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Environmental Movements and Their Political Context

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Abstract

Environmental movements are in various ways shaped by their political context, typically conceptualized by scholars as the *political opportunity structure* (POS). In addition to presenting a review of research on the complex relationship between POS and environmental movements, this chapter provides an analysis of several emblematic climate mobilizations of the late 2010s to elaborate on some largely neglected aspects of POS theory. These include (1) how movements translate POS into strategies through narratives of interactions with governmental institutions; (2) how not only input structures but also output structures of governmental institutions need to be taken into account to understand environmental movements' strategic choices; and (3) how POS may come to play a less significant role when movements shift from a predominantly instrumental logic to an increasingly moral/expressive logic.

Introduction

Amid sometimes fierce theoretical debates, there is nevertheless broad scholarly agreement that social movements are shaped by their political context. Environmental movements are no exception in this respect. In this chapter we discuss the relationship between political context and environmental movements using the concept of the *political opportunity structure* (POS). While environmental movements' contextual embeddedness has been studied from a variety of angles, including 'political culture' (e.g., Jamison et al. 1990), POS has been by far the most prolific approach in the social movement literature. For better or worse, it also captures a broad range of elements in the political context, thus meriting our full attention here.

In the following, we therefore begin by teasing out the central aspects of the POS and discuss what the main mechanisms are through which POSs influence movements. We argue that a better understanding of those mechanisms is needed to make sense of some of the contradictory findings in previous studies and to provide a more robust theoretical

framework. Here, a first argument we introduce is that scholars should consider how movements draw conclusions about POS from narrated experiences of interactions with government institutions, and how these narratives are embedded in collective identities.

Thereafter we turn to a literature review of how various political contexts have impacted on the mobilization, strategies and outcomes of environmental movements. A second argument we introduce is that whereas much work has been done on the effect of *input structures* (governmental institutions' openness to movement demands), differences in *output structures* (the capacity of governmental institutions to produce change) have been overlooked.

Finally, we use the climate movement as an example to demonstrate these two arguments. We show how variations over time of (perceived) POSs on the international level changed movement strategies. However, introducing our third main argument, we also suggest that the wave of climate protests at the end of the 2010s – prominently represented by Fridays For Future and Extinction Rebellion – seems to be strongly driven by a widespread sense of moral obligation to protest. This moral focus may render political opportunities less central.

Political opportunity structures and social movements

During the last decades, the concepts of political opportunities and political opportunity structures (POS) have been the predominant way of theorizing the effect of political context on social movements. However, there are persistent disagreements about either *what* aspects of the POS are most consequential or *how* they shape mobilizations. In his original formulation of the term "structure of political opportunities", Eisinger described it as "elements in the environment [that] impose certain constraints on political activity or open avenues for it, which he specifies as "the openings, weak spots, barriers, and resources of the political system itself" (1973: 11-12). Since the term "structure" has been associated with the more stable aspects of the political context, some authors have preferred the term "political opportunities" to capture also its sometimes volatile elements (e.g. Tarrow 1998: 77).

Following Koopmans' definition of political opportunities as "options for collective action, with chances and risks attached to them" (1999: 97), we argue that an "opportunity" can only exist in relation to specific goals and aims of a political actor (Goodwin and Jasper 1999; Meyer and Minkoff 2004). Nonetheless, it can be maintained that there are elements of the political sphere that *condition* political opportunities. Such elements may be structural in the

sense that they are beyond the direct influence of movement actors. Some are rigid and only slowly changing (such as election systems and a degree of governmental decentralization), others potentially more volatile (such as elite allies in power and divisions among elites). Whether a combination of such elements provides sufficiently good chances to constitute an opportunity can only be determined by movement actors considering if and how to take political action.

