill passing out stickers that said energy dominance. it was sort of a nod to that or, you know, a bit of a joke I guess. But, people kind of trying to play by that, by that game.

Kousha Navidar: Kelsey Brugger is congressional policy reporter at Politico. Kelsey, thank you so much.

Kelsey Brugger: Thank you.

Music: In

Ariana Brocious: Coming up, the work to get President Trump and his cabinet behind solar energy:

Skylar Zunk: The biggest thing and the biggest win that we could get is a substantial change in the messages coming out of Washington, DC as it pertains to solar energy. the message matters an incredible amount, and if we can win that battle, um, we're well on our way to progressing with solar energy projects across the country, uh, at a faster clip.

Ariana Brocious: That's up next, when Climate One continues.

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Music: Out

Ariana Brocious: This is Climate One. I'm Ariana Brocious. If so many conservative Americans support solar energy, why aren't we hearing that message from the very top? That's what Skylar Zunk is working on. He's executive director of Energy Right, a grassroots organization making the case for clean energy from a conservative perspective. Zunk is also Executive Director of America First Energy, an advocacy group working to make and deploy solar energy here in the US They're on a mission to Make Solar Great Again and want to convince conservative voters and policymakers - and they even have the hats to prove it

Ariana Brocious: So, um, before we jump in, I have to ask about this bright red hat behind you, which you had on last time we chatted, and, uh, for radio listeners, it says, "Make solar great again."

Looks good.

Skyler Zunk: Yeah. Well, thank you. Um, uh, we actually chatted about this with Greg last time I was on the podcast, and the idea turned into action. But we've made these hats, have been giving these to partners, farmers, landowners, folks in this space to, uh, uh, edge on our, our message to, to make solar great again, and to appeal to a lot of the conservatives across the country who support solar development, want to see it take place, and want to see this administration embrace it as well.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah, and we're gonna get into all that in just a sec. You wore this hat when you were visiting Mar-a-Lago. I'm curious how it was received. Did people, like, notice it when you were walking around?

Skyler Zunk: So I, I should be, I should be clear, I did not, not wear the hat when we had the opportunity to meet the president and, and take a photo with him. But you know, I enjoyed wearing it, snapped a couple of photos there. Uh, and we wear it, you know, in, in DC, uh, across the country where we're doing this work, uh, just to challenge preexisting notions. I have, you know, deep faith that the president can make a big difference in solar manufacturing, solar deployment, uh, during his term. Um, so did not wear it with him, but uh, we keep it around. Always have one in the back of my car.

Ariana Brocious: So let's jump into the conversation for today. So Politico obtained an internal memo from the American Clean Power Association, also known as ACP, that detailed an effort to support pro-solar messaging with conservative and MAGA media figures and influencers. What did you make of that effort? Or what do you make of that effort?

Skyler Zunk: Well, I think it was a, a welcome and noble mention, um, a mission that ACP and, and its partners, uh, seem to be embarking on. Um, I haven't spoken to them about this internally. I have no knowledge of the inner workings of it. Our organization, America First Energy and Energy Right are separate entities. But I think the mission is there. It all comes down to execution and results. Uh, it's something other industries have done very well at, engaging the White House, uh, through messages that align with the president's broader priorities in energy or whatever, uh, other industry that may be.

So, you know, I'm cautiously optimistic. I haven't seen, um, very many of their, uh, of, of the results quite yet. I've seen some conversations, some, you know, placed media, but it's in many ways a very common sense thing to do. As their polling memo and has, as our polls and other polls that have come out recently, remind us, is that there are large majorities of Americans, uh, especially GOP, conservative, Trump voters in America, who find ways to support solar energy, especially when it's American-made, especially when it's deployed responsibly, uh, and can help add new capacity to our grid to drive down energy costs in an era of so much increased energy demand.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah, and I wanna echo that point you just made, which is this, this poll that Kellyanne Conway's firm used, I think, in support of this push found that seventy-five percent of Trump supporters agree, as you're saying, solar should be used in the US to strengthen and increase our energy supply. I mean, that is essentially the message you've been making since you got into this work. Can you tell me perhaps one or two examples of people that embody this position that maybe might surprise people?

