

Canadian Campus Fossil Fuel Divestment Campaigns and the Development of Activists

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Supporting materials (external URLs):

- [Key texts](#)
- [Campus Fossil Fuel Divestment \(CFFD\) successes](#)
- [Cross-Canada survey spreadsheet](#)
- [Semi-structured interview questions \(forthcoming\)](#)

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1 | Introduction

Activists hoping to control the severity of anthropogenic climate change see building social movements as a core strategy for making aggressive mitigation politically and economically possible.¹ The push since 2011 to convince various institutional investors to divest from fossil fuel corporations is notable for the speed of its growth and the substantial number of municipalities, faith organizations, universities, and other institutions that have accepted the call to divest. Three core objectives have been articulated by climate activism brokers for the campus fossil fuel divestment (CFFD) movement: delegitimizing the fossil fuel industry in the eyes of the public, changing the behaviour of targeted institutions, and developing student participants into committed and effective activists. While a growing body of scholarly work examines the CFFD movement, as yet there have been no systematic analyses of why campaigns emerge where they do, what relationship exists between the strategic and tactical choices of campaigns and the decisions of target universities, and the effects of participation on activist development. Evaluating these features of the movement would be valuable because it offers a new empirical case of social movement formation (with features that can only be accommodated within the social movement and contentious politics literatures with some theoretical development) and because understanding these features is relevant for everyone trying to integrate the importance of climate change into the study and practice of politics.

The contentious politics literature is particularly useful for studying the CFFD movement

¹Following a common convention in environmental NGOs, I will refer to anyone dedicating their effort to supporting a divestment campaign as an “activist” or “volunteer”, while those whose involvement extends to coordinating the efforts of others are “organizers”, regardless of whether they have a formal title within a divestment organization.

because core concepts including cycles of contention and framing are readily applicable and indeed inform the strategic thinking of pro-divestment actors. First, this research project will provide survey data on the emergence and broad experiences of CFFD campaigns in Canada. Second, it will use a random subset of small and large campaigns (defined by peak volunteer participation) to track cycles of contention between activists and university administrations, using event catalogs and other tools to measure the contentiousness of their interactions and trends across time toward more institutionalized or more radicalized behaviour (as laid out in Hanspeter Kriesi’s typology).^{2,3,4} Third, it will use close engagement with interview subjects and documentary evidence to evaluate the personal consequences of CFFD participation for activists, providing evidence of whether broker organizations’ hopes for activist development are being realized. In short, it will assess whether the high level objectives of climate change activists are being advanced, and what consequences that has for Canadian climate change and energy politics.

The pattern through which CFFD campaigns have emerged reveals a lot about the strategic thinking and capabilities of climate activist broker organizations. By these, I mean groups like 350.org and the Canadian Youth Climate Coalition (CYCC) which self-consciously play this role as defined by Jennifer Hadden: they seek to develop and diffuse strategies and tactics to be applied by highly autonomous local affiliates and allied organizations.⁵ With divest-

²Kriesi, “The Organizational Structure of New Social Movements in a Political Context”.

³Institutionalization can be seen in terms of activists becoming integrated into existing university decision making processes, but it can also be interpreted in terms of the application of Robert Michels’ “Iron Law of Oligarchy” to climate activist organizations, in which “over time, organizations displace their original goals, become wedded to routine, and ultimately accept the rules of the game of the existing system”. S. G. Tarrow, *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics*, 3rd ed. p. 123.

⁴As with Charles Tilly’s work, detailed event catalogs will be an important way of laying out how these acts have been undertaken in different CFFD campaigns Tilly, *Contentious Performances*, p. 13, 39, 67.

⁵A broker is defined minimally as “an actor that links two otherwise unconnected actors”. Among other

ment, they noted the earliest application of the strategy in a climate context by Swarthmore Mountain Justice in 2011, identified it as a strategy that could be used to target any investor organization with some concern about its public reputation, and determined that they could induce the emergence of a large number of campaigns using their limited staff and resources, and without the need to control or provide the resources for these campaigns. Hundreds of campaigns have been undertaken around the world, targeting institutions ranging from museums to private foundations. This makes the CFFD movement overall a good match for Charles Tilly’s definition of an activist campaign: “a sustained, coordinated series of episodes involving similar claims on similar or identical targets”.⁶ 350.org’s central strategy might be defined as “wild growth”: get important new ideas out there — like the need to cap the level of CO₂ in the atmosphere to stabilize the Earth’s climate, or the necessity of keeping 80% of the world’s proven fossil fuel reserves underground — and then providing templates of action that allow local affiliates to work toward making those things politically possible. That’s how an organization with fewer than 100 staff members can claim plausibly to be “building a global grassroots movement to solve the climate crisis”.⁷

While public documents provide clear information on the motivation of brokers for proliferating divestment, they do not provide a very useful analysis of whether their top level goals are being realized. At least publicly, broker organizations maintain an unwavering emphasis on the growth and success of the divestment movement, motivated in part by a

roles, brokers connect well-resourced environmental NGOs with newer climate justice organizations. Hadden, *Networks in Contention: The Divisive Politics of Climate Change*, p. 44, 47.

⁶They also include features of what he defines as “strong repertoires”, including the inclusion of performances that cluster in a limited number of recurrent types (like petitions and sit-ins), similarity in the choice of performances from one round of interaction to the next, and innovation in performances arising chiefly from innovation within existing models. Tilly, *Contentious Performances*, p. 89, 204–5.

⁷350.org, *Our Mission*.

view that the perception of momentum leads to further success. Much of the public rhetoric focuses on “escalating” tactics and “forcing” divestment, particularly with institutions that have made a formal decision to reject divestment, with little consideration for whether these strategies are effective. From a purely descriptive perspective, it is appealing to compare a number of campaigns in terms of the discrete acts undertaken by activists and those they are targeting, from petitions and marches to the establishment and reporting of committees and the release of materials to the media. Cycles of action, response, and counter-response both define the evolving relationship between parties and cause parties to refine their own thinking about appropriate and effective behaviour. Understanding these dynamics requires more than simply cataloguing which institutions have committed to some form of divestment.

