

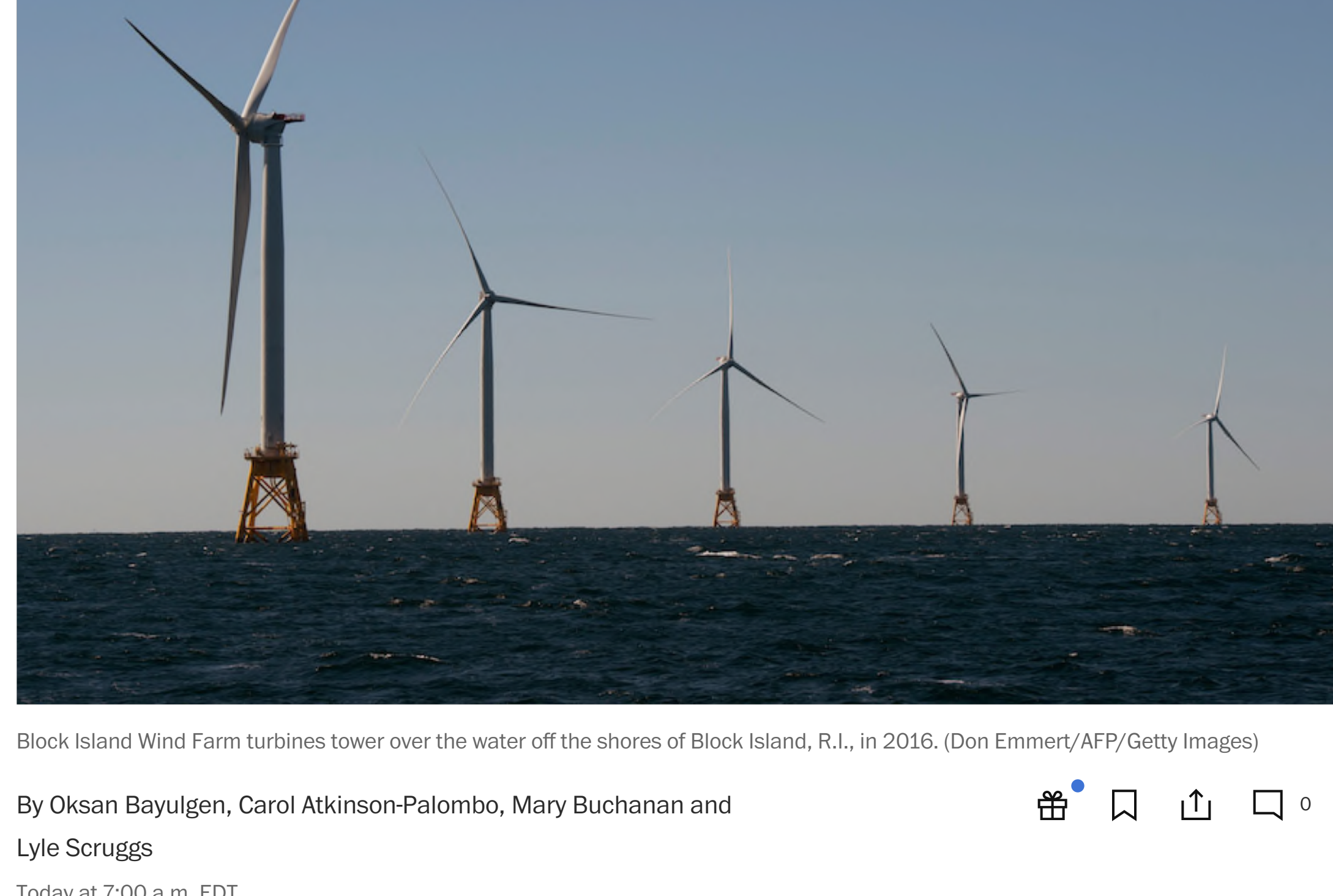
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Monkey Cage • Analysis

Biden wants more wind energy. Those projects should help local politicians, our research finds.

Wind turbines don't just deliver clean energy; they help both Republican and Democratic incumbents win reelection.



