



Public Opinion on Economic Transitions in Oil- and Gas-Producing Communities

Paasha Mahdavi, Matto Mildenberger, Dustin Tingley, Ranjit Deshmukh, and Cesar Martinez Alvarez — June 2026

About this Issue Brief

Communities in oil- and gas-producing regions across the United States will be impacted to varying degrees by policies and market forces that will reduce production of higher-carbon energy sources. Policymakers in these regions are or will be exploring [economic development strategies](#) to mitigate against the potential long-term economic impacts of the energy transition. The success of these development strategies will [hinge on support](#) from individuals in producing communities.

To better understand their experiences, we conducted a geo-targeted, locally representative public opinion survey of households living within a quarter mile of oil and gas wells in the top producing counties across the United States.¹ This is the first such survey at scale that directly gauges attitudes from households living near oil

and gas infrastructure. We further collaborated with community-based organizations and partners to better understand our survey results in the context of various communities in California, Louisiana, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, and Texas. Three patterns stand out:

- 1. Respondents have clear preferences over how governments use oil and gas revenues collected through taxes and fees.** In addition to spending on public programs, such as schools, hospitals, and infrastructure, people in our study also prefer governments devote a portion of these revenues toward long-term savings accounts.
- 2. There is strong, bipartisan support for government programs to plug oil and gas wells that are no longer producing.** This finding resonated with community organizations, which described hearing a desire from people living near oil and gas infrastructure to clean up old wells.

1. The survey yielded 3,597 responses from 108 counties in 18 states (Alabama, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, North Dakota, New Mexico, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Texas, Utah, Virginia, West Virginia, and Wyoming) with a response rate of 3%. The resulting sample is weighted by age and sex to match demographics at the census block level. The sample largely mirrors the census across race: 75% White, 14% Hispanic, 6% Black, 4% Asian, and 4% American Indian and Alaska Native. By political ideology, 50% self-report as conservative, 18% as liberal, and 31% as moderate. By education, 44% have not completed a college or associates degree. Median household income is \$95,000, compared to the 2024 census median of \$83,730. Nearly one-third (28%) are either employed in or have a family member employed in the oil and gas industry.

3. **Job training programs are widely popular.** Respondents particularly prefer programs training for transferrable skills, including skilled trades like electricians, over trainings focused on specific economic sectors like renewable energy. However, only one in five had heard of these programs, suggesting an opportunity for increased messaging.

Key Findings

Public support for both spending and saving fiscal revenues from oil and gas. When asked how to allocate taxes raised from oil and gas production, respondents preferred spending now on existing programs like education, health, and roads (46% of total allocation) or cleaning up abandoned oil sites (32%), compared to putting money into a long-term investment account (22%).² While the savings preferences are below the 48% that New Mexico devotes from oil and gas revenues to long-term savings, they are above the 19% that Texas devotes and far above the 0% that Pennsylvania devotes to long-term savings.

Broad, bipartisan support for plugging inactive or orphaned oil and gas wells. In addition to support for spending revenues on cleaning up old sites, 88% of respondents support a program for plugging inactive or orphaned wells in their communities. Support is even higher (91%) when respondents are told that these programs “can provide jobs for local skilled workers with experience in the oil and gas industry.” Support is still high (86%) even when told that such programs “can be very costly, ranging from \$10,000 to

over \$1 million per well.” Nearly three out of four respondents (72%) want oil companies to pay for the costs of plugging old oil and gas wells. This holds across conservatives (74%), moderates (65%), and liberals (85%); and oil industry workers (70%) as well as non-oil workers (74%).

Our engagement with community-based organizations reinforced this broad support for well plugging locally. An organization working in Louisiana remarked that this support is prevalent because “cleaning up after you’re done is an American ethic.” A California-based organization noted that well remediation is a “great middle ground for many people,” and one that is an underappreciated job creator for oil and gas workers. And a Texas-based organization highlighted how frustrated residents are that “taxpayers are increasingly footing more of the bill” for well plugging, suggesting they’d prefer greater use of fiscal revenues from oil and gas operations to finance plugging.

