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Environmental protest outcomes in austerity-era neoliberalism: perseverance and politics

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores environmental protest outcomes during the decade of the 2010s in the UK. In doing so, it presents the results of a qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) of all 54 major environmental protest campaigns during the period. The study explores alternative causal conditions relating to a number of strategic and tactical options that environmental movements typically face. It finds that two alternative routes were sufficient for environmental protest campaigns to be successful: perseverance over time, in which longstanding campaigns staged a relatively large number of protest events; and instances where opposition political parties drew on, and supported, the demands of protesters. Interestingly, some of the more contested tactical options, including whether to adopt more or less disruptive methods, were inconclusive in explaining the successful outcome of protest-led campaigns. The article argues that this supports the case for tactical diversity. The findings show how in a context of austerity-era neoliberalism, where the government was (ostensibly) committed to tackling climate change, then protests (regardless of the organisational form or type of protest) proved able to exert effective pressure upon the government and firms, to ensure some degree of concession to the climate movement, *provided that* the protest campaign was able to persevere over time and/or secure the support of opposition political parties. This suggests a susceptibility, by both the state and firms during austerity-era neoliberalism, to (considerable) popular and political pressure arising from protest, but in the absence of which economic interests would otherwise take priority over environmental concerns.

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Environmental protests grew in prominence throughout the 2010s, as part of a more general growth in global protest that took place throughout the decade (Barrett et al., 2022; Brannen et al., 2020). In the year before the pandemic, environmental protest had become an especially prominent feature of contestation, perhaps most visibly symbolised by the Fridays for Futures school strikes (Boulianne et al., 2020). The core demands of this environmental movement focused on calls for stronger public policy oriented

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towards tackling the climate crisis, a heightened need to inform the public about the severity of the crisis, and a demand for private firms to move more urgently towards decarbonisation (Pickard et al., 2020). The rise of these environmental campaigns also raises key questions regarding the impact and influence of protest and social movements in contemporary democracies, including over the efficacy of different types of protest, and the responsiveness of the targets of that protest (both public authorities and private firms). These questions also have implications for perennial debates across the social sciences, relating to state-society relations, the responsiveness of political systems, the different ways that the public are able to express popular demands, and the nature of civil society. What types of protest method works best – disruptive direct action seeking to impede the operations of the target in question, or more persuasion-based demonstrations that seek to display the weight of public opinion (Berglund, 2023; Wang & Piazza, 2016)? How can protests best be organised – through grassroots-based independent networks or through more established/professional social movement organisations (Walker & Stepick, 2020)? Under what conditions, and when, do public authorities or private firms concede to the demands of protesters (Bosi et al., 2016)? These questions remain central to understanding the way in which social movements and popular protest can influence outcomes, both in terms of public policy and the actions of corporations, with empirical evidence supporting competing claims.

The inconclusive nature of empirical research on social movement outcomes also reflects the notoriously difficult process of identifying and explaining those outcomes (Uba, 2024). In addressing this challenge, the current article presents the results of a qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) of all major episodes of environmental protest campaigns in the UK during the period 2010–19. In doing so, it benefits from the opportunity that QCA provides to combine the qualitative judgement of the researcher in evaluating the effect of social movements, with a systematic method of comparison required to understand the complex and non-linear process of causality that typically occurs as a result of protest activity. The study identifies 54 environmental protest campaigns, each of which is documented in a website that accompanies the article: *Environmentalist Action in the UK, 2010–19*.¹

The findings identify two alternative routes to successful protest action during this period: perseverance over time, in which longstanding campaigns stage a relatively large number of protest events; and instances where opposition political parties support, and draw on, the demands of protest movements. It makes two key analytical contributions. First, it shows how, despite the considerable amount of strategic and tactical debate between advocates of alternative types of protest activity during the period in question, nevertheless these alternatives were not conclusive in determining the outcome of protest activity. As such, tactical diversity (rather than purity) is supported by the evidence presented. Second, it shows how in a context of austerity-era neoliberalism, where the government was (ostensibly) committed to tackling climate change, protests (regardless of the organisational form or type of protest) proved able to ensure some degree of concession to the climate movement, *provided that* the protest campaign was able to persevere over time and/or secure the support of opposition political parties. This suggests a susceptibility on the part of the state and firms during austerity-era neoliberalism to (considerable) popular and political pressure arising from protest, upon which the commitment to seek to address climate change would be (reluctantly) upheld. In the

absence of such pressure, however, economic interests would otherwise take priority over environmental concerns.

