End Point or Setback?

A Retrospective of the Maine Public Power Ballot Initiative

Johanna Bozuwa, Holly Caggiano, Sara M. Constantino, Lucy Hochschartner, Sandeep Vaheesan, Winston Yau

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Executive Summary

Crises, by revealing the failures and weaknesses of the status quo, can create an impetus for change. While energy provisioning systems are not generally top of mind for consumers, the intersecting and escalating climate and affordability crises have drawn attention to the urgency of a rapid, affordable, and equitable transition to renewable energy. As we work to decarbonize our energy infrastructure, we should also reconsider how it is owned and managed.

Campaigns to build public power, an alternative to corporate control of critical energy infrastructure, have gained momentum in recent years.

Despite growing concerns about the affordability, resilience (e.g., to extreme weather), and sustainability of our energy systems, the private utilities that control and govern most of these systems have failed to adapt to a changing world. Campaigns to build public power, an alternative to corporate control of critical energy infrastructure, have gained momentum in recent years. This movement recalls the New Deal era—when public electricity development was leveraged both to tackle the economic challenges of the Great Depression and to deliver universal electrification.[1]

The renewed interest in public ownership of both production and distribution is evident in two recent campaigns—the Build Public Renewables Act in New York and the Our Power campaign in Maine. Our Power was unique in that it was one of the first efforts to establish a publicly run electric utility at the state level. Although the referendum to establish the publicly run utility Pine Tree Power failed, the effort uncovered fertile ground for building public power movements and showed profound support for future public power campaigns against private utility companies. In this report, we look back at public power's history in the US, experiences from the Our Power campaign, and results from a two-wave survey conducted before and after the referendum vote to identify key insights for the public power movement, which we summarize below:

[1] At the same time, these New Deal programs also excluded people of color and engendered racial injustice in our energy systems. See Johanna Bozuwa, Sarah Knuth, Grayson Flood, Patrick Robbins, and Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò, "Building Public Renewables in the United States," Climate and Community Project, March 2023, https://climateandcommunity.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/23_03_28_energy-2.pdf.

- **Build on momentum, which remains strong even after the referendum defeat:** Our findings show that interest in public power remains high even after the ballot result, and Mainers believe that public power movements will continue to grow both within the state and nationally. Rather than a failure, the campaign can be viewed as a stepping stone on the path to movement building.
- **Identify creative mobilization strategies to overcome entrenched power:** Referendums require a high and consistent level of voter contact, which demands significant resources. The massive campaign spending disparity between Our Power and incumbent private utilities, as well as Our Power's struggle to raise the funds needed to run a statewide electoral campaign, reveals the need for robust grassroots fundraising and creative ways of mobilizing to overcome incumbents' abilities to outspend bottom-up campaigns.

Referendums require a high and consistent level of voter contact, which demands significant resources.

- **Articulate the benefits of public power and harms of the status quo:** Alternative energy ownership models—such as publicly run electric utilities—introduce uncertainty and may raise concerns for people unfamiliar with what this implies for rates and reliability, even when they are dissatisfied with the status quo. Organizers must convincingly demonstrate how public ownership will benefit communities and drive innovation where private capital has failed to address the intersecting challenges of reliability, affordability, justice, and sustainability.
- **Draw on the history of public power and adapt it for the present:** Organizers can remind the public that there is precedent for public and other community-owned power in the US, particularly in rural and underserved communities, where cooperatives led the way for grid development. Drawing on history to show that public power is not new may assuage uncertainty about its current viability and potential benefits for communities and decarbonization efforts.
- **Link public power initiatives across place:** Despite the ballot result, respondents in our surveys reported an increased belief after the referendum that public power movements will continue to grow. Linking efforts to build public power across localities may reinforce and invigorate this growing movement by facilitating

learning and building capacity, which is key to reclaim energy ownership across states and ultimately on the federal level.

- **Create touchpoints for organizers to increase capacity:** From paid media strategy to assessing pre-campaign support strength among voters, Maine campaigners gained tactical and strategic insights that future campaigns can learn from and draw on. One avenue to increase organizing capacity is frequent, dedicated gatherings of public power organizers to bolster collaboration on public power fights across different political and geographical contexts in the US.[2]

With burgeoning examples across the US, from Tucson, Arizona to the Mid-Hudson Valley, New York, a new wave of the public power movement is surfacing.[3] While voters did not pass the Maine referendum, the campaign introduced issues of power ownership onto the policy agenda and into public discourse in the state and delivered important lessons for organizers. We find evidence that the referendum increased residents' sense of momentum around the public power movement. In this report, we situate the Our Power campaign in the historical context of electricity provision in the US and draw on campaign experiences and a survey to draw insights for the future of public power. As opposed to a categorical rebuke of public power, the campaign is a stepping stone toward democratic and just utility provision.

[2] isaac sevier, Johanna Bozuwa, KC Caffray, Matthew Haugen, Lucy Hochschartner, Lake Liao, Lizzy Oh, and John Qua, "The State of People Power for Public Power," Climate and Community Institute, October 2024, https://climateandcommunity.org/research/people-power-for-public-power-summit-2023/.

[3] Colton Allder, "Tucsonans Push for Public Power amid Soaring Electric Bills." *Tucson Spotlight*, February 12, 2025, https://www.tucsonspotlight.org/tucsonans-push-for-public-power/; Kimberly Izar, "Lawmakers Propose Hudson Valley's First Public Energy Company," *Radio Catskill*, April 21, 2025, https://wjffradio.org/lawmakers-propose-hudson-valleys-first-public-energy-company/.

Introduction

Across the United States, renewable energy is not hitting the grid fast enough to tackle the climate crisis. While there are many reasons that renewable deployment has been too slow, investor-owned utilities present an urgent barrier to equitable climate action.[4] Investor-owned utilities' operating model tends to prioritize profit over reliability, affordability, public safety, and distributed renewable energy development. These utilities have not only impeded the shift to renewables because of incumbent interests in the existing systems but have also raised rates and failed to reinvest in grid resilience and renewables, leading to massive, long, or frequent blackouts, or even wildfires.[5] They have failed to adapt to climate-related extreme weather and disaster events in Hawaii, Texas, and California,[6] resulting in poor reliability,[7] and are largely responsible for rising energy costs that hurt ratepayers and enrich shareholders.

In recent years, campaigns have sprung up across the country to take public control over energy production, transmission, and distribution in order to accelerate the energy transition while also meeting the needs of local communities facing growing energy burdens and concerns about reliability. This report focuses specifically on the Our Power campaign in Maine, where, in addition to consistently low reliability ratings, costs to households continue to increase.[8] Between 2014 and 2024, the increase in average retail rates in Maine

[4] Emily L. Williams, Sydney A. Bartone, Emma K. Swanson, and Leah C. Stokes, "The American electric utility industry's role in promoting climate denial, doubt, and delay," *Environmental Research Letters* 17, no. 9 (2022): 094026, https://doi.org/10.1088/1748-9326/ac8ab3; Joshua A. Basseches, "Who Pays for Environmental Policy? Business Power and the Design of State-Level Climate Policies," *Politics and Society* 52, no. 3 (2023): 409–451, https://doi.org/10.1177/00323292231195184.

[5] Climate and Community Project, "#WE CHOOSE NOW: ENERGY POLICY PLAYBOOK," Taproot Earth and Climate and Community Project, May 2023, https://climateandcommunity.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/23_05_04_WCN-ENERGY.pdf; Ivan Penn, Peter Eavis, and James Glanz, "California Wildfires: How PG&E Ignored Risks in Favor of Profits," The New York Times, March 18, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/03/18/business/pge-california-wildfires.html.

[6] Ivan Penn, and Peter Eavis, "Hawaiian Electric Was Warned of Its System's Fragility before Wildfire," *The New York Times*, August 19, 2023. https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/19/business/energy-environment/hawaiian-electric-maui-wildfire-climate-change.html; Alan Zibel, "Fossil Fictions," Public Citizen, August 25, 2023. https://www.citizen.org/article/fossil-fictions/.

[7] Selah G. Bell, and Jean Su, "Report: Utilities Drive Energy Unaffordability, Climate Emergency While Shareholders Rake in Billions," Center for Biological Diversity, February 3, 2025. https://biologicaldiversity.org/w/news/press-releases/report-utilities-drive-energy-unaffordability-climate-emergency-while-shareholders-rake-in-billions-2025-02-03/; Devan Patel, "San Jose Closing in on Agreement with PG&E for Improved Infrastructure, Service Delivery" *The Mercury News*, March 5, 2025. https://www.mercurynews.com/2025/03/05/san-jose-pge-accountability-energy-utility/.

[8] Douglas Jester, "Electric Utility Performance: A State-by-State Data Review, Second Edition," Citizens Utility Board, January 2023. https://www.citizensutilityboard.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Electric-Utility-Performance-Report-Second-Edition-final.pdf.

was the third highest in the country.[9] By removing the profit motive, public power advocates argue that utilities can serve the common good instead of shareholders. While this may sound like a radical change, public power has a long history in the US and is one of the reasons we have power lines serving rural areas. During the New Deal era, the federal government reformed the power sector on a large scale, including through the construction of hydroelectric dams on the Columbia, Tennessee, and other rivers across the nation and the break up of sprawling holding companies that then dominated the power industry. The federal Rural Electrification Administration extended low-cost loans and provided technical assistance to consumer-owned rural electric cooperatives that built lines in the countryside. Prior to this federal intervention, most rural United States residents did not have electricity because rural line construction was deemed unprofitable.

The Our Power movement stands out in comparison to other campaigns for its scale and ambition—it was one of the first-ever grid acquisition campaigns at the state level.

