

# **The Appalachian Regional Commission and the Consolidation of the Coal Consensus**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper interrogates the consolidation of the coal consensus as a political idea. In the immediate postwar era, the future of U.S. coal was seriously challenged by oil, natural gas and nuclear power. Within two decades, however, the development of coal power had become a full-fledged political project without much resistance. To address this puzzle, I leverage a year of archival data collection and analysis to develop a formation story that takes the coal consensus as its object. I argue that this major ideational shift was not the result of market forces but was furthered by the work of the Appalachian Regional Commission. From its creation in 1965, the agency acted as a catalyst organization to consolidate the coal consensus as both a solution to the Appalachian underdevelopment problem and to the national energy crisis of the 1970s. This study highlights the role of bureaucracies in fostering ties between stakeholders, brokering political interests at multiple levels, and organizing competing ideas into a coherent whole. In the end, this paper contributes to better understanding the pathways through which ideas influence both political-economic processes and energy trajectories.

**KEYWORDS:** natural resources, regional development, bureaucracies, environmental sociology, comparative-historical sociology

“It is absolutely without question that coal will always be the most important single resource in the Appalachian Region.”

– John D. Whisman, 1960<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

In his seminal 1962 book *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, Harry Caudill laid out a most compelling statement about the exclusion of Appalachia from the U.S.’s postwar growth. Caudill, a lawyer, ex-member of the Kentucky legislature and prominent political pundit, had been a vocal advocate of federal intervention to address the region’s poverty and underdevelopment.<sup>2</sup> Caudill was not alone: in the postwar era, political, economic and intellectual elites across Appalachia had expressed similar concern about the problems facing their region. The shared political interests of Appalachian states had become evident, leading to a growth in regionalist sentiments. In spite of preeminent state autonomism, the need for federal intervention was increasingly being recognized.

Local advocacy efforts eventually bore fruit. In April 1963, months only after the publication of Caudill’s book, John F. Kennedy instituted the President’s Appalachian Regional Commission at the request of the Conference of Appalachian Governors. Two years later, as part of Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty agenda, this commission became permanent under the Appalachian Regional Development Act (ARDA). The newly created Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) sought to answer the problems that had long been known to Appalachians. As the original text of the ARDA stated:

“Congress finds and declares that the Appalachian region of the United States, while abundant in natural resources and rich in potential, lags behind the rest of the Nation in its economic growth and that its people have not shared properly in the Nation’s prosperity. The region’s uneven past development, with its historical reliance on a few basic industries and a marginal agriculture, has failed to provide the economic base that is a vital prerequisite for vigorous, self-sustaining growth.”<sup>3</sup>

In fulfilling its mandate, the ARC deployed resources early on to build infrastructures like roads and an electric grid. In order to bolster the region’s economy, coal mining was sooner than later identified as a strategic sector. As part of a broader “coal consensus” in the U.S. (Chowkwanyun 2022:191), coal development increasingly appeared as the primary solution to the problems of Appalachian in the 1970s.

Perhaps counterintuitively, what is described as the coal consensus did not motivate the initial expansion of coal mining in Appalachia, but rather emerged in its aftermath. In the 1950s,

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<sup>1</sup> Whisman, John D. 1960. Letter to Joseph E. Moody, President of the National Coal Policy Conference, November 29<sup>th</sup>, 1960. [1997ms282, 30/471].

<sup>2</sup> The Conference of Appalachian Governors defined underdevelopment as follows: “By underdevelopment, we mean that basic handicaps to development of adequate facilities for such needs as transportation and water resources, have in turn hindered the local ability to support necessary public services and private enterprise development. Because of such basic deficiencies, the success of local development activity in all areas of life is severely handicapped.” See Conference of Appalachian Governors. A Resolution Subscribing to and Supporting a Declaration for Action for the Appalachian Region, October 18<sup>th</sup>, 1960, p. 1. [90m1, 234/01].

<sup>3</sup> Appalachian Regional Development Act, 40 U.S.C. § 14101 (1965).

the future of coal was questioned by the expansion of oil, natural gas and nuclear power. In less than two decades, however, coal mining had shifted from one of many energy alternatives to a full-fledged political project tied to economic development, energy sovereignty and nation-building. In this paper, I ask why this shift occurred.

The fact that coal was just of multiple energy alternative in the immediate postwar era is immensely consequential from a causal standpoint. In recent discussions about energy transitions, one of the key factors identified for stagnation is the power exercised by fossil fuel interests. Their ability to impede on policy processes and defeat environmental-friendly groups has indeed been well documented (Farrell 2016; Stokes 2020). As such, the fact that there are no prevalent coal interests at the turn of the 1960s entails that they do not necessarily have the upper hand against oil, gas or nuclear interests, and that corporate power cannot be identified as the deciding factor for the emergence of the coal consensus. This compels us to turn the analytical lens onto other actors to understand how coal interests *became* prevalent in the postwar era. As I argue below, this was not the result of market forces but of ideational processes mediated by bureaucratic instances. I argue that, through its work in addressing Appalachian underdevelopment, the Appalachian Regional Commission acted as a catalyst organization to consolidate an ideal shift towards the U.S. coal consensus in the midst of the 1970s energy crisis.

This paper contributes to better understanding the pathways through which ideas influence political-economic processes. Most notably, it contributes to an understanding of the ideational role of agencies, as they find practical solutions to the problems they are tasked to solve. The argument outlined here thus contributes to a renewed dialogue about the role ideational processes in shaping politics and policy (Béland 2009; Padamsee 2009). Alongside, this study contributes to research in environmental sociology and politics that deals with natural resources. Extant literature on the trajectories of natural resources highlight that they reflects broader political-economic considerations. They are borne to modes of production (Malm 2016), are shaped by state-industry relationships (Urquhart 2018), and respond to imperatives of regional economic dependence (Freudenburg and Frickel 1994; Jorgenson and Clark 2009). Existing research also documents the weight of previous decisions over energy on subsequent ones, which shapes energy trajectories in path dependent manner (Unruh 2000, 2002). This paper extends these accounts by examining the ideational conditions under which structural forces unfold.

This paper proceeds as follows. I first detail the situation of coal before the 1960s, which serves as the core empirical puzzle of this paper. Next, I situate the argument within studies about the political role of bureaucracies. I then discuss case selection and data. In the main section, I analyze the path through which the coal economy went from one of multiple energy alternatives to a national political project. I conclude by considering the implications of this study for sociological research on bureaucracies, ideational processes and energy futures.

## COAL AND ITS ALTERNATIVES BEFORE THE 1960S

Most research considers the political trajectories of energy and natural resources without paying much attention to their counterfactual or factual alternatives.<sup>4</sup> At the crossroads, however, choices are often made between two or more viable alternatives. This is averred in the case of U.S. coal, and neglecting that fact leads to overlook a key puzzle in the political-economic trajectory of

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<sup>4</sup> With the notable exception of Malm (2016), who considers why coal was selected over hydro power in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain.

natural resources in the U.S. Against common wisdom, coal's unchallenged prominence in the U.S. energy mix did not take place until the late 1970s. It was not the primarily result of market forces, nor did it arise out of obvious comparative advantages vis-à-vis other energy alternatives.