One of the most curious features of the fossil fuel divestment movement — often used by opponents as ground for dismissing the effort — is that nobody believes that even divestment by all targeted institutions would achieve the broad goal of defunding the fossil fuel industry or controlling climate change. As such, it is the secondary effects arising from divestment at institutions which can be subjected to activist pressure that ultimately justify the campaigns. Divestment could matter not because a withdrawal of funds from targeted institutions will directly starve the fossil fuel industry of capital, but because it might prompt investors collectively holding much greater assets to consider the ‘carbon bubble’ argument that most of the world’s remaining fossil fuels cannot be used without breaching the 1.5–2 °C temperature limit which has emerged from the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and been re-emphasized in the 2016 Paris Agreement.⁸

⁸This framing has been central to the public case for divestment, in which scientific estimates of the maximum amount of fossil fuel which can be burned without breaching these temperature limits are contrasted

Similarly, by emphasizing the agency and culpability of the fossil fuel industry, divestment seeks to shift political discourse and the range of policy options which are considered and deemed plausible. This dynamic of pursuing secondary effects differs markedly from activist campaigns as generally studied by political scientists, in which those involved are directly injured or aggrieved by the behaviour of the targets and where activists are motivated by the desire for personal benefits.⁹

When it comes to the effect of CFFD involvement on activists, there are three accessible questions of interest:

1. how did participation affect their subsequent political behaviour?
2. how did it shift their perspective on strategies and tactics in climate change activism?
3. and how did it alter their theory of change?

The political behaviour of CFFD activists before and after their involvement can be compared using interviews, surveys, and other sources of information. This includes involvement in the formal political system, from voting to volunteering to sharing partisan messages. It also includes involvement in activist organizations and social movements, including both those with an environmental or climate focus and those motivated by other concerns. Of particular interest is how CFFD experience affects behaviour in relation to movements and organizations where tense questions of allyship and intersectionality persist in the climate movement, such as with movements applying similar strategies to different problems (like

with the much larger size of proven fossil fuel reserves. See: McKibben, *Global Warming's Terrifying New Math*.

⁹See: S. G. Tarrow, *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics*, 3rd ed. p. 22-5.

attempts at driving divestment from Israel) and those which see solving climate change as inherently bound up in changing broader political conditions (such as anti-capitalist, anti-globalization, and decolonization movements).¹⁰ CFFD experience may also be expected to change preferences and perspectives on broad activist strategies and specific tactics such as marches, petitions, and the use of social media. For example, Micah White argues convincingly that the authorities have learned how to neutralize popular activist tactics like large marches and urges the development of alternatives.^{11,12} In particular, perspectives on strategies and tactics in CFFD activism shift as a result of two mechanisms: deliberation within campaigns and cycles of interaction between campaigns and their targets. Theory of change is a form of backward induction in which those seeking social and political change envision incremental steps leading from their desired outcomes to present conditions and theorize mechanisms implementing those steps. Activists' theories range in their degree of sophistication and have evolved with the climate movement, as noted by 350.org founder Bill McKibben:

I thought my job for a long time was just to write about these things. And I was like 27 when I wrote *The End of Nature*. I think my theory of change was, 'I will write a book, people will read it, and then they will change.' ... But it turns out that's really not how change happens, you know? So at a certain point I just figured out it would be necessary to go to work, trying to build a movement.¹³

¹⁰There may be a parallel here with Hadden's observation that the increased number of participants in climate activist networks may lead to a decrease in their ability to affect policy, as more resources are devoted to disagreements between activists.

¹¹White notes: "My mission is to persuade activists to stop ignoring failures and stop repeating tactics". White, *The End of Protest: A New Playbook for Revolution*, p. 40–2.

¹²Notably, a 10,000 person "March for Jobs, Justice, and the Climate" in Toronto in July 2015 got only paltry media attention. Even the 400,000 person People's Climate March in Manhattan in 2014 arguably failed to produce tangible consequences.

¹³Maximov, *Bill McKibben talks about the fight against climate change*.

That effort to build a movement underlies 350.org’s decision-making, including developing their methods to delegitimize the fossil fuel industry and strip it of “social license”, their encouragement of autonomous local chapters free to strategize based on local conditions, and their broad ambition to shift the scope of political possibility to allow rapid decarbonization. For many CFFD activists, the campaign is their first significant personal involvement in attempted political change. Some may become involved with no explicit theory of change. Others may begin with an inchoate or fully developed theory and then find themselves evaluating it against their experience in the CFFD campaign. In any conceivable case — success or failure in calling for divestment, implementing contentious or cooperative tactics — some implicit reexamination of theory of change is destined to accompany CFFD participation, but it isn’t clear what consequences arise from such examination or how they relate to the activist development objectives of brokers. Understanding whether the divestment movement has been as effective a means as it might have been to advance top-level ends, and determining what lessons the experience so far holds for the climate activist movement in general, requires systematic study of the campaigns that have taken place so far.

2 | Theoretical framework

The contentious politics literature which has grown from the work of Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly in the 1990s includes the most suitable tools and explanatory variables for understanding CFFD activism. These core concepts include repertoires and cycles of contention; the construction of meaning (frames for climate change, language and its motivation); mobilizing structures (organization of the movement, decentralization, dif-

fusion of concepts and strategies); and the balance of opportunities and constraints (political opportunities, the effect of context on strategy success).¹⁴

The features of climate change, including the scale of the problem and urgency of action, mean it must be considered within a theoretical framework that is able to incorporate more fundamental changes than those arising from the normal functioning of democratic politics, rising to the level of revolution.^{15,16} Indeed, a central question is whether democracy and capitalism are sufficiently flexible to let humanity avoid catastrophe, or whether any real success in stabilizing the climate will require abandoning one or both.^{17,18} At least two potential routes connect climate change to revolution: in the optimistic pathway, it takes a systematic reconstruction of global political and economic systems to avoid catastrophic warming while, in a pessimistic scenario, the global political and economic order collapses as a consequence of uncontrolled climate change and the mass disruption, relocation, and conflict it creates. Because revolutions have consistently been among the political phenomena it seeks to explain, the contentious politics framework has the scope to consider such radical transformations in the pursuit of planetary stability, including whether the effects of divestment on institutions and activists are steps along the path to revolution or an incrementalist

¹⁴In a 2017 article, McAdam specifically examines “the expansion of political opportunities, the availability of mobilizing structures, and cognitive and affective mobilization through framing processes” to try to explain why climate change has led to “surprisingly little grassroots activism” in the U.S. McAdam, “Social Movement Theory and the Prospects for Climate Change Activism in the United States”.

¹⁵See: McAdam, S. Tarrow, and Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*, p. 193–226.

¹⁶McAdam discusses barriers to action which include the extended time horizons involved, lack of emotional salience, and the effectiveness of fossil fuel industry lobbying. McAdam, “Social Movement Theory and the Prospects for Climate Change Activism in the United States”.

¹⁷For a good discussion of internal tensions in the environmental movement based on disagreements about capitalism, see: Dauvergne, *Environmentalism of the Rich*.

