cogitatio

Politics and Governance
Year, Volume, Article XXXX
https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.XXXX

Article

It's not just structural (ii): Political context and London's environmental networks twenty-one years later

Abstract

The past 21 years have seen the UK environmental movement transform as climate change has become an urgent issue and broader publics have engaged in civil disobedience. More radical protest forms are curtailed by new legislation while large NGOs like Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace have repositioned themselves as more locally responsive (e.g. anti-fracking). This article uses a novel perceptive and mapping approach to political opportunity theory to compare networking in London's environmental movement, 2002-3 to 2023-4. We compare our interview data (n=49) and an organisational network survey (n=66) from 2023-4 with data from 2002-3. We argue that structural opportunities vary little and so cannot explain contrasting networking patterns. We describe a set of contingent factors that *have varied* across the two different eras. These partly tally with activists' own concerns about a recently emerged "grim political environment". Our novel contribution shows that contingent factors shaping environmental activism have influenced activists' perceptions of a closed polity, resulting in slightly more inclusive networks. Our key finding is that the centrality of climate change to contemporary environmental activism, the perceived urgency of the climate crisis and the government's poor track record in slowing it, have resulted, cautiously, in networks that span what was once a more definitive radical-reformist divide.

Keywords

climate change protest; environmentalism; movement networks; political opportunity; political process

1. Introduction

Britain's environmental movement has evolved since the early 2000s, when it used a predominantly conventional *modus operandi* on issues broadly related to wildlife protection, food and transport. It prioritised calm tactics after a decade of dramatic direct-action battles, notably against road-building (Melia, 2021). Large and established environmental NGOs (ENGOs), except Greenpeace, avoided protest. At the turn of the millennium, the movement had three key features: 1) wide popular appeal with high and growing membership (or at least stabilising for those that dipped in the 1990s); 2) ENGOs, like Friends of the Earth, central to the network; and 3) declining rates of direct-action (Rootes, 2012). Climate change was an emergent protest issue (Rootes, 2012) thanks to the Rising Tide direct action network and the Campaign Against Climate Change, which rose to prominence in 2005 with large-scale London-based climate marches.

By 2023, climate change (Scheuch et al., 2024), decoloniality (Huxtable et al., 2020) and intersectional justice (Hiraide and Evans, 2023) were being foregrounded. After a lull in climate action from Rising Tide, Plane Stupid and Climate Camps, 2018 saw the emergence of Extinction Rebellion (XR), rising to prominence for rebellions aiming to close central London (Doherty et al, forthcoming) and Fridays for Future (Swenson and Wahlström, 2023), spurred by Greta Thunberg. Overlapping climate, intersectionality and decoloniality agendas emerged both pro-actively and through learning from mistakes. Even the National Trust, the UK's most popular heritage and nature conservation organisation, began confronting its dark colonial past (Huxtable et al., 2020). In a move some thought tokenistic at addressing intersectionality XR consciously moved away from civil disobedience in 2023.

Differences in the configuration of the British environmental movement at the two points in time (2002-3 and 2023-4) are partly attributable to political contexts. For example, the Labour government's 1997 promise to center the environment may have reduced activists' sense of need to engage in direct action during 2002-3. By 2023, climate change was a more significant public concern due to a favourable discursive opportunity structure (Koopmans and Statham, 1999) resulting from overlapping scientific, journalistic, advocacy and protest campaigns. In 2012, Connelly et al. acclaimed that climate change was environmentalism's defining issue, while others highlighted on-going movement processes of 'climate bandwagoning' (Wapner, 2011) and 'climatisation' (Aykut and Maertens, 2021).

Frustrations have increased that intergovernmental frameworks (the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, [UNFCCC] and its conferences [COPs]) and the UK government's willingness and ability to tackle climate change appear hamstrung. Inadequate actions stemming from the 2008 Climate Change Act is symptomatic of a post-environmental consensus (Blüdhorn, 2011), which assumes environmental problems can be solved with a business-as-usual approach. Activists argue this approach cannot solve intersectional disadvantages of a new wave of colonial practices driving Net Zero policies. This apparent policy output failure triggers activists' radical approaches to climate change (Beer, 2020).

Observable differences in the environmental movement and political contexts (2002-3 and 2023-4) make these time points ideal for analysis of the role of political context, and activists' perceptions of it, in shaping environmental movement networks. We address three key research questions:

1) How do contemporary key UK environmental activists understand opportunities and constraints of the political context? And how do they consider these shape environmental networks?
2) How does their positioning in the political context, shaped by their organisations' status (positive, ambivalent, contingent, negative or none) and tactical repertoires (insider, thresholder and outsider) pattern networking?
3) How do activists' perceptions and inter-organisational networking compare 2002-3 to 2023-4? Consequently, what is the relative importance of perception, structure, status and tactics in shaping environmental movement networks?

Evidence on how political opportunities shape environmental movements is patchy (de Moor and Wahlström, 2022; Rootes, 2003). Few studies examine activists' perceptions of political context (e.g. De Moor and Wahlström 2019, 2022)

or networking within the environmental movement (Diani, 1995; Di Gregorio, 2012). Studies examining how perceptions, status and tactics intertwine to shape networking are rare.

Next we introduce key elements of political opportunity/process theories, arguing that the opportunities environmental movements face are more than structural. We argue activists' perceptions of political opportunities combine with environmental organisations' tactics (e.g. whether they operate inside political institutions as insiders, outside of them as outsiders, or using a combination as thresholders) and their status (e.g. do they have a positive, negative or no relationship with government, or something more variable) to shape their opportunities and constraints. Then we introduce our multi-methods methodology, explain findings and reflect on the importance of context, perception, tactics and their interactions in shaping networks. We compare networking patterns with those Anon (2009) found based on research carried out in 2002-3. The next section explains what we mean by structural factors and why it is important to move beyond them to understand changing movement networks.

1. Towards a dynamic political opportunity theory

Political opportunity/process theories aim to discern the effects of political contexts on social movements' shape and form. The contextual factors shaping movements are broadly characterised as "(more) stable" institutional structures and more "volatile" factors related to power configuration (della Porta, 2022).

1.1. Structural factors

Three key "structural" factors shape movements. First, characteristics of the public bureaucracy determine output structures, shaping activists' sense of agency. A political system that can deliver change might inspire activists to act, whereas an inert state will inspire less agency (Kitschelt, 1986; Kriesi et al., 1995). Second, a powerful and independent judiciary provides opportunities for movements to challenge states and corporations with legal proceedings (Vanhala, 2014). Third, the general political culture of countries shapes protest repertoires. A democracy's (im)maturity might shape the state's extent of (dis)comfort with protest and therefore its repressive inclinations. Repressive states may fail to demobilise radical groups (Jämte and Ellefsen, 2020), sometimes increasing polarisation and radical actions, whereas inclusion will moderate conflict. Political culture can also determine the relative power of other actors such as corporations, competitor political parties and civil society (della Porta, 2022). The very stability of these factors mean they cannot account for changes to movement networks over time. Therefore, it is important to consider more volatile factors.

