

that went on to take control away from royal officials in the early days of the Revolution.

Because of the revolution that the Sons of Liberty helped start in the 1770s, which ultimately gave Americans the democracy that we enjoy today, today's solar patriot does not need to resort to such rough tactics. Yet, the example of citizens across the country banding together to fight a seemingly unbeatable power and win against long odds is one that can inspire solar homeowners to stand shoulder-to-shoulder against monopoly utilities that would attack solar rights.

The Sons of Liberty can also inspire solar advocates to take up creative and powerful tactics hearkening back to the group's most famous action—the Boston Tea Party, which we'll cover in the next chapter.

Four

WHY YOU ARE THE BEST ADVOCATE

A good example is the best sermon.

—BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

Actions speak louder than words. Many types of people advocate for solar power. These include environmentalists, solar industry representatives and employees, and local citizens. Their work is important. But unfortunately, they lack the credibility that you have as a solar homeowner. That's why they need your help!

It's a proven fact that solar spreads more quickly when neighbors can see that at least one neighbor has gone solar already. People who own solar companies already know this. That's why they tell their door-to-door salespeople

to start on streets that already have at least one home with solar panels on the roof.

In his book *Rooftop Revolution*, Danny Kennedy writes that “For every one percent of new installations in an area, it was one percent faster for the next solar system to be installed in the same neighborhood,” according to a study by Stanford University. Why? Both because of the power of the example of someone like you—your neighbor rather than some “crazy hippie”—and also, according to Kennedy, because the “clerk down at City Hall would be more familiar with solar installations and would process the construction permit more quickly.”

An Alliance of Solar Homeowners

Anya Schoolman knows the power that solar homeowners have to stand up for solar better than almost anyone else. She’s been an activist for solar power in Washington, DC since 2007.

At first, she tried getting other people who cared about clean energy to lobby for better solar incentives in the District so that it would be more affordable for homeowners to get solar. But she quickly found out that it actually worked better if she did it the other way around: Help people to go solar at home first. Then, recruit them as activists for better government rules on solar power later.

“We start with helping people go solar and then move to advocacy. What gets them excited is being able to do something concrete and practical. And they try to get engaged with the policy barriers as a side incident. It happens along the way.”

With this approach, Schoolman got together with some neighbors who wanted solar to form the Mount Pleasant Coop, a purchasing club that would let them combine their solar installations into a single order to qualify for a group discount. Then, after they got solar installed, she mobilized some of those homeowners to contact the city government asking for better incentives for solar. At times, that meant arguing against the local electric utility, which wanted to slow down the progress of solar in the District of Columbia to protect the profit it was making there.

“Every step of the way we had to mobilize homeowners to go to the city council and say it’s our money, ratepayer money.”

By successfully lobbying for generous solar incentives and a fair electricity market for homeowners, Schoolman’s group helped make the District of Columbia one of America’s best places to get solar. In 2017, Solar Power Rocks ranked Washington, DC as the ninth best state or district in terms of solar incentives. To recognize her leadership on solar advocacy in the District of Columbia, in 2014 President Obama named Schoolman a “Champion of

Change,” one of ten honorees who had helped bring more solar to communities around the country.

Since then, Schoolman has expanded her work with homeowners to half a dozen states. Her national umbrella organization, Solar United Neighbors, has sponsored local cooperative groups that have installed solar at a discount on more than a thousand homes, adding up to 15 megawatts of distributed solar power so far. At the same time, local affiliates in a dozen states—from SUN Alabama in Montgomery to SUN West Virginia in Charleston—have become powerful lobbying groups in their local areas, helping to pass pro-solar laws and fight government rules and regulations that would hurt solar in their state.

“We really strongly believe that people who have solar are the best people for the issue,” Schoolman told me. “They care about not just solar but also the grid of the future where you have solar, storage, and an electric vehicle, and even use energy management.” (Energy management is a way to plan your energy demand in advance to try to conserve energy and use it more efficiently.)

Schoolman feels that today’s electric grid, which is controlled by utilities, should be more open to homeowners. Since homeowners have made a big investment in solar, then it’s only fair that those same homeowners should have some say in how America’s electricity system is run.