¹⁸See also chapter 6 “Fruits, Not Roots: The Disastrous Merger of Big Business and Big Green” in: Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*, p. 191–229.

distraction that buys into too many of the assumptions of the existing order.¹⁹

One partial model for studying the CFFD movement and activist development is Doug McAdam's 1988 *Freedom Summer*.²⁰ The central focus of that book was the effect of participation in the Freedom Summer civil rights project organized by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee in Mississippi in the summer of 1964. While unfortunately nobody has records of comparable quality and completeness about CFFD participants, McAdam's work nonetheless engages with many of the central themes of this project, including tensions between multiple high-level activist objectives, the effect of participation in one campaign on subsequent activist behaviour, and the evolving repertoires favoured by broker organizations. In practical terms, McAdam's work suggests methods for conducting surveys, locating interview subjects, and acquiring and analyzing relevant documents. Jennifer Hadden's 2015 *Networks in Contention* is also useful thematically and methodologically, particularly in terms of evaluating the role of broker organizations within climate change activism, mechanisms for studying activist networks and ideational diffusion through them, and tensions regarding the appropriate construction of meaning around climate change.²¹ One other book that has relevance both in terms of subject matter and methodology is Doug McAdam and Hilary Schaeffer Boudet's *Putting Social Movements in Their Place: Explaining Opposition to Energy Projects in the United States, 2000–2005*.²² First, McAdam and Boudet raise the danger of attributing too much importance to social movements as opposed to other factors

¹⁹Tilly also sees the revolutions of the 18th century as models for modern social movements. Tilly, *Contentious Performances*, p. 126–30.

²⁰McAdam, *Freedom Summer*.

²¹Hadden, *Networks in Contention: The Divisive Politics of Climate Change*.

²²McAdam and Boudet, *Putting Social Movements in their Place: Explaining Opposition to Energy Projects in the United States, 2000–5*.

when explaining political outcomes. Just because a social movement seeking a particular objective existed before some bit of progress toward that objective took place, that doesn't mean the movement was the cause of the progress.²³ Second, they raise the danger of selecting on the dependent variable and only looking at cases where movements did emerge, as opposed to conditions where mobilization was possible but may or may not have taken place.²⁴ This methodological point partly explains the appeal of carrying out a survey of the presence or absence of climate and CFFD activism at all Canadian universities, as well as a special interest in any schools where climate activist groups emerged but did not choose divestment as a strategy.

2.1 Repertoires of contention

Sidney Tarrow identifies “repertoires of contention”: a flexible variety of forms of action employed by activists in contentious campaigns. These forms of action change in the short term as political opportunities and constraints shift and in the long term as broad societal conditions like the functioning of capitalism and the state evolve.²⁵ “WUNC displays” — demonstrating worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment — are a central part of climate activist repertoires, whether they consist of marches, sit-ins, petition signatures, donation boycotts, or other specific mechanisms. The application of repertoires in cycles of action and response gives rise to cycles of contention, both between activists and their targets and within activist and university institutions seeking to respond to the demands and conditions

²³McAdam and Boudet, *Putting Social Movements in their Place: Explaining Opposition to Energy Projects in the United States, 2000–5*, p. 183–6.

²⁴Ibid., p. 2.

²⁵S. G. Tarrow, *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics*, 3rd ed. p. 98.

they currently face:

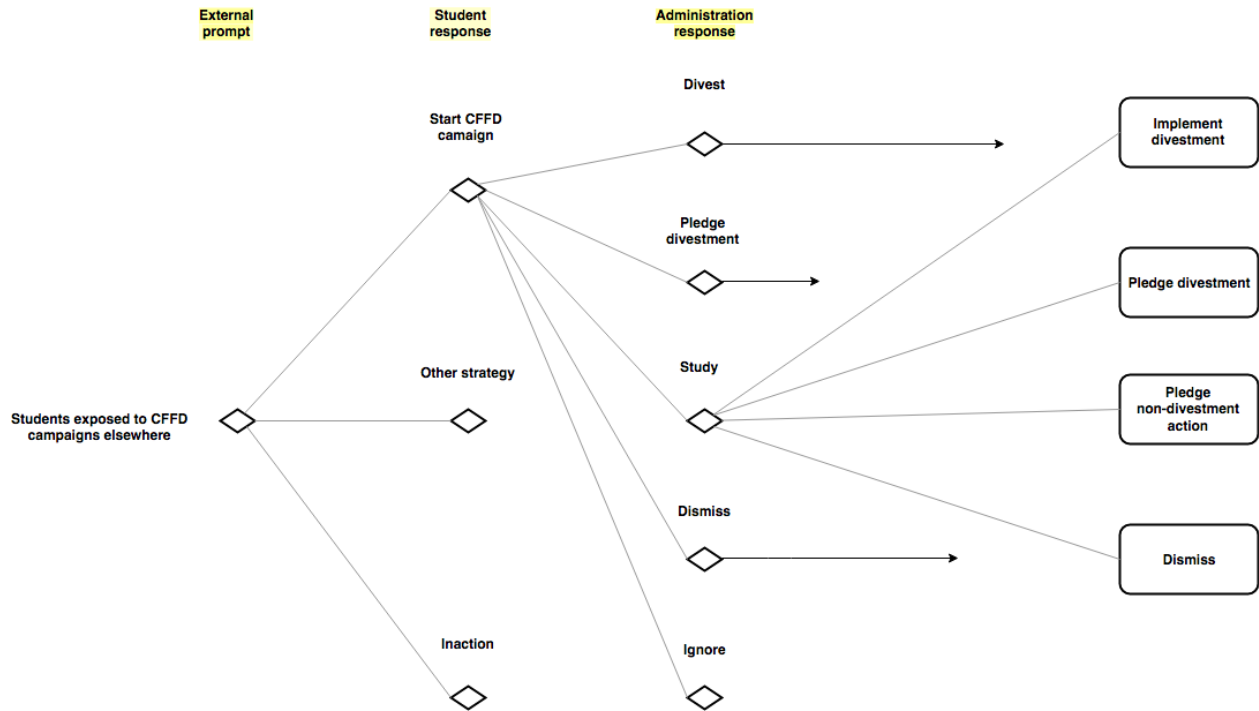


Figure 1: Observed institutional responses

This diagram could be further complicated by incorporating responses from the campaign to each stage of decision making. Universities commonly form committees to study the question and make recommendations, for instance, and CFFD campaigns can choose whether to accept the legitimacy of the university’s proposed approach and seek to convince the committee, or alternatively to reject the process as somehow inadequate or invalid and to lobby in other ways. Differing expectations about what kind of institutional behaviour is reasonable and how to respond are a key source of contention within divestment campaigns and may do much to explain both the evolution of their strategies and tactics and the influence they end up having on activist development. An additional further complication is that cycles of decision making and response function at different paces: while an activist

group might read a university's media statement and deploy op-eds and rallies within hours, formal administrative processes may only respond to activist actions months after they occur. Indeed, as processes of delay and response extend and overlap, it ceases to be entirely possible to describe an action by one party entirely as a response to a precisely bounded set of actions by another.

