



The Clean Power Plan:
**A NARRATIVE
POWER ANALYSIS**

NATIONAL PEOPLE'S ACTION
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INTRODUCTION

Proposed in 2014 and formally unveiled in August of 2015, the Clean Power Plan (CPP) sets the first ever U.S. limits on carbon pollution from power plants and requires each state to create plans to reduce carbon emissions.

The Clean Power Plan – particularly the corresponding state-level implementation plan processes – presents a major opportunity for environmental and social justice advocates to win significant victories that tackle the twin problems of climate change and inequality simultaneously. The plan presents advocates with the opportunity to use state power to intervene in a changing sector of the economy to ensure racial and economic equity while moving towards environmental sustainability.

While National People’s Action has a history of working on environmental issues as they intersect with economic and racial justice, we launched a new phase in our work in 2015 by seizing the organizing opportunities presented by the Clean Power Plan. As part of our overall strategy, we undertook a narrative power analysis.* The aim of our analysis was to uncover the key elements of the story that the opposition is telling and identify the points that the mainstream media is adopting in order to better craft messages and talking points that respond to the current narrative context. What follows are our findings, along with initial suggestions for crafting messages that can advance our collective values as environmental and social justice advocates.



NPA and Communities United for Action leader Sandy Lindsey testifies before the EPA, delivering over 20,000 signatures calling on them to strengthen the Clean Power Plan (November 18, 2015).

*National People’s Action would like to thank the Reframe Mentorship and the Center for Story Based Strategy for introducing us to the practice of narrative power analysis.

KEY FINDINGS

When it comes to speaking specifically to CPP's impact on People of Color and low- to moderate-income people, the opposition is defining the debate.

While proponents of the plan typically stress its economic impact, job creation, and impact on utility rates broadly, opponents of the plan regularly and specifically highlight their claims that the plan will decrease employment and raise utility costs for working, low-income, and people of color. In this study, proponents discussed the plan's impact on low-income and people of color in just four articles, compared to roughly four times that many articles on the other side. Moreover, the talking points used by proponents on this issue largely confined the discussion to the disparate impact the dirty energy economy and climate change have on frontline communities, while neglecting to discuss the need for solutions designed to prioritize economic and environmental benefits for those communities.

Although positive coverage of the plan significantly outweighs negative coverage, much of the mainstream reasoning in favor of the plan diverges significantly from our analysis.

METHOD

In order to best ascertain the narratives that surround the Clean Power Plan, we surveyed 154 articles between July 25 and December 31, 2015. We collected articles that explicitly mentioned the "Clean Power Plan" in major national news sources such as the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, the *Washington Post*, *Fox News*, and *CNN*. We also surveyed articles appearing in local newspapers related to our core CPP campaign affiliates, including: *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *The Southern Illinoisan*, *Detroit Free Press*, *Minnesota Star-Tribune*, *Cincinnati Enquirer*, *Las Vegas Sun*, and *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. The articles examined included 93 news items, 10 editorials, and 51 opinions and letters to the editor.

Several major events took place during the roughly six month period during which coverage was monitored including the release of the final Clean Power Plan, Pope Francis' visit to the United States, the entry of the plan into the federal register, a number of presidential debates, and the Paris Climate Talks.

A significant number of proponents, for example, favored market-based solutions, praised the plan's flexibility, and offered strong support for natural gas and nuclear as positive alternatives to coal. Proponents who care about the economic and racial justice in addition to environmental sustainability thus have to work on two fronts. We must convince our allies to talk about the plan differently in addition to simply challenging the narratives advanced by the opposition.

A small, but significant portion of the coverage in major outlets such as the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* suggests the plan does not go far enough.

A number of editorials explicitly lamented that the plan was a "second-best" option compared to comprehensive carbon tax or cap-and-trade legislation. In some cases, reporters went even further, suggesting that changes in the energy market might ultimately outstrip the targets outlined in the plan and questioning if the plan would ultimately be enough to reach targets necessary to prevent the devastating effects of climate change.

After reading each article, key themes and frames, characters and spokespeople, and key quotes were recorded. The overall tone of each article was then rated positive, negative, or neutral according to the following criteria:

POSITIVE:

An opinion, letter, or editorial written explicitly in support of the plan or a news item that either (1) adopted a positive frame towards the plan, (2) criticized the plan on the grounds that it did not go far enough, or (3) quoted plan proponents, but not the opposition.

NEUTRAL:

An opinion, letter or news item that: (1) covered plan without taking a stance on it and/or (2) quoted proponents and opponents of the plan equally.