“The system should be designed so that if the homeowner is going to put their money and their energy into it

then they should have a role in running it and get some of the benefit. The sharing of the financial benefit has to go with sharing the financial responsibility.”

In a sense, it’s symbolic equity in the electrical system, bought with their purchase of home solar, that gives solar homeowners so much authority to talk about good solar policy.

Since electric utilities often try to roll back good solar policy, Schoolman says that citizens who already have solar at home have to keep fighting. And those homeowners are the best ones to do the fighting, not only because they believe that solar is good for their community and good for America, but because they also have a financial incentive to make sure that the rules stay fair for themselves and other solar homeowners.

“It really requires an ever-growing vigilance and mobilization of people who have a vested economic interest in a different kind of market. It’s just human nature, if you plunk down \$15,000 for a solar energy system, then you’re going to fight to protect it. A lot of people care about climate change. But there’s an intensity when people have their own private property involved.”

A Tale of Two States

The battles between solar supporters and electric utilities in recent years have demonstrated the power of solar

homeowners. Just consider what happened in two different states when utilities came to attack net metering programs, which allow solar owners to sell their excess power back to the grid at a fair rate.

In Indiana, legislators who were friendly to utilities had been trying to repeal the state's net metering program since at least 2015, which paid solar producers for their extra solar power at the retail electricity rate. Utilities said this was too high and they wanted to reduce the rate or cancel net metering altogether. Finally, in May of 2017, after intense lobbying, those utilities got their way. That's when Indiana Governor Eric Holcomb signed a bill to shred incentives for rooftop solar. For current solar owners, it reduced net metering payments by more than 60 percent. Then, the new law ends net metering altogether for new customers after 2022. Also, in the future, utilities can make all solar homeowners pay an extra monthly fee just to stay connected to the grid.

Just as in Nevada and Florida, citizens in Indiana have overwhelmingly supported solar for years. So, it's no surprise that people in Indiana who were informed about state solar policy hated this bill when they found out how it would slow down the spread of solar in the Hoosier State. But utilities were able to get anti-solar legislation through partly because there were few homeowners with solar in the state around to lead the fight against the bill. At the time, Indiana, with a population of 6.6 million people,

had only 30,000 homes powered by solar, according to the Solar Energy Industries Association.

By contrast, Nevada, a sparsely populated desert state with only half as many residents as Indiana (3 million), had a whopping 372,000 homes powered by solar in 2017. Put in terms of families, 1 in 20 Nevada households had solar but in Indiana, only 1 in 77 households had solar.

"In Indiana, you had rallies and protests. But it wasn't the same size as in Nevada, mostly because there are not many solar homeowners in Indiana," Matt Kasper of the Energy and Policy Institute explained to me. "If you talk to the Sierra Club or others who were working on this issue in Indiana, it was clever for utility companies to quickly weaken net metering in that state so you didn't have an army of solar homeowners."

Of course, with lots of sun and high electricity prices, it was natural that homeowners in Nevada would flock to solar. And over the years, the state responded by putting in good incentives, including retail net metering. It was also natural that utilities would start to feel the pinch on their profits as so many of their customers went solar and stopped buying electricity from their local utility. As a result, just as utilities did in Indiana, Nevada's utilities also tried to get the state to cut net metering payments and cancel the program, as we saw in this book's introduction.

At first, the utility lobby in Nevada was successful, as we saw. At the end of 2015, NV Energy was able to

convince the state public utilities commission to cut net metering by 75 percent and triple the monthly fee for solar owners to stay connected to the grid.

“When it comes to legislators and governors, they see the utility companies as some of the top job providers in the state or the district,” explained Kasper. “They provide tax revenues, they have foundations that give money to local charities. Utilities are a very large political force in any state capital. So, when they do have a meeting with a legislator, analyst, or someone at the public utility commission, they trust the utility and want to work with them as opposed to a solar group that may come from out of state.”

But fortunately for solar homeowners in Nevada, despite the influence of NV Energy in Nevada’s state government, the story didn’t end there. In response to this decision by the state, a coalition of solar advocates began an aggressive campaign to reverse the state’s anti-solar stance.

Nevada solar homeowners participated in massive demonstrations at the state capital in Carson City. Solar homeowners wrote letters, made calls, and paid visits to their state legislators. And solar homeowners appeared on TV and radio and gave interviews to newspapers. Public opinion was loud and clear in favor of a fair deal for solar homeowners.