Divestment as a high-level strategy is itself drawn from the repertoire of options open to on-campus climate change activists. Key features position it within the broad universe of options for responding to climate change. It's non-violent and incrementalist, not focused on individual responsibility or voluntary individual action. It emphasizes the agency of fossil fuel corporations which are portrayed, first, as morally culpable causes of the problem of climate change and, second, as active and strategic political actors working to maintain a political, legal, and economic climate in which their existing business models remain valid and their fossil fuel reserves remain valuable.²⁶ Criticism of divestment as a strategy comes from all sides, including anti-capitalists who say that it presupposes the validity of capitalist forms of economic organization, those who assert that curbing demand for fossil fuel energy is more important or plausible, and those who assert that technological development and the efficient functioning of markets in the absence of government regulation will itself prevent severe climate change.

The conduct of divestment campaigns again comprises the selection of forms of action from the broad available set. The means of choosing used are highly relevant for determining

²⁶The inverse framing treats fossil fuel producers as apolitical means through which demand for their products is satisfied, neutralizing the argument that they are responsible for the consequences. One common argument against divestment is that efforts to restrict fossil fuel supply are pointless and all efforts to control the severity of climate change should be grounded in reducing demand.

which are chosen and how participants feel about it: campaigns can be small and united or large and fragmented or factional. Campaigns may be deeply committed to procedural forms of democracy or informally dominated by a socially influential and mutually supportive clique.²⁷ They involve participants with different personal relationships to the university, including those who are only students, those studying and employed by the university (many graduate students), administrative staff, faculty, alumni, donors, and others. Campaigns also vary in their approach to allyship and intersectionality, with some seeking common cause with other organizations and movements simply because they see their goals as laudable but unrelated, or because they see the efforts of both groups as part of a broadly-integrated progressive political agenda. Others see the risk of alienating some supporters or muddling their messages as reasons to be skeptical about tying their fortunes to those of other campaigns. In one view, a CFFD campaign grows out into a broader pool of supporters through mutual endorsements; in another, requiring CFFD supporters to also agree on a range of unrelated issues further and further narrows the set of people who will enthusiastically support the campaign. This split mirrors a broader one in the climate change activist movement, with some seeing a broad progressive coalition incorporating many social justice issues as the most plausible path to successfully avoiding dangerous climate change, with others seeing instead the need to remain subject-specific and work toward a pan-partisan consensus to implement and sustain climate mitigation policies.²⁸

²⁷See: Freeman, *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*.

²⁸The Citizens' Climate Lobby clearly embodies the latter strategy: remaining strictly focused on climate change and aspiring to become a credible source of advice for decision makers of all partisan persuasions through cooperative tactics.

2.2 Construction of meaning

Climate activists and reluctant universities compete vigorously about the suitable framing of their social roles — responsibility for the consequences of their investments, for instance, compared with the obligation to maximize their wealth, as well as how ‘political’ universities should be and which choices are political and which are not. In a CFFD context, some key framing decisions include the extent to which campaigns should put forward their argument in terms that are already accepted and familiar in universities, such as the argument that fiduciary duty requires them to consider the regulatory risk that future climate change legislation will impact the profitability of coal, oil, and gas firms. Divestment campaigns must deal with the objection that universities are not or ought not to be ‘political’ or that their response to issues of justice should exclusively take the form of teaching and research.²⁹

In terms of framing climate change as a broad policy problem, a lively debate is ongoing between those who favour a technocratic and scientific approach which supposedly benefits from the apolitical and convincing character of science to those who favour a deeply normative and intersectional “climate justice” framing in which climate change is seen as symptomatic of global injustices including colonialism and exploitation. Likewise, activists sharply disagree about emotional and psychological questions of persuasion: will the presentation of dire scenarios arising from uncontrolled warming motivate action or resignation and apathy? Will presenting the development of renewable forms of energy in terms of

²⁹See: “Why should the university ‘take sides’ in this matter? Is it appropriate for the university to take stances on social and political issues?” and “Shouldn’t U of T fight climate change through research and education?”: Toronto350.org, *The Fossil Fuel Industry and the Case for Divestment: Update*, p. 132–3, 151.

independence from energy imports from unpopular foreign governments and presenting decarbonization as a vehicle for jobs and growth overcome ideological and partisan opposition? When making public claims about climate science and policy, should experts simply state what they believe to be true in the standard jargon of their disciplines or should they craft the form and content of their messages to produce the kind of public and elite responses which they see as necessary?

All of these debates and unresolved questions about the construction of meaning, the use of language, and the motivation behind communication add to the utility of studying climate activism through a contentious politics framework.

2.3 Mobilizing structures

The particularly challenging structure of climate change as a moral and political problem has ramifications for the mobilizing structures encountered by activist organizations and their consequences for top-level objectives including activist development and changing institutional behaviour. The costs of climate change are diffused across space and time, with many falling on people in the future and on non-human nature. The problem arises inadvertently as a consequence of a huge range of desirable and essential human behaviours, from agriculture to recreation. If understood as an obligation to rapidly abandon fossil fuels in favour of other forms of energy, the costs associated with climate change mitigation are highly concentrated, including on political jurisdictions with valuable fossil fuel reserves and on fossil fuel corporations themselves. Especially in the short term, the tangible benefits any individual can hope to realize by reducing the severity of climate change cannot plausibly

outweigh the personal costs associated with taking action. These problems — which form part of what Stephen Gardiner categorizes as the “perfect moral storm” of climate change — partly explain why some people see no path to success within politics as usual.³⁰ Great disjunctures between the resources available to fossil fuel corporations and supporters of the *status quo* within governments and those accessible to climate change activists also play a substantial role in determining the organization of the movement, its degree of decentralization and informality, and the reliance on internet-based communication channels and networks of personal relationships to diffuse strategies and tactics.

