Book Excerpt: How the Public Got Behind Texas Wind Power

The renewable-energy epiphany that launched Texas wind power came through an unexpected channel: public opinion polls in the mid-1990s. An excerpt from The Great Texas Wind Rush.

BY KATE GALBRAITH AND ASHER PRICE    SEPT. 17, 2013    6 AM

This is the second of two abridged excerpts from Kate Galbraith and Asher Price’s book, The Great Texas Wind Rush: How George Bush, Ann Richards and a Bunch of Tinkerers Helped the Oil and Gas State Win the Race to Wind Power, published by the University of Texas Press. It chronicles the run-up to the passage
of Senate Bill 7, the massive 1999 electric deregulation bill signed by Gov. George W. Bush that, through a little-noticed renewable energy mandate, set Texas on course to become the top wind-power state.

When Gov. George W. Bush casually called out to his top electricity regulator, Pat Wood, to "get smart on wind," Wood was first incredulous, then dubious. As far as he knew, wind energy was not competitive with the cost of fossil-fuel generation. And even if it cost only fractionally more, would consumers really care enough about pollution to pay the premium? "I was not Mr. Tree Hugger," Wood once told the Austin American-Statesman. Indeed, when his boss called out to him that day, Wood recalls this thought flashing through his head: wind, as far as he knew, was "California, Volvo-driving, Birkenstock-wearing, tree-hugging kind of stuff."

But Bush was serious, and others noticed, too. A spring 1996 newsletter from the Texas Renewable Energy Industries Association carried the headline: "Bush to Agency Heads — Pay Attention to Renewable Energy." The story was about a new document that, among other things, urged government officials to stay attuned to environmental matters, such as the percentage of renewables on the grid. It wasn't much, but it was a start. "The governor is to be commended" for his vision, the renewables group concluded.

Soon Wood was serious about wind, too, thanks to a sort of renewable-energy epiphany that came through an unexpected channel: public opinion polls. The concept, trademarked by a then-University of Texas government professor named James Fishkin, was called "deliberative polling." The idea behind the polling system, which was part of an energy planning process ordered by the Texas Legislature, was to determine not just public opinion, but informed public opinion. The core question animating a deliberative poll, as a paper on how it worked in Texas explains, is, "What would the target population think if they were given an opportunity to read about, discuss, and ask questions concerning the issue under consideration?"
"It was a marriage between scientific survey and New England town meeting," says Ron Lehr, a Colorado lawyer who helped organize the polling sessions. Essentially, the large electric utilities asked a representative sample of citizens to join an exercise for one or two days, generally on a weekend. At the end of the exercise a poll would be taken to see if, and how, opinions had changed compared with a similar poll at the beginning.

Every effort was made to make participation easier. "If they say 'Yes, but I need a babysitter,' then you buy them a babysitter," says Karl Rábago, a former Texas public utility commissioner who was attending for the Environmental Defense Fund. The organizers then gave the participants information (vetted by a diverse advisory group) about energy issues in Texas. At the event, the citizens would discuss the issues in both large and small groups and could pose questions to regulators and utility executives.

"Rich, poor, men, women, different backgrounds," Lehr says, "people start to work on each other." Rábago recalls sauntering out during lunch hour in Corpus Christi to fly a kite in a nearby field — subtly hinting at the strength of the wind. "[People] were going, 'Shit, it is kind of windy here,'" he says.

In Texas the verdict was clear and astonishing. "Taken together, renewables and efficiency are clearly preferred by most customers after the event, while coal, natural gas, and purchase power are less preferred," stated a 2002 retrospective report on the project for the National Renewable Energy Laboratory. And Texans were willing to spend more on renewable energy. Specifically, the pollsters found, the percentage of participants willing to pay more on monthly utility bills to support renewable energy — from $2 to $5 more, according to Thomas — jumped from 52 percent to 84 percent, on average, over the eight sessions. Fishkin, in an interview, calls a shift that large "an earthquake in public opinion."

One panelist at the first deliberative poll, in 1996 in Corpus Christi, was Wood, the chairman of the Public Utility Commission. Wood remembers giving opening remarks to the roughly 250 citizens assembled, then watching through a window as small groups of about fifteen chewed over problems like whether it was desirable to buy power from the open market, rather than having it all bundled up and sold as a package by utilities; whether energy conservation or building new power plants was better; and whether renewable energy was a good idea. Any questions the citizens had, they could put to the experts. Fifteen years later, Lehr still recalled what happened then with a sense of wonderment:
"I tell them to shoot the hardest questions they can. Wood's on stage with his lawyer, who's protecting him or something. He was new. Some guy stands up, and says, 'I want to make an observation that I think there should be a statute in Texas encouraging renewable energy.' Pat says, 'I'm a new Bush appointee. We're Republicans, we're market-oriented. If there's demand there will be supply. You will be well served by the market.' The guy walks away, kinda shaking his head, and I say, 'It doesn't look like you're satisfied with the answer.' He turns back and slams his hand down on the podium. 'We pay you big bucks to go to Austin and you're not going to do anything.' And there were probably 250 people in the room and you could hear them all go, 'Grrrr.' Pat Wood blinked and said, 'If that's how you feel we'll have to do something about it.'"

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The truth was, Wood came away from that meeting amazed at the eagerness for renewable energy in Texas. "The switch in support for conservation and renewable energy was just dramatic," he recalls. "It really opened my eyes." More remarkable still, the clamor was not coming from "people in hoity-toity Austin, or, God forbid, people from the East Coast or West Coast." They were people from Corpus Christi, a port town serving the petrochemical industry, and they wanted big changes — changes that would green up the electric system. "I was like, 'Oh, that must be a mistake.'"

It was no mistake. Texans wanted renewable energy, and they wanted their policymakers to start procuring it.

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