Why Goliath Sometimes Wins
Explaining the Outcomes of Extinction Rebellion

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Abstract

Why do social movements seeking policy change experience significant variations in outcomes across time? While existing scholarship posits a number of answers, fewer studies test explanations against each other. This thesis examines Extinction Rebellion (XR), a new environmental movement organization which has not yet been analyzed by scholars of social movement outcomes. I argue that XR had a significant policy impact early in its lifespan, but has since seen few positive outcomes. I find that XR’s initial success was primarily a product of their novel strategy, whereas their later failures were a result of changes in the political context. While my findings largely fit well within existing theory, they also challenge theoretical expectations which predict that movements facing an unfriendly government will see no gains, and that stronger movements will see greater policy changes – neither of which is entirely true for XR. This research also provides a novel contribution to the literature on movement outcomes by highlighting the importance of innovating novel tactics and arguing that competing explanations for movement outcomes will vary in importance across time. Specifically, I suggest that explanations emphasizing internal, movement-controlled factors will perform better early in a movement’s lifespan, whereas explanations emphasizing external, non-movement-controlled factors will perform better at later points in a movement’s lifespan. Finally, I refine the political mediation model by suggesting a somewhat novel graphical conceptualization of how relevant variables interact to produce policy change, which generates arguments with bearing on existing theory and suggests new avenues for research.
Introduction

Why do social movements seeking policy change experience significant variations in outcomes across time? Existing scholarship has generated a number of possible answers, ranging from factors internal to movements (e.g., movement strength and strategy) to external features of the political context (e.g., public opinion and the partisanship of the existing regime). However, existing work is somewhat limited. Systematic research on the policy outcomes of social movements is still new; until recently, relatively little scholarly attention had been paid to movement outcomes (Amenta et al 2019, 450). Additionally, much of the work on movement outcomes is fractured, with scholars failing to test all available explanations against each other, resulting in a literature that “grows, but does not accumulate” (Kolb, 6). Some scholars have begun to correct this deficiency; this thesis follows in their footsteps.

This thesis examines Extinction Rebellion (XR), an environmental movement organization that emerged in the UK in late 2018 seeking significant changes in the UK’s climate policy. To date, no scholarly research has examined the outcomes of XR’s mobilization from the perspective of social movement theory – academic research to date has been descriptive or sought to explain why participants joined XR (Kenward, 1, Furlong & Vignoles, 20, Saunders et al, 3-4). Only one peer-reviewed article examines XR’s outcomes, but it does not employ social movement theory, nor does it examine or explain XR’s changing impact over time (Gunningham, 10-31). In this thesis, I synthesize existing literature on social movement outcomes to identify four key clusters of variables which scholars expect to explain the policy outcomes of mobilization. I then perform a case study analysis of XR’s campaign in the UK, analyzing each of their four largest protest events (called “Rebellions”), which occurred in April 2019, October 2019, September 2020, and August 2021.

I argue that XR’s April 2019 protest had a significant impact on public policy in the UK, causing new legislation that legally mandated the UK to reach net zero emissions by 2050, among other changes. In contrast, XR only experienced partial success in October 2019 – while it caused notable changes in the
Labour Party’s platform and other minor changes, it did not result in new policy being passed. XR’s protests in September 2020 and August 2021 were even less successful, resulting in the introduction of repressive legislation curtailing the right to protest, but some positive changes outside the policy process.

I find that XR’s early success can largely be explained by factors internal to the movement, especially XR’s strategy (tactics, framing, and organizational structure). In contrast, XR’s failures are best explained by changes in the political context, particularly the shift to the right that accompanied Boris Johnson’s ascension to Prime Minister and the Labour Party’s defeat in the December 2019 election. My work confirms existing theoretical explanations that emphasize the importance of movement strategy and the government’s partisan orientation in explaining movement outcomes. However, it also challenges existing theory – XR succeeded despite an unfriendly partisan government, and later failed despite growing much stronger, both of which confound existing theoretical expectations.

This thesis makes four contributions to the literature on social movement outcomes. First, as noted above, it is a new case study. Understanding this particular case is uniquely important from a moral standpoint. A large body of scientific scholarship demonstrates that climate change poses a massive threat to human well-being over the near and long term (Steffen et al, 8252, IPCC, 1). Given that XR has been one of the largest players in the recent global wave of climate activism (others include the Sunrise Movement and Fridays for the Future/School Strikes), understanding the conditions under which movements have caused changes to climate policy is crucial for those interested in avoiding climate disaster (de Moor et al, 1).

Second, I use the case of XR to both test and develop existing theory. From a bird’s-eye-view, XR is puzzling because it is the same group, operating in the same country, with basically the same tactics, and has experienced different outcomes following each of its major protest events. Explaining why this variation occurred is this paper’s primary task. While much of the existing literature on social movement
outcomes tackles this type of puzzle, early literature typically did not test a wide variety of explanations against each other; often important independent variables were not included in study designs. Recent research has begun to correct this trend; I contribute to this correction by testing the explanatory power of all the independent variables scholars have argued may be relevant. Additionally, the details of XR’s case confound existing theory in two ways. First, XR’s most successful protest occurred against the backdrop of an unfriendly political context, and second, XR’s success declined even as its membership and funding ballooned. Thus, XR is a useful case for both testing and developing existing theory.

Third, my findings generate novel theoretical insights about the factors influencing the outcomes of social movements utilizing disruptive tactics. I argue that the case of XR demonstrates that movements must continually innovate new disruptive tactics to remain one step ahead of the police and retain the attention of the media and public. I also argue that disruptive movements should have greater control over policy outcomes early in their campaigns, whereas later on, external political factors will have greater influence over whether movements win policy changes or not. In other words, my findings present a novel solution to the structure-agency problem by suggesting that certain factors are more or less dominant at different points in time – agency will tend to dominate early in a campaign, while structure will tend to dominate later.

Fourth, I deploy my findings to generate a novel refinement to the political mediation model of movement influence. I justify a graphical causal model of the mechanisms by which movements change policy. While my argument centers political elites, and thereby concurs with the political mediation school’s emphasis on the power of political elites to “mediate” movement influence, I also argue that relevant independent variables interact much more than many scholars assume. I argue that each cluster of independent variables (movement strength, movement strategy, the public, and political elites) interacts with each other cluster, and that understanding these interactions may be the key to gaining a more nuanced and holistic understanding of the factors which influence movement outcomes.
Literature Review

As recently as 2017, scholars of social movements lamented the lack of grassroots social movement activity concerned with climate change, offering suggestions for how organizers might mobilize people to the cause (McAdam 2017, 189). However, in the years since 2017, a large wave of grassroots climate activism has emerged globally, with notable organizations including Fridays for the Future/School Strikes, the Sunrise Movement (in the US), and Extinction Rebellion (XR) in the UK and many other countries (de Moor et al, 1). Because the recent wave of environmental contention is so recent (2018-present), few scholars of social movements have examined these new movement organizations, and existing work mostly seeks to explain why mobilization occurred, or describe salient characteristics (framing, membership demographics, etc) of these new groups. In particular, little to no detailed research has sought to understand fundamental questions about whether mobilization by new environmental groups, to be blunt, has achieved anything. What has worked, what hasn’t, and why?

This thesis attempts to rectify this gap in scholarship by examining the policy outcomes of Extinction Rebellion’s (XR’s) mobilization in the United Kingdom. Specifically, I ask: why has XR experienced variation in outcomes over time? While XR’s early protests won significant policy victories, their more recent actions have seen little positive change (Walker et al, Gayle & Carrington). These inconsistent outcomes are puzzling because XR was operating in the same country, over a relatively short (3 year) period of time, and utilizing a strategy of mass disruption/civil disobedience that, while it evolved over time, has also remained somewhat constant.

However, a growing body of existing scholarship seeks to understand why the outcomes of movement mobilization vary over time. Scholars of social movements have outlined a veritable slew of important independent variables that may explain changes in a movement’s outcomes over time. This literature review synthesizes this body of scholarship into four clusters of variables which are thought to be relevant in explaining movement outcomes: movement strength, movement strategy, the public, and
political elites. Throughout my discussion, I draw out two threads of argument that emerge across many of the variables examined. First, scholars tend to agree on a foundational assumption underpinning causal accounts of how most variables operate: political elites are focused on winning elections, and take actions that they believe will improve their odds at the ballot box. To this end, scholars typically explain the causal mechanism by which a variable operates in terms of how that variable alters the electoral incentives faced by political elites. Second, the primary weakness of existing explanations is that variables are empirically weak. Specifically, many variables, when empirically tested, are found to not matter as much as theory expects them to.

Scholars typically suggest that this is because political change is highly complex and influenced by myriad factors – no single variable (or cluster of variables) can explain the whole range of variation in movement outcomes (Kolb, 12). As one scholar explains, a “broad consensus has emerged that both internal and external factors and their interactions must be considered in explaining movement outcomes” (Kolb, 12). In other words, given the empirical dissensus over many important variables, I argue (with existing scholarship) that we should expect a combination of movement-controlled (internal) and non-movement-controlled (external) factors to explain XR’s variant outcomes. Taking this approach has the potential to solve another puzzle specific to the case of XR – XR’s outcomes defy existing theory. They won significant victories with an unfriendly right-wing government in power, and then had a diminished impact once they grew much stronger. This contradicts existing theory about the importance of movement strength and political elites.

The structure of this literature review is as follows. I begin with a brief overview of how scholars have defined movement outcomes. The remainder of the literature review discusses the variables that existing literature suggests are important in determining the policy outcomes of movement mobilization. I divide these variables into two major categories – movement-controlled variables and non-movement-controlled variables, or internal and external variables. For each major category, I sort
variables identified by scholars into clusters – movement strength and movement strategy for internal variables, and the public and political elites for external variables. For each cluster of variables, I identify the causal logic by which each variable is thought to influence movement outcomes (highlighting the common focus on election-oriented politicians) and highlight weaknesses with each variable (typically, the conflicting empirical record).

**Outcomes Defined**

How do scholars measure the policy outcomes of social movements? Early work measured whether movements won “new advantages,” which referred to whether a movement’s stated policy goals were realized (Amenta et al 2010, 290). However, subsequent research pointed out problems with this approach – a movement’s program may not be realized, but it may still win substantial policy changes for their constituents (Amenta et al 2010, 290). Movements may also do worse than failure – their mobilization may backfire and result in policy changes that run counter to their goals (Amenta et al 2010, 290). As a result, recent work has tended assess movement outcomes by focusing on whether a movement’s mobilization produces collective benefits (e.g., greater social spending, new voting rights) or collective harms (e.g., repression/greater policing) for a movement’s constituency (Amenta et al 2010, 290). For the purposes of this thesis, movement outcomes are “positive” if a movement’s actions result in new collective benefits for a movement’s constituents, and “negative” if mobilization results in no new collective benefits, or collective harms.

**Movement-Controlled Variables**

This section outlines two clusters of movement-controlled variables that scholars expect to influence the degree to which movements can achieve positive outcomes. This section focuses on variables concerning movement strength and strategy. Specifically, the discussion of movement strength
examines movement size and resources, while the discussion of movement strategy examines framing, organizational structure, and tactics. Each of these variables constitute movement-controlled variables insofar as they are internally controlled by movement organizers who recruit members/donors, choose the movement’s tactics and organizational structure, and frame the movement’s message. In other words, movement-controlled variables are internal features of a movement (Kolb, 12). I notably exclude a discussion of the importance of movement goals, which a significant amount of work has examined (Gamson, 42-49, Mirowsky & Ross, 214-215, Steedly & Foley, 196, Amenta, 29, Schumaker, 511, Kolb, 47-48, Giugni 2004, 228, Giugni & Yamasaki, 479, Kolb, 47-48). Because XR’s goals did not change over time, their goals cannot explain the change in outcomes that forms the central puzzle of this thesis (Taylor 2020a, 10-15).

Movement Strength

Why might movement strength influence policy outcomes? Scholars typically understand movement strength as a combination of a movement’s size and access to resources. The foundational assumption of this cluster of variables is that stronger movements will be able to exert greater influence on politics, either through greater mobilization or through greater spending of monetary resources (Kolb, 39). Three similar causal mechanisms may enable stronger movements to win positive policy change more often. First, stronger movements may send a stronger signal of the electorate’s preferences. As one scholar explains, “Gains in committed... [members] would indicate to politicians the degree of intense interest in... [a movement’s chosen issue], as would increases in financial resources generated by the organization” (Amenta, 223). Underlying this claim is the empirically-grounded assumption that politicians in democracies are primarily focused on winning elections (Lohmann, 319-320, Burstein & Linton, 386). Therefore, indication of “intense interest” in an issue (e.g., via collective action by a strong movement) will signal to politicians that they can win votes by pursuing policy
changes that meet a movement’s demands (Lohmann, 319-320, McAdam & Su, 702). Protests with
greater attendance are expected to send a stronger signal of the electorate’s preferences; the larger a
protest, the more likely it accurately represents the majority electoral opinion, so changing policy in
response should theoretically net a politician more votes during the next election (Lohmann, 319-320,
McAdam & Su, 702).

Second, stronger movements have greater capacity to deliver benefits to political elites. Broadly
speaking, existing theory expects that movements will be more influential “when institutional political
actors see a benefit in aiding the group the challenger represents,” and larger, better-resourced
movements will tend to be more capable of delivering electoral benefits to political elites (Amenta et al
2019, 456). For example, some scholars suggest that movements which can help a politician win
reelection, either because they have many members who can be mobilized to vote, or resources such as
money/campaign workers, are expected to be more influential (Burstein & Linton, 386).

Third, stronger movements may be more capable of altering public opinion. Felix Kolb terms this
the “public preference mechanism,” in which strong movement mobilization alters public opinion on an
issue in a movement’s favor or raise the salience of a specific issue relative to other issues on the
agenda, creating an electoral incentive for politicians to change policy to meet a movement’s demands
(Kolb, 76-80, Nulman, 130). This aspect of the public preference mechanism (altering public opinion) is
discussed in greater detail in the section on non-movement-controlled variables.

The weakness of movement strength is that the empirical record is very mixed. There is
disagreement among scholars over how strong the relationship is between various measurements of
movement strength and outcomes – many scholars find that a movement’s strength (measured by
movement size and resources) has little to no relationship to winning positive policy change (Kolb, 39-
40, Gamson, 51-52, Amenta, 225). In the case of movement size, part of the problem might be
measurement. Scholars have operationalized movement size by measuring movement membership per
capita, membership in a single movement organization, the number of organizations participating in a movement, the peak size of protest mobilization, and the number of protest events (Kolb, 39-40, Gamson, 51-52, Amenta, 225, Mirowsky & Ross, 213). Thus, the mixed empirical record may reflect differences in measurement more than anything else. For example, a number of empirical studies find no relationship between the number of members and positive political outcomes, and others often only find a weak relationship (Kolb, 41, Gamson, 50-53). In contrast, literature on the size of protest mobilization (e.g., the number of protest attendees, rather than the number of members in an organization) tends to find a slightly stronger relationship between large protests and positive outcomes (Kolb, 42-43). Yet, counterexamples abound. For example, Edwin Amenta’s study of the Townsend Plan argues that the movement won significant changes to Social Security legislation with minimal protest mobilization in 1934, whereas at peak mobilization and membership in the late 1930s, its actions were ignored (Amenta, 225).

Empirical evidence on the importance of resources is also mixed. Some research confirms that movement organizations with greater resources will achieve more positive policy outcomes (Cress & Snow 1996, 11105, Cress & Snow 2000, 1083, Steedly & Foley, 195-196). However, other empirical evidence suggests that monetary resources are often a poor predictor of movement outcomes (Gamson, 64-65, Ganz, 1003-1006, Amenta, 224-225). For example, Marshall Ganz’s study of farm worker organizing in the 1970s points out that Cesar Chavez’s UFW significantly outperformed the AFL-CIO and won union contracts despite being resource poor, whereas the AFL-CIO’s campaign was extremely well-financed but failed to win a single contract (Ganz, 1003-1006).

In light of the mixed empirical record, many scholars argue that strong mobilization is a necessary but insufficient condition for movement influence; researchers often argue that strong mobilization must coincide with a favorable or neutral political context to achieve significant policy changes (Amenta et al 2019, 456, Kolb, 280 McAdam & Boudet, 120, Giugni 2004, 219-222, Giugni &
Yamasaki, 479-480). In a similar vein, Felix Kolb notes that a possible explanation of the conflicting empirical evidence is that repression often drives increases in mobilization by causing public outrage, so many large movements fail to change policy because their size is merely a product of a hostile political context (Kolb, 280-281).

