



Beyond the backyard: Scaling up of resistance to wind power in Sweden

Simon Haikola^{*}, Jonas Anshelm, Johan Niskanen

Department of Thematic Studies – Unit of Technology and Social Change, Linköping University, Sweden

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ABSTRACT

Since 2009, when a municipal veto right was established, wind power in Sweden has become intensely politicised and questioned. Having been considered the key technology to drive the energy system transition by all parliamentary parties before 2010, the 2022 elections brought into power a government that promised an end to the “steel forests of wind turbines”. Based on a comprehensive analysis of media coverage of wind power conflicts on national and local levels, the study explains these developments as a discursive struggle. It shows how localised and fragmented resistance groups evolved into generalised opposition to wind power per se. These shifts are explained as enabled by political, legal and discursive opportunity structures.

The study shows how political, legal and discursive opportunities allow for the scaling up of localised resistance to wind power. It explains wind power resistance as embedded in socio-political structures by analysing the relationship between resistance claims on different institutional and geographic scales. While previous research has identified a need to look beyond formal planning processes and at wider sociopolitical contexts to understand the formation of wind power resistance, there is a lack of comprehensive, longitudinal studies of how local resistance shift scales into national resistance. We provide a theoretically informed and empirically grounded analysis of a national case of growing wind power resistance. By showing the speed with which a counter discourse was able to shift scales and gain an entrenched position in Swedish energy politics, the paper enables an understanding of similar developments around Europe.

1. Introduction

As the energy system transition has entered a second phase, entailing the large-scale implementation of renewable energy technologies refined through the preceding phase of technological development, conflicts over land-use have proliferated (Markard, 2018). Around Europe, local groups protesting the establishment of wind parks have been able to slow or stop the development of new projects, with both state agencies and the wind energy industry emphasising social acceptance as the major factor hindering a faster pace in the energy system transition. While the war in Ukraine has increased demands for energy self-sufficiency in Europe, adding to the impetus for renewable energy expansion, countervailing macro-political factors have manifested in the form of political movements that, like the National Front in France and the Sweden Democrats in Sweden, successfully mobilise local environmental protection as a discursive trope in their political programs (White, 2022; Lockwood, 2018).

Like other resistances to local unwanted land-use (LULU), wind power resistance movements are characterised by heterogeneity in

terms of strategies and actions, as well as their goals (Della Porta and Piazza, 2007; Della Porta et al., 2024). More than for other similar resistances, the drivers behind wind power opposition have posed a particular puzzle for social science. Whereas for example anti-mining movements have lent themselves to framings of anti-colonialism and anti-capitalism, the close association of wind power with liberal and green values has meant resistance to it has been associated with right-wing and/or anti-climate politics (Lockwood, 2018; Batel, 2020). This, coupled with the fact that wind power resistances up until recently have been localised rather than coherent national movements (Niskanen et al., 2024), can explain why social science has rarely analysed them as institutional and structural issues (Aitken, 2010; Wolsink, 2018).

A particular conundrum for research has been the “gap” between local resistance and a wide general acceptance in many countries of wind power as an energy source (Bell et al., 2005). Researching this gap means investigating the relation between local environmental protection claims and national attitudes. The present paper will contribute to the research by proposing that this relation be understood in discursive terms, as a struggle between different discourses.

^{*} Corresponding author.

E-mail address: simon.haikola@liu.se (S. Haikola).

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Using the example of Swedish wind power resistance, it will show that political, legal and discursive opportunity structures can explain how local environmental protection claims become manifested differently over time and over geographical and institutional scales. While local environmental protection is a consistent driver of wind power resistance, the forms in which it is expressed depend on the configuration of discourses at a given time. Critical researchers have long called for multi-dimensional studies of wind power resistance that go beyond a focus on the opponent only, but there is still a lack of comprehensive research of how local wind power protest groups interact with their wider sociopolitical context (Wolsink, 2018). Focus is usually either on explaining the motivations of wind power opponents, or on single local cases. The paper contributes to the research field by providing both a theoretical explanation and comprehensive empirical analysis of a national case of resistance “scale shifting” (McAdam et al., 2001).

Like many other liberal democracies, Sweden has experienced a politicisation of its energy policy debate over the last decade. Local environmental protection claims have been pitted against national transition imperatives, with issues of local autonomy, distributive justice and differentiation of responsibilities along geographical (center/periphery, urban/rural, north/south) and institutional (local, regional and national) levels at the center of political debate (Niskanen et al., 2024; Lindvall, 2023). For the first time, Swedish polls reveal local hostility to new wind power has grown to exceed the number of positive answers, while the support for wind power in general remains overwhelmingly positive (Rosén and Hurinsky, 2023). The widespread general support is difficult to reconcile with the fact that a wind power-sceptic alliance of conservative and nationalist parties won elections in 2022 on a platform to radically overhaul the climate policy agenda premised on massive wind power expansion. The country's environmental legislation gives local resistance to wind power unique institutional influence over the planning process through a municipal veto right. In this sense, Sweden makes a paradigmatic case to investigate how institutional power can be leveraged within discursive power struggles, used to drive politicisation of wind power by scaling up the local core of LULU movements.

2. Literature review – local environmental protection and national resistance

As wind power expanded in Europe in the early 2000s, the appearance of local resistance groups became a topic for research into the relationship between such localised resistance and a strong general support for wind power. To avoid simplistic assumptions or conclusions about local selfishness – “not-in-my-backyard” or NIMBYism – as a driver of resistance, social scientists argued that every manifestation of wind power resistance should be understood in terms of place-specific characteristics (Wolsink, 2000; Wolsink, 2007a; Kempton et al., 2005; Wolsink, 2012). These studies argued that the formation of local resistances must be understood as detached from public attitudes gauged through survey data, and that opinions against specific projects had little to do with attitudes expressed on a general level. Since then, research has evolved to investigate the relation of localised wind power resistances to a sense of place attachment (Devine-Wright, 2009; Batel and Devine-Wright, 2015; Rudolph et al., 2017) or the planning procedure (Wolsink, 2007b; Clausen et al., 2021; Pepermans and Loots, 2013).

With the introduction of the concept of “social acceptance” in 2007, researchers wanted to draw attention to the institutional context in which resistance to new energy technologies was embedded, rather than focusing solely on the motivations of those who protested (Wüstenhagen et al., 2007). Institutions were understood broadly as including a wider sociopolitical context of both formal and informal rules, and the call was for research to be attentive to institutional changes over time to accurately capture the dynamics of localised resistances (Wolsink, 2018). One academic response has been to investigate resistance formations as discursive representations instead of expressions of individual

sentiments. Already in 2007, Maarten Wolsink argued that negative attitudes to wind power in themselves are of little academic interest: “Such attitudes exist everywhere, [so what] is important [is] how negative attitudes are represented within the network at the decision-making level” [21, p.2694]. The pejorative labeling of resistance as NIMBY, for example, could be understood discursively as an exercise of power (Verhoeven, 2021; Zografos and Martínez-Alier, 2009; Burningham et al., 2015). Researchers have proposed to study how the arguments raised for and against renewable energy installations play out as struggles on the level of discourse rather than as attitudes based in psychology or driven by individual motivations (Ellis et al., 2007; Barry et al., 2008).