Due to competitive pressures from oil and gas, the coal economy was on the verge of collapse in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a result, Appalachia suffered from socioeconomic problems associated with overdevelopment of its coal industry, whose production capacity reflected seasonal peaks in demand and led to massive layoffs at times of slowdown. High profits generated during the First World war generated hopes in the prospects of the industry which were then largely disappointed.<sup>5</sup> As Bradshaw (1992:20–23) notes, the Appalachian coal industry was in bad shape precisely because of its failure to compete with domestic and foreign oil and gas. This led to low wages, unemployment, underfunding of infrastructures, and massive outmigration out of rural areas into the cities and even to other regions. Alongside, coal interests were not backed by the federal political establishment. Most notably, the 1935 Guffey and 1937 Guffey-Vison federal bills created a Bituminous Coal Commission that was tasked to set coal prices. Governmental interventions in the coal business, from price-fixing by this Bituminous Coal Commission to unfavorable tariffs promulgated by the Interstate Commerce Commission, were vividly opposed by Appalachian producers.<sup>6</sup>

Political apathy towards Appalachian coal also prevailed as a result of the bad reputation of coal miners and their union, the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). Unionization attempts and contract negotiations were often characterized by unrest and violence. This induced a widespread disregard for miners.<sup>7</sup> This bad reputation only got worse during the Second World war. The 1942-1943 contract negotiations and ensuing strikes were met by resistance from coal operators, but also from the government and the general public.<sup>8</sup> Some saw anti-patriotic and condemnable behavior in the UMWA's strategic use of the war and the corresponding uptick in coal demand as a leverage tool in negotiations. A letter from a soldier to then-UMWA President John L. Lewis published in the National Coal Bulletin in 1943 encapsulates what some viewed as a tension between contract negotiations and the war effort:

“Knowing the hard-headed, power-stricken, selfish attitude you have assumed toward your Government, it is with small hope of influencing your actions that this is written. [...] Living in mud and dust, fighting vermin and mosquitoes, suffering under a blazing sun, and always waiting for equipment – for planes and food – only to read that Americans at home are too concerned with personal welfare to worry about our precarious foothold, still slippery with the blood of our comrades. [...] So sir, I say to you, and to all of you, guard jealously those things we have given to your keeping, for one day those of us who do return will call for a strict accounting.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Pearce, Albert. 1930. *The Growth and Overdevelopment of the Kentucky Coal Industry, 1912-1929*, M.A thesis, University of Kentucky, p. 161-163. [2016MS008, 12/21].

<sup>6</sup> See 61m274, 03/06; 72m2, 06/09. The Bituminous Coal Commission was dismantled in 1939. The Department of Interior took charge of its responsibilities from there.

<sup>7</sup> Taylor, Paul F. 1955. *The Coal Mine War in Harlan County, Kentucky, 1931-1932*, M.A Thesis, University of Kentucky. [2013ms0834, 04/14].

<sup>8</sup> See 92m3, 02/03-06; 03/01

<sup>9</sup> National Coal Association, Bulletin n°2168, June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1943. [92m3, 02/04]. Given the source, there is good reason to question the authenticity of the testimony. Regardless, this document gives a fair assessment of the discourse that were circulating in the press and in policy circles at the time.

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World war, competitive pressures from oil and gas were felt again. As locomotives shifted to diesel engines and home furnaces were increasingly being replaced by oil, gas and renewable alternatives, major domestic markets for coal eroded. In consequence, coal production declined drastically, falling by 36% between 1917 and 1962.<sup>10</sup> This time, the rise of nuclear power created yet another pressure, albeit of a different kind. The “modernization” promise associated with atomic energy put a symbolic shadow on coal, which was increasingly viewed as outdated.<sup>11</sup>

Another impediment to the coal economy was self-induced. The 1950s mechanization of mines greatly reduced coal employment opportunities. For example, in the highly mining-dependent Perry county in Kentucky, employment fell almost threefold in 15 years, from 9,700 mining jobs in 1950 to 3,700 in 1964.<sup>12</sup> This decline in coal production and employment in turn had tremendous impacts on socioeconomic conditions in mining counties (Bradshaw 1992:27). Under these cumulated pressures, the substantial rise in total demand for electricity likely saved coal from terminal decline (Kahle 2019:35–36).

[Insert Figure 1]

The distress of the coal industry from the 1930s to the 1960s may seem counterintuitive in light of its later prominence. Figure 1, which presents the evolution of the U.S. coal sector from 1949 to 1989, hints on the solution to this puzzle. Panel A suggests that, from the 1970s, the coal sector outgrew other alternatives and quickly separated from them. Panel B suggests that, from the 1960s, growth in coal production picked up a new pace that became even more acute in the late 1970s to early 1980s.

The rise of coal’s prominence in the U.S. is thus the result of a relatively sudden shift. In a highly plausible counterfactual, coal mining could indeed have been faded and alternatives could have been preferred. Why wasn’t it the case? I argue that the ARC acted as a catalyst organization for a project that killed two birds with one stone. Coal was first viewed as a solution to the Appalachian underdevelopment problem. This coal solution then truly crystalized when it became a remedy for the brewing national energy crisis. Through its work as a federal agency tasked with regional issues, the ARC was instrumental in enabling the organization of state interests and brokering the relationship between regional and federal actors. Moreover, through its practical work in solving underdevelopment, the ARC was able to put incorporate a normative component to favorable industrial policy towards coal. Not only was this solution nation-building, but it was also – at least on paper – inequality-alleviating.

## BUREAUCRACIES AS CATALYST ORGANIZATIONS

The role of political organizations in shaping ideational processes has been thoroughly examined by sociologists. In the study of political parties, this phenomena has been covered under the prism of articulation (De Leon, Desai, and Tuğal 2009; Eidlin 2016), as parties naturalize common interests between segments of the electorate. In similar fashion, third-wave social

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<sup>10</sup> Academy for Contemporary Problems. 1974. A National Public Works Investment Policy. Background Papers Prepared for the Committee on Public Works, U.S. House of Representatives, 93<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session. November 1974, p. 149. [90m1, 236/2].

<sup>11</sup> Department of Labor Atomic Energy Study Group, Labor Implications of Atomic Power, 1956, cited in Kahle (2019:52).

<sup>12</sup> Crowell, Suzanne et al. 1971. Appalachian People’s History Book, Mountain Education Associates Southern Conference Educational Fund., p. 87. [2016MS008, 12/08]. No systemic county-level data exists for this time period.

movements scholars analyze how cultural signifiers rally interests, create collective identities, and enhance mobilization efforts (Benford and Snow 2000; McAdam 2022). Similar intuitions about the role of political organizations in articulating and diffusing ideas have been applied to international governance bodies, non-governmental organizations, corporate associations and media conglomerates, among others.

This well-developed literature on the role of political organizations in the development, articulation and diffusion of political ideas as hardly spilled over in the study of bureaucracies, and an understanding of how they can assume that role is scant. One explanation for that gap is that bureaucracies are rarely treated by researchers as standalone political organizations, as are governments, parties or social movement organizations (Merriman and Pacewicz 2022:1228). In the study of social change, bureaucracies' role is often viewed as one of responding to executive and legislative demands. In this traditional model, bureaucracies do not possess enough agency or power to significantly influence the development of political ideas. In major works going back to Weber, bureaucracies are indeed viewed as an infrastructural mean to accomplish the projects of states and/or governments (Mann 1993; Skocpol and Finegold 1982; Skowronek 1982). Bureaucracies are conceptualized in terms of administrative capacity and are viewed as a cause of success or failure. As the executive power in the U.S. undertook to tame bureaucratization in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Harris and Milkns 1996:11), this agency-as-enforcer model has sustained traction among sociologists (Maggetti and Verhoest 2014).

