

Paving the way or crowding out? The impact of the rise of climate change on environmental issue agendas

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Abstract Climate change has emerged as a salient issue within the USA. In response, many environmental organizations have pushed climate change to the top of their agendas. As a consequence, critics have charged that environmentalists have decreased attention to—or abandoned altogether—traditional issues such as biodiversity. This research provides empirical data to evaluate such claims. I assess the degree to which climate change has come to dominate US environmental group agendas, using data from organizational websites, financial statements, and interviews. I find that climate change has moved to the top of group agendas, emerging as a key priority and commanding a significant percentage of organizational funding. However, rather than being associated with the neglect of other issues, analysis shows that groups tend to work on a *greater* number of issues after they prioritize climate change. Moreover, the nature of environmental campaigns has evolved as attention to climate change has increased.

Keywords Climate change · Interest groups · Agenda setting · Environmental politics · Public policy

Introduction

In recent decades, American environmentalists have loudly and frequently declared climate change to be the most important environmental issue facing the globe. In their attempt to increase the salience of the issue for the public and politicians, these activists have publicized climate assessment reports,

conducted public education campaigns, organized protests, and devised political strategies to use climate change as a “wedge issue” in elections (Sheppard 2014). Recently, the leaders of 18 prominent US environmental interest groups joined forces to urge President Barack Obama to swiftly craft policies that would avoid a “catastrophic climate future.”¹ In many ways, climate change has become “the new ‘master concept’” of environmental governance (Keil 2007 cited While et al. 2010, p. 77).

Journalistic accounts suggest that, as a result, the conversation among US environmental interest groups has shifted almost exclusively to climate issues. One *Huffington Post* piece asserted that environmental NGOs have put “all their beans in the [climate change] pot” (Czech 2014). The *Washington Post* reported that one NGO leader lamented the failure of cap and trade legislation in the 111th congressional session (2009–2010) because environmentalists “spent the last ten years on this and not on anything else” (Eilperin 2010). In short, according to one environmental writer, someone looking at the agendas of the country’s leading environmental organizations “might be persuaded that climate change is the only real environmental issue we face” (Clarke 2012).

Some scholars have speculated on the effects of increased climate lobbying on attention to other issues, questioning, for example, whether the prioritization of climate might be getting in the way of pursuing other sustainability initiatives (Ellerman n.d.). At the root of such commentary is the assumption that as climate change rises on the agenda, other concerns necessarily must fall. Environmental writer Chris Clarke argues that, in particular, biodiversity issues are losing out. He points out that in 2005 “‘climate change’ started getting more attention, and mentions of biodiversity [in English-

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¹ Letter is available at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/r/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2014/01/16/National-Politics/Graphics/All%20of%20the%20Above%20letter%20Jan%2016%20FINAL%20corrected.pdf>. Accessed 22 July 2014.

language books] actually began to decrease for the first time since the 1980s” (Clarke 2012). The danger is that ignoring other issues in favor of climate change advocacy can have real impacts on environmental outcomes. In the UK, Zac Goldsmith, a Member of Parliament in the Tory party, has argued that an “intense focus” on climate change has led politicians to back away from other issues like air pollution, food production, and biodiversity, asserting that “Climate change went too far. A lot of stuff slipped off the agenda” (Vidal 2012). As a result, the disproportionate amount of attention being dedicated to climate change has left the entire environmental sector out of balance (Czech 2014).

If accurate, this charge has potentially far-reaching and consequential effects. Though the area of interest group influence remains understudied due in large part to methodological challenges (Dür and De Bièvre 2007), we do know that advocacy groups can be very successful at “forcing leaders and policymakers to pay attention” (Simmons 1998, p. 84). John Kingdon found that issues such as national health insurance and mass transit found their way onto governmental agendas in large part because of interest group lobbying (1995, p. 49). Given that advocacy groups—including environmental organizations—influence the agenda-setting process of governments “with considerable frequency” (Kingdon 1995, p. 49), their own agendas are something to take seriously.

The assertion that climate change has come to dominate environmental NGO agendas—and as a consequence, has pushed other issues from view—is not one that should be taken for granted, however. In many cases, the accounts described above are anecdotal in nature, relying on the impressions of movement observers, or generalizing from a limited case study. There has been some attention to the purported rise of climate change on NGO agendas by the academic community. Studies have noted that a growing body of environmental groups are addressing climate change (Straughan and Pollak 2008). We know that the number of lobbyists working on climate change has increased substantially in recent years (Lavelle 2009), and that in 2009, environmental groups spent a combined \$394 million (out of \$1.4 billion) on climate change activities (Nisbet 2011, p. 15). Moreover, some work suggests that these groups are directing new personnel and resources to the task, thereby “elevating climate change to the top of their agendas” (Layzer 2011, p. 325). These findings are rarely a central focus of scholarly work, however, and the evidence to support such claims is still minimal. More often, researchers have focused on changes to public opinion on climate change (e.g., Guber and Bosso 2009), media coverage and framing effects (Boykoff and Boykoff 2007; Nisbet 2009), growing politicization of the issue (McCright and Dunlap 2011), and the impact of conservative activists in delaying policy action (McCright and Dunlap 2003; Layzer 2012). To that extent that environmental advocacy groups are part of these investigations, it is often for the purpose of

implicating or exonerating them from responsibility for the lack of policy change to date (see, e.g., Schellenberger and Nordhaus 2004; Bryner 2008).

