

The Efficacy of Environmentalist Civil Society Organizations in Shifting Government Priorities: A Case Study of Extinction Rebellion UK

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Abstract

The urgency of the climate crisis has galvanized environmental movements around the world, with Extinction Rebellion (XR) playing a key role in UK environmental policy. XR challenges the dominant political and economic paradigm that prioritizes growth over sustainability, with disruptive proposals including government recognition of the crisis, net-zero commitments, and citizen-led ecological governance. This paper explores how environmental civil society organizations (CSOs) can influence a public policy agenda dominated by economic development. Applying frameworks such as IAD, ACF, social movement theory, and game theory, this paper analyses XR's strategy and its impact on UK climate policy.

Keywords

Environmental Policy; UK; Extinction Rebellion; Environmentalist Civil Society Organizations; Government

1. Introduction

The climate and ecological crises pose an existential threat to humanity and require urgent systemic transformation. Scientific consensus emphasizes that global warming must be limited to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels to prevent catastrophic consequences (IPCC, 2018). Yet governments around the world continue to prioritize economic growth over environmental sustainability, often viewing climate action as a trade-off between ecological protection and economic stability. Public anxiety raises fundamental questions about the ability of environmental civil society organizations (CSOs) to influence policymaking norms that prioritize economic development.

Extinction Rebellion (XR) is a prominent climate activism movement that has promoted a viable approach for environmental groups to indirectly influence environmental policymaking. Since its founding in 2018, XR has used disruptive citizen

protests to demand three radical policy shifts: (1) government transparency on the climate emergency, (2) net zero emissions by 2025, and (3) the establishment of a citizen-led parliament to oversee ecological governance. While XR's strategy has sparked short-term policy responses (e.g., the UK's 2019 net zero legislation), the extent of its long-term impact remains controversial.

This paper investigates whether movements like XR can effectively push governments toward transformative environmental policies despite entrenched economic priorities. Applying theoretical frameworks such as the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework, the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), and Social Movement Theory (SMT), Current work examines how CSOs navigate institutional barriers, mobilize coalitions, and leverage political opportunities to drive policy innovation. Additionally, a case study of XR UK evaluates its strategies, successes, and limitations, while game theory is employed to model the strategic interactions between governments and environmental activists, offering insights into the broader potential of radical movements in shaping climate governance.

2. Theoretical Frameworks for Environmental Organizations in Policy Advocacy

2.1. Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework

Elinor Ostrom's Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework underscores the role of institutional rules, norms, and structures in shaping collective action. Institutions—whether formal (laws, policies) or informal (cultural norms)—establish the “rules of the game” that govern decision-making processes (Ostrom, 1990). Scholars argue that institutions prioritising economic growth often marginalise environmental concerns, as they are designed to optimise resource extraction and capital accumulation. The IAD framework suggests that disrupting these entrenched norms necessitates either reforming existing institutions or establishing parallel structures that prioritise sustainability. In this context, the direct political engagement of environmental group members, through voting and campaigning, presents an opportunity to amplify environmental concerns in policy discourse, thereby influencing policymakers and advancing sustainable policy objectives.

2.2. Advocacy Coalition Framework(ACF)

The ACF argues that policy change is generated through competition between advocacy coalitions, a group of actors that share a core set of beliefs (Sabatier, 1988). Coalitions such as environmental groups operate within subsystems, leveraging scientific data, public opinion, and external shocks to advance policy-driven agendas. Anchored policies are common in governments due to entrenched alliances in the fossil fuel industry. Coalitions representing emerging opinions gain an advantage when “policy-oriented learning” or crises disrupt dominant paradigms. Environ-

mental groups can encourage incremental change by providing environmental information and strengthening ongoing efforts to change the belief systems of policy-makers and the public.