Some authors have had very broad notions of what constitutes the POS, including such factors as societal myths, zeitgeist and media discourse (e.g. Gamson and Meyer 1996). In order to maintain some consistency with the (admittedly still broad) mainstream of POS research we think that the term POS should be reserved for opportunity structures related to *governmental* institutions. This way POS is distinguished from other relevant contextual factors influencing movements, such as discursive opportunity structures (Koopmans and Olzak 2004), legal opportunity structures (Hilson 2002) and corporate opportunity structures (King 2008; Wahlström and Peterson 2006). McAdam and Tarrow highlight the following aspects of a regime which affect what political opportunities contenders might perceive:

> (1) the multiplicity of independent centers of power within the regime; (2) its openness to new actors and movements; (3) the instability of current political alignments; (4) the availability of influential allies or supporters; (5) the extent to which the regime suppresses or facilitates collective claims; and (6) changes in these properties. (2018: 21)

These aspects largely meet our definition of structures as 'existing independently' and 'being beyond the direct influence of movement actors', while varying in their stability. The more volatile factors are often related to the configuration of the more stable ones. For instance, the Green Party often presents a significant elite ally for environmental movements that can be voted in or out of office, but the party's electoral chances are determined by stable factors like proportionality.

While much research on POSs has focused on the national level, research has also dealt with different *levels* of POS, including city, municipality, and international political opportunity structures (IPOS) (van der Heijden 2006). A basic distinction is furthermore made between *input structures* – which condition a political actor's access to a polity, and *output structures* – the capacity of a governmental institution to implement policies. While the former has drawn by far the most attention, the latter may be as important for explaining variation in

environmental mobilizations. For example, international organizations such as the UN may be relatively open to environmental demands, but have been rather weak in implementing and enforcing environmental policy (van der Heijden, 2006), motivating various climate movement groups to ignore the institution and target presumably more powerful actors like fossil fuel companies (de Moor 2018; de Moor and Wahlström 2019).

There has been a long-standing debate regarding the causal mechanisms bringing about the various effects of POS on mobilizations. Some argue that objective conditions belonging to the POS can have a direct effect on mobilizations, regardless of the extent to which they are known by activists. In some cases, movements may be "consistent champions" (Meyer 2004) that experience political impact when the POS opens up. It is easy to imagine a movement mobilizing a campaign initially unaware of the presence of a new ally in the political system which eventually facilitates the realization of its demands. Similarly, Koopmans (2005) has proposed an 'evolutionary' model, according to which the POS provides a habitat that determines which mobilizations and which repertoires of action "survive" over time.

However, with respect to movement strategies and levels of mobilization it seems that the most widely held position is that POSs need to be perceived and interpreted by movement actors in order to have an effect on them (McAdam 1999; Meyer and Minkoff 2004). Yet it has rarely been specified why POSs sometimes would, and other times would not, be perceived and acted upon (de Moor and Wahlström 2019). People may learn about changes in the POS through various sources, but to assess whether such changes really constitute an opening or closure of opportunity, one needs to interact with the state and draw conclusions from those experiences (or, as noted by Wall [1999], interpret other organizations' interactions with the state). We have argued elsewhere (de Moor and Wahlström 2019) that experiences of such interactions are constructed, retained and transformed into strategies through collective narration in which common conceptions of actors, causal connections and projected developments are constructed. This perspective highlights that when a collective actor decides what conclusions to draw from prior interactions with the state this is not a matter of simple cost-benefit analysis. Other considerations may include what narrative seems most convincing and fits other processes. For instance, narratives about the POS are more likely to affect strategies if they match ongoing processes of collective identity formation.

The relation between environmental movements and the POS

We have so far not focused on environmental movements, but several of the key early contributions to the literature on POS in fact relate to them (e.g. Kitschelt, 1986; Rucht 1990; Kriesi et al. 1995). Findings on environmental movements were therefore central to shaping POS theory. In this section we explore these foundational insights in greater detail, while taking into account a number of distinctive features of the relation between the POS and environmental movements.

