Movements and Culture: Expanding the Terrain of Environmental Politics

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Abstract
Research on environmental politics typically focuses on the state as the unit of analysis. This special issue considers the larger terrain within which contention surrounding the environment occurs by focusing on two key drivers of environmental politics: (1) environmental movements and (2) the cultural dynamics of environmental issues. The articles engage with underexplored research questions, adopt novel methodologies, examine unique data sources, and contribute to existing theory about political contests over the natural environment.

Keywords
environmental politics, environmental movement, strategy, tactics, culture, framing, political polarization, emotions, collective identity

Wildfires. Heatwaves. Floods. Each of these extreme weather events is becoming more frequent and intense as climate change accelerates. As I write this introduction in August 2021, over 200 active wildfires burn across my home province of British Columbia, Canada. Further south along the coast, in Oregon, USA, the Bootleg fire is among the largest in the nation. Wildfires are also raging in Algeria, Greece, and Turkey, claiming lives and destroying the forests and villages that sustain rural communities.

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These local events reflect larger global trends. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released its sixth assessment report in August 2021 warning of worsening climate impacts over the next 30 years or more if greenhouse gas emissions are not limited. This will include melting ice sheets, rising sea levels, severe heat waves, droughts, and floods. United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres famously described these findings as a “code red for humanity,” prompting renewed calls for action including 0 emissions and the end of fossil fuel and coal extraction (United Nations, 2021).

The IPCC report, the frequency of extreme weather events, as well the proliferation of other environmental problems such as species loss and pollution have made environmental politics a central feature of contemporary life. In fact, they are nearly inescapable as environmental issues become permanent fixtures of the news cycle as well as local, national, and international politics. At its core, environmental politics is concerned with the relationships between humans and their natural environment, particularly as it relates to questions of sustainability (Dobson, 2016) and decision-making surrounding resource use, pollution, and the economic activities that affect the environment (DeSombre, 2020).

Much of the focus on environmental politics, particularly in the news, emphasizes the role of governmental institutions and political elites enacting legislation. This includes national laws, such as America’s Clean Water Act. It also encompasses negotiations in supranational settings, such as the United Nations, where countries come together to discuss coordinated efforts to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions. Unsurprisingly, research concerning environmental politics has historically focused on state processes as the unit of analysis (McBeath & Rosenberg, 2006).

However, environmental politics also occur from below as everyday people mobilize in the streets to express their anger and frustration over how political elites manage pressing environmental problems. In Greece, as 586 wildfires wreaked havoc in August 2021, hundreds of protestors gathered outside Parliament. Protestor Nikos Loutos told Reuters “We are protesting against the government that has let all the country burn, because of profits before people… We are protesting because they give millions for buying warplanes and police and not for the fire brigade” (Liakos et al., 2021). These grievances indicate the expansive terrain of environmental politics, highlighting how everyday people and established movements seek to influence the decision-making of state governments.

The articles contained within this special issue shift our focus away from political elites to environmental movements and the everyday politics of people, organizations, and industry associations in making sense of—and responding to—environmental issues. In doing so, we highlight what Brulle (2010) has previously identified as two key drivers of environmental politics: (1) the mobilization and activities of the environmental movement and (2) the cultural dynamics of environmental issues. A complete understanding of environmental politics must consider extra-institutional actors as well as the cultural processes that characterize struggles for environmental protection.
The Mobilization and Activities of the Environmental Movement

Environmental social movements are important drivers of environmental politics. Individual activists and social movement organizations engage in a variety of tactics—from direct actions and protest to awareness campaigns and lobbying—as a means of pressuring governments and corporations to implement eco-friendly policies and practices (Chewinski & Corrigall-Brown, 2020). The activities of social movements, including questions of strategy and tactics, are key sites of environmental politics (Brulle, 2010). In “Penalty or Payoff? Diversity of Tactics and Resource Mobilization Among Environmental Organizations,” Max Chewinski and Catherine Corrigall-Brown examine the relationship between organizational strategy and resource mobilization using a unique panel data set collected by the Environmental Funders Network. The authors assess whether ENGOs in the United Kingdom choosing to adopt a strategy of diversification (diversity of income sources, tactics, and issue focus) in 2013 are rewarded in their resource mobilization efforts (as measured by income, staff, and membership) in 2016. They show that income and issue diversification do not affect resource mobilization, but that ENGOs are rewarded for engaging in a diversity of tactics. Environmental Nongovernmental Organizations who engage in a diversity of tactics experience a payoff as they are better able to mobilize the staff and members required for mounting environmental campaigns. Chewinski and Corrigall-Brown highlight the importance of strategy for maintaining and growing environmental movement organizations over time, particularly in political environments where external funding is threatened.

The Cultural Dynamics of Environmental Issues

Cultural dynamics are also critical drivers of environmental politics as they help explain the “rise and fall of environmental issues” (Brulle, 2010: 399). The people involved in environmental politics “are signifying agents actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning” for themselves, members of the public, organizations, and political rivals (Benford & Snow, 2000: 613). In other words, they are actively involved in framing environmental issues and problems. But the meanings and frames they ascribe are often saturated with emotions, values, and belief systems that become sites of contestation and political polarization.

