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SECTOR OVERVIEW

ACTIVISM

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What is activism?

Activism seeks to influence political outcomes by mobilizing citizens who are not political insiders to take actions that generate widespread or well-targeted public attention around specific issues or demands, usually through generating media coverage of events like protests, confrontations, or strikes. Activism often seeks to generate a feedback loop where initial actions and attention draw greater participation, which leads to further activity and attention. Some activism is led by organized groups with complex strategies, while other activism emerges when ordinary people collectively protest a grievance and spark waves of action.

Activism can play an important role in accomplishing the following objectives:

1. Shifting public attention towards specific issues and disseminating a specific strategic framing to shape how the public understands and makes sense of an issue, leading to public opinion shifts that may change individual behavior.
2. Targeting politicians, judges, or bureaucrats currently in power to change their opinion or behavior. As some of these individuals are accountable to public opinion to some degree, this is often strongly related to point (1) above.
3. Changing the political fortunes of those in power, to generate support for alternative candidates or fend off challengers during the electoral process.

These three aims are distinct but share a common goal, which is to change political outcomes (often legislation passed). This is usually achieved by shifting public opinion such that politicians responsive to public opinion must act differently in order to maintain electoral support. In addition, public opinion shifts can have broader impacts on society by changing how individuals and organizations behave, though our focus in this document is on activism for policy change.

Giving Green's approach to activism

To better understand how activism works, we analyzed the activity of activist organizations working on climate policy through a series of shallow dive reports. This allowed us to begin to inductively build a theory of change that describes how activism works (in theory and in practice) to affect policy outcomes in the climate space. Then, we completed a systematic literature review analyzing climate activism and the evidence on the effectiveness of the specific activities we catalogued in the first stage of our research. This allowed us to further refine our general theory of change for activism and to critically examine key assumptions linking each part of the theory together. While any one activism organization has a unique theory of change resulting in a unique approach to work, the theory of change in **Figure 1** captures a broad overview of common threads running through most activist work, which we identified through reviewing both academic literature and the behavior of actual activist organizations. Note that we focus on

research dealing with activist organizations in the United States, though we draw on some related work in other countries.

Activism's theory of change

The theory of change we developed is organized into 5 distinct stages, each of which corresponds either to inputs, outputs, or outcomes. We follow the broad formula of inputs + outputs = actions, which expresses the overall structure of the theory of change. The three final stages of the five are all outcomes, which occur one after another according to the arrows depicted in **Figure 1**.

1. The first stage of the theory of change is ***campaign building***. This stage includes the starting points for all of the movement's activities, including the creation of an organizational structure that allows room for the movement to grow while remaining coordinated, its strategic framing (and related content and branding) to shape public understanding of an issue, its internal policy consensus, and its alliance with powerful champions across the climate advocacy, political, and activist communities through coalition building.

2. The second stage of the theory of change is ***directed action***. This stage includes each of the key tactics employed on the ground like protests, participation in climate strikes, endorsement of political candidates, and participation in endorsed candidates' campaigns. Many of these activities provide an opportunity for media content creation, by external media sources or, especially in recent times, media-savvy members of activist groups who record, package, and frame key events organized by the movement for social media dissemination. Each of these activities lays the groundwork for preliminary outcomes that eventually lead to policy change.

3. The third stage of the theory of change is ***initial changes***. Each of these changes in public opinion, the electoral prospects of politicians, and issue prioritization are preconditions for further policy change. In order to generate commitment by candidates and issue prioritization by politicians generally, media coverage of activist's activities must draw public attention to candidates and activists' stance on climate issues, mobilize larger numbers of the public to join the organization or otherwise pressure politicians to take action on climate change, and shift public opinion such that politicians perceive that their continued electoral success (including in primaries) is in part dependent upon their stances and actions around climate change legislation.

4. The fourth stage of the theory of change is ***legislative change***, the enactment of legislation to take action on climate change and reduce atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations. Due to increasing pressure and the presence of politicians sympathetic to the activists' aims of more aggressive and concerted legislative action around climate change, climate change has become a policy priority for the government. As a result, climate change legislation is enacted that would not have been enacted otherwise.

5. The fifth and final stage of the theory of change is ***reduced greenhouse gases in the atmosphere***. This is the final and most important outcome which an activist movement must cause in order for it to make a difference to the trajectory of climate change.

