

Energy at the fair: County fair sponsorship patterns from the energy sector¹

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Abstract

County fairs are a common feature in the American social landscape. As with many local social institutions, companies and other organizations have a chance to sponsor county fairs. These sponsorships help both to put on the fairs and also give organizations a chance to advertise and signal to the local community their involvement. In this paper we review the small literature on the motivations and effects of sponsorships and then turn to a set of empirical questions. First, we examine the distribution of sponsors from the energy sector and compare the sponsorship patterns of traditional fossil fuel companies and those of firms working in the renewable energy sector. Our sample of US counties covers counties with active fossil and or renewable energy sectors. We also collected all counties in several states as well as all state-level fairs. Second, using a national survey, we examine perceptions of sponsorships and support for companies that do or do not sponsor county fairs. Finally, we leave the fair and catalog and compare how large fossil fuel and renewable energy firms display community engagement efforts on their websites to better understand how these companies may be perceived by the communities they operate within. By and large we find that renewable energy has a decidedly lower sponsorship and community engagement presence compared to fossil fuel companies.

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Introduction

County fairs are deeply ingrained in the fabric of American society, serving as platforms for community engagement and celebration of local history and culture. These events often rely on financial support from corporate and small business sponsorships, which not only facilitate the organization of the fairs but also provide advertising opportunities for organizations that simultaneously showcase their investment in local communities. The existing literature on the subject primarily focuses on the motivations and impacts of such sponsorships. This paper aims to delve deeper into the distribution and effects of sponsorship within the energy sector, particularly comparing traditional fossil fuel companies with those in the renewable energy space.

To achieve this, we use a sample of counties with varying levels of public finance contributions from the energy sector. The first part of our analysis examines the distribution of energy sector sponsorships across county fairs in select counties, assessing the extent to which different types of energy companies participate in these local events. We also include an analysis of all the county fairs in Iowa, a state with a large presence of wind energy. Including a case analysis of Iowa enables us to better understand how energy sector sponsorship patterns may shift in states with prominent levels of renewable energy. We similarly elect to include a case analysis of Nebraska due to its high presence of renewable energy. We include a similar analysis of energy sector sponsorship patterns across all 50 state fairs. A next step was to deploy a national-level survey that used experimental methods to estimate the effect of energy firm county fair sponsorship on firm favorability and its impact on support for local investment by a firm. Finally, we examined the websites of the 40 largest public fossil fuel and renewable energy firms. The purpose of this analysis was to capture firms' public display of community engagement efforts. This research builds on previous studies that have investigated the connections between local government finance and the energy industry.

In total, we examined 378 counties across the United States. We identified regional fairs in four ways: three county-level samples and one state-level sample. Our first county-level sample consists of 199 counties and combines two different data collection efforts. First, we identified 119 counties based on the percentage of total employment in each county from the renewable and fossil fuel sectors. Counties that were either in the top 1st or 10th percentiles of all US counties were included in this sample. Our second data collection effort leveraged a set of 80 counties from Raimi et al. ([2024](#)), which seeks to better understand the contributions of energy sector firms on local and state public finances. Our second county-level sample is a case study of Iowa and includes an additional 99 counties. While these counties did not appear in our first sample of 199 counties, we elected to include this case study to better understand if and how energy sponsorship patterns shift in states with a high presence of renewable energy, such as Iowa. Although some (13) Nebraska counties did appear in our first county sample of 199, we decided to include all remaining Nebraska counties (80) as a case study for the same reason: high

presence of renewable energy. The Nebraska case study constitutes our third and final county-level sample. For our state-level sample, we included all 50 states in our sampling frame.

From our total sample of 378 counties, 216 counties hosted county fairs with energy-related sponsors (defined across 12 categories, ranging from energy transmission and distribution to vehicle dealerships and environmental advocacy organizations), amounting to 1,714 sponsors in total. Across our state-level sample, we cataloged 177 sponsors.

The second part of our analysis involves examining public perceptions of county fair sponsorships and support for sponsoring companies using data from a national survey. By exploring how individuals view the involvement of energy companies in local events, our study contributes valuable insight into the broader discourse on corporate social responsibility and public engagement.

Finally, we examined broader community investments by examining the websites of large fossil fuel and renewable energy firms and focusing on the information these companies list on their websites. Individuals in communities where these firms operate can go to these websites, and it is a relevant window into how companies portray their activities. We found that all of the 40 largest fossil fuel firms made community investments, which were showcased on their websites with detailed information. Alternatively, only one quarter of renewable energy firms we reviewed listed community investment initiatives on their websites, and often, these initiatives were accompanied by vague descriptions rather than tangible opportunities or results. As discussed below, these findings suggest that these large fossil fuel firms have more deeply embedded themselves in local communities via engagement efforts.

Ultimately, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of corporate sponsorship in the context of community events and their potential implications for both companies and the communities they serve.

In what follows, we review the small literature on the motivations and effects of sponsorships before turning to a set of empirical questions. First, we categorize the identified sponsors and compare the sponsorship patterns of fossil fuel companies with those in the renewable energy sector. We then surveyed many of the organizations we identified as sponsors to shed light on the decision-making process these companies undertake when considering community sponsorship opportunities. Next, we designed and distributed a national survey to examine the perceptions of companies that do or do not sponsor community events. Finally, we reviewed community engagement efforts from leading fossil fuel and renewable energy companies as portrayed by them on their websites.

Prior Scholarship on Sponsorships

Businesses and other organizations have increasingly utilized sponsorships as a strategic tool to foster a connection with consumers and the broader community. Consequently, the body of literature documenting sponsorship techniques, motivations, and implications has grown alongside the deployment of sponsorship as a business tool. However, within such scholarship,

literature specific to county fair sponsorships is relatively scarce. Further, we found no research on renewable energy company sponsorship decisions. And, while there is some scholarship on the economic worth and benefits of sponsorship, this literature does not extend to focusing exclusively on energy sponsors. The broader narrative regarding the social implications of conventional energy sponsors on the relationship between corporate entities and the general public is better documented, as are the general implications of brand and event image transfer (i.e., when positive characteristics of the thing being sponsored are associated with the sponsoring organization).

Businesses hold a variety of different meanings, motivations, and expectations based on the type of corporate community engagement employed ([Seitanidi & Ryan, 2007](#); [Austin, 2000](#)). Types of such engagement include philanthropy/charitable donations, benefactions, patronage, sponsorship, cause-related marketing, and partnership. Corporate community engagement via sponsorship is broken down into two categories: commercial sponsorship, in which primary business motivations include sales, promotion, and advertising (see [Meenaghan, 1983](#); [Meerabeau et al., 1991](#); [Meenaghan & Flood, 1983](#); [McDonald, 1991](#); [Parker, 1991](#); and [Meenaghan, 1998](#)), and socio-sponsorship, in which the primary motivation is corporate social responsibility (see Skaltsa 1992; [Wragg, 1994](#)). Regardless of sponsorship type, companies often seek out sponsorship agreements to increase brand awareness and change brand image ([Gwinner, 1997](#); [Gwinner & Eaton, 1999](#)).⁵