A notable early challenge to this model is found in what Mann (1993:53) terms “cock-up” or “foul-up” state theories, in which state apparatuses are viewed as a chaotic and balkanized set of administrations with competing interests (e.g., Rueschemeyer and Evans 1985). This theory builds on a long-standing theoretical tradition that focuses on self-preservation as key structuring force of organizations (Selznick 1949). As bureaucracies become more institutionalized and specialized, they tend to develop their own interests, which may compete with broader state interests. Another challenge to the traditional model comes from policy studies, where the concept of implementation gaps arose to describe distortions between initial policy goals and how they are enacted by bureaucracies (Hupe and Hill 2016; Pressman and Wildavsky 1973). Complementarily, policy scholars have studied the use of discretionary power by street-level bureaucrats in their dealings with policy goals in everyday practices (Brodkin 2011; Petchey, Williams, and Carter 2008). These two bodies of literature question the overall ability of elected officials at the center of the state to diffuse their will to bureaucracies or, in the language of Mann (1986), the ability of despotic power to be effectively channeled through infrastructural power.

Recent studies identify mechanisms through which bureaucracies can assume a political role. Merriman and Pacewicz (2022) show that, in some cases, agencies shape policy outcomes through their partisan leaning. Others show that organizational cultures can sometimes foster bureaucratic activism directed towards the promotion of a specific idea or policy proposal (Abers 2019; Hysing, Olsson, and Dahl 2016; Pacewicz 2018). Another mechanism involves policy entrepreneurs who, through individual mastery of bureaucratic procedures or unique expertise, can shake up the iron cage and enact change from within. Historians have long recognized the role of individual bureaucrats in shaping their agency's norms, practices and orientations (Bonnie and Whitebread 1974; Sellers 1997). This insight has been formalized in recent work by political scientists (Arnold 2015; Blain 2021; Carpenter 2010; Petchey et al. 2008).

Most existing literature on bureaucratic influence in the realm of political ideas frame it as an anomaly or a departure from expectations, whether it be through distortions, politicization, activism or entrepreneurship. They are often viewed as a result of peculiar attributes of agencies themselves, or of the context in which they operate. As a result, the ways in which they shape

political processes in non-exceptional cases remains unexplained. Thereby, a narrower but perhaps more broadly applicable question remains: if at all, how do bureaucracies contribute to ideational processes under normal and expected conditions of exercise?

The central force underlying the political power of agencies is autonomy. Bureaucratic autonomy depends to a large extent on a prior definition of roles, which is most often decided in legislative processes. This in turn entails that disagreement between policymakers in the definition of these roles can create an opening for autonomy that exceeds legislative expectations (Yaver 2015). However, the “real” autonomy of bureaucracy is not entirely bound to its formal autonomy (Yesilkagit 2004:531). Beyond formal characteristics, Carpenter (2001, Ch. 1) indeed delineates three prerequisites to bureaucratic autonomy: political differentiation, organizational capacity, and legitimacy. Moreover, agencies can foster autonomy through reputational work with their governmental and non-governmental audiences (Binderkrantz et al. 2023; Bustos 2021; Carpenter 2010; Lee and Van Ryzin 2020). Another important component of bureaucratic autonomy is expertise. For instance, Baumgartner and Jones (2005) highlight the role of agencies in supplanting information to policymakers as part of agenda-setting processes. The development and continued demonstration of expertise ensures that agencies remain relevant and legitimate organizations (Adler 2012). In more technical policy domains that are in principle less accessible to policymakers, expert agencies sometimes shape scientific ideas and ensuing guiding regulatory principles (Demortain 2013).

Autonomy and its correlates allow agencies to exert a decidedly political role. Analytically, ascribing political autonomy to bureaucracies does not eschew the important ways in which their action is constrained by decisions from executive and legislative bodies over their institutional structure and resources. It also cannot avoid the secondary role most bureaucrats play in setting the agenda and moving policy proposals forward, sometimes against their own preferences (Feng and Fox 2022). However, neglecting the role of bureaucracies in shaping politics may lead to overestimate the standalone ability of policymakers to gather power and legitimacy. It may also lead to underestimate how agencies, granted relative autonomy, incorporate their own interests, constraints and network ties in fulfilling their mandate.

In this paper, I take interest specifically in the overlooked role of agencies in altering long-term ideational processes. To address this question, I shift the focus away from endogenous components of bureaucratic power, such as capacity and expertise, and look to the environment in which agencies operate. I introduce the analytic category of catalyst organization to encompass cases in which agencies act as focal point for the consolidation of ideas within policy networks. I locate the catalyst potential of agencies in the process through which they deal with social problems they are tasked to solve. The foremost mechanism through which organizations diffuse ideas is brokering, whereby they act as a mediator for the coordination of actor interests, resources and information (see Engle 2021; Fernandez and Gould 1994). Given their legal-institutional limits, the ability of an agency to play the role of broker is determined in part by a suitable political context. Critical junctures, while favoring ideational change (Donnelly and Hogan 2012), are often not sufficient to effectively consolidate ideas. At these juncture points, catalyst agencies bridge long-term ideational processes with emerging political-economic necessities. They do so by fostering ties between involved parties and by organizing competing and potentially conflicting ideas into a coherent whole.

I argue that, from its founding in 1965 to the late 1970s, the ARC became a catalyst organization for the consolidation of the coal consensus by bridging the problem of Appalachian underdevelopment and the solution of coal industrial development in the midst of the energy crisis. Without the ARC’s necessary role as a broker for federal, state, corporate and citizen

interests, political ideas about coal in the U.S. would have been shaped differently. The ARC's role in advancing the coal consensus highlights the role of agencies in (1) organizing cross-related ideas with hardly symmetric underlying interests into a cohesive body, (2) providing a powerful setting for short-term yet transformative coalition-building, and (3) making ideas into time-resistant and setting seemingly immovable policy precedents. This argument and its underlying framework distinguishes the study of bureaucratic autonomy from the study of bureaucracies' contribution to ideational processes. Although they may coexist, neither phenomenon is necessary or sufficient to explain the other. In this study, I detail how an agency without outstanding differentiation, capacity, or legitimacy still was instrumental in the consolidation of a consequential political idea.

## DESIGN AND METHODS

Coal was not always the predominant energy source in the U.S., and even less so was it part of a political project tied to economic development, energy sovereignty and nation-building. The objective of this paper is thus to understand when and why this powerful political idea emerged, and how a consensus was able to crystalize among actors with different interests and across federal, regional and state boundaries.

To address this puzzle, I trace the trajectory of coal in the U.S. from the 1950s to the late 1970s and develop a formation story, i.e., an explanatory account of how social objects are "brought into being" (Hirschman and Reed 2014:268), focused on the emergence of the coal consensus as a political idea. My analytical approach places great emphasis on context, guided by the principle that "a causal condition may have one effect in one setting, but a different effect in another" (Western 2002:356). I view the role of the ARC in the formation story as a necessary but insufficient cause (see Mahoney 2021:102–3), whereby counterfactually the coal consensus would not have consolidated in the same shape were it not for the ARC's intervention. I rely on a narrative appraisal (or causal narrative) to show the interplay between the catalyst role of the ARC and issues of conjuncture, timing, and place (Lange 2013:43–45; Mahoney 1999:1164–68). This study allows to illuminate some of the conditions under which bureaucracies can act as catalyst organizations.