2.3. Social Movement Theory (SMT)

SMT examines how grassroots movements mobilize resources, exploit political opportunities, and frame issues to drive societal change. Resource Mobilization Theory, a central concept in SMT, argues that movements depend on financial, human, and organizational resources to sustain campaigns (Jenkins, 1983). Political Process Theory highlights that success hinges on “political opportunity structures,” such as elite divisions or public receptivity (Caren, 2007). Framing Theory asserts that movements must articulate resonant narratives to galvanize support (Chong & Druckman, 2007). For climate activists, framing the crisis as a moral imperative or existential threat is critical to broadening appeal. The world's major environmental groups such as Extinction Rebellion all use social movements to promote social attention to environmental protection and policy adjustments. In the next section, the application of game theory framework will clearly explain how social activities can change the government's environmental policy stance or intensity.

3. A Game theory model of Social Movement Theory

I draw on game theory study on the impact of protests on public policy (Pierskalla, 2010). Considering a policy maker (PM) who decides on an environmental policy level, while facing social activists who protest for stronger policies. The PM wants to balance policy costs and the negative effects of protests.

The PM's utility function is:

$$U_{PM} = S - \beta P^2 - \theta A^2$$

where: $S = S_0 - \gamma A + \delta P$ is public support, βP^2 represents the cost of policy implementation, and θA^2 represents the economic cost of protests. Squaring the economic and protest costs helps explain their increasing marginal returns. The protest intensity depends on the policy level is defined as:

$$A = A_0 - \lambda P$$

where A_0 is the baseline protest level and λ measures how effective policy is at reducing protests. To maximize U_{PM} , substitute A into the utility function:

$$U_{PM} = S_0 - \gamma(A_0 - \lambda P) + \delta P - \beta P^2 - \theta(A_0 - \lambda P)^2$$

Applying the first order condition respect for environment policy level P :

$$\delta + \gamma\lambda - 2\beta P + 2\theta\lambda(A_0 - \lambda P) = 0$$

Solving optimal policy level P^* :

$$P^* = \frac{\gamma\lambda + \delta + 2\theta\lambda A_0}{2(\beta + \theta\lambda^2)}$$

The policy maker facing the tradeoff between lower protest cost and lower policy/economic cost

Case 1: Policy Cost is High ($\beta > \theta$)

The denominator is large, so P^* is small, the PM sets a weak policy since policy cost dominates.

Case 2: Protest Cost is High ($\beta < \theta$)

The denominator is small, so P^* is relative larger, the PM enforces a strong policy to minimize protest damage.

This simple model explains why some governments implement strict environmental policies while others do not. The balance between policy costs and protest damage determines the equilibrium policy level.

4. Case Study: Extinction Rebellion UK

A case study of Extinction Rebellion UK provides insight into the movement's effectiveness in shifting policy priorities. Grassroots activism has grown rapidly in recent years, with decentralized protest movements emerging in response to pressing issues such as environmental collapse, inequality, and systemic injustice (Jacobsson & Korolczuk, 2019). XR exemplifies this shift in organizing, operating as a non-hierarchical, decentralized movement that has embraced direct action and civil disobedience. Since its formation, XR has staged large-scale protests, including road blockages, mass arrests, and sit-ins aimed at disrupting business as usual and forcing the government to engage with the movement's demands. One of the most significant actions was the two-week occupation in central London in April 2019, which resulted in over 1,100 arrests. XR elevated media coverage of climate issues by 400% in 2019. As Figure 1 shown, the media coverage generated by these protests elevated climate change as a political priority and created opportunities for policy shifts.