The Our Power movement stands out in comparison to other campaigns for its scale and ambition—it was one of the first-ever grid acquisition campaigns at the state level. The campaign proposed the creation of Pine Tree Power, a democratically run, publicly owned utility that would replace Maine's two large private utilities, Central Maine Power (CMP), a subsidiary of international conglomerate Iberdrola, and Versant. These two corporate utilities found themselves under increased scrutiny due to poor reliability records, systematic misbilling, consistent price increases, and a failure to decarbonize, which precipitated the potential for the Our Power grid acquisition campaign to gain popularity in 2022.[10]

While Our Power generated substantial grassroots support across the state, the campaign ultimately fell short at the ballot box in a referendum for the grid's acquisition.[11] This was in large part due to substantial efforts by the incumbent utilities against the campaign, including outspending Our Power by 34:1—a figural testament to the existential threat posed to the incumbents by the grassroots

[9] Tux Turkel, "Maine's electricity prices grew at the third fastest rate in the country, analysis shows," *The Maine Monitor*, April 26, 2025. https://themainemonitor.org/electricity-prices-third-fastest-rate/.

[10] Evan Popp, "Our Power Delivers Signatures to Trigger 2023 Referendum on Consumer-Owned Utility," Maine Beacon - a Project of the Maine People's Alliance, October 31, 2022. https://mainebeacon.com/our-power-delivers-signatures-to-trigger-2023-referendum-on-consumer-owned-utility/.

[11] Akielly Hu, "Maine Voters Reject Effort to Create the First Statewide Public Power Company," *Grist*, November 8, 2023. https://grist.org/elections/maine-voters-reject-first-statewide-public-power-company/.

campaign.[12] Despite the result, we believe the campaign was an important step toward building a national movement to realize equitable and democratic energy transitions.

Considering the Trump administration's aggressive attacks on social programs, environmental protections, and democratic institutions, it is a critical time to reflect on the next steps for public power movements. Increasing cost of living across the country was a top issue in the run-up to the presidential election and remains top of mind for households struggling to make ends meet. Data from 2023 shows that utility bills have continued to increase nationwide and at least 25 percent of households report difficulties paying their bills.[13] Approaching one year into Trump's presidency, we have seen massive federal funding cuts, including the discontinuation of $6 billion for the life-saving federal Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP).[14] The current moment has turned attention to the opportunities for action at state and local levels. Reflecting on what did and did not work in Maine can help organizers consider viable pathways for realizing utility justice in the context of aggressive deregulation and shrinking federal support.

The current moment has turned attention to the opportunities for action at state and local levels.

This report provides a retrospective look at the Our Power campaign and Pine Tree Power referendum in Maine and contextualizes the campaign amid the broader national public power movement and the long history of public power in the US. We highlight four key action areas for public power organizers: (1) identify creative mobilization strategies to overcome incumbent advantages; (2) clearly articulate the benefits of public power and harms of the status quo; (3) draw on the history of public power and adapt it for the present; and (4) link public power initiatives across place.

We begin with a brief review of the history of public power in the US to contextualize the Our Power campaign as part of an enduring

[12] The figure was calculated from the difference in total expenditures sourced from the Maine Ethics Commission between the Our Power ballot action committee (in support of the public power entity), Maine Affordable Energy (opposed), No Blank Check (opposed), and Maine Energy Progress PACs (opposed); Maine Ethics Commission, "Maine Energy Progress," Mainecampaignfinance.com, 2025, https://mainecampaignfinance.com/#/exploreCommitteeDetail/406171; Maine Ethics Commission, "Maine Affordable Energy," Mainecampaignfinance.com, 2025, https://mainecampaignfinance.com/#/exploreCommitteeDetail/405784; Maine Ethics Commission, "No Blank Checks," Mainecampaignfinance.com, 2025, https://mainecampaignfinance.com/#/exploreCommitteeDetail/405902; Maine Ethics Commission, "Our Power," Mainecampaignfinance.com, 2025, https://mainecampaignfinance.com/#/exploreCommitteeDetail/391052.

[13] Diana Hernandez, "Review of Energy Insecurity and Health: America's Hidden Hardship," *Health Affairs Brief*, June 23, 2023. https://www.healthaffairs.org/do/10.1377/hpb20230518.472953/.

[14] Brad Plumer, "Entire Staff Is Fired at LIHEAP," The New York Times, April 2, 2025. https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/02/climate/trump-layoffs-energy-assistance-liheap.html.

governance model and emerging national movement. Next, we discuss campaign details and messaging tactics from the perspective of organizers on the ground in Maine. Finally, we describe the results of a two-wave statewide survey of registered voters before and after the referendum. Rather than closing the door on public power, the campaign reveals that while alternatives to the status quo can be difficult to imagine, there is a growing appetite for change.

Our Power in Context

Approximately one in four customers across the country receives electric service from utilities without a profit motive.

Public power is an enduring, time-tested model in the US and still plays a major role in the power sector. Approximately one in four customers across the country receives electric service from utilities without a profit motive, including publicly owned utilities or rural electric cooperatives.[15] This section situates the Our Power movement in the context of public power's long history in the US.

Democratizing electricity provision is particularly complex in the US, where each state has different regulations and institutional arrangements governing the ownership of energy generation, transmission, and distribution.[16] In this report, public power refers to not-for-profit utilities owned by governments or semi-autonomous government entities that are accountable to residents. Many public utilities across the US are owned and operated by local governments but can also be owned by counties or public utility districts.[17] Though they are democratically run and not-for-profit, publicly owned utilities are a related but distinct organizational form from cooperatives, which are owned by their members, as a government body such as a municipality or state has ultimate ownership of and responsibility for the utility.[18] The Our Power campaign did not fit neatly into either box. Financed through revenue bonds, Pine Tree Power would not take on taxpayer risk like a typical state-owned utility. Unlike a cooperative, however, where only members have a stake, the entire voter population of Maine would get to vote on the utility's governance.

Most publicly owned utilities were formed in the first half of the 20th century. These institutions were created in two bursts. The first was at the turn of the century and the second during the 1930s and 1940s. They were a product of local organizing and activism—public power was then a popular political cause as electricity was increasingly viewed as a key to improving living standards, and the federal

[15] Anodyne Lindstrom and Sara Hoff, "Investor-owned utilities served 72% of U.S. electricity customers in 2017," Energy Information Administration, August 15, 2019. https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=40913.

[16] Joshua A. Basseches, *Owning The Green Grid: The Political Economy of Renewable Energy Policy Design in the U.S. States* (MIT Press, forthcoming).

[17] American Public Power Association, "What is Public Power?," American Public Power Association. https://www.publicpower.org/system/files/documents/municipalization-what_is_public_power.pdf.

[18] Eric Mack, "Electric Co-op and Utility: What's the Difference?," *CNET*, Dec 7, 2023. https://www.cnet.com/home/energy-and-utilities/whats-the-difference-between-an-electric-co-op-and-a-utility/.

government provided critical support with the New Deal programs introduced during the Great Depression.

In the late 19th century, the control of power systems, a new technology at the time, was a leading and contentious political issue. Like today, ensuring affordable, reliable service was a challenge. Some towns and cities franchised multiple companies to provide power services with the expectation that competition would promote low rates and reliability. Competition, however, quickly proved infeasible, resulting in a dangerous tangle of duplicative poles and wires in many places and driving rates down to unsustainably low levels. Allocation of the franchises also proved to be a source of corruption. Power company executives who bribed local elected officials could obtain franchises for pennies on the dollar and prevent franchises from being awarded to would-be competitors.

A common desire for reliable electricity at reasonable rates drove a push for municipal ownership, and thousands of communities built or acquired power systems in the late 1800s and early 1900s. By 1907, nearly 1,200 publicly owned systems existed across the United States.[19] At the same time, there was a movement by investor-owned utilities to check the municipalization movement through the "compromise" of state regulation. Further, they consolidated independent firms through the holding company form. By the late 1920s, sixteen large power-holding companies owned more than three quarters of electricity generation in the US.[20]

In the 1930s, following the election of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and building on public power fights in the preceding decades, the federal government became a strong supporter of public power nationally and locally. Through the Public Works Administration, the federal government offered grants and low-cost loans to municipalities to build their own power systems.[21] Even though the government did not fund acquisitions of existing power systems, the credible threat of public competition made buyouts easier for local governments. Further, the Public Utility Holding Company Act

[19] United States Census Bureau, "The Electrical Industries," in *Census of Electrical Industries, 1927* (US Government Printing Office, 1931), 7, https://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/19008503ch1.pdf.

[20] Monica Greer, "U.S. Electric Markets, Structure, and Regulations," in *Electricity Marginal Cost Pricing* (Butterworth-Heinemann, 2012), 39–100, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/B978012385134500003X?via%3Dihub.

[21] Public Works Administration, *America Builds: The Record of PWA* (US Government Printing Office, 1939), 122–23.

(PUHCA) of 1935 required the breakup of consolidated corporations owning utilities scattered across the nation, which resulted in the divestiture and transfer of many properties, such as San Antonio's investor-owned system, to public hands.[22] The federal government also assisted in the electrification of the countryside, where in 1935 only about one in 10 farmers had electricity.[23] The Rural Electrification Administration (REA) extended low-cost credit for rural electrification projects. Much of the construction of rural lines was performed by consumer-owned rural electric cooperatives.

The system of stronger public regulation and significant public ownership held until the energy crisis of the 1970s, which triggered a wave of deregulation that lasted through the 1990s. PUHCA was repealed under the Bush administration as part of a broader agenda to remove federal regulation, privatize public services, and stimulate market activity. Today, as in the 1920s, a small number of investor-owned utilities, and an even smaller number of holding companies, serve a majority of US ratepayers.[24]

Compared to publicly owned utilities, investor-owned utilities took nearly three times as long to restore power after service disruptions and charged rates that were around 13 percent higher.