Skyler Zunk: Yeah. I mean, we spend a lot of our time talking with folks in Virginia. We have a program in Louisiana. We're talking with folks honestly across the country in some of our, uh, work in this space who are just true conservatives. They live in rural areas. They wanna exercise the opportunity on their land to develop energy, uh, as opposed to a crop or in addition to a crop. I'm

calling to mind a, uh, a woman from Indiana who I've befriended recently. Her name's Carrie. She lives in southern Indiana. She's a landowner, uh, in a proposed solar project that's received quite a lot of local opposition, largely unfounded, but she is just a true believer and is, is working, on her own behalf to help get this project going, but, uh, on the behalf of about 20 other landowners in, in southern Indiana, that are making maybe a couple thousand dollars a, a year net on their farming operations.

As you may know, um, many farmers across the country lose money on their crop if there's a drought, if the prices are as low, as they have been historically, and this is just an economic opportunity for her, to grow a, a new crop, to grow energy on her piece of property.

Um, so, so Carrie's been a phenomenal voice supporter in Indiana, uh, carrying this message, and there are so many others.

Ariana Brocious: So let's talk about the framing that America First is using, this clean energy framing emphasizing energy dominance, domestic production, property rights, rural economics. Do you have any concerns that that's letting the politics drive the policy?

Skyler Zunk: Huh. A great question, but let me flip it on its head. Um, uh, solar, the solar industry, I think in many ways has been its own worst industry, and, uh, the politics has historically driven interest in solar energy on the other side, with, you know, climate-coded conversations, folks wanting to do this for renewable energy portfolio standards or, for climate change reasons. And I think that's what, uh, in effect the industry is struggling with now. Uh, there's a bit of a hangover from that because so many of its supporters do not support, solar energy for those reasons, but they're more so supporting these, uh, solar energy for the reasons that you just mentioned, uh, being part of the American Energy Dominance Portfolio, celebrating the onshoring of so many of these investments in terms of manufacturing the panels themselves, the racking systems, the steel, uh, you name it.

Also, you know, these projects are the quickest to deploy. From permit to completion, you can have a project completed in, uh, 18 months, and oil and gas, natural gas generation facilities, nuclear, you name it, cannot compete that way. So this is absolutely a, kind of a pendulum swing from that, but we, we need to grow this tent, and this is a way to do it. Uh, you don't get 75% of Trump voters supporting solar because of, you know, climate change goals. Uh, you get 75% because they see the dollars, they see the community impact, and they see the need to create more energy, uh, energy being so central to just about everything we do, and absolutely the, the backbone of our economy and its growth.

Ariana Brocious: I wanna jump back to your comments about the industry's positioning and how this kind of goes with, um, the support it needs to cultivate not only among people, among consumers, but the Trump administration. You know, the administration has been pretty anti a lot of forms of renewable energy, solar as a sort of a component part of that, though not as much as wind. Um, we've seen a lot of loss of some of the federal incentives and programs that were created a few years back. At the same time, as you've said, the solar industry needs support from Trump supporters. How should the industry change its messaging to do that, to, to sort of, you know, gain support on both fronts?

Skyler Zunk: Yeah. So I, I think some of the hesitancy and we, we might call it opposition to solar, uh, from the administration in the past or Republican leaders on Capitol Hill have largely focused around the tax subsidies, uh, that these projects, uh, benefited from in the past. They are extraordinarily comfortable if we have these conversations with them about solar competing on a level playing field in an un-subsidized way, um, recognizing that the federal government's not

going to put its thumb on the scale in support of one energy or another. Solar will be a part of the grid moving forward. It will be the dominant source of new electrons during this administration and beyond, and they realize that. So part of our mission at America First Energy is to engage them in this conversation and identify pathways forward. To your question about the industry, I think its message and its tactics have largely failed, uh, in the past. Uh, I think, the prime evidence of this is, you know, their, their lack of success and involvement in the One Big Beautiful Bill negotiations. The One Big Beautiful Bill ripped the Band-Aid off in terms of the investment tax credit and the federal support for these projects.

However, now that that's happened, we talk to energy CEOs all the time who don't necessarily want those subsidies to come back. They want market clarity, they want regulatory consistency, and they need to build these projects fast. It's much cheaper and more affordable to build a project of like size in two years rather than waiting five years, waiting for permits, waiting for, uh, regulatory thumbs up.

they wanna act, and they do want to compete. Uh, and I think that's a message that the industry so far has, has failed to do, and I, and I really struggle with that. This is the way that we get a win out of this administration, getting them on board, uh, with solar energy as described earlier. Uh, that's competing on a, on a level-levelized playing field without subsidy, increasingly American-made and manufactured, uh, solar components and systems, recognizing the incredible economic benefit that these projects bring to rural America, and also just, competing and winning. I mean, we-- these, these projects are fast to deploy, uh, the fastest to deploy, and we ought to leverage that and, and celebrate

Ariana Brocious: And they cost, I mean, solar I think is still the cheapest ele- new electron, right? To get on the grid essentially.

