

THE ENERGY  
DEMOCRACY  
PROJECT



**PEOPLE'S**

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**UTILITY**

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**JUSTICE**

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**PLAYBOOK**

**The Energy Democracy Project developed this Playbook with the support of many of its affiliated organizations.**

**The Energy Democracy Project** is a collaboration of more than 30 diverse, local, frontline organizations across the U.S. to strengthen their collective efforts to democratize energy and advance the emerging energy democracy movement in the United States.

The Project serves as a collective resource to advance the efforts of organizations working to democratize energy in the United States.

For more information visit [energydemocracy.us](http://energydemocracy.us)

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# ORGANIZING FOR POWER AGAINST UTILITIES!

Energy activists are increasingly colliding with energy utilities, whose interests are often in conflict with the economic and climate justice needs of our communities. Utilities have their own playbook, now we have our own. This document exposes utility tactics and shares how communities have built power to fight back.

The utilities we have now are deeply invested in fossil fuels and have built entire systems around developing and delivering centralized energy at the cheapest costs and highest profits. These systems often operate at the expense of polluting Black and Brown neighborhoods. Renewable energy puts fossil fuel investments at risk, and climate-related disasters like wildfires and superstorms not only reveal the failures of these systems, they also further expose their harmful practices.

Over the past one hundred years during which these utilities have dominated the energy landscape, they have teamed up to tamp down community and ratepayer organizing efforts. Now, these utilities are escalating their anti-organizing tactics in the face of the transition to renewable energy and the growing strength of an opposition movement. In fact, they've created pamphlets, playbooks, and conferences to take out movement demands. As more utilities both proactively work against us *and* fail in the face of climate change, the need for strategic responses that promote energy democracy is critical.

With the energy system at a moment of transition toward renewable energy sources, clean energy and social justice advocates, as well as the utilities themselves, recognize the high stakes. We're at a critical turning point in our energy system, and communities across the country (and around the world) are fighting over the issue of who will control that transition.

In particular, energy democracy forces are fighting for a decentralized energy model—a restructuring of the energy system that prioritizes the development of local, community-based energy resources to advance the environmental, economic, and social justice needs of our communities. A truly decentralized energy model requires community-based decision-making about critical energy needs, new roles (and business models) for energy utilities, and a commitment to equity and leadership from frontline communities.

***We're at a critical turning point in our energy system, and communities across the country (and around the world) are fighting over the issue of who will control that transition.***

The **People's Utility Justice Playbook** is meant to support community and ratepayer advocates, energy democracy activists, and others confronting energy utilities. The first section focuses on the different types of fights waged between utilities and energy activists across the country so that readers can identify why and how they may be targeted. The second section explores the strategies and tactics that utilities use against energy democracy activists during these different fights and the methods activists use to effectively push back.

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# UTILITIES VS. COMMUNITIES

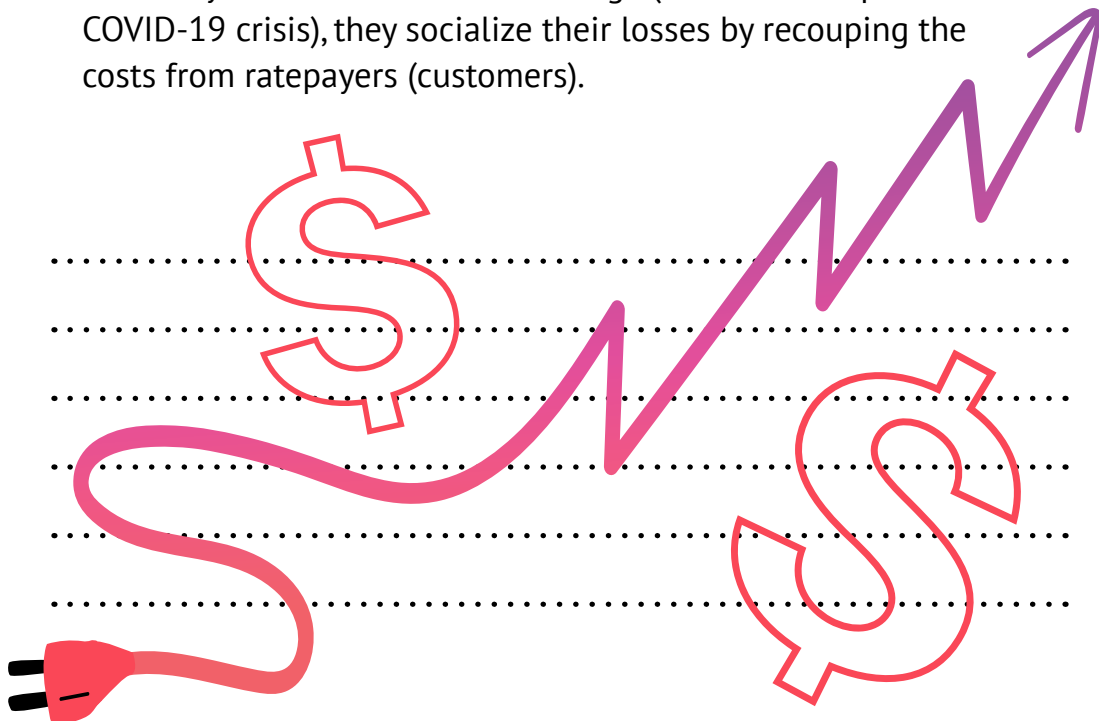
Over the past two years, we have interviewed a host of community organizers, campaigners, and energy democracy activists across the United States to better understand the critical fights they are engaged in against energy utilities. It reflects the deep knowledge of Energy Democracy Project affiliated organizations and other social justice activists as they have become increasingly engaged in fights with energy utilities. The utility attacks described below represent both utilities actively on the offensive that are trying to gain more revenues, and those on the defensive against community and climate advocates pushing for an energy transition. Understanding that every community's context and ecosystem is different, in this section, we will attempt to describe the most prominent utility attacks against our communities.

This by no means represents a full list of what our communities are up against. However, it is our hope that this provides an understanding of the different ways energy utilities (both private and public) continue to perpetuate an extractive, unjust energy system at the expense of our communities' energy future. Our reactions against such attacks can sometimes be attempts to maintain or better community benefits without challenging the existing energy model, utility business model, or the power of entrenched energy institutions. Other fights, however, are more transformative in nature as they pose a more direct challenge to the energy system—the structures and rules that perpetuate the power of the energy utilities.

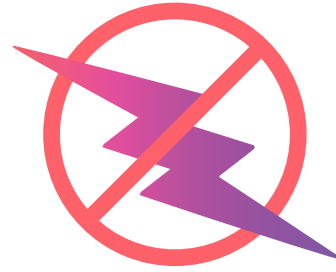
## RAISING RATES

Utilities are “regulated monopolies” and have been such since they struck a deal in the early 1930s. This status translates into utilities having to officially “ask” their regulators at the Public Utilities Commissions for permission to increase rates. Municipally owned and electric coops are often categorized as “self-regulating” as they receive little or no commission oversight. Utilities have continuously increased their rates over the past decades which has led to **one third** of households in the United States having trouble paying their energy bills (an intersecting crisis of disinvested housing and high rates). The impact of sustained rate increase is even starker in BIPOC communities, where an even higher percentage are living in energy poverty and are forced to pay staggeringly high monthly bills to their private utilities (e.g., \$500/month energy bills).

