

Review

Daniel P. Aldrich, *Site Fights: Divisive Facilities and Civil Society in Japan and the West*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2008, 254 pp. (hardcover), \$39.95, ISBN 978-0801446191
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How do governments make decisions about siting controversial facilities such as nuclear power plants, dams, and airports? This is the central research question raised by this extremely well-written and highly readable book.

The construction of *public bads* that have diffuse benefits but highly focused costs on the host community often meets considerable opposition. Governments in advanced democracies have to ‘gauge the potential for conflict by taking the measure of their civil society and then interacting with anti-facility social and environmental movements that often envision state-initiated projects as harmful and unnecessary’ (p. 2). In contrast to predominant explanatory approaches to siting based on technocratic criteria, partisan politics, environmental racism, economic conditions, and political intervention, Aldrich forwards a novel argument that ‘civil society, whether anticipated or encountered by the state, deeply conditions both the selection of sites for public bads and the state’s response to opposition to such projects’ (p. 8). First, state agencies initially manage potential conflict over controversial facilities by avoiding contestation wherever possible. Second, state agencies are more likely to rely on coercive techniques and tools of hard social control, such as land expropriation and police force, when long-term opposition from civil society is weak. Drawing upon historical as well as original interview data on siting of airports, dams, and nuclear power plants from three advanced democracies – Japan, France, and the US – this book makes a significant contribution to the growing literature on the crucial role of civil society in becoming a ‘countervailing force’ to state policies.

Despite impressive evidence to support the argument, a couple of points merit some fine-tuning. The first one pertains to the tightness of the causality argument. In many cases, it remains difficult to nail down the precise moment *when* the civil society effect kicks in by causing the state to change its siting decision. In the case of dams in Japan, despite sustained resistance to siting in the 1970s and 1980s, the Ministry of Construction upgraded ‘its coercion and hard social control tactics’ (p. 103). In the case of France, across cases of airport, dam, and nuclear power plant construction, the absolute power of the state in obtaining a ‘statement of public interest’, giving the state the right to expropriate land for the project, seems to be able to contain, if not override, civil society action. In the siting of nuclear power plants, the French Ministry of Industry, faced with short-lived but often acute opposition, almost consistently ‘relied on highly coercive and hard social control tools’ (p. 152) without expanding its toolkit of responses. It might

be helpful to explain how civil society interacts with other variables to produce a certain siting outcome and policy response.

The second issue pertains to the operationalization of the key independent variables. The author measures civil society quality and capacity by approximating these with (1) the percentage of population change from 1950 until the siting attempt and (2) the change in percentage of primary sector employment from 1980 to 1995. Hence, 'authorities were most likely to attempt to site reactors in communities with low community solidarity and diminished or decreasing levels of social capital' (p. 38). Though this might work in cases where fishermen and farmers were the primary actors involved/affected, the measurement leaves out many instances when more than just the primary sector employment is involved.

One last issue might be the level of analysis. All cases discussed focus on the interactions between the state and local/regional/national opposition. In the case of airport siting in Okinawa, the role of the US is non-negligible. Although the author did mention the involvement of some international non-governmental organizations, there is little analysis on the role of international civil society networks in changing siting outcomes and policy responses.

Site Fights is an impressive book that pushes the reader to reconsider the role of civil society in state policymaking. It is of great interest to scholars in comparative politics and civil society research, activists, and policymakers alike.

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