

Opposing Keystone XL and Northern Gateway: Pipeline Resistance Campaigns as Contentious Social Movements

Milan Ilnyckyj

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



1 Summary

The Keystone XL and Northern Gateway pipeline proposals are important not only in terms of the evolution of North American energy politics, but also because the resistance campaigns against them are comprised of a dynamic coalition of environmentalists, indigenous peoples, faith communities, and others.¹ Through an interview-focused network analysis of these anti-pipeline coalitions, I hope to add to the literature on social movements and contentious politics. 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.

¹This is a brief discussion document for the Environmental Governance Lab brown bag lunch. The [current draft of my proposal is accessible online](#). More details on methodology and the background literature are being incorporated from [this earlier effort](#).

These cases also permit study of deep change in the core ideas of various groups. For fifty years, all political theories without a sophisticated understanding of the biophysical limits of what the Earth can provide in raw materials and absorb in wastes have been engaged by an environmentalist critique and adapted in response (sometimes by reiterating their rejection of environmentalist claims). More recently, environmentalism has been criticized for failure to respect indigenous perspectives and traditions, and for perceived flaws in its theories of change. These ongoing anti-pipeline movements provide an opportunity to understand the perspectives of those involved and evaluate some of the conventional logic about the nature and prospects of environmental activism today.

2 Research questions

1. Which individuals and groups have been involved in resisting the Keystone XL and Northern Gateway pipelines?
2. Which of these organizations have collaborated and how?
3. What tactics and strategies have been employed?
4. What justifications do people use for their actions? How do they envision these actions leading to the changes they desire?
5. How do these groups interpret the problem of climate change, and how do they see it relating to other public policy questions?
6. What kind of organizational learning and changes in core beliefs are taking place? What is driving these processes?

3 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 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.

4 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.

5 Hypotheses

The full proposal includes a broader number of hypotheses, but the key ones for discussion today are:

H1: Climate change activism is connected ideologically and strategically with other movements. While efforts to unify efforts for greater political success have been frequent, profound disagreements about ideal outcomes continue to divide organizations advocating strong climate change mitigation action.

H3: Disagreements about appropriate tactics and forms of training are a notable feature of the climate change activist movement. People emphasize different values when justifying their preferred tactics.

H5: “Environmentalism” as a broad theoretical construct is increasingly contested by those asserting the normative importance of factors often disregarded by the classical environmental movement (which has had a strong animal rights emphasis). Climate change activists likely differ in their perspectives on the applicability of anthropocentric versus biocentric ethics.

H8: Among the most important ideas used as the basis for media campaigns, representations of being “grassroots” have been notable in their use by both climate change mitigation proponents and opponents. Claims to come from among or to represent “ordinary” Canadians have been used to argue for both aggressive climate change mitigation and for further fossil fuel development.

H10: Climate change activists disagree about how appealing capitalism as presently practiced in Canada and the U.S. presently is for the welfare of today’s population, future generations, and life on Earth in general. This affects their alliance-building and, gradually, their core beliefs.