NEGATIVE:

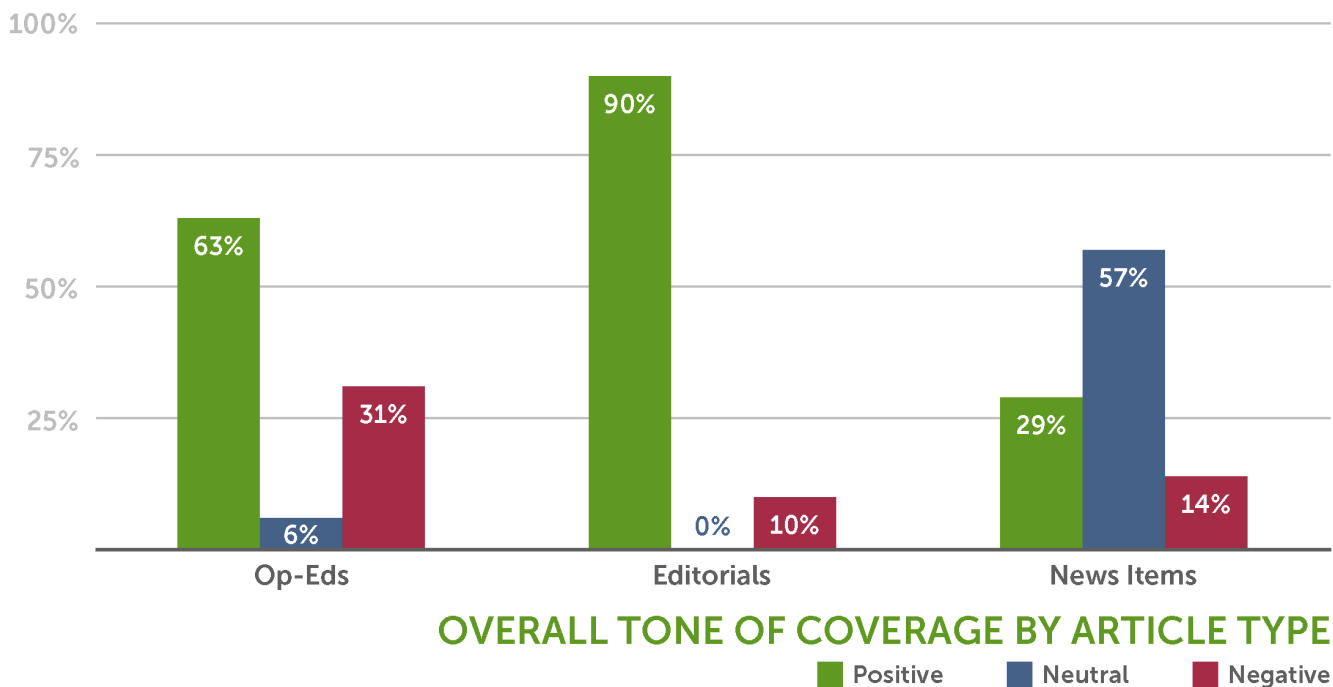
An opinion, letter, or editorial written explicitly to condemn the plan or news item that either (1) adopted a negative frame towards the plan or (2) quoted opponents of the plan, but not proponents.

TONE OF COVERAGE

A positive characterization of the Clean Power Plan pervaded each kind of article: news items, editorials, and opinions. Indeed, within each category of coverage, articles with a positive rating outweighed articles with a negative rating by a margin of at least two-to-one.

Overall, 44% of articles offered a positive characterization of the Clean Power Plan, compared to just 20% that offered a negative characterization. The remaining 36% of articles were neutral.

While news items were the most likely to be neutral, the *Washington Post* had consistently positive coverage of the plan and *Fox News* had consistently negative coverage. Proponents of the plan strongly outweighed detractors on the opinion pages, even though negative opinions of the plan were published in all major newspapers. Every editorial in this study, with the exception of an editorial by the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, favored the plan.



NARRATIVE POWER ANALYSIS

In the narrative power analysis that follows, this study attempts to deconstruct the key elements of the story within the opposition's narrative, and then identify the extent to which those elements (or others) are shaping mainstream media coverage.

1. HOW IS THE CONFLICT BEING FRAMED?

Opposition Frames

Environment versus Economy: This is the primary opposition frame. Roughly 32% of articles surveyed include or quote opposition talking points around the CPP raising utility costs, "killing jobs," limiting growth, and generally wrecking the economy. In many cases,

the environment isn't explicitly mentioned in this frame; instead, the rule is simply presented as a threat to the economy.

In some cases, Obama and the EPA are explicitly or tacitly portrayed as smashing the economy. For instance, an opinion in the *Washington Post* claimed that Obama and the Democrats' "real enemy seems to be economic growth." Many proponents of the Clean Power Plan frequently counter with narratives about economic growth generally, often in harmony with free-market themes, and without explicit mention of economic opportunity for impacted communities, low- to moderate-income communities, and communities of color.