In this paper, I directly investigate the empirical basis for the claim that climate change reigns supreme on environmental agendas, as well as the perspective that interest group attention to different issues is a zero-sum game, looking specifically at the American advocacy context. I begin the paper by looking at the backdrop against which environmental NGOs are waging their climate change campaigns, exploring the state of public awareness and concern about climate change in various sectors of US society. Next, I examine the accuracy of claims about the supremacy of climate change on environmental agendas by analyzing the activities of eight leading US environmental interest groups, assessing both the presence and primacy of various issues on group agendas. I then consider both the risks and rewards of climate change’s ascendancy for interest groups. Finally, I conclude by discussing the development of climate change into a “macro issue” to which all other environmental issues are related and under which all environmental campaigns are organized.

Past the tipping point? Climate change as a public issue

Arguably, we have moved past a key threshold or “tipping point” on the issue of climate change. Deborah Guber and Christopher Bosso define a tipping point as “The point at which awareness and understanding of an issue reaches critical mass” (2009, p. 52). In the climate change context, it represents the moment at which skepticism about scientific consensus on the issue all but disappeared and there appeared to be broad public support for action to address the problem. For Guber and Bosso, this occurred in 2007, following the release of *An Inconvenient Truth* and the 4th IPCC climate assessment report. Aiden White and colleagues (2010, p. 83) place the timing of this critical juncture a bit earlier in 2005/2006. Whatever the specific date in time, it is clear that climate change has emerged as an issue of concern throughout public, scientific, and governmental communities in the USA. One recent opinion poll revealed that a majority of Americans (64 %) believe that global warming is happening, and their certainty about this fact is growing (Leiserowitz et al. 2014).² These numbers reflect the scientific consensus on the issue, with as many as 98 % of international climate researchers in agreement that climate change is a real

² It is important to note, however, that general knowledge about the causes, consequences, and potential solutions to climate change is still woefully low. The Yale Project on Climate Change Communication reports that only 8 % of Americans would receive an “A” or “B” grade on a climate change knowledge quiz, while fully 52 % would receive an “F” (Leiserowitz et al. 2012, p. 3).

and anthropogenic phenomenon (Anderegg et al. 2010, p. 1). Moreover, the scientific community has increasingly begun to step into an advocacy role and push for swift policy action.³ Though the US Congress has failed to pass any comprehensive legislation, the Congressional Research Service identified 65 bills and provisions introduced by the 113th Congress that directly address climate change (Ramseur 2014).

Data from the news sector confirms this trend. Tracking attention to climate change in the *New York Times* from 1996 (pre-Kyoto) to 2013 shows a sharp increase beginning in 2005 and peaking in 2007 (see Fig. 1). The number of news stories addressing climate change declines again after 2007 but remains higher than the years before the tipping point.

More recent attention may have in part been prompted by numerous high-profile climate events that have served to increase public awareness of the issue (Nisbet 2011, p. 49). The American Meteorological Society linked climate change to 6 of 12 extreme weather events in 2012, including heat waves and storm surges (Ogburn and ClimateWire 2013). Overall, most Americans think that weather in the USA has been getting “worse” and that “global warming is affecting weather” (Leiserowitz et al. 2013). Natural disasters such as hurricanes and floods may be especially powerful promoters of policy change, pushing issues such as climate change onto the public radar (Birkland 2006, p. 8).

For all these reasons, then, it is not surprising that many perceive a shift in environmental advocacy behavior toward an enlarged focus on climate change. Environmental advocates may hope to channel this public, scientific, and media attention into meaningful policy action and might be redirecting their own energies increasingly toward that end. Is there evidence to support such a belief?

Expectations

I evaluate the degree to which environmental interest groups have adopted climate change as a top advocacy priority and the extent to which this action has served to displace non-climate-related issues from existing agendas. From a strategic perspective, it makes sense for advocacy groups to increasingly prioritize climate change as the salience of the issue has grown. Understanding that such windows of opportunity are only open temporarily (Kingdon 1995), we might anticipate that environmental advocates of all stripes would jump at the chance to promote climate change in this post-tipping point era. In short, I expect that climate change will be a clear priority for the

³ See, for example, the statements of the Joint National Academies (<http://nationalacademies.org/onpi/06072005.pdf>) and the American Association for the Advancement of Science (http://www.aaas.org/news/press_room/climate_change/mtg_200702/aaas_climate_statement.pdf).

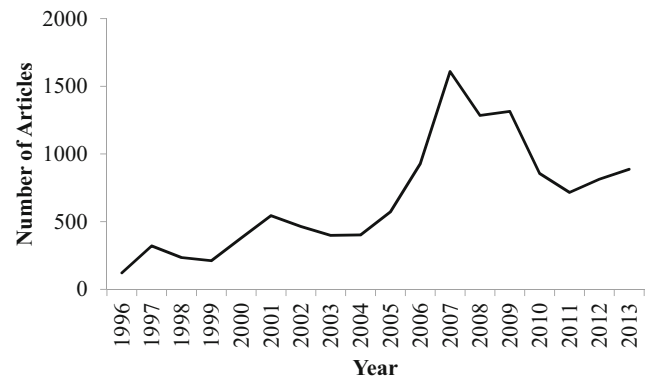


Fig. 1 Attention to Climate Change in the *New York Times*, 1996–2013. From LexisNexis (search terms: “global warming” or “climate change”)

environmental advocacy groups in this study, occupying the top position of organizational agendas (or sharing this position with a very limited number of other issues).

If there is evidence that climate change has ascended to a position of dominance, there are likely to be secondary effects on interest group advocacy for *other* environmental issues. Institutional arenas (including interest group communities) are limited by carrying capacities governed by a scarcity of resources, time, and attention (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988). Issues thus compete with one another to earn (and maintain) a presence on group agendas. While agendas are somewhat flexible and may expand at times to accommodate the emergence of new issues (especially in response to focusing events) (Birkland 1998, p. 60), they are not infinitely so. In most instances, when new issues are adopted, others are displaced (Zhu 1992). I therefore anticipate that environmental organizations will decrease activities organized around traditional issues—such as public lands, pollution, and endangered species—when they adopt a model that places climate change squarely at the forefront of their agenda. This should be reflected in the overall size of environmental NGO agendas, which I expect to shrink in response to climate change ascendance.