The rise of environmental protest: the difficult task of determining protest impact

What perhaps unites the environmentalist protest activity over the past decade is a widespread sense that governments need to be exposed to public pressure if there is to be any move towards a meaningful response to the climate crisis (Buzogány & Scherhauser, 2022). As a result, the question – how to make protest matter? – has risen considerably on the agenda (Berglund, 2023; Fisher & Nasrin, 2021). This question of social movements' effectiveness, and the impact and consequences of protest activity, including that of environmental social movements, has also been the subject of considerable, and in recent years growing, academic research (Amenta et al., 2019; Bosi et al., 2016). Understanding the impact of social movements, however, is widely recognised to be a complex task, including with regard specifically to environmental movements. As Rootes and Nulman (2014) describe, 'because the impacts of social movements are notoriously difficult to assess, the impacts of environmental movements have been relatively under-investigated, and because such competing claims are so difficult to assess, the impact of environmental movements remains highly contested' (p. 729). Part of the difficulty in understanding the impact of social movements and protest activity is that it rarely has a direct and linear impact upon its target, and oftentimes instead results in indirect influence, for instance by shaping public opinion, which may (or may not) indirectly produce the intended outcome (Burstein & Linton, 2002). Furthermore, the effects of different protest campaigns can be highly context-dependent, resulting in seemingly similar forms of protest prompting different responses when combined with different contextual settings (Amenta et al., 2010).

In seeking to understand the impact of environmentalist protest campaigns, we can turn to a range of the literature within the field of social movement studies and political economy.

Social movement activity, allies, and organisation

Perhaps most straightforwardly, the intensity and longevity of protest activity, especially measured in terms of frequency of protest events, but also the number of participants, is widely considered to have a direct impact on the likelihood of protest movements successfully producing the outcome they seek in any particular campaign (Biggs & Andrews, 2015; Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). Likewise, the length of time that any particular campaign can be sustained reflects the degree to which popular support for the issue in question is strongly held. One of the key forms of influence that protest activity brings to both political and private targets is the illustration of widely and strongly held views across society. As such, the intensity and longevity of protest activity is typically considered to be an important factor in putting pressure on the targets of protest campaigns, and therefore has a considerable chance of success. This is perhaps the crux of Tilly's famous 'WUNC' claim that a successful protest movement requires

worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment (Tilly, 2004); a claim which has subsequently been confirmed in two recent experiments (Wouters, 2019; Wouters & Walgrave, 2017).

In addition to the intensity and longevity of protest campaigns, the social movement studies literature has focussed on the role played by sections of the political elite, often referred to as 'political allies' (Kane, 2003; Zelinska, 2023). Thus, the potential to gain support from sections of the political elite, especially opposition parties who seek to represent shifts in public opinion in a way that has the potential to undermine the government's position, is widely viewed as central to enabling protest activity to translate into positive policy outcomes (Giugni, 2007).

The mode of organisation that enables social movement activity to happen is also widely held to be a key factor in terms of understanding the capacity for influence. In particular, formal organisation is held by many observers to be a key factor in enabling organisations to put resources towards lengthier and more impactful campaigns, as well as providing the leadership necessary for a more targeted and effective protest plan of action (Johnson et al., 2010). In contrast, much of the recent trend in popular protest has been towards grassroots, non-institutionalised forms of social movement activity, often considered 'horizontalist', prefigurative, or leaderless, partly driven by the view that such forms of activity are more internally democratic and, therefore, more empowering for their participants (Fominaya, 2015; Yates, 2021).

Social movement strategy and tactics

Tactical choices are also considered to be an important determinant of protest success. Disruptive tactics have been a considerable focus of discussion in recent years, both amongst academic scholars and by social movement activists. Whilst disruptive protest has the potential to increase the cost of non-compliance on the part of the target (Bailey, 2015), at the same time it also has the potential to both alienate public opinion and potential political allies (Uba, 2005), as well as potentially prompting repressive measures from the target or from the political elite (Wang & Piazza, 2016). It is therefore an open question whether disruptive protest is to be favoured by those seeking successful policy change. Second, social movement activity often seeks to gain influence through reputation damage, seeking to galvanise public sentiment in a way that exposes the target into conceding to the demands of the protest activity, in order to limit the damage to reputation that is caused by acts of protest. For King (2016), reputation damage is an especially effective tool for activists to utilise in seeking to influence corporate practices or policies, as corporations are more susceptible to the potential economic risks associated with a poor reputation, whilst they are less directly affected by popular opinion in terms of how it might have an impact through democratic routes. Third, alternative tactics, or what are sometimes called, 'assertive political strategies', including litigation and legal challenges, have the potential to provide additional forms of influence as well provide an indication to the target of the action that the social movement in question is intent on pursuing the issue with considerable commitment (Amenta et al., 2019, p. 456).

