

The Campus Fossil Fuel Divestment Movement in Canada 2012–19

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Outline

- I'm going to stick to the 15 minutes I was allocated. This is based on 63 interviews and years of observation of the movement, so I can provide more detail on anything in the discussion or privately after
- I will provide an extremely brief history and introduction; explain the theoretical framework; and summarize findings from my research

One minute history of the movement

- Swarthmore Mountain Justice adapted the divestment tactic previously used for tobacco and South African apartheid for mountaintop removal coal mining in 2011
- The climate change NGO 350.org and the CYCC decided to promote the formation of divestment campaigns in Canada
- At least 40 were formed at accredited universities
- So far, Laval and very recently Concordia are the only schools in Canada that pledged divestment – though some have set up fossil free funds or adopted new general screening practices for investment (ESG)

Explaining the persistence of the status quo is easy

- The influential people want things that way, and non-influential people don't have the power to change it
- Suggests almost a paradox of politics: how does change happen when those in privileged conditions always want to maintain the broad status quo?
 - Who holds power can change, as can the preferences of those who already have it
 - Material conditions can change, like a long drought diminishing the profitability and influence of farmers
- We're seeing both in climate change politics: some status quo actors realizing how much they have to lose, and an insurgent activist movement trying to solve climate change and other issues

Permanent relationships are important

- In an episode of the British political comedy "Yes, Minister" a civil servant explains: "But that's how the civil service works, in practice. Each department is controlled by the people who it's supposed to be controlling... You see, every department acts for the powerful sectional interest with whom they have a permanent relationship."
- University administrations have relationships with donors and corporate sponsors that outlast undergraduate degrees
- Financial experts need to protect the notion that their fees are justified by their unique and exceptional abilities – if students or activists can give better advice than them it undermines their role and claim to value
- Dedicated activists know they will be interacting with one another for the indefinite future – may be a partial explanation for outraged responses to incremental but positive steps

Contentious politics

CFFD is contentious on at least three levels:

1. Climate activists calling for keeping temperature increases below 1.5-2.0 °C have no mainstream parties to support with credible plans to meet that goal
2. Divestment campaigns involve controversial efforts to persuade universities to act – and have as a top level strategic priority weakening the social license of the fossil fuel industry
3. The movement is highly internal contentious, along with the climate and environmental movements generally. People have very different analyses of the causes of the problem and the appropriate program for solving them

Framing is the biggest area of contestation

- The point about internal contentiousness links up with what I will be saying about framing at the end of the talk – the climate change activist movement is contentious in that it does not have an internal consensus on the root causes of climate change or ideal strategies for combating it, not to mention its relative importance compared to other threats and issues

So CFFD politics is contentious

- Contentious politics is a theoretical framework developed by sociologists Charles Tilley, Sidney Tarrow, and Doug McAdam and applied to the analysis of many movements seeking large scale change from a political status quo and events like revolutions, popular uprisings, and other mass mobilizations
- It emphasizes particular features of the behaviour of activist organizations, relying on theatrical metaphors: the activists choosing certain actions from the repertoire available to them. That creates cycles of contention where people challenging the status quo act, and there is some response in turn from the people they are seeking to persuade, compel, or force

Findings

- These are super top level – there is more detail in the handout and through the links it contains
- And, of course, the dissertation to come – intent to publish it under a Creative Commons license as soon as it is available on TSpace as a PDF

Political opportunity

- At the level of 350.org – three top level objectives for the movement
 - Get institutions to divest, delegitimize the fossil fuel industry, and develop and train activists
 - The organization is clear that they consider the first objective the least important: universities are more important as influential societal actors than as investors
- Individual campaigns generally not very tailored – used the standard campaign in a box "ask" and messaging
- Campaigns which have been rejected have pursued venue shifting strategies, like how the Leap Manifesto campaign at U of T is targeting individual colleges rather than the central administration again

Repertoires

- Campaigns draw from a common set of tactics ranging from the most cooperative (providing information and taking part in university-established processes) to the most confrontational
- Two central emotional strategies: enemy naming and story of self. The first seeks to establish moral culpability on the part of the fossil fuel industry. The second, to bolster the legitimacy of activists' policy demands by making an emotional connection with the audience
- Most campaigns attempt a hybrid "inside / outside game" strategy, seeking to convince the administration while also building campus support
- The successful Laval campaign emphasized that they used the same approach as rejected campaigns elsewhere
- Pro-fossil fuel actors have developed energetic and sophisticated counter-repertoires, both specifically for divestment and for climate change action generally

Mobilizing structures

- In addition to setting much of the aims and messaging for CFFD campaigns, 350.org encouraged an informal, non-hierarchical organizational style
- Most campaigns eschewed governing documents, elected positions, and formal decision making
- Campaigns almost always use "consensus" for decisions, but that is almost always interpreted as a lack of stated opposition
- Broker organizations provided some ongoing support, but campaigns were entirely self-governed. They did generally stick closely to the campaign in a box

Framing

- A key split within the climate change activist movement is between those who see a stable climate as the end goal and accumulating CO2 as the problem and those who see climate change as a symptom of an underlying problem like capitalism or colonialism
- Intersectional activists think multiple social justice problems should or can only be solved together through a broad coalition based on solidarity. More focused climate activists see it is more urgent than other issues, and question whether other goals will necessarily help stabilize the climate
- This has implications for messaging and alliance building: should anyone pursuing social justice be an ally? What if that alliance reduces the odds the administration will act on climate?
- McKibben said the climate movement must be "protean... in every place, in every culture, and in every shade of ideology" yet approaches like the Green New Deal and Leap Manifesto appeal only to those with certain ideological views. Doesn't durable climate change policy require enough consensus between governments to keep each from undoing the work of the last?