Data and methods

Data for this study were drawn from a sample of eight national-level environmental advocacy organizations in the USA: the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), Greenpeace USA, the National Audubon Society (Audubon), the National Wildlife Federation (NWF), the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), Rainforest Action Network (RAN), the Sierra Club, and the Wilderness Society. These groups were selected for several reasons: They operate at the national level within the USA, they have lengthy organizational histories, forming before the emergence of climate change, and finally,

they have maintained active public websites that provide a record of their work stretching back to the late 1990s. The organizations are similar in that they are well-established, respected and influential actors in the environmental policy arena. All, for example, are included in Bosso's (2005) study on the evolution of the environmental establishment. However, they also provide interesting contrasts because they vary in their issue breadth. Some organizations, such as the Sierra Club and Natural Resources Defense Council, have historically maintained a broad issue agenda. Others have organized around narrower interests, such as birds in the case of the Audubon Society or the Rainforest Action Network's focus on the impacts of corporate behavior on forest ecosystems.

To track the rise of climate change on environmental agendas, I examined the issues listed on group websites. These websites provide organizations with an opportunity to communicate with supporters and the broader public about their mission, interests, and goals. Interest groups use websites to inform and mobilize members, fundraise, and build coalitions with other advocacy groups (Merry 2011). As such, these sites provide viewers with a record of a group's main concerns and priorities at a given point in time. To access historical website data, I employed the Wayback Machine, a website run by the non-profit group Internet Archive, which allows users to browse web pages that have been archived.⁴ The archive contains "snapshots" of websites that have been collected at nonregular intervals—anywhere from several times a month to several times a year. This allowed me to trace shifts in issue agendas over time as revealed by changes to group websites.⁵ The timeframe begins in 1998, the first year in which archived websites were available for all of the environmental groups in this study, and runs through 2013. Advocacy groups typically include a section on their website entitled "Campaigns," "What We Do," or "Issues and Policy." For each group, I counted the total number of issues included on these pages for each year in the study. From this, I have a record of the scope of advocacy work being done by the organizations over time.

Because I was interested in issue prioritization as well as overall issue coverage, I also noted if (and when) climate change was promoted to a leading position on group agendas. I identified this through one of three methods. First, in some cases, environmental groups indicate issues that are especially

important to them by explicitly denoting "Priority Campaigns" (Sierra Club), "Priority Goals" (NRDC), or by stating that the issue is a "top priority" (Wilderness Society). For these groups, I recorded the year in which climate change was first included on such listings or discussed in such a way. For organizations that do not formally delineate important campaigns in this way, I relied upon alternative methods for assessing prioritization. In the second method, I analyzed group communications that signal an implied hierarchy of priority through their websites. By listing a limited number of issues upfront and making site visitors click through to secondary (and, in some cases, tertiary) pages to access "More Issues," some groups—namely, EDF and NWF—provide valuable information about which campaigns are more important to them. For these organizations, I recorded the first year in which climate change appeared on the first page listing group campaigns. Finally, for organizations for whom neither of these two methods were available, I utilized group statements that attested to the importance of climate change. For example, in 2004, Greenpeace asserted that "Global warming, caused by burning fossil fuels, has become the most pressing environmental problem we face today." Similarly, in 2007, Audubon claimed that "Global warming is the biggest environmental threat of our lifetime," and the Rainforest Action Network argued that "Global warming is the most urgent issue of our time." By singling out global warming as the preeminent environmental issue, these groups provide insights about the problem's supremacy on their agendas. For these groups, I recorded the first year in which such statements were made.

Another way to assess the amount of attention given to climate change over time is to track the amount of financial resources organizations dedicated to the issue at any given time. I accessed this information through audited financial statements, such as IRS Form 990 and organizational annual reports. The availability and level of detail of these documents vary greatly, however. For example, the Environmental Defense Fund provides a detailed breakdown of program services by issue area for each year dating back to 1998. From these reports, I can trace the level of funding allocated to climate change (and other) campaigns over time. Similar information is available for the Natural Resources Defense Council and Greenpeace beginning at later dates (2002 and 2003, respectively). The remaining organizations do not separate out funding for different issue campaigns, instead reporting a total amount for all conservation and advocacy work. This information is therefore used to supplement the historical website data where possible and provide additional evidence with which to test the expectations described above.

Finally, I also conducted telephone interviews with current and former staffers of the groups included in this sample. I utilized an open-ended interviewing technique, directing questions toward the process of organizational agenda setting and the place of climate change within advocacy campaigns

⁴ Available at <http://archive.org/web/web.php>.

⁵ Note that because the Wayback Machine provides web page snapshots at frequent intervals but (generally) not daily, it is impossible to pinpoint *exactly* when the organizations made changes to their websites. For instance, if the list of environmental issues included on a website is different between two snapshots taken on 2 February and 7 May of a given year (and there are no snapshots available for the intervening months), we cannot say that the changes were instituted for the first time on the 7th of May. Accuracy is thus limited to within a period of months. Therefore, throughout the paper, I refer to dates as, for example, "by January 2001" or "no later than October 2004" when discussing such developments.

but allowing interviewees to take the conversation in unplanned directions as well. These conversations were also used to verify the dates of climate change prioritization identified through the methods described above. In some cases, interviewees requested anonymity when attributing information or direct quotes. In those cases, I have honored that request and identified them simply as someone affiliated with an unnamed environmental organization. For those individuals that consented to being identified, I have included their name and organizational affiliation.