There remains, however, a domination by studies that seek to understand the motivations of protest groups, and the potential policy instruments that could lessen resistance (Lindvall et al., 2024; Gaede and Rowlands, 2018; Carley et al., 2020; Karasmanaki and Tsantopoulos, 2021). We see reason to complement such studies by broadening the perspective to include a wider sociopolitical context, and investigate the interactions between resistance groups and other actor groups, as well as formal and informal institutions (Wolsink, 2018; Batel, 2018; Chilvers et al., 2018). All major power sources – nuclear, hydro and biomass – in Sweden have occasioned sustained and nationwide resistances that have hindered their further development (Anshelm and Haikola, 2016). Therefore, it is imperative to research not only what drives those who object to wind power, but also the structural mechanisms that enable the shift from localised to generalised resistance.

Studies that do look at interactions between protest groups and a wider context provide important insights into how resistances wield influence through mechanisms that extend well beyond the formal planning process (Lintz and Leibenath, 2020; Reusswig et al., 2016; Ogilvie and Rootes, 2015). However, such studies are often limited to one or a few localised cases. Like previous research on Denmark (Kirkegaard et al., 2021), and to some extent Norway (Eikeland et al., 2023), we here seek to understand how resistance comes to influence national politics by locating discursive claims in a broader sociopolitical context. Thus, we contribute to the literature with a theoretically and empirically grounded analysis of a national case that extends over a long time period.

3. The Swedish example

Sweden follows a general trend in Europe and the US towards increasingly polarised energy system politics (Jeong and Lowry, 2021; Froese and Schilling, 2019; Anshelm and Hultman, 2014). Often, but not always, the poles are constituted by liberal promotion of decarbonisation through wind power, and an emerging conservative backlash that instead proposes nuclear power or other measures as more efficient (White, 2022; Lockwood, 2018; Lintz and Leibenath, 2020; Anshelm and Hultman, 2014; Fraune and Knodt, 2018; Hess and Renner, 2019). In the fall of 2022, a conservative-nationalist coalition won the Swedish parliamentary elections on a political platform that disavowed what they argued were wasteful and unjust climate policies enacted by the previous red-green governments. Wind power was at the center of the energy-political message touted by the conservative coalition before the elections, with the future Minister-of-Energy vowing there would be no more “steel forests of wind turbines” (Busch and Brodin, 2021).

The elections revealed a deep rift in Swedish energy and climate politics. Up until 2019, a large majority in Parliament agreed that wind power, together with existing hydropower, would form the basis of the future energy system. In 2009, the liberal-conservative government reformed planning legislation to facilitate wind power expansion and up until 2021 it grew to generate 10 % of Sweden's electricity (Swedish Energy Agency, 2022a). They, and subsequently the two red-green governments in power from 2014 to 2022, retained and expanded the system of green electricity certificates that had been established in 2003. The system meant that each MWh of renewable electricity generated one

certificate which the producer could then either use or sell on an open market, where demand was created through a quota obligation covering, mainly, electricity providers. In 2022, the system was being phased out on the ground that wind power had become competitive enough to no longer require subsidies (Kooij, 2018; Swedish Energy Agency 2022b). Another notable reformation was the division in 2011 of the country into four electricity price zones, from electricity price zone 1 in the north to number 4 in the south. The purpose was to incentivise investments in electricity generation where it was most needed, i.e. where prices were high. Given the location of major hydropower sources to the country's north, zone 1 has since tended to have lower electricity prices than zone 4.

The rapid expansion did not match the prognosis for future renewable energy demand, however. In 2017, the cross-party Energy Commission concluded that up to 120 TWh of renewable electricity would need to be added to 2045, the target year for net-zero (Kraftsamling för Framtidens Energi, 2017). The year before, in 2016, five out of eight parliamentary parties from across the political spectrum struck an energy agreement. It included abolished connection fees for private actors building offshore wind parks, new green electricity certificates and the establishment of a principle of free market conditions. The latter meant that new nuclear power facilities could be built in the three municipalities already hosting nuclear power plants, but without any form of state subsidy.

However, in the years following the 2016 Energy Agreement, parliamentary consensus has dissolved as conservative-nationalist parties have coalesced around anti-wind and pro-nuclear rhetoric, jeopardising the energy system transition plan. Thus, Sweden's is a case where the core tenets of liberal climate policy consensus have been challenged over the last years. The politicisation of the energy transition issue in Sweden may well be indicative of similar developments elsewhere in Europe when net-zero agendas must be hammered out in concrete policies.

Wind power holds a unique place in Swedish environmental history. Hydropower and nuclear power, the main pillars of the Swedish energy system, were projects of industrial modernity, whose build-out occurred primarily during the postwar decades when the centralised state was at the peak of its powers. Neither faced any significant resistance until after they had reached considerable scale. Biomass as an energy source was also only opposed after a large expansion in the 1990s. For all three of those power sources, civil society environmental organisations like the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (SSNC) have played important roles in mobilising the national resistance (Anshelm and Haikola, 2016).

Established in 1909, the SSNC is Sweden's oldest environmental organisation. Over its more than century-long history it has mostly taken an antagonistic position to official energy policy for its destructive effects on the environment. However, in promoting wind power it has found itself in the unusual position of siding with state agencies. Wind power resistance groups in Sweden has therefore been forced to resort to other organisational channels and arguments than those that have enabled environmental opinions against hydropower, nuclear power and biomass to become nationally influential (Anshelm and Haikola, 2016). On its side, however, it has a unique planning configuration that creates significant hurdles for wind power developers.

Unlike most comparable nations, Sweden has no institutionalised compensation for municipalities willing to host wind power parks, and thus no clear incentive for local politicians that face a vocal wind power opposition to insist on a project going ahead (Lindvall, 2023). At the same time, Sweden is unique in giving municipalities authority to block any wind power development through a "veto" rule¹ that was established as part of the planning reformation in 2009.

Swedish municipalities have a constitutional right to self-

governance. The municipal veto was established as a guarantee that this right was not encroached upon in the efforts to facilitate wind power expansion. Until 2009, a wind power project had to undergo a double evaluation, both according to the Environmental Code and the Planning and Building Act. When the liberal-conservative government suggested that only the former should be applicable, thus removing the municipal influence through its land use planning monopoly, a special wind power veto was established instead.

The veto rule is unique not only in the principle of the absolute right to say no, but also in the scope for wielding this right awarded by the planning procedure. Before applying, a wind power developer holds consultations with representatives of the municipality involved and the County Administrative Board, the state's representative in administrative regions. The municipality is also commonly involved when the developer holds information meetings with the general public. After these proceedings the developer, if encouraged to proceed, submits an environmental impact assessment and formal application to the County Administrative Board, which then asks the municipality for its approval. At any of these stages, the municipality may decide to reject the proposal, and the developer has no legal recourse to change the outcome. It may even change its stance if a permit is on appeal, having already given its approval (Darpö, 2020).