Historical overview of research on POS and environmental movements

Building on prior work on the impact of political context of other movements, Kitschelt (1986) appears to have been the first to apply an explicit POS perspective on an environmental movement – the anti-nuclear movement in France, Sweden, the US and West Germany. Kitschelt looked at both input and output structures to explain tactical variations between anti-nuclear movements in four countries. Where input structures were open, like in Sweden and the US, strategies focused on using those institutional openings through assimilative strategies like lobbying. By contrast, in closed input structures, like in France and West-Germany, more confrontational outsider strategies like demonstrations and civil disobedience were necessary. In the US, output structures were weak and therefore open to challengers, so activists maintained assimilative strategies even in the output phase of the nuclear policies. By contrast, Swedish 1970s anti-nuclear activists found few opportunities to influence the country's strong output structure.

In direct response to Kitschelt, Rucht (1990) analysed anti-nuclear movements in the same cases (except Sweden), arguing that Kitschelt's POS model was overly simplistic and could not accurately explain strategic variations. While recognizing the value of considering input and output structures to explain more or less assimilative strategies, Rucht argued that "the concept of political opportunity in its present form can only serve as a starting point for a more sophisticated analysis which includes a broader range of explanatory variables" (1990: 218-219). These variables include transnational diffusion of strategies, the effect of socio-cultural conditions on the tactical repertoire that activists can draw from, time-specific factors affecting changes in the POS over time, varying perceptions of the same 'objective' POS, and the interpretation of the meaning of a conflict. These considerations have remained influential in debates on POS.

Kriesi et al. (1995) later analysed social movements' politicization of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in four countries, showing that the exclusive French state disabled successful mobilization, whereas the weak Swiss and German states were more open to mobilization but did not provide the same opportunities for substantive success as the strong and inclusive Dutch state. Similarly, Van der Heijden (1997) studied the institutionalization[1] of environmental movements in France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland, arguing that differences in degrees of institutionalization were attributable to POS factors such as centralization of the state and degree of repression towards the movement. Rootes (1999), in contrast, argued that there is little consistency in the relation between stable features of the political context and environmental movement institutionalization, for instance pointing to the then increasing number of radical environmental groups in Great Britain, previously dominated by large institutionalized organizations.

Continuing the discussion about environmental movement institutionalization, Dryzek et al. (2003) published the seminal study *Green States and Social Movements,* comparing France, Norway, the US and Germany. They were careful to point out the difference in their approach from POS. While their first dimension (inclusive – exclusive) resembles that of input structures, they contrast their second dimension (active – passive) from that of output structures. Where the latter refers to "the state's ability to impose its agenda on society," (Dryzek et al. 2003: 19), the former looks at whether the state takes a pro-active stance on (environmental) issues. In effect, while e.g. France was considered 'strong' by Kitschelt and Kriesi et al., it is 'passive' for Dryzek et al. Still, the authors find common ground with the previous studies when they conclude that inclusive states lead to greater institutionalization, adding the critical note that access does not equate influence, but often rather co-optation.

Reflecting some more conceptual criticisms of POS in the same period (e.g. Goodwin and Jasper 1999; Rootes 1999) several publications from the late 1990s onwards questioned the usefulness of POS. For example, the influential comparative study on *Environmental Protest in Europe* edited by Rootes (2003) echoed some of the criticisms articulated by Rucht (1990). The study concluded that "Strictly structural factors, political institutional arrangements foremost among them, explain little if any of the variation in the patterns of environmental protest among the seven states we have considered." (Rootes 2003: 22). Instead, "It is the

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[1] According to Van der Heijden (1997), institutionalization is defined by three processes: (1) organizational growth, (2) internal institutionalization (e.g. professionalization, bureaucratization and centralization), and (3) external institutionalization (the action repertoire of the movement).

contingent and conjunctural dimensions of political opportunities rather than the truly structural ones that best explain the patterns we have observed" (Rootes 2003: 23).