Findings

By the late 2000s, climate change was squarely at the forefront of environmental interest group agendas. All of the eight groups surveyed here established formal climate change campaigns by 2007 (and some much earlier). For example, climate change has been on the Sierra Club agenda dating back to 1988, when the organization formulated a policy statement on “Global Warming and Ozone Depletion, Prevention of Excessive Greenhouse Effect.” For most of these organizations, the rise of climate change to a position of prominence occurred several years after the group started work on the issue. Table 1 displays the specific dates when the groups prioritized climate change as an issue of key importance, as determined by the methods described above.

The fact that climate change did not rank as an organizational priority before the turn of the twenty-first century is rather surprising. Alarm bells have been ringing on climate change since NASA scientist James Hansen delivered testimony to Congress on the topic in 1988, so we might have expected environmental groups to act upon it sooner. There are several possible reasons that might explain the delay in promoting climate change on organizational agendas. My interviews pointed toward two such reasons in particular. First, more specialized groups that center on one or a few environmental issues might not have felt that the science connecting climate change to their area(s) of interest was yet conclusive. For example, a 2008 interview with Wilderness Society Senior Policy Analyst Mike Anderson revealed that many of these groups still saw the issue as evolving at that late date. Though he referred to climate change as “the big social, political issue of our time,” he also described the science relating to the impacts of climate change on forest ecosystems as “just emerging,” noting that “we’re still in the process of developing our messages, learning the science” (Telephone interview, 5/29/08).

Secondly, even where groups established a clear and early understanding of the import of climate change, they may not have deemed it politically advantageous to expend their resources advancing the cause until rather recently. One Sierra Club staffer who served as the Director for Global Warming

Table 1 Climate change prioritization on group issue agendas

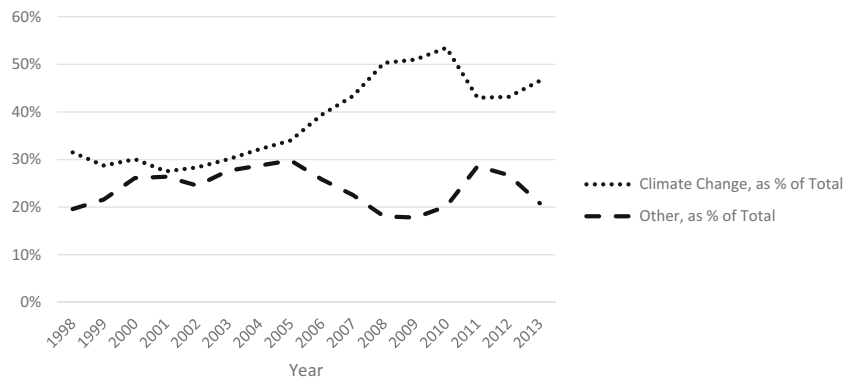
Organization	Date of issue prioritization
Environmental Defense Fund	2001
Greenpeace	2004
National Audubon Society	2007
National Wildlife Federation	2007
Natural Resources Defense Council	2007
Rainforest Action Network	2007
Sierra Club	2001
Wilderness Society	2008

and Energy Programs stated that Americans are most likely to be convinced to support clean energy and efficiency measures when the issue is connected to energy security and jobs, not climate change (Hamilton, Telephone interview, 3/09/10). A more detailed exploration of the trade-offs involved with prioritizing climate change campaigns is included in the discussion section below.

Surprising as it may seem, patterns in the commitment of financial resources to climate change advocacy confirm the developments dated in Table 1. Figures 2, 3, and 4 display the amount of money dedicated to the top two highest-funded issue programs as a percent of total program services funding, by year, for the three organizations for whom itemized funding information was available. As explained earlier, these data were available for 1998–2013 for EDF, 2002–2013 for NRDC, and 2003–2013 for Greenpeace. In every case, climate change campaigns received either the highest or the second highest level of funding when compared with other environmental issues, for every year in the timeframe. It should be noted that the other top-funded campaign displayed on the chart may change over time; for example, EDF’s second highest-funded campaign shifted from health to biodiversity to oceans, all while climate change continued to receive the most funding of all issue campaigns.

These data show that between the years of 1998 and 2013, the Environmental Defense Fund allocated an average of 38 % of their program services funding to the group’s climate change program. In 1996, this translated to \$6.1 million spent on climate change out of a total budget of \$18.7 million; by 2013, EDF was dedicating more than \$47 out of \$101 million. The amount spent on climate change is higher than for any other single issue campaign during this time period. Moreover, the gap between funding on climate change and other programs has increased in recent years. From 2008 to 2010, the difference between the amounts spent on climate change advocacy and the next highest-funded campaign was greater than 30 %, which reflects a dollar value of roughly \$27 million. As Fig. 3 shows, NRDC financial records exhibit a very similar pattern regarding climate change spending. Prior to 2009, a maximum of 22 % of NRDC’s program services

Fig. 2 Environmental Defense Fund Program Services Spending, Top Two Programs, 1998–2013



funding went toward global warming. In this year, climate change was elevated to the top funding position for the first time, claiming \$35.8 million from a budget of \$78.5 million; every year since, the organization has allocated a minimum of 46 % of their program budget toward the issue.⁶ This has resulted in a comparable distance between climate change funding and other priority issues. From 2010 to 2013, NRDC’s climate change and clean energy work commanded approximately 30 % more financial resources than the next closest issue, wildlife and wildlands advocacy.