**Movement Strategy**

The next set of movement-controlled variables I examine concern movement strategy. Specifically, I examine the role of framing, organizational structure, and tactics in explaining movement outcomes. I group these variables under the heading of movement strategy because they represent strategic choices made by movement members/leaders (e.g., should we use disruptive tactics or moderate tactics) about how a movement should be organized and engage in contention. Each movement strategy variable operates via its own causal logic. As a result, this section explains how each variable operates in turn, rather than attempting to offer a general account of how “strategy” contributes to movement outcomes.

How does framing contribute to movement outcomes? Scholars generally argue that movements which deploy frames that resonate with the general public are more likely to experience positive outcomes (Cress & Snow 2000, 1071-1072, McCammon et al, 62, Amenta et al 2010, 296-297). Scholars identify diagnostic framing, which diagnoses a problem and identifies who is to blame, and prognostic framing, which argues for a movement’s preferred solution to the problem, as two key framing tasks that all movements face (Cress & Snow 2000, 1071-1072). Thus, the degree to which the public agrees with and supports a movement’s goals will depend on whether a movement offers coherent and well-articulated prognostic and diagnostic frames, especially those that draw on deep-seated beliefs the public already holds (e.g., the Civil Rights movement’s “equal rights” frame) (Cress & Snow 2000, 1071-1072, McCammon et al, 57, Amenta, 226). This causal logic is linked to the public
preference mechanism outlined above – movements which deploy frames that resonate with popular beliefs will be more likely to mobilize public support behind their cause and/or favorably alter public opinion of their issue, thereby creating electoral incentives for politicians to meet movement demands (McCammon et al, 57, Amenta, 226-227).

However, the framing perspective’s weakness shows in empirical tests. Some studies find that framing plays an important role in explaining movement outcomes, with scholars arguing that movements with resonant framing saw positive outcomes as a result (Cress & Snow 2000, 1072, 1101, McCammon et al, 62). However, the overall evidence linking framing with outcomes is mixed, with some studies finding little or no relationship between resonant framing and positive outcomes (Amenta et al 2010, 296-297, Amenta, 227). Specifically, some movements use the same frames for an entire campaign but experience positive and negative outcomes at different points in time – the outcomes change, but the frames stay the same (Amenta et al 2010, 296-297, Amenta, 227). Additionally, the frames that are effective for mobilizing participants are sometimes not suited for the task of persuading policymakers (Amenta et al 2010, 296-297). Overall, this suggests that framing is at best a partial explanation for movement outcomes – movements do need minimally plausible framing to experience positive outcomes, but framing cannot fully account for variations in outcomes (Amenta et al 2019, 456).

The second variable I examine under the heading of strategy is organizational structure. Scholars typically argue that movements which adopt a formal bureaucratic structure and have centralized leadership are more likely to experience positive outcomes (Gamson 90-95, 99-105, Amenta & Caren, 470, Amenta, 30). The causal logic behind this argument is two-fold. First, scholars argue that formal bureaucracies are important because they are durable structures for aggregating/coordinating resource use, completing key routine tasks, and mobilizing movement participants (Gamson, 90-92, Piven & Cloward, xx). Second, scholars argue that centralized leadership prevents infighting and factionalism,
enabling movements to make fast strategic decisions when necessary (Gamson, 99-105, Amenta, 30). These arguments suggest a somewhat indirect link between organizational structure and movement outcomes. Adopting a centralized bureaucratic form does not directly lead to positive outcomes, but it does maximize the odds that a movement will successfully perform basic essential tasks (e.g., making decisions, mobilizing people) which are necessary to have any chance at winning policy change. Other options, such as leaderless, consensus-based structures, are thought to result in endless meetings when fast decisions are needed (Amenta, 30).

The primary weakness of organizational structure as an explanation is that the empirical record is mixed. Some scholars find statistical links between centralized bureaucracies and positive outcomes, and decentralized informal structures and negative outcomes (Gamson, 90-95, 99-105, Steedly & Foley, 196, Mirowsky & Ross, 210-211, Giugni 1998, 375). However, others find that the effects of bureaucracy and leadership disappear after controlling for a movement’s goals (Goldstone, 222-229). Additionally, some empirical research has found that centralization can have significant downsides; decentralized leadership may “avoid calcification in strategic thinking... centralization will work only to the degree those in charge know what they are doing” (Amenta, 30). One particularly influential argument based on research on the labor movement posits that centralized bureaucracies tend to become too focused on organizational survival, enabling elites to co-opt movements by providing monetary resources to cash-starved organizations in exchange for those organizations ceasing to use disruptive tactics (Piven & Cloward, xxii, Morris & Staggenborg, 172). This perspective argues that disruption is the primary source of a movement’s power, so a reduction in disruption will reduce a movement’s ability to achieve positive outcomes (Piven, 22-26, Piven & Cloward, xxii). Despite these competing arguments, most scholars believe that movements must have some level of formal organization and leadership to serve as a mechanism to mobilize participants and make decisions (Amenta & Caren, 470, Amenta, 30, Nulman, 141-142).
The third strategic variable that scholars have suggested is important in explaining movement outcomes is tactics. Scholars have not reached a general agreement on an expected relationship between particular tactics and positive outcomes (Giugni 1998, 376-378). One group of scholars argues that disruptive and/or violent tactics (e.g., strikes, boycotts, violence against property, and riots) are effective, while another argues the opposite – moderate, insider tactics (e.g., writing letters to Congressional representatives, peaceful marches, lobbying) are more effective than disruption (Giugni 1998, 376-378).

Scholars who believe disruption works argue that disruptive tactics impose a cost on political elites and/or threatens a future cost, incentivizing politicians to bargain with movements, meeting their demands in exchange for the restoration of public order (McAdam & Su, 701, Piven & Cloward, xxi-xxii, 24, Piven, 22-26, Luders 2006, 965-967, Luders 2016, 186-188). Specifically, if a movement’s disruption is more costly than the costs elites would face for making concessions to the movement, elites are expected to make concessions in order to end the disruption (Luders 2016, 188). If the disruption caused by a movement is sufficiently large (e.g., Civil Rights mobilization in Birmingham, or mass strikes during the Great Depression), it can functionally create a “crisis” that forces political action by elites who fear that failure to end the disruption will result in them being voted out of office (Kolb, 73-76, Nulman, 128-129, McAdam & Su, 701, Piven & Cloward, xxi-xxii). This process is termed the “disruption mechanism” – elites desire a return to normalcy and public order for electoral reasons, so if a movement’s disruption is large and long-lasting enough (and can survive repression), elites will make policy concessions to the movement (Kolb, 73-76, Nulman, 128-129). Some scholars have nuanced the literature on disruption by suggesting that movements which innovate new tactics will be more capable of causing renewed disruptions to public order that compel elite concessions (McAdam & Su, 701).

Other scholars argue that moderate tactics are superior. According to this argument, politicians are election-focused and are only expected to respond to movement mobilization if they believe that a
movement represents the majority public opinion (Lohmann, 319-320, McAdam & Su, 702). As a result, politicians will refuse to make concessions to disruptive movements, as they will view a movement’s choice to use disruptive tactics as a sign that a movement is primarily made up of “extremist” participants whose political views are not in line with the majority of the public (McAdam & Su, 702-703, Lohmann, 319). In contrast, moderate tactics will be more likely to draw “activist moderates” as participants, who politicians will respond to with policy change, seeing them as representative of the general public (McAdam & Su, 702-703, Lohmann, 319).

Given the lack of theoretical consensus on how tactics will influence movement outcomes, it is unsurprising that the empirical record is extremely conflicted. A large body of empirical work finds that using disruptive tactics increases the likelihood that a movement will experience positive outcomes (Gamson, 79-84, Mirowsky & Ross, 211-212, Steedly & Foley, 196, Piven & Cloward, xxi-xxii, McAdam & Su, 696, 701, Giugni 1998, 376-378, Cress & Snow 2000, 1096-1098, Luders 2006, 965-967, Luders 2016, 186-188, Amenta et al 2010, 298). However, a roughly equally large body of empirical work finds the exact opposite – disruptive tactics do not increase the likelihood of positive outcomes (they may even backfire), and moderate tactics are more effective (Giugni 1998, 376-378, McAdam & Su, 701, Olzak & Soule, 201). One review highlights an enormous number of studies, many of which studied the same urban riots in the late 1960s, which reached completely contradictory results about the efficacy of disruptive versus moderate tactics (Giugni 1998, 376-378).

What is to be done with the contradictory results concerning tactics? Some scholars suggest that the mixed results on the efficacy of different tactics “may be more apparent than real,” because early studies on the efficacy of disruption (i.e., studies of riots in the 1960s) did not control for the external political context in which a movement operates (Giugni 1998, 379, Kolb, 51). In other words, it could be the case that studies finding that disruption works were studying movements that had a friendly government in power, and studies finding the opposite were studying movements with an unfriendly
government in power (Kolb, 50-51). One recent study in this vein found that mobilizations by homeless people which utilized disruptive tactics were effective only when the movement had elite allies in power – without elite allies, disruption was ineffective (Cress & Snow 2000, 1096-1098). Similarly, some studies of the Civil Rights and Feminist movements have found that the efficacy of disruption varied based on the strength of a movement’s political opposition (Luders 2006, 991-992, Luders 2016, 204-209).

Another line of argument suggests that the distinction between disruptive and moderate tactics should be dropped altogether and replaced with the idea of “assertiveness” (Amenta, 25, Amenta et al 2005, 521-522). Assertive tactics are actions that directly threaten the electoral prospects of the movement’s target (Amenta et al 2019, 456). This includes some “traditional” disruptive tactics (e.g., strikes and boycotts), but also includes sustained efforts to sanction or unseat unfriendly politicians (e.g., endorsing opponents of hostile incumbents, primary challenges, etc) (Amenta et al 2005, 521-522, Amenta et al 2019, 456). Assertive tactics are thought to be effective because politicians are election-focused, so if a movement’s tactics directly threaten the electoral prospects of a politician, that politician is more likely to cave to the movement’s demands (Amenta, 26-28). This may resolve the competing claims about the efficacy of disruption and moderation by revealing that certain “moderate” tactics are highly threatening (e.g., a credible primary challenge), whereas certain “disruptive challenges” are not electorally threatening (e.g., a sit-in at a representative’s office) (Amenta et al 2005, 521). Thus, contested results about the efficacy of disruption or moderation may in fact reflect differences in the tactics being studied – studies finding disruption or moderation are ineffective may be studying the non-assertive forms of disruption/moderation, and vice versa.

In summary, internal, movement-controlled variables are somewhat confusing, on face. With the exception of tactics, there is broad theoretical agreement over how internal variables ought to influence policy outcomes. Movements must be sufficiently strong in members and money, though strength is necessary but insufficient for successful action (Kolb, 280, Amenta et al 2019, 456). Scholars
also agree that movements need sufficiently plausible framing and an organizational structure that enables them to make decisions and mobilize people (Amenta et al 2019, 456, Amenta & Caren, 470).

Yet, despite theoretical agreement, the empirical record for all the movement-controlled variables is considerably more complex than theory predicts. Sometimes, even strong, well-organized movements with convincing framing are unable to achieve positive outcomes. This may primarily reflect a methodological weakness in the field; because there is no standard way of operationalizing certain variables (e.g., movement size), conflicting results may be primarily a product of the method of measurement (Kolb, 6-7). However, the mixed empirical record may also be a result of early work in the field omitting measures of public opinion and the external political context (Burstein & Linton, 395-396).

By including measurements of key external, non-movement controlled variables, some scholars argue that it may be possible to finally reach agreement over how much certain variables matter (McAdam & Boudet, 2, Amenta et al 2019, 455).

Non-Movement-Controlled Variables

This section examines the role of non-movement-controlled variables in explaining movement outcomes. Scholars researching the variables discussed in this section tend to share the assumption that the political context a movement operates in plays a significant role in determining the outcomes a movement obtains (Amenta et al 2010, 298). I group non-movement-controlled variables into two clusters: the public and political elites. For the public, I discuss public opinion and the media. For political elites, I discuss the partisanship of the current government and the state’s use of repression. These variables are non-movement-controlled in the sense that they are external to the movement; movements may influence non-movement-controlled variables, but they do not have control over this class of variables in the same way that they control their tactics, framing choices, etc.
In this section, I exclude a number of non-movement-controlled variables which are not relevant to my research on XR. Specifically, I omit discussion of the structure of the political system (e.g., two-party versus multi-party democracies), the enduring set of elite alignments (e.g., Democrats and the labor movement), the presence of electoral instability and/or national crises (e.g., World War II), and the presence of countermobilization, all of which are noted variables in the movement outcomes literature (Kolb, 54, 58-59, 62-64, Amenta et al 2019, 455, Amenta et al 2010, 298, McAdam 1996, 27-28, Piven & Cloward, xxii, Gamson, 112-119, Goldstone, 232-245, Bob, 5-8). The structure of the political system, enduring elite alignments, and electoral instability are all variables that seldom change, and did not change in the U.K. during the time period this thesis analyzes, making them irrelevant to my research (Amenta et al 2019, 455). I also found no evidence of notable grassroots countermobilization against XR in my research, making it irrelevant to this thesis. Although research on national crises is somewhat more relevant given the emergence of COVID-19 during the time period analyzed by this thesis, existing literature on national crises examines wars and recessions, not pandemics (Gamson, 112-119, Goldstone, 232-245). While COVID-19 did have significant economic consequences, I argue it is analytically distinct from literature on recessions, particularly because the primary effect of COVID-19 has been to restrict gatherings in public space due to social distancing requirements, making it much more difficult for XR to engage in mass mobilization (Taylor 2020b, 1-3).

The Public

The first cluster of non-movement-controlled variables I discuss is the public. These variables seek to capture how public support or opposition to a movement and its goals affects the movement’s ability to achieve positive outcomes. Specifically, I examine public opinion and the media. Because the causal mechanisms underlying each variable are distinct, this section discusses each variable in turn instead of grouping the causal explanation together.
Public opinion is almost unanimously thought to be an important variable which influences movement outcomes (Kolb, 59, Giugni 2004, 123, Burstein, 4, Burststein & Linton, 384-385). Oddly, much of the early research on movement outcomes neglected to control for public opinion, though recent scholarship has begun to correct the trend (Burstein & Linton, 395-396, Kolb, 61). Two causal mechanisms underpin existing work on public opinion. The first sees public opinion as a constraint/enabling factor of movement influence, whereas the second sees public opinion as a mechanism by which movements achieve positive outcomes. Scholars who view public opinion as a constraint/enabling factor of movement influence argue that politicians are (re)election-focused and will therefore adopt policies that are in line with majority public opinion (Burstein, 4, Kolb, 59, Burststein & Linton, 385-386). Thus, if a movement’s demands are not in line with public opinion, the movement will not see positive outcomes, as it would be electorally irrational for a politician to adopt a policy position that only a minority supports (Burstein, 4, Kolb, 59, Lohmann, 319-320, McAdam & Su, 702-703). Here, public opinion acts as a constraint. In contrast, if a movement’s demands are in line with majority public opinion, scholars expect that politicians will see a potential electoral benefit to meeting a movement’s demands and act to realize the movement’s goals (Kolb, 59-61). Here, public opinion facilitates/enables movement influence.

A “strong” version of this argument predicts that the impact of movements will disappear if public opinion is accounted for – if politicians change policy to meet movement demands only when public opinion is on a movement’s side, then public opinion is the primary driver of policy change, and movements are basically irrelevant (Burstein & Linton, 385-386). However, some scholars have argued against the “strong” version of the argument (Amenta et al 2005, 532). They posit that public opinion will help or harm movements to different extents, depending on whether public opinion on a movement’s issue is favorable or unfavorable, and whether that issue is high or low salience (e.g., whether or not voters rate it as extremely important/the most important policy issue in polls) (Kolb, 61,
Skocpol, 117-118, Amenta et al 2005, 530, 532). If a movement’s issue is high salience, politicians are expected to legislate in line with public opinion; the chances that voters will punish them for deviating from majority public opinion are much higher if an issue is high salience (Kolb, 61, Luders 2016, 188-189). If an issue is high salience and the movement’s position is the majority position, scholars expect mobilization to produce positive outcomes (Kolb, 61). If a movement’s issue is low salience, scholars expect that movements will be less affected by public opinion and may achieve positive outcomes with sufficiently strong mobilization, even if the public opposes their position (Kolb, 61, Luders 2016, 204-209, Skocpol, 117-118). This is because politicians may calculate that they can capture movement voters by changing policy, while the low salience of an issue will enable them to avoid electoral punishment by the general public for taking a minority position (Kolb, 60-61, Skocpol, 117-118, Amenta et al 2005, 530).