Despite the prevalence of private actors in electricity system governance, there are still more than 2,000 municipal power systems across the US.[25] They are found in nearly every state in the country and serve large cities, such as Los Angeles, Austin, Seattle, and Jacksonville, as well as hundreds of towns and rural districts. Some recent studies suggest that public ownership, often at the municipal level, is associated with greater environmental sustainability and increased decarbonization.[26] While investor-owned utilities are beholden to shareholders, publicly owned utilities are better suited to prioritize not only decarbonization goals, but also customer priorities, such as reliability and affordability. In 2021, the American Public Power Association reported that investor-owned utilities, compared to publicly owned utilities, took on average nearly three times as long

[22] John Bauer and Peter Costello, *Public Organization of Electric Power* (Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1949), 71.

[23] Rural Electrification Administration, *1937 Report of Rural Electrification Administration* (US Government Printing Office, 1938), 7.

[24] William M. Warwick, "A Primer on Electric Utilities, Deregulation, and Restructuring of U.S. Electricity Markets," U.S. Department of Energy, May 2002, https://doi.org/10.2172/15001013.

[25] "Public Power," American Public Power Association, accessed August 5, 2024, https://www.publicpower.org/public-power.

[26] George C. Homsy and Mildred E. Warner, "Does public ownership of utilities matter for local government water policies?," *Utilities policy* 64 (2020): 120–137, https://doi.org/10.1080/17487870.2018.1515014; Adewale A. Adesanya, Roman V. Sidortsov, and Chelsea Schelly, "Act locally, transition globally: Grassroots resilience, local politics, and five municipalities in the United States with 100% renewable electricity," *Energy Research & Social Science* 67 (2020): 101579, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2020.101579.

to restore power after major service disruptions and charged rates that were around 13 percent higher.[27]

As a result of multiple waves of electricity deregulation at the state and federal levels, the types and roles of utilities vary significantly across states. Some states have regulated electricity sectors, in which utilities, public or investor-owned, operate as vertically integrated monopolies that own both generation capacity and distribution as well as transmission lines. Other states, like Maine, have deregulated markets where utilities are responsible for transmission and distribution of electricity to customers but buy electric power on a wholesale market from independent generators. Thus, even though a public utility in Maine would not be able to build or own electricity generation, it could invest in electrification and updated grid infrastructure.

The threat of climate change and rising costs of electricity have catalyzed a new wave of public power campaigns as investor-owned utilities fail to address the ongoing crises.

The threat of climate change and rising costs of electricity have catalyzed a new wave of public power campaigns as investor-owned utilities fail to address the ongoing crises. In part due to the diversity of state electricity regulation, public power campaigns can take a variety of forms and operate at different scales. In recent years, residents and elected officials in Boulder, Chicago and Minneapolis have publicly discussed or pursued efforts to take over their investor-owned utilities and operate them as public agencies. In California, Illinois, Massachusetts, and New York, dozens of communities have adopted a soft form of public takeover via a public agency called a community choice aggregator, which purchases wholesale power and resells it to residential customers.[28] In New York, voters passed the Build Public Renewables Act, which authorized an existing publicly owned utility, the New York Power Authority, to build and own renewable energy generation to meet state-legislated climate targets.[29] These campaigns suggest the emergence of a new era of public power, illustrated most recently by the Our Power campaign in Maine.

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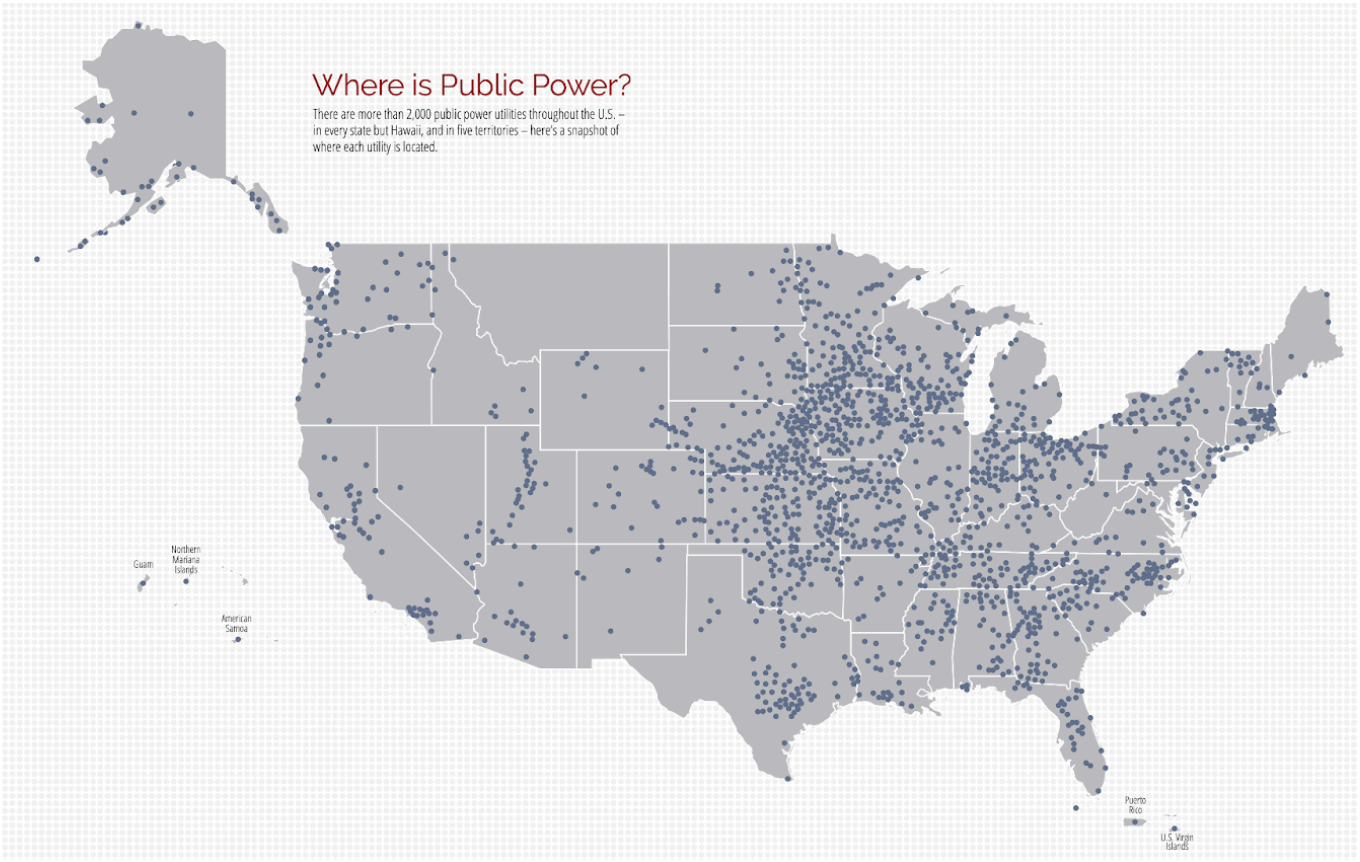
[27] "2023 Public Power Statistical Report," American Public Power Association, 2023, https://www.publicpower.org/system/files/documents/2023-Public-Power-Statistical-Report.pdf.

[28] David Hsu, "Straight out of Cape Cod: The origin of community choice aggregation and its spread to other states," *Energy Research & Social Science* 86 (2022): 102394, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2021.102393.

[29] Akielly Hu, "After a four year campaign, New York says yes to publicly owned renewables," *Grist*, May 4, 2024, https://grist.org/energy/after-a-four-year-campaign-new-york-says-yes-to-publicly-owned-renewables-strong/.

As the urgency of climate change forces us to reconfigure existing energy provision systems and build new ones, we also have an opportunity to reconsider how they are owned, operated, and governed. The rich history of public power in the US provides many possible frameworks through which we might consider our present challenges and chart new paths forward.

Publicly owned utilities in the United States



Source: The American Public Power Association.[30]

[30]"Where Is Public Power?," American Public Power Association, accessed August 15, 2025, https://www.publicpower.org/https://www.publicpower.org/system/files/documents/MAP-%20Where%20is%20Public%20Power.pdfsystem/files/documents/MAP-%20Where%20is%20Public%20Power.pdf.

Maine's Public Power Campaign

In 2023, a first-of-its-kind statewide public power initiative was launched in Maine. While ultimately unsuccessful, the effort raised the profile of public power nationally and offered organizers the opportunity to test and learn from different campaign tactics and messaging strategies. In this section, we first describe the campaign from the perspective of organizers on the ground who worked carefully on key messaging strategies and talked with thousands of Mainers in the process. Next, we outline results from a two-wave statewide poll distributed shortly before and after the referendum vote that reveals key voter beliefs, concerns, and perceptions about their energy systems, providing insights for the future of public power.

Campaign arc

Resident dissatisfaction with the poor track record of investor-owned utilities in Maine created fertile ground for utility accountability campaigns.

Some might be surprised that Maine, a relatively purple, rural state, was where statewide public power first made it to the ballot. Resident dissatisfaction with the poor track record of investor-owned utilities in Maine created fertile ground for utility accountability campaigns. The larger of the two investor-owned utilities, Central Maine Power (CMP), began experiencing major issues when their Spain-based parent company, Iberdrola, consolidated its United States systems under Avangrid in 2015.[31] In the process, CMP laid off customer service staff and consolidated operations. By the fall of 2017, the situation was primed for disaster. That October, as Avangrid rolled out a faulty new billing system, a massive storm hit and resulted in severe outages. A class action lawsuit was filed against CMP, alleging that nearly 100,000 customers—close to half of CMP's customers—were misbilled, leading to at least 50 percent higher bills for those customers.[32] In 2019, the smaller of the two investor-owned utilities, Emera Maine, was bought by Enmax, a corporation wholly owned by the City of Calgary, Canada, and renamed Versant Power.[33]

[31] Katherine Tweed, "Iberdrola USA and UIL Merge to Form Utility Giant Avangrid," *Greentech Media*, December 18, 2015, https://www.greentechmedia.com/articles/read/iberdrola-usa-and-uil-merge-to-form-utility-giant-avangrid.