The funding history of Greenpeace campaigns is less consistent, with climate change occupying the top spot for 3 of the past 11 years, trading this position with campaigns on forests and oceans. Figure 4 illustrates this fluctuation and shows that, overall, Greenpeace has dedicated a smaller percentage of their funding to climate change. Moreover, this organization operates with a smaller program services budget than either EDF or NRDC. In 2008, for example, when climate change advocacy claimed the highest percentage of group funding (26 %), this amounted to \$5.6 million out of a total of \$21.9 million spent. Between 2003 and 2013, the group’s climate campaign received an average of 17 % of the program services budget, well behind NRDC’s 29 % and EDF’s 38 %. Moreover, for the other two organizations, climate change spending gained in proportion to other issue campaigns over the last 5 years. For Greenpeace, the opposite trend proved true, as beginning in 2009, climate change budgets as a percentage of total spending dropped below funding for the group’s Oceans campaign. Nevertheless, climate change has consistently maintained a position as one of the top two priority campaigns throughout the past decade.

We might anticipate that environmental groups will balance their issue agendas by decreasing attention to some issues or cancelling them altogether as they shift resources

⁶ Beginning in 2009, NRDC financial statements do not separate spending on global warming from a related program on “Creating the Clean Energy Future.” This program is always discussed in tandem with the “Curbing Global Warming” program, and one of its primary purposes is to move away from fuels that contribute to global warming. For these reasons, I report the overall funding for these joint campaigns.

toward addressing climate change. Contrary to these expectations, I found that the addition of climate change to organizational platforms was more often associated with an increase in the number of issues on group agendas. In 2010, for example, when the Audubon Society was speaking often about the dangers of climate change, which had been a top priority for 3 years, the group listed more issues (16) on their website than at any other point in the timeframe. Table 2 displays the results of a series of independent samples *t* tests comparing the number of active issues on group agendas before climate change assumed a position of priority to the number of issues after this development (as measured by website presence), for each organization over time. This analysis shows that for five of the organizations, the mean number of active issues increased significantly after prioritization. For the remaining three, there was no significant difference before and after climate change rose in prominence.

There is no evidence, then, that climate change has caused a decrease in the overall size of environmental interest group agendas. At the same time, it is inaccurate to assert that environmental advocacy has not evolved as climate change has climbed up environmental group agendas. The most obvious changes can be witnessed in how groups frame issues in their advocacy work. We know that “environmental groups are devoting unprecedented resources and energy to framing issues” (Duffy 2003, p. 4), and the influence of climate change

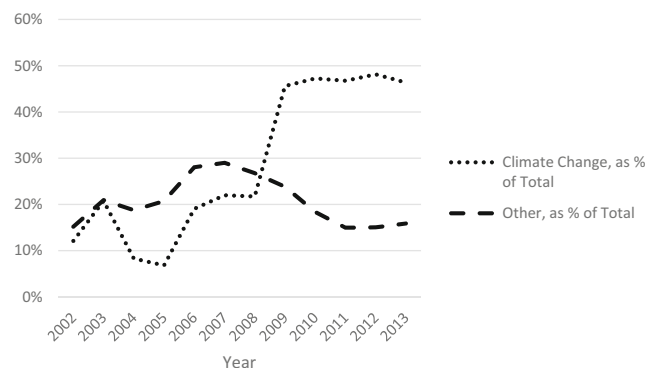
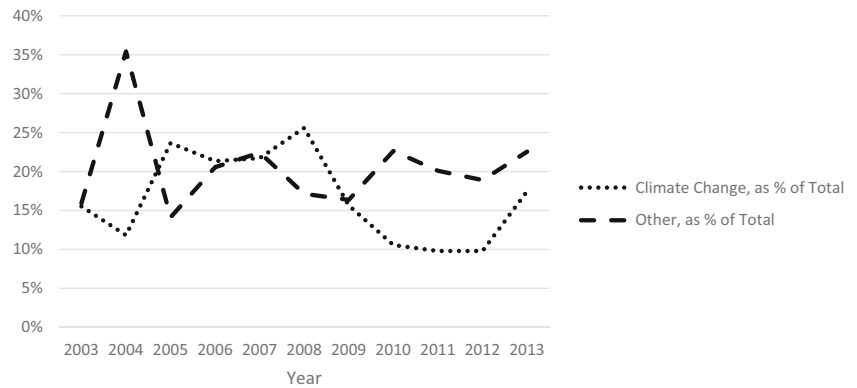


Fig. 3 Natural Resources Defense Council Program Services Spending, Top Two Programs, 2002–2013

Fig. 4 Greenpeace Program Services Funding, Top Two Programs, 2003–2013



is easily seen in this arena. In short, issues are being reframed to highlight their connection to climate change.⁷ Now, campaigns aimed at promoting sustainable agriculture emphasize the ways that green farming can reduce greenhouse gas emissions, programs that seek to protect wild areas are discussing the need to provide habitat for species whose land is being degraded due to climate change, and ocean conservation campaigns focus on increasing acidity levels that result from a warming climate.

This development can be clearly witnessed in the work of NRDC. In 2013, the group designated seven priority issues, of which one was “Curbing Global Warming.” Though this issue comprised its own stand-alone campaign, climate change was also prominently mentioned in five of the six other priority areas. For example, in the organization’s work on “Protecting our Health by Preventing Pollution,” they stated that “Climate change is one of the most serious public health threats facing the nation.” When discussing threats to “Safe and Sufficient Water,” they also noted that “changing climate patterns are draining rivers and aquifers.” Similar arguments were made in relation to the push for clean energy, the imperatives of restoring oceans, and the need to ensure that wild places can remain “critical regulators of global climate.” The same trend was evident in the advocacy messages put forth by the other groups in this study.