1.2. Volatile factors

A more dynamic "political process" (McAdam, 2013) approach has reached consensus that the key contextual factors affecting movements are horizontality of power, openness of the state to movements, the degree of (in)stability of political alignments, the presence of elite allies and the degree of facilitation or suppression of movement actions (McAdam and Tarrow, 2018). Given their volatility vis-à-vis more structural factors, these factors have more potential to account for environmental movement networks' variations 2002-3 to 2023-4.

The UK has a centralised political system with "relative administrative openness" on environmental issues (Rootes, 2012, p.52), changing little 2002-2024. Repeatedly, parties and governments of most persuasions have green epiphany moments, but struggle to follow with significant action. There is, however, evidence that administrative openness varies across the local planning system. Left-wing local authorities are generally more horizontal, sometimes aligning with infrastructural development opposition. Right-wing authorities tend to be more likely to resist opposition to uphold party positions (Clegg, 2023; Garland et al., 2023). The current Labour government seeks to prevent local resistance from holding up its plans to build 1.5 million homes and ramp up "green" industrial development.

In 2003, Labour had been in power for five years. Its honeymoon period with the electorate was over, but it was still out-performing the Conservatives in the polls. There was only a mild risk of party system realignment by the Liberal Democrats replacing the Conservatives as the second strongest party (Webb, 2003). There were significant changes in public opinion around parties, allegiances and voting patterns 2010-2018, (Prentice, 2023). A Conservatives-Liberal Democrat coalition took power in 2010, replaced by a Conservative only government in 2015. In 2019, in a famous takeover of traditional Labour heartlands, Conservative support for Brexit and promises to reduce regional inequalities through a "levelling-up" agenda encouraged many traditional Labour voters to deflect to the Conservatives. Cameron's (2005-2016) Conservative Party branded itself as the Greenest Government ever, but reneged on promises, dismantling previously moderately effective environmental governance frameworks (Carter and Clements, 2015). Theresa May subsequently committed the UK to a legally binding 2050 net-zero emissions target. Boris Johnson then introduced biodiversity-related policy commitments and hosted the Glasgow 2021 COP26 climate summit. The subsequent Truss and Sunak Conservative governments further deprioritised environmental issues.

It is early days for the new Labour government, in power since July 2024. It has programmatic promises for green growth, but remains preoccupied with economic issues and migration, while confronting the rightward shift in public discourse. It endorses the Conservatives' 2023 Public Order Act, which widens the definition of 'serious disruption', making it more applicable to activism and the 2022 Protest Policing and Sentencing Act, which makes an offence of intentionally or recklessly causing public nuisance. Shortly before writing this, sixteen non-violent activists were arrested and imprisoned for 41-years in total for opposing oil companies. These arrestees are known as the "Lord" Walney 16, after the controversial appointment of a pro-oil and anti-Palestine government political violence advisor (Gayle, 2025).

Although volatile approaches to political opportunities can explain changes in movement configuration over time, they are not well-equipped to explain variations in tactics and outcomes within movements at a single time-point.

1.3 New avenues in political opportunity research

Structural factors might be useful for comparing protest incidence and form cross-nationally, while volatile institutional factors are more useful for comparing movements over time keeping place constant. If these factors shaped movement networks, it would mean monolithic networking patterns in all movements, with organisations engaged in uniform tactics. This is not what happens. For example, within the same state, Latino migrants in Chicago use varieties of tactics from sit-ins and street demonstrations, to working with political insiders (Lera, 2023). The Polish state has a small, conflictual and transactional animal rights movement (Jacobsson, 2023), whilst yielding a mass-mobilising women's movement using varieties of tactics (Korolczuk and Zaxonberg, 2014). British environmental movement networks include

moderate NGOs through to law-breaking direct-action networks. This is due to choices about tactics, which impact organisations' status. Insiders will find the political system considerably more open than an ideological outsider would deem possible (Anon, 2009).

Thus, we must recognise that forms of action and political opportunities are mutually co-constituted. De Moor and Wahlström (2019, 2022) stress the importance of narratives and perception in shaping political opportunities, focusing on notions of defeat pervading climate activist discourse around 2009, when COP15 was branded a last chance to save the planet. Importantly, some organisations refused to brand any COP summit as a last chance because of potential demobilising effects. De Moor and Wahlström thus emphasise the importance of narratives that movement activists create, which shape perceptions and tactics.

In a study on the related concept of legal opportunities, Vanhala (2018) concluded similarly. Despite a constant "legal opportunity structure" the sustainability-cum-conservation organisation Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) avoided litigation due to its preference to be non-confrontational. Greenpeace was sceptical of the law, thinking that environmental protection laws should be more stringent. Friends of the Earth drew on a decentralised network of lawyers to bring justice. Vanhala (2018) attributes these differences to framing, but we believe it is also a result of organisations' values and tactical preferences.

1.4 Expectations

Following De Moor and Wahlström (2019, 2022) we argue that perceptions of opportunities shape environmental organisations' tactics, which in turn shape their understanding of and interactions with broader political contexts. We argue that interactions between context, perception and narrative also shape movement networks. Within this interactive context, as perceptive actors, environmental groups and organisations are most likely to engage in relationships beneficial to their organisation or movement outcomes (Farnhill, 2014). Thus, organisations keen to avoid working alongside free-riders and already in a strong position for recruiting members or having influence may be less likely to want or need collaborations (Hojnacki, 1998).

Relatedly, insiders, who establish working relationships with political institutions, may not want to work with others who could jeopardise their status or reputation, while outsiders may eschew working with organisations they consider compromised and co-opted (Anon, 2009). Activists' perceptions are central to our arguments. Should even insiders feel unable to affect change conventionally, they will be more likely to forge alliances with radical counterparts. Further, a closed opportunity structure allows campaigns to expand by reaching out regionally for support (see Renauld, 2016). This happened at the Twyford Down protests opposing the M27 extension in the early 1990s. In a surprising alliance, Middle England and dreadlocked protesters united in courageous civil disobedience, frustrated at finding conventional democratic channels closed. Meanwhile, Friends of the Earth had a choice of pulling out or facing legal challenges that would affect its financial viability and thus all its other campaign activities (Bryant, 1996). As a rational actor, it quit the direct-action protests. Desire for distance from radical action can be easily understood; sometimes, strategic decisions to engage in direct action can forestall opportunities for less radical activists by turning local authorities or governments against an entire movement (Piazza and Genovese, 2016). Thus, we expect an increased urgency to tackle climate change

will increase networking across what was once a more definitive radical-reformist divide, but for there to still be identity and value clashes, as well as reputational stakes, that temper this.

2. Methodology

We build on Anon's (2009) study, which used similar data from 2002-3. We combine qualitative interviews conducted with key campaigners with an online survey of London-based environmental organisations. We interviewed 32 key campaigners in London and an additional 17 activists from elsewhere around the country (see additional online information) to understand their perceptions of national political opportunities and how the political context shapes networking patterns (December 2022-November 2024). The network survey (n=66) provided quantitative data on organisational tactics, relationships with the government, and networks. The research has ethical approval from the [anonymised] Ethics Committee (2021-5). Many individuals and organisations did not elect to remain anonymous.