Since then, discussions about the use of POS per se (Doherty and Hayes 2012), the relevance of variations over time or space (Shriver and Adams 2010; Sarre and Jehlička 2007), and perceived or objective POSs (Saunders 2009) have continued. For instance, considering the strategic diversity among environmental groups that exist within the single POS of the UK, Saunders (2009) argued that the POS cannot determine strategies per se. However, she did find that the POS affects how groups relate to each other (see also Di Gregorio 2014 and Heikkila et al. 2019). That is, while those excluded by the POS develop more collaborative strategies to compensate for unfavourable contextual conditions, those included can afford to remain more isolated (see also Poloni-Staudinger 2009). Yet despite these critiques and qualifications, the concept of POS – with all its variations – has continued to inspire research up until the present. We have identified a number of prominent themes and sub-fields that have dominated discussions on environmental movements.

Contemporary comparisons – on different geographic levels

While POS is a concept that is mainly applied to democracies, there are also a number of studies that use it to capture the political context for environmental movements in undemocratic contexts. China appears to be the most commonly studied country (Xie and Van der Heijden 2010) but there are also comparative studies of non-democracies. In a comparison of the varying presence of environmental non-governmnental organizations (ENGOs) in 71 autocracies, Böhmelt (2014) proposes regime type as a crucial factor, tying it primarily to the level of repression. He shows that one-party states, due to lower levels of (overt) repression, more often have active ENGOs, compared to especially military regimes and personalist regimes.

In addition to studies comparing the effects of country-level POS on mobilization and strategies, a good number of studies direct attention to sub-national variation. For example, McCright and Nichols Clark (2006) compared the impact of varying POSs on environmental mobilization in 257 American communities, finding only weak effects of institutional dimensions of local POS on movement activity level. They instead emphasized the positive mobilizing effects of the activity of other movements and the activity levels of individual citizens, thereby including factors that clearly fall outside of typical definitions and operationalisations of POS.

The impact of local POSs on environmental mobilization has in many instances been studied by comparing resistance to infrastructural projects. Carmin (2003) found that openings in the POS – in terms of elite allies, political representation, divisions among elites and political access – led to higher levels of individual participation against environmental exploitation through building projects. McAdam and Boudet (2010) compared large infrastructural projects in the 'developing world,' finding that Western funding of the projects and public consultation appeared to be necessary conditions for mobilization, increasing the chance of mobilization when combined with some level of environmental (or other) threat, whereas broader and more stable aspects of the POS on the national level had no discernible impact on the incidence of mobilizations. In apparent contrast, a study of resistance against mining projects in Sweden (Zachrisson and Beland Lindahl 2019) found that movements were mobilized when the state offered little or no access to influencing the decisions about mining projects. Apparently, factors like public consultations can have rather different effects on movements across different contexts.

International political opportunities and the growing importance of output structures

Sticking with questions of levels of government, the environmental movement is one of the movements most profoundly affected by the globalization of politics – as a result of both the nature of the problems it addresses and the international governmental organizations (IGOs) that have emerged in response to them. Graubert (2004) was one of the first to shift attention to the impact of the international level on environmental movement strategies, which was shortly after further developed by Van der Heijden (2006). Van der Heijden argues that open formal structures and integrative formal elite strategies increases the frequency of NGOs using 'conventional' strategies whereas closed formal structures and exclusive elite strategies increases 'unconventional' protest. Importantly, he points out that the IPOS for different social movements is tied to different international governmental institutions, depending on their jurisdiction and the issues they deal with. Concurrently, Derman (2014) argued that the relative favourability of the IPOS presented by the UN for working on climate justice can be used to explain transnational climate justice advocacy. Poloni-Staudinger (2008) adds that environmentalists' decision to act at the international level should be understood as a function of the national POS as well: the less favourable it is, the more likely groups are to explore opportunities at the transnational level (see also Henry et al. 2019). Similarly, Cassegård and colleagues (2017) argued that climate movement strategies should be seen as emerging out of a back-and-forth between acting in national and transnational contexts.