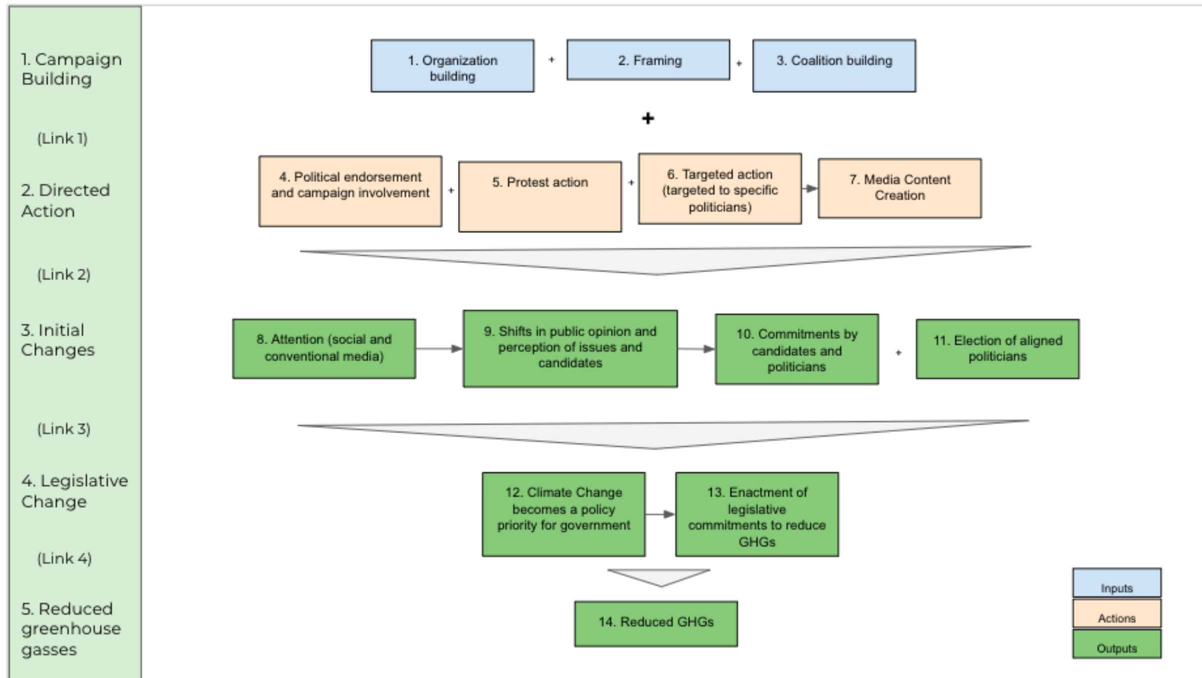

Figure 1: *Climate Activism – Theory of Change*

Below, we detail the assumptions and evidence available for each of the elements of the theory of change above.

Assessing the Activism Theory of Change

1: Organization Building

The social movement literature is composed of differing schools of thought on best practices for aspiring social movements and activist organizations. Roughly, we found that modern social movement theory can be divided into two camps: those that favor structure, and those that favor more informal organizations. We find it likely that both types of activist organizations have a role to play in the ecosystem of climate action, and we discuss both in this section. Importantly, their efficacy likely varies based on the political realities at any given time. A movement must not only organize itself well, but also take advantage of a favorable "political opportunity structure" that creates an opening for social change to occur, e.g. the fragmenting of elites or destabilization of the status quo (Piven and Cloward 1995; McAdam 2017; Caniglia et al 2015).

Structured activist organizations

Those that favor more structured organizations tend to fall into the camp of "resource mobilization theory," which stipulates that an organization's ability to create change is dependent on the resources it is able to access. Resources may be moral (legitimacy, solidarity); cultural (knowledge, know-how, magazines); human (labor, expertise, leadership); material (money, property, equipment); social-organizational (networks, organizations) (Edwards and Gillham, 2013). This creates several implications for effective social movements, e.g. that movements are more likely to develop and grow among existing socially integrated networks, and that hierarchically organized groups are more likely to succeed in challenging elite antagonists (Piven and Cloward, 1995).

Resource-oriented organizations roughly correspond to the Alinskyite community organizing tradition, based on the work of Saul Alinsky; these tactics focus on building long-lasting structure through accumulating small yet radical wins. Notable Alinskyites include Cesar Chavez and Barack Obama (Engler and Engler, 2016).

What makes such an organization successful? A common theme that emerges in the literature on policy-focused activism is a need to achieve internal policy consensus and have clear organizational and leadership structures. These signal to politicians the existence of a well-organized public interest group that they cannot easily counteract.