Government versus Consumers, People of Color, and the Poor: This is a subset of the environment versus economy frame, but worth detailing as it has explicit language around “struggling families,” “fixed-income seniors,” and people of color. The claim goes beyond the idea that the plan will raise utility rates to the claim that it will increase poverty and cause job losses for millions of people of color. At the extreme, Deneen Berelli of *Fox News* calls CPP “the green movement’s new Jim Crow.” National Black Chamber of Commerce President Harry Alford calls the EPA’s rule “a slap in the face to poor and minority families.” Senator Joe Manchin (D-W.V.) sums it up by saying, “A lot of people on the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum are going to die.” Opposition talking points on these issues come primarily from the Black Chamber of Commerce, the Heartland Institute, and the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association. As noted above, those few proponents of the plan who do talk about race and class tend to focus on disparate impact of pollution rather than the need to create targeted solutions that provide economic opportunity along with improved health and security to those most impacted by the dirty energy economy and climate change.

Political and Legal Battle: Federal Government versus States, President Obama versus Republicans, Illegal Regulatory Overreach: At least 25% of articles draw on opposition frames that involve the political and legal battles that surround the Clean Power Plan. Much of the coverage focuses on the struggle between the federal government and the states, or between President Obama and Republicans at all levels. This fades into explicit arguments about government overreach and states rights. In a significant number of articles, the opposition portrays the plan as either illegal or a massive regulatory overreach. For instance, Craig Butler, head of Ohio’s state Environmental Protection Agency, is quoted by *Fox News* saying, “We feel so strongly that EPA has clearly overstepped its legal authority that once courts consider the rule, we maybe would not have to implement it to begin with.”

Climate Nihilism: Clean Power Plan won’t help, U.S. versus China (and India): Although some are still outright climate deniers, a number of opponents are shifting towards arguing that America cannot or should not address climate change. In roughly 9% of articles, the opposition suggests that the plan’s impact on climate change will be negligible to non-existent. This point has been particularly popular among Republican presidential candidates. It was strongly adopted by Marco Rubio in

the second Republican debate, when he said, “We are not going to make America a harder place to create jobs in order to pursue policies that will do absolutely nothing, nothing to change our climate, to change our weather,” which led to a corresponding story in *USA Today*. Closely connected to this claim, and given airtime in prominent sources (*Washington Post*, *CNN*), is the idea that China and India are chiefly to blame for carbon emissions, and therefore U.S. action is pointless.

Mainstream Media Frames

The status quo presentation of the conflict tends to focus on the political fight over the plan, both between Republicans and Democrats as well as between the Obama Administration and states. Legal challenges are presented as looming large. The opposition is successfully exploiting both these frames to ensure their talking points about government overreach and states rights are included in the discussion. Since the successful implementation of the plan hinges on the next administration, there is strong interest in the positions presidential candidates – particularly Republicans – are taking regarding the plan. Finally, in more sophisticated sources, the conflict is presented as taking place within an already shifting energy market – indeed in several articles, Chris Mooney at the *Washington Post* seems to implicitly endorse the idea that the plan is too modest by suggesting the development of alternative forms of energy (including natural gas) could outpace plan requirements.

2. WHO ARE THE KEY CHARACTERS IN THE STORY?

Opposition Characters

Villains: Obama and EPA regulators, sometimes portrayed as in collusion “hyper-aggressive environmentalists” (*Fox News*) and billionaire donors (*Fox News*).

Victims: Millions of consumers and “struggling” Americans, including low-income, fixed-income, and people of color, who will be hurt by high utility rates and lost jobs; coal workers; everyone, insofar as we rely on a stable grid for electricity.

Heroes: Governors challenging the plan.

Mainstream Media Characters

The main characters in the mainstream media are elected officials at both the state and federal level, who are quoted in nearly every news article.

The supporting characters are either representatives from industry groups, environmental organizations, or various “experts” (professors, analysts, etc.). Very few articles in this study included a quote someone impacted by climate change, talking about their own utility costs, or workers from any energy industry. Two stories about coal communities broke this trend, but the lack of quotes from solar and wind employees was particularly notable. Apart from the pope, no other religious figures appeared in these articles. Essentially, everyday people do not currently show up in the media landscape.

3. WHAT FORESHADOWING AND IMAGERY IS USED?

Opposition Foreshadowing and Imagery

Skyrocketing Utility Costs: Plan will make electricity costs so high that “families can’t afford to run their air conditioners” (Editorial, *Las Vegas Review-Journal*).

Grid Breakdown, power outages: Plan will make electricity so unreliable that it will be “harder to keep the lights on” (Op-Ed, *Cincinnati Enquirer*).

