

Developing a Critical Understanding of Environmental Activism through Active Learning


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ABSTRACT This article presents a short simulation active-learning exercise that can be used in political science undergraduate and postgraduate environmental politics courses to introduce and teach the subject of environmental activism. The exercise, which asks students to role play as determined environmental activists, draws on an analytical framework from Diani and Donati (1999) that provides a typology of nonpartisan political organizations. This “learning through typology” allows students to prioritize critical analysis while engaging with the subject matter in a creative and enjoyable way. The article provides the full process of the exercise, from the grounding in the framework and provision of contextual examples, to the running of the simulation, and finally to the presentation of students’ work and a group debriefing session. This exercise therefore adds to the growing use of simulations and active learning in the increasingly prominent field of environmental politics.

Environmental activism is a powerful contemporary political force. There is a long history of environmental activism, with organizations such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in the United Kingdom and the Sierra Club in the United States in existence since the late 1800s. However, the twenty-first century is experiencing a sharp increase in the prominence of this political practice (de Moor et al. 2021). Major figures such as Greta Thunberg, movements such as Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion, and long-standing household names such as Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace demonstrate that these political actors and movements have significant impact on our relationships with and understanding of politics. As the environmental crisis worsens, their role in society has become increasingly prominent, as well as their variation in methods and approaches to their internal operations and intended external impacts. Whereas environmental activism is a long-standing subject in the study

of environmental politics (for an overview, see Carter 2018, 145–76), the elevation in prominence and the organizational choices made by contemporary activists make these organizations a highly necessary subject for today’s political science student. Moreover, many political science students consider post-graduation employment in nonprofit organizations, making activism a useful subject of study through which they can extract potential employability benefits (Moulton 2023).

However, despite the importance of environmental activism to our contemporary political landscape, there is relatively little in the scholarship of teaching and learning literature that addresses how instructors can best approach the subject in the political science classroom. This article responds to this literature gap by describing a simple but effective short simulation exercise that can be used in environmental politics courses to allow students to develop a critical understanding of the variations among different environmental activist organizations in a way that allows for creative engagement with the subject while also meeting specific learning outcomes. This example simulation draws on samples from the UK context to

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increase student engagement. However, with relatively minor amendments, this exercise can be adapted and transferred to a wide range of different contexts.

Using simulations in political science education can confuse and elude instructors. As Asal and Blake (2006, 16) asserted, “It

matter and to develop useful analyses relative to environmental activist organizations’ methods, resourcing decisions, and possible pathways to successfully limiting environmental harm. Asking students to imagine that they deeply care—to the point of founding an activist organization—about the situation they are given

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can be difficult to know how to structure a simulation environment designed to meet specific educational goals.” By providing a detailed simulation exercise for teaching environmental politics, this article responds to Kammerer, Jr., and Higashi’s (2021) concern that contemporary pedagogy research on the use of simulations in the teaching and learning of political science is dominated by international relations and comparative politics, at the cost of other subdisciplines. The exercise contributes to an emergent interest in the use of simulations to teach the environmental politics subdiscipline. Although there have been significant efforts to share environmental politics teaching practice by other scholars, these largely remain focused on the more international aspects of environmental governance (Andonova and Mendoza-Castro 2008; Conca, Ostovar, and Tekenet 2023), leaving a plethora of areas in the field underexplored.

This article draws on five years of development and application of this exercise during the course of my undergraduate and postgraduate teaching, and it proceeds as follows. First, I introduce the teaching of variations among environmental activist organizations through in-class simulation and describe a useful analytical framework from Diani and Donati (1999) for doing so. Second, I describe an exercise wherein students role play as environmental activists, making method, resourcing, and organizational decisions to stop a given form of environmental damage from occurring. Third, I conclude with observations about the experience of applying this exercise and how to approach the use of simulations in a sensitive and reflexive manner to best reduce anxiety that students may have when they engage with active learning.