The view of the target also needs to be considered when seeking to understand the likelihood that certain protest activity might be impactful (Uba, 2016). As discussed above, the type of target, especially whether it is a democratic public body and therefore

more susceptible to popular pressure, or a private actor, such as a corporation, is likely to have an impact upon which methods of mobilisation are likely to result in success (on the economic questions that targets consider, see Luders, 2006). Further, the attitude of the target towards particular types of protest activity is likely to determine whether it adopts a sympathetic or hostile stance towards protesters, and therefore whether some form of concession or compromise might be reached between protest actors and their targets (Uba, 2016).

Political economy matters

In addition to questions of protest activity, organisational form, and tactical and strategic debates, a number of recent contributions to the question of social movement impact have sought to highlight the role of the political economy context within which such activity occurs (Engelhardt & Moore, 2022). The capacity to organise and the likely response of targets of social movement activity are each likely to be shaped by the opportunities and constraints that arise from political economy pressures at any particular moment and place. For instance, in contexts of low economic growth or recession, both firms and governments are more likely to be focused on stimulating growth and balancing budgets, and less able to offer concessions which might prove contrary to the requirements of improving productivity and economic growth (Elsässer & Haffert, 2022). This pressure to produce growth also interacts with the ongoing pressure within capitalist society to marketise ever more sections of social life, and the resistance that emerges in response to such attempts (Fraser, 2023; Moore, 2023). Likewise, the potential for social movements to organise and sustain collective action will be shaped in part by the economic conditions facing potential participants within those social movements, the degree to which they are constrained by economic necessity and hardship, and the compulsion this creates to focus on only the private pursuit of income (rather than broader societal concerns) (Mau, 2023).

In sum, assessing and understanding the likely impact of environmental social movements and protest activity is a challenging task. Given the complex configuration of factors that any social movement campaign is likely to be influenced by, it is perhaps unsurprising that there are few definitive findings within the literature. Explaining protest outcomes remains open to empirical investigation, suggesting that different empirical contexts with different configurations of conditions will see different outcomes as a result of the protest activity which occurs in different times and places. This therefore necessitates empirical inquiry to understand how and why different environmental protest campaigns were able to produce successful outcomes in any particular context, which the present paper seeks to do.

Method: comparing the conditions of success

In order to address the question of environmental protest effectiveness and outcomes, this paper adopts a qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) method to explore the outcomes of each of the major, nationally prominent, environmentalist protest campaigns which took place throughout the period 2010–2019 in the UK. This was a period when climate change increasingly featured on the political agenda (Ares & Bolton, 2020). At the

same time, however, the governing Conservative Party's commitment to a neoliberal policy paradigm, including a perceived need to adopt austerity measures in order to reduce the scale of public debt in the wake of the 2008 global economic crisis, combined to produce a political commitment to limit or reduce government spending. Indeed, the British government during this period is typically identified as the most pro-austerity of those in the high-income democracies, during a period when austerity was being widely implemented across the board. Whilst other governments (such as Greece and Spain) adopted more substantial austerity measures, this was typically under some form of external duress, either as a result of a debt crisis or due to the demands of creditors such as the EU and IMF (Stanley, 2016, p. 391). In contrast, the British government is widely considered to have been the most willing to actively embrace austerity as a policy choice, despite the lack of such external pressures (Konzelmann, 2019, pp. 114–20). The UK case therefore provides an opportunity within which to explore the response of the state (and capital) where an *ideological* commitment to neoliberalism and austerity is especially prevalent. As such, the political economy context facing environmentalist actors was contradictory and the governing party remained committed to both addressing the challenges of climate change *and* to adopting austerity measures in pursuit of economic growth (with the latter goal typically outweighing the former) (Gillard, 2016). This contradictory austerity-focused neoliberal context therefore represents an important and interesting empirical opportunity within which to consider the scope for environmentalist protest to be influential.

