



Original research article

Class capacities and climate politics: Coal and conflict in the United States energy policy-planning network

Ryan Wishart

Department of Cultural and Social Studies, Creighton University, 402.280.1780 | 2500 California Plaza, Omaha, NE, 68178, United States



ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Climate change politics
Coal
Social network analysis
Climate capitalism

ABSTRACT

This article employs a power structure research approach and exploratory network analysis to describe the differing stances on climate action that existed within the United States elite energy policy-planning network during efforts to generate climate legislation in 2009. These divisions are explored in relation to the structural location of the coal industry, other energy sectors, and environmental organizations within the network of director interlocks. My key findings are that coal interests are well integrated into the policy-planning network with major coal producers and reserve holders most connected to ultra-conservative business policy groups and industry associations committed to climate denial while a “coal coalition” of coal-related interests provide linkages to influential moderate conservative groups and industry associations taking a conciliatory stance on climate action. The largest oil and gas firms vary more than the coal industry in their affiliations. In general, policy groups that support climate action are on average significantly less central within the overall EPPN compared to those that do not. I discuss the implications of these findings for understanding the boundaries of United States and global climate policy formation.

1. Introduction

Although the natural scientific community has become increasingly certain and vocal that safely avoiding catastrophic threats from climate change demands major transitions in our energy systems, interdisciplinary groups like the IPCC, the United States Academy of sciences, and energy journals have been slow and partial in incorporating important social science insights into understandings of energy systems [1,2]. The most commonly adopted perspectives from social science employ a methodological individualism from economics or psychology with functionalist assumptions about how social institutions make rational choices that are consensual and adaptive. The American Sociological Association Task Force on Climate Change has warned this results in the dominance of a “post-political” frame that treats the problem of energy transition primarily in technocratic terms and thereby “obscures the institutional and structural roots of climate change, limiting political action in favor of consensual approaches such as individual behavioral change and market-oriented ones like emissions trading” [2].

The emergence of a coalition of business and environmental groups in the United States in 2009 supporting legislation to cap and trade carbon emissions seems like functionalist problem solving within that post-political frame, bringing the United States closer into line with the

pragmatic energy transformation agenda in other developed nations. However, as Stirling warns “the realised forms of ‘transformation’ may be more discursive and superficial than material and substantive. The more radical and challenging the attempted transformation, the greater this propensity to subversion” [3] p.84]. Because of the United States’ status as the top historical emitter of greenhouse gasses, one of the largest still today, and its continued economic and political hegemony in the world system, its failure to adopt climate policies is a major stumbling block for global efforts at an energy transition away from fossil fuels. To understand the lines of cohesion and division among powerful institutions in United States society we must question dominant assumptions about how powerful institutions shape discourse around energy policy in ways that protect incumbent interests [3]. This article analyzes the Energy Policy-Planning Network of industry associations, think tanks, and policy discussion groups most influential in generating and debating policy proposals considered by United States policy makers [4]. It is the Policy-Planning Network that gives the capitalist class the *organizational capacity* to develop class consciousness and engage in class mobilization and exclude counter-hegemonic voices from the policy formation process. But, different class fractions can have diverging interests, opinions, and organizational capacity to exert influence within the network. I describe key organizational capacities of the “coal coalition” within the EPPN and map for the first time how

E-mail address: RyanWishart@creighton.edu.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2018.09.005>

Received 21 March 2018; Received in revised form 21 August 2018; Accepted 7 September 2018
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the basic climate discourse stance of policy-planning organizations corresponds with their director interlocks with the largest United States coal interests, oil and gas firms, and the key environmental and business organizations pushing climate action in 2009.

There is an extensive body of literature dedicated to the analysis of the contradictions inherent in reducing fossil fuel use on a scale necessary to avoid catastrophic climate change within a capitalist economy, making it a radical transformation indeed [5–9]. A major assertion is that the speed of emissions reductions necessary to stabilize the climate is incompatible with the rates of growth and accumulation required for a stable capitalism. But even assuming such an incompatibility exists, the question remains as to whether and how this structural constraint is perceived by elite business and policy makers. The structure of the capitalist response to climate change reflects both the real divisions between capitalists over the extent of threats and opportunities they face from climate regulation and unified opposition to policies where there is agreement they would curtail economic growth in general [5,6,10–12]. Given climate change's projected catastrophically destructive effects, many capitalist state actors are under increasing pressure to offer some kind of action to retain legitimacy and avoid threats to their own institutional interests from its impacts. For example, Carroll has recently described how the interlocking boards of directors between major fossil fuel corporations in Canada and the policy and opinion shaping organization of civil society create the “architecture for ‘soft denial’” that recognizes the carbon threat but offers only superficial responses [13,14]. On the global stage, Sapinski has described efforts by a transnational network of corporate-funded think tanks and policy groups to construct a project of “climate capitalism,” rallying a coalition to protect the currently hegemonic neoliberal order by promising to reconcile growth and emissions reductions through market mechanisms [15,16]. But he warns that even “the rise to hegemonic status of climate capitalism would not be effective to avoid the most catastrophic consequences of climate change” and it is “a form of climate change denial in its own right” because of its imperative to delay cuts beyond what the estimated carbon budget allows and make them contingent on technological breakthroughs [16,17: p.14].