While we found no literature on energy sector sponsors of county fairs, some scholars have documented the impact that the fossil fuel industry has had in bolstering other sectors and the benefits accrued by fossil fuel companies that associate themselves with apolitical and charitable organizations. One pertinent example is the oil and gas industry's involvement in the museum and heritage sector, a relationship that has been likened to the Tobacco industry's history of culture washing ([Chong, 2015](#)). Numerous scholars have concluded that the fossil fuel industry's financial stake in various museums and heritage centers is a deliberate choice to associate themselves with a sector often touted for its respectability and nonpartisanship ([Platts & Kuijt, 2022](#); [Motion, 2017](#); [Chong, 2015](#); [Evans, 2016](#); [Serafini & Garrard, 2019](#)). Similarly, the fossil fuel industry has poured substantial amounts of money into academia, aiming to advance its interests in the energy transition (i.e., prolong fossil fuel dependence) while simultaneously penetrating the veil of rigorous independent research, enabling dominant fossil fuel companies like ExxonMobil, BP, and Shell to claim climate expertise ([House Committee on Oversight and Accountability Democrats & Senate Committee on the Budget](#)).⁶

⁵ Sponsorship enhances brand visibility by exposing consumers to increased signage and corporate logos. Changing brand image materializes differently. Brand and event image transfer refers to the strategic process wherein companies seek to enhance their brand image by aligning with a sponsored entity or event, enabling positive attributes of the sponsored property or event to be attributed to the sponsor's brand ([Keller, 1993](#); [Javalgi et al., 1994](#); [Cornwell & Maignan, 1998](#); [Gwinner & Eaton, 1999](#); [Rifon et al., 2004](#)). Still, other factors have proven to be impactful on brand receptibility in the context of sponsored events, such as attendees' perceptions of fit between sponsors and the event ([Close Scheinbaum et al., 2019](#)). Scholarship has also shown that consumers hold perceptions of a company and its products separately ([Dacin & Smith, 1994](#); [Aaker, 1996](#); [Brown & Dacin, 1997](#)).

⁶ Despite attempts to improve brand image, the fossil fuel industry's contributions to academia have engendered increased scrutiny ([Sharmina, 2022](#); [Almond et al., 2022](#)) and have been equated to the tobacco industry's

Sports are among the major industries sponsored by the fossil fuel industry to enhance public image. Most recently, Aramco, a petroleum refinery company, secured sponsorship rights to multiple events held by the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) until 2027, including the 2026 FIFA World Cup ([Aramco](#), n.d.). Likewise, TotalEnergies, another petroleum company, was the sponsor of the 2023 Rugby World Cup in France, proselytizing sustainability as a common core value between the two entities ([Total Energies](#), 2021). Comparable examples are endless, with QatarEnergy being one of the biggest partners for the 2022 FIFA World Cup ([Inside FIFA](#), 2022) and Shell's recent partnership with British Cycling (the primary national governing body for cycle sport in Great Britain), secured under the agreement that Shell aids in accelerating British Cycling toward net-zero ([Shell UK](#), 2022). At the novice level, Chevron secured a notable partnership with Alianza de Futbol, the leading U.S. organization dedicated to developing Hispanic amateur soccer players. The Chevron Soccer Academy differentiates itself from other skills camps by including a block of time when campers take part in the 'Chevron STEM Zone,' aimed at encouraging STEM education through the science of soccer ([Chevron](#), n.d.). Social implications of fossil fuel involvement in sporting events may have ripple effects. According to [Meenaghan \(1991\)](#), highly involved event attendees are more inclined to display favorable attitudes toward the sponsors of the event, typically in the form of buyer behavior (see also [Fisher & Wakefield, 1998](#); [Lee et al., 1997](#)).

Scholars find that marketing initiatives undertaken by dominant oil companies directly correspond with the degree of congressional activity and media attention related to climate change ([Brulle et al., 2020](#); [Schumann et al., 1991](#)). They further demonstrate that as the perceived threat of regulatory action increases, so do the attempts to salvage corporate image by major oil companies ([Brulle et al., 2020](#)). While there is extensive literature regarding the sponsoring activities of fossil fuel companies, we did not come across any for renewable energy-focused companies. Thus, future research could be especially impactful in investigating the economics of community event energy sponsors, specifically by providing more granular insight regarding types of sponsors, especially as it pertains to renewable energy.

Research Design

Fairs and their sponsorships were reviewed across four samples: three county-level samples (visualized in **Figure 1**) and one sample of all US states.

Our first county-level sample combines two different data collection efforts, resulting in a total of 199 counties. Our first county collection effort consists of 119 counties and was based on energy employment data (see 'Place-based covariates' for data details). Specifically, we summed county-level employment related to 1) the extraction and generation of energy from coal, oil, and

decades-long history of spreading misinformation which ultimately resulted in numerous public health institutions rejecting tobacco money ([Cancer Research UK](#), 2024). See this letter by Kogevinas and Takaro to the International Society for Exposure Sciences and International Society for Environmental Epidemiology (ISES-ISEE) calling for a ban on fossil fuel sponsorship of academic research: [Kogevinas & Takaro, 2019](#).

natural gas, and 2) the generation of energy from solar and wind power. We then calculated the percentage of total county employment represented by each sector. Using these percentages, we identified counties that fell into the top 1% and top 10% of US counties for both renewable and fossil fuel sectors. In particular, we focused on counties in the top decile for both fossil fuel and renewable employment, as well as counties in the top 1% of employment for either the renewable or fossil fuel sectors. These groupings reflect regions where energy production plays a key role in the local economy, either through heavy reliance on traditional fossil fuels or the substantial growth of renewable energy. The top 1% categories highlight areas of extreme specialization, where energy employment constitutes a significant portion of the local workforce, while the top 10% group captures counties with a broader but still prominent energy employment base. More generally, these specific counties represent the crucial proving grounds where significant energy workforces, existing infrastructure, economic dependencies, and cultural heritage are sensitive to—and strategically important for—the nation's energy transition.

An employment-based sampling strategy has its limitations. For one, employment figures are used as a proxy for the active presence of the fossil fuel and renewable energy sectors, leaving more capital-intensive applications to be undercounted. We also excluded industries such as biomass fuel production, though due to relatively small sizes, these decisions would not have meaningfully changed our sampling frame.

Our second county collection effort drew from Raimi et al.'s ([2024](#)) analysis of 80 counties across 10 energy-producing states (Alaska, California, Colorado, Montana, North Dakota, New Mexico, Ohio, Texas, West Virginia, and Wyoming).⁷ Raimi et al.'s research examined the fiscal contributions of energy sector firms to state and local public finances, an understudied area despite the sector's vital role in supporting government services. The counties studied by Raimi et al. provided another established set of regions with significant energy production activities, complementing our employment-based sample. As expected, there was some overlap between the counties in our employment-based sample and those studied by Raimi et al., suggesting that both sampling approaches effectively identified key energy regions worthy of study.

Our second county-level sampling strategy included an analysis of all Iowa county fairs in 2024 to investigate the potential differences in energy sector sponsorship patterns in a state with a high presence of renewable energy. Wind power generates over 60% of Iowa's electricity, the highest percentage of any state in the US. Further, Iowa ranks second nationally in installed wind capacity ([Iowa Environmental Council](#), 2024).

