US Centre Summer Research Grant

Recipient name: Allie Reilly

Project Title: Investigating the effects of US just transition programs can offer insights for renewed climate action

Summary of Project:

The US Inflation Reduction Act's (IRA) just transition strategy relied on place-based industrial policy; this was comprised of programs meant to assuage historic and future economic losses while securing political support and decarbonizing the economy. While responding to climate change is often considered from the perspective of what we can sustain, it is equally a question of what we can and must leave behind (Elliott 2018). Scholarship in sociology (Elliott 2021) and geography (Paprocki 2021) highlights the disconnect between the ways loss is used as motivation for well-intentioned climate policies, and the ways that loss is then experienced by people in places identified for climate action. Building from this work and amidst the backlash against climate policy in the US, I ask: How are IRA just transition programs impacting people's everyday lives? Using the 48C Qualifying Advanced Energy Project Credit Program (48C Program) as a case study, I will investigate the social, historical, and political processes that served to create and implement the 48C Program's focus on alleviating losses in energy communities and the on-the-ground material impacts of this program. By building an understanding of the lived effects of IRA projects, I aim to illuminate the politics of loss that underpin US climate action.

Background and Theoretical Framework

In 2022, the United States (US) passed the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), which was the largest investment in climate action in the nation's history (Greve 2022). A central feature of IRA was a "just transition" strategy that relied on place-based green industrial policy, which was comprised of programs meant to assuage historic losses due to deindustrialization and future economic losses foreshadowed by a transition to a clean energy future, all while securing political support and decarbonizing the economy (U.S. Department of Energy 2025). New clean energy manufacturing investments were simultaneously meant to lay the foundation to realize long held climate mitigation goals and revitalize overlooked economies through job retention and creation. Amidst the current rhetorical and material backlash against climate action in the US, I have been curious about the realized effects of IRA just transition programs. While scholars and practitioners have investigated what went right and what went wrong with IRA (Stokes and Lomov 2026; Jones and Peck 2026; Barkdoll et al. 2026), little is known about the whether the ongoing material work of realizing these projects actually meets the promised vision. In turn, I ask: How are IRA just transition programs impacting people's everyday lives?

My research will consider this question by applying "loss" as an analytical lens. Responding to climate change is both a question of what we can sustain and what we can and must leave behind (Elliott 2018). Scholarship in sociology (Elliott 2021) and geography (Paprocki 2021) highlights the disconnect between the ways loss is used as motivation for well-intentioned climate policies, and the ways that loss is then experienced by people in places identified for climate action. Building from this work in the sub-field of political ecology, I will investigate the social, historical, and political processes that served to create and implement the 48C Program's focus on alleviating losses in energy communities and the on-the-ground material impacts of this program. Through building an understanding of the lived effects of the 48C Program, I aim to illuminate the politics of loss that underpin US climate action and contribute to a body of critical scholarship on loss and climate action. My goal is for this analytical work to enable us to reflect on what this tells us about how climate policies are reshaping spaces and who is ultimately prioritized in efforts to address climate change.

Methodology

I have selected the 48C Qualifying Advanced Energy Project Credit (48C Program) as a case study for my doctoral research, which is emblematic of IRA's green industrial policy just transition objectives (U.S. Department of Energy 2025). Through the 48C Program, the US Department of Energy, the US Department of Treasury, and the Internal Revenue Service allocated $10 billion USD in tax credits to new and repurposed clean energy manufacturing and critical materials processing and refining facilities, and industrial decarbonization activities (U.S. Department of the Treasury 2025). Of these $10 billion USD, $4 billion were directed to projects in communities that formerly had a coal mine or coal-fired power plant, known as "energy communities," to facilitate economic revitalization. The 48C Program is a case of green industrial policy that engages themes of economic, social, and environmental loss through its design.

My PhD research will seek to both historicize this program within the lineage of federal US climate policy and within a longer legacy of policy efforts to alleviate the localized economic effects of free trade and also develop an understanding of the lived effects of the 48C Program in situ. As a result, my research will adopt several methodological strands, which are summarized in Figure 1. The first is concerned with understanding the policy history of the 48C Program through document review and analysis and semi-structured interviews with experts, which was the focus of my research this summer supported by the Phelan US Centre. The second is concerned with historicizing the 48C Program within a longer history of efforts by the US federal government to help alleviate the effects of deindustrialization. The third is concerned with the on-the-ground realities of the 48C Program and will consist of ethnographic research in a community where a 48C project is underway or stalled.