In “Using Structural Topic Modeling to Explore the Role of Framing in Shaping the Debate on Liquefied Natural Gas Terminals in Oregon,” Greg Stelmach and Hilary Boudet use computational text analysis to investigate how proponents and opponents frame the siting of six LNG terminals in Oregon over time and across venues such as public hearings and letters to the editor. In examining over 4500 comments from 2004 to 2019, they find that supporters strictly emphasize economic benefits such as local jobs and community revenue while opponents are more flexible, emphasizing a wider range of threats over time that include environmental (ecological impacts), social
(property rights), and processual (public input in decision-making) frames. By moving beyond threats to the environment and including concerns that appeal to a broad spectrum of the public, opponents were able to facilitate the growth of public opposition to LNG projects and this may explain why none of the six projects have yet been approved. However, the type of frames proffered by opponents and supporters also varied based on the venue. For example, opponents brought forward different environmental concerns in letters to the editor than at public hearings convened by the energy regulator. Stelmach and Boudet’s research highlights how environmental politics include contests over meaning-making, particularly as it relates to the different risks and rewards of LNG facilities.

In “Industry Repertoires: How Transgressive and Conventional Industry Associations Seek to Counter Contention,” Edward T. Walker and Ion Bogdan Vasi shift our focus from framing contests between fracking opponents and supporters to understanding how different supporters (pro-industry groups) respond to anti-fracking events such as protests. The authors engage in a comparative analysis of the tone and topical content of 2829 press releases from two American hydraulic fracturing (“fracking”) industry associations: Energy in Depth (EID) and the Marcellus Shale Coalition (MSC). Walker and Vasi pair these industry communications with anti-fracking event data, finding that not all industry associations are concerned with countering environmental movement discourses. On one hand, transgressive associations such as EID take a negative tone in their communications, frequently responding to anti-fracking protests and countering activist concerns about fracking and its link to climate change. On the other hand, conventional associations such as the MSC adopt a more positive tone in their communications, which are less closely tied to protests and focus on framing natural gas as “clean burning” and promoting the economic benefits of fracking. Walker and Vasi suggest that each association’s activities are complementary and mutualistic with important implications for environmental activists and environmental policymaking.

In “Morality, Emotions, and the Ideal Environmentalist: Toward a Conceptual Framework for Understanding Political Polarization,” Emily Huddart Kennedy and Parker Muzzerall highlight the role of emotions—particularly anger—in explaining political polarization over environmental protection. Using data collected through 63 interviews with a diverse sample of Washington State residents, the authors find that liberal (Democrat) and conservative (Republican) respondents imagine the ideal environmentalist in similar ways. An ideal environmentalist is someone who is conscious of their role in perpetuating environmental problems, expresses care for the environment, and is committed to reducing their environmental impact. However, the specific practices deemed morally good and culturally associated with the ideal environmentalist—such as reducing resource use and eco-friendly shopping—become sites of disagreement across the political divide. Liberals feel anger toward conservatives for failing to live up to this ideal while conservatives express anger toward liberals for devaluing the practices they associate with environmentalism. A consequence of this affective process is the entrenchment of political polarization as
individuals cannot reconcile differences over the practices associated with environmental protection.

The cultural dynamics of environmental politics include contests over meaning-making as well as the emotions that drive division. However, they are also potential sites of unification, where activists draw on shared cultural codes to construct collective identities to encourage environmental action. In “Understanding Collective Identity in Virtual Spaces: A Study of the Youth Climate Movement,” Sohana Nasrin and Dana Fisher examine the extent to which collective identity forms on social media for Americans participating in three waves of climate strikes from 2019 to 2020. The authors use survey data collected from 522 climate strike organizers affiliated with youth-led groups (Sunrise, Fridays for Future, etc.) and adult-led groups (Extinction Rebellion, Sierra Club, etc.) to examine hashtag networks and the emergence of collective identity. Overall, and across the three waves, they do not find evidence to suggest that hashtag usage supported the construction of a thick collective identity (one based on horizontal structures of communication that facilitate user interaction). Instead, two central hashtags indicate the presence of a thin collective identity: #FridaysForFuture during the first wave and #ClimateStrike during the second and third waves. In addition to these two hashtags, youth-led groups were also much more likely to use the hashtags #GreenNewDeal, #ClimateJustice, #ClimateAction, and #ClimateCrisis than adult-led groups. Nasrin and Fisher argue that youth-led groups participating in the climate strike are building collective identity differently, most notably through ideologically congruent but subaltern hashtag networks.

Collective identity formation, political polarization, the contested framing of environmental issues, and the larger activities of the environmental movement are key drivers of environmental politics. To this end, the articles within this special issue examine environmental politics using novel methods and unique data sources, while generating new theoretical concepts or applications of existing theory to the study of political conflicts over the environment. This research is critical to environmental sociologists, political sociologists, and political scientists whose research lies at the interface of politics and the environment.

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Author Biography

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