This paper draws from a year of archival data collection and analysis at the University of Kentucky and Berea College. I initially visited these archival sites in Winter 2023, and then complemented them with online reproduction orders from Spring 2023 to Spring 2024. In total, I surveyed approximately 25,000 pages of archival documents relevant to this study. I rely most heavily on the Appalachian Regional Commission records (University of Kentucky) and the Coal Vertical Files (Berea College), but also draw from other sources to nuance and validate my interpretations. Documents include published reports, personal correspondence, memoranda, conference proceedings, and studies, among other materials. Table 1 summarizes the archival sources used in this study.

[Insert Table 1]

## SOLVING APPALACHIAN UNDERDEVELOPMENT

Under mounting pressure from organized regional interests, and facing criticism directed towards the 1961 Area Redevelopment Act (ARA) for its lack of regional coordination, the Kennedy administration sought a quick yet programmatic remedy to Appalachian underdevelopment. In March 1963, major flooding in Central Appalachia only magnified already strong political



pressures on this issue. At the request of the Conference of Appalachian Governors, the President's Appalachian Regional Commission (PARC) was instituted in April 1963 (Bradshaw 1992:31–32). That Fall, Franklin D. Roosevelt Jr., the newly appointed head of PARC, visited the region. Upon his return, he immediately ordered the allocation of more public health officials, the setting of a school lunch program, and an increase in surplus food distribution, as he recognized Appalachia to be “the worst depressed area in the United States.”<sup>13</sup>

PARC's February 1964 report to the President recommended strong action from federal authorities. It acknowledged a duality between the “natural advantages” of the region in terms of resources and its underperforming economy. It noted in that vein that coal was still the most valuable asset of the region “capable of economic production as well as of further development,” and that “the most promising opportunities for industrial diversification within the region appear to be in localized processing and utilization of coal in conjunction with other resources.”<sup>14</sup> In short, any other development enterprises were to stand on the shoulders of giant coal. The report's recommendations are very much to that effect: it advised that Congress should increase its support to the Office of Coal Research in an effort to bolster coal production and productivity, that mineral exploration should be prioritized by the Department of Interior, and that strategic cooperation between individual states, the coal industry and federal agencies should be fostered.<sup>15</sup>

This report was aligned with prevailing state views. As a 1961 Raleigh County, West Virginia, report submitted, “Since coal is our greatest single payroll, whatever efforts were put forth in behalf of the coal industry would naturally be reflected in an increased number of job opportunities. If the quotas on residual oil could be reduced, this would create additional job opportunities. If there were a reduction of tariffs on low volatile coal shipped to Europe, this would provide additional job opportunities.”<sup>16</sup> At a conference on Appalachian development held in Berea, Kentucky, in April 1964, panelists came to similar conclusions, albeit with an important caveat. Louis Smith, Dean of Berea College, advised that economic growth and increased work opportunities were an absolute necessity, but could not be based on “reckless, rapid, and wasteful depletion of regional resources”<sup>17</sup> At the federal level, some were even more cautious. In his comments on the Appalachia Regional Development Act (ARDA) before the House in May 1964, Secretary of Interior Stewart Udall suggested that “new diversified economic opportunities within Appalachia, retraining of displaced miners, and reemployment of some miners in other mining regions are the appropriate remedial actions” to favor regional development.<sup>18</sup>

The initial iteration of the ARDA reflected this mitigated view of the role of coal in the overall development strategy. Namely, it did not specify how the ARC would contribute to the coal economy. The main focus of the ARDA was the development of a highway system in the region, in much continuity with the ARA. Its other programs were but only weakly outlined and, as Bradshaw (1992:47) notes, were quite limited in scope compared to what the PARC report promised. While it did not specifically address coal, the ARDA nevertheless stated that public investments “shall be concentrated in areas where there is a significant potential for future growth

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<sup>13</sup> Boston Globe, November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1963. [91M2, 07/01].

<sup>14</sup> President's Appalachian Regional Commission. 1964. Appalachia: A Report by the President's Appalachian Regional Commission, 1964., p. xv and 42. Retrieved online: <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED076290>.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43-44.

<sup>16</sup> Provisional Overall Economic Development Program for Raleigh County, West Virginia/Raleigh County Development Association, 1961, p. 18. [90M1, 761/01].

<sup>17</sup> Conference on Appalachia Development, Berea College, April 22-23, 1964, p. 3. [91M2, 07/01].

<sup>18</sup> Statement of Stewart Udall Before the Special Subcommittee of the Committee on Public Works, House of Representatives, on H.R. 11065, May 6<sup>th</sup>, 1964, p. 2. [91M2, 07/02].

and where the expected return on public dollars invested will be the greatest.”<sup>19</sup> In a region where coal and other natural resources were the most readily available levers for economic development, this paved the way for coal mining to be at the forefront of the ARC’s strategy. Another feature of the initial configuration that soon allowed coal to be a programmatic focus was the agency’s refusal to impede on coal interests through fiscal means to achieve redistributive goals (Isserman and Rephann 1995:350). This was paramount in a region where most private land was owned by coal companies and states were endemically funded (Bradshaw 1992:88).

The legislative parsimony of the first ARDA allowed coal interests to be brought forward from below. The National Coal Policy Conference, the product of a coalition between coal producers and the UMWA, was key in articulating the need for a federal policy that would enhance energy sovereignty. The ongoing Cold War certainly made energy sovereignty more appealing (Kahle 2019), as “Russian oil” became a political undesirable.<sup>20</sup> These arguments found an early sympathetic ear at the ARC. In its emphasis on subregional autonomy and federal-state coequal management (Conn 1983:51), the ARC also enabled Central Appalachian governments, which were more amenable to coal interests, to use its program as a tool to further coal mining. Moreover, the delimitation of ARC’S geographical scope was skewed towards mining-reliant communities at the detriment of other areas. As Schwartzman (2023) notes, these boundaries favored majority white populated areas over many majority black areas as a byproduct.

Overall, the initial ARC was defined by its “non-threatening” approach to development, which limited the alteration of preexisting power dynamics in the region (Conn 1983:54). In that role, the agency was much more than a bystander, as its early projects actively facilitated private capital development in the coal industry. Infrastructure development was viewed as a first-order priority to facilitate extractive industries.<sup>21</sup> Crucially, projects like the development of the highway system came at a very low political cost, because – on the surface-level, at least – it did not favor one industry over another, nor did it compromise any established industrial interest in the region (Wood 2006:122). In practice, however, the coal industry had the most to benefit from greater regional integration through the highway system, and after-the-fact data suggests that it indeed significantly did (Bradshaw 1992:64). The development of new highways further contributed to the coal economy by enhancing opportunities for out-of-state consumption, a vital comparative advantage of coal over other energy alternatives.<sup>22</sup> Although the road and transportation system was the primary of the ARC in its infancy, programs to support the development of natural resources were viewed as the next priority.<sup>23</sup> As such, other early examples of support to the regional coal economy included increasing resources for vocational

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<sup>19</sup> Appalachian Regional Development Act, 40 U.S.C. § 14101 (1965).

<sup>20</sup> Joseph E. Moody (President). “National Fuels Policy Held Vital in Cold War Production Race” National Coal Policy Conference, Inc., 1960-02-12, p. 1. [63m300, 87/10]

<sup>21</sup> Statement of Dr. William A. Vogely, Professor of Mineral Economics The Pennsylvania State University. Proceedings of the Appalachian Minerals Evaluation Conference, June 23-24, 1976, Washington DC, p. 21. [90m1, 77/8].