2.1. Interviews

Interviewees represent a range of environmental organisations across different ideological positions and spatial scales. Interview questions were informed by social movement theory, exploring tactics and perspectives on the political environment. Transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis, modifying Clarke and Braun's (2017) approach using a mixture of deductive and inductive reasoning. First, interview transcripts were divided among the authors, who independently selected codes deductively using an existing framework (Anon, 2013). In the "data familiarity phase", to ensure consistency in coding, we held an inter-coder reliability session and refined the coding. This was followed by more in-depth, inductive, thematic analysis. We printed and cut out the quotes and physically grouped them into initial codes. During this stage, 14 codes were generated. We then eliminated repeated (or similar) themes, defined and named them. Our write-up selects quotes exemplifying general themes to address the first research question.

2.2. Network survey

The survey targeted national, regional, and local environmental organisations within Greater London, selected for its relatively vibrant environmental activism. Multiple strategies were used to identify the sample. First, we attempted to contact all of Anon's 2002-3 respondents (see Appendix of Anon, 2013). Organisations no longer operational—indicated by absence of a website or social media presence—could not be reached. Second, we conducted extensive online searches for "London environmental organisation," "local environmental group London," "London-based conservation group," and "environmental charities Greater London". Third, we identified London-based branches or local chapters of national NGOs through websites. Finally, we utilised existing directories and networks, such as the London Friends of Green Spaces Network (http://www.lfgn.org.uk/) enabling us to reach a broad and varied sample of organisations.

A representative completed a questionnaire on behalf of each organisation. We approached 279 organisations via email and direct messages on social media platforms such as Twitter/X, Instagram, and Facebook. We received a 32% response rate (n=90). Among the responses, 66 surveys were fully completed, and 24 were partially completed (ranging from 79% to 24% completion).

2.2.1 Classifying environmental organisations

We classify environmental organisations according to their perceived status with the government and the tactics they use as a step towards answering research question 2. Status with government is characterised in the questionnaire as:

- **Positive**. The government frequently seeks our organisation's advice.
- **Ambivalent**. The government is friendly, but our organisation generally initiates contact.
- **Contingent**. The receptiveness of the government is dependent on the issue(s) or department(s) involved.
- **Negative**. Our organisation unsuccessfully attempts to influence the government, or has become blacklisted.
- **No relationship**. Our organisation does not have a relationship with government either because we prefer alternative campaign targets or do not work at that level.

Organisations' tactics were classified as insider, thresholder or outsider (Tables 1 and 2) based on questionnaire responses. We used internet research to discover the tactics of non-responding organisations identified as collaborators by our respondents.

Table 1: Categories of tactics

Category	Tactics
Insider	Government consultee; or government consultee *and* media work.
Thresholder	Petitions, leafleting, press conferences, research and reporting, letter-writing, education and training, media stunts, marches, rallies, demonstrations, cultural performances, procedural complaints, litigation, public meetings, practical conservation work.
Outsider	Boycotts, disruption of events, blockades / occupations, ethical shoplifting, ecotage, adbusting, other forms of civil disobedience, and /or a mixture of thresholder and outsider activities.

Organisations categorised as insider use *only* insider activities. Thresholders use a range of tactics including insider and thresholder strategies, and they may also use outsider tactics. An organisation is thresholder if it is a government consultee that also engages in marches, rallies and demonstrations, and perhaps even sometimes in civil disobedience. Outsiders use thresholder and outsider tactics only (for example participation in marches, rallies, blockades and eco-tage) (Table 2).

Table 2. Categorisation of insiders, thresholders and outsiders

Category	Uses insider tactics	Uses thresholder tactics	Uses outsider tactics
Insiders	Y	N	N
Thresholders	Y	Y	Y or N
Outsiders	N	Y or N	Y

2.3. The network

We examine a collaboration network, which consists of the respondent organisations' answers to the question: *Please list the five most important environmental organisations with which your organisation has collaborated on a campaign or environmental activity in the last 12-months.* This was asked in respect of each of local, London-wide and national

environmental organisations, allowing nomination of 15 organisations in total. When examining network links by status, we analyse only respondents because we cannot second guess how non-respondents appraise their relationship with the government. When looking at network links by tactics, we use a rectangular matrix, also including listed non-respondents, because we could assess tactical repertoires of non-respondents by examining their web pages. The network maps and visualisations are coded by status and tactics to answer research question 2.

2.4 Comparative analysis

We compare activists' perceptions of political opportunities at the two points in time, as well the networking patterns in relation to status and tactics. This comparative analysis allows us to answer research question 3, addressing the relative importance of perception, status and tactics in shaping environmental movement networks.

Analysis

3.1 Thematic analysis

> *2020 was a catalyst because (1) The UK was going to host COP26; (2) COVID happened; and then (3) the movement for Black Lives Matter really catalysed … and all those narratives helped us to build a narrative of climate justice* (interviewee 9).

This opening quote illustrates the ways in which UK environmental activists interpret events as opportunities within the broader political context that shapes their activism. Climate breakdown, repression and COVID were interpreted as intersecting to create significant threats, while providing the opportunity for narrative development around climate justice. Our thematic analysis identifies four major themes:

- Cynicism about government and corporate inaction.
- Presence of a "grim" political environment
- The effects of COVID-19
- Local opportunity structures.

We show the sub-themes in Table 3 and expand on the first two, below. We have not focused on COVID-19 and local opportunity structures in this paper because we wish to draw attention to contemporary subjectivities around the national political opportunities. Our interviews took place after November 2022, which was after the lifting of social restrictions and therefore COVID-19 was mostly talked about historically.

Table 3: Coded themes on political opportunities and threats of key activists

Focused coding	**Axial coding**
International inaction / failure of IPCC National government inaction The status quo rules Empty rhetoric/greenwashing Small windows of opportunity Improved salience of climate change	Cynicism about government and corporate (in)action

Increased repression Paranoia and fears of infiltration Chilling effects Cost of living crisis Organisational capacity reached Carefulness with disobedience Finding solidarities	A "grim" political environment
Reduced quality of actions online Loss of momentum and shifting priorities Mental health and personal struggles Financial struggles Slactivism Regional levelling effect New audiences and connections New targets	The effects of COVID-19
Worthy (but not always useful) local efforts Local authorities constrained by status quo Lack of funding Local authorities as allies	Local opportunity structures

3.3. Cynicism about government and corporate (in)action

In general, interviewees had little faith in intergovernmental frameworks' and governments' ability to deal with the environmental/climate crises. The following quotes illustrate a lack of faith in the UNFCCC United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Conferences of the Parties to deliver required changes.

> *Unfortunately, the COPs turned out to be a total failure … but it has to be governments that will make the fossil fuel industry do the right thing* (interviewee 35).