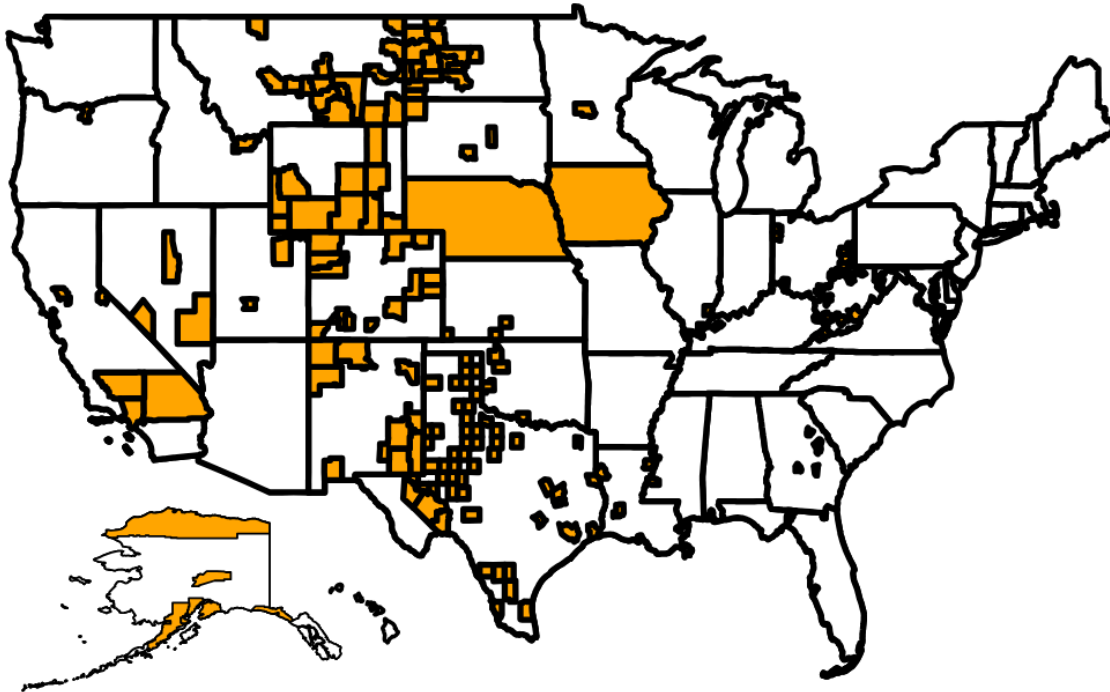
⁷ Time and resource constraints prohibited a comprehensive national analysis, thus, the authors selected these states based on their significant range of energy activity (e.g., production and electricity generation infrastructure of fossil fuels; transportation and refining of those fuels; electricity generation infrastructure of wind and solar; and electricity transmission and distribution infrastructure) as well as the availability of sufficiently detailed data to produce reliable revenue estimates. After identifying the states to be included in the dataset, the authors used online mapping tools, such as the US Energy Information Administration's Energy Mapping System, to identify counties with diverse energy activities. It is important to note that this sample of counties is not exactly representative of the national energy system, as it includes a disproportionate share of coal and oil production compared to the national average while representing a smaller share of wind, solar, and natural gas.

Our third and final county-level sampling strategy included all Nebraska county fairs in 2024. Similar to Iowa, we elected to include Nebraska as a case study due to its high presence of renewable energy. Nebraska provides an interesting contrast to Iowa because while it ranks fourth in total wind power capacity, it ranks 15 in actual wind production (Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy, 2024).

Our final fair-related sampling frame was for state fairs. Here, the process was straightforward as we selected all 50 US states to be included in our sampling frame.

Finally, we include an analysis of broad community engagements by the 40 largest public fossil fuel and renewable energy firms in the United States. We achieve this by examining how these companies portray their engagement with local communities on their public websites. These websites serve as accessible entry points for residents to learn about the energy firms operating in their communities. Thus, examining how fossil fuel and renewable energy companies present themselves and their community initiatives on these platforms provides a relevant analysis. Moreover, unlike sponsorships of fairs which are largely monetary endeavors, self-reported engagements from energy companies on their websites highlight the more active efforts these companies make in communities to build good will. Finally, although self-reported engagements do not represent the totality of community engagement these companies may do, analyzing public-facing websites is a valuable methodological approach that offers insight into corporate communication strategies, transparency practices, and the rhetorical framing of community investment from the companies themselves.

Figure 1. Visual representation of the 378 counties considered in this study.



Sample Type	Sampling Frame	Sampling Method
County Level	199	119 counties included based on fossil fuel employment data. All 119 counties fell into either the top 1st or 10th percentile for fossil or renewable employment. The remaining 80 counties included in this sample came from Raimi et al., 2024.
Iowa Case Study	99	This sample includes all Iowa counties.
Nebraska Case Study	93	This sample includes all Nebraska counties.
State Level	50	We included all 50 state fairs in this sample.

Fair Sponsor Classification

For the counties/states in our samples, we cataloged pertinent information about their county/state fairs (namely, the sponsors of these fairs and what industries these sponsors worked in). For each fair, we identified the fair website (or, in some cases, the Facebook page) and noted down the names of relevant sponsors listed. In the case that we could not identify a branded county fair but instead found an annual fair or festival equivalent,⁸ we included it in our sample (if there were multiple such fairs for a county, we chose the one explicitly labeled as a county fair, thereby creating a “one county, one fair” sampling method). We considered companies who sponsored the entirety of a fair and sponsors who sponsored specific events at the fair in our record. Where possible, the most recent (2024) iteration of the fair was considered, but in some cases, previous iterations of the fair were utilized in the case that either the 2024 version of the fair was yet to happen or not scheduled to happen. Information about previous iterations of fairs was cataloged by utilizing the [WaybackMachine](#). Finally, for a select few counties, emails and phone calls were made to fair operators through publicly available contact information to gather sponsorship data. Details on missing data from select fairs can be found in the Appendix under “Missing Data”.

Sponsors were categorized into one of twelve categories, described in the table below. Sponsors that did not fit into any of the categories were disregarded for our analysis.

Table 1. Categories of sponsors in fairs.

<i>Category</i>	<i>Explanation</i>
Fossil	These companies are involved in the extraction, refinement, processing, or handling of fossil fuel energy, including those that produce related equipment or technologies.
Renewable	This category includes companies focused on the production, installation, and management of renewable energy, as well as those that develop products or services for renewable energy applications.
BothGenerationDistribution	These companies generate power from both fossil fuel and non-fossil fuel sources, handling both the production and distribution of energy.
TransmissionDistributionBoth	This category comprises companies that transmit energy from both fossil fuel and non-fossil fuel sources but do not generate power themselves; these are typically utility companies.
COReduction	This category includes companies specializing in carbon dioxide reduction efforts, such as carbon capture technologies.

