

# The Contentious Politics of Campus Fossil Fuel Divestment Campaigns

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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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## Land acknowledgement

The settler-colonial city of Toronto is in the “Dish With One Spoon Territory”. The Dish With One Spoon is a treaty between the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas, and Haudenosaunee that bound them to share the territory and protect the land. Subsequent Indigenous Nations and Peoples, Europeans, and All Newcomers have been invited into this treaty in the spirit of peace, friendship, and respect.

I am grateful to have had the chance to live and to engage in research and activism on Dish With One Spoon land.

# 1 | Context

Among contemporary North American social movements, climate change activism is notable for its rapid growth, level of activity, and impact to date on policy outcomes. Within the movement, on-campus climate change activist movements (and the campus fossil fuel divestment (CFFD) campaigns they undertake)) have appealing features from the perspective of empirical and theoretical research in political science. By examining the operation of activism within a single broad institutional context, some controls are automatically introduced. The targeted decision makers (university administrations) share many characteristics, including financial and legal concerns, their place in society, and broad decision-making practices. Student activists are also from similar social groups and the same political generation.<sup>1,2</sup> The movement for campus fossil fuel divestment CFFD is also time-bounded, with the first campaign at Swarthmore in 2011. With these similarities, prospects for meaningful analysis in variation in outcomes are strengthened. Also, because the CFFD movement is being undertaken principally by young people and developing students as activists, it will reverberate in subsequent political activity, in ways potentially similar to the anti-war protests of the Vietnam War era.

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<sup>1</sup>Following a convention used in some 350.org groups, I will be using “activist” and “volunteer” interchangeably to refer to anybody who has exerted some meaningful effort in a campaign, while “organizers” are those who have played a major coordinating role and directed the efforts of others.

<sup>2</sup>Tilly stresses that “social movements could not survive without political entrepreneurs who know how to organize meetings, bring out throngs of supporters, and draft public statements”. Tilly, *Contentious Performances*, p. 123.

## 2 | The contentious politics literature

While the social movements literature that has emerged from sociology since the 1970s may seem most directly applicable to CFFD activism, the scale of societal change being sought calls for a theoretical framework that is capable of addressing profound societal change on the scale of revolutions.<sup>3,4</sup> In terms of the scale of change being demanded, its impact on existing economic structures and interests, and the broad moral and intergenerational issues involved, climate change activism more closely resembles the movement to abolish slavery than it does other social movements like pacifism or the movement for racial equality. Its demands, consequences, and moral claims are all revolutionary.<sup>5,6</sup> A theory capable of incorporating revolutions is also desirable because of the decision making structure of universities. They are not democratic institutions where a majority of stakeholders (students, faculty, staff) can enforce their will on the administration. Rather they are more akin to oligarchies in which non-administrators can only seek to petition, pressure and persuade — unless the activists seek to reorder decision-making processes within the institution. Therefore, the theoretical framework of contentious politics — with key features including cycles of contention and protest as performance — offers the best prospects for comprehending the full context and potential of the CFFD movement and developing research questions and hypotheses capable of adding to the political science and environ-

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<sup>3</sup>Tilly argues that revolutions substantially predate social movements, and that they can occur in “places untouched by social movements”. Tilly, *Contentious Performances*, p. 126.

<sup>4</sup>Tilly, *European Revolutions, 1492–1992*.

<sup>5</sup>For a convincing and expansive discussion of what moral obligations we may bear as a consequence of climate change, see: Pachauri et al., *Climate ethics: Essential readings*.

<sup>6</sup>S. M. Gardiner, *A Perfect Moral Storm: the Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change*.

mental politics literatures.<sup>7</sup> 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). The framework also considers effects on activist participants, theorizing that social movements can shift in four broad directions: toward institutionalization, radicalization, commercialization, and involution (a shift from external action to personal consciousness-changing). The contentious politics literature emerged from the work of Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly in the 1990s: specifically, through the Dynamics of Contention Program [TK — where?].<sup>8</sup> These concepts apply both to activist participants in CFFD campaigns and to decision makers at targeted institutions who draw upon their own repertoires to facilitate, forbid, and tolerate a range of activist performances.<sup>9</sup>

While it self-identifies as being broader in historical and theoretical scope than the social movements literature, the modern contentious politics literature is in some ways a culmination of social movement theory. Specifically, it incorporates multi-causal explanations involving factors ranging from issue framing and the formation of collective identities to political opportunity. The contentious politics literature is also focused on dynamic processes, specifically theorized in terms of cycles of contention in which progress by a movement generates a counter-movement with contradictory policy objectives and framing and a repertoire

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<sup>7</sup>Tilly defines contentious claims as those that bear upon someone else's interests. Tilly, *Contentious Performances*, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. xv.