The emphasis on mobilizing structures within the contentious politics framework is relevant to the emergent organization of the climate change activist movement and the involvement of allies in the labour movement, indigenous rights movement, and other related networks. Decentralization is a key feature of climate activism, which is spread out not only geographically but between organizations of different types in different domains. In at least one way, this is useful from a research perspective since various organizations that lack strong pre-existing relationships and channels of communication end up doing a lot of their deliberation about objectives and strategy through the media and public documents. These public deliberations, along with analyses of what one another’s efforts have yielded so far, are key channels for the diffusion of concepts and strategies and the evolution of activist repertoires and theories of change.

³⁰See: Gardiner, *A Perfect Moral Storm: the Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change*.

2.4 Political opportunities

The contentious politics framework also incorporates political opportunities and constraints as explanatory factors, drawing upon aspects of the social movement literature which often overlap with the contentious politics literature. Sidney Tarrow argues that “people engage in contentious politics when patterns of political opportunities and constraints change ... by strategically employing a repertoire of collective action, creating new opportunities, which are used by others in broadening cycles of contention”.³¹ Many key features of the political opportunities facing CFFD activists are entirely beyond their control: the established decision-making structures and procedures of universities, the personnel in influential positions, the school’s long-term relationship with sustainability issues, etc. CFFD activists can nonetheless tailor their approach based on an analysis of these factors, selecting a bespoke repertoire which maximizes the odds of influencing a particular administration. Such flexibility is one motivation for 350.org’s general approach to relations with local affiliate groups, which are both permitted and encouraged to tailor their objectives and approaches to local conditions.

The climate activist and CFFD movements are also mindful about the plausible possibilities for change differ across timescales. Particularly when starting with very reluctant targets, the first stage can often be to simply make people aware of the existence of a policy demand, for example ‘keeping fossil fuels in the ground’. The contentious politics literature recognizes the concept of a ‘policy window’, delineating the boundaries of what kinds of proposals might be seriously considered at any point in time. The broad ideational changes in

³¹S. G. Tarrow, *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics*, 3rd ed. p. 28–9, 32–3.

the minds of policy makers and the general public being promoted by climate activist groups are partly motivated by the desire to shift such windows. Similarly, a key part of the rationale for divestment campaigns is to shift the thinking of even highly resistant organizations by having their peers take into consideration the financial risks and moral consequences associated with investing in the fossil fuel industry, spreading an expectation that this is normal and expected business practice.

The presence and demands of other ongoing activist campaigns represent an important feature of the balance of opportunities and constraints facing CFFD activists. Establishing mutually supportive networks with such campaigns — and even formally linking demands when directing statements and actions toward the university administration — has the potential to engage greater numbers of students and strengthen WUNC displays. At the same time, the comparatively sympathetic treatment given to CFFD campaigns at most universities contrasts with the more immediate and vociferous rejection often experienced by campaigns such as BDS against Israel. Indeed, some evidence suggests that one of the main subjects of concern for university administrations considering fossil fuel divestment is whether doing so would set a precedent which would need to be followed in more controversial cases. If so, and if institutional response is the main goal being pursued, consciously distancing CFFD from other activist demands may be a sound strategy. If, however, activist development is the main objective, the picture becomes much more mixed. There is a long-standing view that a key explanation for why people remain engaged in activism is because of continuing ties to other activists, which may be enhanced by taking a broad approach to

allyship.³² At the same time, debating and undertaking alliances that are contentious among activists may exacerbate interpersonal conflicts which drive people out of the CFFD movement, and perhaps activism generally. Empirical data on what proportion of activists are driven out of CFFD organizations because of internal conflict, as well as about the subject of disagreement, would be valuable for those seeking to balance these considerations about allyship.

3 | Literature review

So far, only a small set of scholarly analyses of the CFFD movement have been published as theses, book chapters, and articles.³³ None examines more than a handful of campaigns, or seeks to identify broad patterns and outcomes in the CFFD movement. Nierika Hamaekers' master's thesis is one of the few existing comparative accounts which seeks to explain variation in institutional responses, with the University of Glasgow and Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam as case studies. Theo LeQuesne's account of efforts in the University of California system does a good job of showing cycles of contention, where each new administrative response prompts a reevaluation of which activist performances best suit the new conditions. This can also be seen in non-scholarly accounts of as-yet unsuccessful campaigns at universities including Harvard, Yale, McGill, and UBC. Other accounts describe the divestment movement in general, without substantial empirical research on any specific campaigns. Some of this, like Leehi Yona and Alex Lenferna's "Fossil Fuel Divestment Movement within Universities", includes limited discussion of the effects of participation on activists. Related

³²See: McAdam, *Freedom Summer*, p. 237.

³³I have created a spreadsheet tracking scholarly work by campaign.

literatures also exist about other campus divestment campaigns, including tobacco, South African apartheid, and BDS.³⁴

There are also some examples of anti-divestment analyses. Indeed, a 2015 report prepared for the National Association of Scholars may well be accurate in calling itself “the most thorough encyclopedia of collegiate fossil fuel divestment activism published to date”.³⁵ In an interview about the 300 page report, the author argues that CFFD activists have a strangely roundabout strategy: “The organizers’ goal is not to cause colleges to divest, but to anger students at the refusal of colleges to divest fully and to turn their frustration into long-term antipathy toward the modern fossil fuel-based economy”.³⁶ Other critics see divestment as mere symbolism, a capitulation to corporate capitalism, or as an insufficient response to the scale of climate change.³⁷ Critical accounts — academic, journalistic, and popular — are useful insofar as they are part of the context in which activists must frame their arguments and policy prescriptions, and insofar as they are demonstrative of the political and ideological climate in which CFFD activism is being undertaken. Even reputable media outlets like *The Economist* restrict their discussion of the seriousness of climate change and the need for rapid decarbonization to articles specifically about that subject, while otherwise maintaining an editorial stance that economic growth is the greatest good and that largely business-as-usual politics is either desirable or inevitable.

In summary, the existing CFFD literature suffers from three major defects. To begin

³⁴See p. 39–43 <https://www.sindark.com/phd/thesis/proposal/CFFD-proposal-1-1.pdf>

³⁵Peterson, *Inside Divestment: The Illiberal Movement to Turn a Generation Against Fossil Fuels*, p. 10.

³⁶redhotconservative.com, *Takeover of American Universities*.