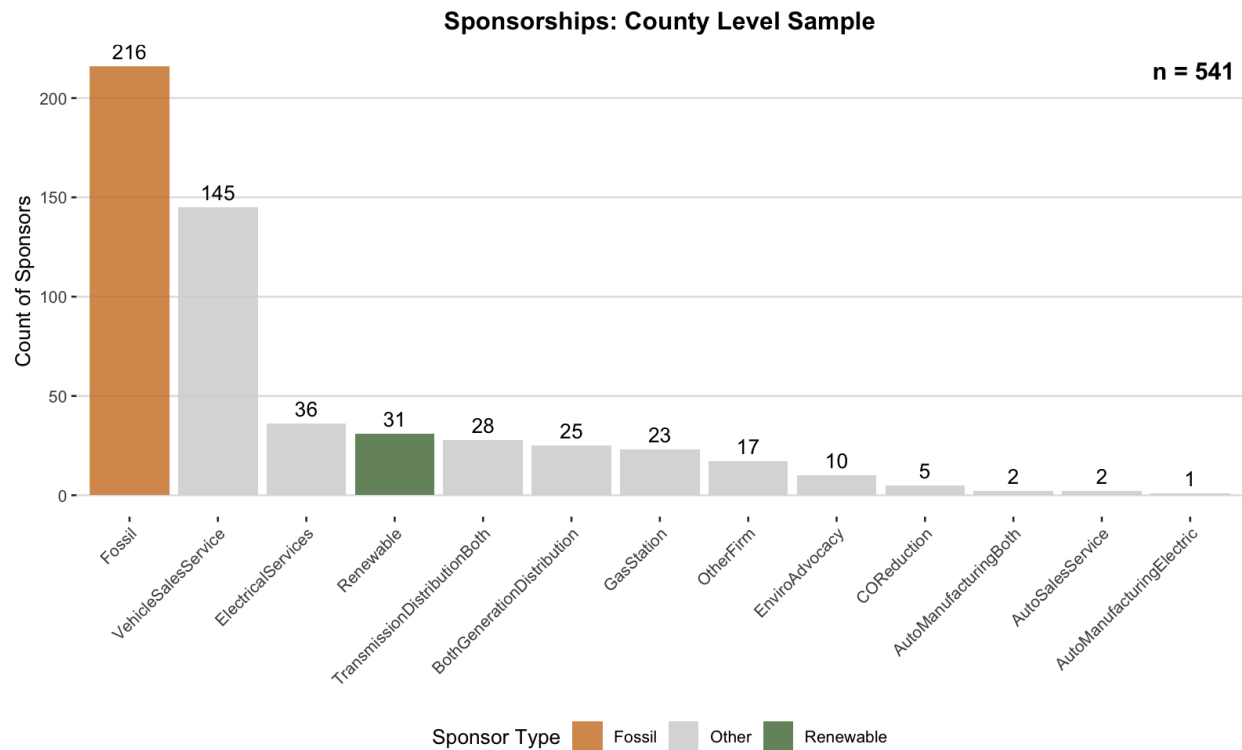
⁸ For the purposes of our work, county-fair equivalents simply refer to meaningful community events that are congruent with many of the common characteristics of county-fairs: large public gatherings that typically feature local agriculture, crafts, food, entertainment, competitions, and exhibitions, while serving as a celebration of local culture and traditions. These events often bring together diverse segments of the community, provide opportunities for local commerce and cultural exchange, and maintain a festive, family-friendly atmosphere typical of traditional county fairs, regardless of their official designation or name.

ElectricalServices	This category comprises electricians and other providers of electrical services.
AutoManufacturingElectric	This category encompasses automobile manufacturers that exclusively produce electric vehicles (EVs).
AutoManufacturingBoth	These companies are automobile manufacturers that produce both electric vehicles (EVs) and non-electric vehicles.
EnviroAdvocacy	These organizations focus on conservation, responsible land and water management, or community engagement in the context of environmental and energy activities.
GasStation	This category includes businesses that operate gas stations for refueling vehicles.
VehicleSalesService	This classification includes businesses engaged in the sale of vehicles (including cars and agricultural equipment) and vehicle components.
OtherFirm	This classification primarily encompasses companies specializing in heating, cooling, and HVAC (Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning) services.

Sponsorship Results

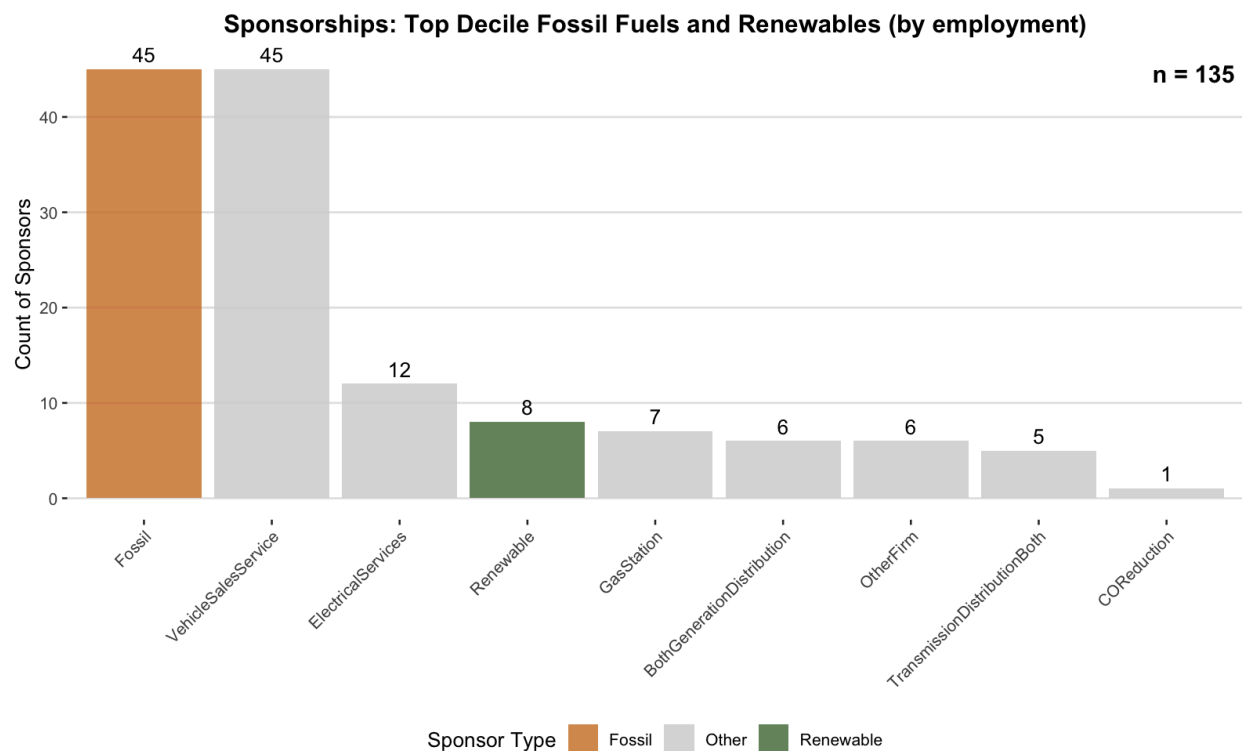
Figures 2a-f reflect the distribution of fair sponsorships across five categories: the county-level sample, counties in the top decile for both fossil fuel and renewable employment, counties in the top 1% of employment fossil fuels, counties in the top 1% of employment renewables, all counties in Iowa and Nebraska, and the state-level sample.