<sup>9</sup>Tarrow, *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics*, 3rd ed. p. 110.

chosen in response to that of their opponents. [TK] Seeing contentious politics as a theoretical culmination highlights how it can be challenging to identify theoretical disagreements or methods of disconfirming predictions. Different theories of activist motivation (for instance, personal injury versus construction of shared identity) can be evaluated, as can predictions that focus on the internal resources of campaigns (resource mobilization) compared with their external context (political opportunity).<sup>10</sup>

Beginning with the example of the European rebellions of 1848, Tarrow defines “cycles of contention” as “events of continental importance” and:

a phase of heightened conflict across the social system, with rapid diffusion of collective action from more mobilized to less mobilized sectors, a rapid pace of innovation in the forms of contention employed, the creation of new or transformed collective action frames, a combination of organized and unorganized participation, and sequences of intensified information flow and interaction between challengers and authorities.<sup>11</sup>

Expected features include efforts to create new political opportunities, improvisation in activist repertoires, protest campaigns, and coalition formation.<sup>12</sup> Internal dynamics include diffusion of tactics, exhaustion of some disillusioned participants, paired impulses toward radicalization and institutionalization, and restabilization following repression from authorities.<sup>13</sup> All of these phenomena have been evident in the CFFD movement. Cycles of contention come to an end in ways that affect future political activity (contentious interactions between claim-makers and institutional respondents): including by leaving behind social relationships between activists in latent networks that can be re-activated for other issues or

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<sup>10</sup>Tarrow, *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics*, 3rd ed. p. 163.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. . 199.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. . 197–8.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 197–8.

campaigns subsequently, and by changing decision making processes in target institutions.

Tilly's analysis of repertoires in contentious politics extends back into the European politics of the early modern period, contrasting the motives, targets, and methods of the time with those of subsequent society-wide uprisings and revolutions and subsequently with those of post-industrial politics. Tilly coined the term in 1977, with Mancur Olsen describing them soon after as a "dangerous idea".<sup>14,15</sup> These repertoires shift through "a changing interplay between continuity and improvisation" as processes like institutionalization favour repeated use of well-established performances and factors like changes in the political opportunity structure favour tactical innovation.<sup>16</sup> In the contemporary context of democratic societies, he identifies a modern repertoire of contention which emerged from the anti-globalization movement and was epitomized in the 1999 "Battle of Seattle" protest against the World Trade Organization and which involved "theatrical tactics" and "giant puppets".<sup>17</sup> Tarrow's description of the "American Strong Repertoire" which has developed since the 1960s clearly aligns with major features of North American climate change activism. His three characteristic practices — marches on Washington, the creation of specific targeted campaigns in discrete time periods, and the use of disruptive practices including sit-ins and building occupations — have all been employed by climate and CFFD activists and propagated by broker organizations including 350.org.<sup>18</sup> The detail with which such practices are followed is demonstrated by how the legitimizing power of formal dress and demeanor has been

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<sup>14</sup>Tilly, "Getting it together in Burgundy, 1675–1975".

<sup>15</sup>Tilly, *Contentious Performances*, p. xiv.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>17</sup>Tarrow, *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics*, 3rd ed. p. 99.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 114.



transferred from lunch counter sit-ins to climate activist direct actions. The formal action guidelines from 350.org’s 2011 Keystone XL protests include: “I will be dignified in dress and demeanor — these are serious issues, and we want to be taken seriously”.<sup>19</sup> [TK] The concept of repertoires in this context also applies to university responses, which are self-reinforcing as they diffuse between institutions with similar characteristics; the legitimizing (certifying) precedent of universities that have said yes provide cover and justification for other schools inclined to do so, while administrations that reject divestment can use the decisions and arguments of those that did so earlier in the same manner.

Issue-framing is a central focus of the social movements and contentious politics literatures, as well as a central feature of CFFD campaigns. Activists adopt an “injustice frame” and their formal petitions very deliberately identify the injustices associated with fossil fuel corporation behaviour and climate change, attribute responsibility, and propose a solution in the form of divestment.<sup>20</sup> Activist framings — whether of the scientific, numerical, or ‘climate justice’ formulations — conflict with the preferred framings of universities and governments. When challenged by a claim that universities are failing to play their appropriate social role by continuing to invest in the fossil fuel industry, they often respond by re-framing themselves as institutions with a singular legitimate focus on teaching and research, and where financial choices made in support of those purposes are non-political and appropriately governed by a perspective on fiduciary duty in which only returns matter.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>See: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/sindark/6071402216/in/album-72157627496416444/>. This requirement is not universal, as shown by the action agreement from the November 2015 ‘Climate Welcome’ for the Trudeau government in Ottawa: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/sindark/22863477245/in/album-72157660922071322/>.

<sup>20</sup>Tarrow, *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics*, 3rd ed. p. 145.