Whenever they have the chance, utilities will propose rate increases that either retain or bolster their own shareholder profits. They also neglect to offer or work to limit bill assistance programs for lower-income customers. What’s more, as utilities are hit by storms from climate change (or feel the impact of the COVID-19 crisis), they socialize their losses by recouping the costs from ratepayers (customers).



## **SHUTTING OFF ENERGY FOR FAILURE TO PAY**



Across the United States, utilities shut off millions of people's energy every year due to nonpayment. With rates constantly rising and high energy burdens (the percentage of one's income spent on energy bills) felt across the country, it is understandable how people may fall behind in their energy bill payments. Over the course of COVID-19 and the following economic crisis, utilities have run rampant shutting off customers' energy at a time when people need it most. According to a study released in January 2021 by Duke University, if a national moratorium on utility shut offs had been in place since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, the United States could have reduced COVID-19 infections by 8.7% and deaths by 14.8%.

Utility debt and the shut off that follows can reverberate throughout a person's financial life, decreasing the credit scores that are often key to opening a bank account or renting an apartment. Utilities are even bundling customers' debt and selling it to third-party debt collectors, allowing the companies to profit twice from the debt by deeming it "bad debt" and then raising rates to "cover losses."

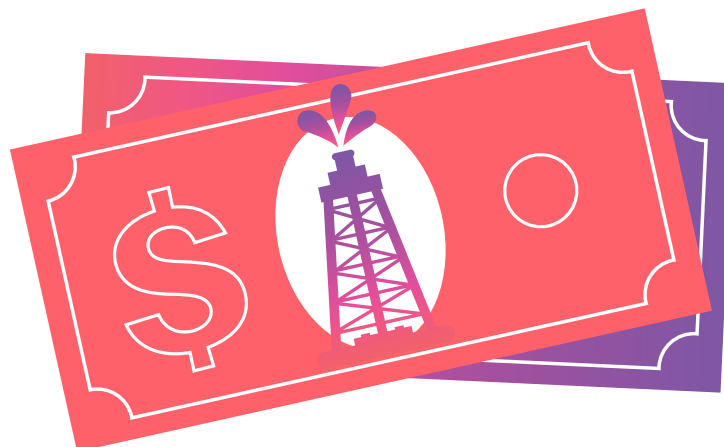
Communities have fought for energy access as a human right. They have organized to stop shutoffs permanently or at least provide relief from shutoffs in seasons that carry potential health risks like in winter. The utilities often plead poverty, stating that if they did not disconnect people they would be ruined financially. Utilities also claim a "free rider" problem, contending that if they put a permanent ban on shutoffs, people would take advantage of the system and never pay bills. It should be noted, however, that no utility that has permanently banned shutoffs has suffered any financial instability as a result.



## **CONTINUING TO INVEST IN FOSSIL FUEL INFRASTRUCTURE**

The more that utilities build large fossil-fuel infrastructure projects like gas plants, the harder it is to make effective cost-based arguments for clean energy. These utilities have a vested interest in building out more pipelines and more natural gas plants because they are nearly guaranteed a return on infrastructure investments. Utilities also argue against policies that would require regulators to consider the cost of pollution when determining the cost of electricity. Without those considerations, the costs of pollution fall on individual people and their communities. In particular, utilities that run gas infrastructure are likely to be wiped out by a transition to renewable energy and electrification. As a consequence, they actively fight against gas bans, which have been gaining momentum. For instance, Eversource Energy is the lead on the “Consortium to Combat Electrification” to mobilize their peers to confront the move away from gas.

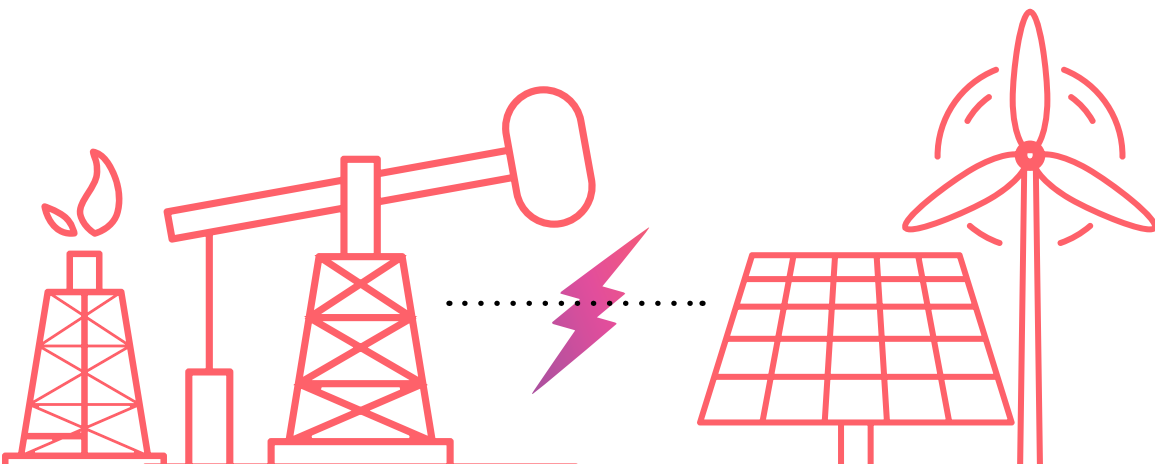
When utilities build fossil-fuel infrastructure, they also create jobs and the people who work those jobs can become strong advocates for keeping the status quo going for as long as possible. Meanwhile, utilities often make political contributions to politicians who work against safety nets that would protect workers in the event of layoff. That way, utilities can maintain a high degree of power.



## FIGHTING THE TRANSITION TO RENEWABLE ENERGY

When communities organize for renewable standards or climate bills that would require a certain amount of renewable energy or pollution reduction by a certain date, utilities will actively campaign against those goals. They'll often organize to stop the regulation or legislation in its path or water it down so egregiously that it lacks any teeth. For instance, they will manipulate the language used so that any required standards emerge as "voluntary goals." They will also try to sneak in technologies that allow them to continue running gas plants well into the future. One of the most egregious examples of this is the fight for "carbon capture and sequestration." Many utilities want standards that allow them to run their gas as long as they can "capture" the emissions-- a very expensive and untested way for them to keep running the status quo.

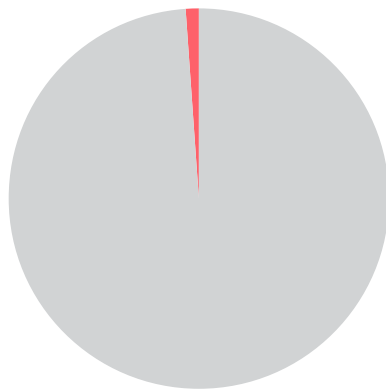
Additionally, the utilities will commit to "**net-zero**" targets. While these are outwardly laudable and progressive actions, the devil is often found in the details. In addition, this results in the continued running of fossil fuels far into the future and a reliance on carbon offsets (paying for someone else to decarbonize) and loopholes. The fine print is buried within hundreds of pages of "**integrated resource plans**" or is simply not published making it hard for campaigners to call them out.



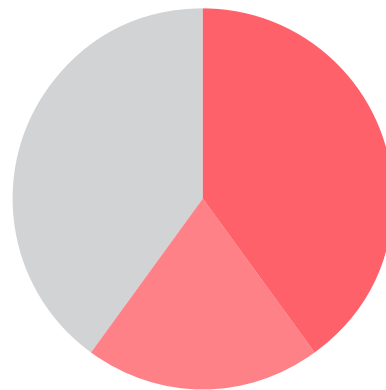
## **FIGHTING ENERGY EFFICIENCY MEASURES**

Energy transition advocates have pushed utilities to focus more on promoting energy efficiency (meeting community’s energy needs through reduced use instead of increased production). This would encourage opportunities to invest in families’ homes which would not only reduce energy poverty, but also create safer, cleaner, and more comfortable homes for all. However, as with customer-owned clean energy, energy efficiency reduces the infrastructure investments needed by energy utilities and the guaranteed rate of return on such investments.