The way that environmentalists are defining issues has thus shifted to reflect the far-ranging effects of climate change; indeed, groups are testing the theory that there remain any issues *not* affected by the phenomenon. One staffer interviewed for this project explained that climate change “has become the frame through which a lot of other things are seen” (Telephone interview, 8/7/12). This

is also true for environmental activists in other political contexts. For instance, in the UK, Tory MP Zac Goldsmith recalls that “When we talked about forests we talked about them as sticks of carbon” (Vidal 2012). This shift is subtle yet important. As Corey Schott, Senior Legislative Representative for climate and energy issues at the National Wildlife Federation, noted, climate change is “not the only thing we do, but it’s part of everything we do” (Telephone interview, 8/24/12).

Discussion

In many ways, climate change can be best described as a “macro” issue. By its very nature, it touches upon most other environmental concerns: air and water quality, energy use, forest protection, habitat loss, and species extinction, among others. All are intimately related to climate change, as a causal factor, resulting effect, or both. This makes the issue almost impossible to ignore from an environmental advocacy standpoint. However narrow one’s area of interest and policy goals, it is difficult to imagine that climate change has no relevance. It is therefore not surprising that environmental groups have promoted climate change to the top of their issue agendas.

There may be community-level benefits to the dominance of climate change on environmental agendas. Research finds that as more interest groups incorporate an issue into their agenda, they bring with them a greater diversity of tactics, which may increase political efficacy (Johnson 2008, p. 10). Such tactics may include targeting different constituencies and policy venues, as well as framing the issue in different terms. Moreover, as environmentalists coalesce around climate change as a primary issue, within- and cross-sector policy coalitions to address the problem may become more likely. A prime example can be found in the Blue-Green Alliance, a coalition of environmental and labor organizations that works to advance a clean energy economy. This coalition has been a vocal participant in the climate change debate and has had impacts at the state and local levels. An affiliated

⁷ Framing is also a critical component of efforts to advance specific policy solutions. One reason that cap-and-trade was believed to be the most viable proposal during the 113th Congress was because it was not framed as a tax. Current efforts to advance a carbon tax option are being labeled as “fee and dividend” or a “carbon price” to avoid this loaded language (see Hurst T [2012, March 2] Goodbye, cap, and trade. Hello, fee, and dividend? Ecopolitology. <http://ecopolitology.org/2012/03/02/goodbye-cap-and-trade-hello-fee-and-dividend/>. Accessed 14 January 2013).

Table 2 Analysis of active issues before and after prioritization of climate change (independent samples *t* test)

Organization	Pre-prioritization		Post-prioritization		<i>t</i> test	<i>p</i>
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation		
Environmental Defense Fund	5.0	.000	10.6	4.108	−5.074	.000**
Greenpeace	5.0	.894	6.1	.316	−2.91	.028*
National Audubon Society	8.3	1.581	11.9	2.673	−3.30	.005**
National Wildlife Federation	4.4	1.236	6.1	1.574	−2.42	.030*
Natural Resources Defense Council	10.0	1.732	14.6	.976	−6.23	.000**
Rainforest Action Network	3.7	1.000	3.4	.535	.611	.552
Sierra Club	14.3	2.082	11.4	3.070	2.00	.110
Wilderness Society	10.3	3.530	10.5	3.619	.82	.915

N=16

p*≤.05; *p*≤.01

organization of the group⁸ was credited by then-Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid as being a major force behind the inclusion of clean energy provisions in the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (Apollo 2009).

No doubt one factor influencing advocacy decisions is the wide interest in and availability of financial backing for climate change initiatives from granting foundations. As Robert Brulle and J. Craig Jenkins show, environmentally-oriented grants from philanthropic organizations “[channel] resources to specific environmental discourses and types of organization” (in ways that, they argue, ultimately harm the movement) (2005, p. 152). In 2006, 11 % of all environmental grant monies from US foundations went toward activities related to global warming, totaling \$123 million (Straughan and Pollak 2008, p. 31). Between 2005 and 2009, one billionaire alone (Julian Robertson) granted more than \$40 million to the Environmental Defense Fund for work on climate change (Nisbet 2011, p. 32). The availability of such funding influences not only issue selection but advocacy tactics as well, pushing groups into the pursuit of market-friendly, technocratic approaches to climate change (Nisbet 2011, p. 32). *Inside Philanthropy* (2013) notes that philanthropic funding for climate change remained steady for the first half of the 2000s and then grew significantly in 2006 and 2007, surging even higher in 2008. These figures illustrate a possible incentive for environmental groups seeking to secure outside financial support to increase attention to climate change. Indeed, the top 25 recipients of US-focused climate change grant monies in 2007 included several well-known environmental groups, including the Environmental Defense Fund, who received seven grants worth \$2.16 million (Foundation Center 2009). Several staffers interviewed for this research mentioned that

foundation support attracts environmental organizations into the climate change arena.

At the same time, there is recognition that prioritizing climate change might entail some organizational costs, most significantly in the area of retaining member support. For some groups, incorporating climate change into an issue portfolio represents a significant change from previous group priorities, and one that might not be welcomed by group members. For example, the National Wildlife Federation is a more traditional wildlife-focused organization, whose members tend to be sportsmen and other outdoor enthusiasts. As a whole, they are not inherently interested in climate change and might even “prefer the group stick to addressing more immediate, tangible impacts on wildlife” (Corey Schott, Telephone interview, 8/24/12). One interviewee explained that climate change “is not the issue that gets people excited, so it’s not being done to get your average person to give money to environmental groups, because it is, if anything, counterproductive to that” (Telephone interview, 8/7/12). Specifically, connecting more traditional issues—wildlife, clean energy, etc.—to climate change is risky because “for the broader public, they are most skeptical about climate and so the intersection with climate makes them more skeptical of everything else [environmentalists do]” (Telephone interview, 8/7/12). In short, “climate is a bigger, heavier object and it drags whatever it draws into it down with it, rather than the opposite” (Telephone interview, 8/7/12).⁹

Within the conservation community especially, addressing climate change brings up potentially difficult policy trade-offs. As one interviewee explained, many individuals within the conservation community built their movement on an

⁸ In 2011, the Blue-Green Alliance merged with the Apollo Alliance, a clean energy-focused coalition that formed after the 9/11 tragedy.