<sup>21</sup>The argument that divestment is somehow too political for universities to undertake (suppressing the

Activists then respond to those claims both by challenging the idea that investment is non-political and by challenging the factual claim that divestment would be financially harmful.<sup>22</sup> Among governments, meanwhile, a dominant frame is “balancing” environmental protection with maintaining economic growth and employment. This framing helps them avoid choices which would involve imposing politically-damaging concentrated costs on industries like coal mining. It is, however, fundamentally at odds with the scientific understanding of the problem of climate change, in which continuing with business as usual will lead to catastrophic outcomes. From that perspective, allowing further fossil fuel extraction and the development of new projects isn’t something that can be ‘balanced’ through parallel initiatives like carbon pricing or energy efficiency improvements, but is rather a set of choices that add weight to one side of a set of scales that is already falling over. When Prime Minister Trudeau argued that “No country would find 173 billion barrels of oil in the ground and leave them there” he was either undermining the whole premise of the 2016 Paris Agreement (which relies on mutual restraint of this kind from all countries) or indirectly asserting that some sort of technological or geoengineering response will emerge to negate the consequences of those emissions.<sup>23,24,25</sup> Challenging the ability of governments to convincingly rely upon such

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question of whether holding fossil fuel investments is equally political) is embodied in comments from Harvard President Drew Gilpin Faust where she asserts the “University’s fundamental aversion to instrumentalizing the endowment as a means of seeking to influence the political process”. McKenna, *Fossil Fuel Divestment: Harvard Students Blockade Entrance in Protest*.

<sup>22</sup>Or, in a few cases, by asserting that any financial penalty is a cost that we should play in playing an active part on combatting climate change. See Noam Chomsky on the subject: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AQJQU2GzV0w>

<sup>23</sup>CBC News, *Trudeau: ‘No country would find 173 billion barrels of oil in the ground and leave them there’*.

<sup>24</sup>On geoengineering, see: S. Gardiner, “Is “Arming the Future” with Geoengineering Really the Lesser Evil? Some Doubts About the Ethics of Intentionally Manipulating the Climate System”.

<sup>25</sup>Keith, *A Case for Climate Engineering*.

frames is central to the delegitimization objective of the CFFD movement. For their part, the preferred framing of the fossil fuel industry focuses on the benefits people receive from fossil fuel use, the continued dependence of society on fossil fuel energy, and the industry's own capacity to provide solutions to climate change without strong government regulation and certainly without being compelled to leave reserves unburned. Universities that have rejected divestment (including Harvard and McGill) nearly always include elements of this frame in their public justifications.

Whether they are aware of the theory or not, CFFD campaigns specialize in “worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment” (WUNC) displays, including marches, acts of non-violent direct action, civil disobedience, and rallies.<sup>26</sup> This conceptualization ties resource mobilization to repertoires and performances, specifically because of how each constituent factor can compensate for weakness in another: a hunger strike by a small number of committed individuals may accomplish more than a march by a much larger group. [TK — more]

[TK — Political opportunity] One challenge in examining political opportunities is the danger of identifying them *post facto* in a tautological manner: if some change took place, an opportunity must have opened to allow it. Tilly describes the concern that the theory may be “unverifiable because it only applies after the fact”.<sup>27</sup> Tilly offers a partial answer to this challenge: political opportunity analysis must include threats as well as opportunities, and consider political opportunity in a multidimensional way, in which the openness of the regime, the coherence of its elite, stability of political alignments, availability of allies, repression or

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<sup>26</sup>Tilly, *Contentious Performances*, p. 72, 74, 122–3, 125–6.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 91.

facilitation, and pace of change.<sup>28</sup>

Contentious politics also includes a rich theory of networks based on extensive theoretical development and the examination of empirical cases. For instance, Jennifer Hadden's work on the climate change activist movement in the context of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change UNFCCC climate negotiations in Copenhagen in 2009 emphasizes how activist networks shaped both normative understandings of what ought to be done and strategic and tactical decision making about how it might be accomplished.<sup>29</sup> Central to Hadden's analysis is the importance of brokers: both individuals and organizations that serve as connecting nodes between otherwise disconnected campaigns and organizations. [TK — more on brokers from CFFD-1.1] Methodologically, Tilly identifies two principle pathways through which networks of influence connect activists as co-presence at physical events and communication (which might be said to include indirect communication through media reports as well).<sup>30</sup>

Lastly, the contentious politics framework includes an emphasis on psychological elements which is well-matched to the experience of the CFFD movement. It sees political activity as largely emotionally motivated, with collective identity formation as a key mechanism. People engage in contentious politics less because of how they expect advocated policy changes to affect them personally and more because of external pressure from social connections and internal pressure from a psychological and emotional model about what kind of personal actions are desirable and appropriate. The excellent in-depth study on the Fossil

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<sup>28</sup>Tilly, *Contentious Performances*, p. 91.

<sup>29</sup>Hadden, *Networks in Contention: The Divisive Politics of Climate Change*.

<sup>30</sup>Tilly, *Contentious Performances*, p. 108.