Utilities have dragged their feet on efficiency projects and have made many of the programs inaccessible for low-income households (often those most impacted by their rising energy rates). The total amount of energy being saved is still miniscule - in most states 1% or so per year - as compared to the **40-60%** of total energy usage that could be eliminated through energy efficiency, as estimated by experts like Rocky Mountain Institute and the American Council for an Energy Efficient Economy.



**1%**  
Amount of energy  
being saved per year



**40-60%**  
Amount of energy that  
could be saved per year

## OPPOSING DECENTRALIZED OWNERSHIP

Decentralized ownership typically refers to ownership of distributed energy sources such as rooftop solar, community-owned solar, a small wind turbine, battery storage, or small microgrids. These can be good for the environment and for energy democracy, but they pose a problem for energy utilities because such practices reduce the need for infrastructure investment and its subsequent profitable rate of return.

Net metering provides a one-to-one credit for distributed renewable energy that is provided to the grid. Multiple studies have found that this is a fair value or even undervalues **distributed solar**, yet utilities are fighting hard to reduce net metering. Utilities have pushed to change net metering policies, to **impose fixed fees** on solar customers, or to reduce the financial benefits of local or rooftop solar. Utilities argue that net metering customers are not paying their fair share of costs to maintain the grid. These arguments ignore the valuable services net metering customers are providing to the grid, which saves the utility (and other energy users) money that net metering customers are not recognized for. These services also include the avoidance of investments in new infrastructure, the value of producing energy at peak periods of the year (hot sunny afternoons) when the cost of energy is high, the value of increased local grid resilience, and more.

However, the utilities are quite clear that local, community-based solar is a threat to their business model and have waged a national campaign to stop its growth. Utilities will try to keep people and communities from having their own clean power sources. One way they do it is by increasing minimum fees on utility bills, which means that unless you can get 100% off of their grid, you still have to pay them a hefty sum.

# CO-OPTING THE TRANSITION TO RENEWABLE ENERGY

Many utilities try to have it both ways working simultaneously against clean energy, while also positioning themselves as the only ones who can implement clean energy infrastructure. Some utilities may be developing wind and solar, but they are doing it in a way that maintains their control. They will fight any type of commitment to community ownership or they will run projects from which the community gets no benefit. One example is “community solar” programs where there is little to no community involvement and where the facility is owned by the utility. Another example is where they build out large scale renewables in ways that might be harmful to Indigenous rights or ecosystems. Ultimately, we must be aware of utilities who seek to reap the benefits of new energy development but do so without sharing the wealth with the community.

*Rally in Manhattan for the Build Public Renewables Act - June 2, 2021*



## FIGHTING PUBLICLY-OR COMMUNITY- OWNED UTILITY PROPOSALS

Frustrated with investor-owned utilities' continued disinvestment, exploitation, and fossil fuels, communities across the United States have taken up campaigns to put their utilities into public ownership on the basis that access to clean, affordable energy is a public good. Their campaigns focus on kicking out the investor-owned utility from their state, region, or city, by buying the utilities' infrastructure like the poles and wires, and replacing it with a publicly owned utility.

Of course, this is a threat to investor-owned utilities' very existence and they actively fight to squash these sorts of campaigns. They will use a host of fear-based strategies to scare the community into staying with the utility. The utilities try to paint publicly owned utilities as entities riddled with government incompetence. All the while, these same utilities are hiding their own incompetence, inflating the costs of their assets, and scaring cities into thinking that accepting public utilities will lead them into bankruptcy. Utilities use these tactics, and the ones found below, to divide communities and prevent progressive change. Unfortunately, these utilities have been disturbingly good at eliminating public power campaigns as **only four cities** have successfully taken over their utility infrastructure between 2008 and 2018. However, there is a growing momentum for change as more public power campaigns are emerging across the country.

## **FAILING IN CLIMATE DISASTERS**

Utilities' continued investment in fossil fuel infrastructure has actively led to more climate disasters like the Polar Vortex that hit Texas in 2021, the storms and hurricanes constantly hitting the coasts, the fires in the West, and the extreme heat waves hitting cities and rural areas alike. All of these climate-related weather events put major strain on the energy system. However, time and time again, utilities neither invest in infrastructure in a way that builds climate resilience nor do they plan for these extreme moments, particularly in BIPOC communities.

In the wake of these climate disasters, many communities have fought for reinvestment in the grid, as well as more distributed energy resources that can add important systems of resilience to help keep the lights on. As described earlier, this is not in the utilities' interests. Furthermore, utilities are also less likely to invest in maintenance for existing infrastructure as building new, expensive systems is a cornerstone of their profit strategy.

*Reclaim Our Power campaign in California is a BIPOC lead campaign incubated by Local Clean Energy Alliance*



# THE TACTICS UTILITIES USE

Many utilities use similar tactics in the different fights they initiate to defend against community-driven change. They've built political, social, and public relations machines that they deftly deploy against community organizers to maintain the status quo. In the following sections, we dig into those tactics, building from community organizers' knowledge in the field, to show you what you should expect from the utilities and the critical lessons learned by organizers regarding how communities can build their own power and win.



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# UTILITIES MAKE ENERGY DECISIONS INACCESSIBLE

## What to expect

Most of us don't completely understand how coal, gas, or the sun's rays get turned into the electricity that shows up in our homes at the flip of a switch. There are lots of engineering and logistical details to make that work--and the utilities like to dwell on all those complicated details. They present information **in ways that confuse**, rather than clarify. They give **presentations** that intimidate rather than illuminate.

Utility experts are mostly white, male, and hold advanced educational degrees. They also often talk down to community leaders who don't hold the same privileged status. It is easy to feel intimidated when jargon starts flying and you are the only one in the room who does not know the terms. But energy democracy activists have ways to stay focused on the larger truth: community-owned clean energy is entirely possible, and it is on its way.

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**How to fight back**

The most important thing to remember is that **your lived experience is expertise**. We don't need to answer their arguments point for point and, in fact, doing so would allow them to control the shape of the discussion. Instead, it is important to stay focused on what you know, and put them on their heels. They may understand the complex equations that enable various coal plants to dispatch various amounts of power, but they know nothing about your community: about the harm from pollution; about the struggle to pay bills; about working multiple jobs while raising kids; about the ways that controlling your own clean energy supply will have untold positive ripple effects. Whatever you do, never diminish the importance of the knowledge you have.

Of course, we do understand that the technical and legal details do matter **and we need to build a deeper bench of experts to work with us**, something the [Energy Democracy Project](#) is currently doing. Building relationships with economists, energy modelers, lawyers, and analysts has proved enormously valuable, so long as these types of experts are prepared to work in service to the community.

But even when there are strong partnerships between technical and community experts, regulators may still go along with corporations. David Pomerantz from the Energy and Policy Institute notes "Activists have objectively demolished technical arguments, but it doesn't matter if people making the decisions don't care. We must force them to care."