As wind power controversies have proliferated, the veto rule has come increasingly into political and media focus. In 2021 and 2022, over 70 % of new project applications were blocked by municipalities, according to the wind power industry (Björkland, 2023). It has become evident that the wide scope for municipal intervention provides uncertainty not only for developers but also for civil servants within affected municipalities. Usually, the municipal council, where all elected parties are represented, make the final decision but the administration could also decide to let another representative instance speak for it (Swedish Government, 2008). As wind power has become increasingly politicised, civil servants have protested that their expert assessments, whether in favor or against, have not been taken into consideration due to the politicised nature of the projects (Haikola, 2024). A political proposal put forward by the Social Democratic government in 2022 to limit the veto power was voted down in Parliament.

4. Theory – discourse and opportunity structures

In this study, we adopt a discourse theoretical perspective to study the relation between localised and generalised resistance claims against wind power. Discourse, here, means a series of claims about a certain phenomenon that takes place within a specific field of knowledge or field of discussion (Hajer, 1996). Such a field should not be confused with a formalised debate arena, such as Twitter/X, but is an analytical construct encompassing the totality of discourses competing to define the meaning of the phenomenon in focus. In Foucauldian discourse analysis, this field is often called the discursive order. In the present paper, the phenomenon which rival discourses compete to define, and therefore holds the discursive order together, is the large-scale expansion of wind power in Sweden.

Both an effect and a point of using discourse analysis to study environmental conflicts is to divert attention from intentional actions to constructions of meaning. It puts focus, in our case, on how wind power resistance becomes manifested through public discourse where actor groups make claims that are always "co-constructed, relational, contextual, dynamic and rhetorical" [19, p.318]. There is both a "weak" and a "strong" case to make in favor of this approach. The weak is one of epistemological necessity: actor intentions are always difficult, if not impossible, for the researcher to access. The strong case is that the struggle between different claims to reality is a key manifestation of the environmental conflict itself. As argued by Haggett & Smith: "Claims-making and counter claim-making constitutes the debate itself ... the claims are the conflict; there is not other means to access or study it" [(Haggett and Smith, 2004), p.14; see also 58].

¹ The rule is not formally a veto, but a requirement for municipal approval for a project to proceed beyond a certain stage.

A key point of discourse theory is that discourse structures political action: it both constrains and enables policymaking and resistance by setting the informal rules for what can be formulated as a political problem or solution (Löfbrand and Strippel, 2015). The structural aspect of discourse theory means that political protests are co-constructed in the interaction between actors and their (structural) sociopolitical context: “Subjects and identities do not pre-exist their struggles and conflicts [but] are actually produced in the very construction of projects and coalitions” [(Howarth, 2024), p.320]. This resonates with the theory of political opportunity structures, which claims that the forms and relative success of political resistances are results of the interaction between movements in civil society and political institutions (della Porta, 2022). Specifically, political opportunity structure theory has identified receptiveness of established political parties, disagreement among political parties, and the ability to align with political or social elites, as crucial factors for resistance groups’ ability to gain influence over policymaking on a national level (Goodwin, 2012; McAdam, 1996). Likewise, studies have emphasised the openness of the legal process for resistance groups in terms of formal law and access to decision-makers (Hilson, 2002).

The central claim here, at least for our purposes, is that in researching wind power resistance on a collective or national level, we gain much by focusing on opportunities residing in the political/legal structure, rather than on the grievances that motivate individual actors or actor groups (Koopmans, 1999). This is not to argue grievances are unimportant in understanding how wind power becomes manifested. It is to state, rather, that such grievances must ultimately be channeled through the surrounding political and legal institutions, and that such institutions, therefore, are the primary determinant of the way resistance manifest on a wider societal scale (Koopmans, 1999).

Discursive structures are inextricably linked to political and legal structures. As political scientist Colin Hay argues, the processes through which issues become politicised or depoliticised are always inherently discursive (Hay, 2014). While there is no need to assume that political institutions should be understood in a limited sense, as only formal institutions (Koopmans, 1999), for the sake of analytical clarity there is reason to differentiate between the formal institutions of parliamentary politics and law, on the one hand, and on the other hand the cultural or ideational context in which such institutions are embedded. For this purpose, Koopmans and Statham [(Koopmans and Statham, 1999b), see also (Koopmans and Statham, 1999a)] introduced the concept of discursive opportunity structure. It signifies the “political culture” that is a key determinant for which types of resistance arguments gain a wider societal resonance, and can encompass a wide range of social traditions, norms and historical memories.

In the present paper, we use the concepts of political, legal and discursive opportunity structures to explain the mechanisms that have enabled a “scale shift” in the resistance to wind power in Sweden, from being an issue of localised opposition against specific projects to a generalised opposition with an entrenched position in national energy policy discourse. In the literature, the term scale-shifting is typically employed to connote a deliberate and strategic expansion of protest groups’ claims from localised to more general arguments with the aim of influencing policymaking (McAdam et al., 2001; Rootes, 2013). Here we make no claims about intentions, but use the term only to mean a change in the geographic and institutional scope of the arguments; i.e. whether they concern only a local, specific context or take the form of generalised opposition.

5. Methodology

We use Swedish national and local press covering wind power conflicts between 2009 and 2022, complemented with an analysis of the energy system debate in the Swedish Parliament. The main data set was gathered through the Retriever database, on the search “WIND POWER (and interchangeable concepts, e.g. WIND ENERGY) AND (veto OR

resistance OR opposition)”. The start year was set to 2009, the year the municipal veto was established in Swedish environmental law. Through the search, we identified around 650 relevant texts (feature articles, editorials, and opinion pieces) in the five largest national newspapers, and 3500 texts of the same categories in the local press (153 local newspapers covering all of Sweden’s 290 municipalities). Articles on the national level are mostly written by politicians, public officials, and representatives of the wind power industry, while the local press articles also include the voices of local opposition movements and private citizens.

The analysis of the main empirical material used in the paper had two main steps.

First, a qualitative discourse analysis of all selected articles was used to identify discursive themes (Braun et al., 2019). The analysis was inductive, with texts sorted between local and national press. The discursive themes were derived from a close reading of all the texts. The analysis was compiled into two separate chronological narratives, one based on the local press, and one based on the national press. We focused this part of the analysis on argumentative lines, and each main discursive theme was given a name indicating primary type or substance of argument/idea (see Appendix). To validate the identification of discursive themes from the main body of texts each author made a separate reading and coding. The codes were then compared, and differences reconciled through a discussion.

From the main body of texts, 180 articles were selected as representative of the discursive themes identified through the analysis, i.e. they form the selection from the main body that best illustrates the themes we identified. A chronological narrative was compiled analysing the events and arguments represented in the two types of press material where these 180 articles were cited.

The number is random, as it is the number of articles that we deemed necessary to verify the occurrence of the main discursive themes. The reading was focused on identifying resistance to wind power on the local and national level, and therefore the analysis was not representative for the general wind power debate. We did, however, identify themes of support to clarify the presence of a powerful pro-wind discourse on the national level. This list should not be seen as an exhaustive list of references for various arguments, but a representative sample for the themes that we identified. One author chose the sample, and another validated the selection.

A discursive theme, in this context, means a central idea or argument, to which several supporting claims, associated ideas and sentiments, memories etcetera may be invoked (Hajer, 1996). To be identified as a discursive theme, such an association of arguments and ideas must form a constitutive part of the discursive order (see Section 4). The discursive order is an empirical phenomenon that can be identified only through structured analysis of a given empirical material. In the hermeneutical tradition, such analysis necessitates qualitative close reading. Following Ricoeur’s conceptualisation we understand the process of text analysis to involve reader and text in a close relationship (Ricoeur, 1976). Analytical concepts are products of this process, and must therefore be understood as situated knowledge that, nevertheless, hold external validity. Analytical claims should be externally rational and plausible, whereas precise replicability is not possible through this method.