[32] Eric Russell, "In Rare Move, PUC Regulators Fault Utility for Billing Failures," *Portland Press Herald*, July 21, 2019, https://www.pressherald.com/2019/07/21/maine-puc-to-public-we-will-take-action-on-cmp/.

[33] Gabrielle Mannino, "Emera Maine Becomes 'Versant Power,'" *News Center Maine*, May 14, 2020, https://www.newscentermaine.com/article/money/business/emera-maine-becomes-versant-power/97-4193c28a-e614-4066-96b3-92ab8744b44e.

At the same time, CMP attempted to build a controversial new transmission line. The transmission line was proposed to bring Canadian hydroelectric power to Massachusetts by way of Maine. While the transmission project would have helped Massachusetts add more hydropower to the grid, a majority voted against the project via an overwhelming referendum vote in 2021.[34] More than a judgment of the transmission line itself, the vote was considered a rebuke of both the utility building the project and Massachusetts. In 2023, Maine courts allowed the project to proceed.[35] By the end of this period, CMP and Versant had both dropped to the bottom of nationwide utility customer satisfaction rankings.[36]

In 2022, Maine ranked third in the nation for most frequent and longest average duration of power outages.

Throughout these very public failures, CMP and Versant customers were also struggling with more typical utility issues. In 2022, Maine ranked third in the nation for most frequent and longest average duration of power outages.[37] At the same time, electricity prices continued to rise. CMP and Versant both hiked their delivery rates, and gas prices rose due to the war in Ukraine, which increased generation costs. This contributed to a growing affordability crisis culminating with nearly 90,000 disconnection notices sent out by the Maine utilities in 2023[38]—a shocking figure given that CMP and Versant have a combined customer base of around 813,000 users.[39]

In the wake of the 2017 storm and CMP's misbilling incident, grassroots energy was generated to hold utility companies accountable. In 2019, state legislators introduced the idea of public power as a solution and passed a study bill.[40] The resulting feasibility

[34] Benjamin Storrow, "Embattled Maine Power Line Foreshadows U.S. Climate Obstacles," *E&E News by POLITICO*, September 6, 2022, https://www.eenews.net/articles/embattled-maine-power-line-foreshadows-u-s-climate-obstacles/.

[35] Kevin Miller, "Maine's High Court Rules That Voter Referendum Blocking Power Corridor Was Unconstitutional," *WBUR*, August 30, 2022, https://www.wbur.org/news/2022/08/30/maine-high-court-cmp-power-corridor-unconstitutional.

[36] Dan Lampariello, "CMP Ranks Last among Large Utilities in Nationwide Customer Satisfaction Survey," *WGME*, December 14, 2022, https://wgme.com/news/local/cmp-responds-to-being-ranked-worst-large-to-mid-sized-electric-utility-in-us-jd-powers-2022-study-of-electric-utility-business-customer-satisfaction-central-maine-power; "2022 Electric Utility Residential Customer Satisfaction Study," J.D. Power, December 14, 2022, https://www.jdpower.com/business/press-releases/2022-electric-utility-residential-customer-satisfaction-study.

[37] Annie Ropeik, "Weather-Related Power Outages on the Rise," *The Maine Monitor*, April 26, 2024, https://themainemonitor.org/weather-related-power-outages-on-the-rise/.

[38] Some notices were likely repeats to the same customers, and most customers were able to avoid disconnection.

[39] Dan Lampariello, "Maine's Power Struggle: Everything You Need to Know about Question 3," *WPFO*, September 21, 2023, https://fox23maine.com/news/i-team/maine-power-struggle-everything-you-need-to-know-about-question-3-consumer-owned-utility-pine-tree-central-versant-company-taxpayers-state-public-distribution-cmp-transmission-electricity.

[40] Tux Turkel, "Proposal to Study Public Power Options for Maine Moves Forward," *Portland Press Herald*, June 17, 2019, https://www.pressherald.com/2019/06/17/proposal-to-study-public-power-options-for-maine-moves-forward/.

study by London Economics International (LEI), published in 2020,[41] did not provide a clear answer in favor of or against a consumer takeover of CMP and Versant.[42] In 2020, organizers started a nonprofit advocacy group—Our Power—to support the creation of a consumer-owned utility. Allied legislators and Our Power activists succeeded in passing a bill through the legislature on a bipartisan basis that would send the question of whether to buy out CMP and Versant to voters. However, Governor Mills vetoed it.[43] The movement was not ready to give up, though, and organizers spent 2022 gathering over 80,000 signatures to get a referendum on the ballot for the 2023 election.[44]

The referendum proposed the creation of Pine Tree Power, a consumer-owned, nonprofit utility. The utility would be locally controlled, governed democratically by a board of 7 elected members representing State Senate districts and 6 designated expert members, all of whom must reside in Maine. Pine Tree Power would take control of ownership, management, and operations of the transmission and distribution grid. Like CMP and Versant, Pine Tree Power would purchase electricity from generators and Maine customers would retain the ability to opt into other energy generation or service providers on the deregulated market. The proposal did not rely on public funds to acquire the infrastructure, instead proposing a plan to use utility revenue bonds, municipal bonds commonly used for public infrastructure projects that repay directly from project revenues rather than taxes.[45]

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[41] "Evaluation of the Ownership of Maine's Power Delivery System," London Economics International LLC, February 2020, https://legislature.maine.gov/doc/4350.

[42] The report's main points included juxtaposing short-term rate increases with long-term rate benefits, assuming limited rate reduction from continued hiring of unionized labor, loss of regulatory oversight along with loss of service quality, and loss of tax revenues from the private utilities. There were mixed feelings about the results, both more broadly with the private-utility lean of these feasibility studies, as well as with this study's assumptions, such as that it discounts some of the opportunities that a public utility would have over a private one and presumes a loss of tax revenue when private utilities' tax dodging has been well documented. The report's affordability evaluations were also called into question. A review of the report found $6 to 8 billion in systems cost savings that the report authors did not factor in for electricity user savings. See Sarah Anderson and Janet Redman, "New Report Shows Utility Tax-Dodging Worth Billions," Institute for Policy Studies, July 19, 2016, https://ips-dc.org/new-report-shows-utility-tax-dodging-worth-billions/; Gordon L. Weil, "Review of 'Evaluation of the Ownership of Maine's Power Delivery System' by London Economics International LLC, February 15, 2020," February 23, 2020, https://legislature.maine.gov/doc/4352.

[43] Akielly Hu, "Public Power Is on the Ballot in Maine. Will Voters Take a Leap of Faith?," *Grist*, November 3, 2023, https://grist.org/politics/maine-public-power-utility-referendum/.

[44] Kodichi Lawrence, "80,000 Signatures in Favor of Replacing CMP, Versant Submitted to Secretary of State," *WABI*, October 31, 2022, https://www.wabi.tv/2022/10/31/80-thousand-signatures-favor-replacing-central-maine-power-versant-submitted-office-secretary-state/.

[45] "An Act To Create the Pine Tree Power Company, a Nonprofit, Customer-owned Utility," Our Power, accessed August 7, 2025, https://ourpowermaine.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/pine-tree-power-petition-final.pdf.

Investor-owned utilities spent $40 million to oppose the consumer takeover, outspending the Our Power campaign by 34:1.

By the end of the 2023 campaign, the incumbent investor-owned utilities had spent $40 million to oppose the consumer takeover and won with 70 percent of the vote. Our Power campaign supporters were outspent 34 to one. Likely influenced by money and entrenched power, major political figures in the state aligned with CMP and Versant. Over the course of the campaign, they contracted with national Democratic consulting firms, put former state legislators on the payroll, employed most political, lobbying, and legal firms in Maine, and had the strong support of Governor Mills and major local unions, including IBEW Local 1837, which brought along the Maine AFL–CIO.[46]

Another key challenge for the referendum was that environmental groups on the ground were split. This fracture undermined the coalition of NGOs and activists that could have been key funders and volunteers for the referendum. Climate groups were largely split on the viability of Pine Tree Power to accelerate the state's climate goals. While some saw a consumer-owned utility as a key mechanism for achieving decarbonization and electrification on a timeline in the public interest, other environmental advocates were more wary, citing concerns that a utility shakeup would be disruptive and thus potentially slow transition progress.

Campaigning began in earnest on both sides of the referendum in the spring of 2023, toward the end of Maine's legislative session. The Our Power campaign focused its messaging on the potential for savings, local control, and reliability under a consumer-owned utility. The campaign used a variety of tactics to persuade voters, including televised and in-person debates, house parties and other educational campaign events, door-knocking, media stories, and opinion pieces. Later on, the campaign expanded into paid mail and digital advertising (social media, searches, and connected TV), as well as a field effort that included predictive dialing and peer-to-peer texting, though the campaign did not have sufficient funds for cable television ads. While many of the campaigners themselves were climate advocates, the campaign did not start with a focus on climate, instead stressing issues of cost and reliability. However, in an effort to erode support from progressives, the utilities strategically

[46] Steve Mistler, "A Look at the Secretive, Expensive Campaign to Turn Maine Voters against Pine Tree Power," *WMEH*, October 19, 2023, https://www.mainepublic.org/politics/2023-10-19/a-look-at-the-secretive-expensive-campaign-to-turn-maine-voters-against-pine-tree-power; Kate Cough, "A Q&a on Question 3, the Pine Tree Power Referendum," *The Maine Monitor*, November 1, 2023, https://themainemonitor.org/question-3-pine-tree-power-referendum/.

focused their messaging on the delays that a transition to Pine Tree Power could introduce for achieving climate goals.