Some recent literature on social movements and protest movements in the age of social media critiques an overall low level of organizational structure and coherence in such movements (Tufekci, 2017). This literature identifies the signaling importance of social and protest movements: in the past, organizing a large-scale protest or other collective action event required a significant amount of organizational centralization and commitment. Because of this, collective action may have derived much of its power through signaling effects: a protest served as a signal of a broader non-state organizational structure that could pose a meaningful electoral threat and not easily dissolve into disagreement and infighting. Because of the relative ease of organizing mass events today through social media mobilization, contemporary social movements have been hypothesized to lack effectiveness relative to historical movements due to their tendency to involve large numbers of people without a parallel organizational structure to ensure consensus and organized tactics (Tufekci, 2017). This suggests contemporary social movements that achieve success need to have a high degree of consensus and organization and clear leadership to achieve the same effect as historical movements.

Informal mass movements

Critics of resource mobilization theory argue that these highly structured and bureaucratic organizations with roots in longstanding social networks have their limits. At an individual level, people with many ties to the existing social order may be more constrained in their participation in movements, which may explain why students and young people are disproportionately represented in movements such as the 1960s civil rights movement (Piven and Cloward, 1995). At an organizational level, groups that depend on

established social structures, e.g. for funding or legitimacy, are unlikely to meaningfully challenge those structures (McAdam, 2017). Indeed, some critics point to the failure of the institutionalized climate movement to enact meaningful federal policy despite an "impressive array of social movement organizations" (Caniglia et al, 2015), complex coalitions, and numerous Congressional testimonies (Brulle, 2014).

This suggests that, while structured movements can be effective at winning short-term marginal victories, "informal" movements outside of dominant institutions may be more effective at creating larger shifts in political discourse and broader systemic changes. Such informal movements need "free spaces" to develop "truly oppositional" campaigns against the status quo (McAdam, 2017). Piven and Cloward (1995) argue that "lower-stratum" protestors—people without traditional political influence or access to the resources that enable the formation of a structured movement—can exert influence and mobilize outside support by disrupting "the workings of an institution on which important groups depend". Such disruptions often arise from moments of mass grievance that must be effectively harnessed by existing mobilizing infrastructures. Examples of movements seen as more closely aligned to this tradition include Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring, and some flanks of the feminist and civil rights movements of the 1960s.

2: Framing

Framing processes are the ways in which activists (and other organizations) create collective understanding of a given issue based on their messaging and activities (Wasow, 2020; Goffman, 1974; Gitlin, 1980; Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993). The links between social movements and climate change knowledge have not been closely examined, though Jamison (2010) contends that the main positions in public discourse around climate change and climate science are shaped by social movements. We have thus far not found specific literature on effective framing processes for climate change activists, so we turn here to more general research on public opinion and the factors that influence individuals' climate beliefs.

Public opinion on climate change

Addressing climate and environmental issues consistently polls favorably among Americans. However, as discussed in the previous section, several authors contended as recently as 2017 that an effective climate movement did not exist in the US.

As recently as 2012, survey data in Western countries including the US indicated that the long-term increase in scientific confidence in climate change was not linked to any long-term increase in public concern (Ratter et al, 2012). Because of the scientific nature of climate phenomena, a lack of easy attribution of events in lived experience to climate change, a perception that climate change effects other countries more than the United States, and a concerted effort by fossil-fuel interests to tie climate change opinion to polarized American politico-cultural identities, climate change is an issue area that commands relatively little public attention and is also subject to high degrees of motivated and self-confirmatory reasoning (Egan & Mullin, 2017; Weber & Stern, 2011). This may be exacerbated by incentive structures in

politics and the media that reward overemphasis on "extreme" scientific results from either end of the political spectrum (Schenuit et al, 2019).

Further, climate change public opinion in the United States is typically believed to be elite-directed and determined by the dynamics of institutional polarization, rather than influenced by mass movements (Brulle et al. 2012; Stokes & Warshaw, 2017). Indeed, climate change has been found to be salient to extreme conservatives, who oppose governmental climate action as part of their core belief system, but not any other segment of the American public (McCright & Dunlap, 2011 and Kahan, 2015, in McAdam 2017). Thus, while many support climate action, few will take to the streets in favor of it.

Factors that influence public opinion and individual beliefs

We found that the literature on effectively framing climate change was inconclusive, with many studies of individual messages but few overarching patterns. Further, studies that examine specific messages on specific audiences in controlled settings may not generalize to real-world activism.

Studies have found positive effects of framings that:

1. Emphasize the potential for climate change to impact one's own community and home (Spence et al., 2012), which is especially effective for independents and Republicans (Wiest et al., 2015);
2. Emphasize gains from climate change action and de-emphasize climate change losses (Spence & Pidgeon, 2010);
3. Emphasize air pollution and energy independence implications of climate policy, particularly towards Republicans (Feldman & Sol Hart, 2018);
4. Emphasize job creation (Stokes & Warshaw, 2017);
5. Focus on the negatives to be addressed (e.g. stop dirty energy) rather than the positives (e.g. promote clean energy) (Michelson and DeMora, 2021).