Mass Joblessness: The “EPA’s proposed plan would increase black poverty by 23 percent and eliminate seven million jobs for blacks by 2035. In addition, the study confirmed a 26 percent increase in Hispanic poverty resulting from the proposal, with job loss reaching 12 million by 2035” (Op-Ed, *The Southern Illinoisan*).

Mainstream Media Foreshadowing and Imagery

The mainstream media tends to present images and foreshadowing from both the opposition and proponents of CPP. There is a significant media fascination with the “booming” renewables sectors – including, in several instances, things like community solar.

4. ASSUMPTIONS

Finally, it’s worth examining some of the key assumptions at play in the opposition’s story:

CPP will raise utility costs, “kill jobs,” hurt the economy – especially for low- to moderate-income people and people of color: We know this isn’t true and should fight back against this narrative, while emphasizing specific ways CPP could grow the economy and alleviate inequality, particularly in the most impacted communities. Instead of simply asserting the generic benefits that CPP could have, we should put forward targeted solutions that could increase economic opportunity for the most impacted communities.

By combining a message about climate change with a pervasive discussion of economic and racial inequality, we can make it clear that the plan carries high stakes on many of the key issues Americans are concerned about today. We should not challenge this narrative exclusively with facts and figures, which carry little emotional weight, but also with positive personal and community stories about how clean energy and economic development can go hand-in-hand.

People are not worried about climate change and pollution: While economic concerns remain important, there is room to appeal to other political motivations. Fewer Americans today deny the existence of climate change and a strong majority of Americans, particularly among self-identified Democrats, believe climate change is a serious problem. Communications that challenge climate deniers and climate nihilism could rely heavily on working with people’s hopes and fears for the future. We can also highlight personal stories that talk about the impact the current dirty energy economy and climate change have on our families and our communities and the positive difference a strong clean power plan could make.

The federal government has no role in protecting citizens from the dirty energy economy and climate change: While a substantial number of Clean Power Plan proponents lift up free-market solutions to climate change, the CPP presents us with an opportunity to discuss the positive role government can play in constraining corporate power to serve the public good by improving public health, constraining costs, and ensuring sustainability. The plan offers us an opportunity to argue government has an important role to play in ensuring that infrastructure and basic goods and services are structured to benefit everyone, rather than just CEOs, shareholders, and the wealthy few.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1 Present the Clean Power Plan as an opportunity to tackle the twin problems of climate change and inequality

There is widespread agreement among proponents of the CPP that we must highlight the economic benefits of the plan to counter the opposition. We have a choice, however, in how we frame our counter narrative. We can either tell a story that favors free-market solutions and praises economic growth without talking about shared prosperity, or we can advance a narrative about the need for expanded public and community control over a changing sector of the

economy. By connecting climate change directly to solutions that create equity, we achieve two important aims. First, we make the argument for climate action stronger by connecting it to inequality, which is at the center of our public discourse and concern. Second, by speaking directly to the experience of struggling Americans about the opportunities CPP presents for their communities, we can attract new and more diverse supporters of our efforts.

2 Talk about specific solutions that can create economic opportunity in the most impacted communities, especially low- to moderate-income communities and communities of color

Proponents can and should talk far more frequently about what CPP means for people of color and low-income people. We must center racial and economic justice instead of running from them because climate justice is inherently a racial and economic justice issue given how and where dirty energy is produced. Proponents should not only talk about the current

disparate impact of the dirty energy economy, they should also highlight the need for solutions that create economic opportunity in the most impacted communities. Part of this could be highlighting specific policy demands, but it could also be achieved by lifting up the voices and stories of those who are most impacted (see next point).

3 Work to inject the stories of diverse, everyday people into the debate

Although the mainstream media has largely focused on speaking to politicians, policy experts, and high level advocates, we can give this highly technical regulatory process emotional resonance by attempting to lift up the voices and stories of individuals most impacted by the dirty energy economy and climate change.

And we can foreshadow a vision of sustainability and fairness by lifting up success stories about how the transition to sustainable energy can be paired with economic development in those communities that have traditionally experienced disinvestment.

4 Combat climate nihilism with an expansive vision of climate opportunity

Climate change is frightening. The way to meet that fear isn't by putting our heads in the sand or pointing our fingers at China and India. It's by coming together to meet the challenge of climate change head on and, in the process, spurring mass reinvestment in our crumbling infrastructure, creating good paying jobs that are desperately needed, and reinvesting in communities that have been historically subject to disinvestment. The more specific we can be about what

that future will look like, the better. We can tell stories about how a good green job can make the difference for a struggling family or how debt-free on-bill financing of solar panels can help a family struggling to pay its energy bill each month. Projecting this hopeful vision that the transition to clean energy will fuel opportunity for everyday Americans can combat the idea that we can't and shouldn't do anything about climate change.

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