The fossil fuel industry generally, and coal in particular, have a historically prominent position within the United States power structure relative to many other nations [18,19] and have proven unwilling and unable, given the state of available technological fixes, to agree to ecologically consequential emissions reductions. There are many factors that help explain this beyond the structural relationship of cheap energy to growth, including the role of energy and fossil fuels in United States geopolitical dominance [20,21], and contingent historical factors like the abundance and distribution of fuel sources across United States electoral districts [22]. The United States climate change counter-movement has been uniquely effective in promoting climate change denialism, in part due to the alliance between these significant fossil fuel fractions of the capitalist class and the nation's extraordinarily prominent ultra-conservative policy groups [23–25].¹ This is a different response to the legitimation crisis. However, as Bonds has argued: “A full accounting of [US] policy development must also acknowledge that many members of the corporate community have long recognized climate change as reality, and the think tanks they fund and direct have advocated for measures to begin reducing carbon emissions...[but] hardly envisioning the creation of a new economic infrastructure that is no longer dependent upon fossil fuels.” [12: p.314]. There is a tension between the dividing fractional interests of capital in different energy

¹ While United States politics have long been to the right compared with other developed nations, this counter-movement offensive and the increased partisanship around the science increased precisely as the implications of the science for the incompatibility of capitalist growth and necessary emissions reductions became clearer [11].

sectors based on the threats or opportunities presented by climate change and the potentially unifying role of policy planning organizations in the class formation and mobilization processes. A “power-structure research approach... recognizes that while the corporate community is unified on important matters related to the economy and the [United States] class structure, it is also split along certain issues such as climate change” [12: p.306-7]. The coal industry, as the most carbon intensive source of energy, faces the greatest potential threat from climate regulation. The United States has the largest coal reserves in the world and the industry has had an importance in the country's political economy that is relatively unique. The peak of efforts at formulation of climate policy there in 2009 is a valuable case study of the structure of the EPNN and the place of coal interests, other fossil fuels, and the architecture of efforts at a “climate capitalism” within a nation where hard denial has been prominent.

After a review of the power structure research in relation to environmental policy, I then describe the “coal coalition” of linked economic interests across different sectors identified in the literature as supporting the coal industry during policy formation in the past and changes in coalition's key institutions circa 2009. Next, I contextualize corporate dominated climate politics in 2009 (what Sapinski calls “climate capitalism”) as a political capitalism strategy pursued by particular class fractions within the EPPN. I employ exploratory network analysis to describe the place of coal interests, the broader fossil fuel industry, and the United States Climate Action Partnership coalition within the energy policy-planning network and the climate policy stances taken by organizations during the push for cap and trade legislation. In describing this network I am able to offer exploratory analysis of the relationship between industry ties and climate position and show the integration of various fossil fuel associations relative to those of renewable energy associations and environmental groups. Finally, to contextualize claims of business support for climate action, I am able to measure whether organizations that took a stance supporting climate action were more central within the overall network.

2. Environmental politics in the power structure literature

My theoretical approach in this paper draws primarily from Domhoff's conceptualization of the policy planning network and the role of the power elite within it, but I view this framework and its empirical literature within a larger Marxist or neoMarxist political economy of the state that Domhoff does not share. However, at the level of abstraction for this analysis the larger theoretical disagreements between the perspectives do not present a barrier.

“For all intents and purposes, Domhoff shows that Marx's—or better, Gramsci's or Poulantzas's—conception of a dominant class, exhibiting hegemony over economic and social institutions, really exists in the United States, and that this class is a corporate bourgeoisie, cohesive and with clear definitions of who is and is not a member, but at the same time in conflict and disagreement about how best to run the society to protect its particular interests. ... [he] describes a state that represents the interests of the corporate class while at the same time opposes the interests of individual capitals or fractions of the business elite” [26 p.213–14]

Domhoff's concept of the policy-planning network in the United States can be theorized as an example of an ideological state apparatus in the framework of Poulantzas [27,28] where rival power blocs compete for hegemony and intellectual production takes place to ensure capitalist class hegemony in the wider society. The *policy-planning process* of general and long-term class interests is distinguished from the *special-interest process* concerned with narrower and short-term interests of particular corporations, families, or sectors [29]. In environmental politics the former sets the boundaries of what is acceptable in line with general class interests while the latter can involve considerable conflict between particular class fractions or even defeats of particular fractions

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