

Fossil Fuel Divestment Activism as Contentious Politics

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POL2351 – Professor Diana Fu

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Outline

1. Background to the campus fossil fuel divestment movement
2. How this project is informed by the contentious politics framework
3. Research method
4. Findings in terms of political opportunities, mobilizing structures, repertoires, and framing

1. CFFD background

- Oct 2011: Swarthmore Mountain Justice begins divestment campaign against mountaintop removal coal
 - Inspirations: Apartheid South Africa (1960s to 1980s), tobacco
- 2011: climate activist group 350.org decides to adapt and proliferate divestment against fossil fuels, Bill McKibben article and Do The Math tour
- Campaigns begin at universities around the world, as well as private foundations, municipalities, churches, and charities
- Interesting model: share a "campaign in a box" to be implemented by self-created student groups who you don't provide resources to (beyond centralized branding) or control

Core messaging

- McKibben: "when you are in a hole stop digging"
- Staying below a 2.0 or 1.5 °C warming target constrains us to not burning most of the world's remaining fossil fuels
 - Financial case: there is a "carbon bubble" of unburnable reserves which will become "stranded assets"
- Contentious in three respects
 1. No competitive party in North America is proposing an end to new fossil fuel infrastructure, or mitigation policies in line with the Paris Agreement
 2. Canadian universities found calls to divest unpalatable
 3. Activists disagree among themselves: liberal/anti-capitalist, if/when/how to escalate, intersectionality
- Brokers tried to focus opposition at fossil fuel industry, not individual administrations – with mixed success

2. Theoretical framework

- Political opportunity
 - From the perspective of the groups that initiated the movement, and for individual campaigns
 - What is the whole campaign meant to achieve, versus who has authority to divest at this school
- Mobilizing structures
 - How groups organize themselves and make decisions (brokers encouraging horizontal and informal)
- Repertoires of contention
 - Spectrum observed from least to most confrontational (broker language re: "forcing" divestment)
- Framing
 - Scientific/technocratic/economic v. "justice" framing

3. Research method

- 3 objectives to the movement: shift institutional investments, delegitimize the fossil fuel industry, motivate and train activists
- Only one success in Canada, so not as productive place to assess which strategies work with university admins
- Public opinion impacts would be a different project with very different methods
- Research question: what effect has CFFD participation had on the political views and behaviour of the people who participated?
 - Semi-structured interviews with campaign organizers, identified by public documents or each other
- For 350.org the purposes were movement building and to share a set of ideas: climate change is about intersectional justice

Data sources

- Personal involvement in Toronto350.org and U of T campaign
 - Provided background knowledge and made me known to many brokers and participants elsewhere
- 58 interview subjects at 21 universities plus broker organizations (min 40 – max 300 minutes, most around 90)
 - Mostly student organizers, but also faculty, administrative staff and others
 - Some significant subject protection concerns: "criminality" in some campaigns and public information that police and intelligence services are targeting climate activists
- Public documents online and on social media, documents from interview subjects

Key semi-structured interview questions

- Were you involved in any activist campaigns before CFFD? If so, how do you think they affected your perspective on effective and desirable forms of activism when you became involved in the CFFD campaign?
- What opinions did you have on activist strategies and tactics before your CFFD involvement? Could you describe the implicit or explicit theory of change which you held at that point?
- Do you recall specifically what motivated you to become involved in the CFFD campaign? What was your early experience in it like?
- Is there anything about [SCHOOL's] history or reputation which affected the campaign's decisions about how to proceed?
- What role(s) did you personally play in the CFFD campaign?
- Which strategies or actions were you involved in developing and implementing?
- How did you feel about the university's responses to your campaign's actions?
- Were any other divestment campaigns happening at the same time? What about contentious activist campaigns with demands other than divestment? If there were such campaigns, how did they affect the CFFD campaign and the university's response to it?
- How were decisions made in your campaign? Were formal decision making processes used and, if so, did you feel that that is where decision making really happened?
- CFFD campaigns are often distinguished by the degree to which they embrace cooperative as opposed to confrontational strategies and tactics. What would you say was the balance in your campaign? Did it change at any point and, if so, in response to what?
- In terms of individual campaigns, do you think people have been more affected by how their campaign conducted itself, or by how their university responded? - Would people have been impacted differently if the university had divested? Could any strategy/tactics have succeeded?
- In what ways did participation in CFFD activism change your behaviour and beliefs?
- Has participation in CFFD activism changed your thinking about allyship between activist campaigns or progressive organizations?
- Are there any other lessons from the CFFD movement in Canada - either for activists or people studying social movements?