> *Up until COP27 last year, even after the invasion of Ukraine, we could still latch on to the fact that the UK was COP President, we could use that. This year it's been slightly more challenging* (interviewee 9).

That lack of faith also filters down to the national level, as activists express disappointment, alongside recognition that the status quo and economics are given more importance in political discourse and action than large-scale changes required to live sustainably with our environment. One expressed:

> *Very, very little faith in governments. Just massive disappointment (*interviewee 47).

And that was a mild statement compared to some:

> *In terms of the national government, they are f***ng awful. Granting these new licences and things. They're b****y awful* (interviewee 1).

Many of our interviewees recognised the government's general inability to challenge the status quo, that sat alongside empty rhetoric and greenwashing:

> *It's a problem of economics. And the way our society and our economy is structured. You have to be willing to confront that and tackle that in the way you look at solutions … All the scientific evidence in the world has not pushed us forward to making the kind of changes [needed]* (interviewee 26).

The setting of mid-term targets without delivery and the paucity of action in short-term election cycles were noted as problematic:

> *The thing that gets to me the most is when things are promised and we don't see any progress ... You know, you hear all this is going to be done by 2030 but you get halfway there and you think "well, I haven't heard anything about that"* (interviewee 44).

> *If politicians want to be re-elected they can't do anything that's going to upset the public* (interviewee 4).

Despite overall negativity, a few organisations had insider relationships with government agencies, seeing new opportunities emerging from these relationships. This next quote illustrates one organisation's set of cooperative relationships with governmental institutions:

> *We have working relationships with them [the Environment Agency] and we have relationships with people like DEFRA [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs] and the OEP [Office for Environmental Projection]. We're trying to make sure that our voices are heard in terms of legislative changes* (interviewee 37).

> And later:

> *Setting up the Office for Environmental Protection … was a good step because … it's essentially acknowledging that the regulators aren't enforcing much of the legislation that's required to protect the environment* (interviewee 37).

The new Labour government was viewed by some in a slightly hopeful manner (see quote below), even though the majority branded all governments as ill-equipped to deal with environmental problems.

> *With the new government, obviously, we have an opportunity. And we've got "asks" to the government and that, you know, we want things we want to see improved* (interviewee 14).

Several others recognised the importance of changes to the discursive opportunity structure, particularly with climate change, which was becoming a more acceptable subject for public discussion as more people are agreeing with the scientific consensus and its urgency.

> *You've got more and more surveys coming out saying most of the population now get it. I think when we started in 2014/15, that wasn't the case. You know, I'd be stood out there in the pi****g rain trying to give leaflets out, you know: "are you worried about the climate?" "No, f**k off.!"* (interviewee 26).

3.3.1. A "grim" political environment

There was a strong sense among interviewees that we are living in "grim times" (interviewee 8) as the "state is becoming more repressive" (interviewee 38) alongside other societal challenges, including the cost-of-living crisis and aftereffects of COVID-19. We found significant opposition to the Public Order Act 2023 and clear signals from some of keenness to avoid a prison sentence. The first two quotes, below, illustrate the sense of fear and constraint activists feel in an increasingly hostile environment for protest.

> *With the media and government, you know, it's very much against human rights. To be stopped and to be fearful of going and protesting about anything … We're in dangerous times really* (interviewee 44).

> *It feels like this sector as a whole is just really restrained by what we're allowed to say and how the government will react* (interviewee 5).

Interviewee 44 describes a sense of fear that pervades environmental activist spheres, while interviewee 5 suggests restraining effects in general, even around what can and cannot be said. However, a few activists had a nuanced view of impacts of the Public Order Act and future attempts to restrain protest, envisaging opportunities. Interviewee 37 states people can be inspired by injustice, a theme also highlighted by interviewee 49 who thinks the law reveals the state's draconian nature. Interviewee 48 emphasised how people can wake up to the injustice of a perceived draconian state, triggering new waves of resistance.

> *I think it [changes to protest laws] will … turn away the people who were kind of on the fence a little bit about it. But then yeah, it will also inspire others who are just like, dead against the injustice of it* (interviewee 37).

> *Until recently slow marching was considered legal. The idea was to put pressure on the demand while still being within the confines of the law. This changed with the Public Order Act meaning this became unlawful. I feel this holds a mirror up to the government at how draconian and unjust the system is* (interviewee 49).

> *… At some point those dice might land on a double 6 and trigger an explosion of resistance, and so the job of these activist campaigns is to force the government to throw the dice as many times as possible* (interviewee 48).

We found that radical groups had a sense that they may have been infiltrated by undercover police, particularly as awareness of the undercover policing scandal increased (Schlembach, 2018). However, XR activists were more immune to this sense of infiltration, tending to be more inviting and open to everyone, including police officers (interviewee 14). Despite XR's apparent openness, some NGO representatives informed us they feel constrained in openly associating with XR or other direct-action groups. A staff member from a well-known conservationist NGO characterised its supporters as tourists, very different from direct action protesters.

> *I know that the RSPB [Royal Society for the Protection of Birds] has always been very wary of actually encouraging supporters to go to XR events or doing anything like that* (interviewee 16).

> *Supporters [of my organisation] may be climate aware, but many simply want to be able to visit locally beautiful and heritage-rich sites with free parking* (interviewee 21).

Another (anonymised) NGO worker commented on the need for their NGO to find a "central and safe place" within the environmental movement (interviewee 8):

> *We're careful about that link [with more radical factions of the environmental movement] because … to get conservative support … We've been very carefully short of shifting ourselves away from that* (interviewee 8).

However, not all activists think distance is the solution, instead favouring a movement ecology built across insiders and outsiders. As interviewee 21 told us:

> *I think there is this amazing utopia of campaigning, where you have groups like XR [Extinction Rebellion], JSO [Just Stop Oil] who are really setting the agenda … making space for these conversations, and then groups like us are coming in with the right insider influencing.*

The range of activities in which activists engage is seen as inspiring to some, filling them with hope that change is possible. While some are sceptical of direct action, others are concerned about the inefficacy of legislative changes to deliver climate action, rendering reformist-insider approaches pointless or compromised. Interviewee 32 told us they had friends who were:

> *… connected with Friends of the Earth. I've noticed they still think you can get legislative change … may be with the next government. But, I think putting a lot of energy into things like petitions and so on [are] probably maybe less effective but, it's complex … There's people fighting in different ways on so many different fronts and I think there's strength in supporting each other, if we can, and being a bit forbearing about various approaches* (interviewee 32).

Overall, our thematic analysis of activists' perceptions of the political opportunities and the resultant networking indicates a sense of despair, with some differences of opinions between insiders, who are seen by insiders astoo radical, and outsiders who see insiders as too soft to generate required changes.

2.2.4 Comparison with perceptions in 2002-3

In 2023-4 there is more nuance than Anon (2009) found in 2002-3, with notably more willingness to build the environmental movement by working across what was seen as an insider-outsider divide. Similarly to the current era, qualitative interviews with key activists 21-years ago revealed some frustration with the government's "words not action", but this was on issues such as marine protection and runways rather than the meta-issue of climate change, which has proved more sticky issue to address. Importantly, at both points in time, "openness of the government varies according to the organisation involved, the nature of the issue, and the department being targeted, but also according to perceptions of individual activists" (Anon 2009).