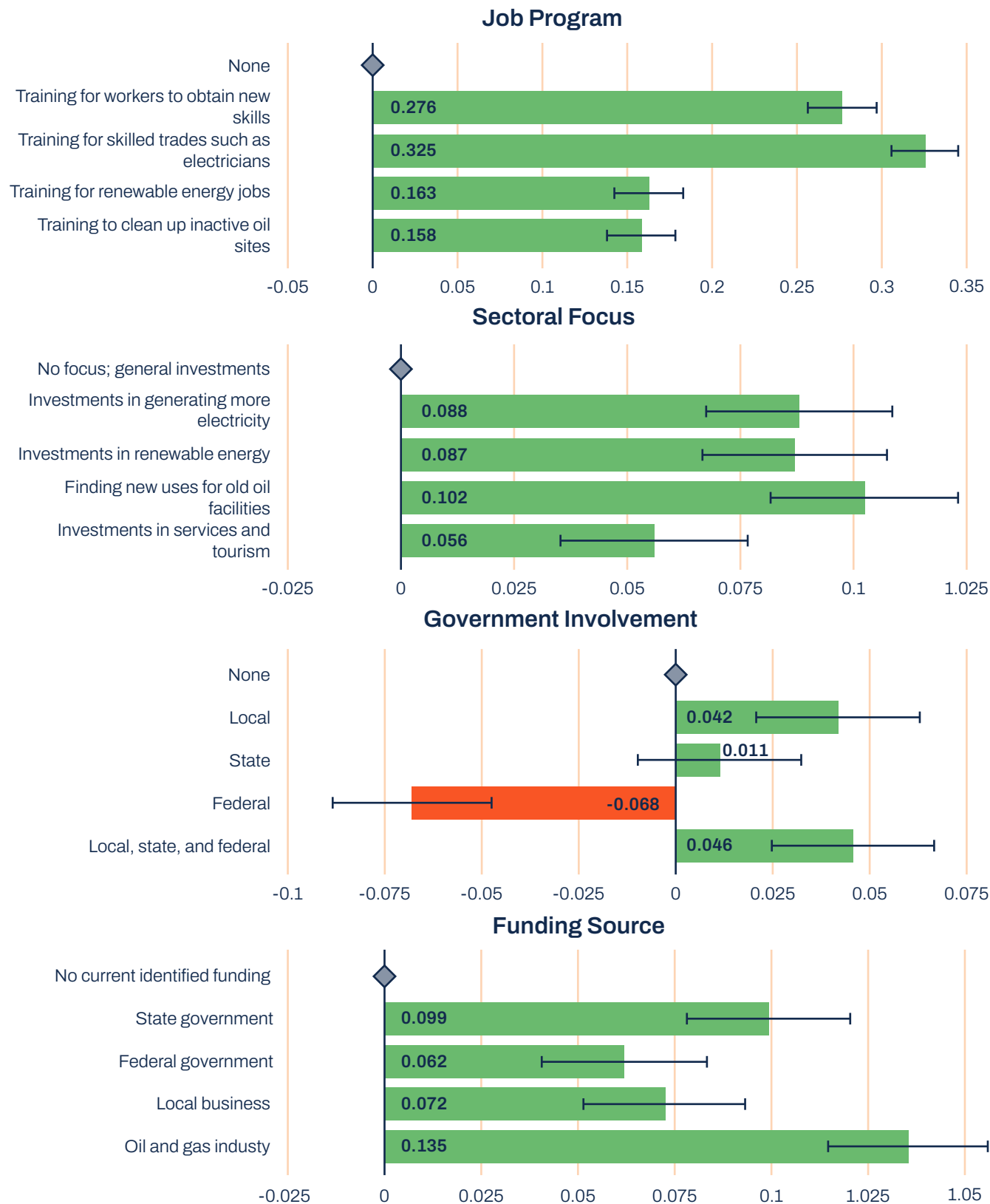
Preferences for student training and renewable energy investment for high-quality job creation.

When asked which programs would create high-quality, well-paying job opportunities, respondents generally prefer training students for jobs in renewable energy and general investments to create jobs in renewable energy over re-training oil workers for renewable energy jobs or for closing inactive wells.³ However, the top preference is divided by political ideology: liberals see high-quality job opportunities as better created by investments to create jobs in renewable energy, while conservatives view these opportunities arising from student training.

2. Respondents were asked to indicate how to spend tax revenues from oil and gas across categories, where 0 would represent no resources, 100 would represent all resources, and 50 would represent half of the resources.

3. Respondents were asked to rank four programs: training students for renewable jobs, investments in renewable jobs, close inactive wells, and re-training oil workers for renewable jobs.

Figure 1. Public Preferences for Economic Development Strategies



Note: This figure shows the results of an experiment that tests the effect of randomly varying four components of an economic development strategy: type of job program, sectoral focus of government investments, level of government involvement, and source of funding. The numbers in each bar correspond to the change in support for a given economic development strategy if that specific component (e.g., job training) were included, relative to a baseline component (e.g., no job training program).