Figure 2a



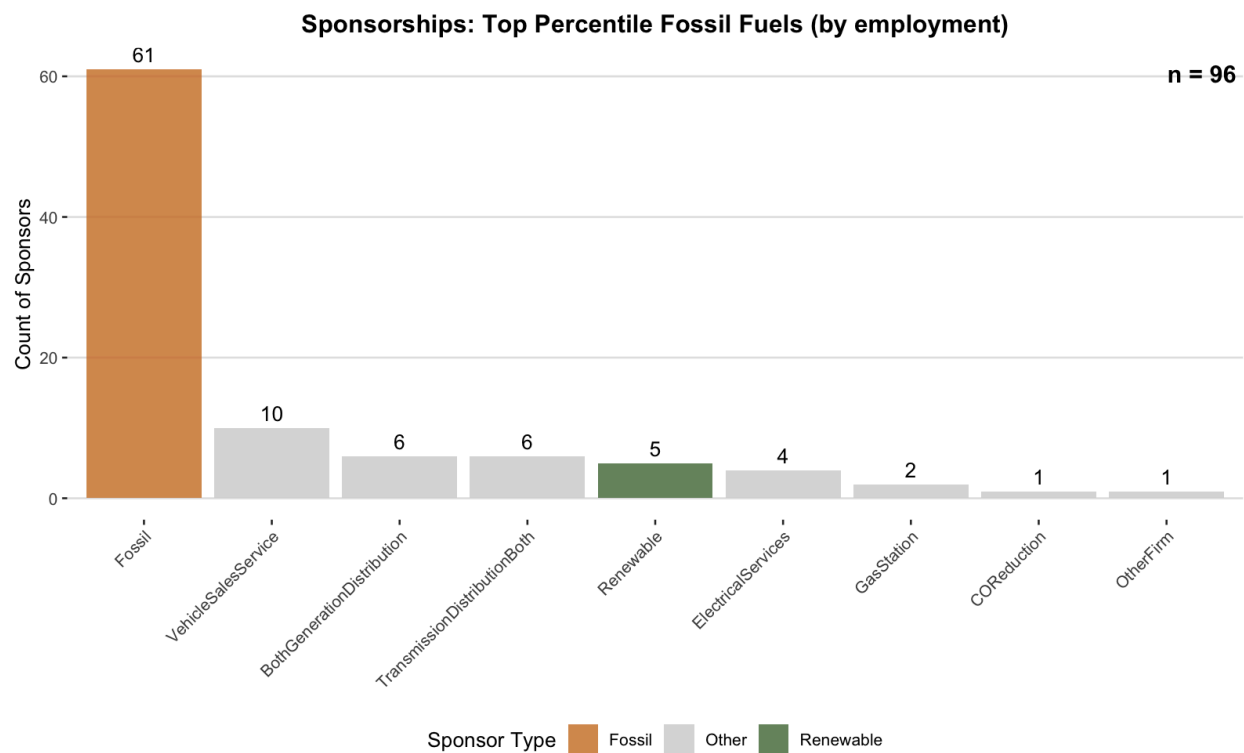
Summary: Shown here are the sponsorships for our “County Level” sample (sample size of 98 counties), which includes counties selected based on their energy employment and reference in previous scholarship (see Research Design for further detail). Fossil fuel sponsors dominate this sample, representing 41% of the total, followed by vehicle sales and services at 29%. Renewable energy sponsors make up 16% of the sample, with smaller categories like CO reduction accounting for just 2%.

Figure 2b



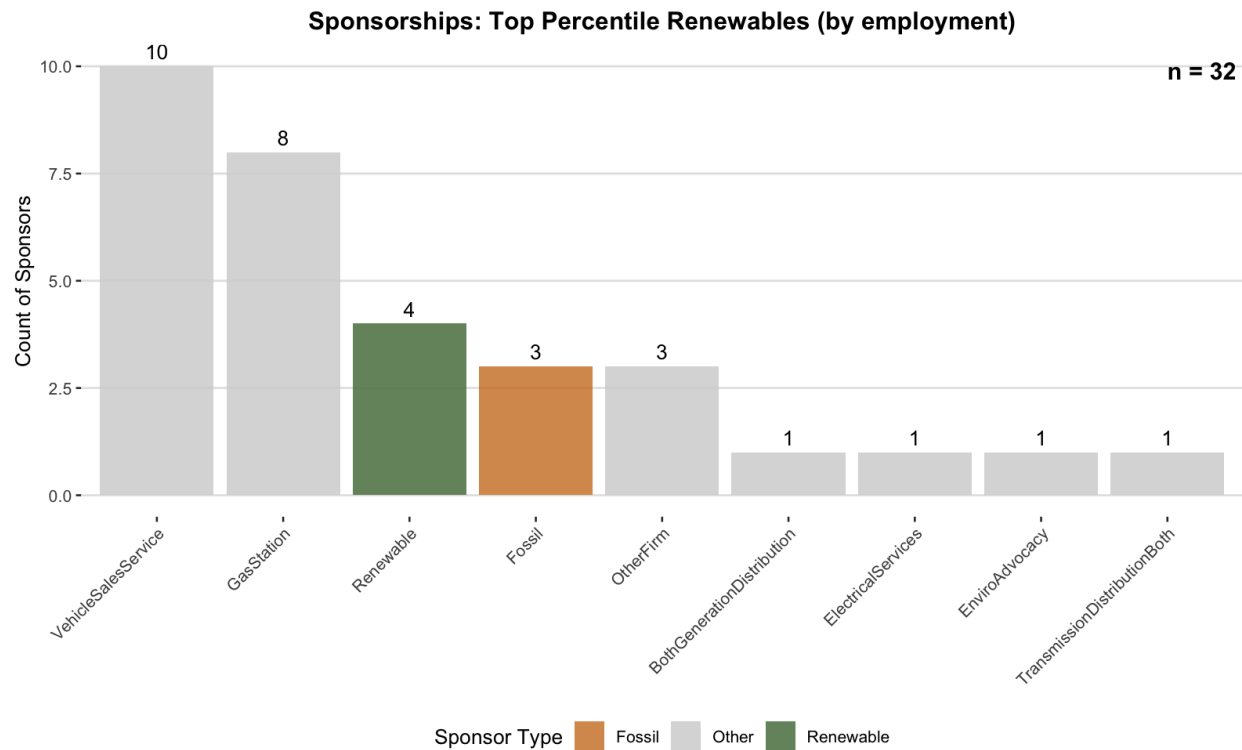
Summary: Shown here are sponsorships in the top decile of counties for both fossil fuel and renewable energy employment, defined as those where each sector's share of total county employment falls within the top 10% based on 90th percentile thresholds. 23 counties comprise the sample size of subset. Fossil fuel sponsors and vehicle sales and services each make up 33% of this subset's sponsorships, representing the largest categories. Renewables account for only 6% of the total sponsorships, but are larger than several other sponsorship categories.

