

## Research Note

# The Other Side of the NIMBY Syndrome

ERIC R. A. N. SMITH  
MARISELA MARQUEZ

Department of Political Science  
University of California, Santa Barbara  
Santa Barbara, California, USA

*Whenever a neighborhood or community group objects to a proposed development in their area, someone questions whether the objections are part of a NIMBY, or "Not in My Backyard," pattern of responses. According to past studies, one characteristic of a typical NIMBY syndrome is a lack of trust in project sponsors or experts. Most researchers argue that distrust leads to the NIMBY syndrome. Margolis (1996), however, argues that opposition to a proposed development may cause distrust. In this article, we investigate opposition to offshore oil development in California using focusing groups of local political activists on both sides of the issue. Previous research has largely ignored project supporters when studying NIMBY responses. We find that supporters and opponents are quite similar, especially in their distrust of one another. That is, distrust characterizes both sides in NIMBY situations. We believe that our findings make Margolis's claim that distrust does not cause NIMBY responses more plausible.*

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Whenever a neighborhood or community group objects to a local development, someone suggests that the objections are part of a NIMBY, or "Not in My Backyard," pattern of responses. For policymakers, the question is whether the people who object to the development are being reasonable or irrational and unreasonably selfish.

NIMBY responses to proposed development projects are generally described as extreme opposition to local projects characterized by (1) parochial and localized attitudes toward the problem, which exclude broader implications; (2) distrust of project sponsors; (3) limited information about project siting, risks, and benefits; (4) high concern about project risks; and (5) highly emotional responses to the conflict (Kraft and Clary 1991, 302–303). The first item in this list—localized attitudes—raises

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Address correspondence to Eric R. A. N. Smith, Department of Political Science, University of California, Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA 93110, USA. E-mail: smith@sscf.ucsb.edu

the question of selfishness. The other items raise questions about the reasonableness or rationality of the objections.

Kraft and Clary (1991) based their description of the NIMBY syndrome on their review of the scholarly literature. However, when they examined opposition to a set of proposed sites for nuclear waste repositories, they found that the conventional description of NIMBY responses did not hold up. They found high concern about project risks and distrust of the sponsors, but they did not find low information, localized attitudes, or highly emotional responses (Kraft and Clary 1991, 318). Other researchers have also found evidence suggesting that the only patterns that regularly appear are concerns about health and safety risks and distrust of project sponsors (Hunter and Leyden 1995; Wright 1993). Consequently, we regard the conventional description of NIMBY responses as problematic.

In a recent book, Howard Margolis (1996) raised doubts about how trust or distrust of project sponsors fits into the NIMBY syndrome. The generally accepted argument is that a lack of trust in industry or government spokespeople or in scientific experts will cause people to reject accurate information about risks and open the door for wildly exaggerated fears. Margolis suggests that the causal path may actually be in the opposite direction. That is, once a person has decided that a project is dangerous, he or she will distrust any so-called expert who says otherwise. In short, Margolis suggests that distrust is *caused by* the NIMBY syndrome, rather than being a cause of the NIMBY syndrome.

In this article, we examine the role of trust in NIMBY responses using a series of focus groups of leaders of both sides of a conflict. Although we cannot test Margolis's claim that opposition to a proposed local project causes distrust of project sponsors, rather than the reverse, we can cast some light on the relationship of trust to project opposition that makes Margolis's claim seem more plausible. Specifically, we find that while distrust of project sponsors characterizes project opponents, distrust of project critics equally characterizes project supporters. In other words, in disputes over local projects, neither side trusts the other and neither side trusts the other side's experts.

### **The Conflict: Offshore Oil Development**

The question of whether to permit more offshore oil drilling along the California coast has long been a controversial one.<sup>1</sup> Resistance to offshore oil drilling began in response to the first offshore oil drilling operation in Summerland in 1896 (Paddock 1994). Ever since—long before the modern environmental movement—the oil industry has met resistance to its efforts to expand offshore drilling. Following the 1969 Union Oil platform spill in the Santa Barbara Channel, the opposition to offshore oil development became better and more permanently organized. New groups such as “Get Oil Out” (GOO) formed, and existing groups such as the Sierra Club focused some of their attention on monitoring oil industry activities along the coast. The year 1969 marked the end of the period during which the oil industry could hope to expand its offshore drilling operations without serious political challenge.

