



Site Fights: Divisive Facilities and Civil Society in Japan and the West
by Daniel P. Aldrich

States face vexing problems as they try to construct facilities that serve the needs of citizens as a whole but potentially bring unfavorable consequences into their host communities. Plans to site incinerators, waste treatment facilities, nuclear power plants, and airports regularly create backlash in communities around the world. Residents have hurled Molotov cocktails, blown up guard posts, and gone on hunger strikes to prevent the placement of unwanted projects in their backyards. A half century ago, the problem was less acute. A world with abundant land, cheap energy, and uncongested airports had far less need for such projects. Furthermore—and even more importantly—the citizens who were adversely affected were far more likely to accept such projects in the name of advancing the public good.

Times have changed. As energy consumption, garbage output, and airport use have increased, the demand for such facilities has soared, and the land available for large-scale projects has shrunk. Meanwhile, rising educational levels, increased environmental consciousness, declining confidence in governments across the industrial countries, and increased access to information all mean that citizen opposition to such projects is rising, and host communities are harder to find. State authorities thus face fundamental

challenges: how to locate controversial facilities and how to respond to local citizen opposition to such projects when it arises.

Social scientists and policy makers have demonstrated a growing interest in siting issues. Meanwhile, the acronym NIMBY (Not in My Back Yard) has become commonplace in referring to siting dilemmas. Simultaneously, the many prominent works on civil society and social capital by scholars at Harvard University like Robert Putnam, Theda Skocpol, and Susan Pharr reflect the growing recognition that studies of governance and political economy must take civil society seriously.

My forthcoming book, *Site Fights: Handling Controversial Facilities in Japan and the West*, contributes to both of these literatures. Drawing upon two years of fieldwork in Japan and France, it shows how democratic states meet the challenges of constructing controversial projects. Focusing on Japan with selective comparisons to France and the United States, I frame siting as an interaction between state and civil society. Previous research has suggested that, for governments countering potential resistance, the main story is about developing elaborate strategies to appease targeted communities. This is far from the whole picture, however. Citizen consciousness worldwide has increased, but there are in all countries wide variations in potential for organized opposition. The basic first-order bureaucratic approach to siting these “public bads” is to identify potential sites in communities that have less sturdy civil society and thus less potential for protest.

This book demonstrates that bureaucrats seek to avoid costly resistance and choose weak civil societies for sites. Literature on environmental racism argues that state agencies target local communities for such projects on the basis of race and ethnicity. Political economists contend that local support for or opposition to ruling parties best determines the outcome of siting decisions. Not surprisingly, bureaucrats themselves tend to claim that they site solely on the basis of technocratic, politically neutral criteria. Others believe that economic conditions determine siting locations. These explanations, while illuminating facets of the process, do not capture the full variation in site selection. As my book shows, the choice of sites turns on bureaucratic estimates of the potential for civic conflict. In all three national settings, the typical site is apt to be relatively unpopulated and rural with low or diminishing community solidarity and diffuse civil society, compared to the situation in

alternative potential sites.

In a global context in which civic opposition to public-bads siting is rising, coercion is clearly not an optimal strategy, and formulas that include soft social control and incentives are preferable for dealing with future siting dilemmas. And indeed, nuclear power siting in Japan displays the skills of the country's bureaucrats in generating precisely these kinds of non-coercive solutions. But civil servants in all three nations adopt these “soft” solutions solely when forced to do so. Only when they encounter stiff civic resistance do state decision makers set aside coercive strategies.

This research has profound implications for research on both states and civil society. My work complements earlier work by Robert Putnam to show how the nature of civil society conditions a state's strategies for addressing policy problems. The location of facilities and the tool kit that states develop to handle anti-facility resistance are deeply related to the strength of civil society. Strong civil society pushes states to develop less force-based—and hence more sustainable—strategies for handling divisive problems. Weak civil society allows state authorities to continue using standard operating procedures that rely heavily upon expropriation, police suppression and surveillance, and hard social control techniques.

Increasing pressure from civil society has produced at least partially successful, softer solutions to siting conflicts. More than changing policy tools to offer incentives, educational curricula, and similar “soft strategies,” state agencies could work to actually involve local residents in plans for controversial facilities. Research has consistently demonstrated that government agencies involving citizens directly in the decision-making process creates better policies than top-down, state-directed ones. Governments must recognize the degree to which national plans rest on the reactions of local communities and work to involve them in decision making. (*Forthcoming, Cornell University Press, 2008*)

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