

Contentious Politics and Learning in Anti-Pipeline Coalitions

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Figure 1: Keystone XL and Northern Gateway routes. Figure: Anežka Gočová



1 Summary

With the Canadian and United States (U.S.) governments unwilling to adopt climate change policies compatible with avoiding warming of over 2 °C, climate activists have focused on blocking fossil fuel infrastructure as a means of curtailing total human greenhouse gas (GHG) pollution. These efforts have increasingly involved efforts by environmentalist groups to reach out to potentially allied organizations and social movements, including unionized labour and racial justice movements like Black Lives Matter. Critically, anti-pipeline movements have established and deepened linkages between environmentalists, members of faith communities, and indigenous peoples. While it is strategically motivated for climate activists, this alliance-building is also provoking a re-evaluation of environmentalist thought, both in terms of theories of change and in terms of deeply held normative beliefs. Within the anti-pipeline coalitions we can see many of the central cleavages in contemporary environmental politics, including perspectives on capitalism, disagreements about tactics and strategy, protest as performance, and responses to the corporate capture of the state. Using

the case studies of the movements opposing the Keystone XL (KXL) and Northern Gateway (NGP) pipelines and a methodology centred around interview-based network analysis, this project will closely examine the processes of alliance formation in the context of pipeline resistance and examine how participants in these coalitions are learning and experiencing gradual changes in their deep core beliefs as a consequence of cooperation.

Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith hold deep core beliefs to be highly resistant to change, seeing cases where it takes place as “akin to a religious conversion”.¹² In the context of environmental politics, however, slow change in deep core beliefs is evident on several fronts. First, environmentalism itself can be characterized as a profound critique of previous political philosophies which took for granted the unlimited ability of the Earth to supply raw materials for human purposes and absorb wastes. All political theories have had to respond to this criticism, admittedly sometimes by rejecting it completely and re-asserting their cornucopian conception of political economy irrespective of biophysical planetary limits. Second, the earlier forms of environmentalism which were deeply rooted in biocentric as opposed to anthropocentric ethics and the extension of rights to non-human animals are being challenged on normative bases that draw attention to issues like poverty and development, as well as the cultural rights and traditions of communities including indigenous peoples. Third, the seriousness and urgency of climate change are altering the thinking of environmentalists, particularly by adding pressure to build alliances with the potential to create prompt and enduring policy change, even if doing so exacerbates tensions within environmentalist movements or requires sacrificing lesser objectives.

Thus, the core research questions at the centre of this project are:

1. What alliances have emerged between groups of different types that have worked together to oppose bitumen sands pipelines in Canada and the U.S., and how did those alliances form?
2. How has the formation and operation of these alliances begun to shift the deep core beliefs of all participants?

2 Literatures and theoretical framework

This project will primarily be contributing to the political science literatures on social movements and contentious politics, though I will also be engaging with the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF). The social movement and contentious politics literatures provide both theoretical frameworks which may be applicable in the cases of anti-KXL and anti-NGP resistance, as well as comparative cases of environmental activism and resistance to major energy infrastructure projects. These movements are contentious in at least two key senses: they have policy demands which are well out of line with those offered by mainstream Canadian and U.S. policy-makers or parties, and they have major internal disagreements

¹Jenkins-Smith et al., “Belief system continuity and change in policy advocacy coalitions: Using cultural theory to specify belief systems, coalitions, and sources of change”, p. 3.

²Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, *Policy Change and Learning*.

about objectives, strategies and tactics, and the desirability of alliances. Aspects of the ACF are readily applicable — including the emphasis on learning, and efforts to use scientific knowledge to drive change — while these cases challenge the conventional assumptions of the ACF by having essentially contested geographic scopes, policy change at a much more rapid pace than expected by the ACF, and theories of change that focus on developments within rather than outside the relevant subsystem.