³⁷For a decidedly non-academic example, see: Wrong Kind of Green, *McKibben’s Divestment Tour - Brought To You By Wall Street*.

with, analyses to date have concentrated on a single campaign or a small set — usually those in which the authors have been personally involved. So far there have been no broad comparative studies of many campaigns which have taken place at similar institutions. They have also concentrated heavily on institutional response as an outcome: did the targeted university wholly reject the campaign, make some non-divestment concessions, or commit to divestment? Analyses to date have also been self-consciously motivated by a desire to help the movement succeed, or to shape it in particular directions like greater emphasis of the ‘climate justice’ frame or an intersectional approach to allyship.^{38,39} For those seeking to understand the broad societal consequences for the movement so far, and the ways in which it differs from related social movements, a less partisan approach may be more helpful. This is not to say that a more comparative study which takes into consideration analysis of a wider variety of intended outcomes would not support the success of divestment going forward, but rather that this analysis should be motivated to the largest possible degree by an ideal of disinterested and impersonal analysis, rather than the aims of making readers into more fervent divestment supporters or more strongly convinced that the effort has been worthwhile and effective.

The primary audience for this dissertation will be scholars of politics seeking to understand the changing character of climate change and energy politics in Canada. It also includes those for whom the specific objectives of the CFFD movement are less relevant than theoretical and empirical questions about how social movements in general operate and

³⁸See, for instance: [Is divestment working?](#)

³⁹In part, 350.org’s active efforts to attract and motivate activists interferes with their ability to engage publicly in debates about the effectiveness of activist tactics, lest they dispirit people with talk of failure or strain alliances with other social justice movements.

how they influence societal outcomes, as well as how social movements operate in relation to transnational issues and through modern electronic communication networks. In part because no large comparative analyses of many campaigns have yet been undertaken, it should be of interest to climate activists themselves: both those undertaking campaigns targeting specific institutions and decision makers and those seeking to more broadly examine how the efforts of the movement are or are not shifting the broad political context toward one where decarbonization pathways compatible with a 2 °C or 1.5 °C temperature limit become possible. This analysis of institutional outcomes and activist development could be very usefully complemented by work undertaken by others on the influence of CFFD activism on public perceptions of the fossil fuel industry and the factors considered in investment decision-making by other bodies, including entities like banks and hedge funds which are less sensitive to public pressure. It would also be useful to consider this work alongside comparable analyses of other regions where CFFD campaigns have emerged and influenced university behaviour, including the United States, United Kingdom, and Europe, as well as fossil fuel divestment efforts at institutions including municipalities and faith organizations.

4 | Hypotheses

The strategic choices that do the most to maximize the odds that a target institution will divest do not align perfectly with those that best satisfy the preferences of many activists, or those that most effectively train and motivate large numbers of students to persist in climate change activism. One major explanation is that activist organizations and universities must justify themselves to very different audiences which apply incompatible criteria when eval-

uating the appropriateness of their conduct. Important structural features also distinguish activist organizations from universities, including the type and quantity of resources they have available and the timescale emphasized in decision making.

Likely, the balance of opportunities and constraints within universities will do more to explain variation in responses to divestment campaigns than the strategic choices of the campaigns themselves. This includes relevant precedents in how previous non-fossil fuel divestment petitions have been dealt with, along with broader patterns of institutional decision making with regards to matters of environmental sustainability and engagement with contentious political issues broadly. It also includes the decision making structures and processes empowered to make divestment decisions, and the personnel occupying positions of influence.

Two broad variables seem most likely to explain variation in activist development between CFFD campaigns. The first is the social character of the organization and the subjective experience of participation, whether it's a tight-knit group of friends with similar objectives and perspectives on strategy or broad collective or set of factions seeking to determine campaign choices through internal democratic structures. Factors like the timing and depth of involvement from faculty, staff, and alumni and the level of activity in other ongoing on-campus activist campaigns can be expected to influence this social character. The second is the developing pattern of action, response, and counter-response between the campaign and the administration. In cases where universities undertake what seem to be inclusive good-faith efforts to seriously consider the divestment proposal and where concrete steps toward that end are promptly undertaken, the development of cooperative relations and the

institutionalization of divestment activists and their concerns into university structures can be considered more likely. With dismissive or hostile university administrations, a pattern of escalation and radicalization within campaigns can be expected, along with a greater willingness to ally the CFFD organization with contentious demands from others which the university is unlikely to accede to.⁴⁰

5 | Research design

The core methodology is to begin with a survey of all of Canada's approximately 100 accredited universities, using a screening of conventional and social media along with interviews with administrators, student government, and faculty to determine if any climate change activist group is present on campus, and whether any such group has initiated a fossil fuel divestment campaign. This would provide summary statistics on the incidence of such groups and campaigns. A random set of large and small campaigns would then be examined in much greater detail to illuminate the cycles of contention and factors affecting activist development which are the main topics of investigation.

5.1 Case selection

Case selection would begin with a relatively quick review to see whether any university has been a site for meaningful climate change or CFFD activism since 2011. This would include:

⁴⁰Interpersonal conflict within climate activist groups may be exacerbated by adverse selection: as sharp disagreement and social tensions drive the most conflict-averse to participate less, deliberations take place more and more between people willing to engage in strenuous argument. Concerted efforts by such groups to be inclusive and democratic may feed this dynamic, since the most combative individuals are left with a protected platform from which to express their views.

1. Searching Google, Twitter, and Facebook to identify any 350- or Fossil Free- branded campaigns at the institution⁴¹
2. Scanning a suitable news database for the name of the institution and “divestment”, “climate change”, and “fossil fuel”⁴²
3. Contacting the university administration to ask about whether any relevant campaigns have taken place
4. Contacting the student government with the same question
5. Contacting a small sample (up to 5) faculty members with specializations in environmental science or policy to ask about whether any campaigns have happened

Data from the screening would be collected into a spreadsheet and would form the starting point for more detailed examination of a subset of cases.

This process could be used to screen all accredited Canadian universities, based on Statistics Canada’s Revised Tuition and Living Accommodation Costs (TLAC) survey, which has been conducted annually since at least 2007 and includes 110 educational institutions.⁴³ In addition to identifying most cases where climate activist groups or campaigns are present, this screening would provide useful survey data on which schools have groups of campaigns and if those universities share characteristics like size and location. Using multiple methods for identifying campaigns and organizations will also give me a bit of error checking capa-

⁴¹Not all CFFD campaigns use either branding. For example, the campaign at King’s College London was run by King’s College Climate Emergency while the group at Columbia is called Columbia Divest for Climate Justice. Presswood, *Kings College London has agreed to divest from fossil fuels*.

⁴²I used my paper for the 2017 Canadian Political Science Association conference to test some approaches to test some methods for identifying activist individuals, organizations, and frames from media coverage: <https://cpsa-acsp.ca/documents/conference/2017/Ilnyckyj.pdf>

⁴³See: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1bggNUTjmp3VDhF3Qck4NJGwBbh9iT2kk0IZPTyedmKg/edit?usp=sharing>

bility. It would be interesting to see if there are cases where some on-campus sources are aware of campaigns while others are not.