3.4. Survey and network analysis

Figure 1 shows a relationship map of organisations in our sample by their categorised tactics (insider, thresholder, outsider) and their relations with government (positive through to none). Those who use more moderate tactics tend to have closer relations with government. This illustrates the mutually co-constitutive nature of political opportunities, which are shaped by tactics used and perceptions of relations with government . Indeed, the more positive appraisal of political opportunities in our qualitative data are from organisations with moderate tactics.

Figure 1: Relationship map of tactics and relations with government

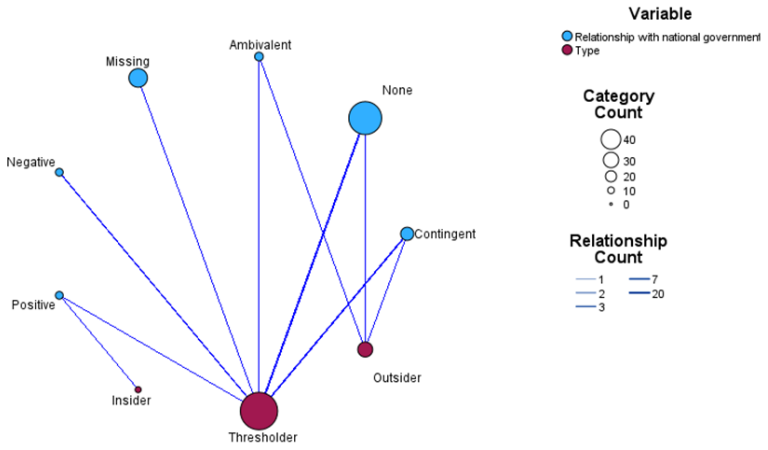


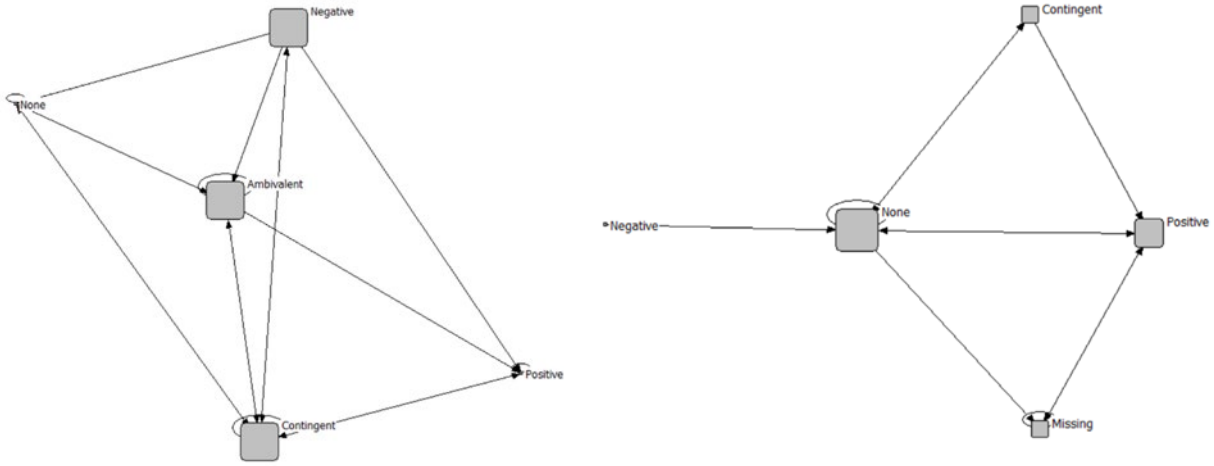
Table 4 shows the collaboration network by status with government. To interpret this table, read the cells across the rows. Of the three organisations responding to the questionnaire that had positive links with government, only one provided network data; listing an organisation that lacks a relationship with government, and one for which we had insufficient data to make a categorisation. The four organisations with an ambivalent relationship to government did not list any collaborators in their questionnaire responses, so there is no row data included. Of the nine that have a contingent relationship with government, four had network links. Together, they were linked to one organisation with a positive relationship with government, and three that had no governmental relationship.

Table 4: Collaboration network by relationship to national government

		RECEIVER OF TIES					
INITIATOR OF TIES	Number of orgs with links	Positive	Contingent	Negative	None	Missing	Average links per org
Positive (n=3)	1	0	0	0	1	1	2
Contingent (n=9)	4	1	0	0	3	0	1
Negative (n=3)	1	0	0	0	1	0	1
None (n=31)	8	1	2	1	6	2	1.5
Missing (n=15)	3	1	0	0	0	2	1

Note that the most central organisations, linked with the broaderst range of organisations with a variety of statuses vis-a-vis government, are without any links to government themselves. They are represented by the largest square in the right panel network visualisation summary (Figure 2), where those without a relationship to government broker the network, linking the single organisation with a negative relationship to government to the rest of the network. Figure 2 facilitates comparison with the 2002-3 network. In the 2002-3 data, organisations with ambivalent, contingent and negative relationships with government are all quite central, but in 2002-3 it was ambivalent organisations that were central brokers. In 2002-3, organisations lacking a relationship with government and those with a positive relationship to government lacked network links. But these organisational types are mutually linked in 2023-4. Overall, the square matrix yields a fairly fragmented network, with only an average of 0.33 links for the 66 organisations included in the data. This is down from an average of 0.64 in Anon's (2009) 2002-3 data.

Figure 2: Summary visualisations of organisational types by relationship with national government 2002-3 and 2023-4



Notes: The panel on the left shows a visualisation of summary data from Anon's (2009) Table 7. The panel on the right shows a summary of the data from the current study. The visualisations are drawn using NetDraw (Borgatti, 2002), with a graph theoretic layout, and using the degree score (number of times each category mentioned) to size the nodes.