Skyler Zunk: That's true, and it's, it's part of an overall grid, that's balanced. But, you know, I have several critiques and, and a wish list for industry and its associations to do. Some of it just perplexes me, why they haven't been acting on it to date.

Ariana Brocious: So the politics, you know, are present in, in many parts of this conversation, and I think one factor as we look at the next six months is that, Republican politicians need some economic wins to deliver to rural constituents, especially ahead of the midterms. We've been seeing these electricity spikes all across the country. A lot of people are feeling really strained right now. So I'm wondering, is this piece, this solar, push part of that, you know, trying to kind of address some of those concerns and get some wins ahead of the midterms?

Skyler Zunk: These projects are, are large and take, uh, a l- a lot of time. Um, I think there's ample reason to bring solar into an all-of-the-above strategy and the energy dominant strategy with the administration. Um, and certainly that could have some electoral effects, but I'm not sure if that's the, the motivating factor here. you know, m- my question to industry is, and the associated associations is, you know, are we having these conversations? Can we, we get some wins, you know, out of this administration ahead of the midterms? I want Republicans to support solar energy, and I want them to go back to their voters and be rewarded for that. But it seems like that hasn't been the case to date, and, you know, certainly some of the, you know, internal elements of these tr- trade associations are standing in the way, of engaging Republicans and getting them on board, uh, with the, uh, with the mission as, as I described in support of solar. Uh, but you take a look at some of these associations and the ind- the solar industry's flagship trade association over the past few years, when you look at where their employees are giving politically, uh, it's 94% to Democrats.

That's an issue. And to be clear, no employer can direct how its employees give politically, that's

their own freedom, but it is a symptom of a wider disease that, uh, the people working for these groups are overwhelmingly aligned to the left. Um, so many of the supporters are bipartisan or, or right of center, so we need our associations to lead by example. and it's important that our industry treats Republicans and treats this administration with respect and dignity because we want them to treat us well too. We want them to come on board with this message. I wanna see the president tour a solar energy manufacturing plant, uh, that was a, a multi-billion dollar investment and employs 800 folks in a rural area. Uh, but we're not going to do that by constantly catering to one side over the other, and, and not coming to the table to identify areas of common interest.

Ariana Brocious: So Skyler, a lot of your work happens at the federal level. You spend a lot of time in DC, you talk to a lot of people who are, you know, kind of at the highest levels of government or, um, you know, lobbyists, people who are working in that space. You're expanding some of your work into Louisiana through the America First Energy project, and I'm really curious how the work there differs, um, from the work that you're doing in Virginia, how the approach differs.

Skyler Zunk: Our approach is surprisingly but actually very consistent. Um, you know, we have this message and on the energy right and American Energy Project side, you know, we're very educational focused, working in, in rural areas. I, I would certainly say Louisiana ha- is more of an oil and gas state and has built-in, i-industry footholds. Um, however, a lot of the biggest manufacturers and petrochemical companies in Louisiana have clean energy goals. they also want new energy online soon. the Hyundai Steel plant that, was announced this past year, I believe it's seventeen thousand acres, and it will be the largest plant, in potentially America, certainly in Louisiana. Uh, they're gonna need a lot of energy for that, um, a lot of electricity for that as well. And you look at the data centers that are coming to northern Louisiana, they're building a lot of their own power, but they want more power added to the grid, altogether. And Louisiana's, the number one, industrial user of energy.

So many of those industries wanna see fast, clean energy deployed. and they're also a big importer of energy from other states. Um, there's a lot of similarities uniquely to Virginia, but our message stays the same. we, we wanna educate communities about these projects. Uh, we want to teach them, uh, as much as we can on, on good siting practices and how these projects can benefit, their own communities when they're done the right way. And ultimately let them make decisions for themselves. But when they're equipped with good information, those are gonna be better decisions.

Ariana Brocious: So we've talked a bit about the public, you know, some voter angles. I'd like to talk for another minute about the administration itself. You worked in the Trump administration. This second iteration, the administration has taken a much more aggressive approach to some of its changes of federal policy, regulations, incentives, and so forth. What would you like to see from the Trump administration to support solar energy production here in the US?