To check the effectiveness of this method, I would begin with accredited universities in a single medium-sized province, such as British Columbia (B.C.). The TLAC survey includes 20 B.C. educational institutions. This would allow me to evaluate the effectiveness of the fast screening process described above before applying it to the Canada-wide set.

Communication with university administrations and student unions would be attempted by email and telephone simultaneously, while faculty contact would be attempted first by email. To reduce long-distance charges, telephone calls will be made via Skype.

In cases where CFFD campaigns are found, I will contact someone publicly associated with the effort and ask for an estimate of the total number of activists involved at the peak of the campaign. The main reason for being interested in both larger and smaller divestment campaigns is the expectation that they will differ in their internal processes of deliberation and decision making. In particular, larger campaigns may be expected to adopt more formal mechanisms and be less defined by personal relationships, though such relationships between influential and dedicated activists are sure to be important in campaigns at all scales.⁴⁴ Based on the information from the preliminary screening, I will be able to identify how many schools are above the threshold of having no CFFD campaign at all, which have ‘minor’ campaigns, and which have a ‘major’ campaign, defined in terms of some lower limit for peak number of volunteers, to be set once the data is collected showing the complete distribution of estimated peak campaign sizes. I will then randomly select cases of CFFD campaigns from two sets,

⁴⁴See: Freeman, *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*.

perhaps 3–10 cases of minor campaigns and 3–10 cases of major ones. I could then add back a few schools with climate activist groups but no CFFD campaigns as controls and to avoid selecting on the dependent variable. In addition, I would add back any successful Canadian cases, where university administrations have committed to at least partial divestment. This will ensure at least some variation in the dependent variable, as far as institutional response is concerned. As of August 2017, only L’Université Laval is in that category.

5.2 Methods

For universities where campaigns exist or did exist, contacting publicly-identified spokespeople would allow the campaigns to be categorized as large or small, based on a threshold number of volunteers active during the busiest period so far. A feasible set of small and large campaigns could then be randomly selected, in order to try to avoid selection biases. It would likely be desirable to start with a single small and a single large case in order to evaluate how many cases it will be feasible to consider in total. The campaigns at the selected set of institutions will be studied on the basis of media accounts, university and activist publications, and interviews with activists, decision-makers, and other influential members of university communities. These will be used to develop event catalogs, where the actions of activists and responding universities are categorized and tracked by frequency, tracing interactions between claim makers and respondents across multiple episodes.⁴⁵ For ongoing divestment campaigns, participant observation of the kind employed by Curnow and Gross, as well as

⁴⁵See: Tilly, *Contentious Performances*, p. 211.

Grady-Benson and Sarathy, could be a useful complement to interviews.^{46,47} Interviews will be semi-structured, with a fairly consistent set of branching open-ended questions asked of participants in various campaigns. The open-endedness of questions is intended to avoid confining interview subjects to pre-prepared frames of thinking or hypotheses, while the use of a consistent set of topics with different subjects is intended to enhance the comparability of information from different activists and campaigns.

Campaign members will be asked about their groups' choice of tactics, the processes of decision-making employed, the kinds of contention that arose within the campaign and between the campaign and other bodies, and their own explanations for why they experienced the outcome they did, in terms of institutional response. This will allow for examination of the first major research question, regarding how activist repertoires have been shifting as a result of the responses to their demands. Where communication channels to past volunteers still exist, they could be used to seek subjects for surveys on their experiences within campaigns, thoughts about campaign functioning and internal decision-making, and subsequent activist and political behaviour. This will support analysis of the second major research question, regarding how participation in CFFD activism is shifting activist beliefs and behaviour. This analysis could be supplanted with documents and records from the campaign, including any minutes or recordings of meetings, as well as any communications or personal recollections that research subjects choose to share.

In some cases, claims about causes and effects can only be subjectively evaluated. For

⁴⁶Curnow and Gross, "Injustice Is Not an Investment: Student Activism, Climate Justice, and the Fossil Fuel Divestment Campaign".

⁴⁷Grady-Benson, "Fossil Fuel Divestment: The Power and Promise of a Student Movement for Climate Justice".

instance, perceptions on the internal dynamics of campaigns are largely subject to personal interpretation which is likely to vary between individuals. Similarly, individual explanations about how participation in campaigns affected their subsequent behaviour — and which features of the campaign explain the changes — cannot be objectively or unambiguously confirmed. Nonetheless, an interpretive account generated from discussions with a large number of participants would have value in assessing the core questions of this research project, allowing for the more robust defence or rejection of hypotheses. Furthermore, in some cases objective data will be available: about which universities had climate activist groups and CFFD campaigns form, what institutional responses the campaign evoked, and to some degree what effect the experience of the campaign has had so far on activist organizations (in terms of numbers of volunteers, general level of activity, prominence in the media and community, etc). Objective information can also be collected about forms of decision making (formal or informal, democratic or otherwise), the number of people active in campaigns (or at least attending meetings), and the causes and consequences of disagreements. Collectively, these information sources have the prospect to support or refute claims about how campaign behaviours influence institutional outcomes, as well as what impact CFFD participation has had on activists.

5.3 Potential problems

The most likely problems associated with this project arise from the decentralized and uncoordinated character of the CFFD movement. In stark contrast with McAdam's exceptional document access for Freedom Summer volunteers (including not only contact informa-

tion, but also their applications to take part and follow-up surveys) no central organization even has a list of a significant proportion of students working toward divestment on Canadian university campuses.⁴⁸ Indeed, many campaigns probably don't even have a single list of supporters with contact information. This raises the obvious practical problem of getting in touch with potential research subjects, while also raising more insidious problems of bias. It is likely that there will be systematic differences between activists and organizers who I am able to identify and contact and those who I am not. For instance, media spokespeople identified in news stories are among the easiest of organizers to contact, but are not likely to be representative of all campaign participants. This bias is especially relevant when it comes to trying to explain why some activists remain involved while others do not. People who have been driven out of CFFD campaigns by disagreements about strategies or alliances — or even simply through dislike of their internal contentiousness — can be considered unlikely to respond to surveys or interview requests.