How do you do that? **Invest in leadership development**. Work to keep the conversation focused on what you know. Together we can **move utilities out of their comfortable zones** and into the public eye. As Patrick Robbins from the New York Energy Democracy Alliance says "Insider baseball is not where we have the most power. Getting utilities off their footing using organizing and actions is powerful." If utilities try to keep the

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conversations focused purely on technical arguments decided by the utility commission, take the conversation to the community, to the media, to sympathetic legislators, and the like.

Jodi Lasseter and Connie Leeper from the North Carolina Climate Justice Collective note that building a narrative to bring your story to the forefront is essential, and that the key to being most effective is to **develop a narrative that will give you the clear moral high ground**. For example, when the Michigan activists in the Work for Me DTE petitioned regulators to get involved in what is usually the highly technical process of influencing DTE's filing of a 15-year Integrated Resource Plan, they framed their campaign as **a demand for health, affordability, and democracy**. They then broke down how DTE's plan was to invest in expensive and polluting infrastructure.

Part of the way utilities (and the government) keep you marching to their tune is by making things complicated and by having so many moving parts. One commission oversees utilities, another oversees transmission, yet other agencies have to approve permits you need to set up community projects, and still another one is needed to get financing approved. If you are working on a large effort, **insist on interagency working groups** and put the burden on the agencies to communicate with you in a clear and efficient manner instead of making you run from one to another and being told something different each place.

*Building Consensus on a community-centered energy efficiency program with the Peer-Learning Energy Cohort - 10-12 based community organizations gathered for one year to identify how energy can meet community needs. This consensus exercise helped the group develop the key design; photo from Community Power*



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## **CASE STUDY: MARI ROSE TARUC**

Mari Rose Taruc, an environmental justice organizer in California, described one of her first energy campaigns in California-- the Solar for All bill that aimed to include community buildings and rental properties in environmental justice communities to earn income from solar projects.

She remembers vividly sitting at the front of a hearing room with a team of other young women of color ready to fight for the campaign, and being confronted with a sea of old white men. These men had spent so much of their lives as “experts” in the utility sector, knew each other, and used intimidating words that she didn’t know. But Mari Rose centered and reminded herself that she holds the expertise of her community. “The people [the current system] works for and those who designed it don’t look like me. Just because it is how it is, doesn’t mean it is how it needs to be.”

While these men in the room may have technical expertise and the ear of decision-makers, Mari Rose knew that her voice and those of her peers would be more trusted by the people of California than these men. This has continued to be a motivating force in Mari Rose’s organizing. While she builds a bench of researchers and activists, she’s committed to lifting up their everyday experiences to disrupt concepts of expertise.

## **CASE STUDY: COMMUNITY SOLAR IN FRESNO, CALIFORNIA**

Shake Energy Collaborative, People Power Solar Cooperative, and El Dorado Park CDC in Fresno worked to submit two project bids for California’s Community Solar Green Tariff (CS-GT) program in 2020. Either of these bids, if approved, would have led to the construction of a ~75kW community-owned solar garden providing long-term energy ownership and on-bill energy savings to the residents of the El Dorado Park neighborhood, a diverse neighborhood in Fresno consisting of working-class Syrian refugees and Latinx immigrants.

The CS-GT program was created in 2018 as the result of work by California Environmental Justice Alliance, Sustainable Economies Law Center, and others fighting for a more inclusive community solar program in the state.<sup>1</sup> Facing intense opposition from IOUs, the final program implemented by the Public Utilities Commission was watered down, and gave enormous powers to the utilities to manage and manipulate the program. The CS-GT program uses a “least cost-best fit” model, where project costs are weighed against equity priorities, such as workforce development or being locally sited in a disadvantaged community. These equity priorities are intended to give community-based developers a leg up over private developers who may cut corners around things like labor and community engagement to deliver lower costs.

In their first attempt at bidding into the CS-GT program, Shake Energy was engaged in numerous communications with Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E) in order to understand the technocratic and opaque bidding process for the program. Ultimately, their first bid was declined by PG&E by virtue of applying for a “Rule 21” interconnection, an interconnection that PG&E’s own

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interconnection team had advised they pursue! The second application was declined for undisclosed reasons. When People Power Solar Cooperative inquired how PG&E had scored their equity priorities against the cost in the bid, PG&E only replied that they used a “subjective” scoring process for the equity priorities. In the end, the fact that IOUs were able to obfuscate the decision process led the project team to pursue other pathways to community solar outside of the CS-GT program. This shows the difficult obstacle of utility monopoly over-reach and the downside of having a private company administer a public-purpose program.

**IMPORTANT RESOURCES:**



**BLUEPRINT FOR ENERGY DEMOCRACY**

Soulardarity’s Blueprint is a great example of framing energy issues within the context of community needs.



**ENERGY 101**

The Initiative for Energy Justice has built a straightforward module to understand how different types of utilities work.

# UTILITIES DIVIDE COMMUNITIES USING “CHARITABLE” GIVING

## What to expect

Utilities are increasingly using their company’s charitable arm to advance their own agenda, all the while their other arm is used to fight against our advances for energy democracy. Between 2013 and 2017, the **Energy and Policy Institute (EPI)** estimated that ten of the top utilities *alone* gave **\$1 billion in “charitable contributions.”** This is **big money** -- thirteen times the amount of money that the utilities spent on federal elections combined.

*2019 rally in DC for No Pepco Pledge for DC city council candidates to reject Pepco utility contributions, disclose meetings with Pepco, and support feasibility study of municipalization, Community Choice energy programs, and other alternatives in DC; photo from Solar United Neighbors.*



Philanthropy has become an important weapon in the utilities' arsenal that -- when used effectively-- can both boost the companies' own media image while also dividing our communities. In EPI's seminal report, ["The Power of Philanthropy"](#) they dive into the use of utility philanthropic giving and found four key ways that the utilities use to leverage donations:

**1. Utilities get grantees to weigh in on political issues.**

In Ohio, FirstEnergy outright asked its grantees to write comments to the regulators in favor of a coal and nuclear bailout. They've also had grantees speak up in favor of rate hikes.

**2. Utilities curry favor with politicians by giving money to causes they care about.**

In Virginia, Dominion Energy's CEO and the company itself **gave a gift totalling \$125,000** to an influential Democrat's nonprofit.

**3. Utilities suppress organizing and dissent by dividing communities or muzzling them with money.**

In Missouri, Peabody Coal gave money to the St. Louis NAACP branch. When the NAACP **took a stand** against the pollution in their communities, Peabody pulled their contributions.

**4. Utilities use communities of color and low wealth communities for their own benefit.**

In Florida, Duke and Florida Power & Light convinced the NAACP chapter to fight against solar in the state by writing opinion pieces and speaking to the media on their all based on the premise that solar would have a negative impact on low-income ratepayers. As the **chapter leader Adora Nweze described**, "I felt that if we wanted the money, we had to do it [...] The shortcoming on my part was that I didn't have the necessary knowledge to know that it was a problem."

Many of the energy democracy activists we interviewed said they had experienced this tactic [exploitation of groups via charitable giving by utilities] firsthand. Jorden Revels, from



North Carolina, referred to this tactic as “money and resource slinging” citing how the local utility Duke spends money on grants, award scholarships, and community events to build dependence on the utility’s continued charitable giving, while at the same time creating the appearance that Duke is a charitable, community-focused organization. Bridget Vial from Michigan, who spends her time fighting against DTE, made it clear that the utilities will spend small amounts on local barbeques and give big sums for nonprofits all in the hopes of cultivating a positive community image.