Public opinion among Californians was divided during the 1970s, with majorities of 50 to 60% favoring additional drilling (Smith and Garcia 1995). After the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency, however, support for oil drilling along the coast fell, hitting a low point of 22% after the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* disaster, rebounding to 34% by 1990, and declining again to 20% by 1998.<sup>2</sup> Although opin-

ions in the coastal, oil-producing counties were held more intensely than elsewhere, the survey evidence indicates that there were no differences between coastal and noncoastal counties in level of support for further offshore oil drilling (Smith and Garcia 1995).

At the time of the focus group interviews in late 1994 and early 1995, no oil companies had any current proposals for new offshore oil platforms. There was, however, a major controversy over a proposal by Mobil Oil Corporation to build an onshore facility designed to tap an offshore reservoir in state waters using "extended reach" technology (LePage and Burns 1995; Paddock 1994). Mobil dubbed the facility "Clearview" because the onshore facility would replace an existing offshore platform, which Mobil would remove, opening up a clear view of the ocean. The proposed site was on property owned by the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB). The deal therefore required that the university lease the land to Mobil. Environmentalists argued that Clearview should be rejected because oil development was inappropriate for the area and because Mobil proposed to build the facility in the ecologically sensitive Devereaux Sloughs. Resistance also arose because the site was adjacent to university housing and close to a densely populated neighborhood with an elementary school and a child-care center. Eventually, after our focus group interviews were completed, the university bowed to local opposition and decided not to lease the land to Mobil, killing the proposal.

### **The Focus Group Method**

A focus group is best described as a group interview (Krueger 1988; Morgan 1989). Focus groups are a technique designed to gather qualitative information about people's beliefs and attitudes by interviewing groups of like-minded people. The "interview" is actually a group discussion led by a moderator, who asks a general introductory question to which each group member responds in turn. The moderator then encourages further discussion of the question before moving to the next question. In our focus groups, for instance, the moderator opened the discussion by asking the participants what they thought about offshore oil drilling along the coast of California. No suggestions were offered about how the participants should interpret the question, so they were free to bring up whatever they wished to say. Subsequent questions were asked about the benefits, costs, and risks associated with offshore oil, the beauty or ugliness of the oil platforms, and what the participants thought about the Clearview project.

The moderator allows the participants to take the discussion in whatever direction they find interesting. By encouraging a free-flowing discussion, the moderator gives participants the freedom to bring up some aspects of an issue and to ignore others. In doing so, the moderator lets the participants indirectly tell the researchers what they find important, what they find interesting, and how they see the problem in question.

To draw out the opinions of focus group participants, the researcher selects participants for each focus group who will presumably see things from a similar perspective so that they will feel comfortable expressing their opinions. Consequently, the researcher chooses people who have similar demographic, cultural, or political backgrounds, depending on the characteristics that are relevant to the problem.

We interpret our focus group data using a qualitative, or ethnographic, approach. That is, our analysis uses quotations to illustrate the observations we make. Although we counted a number of references of different types to assist in

interpreting the data, we have chosen not to present any formal content analysis because such numbers imply a precision that we believe focus groups do not offer. Moreover, our principal observation can be plainly seen in the quotations we offer as examples; numbers would add little to the persuasiveness of our argument.

### **The Focus Groups in this Study**

In this series of focus groups, we sought to explore the beliefs and opinions of local political leaders and activists in Santa Barbara County, California, regarding offshore oil development. Because we were dealing with elites, who knew more about the subject and are more talkative than the general public, we put together small groups of four to six members each. We recruited people to fit into four types of groups: (1) Democratic political activists; (2) Republican political activists; (3) proenvironmental political activists; and (4) prodevelopment political activists. A total of nine focus group interviews was conducted with the four types of participants. Two sessions each were held with Democrats, Republicans, and environmentalists. Because the first two prodevelopment groups had slightly fewer participants, we conducted an extra prodevelopment session for a total of three. Thirty-seven local leaders participated in our sessions.