3 Methods

Content analysis of newspapers and online news sources will be used to identify KXL and NGP opponents who may be amenable to interviews. This will be done in part through electronic databases of news stories, including Factiva and Canadian Newsstand.

Two stages of interviews with activists will be conducted: with a first set done remotely via telephone or Skype and a second done in person as part of a research trip from the Gulf Coast of Texas to Kitimat and the Haida Gwaii. Interviews will be semi-structured, with branching chains of questions. Interviews will also be used to identify individuals and groups involved in resisting these pipelines. A range of consent options will be offered, running from permission to made free use of recordings and transcripts to the most restrictive option, where recordings will only be kept long enough to make non-identifiable transcripts which will be kept confidential.

Because this project focuses on the emergence of coalitions and their effect on participants, it is less vulnerable to new political developments than the focus on KXL and NGP might suggest. In place of these pipelines, scholars could examine the proposed Dakota Access Pipeline, Energy East, Kinder Morgan, or any number of others in democratic states around the world. What's important to this analysis is not whether these specific pipelines end up being built — though processes of review, approval or rejection, and re-proposal speak to the notion of cycles of contention — but rather the ways in which collaborating to work against fossil fuel infrastructure construction are affecting and even reconstituting social movements.

4 Case selection

Climate change activists have targeted new fossil fuel infrastructure because of the idea that it will 'lock in' future GHG pollution. Facilities like coal mines, pipelines, and export terminals have high up-front costs and are expected to operate for decades. Once such facilities are in operation, the associated jobs and tax revenues (as well as the losses associated with shutting them down prematurely) create formidable political barriers to their deactivation.³ While economy-wide climate change policies like carbon pricing are intended to discourage investments which are wasteful or inappropriate in a low-carbon future, neither the Canadian nor U.S. governments have implemented sufficiently ambitious policies to pre-

³Canada's shameful history of asbestos mining is an example of the phenomenon.

vent infrastructure development. Indeed, planned growth in Canada’s bitumen sands is of such a magnitude that it threatens to negate GHG pollution reductions in all other sectors of the Canadian economy, as well as invalidate Canada’s climate change mitigation targets.⁴ Resisting fossil fuel infrastructure provides a geographic anchor for what would otherwise be nebulous opposition to climate change as a global phenomenon; this links opponents with a global climate emphasis with those whose concerns are local, based around protecting water or land rights. Infrastructure resistance movements have also been key venues for alliance formation, and thus potentially for gradual change in the deep core beliefs of participants.

This research study centres around a network mapping methodology. The two networks being studied are those that have worked to oppose the KXL and NGP pipelines. Within the population of people who engaged in at least some active opposition or resistance to either pipeline, I intent to expend more effort to contact and interview people from indigenous and faith communities.

The proposed 830,000 barrel per day (bdp) TransCanada Keystone XL (KXL) pipeline would run from Hardisty, Alberta (200 km southeast of Calgary) to Nederland, Texas (130 km East of Houston) on the Gulf of Mexico. Resistance to the KXL pipeline has become a model for anti-fossil fuel activism, and a focus of strategic analysis. In 2011, Tar Sands Action — a climate activist group soon incorporated into 350.org — called for individuals and organizations to join a large act of civil disobedience protesting KXL outside the White House in Washington D.C.⁵ Ultimately, 1252 people were arrested in protest. Many other anti-Keystone actions took place, ranging from bird-dogging of President Obama (who had the final say over the cross-border portion of the pipeline) to 10,000 people surrounding the White House in November 2011 to physical blocking of pipeline construction in Texas.