<sup>22</sup> White House Conference on Balanced National Growth and Economic Development, Working Document as of August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1977, p. 19. [90m1, 233/01].

<sup>23</sup> Louis Smith, The Berea College Conference on Appalachian Development, April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1964. [91M2, 07/01].

training and education, and funding research on how to efficiently manage the environmental problems of land degradation and water contamination caused by coal mining.<sup>24</sup>

By the end of the decade, ARC's work as an intermediary between regional and national interests meant that federal stakeholders had caught on the idea that the coal economy should be at the forefront of broader regional development. To that effect, a 1970 Public Land Review Commission stated that "mineral exploration and development should have preference over some or all other uses on much of our public land"<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, the ARC own views on the matter remained mixed. For instance, ARC Director Ralph Widner wondered what would happen to the region if future prospects for coal were underwhelming. He also questioned whether the human and environmental costs of coal mining were truly outweighed by its economic benefits.<sup>26</sup> With a sweeping energy crisis on the horizon, these concerns were soon to fade out into the background.

## SOLVING THE ENERGY CRISIS

In the 1960s, proposals for a national energy policy had started to emerge as a necessary remedy for the crisis of coal, but energy itself was not in crisis. That would abruptly change in the early 1970s. The Oil shock of October 1973 transformed energy policy debates (Kahle 2019), and paved the way for coal to play a central role in the energy mix. The Appalachian problem would be included as a corollary issue early on. In a statement before the House in December 1973, ARC Director Ralph Widner made the case for bridging the energy crisis and Appalachian development: "Appalachia currently produces about 70 percent of the Nation's coal, and obviously, that coal has become terribly important once again."<sup>27</sup> Federal agents saw the potential of coal development for solving the energy crisis, and most importantly recognized its convenience. As Robert M. Paul, Staff Director of the House Economic Development Subcommittee asked, "What can this committee do in the development of the only *readily available* domestic energy source that we have, that is the coal?"<sup>28</sup>

The oil shock led to a sharp increase in coal production and employment in Appalachia. In the process, consensus began to emerge on the necessity of federal interventions to address energy and development in conjunction, notably to curtail unemployment that would result from long-term fuel shortages.<sup>29</sup> This shift spilled over onto the ARC's priorities, which from there assumed a more lenient posture towards coal (Bradshaw 1992:59–60).<sup>30</sup> The 1974 Subregional development strategy for Central Appalachia stated that supporting the coal economy constituted "an immediate base for expanding employment and generating a higher level of secondary

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<sup>24</sup> McFarland-Johnson Engineers, Inc. Socio-Economic Impacts of Coal and Industrial Development in the 1970s/1980s for Lincoln-Wayne Counties in Region II, Prepared for the Region II Planning and Development Council, August 1976, Section X. [90m1 872/5].

<sup>25</sup> Science, July 3<sup>rd</sup> 1970, p. 33. [91M2, 07/02].

<sup>26</sup> Ralph R. Widner, The Future of Appalachian Coal, p. 1-2. [90m1, 208/25].

<sup>27</sup> A National Public Works Investment Policy: A Strategy for Balanced Population Growth and Economic Development (93-29). Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Economic Development of the Committee on Public Works, House of Representatives, Ninety-Third Congress First Session, November 1, December 10 and 13, 1973. [90m1, 235/5]. Widner himself recognized the need for economic diversification in Appalachia.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* I underline.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> John C. West, South Carolina Governor and Cochairman of the ARC, letter to Arch A. Moore, Governor of West Virginia, January 14<sup>th</sup>, 1974. [90m1 236/1]. See also 90m1, 248/1-5.

employment.”<sup>31</sup> To attain this goal, priorities included integrating coal with other regional economic sectors and investing in infrastructure to ensure that the effects of coal development had long-term benefits for mining communities. Another key means through which the ARC furthered its involvement was by fostering ties between experts, policy and corporate actors. At a May 1974 ARC conference on regional development in mining communities, Professor V. Lawrence Parsegian from the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute presented technological solutions to increase coal productivity. Parsegian argued that optimal coal industrial development was unlikely without financial support from governments as well as scientific and technological support from universities.<sup>32</sup> The ARC’s statement on energy policy of September 1974 builds on this position, and clearly linked the national energy crisis to its structuring project for regional development.<sup>33</sup>

The 1975 reauthorization of the ARDA reflects the more decidedly pro-coal attitudes of the ARC and explicitly ties its mission to national energy needs. The very purpose of the ARDA is amended to include the coordination of “Federal, State, and local efforts toward (1) anticipating the effects on the region of alternative national energy policies and practices, (2) planning for the growth and change generated through environmental well-being of the region, and (3) implementing the activities of Federal, State and local governments in the region to better meet the special problems generated in the region through national energy policies.”<sup>34</sup> In this shift, the necessity for regional development nonetheless still serves as a master frame: “It is essential that the opportunities for expanded energy production be used so as to maximize the social and economic benefits and minimize the social and environmental costs to the region and its people.”<sup>35</sup>

From its reauthorization, the ARC amplified its role in bridging ideas from its partners together. In June 1976, the agency co-sponsored the Appalachian Minerals Evaluation Conference along with the National Science Foundation. This conference brought together 65 regional and national experts as well as industry partners. In his opening statement, Donald W. Whitehead, Federal Cochairman of the ARC, summarized the agency’s view regarding intersectoral partnerships: “one of the strengths of American society is the readiness of industry and academia to counsel with government when professional advice and technical assistance are critical in the development of public policy. In this country we have a long tradition of encouraging such cooperation and innumerable mechanisms for achieving it.”<sup>36</sup> The conference took a holistic approach to the problem of coal production, and looked at how favorable infrastructure arrangements, zoning laws, tax structure and regulatory stability could enhance mineral development prospects.<sup>37</sup> Publications of the agency also started to reflect more clearly

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<sup>31</sup> Appalachian Regional Commission. Subregional Development Strategy, Central Appalachia. Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia. April 1974., p. 2. [90m1, 236/1].

<sup>32</sup> Parsegian, V. Lawrence. 1974. A cooperative effort to aid Appalachian communities to meet the new energy-from-coal requirements and opportunities, May 9<sup>th</sup>, 1974. [1997ms282, 116/1780].

<sup>33</sup> Statement of the Appalachian regional commission on energy policy, September 13<sup>th</sup>, 1974. [1997ms282, 116/1779].

<sup>34</sup> Appalachian Regional Commission. 1977. “Goals, Objectives and Development Strategies for Appalachia.” ARC Meeting of the Alternates, October 11<sup>th</sup>, 1977, p. 19. [90m1, 236/5].

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Appalachian Regional Commission. Proceedings of the Appalachian Minerals Evaluation Conference, June 23-24, 1976, Washington DC. [90m1, 77/8].