Skyler Zunk: The biggest thing and the biggest win that we could get is a substantial change in the messages coming out of Washington, DC as it pertains to solar energy. the message matters an incredible amount, and if we can win that battle, um, we're well on our way to progressing with solar energy projects across the country, uh, at a faster clip. What we've learned by bringing farmers from, from a great number of states to Washington to, to have meetings with the administration, with cabinet agencies, with countless folks, uh, in the House and Senate, uh, is that the, the message that we're seeing locally is not always reaching the top. But the message at the top that folks listen to on the evening news, uh, with, with great frequency is reaching these rural communities as well. And it really helped us to realize that the, the, the message from the president, the message from this administration matters a whole, whole lot. And, those effects can be felt locally. Those effects can be felt to the benefit of, folks in, in, in rural America, landowners, farmers, producers, uh, when they, when they see the benefits and they see, folks in Washington celebrating them and wanting to

lean into them, and, uh, doing so from a, a position and a message that is appealing very broadly, uh, to folks back home, but also is in line with several of the administration's goals.

So our challenge is a messaging one. Uh, the messenger really matters. The way we go about this matters as well. but we're, we're on the right track. very optimistic, for the future of America First Energy and its, and its efforts in, in Washington and beyond. So much of this is common sense.

Ariana Brocious: I think you were on the Hill just yesterday. What kind of conversations have you been having lately?

Skyler Zunk: We were on the Hill for several days actually last week, and, it was one, one of these fly-ins for an, a collaboration that we're calling the Farm Viability and Solar Initiative, bringing farming voices to Washington to present them with the landowner's perspective. Uh, unique to this effort was the solar grazers that we brought to Washington to share stories of how their-- they, they saved their farm, they started a new farm, or are growing a farm, with solar grazing as the backbone of their operation. Grazing sheep for the most part. Cattle are close, and we had many discussions on that, uh, on these solar sites to keep the vegetation down while keeping this land in agriculture and producing an agricultural product. It makes so much sense. Some of the conversations that have been less than helpful coming out of Washington is pitting farmland and farmers against solar energy development that might utilize an individual's farmer's farmland. Uh, that, that f-farmer and landowner's perspective is missing in a lot of these criticisms. No one's coming and taking away farmland from America. Farmers are exercising their property rights and are, you know, s-sometimes engaging in leases for, for these projects, and many, many farmers across the country are grazing livestock on these sites.

So there's this narrative that we've been working to challenge, that, that solar and farmland are competing uses, uh, when they're, in fact, very complementary uses. And, it was really enjoyable but really shocking to see how few people in Washington had heard this story before. Uh, it's a, it's a key message and one we're happy to lean in towards.

Ariana Brocious: Skyler Zunk is Executive Director of America First Energy and Founder and CEO of Energy Right. Thank you so much for coming back on Climate One.

Skyler Zunk: Thanks, Ariana.

Music: in

Kousha Navidar: Coming up, what some conversations around developing more solar energy in rural Indiana sound like:

Lillian Floutsis: It's that property rights, economic development, and national security, and we find that that's what resonates most with conservatives.

Kousha Navidar: That's up next, when Climate One continues.

Music: out

Ariana Brocious: This is Climate One. I'm Ariana Brocious.

In Utah, a group of communities have joined forces to bring more renewable energy to the electric grid. As part of NPR's climate solutions week, KUER's David Condos reports on an effort that could help cities in other states take climate action.

DAVID CONDOS, BYLINE: Utah has typically looked underground for its power. Most of the state's electricity comes from coal and natural gas, and state leaders have taken action recently to keep Utah's fossil fuel plants alive.

EMILY QUINTON: We do have a legacy here of mining.

CONDOS: Emily Quinton walks up to a life-size statue of a miner in the mountain town of Coalville in northern Utah.

(SOUNDBITE OF FOOTSTEPS)

CONDOS: Quinton is the sustainability director for Summit County, which is home to Coalville.

QUINTON: Obviously, the city that we're in here of Coalville named after that - not just the coal that was mined here, but we're in a state of Utah where the state rock is coal.

CONDOS: But now, Coalville is one of 19 Utah communities working to go all in on clean power. They make up the Utah Renewable Communities coalition, which plans to build at least one renewable energy project in the next few years. They want to generate enough electricity from things like wind and solar to offset all the power used in their nearly 300,000 homes and businesses. It's a unique strategy, Quinton says, particularly at a time when the federal government has done a U-turn on supporting renewables.

QUINTON: Our efforts here have been happening over the course of multiple federal administrations already. It shows us that at the local level, you can continue to move on climate strategies kind of regardless of the federal winds.

