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The socio-political dimension of the energy transition: Under which do citizens support renewable energy policies at the ballot box?

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The nuclear phasing out and promoted energy turnaround (Energiewende) could constitute a major driver for renewable energy projects. Increasing the share of renewable energy is seen as indispensable to solve the energy supply dilemma. This new orientation faces various challenges not only on a technical, but also on a political level. I emphasize that a governmental decision as such does not automatically induce energy transition, but renewable energy projects and innovative policy instruments enhancing them have to be accepted and realized at the national, regional and local level.


Whereas political actors and the population generally tend to have a positive view on renewable energy, opposition towards specific policies and projects is a recurrent issue in many countries. In participatory contexts like Switzerland, where citizens often need to support renewable energy policies in a direct-democratic vote, social acceptance by citizens is a crucial condition for the energy transition. But also in other countries, large-scale changes like the transition from fossil/nuclear to renewable energy will probably not be successful without at least some support by the population. Hence, in my presentation, I concentrate on the question: Under which conditions do citizens support renewable energy policy at the ballot box?

I will present findings from several large-scale population surveys conducted in Switzerland between 2016 and 2017, in particular also in the context of the national vote on the Government's Energy Strategy 2050. Based on conjoint analysis, I will show that the cost factor is the main single factor that determines voting on renewable energy policies – and this also is true for green-left voters. On the other hand, it proves to be quite difficult to find aspects that citizens perceive as benefit, i.e., compensating the costs. Whereas nuclear phasing out, subsidies for large-scale hydropower and a broad political coalition supporting the policy can be identified as triggers of support, the crucial potential benefit of renewable energy policies is not acknowledged by voters: A substantial part of citizens do not understand or do not believe in the efficacy of renewable energy policies.

Speaker Biography

Isabelle Stadelmann-Steffen is Professor of Comparative Politics at the Department of Political Science, University of Bern. Her research interests lie in the areas of public policy (especially welfare state policy and energy policy), direct democracy and political behavior and attitude research. In her current research projects, she is also working on the interfaces between these priorities. For example, it examines how policies such as family policy and energy policy influence citizens' political preferences.

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