Free campaign at American University by Eve Bratman et al. documents many interesting psychological features of that campaign, including feelings of divided allegiance in faculty members concerned with how activism affects their roles as educators and employees.<sup>31</sup>

### 3 | Research question

What then about CFFD campaigns cannot be immediately explained by applying the concepts developed in the contentious politics literature? In the first place, it's worth asking if such a theoretical break is necessarily required in a valid research project. Within Thomas Kuhn's description of "normal science" we expect to find that much scholarly work consists of applying existing models to new empirical cases, with the understanding that this process will incrementally identify anomalies that must be addressed through theoretical development.<sup>32</sup> Several scholars of social movements call specifically for new empirical cases to be examined. While common factors can be identified in a number of social movements, McAdam and Boudet argue that significant gaps remain in the literature, including empirical examinations of "factors and dynamic processes that shape the geographic expansion (or occasionally, contraction) of a movement".<sup>33</sup> A survey of Canadian CFFD campaigns would illustrate patterns of diffusion of norms, framing, and theory of change between climate change activist organizations.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Their analysis also emphasizes a normative and framing shift toward "climate justice" as one of the most notable features of the youth climate change activist movement. Bratman et al., "Justice is the goal: divestment as climate change resistance", p. 11, 13.

<sup>32</sup>Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

<sup>33</sup>McAdam and Boudet, *Putting Social Movements in their Place: Explaining Opposition to Energy Projects in the United States, 2000–5*, p. 134.

<sup>34</sup>Tilly identifies social movements as normalized comprised of multiple "social movement organizations". Tilly, *Contentious Performances*, p. 199.

Nonetheless, there are some senses in which the contentious politics literature cannot be automatically read as an explanation of the CFFD movement.

One unusual feature of CFFD activism is that nobody believes that the direct impact of a successful campaign will advance the ultimate objective of climate change mitigation. Stocks sold by universities will be bought by others, and stock trading has no effect on the ability of fossil fuel corporations to invest in new extraction, processing, and transport projects. Rather, the hope for those focused on investment is that divestment by universities will raise the perception of risk among other investors, decreasing their general willingness to put capital into the fossil fuel industry. For those with more normative objectives (or those more focused on deliberately shifting norms), the hope is that divestment will delegitimize the fossil fuel industry in the eyes of the public and decision makers, shifting the scope of what is politically possible in terms of regulation and climate and energy policies. For those focused on the CFFD activism as a means for training, motivating, and radicalizing participants, success or failure of campaigns in terms of university responses is only relevant insofar as it affects those outcomes. These features set CFFD activism at the extreme opposite end of the spectrum from social movements as understood by the ‘classical’ literature, in which people who are personally aggrieved are motivated and take action in proportion to their own injury.<sup>35</sup>

Another ambiguity in the literature concerns the scale at which cycles of contention take

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<sup>35</sup>Donald Culverson’s research on anti-apartheid activism in the South African case identified “conscience constituencies” of activists supporting campaigns that either will not or will only minimally benefit themselves personally if successful. Such empathetic as opposed to pragmatic motivation is widespread in climate activism, though a sense of personal threat is clearly also a motivating factor. Culverson, *Contesting apartheid: U.S. activism, 1960–1987*, p. 15.

place. Tarrow claims that such cycles exist when “contention spreads across an entire society” or across “entire systems”.<sup>36</sup> The experience of the climate change activist movement shows that cycles of contention take place at multiple scales simultaneously: between society-wide actors like governments and fossil fuel corporations, between campaign proponents and opponents within specific institutions, and within campaigns themselves as fundamental disagreements about objectives, strategies, and alliances play out. For example, activists opposed to the outcome of group decision making establish private alliances and independent decision making structures more aligned with their preferences and theories of change, or even split off to form competing organizations. These intra-movement conflicts bear some resemblance to the frictions within environmental and animal rights movements opposed to Canada’s seal hunt. Most notably, both conflicts have deep roots in contradictory ethical judgments about appropriate action expressed as frames, one emphasizing the alleged cruelty of the hunt from the perspective of animals and another framing it as “a highly regulated, humane, and sustainable hunt”.<sup>37</sup> Intra-movement conflicts are also reflected in the performances chosen from the repertoires of opponents of the anti-sealing movement, constituting a cycle of contention akin to that taken place between fossil fuel opponents and defenders in Canada and the U.S. now. The contentious politics literature does acknowledge multi-level interaction insofar as “single-issue or single-constituency oriented cycles” aggregate into cycles of contention, but does not adequately specify which boundaries are relevant. This issue is acute in the context of trans-national policy and coordination in the climate change field,

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<sup>36</sup>Tarrow, *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics*, 3rd ed. p. 16, 195.

<sup>37</sup>Dauvergne and Neville, “Mindbombs of right and wrong: cycles of contention in the activist campaign to stop Canada’s seal hunt”, p. 9, 12.

as well as in terms of overlap between issues and policy demands. An activist understanding of climate justice situated as part of a larger set of progressive demands (including racial justice, indigenous rights, and economic redistribution) calls for a reconceptualization of cycles of contention as functioning on overlapping scales with interactive channels of influence.