<sup>37</sup> Statement of Dr. William A. Vogely, Professor of Mineral Economics The Pennsylvania State University. Proceedings of the Appalachian Minerals Evaluation Conference, June 23-24, 1976, Washington DC, p. 20-23. [90m1, 77/8].

its coal-centric approach to Appalachian development. Its 1977 strategic plan explains positive outcomes, such as the slowdown in outmigration, as the result from an increase in coal-related job opportunities. Alongside, it explicitly frames highway development as a tool to cater to national energy needs and reiterates that the region's fate is intimately tied to the success of the coal economy.<sup>38</sup>

Amid the energy crisis, the agency staff began to recognize its own role as brokers of regional, federal and coal interests. As future ARC director Francis E. Morawitz argued, "the Appalachian Regional Commission has demonstrated that if called upon it can help out a national energy policy, calling for increased coal production. For example, the Commission can serve as an effective broker between industry, labor and government for the purpose of meeting the housing and community service demands for new mine workers. In this context and for the immediate future, the Commission will be perceived as a useful, special-purpose organization."<sup>39</sup> Initially self-attributed, this mandate became embedded into the very *raison d'être* of the agency from the 1975 reauthorization. By repurposing already existing ties to accomplish this new official mandate, and by tying it to its initial focus on underdevelopment, it acquired a reputation at the federal level for its "pragmatic" approach to problem-solving.<sup>40</sup> In turn, it became recognized for its success in developing solution to the national energy crisis "*packaged* to contribute to the growth of a region."<sup>41</sup>

With the election of the Carter administration in 1976, the national energy policy that coal interests had pushed for nearly two decades was finally sitting atop of the legislative agenda. Carter saw energy as one of the defining issues of his Presidency (Richardson and Nordhaus 1995). While coal production increased in the aftermath of the 1973 oil shock, industry stakeholders wanted a federal intervention that would ensure stability going forward. This was easy for the ARC to get behind, as steady growth precluded the deleterious impacts of boom-and-bust cycles on unemployment and poverty.<sup>42</sup> The need to address the future of coal in conjunction with the energy crisis led to the passage of the 1978 National Energy act.

These reforms formally addressed power production and supply but were framed by its proponents as advancing national security through energy sovereignty. Coal was a central element to this project. The reforms indeed sought to double coal production to 1.2 billion tons by 1985, in recognition that coal represented 90% of national energy reserves but fulfilled only 18% of domestic needs.<sup>43</sup> This aspect directly mirrored the National Coal Association's

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<sup>38</sup> Appalachian Regional Commission. 1977. "Goals, Objectives and Development Strategies for Appalachia." ARC Meeting of the Alternates, October 11<sup>th</sup>, 1977., p. 40. [90m1, 236/5].

<sup>39</sup> Francis E. Moravitz. "Alternative Structure for Public Works and Economic Development Programs," Draft memorandum to Hal Williams, April 6<sup>th</sup>, 1977. [90m1, 236/4].

<sup>40</sup> Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations. 1978. Assessing the inadequacies of government structure and processes: an overview of problems and prescriptions, White House Conference on Balanced National Growth and Economic Development., p. 32. [90m1, 233/02].

<sup>41</sup> The Establishment of Federal-State Development Councils [c. late 1970s]. [90m1, 238/2].

<sup>42</sup> Page L. Ingraham (Planning and Evaluation Division, ARC). Letter to Robert P. Duckworth, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, "Preliminary Response to Five Agenda Items for 11/12/76 Meeting on 178 Biennial Growth Report," August 12<sup>th</sup>, 1976. [90m1, 233/01]; Donald W. Whitehead. Letter to Carla A. Hills, Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, "Comments on Draft of the 1976 Report on National Growth and Development, January 6<sup>th</sup>, 1976, p. 2. [90m1, 249/2].

<sup>43</sup> General Accountability Office, U.S. Coal Development, Promises, Uncertainties. EMD-77-43, 9.1, 1977, <https://www.gao.gov/products/emd-77-43>. Also discussed in Kahle (2019:336).

demands.<sup>44</sup> It further provided fiscal incentives for industrial conversion from oil to coal, thereby not only ensuring abundant supply but also consistent demand.

In Congressional hearings, the ARC was instrumental in articulating how this federal intervention bridged national and regional interests. ARC Federal Cochairman Robert W. Scott summarized the role of Appalachia in advancing the national interest: “As you know, the national energy policy now being fashioned by the Administration and the Congress proposes to commit the nation to the use of coal as our major source of energy over the next quarter of a century. The location, quantity, quality and availability of Appalachian coal means that the Appalachian states must be involved in meeting this national commitment.”<sup>45</sup> Scott highlighted the need for these reforms to serve the interests of Appalachia in return: “If we are to produce the coal the nation needs, we must have the assurance of participation in a shared decision-making process that will provide the nation the energy it so urgently needs, and for the people of Appalachia the quality of life they deserve.”<sup>46</sup> His foremost argument in that regard was that local, state and regional instances needed to be included in establishing priorities.<sup>47</sup>

In parallel to these debates, the ARC contributed to addressing the environmental harms of coal, perhaps the most important obstacle to a broad-reaching regional consensus on the matter (Chowkwanyun 2022, Ch. 5). The work of political activists like Harry Caudill had shed light onto the many environmental problems caused from coal mining. The health of coal miners had partially been addressed by the 1969 Federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act. Nonetheless, the issue of environmental degradation remained. Amid the rise of strip mining, air and water contamination had only become worse. The Bureau of Mines had studied the question from 1965 and concluded early on that stricter regulations were indeed necessary.<sup>48</sup>

In 1972, at a National Conference on Strip Mining held by the Council of Southern Mountains, a proposal for the abolition of strip mining emerged.<sup>49</sup> Many prominent political figures like South Dakota Senator George McGovern, West Virginia Governor Jay Rockefeller and West Virginia Representative Ken Hechler showed support for this proposal.<sup>50</sup> It was, however, not without firm opposition. Coal corporations and the UMWA were vehemently against any additional regulations to strip mining in fear that it would lead to economic slowdown.<sup>51</sup> Their opposition was so noticeable and well-affirmed that, after introducing a bill to ban strip mining in Congress in 1972, Ken Hechler feared his reelection campaign was compromised on the sole basis of that legislative piece. “I don’t mind telling you, I’m in trouble,” he wrote Harry Caudill and his wife Anne.<sup>52</sup>

In between a radical proposal to abolish strip mining and a perhaps even more radical push for status quo, the ARC stood as representative of a “third way.” The agency sure had been a vital proponent of coal since its inception. Nevertheless, it also had been consistently preoccupied by environmental degradation, notably through its funding program for mine restoration projects.

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<sup>44</sup> Cincinnati Enquirer 1978-02-26, BCA 0253, 80/13.

<sup>45</sup> Statement by the Honorable Robert W. Scott, Federal Cochairman, Appalachian Regional Commission, Before the Subcommittee on Regional and Community Development on S.1493, “Inland Energy Development Impact Assistance Act of 1977”, Tuesday, August 2, 1977., p. 3. [91M2, 07/02].

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3-5.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>48</sup> Walter R. Hibbard Jr., Director of the Bureau of Mines, Letter to Harry Caudill, April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1966. [91M2, 19/06].

<sup>49</sup> See 91M2, 23/02.

<sup>50</sup> See 91M2, 23/01.

<sup>51</sup> See 0253, 69/09

<sup>52</sup> Ken Hechler, Letter to Mr. and Mrs. Caudill, October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1972. [91M2, 23/01].