The discussion on IPOSs has also affected how output structures are understood and how central they might be for explaining movement activity. While Kitschelt mainly considered output structures as opportunities to exert influence during the implementation phase of policies, more recent studies on the transnational level (e.g. Van der Heijden 2006; de Moor and Wahlström 2019) have considered output structures in terms of whether a polity is able to get things done, including the fulfilment of protesters' demands. It has been argued that output structures therefore rather determine *which* actor movements will target, whereas input structures are more decisive for *how* the polity should be targeted (de Moor 2016). In this light, output structures have arguably become more important to explain the targets of environmental movements given the persistent inability of states to effectively address major environmental concerns like climate change, opening debates about which other, arguably more powerful actors (e.g. companies) should be targeted.

Opportunities changing over time

As the overview so far implies, most studies testing POS theory do so by comparing countries or regions. However, some study the impact of changes in POS over time, either by following long time periods or by studying the impact of major societal transitions. Further emphasizing that there is no obvious positive relationship between open POS and environmental mobilization in the US, a study by Carmichael et al. (2012) showed that, between 1900 and 2000 there was even a weak *negative* relationship between the founding of US environmental organizations and the presence of political allies such as a democratic congress and/or a president sympathetic to the ideas of the movement. A prominent sub-group of diachronic POS studies concern Eastern Europe over the period of its transition to post-socialism. A considerable number of studies have looked at the impact of the collapse of the Soviet-Union on environmentalist strategies, including the shift from organizing collective action to reproducing one's own organizations under hostile conditions in Russia (Yanitsky 2012) and Czechoslovakia (Shriver and Adams 2010), and the rise of contentious action in response to opportunities opened by a weakening Soviet-Union, followed by institutionalization and internationalization (Carmin and Fagan 2010).

POS and movement outcomes

Finally, some studies connect POS and environmental movement outcomes (see chapter 30 by Johnson and Agnone for a discussion on outcomes). On the one hand, studies indicate that POSs affect chances for success (Rootes and Nulman 2015). For instance, based on a study of

anti-nuclear campaigners in China, Sheng (2019) argues that elite fragmentation and decentralization can increase the number of entry-points for movements and consequently their success (see also Zhang 2018). Research on the US has shown the importance of having elite allies in power – particularly Democrats – to ensure the success of environmental campaigning (e.g. Kemberling and Roberts 2009; Giugni 2006). On the other hand, changes in POSs themselves are often depicted as important movement outcomes in the form of 'structural effects' (Kitschelt 1986). For instance, Almeida and Stearns (1998) argue that a national anti-pollution movement in Japan put pressure on the national government to take pollution into account by challenging its legitimacy in this area, which made it increasingly costly to repress challengers, and which in turn opened up opportunities for local campaigns. Such structural changes can in turn contribute to substantive movement success (Zhang 2018).

Perceived opportunities

A different comparative approach to comparing the impact of "objective" features in different polities is to compare the strategic consequences of different groups' or individual activists' *perceptions* of the POS. Ergas (2010) demonstrated the importance of perceived opportunities and constraints for shaping how ecovillages pursue their goals. De Moor et al. (2017) similarly argued that perceived opportunities – output structures in particular – shape lifestyle activists' choice to engage with the state or not: if the state is perceived as unable to solve environmental problems, they refrain from making demands to it.

While some stress the importance of rational evaluation of political opportunities by which activists learn to 'read' the POS (Hadden 2018), we have as outlined above argued for the importance of interaction and storytelling between groups. In our case study of the climate movement's mobilization around COP21, we found that perceiving the UNFCCC as incapable to get things done motivates disengagement from targeting international climate negotiations (de Moor and Wahlström 2019). However, we challenged the rationalist 'perception model' by stressing the importance of learning about POSs through the experience of interacting with a polity (see also Shriver and Adams 2010) and the role of narratives in developing strategies to respond to experienced opportunities or constraints (see also Hadden 2017).

POS and the climate movement

Our literature review in the previous section shows the relevance of POS as a concept for studying environmental movements, but perhaps also confirms the challenge in drawing generalizable conclusions from this research. The latter is perhaps not so surprising given the diverse contexts to which POS has been applied and its many different operationalisations. In this final section, we discuss how our two main arguments made so far – about the importance of outputs structures and of movement narratives – apply to the contemporary climate movement. We furthermore use the case to introduce our third and final argument that as movements become less 'instrumental', the POS becomes less central to their strategic considerations. Specifically, we look at the climate movement's historic mobilization around the 2015 Paris Climate Summit (COP21) and the more recent mobilizations by Fridays For Future and Extinction Rebellion.