A further anomalous feature of climate change activism is the inflexibility of the core demand: that the atmospheric concentration of greenhouse gases (most importantly carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>)) be stabilized at a low enough level to avoid catastrophic climate change. This demand comes from physics, not politics, and as Robert Watson remarked: “Mother Nature is going to do whatever chemistry, biology and physics dictate. Mother nature always bats last, and she always bats 1,000”. Tarrow argues that social movements in general rarely achieve their original objectives, but rather have them reshaped through interaction with their targets and other societal actors during cycles of contention.<sup>38</sup> Most social movements have been susceptible to such shifts in objectives but — barring the endorsement of geoengineering as an alternative to mitigation — shifts in core objectives will not occur for climate change activists.<sup>39</sup> Of course, preferences about the preferred means to that end, from carbon markets to overthrowing capitalism, will continue to shift within and between climate change activist organizations. Nonetheless, the possibility of a social movement with such a singular inflexible demand is not presently well incorporated into the contentious politics literature, despite attention paid so far to climate change by Hadden, McAdam and Boudet, and others. Since there is a clear and easily measured relationship between fossil

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<sup>38</sup>Tarrow, *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics*, 3rd ed. p. 215.

<sup>39</sup>McKibben notes the universality of this goal: “We took 350.org for our name, reasoning that we wanted to work all over the world (they don’t call it global warming for nothing) and that Arabic numerals crossed linguistic boundaries”. McKibben, *Oil and honey: the education of an unlikely activist*, p. 12.



fuel burning and changing atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations, this core objective of climate activism is closely tied to the CFFD movement and associated divestment efforts at faith institutions, private foundations, etc.

**RQ: Are CFFD organizations shifting toward institutionalization, radicalization, commercialization, or involution (a shift from external action to personal consciousness-changing)?**

Hanspeter Kriesi identified four probable trajectories for social movement organizations engaged in contentious politics:<sup>40</sup>

**Institutionalization** Moderation of goals; beauraucratization as envisioned by Michels’

“Iron Law of Oligarchy” or otherwise

**Commercialization** “Transformation from a movement organization into a service organization or profit making enterprise”<sup>41</sup>

**Involution** A shift to exclusive focus on social incentives — cultivation of personal consciousness — a shift from voluntarism to subjectivism in Micah White’s categorization<sup>42</sup>

**Radicalization** “Reinvigorated mobilization” (as opposed to “exhaustion or privatization”) — more contentious tactics, more emphasis on intersectionality and alliances, more internal disagreement about decision makers to target, strategies to employ, stances on violence and property damage<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Kriesi, “The Organizational Structure of New Social Movements in a Political Context”.

<sup>41</sup>Tarrow, *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics*, 3rd ed. p. 212.

<sup>42</sup>White, *The End of Protest: A New Playbook for Revolution*, p. 73.

<sup>43</sup>Tarrow, *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics*, 3rd ed. p. 213.

Understanding these shifts requires examination of multi-level cycles of contention operating in the climate change activist movement; the study of repertoires of contention employed by CFFD campaigns and their target universities; and the diffusion of practices and ideas in both activist and target networks.

## 4 | Methodology

Several texts in the contentious politics canon emphasize the importance of methodological choices. McAdam and Boudet’s research on recent opposition to energy projects in the U.S. emphasizes the importance of considering mechanisms other than social movements when explaining political outcomes, and stresses the need to investigate cases where social movements failed to form and organize alongside the cases where they did.<sup>44</sup> Tilly’s *Contentious Performances* stresses the need for “fastidiously detailed event catalogs” which “trace interactions among participants in multiple episodes” as opposed to event counts or single-episode narratives.<sup>45</sup> Particularly in cases where a broad variety of data is available (interviews with core organizers, minutes of activist meetings, etc), composition of such catalogs for specific CFFD campaigns is feasible. [TK — Does Hadden say anything specific about methodology?]

### 4.1 Hypotheses

**H1:** CFFD organizations will tend toward radicalization as described by Tarrow, as opposed to institutionalization, commercialization or involution.

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<sup>44</sup>McAdam and Boudet, *Putting Social Movements in their Place: Explaining Opposition to Energy Projects in the United States, 2000–5*, p. 2.

<sup>45</sup>Tilly, *Contentious Performances*, p. 13, 211.

One mechanism driving this shift is the differing rate of “exhaustion” between “core” and “periphery” activists more likely to favour radical versus incremental strategies, respectively.<sup>46</sup> As those weakly bound to the CFFD movement experience “risk, personal costs ... weariness and disillusionment”, the remaining population may be expected to become more radical.

Features of CFFD activism as a student movement also support the view that radicalization is the most probable outcome. For organizations largely run by and comprised of undergraduates, there is little scope for institutionalization in the sense of professionalized NGO or political party formation. Similarly, there is no clear path to commercialization (whether in the for-profit sense, or as service organizations) for CFFD groups.