CONDOS: But it hasn't been easy. It's taken years of work, Quinton says, driven by residents' demand for more clean energy options. And the state legislature had to pass a law in 2019 to even make this type of community utility collaboration possible. Steve Handy was the Republican state representative who championed the bill. He says renewables have often been politicized. But to him, adding it to Utah's energy mix just makes sense.

STEVE HANDY: Utah needs all of the power that it can get with the data centers, the advent of artificial intelligence, EVs. And we can't get it just from coal-based, fossil-fuel based, because that is now one of the more expensive options.

CONDOS: PacifiCorp, which runs the regional utility, is rolling back its future plans for building more renewable energy, but it is moving forward with the coalition's program. That's because it'll generate the funds to pay for new projects through a \$4 monthly fee on customers' bills starting next year. The group of Utah communities ranges from the capital, Salt Lake City, to small towns like winter sports hub Park City.

(SOUNDBITE OF SKI LIFT WHIRRING)

CONDOS: City sustainability director Luke Cartin walks beneath a ski lift on a grassy hill that's normally covered with snow all spring. He says residents feel extra urgency to reduce the emissions fuel and climate change this year. Record warm winter temperatures zapped the snow that's the foundation of this area's economy and identity.

LUKE CARTIN: We made this change in one of the most conservative states in the country. And it's something that the community can take pride in.

CONDOS: But it may be an uphill climb for other red states to pass a law like Utah's, says Severin Borenstein. He is an energy expert at the University of California, Berkeley. Now, a single program won't do much to stop climate change, he says, but it could help build momentum as people see what's possible.

SEVERIN BORENSTEIN: That sort of leadership and setting an example, I think, is the real value of these sorts of efforts.

CONDOS: And for many rural communities, switching to all renewable power without this coalition would be next to impossible. Take Castle Valley, a southeast Utah town of just 347 residents.

(SOUNDBITE OF FOOTSTEPS)

CONDOS: Council member Pamela Gibson says people here have seen climate change impact their valley, like during this year's warm, dry winter. She says the community wants to do what they can to protect their home for the future.

PAMELA GIBSON: I mean, we can't solve all the problems. But if we all get together, it's drops of water in a big pond, and we can eventually fill it up.

CONDOS: Castle Valley and the other communities have until June to fully commit to the program. The coalition plans to announce its first renewable energy project this summer and begin adding new power to the grid by 2030.

For NPR News, I'm David Condos in Castle Valley, Utah.

Ariana Brocious: David Condos reports on the environment for KUER, NPR Utah. He produced this story as part of NPR's Climate Solutions Week.

Ariana Brocious: Lillian Floutsis is Indiana Senior Field Representative for the Indiana Land & Liberty Coalition, a project of Conservative Energy Network. They focus on supporting utility-scale solar, wind and battery projects in predominantly rural counties through community engagement, education and advocacy.

Lillian Floutsis: So I started this work in twenty twenty-four after running the field program from a congressional campaign in Indiana. But I've had an interest in clean energy policy and advocacy since I would say around twenty twenty-one. I was in college, and I took a class on environmental literature and, like, dystopian futures.

I used to be an English major. One pattern that I noticed was that almost every dystopian future was triggered by some sort of grid collapse, which was, like, terrifying to me. And so I did some more research, and one of my favorite books that I read last year that has really helped paint the picture for me is *The Grid* by Gretchen Bakke,

it really laid out how our grid system is essentially set up to fail, uh, and how important it is to build out new transmission infrastructure and vary our energy sources, so we don't find ourselves in a grid collapse situation. And so that really sparked my interest and, the question I kept coming back to and asked myself a lot during this time was I felt like, "Ugh, why aren't more mainstream conservative leaders talking about these issues?" It seems like a no-brainer to me since national security is one of our biggest issues on the conservative side, that grid security would be just as important.

Ariana Brocious: That's great. Uh, I just love the origin story coming from dystopian novels.

Lillian Floutsis: Super nerd. I'm a super nerd.

Ariana Brocious: We're all there.

Lillian Floutsis: I love it

Ariana Brocious: So you wrote an op-ed for the Fort Wayne Journal Gazette about what happened in Allen County, where the planning commission voted to reduce solar setbacks to two hundred feet, only to have the board of commissioners come back and reinstate an original one thousand foot setback requirement. That effectively amounts to a ban. So we're talking about, for context for listeners, utility scale or, or more major solar installations that landowners are inviting onto their property, and the commission setting these setback requirements that, yeah, at a thousand feet effectively make it impossible to build. So you're a conservative working for a conservative organization, walking into a room full of conservative local officials, telling them that they got it wrong. So tell me what that moment was like.