It was important for the agency that coal hindered as least as possible the aspiration of the region to thrive on its other resources, especially water.<sup>53</sup> In its 1977 strategic plan, the ARC reiterated this view in light of rising critiques of strip mining from prominent regional actors.<sup>54</sup>

The 1977 Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act answered part of these critiques, although many – President Carter being the first among them – hoped for more stringent regulations. Among other things, the Surface Mining Act instituted the Office of Surface Mining, responsible for rulemaking and oversight, created funding programs for university and private research on best practices and technologies to promote environmental preservation, and developed an abandoned mining site cleanup program. The act reflected well what the ARC had stood for: rigorous surveillance of strip mining to limit its detrimental effect, while at the same limiting threats to the reputation and legitimacy of the industry in the region. This bill may have been the last missing piece to consolidate the coal consensus in face of public concerns over pollution in the 1970s. Key federal policy interventions transformed the conditions under which the Appalachian coal industry operated and promoted a compromise approach to extraction. This approach curtailed employment instability, better protected miners from occupational hazards, and limited environmental degradation caused by mining. The ARC was instrumental in reaching this compromise approach, and in turn allowed for the consolidation of a consensus around coal.

The coal consensus was multi-layered. It first concerned the general approach to the development of mining regions. Coal country was thought to suffer most from instability and the boom-and-bust cycle.<sup>55</sup> The solution to that problem was clear: policies needed to foster stability, which would promote the long-term benefits of the coal economy and limit some of its short-term ailments. In the first quarter-century of the ARC's existence, growth in the mining sector surpassed that of any other industry in Appalachia, and coal producing counties developed faster than non-coal producing counties (Isserman and Rephann 1995:358–62). A second layer covered political understandings of what had happened after the Oil shock. While evidence presented here suggests that the selection of coal as a solution to the energy crisis was the result of complex political dynamics, the mainstream account came to view it as an unproblematic inevitability. In a 1977 report on U.S. coal supply, the General Accountability Office reflects well this discursive shift: “The turn to coal in the late 1970s was ‘a matter of necessity rather than choice’.”<sup>56</sup> A third layer concerned the eventual rise of national myths around coal, which are still very prevalent today (Bell and York 2010), and especially so among rural populations and right-wing voters (Mayer 2022). In 1980, Carter campaigned on this very connection between coal and nation-building: “America indeed is the Saudi Arabia of coal, and my goal as President of the United States is to see on the world energy markets Arab oil replaced with Illinois coal.”<sup>57</sup>

Throughout the Reagan presidency, the ARC was repeatedly under attack, as were many other governmental agencies. For the Reagan Administration, regionalization added an unnecessary fourth order of government (Conn 1983:49). Yet, this decade-long tumult did not

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<sup>53</sup> See 91M1, 234 91M1, 235/3.

<sup>54</sup> Appalachian Regional Commission. 1977. “Goals, Objectives and Development Strategies for Appalachia.” ARC Meeting of the Alternates, October 11th, 1977., p. 10., 90m1, 236/5.

<sup>55</sup> John Whisman, “Comments on the origin and development, current status and future of Regional Development Programs,” September 1st, 1980., p. 4 and 22. 90m1, 237/4.

<sup>56</sup> General Accountability Office, U.S. Coal Development, Promises, Uncertainties. EMD-77-43, 9.1, 1977, <https://www.gao.gov/products/emd-77-43>. Also discussed in Kahle (2019:336).

<sup>57</sup> Carter, Jimmy. 1980. “West Frankfort, Illinois Remarks to Miners and Employees of Old Ben Coal Mine No. 25,” October 13<sup>th</sup>, 1980. The American Presidency Project. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/west-frankfort-illinois-remarks-miners-and-employees-old-ben-coal-mine-no-25>.

threaten the coal consensus, as it remained alive and well until the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. After the important federal reforms of 1977 and 1978, political and economic structures supported the coal economy on its own. In other words, Appalachian coal did not need the ARC anymore.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this paper, I argued that the Appalachian Regional Commission acted as a catalyst organization for the consolidation of the coal consensus. Through its work in addressing Appalachian underdevelopment, the agency was instrumental in organizing the interests of key partners and bridging federal and regional interests. The coal economy was a readily available tool to address Appalachian underdevelopment, but it lacked national appeal and was challenged by other energy alternatives. In its infancy, the ARC articulated the advantages of coal for solving Appalachian underdevelopment and to use its limited but effective powers to facilitate coal development in the region. Moreover, while coal interests lobbied early on for a national energy policy, there was no corresponding national energy crisis for it to become a salient political idea. In light of the 1973 Oil shock, it finally gained traction. What it lacked, however, was a clear vision of how it also advanced regional interests. The ARC, especially from its reform in 1975, was instrumental in articulating how solutions to Appalachian underdevelopment also furthered urgent national energy needs.

This case study of the ARC highlights the role of agencies in (1) organizing cross-related ideas with hardly symmetric underlying interests into a cohesive body, (2) providing a powerful setting for transformative coalition-building, and (3) making ideas into time-resistant and setting seemingly immovable policy precedents. One of the conditions for the ARC's continued role as a catalyst organization was that it fitted the national needs and priorities of governments in place. Successive administrations valued the ARC's solution to the problem of underdevelopment and energy crisis. In that sense, the ability of agencies to act as catalysts depends on having the right mandate in a favorable conjuncture. Nevertheless, as shown in this paper, this does not discard the distinct role of the ARC in shaping the ideational process that led to the coal consensus. Most notably, it was key in articulating the problems to be solved, tailoring coal solutions to its regional development mandate, and reassuring critiques of coal by pushing for compromise policies that included environmental concerns. Alongside, this paper shows that crucial choices regarding energy supply can be guided by concerns that are not directly borne to economic forces. The coal consensus was not a historical inevitability, and this observation may well hold in other energy trajectories. In the age of climate change and energy transitions, this paper thus reinforces the need for environmental scholars to contextualize energy trajectories within ideational processes.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, coal consumption, especially that for electricity generation, has largely decreased. Meanwhile, the coal consensus has all but fallen apart and support for coal has become largely divided along partisan lines. In his first presidential bid, Donald Trump campaigned in Appalachia on nostalgia for coal's prominence. During his term, coal production did increase slightly, but it quickly went back on its previous pace throughout Joe Biden's presidency. The 2022 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, which commits 73 billion on various energy programs that will in all likelihood engage the U.S. further down its path of divesting from coal and other fossil fuels. In 2016, for the first time since national data has been



compiled, coal was not the primary source of electricity in the U.S. In 2022, renewables surpassed coal in electricity generation for the first time.<sup>58</sup>

Harry Caudill spent most of his intellectual career criticizing coal interests for their mistreatment of miners and the environment, and regional political elites for their complacency towards the coal industry with a reformist agenda in mind. In the two decades following the creation of the ARC, progressive reforms did happen. Yet, for advocates like Caudill, their results were mixed at best. In the last few years before his death in 1990, he wrote more decisively than ever about the necessity for his home state of Kentucky to fade out coal and radically rethink its development model.<sup>59</sup> He believed that Appalachia was otherwise doomed to remain a “America’s Exploited Colony”<sup>60</sup>

Was he right? As the 50-year anniversary report of the ARC shows, although progress has been made in most intervention areas, Appalachia still lags behind on key socioeconomic measures. Appalachian still suffers from higher poverty, unemployment and outmigration, and still has poorer health and educational outcomes than the rest of the U.S.<sup>61</sup> Most evidently, the coal consensus did not solve Appalachian underdevelopment. Nonetheless, there is hope for Appalachia. The 1998 revisions to the ARDA places far more emphasis on economic diversification. From there, the ARC has more consistently promoted a wide array of means to develop the region. Since 2015, the ARC has managed the Partnerships for Opportunity and Workforce and Economic Revitalization (POWER) Initiative, which co-sponsors development projects across coal-impacted communities. To date, this initiative has invested 421.6 million on 507 projects in 365 counties.<sup>62</sup> The Appalachian economy was built on coal, and its dependence to the mining sector has increased from 1965 in order to solve the underdevelopment problem, but also the national energy crisis. As recent federal interventions now seek to divert from coal, a unique and unprecedented opportunity opens for Appalachia to finally reimagine itself.