Our Power organizers worked to keep messages simple. For instance, positive messages included the following: "Pine Tree Power will save customers $367 a year," "Pine Tree Power will bring back local control from foreign corporations," "Pine Tree Power will build power we can trust," and "Pine Tree Power will transition us to clean, renewable energy faster and cheaper than CMP and Versant." Our Power also used negative messaging to draw contrasts between private utilities and consumer ownership, e.g., the following: "CMP and Versant made $187 million in profit last year, while sending out over 90,000 disconnection notices," "CMP and Versant are owned by foreign corporations and governments," "Under CMP and Versant, Maine has the most frequent outages in the nation," and "CMP and Versant exist to make a profit, not to build the grid of the future."

The campaigns spearheaded by the incumbent for-profit utilities focused on sowing doubt about Pine Tree Power's plans. They disseminated their message mainly through digital and TV advertising, as well as mail and paid canvasses. Initially, their messaging was focused almost entirely on how Our Power was "too risky" and "too expensive." They repeatedly cited a "$13.5 billion" buyout cost, though there was significant uncertainty around this number as energy company reports had valued the infrastructure at only $5.4 billion.[47] As the campaign evolved, they also attempted to discredit the proposal through messages like "Pine Tree Power doesn't have a plan." Finally, toward the end of the election, the utilities shifted to attacking the democratically elected board of Pine Tree Power, saying "Pine Tree Power will be run by politicians."

[47] Tux Turkel and Mario Ariza, "Maine power companies are spending millions to defeat a vote to dethrone them," *Portland Press Herald*, June 18, 2023, https://www.pressherald.com/2023/06/18/maine-power-companies-are-spending-millions-to-defeat-a-vote-to-dethrone-them/.

Public perceptions and experiences: a two-wave survey surrounding the vote

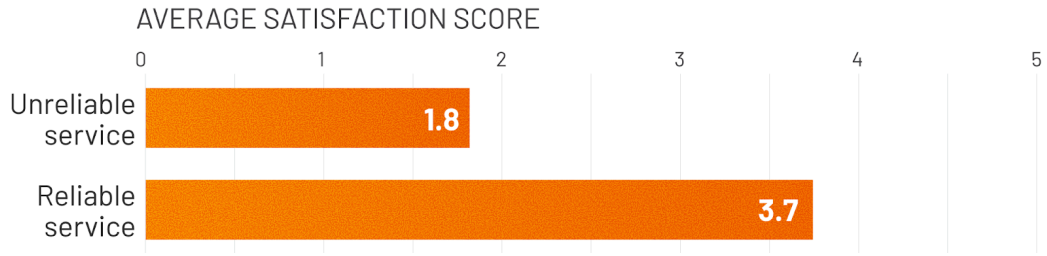
Below we outline some of the outcomes of polling with a demographically representative sample of respondents in Maine conducted both before[48] and right after[49] the referendum. Survey data collection methods and additional descriptive statistics are detailed in the appendix.

Lack of reliable power provision and dissatisfaction with utilities

The vast majority of respondents in the first survey wave reported their utility provider as either CMP (71 percent) or Versant (22 percent), with the remainder served by Eastern Maine Power Cooperative or unsure of their utility. Before the referendum, 30 percent of survey respondents reported low satisfaction and trust in their utilities.[50] Dissatisfaction was closely related to the experience of unreliable electricity service: respondents who reported unreliable service rated their satisfaction at 1.8 out of 5, versus 3.7 out of 5 for respondents who reported reliable service.

Customers' dissatisfaction with their utility was closely related to experiencing unreliable service.

Respondents who reported unreliable service rated their satisfaction at 1.8 out of 5, versus 3.7 out of 5 for those who reported reliable service.



Source: Climate and Community Institute polling[51]

[48] Wave 1 was conducted from October 12 to 20, 2023 and had 325 respondents.

[49] Wave 2 was conducted from November 21 to December 18, 2023 and had 250 respondents.

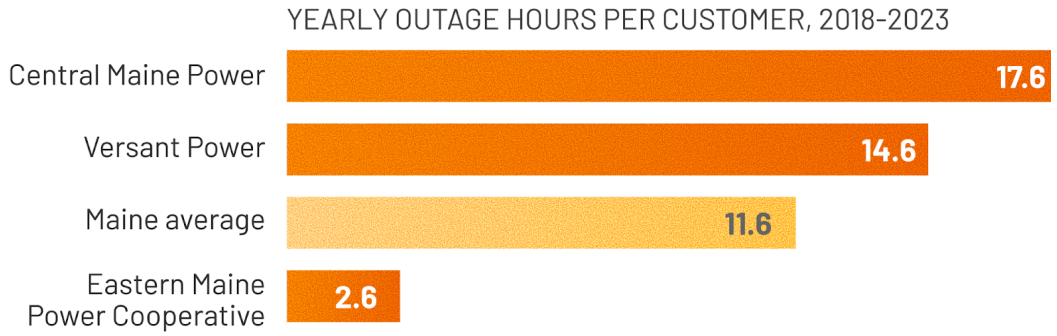
[50] In Wave 1, 98 of 325 respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed with the following statement: "I am generally satisfied with my utility."

[51] Results from Wave 1. Satisfaction score: 1 indicates strong disagreement and 5 indicates strong agreement with the statement "I am generally satisfied with my utility." Service reliability: "Unreliable service" means respondents disagreed with the statement "My utility offers reliable service and handles system interruptions effectively," and "Reliable service" indicates respondents agreed with the statement. The average satisfaction score for unreliable service was 1.82 with a 95 percent confidence interval of ± 0.24, and for reliable service it was 3.74 (95% CI ± 0.15).

The issue of service interruptions was so pervasive that almost all respondents who took the survey (93 percent) reported at least one experience of loss of power in their homes in the past 5 years. These experiences are reflected in power outage data: between 2017 and 2023, customers experienced average outages ranging from 10.9 hours per year in Androscoggin County in Southern Maine to 30.3 hours per year in Hancock County in Downeast Maine, with an overall state average of 11.6 outage hours per year. Mainers experienced far more annual outage hours than the average customer in the US, which was 5.6 hours in 2022.[52]

Outage hours for private utilities were much higher than for the largest existing cooperatively owned utility in the state, Eastern Maine Power Cooperative. Versant customers experienced an average of nearly 15 yearly outage hours, and CMP customers averaged 17.6. In contrast, Eastern Maine Electric Cooperative customers, the third-largest utility in the state—and a member-owned cooperative—averaged about 2.6 yearly outage hours.

Central Maine and Versant Power customers experienced more than five times the outage time of Eastern Maine Power Cooperative customers.



Source: Climate and Community Institute analysis of BlueFire LLC data[53]

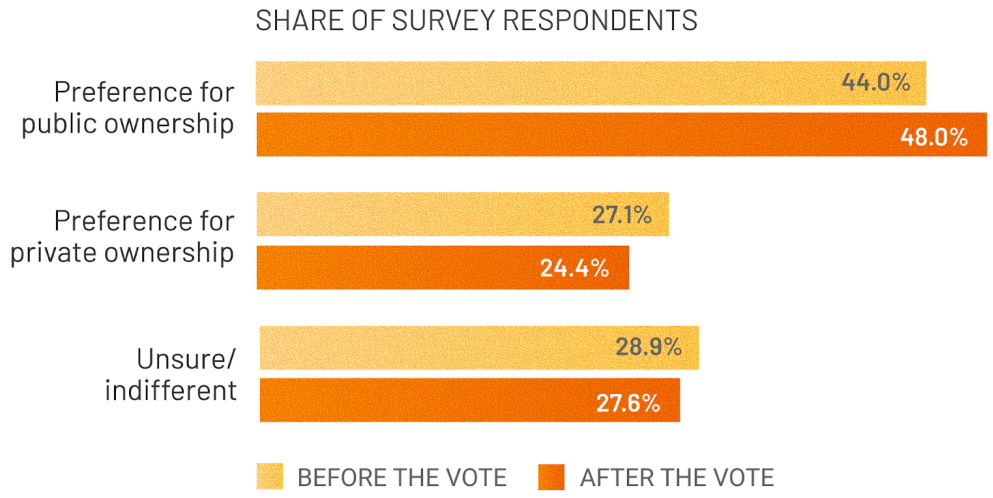
[52] Alex Gorski, "U.S. electricity customers averaged five and one-half hours of power interruptions in 2022," U.S. Energy Information Administration, January 25, 2024, https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=61303#.

[53] Bluefire Studios LLC, "Power Outage Tracking," accessed January 17, 2025, https://bluefirestudios.com.

Interest in consumer ownership and governance

In light of these results, it is unsurprising that only 27 percent of respondents prefer private ownership of their utilities. While 29 percent of respondents indicated that they were unsure or indifferent, 44 percent expressed a preference for public ownership before the referendum vote, with a slight (but statistically insignificant) increase following the vote. These findings suggest that even though the referendum did not pass, the outcome did not reduce support for public power.

Support for public power did not decrease even though the referendum did not pass.



