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Are You Paying Your Utility Company to Block Clean Energy?

By [Gemma Alexander](#)

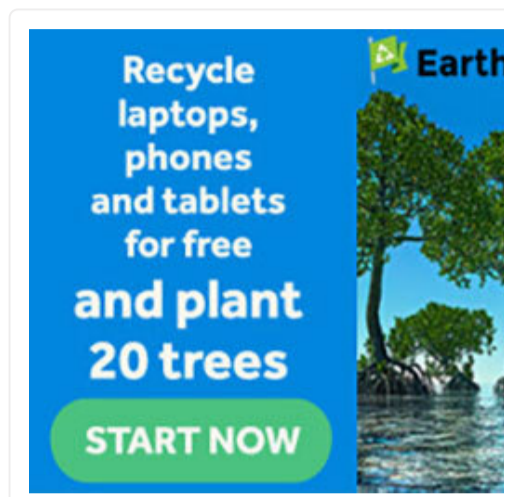
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[electric utilities](#), [lobbying](#), [ratepayer fees](#), [renewable energy](#)

Some utility companies are fighting against renewable energy – and they are using your money to do it.

When you move into a new house, you usually have to contact the city to turn on the electricity. Even if the city sends your monthly power bill, they don't actually provide your electricity. Private companies generate nearly all the [electricity in America](#), and they don't always have your best interests at heart. The switch to renewable energy is critical to stopping climate change.

There are [more than 1,600](#) electric utility companies in the US. Their [electricity generation sources](#) vary dramatically. South Dakotans have access to 83% nuclear-free renewable energy, but in Mississippi only 1% of electricity is produced by solar facilities. Despite rapid progress in renewable energy, [the US generates](#) more than half of its electricity from fossil fuels, including 38% from natural gas and 22% from coal.



Coal Power Pays for Political Power

Whatever their current sources of electricity, some utilities are making real efforts to shift toward renewables. The City of Seattle's [Green Up](#) program gives residents the option of supporting new renewable energy sources through a surcharge on their electric bills. San Diego Gas and Electric is playing a key role in San Diego's [Smart City](#) initiative. Hundreds of cities and three states have [committed](#) to reaching 100% renewable energy by 2050.

Unfortunately, some of these pledges amount to little more than [greenwashing](#). Even worse, across the country, many utility companies are committed to coal, going so far as to actively fight legislation that would help eliminate fossil fuels. Some of them are even charging customers to pay for their own political activity.

Spending Your Money

The rampant use of fees paid by customers for political activity is technically illegal and undercuts the debate about making a national transition to renewable energy. The Energy Policy Institute warned in a [January 2023 report](#) that "A combination of vague and outdated rules riddled with loopholes, a lack of visibility into utility political influence activities for regulators and the public, and an abdication of enforcement by regulators has meant that utilities have had free reign to use their customers' money toward their political operations."

For example, Florida Power & Light (FP&L) [planted a candidate](#) in an election to oust a state senator who proposed legislation encouraging rooftop solar. Matrix, FP&L's political consulting company, engaged in equally shifty efforts to resist the expansion of renewable energy in six states and directly against the EPA.

In Ohio, [FirstEnergy concealed \\$60 million in bribes](#) through a web of dark-money groups. [The state of Wyoming contributes](#) taxpayer money to the Energy Policy Network, a group that runs political campaigns supporting utility-owned coal plants. And in Michigan, [Consumers Energy](#) gave more than \$43 million to influence political races.

Gas companies around the country are supporting [pre-emption laws](#) that block governments' ability to ban new natural gas installations. In California, SoCalGas distribution utility [misused ratepayer money](#) to fight electrification plans. National Fuel's [New York customers](#) also unwittingly paid for campaign materials opposing electrification.

Many these tactics have resulted in [fines costing millions](#) of dollars, [criminal charges](#) and even [racketeering convictions](#). Yet utilities continue to block green energy progress.

Lobbying Limits

Private companies can legally engage in lobbying and energetically do so. But most utility companies are [regulated monopolies](#), which are allowed to exist for the supposed public benefit they provide.

State regulations are usually supposed to ensure customers are charged only for the cost of the power they use, and even place limits on company profits. Nevertheless, utility companies find creative ways around state regulations, which means that customers who disagree with their energy provider's political activity [have no choice](#) but to pay for it. Often, electricity rates are inflated to prop up economically inefficient and ecologically unsustainable fossil fuel power plants.

[Colorado](#), [Connecticut](#), and [Maine](#) have recently passed laws that expressly prohibit their utilities from charging customers for their political activities such as lobbying, public relations spending, and dues to political trade associations. Utilities can still spend profits on these activities.

What You Can Do

Knowledge can be power. Look into your utility companies and find out which side of the renewables divide they are on.

Check the EPA's [Power Profiler](#) to understand the sources of your personal energy mix. Although this won't tell you about your utility's political activity, an energy mix heavily reliant on coal and natural gas without renewables may indicate that your power company is lobbying to continue using fossil fuels.

Next, visit [Open Secrets](#), which tracks how much utilities spend on lobbying to see if your utility is spending heavily to influence legislation and regulatory policy. While Open Secrets doesn't have data on what companies are lobbying for, it will give you the basis for asking a utility to explain their position to you.

If your utility offers green energy programs, sign up to send a clear signal that you want renewable power. When you find that a utility company is fighting clean energy, you may have the option to switch to [community solar](#) or go [off-grid](#) with your own system. Most people don't have the financial wherewithal or local access to community solar,

Your best chance to make an impact is by contacting your [state representatives](#) and encourage them to at least require that utilities disclose all political spending. Advocate for laws like the ones in Connecticut and Maine that restrict political activity. Even better, ask that your state include mandatory enforcement provisions with significant automatic fines for noncompliance with limits on spending ratepayer fees on political activity. Because utilities have successfully ousted elected officials who stand up to them, your representatives need to know that their constituents have their back when it comes to green energy.



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[Your Favorite Retailer Has an Ocean Shipping Problem](#)



By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).

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