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<sup>58</sup> Energy Information Agency. “Electricity explained. Electricity generation, capacity, and sales in the United States,” Updated: June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2023. <https://www.eia.gov/energyexplained/electricity/electricity-in-the-us-generation-capacity-and-sales.php>.

<sup>59</sup> Harry M. Caudill. “If Kentucky Expects to Move Ahead It Will View Coal as ‘An Economic Relic’.” Louisville Courier-Journal, January 31<sup>st</sup>, 1986. [91M2, 67/10]

<sup>60</sup> Harry M. Caudill. 1969. “Appalachia: America’s Exploited Colony,” Interplay, vol 2, n°10, p. 20-25. [91M2, 65/13]

<sup>61</sup> Center for Regional Economic Competitiveness and West Virginia University, for the Appalachian Regional Commission. Appalachia Then and Now. Examining Changes to the Appalachian Region Since 1965, February 2015. <https://www.arc.gov/report/appalachia-then-and-now-1965-2015/>.

<sup>62</sup> Appalachian Regional Commission. Partnerships for Opportunity and Workforce and Economic Revitalization Initiative <https://www.arc.gov/grants-and-opportunities/power/>. Consulted on February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2024.

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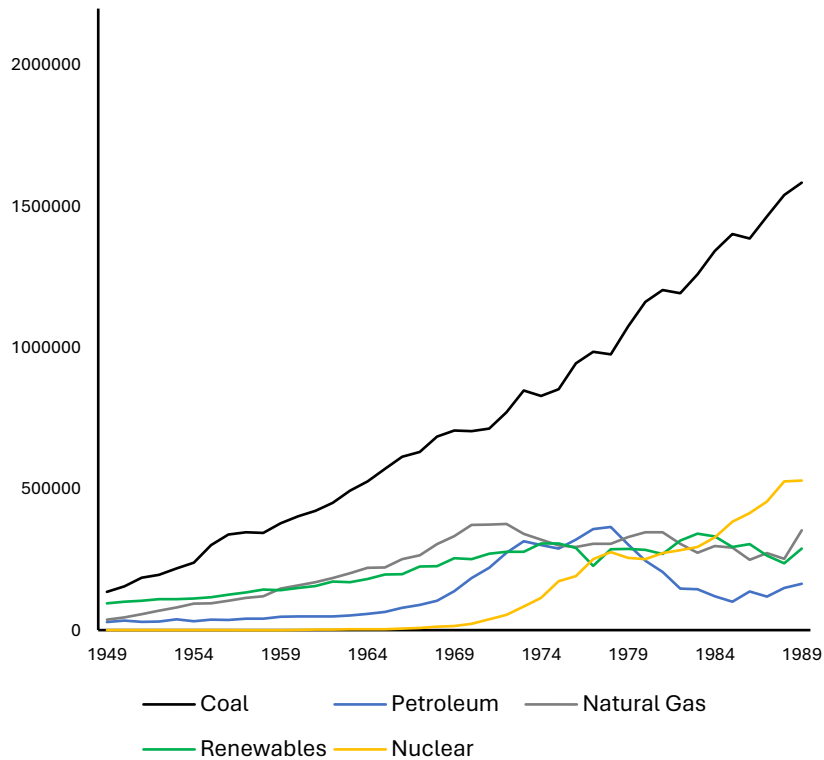
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TABLES AND FIGURES

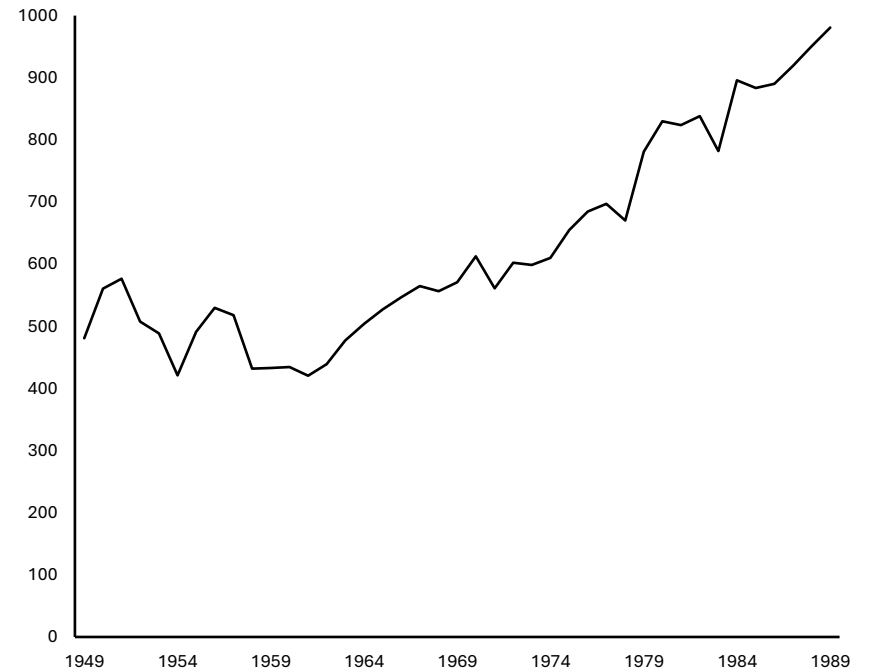
**Table 1.** Archival sources

<b>Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky Special Collections Research Center</b>		<b>Hutchins Library, Berea College Special Collections and Archives</b>	
<i>Name</i>	<i>Collection ID</i>		<i>Collection ID</i>
Appalachian Regional Commission records	90m1	Coal Vertical Files	BCA 0253
Anne MacKinnon coal research files	2016ms008	Council of the Southern Mountains Records, 1970-1989	BCA 0101 SAA 101
Coal Information Network of Kentucky Archives, 1982-1986	87m41	Harlan County Struggle Collection	BCA 0060 SAA 060
Anne and Harry M. Caudill Collection	91m2	Alan J. Crain Collection	BCA 0113 SAA 113
Pauline Canterberry papers	2014ms0253-001		
Rogers C.B. Morton Collection, 1939-1976	84m1		
John B. Breckinridge papers	96m1		
Robert F. Sexton papers	2013ms0834		
Brent Spence papers	63m300		
James S. Brown papers	1997ms352		
Marion Pearsall Collection, circa 1910-1984	1985UA020		
Thomas R. Underwood papers	61m274		
Alben W. Barkley papers	63m143		
Louie B. Nunn papers	1998ms002		
Frederick Moore Vinson papers	72m2		
James G. Wheeler papers	92m3		
John D. Whisman Papers	1997ms282		

Panel A: U.S. Net electricity generation, in million kWh, 1949-1989



Panel B: Total U.S. coal production, 1949-1989



**Figure 1.** Evolution of the U.S. coal sector in the postwar era

Data, Panel A: U.S. Energy Information Administration, Table 7.2a Electricity Net Generation: Total (All Sectors), *Monthly Energy Review*, January 2024, <https://www.eia.gov/totalenergy/data/monthly/#electricity>.

Data, Panel B: U.S. Energy Information Agency. 2023. *Annual Coal Report*, Table ES1. Coal Production, 1949-2022. <https://www.eia.gov/coal/annual/pdf/acr.pdf>.