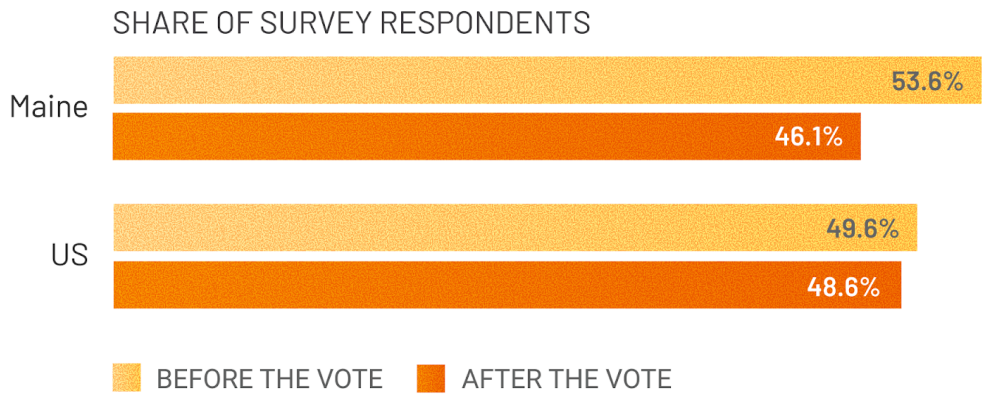
Source: Climate and Community Institute polling[54]

In spite of the ballot results, perceived support for public power is high and likely growing

We also surveyed respondents before and after the ballot to estimate Maine residents' support—and that of US residents more broadly—for publicly owned and not-for-profit energy resources. Respondents perceived support for public power to be relatively high both before and after the referendum, both within Maine and nationally.

[54] Survey question: "Do you think that energy resources like public utilities, power plants, and electricity infrastructure should be privately owned and for-profit or consumer-owned and not-for-profit?"

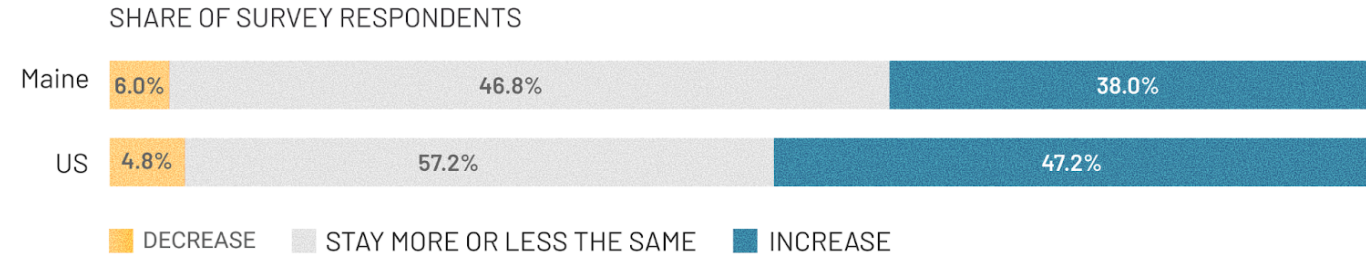
Respondents perceived support for public power to be relatively high both before and after the referendum.



Source: Climate and Community Institute polling[55]

Following the referendum, the vast majority of respondents still expected that support for public power would stay the same or increase over the next five years. At the state level, nearly half (47 percent) of respondents believed that support for public power would increase. This signals that voters do not see the ballot results as indicative of the level of support for public power—to the contrary, they see that support will grow *regardless* of individual campaigns' successes or failures.

Following the vote, respondents still thought support for public power would remain the same or increase at both the state and national level.



Source: Climate and Community Institute polling[56]

[55] Wave 1 survey question: "What percentage of people in [Maine/the US] do you think somewhat or strongly agree that energy resources should be consumer-owned and not-for-profit?" Wave 2 survey question: "What percentage of people in [Maine/the US] do you think support the not-for-profit consumer ownership of energy resources?"

[56] Wave 2 survey questions: "Do you think this percentage [of people in Maine who support not-for-profit consumer ownership of energy resources] will increase, decrease, or stay the same in the next 5 years?" "Do you think this percentage [of US residents who support not-for-profit consumer ownership of energy resources] will increase, decrease, or stay the same in the next 5 years?"

Voters who supported the "Yes" vote believe public power will rein in corporate greed, promoting democracy and transparency

In the second survey wave we asked respondents how they voted on the ballot and to explain the reasons behind their vote. Of the respondents who replied to this question, 79 voted in favor of the ballot and 93 against, and 2 reported abstaining. Respondents who reported voting "yes" on the ballot were motivated by an opposition to the corporate greed and corruption they perceive among current for-profit utility providers, as well as a desire for greater democracy and transparency. Respondents who voted against the ballot initiative primarily cited their distrust in government, concern that it would increase costs, or insufficient information. The messaging both for and against the Our Power campaign is reflected in the respondents' answers, of which the following table provides example excerpts.

Qualitative responses from Maine residents on their referendum vote

Vote	Category	Quotes
Yes	Concerns about corporate greed	"I believe CMP has too much power over the people and are over charging the people to fill their own pockets." "CMP is a profit-driven private company that has done nothing to lower energy prices." "No basic necessity should have a profit motive involved." "CMP & Versant are poorly run and a financial burden lining the pockets of foreign investors at our expense."
Yes	Desire for local, democratic utility ownership	"I believe that electrical power should be a public utility and provided by a consumer owned organization and not by a private, for profit company." "For-profit utilities don't make sense. Profits go to shareholders rather than strengthening our grid and working on making Maine use more sustainable fuel." "Power distribution should at the very least be locally owned, preferably with accountability to the person it served rather than foreign shareholders and investors." "I wanted the power grid to be owned by a cooperative with more democratic reach and long term vision."

No	Low trust in government capacity and efficiency	"Keep the government out of our business." "State-owned means more expensive and less efficient." "The government can't do much of anything correctly, if they managed a desert we'd run out of sand." "Elected officials do not generally have the specialized knowledge to run a utility company."
No	Concerns about cost increases and risk	"Too much risk for taxpayers." "It was going to cost Mainers lots of money." "Cost too high for the state of Maine to buy electric co."
No	Uncertainty and insufficient knowledge	"Not enough explanation of how it would function and how much the citizens of Maine would end up paying for it." "Vague implementation/no guarantee, employees would be retained." "There was no plan from day 1 on operations of Pine Tree Power." "I do not think this was the time to make this kind of change. I think more information and planning is needed to consider such a large task to take on and still has many questions/concerns to address."

Messaging strategies for different audiences

As a new wave of public power campaigns gains momentum, the coalitions that fight for them are still emergent, the voters' reactions untested, and the ultimate outcome largely untried. This is what makes the messaging strategies and polling in the case of the Our Power campaign so interesting. In addition to the polling described above, the Our Power campaign took notes from extensive voter contact efforts. Organizers found that support and opposition did not clearly align with political parties. Instead, clear oppositional, working-class messaging worked the best during the campaign in persuading voters, over more rational, cost-benefit analysis-based arguments. Below, we outline a series of "voter archetypes" created by the Our Power campaign that reflect organizers' experiences in the field and insights from voter contact efforts. While some of the archetypes align with supportive or oppositional coalitions, many voters remained undecided or unaware at the outset of the campaign, creating ample opportunity to change minds through information. Future, more well-funded campaigns can use these archetypes to inform and build a more sophisticated voter contact strategy from the outset.

Maine campaign archetypes and spectrum of support

Archetype	Description	Our Power campaign response
	Strongly Supportive	
The most affected	This person was misbilled, lied to by customer service, experienced regular outages, or cannot afford rising costs. They are motivated by their dislike of CMP and Versant rather than a strong preference for public power. Many in this group had lower incomes or less formal education.	The campaign listened and answered questions, aiming to create even stronger supporters or volunteers.
The community-minded	This person shops at a co-op and might work for a nonprofit. They are more motivated by community ties and a skepticism of large corporations than an ideological belief in public ownership.	The campaign emphasized consumer ownership, the equity issues inherent within the current system, and how Pine Tree Power would be better positioned to address the climate crisis. These were often important campaign volunteers, fueled by groups like Democratic Socialists of America.
	Neutral / Persuadable	
The populist	This person may not have personally had a bad experience but feels that the system is not working—they could be a Bernie/Trump crossover voter.	The campaign emphasized the outages and increasing prices under the existing system, and that a vote for Our Power would upend the status quo and take power back from large corporations. These were movable voters who could be persuaded to support.
The climate-concerned	This person cares about the climate above all. Climate was a big motivating factor for campaign volunteers and staffers, but the climate voters were split. While there were not many voters deciding based only on climate, the campaign needed them to be organizational and political allies, as well as volunteers.	The campaign described how existing investor-owned utilities lobbied and fought climate action. As discussed, this was a critical group to persuade that was inconsistent in its support.

Maine campaign archetypes and spectrum of support

Archetype	Description	Our Power campaign response
	Leaning Opposed	
The uncertain	This person likes the idea of Our Power but is concerned about how and whether it would actually work. Many of these voters were concerned about what would happen to "the trucks," or the linemen who fixed the lines.	The campaign focused on answering questions, minimizing the change to the existing system, and emphasizing existing case studies, such as the state of Nebraska and Maine's smaller consumer-owned utilities. The campaign also pointed to its plan to ensure all existing utility workers would be rehired by the new public entity.
The cost - concerned	This person is open to Our Power, but they are unlikely to support Our Power unless the campaign could promise lower bills (which the campaign could not).	The campaign emphasized CMP's and Versant's profits and explained that under a consumer-owned system, this money could go toward investments in the grid or savings for customers.
	Strongly Opposed	
The big - government skeptic	This person is opposed to Our Power because they are against government ownership.	While hard to persuade, the campaign emphasized how the existing utility system is more of a monopoly than a free market and how existing utilities are owned by foreign corporations and governments (for instance, Versant's parent company is owned by the City of Calgary, Canada).
The technocrat	This person may see problems with current electric service, but not with the system itself. They advocate for better regulation. These people were most often Democrats.	The campaign found these voters among the hardest to talk to and least likely to be persuaded. The campaign provided information about the history of the investor-owned utility system and how it has suffered from regulatory capture.