Figure 2c



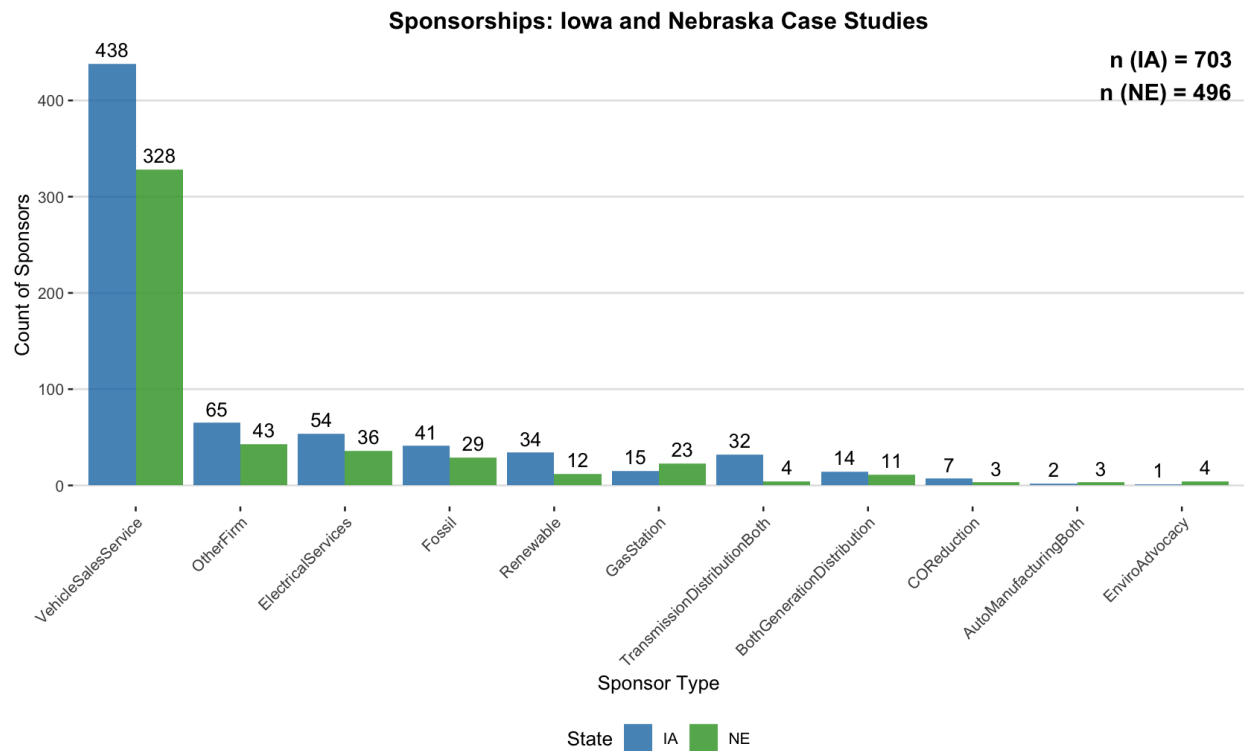
Summary: Shown here are sponsorships in counties where fossil fuel employment accounts for a proportion of total county employment within the top 1%, as determined by the 99th percentile threshold. 12 counties comprise the sample size of this subset. Fossil fuel sponsors dominate this subset, accounting for 64% of the total sponsorships. Vehicle sales and services are the second-largest category, representing 10%, while renewables contribute just 5%.

Figure 2d



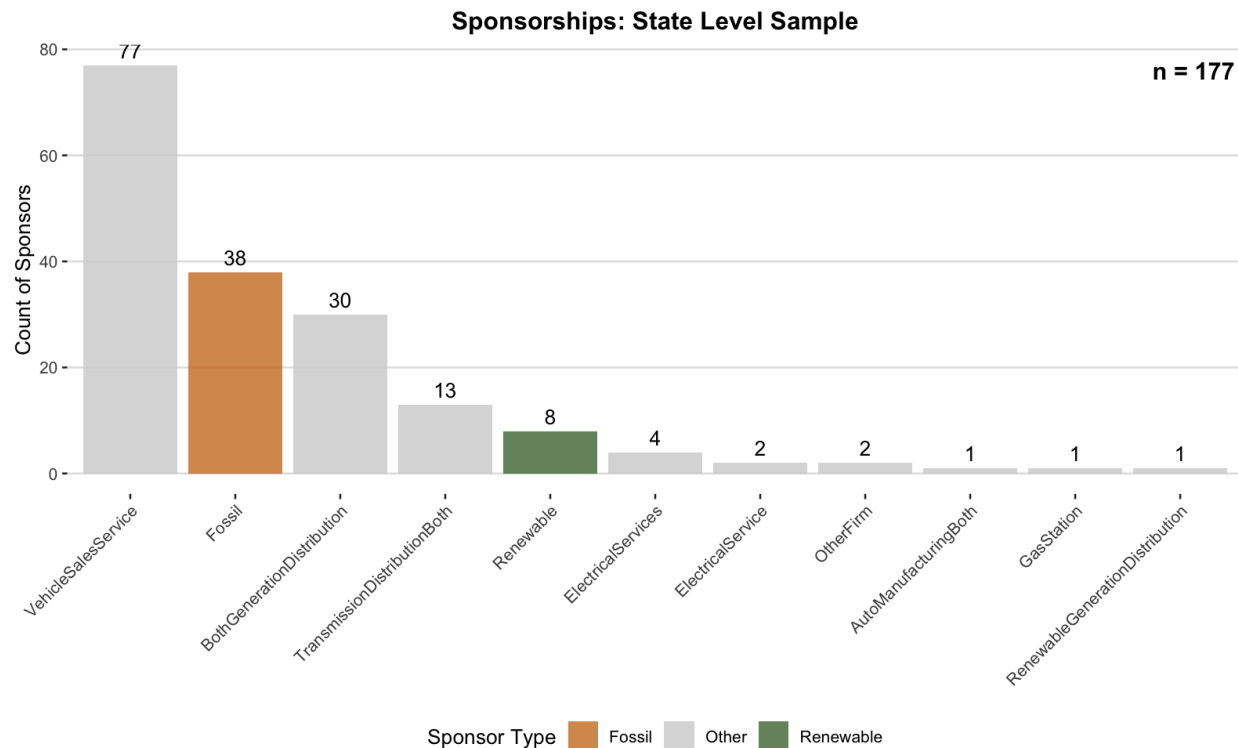
Summary: Shown here are sponsorships in counties where renewables employment accounts for a proportion of total county employment within the top 1%, as determined by the 99th percentile threshold. 6 counties comprise the sample size of this subset, which is the smallest subset by sponsorships. Vehicle sales and gas stations dominate this subset, comprising 31% and 25% of the subset's sponsorships, respectively, while renewable energy sponsors account for 13%, the only subset wherein there are more renewable energy sponsors than fossil fuel sponsors.

Figure 2e



Summary: Shown here are sponsorships from a sample (sample size of 107 counties) of all counties in Iowa and Nebraska. In Iowa, vehicle sales and services make up 62% of sponsors, similar to 66% in Nebraska. Fossil fuel sponsors represent 6% of Iowa's total and 6% in Nebraska, while renewables constitute 5% in Iowa and 2% in Nebraska.

Figure 2f



Summary: Shown here are sponsorships from state fairs in a sample of all states in the US. Vehicle sales and services account for 43% of the state-level sample, while fossil fuel sponsors represent 21%. Renewable energy sponsors make up 5% of the sample, with smaller categories such as gas stations and renewable generation distribution contributing less than 1% each.