The Copenhagen narrative and the mobilization around COP21

The 2015 mobilization around COP21was an iconic moment in the history of the climate movement. In analysing how POSs affected this mobilization, a story of the failed COP15 Copenhagen Summit in 2009 kept recurring in strategic discussions. Copenhagen had – both inside and outside the climate movement – raised great expectations of delivering a crucial step forwards in the global effort to address climate change, but delivered an equally great disappointment when it failed. At least that was the dominant 'Copenhagen narrative' – moderated and streamlined to unify the climate movement behind a new strategy. The following example illustrates both the key storyline and its (desired) strategic implications:

> Interviewer: Do previous experiences with the COP affect how you are mobilizing for COP21?
>
> Respondent: Yes, definitely. (…) Alternatiba is actually answering [to] the (…) consequences of COP15 in Copenhagen where movements adopted a strategy of saying: "Yes this is the COP of the last chance," and thought that by massively mobilizing people they could obtain this dream agreement, you know. And then it didn't work. And after that, the climate movement in Europe completely collapsed (…). And so Alternatiba said: "Yes, we need to change this strategy for COP21 and avoid saying it's (…) the COP of the last chance (…)." (Interview Alternatiba 2015)

This story clearly emphasizes the contextual dependency of the climate movement's success, and more specifically, how it was constrained by the weakness of the UN's output structure. Yet while there was broad agreement on this narrative, closer examination showed that it left out conflicting interpretations of what had caused the Copenhagen defeat, instead telling a unified story to identify today's climate movement as having learned from defeat and being on its way to greater success. For instance, some interviewees challenged the idea that everyone had believed that Copenhagen could deliver a great policy victory, instead emphasizing that the climate justice movement itself had failed to develop a strategy that could mobilize sufficiently for its cause, thus understating the role of the POS.

While most of these disagreements remained in the background, one disagreement could not be resolved, creating a deep cleavage within the climate mobilization around COP21. It was in particular the online-based campaign group Avaaz (representing one of the most resourceful groups in the coalition) that strongly disagreed on the accuracy of the narrative, and in particular, on the strategic implications it was attributed. One interviewee explained:

> We took Copenhagen as far as we could take it in that moment. (…) And our community was growing massively after Copenhagen. Donating more money than ever before, people were sharing our campaign more than ever before. (…) So, where is the sense of movement collapse coming from? (…) So, we get to Lima [COP20 2014] (…) and there's a presentation from the French groups that the COP is going to be a failure and we have to mobilize at the end of the COP and we shouldn't make it about the COP because we could have the final word and signal to where the movement needs to go next. And we were like, uhm, what?! (Interview AVAAZ 2015)

By disagreeing on the nature and the causes of the Copenhagen failure, Avaaz proposed an alternative narrative. This narrative did not so much challenge the perception of the COP's POS, but instead downplayed its importance by emphasizing the movement's ability to mobilize masses and the strength that lies in that regardless of the POS. This resonates with Gamson and Meyer's (1996) argument that POSs are often framed to support pre-existing strategic preferences.

While the coalition that mobilized for COP21 remained intact, this disagreement did lead to a clear split in the strategic plans for COP21 (de Moor 2018). Those adhering to the dominant

Copenhagen narrative advocated a strategy that would symbolize the movement's scepticism about the ability of the COP to produce a meaningful outcome. For some this meant mobilizing during the COP but focusing on corporate targets like fossil fuel companies and banks supporting them. Others mobilized at the end of the conference to symbolize that they were not trying to influence its outcome. Those who challenged this narrative argued that it was still useful to target the COP, and that the movement merely had to mobilize enough people to drive up pressure on government leaders to do the right thing. To exert this pressure timely, they would mobilize at the beginning of the summit. The latter strategy was criticized by the former for its short-termism as it arguably prioritized the mobilization of as many participants as possible with an overly optimistic narrative that would inevitably lead to disappointment like in Copenhagen, and subsequently a similar pattern of demobilization. To involve people in climate action for the long term, the dominant belief was that an honest, more sombre presentation of expectations would be more successful. This disagreement crystalized in a split mobilization where those adhering to a story of favourable political opportunities at COP21 mobilized during the first weekend of the summit and those adhering to a story of lacking opportunities mobilized elsewhere or during the last weekend.