The second causal account of public opinion sees it as a variable which movements can exert partial influence over – public opinion is a mechanism of movement influence (Kolb, 76-77, Giugni 2004, 124-125). This is what Kolb refers to as the public preference mechanism, in which “If movements can raise the salience of an issue and bring public opinion onto their side, then policymakers may support that issue in order to gain favor with their constituency... a movement’s ability to influence policy occurs indirectly via the public” (Nulman, 130, Kolb, 76-77). This logic suggests that mobilization is influential insofar as it brings an issue to the public’s attention (raising salience) and may alter public opinion to be more favorable (McAdam & Su, 703, Kolb, 76-78, Giugni 2004, 124-125). Some scholars suggest that raising an issue’s salience via mobilization may be sufficient on its own to trigger policy change, even if public opinion does not become more favorable (Burstein, 15-16). For example, Paul Burstein’s work on the civil rights movement argues that major legislative victories were won not because public opinion was altered by protest, but because protest raised the salience of the civil rights issue and a majority already supported the movement’s goals (Burstein, 16, Giugni 2004, 123).
Public opinion has two weaknesses as an explanation. First, scholars disagree over the degree to which public opinion matters when an issue is low salience – the “strong” view outlined above expects politicians to always follow public opinion, while others argue that public opinion is mostly irrelevant if an issue is low salience (Burstein & Linton, 385, Amenta et al 2005, 532). In other words, while most scholars agree that public opinion matters, they are unclear (and disagree) over how much it matters. One argument posits that public opinion’s impact on policy has varied over time – sometimes it matters, and other times, it doesn’t (Amenta et al 2005, 532).

Second, some research (including one recent very large-N study) has produced results which suggest that public opinion has little influence policy or does not constrain movement outcomes (Gilens & Page, 564, Giugni 2004, 205-208, McAdam & Su, 715). Scholars have also found evidence that movement mobilization can achieve positive outcomes despite unfavorable public opinion when an issue is low salience, which somewhat challenges theoretical expectations (Kolb, 287, Luders 2016, 204-209). For example, Theda Skocpol argues that Tea Party mobilization played a key role in torpedoing cap-and-trade legislation in the U.S. – even though a majority of the public supported the legislation, the issue was low salience for the general public, so the threat of Tea Party primary challenges to Republicans who supported the legislation was sufficient to cause Republican senators to oppose the bill (Skocpol, 56, 90-91, 117-118).

However, this second weakness is somewhat overstated. The vast majority of work in the field has found support for the “constraint” view of public opinion, in which favorable public opinion helps a movement, while unfavorable public opinion reduces the chances of positive outcomes (Amenta et al 2005, 530, 532, McAdam & Su, 715, Kolb, 236, 286-287, Luders 2016, 204-209). Scholars have also identified numerous instances where movement mobilization altered public opinion, which subsequently resulted in positive outcomes – the public preference mechanism in action (Kolb, 236, 286-287, Burstein, 15-16, McAdam & Su, 703, Luders 2016, 204-209, Nulman, 138).
The second variable I examine is media coverage. While media coverage is movement-influenced, it is not movement-controlled; coverage varies across movements due external factors such as news routines (e.g., is there a reporter whose beat is covering a movement’s issue area) and news values (i.e., does a movement’s framing align with the values of reporters) (Andrews & Caren, 841-844). Media coverage is thought to matter for explaining movement outcomes in two ways. First, higher media coverage is hypothesized to increase movement strength by enabling a movement to recruit from a wider audience, especially if the coverage is favorable to the movement (Kolb, 62-63). Second, media coverage is thought to mediate a movement’s impact on public opinion – more coverage, and more favorable coverage, are expected to serve as a mechanism by which mobilization influences public opinion (Kolb, 62-63, Andrews & Caren, 841, Gaby & Caren, 413). The media reports on a protest and public exposure to that media coverage is what alters public opinion of a movement (Bugden, 1-2).

This seems to suggest that media coverage does not exert independent influence on movement outcomes, but rather shapes other afore-mentioned variables (e.g., movement strength and public opinion). This may explain why the role of media coverage in influencing movement outcomes is relatively understudied – many scholars assume that the impact of media coverage is functionally accounted for by examining public opinion (Kolb, 63-64). This may be misguided, insofar as it black-boxes the question of precisely how movements influence public opinion. Scholars who examine changes in public opinion following mobilization effectively skip examining the steps between mobilization and public opinion changing, and are therefore unable to provide a rich causal account of how media coverage matters for movement outcomes.

The primary weakness of media as a variable is that it is understudied and undertheorized. Empirical research examining the link between media and movement outcomes is sparse (Kolb, 62). The limited existing literature provides some evidence that the level and favorability of media coverage received by a movement has an effect on policy outcomes (Kolb, 62-63). However, there is still little
theoretical understanding of the degree to which the level or favorability of coverage matter. For example, it’s unclear if all press is good press, or whether high levels of unfavorable coverage are counterproductive. Some scholars have examined the factors which determine how much coverage a movement receives, or how mobilization combined with media coverage may cause a “discursive shift” (i.e., a durable alteration to public opinion) (Andrews & Caren, 841, Gaby & Caren, 413-414). Some lab research tests how people react to different ways of reporting on mobilization, seeking to understand how mobilization’s influence on public opinion is mediated by the type of coverage it receives (Bugden, 1-2). Overall though, we simply lack sufficient research to know whether and to what extent the media coverage received by movements is important.

Political Elites

The second cluster of non-movement-controlled variables I examine concerns political elites. These variables seek to capture the views and tactics of political elites – specifically, the degree to which political elites are friends or foes of a movement, and whether elites repress movement mobilization. This section combines elite allies, elite divisions, elite conflict, and partisanship into one variable (partisanship), as all four of these variables measure the same thing (McAdam 1996, 26-27, Kolb, 56-57). The presence of a divided elite, elite conflict, elite allies, and a friendly government in power (i.e., friendly partisanship) are all hypothesized to increase the chances of positive outcomes for movements through the same causal mechanism and are operationalized almost identically in empirical research (Amenta et al 2019, 455, Giugni 2004, 121-122, 220-222, Kolb, 56-57). For example, Marco Giugni’s study of the anti-nuclear, peace, and ecology movements operationalizes “elite allies” by measuring the power of social-democratic parties in the legislature – in other words, a measurement of partisanship (Giugni 2004, 220-222). While repression often coincides with hostile partisan governments, there is no intrinsic reason that hostile governments must respond to a movement with repression, so I treat
repression as a separate variable. Because the causal mechanisms linking partisanship and repression with movement outcomes are different, I discuss each variable in turn.

How does partisanship influence movement outcomes? Having a friendly government in power is thought to make it easier for movements to influence policy (Amenta et al 2019, 455, Kolb, 56-57). Politicians are reelection-focused, and theory expects friendly partisans to believe they’ll benefit electorally from pursuing a movement’s desired policy change; even limited mobilization should be sufficient to demonstrate that a movement’s constituents are an important part of a government’s winning electoral coalition (Amenta et al 2005, 521, Amenta et al 2019, 455, Kolb, 57, Giugni 2004, 121-122). Additionally, this line of research suggests that “windows for reform” often open when partisan circumstances change abruptly (e.g., after a landslide election victory), which can make movements’ policy goals suddenly achievable (Kolb, 64-65, Nulman, 139).

In contrast, a movement operating in a hostile partisan environment is expected to have much more trouble achieving positive outcomes, as the government in power is unlikely to view meeting a movement’s demands as electorally beneficial (Amenta et al 2019, 456, Luders 2016, 188-189, Cress & Snow 2000, 1096-1098). Additionally, unfavorable partisans are often hostile to a movement’s goals because of long-standing ideological preferences – for example, the U.S. Republican Party’s opposition to higher social spending made it oppose the Townsend Plan movement, which sought old-age pensions during the 1930s (Amenta et al 2005, 521). Under hostile partisan conditions, only movements which adopt highly assertive strategies are expected to succeed – if movements can convince unfriendly governments that they possess the capability to electorally punish politicians who don’t meet movement demands, even elites who oppose a movement may decide that making concessions is the best strategy for winning reelection (Amenta, 25-26).

The weakness of partisanship as an explanation is two-fold. First, some movement organizations outperform others despite facing identical partisan conditions and working on the same issue, in the
same place, at the same point in time (Ganz, 1004-1005). This means that partisanship cannot fully
explain the range of variation in movement outcomes (Ganz, 1004). Second, empirical findings are not
entirely consistent; some studies (especially cross-national ones) find a weak or non-existent
relationship between partisanship and movement outcomes (Kolb, 57-58). That said, the overall record
is more consistent than most other variables. Numerous studies of local mobilization find that
movements with elite allies on city councils are more likely to achieve positive outcomes (Schumaker,
509-511, Cress & Snow 2000, 1096-1098, McAdam & Boudet, 120, Amenta et al 2019, 457, Jenkins &
Perrow, 287-288). Studies of movements at the national level often reach the same conclusion –
favorable partisan conditions increase the likelihood of positive outcomes for a movement, whereas
unfavorable conditions do the opposite (Giugni 2004, 220-222, Giugni & Yamasaki, 479-480, Kolb, 56,
280-287, Amenta et al 2005, 527-529). Another body of literature identifies specific partisan shifts that
opened windows for reform for particular movements – for example, Lyndon B. Johnson’s landslide
election victory after JFK’s assassination significantly helped the Civil Rights Movement (Kolb, 288-289,
Nulman, 140-141). Overall, among studies which find movements have some impact on policy,
partisanship is the most frequently cited external factor mediating movement influence (Amenta et al
2010, 299).

The second variable concerning political elites is the state’s use of repression. Just as with
tactics, scholars frequently reach directly opposite conclusions about the effect of repression on
movement outcomes. Some scholars argue that repression makes mobilization more difficult and raises
the cost of participation in a movement (McAdam 1996, 28). Repression may take the form of police
violence against protestors, which creates a clear incentive against participating in a movement
(Gamson, 79-86, McAdam & Su, 702-703). Repression may also involve arresting movement
members/leaders, which may remove important figures from a movement and discourage further
participation (Gamson, 79-86). In other words, repression is thought to reduce movement strength, and more generally be a sign that a state is closed to movement influence (McAdam 1996, 27-28).

On the other hand, some scholars argue that repression often increases a movement’s prospects for success. This line of argument suggests that repression helps movements by “offending a community’s moral values, increasing solidarity... intensifying the commitment of core activists... [and] mobiliz[ing] normally passive members of the population (Schneider, 481-482). Repression (especially visible police violence) may engender public sympathy for a movement and drive more people into a movement’s ranks (Schneider, 481, McAdam & Su, 702-703). In other words, repression is hypothesized to improve a movement’s chances of achieving positive outcomes because it (somewhat paradoxically) increases movement strength. Additionally, some scholars suggest that police violence against protestors will alter public opinion in a movement’s favor, creating an electoral incentive for politicians to side with a movement, assuming a majority of the public supports the movement (McAdam & Su, 702-703).

The key weakness of repression as an explanation for movement outcomes is that empirical results are very mixed. Some scholars find that repression reduces movements’ prospects for positive outcomes (Gamson, 79-86, McAdam 1996, 27-28, Kolb 280-281, O’Brien & Deng, 457-458, McAdam & Su, 712-713). Other scholars find the opposite, suggesting that repression benefited the movements being studied (Kolb, 280-281, O’Brien & Deng, 457-458, McAdam & Su, 712-713, Schneider, 480-481). O’Brien and Deng, citing dozens of articles, explain that “Students of contentious politics have long examined the ‘dissent–repression nexus’, but their findings are all over the map. Some show that police suppression dampens protest, while others argue it inspires dissent. Still others observe a more complicated pattern, with repression leading to more or less protest, depending on circumstances and timing” (O’Brien & Deng, 457-458). Scholars agree that the use of repression is often a turning point, but are unable to agree on how repression will typically affect a movement’s campaign (O’Brien & Deng,
One example of the “more complicated pattern” is Kolb’s study of the anti-nuclear movement, which argues that repression initially increased mobilization, but subsequent, more severe repression squashed the large mobilization which resulted from the initial round of repression (Kolb, 280-281). This inverted-U relationship between repression and mobilization may explain why literature on movement strength doesn’t consistently find that larger movements are more successful (Kolb, 280-281, O’Brien & Deng, 458).

In summary, the literature on external, non-movement-controlled variables generally agrees on core theoretical points. Friendly governments, media, and public opinion will facilitate greater movement influence on public policy. Additionally, the empirical record for external variables is somewhat more consistent than the empirical record for movement-controlled variables – most research confirms the theoretical predictions made for each variable (especially partisanship and public opinion). Despite this strength, an important weakness is the theoretical ambiguity over the degree to which certain external variables are expected affect policy outcomes (e.g., how much public opinion will matter for low salience issues). Additionally, the presence of mixed results (especially for repression) is a core weakness, just as it is for internal variables. The political context is an imperfect predictor of movement outcomes – some movements manage to achieve positive policy changes in closed political contexts (Chenoweth & Stephan, chapter 2).

Conclusion

This literature review of the policy outcomes of social movement mobilization has outlined relevant independent variables that I examine in my research of XR. I began by outlining what constitutes positive movement outcomes, arguing that a positive outcome is one in which a movement’s constituents receive some new collective benefits. Recognizing that the literature has converged on the consensus that both movement-controlled and non-movement-controlled variables matter, I examined
the variables within each category that scholars have argued are important. Specifically, I outlined four clusters of variables: movement strength (size and resources), movement strategy (framing, structure, and tactics), the public (media coverage and public opinion), and political elites (partisanship and repression). Throughout, I outlined the causal mechanisms by which each variable is hypothesized to function, noting the common thread tying most explanations together. This core idea is that politicians are election-focused, and movements therefore achieve positive outcomes when their actions result in elected officials believing that meeting movement demands will be electorally beneficial.

While early reviews of the movement outcomes literature noted that the field was relatively underdeveloped, recent reviews have pointed out that this is no longer the case, given the wealth of research on movement outcomes done in the last twenty years (Giugni 1998, 371, Amenta et al 2019, 450). The remarkable strength of this literature is that the development of the field has not produced much theoretical disunity or conflict – with the exception of tactics and repression, scholars largely have remained in agreement over the importance of certain variables and the causal logics by which they function. Whereas scholars in the 20th century often debated whether movement-controlled or non-movement-controlled variables were more important for explaining outcomes, in the 21st century, there has been a general agreement that both matter (Kolb, 12, Schumaker, 511, Chenoweth & Stephan, chapter 3).

However, the primary weakness of this literature is that empirical results are mixed, with different scholars finding that certain variables are or are not significant. Because much of the research on movement outcomes utilizes a case study methodology, scholars typically do not take results that go against the theoretical consensus as generalizable conclusions, which partially explains the relative lack of major theoretical disagreements (Kolb, 6-7). An additional weakness of the field writ large is that scholars often operationalize the same variables differently (or fail to include certain variables entirely), which reduces comparability across studies and makes it difficult to reach generalizable conclusions.
(Kolb, 7-9). Thus, inconsistent empirical results may be a product of scholars using different measurements of the same variable, rather than a sign that a particular variable has no explanatory power.

In light of this weakness, more efforts must be made to study the relative importance of the various factors influencing movement outcomes without omitting any of the relevant variables. Recent work has typically included measurements of movement strength, strategy, elites, and public opinion, even if scholars operationalize each variable differently (Amenta et al 2019, 454-457). My thesis adds to this small but growing literature by examining the importance of all the variables listed in this literature review concurrently. The hope in doing this is that detailed analysis may be able to reveal an indication of which variables are most important in explaining movement outcomes. Additionally, by limiting the scope of my analysis to a single, in-depth case study of one movement organization (XR) over a relatively short time period, I aim to both test existing theory and generate novel theoretical contributions via a thorough examination of the case of XR.
Hypotheses

The division in existing literature between using internal (movement-controlled) and external (non-movement-controlled) variables to explain movement outcomes naturally produces two hypotheses. They are as follows:

H1: Variation in the policy outcomes of social movement mobilization can be explained by factors that are movement-controlled.