To identify all nationally prominent environmentalist protest campaigns during the 2010s, the empirical research drew on an existing dataset² of protest events covering all protests reported in two national newspapers for Britain during the period 1985 to 2019. From this dataset, those protest events conducted by 'environmentalists', plus the school children taking part in the school strikes for climate action, between the start of 2010 and end of 2019, were selected. This produced a subset of 235 protest events, of which those events led by the same actors, and focusing on the same issues, grievances, and goals, were combined into discrete individual campaigns. This produced a list of 54 discrete environmentalist campaigns, identified as the most prominent environmentalist campaigns in the UK for the period. For each of these 54 campaigns, process-tracing methods were deployed in order to identify the key events that took place throughout the campaign, with a specific focus on the initial goals and the overall outcome of the campaign (specifically in terms of the degree to which the initial goals were realised) (on the process tracing method, see Bennett and Checkel, 2015). For each campaign, an assessment was made regarding the degree to which a range of potential causal conditions were present, reflecting the range of potentially relevant conditions of success discussed in the previous section. This included whether (and the degree to which) the tactics used: were disruptive, included legal action, achieved reputation damage of the target, acquired political support (from both opposition parties and governing parties), were led by either a professional social movement organisation (such as Greenpeace or Friends of the Earth) or a more independent/grassroots group, and/or were driven more by immediately perceivable environmental risks (reflecting what might be considered a form of NIMBY-ism) or by a more general concern with climate change and environmental damage to the planet. Less strategic features of the campaign were also documented, including the

number of protests carried out, the length of time that the campaign went on for, the scale of the goals being pursued by the campaign, and the type of target of the campaign (public authority, non-public organisation, or private corporation). Through the use of online sources, it was possible to identify the key details for each of the discrete campaigns, creating a case narrative and overview for each of the 54 campaigns. This represents an extensive dataset covering environmentalist disputes in the UK during this period, and is made available online in a website, *Environmentalist Action in the UK, 2010–19*.¹

In order to systematically compare the different outcomes, and the effect of the different causal conditions, in each of this large number of qualitative case studies, the research adopted a qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) method. Initially developed by Ragin (2008), and subsequently refined through a number of publications and software packages, QCA is a form of configurational analysis that uses set-theoretic methods to explore and identify the causal conditions that produce particular outcomes (Schneider & Wagemann, 2012). This enables the researcher to consider the complex interaction between different causal conditions, allowing the researcher to use their knowledge of specific cases to qualitatively determine whether or not, and the degree to which, a particular case displays the conditions and outcome of interest to the study (Ragin, 2008). These evaluations are subsequently coded numerically, and through a process of ‘logical minimisation’ it is possible to ascertain whether a (configuration of) causal condition(s) is necessary and/or sufficient for the outcome of interest to occur. In instances where the configuration of conditions is *necessary*, these conditions *must* be in place for the outcome of interest to occur. In that sense, it is a minimum requirement. In instances where the configuration of conditions is *sufficient*, if these conditions are in place then the outcome of interest *does* occur. In that sense, it is a maximum requirement.

QCA is especially well suited to explore the complex non-linear way in which protests lead to outcomes, identified through the qualitative evaluation of the researcher, rather than merely through the occurrence of correlation (for a discussion of the method as applied to social movements, see Amenta et al., 2023). This method is therefore in contrast with linear models of causation, such as those which are used in most quantitative methods, which assume that causation requires a correlation between a high(/low) incidence of an independent variable and a high(/low) incidence of the dependent variable. As Ragin argues convincingly, this linear model is not how causation occurs in much of the social world, particularly because there are multiple causal routes (or ‘causal recipes’) that produce the same outcome. For instance, successful protest campaigns may result from *both* disruptive methods or *alternatively* through legal methods, meaning that the absence of one causally efficacious condition should not necessarily be expected to be correlated with the absence of the expected outcome (as the outcome could also be achieved through the alternative route). This inconvenient aspect of social reality – equifinality – causes serious problems for linear models of causation, as it creates the possibility that causal mechanisms which exist in reality will nevertheless fail to generate correlations between independent and dependent variables, and therefore remain undetected by linear models. In addressing this problem, QCA instead seeks to identify the causal routes, or ‘recipes’, that have been empirically shown to generate the outcome of interest. These might be complex *or* simple configurations of causal conditions, but importantly the verification of *one* causal route does not imply that an

alternative route is more or less credible or significant. As such, the methodological problem arising from equifinality is dealt with by allowing for the possibility that *multiple* different routes will be able to achieve the same outcome.

The details of each of the 54 environmentalist campaigns were coded according to the scheme described in the supplementary online appendix A, with the full table of results available online.³ In each case, a judgement was required regarding the degree to which there was a successful outcome, and whether each causal condition was present, creating a full table of crisp set values⁴ for each condition and the outcome.⁵

The criterion for considering campaigns to be successful was whether they secured 'substantial achievements' (not that campaign goals were achieved in their entirety). This reflects a degree of pragmatism in terms of evaluating the effect of protest and dissent. To give an illustrative example of this evaluation process, we can consider the difference between a successful and unsuccessful case. Thus, case 27 was the campaign opposed to the construction of a third runway at Heathrow. Whilst the campaign was unsuccessful in securing an end to the plan to construct the airport, it nevertheless produced a substantial delay, to the extent that speculation remains at the time of writing that it still might be cancelled altogether. This therefore saw substantial achievements for the campaign, and it was included within the 'success' set. In contrast, case 34 is the Stop Killing Londoners campaign against air pollution in London, which sought stronger action from the London Mayor to tackle pollution in the city. Whilst some measures were introduced that broadly chimed with the campaign goals, overall their demands were ignored or rejected, and the case is not included in the 'successful' set of cases.