The analysis of sponsorships at the county level reveals a clear dominance of fossil fuel sponsors. As shown in Figure 2a, fossil fuel sponsors account for 39.9% (n = 216) of the total 541 sponsors in the county-level sample. In contrast, renewable energy sponsors comprise only 5.7% (n = 31) of the total. This distribution suggests that fossil fuel industries continue to maintain a strong presence in sponsorship activities at the local county fair level, while renewable energy sponsors have a relatively smaller foothold.

Examining sponsorships in the top decile of counties for both fossil fuel and renewable energy employment provides further insights. As shown in Figure 2b, even in these high-renewables counties, fossil fuel sponsors maintain a 33.3% (n = 45) share of the 135 total sponsors, while renewable energy sponsors account for only 5.5% (n = 8). This suggests that the shift towards renewable energy sponsorship has been relatively slow, despite the higher concentration of renewable energy employment in these counties.

The top percentile of fossil fuel employment counties highlights an even more pronounced dominance of fossil fuel sponsors, as depicted in Figure 2c. In this subset, fossil fuel sponsors

make up 63.5% ($n = 61$) of the 96 total sponsors, compared to just 5.2% ($n = 5$) for renewable energy sponsors. Conversely, the top percentile of renewable energy employment counties, shown in Figure 2d, presents a more balanced landscape, with renewable energy sponsors accounting for 12.5% ($n = 4$) and fossil fuel sponsors at 9.4% ($n = 3$) of the 32 total sponsors.

In Iowa, fossil fuel sponsors account for 41 (5.8%) of the 703 total sponsorships, while renewable energy sponsors make up 12 (1.7%). Similarly in Nebraska, fossil fuel sponsors comprise 29 (5.8%) of the 496 total sponsorships, compared to 15 (3.0%) for renewable energy sponsors. The data (Figure 2e) suggests that fossil fuel sponsors maintain a stronger presence than renewable energy sponsors in both Iowa and Nebraska, reflecting the broader trend of fossil fuel industry dominance in sponsorship representation, even in regions characterized by a high presence of renewable energy.

Finally, for state fairs (Figure 2f), we observe that fossil fuel sponsorships comprise 21.4% ($n = 38$) of the sponsors compared to 4.5% from renewable firms, highlighting the trend of fossil fuel dominance in fair sponsorship at a national level too.

Overall, the results underscore the continued dominance of fossil fuel sponsors across both county and state-level samples. While renewable energy sponsors are present and gaining traction in areas with higher renewable employment, they have not yet achieved parity with the entrenched presence of fossil fuel sponsors. This suggests that the economic and industrial influence of fossil fuels remains a significant factor in determining sponsor representation, even in regions where renewable energy is becoming more prominent.

Survey Design and Results

Next, we turn to a survey-based experimental method to explore whether county fair sponsorship could potentially cause citizens to have more favorable attitudes toward energy companies.

In August - November of 2024 we fielded a quota-based US nationally representative sample through the company Qualtrics with a sample of 1531 adult respondents (quotas for age, education, income, and region). As part of the survey, we presented respondents with the following question where we randomized the components contained within the parentheses:

Consider (a/a solar/an oil) company that (decided not to sponsor. This sponsorship would have helped your community come together to enjoy the fair. / sponsored the local fair in your community. Thanks to this sponsorship, your community can come together to enjoy the fair.)

Have favorably or unfavorably would you view the company? Very favorably, Somewhat favorably, Somewhat unfavorably, Very unfavorably.

Next, we asked:

How much would you support or oppose [a/a solar/an oil] company building their next project in your community? Strongly support, Somewhat support, Somewhat oppose, Strongly oppose.

Where the entry in the [brackets] was entered based on what was randomized in the previous question. For each question we scale the responses evenly from 0 (negative) to 1 (positive) to aid in the interpretation of results.

Our goal is to examine whether being made aware of a sponsorship decision has an impact on positive firm favorability and then whether, in turn, this favorability has an impact on supporting a local investment decision. Given that we are estimating the role of favorability as a mechanism linking sponsorship decisions to investment support, we leverage a causal mediation analysis (Imai et al., 2011). In particular, we fit two linear regression models. The first uses the mediating variable—firm favorability—and regresses it on the treatment variable—sponsorship decision. The second uses the outcome variable—investment support—and regresses it on both the mediator variable and the treatment variable. We include a set of pre-treatment covariates in both regression models to guard against sequential ignorability assumptions required for conducting causal mediation analysis, given that we do not randomize firm favorability (the mediating variable) directly. By combining these two regression models, our mediation analysis produces estimates of the average causal mediation effect. That is, the effect of the treatment that runs through firm favorability onto support for investment.

We find a substantial and highly significant effect for all company types, with an estimated magnitude range from .1 (on a 0 to 1 scale) for solar companies, and .14 for oil or the pure case of no additional company information.⁹ By sponsoring county fairs, energy companies can plausibly enhance their favorability and, in return, generate a more conducive investment environment. While these survey results are based on a hypothetical experiment, they complement the types of motivations and behavior studied in the previous section.

Energy Firm Corporate Website Sponsorships

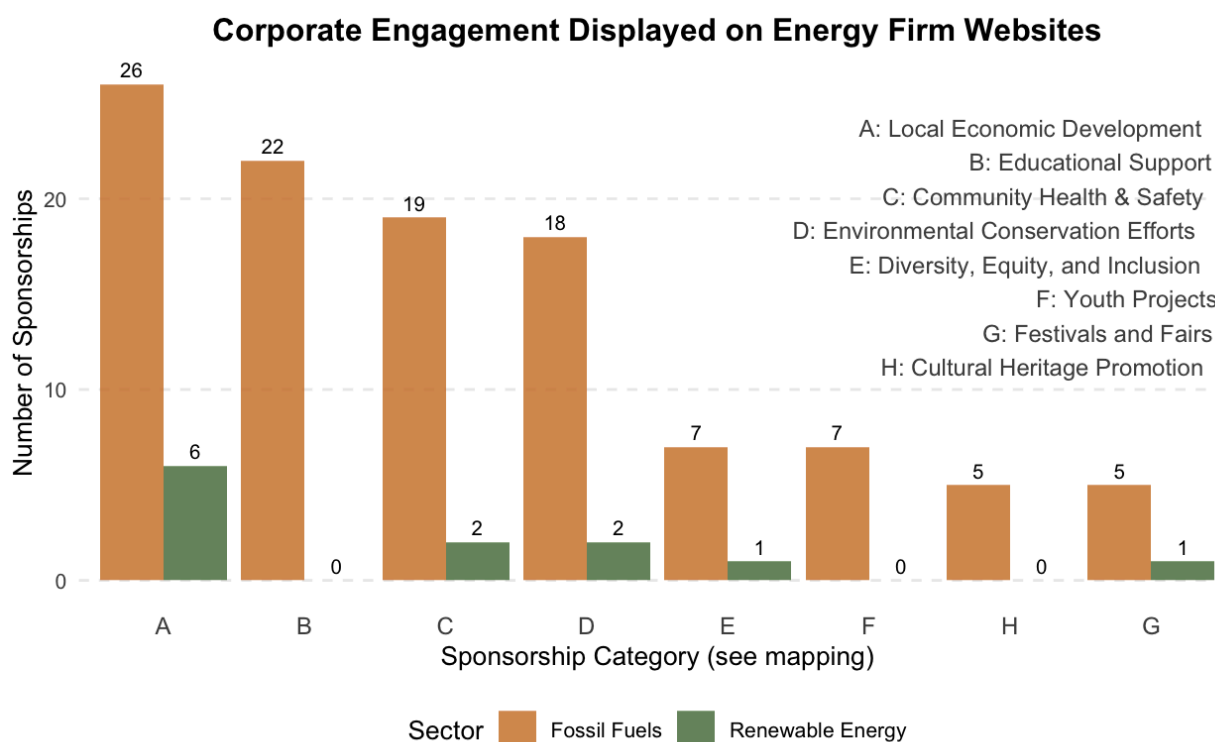
To compile a list of the largest fossil fuel and renewable energy companies headquartered in the United States, we ranked the top 40 firms in each sector based on their total market capitalization (November, 2024) through the Financial Times Equity Screener (we filtered these firms to only those headquartered in the United States). Specifically, fossil fuel companies were listed as “Oil,