One potentially countervailing force concerns psychological agreeableness in activists and personal conflict. Instead of the least committed drifting out of the movement, those who become involved in conflict may be passionately propelled out. This could encourage either shifts toward more or less contentious tactics, depending on the balance of influence between individuals and factions involved in these conflicts. Those individuals who leave CFFD movements because of conflict are more likely than groups as a whole to refocus on involution: cultivating their own psychological state rather than seeking policy change from external actors. Also, the process of radicalization through the changing composition of membership may be actively opposed by organizers who feel that a broad coalition is necessary to success, and who will encourage more moderate messaging and tactics in support of that strategy. Brokers involved in more than one social justice organization are most likely to play such an

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<sup>46</sup>Tarrow, *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics*, 3rd ed. p. 206.

overt moderating role.

**H2:** Cycles of contention are at work on multiple simultaneous scales in Canadian and U.S. climate change politics. This includes at an institutional scale, between pro-divestment bodies including volunteer-run climate activist groups, student government organizations, and university administrations.

“Scale shift” as discussed in the contentious politics literature has been deliberately undertaken by CFFD brokers like 350.org and the Canadian Youth Climate Coalition CYCC. At the same time, the core logic of fossil fuel divestment emphasizes universities as influential investors whose example may be followed by others like pension funds and faith organizations.

**H3:** The repertoires of contention employed by CFFD activists will evolve as resistant universities continue to find new justifications for not divesting. At universities that do divest, the repertoires from the CFFD campaigns will be replicated by other social movement organizations seeking institutional policy change, especially divestment based on other criteria.

Student movements constantly use one another as templates for understanding intersectionality, making strategic choices about campaigns, and the deployment of tactics capable of shifting public opinion and garnering media attention. These include high-profile announcements, the design of direct actions to include a strong visual component, the production and rapid dissemination of media including video and photographs online, and the use of non-violent direct action tactics generally.

**H4:** Self-reinforcing trends will be perceptible in the decision making of two sets of

universities: those most institutionally inclined to make an active effort for environmental protection and those financially or ideologically committed to supporting the fossil fuel industry. In each case, a growing set of precedents will help entrench frames, decision making processes, and normative claims regarding the desirability of fossil fuel divestment.

As currently uncommitted universities respond to ongoing formal CFFD petitions and processes, campaigns to “force” divestment will persist in at least some campuses where the administration rejects their core demands. At universities sympathetic to arguments that they should actively promote positive environmental and climate change outcomes, growing legitimation from successful campaigns will help overcome institutional resistance from those who prefer the *status quo*, and future campaigns will be more likely to succeed. At institutions which are ideologically or pragmatically inclined to avoid any risk of offending fossil fuel corporations, the administration will adapt repressive tactics from other resistant universities to try and render ineffective major parts of the CFFD repertoire, perpetuating future cycles of contention.

## 4.2 Case selection

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

1. Searching Google, Twitter, and Facebook to identify any 350- or Fossil Free branded campaigns at the institution<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>Not 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*.

2. Scanning a suitable news database for the name of the institution and “divestment”, “climate change”, and “fossil fuel”
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.

A survey of all of Canada’s approximately 100 accredited universities could be undertaken using the screening process above. The survey would be 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.<sup>48</sup> In addition to identifying most cases where climate activist groups or campaigns are present, this 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 capability. 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

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<sup>48</sup>See: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1bggNUTjmp3VDhF3Qck4NJGwBbh9iT2kk0IZPTyedmKg/edit?usp=sharing>

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 can get in touch with someone publicly associated with the effort and ask for an estimate of the total number of activists involved at the peak of the campaign. Based on the information from the preliminary screening, I could identify how many schools are above the threshold of having no CFFD campaign at all, as well as which have a ‘major’ campaign, defined in terms of some lower limit for peak number of volunteers. I could then randomly select cases of CFFD campaigns from two sets, 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 March 2017, only Laval is in that category.

### **4.3 Methods**

This project will employ interviews, participant observation, analysis of documents, and surveys. I am to follow Tilly’s methodological lead and avoid “sharp choices between quan-

titative and qualitative methods, between formal analysis and literary storytelling [and] between narrowly conceived pursuit of explanations and broadly conceived interpretations”.<sup>49</sup> The contentious politics and social movement literatures incorporate a spectrum from “epidemiology” (highly formalized descriptions of events assembled for large-n analysis) and “narrative” (detailed case studies, often based around ethnographic research methods and participant observation). Methods from across the spectrum have explanatory power for the evaluation of different questions about social movements and contentious politics: from quantitative assessments of the distribution of tactics across long timespans in the manner of Tilly’s *Contentious Performances* to in-person accounts supplemented with formal methods like Hadden’s *Networks in Contention*.