Four cases were removed from the analysis as it was not possible to ascertain any concrete goal, thereby leaving 50 cases as the subject of the analysis⁶. A total of 20 out of these 50 campaigns were categorised as successful (40%).

The presence or absence of key causal conditions in each case were evaluated as follows: A campaign was considered disruptive if it produced more than minimal levels of disruption. For instance, the Greenpeace Save the Arctic campaign included the widespread attempt to blockade petrol stations, prompting their closure for a short period of time and was therefore considered disruptive. In contrast, the London fashion week protests in 2019 witnessed a number of stunts but no significant disruption of the fashion week operations, and therefore was not considered disruptive. A campaign was considered to have used reputation damage as a tactic if it showed at least some signs of negative/adverse media reporting and some signs that this translated into some degree of visible public opposition. For instance, the campaign in opposition to plans to transfer oil at Cromarty Firth which began in 2016 gained some media attention, and a popular online petition, and was therefore considered to have used reputational damage of the target as a tactic. In contrast, the campaign for more cycle paths in Scotland in 2019 saw no sign of controversy or widespread media reporting, adverse publicity, or public anger, and was therefore not considered to have used reputation damage as a tactic. Support by political parties was measured as positive if there was visible reporting of supportive statements by party politicians in the media. An evaluation of whether the campaign was driven by immediately perceivable environmental risks was determined by whether the campaign goals reported issues immediately apparent to the local residents or other

members of the campaign. For instance, in the Reclaim, the Power campaign against open mining at Ffos-y-fran, residents reported immediately perceptible concerns about the impact on them of the mining.

Findings: when environmental protests succeeded

The QCA package developed by Duşa (2019) was used for the calculations. Adopting the criteria suggested by Duşa (an inclusion score of 0.9 and a relevance of necessity score of 0.6), none of the conditions included in the study were found to be *necessary* in order for the campaign to be successful.

To identify which conditions were *sufficient* for environmentalist campaigns to meet our measure of success (substantial achievements), we report the truth table and Quine – McCluskey minimisation results from the QCA package for the best explanation able to account for successful environmental protests. This explanation included only three conditions (lengthy campaign, large numbers of protest, and political support from opposition parties/party actors).⁷ Table 1 presents the truth table for this calculation. Table 2 presents the conservative results of the minimisation (with no assumptions made about logical remainders), with the inclusion score for the calculation of the truth table and logical minimisation set at 0.75. The results in Table 2 includes the inclusion score (measuring the consistency with which the causal configuration covers [or explains] the positive outcome), the proportional reduction in inconsistency (which measures the degree of consistency of each configuration), the raw coverage (how much of the outcome cases are explained by that particular configuration) and the unique coverage (how much of the outcome cases are *only* covered by that particular configuration), along with a list of the concrete cases that are fully within each of the two configurations of conditions of success (the ‘causal recipes’) and which resulted in the campaign being successful (note that, of all of the 18 campaigns that met at least one of the two configurations (causal recipes), only two were unsuccessful). Cases in bold are those that feature in only one of the two ‘causal recipes’. The results for the overall solution are also reported below the table.

The solution, as shown in Table 2, has two different configurations of conditions, or ‘causal recipes’, that were sufficient to produce a successful campaign outcome. These are: (i) those campaigns that are both lengthy (lasting for over one year at least) and staged a relatively large number of individual protests throughout the campaign (at least five separate protest events);⁸ and (ii) those campaigns that secured the

Table 1. Truth table.

Lengthy campaign	Large number of protests	Political Support	Successful outcome	Number of cases
1	1	0	1	8
1	1	1	1	5
1	0	1	1	2
0	1	1	1	2
0	0	1	1	1
0	0	0	0	26
1	0	0	0	5
0	1	0	0	1

Table 2. QCA results for conditions of success.

