Canadian Campus Fossil Fuel Divestment Campaigns and the Development of Activists

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1) What's the puzzle?

Since 2011, climate change activists have taken the strategy of divestment, which has previously been used against tobacco companies and firms associated with apartheid in South Africa, and turned it against the fossil fuel industry. In particular, they have sought to get institutional investors including universities to commit to withdrawing their investments in the industry. The campaign has three strategic purposes, as described in materials from organizations promoting and coordinating it like 350.org: to change the institutional behaviour of universities, to affect the broad public perspective on the fossil fuel industry, and to develop and motivate student activists.[1] So far, nobody has done a systematic analysis of whether these top-level aims are being achieved. The objective of changing societal views on the fossil fuel industry is outside the bounds of this research project, but the questions of what explains institutional outcomes and consequences for activists are causally bound, normatively important, and subject to empirical examination. How does the institutional context in which a campaign takes place (including a university's personnel, policies, any divestment precedents, etc) interact with the strategies and tactics of the campaign to affect the chances of different outcomes, ranging from ignoring the campaign to actually implementing divestment? How do more collaborative and more contentious approaches fare in combination with more and less sympathetic administrations? What factors within campaigns affect the consequences they have for students in terms of their subsequent political and activist behaviour, and what should those patterns suggest to people who are trying to prioritize the efforts of climate change activists? To what degree does the degree of campaign

[1] Groups including 350.org and the Canadian Youth Climate Coalition (CYCC) self-consciously play the 'broker' role in climate activism described by Jennifer Hadden — actively diffusing strategic guidance and resources to numerous divestment campaigns.

success affect future activist behaviours? Also, in what ways do more and less contentious tactics affect the behaviour and theories of change of the activists involved? How do strategic choices on allyship and intersectionality affect both institutional outcomes and activist development, as well as the relationships between climate change activism and other social justice movements?

The causal connection between institutional outcomes and the development of activists arises from the cycles of claim-making and response which characterize campus fossil fuel divestment (CFFD) campaigns. The ongoing movement can be thought of as a pipeline running from behaviours to outcomes, or as cycles of contention. Students either form climate activist groups or do not; chose divestment as a tactic or do not; adopt a variety of different tactics and strategies in seeking to influence university behaviour; and experience different responses from universities, as well as different experiences within the CFFD campaigns themselves.

At first blush, having so many questions may seem impractical or demonstrative of a lack of focus; instead, I hope to show that the questions about institutional outcomes and the questions about activist development are necessary background to each other and that close analysis of CFFD campaigns on the basis of only one or the other would be too limited to explain either well. Furthermore, looking at both institutional outcomes and activist development is helpful for those seeking to understand progressive social movements with multiple overlapping objectives which are sometime in tension, including the Indigenous resurgence in North America, Black Lives Matter, and efforts to confront economic inequality.

2) Why is it puzzling? Why is it important?

It's hard to describe a pattern of outcomes as puzzling before a reasonable data set has been collected. 350.org catalogues divestment successes at a variety of institutions, but neither activists nor academics have yet sought to review where divestment campaigns have emerged or what effects they end up having on institutional and activist behaviour.[2] We can construct some hypotheses on the basis of existing literatures, including those on

[2]As documented in my full proposal, a number of academic analysis of 1–2 campaigns have been undertaken, but the selection has been idiosyncratic and the sample size too small to reveal general trends. I have created a spreadsheet tracking scholarly work by campaign.

prior divestment campaigns, the social movement literature broadly, and the contentious politics literature specifically: for instance, that campaigns will follow trajectories toward greater institutionalization or greater radicalization depending on internal dynamics and the responses to their demands (within Hanspeter Kriesi's typology). Before collecting data on the distribution of campaign outcomes, we can identify features of the movement which are anomalous within contentious politics theory. Specifically, CFFD activism is unusual because it has inflexible core demands (stop fossil fuel use), it is not driven by personal grievance, and because the mechanism of influence from university divestment to avoiding dangerous climate change is indirect.

The importance of studying the CFFD movement is much easier to explain. Divestment and pipeline resistance have been the two principal campaigns of 350.org since its inception, each as a means of "building the global grassroots climate movement". Looking at the Swarthmore Mountain Justice campaign for divestment from mountaintop removal coal mining starting in 2011, 350.org recognized a model which could be easily replicated at many institutions — from municipalities to schools to private foundations to churches — without the central organization providing material resources or specific direction to individual campaigns. This possibility for wild growth made the strategy practical to apply, but it is the theory of change behind it that explains why it was actually chosen and sustained. That theory is threefold: (1) the ultimate target is the decision-making structures which set global climate and energy policy, and the means for influencing them are (2) changing public opinion (in the deep sense of changing what citizens see as technically and politically possible, like a world without fossil fuels) and (3) building the grassroots network of activists who will drive better climate outcomes in jurisdictions around the world. Universities are both institutional actors whose behaviour can be influenced and communities where people emerge and develop as activists; in 350.org's ideal case, multiple important objectives can be simultaneously achieved in this context. Whether this is really happening, however, cannot be discerned by simply looking at the growing list of institutional divestment commitments at https://gofossilfree.org/commitments/. It requires a systematic survey of universities which are potential targets, close engagement with the people who have been involved in trying to

convince them, and examination of those who are responding to activist demands.