Ultimately, these plans were disrupted entirely when France introduced a state of emergency after the 15 November terrorist attacks in Paris just two weeks before the Summit (Wahlström and de Moor 2017), indicating a dramatic and fast closure of opportunities in the form of a demonstration ban. However, the case still shows how narrated perceptions of the POS, and of output structures in particular, affected mobilization and strategy in the climate movement. We believe this case also shows that this version of the POS approach can bridge the structure-agency duality. It is possible to identify actual conditions "out there" that affect the degree of success of a mobilization, but experiences have to be made by the movement in interaction with these conditions, and then interpreted to guide strategy. Different strategies among movement factions do not show the lack of impact of structure; only that it is not deterministic.

FFF and XR: the end of a narrative?

If the Copenhagen narrative motivated a widespread desire to move activism beyond attempts to influence (especially international) policy-making processes, more recent climate mobilizations suggest that this narrative, or at least its impact, has changed. Since late 2018, climate activism has taken a new turn with the emergence of new campaigns in the form of

FFF and XR. While the former is mainly characterized by its non-confrontational tactics of school strikes and mass demonstrations, the latter opts for non-violent civil disobedience to disrupt public life and force stronger climate action. Yet they have in common that they primarily target governmental institutions – either at the local and national levels, or at the international level such as during the 2019 Climate Summits in New York and Madrid. This represents a clear break from recent trends towards direct action campaigns like Ende Gelände which in Germany organizes massive occupations of coal mines, to instead focusing on demanding action from state governments.

How can we make sense of this shift, particularly from a POS point of view? Does this shift mean that FFF and XR are more optimistic about the ability of states to get things done, or do they share the scepticism of previous climate movements but draw different strategic conclusions from this? While more research is needed to answer this question in full, some recently collected data indicates that the latter option is a more convincing explanation.

During 2019, we collected protest-survey data at various large-scale FFF and XR demonstrations around the world, giving us representative data on how today's activists perceive states' ability to address environmental issues like climate change (for details on the study see Wahlström et al. 2019; de Moor et al. 2020; Saunders, Doherty and Hayes 2020). The data show widespread scepticism regarding governments' ability to address main environmental challenges, thus indicating that output structures were still perceived to be weak. Specifically, very few respondents agreed with the statement that "governments can be relied upon to solve our environmental problems." As Figure 1.1 shows, this is true across FFF demonstrations in various countries, and comparable data show a very similar picture at XR demonstrations in the UK (Saunders, Doherty and Hayes 2020).

INSERT FIGURE 1.1 NEAR HERE

Figure 1.1 Degree of agreement with the statement "governments can be relied upon to solve our environmental problems" among youth and adult participants in Fridays for Future demonstrations 20-27 September 2019. Reproduced under a Creative Commons BY-NC Licence 4.0 from de Moor et al. (2020).

There are considerable variations between countries, but interestingly, there seems to be no direct correlation between 'objective' indicators of environmental performance and these perceptions. While perceived capacity seems to be higher in some countries that are indeed known as environmental leaders (e.g. Sweden, but here we also find considerable internal differences), it is low in other 'leading' countries (e.g. Germany) and relatively high in some laggards (e.g. Hungary) (see Liefferink et al. 2009). What seems to matter more is an overall perception of states as weak on environmental performance.

While we cannot directly compare these quantitative findings to the qualitative findings of our COP21 study, we can cautiously conclude that there has not been a radical shift away from perceiving states' output structures as weak. It is therefore more likely that what has changed is how activists draw strategic conclusions from these perceptions. Here we present some working hypotheses as to what might be going on.