The discursive order and discursive themes are thus determined through qualitative judgement. Two clarifications should be made following this. First, that discursive themes are the constructs of us researchers and not derived directly from the texts themselves. They signify what we interpret as the main meaning of a certain argumentation. Sometimes, they lie close to the literal reading of the texts. For example, the concepts of the local “backyard”, and “not in my backyard” (or NIMBY) are terms that occur in the texts themselves and a debate the actors explicitly relate to. We therefore identified NIMBY and the defence of the “backyard” as a central discursive theme. Other themes are further removed from the texts themselves in terms of abstraction.

All direct quotes are given in quotation marks. See Appendix for a list of all the identified discursive themes.

The second clarification is that identification of discursive themes is not, primarily, a matter for quantification. However, while frequency of occurrence is a subordinate factor in determining the discursive order, it cannot be said to be completely irrelevant (a claim that occurs only one time is likely difficult to argue is part of the discursive order). Therefore, we have sought to substantiate each analytical claim with a significant number of references while not quantifying the precise occurrence of different types of statements.

The analysis yielding discursive themes revealed a distinctive difference both between local and national levels, and over time as regards the geographical and institutional scope of the resistance. Therefore, we chose to perform a second analysis. In this second round of reading, we sought specifically for variations between exclusively localised argumentations and generalised resistance to wind power over time, across local and national institutions, and across geographic regions. We also took note of the actor groups involved in the shifting of scales between localised and generalised arguments. In this round, we also returned to the original, main body of over 4000 texts to verify that the patterns we identified regarding actors and scale-shifting in the narrative manuscript (citing 180 texts) were representative of the wider material. Since we focused this second round of analysis on argumentative scale shifting, some claims of resistance that were not relevant to the purpose of the paper were left out. For this reason, the original manuscript has more references than what is used in the paper (180 and 166, respectively). For a comprehensive account of the discursive developments, see [Niskanen et al. \(2024\)](#).

We also perceived a need to complement the findings related to the importance of the Sweden Democrats and their introduction of generalised arguments against wind power to Parliament. The temporal co-incidence of these arguments in Parliament with their deployment on a local level by the Organisation for Landscape Protection needed an analysis of parliamentary debate to be verifiable. We therefore added findings from an analysis of around 5000 pages of parliamentary energy policy debate which were used for a separate publication ([Anshelm, 2024](#)). The material was gathered from the Swedish Parliament database using search terms including variations on energy policy, climate policy and wind power. Similarly to stage one of the analysis presented above, we inductively identified discursive themes through an analysis where we focused exclusively on resistance and controversies around the wind power expansion. All other issues were left outside of the analysis. In the present paper, that analysis is used only to substantiate the role of the Sweden Democrats in introducing new lines of argumentation on the national level, controversies around the municipal veto in the first period of the analysis, and the wider adoption of anti-wind arguments in the parliamentary debate. For a more in-depth discussion of the analysis, we refer to the publication ([Anshelm, 2024](#)).

The method is suited to analyse interactions between discourses on different institutional and geographical scales. It can establish patterns of change over time as regards political coalitions and actions, and collective meanings. It precludes a systematic analysis of individual drivers of wind power resistance and reveals little about strategic deliberations within and between resistance groups. We have remained attentive to strategies and practices in the analysis, but the empirical material limits the detail to which we may study them. Further, the method is not suited for the study of power relations between socio-demographic groups and how they determine wind power resistance. Finally, it is not suited for the establishment of causality, and often limits the researcher to identifying temporal co-incidence. The concluding discussion should therefore be read as theoretically derived claims rather than firm verdicts about cause and effect.

To some extent, these are not only methodological limitations but also choices with an epistemological foundation. The study is premised on the assumption that individual and psychological factors cannot be used to account for collective resistance to wind power. Most people

likely harbor the potential to react against unwanted land-use in their geographical vicinity. Research aiming to understand acceptance or rejection of energy technologies should therefore focus on the discursive expressions such feelings take at different times and in different places ([Wolsink, 2007b](#)).

6. Results—the politicisation of Swedish wind power expansion

6.1. The first period – defense of the “backyard”

In 2009, the Swedish Energy Agency established a new planning goal for the national wind power expansion of 30 TWh to 2020. At the time, the red-green parliamentary opposition put pressure on the liberal-conservative government to increase its efforts to expand wind power. While some of the more nuclear power-friendly parties equivocated, in 2010 there was consensus in Parliament around the need to increase the share of renewables in the energy system. After the Fukushima accident in 2011, Minister of Environment Andreas Carlgren emphasised that rapid wind power expansion was crucial for a sustainable energy transition ([S lanserar program för vindkraft, 2009](#); [Det blåser snål om vindkraften, 2009](#); [Sennerdahl, 2010](#); [Lundström, 2010](#); [Ottoson, 2011](#); [Nilsson, 2010](#); [Polfjärd, 2012](#)). Comparing wind power with the existential risks of nuclear power and climate warming, Carlgren argued the minor problems occasioned by the establishment of a “a couple of wind power plants on the bay” were negligible ([Mortensen, 2011](#)). Anders Ygeman, environmental spokesperson for the Social Democrats in opposition, likewise argued that wind power amounted to a “sound investment in the climate” ([S lanserar program för vindkraft, 2009](#); [Nilsson, 2010](#)).

Unsurprisingly, the wind power industry joined the chorus of support for a renewable energy transition, arguing Sweden held an almost moral duty to take the lead in the global wind power expansion ([Mortensen, 2011](#)). They feared, however, that the energy revolution would be stopped in its tracks by the municipal veto established in 2009 as part of the reform of the wind power planning process. Already one year into the existence of the new rule, Swedish Wind, the national organisation for the industry, claimed that 380 planned wind power plants had been hindered on a local level [[Sennerdahl, 2010](#); [Lundström, 2010](#); [Mortensen, 2011](#); [Rapp, 2009](#); [Pehrson, 2010](#); [Nilsson, 2011](#)], cf. ([Inget alliansstöd för slopat veto, 2011](#)]. Minister of Environment Carlgren agreed that the legislation might need to be changed, and said that it had never been intended to allow for “municipal councils to simply reject project proposals out of hand” ([Sennerdahl, 2010](#); [Carlgren vill slopa vindkraftsveto, 2011](#)). In this regard, he agreed with the red-green parliamentary opposition which argued in 2009 the newly imposed municipal veto should be abolished ([S lanserar program för vindkraft, 2009](#); [Det blåser snål om vindkraften, 2009](#); [Bolund et al., 2009](#)). The liberal editor on the country’s largest national newspaper also voiced concern that the veto threatened to “suffocate” the wind power companies ([Siwe, 2010](#)).