TEACHING VARIETIES OF ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM THROUGH SIMULATION

The simulation presented in this article was developed in response to the following specific learning outcomes, which state that teaching should enable students to:

- be able to differentiate among a range of types of environmental activist organizations, based on their methods and resources
- critically assess how and why environmental activist campaigns succeed or fail and what success means for different organizations

These learning outcomes draw on the key theoretical debates and questions that often are core to the study of environmental activism (Carter 2018, 145–76).

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I have observed that the same students can be either fascinated or repelled by the social sciences. The difference often seems to come down to whether students find the material to be relevant and stimulating. The difficulty of the material does not seem to matter nearly as much as its vividness. I have found simulations to be one consistently effective tool for sparking student interest.

The benefit of using active learning was also well detailed by Holtzman (2019, 754), who argued that without such approaches, students can “get stuck making surface-level observations or jumping straight to personal opinions, falling far short of critical thinking.” This can be especially likely to happen with particularly emotional and controversial topics, such as those found in environmental politics (Cotton 2006). Most students in environmental politics courses and modules care deeply about halting environmental destruction in some way, with many involved in environmental activism. However, it would be a mistake to assume a homogeneity of group understandings of the root causes of environmental damage and the best methods to halting that damage. Therefore, providing subject matter without asking students to engage with a suitable critical framework with which they can build a concrete and useful analysis might lead to “knee-jerk” opinions and classroom polarization.

For the exercise proposed in this article, a simple typology of nongovernmental organizations is used as a basis for developing a critical analysis of intergroup differences. Taken from the work of Diani and Donati (1999), the typology highlights two key factors that influence differing environmental activist group dynamics: resourcing and form of action (table 1). Students’ engagement with this typology can be enhanced with examples of environmental activist organizations that fit within the respective categories. UK examples of activist groups for each category are listed in table 1. Although the examples proposed in this article are from the United Kingdom, this exercise is relatively transferable to other contexts (especially within the Global North), with minimal adaptations, by using a different range of locally relevant examples.

This typology leads to the division of environmental activist organizations into the following four distinct categories (Diani and Donati 1999, 16–17):

The Public Interest Lobby. A political organization managed by professional staff, with weak participatory inclinations and emphasis on traditional pressure tactics [e.g., lobbying, policy

Table 1

A Typology of Nonpartisan Political Organizations with Examples

	Forms of Action	
	Conventional Pressure	Disruption
Professional Resources	Public Interest Lobby (<i>Carbon Trust, Sandbag</i>)	Professional Protest Organization (<i>Greenpeace, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals</i>)
Participatory Resources	Participatory Pressure Group (<i>Earth First!, Extinction Rebellion</i>)	Participatory Protest Organization (<i>Friends of the Earth, Sheffield Tree Action Groups</i>)

Source: Diani and Donati 1999, 16.

papers, writing to representatives, and petitions], This comes closest to the conventional interest group.

The Participatory Protest Organization. Emphasis on participatory action and subcultural structures combines with a strong inclination to disruptive protest. This model is closest to the classic idea of the decentralised, grassroots SMO [social movement organization], prepared—and equipped, given its organizational traits—to adopt confrontational strategies [e.g., protest, civil disobedience, sabotage, and violence].

The Professional Protest Organization. This model shares with the public interest lobby the emphasis on professional activism and the mobilisation of financial resources. However, it

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includes confrontational tactics among its tactical options, along with more conventional ones.

The Participatory Pressure Group. Similarly to the participatory protest organization, rank-and-file members and sympathizers are involved in organizational life but the focus is on conventional lobbying techniques rather than protest.

This typology provides a foundation for critical discussions around why different environmental activist groups organize and act in different ways—and how and why they succeed or fail—as they are shaped by their contexts and opportunities. This allows for a critical approach to a subject and minimizes the risk that students “get stuck making surface-level observations or jumping straight to personal opinions” (Holtzman 2019, 754). Now that the analytical framework has been introduced, the next step in the course is the introduction of the simulation exercise.

THE EXERCISE

The simulation exercise divides the class into three groups and provides each group with one of three “situations.” Each situation

ends with a sentence that begins, “You are determined to...”—a wording that was chosen to collectively focus the group on the specific nature of its set goal. The simulation aspect comes with the students role playing as people who are genuinely determined to resolve their given environmental situation. In this role, they need to collaborate with members of their group to establish what they believe is the most suitable form of activist organization for their situation and an accompanying campaign that they can argue will best achieve their goals.