Solution	Inclusion score	Proportional reduction in inconsistency	Raw coverage	Unique coverage	Cases
Lengthy campaign & large number of protests	0.846	0.846	0.55	0.30	<p>opposition to Trump-owned golf course 2007–12</p> <p>Campaign against RBS funding oil/gas projects 2007 – 18</p> <p>anti-fracking campaign 2011 – 2019</p> <p>Greenpeace Save the Arctic campaign 2012–15</p> <p>anti-HS2 campaign 2014– 2023</p> <p>Liberate Tate opposition to BP sponsorship of Tate 2010–16</p>
Political support (opposition)	1	1	0.5	0.25	<p>opposition to Trump-owned golf course 2007-12</p> <p>campaign against privatisation of Forestry Commission land 2011</p> <p>anti-fracking campaign 2011 – 2019</p> <p>anti-HS2 campaign 2014– 2023</p> <p>Stop Climate Chaos Scotland seek funding for cycling and walking from Scottish Government – ‘We Want to See Double’ (2012–14)</p>
					<p>opposition to Heathrow 3rd runway 2015–2019</p> <p>Greenpeace against air pollution 2016–19</p> <p>Reclaim the Power against open mining at Ffos-y-fran 2016–2023</p> <p>Extinction Rebellion’s demand for action on Climate Change 2018 – 2019</p> <p>Reclaim the power against Drax 2019–21</p> <p>opposition to the eviction of Grow Heathrow 2014</p> <p>Reclaim the Power against open mining at Ffos-y-fran 2016–2023</p> <p>Extinction Rebellion’s demand for action on Climate Change 2018 – 2019</p> <p>opposition to plans to transfer oil at Cromarty Firth 2016–2018</p> <p>School climate strikes – Fridays for Futures 2019</p>

Solution inclusion score: 0.889; solution PRI: 0.889; solution coverage: 0.800.

visible public support of one of the opposition political parties. With a solution inclusion score of 0.889, we can see that with a high level of certainty (88.9%), of the nationally prominent environmental protest campaigns which took place during the period of investigation, if one of these two configurations of conditions was in place then this proved sufficient for the campaign to be successful. The solution has a coverage score of 0.8, meaning that 80% of the positive outcomes which occurred during the period are covered (or explained) by the solution. In order to illustrate the effectiveness of these two alternative ‘causal recipes’ we can consider in more detail an example case for each of these two alternative routes.

Route 1: lengthy campaign & large number of protests

The Greenpeace Save the Arctic campaign that ran between 2012 and 2015, and included over 100 protests, provides an important example of the way in which campaigns that persisted over time and staged a large number of protest events combined to produce the conditions that were sufficient for a successful outcome (with 11 out of 13 of the campaigns with these conditions in place proving to be successful).

The campaign first gained national prominence in July 2012 when Greenpeace activists shut down 74 Shell petrol stations in London and Edinburgh in opposition to Shell’s plan for Arctic drilling for oil, as part of its ‘Save the Arctic’ campaign. This successfully put the campaign into the public eye, with considerable media coverage prompted by the campaign, and forcing Shell to publish a public statement in response to the campaign. This also formed part of a coordinated international campaign in which similar events took place across Europe. Despite the considerable media attention, Shell continued with its exploration program, *Offshore Alaska* (Tuffrey, 2012).

Greenpeace continued its campaign, and in 2013 six Greenpeace activists climbed the Shard, in an attempt to draw attention to Shell’s actions in drilling for oil in the Arctic (with Shell being partly based in the Shard). Whilst this stunt again successfully drew media attention, nevertheless the company continued to defend its plans, claiming that ‘if responsibly developed, Arctic energy resources can help offset supply constraints and maintain energy security’ (quoted in Walker & Mathiesen, 2013).

Greenpeace went on to stage a month of protests, with one protest per day for the whole month of August 2015. Still, Shell seemed unmoved by the action, with a spokesperson saying: ‘We choose to explore there [the Arctic] because we have the expertise and experience to operate responsibly and be profitable at the same time’ (quoted in Gayle, 2015). This constant pressure generated by protest, however, successfully drew attention to Shell’s plan for drilling, creating considerable controversy, as was perhaps best evinced by Shell’s ousting from the Prince of Wales’s Corporate Leader Group due to a fallout with other Group members, directly as a result of the increasingly controversial nature of its drilling plan (Macalister, 2015a).

The following month, in September 2015, Shell announced it would quit the drilling, at an estimated cost of £4b. This was officially announced as being due to poor results from the initial drilling tests. But campaigners, including Greenpeace, and media reports, put it down to Greenpeace’s considerable international campaign and the high impact on Shell’s reputation that this had (Macalister, 2015b).

Route 2: support by opposition political party

A second route to successful protest outcomes during this period were those campaigns that acquired the visible political support of one of the opposition political parties. Indeed, all of the 10 campaigns that secured such support were successful, highlighting the very considerable impact that visible political support from political opponents of the government had during this period.