Thus, by 2010 a powerful national discourse coalition supporting a rapid wind power build-out was established. It involved all parliamentary parties except the nationalist Sweden Democrats who entered Parliament that year. Over time, it would come to include the heavy manufacturing industry, as it embraced the energy transition imperative and became one of the most insistent voices for electrification and large-scale wind power expansion. State agencies like the Energy Agency and the Environmental Protection Agency have worked to identify areas suitable for wind power to facilitate planning for the private sector, which has been further incentivised by green electricity certificates.

From this perspective, the existence of legislation allowing for municipalities to block any wind power project seems almost inexplicable. In the Parliamentary debate, the red-green opposition argued the new legislation was extremely problematic considering the scale of the needed build-out. However, despite the occasional ministerial acknowledgment that local vetoes did provide uncertainty for wind

power developers, the liberal-conservative government largely maintained that the legislation would be used responsibly by municipalities (Swedish Parliament, 2008; R Swedish Parliament, 2010a; R Swedish Parliament, 2010b). They claimed to have figures of historically unprecedented wind power growth to support this stance (R Swedish Parliament, 2010c; R Swedish Parliament, 2011a; R Swedish Parliament, 2011b). When the supply of green electricity certificates was replenished in 2016 and wind power began growing rapidly again after a few years of stagnation, fears of municipal hindrance seemed to be overblown. Though there were misgivings, between the early 2010s and through the incumbency of the first red-green government 2014–2018, the idea of the municipal veto could thus be reconciled with a dominant discourse of rapid wind power expansion.

In the early 2010s, local conflicts appeared only rarely in the national press, and then mostly through the voice of the wind power industry's representatives. When representatives of local opposition did speak through the national press, they were careful to point out they did not object to wind power in general but found the specific project against which they protested to be unsuitable for that locality (Sandberg, 2011; *Det krävs forskning om vindkraft*, 2014; Gröning, 2015). Judging from the national news reports only, wind power opposition appeared to be a matter of a few very limited cases that could be explained as NIMBY reactions.

However, when looking at the local press a very different story emerges. Already in the beginning of the investigated period, the news coverage is full of reports of local resistance to planned wind power projects, especially in the southern part of Sweden that made up electricity price zone 4 (*Naturkraft i medvind*, 2010; *Starkt motstånd i Österlen*, 2010; *Motståndet ökar mot vindkraft*, 2010; *Kräver vindkraftspengar till landsbygden*, 2010; *Med vindens kraft i länet*, 2011; *Bybor vill stoppa vindmöllor på Österlen*, 2012). In the early 2010s, the arguments were exclusively about detrimental effects on the local environment. At first, visual effects were stressed, but successively new arguments about noise and health effects, destruction of unique environmental values and landscapes, and reduced tourism and property values were introduced to the debate (*Med vindens kraft i länet*, 2011; *Vindkraft i Lomma*, 2010; *Nej tack till vindkraft på soptipp*, 2010; *Del-seger för demokratin i Lekeberg*, 2010; *Oroväckande vindkraftsplaner. Karlskoga Tidning*, 2010; *Vindkraften – gökungen i energiboet*, 2011). The southern arguments were thus originally cast in terms that could easily be interpreted as NIMBY from a superficial analysis. Protesters in the south claimed to support wind power expansion in general and objecting only to a specific project which, they argued, would entail irreversible damage to a unique environment. Instead, they proposed, wind power should be built in sparsely populated forest areas in northern Sweden, or at sea (*Opinionsvindarna vänder för vindkraften*, 2013; *Fastighetsägare vill se oberoende undersökning... Smålandsposten*, 2020).

In the local press, protesters were not wary of being cast as NIMBY, even though objectors seemed well aware of that risk. In fact, they explicitly related to accusations of NIMBY by rejecting the ground for such claims. The “backyard” was theirs to defend, they argued, since nobody else would do it. Indeed, the planning legislation awarded them the right to do so. In the early 2010s, the legal right to veto wind power projects provided sufficient moral ground for the local protest groups, and only in rare instances did they add arguments about nuclear power to answer the wider question of the viability of the future energy system. Instead, the municipal veto was referred to as an almost moral imperative to defend the local environment. This discursive trope, which explicitly refused to acknowledge any responsibility of municipalities in the south to partake in the wind power expansion, was most pronounced at the beginning of the period under investigation. However, it should be noted it is present all the way through [(*Fula och olönsamma eller vackra energitorn*, 2014; *Nu går flyttlasset. Filipstads Tidning*, 2014; *Vindkraft på våra verandor*, 2016; *Nej till vindkraft intill naturreservat*, 2019; *Tar uppdrag på allvar*, 2021; *De vägrar vindkraften*, 2021; 200

ansökningar –65 verk, 2010); cf. (*Förnyelsebar energi är bästa alternativet 2015, Medvind för vindkraft 2015*)].

Through the civil society Organisation for Landscape Protection (OLP), founded by local action groups against wind power in 2009, another more generalised framing was also provided. Already in the early 2010s, when the organisation had 15 000 members (*Ökat motstånd mot vindkraft*, 2009), the organisation related wind power to a wider energy system analysis. It claimed wind power was inefficient and a waste of natural and monetary resources. Nuclear power would be a far more secure and climate friendly option, according to the organisation. The liberalised energy market meant that cheap Swedish electricity was being exported to climate polluting countries in northern Europe. Therefore, if any country should be obliged to build wind power, it should be these. The only reason wind power had taken such a hold in Sweden, argued the organisation, was that the “wind power lobby” had infiltrated national politics. Wind power would have been a completely unviable energy source without massive state subsidies, it claimed.

The OLP became nodal point for what in the early 2010s were isolated, geographically dispersed local resistance groups, distinctly local in their character. First, by providing a frame of more generalised arguments against wind power. Second, by actively engaging in the local debate wherever a wind power controversy surfaced. It offered its resources to local protest groups and its representatives became actively involved in the local media debate, adopting a more general perspective on the local issues concerned. The OLP therefore served an important function in tying the fragmented opposition together in the initial period (*Vindkraftsmotståndare får stöd av organisation*, 2009; *Folkpartiet hotar landskapet i Skövde*, 2010; *Vindkraft i motvind*, 2010; *Avveckla vindkraftens gräddfil*, 2011; *Kampanj mot vindsnurror*, 2011; *Motstånd mot växande vindkraft*, 2012; *Stormigt på vindkraftsmöte*, 2013; *Vindkraftspark möter motstånd*, 2013).