This strategy is not relegated solely to the investor-owned utilities (though they have much more money to spend). Wan Smith from the Partnership for Southern Equity recounted how rural electric coops in Georgia have bribed people to come to coop meetings through gifts and building up a fair-like atmosphere. They do this hoping to lull members into complacency. Those wooed members then happily support those in power. While the gifts these members receive may be small, the real cost is their continued exploitation.

Basically, **philanthropy acts as a backdoor strategy** to building the utilities’ political and social capital. They can spend money to advance policies without the inflammatory label of political donations. When utilities spend money through their foundation wings, it acts as a **tax shelter** for that money, and “investing” in political campaigns gives them “returns” in the form of lax legislation or sign offs on big rate hikes. Furthermore, when they give grants directly from their corporation, they do not need to disclose who gets the money-- creating a knotted mess of strings that can be hard for activists to untangle.

## How to Fight Back:

### INVEST IN DEEP RELATIONAL ORGANIZING

**Bridget Vial** from the Work For Me DTE campaign in Michigan put it well, “Mobilizing people is all about relationships. People will not invest in your cause if they do not trust you, and they need to feel that their needs are considered.” This is all the more true when the utility has positioned itself as a benefactor of community groups. The truth is the energy movement often requires its allies (who are trying to provide direct aid on a shoestring budget) to forgo reliable funding or stand up to the very people holding their purse strings. **Philanthropic giving is used to artificially divide us** by giving us small amounts of reform so we don’t seek revolution. We saw it with the Florida NAACP example-- the NAACP needed the money and didn’t know the potential benefit of solar to their community. This is a great example of where we need to use **our deep relational organizing as a movement** to care for those who may feel constrained and to aid them in building power so that they are emboldened and positioned to take action for energy democracy.

In order to counter the divisiveness of the utilities’ philanthropy, we have to build deep, intentional relationships. What does deep relational organizing look like in practice? Wan Smith says that it is when you, “**Embed for the long term in your community**, providing continued spaces for relationship building, providing food and emotional support. If you’ve created the relationships from that embeddedness, they can be **leveraged at catalytic moments**, activating the community you have created.”

### CENTER BIPOC & WORKING-CLASS VOICES AND CONCERNS

When utilities spend money on Black-led or BIPOC groups or nonprofits focused on providing services to low-income community members, they’re exploiting the fact that these communities are considered “authentic voices” of the impact. By working directly with our BIPOC and working-class allies, we can ensure that the fights we are engaged in support a

liberatory form of energy democracy. It also means that we can speak directly to the experience of people unable to pay their bills, who breathe the polluted air every day next to the compressor station, or who have been personally intimidated by the company. Telling these stories in the media and making it clear who the ultimate enemy is-- the utility-- means that we can counteract their donations and win control over our energy systems.

### **BUILD CROSS MOVEMENT CONNECTIVITY**

Our movements are tied in important ways, and as a movement, we must lean into those intersections. Utility justice and energy justice are directly connected to housing justice and stopping evictions-- sometimes inability to pay utility bills can be the reason that people are **evicted from their homes**. Utilities are also tied to structural violence and, therefore, are connected to police brutality. Philanthropic donations by the utilities may go to faith leaders or nonprofits adjacent to what we consider energy democracy organizing, making it all the more important to weave together instances of struggle that points directly at our oppressors. We should include guidance that will help communities better weave utility justice work into other types of activism (e.g., economic justice, health justice, climate justice etc.), as that will help them organize and energize as many people as possible. This is also so important when we are organizing with BIPOC groups that are grappling with the heavy layers of oppression on a daily basis.

## KNOW THE FLOW

A key step to fighting against the power of philanthropic donations is to understand who is getting money from your utility. Knowing where and how the philanthropic dollars are flowing can help you refine your organizing tactics. It is also of particular help when power mapping your allies. As a campaign or organizing team, start to map the philanthropic influence of your utility. Some places to look are:

**List of Grantees:** See if your utility has a foundation and, if so, check their annual reports to see if there is a list of grantees. Utilities often like things named after them to give them social clout, so you can even look to art museums or universities to see their range of influence.

**Media:** Investigate who in the community is speaking on behalf of the utility in the media, or review more official filings like those at the Public Utilities Commission to see how different groups are siding on issues that matter to you and the utility.

**Executives:** Remember that utilities will often use their executives to spend money in ways that are less obvious. Look up the utility's executives' names and search to see if they are spending their money on charitable contributions. It is also worth checking out nonprofit boards to see if they have utility leadership represented there.

**Use Little Sis:** Check out this influence mapping tool called Little Sis! We Power DC used the Little Sis database to [track the relationship](#) between their utility, Pepco, and the local Police Foundation. Amidst a contentious merger, Pepco gave money to the DC Police Foundation to cultivate a “community leader” to speak on behalf of the utility. As the organizers described, “Pepco has something in common with the D.C. police department: They both claim to provide a service that doesn't actually serve D.C. residents, especially poor, Black Washingtonians being pushed further to the edges of the city as gentrification intensifies.”

**IMPORTANT RESOURCES:**



**STRINGS ATTACHED** - *Energy and Policy Institute*

This report digs deeply into the ways that philanthropy is used as a tool by utilities. The report has data on some of the most shameful utilities and how they have used their philanthropic dollars.



**FOSSIL FUELED FOOLERY** - *NAACP*

This breaks down some of the most important tactics that utilities and fossil fuel companies (they overlap... a *lot*) use against us.



**LITTLE SIS**

use this site to “connect the dots” between your politicians and utility. WePowerDC used this tool to expose the relationship between Pepco and Policing -- two forms of oppression in DC.

# UTILITIES USE EFFECTIVE MEDIA SHOPS

## What To Expect

Utilities have spent millions of dollars on public relations (PR) in order to control the narrative about their operations and influence policy in their favor. According to a 2015 study by the **Center for Public Integrity**, by industry sector, the biggest clients of PR, marketing, and ad services were energy and natural resource associations. Public relations work is not considered lobbying and doesn't need to be federally disclosed, so utilities have flocked to PR firms in recent years to spend vast amounts of dark money on services as proxies to direct lobbying. The utilities have built well oiled, and sometimes nefarious methods to keep public narrative on their side.

When communities organize around change that builds energy democracy or when the utility wants something, the utility will work with its in-house or contracted PR firm to turn out op-eds in local newspapers, create slick videos that lambast things like renewable energy, and send mailers to their captured customers. They cultivate **narratives of themselves as “community-focused corporate citizens,”** as Bridget Vial from Work for Me DTE described when she discussed her local utility. Patrick Robbins of the New York Energy Democracy Alliance pointed out that utilities use the **rhetoric of free riders and fair share** to advance policies that inhibit investment in renewable energy, particularly the types of investments that could support BIPOC communities.

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Utilities also work across geographies with their trade groups like the Edison Electric Institute (EEI) to coordinate campaigns to stop energy democracy and renewable energy projects. For instance, the Energy and Policy Institute reported that **between 2008 and 2013, EEI spent \$74 million contracting PR firms to support their efforts** on everything from slowing the energy transition to bolstering gas pipelines and stopping distributed renewable energy. These industry groups have become “**Merchants of Doubt**,” coordinating a doubt media playbook on issues of climate change and renewables in an effort to maintain their status quo.