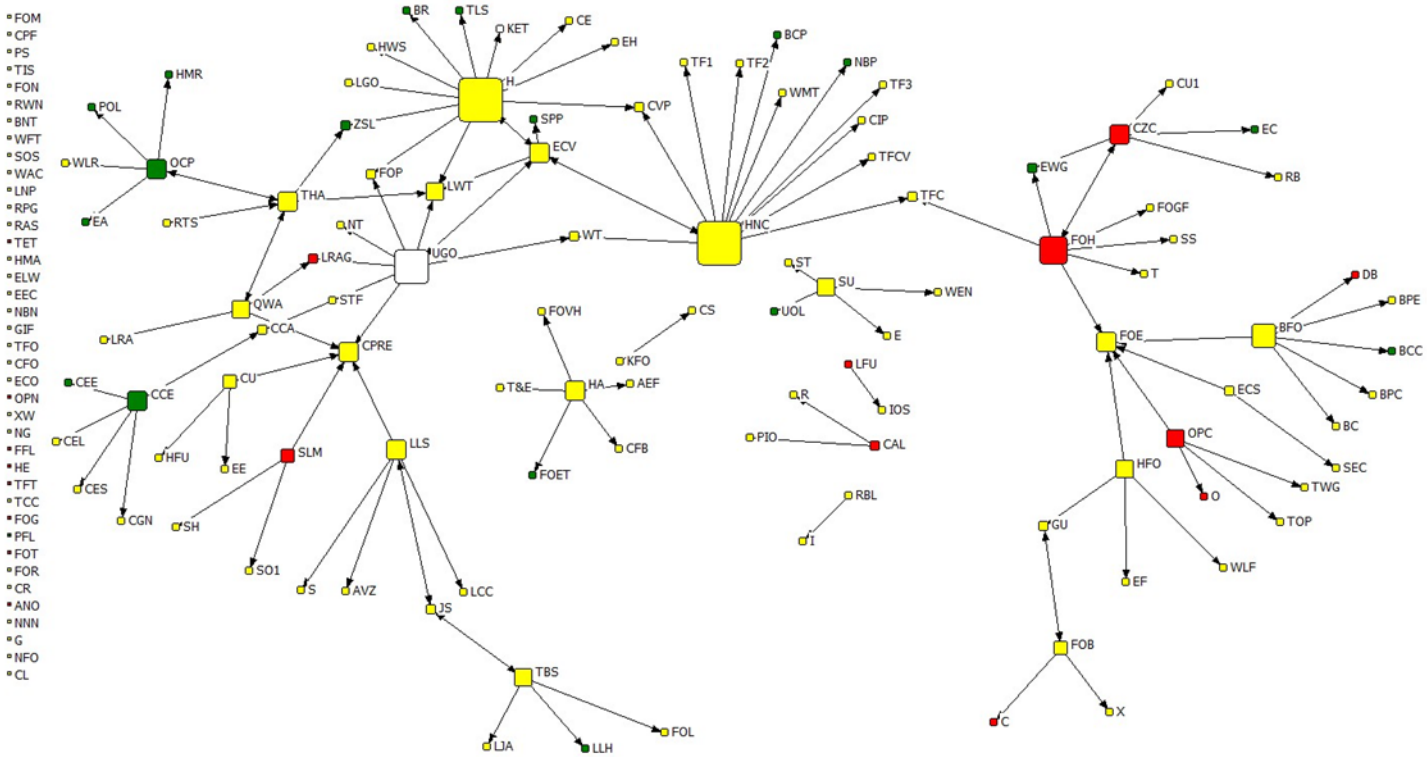
Table 5 shows the collaboration network by categories of tactics. Of the thresholders' 78 ties in the 2023-4 data, 61% of them were directed towards other thresholders, down from 86% of ties that the 2002-3 thresholders had with other thresholders. In 2023-4, one-third of the links that thresholders had were with insiders, up from just 12% in 2002-3. A higher proportion of thresholders have collaborative links with outsiders than in 2002-3. In 2002-3 thresholders extended just 2% of their links to outsiders. This increased to 5% in 2023-4. The frequencies for the 2023-4 data are shown in Table 4.

Table 5: Collaboration network by categories of tactics used

		RECEIVER OF TIES			
INITIATOR OF TIES	Number of orgs with links	Insiders	Thresholders	Outsiders	Average links per org
Insider (n=3)	1	3	5	1	9
Thresholder (n=47)	47	26	48	4	1.6
Outsider (n=15)	9	3	15	2	2.2

Figure 3, visualises the collaboration network by tactics. Thresholders (yellow nodes) are the most central. The outsider Friends of Horsenden (FOH) – the first red node on the right-hand side of the graphic – bridges thresholder organisations. In comparison, the insiders (green nodes) are generally more peripherally positioned, while some are linked to both outsiders (red) and thresholders (yellow). Note how Friends of Horsenden (FOH) links with the insider Ealing Wildlife Group (EWG), which is also linked with the outsider Citizen Zoo CIC (CZC). Elsewhere in the network, insiders are mostly linked with thresholders.

Figure 3: The collaboration network coded by tactical repertoire category

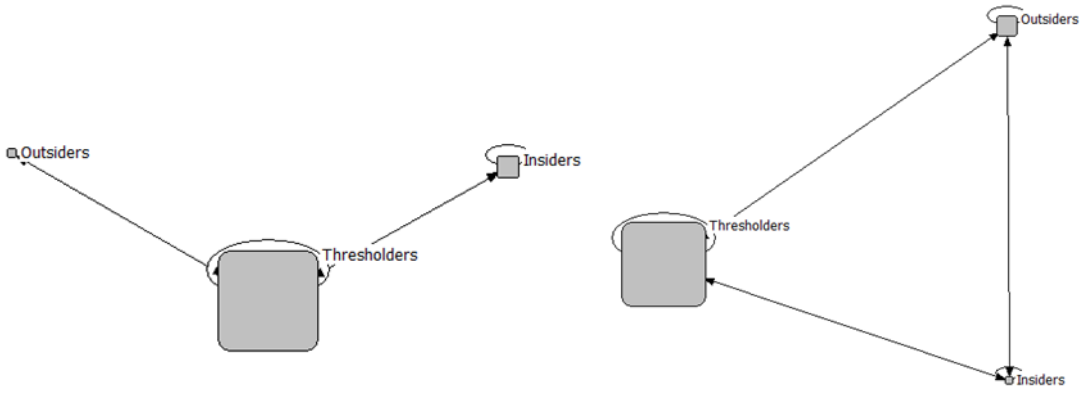


Key: Green = insiders; Yellow = thresholders; Red = outsiders; White = not possible to characterise.

Notes: Data are symmetrised under the assumption that collaboration is not possible without a two-way link. The visualisations are drawn using NetDraw (Borgatti, 2002), with a graph theoretic layout, and using the degree score (number of times each category mentioned) to size the nodes.

Figure 4 summarises the network by tactical repertoire category, comparing 2002-3 to 2024-5. At both points in time thresholders were the most well networked, including ties to others like themselves. Notably, insiders and outsiders now have direct links and no longer require thresholders as brokers.

Figure 4. Summary visualisations of organisational types by tactical repertoire category 2002-3 and 2023-4



Notes: The panel on the left shows a visualisation of the summary data from Anon (2009) Table 5. The panel on the right shows a summary of data from the current study. The visualisations are drawn using NetDraw (Borgatti, 2002), with a graph theoretic layout, and using the degree score (number of times each category mentioned) to size the nodes.

In summary, our findings have shown some key differences in activists' perceptions of opportunities across the two times, which we argue have favourably shaped the willingness of reformist and radical environmental organisations to collaborate, except those most principled or most concerned about their reputations. The 2002-3 qualitative analysis did not reveal such a sense of urgency, nor such a grim interpretation of the overall political context. Our network mapping indicates broader willingness to cooperate across the movement when activists agree that political opportunities are closed. In 2002-3 more organisations had convivial relationships with the government, constraining their willingness to link with radicals (Anon, 2009).