H2: Variation in the policy outcomes of social movement mobilization can be explained by factors that are not movement-controlled.

However, because scholars tend to agree that movement outcomes are best explained by a combination of internal and external factors, a third hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Variation in the policy outcomes of social movement mobilization can be explained by some combination of both movement-controlled and non-movement-controlled factors.

H3 is overly broad – as long as both movements and the external political context exercise some influence, H3 will be validated, making it a poor test of existing theory. Thus, I propose four sub-hypotheses which map onto the four clusters of variables identified in the literature review:

H3a: Variation in the policy outcomes of social movement mobilization can be explained by changes in movement strength.

H3b: Variation in the policy outcomes of social movement mobilization can be explained by changes in movement strategy.
H3c: Variation in the policy outcomes of social movement mobilization can be explained by changes in the public.

H3d: Variation in the policy outcomes of social movement mobilization can be explained by changes among political elites.

H3a tests the explanatory power of protest participation and resources, H3b tests the explanatory power of framing, tactics, and organizational structure, H3c tests the explanatory power of public opinion and media coverage, and H3d tests the explanatory power of the government’s partisanship and use of repression. Note that it is possible for H3 to be confirmed, even if two of H3a-d are disconfirmed. For example, if H3a and H3d are confirmed, H3 is confirmed, even if H3b and H3c are disconfirmed. However, it is also possible that the confirmation of some combination of H3a-d results in H1 or H2 being confirmed, while H3 is disconfirmed. For example, if H3a and H3b are confirmed, but H3c and H3d are disconfirmed, H1 is confirmed, and H3 is disconfirmed.

Based on the literature review, I expect H3 to be confirmed, and H1 and H2 to be disconfirmed. Most scholars agree that both internal and external factors influence movement outcomes, though they disagree over precisely which factors (strength, strategy, the public, political elites) matter most. Thus, while I expect to confirm H3, I enter my case study without a particular prediction of how H3a, H3b, H3c, and H3d will fare.
Research Design & Methodology

This thesis utilizes the comparative method to engage in a hypothesis testing project, aiming to examine different explanations for movement outcomes produced by existing literature on social movements (Landman, 6-9, 34). Specifically, I examine to what extent existing theory holds up in the case of XR, given the puzzles outlined in the introduction: why has XR experienced different outcomes over time, why did they succeed when faced with a conservative government, and why did they not succeed after growing substantially in membership? Each of these questions poses somewhat of a challenge to existing theory on social movement outcomes, so conducting a single-country study to hypothesis test existing theory is appropriate (Landman, 34, Eyadat, 65). Additionally, if existing theory fails to adequately explain the case of XR, the level of detail provided by a single-country study can double as a plausibility probe for a novel theoretical idea (Landman, 35). When making my argument, I use process tracing, a research method for constructing convincing causal inferences from qualitative data (Collier, 823).

This paper’s research design follows a “method of difference” approach, in which a case is selected with variation in the dependent variable, and as many independent variables kept constant across all observations as possible (Eyadat, 64-65). In this paper, the dependent variable is the outcome(s) of XR’s major protest events, which varies over time. XR’s April 2019 protest produced significant policy changes, whereas its subsequent protests in October 2019, September 2020, and August 2021 did not. Moreover, there are some partial successes among the failures: October 2019 produces significant changes in the platform of the Labour Party but no policy changes, September 2020 is followed by a bill to criminalize XR’s tactics, and August 2021 produces changes in the business community, but no changes at the governmental level.

In keeping with the method of difference, the independent variables are held as constant as is reasonably possible, ensuring observations can be plausibly compared (Eyadat, 64). The country is held
constant across time – I do not examine XR outside the UK. The movement group is held constant – I only study XR, which ensures the movement’s goals are held (mostly) constant over time. Moreover, by studying a relatively short window of time (2019-2021), I ensure that observations within this window can be plausibly compared (rather than comparing environmentalist mobilization in the 1990s to today). Additionally, the location of each observation (London) is held constant, which ensures geography is not a confounding variable (ie, protests outside the capital may have less policy impact than those in the capital). Finally, the observations are also held constant – each observation (April 2019, October 2019, September 2020, and August 2021) represents one of XR’s “Rebellions,” a recurring major protest in which most members converge on London for two weeks of mass civil disobedience with the purpose of compelling policy change. XR has staged other protests from 2018-2021 involving different tactics, locations, and (typically lower) levels of mobilization; focusing only on Rebellions ensures that I can isolate the effect of the independent variables which are of interest.

While conducting a single-country comparative study of XR meets the criteria for a method of difference analysis, I do study a significant number of independent variables. Specifically, I examine levels of protest mobilization, XR’s level of funding, XR’s organizational structure, XR’s tactics (which change, but only slightly over time), the partisanship of government, the government’s use of repression, public opinion of XR and climate change, and the quantity and favorability of media coverage. Given the relative lack of scholarly research on XR, I operationalize most of these variables qualitatively through extensive analysis of existing news articles, op-eds, and other public information on XR and UK politics. Most of my evidence is sourced from journalists and related sources (e.g., press releases by the government, quoted sources in news articles, etc). However, I operationalize public opinion and media coverage quantitatively, given that there are numerical measurements for these variables.
The plethora of independent variables I analyze poses an obvious problem. Given that I only have four observations, how is it possible to know which independent variables are causing changes in the dependent variable? Two solutions are utilized. First, sorting the independent variables into clusters (movement strength, movement strategy, elites, and the public) somewhat alleviates the problem. If three clusters remain constant between two observations, or change ambiguously (i.e., protest mobilization goes up while funding goes down, meaning change in movement strength is unclear), then a single cluster changing decisively can plausibly be attributed as being the primary cause of a change in the dependent variable. Second, careful analysis of the qualitative evidence makes it possible to distinguish which variable is causing which outcomes. Journalists, party insiders, and public opinion researchers do not simply report what events occurred; they often attribute specific changes to the external political context to specific actions/changes made by XR. While it may be the case that changes in certain independent variables coincide with changes in the dependent variable, if no observers posit a causal connection, I assume that the existence of one is unlikely (unless significant evidence suggests otherwise).

Proving a causal relationship between and independent and dependent variable is challenging for an additional reason though, as it is challenging (if not impossible) due to omitted variable bias. It may be the case that my independent variables are not causing changes in the dependent variable, but rather, some alternate cause is, a problem social movement scholars continually wrestle with (Burstein & Linton, 395-396, McAdam & Boudet, 2, Amenta et al 2019, 455). Four solutions to this dilemma are employed. First, to some extent, very few variables are omitted. Early social movement scholarship was plagued with studies that controlled for few (or no) variables measuring the external political context, thereby incorrectly attributing policy change to mobilization, when the real driver may have been something else (for example, public opinion) (Burstein & Linton, 395-396). To the extent that information on relevant confounding variables was available, I control for them.
Second, studying single protest events and the period following them for policy change increases the likelihood of correctly attributing causality. If policy change immediately follows XR’s mobilization, the temporal proximity makes it less likely that some third actor is the true cause of a change in policy. That said, this strategy is obviously not bulletproof.

Third, rigorous application of process tracing for the case study reduces the odds of misattributing the cause of changes in the dependent variable (Collier, 823). Many of the qualitative sources used to examine XR’s effect on climate policy suitably fulfill hoop, smoking gun, and doubly decisive tests to make a strong case for a causal relationship (Collier, 825).

Fourth, as noted in the literature review, specifying the causal mechanisms by which movements influence policy makes it possible to convincingly argue that movements are responsible for causing a particular policy change. For example, if convincing evidence suggests that a movement activated the public preference mechanism, then subsequent policy change can be plausibly attributed to mobilization. In other words, knowing how movements change policy means we know what to look for when seeking evidence of movement influence.
Chapter 1: The April Rebellion

This chapter discusses XR’s most successful protest to date – the April Rebellion, which occurred in April 2019. I begin with an introduction which summarizes the recent history of environmental mobilization in the UK, before discussing April Rebellion and its outcomes. I then divide the chapter into four sections, with each section discussing one cluster of variables. The first section discusses movement strategy, the second discusses movement strength, the third discusses the public, and the fourth discusses political elites. I argue that major policy changes following the Rebellion were the causal result of XR’s mobilization. I argue that for the April Rebellion, movement-controlled variables have far more explanatory power than non-movement-controlled variables – XR succeeded on their own merits. Additionally, I suggest that XR’s success is surprising for existing theory, as they achieved policy change despite an unfriendly government being in power. Below are two tables that summarize key variables of interest in April 2019 as a preview to the chapter’s argument.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internal Clusters</th>
<th>Movement Strength</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
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<tr>
<td>Outcome</td>
<td>Date</td>
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<td>Success</td>
<td>Apr19</td>
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<th>External Clusters</th>
<th>Political Elites</th>
<th>The Public</th>
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<tr>
<td>Success</td>
<td>Apr19</td>
<td>Unfriendly</td>
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The April Rebellion: A Brief Summary

XR was not the first group in the UK to protest for more significant climate policy. Throughout the early 2000s, three major environmental campaigns occurred. First, Friends of Earth successfully campaigned for a bill to legally require the UK to cut emissions 80% by 2050 (Nulman, 3). Second, a coalition of different groups successfully protested to stop the expansion of Heathrow airport (though the expansion was later greenlit) (Nulman, 3). Third, a small group (mostly consisting of insiders) lobbied
the treasury to create a Green Investment Bank; their campaign only partially succeeded (Nulman, 4). The Friends of Earth campaign is most relevant to this thesis, as the Climate Change Act (CCA) produced by the campaign in 2008 was amended following the April Rebellion; this amendment is likely XR’s largest policy victory to date. Eugene Nulman’s analysis of these campaigns argues that they succeeded in large part due to the opening of a window of political opportunity for climate policy – David Cameron decided Conservatives should compete to be seen as greener than Labour as a way to appeal to younger voters who saw the Conservatives as “nasty” (Nulman, 89-93). Both parties competed to out-green each other in the run up to the 2010 election, so the CCA passed in 2008 with bipartisan support (Nulman, 93). This view is echoed by other scholars (Carter, 423, Lockwood, 1346).

However, after the Conservative Party lost seats in 2010, the opportunity window for climate policy closed – the move to green the Conservatives was seen as having failed to pay dividends (Nulman, 101-102). This change reflected the ascendancy of more right-wing members of the Conservative party, who, following the 2010 election, successfully agitated to polarize climate change into a more partisan political issue (Carter, 423). This task was facilitated by the Great Recession; as economic recovery became the dominant national priority, austerity politics took over the Conservative Party, forcing a retreat from any consideration of ambitious spending on decarbonization (Gillard, 26). Overall, the Conservatives shifted to the right, climate change became increasingly partisan, and the CCA was put on more shaky footing – exemplified by the Conservative government almost rejecting the fourth emissions budget (Lockwood, 1346, Carter, 423). Even by 2018 (when XR launched), neither major party was committed to changing the target of cutting emissions 80% by 2050 (Mance). In summary, the 2008-2010 period offered a brief window of inter-party competition where Labour and the Conservatives were trying to out-green each other on policy issues, notably resulting in the CCA. Once that strategy failed to pay dividends for the Conservatives, the window of opportunity for climate policy closed. The
Conservatives retreated to a more right-wing position, especially after the Great Recession provided ammunition for advocates of austerity and decreased government spending/investment.

In the lead up to the April Rebellion, XR formulated its demands and theory of change before delivering presentations to community groups to recruit members to participate in protests (Taylor 2020a). After months of building its membership, XR staged the April Rebellion, which began on April 15, 2019 (Taylor 2020a, Taylor & Gayle 2019b). The Rebellion lasted 11 days, with XR holding five major protest sites (key roads and bridges), causing significant disruption to London’s transportation (Taylor & Gayle 2019b). The Rebellion had a huge impact on public opinion and the media, with unprecedented levels of media coverage on the climate, and a massive spike in the portion of the public rating the environment as the most important issue (Barasi 2019a, 2019b, 2019c).

In the month and a half following the Rebellion, political elites held negotiations with XR representatives and took steps to meet all three of XR’s key demands (Harvey). Specifically, Parliament declared a climate emergency via a motion, backbench MPs established a non-binding citizen’s assembly on the climate, and Theresa May’s administration pushed for and signed a law amending the CCA to require net zero emissions by 2050 (Barasi 2019b). I argue that these changes were primarily driven by XR, specifically suggesting that XR’s unique strategy and strong mobilization played the key role in driving policy changes. Despite facing an unfriendly conservative government, XR activated the disruption and public preference mechanisms, causing meaningful changes to UK climate policy.

**Movement Strategy**

XR was launched in 2018 after its two major founders, Roger Hallam and Gail Bradbrook, plus a group of a dozen core organizers, formulated three core demands and a theory of change, and began recruiting members to the organization (Kinniburgh, 129, Mansfield, 376). XR’s demands are that “a) The government must tell the truth by declaring a climate and ecological emergency, working with other
institutions to communicate the urgency for change. (b) The government must act now to halt biodiversity loss and reduce greenhouse-gas emissions to net zero by 2025. (c) The government must create and be led by the decisions of a Citizens’ Assembly on climate and ecological justice” (Pickard et al, 259).

XR’s core theory of change prioritizes using highly disruptive civil disobedience tactics. This choice was a product of the belief among XR’s founders that conventional campaigning by environmental organizations has been a total failure. As the preface to XR architect/founder Roger Hallam’s book reads, “I was there. For the past 20 years. Climate activism. It didn’t work... We raised billions to reach people and politicians – it didn’t work. We lobbied for subsidies for renewables – it didn’t work. We signed countless online petitions – they didn’t work. We looked to the United Nations to resolve the crisis – it didn’t work... Countless NGOs did their best – it didn’t work” (Hallam, 3). Hallam argues that non-disruptive tactics are a dead-end; “NGOs, political parties and movements... have brought us... thirty years of abject failure – a 60% rise in global CO2 emissions since 1990...The paradigm shift is to move... from lobbying to mass breaking of the law through nonviolent civil disobedience” (Hallam, 6-7).

XR’s theory of change was also strongly influenced by Hallam’s PhD research, where he encountered research by Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan which found that non-violent campaigns of mass civil disobedience to topple autocrats never failed once they consistently mobilized a sufficiently large percentage (3.5%) of the population (Mansfield, 376-377). They also settled on disruptive civil disobedience after studying its success in particularly well-known historical case studies – the suffragettes, the civil rights movement, and Gandhi’s salt march (Mansfield, 376). This research led XR’s core organizers to conclude that they should utilize mass civil disobedience as their primary tactic, deliberately courting mass arrest and pursuing maximum disruption in the UK capital (Mansfield, 377, Rose 2020a, 84-85). The idea behind this strategy was that either the UK would violently repress the
protest, drawing more participants to XR and moral outrage by the public, or allow the protest, in which case disruption would continue until the government was forced to the negotiating table by their need to make London function again (Rose 2020a, 84-85, Hallam, 7-8). Indeed, Hallam’s book basically provides a vision/roadmap of what applying Chenoweth & Stephan’s civil resistance model would look like in the context of the UK, arguing that civil resistance is effectively the only remaining option (Hallam, 10-50). In the words of one scholar, “XR argues that what is needed is not merely a few hours of occasional civil disobedience but sustained disruption... rather than focus on particular targets such as coal mines or pipelines, ‘XR plans civil disobedience blockades to scale—with the aim... of shutting down cities, not just for an afternoon but for days on end’. This means ‘economic disruption—to shake the current political system—and civil disruption—to raise awareness”’ (Gunningham, 198).