⁹ Greenpeace USA, self-described as the “left flank” of the environmental movement, draws from a different membership base and has not found this to be the case. Kyle Ash reports that “our supporters love hearing about climate” (Telephone interview, 9/10/12).

opposition to development. Now, in the name of mitigating climate change, these same advocates are being asked to support development (of, for example, large-scale renewable energy projects). Accepting this trade-off has not come easily. At times, the prioritization of climate change over other issues has brought forth an outright battle between various members of the environmental movement, as illustrated in a 2009 piece by *The New York Times* that highlighted the conflict over wild land protection and renewable energy development in places like the Mojave Desert (Barringer 2009). Similar clashes have arisen over attempts to deploy hydroelectric dams (Fletcher 2010) and nuclear power (Pralle and Boscarino 2011) as climate-friendly energy sources.

Given these dangers, it might seem curious that environmental advocates have continued to pursue a climate-heavy advocacy agenda. Information gleaned from interviews suggests that this reflects a principled stance about the importance of the issue and the inherent responsibility of green groups to change minds regarding climate change (one interviewee used the word “obligation”). As Corey Schott of the National Wildlife Federation explained, “NWF is pretty strong that this is the biggest threat to wildlife, so we’re going to continue to talk about it and continue to advocate for various pieces of the solution” (Telephone interview, 8/24/12). Another organization in this study takes a similar position, with one employee stating that “Climate is overarchingly the thing we think is the biggest problem” (Telephone interview, 8/7/12). Kyle Ash of Greenpeace USA asserted that all the data shows we are in serious trouble if we do not act on climate change now, “so I don’t see how you just tiptoe around it and talk about extraneous issues” (Telephone interview, 9/10/12). Tellingly, one staffer pointed out that part of what is meant by an environmental campaign is the task of reaching out to the public and convincing them to care about an issue—not waiting until they already do so to address it (Telephone interview, 8/7/12).

Framing climate change in specific ways might increase its power as a policy (and membership) driver. The public has been shown to respond especially strongly to frames that discuss the public health impacts of climate change, such as asthma, infectious disease, and heat stroke—especially when the most vulnerable populations (children and the elderly) are invoked (Nisbet 2009, p. 22). These frames are arguably so effective because they take a potentially abstract risk and make it concrete and personally relevant to the public (Nisbet 2009, p. 22). Several environmental advocates interviewed for this research noted polling data showing how well the health frame resonates with the public. Interestingly, many of these same staffers acknowledged that their own organizations do not rely as heavily on such frames as one might expect because either (1) they are skeptical about the actual effectiveness of such a frame (noting the long causal chain and some doubt about the veracity of such claims) or (2) they favor other

frames (e.g., risks to wildlife) because those messages are more closely tied to the group’s identity and mission.

The dominance of climate change also leaves environmental groups vulnerable to shifting public and governmental concern. When mobilization around climate change is high, it paves the way for policy reform. As one environmental lobbyist in the UK reported, “If we want to talk about climate change, we can get a meeting with the prime minister. If we want to talk about biodiversity, we can’t even get a meeting with the environment secretary” (Black 2009). But where does this leave advocacy groups when “climate change fatigue” sets in? There is evidence that climate change is becoming less salient to the public, even as more Americans acknowledge its threat (see, e.g., Guber and Bosso 2009). As Downs (1972) demonstrated, attention to social issues is episodic, and though issues may reemerge, they rarely maintain a position of permanent prominence on the public and governmental agendas. Global warming has already been through at least one issue attention cycle, rising to “celebrity status” following the unprecedented heat of the summer of 1988, but subsequently declining as the heat waned and other pressing events entered the American scene (Ungar 1992). In his analysis of this cycle, Sheldon Ungar concludes that “The greenhouse effect is not a good candidate for enduring attention in public arenas” (1992, p. 495).

Indeed, we may be witnessing the end of a second cycle of attention to global warming. Although Americans are currently more knowledgeable about climate change than they have ever been, concern and salience may be slipping. We may be in a position of “knowing more, caring less” (Guber and Bosso 2009, p. 55). The percent of Americans “very worried” or “somewhat worried” about global warming has decreased from 63 % in November 2008 to 54 % in March 2012 (Leiserowitz et al. 2012, p. 6). At the same time, 39 % of respondents reported that global warming was either “not too important” or “not at all important” to them personally in March 2012, up from 29 % in November 2008 (Leiserowitz et al. 2012, p. 10).

Moreover, climate change has developed into a politically charged, partisan issue. Throughout the “Golden Age” of the US environmental movement in the 1960s and 1970s, environmentalism evolved as a bipartisan cause with widespread support. This agreement made it possible to enact landmark legislation such as the National Environmental Policy Act, Clean Air and Water Acts, and Endangered Species Act. The consensus eroded in the 1980s with the Reagan presidency, however, and many cite the 1994 Republican Revolution in Congress as the point past which bipartisanship on the issue became impossible (Duffy 2003; Bryner 2008). Research illustrates that, on the issue of climate change, the public is in many ways just as polarized as those in Washington, D.C. Those on the political left are more likely to both believe that global warming is occurring, and to be concerned about it, than are those on the right, and the gap between partisan

groups has been growing in recent years (McCright and Dunlap 2011, p. 166). Addressing climate change thus poses a challenge for advocacy groups in that the scope of the policy response required lies in tension with the likelihood of winning extensive support for any given measure.