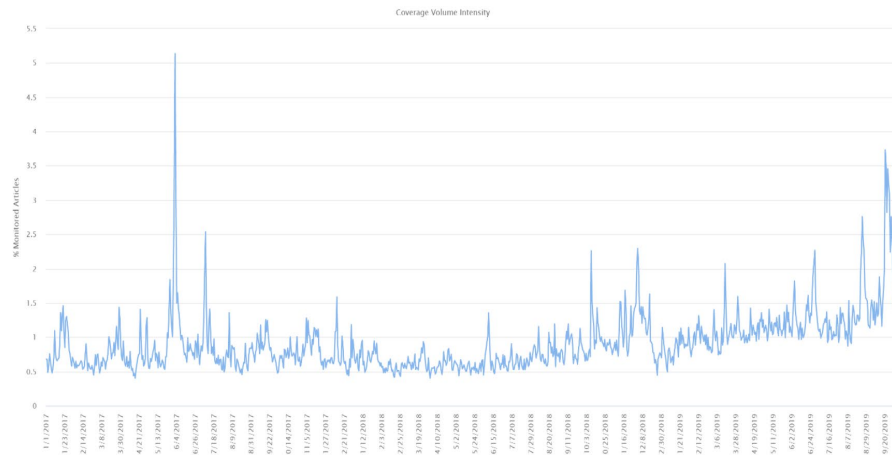


Figure 1. Extinction Rebellion's Rise Coincides with Steadily Increasing Media Coverage of Climate Change. GDELT Project. (2019, October 8).

Retrieved from

<https://blog.gdeltproject.org/extinction-rebellions-rise-coincides-with-steadily-increasing-media-coverage-of-climate-change/>

The XR's disruptive tactics resulted in immediate policy responses, including the UK government's declaration of a climate emergency and the subsequent commitment to achieving net-zero emissions by 2050. Additionally, many local authorities declared climate emergencies, with several setting more ambitious targets such as net-zero by 2030. Figure 2 shows that due to the high frequency of protest days implemented by XR in 2018-2020, the UK government significantly increased the stringency of environmental policies in 2021 and beyond. This shows that XR's ability to disrupt normal political processes can create opportunities for policy shifts. According to Nisbett et al. (2024), XR's protests had a "decisive" impact on the UK climate policy narrative, helping both government and opposition parties align around more pro-climate action stances. But what is worrying is that as the game between the government and environmental groups has become normalised, the density of environmental protection policies has also been declining in recent years.

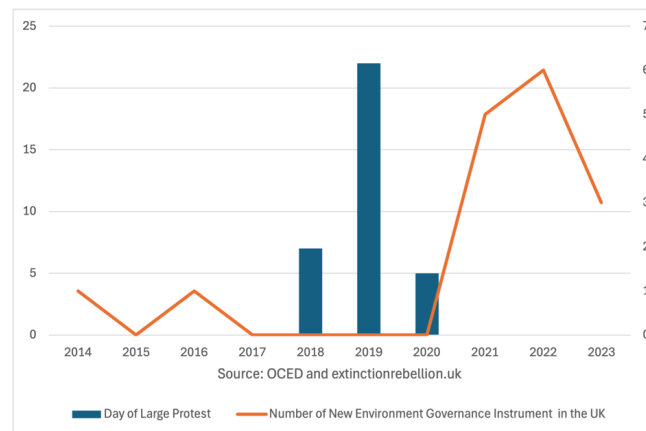


Figure 2. New Policy Instruments for the Environment and Number of XR Protesting Days in the UK

Despite the movement's successes, XR faces substantial challenges in achieving its long-term goals. A key barrier is the persistence of government policies focused on economic growth, which is often framed as essential for maintaining stability and ensuring employment, particularly in fossil fuel-dependent sectors. This resistance to climate policies poses a significant obstacle for XR in realizing its ambitious demand for net-zero emissions by 2025. Governments, particularly those in industrialized nations, often view the rapid transition to a sustainable economy as a threat to economic stability and the interests of powerful industries. As a result, XR's call for immediate action on climate change clashes with these long-standing economic priorities.

Moreover, XR's decentralized structure and commitment to leaderless organizing have resulted in internal tensions and accountability challenges. While the non-hierarchical model allows for flexibility and inclusivity, it has also led to difficulties in coordinating the movement's actions and ensuring consistent messaging. In addition, the reliance on volunteer labor and crowdfunding limits XR's capacity to scale up its actions compared to better-funded and more organized industry-backed opponents (Fotaki & Foroughi, 2021).

Despite these challenges, XR has succeeded in raising the profile of the climate crisis. However, achieving systemic change remains elusive. Governments remain hesitant to adopt policies that might disrupt economic stability or reduce profits for fossil fuel sectors. This is particularly evident in the reluctance of industrialized countries to adopt more ambitious targets for net-zero emissions. For instance, the UK government's target of achieving net-zero emissions by 2050 is widely regarded as insufficient by XR and other climate activists, who argue that more immediate action is needed to prevent catastrophic environmental damage.