The campaign in 2011 against the privatisation of Forestry Commission land is a good illustrative example. The proposal for privatisation was itself announced in January 2011 when the government unveiled a proposal to sell off forestry held by the Forestry Commission. This announcement precipitated significant and widespread opposition, with strong disapproval among the general public. This opposition took various forms and was largely coordinated by the campaign group, 'Hands Off Our Forest' (HOOF). Protest actions included an online petition, which gathered an impressive 500,000 signatures. Additionally, large-scale demonstrations occurred in several key locations, including a protest involving 3,000 individuals at the Forest of Dean, and other protests at several other forests.

This growing discontent was drawn on by the Labour Party opposition to call for the withdrawal of the proposal, with Ed Miliband (the Leader of the Opposition) using the opportunity to pressure the Government, stating in Parliament: 'Everybody knows you have to drop this ludicrous policy. Let me give him the chance to do it. Nobody voted for this policy; 500,000 people have signed a petition against the policy' (quoted in Watt & Vidal, 2011). Eventually, the privatisation plan was abandoned, only 3 weeks after it was announced.

Discussion and conclusions

The outcomes of social movements are notoriously difficult to study due to the non-linear and indirect way in which protest and other forms of resistance have an influence over multiple types of outcomes (Uba, 2024). The present paper has sought to address this challenge through a process tracing method that identifies key features of each of the 54 major environmental protest campaigns during the 2010s. The results of this process tracing exercise are also made available online in a website, *Environmental Action in the UK, 2010–19*. Through the use of qualitative comparative analysis (QCA), it is possible to combine qualitative judgement with a systematic comparative approach, to calculate the complex way in which configurations of causal conditions generate particular social movement outcomes. As such, the present article presents an important advance in both our knowledge of the impact of a number of high-profile environmental protests in the period under observation, *and* an illustration of the benefits that can be gained for the study of social movement outcomes through the use of the QCA method.

The analysis compared a range of key causal conditions that are typically identified within the existing social movement studies literature. This included the intensity of protest (as measured by the number of protest events) (Biggs & Andrews, 2015; Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011), and the longevity of the protest campaign (which we might consider to be an indication of Tilly's (2004) famous 'WUNC' formula). It also explored the effect of support by political allies (Giugni, 2007; Kane, 2003; Zelinska, 2023). The role of organisational form was also considered; especially whether each

campaign benefited from being led by grassroots independent groups (Yates, 2021); or by more professionalised social movement organisations (Johnson et al., 2010). The impact of a range of different tactical options was included, which are identified in the broader literature, including the role of disruptive methods (Bailey, 2015), the impact of reputation damage (King, 2016), and litigation (Amenta et al., 2019).

The findings show two causal routes (or ‘causal recipes’) were sufficient to generate a successful outcome. First, those campaigns that combined both protest intensity (holding at least five protest events), and long-term commitment (lasting for at least longer than one year) were sufficient to produce successful outcomes. This suggests that perseverance was a key factor of success, and as such broadly supports Tilly’s (2004) ‘WUNC’ formula. Secondly, those campaigns which secured the political support of opposition parties were successful, highlighting the role of political allies (in agreement with, for instance, Giugni, 2007; Kane, 2003; Zelinska, 2023).

In terms of the implications for our broader knowledge for social movement outcomes, the study shows that, during this period, the alternative, more strategic and tactical, causal conditions identified within the social movement studies literature were not decisive in ensuring successful campaign outcomes. This includes the decision over whether or not to use disruptive protest tactics, the merits of which have been hotly debated recently within the environmentalist movement (see, for instance, the discussion in Hymer, 2023). Indeed, the findings suggest that during the period and context in question, attempts to adopt a single, specific tactical or strategic approach to campaigning might have a limiting effect upon the goals achieved. This would therefore seem to support the argument for tactical diversity (Bugden, 2020). Indeed, we can justifiably expect that the capacity to stage and sustain a campaign’s momentum will be greater in instances where the types of activities conducted are drawn from a broad range of protest types, and therefore are suitable to a broad range of participants, each of whom have different degrees of willingness to participate in different types of protest. As such, campaigns adopting a diverse range of tactical options are likely to appeal to a broader pool of participants than those using a more narrow range of options, and therefore more able to sustain campaign momentum given the broader range of potential participants upon which to draw.

As a caveat, it might also be that more controversial protest methods, such as disruptive methods, could discourage support from political allies (thereby favouring non-disruptive methods as a route to securing the support of political allies, which is the second of the two routes to protest success). Although this would need to be explored further, as recent research finds that protest generates more (online) public statements from political actors, but does not specify which types of protest (Barrie et al., 2024). Further research would therefore benefit from identifying under which conditions, and in response to which types, protest prompts support from political allies.