5. Discussion and conclusions

We show that contemporary key environmental activists understand the opportunities and constraints they are afforded by the political context differently, partly shaped by perceptions, status and tactical choices. Mostly, they express little faith in intergovernmental agreements and governments to affect required changes. Some hoped the Labour government would open new opportunities. However, these opportunities are closing in the theoretical sense of less favourable laws governing protest, and according to activists' subjectivities. The UK government has recently approved a third runway at Heathrow airport and introduced new planning mechanisms to reduce delays caused by protests and judicial reviews . A few mentioned how the government's attempt to foreclose civilly disobedient protest could create an upsurge in mobilisation and new networks, which has not yet manifested. Certainly, climate change appears to be a central issue to almost everyone interviewed recently. Our qualitative analysis also showed that more established conservationist NGOs like RSPB were not willing to associate themselves, or their membership bases, with direct action; yet this disassociation was much more strongly expressed in 2002-3. In the contemporary era, activists were more open to a division of labour within a carefully negotiated movement ecology.

Our quantitative analysis reveals closeness between organisations' tactical repertoires and their status with government, providing grist to our argument on interrelationships between tactics and perceptions of opportunity . We also found patterns in the positioning of actors in the network shaped by their own organisations' status (positive, ambivalent, contingent, negative or none) and tactical repertoires (insider, thresholder and outsider). Organisations with a negative relationship with government were not, in 2023-4, networking with organisations other than those lacking a relationship with government, otherwise there were linkages across organisations with varieties of relationships with government. Moreover, insiders, thresholders and outsiders were linked directly, as well as through brokers.

In 2002-3, Anon (2009) discovered a much higher proportion of organisations ambivalently related to government. This sort of relationship is friendly, but initiated by environmental organisations themselves. We can attribute this to activists' sense that it was once more worthwhile engaging with government. Certainly the planning system was more favourable to challengers (Clegg, 2023). False promises documented in the more contemporary interviews further explains why few organisations currently have an ambivalent relationship with government. Contemporary environmental organisations in London either engage directly, have mixed experiences of engaging or do not bother engaging with government. This change has potentially affected the network. Previously, organisations with an ambivalent relationship to government

were central to the environmental network. They used to bridge those with a positive relationship with government and those without such a relationship. We now find that those without a relationship to the government are more embedded in networks; some are directly linked to those with positive relationships to the government, and broker those with negative and positive relationships. Moreover, in the 2002-3 data, Anon (2009) found that thresholders were brokers between insiders and outsiders. More recently, this has changed with network links now existing between each of insiders, thresholders and outsiders.

How can the differences be explained? Frustration at government inaction and false promises on climate change have, in recent years, been more pronounced than in 2002-3, when small networks like Rising Tide were a relatively lonely voice. All-the-while, changes to the Public Order Act seem to have encouraged some well-established organisations to distance themselves further from direct action protest, while others have emphasised direct action's importance and the right to participate in it (e.g. Greenpeace); or the importance of a multi-pronged battle plan.

These perceptions are barely related to a "more stable" (della Porta, 2022, p.1) political opportunity structure. The POS' very stability proves its redundancy to explain changes in movement networks over-time. More volatile factors matter more. In 2003, the Labour Party was still relatively popular and not under threat from any competitor party (Webb, 2003). In contrast, in 2023-4, the Conservative Party was emerging from a debacle it caused over (mis)management of COVID-19, and a raft of anti-Green political decisions. This took place within the context of a partial party realignment (Prentice, 2023), which would have likely made it less appealing for organisations to want to work with government, and consequently for insiders and those with a positive relationship to government to feel they had considerably less at stake by soiling their reputations by associating with direct action networks. Combined with the escalated sense of emergency, we have at least a plausible explanation for networking now occurring more readily across a reformist-radical divide. At the same time, we recognise that networking across previous ideological divides (Anon, 2009) remains uncommon for the more staid established NGOs.

Our work stresses the importance of considering activists' perceptions of political opportunities, as well as interactions this has with their tactics and status. Our comparison of networks at different points in time indicates that "more stable" structural approaches to political opportunities have few advantages for understanding movement networks in a single country context. We have shown instead that perceptions, tactics and status interact with the political context to shape inter-organisational networking in the environmental movement. The key finding of our paper – that movement networks vary over time dependent on perceptions, status and tactics – is generalisable to other movements, including Black Lives Matter. In that movement, the suffocation to death of George Floyd by a police officer resulted in perceptions of a closed political opportunity structure. This subsequently triggered a range of reformist and more radical organisations to link together in significant demonstrations (Gürcan and Donduran, 2021). Importantly, these linkages do not extend across generational waves of civil rights activism, stressing the importance of historical changes to perceptions of openness and consequently of movement networks (Board et al., 2020). Contra to the structural approach, we do not anticipate different movements in the same political context to have similar networking patterns to each other. This is because the

perceptions of activists are likely to be different, and consequently so will be their tactics and status with government. Context, perceptions and tactics all matter.

References

Aykut, S.C., & Maertens, L. (2021). The climatization of global politics: introduction to the special issue. *International Politics*, 58: 501–518. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-021-00325-0

Beer, C.T. (2020). "Systems change not climate change": Support for a radical shift away from capitalism at mainstream U.S. climate change protest events, *The Sociological Quarterly*, 63(1): 175-198. https://doi.org/10.1080/00380253.2020.1842141

Blüdhorn, I. (2001). The politics of unsustainability: COP15, Post-ecologism, and the ecological paradox*, Organization & Environment*, 24: 34-53. https://doi.org/ 10.1177/1086026611402008

Board, M. Jr., Spry, A., Nunnally, S.C. and Sinclair-Chapman, V. (2020). Black generational politics and the Black Lives Matter Movement: How political opportunity structures and respectability politics affect movement support, *National Review of Black Politics*, 1(4): 452-473.

Borgatti, S.P. (2002). NetDraw Network Visualisation, Analytic Technologies, Harvard MA.

Bryant, B. (1996). *Twyford Down, Roads, Campaigning and Environmental Law*, London: E. and F.N. Spon.

Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*. *12*(3), 297-298. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613

Clegg, L. (2023). Taking one for the team: Partisan alignment and planning outcomes in England*. British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 23(4): 680-698. https://doi.org/10.1177/1369148120985409

Connelly, J., Smith, G., Benson, D., & Saunders, C. (2012). *Politics and the Environment: From Theory to Practice*, Abingdon-on-Thames, Routledge.

della Porta, D. (2022). Political opportunity / political opportunity structure. In Snow, D., della Porta, D., McAdam, D., and Klandermans, B. (eds.),*The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Social and Political Movements* (2nd Edition), Hoboken, New Jersey, pp.1-7. https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470674871.wbespm159.pub2

De Moor, J. & Wahlström, M. (2019). Narrating political opportunities: Explaining strategic adaptation in the climate movement*, Theory and Society*, 48: 419-45. https://doi.org/ 10.1007/s11186-019-09347-3

De Moor, J. & Wahlström, M. (2022). Environmental movements and their political context. In Grasso, M. and Giugni, M. (eds) *Routledge Handbook of Environmental Movements,* Abingdon, Oxford, pp.263-277.