6.2. The second period – scaling up to a general rejection of wind power

Over time, the generalised arguments offered by the OLP gained traction in the wider wind power resistance discourse, which increasingly came to take the form of generalised resistance to all wind power. After a lull in the conflicts, corresponding to a marked reduction in applications for wind power between 2014 and 2016 when electricity prices were low (*Kraften hotar att gå ur vindboom*, 2013; *Tillnyktring efter visionerna*, 2014; *Vindkraft i motvind*, 2014; *Mörka moln över östgötsk vindkraft*, 2016), protests proliferated again after the parliamentary Energy Agreement saw a new package of green electricity certificates being introduced to the market, leading to renewed interest in building wind power. While arguments about local environmental protection remained important, the protests were now also couched in terms of energy system reliability and cost-effectiveness. Local resistance groups began targeting what they identified as an industry of private profiteers that falsely claimed to be “climate friendly”. In fact, claimed these groups, wind power was far more resource intensive than other power sources. The intermittency of wind power further meant that an equal amount of “base power” had to be built to guarantee system reliability. For the wind power resistance, the entire notion of a future renewable energy system now appeared like an enormous waste. It was driven either by ignorance or a national political elite's conspiring with global financial interests (*De vägrar vindkraften*, 2021; *Vindkraften försämrar livsmiljön*, 2012; *Vindkraft – ett skämt*, 2013; *Kinda vinner inget på att tillmötesgå Eon*, 2013; *Sluta stöd vindkraften*, 2014; *Vindkraft – till vilket pris?*, 2015; *Landskapsbild på spel*, 2015; *Tvärmit för svensk vindkraft*, 2015; *Avskaffa inte kommunalt veto*, 2017; *Utredningen om kommunveto hör hemma i papperskorgen*, 2020; *Flytta inte fokus från det frågan gäller*, 2021; *Hur bra är vindkraften egentligen?*, 2021; *Vindkraften löser inte elproblemet*, 2021; *Vindkraft oroa och upprör*, 2021; *Vindkraftsindustrins översitteri mot oss på landsbygden*, 2021; *Råder stor politisk enighet emot*, 2021; *Hur extremt är motståndet mot vindkraft?*, 2021).

Furthermore, protesters began making effective use of environmental legislation protecting endangered species and biodiversity. Local resistance groups emerged as eager defenders of rare birds, bats and small animals, as they carefully mapped areas targeted for wind power establishments to find occurrence of a threatened species that would necessitate the County Administrative Board to protect the area from energy exploitation (Fick rätt i överdomstol, 2015; Vem ska man tro på?, 2015; Satts munkavle på politikerna?, 2016; Vindkraft möter motstånd, 2016; Ja till vindkraftspark får kritik från flera håll, 2016; Nätverket återuppstår, 2016; Fladdermusholkar slagträ mot vindkraft, 2016; Knapp majoritet för vindkraft, 2017; Vill inte ha vindkraft vid Ölmes reservat, 2018; Vindkraftsprojekt kraftigt nedbantat, 2018; Fortsatt motstånd i Ölme, 2021).

Importantly, the nationalist Sweden Democrats entered Parliament in 2010 arguing for a radically different energy policy from the one embraced by the other parliamentary parties. Claiming the 30 TWh goal to be “a grossly misdirected effort” by the state, the party’s representatives instead argued that nuclear power was the only rational way to decarbonise the energy system. Wind power, they claimed, took a much greater toll on the environment both through its use of raw materials and its use of land. Furthermore, the intermittent character of wind power meant that building it into the energy system would necessitate even more fossil fuels for back-up. In their rhetoric, they expressed deep sympathy for people who saw “aesthetic and landscape values being destroyed” through a “headless energy policy” while feeling “abandoned by the legal system” (Anshelm, 2024). There is a clear temporal co-incidence between the Sweden Democrats introduction of a more generalised critique of wind power and the deployment in the local debate of the same arguments by the OLP, with both sets of arguments becoming more prominent around 2012.

After 2016, local wind power resistance groups put heavy pressure on municipal politicians to veto projects. They organised local rallies, name collections and social media groups, and frequently used the local press to mobilise opposition. Such pressure had existed before (Delseger för demokratin i Lekeberg, 2010; Oroväckande vindkraftsplaner. Karlskoga Tidning, 2010; Våra kulturområden måste införlivas med det moderna samhället, 2011; Oenighet om vindkraftverks höjd, 2011; Vindkraften kan bli het fråga inför höstens val i Åre kommun, 2014; Batalj blev till veto, 2014; De vill krossa blockpolitiken, 2014; Syn i skärgården, 2014; Osäkerhet om vindpark, 2014), but became increasingly widespread – across the country – and intense in the second period. In the election year 2022, the local press was full of coverage of local protest groups pressuring their elected representatives to stop a planned project. In the later period, single-issue political parties with the sole purpose of hindering planned wind power projects also started appearing on the local level. For local politicians, the issue often became a conflict between a national party line that centered on climate mitigation and energy system transition, and pressure from local action groups to preserve the local environment. Intraparty conflicts of this kind occurred across the political spectrum, even if the rightwing parties were more consistently against planned wind power projects on the local level (Fula och olönsamma eller vackra energitorn, 2014; Nej till vindkraft intill naturreservat, 2019; Hur extremt är motståndet mot vindkraft? 2021; Knapp majoritet för vindkraft, 2017; Ett första ja till vindkraft i Norberg, 2016; Politikerna kör över folkets röst, 2016; Ja till vindkraftspark får kritik från flera håll, 2016; Vindkraft splittrar – igen, 2017; Moderaterna: Vi är skeptiska mot planerna...Arbetsbladet, 2018; Det finns andra ställen att bygga vindkraft på...Gefle Dagblad, 2020; Miljöpartiets motstånd är dåligt för klimatet, 2020; C säger ja till vindkraftspark vid Storgundet, 2021; Oenig kommunstyrelse säger ja till vindkraft på Storgundet, 2021; C-politiker mordhotad efter beslut om vindkraft, 2021; Andersson, 2022; Nejsidan efter valseger, 2020; Offra oss inte på klimatets altare, 2021; När tänker Västerviks kommun agera i vindkraftsfrågan? 2021; Sista chansen att stoppa Utposten 2, 2021; Folket initiativ gav resultat. Hela Hälsningland, 2022; Fullmäktiges ordförande hotade demonstranter, 2022; Vill stoppa vindkraft,

2022; Nytt parti – med aktivister, 2022; Kritisera bygget invigs, 2022; Kihlberg, 2022; Kallberg, 2022; Moberg, 2022; Nilsson, 2022; Lagerström, 2022; Falkirk, 2022). The same tendency was evident in the activities of the non-governmental organisation Swedish Society for Nature Conservation, which argued intensely for wind power expansion on a national level but often objected to projects on the local level (Falkirk, 2022; Vindkraften – en stormig fråga i Uddevalla kommun, 2015).

In 2021, the conflict level was ratcheted up as the Environmental Protection Agency and the Energy Agency published their strategy for rapid wind power expansion, as instructed by the red-green government. The parliamentary base for the Energy Agreement of 2016 had already started to dissolve. In the national energy policy debate that followed from the publication of the new strategy – which subsequently merged with political posturing for the 2022 parliamentary elections – a distinct political dividing line was cemented (Hårt motstånd mot regeringens förnybarhetsplaner, 2015; Nordenskiöld, 2016; Fransson and Bäckström-Johansson, 2014; Larsson, 2016). On one side, the red-green parties together with the liberal Center Party defended a program for massive electrification through renewables, mainly wind, supported and pressured by industries whose green investment plans were premised on access to cheap, renewable electricity (Debatt om kärnkraft oroar vindbranschen, 2019; Johansson, 2015; Rentzhog et al., 2017; Söderström et al., 2017; Lundin, 2019; Jiborn et al., 2022; Wijkman et al., 2020; Westlund, 2021; Rogvall, 2021; Försvaret pekas ut som bromskloss, 2021; Samuelsson, 2021; Ritzén, 2021; Forsberg, 2021; Lundin, 2021a; Strandberg, 2022; Lundin, 2022a; Lundin, 2022b; Kejerhag, 2022; Törnwall, 2021; von Seth, 2020; Strandberg, 2021; Burenius, 2020). On the other side, the nationalist and conservative parties demanded a nuclear revival and that national targets for the energy transition be refocused from “renewable” to “fossil-free” (Busch and Brodin, 2021; Fransson and Bäckström-Johansson, 2014; Bäckström Johansson, 2020; Stegrud and Bäckström Johansson, 2021; Larsson, 2021; Sabuni, 2020; Busch and Brodin, 2020; Lundin, 2021b; Elofsson and Ericson, 2020; Mothander, 2022).