To stand in the way of energy democracy demands, utilities have been known to **create fake front groups to look like concerned citizens**. For example, Nikita Perumal from Kentuckians for the Commonwealth remembers having to fight the Consumer Energy Alliance-- a **national front group** said to be the voice of the energy consumer. The so-called Alliance actively fights against solar while saying they stand for families and small businesses. In reality, the Consumer Energy Alliance receives money directly from utilities. In New Orleans, the utility, Entergy, went so far as to **hire actors** as protestors to support a natural gas power plant. They also lean on their philanthropic donations (discussed above) to cultivate leaders that speak for the utility in hearings or even in op-eds. The American Gas Association has even started an **ad campaign** with Instagram and Facebook influencers focused on the benefits of cooking on gas stoves as a way to combat building electrification.

## How We Fight Back:

### BUILD GRASSROOTS POWER

One of the most critical resources that we have is our community. The best antidote to PR and media onslaught is grassroots power. As Mari Rose Taruc put it “we are more trustworthy than a company.” The deep relational building we do will mean that we can show up in numbers and counter the narrative being put forward by the utility. Reaching out to community members in the places where they come to support one another-- like community centers, churches, other organizing spaces-- and speaking in ways that connect to their issues or resonates with their experience, will facilitate stronger, more diverse community opposition to the utility’s media tactics. For instance, Wan Smith from the Partnership for Southern Equity described how they connected with people at food pantries, handing out popular education materials and connecting the intersecting crises of food insecurity with utility justice and the rate hike they were fighting.

### INVEST IN POPULAR EDUCATION

A key to building upon that grassroots power is investing in popular education to inoculate the community from misinformation and build your organizing base. The utilities’ media machines will be hard at work skewing data in their direction or telling a story about their community service. It is important to design popular education assets that **breaks down issues so that they are accessible and relatable to people’s everyday lives**. As was mentioned in the previous section, utilities actively try to either make issues too complicated for understanding or they sow disinformation. By articulating how the utility works or why their messaging is misleading, it can help community members feel empowered with the information to engage in action in the case of the former or be wary of utility messaging in terms of the latter. When we are working in a complexified energy system, popular education is an opportunity to design visuals that lay out the basics, expose inequities, and help us articulate our demands.



### **TELL STORIES AND BUILD A NEW NARRATIVE**

Critical to a winning messaging strategy is to not engage in a fight with a utility on their home turf, but to instead force them to meet us on our court. Storytelling is a powerful tactic that we can use to show the real implications of utility decisions. For instance, someone sharing their experience of having their energy cut off can create a visceral and emotional reaction around the experience of impacted community members, making the suffering more real to those not living under such oppressive circumstances. We can also leverage these moments to shift the larger narrative that the utility is meticulously cultivating. For example, while the utility may be talking in terms of time horizons for shifting off gas that are “economically viable,” we can lift up the voices of those struggling to breathe in the shadow of a gas plant and move the frame toward access to clean energy as a human right. Storytelling is also an opportunity to weave intersecting crises together and expand your movement-- connecting housing justice to the fight for energy democracy, for example. Bridget Vial from Work for Me, DTE broke down the three critical pieces needed to build a compelling narrative:

- 1. Tell a story of impacted communities** that illustrates the real harm of utilities;
- 2. Gather data and information that refute your opponent’s messaging** and exposes their motivation-- like the profit motive for private utilities; and
- 3. Build a vision** for energy democracy that resonates with and energizes your community.

Jorden Revels emphasized the last point-- critical to building momentum towards energy democracy is to help people develop the “political imagination of what is possible.” We need to prove that we have a more compelling, viable model for the public grounded in justice that stands in opposition to the utilities.

### **CULTIVATE THE LEADERSHIP OF IMPACTED COMMUNITY MEMBERS**

Leadership from the frontlines that is supported and cultivated will be incredibly important to telling authentic stories. Jodi Lasseter and Connie Leeper from North Carolina mention that people living in low-income and/or oppressed communities often receive messages about themselves that make it hard for them to see that they can become leaders and that their communities have power. It is important to help new leaders, especially among Black and Indigenous communities, re-conceptualize what leadership means and we must help them to see themselves as people with the capacity to take on such roles. Often, certain people from impacted communities are relied upon to represent and maintain the entirety of the narrative, putting major burdens on just a few people. It is important to build in opportunities for leadership so that the movement has many spokespeople who can talk to the experience of utilities in their lives.

Utilities have a huge amount of power, self-confident messengers, and money to build their messaging. This means that they may intimidate or even try to undercut these emerging community leaders. Campaigns should grow community members' confidence to speak to the press and the public while providing care and back up when the utility begins to fight back.

### **USE SMART DIRECT ACTION**

Our communities can leverage inflection point moments via smart direct action tactics-- both on platforms like social media and in-person actions. These direct actions are opportunities to mobilize your base and expose publicly and even villainize the utility. Before attempting a direct action, however, you should know who you are targeting with the action. You must ask questions like: Who is the intended audience for the action? Who is going to move on your issue and how much power do they have to make change? Escalation toward direct action should always align with your political goals.

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Creative actions are part of the wheelhouse of movements that utilities often do not have (unless they actively pay impersonators like in Louisiana). It allows us to inject creativity and fun into our organizing, as Mari Rose Taruc puts it. Media outlets love to cover controversy and movements can force issues by mobilizing their bases, increasing media hits, and either gain additional political support or force politicians to take a side via direct action. Art helps us tell compelling stories quickly and it helps to build relationships with artists to drum up creative ideas that can inspire action.

Social media is increasingly becoming a place for direct action, as well. Mary Anaise-Helgar, climate writer and activist, has talked about the **compelling reasons** to take down fossil fuel companies whenever they try to greenwash on social media. This is a clear way to deprive the companies of their social capital. Helgar has used this tactic as a way to engage and activate allies in the fight while also coming up with witty GIFs and emojis.

*Though the Public Service Commission is responsible for ensuring that NY state's climate and consumer protections laws are upheld, the PSC often acts incrementally, instead of with the bold action required of this moment in climate catastrophe. AGREE advocates for Commissioners who will prioritize renewable, equitable, and affordable energy for all New Yorkers because we need decision-makers versed in environmental justice at the helm; photo from the Alliance for a Green Economy (member organization of the NY Energy Democracy Alliance).*



## **CASE STUDY: KILLING AB1139 IN CALIFORNIA**

Crystal Huang at People Power Solar Cooperative recalls the fight in 2021 to overturn AB1139, a bill that would have hiked the costs of both new and existing net-metered projects in California, making community-based solar projects all but impossible to finance. In this fight, Utilities employed a “cost shift” narrative that local rooftop solar shifts the costs of grid maintenance away from wealthy homeowners and onto LMI communities. They employed the imagery of Elon Musk stealing wages from his workers and selling solar as a luxury commodity in order to prove their point. Along the way, they were able to convince some progressive assembly members as well as their union, IBEW, to carry the bill.

Crystal and allies such as the Local Clean Energy Alliance understood that energy democracy advocates should have more in common with progressive lawmakers and labor unions than they do with IOUs or Elon Musk. They rejected the IOUs’ “cost shift” argument entirely, and instead framed the IOU position as “benefits robbery”. They explained the IOUs’ monopoly position and corrupt business model in understandable language, and emphasized the millions IOUs pay each year to protect their business model despite literally burning down the state. Lastly, instead of using terms like “rooftop solar” employed by corporate enemies of AB1139, they used the language of “local solar”, emphasizing solar’s democratic potential and setting themselves apart from the Elon Musks of the world.

In a conversation with IBEW representatives at the Alameda Labor Council just before the bill was killed, Crystal was able to build bridges of shared understanding with labor representatives by engaging them as an ally despite their opposing stance on AB1139. Crystal began by being empathetic to the need for more unionized jobs and worker-owned companies in the

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solar industry. This sat well with the IBEW representatives and surprised some of them, who in turn were empathetic to Crystal's critiques of the IOU business model and the need for local solar in order to provide clean air, community wealth, and energy resilience. The conversation ended on good terms, with both groups promising to work together despite their differences to build toward their shared goals for energy democracy in the long term.