Nowhere is this challenge more evident than in the halls of the U.S. Congress. The House-sponsored Waxman-Markey climate bill of 2009¹⁰ pursued a cap-and-trade approach to carbon dioxide reduction in part because many environmentalists assumed that the pollution control scheme's Republican roots would increase its likelihood of passage. Ultimately, the bill passed the House by a vote of 219 to 212, with just eight Republicans voting in favor, and the Senate version of the bill that progressed the farthest—sponsored by Senators John Kerry (D-MA), Joe Lieberman (I-CT), and Lindsay Graham (R-SC)—never came up for a vote. In essence, David Doniger of NRDC contends that climate change was just one more issue involved in a power struggle whose outcome was a decision by conservatives to “oppose everything and vilify everything” associated with the Obama administration (Telephone interview, 8/1/12). More broadly, Doniger observes that “this whole issue area is caught up in a larger narrative between Democrats and Republicans,” a notable change from the pre-1990s era (Telephone interview, 8/1/12).

There is now widespread acknowledgement that the moment for cap-and-trade has, at least in the short term, passed. Language used to describe the political prospects for comprehensive legislation suggests that the policy area is afflicted with a terminal disease: the House is “toxic” to climate issues (Schott, Telephone interview, 8/24/12); the term *cap-and-trade* is “poisonous” (Telephone interview, 8/7/12). There is disagreement over whether a variation on the approach—known as cap-and-dividend—would be more politically palatable. Most environmental advocacy groups have, therefore, focused their energy elsewhere in the climate fight, working on regulations that strengthen auto emissions standards or exploring options for limiting greenhouse gas emissions by using the regulatory authority granted under the Clean Air Act (Nisbet 2011, p. i).¹¹

Conclusion

Observers of the modern US environmental movement are correct that, over the course of the past decade, climate change has been elevated to the top of environmental group agendas.

¹⁰ American Clean Energy Security Act, H.R. 2454.

¹¹ It might also be noted that many groups are dedicating resources to climate change adaptation efforts, particularly on the part of more locally focused organizations. Though this still remains a smaller focus than climate change mitigation for national groups, it may increase in emphasis as climate change legislation gets pushed further into the future, and the reality of climate change already in the pipeline is recognized.

It has effectively been transformed from a single issue into an organizing lens through which all other issues are viewed. As a result, environmental groups have reorganized their advocacy efforts, redirecting resources and personnel into climate change programs, and reframing existing campaigns to highlight the connections between climate change and other ecological concerns. There is no doubt that environmental advocates judge climate change to be the most urgent and consequential threat facing the planet. However, charges that this development means a decreased emphasis on other issues (in some cases going so far as to assert that they have been abandoned) are overwrought and without empirical basis. US environmental groups continue to wage campaigns on a wide variety of issues, both intimately related to climate change (e.g., air pollution, forest conservation, species preservation), and less so (e.g., nuclear waste, genetically modified organisms). We have witnessed changes in the *way* that environmental advocates promote such causes, in that they are often framed under the rubric of climate change and its myriad effects. Nonetheless, these separate issues remain a vital aspect of modern environmental advocacy.

Whether or not the prioritization of climate change and the subsequent reframing of other issues are likely to result in more effective environmental advocacy is another question. Clearly, climate change has achieved a degree of visibility and credibility that it lacked just a decade ago. Climate skeptics are increasingly portrayed as outside the scientific consensus, and public opinion on the issue shows that the American public has taken notice.¹² If environmentalists are serious about having a positive impact on ecological quality, there is no more important, multifaceted issue that they could address. At the same time, the progression of climate change awareness and concern has stalled and, in some quarters, reversed, in recent years. The failure to enact comprehensive climate change legislation in the 2009–2010 congressional session likely means that the odds for passing similar policy are, for the short term, low. In part, this reflects the evolution of climate change within the halls of Congress into a divisive partisan issue. Reframing other environmental issues under the climate change rubric risks also dragging them into the partisan fight. Some environmental groups find themselves facing an additional uphill battle to convince their members that climate change is worthy of all of this attention, when many supporters originally came on board in the name of other concerns, which they may not even realize are linked to climate change. In short, while climate change is undoubtedly powerful as a cause célèbre, it may serve as a mixed blessing for

¹² One impediment to advancing public understanding about the existence and causes of climate change is the journalistic norm of balanced coverage. Research has shown that media outlets frequently portray both sides of the climate change debate as equally valid and supported by experts, which hampers the ability of the public to understand the scientific consensus on the issue (Boykoff and Boykoff 2007).

environmental groups that promote it to the top of their agendas.

This research has focused exclusively on the American environmental advocacy context. Future work might explore these questions in other domestic settings. It would be especially interesting to examine trends in environmental agenda setting and issue advocacy in political systems that have enacted climate change policy. For example, how has environmental advocacy evolved in the European Union and its member states? Do we see similar trends among advocacy organizations there? And how might the risks and rewards of “climate change dominance” differ based upon variations in political and societal conditions?

We might also consider how the emergence of other issues—in particular, the development and subsequent concerns over hydraulic fracturing—has impacted relative attention to climate change. The global focus of climate change might face competition from the more regional, and in some cases extremely local, impacts of hydrofracking on air and water quality and public health. These concerns intersect in interesting ways with the fact that natural gas is a relatively “clean” fuel and has long been preferred by environmentalists to other fossil fuels such as oil and coal. Future research might explore what position hydrofracking has assumed on environmental issue agendas and whether this differs depending on the type and scope of work of a given organization. We might expect, for example, that groups operating at the local and state levels might be more active on the fracking issue than national level groups. In some cases, hydrofracking might even be displacing climate change as a primary issue for locally based organizations. If so, there are potentially important consequences for climate change advocacy.

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