Block Island Wind Farm turbines tower over the water off the shores of Block Island, R.I., in 2016. (Don Emmert/AFP/Getty Images)

By Oksan Bayulgen, Carol Atkinson-Palombo, Mary Buchanan and Lyle Scruggs

Today at 7:00 a.m. EDT

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Despite Sen. Joe Manchin III's (D-W.Va.) [opposition](#) to investing in clean energy in the Democrats' signature [social investment bill](#), the Biden administration has been steadily working to advance renewable energy. In January, he [signed executive orders](#) to combat climate change, including a national goal to generate 30 gigawatts of electricity from offshore wind turbines by 2030. In March, the administration [announced a massive, coordinated effort to bolster several offshore wind energy projects](#) along both the Northeast and Pacific Northwest coasts. And last week, Interior Secretary Deb Haaland announced that the [agency will begin identifying federal waters appropriate to lease to wind developers, with the goal of doing so by 2025](#).

Can all of this succeed? That depends partly on state and local officials who control many aspects of the siting, terms and pace of these projects. Whether they are willing to cooperate depends on how much their residents welcome wind turbines. While Americans [support wind energy](#) generally, the NIMBY problem applies: Sometimes people support massive wind energy projects in the abstract, but [don't want them close by](#).

Even when some locals object, however, [our research](#) finds that wind development projects onshore helps incumbents — of either party — win more votes for reelection. Here's how we know.

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Lessons from onshore wind

While the United States hasn't developed many offshore wind farms yet, onshore wind power has grown rapidly over the past 15 years. That has been encouraged by a rapid decline in the cost of equipment, as well as various federal and state government guarantees and incentives. For instance, the federal government provides a [production tax credit](#) (PTC), which subsidizes the cost of producing wind and other renewable energy. Most states also set [renewable portfolio standards](#) (RPS), which promote renewable electricity production by requiring that electric utilities source some power from renewable sources.

By 2019, the United States produced [more energy from wind](#) than from hydropower. In 2020, the United States [recorded the largest annual expansion in wind capacity](#). While offshore and onshore wind development differ somewhat, including in where the opposition comes from and how intense it can be, we can learn something about the political implications of both by looking at how onshore wind farms have affected politicians' fortunes.

[\[Europe really wants to fight climate change. Why is that making other countries so unhappy?\]](#)

Promoting wind development is a winning strategy

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Our research focused on Minnesota, one of the 10 U.S. states with the highest installed wind capacity. We merged the [U.S. Wind Turbine Database](#), which lists the locations of all utility-scale U.S. wind turbines, with voting and census data at the precinct level, to examine how adding a wind turbine between elections affected incumbent state legislators' share of the vote in the next election, between 2006 and 2018.

According to our analysis, adding at least one turbine in a precinct [increases](#) the share of the incumbent party's vote in the next election by anywhere from 1.8 to 9 percentage points. (The exact number depends on the statistical assumptions we use to estimate the effect.)

Both Democratic and Republican incumbents win

We also examined whether the electoral effects of turbine development differ for Republican and Democratic state legislators. We find that the expected gains are about the same for both major political parties (in one model, 5.5 points for Democrats vs. 7.1 points for Republicans; in another model, 7.0 vs. 6.5 points, respectively).

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Our findings are consistent with polling that finds [bipartisan national public support](#) for wind energy projects, with recent reports from the nonpartisan Pew Research Center finding [up to 77 percent of Americans in favor](#). While Democrats may support wind energy's positive effects on the climate, most citizens support its economic opportunities, including jobs and tax revenue.

[\[New 'net zero' standards could transform the climate — unless they're derailed\]](#)

What this means for Biden's clean energy agenda

The Biden-Harris administration's push for a transition to renewable energy can only succeed if clean energy infrastructure is socially accepted and politically rewarding for the elected representatives who must implement it. If voters punish politicians who develop wind in their jurisdictions, those politicians — and others — are likely to abandon their support. But the opposite is just as true: If politicians win more votes because they have built wind energy projects, we are likely to see more such developments.

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Our findings suggest that, at least in Minnesota, developing wind farms helps politicians win reelection. We think our results might be true for other states as well. During the past decade of rapidly expanding wind farms, most have been built not in blue, coastal states, but in very red parts of the middle of the United States, where it is easiest to reap energy from wind. According to the [Energy Information Agency](#), the top four states for wind energy production are Texas, Iowa, Oklahoma and Kansas. Red states are adding capacity as fast or faster than blue states.

To be sure, our project did not control for well-funded local opposition, like the [campaign](#) that blocked the Cape Wind development off Massachusetts. However, our findings should allay politicians' fears of backlash if renewable energy projects are sited in their districts. We can't promise that wind turbines always win votes for incumbents, but our results suggest that on average, such developments help both Republicans and Democrats.

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Mary Buchanan recently received her PhD in geography from the University of Connecticut and is co-editor of "Global Im-Possibilities: Exploring the Paradoxes of Just Sustainabilities" (Bloomsbury, 2021).

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