To execute this strategy, XR’s core organizers spent the months before and after their first major protest in October 2018 delivering a presentation titled “Heading for Extinction and What to do About it” at local libraries, town meeting halls, schools, universities, churches, and other community gathering spaces (Taylor 2020a). The presentation, known as “The Talk,” explained XR’s central thesis – that unchecked climate change will cause catastrophe (possibly human extinction), and that mass civil disobedience is the only option left that can cause sufficiently fast political change to avert catastrophe (Taylor 2020a). At the end of the Talk, presenters would ask members of the audience to sign up to join XR chapters and participate in upcoming protests, asking people if they were willing to join the “arrestable” list (Rose 2020a, 38-41). This generated a group of recruits willing to participate in XR’s “Rebellion Day One” protest in October 2018, a single-day protest in which 1,000 people blocked the five major bridges going into London (Taylor 2020a). This event drew substantial media coverage (it was, at the time, one of the largest actions of civil disobedience the UK had seen in decades) and subsequently, XR delivered the Talk many more times in the months leading up to the April Rebellion (Taylor 2020a). As XR delivered the Talk after October 2018, it recruited more and more audience
members to join local chapters of the organization across the UK that XR could then call on to descend on London in April 2019 (Taylor 2020a). The Talk was also very intentionally designed to leverage listener’s emotions by convincing them that climate change was a near term threat to their lives (and their children’s), that the government was doing nothing, that XR’s simple strategy was guaranteed to work, and that other environmental NGOs were abject failures (Rose 2020a, 38-41). One representative example of the Talk’s focus on emotions comes from Hallam, who at one point says, “one of the things I’ve realized over the last year, is that you can know about climate change ... and when you really know about it you haven’t really felt, and when you think you’ve felt it, you haven’t really felt it - right? So it’s a bit like grief, you know, it comes in waves, you’re shitting yourself one day and then the next two weeks you sort of forget about it, the sun’s shining, there’s plenty of food in Tesco’s ... and then you read a Guardian article and you think what the fuck and then someone comes in and they’re crying or something and ‘bang’ ... it like that – right?” (Rose 2020a, 41).

These features of The Talk point to three notable divergences between XR’s framing and the framing typically used by other environmental NGOs. First, XR framed climate change in a non-partisan manner, rather than explicitly aligning themselves with the political left (Judt 2019). This makes sense: Brexit had so poisoned the meaning of “politics” that XR’s slogan “beyond politics” served as code for “beyond Brexit,” which allowed them to avoid getting pulled into highly polarized debates over Brexit by avoiding electoral politics (Judt 2019). This decision was a conscious one, but mainly a product of Hallam’s read of the civil resistance literature (successful movements typically attract a diverse variety of people); he argued forcefully that climate change should be framed as a concern for everyone, regardless of their politics (Doherty et al, Taylor 2020a).

Second, XR broke a major norm in environmental communication literature, which suggests that environmental issues should be framed through a mix of optimism and urgency – climate change is bad, but we can still fix it (Doherty et al). In contrast, XR’s central message prior to the April Rebellion was
that climate change will likely cause catastrophe; our only choice now is how bad it will get (Doherty et al). This outcompeted conventional framing because it was more resonant with people’s actual emotional experience of climate change as too monumental to solve entirely while highlighting that we should still choose a less catastrophic world (Doherty et al). Crucially, XR’s emphasis that climate change is an emergency also let them tap people’s sense that they have a moral duty to their children (or to their own future selves) to avoid future generations inheriting a hellscape of a planet (Pickard 2021, 3-4, Doherty et al). This was designed into the structure of the Talk, which begins by emphasizing recent scientific projections about the catastrophic threat (billions dead or relocated, mass drought, famine, heatwaves, etc) posed by warming above 2 degrees Celsius before pivoting to invite the audience to “really feel it,” and think about what’s morally important to them (e.g., protecting the next generation, etc) (Rose 2020a, 38-45).

Third, XR’s framing diverges from other environmental organizations by being highly critical of status quo ENGO lobbying/petitioning tactics, which it views as failures (Hallam, 3, Gunningham 2019, 198, Rose 2020a, 38-41). By amplifying people’s sense that traditional politics/ENGOs are failing, XR’s simple explanation of the efficacy of mass disruption achieves the core framing task of answering the question “why collective action?” As Hallam argues in his book, “NGOs, political parties and movements which have brought us through the last thirty years of abject failure – a 60% rise in global CO2 emissions since 1990... offer gradualist solutions which they claim will work... The paradigm shift is to move from the words to radical action, from lobbying to mass breaking of the law through nonviolent civil disobedience... The penny has finally dropped – the corrupt system is going to kill us all unless we rise up (Hallam, 6, 11).

Crucially, recent field work suggests that XR’s framing choices played a key role in achieving mass mobilization (Pickard 2021, 3-4). Specifically, framing climate change as an emergency/crisis that traditional actors (government, environmental NGOs) were failing to solve enabled XR to leverage
people’s emotional attachment to their children’s futures (or their own) and take politics into their own hands by participating in XR’s Rebellions (Pickard 2021, 3-4, 8-11). Survey research finds that people who believed that civil disobedience would work and had feelings of anger/perceived injustice were more likely to identify themselves with XR, which in turn led them to participate in collective action (Furlong & Vignoles, 29-31). In other words, XR’s framing – that traditional NGO tactics are failing, that you should be angry/fearful, and that civil disobedience will work to stop a massive injustice – was effective at mobilizing people for the April Rebellion. People believed XR’s framing, and mobilized as a result.

Other survey research has confirmed these findings – the strongest cited reasons for participation in XR’s Rebellions were to raise awareness, pressure the government, and a sense of moral obligation to act (Saunders et al, 29). Many participants said that they thought they could be efficacious by engaging in civil disobedience, and that traditional forms of environmental campaigning were unlikely to work (Saunders et al, 28-29). Crucially, most XR participants in the April Rebellion were inexperienced protesters – XR’s unique framing drew a large number of new participants to the climate cause (Saunders et al, 3). In other words, XR’s framing recruited people who had not previously been mobilized by conventional environmentalist framing, demonstrating the efficacy of XR’s framing choices – XR’s new framing tapped a new market of potential activists.

Much of this section has described how XR’s core framing and tactics were formulated prior to the April Rebellion. The April Rebellion saw XR execute on its strategy successfully, beginning on April 15, 2019, with thousands occupying Waterloo Bridge, Marble Arch, Parliament Square, Oxford Circus and Piccadilly Circus, resulting in widespread disruption to London’s operation (Taylor & Gayle 2019b). XR succeeded at holding key protest for eleven days, despite police attempts to remove them (Watts & Gayle). This was in large part a product of XR’s use of supergluing and lock-ons, two methods of physically attaching themselves to their physical surroundings (via either superglue or padlocks) to make
it impossible for police officers to remove them without using specialized equipment (Pickard et al, 264-265).

XR’s actions typically combined strategic disruption with “street theatre” and a celebratory atmosphere meant to draw in bystanders (Gunningham 2020, 13-14). For example, XR held a bright pink boat (calling attention to sea-level-rise) with “Tell The Truth” written on its side in the middle of Oxford Circus for days (Watts & Gayle). Overall, one estimate suggested that 500,000 people were affected by XR’s disruption or core roads and bridges in April (BBC 2019b). By the end of the Rebellion, over a thousand people had been arrested (Knights 2020). In other words, XR’s framing worked to mobilize thousands to the streets, and once there, they utilized disruptive tactics as planned, causing shockwaves throughout London.

Over the course of the Rebellion, actions were coordinated by the Rapid Response Team, which was largely comprised of the group’s founding 15 members (Groth, The Economist 2019). XR’s general organizational structure has been decentralized from its inception – local chapters are empowered to design their own actions so long as they follow XR’s core principles; a national team chooses when Rebellions occur, but chapter members tend to be unaware of the plans of other chapters (The Economist 2019, Groth, Rose 2020a, 39). Empowering local chapters to choose their own actions enabled XR to avoid the pitfalls other decentralized movements (i.e., Occupy) faced from trying (and failing) to reach consensus among the entire movement, and being unable to make decisions as a result (The Economist 2019).

However, XR was partially centralized during the April Rebellion – as one of the group’s founders put it, “we still had a more hierarchical way of organising; we established a body that had oversight over the entire rebellion called the Rapid Response Team, which was supposedly representatives from different subgroups across the organisation but was basically just fifteen people from the central team” (Rose 2020a, 117). Having some centralized authority made it possible for XR to coordinate actions more
effectively; when the police were close to taking the boat out of Oxford Circus, hundreds more XR members were directed to swarm the area, surrounding the police (Watts & Gayle). Similar reinforcement efforts made it possible to hold highly contested locations like Waterloo Bridge for days on end (Taylor & Gayle 2019a). Moreover, retaining some hierarchy stopped potentially damaging actions from occurring. Internal debate eventually stopped a proposed actions that would have shut down London’s entire subway system, and the Rapid Response Team (barely) stopped one local chapter from shutting down a subway station in a working-class neighborhood (Taylor & Gayle 2019a, Read, 13, Rose 2020a, 117). This is discussed in much greater detail in chapter two, as the same local chapter undertook the subway action in XR’s October 2019 Rebellion. I highlight it here to both foreshadow and point out that XR’s partially centralized organizational structure played a role in ensuring the Rebellion was run successfully.

Thus, there is strong evidence that XR’s strategy played a crucial role in the success of the April Rebellion. They strategically chose a novel framing of the issue (climate change is an emergency) and solution (only civil disobedience will work) that differentiated them from other green groups and mobilized new participants to the environmental cause. XR’s framing activated people with little history of activism, enabling them to mobilize a fairly large number of people to stage an unprecedentedly large action of civil disobedience. During the Rebellion, XR’s organizational structure successfully prevented damaging protest actions from occurring and coordinated actions effectively. Most importantly, XR selected novel disruptive tactics that enabled them to cause a disproportionate impact relative to their numbers – a mere six thousand people shut down major parts of central London for eleven straight days, utilizing unique methods (supergluing and lock-ons) to hold sites despite (admittedly somewhat feeble) attempts by the police to remove protestors.

XR’s unique tactics and framing also eventually won over the public and the media (as discussed in section three); their willingness to be arrested turned hostility into grudging respect, and their ability
to hold sites ensured their framing entered the public debate (Read, 5). In the third and fourth section on the public and political elites, I will argue that the April Rebellion’s massive impact on public opinion played a key role in driving significant policy changes that partially met each of XR’s demands. Thus, I argue XR’s strategy played a key role in driving policy change, as the strategy successfully activated the disruption and public preference mechanisms, as detailed in the third and fourth sections.

Movement Strength

Having spent the months between XR’s first public protests in October 2018 delivering the Talk to get more people signed up, the April Rebellion arrived (Rose 2020a, 116). The April Rebellion drew initially drew 6,000 participants, making it the largest act of civil disobedience seen in the UK for decades (Gunningham 2019, 199). By the end of the Rebellion, estimates suggested upwards of 10,000 people had participated, as many bystanders joined spontaneously (Gunningham 2020, 13, Taylor & Gayle 2019a). Locations were chosen strategically to maximize disruption via blocking traffic; the goal was to “bring London to a standstill” for two weeks by blocking key roads, intersections, and bridges (BBC 2019a). This included periodically “swarming” the few bridges leading into London, stopping traffic for 5-7 minutes, briefly allowing it through, and then stopping it again (Segalov). XR managed to coordinate the Rebellion with relatively few resources, though they subsequently received significant donations (Nugent).

Unfortunately, very little is written about XR’s strength during the April Rebellion. No comprehensive account exists of the status of their finances, and besides numerical estimates of the number of participants in the April Rebellion, little is written about their membership. While some survey research has examined the demographic characteristics of XR participants, very little has been written directly drawing a line between the strength of XR’s mobilization in April 2019 and the policy outcomes they witnessed (Saunders et al, 3). That said, one academic argues that XR’s protests in April
2019 were hugely impactful – XR mobilized thousands to participate in arrestable civil disobedience for the first time in decades, “not only shutting down substantial parts of London but causing substantial disruptions to daily life... These protests had a substantial impact. Not only did they lead to two parliamentary debates, and a climate emergency motion being passed by the UK Parliament, but the media gave XR’s disruptions a high profile” (Gunningham 2020, 13-14).

In other words, the fact that XR had mobilized so many people to get arrested played an important role in winning them media attention – the April Rebellion’s success (and the scale of the disruption) shocked British society, as the level of disruption was without recent precedent. Later in the chapter, I argue that XR achieved policy change by activating the disruption and public preference mechanisms discussed in the literature review. Thus, XR’s strength was moderately to strongly important in explaining their impact on policy – the large number of protest participants enabled them to functionally shut down London, winning them massive attention from the public.

XR’s strong showing in April 2019 also played a key role in a non-policy outcome – the organization’s explosive growth. As Gunningham explains, “the Guardian, amongst others, called XR ‘the fastest growing environmental organisation in the world’... In the UK it has, in a remarkably short time, succeeded in getting thousands of people to undertake civil disobedience and has captured the attention of the UK Parliament, the public and the media... XR has also gone global: in addition to... groups across the UK, XR has a presence in 66 countries, within which there are over 1000 branches” (Gunningham, 14-15). This points to a demonstration effect – the fact that the April Rebellion drew so many to the street and drew global media attention resulted in people flocking to XR after April – XR had demonstrated that mass civil disobedience was a viable strategy for the climate movement (Taylor 2020a). As one of XR’s original founding members argued, “the April rebellion managed to alter the public perception of what is and what is not possible, not only in the wider green movement but in every activist group up and down the country... we created a space for debate. We proved that non-
violent civil disobedience works and, in doing so, we created space not only in a figurative sense, but also in a very literal one” (Knights 2019). By redefining the possible and shattering precedent, XR’s strong showing in April drove its massive growth in the months that followed.

*The Public*

The April Rebellion had a meteoric impact on British media. Hundreds of articles, editorials, and radio and TV interviews covered the protests (Taylor & Gayle 2019a). Whereas research prior to April 2019 found that climate protests rarely got much media coverage, the UK media mentioned climate change more times in April 2019 than in any previous point in time, including the 2015 Paris Climate Conference (Barasi 2019a). Moreover, much of the coverage of the April Rebellion was fairly positive and substantive, rather than simply focusing on the disruption to people’s commutes (Barasi 2019a). As a member of XR’s media team noted during the Rebellion, “The phones never stop ringing, we have press inquiries round the clock from media around the world” (Taylor & Gayle 2019a).

Why did XR receive high amounts of favorable media coverage? Rupert Read, a major figure within XR, notes that initial media coverage was viciously negative, but after XR successfully held sites for over a week, the tone completely reversed – coverage became generally positive, with business leaders signing an open letter in support of XR and a major op-ed declaring the Conservatives would be buried by history if they didn’t positively respond to XR’s demands (Read, 5). Read argues that this shift occurred both because XR successfully held protest sites for extended periods (and therefore had more opportunities for spokespeople to disseminate XR’s message to the press), and because people’s feelings evolved over time from annoyance to respect at XR’s willingness to get arrested (Read, 6). The longer they held protest sites, the more opportunities XR had to spread their framing to the general public. The more people got arrested, the more ordinary people respected that XR activists were highly committed and willing to suffer personal consequences for their protest, which Read argues contributed
to people’s grudging respect for XR by the end of the Rebellion (Read, 6). One speech from a member of the House of Lords put it best, “[I expected] that the tabloid newspapers would be full of ‘3 billion tonnes of CO2 released by cars jammed by Extinction Rebellion’, or ‘Ooh, look how this demonstrators travelled to London in a gas guzzler’, I thought that the establishment would turn on them, but in fact it has not. The demonstrators and their leader were received with great seriousness and respect, and I applaud that” (hansard.parliament.uk 2019a). Moreover, as one journalist remarked, “[XR’s] disruption made the climate crisis ‘sexy’ and without it, it was almost impossible to give the issue air time on the talk radio station” (Lam). In other words, XR’s disruptive street theatre made a good story because it kept people’s attention – reporting on it made economic sense for the UK media.

XR also benefited from fortuitous timing. The April Rebellion coincided with the release of a widely-watched David Attenborough documentary on the climate crisis and Greta Thunberg’s visit to the UK (she publicly supported XR), both of which contributed to the high media coverage of climate change, and may have somewhat shielded XR from criticism (Barasi 2019a, Rose 2020a, 9). Additionally, months of coverage of Theresa May’s ongoing failure to pass her Brexit agreement through the UK Parliament meant that the public was fatigued with Brexit coverage – Brexit was briefly off the agenda (Barasi 2019a, BBC 2019h). In this sense, XR’s timing was extremely lucky – the April Rebellion occurred after May’s third and final attempt at passing a Brexit agreement through Parliament fell through at the end of March, and she was forced to seek an extension from the EU to June (BBC 2019g). In other words, the April Rebellion occurred during a lull where Brexit negotiations were not occurring, and therefore were not dominating the news cycle. As noted above, XR’s decision to remain non-partisan and “beyond politics” also enabled it to remain above the Brexit fray instead of being branded as a purely leftist movement (Judt 2019). Moreover, as scientific evidence had mounted in recent years on the catastrophic threat posed by climate change, climate denialism had run its course in the UK media, and the press had started to become more interested in reporting on the climate crisis (Barasi 2019a). In
other words, XR’s mobilization fortuitously coincided with a longer term shift in media willingness to discuss climate change – though, as noted above, XR’s street theatre made for engaging coverage; XR accelerated this shift (Lam).