At the local level, conflicts proliferated, and the critique became increasingly vociferous. Arguments about speculative finance being a driving force behind the wind power agenda was now at the center of the objections. While outright denial of climate science was rare, protestors argued that local environments were being sacrificed on the “climate altar” by a national elite of politicians and experts in the urban areas in the service of a global wind industry (Offra oss inte på klimatets altare, 2021). Such arguments about local environmental protection, however, took different form depending on geography as they became connected to different historical discourses.

In the southern municipalities of electricity price zone 4, which were often net importers of electricity, the most common argument was that a failed national energy policy had occasioned high electricity prices and that national-level politicians had no right to impose the environmental costs for those mistakes on the municipalities. Arguments were focused on aesthetic values in connection to the economic value of properties, perceived to be jeopardised by wind power expansion. Municipal politicians and local action groups opposing wind power in the south argued that nuclear power was the solution. The nuclear phase out, first decided through popular referendum in 1980, affected southern municipalities more than northern ones since they had no large-scale hydropower in their vicinity. Therefore, they often referred to a historical discourse where nuclear power stood as a symbol for Swedish technological progress. For municipalities in the northern price zone 1, which as a region was a net exporter of electricity, the historical experience of having sacrificed much of their local environment for hydropower expansion justified a position of general rejection. They had already committed enough land to wind power, with no compensation to show for it. The geographically variegated politicisation amounted to a shift from localised arguments to more generalised opposition to wind power. The shift was both reinforced and evidenced by the fact that offshore

wind, now being promoted as the future of wind power by its proponents, was also rejected as a waste of taxpayer money (Avskaffa inte kommunalt veto, 2017; Moderaterna: Vi är skeptiska mot planerna... Arbetsbladet, 2018; Det finns andra ställen att bygga vindkraft på... Gefle Dagblad, 2020; Nejsidan efter valsegern, 2020; Offra oss inte på klimatets altare, 2021; Lundin, 2021b; Vi människor kan vänja oss, 2019; Riskfyllt beroende av statlig välvilja, 2020; Havsbaserad vindkraft... Gefle Dagblad, 2020; Katastrof om kommunalt vindkraftsveto avskaffas, 2021; Ingen mer vindkraft i Ragunda – låt någon annan leverera grön el, 2021; Vindkraften tar död på landsbygden, 2022; Persson et al., 2022; Elkonsumenterna de största vinnarna vid utbyggnad av vindkraft, 2014).

There is some probability that issues of energy provision and the nuclear power phaseout proved decisive for the elections in 2022, held at a time when electricity prices had soared in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The conservative-nationalist government that came into power has since retracted some of its most aggressive criticism of wind power under heavy pressure from industries already committed to electrification through renewables. However, by all accounts, that very rhetoric proved successful in a country more divided on the politics of energy system development than it has been for over three decades. Already before the elections, a noticeable shift had occurred also in the national press coverage of wind power expansion. Local resistance to wind power installations was no longer framed and explained only as NIMBY opposition, but also as a response to energy colonialism imposed on poor municipalities by a political elite in the urban areas. Thus, the local framing of the energy policy conflicts had gained traction both in parliamentary politics and in the national press [(Anshelm, 2024; Rogvall, 2021; Rogvall, 2020; Gröning, 2020a; Gröning, 2020b; Gröning, 2021; Lindberg, 2021; Vindkraftsplaner väcker ilska i bruksorten, 2021); cf. (Samuelsson, 2021; Lundin, 2021b)].

7. Discussion

The analysis has shown how the Swedish wind power resistance evolved from a localised and dispersed opposition based on claims to local environmental protection, to a generalised resistance against all wind power with firm anchoring in not only Parliament, but after 2022 also government. In the paper, we have focused on how local resistance claims have been leveraged with formal institutions (environmental legislation and the municipal veto in particular), and also connected to historical, regional discourses to shift scales to a generalised wind power resistance. It justifies a view of LULU conflicts as being fundamentally driven by local environmental protection claims, which become overlaid when scaled up through political, legal and discursive opportunity structures. However, such overlaying means more than mere rhetorical varnish. The political, legal and discursive opportunity structures that enable scaling up of localised conflicts are crucial and inseparable dimensions of what after 2016 emerges as a national environmental movement (Niskanen et al., 2024). In the following, we discuss in further detail how political, legal and discursive opportunities enable scale shifting for the Swedish resistance against wind power.

7.1. Political and legal opportunity structures

Social movement literature on political opportunity structures has emphasised that a receptiveness among established political parties, political elite dissensus, and an ability to align with political or social elites are crucial factors in determining the potential for localised resistances to scale up and gain influence over national politics (Goodwin, 2012; McAdam, 1996). The discursive change we have analysed is clearly facilitated by, and premised on, the entrance into Parliament and growing political influence of the anti-wind Sweden Democrats. By carving out a discursive position for the wholesale rejection of wind power, they create an opportunity for local resistance groups to scale up their arguments from local, project-specific protests to generalised

opposition (Rootes, 2013; Walker et al., 2018; Meyer, 2004). Over time, the Sweden Democrats can shift the Parliamentary debate by attracting other parties to their anti-wind position, creating further disagreement among political elites. Through this shift, the localised wind power resistances are elevated into a national environmental issue. A dominant, elite, pro-wind discourse is faced with a counter discourse based in a radically different valuation of the environment (Drenthen, 2010).

Legal opportunity structure literature similarly highlights the importance of resistance groups' access to the legal system (Hilson, 2002). While individuals, apart from landowners directly affected by establishments, lack legal standing in the Swedish wind power process, they have access to the legal system through the municipal veto. In our analysis, we see how a resistance that is initially fragmented can grow in scale as localised protest groups increasingly exert pressure on municipal administrations to wield the veto (or to signal their intent to do so, thereby forcing wind power developers to abandon their plans). They also make use of environmental legislation by identifying rare animal species to protect the local environment. Over time, the accumulated effect of these local processes contributes to the discursive change whereby further wind power expansion appears less of a foregone conclusion than when the veto rule was instituted in 2009. When national media starts to acknowledge the existence of widespread local opposition across the country, it also does so in more nuanced terms than was the case in the early period.

Thus, the political and legal opportunity structures are co-produced in the ascendance of Swedish wind power resistance. While the opening in Parliament is crucial for the discursive shift, increasing resistances on a local level are important to reinforce this opening. There is a bottom-up logic to the emergence of wind power opposition as a national issue, evidenced by the fact that municipal politicians often diverge from the main party line in matters of wind energy. We see also that local offices of the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (SSNC) diverge from the agenda of the national organisation. Established civil society organisations like SSNC play an important role in Swedish environmental legal processes (Anshelm and Haikola, 2016; Peterson et al., 2017). Here, the SSNC and the Organisation for Landscape Protection are key levers for the scaling up of what is initially a fragmented opposition.