Three different situations are provided for two reasons. The first reason is a practical one. This exercise has been run only in sessions with a maximum group size of 20 students. Class size is important to consider: as Shaw and Switky (2018, 525) stated, classes with fewer than 10 students and more than 50 students can be challenging for running simulations. Having too few students in each group could mean that consensus is formed too easily around a proposed solution. As described in the following discussion, the experience of running this exercise has demonstrated that negotiations and disagreement can be especially instructive with this subject matter.

Second, using three situations means that students do not assume there is necessarily only one example for each of Diani and Donati’s (1999) four identified groups. This allows students to think beyond what they might first imagine is the option that they are “meant” to select. However, the three situations were designed to maximize the likelihood of variation in the type of organizations selected (i.e., contrasting more localized issues with more national issues). The exercise likely would work well with larger groups; however, if class size were to decrease to fewer than 10 students, for example, it would be worthwhile to provide only two cases for the simulation and to use the third case for an all-class discussion during the debriefing session.

The three situations (ranging from the slightly to the very fictional) developed during the past five years are as follows:

- With other countries banning the import of the United Kingdom’s plastic waste, a stockpile has rapidly built up in the country. There are no immediate solutions seemingly available that will result in recycling of the waste. Without any public awareness of this fact, the government has taken radical steps to confront the problem of plastic waste piling up across ports. Ships loaded with the plastic are sailing into the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, where they dump the waste into the sea before returning to the United Kingdom to repeat the process. You are determined to make this practice stop as soon as you can.
- Although the UK government has a legally binding commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050, progress toward that target has begun to slow down. The government no longer appears to be taking the target date seriously and certainly will fail to meet short-term targets in the coming years. Rather than taking these failures seriously, the government maintains that its primary responsibility is to

protect the United Kingdom's struggling economy. You are determined to make the government realize the importance of concerted climate action and to get them back on track toward meeting the 2050 target.

- A multinational fossil-fuel extraction company recently acquired the rights to begin several fracking operations across the United Kingdom.¹ Your town now has a fracking site in development only two miles away, causing great concern about the safety and health of the town's residents and for the local environment. Every day, the once-quiet streets of your town have trucks driving through them to deliver industrial hardware and chemicals to the fracking site, which already is impacting your quality of life and is a constant reminder of the changes that fracking might bring. You are determined to halt the local fracking business in an effort to protect your town and the local environment.

These three situations are clearly focused on the United Kingdom. As noted previously, small changes can be made to the exercise to make it relevant for different political contexts and experiences. For example, the fracking case could be adapted to focus instead on the construction of a new coal or nuclear power plant. The net-zero case could be adapted for a country without such a goal to focus on an alternative legally binding environmental protection commitment. The decision to focus on local examples was made to allow students living and studying in the country to picture the situation rather than asking them to imagine being in a different political context. The focus of using imagination for this exercise was instead to ask the students, who were role playing

- “Are some method and resourcing decisions more likely to have consistent success than others?”
- “What were the challenges in creating a group consensus in the simulation?”

These questions provide the context for a reflective and analytical engagement with the subject that will provide an opportunity to engage with the specific learning outcomes (Wedig 2010). The timing of this exercise also can be adapted to fit within shorter teaching sessions—for example, 60-minute seminars with the role-playing element limited to 20 minutes.

THE EXPERIENCE

During the five academic years that this exercise has been run, my experience has been positive and affirming. Evidenced by strong critical engagement rather than knee-jerk reactions with the subject matter in both class and written assessments, the exercise has proven to be a useful tool for providing an analytical approach to environmental activism. Undergraduate and postgraduate feedback in module evaluation questionnaires also has shown that students enjoy the active-learning exercises in their seminars. Although one might reasonably be concerned about student resistance to engaging with a new exercise (e.g., Usherwood 2024), I have found that students are keen to engage with this activity and enjoy playing their given role as environmental activists determined to halt an environmental harm.