Takeaways

While the results of the ballot initiative were disappointing, especially to organizers who committed a considerable amount of time, resources, and passion to the campaign, the campaign is part of a resurgence of public power movements nationally. In this report, we looked back at the history of public power in the US to contextualize the Our Power campaign. Through a combination of survey research and reflection on organizer experience, we identified key takeaways from the campaign for future action by public power organizers across the country.

Build on momentum, which remains strong even after the referendum defeat:

Despite the outcome on election day, our polling results reveal that Mainers remain interested in public power and expect to see growing movements in the near future. From the outset, the campaign was ambitious, organizing statewide and against powerful incumbents. A pessimistic reading of the result could misguidedly suggest that people just are not interested in public power. Our results refute this interpretation, instead showing not only that interest in public power remains strong, but also that respondents believe public power has broad, increasing support.

In the context of the Trump administration's attacks on the regulatory state and climate backsliding, maintaining momentum can seem like a difficult task. More work than ever must be done to both protect our communities from immediate harm and realize positive visions of the future. Instead of scaling back our ambition, we can meet the moment by looking inward and strategizing to understand the institutional changes necessary to achieve democratic and just energy provision.

Identify creative mobilization strategies to overcome entrenched power and wealth:

First, getting public power into the popular imagination requires experimenting with different political strategies and tactics. Moreover, movement building often spans decades. The fight for the New Deal to center public ownership of institutions, such as the Bonneville Power Administration, Tennessee Valley Authority, and the

Rural Electrification Administration, was preceded by public power campaigns in the early 20th century that experimented with different tactics, including the creation and expansion of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power in the 1910s and 1920s.[57] Our data shows that people sense the tide is changing, and many expect more public power campaigns in the future. In Maine, these same advocates are renewing their momentum and achieving progress with a new bill to allow for the state of Maine to build new publicly owned and financed transmission infrastructure. The bill was brought by the chair of the Energy Committee in the 2025 legislative session, illustrating that there are multiple pathways to increasing public control of energy infrastructure.[58] The setback to public power in Maine does not dampen the chances for future campaigns to win but provides an opportunity to learn.

In the face of power imbalances from incumbent utilities with deep pockets, campaigns must identify creative mobilization strategies that energize uncertain voters. While public power had broad support in the case of the Our Power campaign, the importance of prolonged organizing and canvassing before the official launch of a campaign—especially a referendum—is important to offset narrative manipulation and big-dollar spending from incumbent utilities and aligned interests. It is always easier to persuade a voter from neutrality than it is after they have already been persuaded by the utility. In the case of Maine, while polling for the Our Power campaign was strong throughout, the volunteers' qualitative experiences of door-knocking revealed the impacts of money-backed narrative manipulation. Some of the common refrains around costs of acquisition, the lack of a plan, and the future of utility workers were extensively addressed in the campaign's proposal but were twisted by the incumbent's counter-campaign.

The "no plan" narrative was still effectively developed and distributed by the incumbent. Ultimately, CMP and Versant sowed enough doubt about the Our Power campaign to scare voters. When confronted with high spending to maintain the status quo, the Our Power campaign demonstrated that it is very important to build relationships and trust

[57] Sandeep Vaheesan, *Democracy in Power : A History of Electrification in the United States* (University of Chicago Press, 2024); "People's Utility Commons", People's Utility Commons, accessed June 2, 2025, https://peoplesutility.org/; Sandeep Vaheesan, "The IRA Is Still Being Formed," *Democracy Journal*, September 28, 2023, https://democracyjournal.org/arguments/the-ira-is-still-being-formed/.

[58] "Bill Text: ME LD838 | 2025-2026 | 132nd Legislature | Introduced," LegiScan, accessed June 17, 2025, https://legiscan.com/ME/text/LD838/2025.

with the public to validate and add to the enduring credibility around public power. The 34:1 spending ratio shows a significant asymmetry in democratic access that allows private utilities to manipulate narratives and secure support. Engaging in democracy is actually monetarily prohibitive, and the outcome could be unrelated to whether a position is actually popular, as demonstrated by polling that showed people in fact believe that they will grow to like public power more over time.

Clearly articulate the benefits of public power and harms of the status quo:

It is crucial to clearly articulate the benefits that public power can provide—and for whom—and to explain how current challenges are linked to the status quo. This is particularly important in the context of voter uncertainty and distrust in government, and in change more generally. In Maine, residents experience dual challenges that especially and severely impact quality of life: affordability and reliability. While climate change was an issue for many in our polling, it often took a backseat to problems Mainers continue to experience, like rising costs and power shutoff risks. We saw that while it is important to attain climate buy-in to activate the climate base for volunteers, campaign staff, and other forms of support, public power campaigns need to be able to tailor the climate and cost arguments to climate groups and cost-concerned voters, respectively.

One possible talking point is that private utilities are unlikely to willingly pass on the benefits of cheap renewables to electricity users and thus slow-walk installing clean electricity because of the high rates of return associated with more expensive projects. As Sandeep Vaheesan has noted, public power, climate investments, and low rates can work together.[59] The Our Power campaign made successful inroads with many voters by comparing takeover costs with opportunity costs, demonstrating the opportunity for Mainers to save $367 per year. Future campaigns can build on Our Power by also including specific rate protection measures in their strategy and as an explicit mandate of the new public power entity. With grids deeply

[59] Sandeep Vaheesan, "Even under Trump, Americans Can Fight Climate Change," *The American Prospect*, March 10, 2025, https://prospect.org/environment/2025-03-10-even-under-trump-americans-can-fight-climate-change/.

vulnerable to climate change-induced extreme weather events,[60] public power serves as a platform for everyday people to drive the scale of investment needed to keep people's lights on.

Draw on the history of public power and adapt it for the present:

While actively involved organizers clearly see how their campaign will bolster democratic governance and improve outcomes for residents, it may be more difficult for less engaged voters to see how public power will be different from other chronically underfunded and increasingly bureaucratic public services. Survey respondents reported a low belief in the ability of the state to run critical infrastructure effectively and expertly. The past 50 years of neoliberal doctrine has embedded the primacy of the private sector in the public consciousness. This, combined with private interests' decades-long effort to strip public services, means that any change that tries to restore public capabilities is an uphill battle.

Ultimately, public power advocates must consider how to reshape perceptions of the public sector's role. What does the government do? What should the government do? The state can provide, and has historically delivered, an incredible range of services beyond acting as an administrator for markets. Recent and deeply unpopular attacks on key functions of the state by the Trump administration, including the firing of a substantial number of federal employees across critical government agencies, have revealed for many the extent of the state support that people rely on—and which is often taken for granted—to sustain a basic quality of life.[61] It is incumbent upon public power campaigners to show how the government already provides key, affordable services for all and how private company incentives warp their abilities to adapt to a changing climate and provide access to basic services like electricity.

Link public power initiatives across place:

As the Trump administration moves quickly to defund critical public services that people across the country rely on, an increasingly hollowed-out state provides fewer existing frameworks through which

[60] Nathaniel Scharping, "U.S. Power Grids Are Vulnerable to Extreme Weather," *Eos*, February 21, 2025, https://eos.org/articles/u-s-power-grids-are-vulnerable-to-extreme-weather.

[61] Annette Choi, Danya Gainor and Kate Carroll, "Tracking Trump's overhaul of the federal workforce, *CNN*, July 14, 2025, https://www.cnn.com/politics/tracking-federal-workforce-firings-dg.

organizers might mobilize. Local initiatives, however, often provide important leverage points for collective community resistance to federal backsliding and allow for the imagination and testing of new possibilities. If the national movement for public power is to build momentum, organizers should continue to coordinate across communities and highlight the viability and popularity of public models.

Handle financial asymmetries:

Operating in a financial asymmetry against more well-resourced utilities, future campaigners should consider how referendums which do not have donation limits are inherently more tilted in favor of public power fights than running campaigns for candidates who support public power and effecting legislative/ordinance changes. The Our Power campaigners experienced difficulties fundraising from traditionally liberal donors who were uncomfortable with efforts that centered challenging the profit motive, who were unconvinced by the case of public control as a necessary condition to achieving climate goals, and were further deterred by the unfavorable polling results. Once they secured an initial funder, however, that funding served as a bulwark to beget further funds. Overall, fundraising challenges translated into scant time to conduct voter research and outreach. Ad buys are expensive and require upfront capital, but they are important for being able to inject messaging into the electorate. One campaigner pointed out that future public power efforts should continue centering grassroots fundraising and organizing early and often, while exploring newer fundraising strategies that do not rely on swaying major donors.

Build rapport with labor and environmental advocates:

Ensuring early, consistent, and enthusiastic buy-in from energy sector unions and beyond is also crucial for responding to voter concerns for existing utility workers' job security. In the case of Pine Tree Power, while there was informal support from union workers in other fields, and ultimately the nurses broke with the Maine AFL–CIO to endorse the campaign at the last minute, generally labor felt it had to have a united front alongside the energy sector unions.[62] Building rapport with directly impacted workers and integrating their insights, as well

[62] "Nurses Union Backs Pine Tree Power Ballot Measure," *Portland Press Herald*, September 27, 2023, https://www.pressherald.com/2023/09/27/nurses-union-backs-public-power-measure/.

as deepening ties with workers in indirectly affected industries (like teachers or nurses), is an important two-pronged approach to gaining labor trust.

Green organizations with a base-building focus like the Sierra Club were easier to bring on board with the campaign than some of the other environmental nonprofits in the area. Unsurprisingly, and similar to democratization campaigns around the country such as the New York mayoral race, campaigners found establishment Democrats' opposition, such as that of the governor, to be a factor in limiting the credibility and potential of the campaign's voter outreach efforts.