Public opinion of XR was favorable following the Rebellion, and surveys found that the public largely agreed with XR’s demands. This is important insofar as support for a movement in public opinion is expected by theory to predict greater odds of policy change. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the public’s initial hostility to XR (e.g., motorists on blocked bridges yelling “get a job”) evolved to respect as they saw activists willing to be arrested for the cause (Read, 5-6, Segalov). One survey with a representative sample found that more (46%) supported XR’s actions than opposed (27%) (Kenward 2019a). Additionally, a majority (51%) said the government wasn’t doing enough to tackle climate change, a strong majority (61%) said a citizen’s assembly would tackle climate change more effectively than government, and a supermajority (83%) said climate change is a leading threat facing humanity (Kenward 2019a, Kenward 2019b). Experimental surveys found that support for XR increased following the Rebellion, compared to support prior to the Rebellion (Kenward 2019c). Evidence suggests this change in public support was partially mediated by the media – experimental polling found that exposure to BBC coverage of the Rebellion and direct social media content produced by XR increased support for XR’s civil disobedience relative to a control group (Kenward 2019d).

More notably, the April Rebellion caused a permanent increase in the salience of climate change in public opinion research. Polling research did not examine whether the Rebellion changed people’s opinion of whether climate change is real and human caused, likely because a supermajority of the UK public (85%) surveyed in August 2018 believed that climate change was real and human caused (Crawley et al). Only 7% of people did not agree that climate change was happening, while 74% strongly believed climate change was real (Crawley et al). In other words, the overwhelming majority of the public was already convinced that climate change was real, so XR could make little impact on this aspect of public
opinion. However, the same research found that only a small portion of the public thought climate change was a high salience, top three issue (Crawley et al). Long running polling by Ipsos-MORI similarly found that climate change didn’t even make the top ten of “top issues facing the nation” in 2018 (Ipsos-MORI 2018).

This changed immediately following the April Rebellion. In May 2019, the percentage of people listing climate change as the most important issue facing the UK jumped to its highest level in 30 years, though Brexit remained the dominant issue (Ipsos-MORI 2019a). Polling by YouGov found a similar result; people listing the environment as a top three issue jumped to its highest level on record immediately following the April Rebellion (Smith). Ben Kenward’s pre- and post-Rebellion polling similarly found that the percentage of people agreeing that climate change is one of the greatest threats facing humanity increased significantly immediately after the Rebellion (Kenward 2019c). Other polling found 63% support for the UK declaring a climate emergency, and a majority of those surveyed (especially among young voters) said they would change their vote to protect the planet from climate change (Rathi, Read, 5, Carrington 2019a). Google searches for climate change rose to their highest level on record during the April Rebellion (Barasi 2019a, Google Trends 2021a). These trends led numerous commentators to conclude that the April Rebellion was the primary driver behind the permanent increase in the salience of climate change (Barasi 2019b, Barasi 2019c, Tryl, Gunningham 2020, 14, Sinclair, Read, 5-6). The former director of Greenpeace told TIME that “there’s ‘no question’ that XR contributed to a shift in public consciousness on climate change, reflected in opinion polls that are ‘unrecognizable’ from his time at Greenpeace” (Nugent).
It’s worth noting that XR cannot take total credit for the change in public opinion. During the April Rebellion, Greta Thunberg’s visit to the UK Parliament and a newly released David Attenborough documentary made waves in the media, and likely contributed to the change in the environment’s salience (Rose 2020a, 15-18). The fact that the April Rebellion temporally coincided with Greta’s visit and the documentary’s release makes it quite difficult to disaggregate which event was the “primary” driver behind the shift in public opinion concerning climate change.

That said, there is some reason to believe that the April Rebellion was of primary importance. The Rebellion dominated the news cycle for eleven days with continual reporting on the status of Central London, plus follow-up reporting after the Rebellion. Greta’s visit and Attenborough’s
documentary were not capable of generating the same level of continual coverage, as they were one-off single day events. As noted above, XR made reporting on climate change “sexy,” and uniquely made it more possible for the media to report on climate change (Lam). In other words, XR’s mobilization contributed to the interest in reporting on other climate related stories (like Greta and Attenborough). The suspicion that XR received more media attention (and thereby had a larger impact on public opinion) is also backed by data from Google Trends which shows XR receiving more searches than Thunberg or Attenborough in April 2019 (Google Trends 2021b).

Second, even if non-XR events played a significant role in altering public opinion in April 2019, it would be wrong to argue that these other events played the key role in altering actual policy. Put another way, the most accurate way to think about Greta’s visit and Attenborough’s documentary is that they contributed to XR’s ability to impact policy – they amplified the impact of the protest by adding to the media frenzy around the climate crisis. The next section argues that XR activated the disruption and public preference mechanisms, altering the calculations of political elites, who decided that changing climate policy in line with XR’s demands was electorally advantageous. No commentator has argued that Attenborough’s documentary and Greta’s visit are primarily responsible for the policy changes that followed the April Rebellion. The most obvious evidence that XR played the key role in altering policy is simple: the policy changes made following the April Rebellion were directly related to each of XR’s demands (emergency declaration, faster decarbonization, and citizen’s assemblies).
Parliament declared a climate emergency, set a faster target for decarbonization, and a non-binding citizen’s assembly on the climate.

In summary, this section has argued that the April Rebellion had a significant impact on the public (measured by media coverage and public opinion). However, I suggest that this section has only provided neutral evidence on the importance of the public. The crucial argument is that XR succeeded because they *changed* media coverage and public opinion – they were not assisted by an already favorable public environment. Though media coverage of climate change was moderate and the public widely agreed that climate change should be dealt with, the issue was very low salience, and media coverage of XR was initially fairly hostile. Theory which stresses the importance of media and public opinion typically emphasizes that public opinion constrains or assists movement influence based on whether the public is in *already* favor of the movement’s demands (or not), and whether the issue is *already* high salience (or not). The fact that XR succeeded because they *altered* public opinion provides evidence for the importance of internal (e.g., XR’s strategy and strength), not external factors, in determining movement outcomes. If the evidence suggested that XR won policy changes *in spite* of their disruption, (e.g., because the public agreed with XR and environment was already a high salience issue), rather than *because of* their disruption, then this would be evidence for the importance of external factors such as public opinion, and against the importance of movement strength and strategy. However, the opposite is the case. Rather than argue that this provides evidence against the importance of the public, I label this evidence as neutral because this section does validate more general theoretical predictions that public opinion is an important determinant of policy change, and because of evidence suggesting that Brexit’s absence from the agenda/public consciousness played a meaningful role in assisting XR.

*Political Elites*
One crucial factor that contributed to XR’s surprising ability to cause disruption for ten straight days was that the police were almost completely unprepared to stop XR – they were caught by surprise at the level of disruption (Read, 5, Rose 2020a, 124). This was for at least five distinct reasons. First, as noted above, XR’s use of supergluing and lock-ons made repression difficult, as police had trouble removing protestors for arrest – when XR members were arrested, it was because they wanted to be, as part of the group’s wider strategy of deliberately seeking arrest to clog the courts (Nugent, Rose 2020a, 124, Special). Second, Theresa May’s administration was relatively tolerant of the disruption, though as it continued, conservative criticism of the police for not clearing the protesters mounted (Salter, Read, 5). Third, the London police alone was insufficient – at one point during the Rebellion, Metropolitan police ran out of cells to hold arrested protesters, meaning XR had functional immunity from arrest – adding one protestors to the cells would just let another out (Hardy). Fourth, as one police official put it, “These people are explicitly peaceful, they have liaised closely with us over their plans and have a legitimate cause. We all have a limit on what we think is the right level of action to take but I think everyone is worried about climate change” (Taylor & Gayle 2019a). In other words, the police largely permitted XR’s actions due to prior communication and XR’s ironclad commitment to nonviolence – XR made sure to remain polite and cordial relationships with the police throughout the Rebellion (Taylor & Gayle 2019a, Watts & Gayle). Fifth, Brexit played a role. As Christopher Rose argues, “one reason for the confused [police] response was that Britain’s government was in a state of chaos as a result of the ongoing Parliamentary paralysis over Brexit. It had almost no ‘bandwidth’ for anything else” (Rose 2020a, 124-125). These five factors combined to produce an ineffective police response to the April Rebellion, which contributed to XR’s success in holding sites for days on end.

In the days following the Rebellion’s conclusion on April 25th, XR participated in negotiations with a variety of political elites, including Mayor of London Sadiq Khan, Labour’s Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, and Theresa May’s Environment Secretary, Michael Gove (Read, 5, Harvey). This was
unprecedented – never before had climate protests in the UK resulted in activists negotiating with the government (Harvey). Notable advances occurred as the result of these meetings – Sadiq Khan used his position to have London declare a climate emergency and put pressure on the federal government to do the same, while John McDonnell agreed to consider moving Labour’s target for net zero emissions up from 2050 to 2030 (BBC 2019c). Most significantly, Michael Gove pledged that Theresa May’s government would set a target for net zero emissions, though did not commit to a timeline (Harvey).

Unfortunately, there is a dearth of publicly available information about these negotiations besides the above facts, making it hard to gain greater insight into what precisely occurred in these meetings, what promises were (or weren’t) made to XR, and more.

In the weeks following the negotiations, XR witnessed a number of impressive policy victories. Each of XR’s three demands – a climate emergency declaration, net zero emissions by 2025, and formulation of climate policy by a citizen’s assembly – received significant progress. For the first time in UK history, climate protest sparked multiple debates in parliament, with one headline reading “Extinction Rebellion succeeded where most climate protests fail” (Rathi). On May 1st, the UK Parliament met XR’s first demand and passed a non-binding motion to declare a climate emergency – no MP opposed the motion (BBC 2019d, Read, 5, Taylor 2020a). The motion was brought to the floor by Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, and Theresa May ordered Conservative MPs not to vote against it (edie News 2019a). Days before the UK declaration, the Parliaments of Scotland and Wales both declared climate emergencies, along with dozens of cities and towns (BBC 2019d, Climate Emergency Declaration).

During the debate on declaring a climate emergency, many MPs attributed XR for driving the environment up the agenda. Jeremy Corbyn argued noted that, “the truth is that they are ahead of the politicians on this, the most important issue of our time. We are witnessing an unprecedented upsurge of climate activism, with groups such as Extinction Rebellion forcing the politicians in this building to
listen... they are a massive and, I believe, very necessary wake-up call.” (TheyWorkForYou 2019a). Others also attributed the change in public consciousness to XR. Caroline Lucas, MP and leader of the Green Party, said, “I pay tribute to the work of Extinction Rebellion and the youth climate strikes, because they have already made a difference. The sheer number of people in the Chamber today is testament to that” (TheyWorkForYou, 2019a). Rebecca Pow, a Conservative MP, noted that “the Extinction Rebellion people whom I met up here and all sorts of religious people of every shape and form—have asked me to put the environment at the top of the agenda. People care” (TheyWorkForYou, 2019a). This explicitly points to the role XR played in increasing the salience of climate change for the public, which translated into the environment topping the legislative agenda. One Labour MP implicitly noted the electoral calculus behind the emergency declaration, saying, “It would also send a signal to the Extinction Rebellion protesters, the striking schoolchildren and the young people I speak to in schools in my constituency that we are listening and will act with urgency” (TheyWorkForYou, 2019a). David Drew, Labour’s Shadow Environment Minister, put it most succinctly: “My main point is that we are here today because of Extinction Rebellion” (TheyWorkForYou, 2019a).

The House of Lords debate on the climate emergency declaration also attributed XR with responsibility for bringing the environment up the agenda. The Bishop of Salisbury said, “the context of this debate has changed radically over the past few months. Whatever you think of the tactics of Extinction Rebellion, what has been created by its disruption has put the environment on the agenda in a new way and with greater urgency” (hansard.parliament.uk 2019a). Another Lord noted that “For me, the Extinction Rebellion campaign has been a breath of fresh air. It has drawn the climate and ecological emergency to the forefront of political debate” (hansard.parliament.uk 2019a). Moreover, one Lord spent an entire speech elaborating on XR’s three demands, and calling the emerging target of net zero by 2050 “shockingly weak” (hansard.parliament.uk 2019a).
Additionally, partial progress was made towards XR’s third demand (citizen’s assemblies) in June—backbench Labour MPs in the UK parliament established a non-binding citizens assembly to write a report with recommendations on how the UK could reach net zero emissions by 2050 (Carrington 2019b, Mansfield, 380). However, XR criticized the move, as the assembly was not able to make binding recommendations and was not backed by the Conservative government, meaning few of its suggestions would be implemented (Carrington 2019b, Extinction Rebellion UK 2020a). Dozens of cities followed suit, creating local citizen’s assemblies on the climate (Judt 2020).

XR’s largest victory came in late May 2019, when Theresa May pushed a law through Parliament to amend the CCA, setting 2050 as the target date for the UK to reach net zero emissions, rather than an 80% reduction (Walker et al, Barasi 2019b). While this is a far cry from the second demand of net zero by 2025, it was still a significant change in policy that carried legal force, not a non-binding symbolic action (Barasi 2019b). The CCA’s institutional architecture has built in mechanisms to ensure the government meets legally binding emissions targets, meaning an updated emissions target had significant downstream ramifications for policy. Numerous commentators attributed the April Rebellion with the policy change, arguing that XR raised the salience of the environment in public opinion and created a crisis through their disruption, which caused May to legislate a new 2050 target (Mance, Barasi 2019b, Sinclair, Barasi 2019c, Lam, Nugent, Knights 2020).

One journalist provided a nice summary of the argument, writing “within weeks of XR’s first two-week mass mobilization... the U.K. parliament declared a climate emergency and the government announced a legally binding target for net-zero carbon emissions by 2050. Christiana Figueres, the former U.N. climate chief, compares XR’s potential impact to that of groups like the suffragists and the civil rights movement. “When you’re talking about a large systemic transformation, history shows us that civil disobedience is a very important component” (Nugent). As one commentator studying environmental campaigns argues, “Every time Extinction Rebellion cause disruption, they certainly
attract scorn, but they also raise awareness of the climate crisis and get people talking about issues like net-zero targets in a way that no other campaign has been able to match” (Tryl). Another argued that “XR’s disruptive protests in 2019 were instrumental in getting the UK Government to commit to net zero by 2050. They produced a declaration of climate emergency by the UK Parliament. And XR is a large part of what explains unprecedented levels of public concern about climate change in the UK in recent years” (Sinclair).

Perhaps most definitively, Tim Lord, a senior fellow at the Tony Blair Institute, argued that “XR were vital in giving space for net zero 2050 to seem a credible position” – prior to XR’s founding, neither Labour nor the Conservatives were committed to any target for net zero emissions (Mance). Moreover, debates in Parliament over the net zero legislation saw MPs note XR’s role in pushing climate change onto the agenda. Alan Whitehead, a Labour shadow Minister, noted that the net zero target “has, of course, been widely called for by climate strikers and green activists across the country. This first step in the right direction is for them as much as for the Members debating it today” (TheyWorkForYou 2019b).

The fact that a Conservative government passed a legally binding emissions reduction immediately following the April Rebellion is highly puzzling, given that existing theory expects movements to not win significant policy victories when faced with unfriendly governments. As noted in the introduction, the Conservative Party drifted significantly to the right following the 2010 election and climate change became an increasingly polarized issue, with Conservatives advocating against further action (Nulman, 101-102, Carter, 423, Lockwood, 1346). Prior to the April Rebellion, the Conservative government was not committed to net zero emissions – that only changed in XR’s meeting with Michael Gove. That said, there is some limited evidence that Theresa May was greener than some of her Conservative peers – her tenure as Prime Minister saw some significant environmental policy changes, she voiced support for the Climate Change Act when it passed in 2008, and did not opt for outright repression of the April Rebellion (edie News 2019b, Hickman, Salter).
However, May was not a moderate – one commentator argued that “Theresa May’s manifesto shows that she is more right wing than Cameron ever dared to be” (Foster). Additionally, her voting record as an MP on environmental issues was largely in line with the Conservative Party, and as Prime Minister, she blocked expansion of onshore wind energy, and was vocally critical of school strikes for the climate, arguing that “disruption increases teacher’s workloads and wastes lesson time that teachers have carefully prepared for” (edie News 2019b, Hickman). Specifically, May’s Premiership saw her block onshore wind from “competing for new power contracts under the Contracts for Difference (CfD) auctions, while the solar sector is now facing the possibility of VAT hikes following a string of subsidy closures” (edie News 2019b). Moreover, May’s manifesto outlining her policy vision only committed to meeting the 80% reduction target by 2050; it was focused primarily on reducing energy costs by developing the shale gas industry in the UK – the opposite of environmental progress (BBC 2017). Taken together, these facts confirm that May’s decision to pass a new emissions target is a legitimate puzzle, not a product of her actually being a closet environmentalist, which she was not.