The participants in our groups were all political activists in Santa Barbara County. They were recruited from the local Democratic and Republican party central committees, from local campaigns, and from environmental, business, and oil-industry groups in the area. The political participants included several former elected government officials and several people who will probably run for office in the future. None of the participants held an elected government office at the time of the interviews. The business and environmental participants included people who held prominent positions in business and environmental groups. They all had actively worked in the political realm to further their interests. Most of the participants had been quoted in local newspapers at one time or another, and many were frequently interviewed news sources. In sum, these groups included a cross section of prominent political activists and leaders.

The focus group sessions were conducted on the University of California, Santa Barbara campus. The sessions were videotaped and later transcribed. Because the subject was politically sensitive and some of the participants held political ambitions, all of them were guaranteed anonymity.

### **Trust in Project Sponsors**

Most scholars believe that people's trust in various sources of knowledge (e.g., government and industry spokespeople, and scientific experts) plays a key role in whether people worry unnecessarily about potential risks (Committee on Risk Perception and Communication 1989, 118–122; Covello 1984, 1992; Laird 1989). The conventional argument is that if trusting people are told by government spokespeople that a potential hazard is extremely unlikely to occur and not worth any attention, they will feel reassured and ignore the potential risk. Their information will be more accurate and they will make their decisions more rationally. However, if people do not trust government and industry spokespeople or scientific experts when they say that something is safe, then the expert statements will have no effect on people's perceptions of risk or attitudes toward the proposal in question. People

who do not regard experts as trustworthy, therefore, will be more likely to exaggerate risks and irrationally fear highly unlikely hazards. For these reasons, distrust of project sponsors has been identified as an important cause of NIMBY response patterns.

Although our moderator never specifically asked about trust, comments either openly voicing mistrust of the oil industry or implying a lack of trust were scattered throughout all four Democratic and environmentalist focus groups. Moreover, no one in any of these groups defended oil companies or suggested that they were being unfairly criticized. All the participants seemed to share the view that the oil companies' promises about safety could not be taken at face value, as the following comments illustrate:

"I guess I just don't trust the corporations that are engaging in this exploration and drilling in terms of really following through on the kind of safety procedures and testing that they would need to do before they just go in there and start pumping the oil."

"I think that we have ample ground to be suspicious until the validity of those claims [by oil companies] are actually proven by objective people."

"I see oil companies as a sort of bad guys—citizen bad guys—they haven't proven themselves worthy of the chance to exploit what's off our coast and what belongs to the state and the nation."

"Since this part of corporate America doesn't seem to attend to its problems and show us that it can handle the problems we've brought up time and again—'we' meaning the neighbors in every part of the coastline and every part of the country—we have no real solid ground on which to trust them and to appreciate much of what they say."

So far, the mistrust looks exactly as one should expect based on the literature about NIMBY patterns. Those who oppose the local oil development do not trust the oil companies.

### **Trust in Project Critics**

We now consider the responses of the Republicans and prodevelopment activists, almost all of whom favored more oil development. Their comments also reveal a good deal of distrust—except that they distrust a different set of people. The supporters of offshore oil distrust environmentalists and others whom they see as opposing them, such as the university community and the residents of the wealthy (and generally proenvironmental) community of Montecito.

Although their comments clearly reflected distrust, the supporters of oil development rarely used the word "trust." Instead, they questioned the environmentalists' motives (for instance, suggesting that true environmentalists would behave differently); they suggested that the opponents were "extremists," "radicals," or political manipulators; they claimed that the opponents were not really members of the local community, but were in some sense outsiders who did not care about local affairs; and they argued that the opponents were just a tiny number of people who were not representative of general public opinion.

The following comments illustrate some of the attacks on the critics of oil development:

“The restraints, the constraints, the cost of doing business in this area are not based on the relative risk that is posed by the industry, but on heightened fears that have been projected on the industry by people that I believe are not truly ethical in their arguments.”