Conversely,

1. An emphasis on increased energy cost has negative effects on framing (Stokes & Warshaw, 2017);
2. Multiple studies find "a strong relationship between economic fluctuation and concern for climate change," with e.g. the Great Recession causing decreases in support for climate action (McAdam, 2017).

Research has suggested that linking extreme weather events to climate change may be an effective framing (Egan & Mullin, 2017). Empirical evidence of the effects of extreme weather on climate beliefs is mixed (Demski et al, 2017). The effects of extreme weather on climate beliefs may depend on a variety of factors. For instance, different studies have found that long-term temperature changes affect climate beliefs, but recent temperature extremes do not (Hughes et al, 2020); and that cold temperatures and snowfall can decrease belief in climate change, whereas high temperatures and drought increase it (Borick and Rabe, 2017). Notably, motivated reasoning may result in people interpreting the weather in a way that confirms preexisting views. A person's perception of the extreme weather event may influence or be

correlated with climate beliefs (Howe, 2021; Dai et al, 2015), but it is unclear whether preexisting beliefs are merely causing them to perceive weather events in a way that confirms those beliefs (Borick and Rabe, 2017).

How should climate-focused activist organizations frame climate issues? Overall, the evidence discussed above suggests emphasizing gains from climate action and links to one's immediate experience. For instance, McAdam (2017) suggests mobilizing an identity-based group (e.g. young people, or coastal dwellers); organizing directly in communities affected by extreme weather in order to promote knowledge of its links to climate change; utilizing anger and hope against a common enemy; and choosing a campaign that allows for small victories. However, the literature is inconclusive on this front, and effective messaging is likely to depend on the target audience and broader political climate.

3: Coalition-building

Coalition-building is a feature of most activist organizations, who frequently partner and collaborate with other peer organizations as well as insider policy advocates and value-aligned politicians themselves. We found little evidence to suggest specifically how a climate organization should go about building a coalition, which is likely highly context-dependent.

Importantly, public opinion and attention to climate change is highly responsive to elite partisan cues (Brulle et al., 2012; Stokes & Warshaw, 2017). For this reason, coalitions with sympathetic politicians may play an important role in amplifying and framing an issue. Politicians are highly accessible to the media and receive large amounts of coverage and attention, which filters to the public and plays a role in determining public opinion and discourse on the topic. On the other hand, of course, allying with a politician from one side of the political spectrum risks alienating members of the public on the other side.

4: Political endorsement and campaign involvement

Climate activist organizations often become involved in the political process through issuing endorsements, supporting campaigns through direct voter contact campaigns to persuade and mobilize supporters, and pressuring candidates on climate issues.

Political endorsements

Overall, political endorsements are likely effective, particularly in settings such as primary races where voters and politicians share similar ideologies. A 2014 poll found that 60 percent of Democratic Party voters reported attaching importance to endorsements in determining which candidates to support.

Voter contact

The evidence of campaigns' efforts on candidate *choices* is mixed, with one meta-analysis yielding an average effect of zero (Kalla & Broockman, 2018).

However, efforts to mobilize *existing* supporters, rather than persuade undecided ones, may be more effective; recent studies suggest a positive effect on voter turnout of non-partisan get-out-the-vote efforts (Ohme et al, 2020; Peixoto et al, 2020; Green and Gerber, 2019), though this finding is by no means universal (Scott et al, 2021).

We believe that such activities, when properly tailored to the race and political climate, may have a modest effect.

Pressuring candidates on climate issues

A number of activist organizations pressure candidates and politicians to refuse donations from fossil-fuel linked interests. The evidence on whether such donations influence political behavior is mixed.

Until recently, much of the literature on campaign contributions and political donations found little evidence of systematic benefits accruing to corporations who make political donations when looking at roll call voting patterns, but more recent studies have called this into question (Powell, 2013). Kalla and Broockman (2016) find that politicians make themselves available for meetings with individuals said to be donors between 3-4 times more often than others.

Overall, it is difficult to determine the effect of donations on political behavior, especially since many studies focus on single politicians and issue areas. Thus, we conclude there is modest evidence that pushing candidates to refuse campaign donations from fossil fuel interests could affect the candidate's political behavior once in office.

Refusing contributions is also unlikely to disadvantage the candidate in an election: corporate donors overwhelmingly donate to incumbents in non-competitive races (Bonica, 2016), and there is little evidence that campaign spending has electoral implications for incumbents (Gerber, 2004). Fundraising may be more impactful in competitive races and for challenger candidates (Gerber, 2004).