Lillian Floutsis: It was mostly disappointing to say the least. At the Area Planning Commission meeting where they had the public testimony where they voted to reduce the setbacks, support for renewable energy and support for private property rights outweighed the opposition in that room. There are tons of community members saying, "This is something we want in our county.

We want these landowners to be able to use their land how they see fit. We want to protect property rights, and we want the economic development benefits for our county." And the Area Planning Commission listened to them. And then the commissioners, after attending that meeting, they decided, "We're not going to listen to our community.

Instead, we want to increase those setbacks." And it was really disappointing to see what I felt like seemed like government overreach, right? This is something the community wants, but you don't wanna look at it, you don't wanna deal with it, so you, you don't want it in your county. And one of the Area Planning Commissioners, he actually sits on the, the county council, Paul Lauggemon, he was quoted in in the follow-up Area Planning Commission meeting, he said, "This is woke government at its worst,"

Ariana Brocious: "Woke government at its worst."

Lillian Floutsis: to a room of, you know, Republican commissioners. And so, yeah, it was just... it was disappointing to say the least

Ariana Brocious: Well, so tell me that, that is striking, and I wanna know from your perspective what that tells you about the political framing around clean energy in Indiana where you're working, and, and how it is shifting or how it maybe reflects how the actuality is different from what some of the rhetoric can be

Lillian Floutsis: It seems like there is a really big disconnect when you talk about renewable energy and the economic development to be had, I just feel like most people don't think conservatism and clean energy go hand in hand. And even one of the commissioners on the board at that time said, "You know, we don't wanna tie up the land for 30 years because we're hoping that SMRs are right around the corner, and we want space for SMRs."

Ariana Brocious: SMRs are small modular nuclear reactors.

Lillian Floutsis: Small modular reactors. Nuclear, yep, which as, you know, an all-of-the-above energy proponent, I love the idea of SMRs and nuclear coming to Indiana. The problem with that is, is minimum 10 years out,

Ariana Brocious: At least.

Lillian Floutsis: At least, at least, and then you have to deal with siting and permitting, and you have a bunch of people who have issues with the cleanest, most affordable, least obtrusive form of energy generation in their backyard, solar, and they have issues with that. Can you imagine the siting nightmare that is to come when you're talking about putting a nuclear reactor in people's backyards? So I think there is that disconnect of one type of energy seems more conservative than the other, when in reality they're party neutral. It's a nonpartisan issue. We need electrons on the grid. Solar is the most clean, most affordable, and more quickly deployable option.

Ariana Brocious: I think that when you're speaking about something coming onto somebody's land that the rest of the c- uh, other members of the community might see, interact with, it is the least obtrusive really, apart from maybe batteries, because it's not wind farms. They're not as visually striking, and it's not even a, you know, a pump jack or something, which is also kind of a pretty visual part of energy development on the landscape.

Lillian Floutsis: And, and most ordinances require screening to go around the fence and the property line. They're hidden behind trees. Nine times out of 10, you're driving past a solar farm, you don't even realize it unless you're looking for it.

Ariana Brocious: So you've touched on this a bit. You work under the banner of property rights as much as clean energy and, grid resilience and, and, and national security, as you've said. How central is that framing, this property rights argument, to the conversations you have in Indiana?

Lillian Floutsis: I would say it's one of the most central framing messages that we have next to economic development and the national security standpoint, because it really resonates with the local landowners, farmers. We are a rural state. Most of Indiana is rural, and so people really understand, "Hey, I live in a rural community. I live out in the country because I don't want HOAs to tell me what I can do with my property and my land and my yard, and I don't want all of the things that come with living in a city." And so when you tell them, "Hey, like, you're infringing on this person's property rights with these super restrictive setbacks," they kind of take a step back and, and we just like to frame it of like, "Okay, how would you like it if you couldn't build a shed or if you wanted to have a pig farm and somebody told you that you couldn't do it?" They're like, "Well, I wouldn't actually really like that." And, and it's the same thing.

Ariana Brocious: So the Land and Liberty Coalition, the work you do there is a lot of grassroots engagement, and I'm curious if you could just give us a sense what that looks like in a given week. So is this knocking on doors, having coffee with farmers? What are some of the conversations like?