Additionally, the experience of the Yellow Vests movement in France highlights the potential for significant backlash against climate policies perceived as inequitable. The Yellow Vests movement in France illustrated the impact of inequality aversion on climate policy acceptance. Protests erupted in response to a carbon tax increase and earlier tax cuts for the affluent, demonstrating the potential for public backlash against climate policies perceived as unfair (Berger & Liebe, 2025). Similarly, XR's policies, if not inclusive and mindful of social equity, risk facing backlash from marginalized communities who may feel that such policies would unfairly impact them. However, there are positive examples of citizen engagement, such as Ireland's Climate Assembly, which successfully provided recommendations for carbon budgets and contributed to shaping national climate policies (Devaney et al., 2020). While these citizen-led assemblies have faced challenges in terms of co-optation and political resistance, they demonstrate the potential for inclusive, participatory governance to inform and shape more ambitious climate policies. However, the effectiveness of such assemblies is limited unless their recommendations are binding or are adopted into law, as seen in Ireland, where the recommendations were only partial-

ly incorporated into the final climate policy.

5. Discussion

Extinction Rebellion (XR) advocates for citizen-led assemblies as a way to shift decision-making from top-down, elite-driven governance to more democratic, participatory processes. This idea fits well with Elinor Ostrom's concept of polycentric governance, which encourages decentralized decision-making. However, institutional inertia remains a significant barrier to achieving XR's goals. For example, the UK's target for net-zero emissions by 2050 still seems distant compared to XR's demand for a 2025 deadline, reflecting the slow pace of structural reform.

XR's framing of climate change as an existential threat has successfully mobilized diverse groups, including activists, scientists, and policymakers, which aligns with the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF). The movement has played a key role in shifting the public and political discourse. Yet, resistance from entrenched coalitions—such as fossil fuel interests and conservative policymakers—still limits XR's influence. These groups continue to prioritize economic interests over environmental goals, reducing the movement's immediate impact.

Another challenge is XR's reliance on grassroots funding and volunteer work, which restricts its ability to scale up compared to better-resourced, industry-backed opposition. This financial constraint is compounded by the movement's decentralized nature, which can make coordination and strategic direction more difficult.

Furthermore, XR's focus on disruptive protests and its primarily middle-class and urban base risks alienating marginalized communities. Many people, especially in working-class or rural areas, may see XR's policies as disconnected from their everyday struggles, particularly if those policies are perceived to disproportionately burden them. Previous research has highlighted that perceptions of disadvantage or injustice can undermine support for climate mitigation efforts (Maestre-Andrés et al., 2019).

Despite these challenges, XR has demonstrated that civil society organizations can force governments to engage with the climate crisis. Its actions have prompted governments to acknowledge climate emergencies and adopt more ambitious targets. However, achieving systemic change remains difficult as the dominance of the economic growth agenda continues to obstruct more radical environmental policies. Future movements may need to combine grassroots mobilization with strategic engagement with existing political structures to create lasting, systemic change. By balancing radical tactics with institutional engagement, movements like XR can continue challenging the status quo and pushing governments toward more ambitious climate policies.

6. Conclusion

Extinction Rebellion (XR) has shown that civil society organizations can play a key

role in pushing governments to take climate change seriously. Through large-scale protests and disruptive tactics, XR has helped bring the climate emergency into mainstream political discussion, leading to policy commitments like the UK's net-zero target. However, achieving lasting change remains difficult. Economic priorities, government resistance, and public concerns about financial stability continue to limit XR's influence. The movement's ability to create media attention and political pressure is clear, but its radical demands sometimes face backlash. Using theories like Social Movement Theory, the Advocacy Coalition Framework, and game theory, this paper has shown both the potential and the limits of XR's approach. Going forward, environment group such as XR may need to balance activism with collaboration, working within political system so they will be able to continue to challenge inaction of policy makers on climate change.

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