Di Gregorio, M. (2012). Networking in environmental movement organisation coalitions: Interest, values or discourse? *Environmental Politics*, 21(1): 1-25. https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2011.643366

Diani, M. (1995) *Green Networks: A Structural Analysis of the Italian Environmental Movement*, Edinburgh University Press.

Farnhill, T. (2014) Understanding the labour-environmental relationship in Britain, 1967-2011: A new narrative using political opportunity structure and coalition theory*, Labor History*, 55(4): 427-447. https://doi.org/10.1080/0023656X.2014.932513

Garland, J., Saunders, C., Olcese, C. & Tedesco, D. (2023). Anti-fracking campaigns in the United Kingdom: The influence of local opportunity structures on protest, *Social Movement Studies*, 22(2): 211-231. https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2022.2031956

Gayle, D. (2025). Sixteen jailed UK climate activists to appeal against 'unduly harsh' sentences. *The Guardian*, online at: https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/jan/29/sixteen-jailed-uk-climate-activists-to-appeal-against-sentences. Last accessed 7 February 2025.

Gürcan, C.E. and Donduran, C. (2021). The formation and development of the Black Lives Matters Movement: A political process perspective*, SIYASAL: Journal of Political Sciences*, 30(1): 151-167. https://doi.org/10.26650/siyasal.2021.30.1.871276.Hiraide, L.A., & Evans, E. (2023). Intersectionality and social movements: A comparison of environmentalist and disability rights movements*. Social Movement Studies*, 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2023.2234828.

Hojnacki, M. (1998). Organised interests' advocacy behaviour in alliances. *Political Research Quarterly*, 51(2): 437-459.

Huxtable, S., Fowler, C., Kefolas, C., & Slocombe, E. (Eds) (2020). *Interim Report on the Connections between Colonialism and Properties now in the Care of the National Trust, Including Links with Historic Slavery*, available online at: https://nt.global.ssl.fastly.net/binaries/content/assets/website/national/pdf/colonialism-and-historic-slavery-report.pdf, last accessed 2 January 2025.

Jacobsson, K. (2023). Channeling and enrollment: The institutional shaping of animal rights activism in Poland. In Jacobsson K. & Saxonberg, S. (Eds.), *Beyond NGO-ization: The Development of Social Movements in Central and Eastern Europe*, Farnham: Ashgate, pp.27-47.

Jämte, J. and Ellefsen , R. (2020). The Consequences of Soft Repression. *Mobilization: An International Journa*l 25(3):383-404 DOI 10.17813/1086-671X-25-3-383

Kitschelt, H. (1986). Political opportunity structures and political protest: Anti-nuclear movements in four democracies. *British Journal of Political Science*, 16(1): 57-86.

Kriesi, H., Koopmans, R., Duyvendak, J. W., and Guigni, M. G. (1995). *New Social Movements in Western European: A Comparative Analysis*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Pres

Koopmans, R., & Statham, P. (1999). Ethnic and civic conceptions of nationhood and the differential success of the extreme right in Germany and Italy. In Giugni, M., McAdam, D., and Tilly, C. (Eds.), *How Social Movements Matter*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, pp. 225–251.

Korolczuk, E., & Zaxonberg, S. (2014). Strategies of contentious action: A comparative analysis of the women's movements in Poland and the Czech Republic. *European Societies*, 17(4): 404-22. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2014.977321

Lera, C.L. (2023). When local opportunity structure matter in political agency: The multipronged incorporation of Latinos in Chicago*. Local Government Studies*, 49(2): 295-313. https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2020.1857248

McAdam, D. (1982). *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

McAdam, D. and Tarrow, S. (2018). The political context of social movements, in Snow, D.A, Soule, S.A., Kriesi, H. and McCammon, H.J (eds) *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, 2nd edition, Chichester: John Wiley and Sons Ltd. pp.17-42.

McAdam, D. (2013). Political process theory, in Snow, D.A., della Porta, D.P., Klandermans B. and McAdam, D., *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*, Hoboken, Wiley Blackwell, pp.1-4.

Melia, S. (2021). *Roads, Runways and Resistance: From the Newbury Bypass to Extinction Rebellion*, London: Pluto Press.

Piazza, G. & Genovese, V. (2016). Between political opportunities and strategic dilemmas: The choice of 'double track' by the activists of an occupied social centre in Italy. *Social Movement studies*, 15(3): 290-304. https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2016.1144505

Prentice, J. (2023). The decade of realignment: Explaining political change in Britain 2010-2021. PhD thesis, University of Sussex, available at

https://sussex.figshare.com/articles/thesis/The_decade_of_Realignment_explaining_political_change_in_Britain_2010-2021/23494334?file=41202479

Price, S. (2013). *How the Environmental Movement Influenced Climate Change Debates and Actions in Britain Between1987 and 2008*. PhD thesis, School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research, University of Kent, Canterbury.

Renauld, M. (2016). The Esquel effect: Political opportunity structure and adaptation mechanisms in anti-mining mobilization in Argentine Patagonia, *Canadian Journal of Development Studies*, 37(4): 524-540. https://doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2016.1202102

Rootes, C. (2003). The transformation of environmental activism: An Introduction. In Rootes, C. (Ed.), *Environmental Movements in Western Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp.1-19.

Rootes, C.A. (2012). New issues, new forms of Action? Climate change and environmental activism in Britain. In van Deth, J.W. and Mahoney, W.A. (Eds.), *New Participatory Dimensions in Civil Society: Professionalisation and Individualized Collective Action*, Abingdon, Routledge, pp.46-48.

Rootes, C.A. (2013). The environmental movement in Great Britain, in *Environmental Movements Around the World: Shades of Green*, Santa Barbara CA: Praeger, pp.45-86.

Scheuch, E.G., Ortiz, M., Shreedhar, G. & Thomas-Walters, L. (2024). The power of protest in the media: examining portrayals of climate activism in the UK news*, Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 11: 270. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-02688-0

Schlembach, R., (2018). Undercover policing and the spectre of 'domestic extremism': the covert surveillance of environmental activism in Britain. *Social Movement Studies*, 17(5): 491-506. https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2018.1480934

Vanhala, L. (2018). Is legal mobilisation for the birds? Legal opportunity structures and environmental nongovernmental organizations in the United Kingdom, *Comparative Political Studies*, 51(3): 380-412. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414017710257

Vanhala, L. (2012). Legal opportunity structure and the paradox of legal mobilization by the environmental movement in the UK. *Law & Society Review*, 46(3): 523-556. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5893.2012.00505.x

Wapner, P. (2011). The Challenges of Planetary Bandwagoning. *Global Environmental Politics*, 11 (3): 137–144.

Webb, P. (2003). Parties and party systems: Prospects for realignment. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 56(2): 283-296. https://doi.org/10.1093/parlij/gsg019