⁹ Following guidance from Imai et al., 2011 we also conducted a formal sensitivity analysis to violations of the sequential ignorability assumption. Our results are highly robust, with an estimated rho parameter of around .5 for all of our analyses.

Gas, and Coal” and renewable energy companies were listed as “Alternative Energy”. Our selection, therefore, includes only publicly traded companies, as this was necessary to ensure the availability of a public, rankable metric for selecting and comparing these firms.

Once we had a list of top firms, we surveyed each of their community initiatives by navigating to the applicable section on the company’s website and took account of any investments, sponsorships, or other involvement in host regions. These engagements were sorted into one of eight categories ranging from local economic development efforts to youth projects. Qualitatively, we observed that the initiatives that renewable energy companies listed on their websites were less detailed and less likely to be accompanied by tangible results compared to those outlined on fossil fuel company's websites.

Figure 3



Analysis of self-reported community engagements among major energy corporations reveals significant differences in sponsorship patterns between renewable energy and fossil fuel sectors. Overall, fossil fuel companies exhibit a higher frequency of self-reported engagement, accounting for 90.1% (n = 109) of the total engagements across all categories, while renewable energy companies contribute only 9.9% (n = 12). Of the 40 fossil fuel companies we reviewed, all 40 had at least one type of self-reported engagement, compared to only 10 of the 40 renewable energy companies.

Local Economic Employment Development emerges as the most supported category for both fossil fuel and renewable energy companies, constituting 26.4% of all listed self-reported engagements. Educational Support, Cultural Heritage, and Youth programs show substantial engagement by fossil fuel companies, accounting for 100% of sponsorships in these categories, with no contributions from the selected renewable energy companies.

Community Health and Safety, Environmental Conservation, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, and Cultural Heritage initiatives also see high levels of support from fossil fuel companies, though renewable energy companies contributed to these categories with 2 sponsorships in each of the first two categories and 1 in each of the latter two.

These results underscore the dominance of fossil fuel companies in self-reporting their community engagement efforts. Of course, it may well be that renewable energy companies are more involved in their communities than their public-facing websites may acknowledge. However, these data illustrate that fossil fuel corporations are strategically positioning themselves as community-oriented actors through comprehensive and widely communicated sponsorship strategies. The significant disparity in reported engagements suggests a potential public relations approach by fossil fuel companies to enhance their social legitimacy and mitigate potential negative perceptions about their environmental impact. While the data reveal extensive community involvement reporting by fossil fuel firms, they also highlight a critical communication gap for renewable energy companies, who may benefit from more proactive documentation and public communication of their community support initiatives.

Conclusion

We collected the first systematic analysis of fair sponsorships, with a focus on the energy industry. Our analysis spanned over 378 counties and all 50 US state fairs. We also extended our analysis to website portrayals of community investment from the top 40 US fossil and renewable energy firms and provide survey experimental evidence showing the positive impacts of sponsorship decisions on firm favorability and its impact on support for firm activity in a region. Our primary focus was on firms focusing on fossil fuels or renewable energy, though our collected data enables other contrasts. We find that renewable energy firms often lag compared to their colleagues and are not yet taking full advantage of this type of common sponsorship activity. Our work contributes to a growing body of research in the social sciences around public finance, community engagement strategies, and energy industries (Brulle et al., 2020; Gazmararian & Tingley, 2023; Raimi et al., 2024).

Of course, our results do not imply that renewable energy firms in total or in part are being negligent in this regard, only that their fossil colleagues have a long tradition in this space and

continue to highlight their community-level investments. Furthermore, there clearly are a number of newer energy entrants in the renewable space that are taking advantage of these types of community-level engagements. Furthermore, the fossil fuel industry has been well-established for many decades in many of the regions we study, and renewable energy firms are typically smaller in size. Nevertheless, renewable energy production continues to spread and the costs of sponsorship are quite modest.

Our research agenda contains multiple next steps. First, the nature of our data is publicly observable via the display on websites of fairs and companies. This enables us to collect a longitudinal data set. We could, for example, even run experiments where we identify firms that are not yet sponsoring local community activities such as fairs and see if they change their strategy when informed of the potential upsides as well as behavior of peer energy firms. Second, we can broaden the geographic scope of our data collection to include other counties. Third, we plan to conduct deeper interview-based analysis to help understand why particular firms make the choices they do.

Appendix/Supplemental Information

NOTA BENE: We are still working on this section.

Our categorizations and collection of fair sponsorships and corporate websites represent a “snapshot” – they were recorded once during our data collection period. To this end, all pertinent data from each fair website, including fairs for which we could and could not gather sponsor information, was downloaded. These data—text and images—from all the websites can be found in our supplemental data file.

Missing fair data

In this study, we examined a total of 378 counties: 120 from our employment-based sampling frame, 80 from Raimi et al.’s work, 99 from Iowa, and 93 from Nebraska. The state fair sample surveyed all fifty US states.

Among the 378 counties, we were able to catalog relevant (as defined in **Table 1**) sponsors in 216 of these counties (57%). Of the remaining counties, 13% (n = 50) had no public fair websites or pages for us to review, 25% (n = 96) had fairs but no sponsorship information, and the remaining 4% (n = 16) had sponsors outside of our categorization. Among the states, five (Georgia, Nevada, Vermont, Rhode Island, and Washington) did not have sponsors germane to our categorization (though all had fair sponsors of some kind).

To address these missing data, we contacted the bulk of these county fairs using available phone numbers and email addresses. Unfortunately, many of our inquiries were left unanswered – fair directors from Broomfield, CO and Oliver, ND did respond to our emails and we have included their self-reported and publicly unavailable sponsorships in our data.

Place-based covariates

We compiled datasets at both the county and state levels for various economic and political covariates. These databases include county-level and state-level data on energy sector employment in 2022, sourced from the 2023 U.S. Energy & Employment Jobs Report by the US Department of Energy; economic data covering education, general employment, and population information, obtained from the US Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service; and party voting percentages from the 2020 election, as tabulated by the MIT Election Data and Science Lab. Furthermore, for the 80 counties studied by Raimi et al. (2024), we incorporated their county-specific data on fossil fuel and renewables-related tax revenue into our county-level database. These datasets were integrated into our respective county-level and state-level databases, providing a rich context for analysis alongside the sponsor data. For future research.

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