A related issue is temporal instability and lack of institutional memory in CFFD campaigns. Student-led campaigns experience high turnover, including among key organizers. They also rely on *ad hoc* decision making, record keeping, and communication systems such as Facebook and Google Docs. Particularly since I will be using a methodology where campaigns are selected randomly — rather than on the basis of which are largest, most successful, or most thoroughly documented — it's likely that the documentary information available will be incomplete, fragmentary, and potentially biased. This is especially true in relation to campaigns which are no longer functioning as an active concern, or those that shut down

⁴⁸See: McAdam, *Freedom Summer*, p. 8–9, 186–90.

for a period before being reinstated by new people or a new organization.

At least a few methods are available to try to access comprehensive information about CFFD campaigns. A key target will be the most comprehensive contact lists maintained by campaigns, whether they consist of an email list, a Facebook group, or another mechanism. Outreach through such lists could be rendered more effective by emulating some of McAdam's methods and seeking to get influential figures within the climate activist movement to endorse this research, and include a brief form of their endorsement in materials sent to prospective interview subjects. When it comes to potential research subjects who have been alienated from the CFFD movement, it may be productive to include specific language appealing to them, perhaps by explaining that their input could help organizations avoid their negative experiences in the future. It may even be productive to create entire messages designed to reach out to ex-CFFD activists, offering them the chance to discuss their experiences (anonymously or without attribution if preferred).

While I do not yet have authorization to conduct research involving human subjects, I have been consulting with CFFD activists and members of broker organizations about research design and methodology. There is a substantial appetite for systematic analysis of outcomes arising from the movement. At the same time, there is little institutional capacity to undertake or even strongly support such research: activists tend to be committed to working on the most pressing issues of the moment rather than devoting time to analysis which may only be valuable in the longer term. Also, activists and organizers can be wary about sharing or publicizing any information about their efforts which may be interpreted in a negative light. Both of these factors support the value of undertaking this research as an

academic project, with critical distance both from the most urgent areas of work and from any feeling of obligation to portray all outcomes as positive and productive.

In developing the methodology for this project, the most commonly expressed concern is that it seeks to answer too many different questions and is therefore not well matched in scale to a PhD project. While I am sympathetic to the idea, for instance, that it would be neater to focus exclusively on the relationship between activist strategies and institutional outcomes, or exclusively on how the experiences of campaigns have shaped activist development, I think an adequate answer to the latter question requires a detailed examination of the former. I suspect that the most important factor affecting how activists develop as a result of CFFD involvement is the cycles of contention which they experience — evaluating that possibility requires that both types of information be collected from each campaign being studied. A related criticism is that this proposal lacks a neat ‘puzzle’ of the following form: the theoretical framework being employed here produces a specific prediction that appears to be at odds with the empirical evidence, therefore this project will seek to investigate the anomaly. Framing this project in terms of such a puzzle would be putting the cart before the horse, however, since no extensive comparative assessment of CFFD campaigns has yet been undertaken. While it’s certainly possible to develop hypotheses about the main research questions, it presumes too much to make empirical claims so strong that they can be expressed as a puzzle.

5.4 Subject protection

When studying many areas of climate change activism, subject protection concerns are acute. Activists are targeted by private corporations whose plans they oppose, as well as police and intelligence services with extensive technical capabilities and the assistance of telecommunication corporations. In particular, there is ample recent evidence of anti-pipeline activists being targeted with techniques ranging from surveillance of their communication to infiltration by undercover agents. These concerns are much less acute in the context of CFFD activism. Potential risks do exist, including the possibility of retaliation from resistant university administrations, corporations targeted by divestment campaigns, or members of the public hostile to climate activism or the CFFD movement. In some cases, the young ages of some of those involved in CFFD may be relevant for research design.

Despite these lesser causes for concern, subject protection will nonetheless be borne in mind when making choices about interview and survey questions, as well as designing data protection and confidentiality policies. In particular, interview subjects will need to be given clear guidance about what, if anything, to disclose about acts of civil disobedience and any other illegal actions. It will also be necessary to have a protocol developed in advance to address any requests for access to research materials from outside parties, including the U of T administration, as well as police and intelligence services. In particular, the sensitivity of interpersonal conflicts within CFFD campaigns must be considered in order to give research subjects a credible belief that their participation in this research will not produce adverse consequences for them.

6 | Draft chapter outline

1. **Issue context** Divestment as a tactic, climate change activism, and the CFFD movement — results of cross-Canada survey
2. **Literature context** Contentious politics, protest as performance, social movements as vehicles for mass political change
3. **Repertoires of activists and their targets** Diffusion of strategies and counter-strategies, cycles of contention on multiple simultaneous scales
4. **Issue framing in CFFD activism** Activist, government, industry, and university framing — normative disagreement embedded and expressed in framing
5. **Resource mobilization in CFFD campaigns** External support; coalition-building; volunteer recruitment, retention, and effective deployment
6. **CFFD campaigns and political opportunity** Avenues to campaign success
7. **Climate activist networks** Broker organizations and individuals, diffusion of strategies and tactics, normative and ideological diffusion
8. **Consequences of participation** Psychology, skill development, theories of change
9. **Conclusions** Evaluation of hypotheses, opportunities for further work

7 | Tentative timeline

The intended total timeline for this project is two years from the approval of the proposal by my committee and the department to the submission of the final dissertation text and dissertation defence.

August 2017 Finish proposal and get departmental approval

September–October 2017 Finish ethics protocol and get IRB approval, complete most background reading

November 2017 Survey test province, review screening process

November 2017 Initiate contact with identified brokers

January–February 2018 Complete cross-Canada survey, select cases, begin detailed literature review⁴⁹

March–April 2018 Develop detailed data sets on CFFD campaign participants and university officials involved in responding; begin formal interviews and the collection of campaign documents

June–August 2018 Complete principal data collection and literature review

September–October 2018 Write issue and literature context chapters

November 2018 Write repertoires chapter

December 2018 Write framing chapter

January 2019 Write resource mobilization chapter

February 2019 Write political opportunity chapter

March 2019 Write networks chapter

April 2019 Write activist development chapter

May 2019 Write conclusions

June 2019 Complete full manuscript, circulate to committee members and reviewers, incorporate feedback

July–August 2019 Incorporate changes

September 2019 Dissertation defence

⁴⁹The literature review and survey results may be plausible to present at a conference or write up as a stand-alone paper.

8 | Bibliography

Note: ‘Link rot’, in which links become ineffective because online resources are removed or relocated, is a persistent problem for academics referring to online sources. As a means of partially mitigating this problem, I will be submitting web addresses to the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine (<https://archive.org/web/>) for archiving. If an online resource has become unavailable, please try searching for it there. I plan to use the same procedure for the final thesis.

My reading list for the project is available in a supporting document: [Key texts](#)

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