When it comes to politics, North Carolina is not California. California is regularly and consistently Democratic at the state and national level. North Carolina is a swing state in presidential elections, has a Republican majority in its delegation to the House of Representatives, and has a state government currently dominated by Republicans.

And when it comes to environmental policies, North Carolina has been famous recently for its lax regulation – allowing a major electricity utility to store coal ash in ways that allowed for a catastrophic spill in to a major river. The state legislature even forbade state planning agencies from taking into account long-term predictions of sea level rise from climate change.

And yet – North Carolina is now a leader in the solar industry, with the third highest level of installation in the prior year among all states. Why? This article from Slate gives a good overview. In short: State policies that preceded Republican control encouraged solar energy development, and major companies in the state sought to build and expand on that development.

What is striking to me is how North Carolina's history demonstrates the important role that building interest groups can play in energy and environmental policy, something I have written about before. The earlier state policies succeeded in building powerful economic and political forces that support renewable energy in the state. Those forces are now strong enough that they can resist even the Republican majority in the statehouse – an effort to weaken the state's renewable portfolio standard died in committee in the state legislature. There are now projects proposed for North Carolina to produce solar power to export to Washington D.C.

I have written about how similar patterns have played out in California and Arizona. The history of North Carolina's solar industry shows how important building powerful interest group allies can be in advancing future environmental policy – and how this tactic can be successful even in states with very different politics from California.