Discerning trends in how the CFFD movement is or is not achieving its core objectives will interest scholars examining the influence of social movements in contemporary Canadian politics as well as scholars of environmental politics seeking to track the methods and influence of the climate activist movement.

3) What have others said? What are the possible explanations?

While it extends beyond political science into sociology and other fields, the theoretical framework and body of literature on social movements is most applicable to understanding the effects of the CFFD movement on institutional behaviour and activist development. The literature incorporates a multitude of relevant explanatory variables, including political process, identity formation (including how social relations more than personal interests can explain participation in activism), and political opportunity. The contentious politics literature associated with the work of Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly is sometimes situated within the social movements literature, but which also examines broader political processes, including those that extend beyond everyday politics into revolution and other large-scale social and political changes. It emphasizes the presence of cycles of contention between activists making demands and authorities and institutions responding. This theoretical framework incorporates many of the explanatory variables which may help with understanding how CFFD activism is changing institutional outcomes and activist development. The cycles of contention framework incorporates repertoires of contention (strategy and tactic selection, performing for an audience), mobilizing structures (organization of the movement, decentralization, diffusion of concepts and strategies), the construction of meaning (frames for climate change, language and its motivation), and the balance of opportunities and constraints (political opportunities, the effect of context on strategy success).

Charles Tilly's conceptualization of activism as a set of performances drawn from a repertoire has significant explanatory potential both for the strategic decision making of individual campaigns and for the behaviour of divestment brokers. It helps to explain variation between campaigns and across time in individual campaigns, both as activists respond to changes in context and as internal discourse leads to them changing their perspectives and chosen

strategies. The perspective of activism as performance also includes the idea of performing for multiple audiences simultaneously, seeking to influence university administrations, the broad investment community, and potentially politically active students. Framing is another key dimension of climate change activism, and also of ongoing contention within the movement. Should scientific and technical frames be emphasized because they seem pragmatic and well-matched to the styles of decision makers, or is a broader justice framing a valuable mechanism for building a winning coalition? How can frames which emphasize the overriding importance of financial performance be rebutted? Literature on political opportunity likewise has value for explaining why change may be especially likely at certain moments (such as when new leaders take power), and for choosing activist performances which can still achieve worthwhile ends at times when the desired institutional response is especially unlikely to be achieved.

So far, only a handful of scholarly analyses of the CFFD movement have been published as theses, book chapters, and articles.[3] 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 literatures also exist about other campus divestment campaigns, including tobacco, South African apartheid, and the BDS campaign against Israel.[4]

[3] I have created a spreadsheet tracking scholarly work by campaign.

[4] See p. 39–43 https://www.sindark.com/phd/thesis/proposal/CFFD-proposal-1-1.pdf

4) What's your best guess at this point?

News reporting, public relations from universities, and the public outreach of divestment groups allow us to identify the range of institutional responses which have taken place, and to develop preliminary hypotheses about what explains variation. It seems clear that the most rapid victories are possible when a focused divestment campaign based around cooperative strategies meets a like-minded administration which is willing to act from the get-go. In Canada so far, only L'Université Laval is in this category. Much more commonly, campaigns are divided in their preferences on strategy and find themselves universities which are skeptical or hostile. In these cases, campaigns must choose between contentious performances coupled with ideal but unrealistic demands, working gradually toward incremental progress, or emphasizing objectives other than changing institutional behaviour, such as activist development. There is preliminary evidence that campaigns which are more focused in their claims and demands, seeking divestment only from the fossil fuel industry or the most problematic subset thereof, are more easily able to drive institutional action that those that make broader justice-based calls to action which are harder for universities to interpret and implement. The differential effects of campaigns more or less committed to intersectionality and allyship on activist development cannot be discerned at this stage of research, though it's quite possible that bonds of solidarity and mutual support mean activists who take part in broadly intersectional and justice-based campaigns will develop more enduring ties to activist communities.

When more time has passed and more universities have decided how to act on CFFD demands, it will be possible to better understand ongoing institutional learning within both activist groups and university administrations. It seems likely that two self-reinforcing patterns will emerge: one of deepening contention (radicalization) at schools where activist demands are consistently rejected and divestment groups choose more and more contentious tactics in response, and another where activist concerns are meaningfully incorporated into university policy-making and CFFD activists join existing university decision-making institutions (institutionalization). This may echo the trajectories of states where more or less public concern about climate change exists and where institutions are configured to facili-

tate or impede climate action, with a coalition of states institutionally and politically poised to act moving collectively toward decarbonization (though perhaps still not fast enough to avoid dangerous climate change as defined by the Paris Agreement) and another bloc of recalcitrant states using one another's inaction as ongoing justification for fossil fuel use.