Lillian Floutsis: Yeah. So me personally, I'm constantly on the road traveling from county to county. We meet with county officials, with the commissioners. We're in front of their boards testifying. So the Board of Zoning Appeals, the Area Planning Commissions, the commissioners, we're testifying. We're gathering support for property rights. So we do that a couple of different ways. Sometimes we're canvassing and making phone calls. More often than not, we're going to community events, farmers markets, town halls. Or we're just meeting those concerned individuals who are also at the county meetings. Uh, we do a lot of education, so we host in-person what we call power hours, where we just talk about who we are and make our case for property rights, economic development, and clean energy deployment with, uh, all of the above approach. And then we also

have a monthly virtual power hour where anybody we meet across the state can come every month, and we use that opportunity to debunk some of the opposition myths that people may have, kind of like a frequently asked questions.

Ariana Brocious: So when you are having conversations with any of these members, any of these people that you just listed, and you encounter skepticism around the benefits of solar power, what are the arguments that you lean into?

Lillian Floutsis: So in terms of the benefits, we make sure that they know that... 'cause a, a, a big myth is, oh, they're leaching chemicals into the ground. You know, we make sure to let them know, one, there's, there's no chemical runoff. The only thing that's going into the ground, for solar anyway, are steel piles. Sometimes they have to put wiring underground, depending on the type of ordinance. There's no chemical leaching. There's no, uh, water pollution or runoff. There's hardly any noise. So we start there, and then we talk about, you know, the economic developments for the county. A lot of these projects bring in upwards of \$30 million for the county over the lifetime of the project from just tax revenue alone.

Ariana Brocious: And let me interject really quickly, so to my understanding, they would work similar to other kinds of energy development. So there's like the landowner's getting some dividend or some payment, and then there's, there's the tax collection for the county as well. Is that how it works?

Lillian Floutsis: Yes. Yes. So they, the landowner leases the land to the developer, and there's a contract, and every contract is different, but we've seen typically it's like \$1,000 an acre per year. And so if you're leasing 250 acres, that's \$250,000 a year that you're making from solar lease alone. And then the land is taxed at a higher rate, once solar panels are on it, so then the property taxes are in, it's increased revenue for the county. And then many developers form economic development agreements with the county so that the money that's coming in they can put towards something specific. So for example, Emerald Green Solar in Howard County is a project that we went to testify in support of the property rights, and they have an economic development agreement with Howard County to give \$19.8 million directly into the school system over the lifetime of the project. And, and that money can go towards anything, emergency services, roads, you know, the possibilities are endless.

Ariana Brocious: And so climate arguments around renewable energy and climate goals sounds like is not a part of the conversation usually.

Lillian Floutsis: Usually not. Um, and the, and the reason for that, one, the Conservative Energy Network is not a climate organization, although part of our mission and vision is to steward the land well. We wanna be good stewards of the land, and we recognize that that's a part of it. We want more clean electrons on the grid. , But for land and liberty in general, it, it is, it's that property rights, economic development, and national security, and we find that that's what resonates most with conservatives.

Ariana Brocious: Do you find common ground with liberal energy advocates?

Lillian Floutsis: Yes.

Ariana Brocious: And do you, do you work with any of them?

Lillian Floutsis: On both sides, right? We wanna see more clean electrons on the grid. We want to steward our land well. We want cheaper and more affordable energy prices, and we wanna see an

all-of-the-above energy future. Uh, we do have s- some partner organizations that we've worked alongside, like tabling events and, and other things like that, and we always see them in the field. You know, we will kinda nod at each other like, "Hey, I see you. I recognize that you're here." and so it, it is nice when you see people on both sides working together for a common cause.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah. What would you say has been your biggest success story so far?

Lillian Floutsis: Oh, I had so many to pick from, and so I, I found two. So last summer we engaged heavily in Howard County with the Emerald Green Solar Project. It was before the county board, and so we engaged with landowners and provided testimony at all the different county boards in support of landowner property rights. And so by the end of it, we had a really strong show of support, and the developers really did their due diligence to provide a plan that worked within the ordinance set forth by the county. They even gave up some setbacks. and then they brought tons of benefits to the community, like I, I talked about earlier, But the project was approved, and so that county will get to see 300 megawatts of solar come onto the grid, which is, I believe enough power for 33,000 homes. Yeah, that's a lot of power. Uh, and then the community will enjoy \$30 million in tax revenue to the county over the lifetime of the project, \$19.8 million going directly to Eastern Howard County School Corporation, and around 300 jobs created during the construction of the project. They also are growing pollinator-friendly vegetation under the panels, and so that will help build up the soil, it will help the water table, and it'll help the neighbors who are growing crops.