Conclusion

Even after the ballot initiative was rejected, voters in Maine, including those who voted against the initiative, believed that the public power movement would become more popular across the country. They have much reason to believe so: with a chaotic federal energy agenda, a cost-of-living crisis that private utilities help drive, and increasingly visible climate impacts, there is deep and widespread concern that can motivate communities to exercise their agency to achieve systemic change.

Public power is a lightning rod that can strike through these simultaneous crises. Around the country, public power movements and a growing collaborative ecosystem of researchers and organizers from economic to environmental justice movements are ready to pick up from where the Maine campaign left off. We remain optimistic that through sustained collective action, we can realize democratic and just energy systems.

Appendix

Survey data and sampling methods

To understand the beliefs, preferences, and priorities of Maine residents concerning utilities, ownership, and the provision of electricity—and related energy policies—as well as the impact of the referendum on these opinions, we conducted a two-wave survey with the survey firm YouGov. We ran the first wave before the vote, from October 12 to 20, 2023, and the second wave right after the vote, from November 21 to December 18, 2023. We recontacted all participants from Wave 1 to participate in Wave 2, as well as 65 new respondents. A total of 390 respondents were included in the study (140 completed only Wave 1, 185 completed both Waves 1 and 2, and 65 completed only Wave 2). The survey instruments and data collection procedures were approved by the University of British Columbia's Behavioral Research Ethics Board (Protocol H23-03190).

The sampling frame is a politically representative "modeled frame" of Maine adults, based upon the American Community Survey (ACS) public use microdata file, public voter file records, the 2020 Current Population Survey (CPS) Voting and Registration supplements, the 2020 National Election Pool (NEP) exit poll, and the 2020 Cooperative Election Study (CES) surveys, including demographics and 2020 presidential vote. Two weights were created for groups: (1) People who responded to Wave 1 & Wave 2 and (2) all of the recontacts from Wave 1 plus 65 fresh respondents who were matched to the sampling frame on age, education, race and gender to create Wave 2 sample. As the samples were quite small, the datasets were weighted separately firstly by post-stratifying on 'Vote Outcome W2', and then raking (iterative proportional fitting) on home ownership, 2020 presidential vote choice as well as raking of gender, age (4-categories), race (2-categories), and education (4-categories), to produce the final two weights.

In addition to the polling data provided in this report, we draw on the experiences of the lead campaigners involved in the Our Power campaign to understand their firsthand experience speaking with voters and developing strategies.

Wave 1

I am generally satisfied with my utility.

Response	Count	Percent
Strongly agree	42	12.9%
Somewhat agree	117	36.0%
Neither agree nor disagree	67	20.6%
Somewhat disagree	57	17.5%
Strongly disagree	41	12.6%
Skipped	1	0.3%
Total	325	100.0%

My utility offers reliable service and handles system interruptions effectively.

Response	Count	Frequency
Strongly agree	56	17.2%
Somewhat agree	136	41.8%
Neither agree nor disagree	66	20.3%
Somewhat disagree	51	15.7%
Strongly disagree	15	4.6%
Skipped	1	0.3%
Total	325	100.0%

Do you think that energy resources like public utilities, power plants, and electricity infrastructure should be privately owned and for-profit or consumer-owned and not-for-profit?

Response	Count	Frequency
Strongly agree they should be privately owned	47	14.5%
Somewhat agree they should be privately owned	41	12.6%
I am indifferent/unsure	94	28.9%
Somewhat agree they should be consumer-owned	72	22.2%
Strongly agree they should be consumer-owned	71	21.8%
Total	325	100.0%

What percentage of people in Maine do you think somewhat or strongly agrees that energy resources should be consumer-owned and not-for-profit?

Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
0	100	53.56	19.65

What percentage of people in America do you think somewhat or strongly agrees that energy resources should be consumer-owned and not-for-profit?

Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
0	100	49.61	18.797

Wave 2

Do you think that energy resources should be privately owned and for-profit or publicly owned by communities and not-for-profit?

Response	Count	Percent
I think they should be privately owned and for-profit	61	24.4%
I am indifferent/unsure	69	27.6%
I think they should be consumer-owned and not-for-profit	120	48.0%
Total	250	100.0%

What percentage of people in Maine do you think supports the not-for-profit consumer ownership of energy resources?

Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
0	100	46.11	19.45

Do you think this percentage will increase, decrease, or stay the same in the next 5 years?

Response	Count	Percent
Increase	118	47.2%
Stay more or less the same	117	46.8%
Decrease	15	6.0%
Total	250	100.0%

What percentage of United States residents do you think supports the not-for-profit consumer ownership of energy resources?

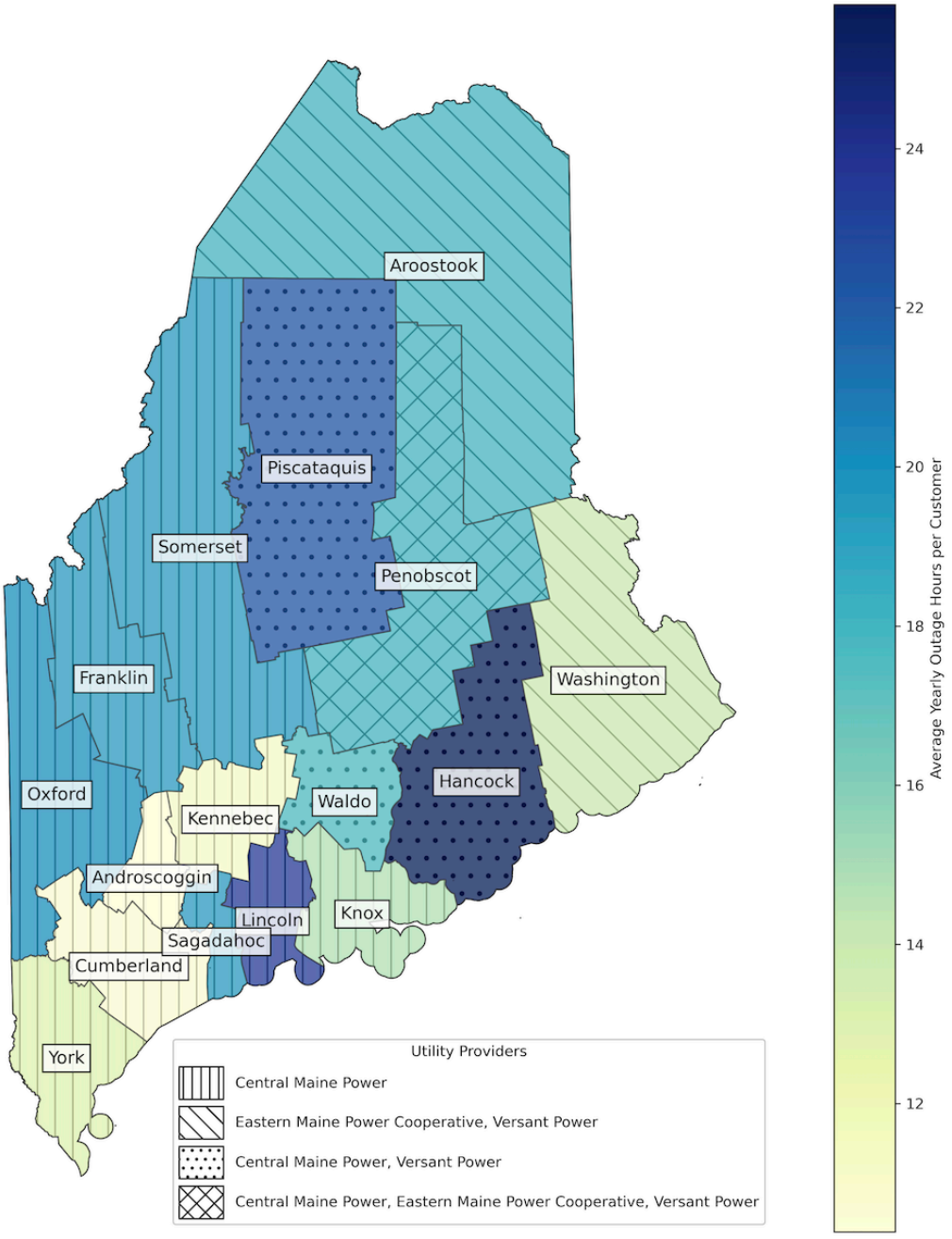
Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
0	99	48.61	18.47

Do you think this percentage will increase, decrease, or stay the same in the next 5 years?

Response	Count	Percent
Increase	95	38.0%
Stay more or less the same	143	57.2%
Decrease	12	4.8%
Total	250	100.0%

Yearly average outage hours per customer by county/utility provider

County	Overall yearly average outage hours per customer (2017–2023)	Utility provider(s)
Androscoggin	10.39	Central Maine Power
Aroostook	18.00	Eastern Maine Power Cooperative, Versant Power
Cumberland	10.66	Central Maine Power
Franklin	19.40	Central Maine Power
Hancock	25.81	Central Maine Power, Versant Power
Kennebec	11.15	Central Maine Power
Knox	14.73	Central Maine Power
Lincoln	23.44	Central Maine Power
Oxford	20.01	Central Maine Power
Penobscot	17.99	Central Maine Power, Eastern Maine Power Cooperative, Versant Power
Piscataquis	22.30	Central Maine Power, Versant Power
Sagadahoc	19.47	Central Maine Power
Somerset	19.44	Central Maine Power
Waldo	17.73	Central Maine Power, Versant Power
Washington	13.84	Eastern Maine Power Cooperative, Versant Power
York	12.95	Central Maine Power



Data source: BlueFire Studios LLC.[63]

[63] Bluefire Studios LLC, "Power Outage Tracking," https://bluefirestudios.com.