In other words, XR succeeded not because they protested with a friendly (or even neutral) government in power – they succeeded despite a relatively unfriendly partisan environment. What accounts for this success? I argue that XR activated two of the causal mechanisms of policy change outlined by Felix Kolb in the literature review – the disruption and public preference mechanisms. XR’s ability to hold key sites in London for days on end against failed police attempts to remove them caused massive, unprecedented disruption to the basic operations of London. While occupying public space wasn’t a new tactic (e.g., Occupy, the Arab Spring), XR’s use of superglue, lock-ons, and swarming of roads/bridges were novel. Police were unprepared to respond, and were forced to allow disruption to continue because they were unable to remove XR protestors – even if they had made more arrests, they would have simply had to let other XR activists go, as jails were full. The April Rebellion affected hundreds of thousands of citizens and imposed significant economic costs. Taken together, these facts
meet the criteria of a smoking gun test, providing strong evidence that XR activated the disruption mechanism (Collier, 825). Mass mobilization created a crisis, and the government saw that the typical choice between repression and concessions was unavailable – effective repression was impossible, so concessions were the only option. Concessions following the protest may have been made in the hopes that doing so would prevent a rapid resumption of disruptive action.

Additionally, as noted in the third section, the April Rebellion clearly activated the public preference mechanism, in which movement mobilization alters public opinion, making it electorally advantageous for politicians to meet movement demands. A mountain of polling data provide strong evidence that XR was uniquely critical to climate change’s massive spike in salience in public opinion. XR’s street theater and willingness to get arrested made for good TV (and made the climate crisis hold viewers’ attention), resulting in unprecedented media coverage that played a large role in altering public opinion. Additionally, the April Rebellion significantly increased the share of the public listing climate change as a top issue, the share of the public labeling current government response to climate change as inadequate, the share of the public backing XR and its demands, and perhaps most importantly, the share of the public saying that the climate crisis would make them vote differently (Carrington 2019a).

Taken together, these facts provide doubly decisive evidence that XR activated the public preference mechanism – by raising the salience of climate change in public opinion polls, they changed the electoral calculus of both major parties, convincing them that electoral prospects depended on passing new climate policy. Neither party was committed to net zero prior to XR, but XR’s mobilization made net zero by 2050 a “credible” position, and per Greenpeace’s former director (mentioned above), resulted in polls of the environment’s salience that were “unrecognizable” (Mance, Nugent). Additionally, it’s worth remembering that theoretical accounts of social movement influence on policy all stress that movements which alter the electoral incentives of political elites (for example, by increasing the salience of their issue in public opinion) should see policy changes implemented by
election-focused political elites. Thus, polling evidence following the April Rebellion that a majority of voters would vote based on climate change provides strong evidence of a link between the change in the environment’s salience and a change in legislator perceptions of how important climate policy would be for their chances at reelection. In other words, XR made it electorally advantageous for both parties to compete to win over a public newly concerned with the environment (Judt 2019). This provides strong evidence that the public preference mechanism was highly important in explaining policy changes following the April Rebellion.

Two objections to my argument are worth answering. One objection argues that Theresa May simply passed the amendment to the CCA because the Committee on Climate Change (CCA) established by the CCA recommended the net zero by 2050 target in early May 2019 (Judt 2020). This explanation fails for three reasons. First, at worst, the CCC can be viewed as facilitating XR’s impact on policy, rather than providing an alternate cause for the policy change. The CCC’s report had fortuitous timing and boosted the credibility of XR’s demands for faster decarbonization. Second, this objection cannot explain why May told Conservative MPs not to block the climate emergency declaration, which pre-dated the CCC’s recommendation (May 1st versus May 2nd). More fundamentally, it cannot explain why the changes to climate policy made by the UK government following the April Rebellion were directly tied to each of XR’s three demands. Third, this explanation is functionally eliminated by quotes suggesting that XR was responsible for making net zero by 2050 politically credible and creating “unrecognizable” polling data, and by the fact that XR’s meeting with Environment Minister Michael Gove was the first time the May administration had voiced willingness to commit to a net zero target. As noted above, the CCC and CCA were imperiled by the Conservative Party’s move to the right, with a Conservative government almost rejecting the CCC’s proposed fourth carbon budget (Lockwood, 1339-1340). This suggests that absent XR-driven changes to public opinion, Theresa May could easily have rejected the CCC’s recommendation to legislate a net zero by 2050 target.
A second objection argues that Theresa May would have supported a 2050 emissions target regardless of XR because she wanted to leave a positive legacy after announcing she was resigning as Prime Minister (Walker et al, Judt 2020). After failing for months to pass a Brexit deal through Parliament, May had “one eye on her legacy after being effectively forced out of office before doing everything she wanted to in terms of domestic policy. Downing Street sources said implementing the [2050] target before she leaves No 10 in a few weeks’ time was extremely important to May” (Walker et al). With her resignation looming, May was “desperate to put something besides a bungled Brexit to her name” (Judt 2020).

The problem with this objection is that it is an argument for XR’s importance. While it’s certainly true that XR’s timing was lucky given May’s looming resignation, had the environment not been turned into a highly salient issue by the April Rebellion, there would have been little reason for Theresa May to use it as an issue to leave behind a positive legacy. As one Labour MP noted, “She’s in the dying embers of her premiership, and she rolled this very simple net zero grenade... It was very good politics” (Judt 2020). By late June, when the net zero amendment was signed, polling data had revealed the change in the salience of climate change among the public, and that climate change would affect people’s votes. These facts made proposing and signing the net zero law “good politics.” May leveraged widespread public concern for the environment to leave on a high note, and helped the Conservative Party electorally by enabling it to take credit for environmental progress prior to the next election. While May was not seeking reelection, acting in the perceived electoral interests of her party (and successor as Prime Minister) fits with existing theory expecting politicians to be election-focused. Additionally, this fits well with Lohmann’s theoretical argument that protests attended by “activist moderates” who are seen to represent the general public/median voter will see greater policy responsiveness (Lohmann, 319). The fact that XR mobilized a large number of ordinary citizens with little experience of environmental activism may have signaled to May that a sizable chunk of moderate voters cared
significantly about climate change, and it was therefore worth changing policy to seek their votes for her party (Saunders et al, 3-5).

This section has argued that the April Rebellion was a primary driver behind significant changes to the UK’s climate policy. I argue that the fact that XR achieved anything at all is a surprise, and provides moderate evidence against the importance of political elites in explaining movement outcomes. Despite an unfriendly partisan government, XR saw significant movement on each of its three demands (emergency declaration, net zero emissions, and citizen’s assemblies). XR was facing a Prime Minister who was more conservative than her predecessor, with a voting record on the environment which mirrored her party’s, which had drifted right since 2010 and was not in favor of more aggressive action to curb emissions. XR benefited from the lucky timing of May’s resignation and Brexit being temporarily off the agenda, but they won changes to policy primarily on their own merits. XR’s unique strategy resulted in a strong, well-managed, highly disruptive mobilization which outwitted unprepared policy, who were unable to repress or stop the protest. The April Rebellion activated the disruption and public preference mechanisms, altering the electoral calculations of even unfriendly political elites, who decided it would be advantageous to pursue a greener climate policy.

Conclusion

In summary, this chapter has analyzed the April Rebellion. I argue that the April Rebellion primarily provides evidence for the importance of movement-controlled variables in explaining policy change. XR’s highly disruptive protests significantly altered public opinion and generated a mountain of media coverage, altering the electoral calculations of politicians. XR’s ability to impact public opinion was likely partially facilitated by the fact that, following failed negotiations, Brexit was not dominating the policy agenda and national discussion; the public had Brexit fatigue. Regardless, the April Rebellion resulted in policy changes that partially addressed each of XR’s three demands. These outcomes were
observed even though XR was faced with an unfriendly partisan context and was advocating for an issue that was low salience prior to mobilization. This presents limited evidence against existing theory which predicts that movements will only be capable of causing policy shifts in friendly partisan contexts.

These results validate the importance of specifying the causal mechanisms by which movements win policy change – the disruption and public preference mechanisms clearly played a key role in understanding why XR succeeded in April 2019 despite the odds. Moreover, these results hint at the importance of generating a novel strategy (an argument more fully developed in subsequent chapters). XR’s unique framing enabled them to mobilize new activists to the cause, and their tactics (which were unprecedented in the UK) caused a demonstration effect which resulted in the organization massively expanding in the months following the April Rebellion.
Chapter 2: The International Rebellion

This chapter discusses XR’s second Rebellion (titled the International Rebellion), held in October 2019. The chapter begins with a brief summary of the Rebellion, before, during, and after. I then divide my analysis into four sections, one for each cluster of independent variables. The first discusses movement strength, the second discusses movement strategy, the third discusses the public, and the fourth discusses political elites. In contrast to the April Rebellion, I argue that the International Rebellion provides evidence against the importance of movement-controlled variables, and evidence for the importance of non-movement-controlled variables. Specifically, XR was at its peak strength, yet achieved little, primarily due to changes in the partisan political context. I suggest that Conservative politicians realized that XR was a movement of the left and therefore saw little electoral advantage to be gained by making concessions, whereas the Labour Party was responsive to XR because they realized that XR represented their constituency. I also argue that XR’s failure to innovate novel tactics contributed to a less enthused response by the media and public. As previously, below are two tables summarizing key variables of interest in October 2019.

### Internal Clusters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Movement</th>
<th>Strength</th>
<th>Org. Structure</th>
<th>Tactics</th>
<th>Framing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Semi-success</td>
<td>Oct19</td>
<td>30k</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Decentralized</td>
<td>General + targeted disruption</td>
<td>Same</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### External Clusters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Political</th>
<th>Elites</th>
<th>The</th>
<th>Public</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Semi-success</td>
<td>Oct19</td>
<td>Unfriendly-Hostile</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Highest</td>
<td>Mixed-unfavorable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The International Rebellion: A Brief Summary*
Prior to the International Rebellion, XR became significantly stronger and well-resourced (Nugent). The organization also became more decentralized and, after heated internal discussions, slightly adjusted its tactics and framing to be more targeted against the worst perpetrators of climate change (Taylor 2020a). Boris Johnson replaced Theresa May as Prime Minister, shifting the Conservative Party and executive branch to the right (McTague, The Week UK). Leading up to the International Rebellion, signs indicated that this shift to the right would be reflected in a more repressive police approach to XR’s protest (Gayle et al 2019a). The International Rebellion saw XR utilize a similar tactical playbook as in April 2019, causing major disruption across central London by blockading key roads, bridges, and intersections, and holding more protest sites than in April for two weeks (Taylor 2019b). The protest saw more harsh policing, but also a far larger mobilization by XR (Townsend, Gayle et al 2019b). Media coverage was somewhat lower and more hostile than in April, the public was opposed to XR’s actions, and the salience of climate change did not increase by as much as it had in April 2019 (Taylor 2020b, Ibbetson, YouGov 2019a).

The Rebellion saw XR achieve far less than it had in April 2019. The Conservative government was intransigent. Boris Johnson established a new committee but did not change existing emissions targets or meet any of XR’s other demands, while also beginning to work on a bill to expand police powers to regulate XR’s protests (Gov.uk 2019, Dodd et al). In contrast, the Labour Party adopted a socialist Green New Deal with a far more aggressive decarbonization target as a core part of their platform in the month following the International Rebellion (Kinniburgh, 132). More cities declared climate emergencies and Scotland passed a new law setting a net zero target of 2045 (Smyth & Walters, 621, Gov.scot 2021a).

*Movement Strength*
XR’s strength increased significantly following the success of the April Rebellion. The widespread media publicity surrounding the April Rebellion catapulted XR into public consciousness (both in the UK, and globally), resulting in a veritable flood of new members joining the organization (Taylor 2020a, Nugent). Hundreds of new XR chapters were started across the entire UK following the April Rebellion, and tens of thousands joined the movement in the UK and elsewhere (Taylor 2020a, Nugent). Moreover, XR received numerous large donations following the April Rebellion totaling at least $2 million, likely more – they were relatively well resourced prior to the International Rebellion, and hired more full-time staff in the lead-up to October (Nugent, Carver). XR received five times more signups prior to the International Rebellion than the April Rebellion, and estimated that the 10,000 signups would translate into 20,000-30,000 participants (Extinction Rebellion UK 2019, Townsend).

XR’s predictions about attendance at the International Rebellion were largely validated. On October 7th, the International Rebellion began, with XR protestors blocking two bridges and multiple roads around Westminster Abbey (Taylor 2019b). The “International” referred to XR’s internationalization – protests occurred in 60 cities in other countries, many using a similar model of attempting to shut down the capital city (Taylor 2019b). As predicted, the International Rebellion in the UK drew far more participants than the April Rebellion – approximately 30,000 (Townsend, Taylor 2019b). Like the April Rebellion, the protests attempted to hold sites for two weeks – though the International Rebellion held protests at eleven sites, whereas the April Rebellion were concentrated around four to five (BBC 2019e). Over the course of the Rebellion, XR spent $1.2 million – a massive increase from April (Nugent).

Little has been written linking XR’s strength in October 2019 to the outcomes it experienced. Strikingly, XR did not experience more positive outcomes in October than in April – despite XR mobilizing more than three times as many people and being flush with cash, the International Rebellion had a much smaller impact on public policy than the April Rebellion (as is detailed in later sections). This
provides strong evidence against the importance of movement strength as an explanation for policy outcomes – XR was much stronger, yet it saw few gains, which contradicts theoretical expectations that stronger movements will win greater policy victories. This may validate theoretical expectations that mobilization is necessary but not sufficient to achieve policy change – once movements reach a minimum viable threshold of mobilization, gaining additional protest participants will have little marginal effect on the movement’s ability to cause policy change, especially when facing unfriendly regimes (Amenta et al 2019, 455).

That said, XR’s increased strength in October benefitted them in at least two ways. First, XR’s strength may have helped it impact public opinion and draw media coverage. In later sections, I argue that XR had a smaller impact on public opinion and media coverage in October, and that this change is largely explained by XR’s failure to innovate novel tactics. However, I also find some evidence suggesting that despite XR did have some impact on the salience of climate change (Ipsos-MORI 2019b). Taken with evidence from chapter three that XR’s smaller mobilizations had little impact on public opinion, this plausibly suggests that the size of XR’s mobilization in October 2019 helped it retain some notable impact on public opinion. In other words, XR’s failure to innovate resulted in diminished attention by the media and public, but its high strength in October meant that the reduction in public attention was not as large as it would otherwise have been.

Second, XR’s strength blunted the impact of increased repression. Despite a more robust police response to the International Rebellion, XR successfully held sites throughout the Rebellion (Gayle et al 2019b). While more police were pulled in to deal with the protests and more arrests were made than during the April Rebellion, XR’s greater numbers meant that police resources were still significantly strained, with hundreds of new officers being brought to London later in the Rebellion (Gayle et al 2019b). Additionally, when London Metropolitan Police issued a temporary blanket ban on all XR protests nine days into the Rebellion, XR’s large numbers meant it could simply ignore the ban – London
police lacked the manpower to arrest tens of thousands of protestors – and public outrage at the move
drew more participants to the street the day after the ban was issued (Dodd et al, Gayle et al 2019b).
This roughly accords with existing literature on movement strength which argues that stronger
movements should not necessarily expect more positive outcomes when they are operating in a hostile
or repressive political context. XR’s large numbers made it resilient to repression, but the presence of
repression was a sign that political elites were unlikely to positively respond to XR’s protest to begin
with.

Movement Strategy

XR’s strategy underwent notable changes prior to the International Rebellion. First, it’s worth
noting that the organization’s growth in strength was partially facilitated by XR’s existing decentralized
structure. As Sam Knights, one of the original 15 members of XR, argues, “[the] decentralised structure
means that so long as you are abiding by our key values and principles, you can start organising an
action... without seeking permission... This is what allowed us to grow so rapidly” (Knights 2019). This
highlights the dynamic relationship between movement strategy and strength – how a movement is
structured may facilitate or constrain its ability to grow. And, as I argue below, its growth in strength
may subsequently drive alterations in its strategy.