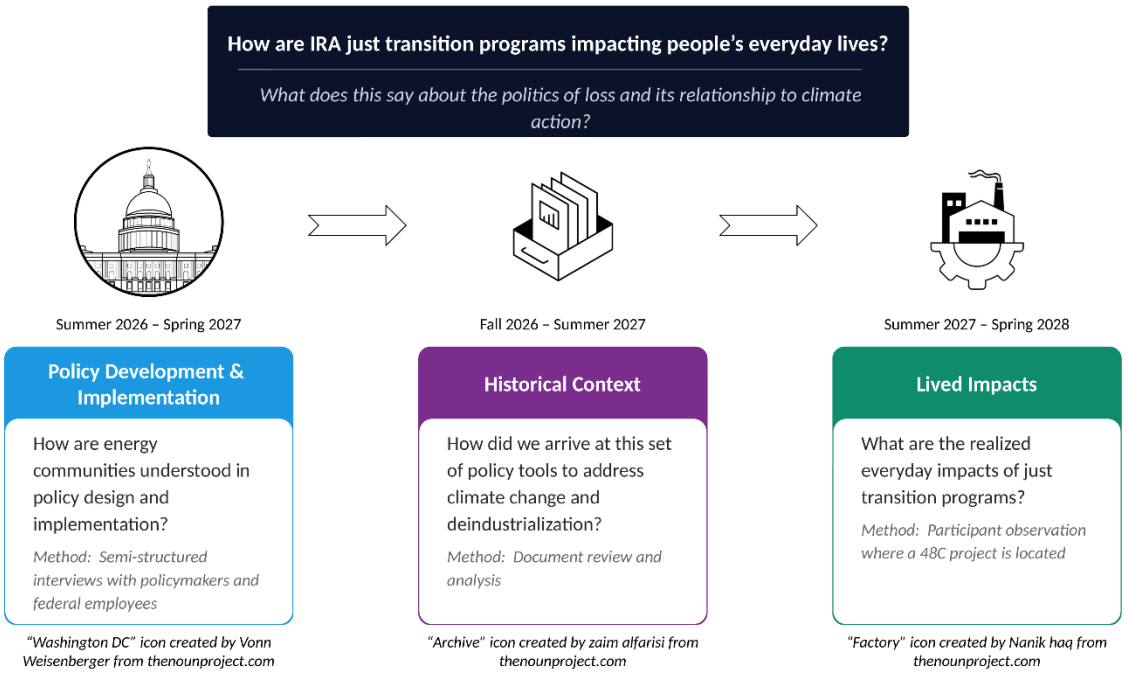


Figure 1 Research Methods Summary

Summer Research Activities Sponsored by Phelan

As a rising second year PhD student, the Phelan Summer Research Grant provided me with the funding to initiate the first phase of data collection concerned with understanding policy development and implementation of the 48C Program. Building upon research in the field of political ecology, my research this summer was concerned with studying the underlying "imaginary" of 48C energy communities, meaning the state's constructed understanding of energy communities, the problem of climate change, and proposed futures in these geographies (Paprocki 2019, 297; Scott 1998; Li 2007). Through interviews and document analysis I was interested in understanding the levers and impacts

of the just transition advanced through contemporary US climate policies, namely the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022. Taking the 48C Program as an initial case, this summer research project studied how the program was developed and began to investigate whether/how the program is impacting people in designated energy communities.

As a result of receiving funding from Phelan, I was able to travel to Washington, DC this summer to conduct semi-structured interviews with decision-makers involved in designing and shaping the 48C Program in Congress and at non-governmental organizations, and individuals involved in implementing the program at relevant federal agencies. I conducted interviews with eighteen individuals. Many of these interviews took place in person in Washington, DC, and others took place over video call given that many former federal employees have departed DC or are/were fully remote. While my interview questions and structure varied based on the interviewee, the interviews were organized around a few core questions:

- What was the goal of the 48C Program?
- What was the goal of the energy communities set aside?
- How was the 48C Program implemented? How/why were certain policy tools selected and implemented over others?
- How/why was the definition of energy communities selected? Who was meant to benefit from this program?
- What did successful implementation of the 48C Program look like?
- What did you imagine that energy communities would look like after the program was successfully implemented?

In addition to conducting interviews, I was able to have informal discussions with individuals involved in climate and energy policy in DC. Through these conversations I was able to learn more about the current state of US climate policy, challenges communities and people are facing, and garner additional insights into how IRA was ultimately developed and passed. Further, I dedicated time this summer to collecting and reviewing documents related to the 48C Program, including Congressional hearings and relevant reports. Many of the documents I collected were shared with me by individuals I interviewed or met with this summer.

Being able to be in person in DC was invaluable to data collection at this early stage of my PhD, and the process of socializing my research project with relevant stakeholders helped me to better understand the wider context of my research. These conversations were also helpful to begin to develop the remainder of my research methodology, hone my research question, and mature my theoretical and conceptual framework.

Next Steps

The immediate next steps for my research are to transcribe my interview recordings and analyze the data collected through interviews as well as document collection. The data collected through my research this summer may serve as the foundation for a chapter or paper of my dissertation. The

longer-term next steps for my PhD are to use this initial research from this summer to help inform a robust and updated research proposal for my full doctoral project, including selecting a case study for ethnographic study. Lastly, as a result of my research this summer, I will reflect on and revise my current literature review to be more aligned with the refined direction of my research.

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