Support for job training programs focused on skills development versus specific sectors. When presented with different economic development strategies (Figure 1), respondents prefer strategies that include job training programs for skills development rather than programs targeting specific industries, such as renewable energy or inactive well cleanup (even despite respondents' support for well cleanup in general). While respondents did not favor job training programs with sectoral focuses, they did think it was important for government's economic development strategy to invest in particular sectors (Figure 1): respondents showed the least support for economic development programs without any sectoral focus, and investments in services and tourism were the least popular among the sectors offered in our survey.

Support for economic development strategies that include **training for skilled trades** is particularly popular (Figure 1). Including "training for electricians" makes an economic development strategy 33 percentage points more popular than strategies that do not include any job training programs. These levels are consistent across younger and older respondents, across political ideology, as well as across respondents in "booming" regions like the Permian Basin and in "declining" regions like the San Joaquin Valley (California) or the Barnett Shale (Texas). However, most respondents (82%) had not heard of any job training programs in their community, despite their **prevalence** in oil and gas communities.

Support for coordinated economic development by government, with oil and gas industry funding. As shown in Figure 1, respondents prefer economic development strategies that have local government involvement or have a combined local-state-federal approach, with far less support for programs with only federal government involvement. Respondents also prefer efforts funded by the oil and gas industry.

Support for local governments to prepare transitioning away from fossil fuels. Among younger respondents (18-35) who live near oil or gas wells, 64% support their local government preparing for a transition away from fossil fuels, compared to 55% support from those above 35. Support varies considerably by political ideology, with 40% support from conservatives versus 65% from moderates and 91% from liberals. Support is higher in counties with declining oil production (64% support), but surprisingly a majority (51%) in boom counties still support their local governments preparing for a transition away from fossil fuels.

Policy Implications

While constituent preferences may not always align with the optimal set of policy actions, responsiveness to public preferences and obtaining local public buy-in are essential ingredients to successful policy implementation and durability. Our findings imply public support for a range of state- and locally-led economic development strategies in oil and gas producing areas:

- **Spend oil and gas revenues on infrastructure and services, but also save some for the future.** States like Pennsylvania that do not save a portion of public revenues from oil and gas could consider creating long-term funds along the lines of those in New Mexico or Texas, in addition to spending on education, health, and infrastructure.
- **Invest in programs to plug inactive oil and gas wells.** Legislators could consider expanding programs to decommission inactive, orphaned, or abandoned oil and gas wells, financing these efforts using taxes and fees collected from the oil and gas

industry. Governments could also devote greater resources to local and state agencies with existing regulatory authority over well capping and remediation.

- **Incorporate training programs for transferrable skills and skilled trades, with less focus on training programs for specific sectors.** Governments could design job training programs with general skills in mind, such as electricians, rather than programs that target job opportunities for impacted workers to specific sectors like jobs in renewable energy. Establishing or expanding programs aimed at training students and younger generations in particular can pave the way for high-quality job creation.
- **Begin local-level preparations for a transition away from a fossil fuel-reliant economy.** There is already public support for governments to begin planning for a transition away from fossil fuels, even

before areas are affected by significant declines in production or reductions in demand. This support is likely to continue growing in the future. Given limited capacity and jurisdiction, local governments will likely need support from federal and/or state governments when planning this transition.

Contact the Authors

Paasha Mahdavi, University of California, Santa Barbara (paasha@ucsb.edu)

Note: This policy brief was prepared under a grant from the Resilient Energy Economies initiative (REE). The statements, findings, conclusions, and recommendations are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of REE.

..... About the Resilient Energy Economies Initiative

The REE Initiative was established in 2024 to develop strategies that support the economies of fossil fuel-dependent communities across the United States as the energy system transforms. In addition to supporting action-oriented research to find what works, REE has built a community of scholars, policymakers, and economic development practitioners from the local, state, tribal, and federal levels to share knowledge and build relationships across the nation's energy communities.

www.resilientenergyeconomies.org



Center on
Global Energy Policy
at COLUMBIA | SIPA



RESOURCES
for the FUTURE



UNIVERSITY OF
NOTRE DAME



MONTANA
STATE UNIVERSITY



WAKE FOREST
UNIVERSITY



UNIVERSITY
OF WYOMING



West Virginia University
COLLEGE OF LAW



THE UNIVERSITY OF
NEW MEXICO



University of
Kentucky

Gatton College of
Business and Economics
Department of Economics



University of
Pittsburgh
Graduate School of Public
and International Affairs



THE SALATA INSTITUTE
FOR CLIMATE AND SUSTAINABILITY
at Harvard University