### IMPORTANT RESOURCES:



#### DRAG THEM - HEATED

An article written about the importance of going after fossil fuel and utility companies in social media forums.

# UTILITIES CAPTURE POLITICAL PROCESSES

## What to expect:

As a regulated monopoly, one crucial way that utilities can continue to increase rates, pump out fossil fuels, and get other things they want is by capturing the very institutions set to regulate them. They have been able to effectively co-opt political ties in a number of ways, most importantly through: campaign contributions, lobbying, the “revolving door”, and using dark or illegal money in politics. Lobbying and campaign donations help companies maintain their monopoly and get things they want like higher energy bills or an end to rooftop solar.

*Rally in Albany for the Build Public Renewables Act with Venmo posters highlighting the contributions Democratic leadership has taken from the fossil fuel industry; from Public Power NY Coalition*



Utility companies **donate campaign contributions** to politicians and commissioners involved in the decision making process. They make these contributions in numerous ways-- including by donating directly as the utility itself, passing it through their **chief executives**, and bundling their donations through trade groups like the Chamber of Commerce, Edison Electric Institute, or the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association. Oftentimes, utilities will donate on both sides of the aisle, Republican and Democrat, to secure their position regardless as to who holds power. However, generally speaking, utilities are more likely to give campaign contributions to Republican candidates. In fact, utilities and their trade groups gave around \$6.3 million in recent years to members of Congress who called to **overturn** the 2020 elections.

While utilities contribute a lot of money at the federal level, they are largely regulated at the state level. As a result, they **pour large sums into state politics**-- where a few dollars have even more political gain. Sometimes contributions can be quite elusive to track as utilities will give money to charities or projects that politicians support in an effort to curry favor. Nikita Perumal of Kentuckians for the Commonwealth stated, "Kentucky eliminated one-for-one net metering during the 2019 legislative session. Utilities spent absurd amounts of money in campaign contributions and direct lobbying over a period of years, trying, and eventually succeeding, to push through this anti-net metering legislation. We did the math, and in one year they spent over \$500,000--\$204,557 on lobbying in 2018, and \$327,050 in PAC contributions to 2018 legislative candidates." On another nefarious note, **utilities often use our own bills** to directly fund groups like Edison Electric Institute who then lobby against our own interests.

Utilities also lobby regulators and legislators. Their major **campaign contributions gain them increased access** to those politicians and it allows the utilities to influence them in their favor. They use rate-payer funds to staff large teams of lawyers for each Commission proceeding. Particularly at the state level

and after years of austerity so politicians have little help on hand to understand the complex system of energy, utilities come in as experts with ready-made policy and will give briefings that politicians can then run with. Trade groups like the American Legislative Exchange Council often have **prepped legislation** that they deploy across multiple states to advance their agenda to roll back renewable energy standards .

The use of dark or illegal money to influence campaigns is not a foreign tactic to utilities. In fact, it is quite the contrary. Utilities could teach a master class on such methods. As has been described in previous sections, utilities will use fake front groups as political campaign ads to mislead the public and politicians. They will use their philanthropic donations to bolster political support for legislation or regulatory changes. Utilities also invite politicians or well-positioned people to events or fancy wine tastings as a way to curry favor. They encourage staff to hold Board positions and run for office. In other cases, their political operations stray outside any gray area and become outright illegal political activity.

For instance, FirstEnergy allegedly **bribed legislators** in Ohio to support its nuclear and coal bailout bill. U.S. Attorney David M. DeVillers explained the political game as, “a conspiracy to pass and maintain a \$1.6 billion bailout in exchange for \$61 million in dark money. [The money was used] to line the pockets of defendants, to build a power base for Larry Householder and to pass and maintain House Bill 6.” Federal investigators caught them in 2019, but they are not the first utility to take political influence to such illegal extremes.



## How to Fight Back

### EXPOSE THE TIES OF POLITICIANS

Much like the need to “know the flow” of philanthropic donations, a clear way to uncover the ways that utilities influence politicians is to look at their campaign contributions and the lobbying spending that they are mandated to publish. This will let you know who they are trying to curry favor with and who might stand as some of your biggest opponents while campaigning. It can also be used as a way to expose the ties between politicians and utilities and to show the public how they’re being cut out of the equation. There are really helpful websites that actually run search engines that make looking up contribution and lobbying spending easy. For federal-level investigation, [Open Secrets](#) is a great guide, and [Follow The Money](#) has a wonderful state-level search engine. [Little Sis](#) can help you build out maps of contributions and lobbying, as well as other flows of money. In one case, activists exposed an [unacceptable gift](#) between the head of the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality and utility Dominion after they found out that Dominion paid his way to a Masters’ golf tournament. They set up a golf “shuttle” on the front lawn of Department of Environmental Quality-- **using direct action as a way to show the ties to the public.**

### INVESTIGATE USING FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACTS

Politicians and government officials are supposed to be beholden to the public, and so there is a tool called the **Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)** that can allow you to get direct access to records and correspondence by politicians. Sometimes politicians will try to actively avoid giving the information. Therefore, you should make sure your request is quite specific. Sometimes just putting in a FOIA request puts politicians on notice that you are watching. You should try to work with friendly researchers or lawyers who can [help you navigate](#) what can sometimes be a complicated process of getting access. If you’re able to get information, you may be able to see

illegitimate deals between politicians and the utilities or expose chummy relationships. **Naming and shaming** politicians and their relationships with utilities can be a great way to ostracize them and open up space for better policy.

### **PULL THE GRAVITATIONAL FORCE OF LOBBYING**

Mobilize your grassroots allies and growing movement to engage in legislative or regulatory pushes. Because utilities have been so effective at making the energy system so complex and hidden from the public eye, they are not used to public or movement engagement. The benefit is when you're able to mobilize a base for specific pieces of legislation or regulatory cases, it can have a major effect. Set up meetings with politicians that you think can help you organize a coalition against utility interests and bring people directly affected by utility operations to speak with them. You can also organize testimony at public hearings so that people can provide their direct experience and overwhelm the regulatory body with stories from the ground or from your aligned experts. Not only will this apply personal pressure, it can lead to media coverage that will apply public pressure as well.

It can be helpful in these cases to coordinate messaging, providing guides to some of the most crucial points you want politicians to walk away with and establish protocols so people know who they're talking to and how to join (either online or in person) and support them so that if someone is new and nervous about engaging, they have personal and educational resources at their disposal. Admittedly, this can be quite hard. Utilities will sometimes work with politicians to stifle the public voice by rescheduling hearings making them at times inaccessible to working class people or by curtailing time for public comment. You should be prepared to be flexible and always plan for some of these contingencies in your organizing strategy.

## ENGAGE IN ELECTORAL POLITICS

While pushing for specific legislation or changes at the Public Utilities Commission can be mission-critical, we have to engage in electoral politics. In doing so, we can actively change the advocacy landscape (a tactic that utilities have used to their benefit for years). One method that has proven very successful in beating back utility influence is fighting to end utility donations to politicians. The **No Fossil Fuel Money Pledge**, originated from a pledge, which involved rejecting contributions from both Dominion Energy and Appalachian Power Company. It puts politicians on the spot to call out why they may or may not be against the utility or fossil fuel company while on the campaign trail. It is also a helpful vehicle to put the utility on the defensive by making the Pledge a political talking point. Further, it offers a story to the media if the politician breaks that pledge or there is a contested race with one signed and the other has not. Another option is to fight at the local or state level for publicly funded elections so that politicians can run without relying on corporate donations.