The findings also raise the question of the impact of political economy context. The cases selected in the present study were all taken from a single political economy context (austerity-era neoliberalism in the UK, 2010–19). It is not therefore possible to compare directly with other political economy context types. Nevertheless, as discussed, the context studied was marked by a contradictory commitment by the government (and, perhaps less directly, but nevertheless also, by firms) to both address the risks of climate change, but also to significantly subordinate that

commitment to one of pursuing an austerity-focused route to economic growth (Gillard, 2016). This suggests (but also would need to be confirmed through further comparative research) that public bodies and firms during this period, whilst declaring their commitment to tackling climate change, nevertheless preferred to be relatively inactive in adopting concrete climate-friendly measures, *unless* they experienced considerable public pressure, either sustained over time, or through exposure to critique from opposition political parties, under which conditions there would be a greater need to more visibly act upon their declared commitment to addressing climate change. This claim would seem to be supported by research in the critical political economy literature that highlights the contradictory approach of both the state and firms in reconciling the contrary pressures to both address climate change and to meet the economic demands associated with governing a capitalist economy (Nunn, 2012; Paterson, 2010). This also would benefit from further research.

Finally, the literature also suggests that different types of targets might be susceptible to different types of protest activity (King, 2016). The current findings allow us to compare whether this is the case, by conducting the QCA for a *sub-set* of the cases: one calculation in which only cases where corporations are targeted are included; and another in which only cases in which ‘non-corporations’ (public bodies and non-profit organisations) are included. The results of such an analysis, and a brief discussion of the findings, are reported in online appendix C. Whilst the findings are only exploratory, in part due to a reduced number of cases being available for the analysis when working with a sub-set of cases, nevertheless they do suggest slightly different routes to successful outcomes for the two types of target, with corporate targets more susceptible to being influenced by lengthy campaigns, and public bodies (non-corporate actors) more influenced by political support and issues which are immediately perceptible to the citizenry. Again, these exploratory findings would benefit from further research.

Notes

1. This is made available here: <https://sites.google.com/view/ukenvironmentalism2010s/home>
2. The *Political Protest in Britain, 1985–2019* dataset is available here: https://leftpartiesprotestmovements.wordpress.com/britain_protest/
3. Available here: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1KPU1BP8ANx1w6x3GTur3wazfAyI4wNje/view>
4. The results reported used crisp-set values throughout. As some of the conditions and the outcome had multiple values, it was possible to also consider whether fuzzy set values would provide better insights. Neither fuzzy nor crisp sets produce more rigorous results *per se*. Instead, the decision over which approach is most appropriate depends on whether we are interested in identifying a clear threshold, crossing which changes the *kind* of case observed, or whether we are interested in the effect of gradual change in the *degree* to which a case falls within one set or another (Rohlfing, 2020, p. 85). Further, the findings themselves can inform the use of value types used in QCA. Thus, if crisp set values produce set relations which aren’t produced through fuzzy set values then this in itself is an interesting finding, as it suggests a clear threshold applies, over which conditions begin to have a causal impact. Fuzzy values for each of the key causal conditions were calculated in the present study where this was possible. These results (unreported) did not produce as compelling results, suggesting that each of the

conditions and outcome have clear (rather than gradual) thresholds, upon crossing which we see clear change in the kind (rather than the degree) of effects.

5. Available here: https://drive.google.com/file/d/13QBIV4_DQfmV4uL7z_E_LYh7CHynwelD/view
6. The cases removed were campaign 5, 10, 29, and 35. See the accompanying website for the relevant numbering.
7. A number of alternative QCA calculations were conducted. Each failed to produce any rival explanation that could match the results presented, with thresholds for both solution inclusion and coverage set at 0.8. An overview of these alternative calculations is provided in the online appendix B.
8. The importance of the lengthiness of the campaign raises an additional question of temporality. As Caren and Panofsky (2005) note, the temporality of conditions should also be considered. In particular, the order in which conditions play a part. However, as Caren and Panofsky (2005) also note, this is a matter of judgement as not all conditions will have a temporal dimension. In the case of the present study, the causal recipe 'lengthy campaign & large number of protests' is the only one which raises the issue of temporality. In principle, it could be the case that the timing of the protests over the period of a lengthy campaign could make a difference to the type of outcome witnessed; however, each of the cases which had both a lengthy campaign and large number of protest events also saw those protest events spread across the duration of the campaign, and as such there is no obvious variation, in temporal terms, between them to investigate.

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