A typical aspect of simulations is the use of negotiations, as in the example of international climate negotiations noted previ-

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as determined environmental activists, to work with their group to establish an environmental activist organization and campaign using the Diani and Donati (1999) framework to guide their discussions on resourcing and action.

Playing their role as determined environmental activists, students then are typically given 30 minutes of the 90-minute seminar to work within their group to determine which type of organization they are forming and the exact details of their intended campaign. During this time segment, table 1 is visible to the students (e.g., projected in the classroom) to help them consider the typology. Students are encouraged to be imaginative with their potential campaign. After those 30 minutes, each group presents its selected type of organization and its campaign. The other groups provide feedback on the suitability of the organization type, the chance of success for the campaign, and other useful details that might be constructive in the group's analysis. Following this, class time should be allocated for an all-class debriefing session about the exercise. Questions to ask students during the debriefing include the following:

- “How does context impact activist method and resourcing decisions?”
- “What does ‘success’ or ‘failure’ look like for environmental activists?”

ously. Although this exercise was planned to be a team-based undertaking, after students had been given an issue that they now cared about, it was interesting to see negotiations and factionalism emerge. Although all group members—at least in the role playing—wanted to resolve their environmental dilemma, they might not have agreed on the best solution to their given situation. In-group negotiations have not always produced a clear consensus on how their environmental activist organization could be resourced and what form of action it should take. During the multiple times of running this exercise, individual groups have split into markedly different proposed organization types—for example, one using traditional “public interest lobby” pressure and another using a more radical “participatory protest organization” approach.

In-simulation group splitting has been effective in teaching students that the same negotiations and group splitting happens, for comparable reasons, in real-life environmental activist organizations. However, given that both parts of the split group remain determined to halt the environmental harm, this allows for discussion of the type of symbiosis that is seen in other political movements split by divergent political methods (Bale 2018). Highlighting the pedagogical benefit of group splitting and diverging opinions in types of organization used by environmental activists is something that instructors should clearly define in the debriefing stage of this exercise. Potential group division is

something that other instructors using this exercise may want to engineer by not grouping together those students who might easily agree on resourcing and tactical decisions for their environmental activist campaign—thus providing a chance to engage with these divisions as a learning opportunity. However, taking such an approach to the simulation may pose a pedagogical challenge and must be treated with care and reflexivity. Whereas active learning has been shown to engage students and to even narrow achievement gaps for first-generation students, it also has been shown to provoke student anxiety (Hood et al. 2020). Therefore, active-learning simulations must be approached with sensitivity. Centering the learning outcomes can be a key part for ensuring that in-class simulations remain a positive learning experience (Shaw and Switky 2018). Cotton (2006) also suggested that instructors should not seek to persuade students of a particular view (i.e., their own) in the course of teaching in order to decrease the potential for controversy. Instructors certainly should stay present and attentive during the simulation to ensure that serious problems do not arise within groups.

CONCLUSION

The exercise described in this article allows for a simple and transferable approach to teaching the subject of environmental activism and activists' dilemmas in terms of selecting methods, resourcing, and organization to political science students. When applied with sensitivity to potential student anxiety, which must be considered during any active-learning exercise, this simulation engages students with active learning in a way that not only deepens their critical understanding of environmental politics but also provides useful thinking in terms of the work they want to do after they graduate. Having applied this approach in the course of undergraduate and postgraduate teaching, my experience has shown that it also provides an enjoyable way for students to meet learning outcomes. They engage with the subject in a way that excites serious and passionate debate while also using an analytical framework that ensures discussions are underpinned by criticality. This exercise therefore adds to the developing scholarship of teaching and learning literature about active learning and simulations in the field of environmental politics. Because of the rate of environmental degradation and the emergence of new and radical forms of politics to meet the challenge of halting that degradation, this important field is even more vital in contemporary political science education.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments on an earlier draft of this article.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

NOTE

1. Fracking, short for hydraulic fracturing, is a method for extracting natural gas and oil from underground rock formations by injecting high-pressure fluid to create fractures and release the trapped resources. Fracking has been linked to environmental degradation and therefore has sparked considerable protest from activist groups.

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