“If they [local environmentalists] were really truly concerned about the environment and were not hypocritical about their own insatiable desires and needs for oil products, they would want that oil produced here in the most environmentally sensitive manner in the entire world.”

“Disinformation and lobbying [by oil industry opponents] . . . are going on all the time.”

“It’s [Clearview] simply such a great idea to me. . . . Of course, it’s already generating all kinds of opposition. Of course, the forces that are against it would be out there, but I think there’s a certain element which would be protesting regardless of how safe it was, how clean it was, how unobtrusive it was.”

“I think the Clearview project has more clearly revealed the hypocrisy of the local environmentalists and UCSB than anything we’ve seen in our five years of existence.”

“When I think of offshore oil, I think of basically two big areas. The first is that it is a very sensitive political issue, particularly California, and it’s used by politicians in general to basically manipulate opinions and votes rather than to be used for what it should be—the economic advantages that are potentially there.”

Taken together, we believe these and similar comments indicate distrust of project critics. Project supporters believe that their opponents’ honesty and integrity are questionable, that their factual claims should not be believed, that their arguments can be dismissed without serious consideration. In short, project supporters and project opponents share similar views of one another.

## Discussion

The evidence that supporters of offshore oil distrust their opponents does not contradict any findings in the literature on NIMBY syndrome. Indeed, the literature on the NIMBY syndrome does not include any investigation of this subject. Previous investigations of trust have looked at trust either in the corporate sponsors of projects or in the government, which was the sponsor in many cases (e.g., nuclear power). Researchers have not examined trust in the environmentalists, scientists, or political activists opposing projects.

Yet when one considers the question of trust on both sides, our findings seem perfectly sensible. Casual observation of politics at any level suggests that a basic characteristic of heated political disputes is that neither side trusts the other—and that includes the experts that the other side offers to support its position. The literature on NIMBY responses makes that point about opponents of local projects. Our evidence suggests that it applies equally well to the *supporters* of local projects.

If there is a NIMBY syndrome, then there may also be a BIMBY—or Build It in My Backyard—syndrome. The NIMBY response gets far more attention and seems far more common. Still, there really are two sides to these sorts of conflicts, despite the fact that past research has focused almost exclusively on the NIMBY side.

Our finding about the two-sided lack of trust brings up a question about the role of trust in the NIMBY syndrome. Most studies of NIMBY responses claim that distrust is a key variable that predicts strong opposition to proposed projects. That view has not gone unchallenged. Margolis (1996, 28–32) argued that the conventional argument can be turned on its head. That is, perhaps the facts that people have exaggerated perceptions of risk and that they realize some experts do not agree with them causes those people to distrust the experts. Instead of trust causing perceptions of risk, perhaps risk perceptions cause trust.

We do not have the data to sort out the direction of the causal path between trust and risk perceptions, but we believe that our findings make Margolis's argument more plausible. Our conclusion is this. Instead of a lack of trust being a characteristic only of people who are strongly opposed to a local project—that is, only of people who are caught up in a NIMBY syndrome—we see it as being characteristic of being involved in either side of heated local political disputes. If further investigation supports this conclusion, then not being a trusting person does not necessarily make one more likely to oppose local projects.

### Concluding Comment

By looking only at opponents of local projects and ignoring supporters, the conventional description of NIMBY disputes tells only half the story. Once the supporters are brought into the picture, we see that supporters and opponents share similar views of each other. This similarity suggests that to understand some aspects of what has been described as the NIMBY syndrome, researchers need to look at the complete dynamics of disputes, rather than at just one side.

### Notes

1. For further discussion of the politics of offshore oil development along the California coast, see Freudenberg and Gramling (1994) and Smith and Garcia (1995).
2. Data are from the California Offshore Oil Drilling and Energy Policy Survey, conducted by the Field Institute in March 1998. The Field Institute is a nonpartisan, not-for-profit public opinion research organization established by the Field Research Corporation (550 Kearny Street, Suite 900, San Francisco, CA 94108). The sample was a representative sample of 810 adult residents of the state.

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