This time, Nevada’s legislators listened to the citizens instead of utilities. Pro-solar forces ultimately won the

battle. In June of 2017, Governor Brian Sandoval signed Assembly bill 405 to restore net metering at nearly its previous rate and reduce the monthly charge for solar homeowners.

What made the difference in Nevada versus Indiana? In both states, the Republican Party was in control. And in both states, utilities used the influence that they had built over decades of lobbying to get a friendly ear from state officials. The big difference was the presence in Nevada of a large group of solar homeowners who stood up against the utility attack on solar.

As a result of their defeat in Nevada—and defeats around the same time to roll back rooftop solar in other states including California and Florida—utilities have learned a big lesson. They learned that they can successfully attack the solar industry where it is weak, in states like Indiana where homeowners have just started to go solar in big numbers. But in states like Nevada with many solar homeowners who can field an army of homeowner-advocates to defend good solar regulations, then utilities can’t just kill solar with impunity. Utilities know that they will face a tough fight if they want to roll back solar in states where it’s well established. And in big solar states, utilities now know that trying to roll back solar in those states is a fight they will probably lose.

When it comes to spreading solar, solar homeowners are the real deal. They’ve already put their money where

their mouth is. That makes them more credible than any other advocate for solar. If a homeowner starts with their own network—their own neighbors, family, and friends—then they can easily influence people who are already curious about solar to want to learn more. And that’s the first step towards recruiting others into an army of solar champions who can stand up for rooftop solar power against attacks by electric utilities.



FROM THE REVOLUTION: BOSTON TEA PARTY

It would later become an inspiration to generations of Americans who wanted to protest against government support for crony capitalists. But the Boston Tea Party started as the biggest hit of the Sons of Liberty. On the night of December 6, 1773, members of the group disguised as Mohawk warriors boarded three ships in Boston Harbor and threw 342 chests of tea into the water. This lively protest was a response to the Tea Act passed by the British Parliament earlier that year, which the colonists saw as just another attempt to tax them without representation.

While a small tax was levied on tea, the real issue was that the Tea Act bolstered the monopoly of the British East India Company as the exclusive legal provider of tea to the thirteen American colonies, putting small American suppliers of tea out of business. Also, like the Stamp Act eight years earlier, the tax on tea was not introduced by the colonists themselves as was their custom, but it was imposed without consulting colonial legislatures by the British Parliament.

The Boston Tea Party led the British authorities to overreact. When news reached London in January of 1774, King George’s government passed a series of laws meant to punish the colonists, known to Americans as the Intolerable Acts.

The worst of these offensive laws suspended the self-government that Massachusetts had enjoyed under its colonial charter since the days of the Pilgrims. The British also closed the busy port of Boston to all trade until the Bostonians would repay the cost of the drowned tea, destroying the livelihood of thousands of citizens of the city. Anger at this extreme response helped provoke Americans to unite across colonies in the First Continental Congress convened in Philadelphia in the fall of that year.

More than two centuries after independence, Americans have continued to take inspiration from the Tea Party's protest against British rule to stand up for their freedoms against entrenched domestic powers. Perhaps the most famous was the Tea Party movement that elected a slate of protest-minded Republicans to Congress in 2010. Today, that same movement has joined the fight for solar rights.

One of America's leading advocates for solar homeowners is Debbie Dooley, leader of the Georgia Tea Party Patriots and founder of the innovative Green Tea Coalition. Dooley became famous nationwide when she led a successful effort in 2013 to require utilities in Georgia to buy more power from solar homeowners. Later, in Florida in 2016, she helped lead the alliance of solar companies, homeowners, environmental groups, conservative activists, and others to defeat Florida's deceptive Amendment 1, which we discussed in Chapter 2.

Five

THE JOY OF GETTING INVOLVED

The consciousness of having discharged that duty which we owe to our country is superior to all other considerations.

—GEORGE WASHINGTON

It can be energizing to step outside yourself and commit to something larger. And what can be bigger than helping Americans win freedom from dirty energy, protecting the future of both our own country and the whole world?

When you start talking with people you know about solar power, you may notice that their ears perk up. Americans are a practical people who admire those who have found a better way to make money or save money.