Another cool story. Stark County has been at the center of heart operations in Indiana for a long time. They've had this long moratorium that they passed that just came to a close, and so we've engaged there for, like, the last year and a half. At one point, the setbacks they proposed were at two thousand feet on all sides of a project, which is almost four football fields on either side, so it would have banned development. And so through our testimony and just providing resources to the county, we were able to get those setbacks reduced to five hundred feet, which we deem still pretty restrictive, but it will allow for much more development in the county. The one thing that I think is really cool, a past project that was permitted in Stark County, there is one farmer who grazes sheep under the panels as a form of agrivoltaics.

Ariana Brocious: Mm-hmm.

Lillian Floutsis: And when I was sitting in a Stark County meeting, there was a family who came in that wanted to open up a meat processing plant. And they were like, "Cool, because there's this farmer with five hundred sheep, more on the way, and we need... and we don't have any meat processing plants within the county, so that money is leaving the county, and we would love for it to stay here." And so they got the permit to open their meat processing plant, and so you're going to see this really cool of the county working together to benefit each other of, "Hey, I've, I've got my solar field, I've got my sheep grazing, I'm gonna send them to my neighbor to process them, and the money is going to stay in the county." And I don't know, I just thought that was really cool and a really beautiful picture of how the community can work together with projects like this.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah, it sounds like there's a flourishing of economic activity from some of these projects, which is very exciting. Lillian Floutsas is Indiana senior field representative for the Indiana Land and Liberty Coalition, which is a project of the Conservative Energy Network. Thank you so much for joining us on Climate One.

Lillian Floutsis: Thank you.

Music: In

Kousha Navidar: Hey everyone, before we close out the show, it's time for Climate One More Thing. We've got our sound engineer and producer extraordinaire, Austin Colon. Hey Austin, what's up?

Austin Colon: Hey Kousha. I'll take extraordinaire for anything you wanna describe me as, thank you.

Kousha Navidar: Well, it would apply. Speaking of extraordinary, maybe not, we'll find out, I know that you love electric cars, and there is a new one that just came out that you're really into, right?

Austin Colon: Yes. So, uh, as electric car nerds have been waiting for for a long time, Rivian has finally released their, I'd call it the Model Y competitor. Some people would call it the Model Y killer. They're known for their big pickup truck and their three-seater SUV.

Kousha Navidar: Rivian.

Austin Colon: But this is... Yeah, Rivian is. But this is the family SUV, almost, like, small enough to be crossover-sized that the US market in particular is obsessed with. Like, every car is basically around this size, this, you know, SUV crossover, and their new one has just hit the market.

Kousha Navidar: So Rivian, what's the name of this? The R2, is that right?

Austin Colon: That's right.

Kousha Navidar: Okay, so the R2 just came out. It is a crossover. It's a big deal because this is what every person in the United States generally wants in the size of a car. Did you get to see it?

Austin Colon: Not only did I get to see it, uh, I actually got to test drive it. They've been releasing very limited, um, slots to test drive, and over the weekend, I will admit I went twice.

Kousha Navidar: So you really know how it drives. What was it like? I'm sure you were excited. What was it actually like when it happened?

Austin Colon: Well, uh, yes, I think excited is, uh, an understatement. Um, to finally get to sit behind the wheel, and they have these cool, like, haptic disks that do all of the wheel adjustments and stuff. Finally got to play with those, got to put my music- ... on the radio and hear that for the first time. Um, and then, uh, it was unsupervised, so hopefully the Rivian people aren't listening. I did get to test it out. Its zero to 60 time in 3.6 seconds was incredibly fast.

Kousha Navidar: Wow.

Austin Colon: I think it's gonna be a big, big hit.

Kousha Navidar: I love that. Something you and I have in common is that we both really like cars, and I love hearing people that get excited about cars talking about them 'cause i- it's, it, it is, like, s- there are so many ways to e- experience this, a, a vehicle, driving it, looking at the design, looking at the disks inside, the haptic touch disks. Like, it's just so cool. So thanks for, thanks for sharing it with us.

Austin Colon: Yeah. No problem.

Kousha Navidar: And that's our show. Thanks for listening. Talking about climate can be hard, and exciting and interesting -- AND it's critical to address the transitions we need to make in all

parts of society. Please help us get people talking more about climate by giving us a rating or review. You can do it right now on your device. Or consider joining us on Patreon and supporting the show that way.

Ariana Brocious: Climate One is a production of the Commonwealth Club. Our team includes Brad Marshland, Jenny Park, Austin Colón, Megan Bisciegia, and Kousha Navidar. Our theme music is by George Young. I'm Ariana Brocious.