[TK — Methods must be specifically linked to hypotheses]

Interviews with key CFFD organizers and inter-campaign brokers will be an essential data source for network analysis. As such, it seems desirable to share information about this study as early as feasible, in part so that knowledgeable organizers and brokers can contribute methodological ideas to the research design. This early outreach should include all the divestment staffers at [350.org](http://350.org), as well as known former staffers like Becca Rast, who was their West Coast Fossil Free Organizer in 2014. It should also include Kiki Wood and Cameron Fenton at the CYCC: another NGO working as a CFFD broker. It should also include key organizers identified in the existing literature and media coverage, including Betsy Bolton, Peter Collings, Giovanna Di Chiro, Mark Wallace, Kate Aronoff, and Stephen O’Hanlon at Swarthmore; Allyson Gross at Bowdoin; Chloe Maxmin at Harvard; Richelle Martin, Kayley

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<sup>49</sup>Tilly, *Contentious Performances*, p. 5.



Reed, and Christina Wilson at the University of New Brunswick; Lily Schwarzbaum and Kristen Perry at McGill<sup>50</sup>; Alice-Anne Simard at Laval; George Hoberg, Kathryn Harrison, Molly Henry, Cohen Hocking, and Kate Hodgson at UBC; and Sophie Baumert, Luke Evens, and Miriam Wilson at the University of Glasgow. The pinnacle objective in terms of research subjects is cooperation from organizers who are known to have worked on more than one fossil fuel divestment campaign which led to some kind of response from the authority who they were petitioning. This clearly includes professional brokers employed by climate activist NGOs. It also includes Miriam Wilson, who went from helping to organize the U of T CFFD campaign to organizing a successful campaign at the University of Glasgow, along with as-yet-undetermined brokers who customized open-source materials from the the U of T CFFD campaign to divest Toronto's Trinity-St. Paul's United Church and Centre for Faith, Justice and the Arts.<sup>51,52,53,54</sup> Family networks of brokers may be important. George Hoberg and Kathryn Harrison have been key members of the UBC effort while their daughter Sophie was a major organizer at Stanford and their son Sam was a central part of the effort at U of T. In addition to interviewing people who played a prominent role in a CFFD divestment campaign, brokers in NGOs, and volunteer brokers, it would likely be valuable to interview people who played significant roles in off-campus fossil fuel divestment, including Jeanne Moffat at Trinity-St. Paul's United Church.

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<sup>50</sup>Also the authors of the Divest McGill brief Divest McGill, *Carbon at All Costs: The Fossil Fuel Industry and the Case for Divestment*, p. 5.

<sup>51</sup>Brooks, *Glasgow becomes first university in Europe to divest from fossil fuels*.

<sup>52</sup>The Glasgow University Climate Action Society's formal petition to the university notes: "This brief has drawn heavily from the document written for the same purpose for the University of Toronto by members of Toronto350.org". Glasgow University Climate Action Society, *The Fossil Fuel Industry and the Case for Divestment*, p. 2.

<sup>53</sup>Baumert, *How we persuaded the University of Glasgow to divest from fossil fuels*.

<sup>54</sup>Moffat, *Trinity-St. Paul's United Church Votes to Divest from Fossil Fuel Companies*.

Interviews will be undertaken with a semi-structured style, with high-level questions intended to determine if a particular topic is relevant in the case being examined and strings of follow-up questions on the same theme.<sup>55</sup> For instance, if I ask whether a BDS campaign was ever active at the same time as the CFFD campaign and learn that it was, I can ask follow-on questions about whether the campaigns attempted to coordinate, whether any collaboration actually took place, written comments made by one campaign about another, and whether the presence of the BDS campaign seemed to affect the decision making of the university administration. Similarly, after learning that a campaign sought to function on a democratic basis through elected positions and vote-based decision making, I could follow on with questions about how that shaped the choice of strategy and tactics, as well as how it affected the morale and involvement of volunteers and organizers.

Participant observation played a key role in Curnow's research on the U of T CFFD campaign. It was similarly employed by Hirsch on the Columbia anti-apartheid campaign of the 1980s, in which he "spent many hours each day observing the activities of the protestors and their opponent, the Columbia administration" as the protestors peacefully blockaded Hamilton Hall.<sup>56</sup> There may be scope for engaging in participant observation directly as part of this project, by acting in person to observe planning sessions or actions being undertaken by CFFD campaigns. Also, much of the small existing literature comparing divestment campaigns has been written by current and former participants.<sup>57,58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>Semi-structured interviews were also used in: Singer-Berk, *Campuses of the Future: The Interplay of Fossil Fuel Divestment and Sustainability Efforts at Colleges and Universities*, p. 3, 28–29.

<sup>56</sup>Hirsch, "Sacrifice for the cause: Group processes, recruitment, and commitment in a student social movement", p. 246.

<sup>57</sup>For example: Singer-Berk, *Campuses of the Future: The Interplay of Fossil Fuel Divestment and Sustainability Efforts at Colleges and Universities*, p. 12.