Limitations

- Contrast with Freedom Summer
 - One organization with complete applicant and participant lists they shared
 - People who went, and others who were selected and didn't go
- CFFD – no single organization coordinated, individual campaigns run by rolling set of people, limited institutional memory
- Can't generalize to the experience of all participants
 - This would make at least some who have a very "social science" view of political science reject the whole project since you need a random sample to estimate what's true of the broader population
 - My perspective is more interpretive and ethnographic – deep engagement with the people involved yields information you couldn't get with perfect experimental design and randomness but where the cases are just rows in your data table
 - Few political scientists still see the roots of the discipline in history and moral philosophy, but that's my broad perspective – employing statistical analysis doesn't necessarily make your conclusions scientific or generalizable

4. Political opportunities

- Campaigns mostly built to a very similar template, with major strategic decisions encouraged by discrete broker organizations including 350.org and the CYCC – these infused campaigns with a focus on direct holdings in the top 200 fossil fuel corporations by reserved over five years, and encouraged non-hierarchical consensual decision-making structures and a general lack of formality
- University administrations in Canada all responded negatively in terms of the key demands of these CFFD campaigns, though one administration (Laval) did commit to divest through an agreement between the student campaign and the university administration
- Campaigns have suffered setbacks and re-emerged targeting new institutions, and elements from one campaign can be successfully used elsewhere, in part because of campaign coordination and international branding conducted by organizations like 350.org

5. Mobilizing structures

- Most campaigns adopted a deliberately non-hierarchical form of organizing, described in detail by many interview subjects as being voluntaristic and informal, rather than based on formal voting procedures, governing documents, and decision-making institutions, with decisions sometimes being made by a smaller subset of campaign participants or via Internet-based means with selective participation
- In practice "consensus" was not formally or consistently defined, potentially leading to a hidden form of elite decision making within CFFD groups
- Campaigns suffered from a lack of institutional memory and experienced organizers, especially after setbacks and major graduations

6. Repertoires

- Campaigns adopted a spectrum of tactics, in terms of how confrontational they were from the perspective of the university administration being urged to divest. At times, campaigns consciously moved to more confrontational actions to protest incremental decisions made by universities. At some universities, large-scale escalations took place after initial rejections, incorporating non-violent direct action tactics like sit-ins, building occupations, and campouts
- Key strategies emotional: enemy-naming to make an abstract and impersonal issue tangible and about somebody's intent; "story of self" to legitimize demands
- Institutions developed and deployed counter-repertoires to resist student demands – 3 step of publicly agreeing with scientific consensus, listing past actions, and promising non-divestment steps

7. Framing

- Most campaigns adopted a "climate justice" frame emphasizing intersectionality between climate change mitigation and other social justice or progressive issues like income redistribution, migrants rights', the struggle against racism, etc. This affected how they framed their moral arguments, and the alliances they undertook with other on-campus movements, including the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions campaign against Israel
- Campaigns generally presented financial arguments for the prudence of divestment, often rooted in the "carbon bubble" and "stranded assets" arguments affirmed by McKibben's 350.org and others
- In response to campaigns, universities presented themselves as concerned about climate change, citing the authority of international bodies like the IPCC. They cite their actions in terms of curricula and research; as well as building modernizations intended to improve energy efficiency or avoid greenhouse gas emissions. They often took incremental action like implementing some sort of supposed ESG screening for portions of or all of their endowments, established funds specifically mandated to invest in "green" options, and join various worthy international standard-setting bodies for essentially what to do when you are rich and trying to be responsible in a world threatened by climate change

8. Conclusions and questions

- Who cares?
 - Pipeline resistance and divestment have probably been the most active areas of CC activism in North America
 - There is a widespread view that formative political experiences have long-standing importance in lifelong political behaviour
 - All political parties and ideologies are coping with incorporating some answer to climate change into their policy platforms
 - Internal debates and disagreements of the CFFD movement are revealing about the evolving environmental movement
 - Disagreement about whether democracy and capitalism are compatible with a stable climate; what a winning coalition looks like (does leftist solidarity help or hurt by alienating centrists?); social versus technical versus political solutions (what if nuclear and GMOs will help?)
- How should people behave when their policy demands are totally outside the mainstream political spectrum?
- How do you build a winning coalition when building deeper ties with some (like other progressive social justice movements) might marginalize you with others?