7.2. Discursive opportunity structures

While all political and legal institutions are parts of discourses (Löfbrand and Strippel, 2015; Hay, 2014), Koopman & Statham proposed an analytical distinction between formal institutions and discursive structures, with the latter signifying the cultural and ideational context that resistance claims are embedded in (Koopmans and Statham, 1999b). Here, we follow this analytical distinction to highlight the historical memories and traditions that the wind power resistance draw upon in their arguments.

The municipal veto resonates with a long historical tradition of municipal autonomy in Sweden (Pierre and Sundström, 2009). Local self-governance is an important discursive trope for the wind power resistance groups from the outset of the period under investigation, and in Parliament for those who defend the rule against critique. Likewise, the fact that (large scale) wind power is a relative newcomer to the Swedish energy system means it lacks a robust discursive anchoring (Wolsink, 2018). This can explain why wind power resistance has been elevated into an environmental issue of national concern whereas mining resistance, another LULU movement, remains restricted in its political influence in Sweden. Both resistances share the discursive tropes of anti-colonialism, anti-capitalism, center-versus periphery and aversion to foreign ownership, but mining resistance has failed to gain much traction within parliamentary discourse (Envall, 2018; Fjellborg, 2024; Stiernström, 2024).

The importance of historical discourses is also revealed in the geographical differences between north and south, findings that are in line with previous research on Swedish wind power resistance (Lindvall,

2023). In the north, the historical memory of hydropower expansion, for which the region has received little compensation, form an important discursive trope. In the south, loss of environmental and property values is focused instead. Due to the geographical differences determined by hydropower access, resistance groups in the southern municipalities also increasingly resort to nuclear power revival as the answer to any questions about the future of the energy system.

There is certainly an irony that resistances who insist on local self-determination over energy policy build their arguments on a retrotopia about a time when energy system planning was heavily centralised. However, there is a discursive logic behind it. When the Sweden Democrats enter Parliament in 2010, they premise their wind power opposition on nuclear power. It is simply not possible for a party in Parliament to restrict their arguments to a local level only, as the resistance groups at the time primarily do. The party obviously draws its strength, however, from such localised, anti-wind sentiments. Thus, while the generalised arguments against wind power introduced to Parliament by the Sweden Democrats provide local resistances with the political and discursive opportunity to shift scales, the discursive position of the Sweden Democrats is dependent on the existence of such localised resistance in the first place. The pro-nuclear, anti-elite and wind power-sceptic energy policy platform formulated by rightwing parliamentary parties after 2019 is an amalgamation of arguments developed by local resistance groups several years earlier but combined to a coherent and generalised form.

Finally, we must also consider the relative position of the different discourses within the discursive order. Throughout the investigated period the local resistances occupy a discursive position of a marginalised group resisting a dominant order. In the first period, they were careful to acknowledge the importance of wind power, even though their defense of the local environment was stated in terms of proud and legitimate resistance. It is not hard to see how that stance could be interpreted as NIMBY from a distanced perspective, which also occurred on the few occasions the national press did pay attention to local wind power resistance. Over time, more generalised arguments were added to the anti-wind discourse, but as new layers rather than replacement for the resistance groups' core claims to represent a marginalised locality against elite consensus. As we saw, this overlaying was enabled by the growing political influence of the Sweden Democrats, who entered Parliament as the only anti-wind party but over time successfully shifted political discourse in their favor. Thus, wind power resistance discourse both nationally and locally can share a position of vindication and even revenge. In the conclusions, we reflect on what marginalisation and revanchist discourse means for land use policy.

8. Conclusions – policy and research implications

As wind power resistances grow into potent environmental-political movements across Europe, understanding the logic of both their ascendance and their reasoning becomes imperative. In this paper, we have made one attempt to identify, on the level of discourse, the political, legal and discursive opportunities through which fragmented and localised resistances are able to scale up and gain broad national influence.

First, the findings indicate a significant political risk in disregarding marginalised discourses. There is a sense of revanchism to the discursive shift whereby localised protests become translated into a generalised wind power resistance of national scope. In this sense, Sweden as a case study has significance for wind power and energy policy in other countries. It was long characterised by parliamentary consensus around the virtues of rapid wind power expansion through a liberalised planning model. The force and political impact with which an initially localised and fragmented wind power resistance has emerged casts light on the limits to the state-sanctioned but thoroughly liberalised model for wind power expansion adopted by Sweden.

Secondly, the discursive, longitudinal approach of a large dataset

covering two different types of national press allow for new insights into the way local resistances interact with formal institutions and the impact of resistance on national politics. In contrast to studies that suggest local wind power opinions have not been determinative of local election outcomes (Umit and Schaffer, 2022), our study shows a powerful interaction between local resistances and the formulation of a new discursive position within Parliament. While several studies have argued that influence of local resistance must be gauged by looking beyond the formal planning process, they are focused on localised cases (Lintz and Leibenath, 2020; Reusswig et al., 2016; Ogilvie and Rootes, 2015). Here, we have presented a comprehensive analysis of discursive changes over time, revealing that, while cause and effect relationships remain beyond our scope, the formation of local resistance groups have played an important role in the scale shifting of wind power resistance in Sweden.

Third, by studying the political ascendance of wind power resistance discursively we also shift the focus from individual grievances and protest group strategies to structural shifts in wider socio-political meanings. This is not to discount the value of studying protest groups in isolation, either by looking at their strategies or their motivations. Rather, it is to remediate a lack of studies that position the protest groups in a wider sociopolitical context (Wolsink, 2018; Kirkegaard et al., 2021). From this perspective, the emergence of wind power as a national issue is similar to environmental opinions formed previously against other large-scale power sources in Sweden, all of which have gone through shifts of scale to wield significant national influence (Anshelm and Haikola, 2016). This is certainly not a claim that all power sources are equally problematic, but rather that they occasion similar patterns of resistance when they are scaled up to affect land use on a societal scale. In an ironic sense of history repeating itself, nuclear power, which was a relatively novel technology when it became the focus of similarly intense and dramatically effective environmental protests in Sweden in the 1980s (Anshelm, 2000), has become the discursive trope that wind power resistance leverage in their scale shifting. The speed with which wind power expansion has become politicised speaks to its lack of firm discursive anchoring in the political culture. Thus, if official energy policy plans for the rapid continued expansion of wind power are to be taken seriously, institutional work to better prepare society for its acceptance must be intensified.

The study complements previous research on wind power resistance with a wider, sociopolitical perspective on discursive developments over a long time period. It provides theoretically and empirically grounded knowledge about formation of national resistances, adding to similar previous studies on Denmark (Kirkegaard et al., 2021) and Norway (Eikeland et al., 2023). It contributes to an understanding of political developments around Europe where, as evidenced by recent elections to the European Parliament, political attempts to expand wind power has run into significant political resistance. Further research should look into other national contexts, and also perform cross-country comparisons of opportunity structures. A more fine-grained analysis, including additional types of empirical material, could also penetrate further into the political processes that allows for wind power resistance to gain influence across geographical and institutional boundaries.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Simon Haikola: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Jonas Anshelm:** Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Johan Niskanen:** Validation, Data curation.

Declaration of competing interest

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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