<sup>58</sup>Bratman et al. note: "Our methodological process involved dynamic participation within the cam-

In terms of documentary evidence, fossil fuel divestment is a promising research topic in part because campaigns have often involved highly formalized written decision making processes, in which campaigns have put forward detailed written arguments, committees of various types have deliberated and published recommendations, and decisions made by universities have often included formal written justifications. The U of T process provides an example, with a formal petition from divestment proponents to the university (written specifically to satisfy the schools pre-existing divestment policy and updated substantially at one point because the process had taken so long), formal recommendations from a committee appointed by the administration, a response from the campaign to that committee (emphasizing the need to address harm imposed on indigenous groups by the fossil fuel industry), and the university's final decision rejecting divestment with detailed written justification.<sup>59,60,61,62,63,64</sup> Formal petitions to other schools include the University of Denver and McGill.<sup>65,66,67</sup> Formal presentations and speeches for which transcripts, audio, or video are available would play a similar role. In addition to providing important evidence about how various stakeholders interpret the situation and justify their actions, these documents

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paigns discussed herein, sometimes involving roles as organizers, leaders, and participants, and sometimes as sympathetic observer". Bratman et al., "Justice is the goal: divestment as climate change resistance", p. 2.

<sup>59</sup>Toronto350.org, *The Fossil Fuel Industry and the Case for Divestment*.

<sup>60</sup>Toronto350.org, *The Fossil Fuel Industry and the Case for Divestment: Update*.

<sup>61</sup>Karney et al., *Report of the President's Advisory Committee on Divestment from Fossil Fuels*.

<sup>62</sup>The UofT350.org Community Response sought to add a divestment screening criterion to exclude firms that violate the principle of free, prior, and informed consent as asserted in the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Asher et al., *U of T Community Response to the Report of the Fossil Fuel Divestment Committee*.

<sup>63</sup>Gertler, *Beyond Divestment: Taking Decisive Action on Climate Change*.

<sup>64</sup>Notably, the members of the committee who endorsed divestment published a letter responding to the administration's decision in The Globe and Mail. Hoffmann et al., *A committee replies*.

<sup>65</sup>Divest DU, *Fossil Fuel Divestment*.

<sup>66</sup>Redel et al., *Report of the Committee to Advise on Matters of Social Responsibility*.

<sup>67</sup>Divest McGill, *The Social Injury Caused by the Exploitation of the Tar Sands and Fossil Fuels*.

reveal linkages between both activist campaigns and institutional decision making processes at different schools. At least occasionally, activists produce self-conscious ‘power analyses’ through which they evaluate the circumstances in which they have found themselves so far, and the means through which they have sought to achieve their objectives.<sup>68,69</sup> Activist campaigns learn from one another, and university administrations are sensitive to the decisions of their peers. In a few cases, the additional insight into administration thinking and processes at public institutions might be produced through an access to information request. The time and cost requirements of such requests should however be kept in mind.

As used by Hirsch, surveys could be useful for understanding the perspectives of current and past organizers and activists in CFFD campaigns. Many people who were only somewhat actively involved in campaigns may be difficult to identify, contact, and engage with.<sup>70</sup> Nonetheless, short web-accessible surveys might generate data that would bolster evidence on hypotheses about the effects of participation in CFFD campaigns on the subsequent thinking and political activity of activists. Survey would also lead to new channels of communication with brokers and organizers willing to be interviewed about their CFFD work.

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<sup>68</sup>For example: Meisel and Russell, *Case Study: Tar Sands Action*.

<sup>69</sup>At least a few campaigns have also compiled institutional memory documents. Swarthmore Mountain Justice, *Institutional Memory Document 2011–12*.

<sup>70</sup>Of Hirsch’s 300 surveys, a remarkable 60.3 percent were returned complete., many of them by members of the university community who either were not involved in or actively opposed the divestment campaign. Hirsch, “Sacrifice for the cause: Group processes, recruitment, and commitment in a student social movement”, p. 246.

## 5 | Conclusion and next steps

An analysis of CFFD campaigns in Canada alone could be broadened in later research to include any of the regions where CFFD campaigns have been active and successful, including the U.S., the U.K., continental Europe, and Australia and New Zealand. Japan may also be an interesting case, as [350.org](#) has a regional divestment coordinator there but [gofossilfree.org](#) reports no successful campaigns. There are two principal reasons why an international comparison might raise the explanatory power of this project. First, the brokers who are involved in a number of CFFD and other divestment campaigns simultaneously tend to function internationally. Second, CFFD participants see themselves as part of a global or transnational social movement where state boundaries are important in terms of decision makers to target rather than a nationally-defined sense of shared interest or solidarity. A further benefit from a broader international analysis would be the opportunity to study more cases where universities have committed to divestment, a choice that has been too bold for most Canadian administrations so far.

## 6 | Appendix I: Timeline

[TK — Update from CFFD-1.1, allow at least 4–6 weeks for ethical approval (good time to read through the key texts identified in the supporting document)]

## 7 | Appendix II: Chapter breakdown

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

## 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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