Another key method to engage in electoral politics is to **back utility justice advocates or run new people from inside of your movement**. In doing so, you can organize to put someone in power who will actively combat the utility and advocate for energy democracy. While utilities may have money, they usually don't have as good a ground game and lack the organizing skills held by movement folks. You could be the major force in a candidate's win as victory is generally dependent upon a few deeply committed community people knocking on doors to talk one on one with neighbors about a person running for office, holding town halls in your local neighborhoods to talk about the candidate and energy democracy, and organizing online phone banking or engaging on social media. Even if your candidate doesn't win, the campaign itself will force the utilities' candidate to speak to the agenda that affects your community. In Georgia, there was a **competitive Public Service Commission race** where the candidate running on an environmental justice platform lost but was able to garner support and bring up topics in the race that wouldn't likely have been voiced otherwise.

## **CASE STUDY: SOLAR UNITED NEIGHBORS IN DC**

Campaign donations, donations to local non-profits in exchange for political support, and dark money spending by Exelon allowed them to take over the local utility, Pepco, in 2017. During the campaign for the merger, the company coming in, Exelon, promised to keep the energy rates low-- but two years later they reneged on that promise. A broad coalition mobilized to stop the merger and successfully brought it to an end twice before it finally got approved, largely through the utility's payment of \$20 million to the Mayor's office that allowed her to buy the land for DC's Soccer Stadium. However, the campaign stands up as a guide to engaging the community and fighting back against the influence of money in politics. The coalition to stop the merger wrote letters, campaigned, and advocated with public service commissioners and council members. There's clearly some "off the record" influence being made here. The utilities' energy and focus are on extracting as much money as possible off their captive rate-base through a relentless series of the rate cases and nearly unfettered investment in capital improvement that they can rate-base. They are currently asking for a 10% rate increase over the next 3 years and massive funding for infrastructure development. Washington, DC's Council has mandated that the city achieve 100% clean energy by 2032 including 10% local distributed solar carve out. Exelon could not stop that legislation so instead they are working to bypass local rules that limit the scope of the monopoly by throttling community solar and seeking rule changes that allow them to own and profit off of solar, storage and energy efficiency work. Nothing is stopping them from investing billions in infrastructure development and passing on the increase to ratepayers whether the investments are needed or not. The community is obviously displeased with this arrangement. When people start complaining about the price of electricity, they will undoubtedly blame the clean energy mandate.

**IMPORTANT RESOURCES:**



**POWER LINES** - *Little Sis*

This is an indispensable resource that digs even deeper into political ties and how to use their resources to map the levels of political influence over utilities.



**OPEN SECRETS** - *The Center for Responsive Politics*

This guide will allow you to track federal donations and lobbying expenditures for a huge number of sectors, including energy utilities.



**FOLLOW THE MONEY**

This guide will allow you to track *state* donations and lobbying expenditures.

**HOW TO FOIA** - *MuckRock*

This resource was created to support people investigating privatization for water utilities but it has some helpful explainers on how to use FOIA for local government.

# UTILITIES BUILD INFORMAL NETWORKS WITH REGULATORS

## What to expect

In the previous section, we discussed the ways that utilities use money to lobby or otherwise sway outcomes in their favor. But some of the people we talked to feel that the relationships utilities cultivate with regulators or legislators go deeper than simple financial contributions. In fact, when describing the relationships between utilities and regulators, most people we interviewed used phrases such as “cozy,” “buddy-buddy,” and “insider baseball.”

Utility executives have many important cultural ties with regulators. One review of commissioners and utility executives in the Midwest found striking similarities in the racial and gender makeup of the utility executives and the bodies that regulate them.

*Though the Public Service Commission is responsible for ensuring that NY state's climate and consumer protections laws are upheld, the PSC often acts incrementally, instead of with the bold action required of this moment in climate catastrophe. AGREE advocates for Commissioners who will prioritize renewable, equitable, and affordable energy for all New Yorkers because we need decision-makers versed in environmental justice at the helm; photo from the Alliance for a Green Economy (member organization of the NY Energy Democracy Alliance).*



In many cases, regulators and legislators feel a stronger cultural tie to the people they are supposed to regulate than they do to the ones they are supposed to protect. It's rare that a commissioner has the firsthand experience of being unable to pay a utility bill or of having their power shut off. Instead, their financial concerns are in closer alignment to the kinds faced (to a lesser degree) by utility executives: which private school to send their kids to; paying the mortgage on a first or second home; and affording nice vacations. These similarities don't come up in any official argument, but they can and will subtly (or not so subtly) influence the thinking.

Additionally, utilities will actively recruit former regulators to work for them in order to take advantage of their collegial bonds with regulatory agencies or legislatures. They also encourage their employees to either run for positions (in some states, regulatory positions are elected) or lobby internally for a friendly person to be put on commissions or other important committees. In the case of electric cooperatives, the elected board also serves as the regulatory body and they have built a-- largely white and male-- board of leaders who share many of the same wants and needs and who actively support one another in staying in power. This phenomenon is usually described as a **revolving door** between political office and members of the industries those offices are supposed to be regulating.

And what is the result of this revolving door policy? The unfortunate outcomes of this arrangement are decisions that do not make logical sense and that are not based on facts. For example, Georgia Power used its **cozy relationship with regulators** to compel a rate increase even though the utility has some of the highest profit margins in the country. Indeed, there are dozens of other decisions, large and small, that get influenced by these informal networks all to the detriment of the communities they serve.

### How to Fight Back

First, it's important to bring fights out into the open. The very strength of the utilities' informal networks can also be a source of weakness. Their overreliance on relationships means they are not always prepared to make a solid public case. Utilities simply lack the kinds of resources that strong grassroots networks bring to bear in the public arena.

Mari Rose Taruc in California and Bridget Vial in Michigan champion the phenomenal network of environmental justice activists and how it can keep utilities from **controlling the public narrative** while getting local leaders on their side. Denise Abdul-Rahman shared how they've **demanded accessible meetings** in Indiana so that it's not just industry insiders that can weigh in.

It can also be worthwhile to pursue strategies that **change who holds legislative and regulatory roles**. By getting energy democracy champions onto commissions, boards, or into legislatures, it may be possible to alter the chummy nature of their relationship with utilities. Advocates can change the culture from one of rubber-stamping utility requests to one where officials question utility proposals and advocate for the public interest. However, if there is just one energy democracy advocate on a commission that is otherwise full of people closely tied to utilities, the reality may be that the EJ advocate ends up conforming with the new culture. Therefore, we must make a conscious effort to maintain connections.



# WE HAVE THE POWER TO WIN!

Our communities have power. We have the power to fight back behemoth utilities, and even to win. This playbook has attempted to expose utility strategies and how communities have effectively organized back in order to equip our allies, activists, and relatives across the country to find and build their own power. It does not fully cover the breadth and vibrancy of many movements and how they've organized, nor the new and nefarious ways utilities may try to undermine us. However, it has attempted to give an overview and add to the toolbox of strategies that have worked in others' campaigns.

Amidst all of the exacting and creative solutions, a theme knit together the research and interviews in this project: we win when we invest in our communities, build up our own leadership, and we build grassroots power grounded in racial, gender, and energy justice. Our movement is strong when we listen to people's experiences and stories and support one another.