5, 6, 7, 8, 9: Protest action, targeted action, media content creation, attention, shifts in public opinion and candidate perception

Overall, research demonstrates that activism has in the past played a key role in shifting public opinion around contentious social issues, with important implications for politics and policy. Broadly, some evidence suggests protest and movement activities generally tend to lead to greater political prospects for politicians aligned with protester demands (Gillion & Soule, 2018. Existing literature suggests that the success of mobilization is highly dependent on the number of individuals mobilized (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). Importantly, negative media coverage has been shown to have had a negative effect on popular support for social movement aims (Gillon & Soule, 2018); climate policy is often the target of such coverage.

Case studies in the US

The civil rights protests of the 1960s were highly successful at gaining media and thus public attention, shifting public opinion, electoral support, and policy (Mazumder, 2018; Wasow, 2020). Social movements played an important role in shifting discourse and awareness around marriage equality issues in the United States (Woodly, 2015). Even movements initially seen as a failure, such as Occupy Wall Street, may turn out to bear fruit by shifting discourse five or ten years later (Engler, 2016). On the other hand, protest movements have certainly been evaluated as failing in achieving their mission, such as the anti-Vietnam war movement (McAdam & Su, 2002).

Overall, these prominent case studies and others demonstrate that large-scale policy shifts driven by social movement activities are possible, but highly context-dependent, making it difficult to predict whether a particular protest act or social movement will achieve success with any reasonable certainty. The chain from base-building to action to shifting public opinion is long.

Implications for climate activism

Turning to climate change specifically, some evidence suggests that large-scale protests like marches may change public intentions to participate in climate social movement activities further (Swim et al. 2019). Continued participation is key to reaching the critical mass of active protestors observed by Chenoweth and Stephan (2011). Overall, such evidence is not conclusive.

In summary, we find ample evidence that activist mobilization *can* succeed in generating media attention and shifting public opinion, but little evidence that there is one “best-practice” approach to achieving public opinion and policy shifts. This suggests that a key criterion for evaluating the likely effectiveness of a climate activist organization must be the organization's ability to adapt its tactics to shifting political conditions and public opinion.

10, 11, 12: Commitments by candidates and politicians, election of political allies, climate change becomes a policy priority

We observe that many climate activist organizations seek to gain commitments by elected politicians or candidates to act in a particular way. This serves partially as a way to attract media attention, but it may also be useful in changing politicians’ policy priorities. Overall, we find evidence that politicians most often do follow through on promises and commitments made during campaigns.

The academic literature on the subject suggests that most politicians keep promises and follow through on their campaign commitments most of the time. A review of the literature on the subject by Pétry & Collette (2009) finds that on average across studies in North America and Europe, politicians keep their promises about 67 percent of the time. However, the variance of the studies is significant (around 10 percent) and the overall quality of research reviewed is deemed fairly low. In an analysis of follow-through on environmental campaign promises in the 105th US Congress (1997-99), Ringquist & Dasse (2004) found a rate of 73 percent agreement between campaign promises and votes on legislative proposals. Sulkin

(2009) finds additional evidence of this, particularly in the context of campaign promises in the US and political activity in the 106th to 108th US congress (1999-2005). Thompson et al. (2017) provide a further up-to-date verification of these overall findings. Ultimately, we conclude that politicians are more likely to follow through on their promises than not.

13, 14: Enactment of legislative commitments, reduced atmospheric greenhouse gas concentration

Activists often advocate for politicians to adopt commitments, such as commitments to decarbonize the American economy by a particular date (most often 2030 or 2050). Overall, we find little evidence that such commitments, in the context of climate policy, represent likely follow-through. Some intermediate evidence suggests that climate commitments across countries have tended to lead to expected intermediate changes (Tolliver et al., 2020).

Conclusion

Our analysis of available research demonstrates that activism has in the past played a key causal role in shifting public opinion around contentious social issues, with implications for politics and policy, but that such shifts are far from assured. For every instance of successful activism, instances of unsuccessful activism abound. The success of activism is highly context-dependent, relying on the ability of activists to formulate winning strategies in the face of existing and constantly shifting political, media, and public opinion conditions.

Because of the demonstrated successes of activism in causing massive political and policy change around contentious social issues in the past, we believe that **activism is a highly promising activity for influencing policy, but that activist organizations must be assessed for quality and the coherence of their theory of change within the political context in which they work**. In our shallow-dive and deep-dive documents, we apply the lessons gained from our theory of change exercise and literature review presented here to identify high-potential opportunities for funding climate activism efforts.

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