A first possibility is that the capacity of the state to get things done is no longer framed as a given contextual determinant, but as something that social movements can influence. Previous studies suggested that while social movements may believe that they can force governments to listen, they might not believe they can force them to become more capable (de Moor 2016). However, capacity to act is to some degree the result of political decisions (e.g. the amount of tax a state decides to collect can affect the extent to which it can address societal problems), and movements can and do challenge these decisions. For instance, Thörn and Svenberg (2017) argue that environmental movements sometimes oppose neoliberal processes by which states shift responsibility to address environmental challenges to market actors and civil society, demanding instead that states take more responsibility themselves. Such views may contribute to the current re-responsibilizing of the state (see also Thörn's chapter in this volume). In POS terms, we could thus argue that not only input structures can be seen as movement outcomes (see above), but that output structures can be as well. We also see this reflected in the argument expressed by multiple climate activists that states' far-reaching actions in response to the Covid-19 pandemic prove that – if willing – governments could deploy similarly strong measures in response to the climate crisis.

A second possibility is that we are witnessing a shift not so much in *how* POSs matter for FFF's and XR's strategies, but *whether* they matter. As discussed earlier, POSs are considered to be especially important for 'instrumental movements,' and changes in this regard may make perceived POSs less relevant to inform strategies in today's climate

campaigns. While our survey data clearly show that participants in FFF and XR demonstrations have relatively strong instrumental motivations (Wahlström et al. 2019; de Moor et al. 2020; Saunders, Doherty and Hayes 2020), slogans and messages from within these campaigns also suggest a sense of moral obligation. Between 70 and 80% in most locations of the FFF protest survey agreed or strongly agreed that they participated because "felt morally obliged to do so". Instead of asking which potential target has the greatest capacity and willingness to make things change, governments are addressed based on their moral responsibility to protect the people – today and in the future – from existential threats posed by climate change. This is for instance illustrated by Greta Thunberg's famous speech at the UN Climate Summit in New York 2019:

> "People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are at the beginning of a mass extinction and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of economic growth. How dare you?!"

The need for citizens to pressure governments into taking up this responsibility is framed in similarly moral terms, as illustrated by an elderly XR protester who was photographed wearing a sign saying, "I am a rebel so that I can look my grandchildren in the eye". In the face of existential crises, instrumental discussions about political opportunities seem to loose force, making room for unconditional demands for action – no matter what the circumstances. A Swedish activist recently explained to us that for XR, "bravery" is a key virtue, referring to the tenacity to keep fighting despite having the odds stacked against you.

Conclusion

The impact of the political context on environmental movements has been a productive field of research for several decades now. Much of the early work in the area was preoccupied with national comparisons of developments of the environmental movement in different countries, in particular different degrees of institutionalization. Lately, focus seems to have increasingly shifted towards both local variations as well as international political opportunity structures. The latter represents the globalized framing of the climate issue and the concomitantly globalized mobilization. The complex governance of this issue has presented challenges for movement actors to accurately identify political opportunities and highlighted the need for studying activists' perceptions of the POS and how those perceptions are translated into movement strategies.

We have sought to make three main contributions to the already rich literature on environmental movements and POS: 1) while input structures have received most attention, output structures seem to merit as much attention – especially in a context in which states' capacity to act on society's main environmental challenges has become questionable; 2) narratives may present a key mechanism to link POS and strategies, and narrated opportunities need to be understood as entangled in wider movement process, including collective identity formation; and 3) the relevance of POS can vary over time – even within movements – depending on the instrumental or moral orientation of the movement. Applying these ideas to some of the most recent climate movement mobilizations, we can conclude that new narratives facilitate a re-responsibilizing of the state which may ultimately result in the strengthening of output structures, thus rendering the state's POS more favourable for environmental movements. At the same time, whether and how the POS is relevant to environmental movements remains a question that merits ongoing academic scrutiny.

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