Not only was this anti-Keystone action widely covered in the media, but it has been taken by many commenters (including within the fossil fuel industry) to be emblematic of an emerging form of resistance against fossil fuel infrastructure projects. America’s Natural Gas Alliance President and CEO Marty Durbin has publicly discussed the threat arising from the “Keystonization” of all new fossil fuel infrastructure.⁶ Naomi Klein’s concept of a global “Blockadia” resisting fossil fuel development and “extractivism” is described as emerging partially from KXL resistance.⁷ KXL is also of critical interest for this research project because it represents an important stage in the ongoing process of alliance formation. The model provided by the anti-KXL movement continues to be relevant. In a public conference call including 350.org co-founder Bill McKibben and 350.org staffer and member of the Mathais Colomb Cree Nation Clayton Thomas Muller, the KXL protests were specifically cited as inspiration for current actions resisting the Kinder Morgan expansion in British

⁴See: Oil Change International, The Natural Resources Defense Council, and Environmental Defence, *Tar Sands: The Myth of Tidewater Access*.

⁵The action was described beforehand as involving “a wildly diverse range of protesters — Nebraskan ranchers and teachers from Wisconsin, Texan landowners and indigenous leaders in Canada, some of the country’s top scientists and a few celebrities”. Lukacs, *Canada’s PR work for tar sands: dirty, crude and oily*.

⁶Gardner, *Natural Gas Boom Prompts Questions in Congress on the Industry’s Future*.

⁷Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*, p. 139–41.

Columbia.⁸ With the election of Donald Trump in the U.S., the prospect of KXL actually being built has been renewed, but the actual outcome in terms of the pipeline is not of principal interest in this analysis. Rather, the coalition that has emerged to contest the proposal and its implications for North American and global environmental politics is the subject of study.

The proposed 525,000 bpd Enbridge Northern Gateway pipeline (NGP) would run from Bruderheim, Alberta (50 km northeast of Edmonton) to Kitimat, British Columbia (700 km northwest of Vancouver). The NGP case is an important comparison in terms of both the role of indigenous communities in anti-pipeline activism and the judicial politics of fossil fuel infrastructure projects.⁹ The route of NGP through British Columbia raises particular issues related to indigenous rights in unceded territory.¹⁰ While tanker traffic from exports has been identified as a substantial cause of opposition in the case of NGP, such criticism has not been prominent in the case of KXL, though some have used the argument that it will support exports rather than domestic U.S. energy needs as an argument against it. Including the NGP case will allow for analysis of whether multi-jurisdictional alliance formation has any special characteristics, as well as whether different patterns of land ownership in Canada and the U.S. affect activist cooperation or strategy.

The two cases also involve both overlap and separation when it comes to individuals and groups involved in resistance: few grassroots activists are likely to have been directly involved in resisting both pipelines, national and international indigenous rights, aboriginal, and faith groups have resisted both. Particularly in terms of a detailed network analysis of environmental, faith, and indigenous groups, these two cases therefore present the opportunity to map the contours of normative thinking and theories of change within anti-pipeline and anti-fossil fuel infrastructure movements more generally.

5 Hypothesis

At a minimum, attempts at cooperation put the deep core beliefs of members of faith communities, environmentalists, and indigenous peoples under tension. This is both in terms of the central normative underpinnings of their worldviews, and in terms of their theories of change in policy and public perception. People can be expected to respond to this tension in different ways and its existence contributes to the internal contentiousness of climate change and pipeline politics. At the same time, the possibility that deep core beliefs can be sufficiently reconciled to produce a durable coalition with a credible program of action

⁸How to cite? An open group video call featuring 350.org organizers on 2016-11-16. Groups taking part in anti-Kinder Morgan actions include 350.org, Leadnow.ca, Greenpeace Canada, the Council of Canadians, and the Canadian Youth Climate Coalition.

⁹Klein describes “an unprecedented coalition of Canadians who oppose the project, including a historic alliance of Indigenous groups in British Columbia”. Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*, p. 302.

¹⁰Another key question for the Trudeau government at the intersection between energy, climate, and indigenous policy is whether and how it will implement the principle of free, prior, and informed consent from the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

creates some possibility that climate policies in Canada and the U.S. may eventually support mitigation of a sufficient magnitude to help minimize the worst impacts of climate change.

6 Bibliography

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