For many participants, the contentiousness of the CFFD movement may work against brokers' aspirations that participation will train and motivate them for further work. Campaigns are not only in contention with universities that resist their demands and national governments unwilling to seriously pursue decarbonization, but are also characterized by internal contention about tactics and objectives and tensions with other social justice movements. It would be valuable to assess the degree to which the stress associated with participating in a campaign dissuades rather than encourages further involvement in climate change activism. It would also be interesting to examine whether campaigns which make a greater effort to use democratic or consensus-based decision-making experience higher or lower levels of conflict, and what effect that has on activist development. There are likely to be tensions between strategic choices that optimize the odds of institutional action versus those that maximize activist development, in part because the kinds of activist performances that reassure and encourage administrators are often unsatisfying and seen as insufficiently bold by those committed to promoting justice.

5) How will you know if you're right or wrong?

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. 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.[5] A

[5]For CPSA2017 I conducted a trial run of reviewing media reports to identify campaign spokespeople within climate activist organizations.

feasible set of small and large campaigns could then be randomly selected, in order to try to avoid selection biases. The campaigns at this set of institutions could then 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. For ongoing divestment campaigns, participant observation of the kind employed by Curnow and Gross, as well as Grady-Benson and Sarathy, could be a useful complement to interviews.

Campaign members can 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, both in terms of institutional decision making and activist development. 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.

In some cases, claims about causes and effects can only be subjectively evaluated. For instance, perceptions on the internal dynamics of campaigns are largely subjective and 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). 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.

Appendix: Observed institutional outcomes

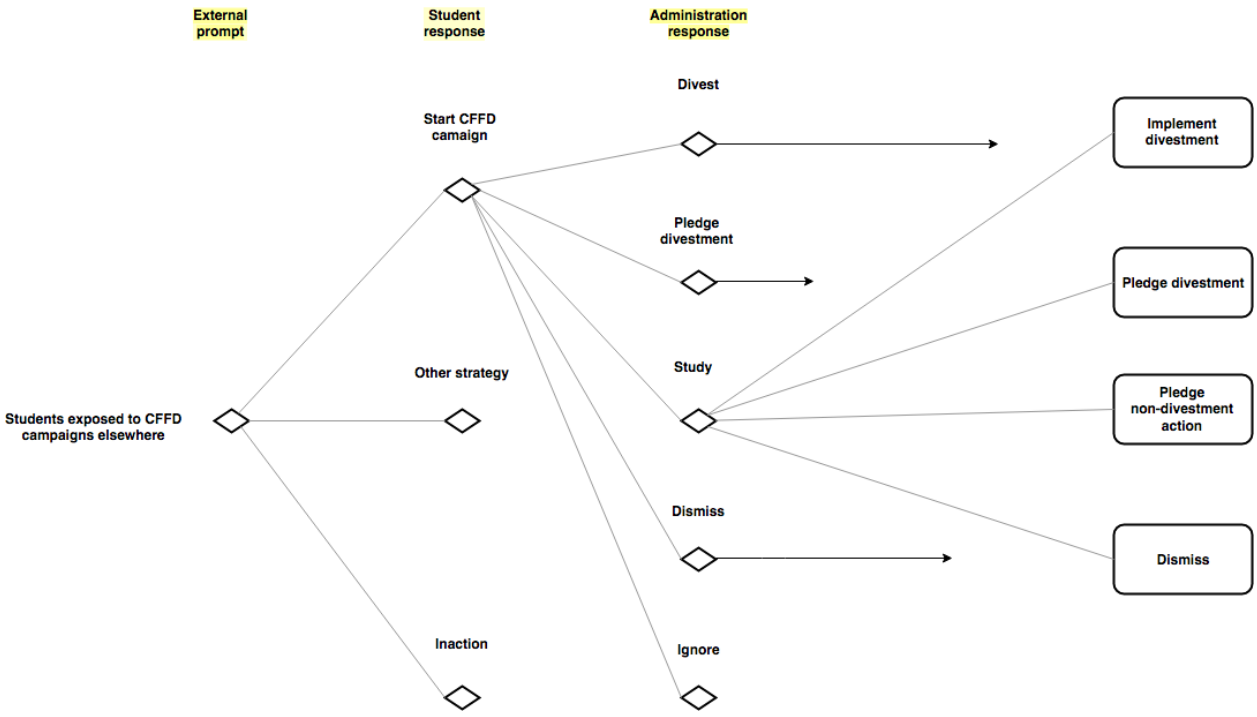

Figure 1: Observed institutional responses