XR’s membership explosion following the April Rebellion caused two specific changes to the
organization’s strategy. First, XR became significantly more decentralized, largely by necessity – there
were too many new members joining local chapters with little connection to the national team for XR to
remain partially centralized (Taylor 2020a). Increased decentralization ensured the influx of new
members wouldn’t cause decision paralysis; there were simply too many new members to retain the
centralized decision-making power of the original organizers (Salter, Nugent, Taylor 2020a). During the
April Rebellion, the Rapid Response Team and Anchor circle had some centralized decision-making
power over the actions local chapters took at the Rebellion (Rose 2020a, 117). However, by the
International Rebellion, this had changed – there was still a national team to coordinate when major
protests would occur, but it had less authority over actions planned by local chapters and no way to veto
proposed actions (Rose 2020a, 117, Taylor 2019a, Nugent).

Second, XR’s growth in membership caused internal conflicts. Specifically, many people gave up
their “jobs to dedicate themselves to XR full-time. This influx boosted XR’s organisational capacity, but
also brought new ideas about what the group should be, and competing theories about how to achieve
the change needed to tackle the climate crisis” (Taylor 2020a). The months following the April Rebellion
saw significant internal disagreements over XR’s tactics and framing. On one side, Roger Hallam and his
backers argued that XR should escalate its disruptive tactics rapidly to retain the momentum,
undertaking even more controversial actions to cause paralyzing disruption (such as supergluing
children onto subway trains to shut down the beating heart of London’s transportation system) (Taylor
2020a, Rose 2020a, 6-7). However, others argued that XR should avoid actions that would cost them the
public’s favor, and instead take actions that would win the public’s goodwill (Taylor 2020a). This resulted
in highly contentious arguments, particularly over one proposed action (by Hallam’s cohort) to use a
drone to prevent Heathrow Airport from operating (Nugent). While Hallam’s cohort argued for actions
that would cause general disruption to ordinary members of the public, their opponents suggested that
targeting Heathrow would backfire, and argued instead for targeting disruption against actors the public
disliked (e.g., banks, fossil fuel corporations) that were most responsible for the climate crisis (Read, 14-
16, Taylor 2020a, Nugent).

Additional disagreements occurred over questions of framing. Specifically, Hallam and his
supporters wanted XR to stick to its original “beyond politics” framing so as to reach Conservative
voters, whereas others wanted XR to move to the left (Taylor 2020a). For example, XR had received
criticism following the April Rebellion for being overwhelmingly white and middle class, which
manifested especially in XR’s blindness to police racism – the emphasis on arrest as a tactic was criticized as functionally excluding people of color from participating in the movement (Nugent, Taylor 2020a, Salter). As one black member of XR explained, “Arrestability does lie in privilege, and not everyone needs to get arrested” (Nugent). Moreover, XR’s friendliness to the police was criticized as showing a lack of “empathy for communities who experience racist policing” by racial justice campaigners (Nugent). Others argued that XR should be more critical of neoliberal capitalism for its role in driving the climate crisis, suggesting that XR target its messaging and actions against the rich/banks, who are disproportionate emitters of carbon (Read, 15-17, Taylor 2020a).

These disagreements were not fully resolved prior to the International Rebellion. They marked the beginning of a partial change in XR’s tactics and framing, but by the International Rebellion, the transformation had only just begun (Taylor 2020a, Nugent). For example, after significant internal debate, XR decided against the drone action targeting Heathrow Airport, but Hallam and others undertook the action, just not as XR members or representatives (Nugent, Taylor 2020a). Some XR members said that despite the action not being endorsed by XR, it still hurt the group’s image (Nugent). The International Rebellion was also somewhat more targeted against the parties responsible for the climate crisis, but still retained a focus on mass arrests and mass disruption by holding key traffic intersections (Taylor 2020a).

While the general model of holding sites to cause significant disruption (especially by blocking major roads and bridges) remained unchanged during the Rebellion, protests were more targeted, reflecting the internal wrangling over tactics and framing. For example, Rupert Read’s suggestion of targeting Parliament (by occupying Westminster) to highlight government inaction on climate change was largely implemented (Read, 16-17, BBC 2019e). Westminster was occupied for much of the two weeks, with street theatre actions such as delivering a tree to every MP to advocate for reforestation (BBC 2019e, Jones). Additionally, the London City Airport was targeted in an attempt to shut down the
airport (Duncan). This reflects the argument made by Read in an internal memo prior to October which argued that XR should target London City Airport rather than Heathrow, as London City Airport is primarily used by wealthy individuals with private jets who are disproportionately responsible for the climate crisis (Read, 14-15). Other targets included Google, targeted for its failure to remove climate denier content from YouTube, and the City of London (the financial district of London, which is technically a separate political entity) for banks’ funding of fossil fuel companies (Gayle et al, Davies).

Despite these tweaks to XR’s targets and framing, the International Rebellion achieved little policy progress (as detailed in the introduction). I argue that the continuity in XR’s tactics across events played a significant role in explaining their declining impact. XR failed to innovate novel tactics, which resulted in lower media coverage of the protests, and a smaller impact on public opinion. XR used basically used the same tactical repertoire as they had in April, aiming to cause generalized disruption to central London. While actions were somewhat more targeted, the general model and look-and-feel of the protests (holding multiple protest sites to block traffic, using street theatre) remained unchanged. XR was aware of the risk of not innovating; they labeled the International Rebellion “the difficult second album” in the months before October – “repeat your material and you’re boring; innovate and you may lose the magic” (Barasi 2019b).

XR chose to repeat their material and saw less media coverage as a result. As one reporter notes, “[October] failed to capture the public and the media in the same way as previous protests had... With each action, the shock factor of blockades, ‘swarming’ and mass die-ins has diminishing returns. ‘It’s got to a stage where certain types of action could just be normalised which could really kill off the movement,’” (Salter). The public and media were already expecting XR’s tactics – they had started to become normalized and have diminishing returns (Dodd et al). A similar argument is made by another reporter, who notes “it proved impossible to recreate the surprise and novelty that defined the earlier protests. Although XR held more sites in October and said it had more people arrested... the protests
failed to catch the public’s imagination in the same way. Actions that would have been headline news just six months earlier... were now seen as par for the course by the media” (Taylor 2020a).

Additionally, while XR’s move to a more decentralized structure facilitated its growth in membership, during the Rebellion, decentralization backfired. On October 17th, a local chapter of XR staged a protest at the Canning Town subway station during rush hour, gluing themselves to the train to stop it from leaving (Townsend, Taylor 2020a). This only occurred because XR lacked any group with centralized authority to veto actions. An internal poll prior to the action found that a significant majority of XR members (72%) were opposed to the action occurring under any condition (Taylor 2019a). However, the poll’s result did not have binding force – while some of those planning the action backed down, others went ahead (Taylor 2019a, Knights 2019). Sam Knights noted, “this same group tried to do the exact same thing during the April rebellion. At the time, we still had a more hierarchical way of organising; we established a body that had oversight over the entire rebellion called the Rapid Response Team... I was in the meeting when this action was finally put to bed and... had a couple of us not threatened to publicly quit if this action took place, then it would have happened in April” (Knights 2019). The Rapid Response Team stopped the Canning Town action from happening in April 2019; by October, XR had become more decentralized, so there was no group with the power to veto damaging actions. One follow-up study which conducted fieldwork of XR members found that many interviewees thought Canning Town showed the limits of decentralization; a number argued that XR needed more established democratic procedures for blocking actions from happening and electing people to leadership positions who would have the power to make executive decisions (Fotaki & Foroughi, 12-14).

Canning Town was a major blunder – the subway station was in a primarily working class, non-white neighborhood; many civilians impacted by the protest were on zero-hour contracts (in which employers don’t have to pay benefits or provide a minimum number of working hours per week) (Taylor 2020a, Nugent, Taylor 2019a). Angry commuters whose ride to work was being disrupted eventually
dragged the protestors off the train and physically beat them; a video of the incident went viral and drew widespread condemnation of XR in the press for targeting public transit (a solution to the climate crisis) in a working-class neighborhood (Fotaki & Foroughi, 12, Taylor 2020a, Nugent, Salter, Rose 2020a, 120). One representative headline read, “Too white, too middle class and lacking in empathy, Extinction Rebellion has a race problem, critics say” (Lewis). Another article by the right-wing Daily Mail read, “Extinction Rebellion’s reign of mayhem in London finally hit the rocks today when commuters took matters into their own hands... their efforts to disrupt public transport were met with a furious backlash from commuters, industry groups and politicians, leading one XR spokesman to admit the move had been a 'huge own goal'” (Adams). The Canning Town action and subsequent backlash reversed the energy and momentum XR had gained following the police attempt to ban the protests, with the Rebellion officially ending a few days later (Dodd et al).

The Canning Town action was enormously controversial within XR (Townsend, Taylor 2019a). Some argued that it was critical to generating a spike in media coverage – while ten days of arrests had failed to “cut through,” Canning Town was what got XR members invited onto radio and TV shows, whereas media attention had been limited beforehand (Taylor 2019a). In the words of one XR member, “Our phones and inboxes have never been as busy...We have had people on radio and TV programmes this morning and have more lined up for this afternoon and this evening... Now conversations will be going on about what we are doing – and hopefully why we are doing it – at dinner tables and in pubs up and down the country... It has been polarising but it has created... an opportunity for some real change” (Taylor 2019a). However, most XR members recognized that the action lost them goodwill with the public (Knights 2019, Taylor 2019a, Townsend, Nugent). For example, one member told reporters “We were vehemently opposed to it. We feel that a handful of protesters have jeopardised our movement, turning public opinion against us and creating a potential schism within our ranks” (Taylor 2019a). Another member echoed this argument, saying, “Our fear was that targeting public transport, an
environmentally friendly way to travel, would alienate the public and muddle what we were trying to say in the minds of the public” (Taylor 2019a). I discuss the impact of Canning Town on the public’s perception of XR in greater detail in the next section, arguing that Canning Town, and XR’s failure to innovate new tactics more generally, explain why the public turned against XR during the International Rebellion.

Taken together, the evidence presented in this section provides moderate evidence for the importance of movement strategy. XR’s overall tactics and framing were only slightly changed between April and October 2019, and there’s no evidence that these changes can explain the changes in policy outcomes. However, XR’s shift to a more decentralized structure resulted in an extremely unpopular and damaging protest action (Canning Town), which contributed to a more hostile media and public reaction to XR. In addition, XR’s failure to innovate novel ways to cause disruption (beyond being slightly more targeted) meant that media coverage of the International Rebellion was lower than in April, as XR’s actions were not as fresh of a story anymore. To be clear, there is no direct evidence linking XR’s strategic choices to their limited policy impact. However, XR’s strategic choices clearly had an indirect effect on their ability to influence policy, insofar as their choices resulted in lower media coverage and a smaller impact on public opinion. In other words, XR’s strategic blunders meant that they were unable to activate the public preference mechanism during the International Rebellion – the salience of climate change did not increase by enough to make Boris Johnson’s administration calculate that it was electorally optimal to change policy accordingly. This argument is more fully developed in the next two sections.

The Public

While Canning Town generated a spike in media coverage of XR, the International Rebellion generally appeared to received less media coverage than the April Rebellion, and post-Canning Town
coverage was quite unfavorable (Taylor 2020a, Salter, Dodd et al, Nugent, Rose 2020a, 120). The decrease in favorability is clearly explained by the Canning Town action – coverage was about the same level of favorability as April prior to Canning Town (Salter, Taylor 2020a). However, the fact that XR received less coverage despite greater numbers and greater disruption is somewhat surprising. I argue that this change can be attributed to two factors. First, as argued in the prior section, XR failed to innovate novel tactics, which produced significantly less media interest than in April 2019.

Second, the International Rebellion suffered from poor timing. In October, “the UK was in the midst of Brexit convulsions” (Taylor 2020a). Boris Johnson was quickly hurtling towards a no-deal Brexit that would trigger on October 31st after months of declaring Halloween to be the final deadline, so Brexit was dominating news coverage, unlike in April (BBC 2019f, Rose 2020a, 124-125). Throughout October (and the International Rebellion), there were daily updates on the status of Johnson’s Brexit deal as it was negotiated with the EU and struggled through the UK Parliament (Sandford). However, by the end of the month, Johnson had failed to pass his deal through Parliament and was forced to extend the deadline again to January 2020; he subsequently called for snap elections in December with the hopes of increasing the number of Conservative seats in Parliament (Sandford, BBC 2019i). Google Trends indicates just how much Brexit was dominating the news cycle in October 2019 compared to April – the April Rebellion occurred after a crash in searches for Brexit (following Theresa May extending the deadline in late March), whereas the International Rebellion occurred during a peak in interest in Brexit (BBC 2019g, Google Trends 2021c). The images below demonstrate this – the yellow line (for Brexit) falls massively prior to the April Rebellion, but spikes in October, during the International Rebellion.
XR also had a smaller impact on public opinion in October than in April – they “failed to capture the public’s imagination in the same way” (Taylor 2020a). This manifested in how favorably the public viewed XR. Two surveys conducted by YouGov on October 7th and 15th (both before Canning Town) found that a majority of respondents (53-54%) either somewhat or strongly opposed XR’s efforts to shut down London, whereas 36-37% somewhat or strongly supported XR (YouGov 2019a, Ibbetson). This level of support and opposition was basically identical across the two waves of the survey (Ibbetson). Another third survey was run by YouGov following Canning Town. That survey asked if respondents sympathized more with the protesters or the commuters; 63% identified with the commuters, 13% with XR, and the remainder either said “don’t know” or “neither” (Ibbetson). This suggests that Canning Town reduced XR’s support, as they went from 36-37% support to only 13% identifying with them. That said, the difference is also a result of the different question being asked – many people might have been
somewhat supportive of XR, but identified more with the commuters in Canning Town. Taken together, these surveys demonstrate that XR’s disruption was substantially less popular in October than in April.

Despite media accounts suggesting that XR had a small impact on the salience of climate change, the data presents a mixed picture. Ipsos-MORI’s polling of which issues are most important found that in October 2019, the percentage of people rating climate change/the environment as most important jumped 6 points to 20% (Ipsos-MORI 2019b). Importantly, these numbers are identical to April, when concern for the environment also jumped 6 points to 20% (Ipsos-MORI 2019a, 2019b). The close temporal relation between the International Rebellion and the spike in the environment’s salience suggests that the International Rebellion had a similar impact on climate change’s salience as the April Rebellion. However, surveys by YouGov show that after an unprecedented spike in public concern in April, climate change remained at the same level of salience throughout 2019 (around 27-31%)—salience did not notably change in October or November (YouGov 2019b, 2021a). This suggests that the International Rebellion had relatively little impact on public opinion. To some extent, these data validate the claim that XR had a more muted impact in October. In April, there was consensus among polls that the salience of the environment spiked following XR’s mobilization; in October, there’s one poll showing a spike in salience, and another showing no change at all. Moreover, given the expectation that a larger protest would have a larger impact on public opinion, the lack of change suggests that XR had a much more muted impact in October. In the images below, the Ipsos-MORI graph shows a spike in the portion of the public listing the environment as a top issue following October 2019, whereas the YouGov graph shows no spike or meaningful change at all.
What explains the change in XR’s favorability and (to a lesser extent) ability to impact the salience of climate change? First, Brexit played a clear role. Both Ipsos-MORI and YouGov’s survey data shows that Brexit was overwhelmingly the most salient issue to the public in October (Ipsos-MORI 2019b, YouGov 2021a). Additionally, the intense media coverage of the period running up to the October 31st deadline may well have traded off with covering the International Rebellion, resulting in a smaller impact on public opinion (Taylor 2020a). Second, as argued above, XR’s inability to innovate novel tactics likely contributed both to the public turning against them and to their reduced impact on climate change’s salience (Taylor 2020a, Barasi 2019b). Additionally, XR’s victories following April may have resulted in the public believing climate change was already being tackled, thereby reducing their
ability to impact the issue’s salience – “If the public believe the protesters have already won, continued street blockades could look unnecessary” (Barasi 2019b).

Beyond making it harder to “capture to public’s imagination,” the lack of novel tactics may have affected XR’s impact on public opinion in a simpler way: people were more frustrated with their commutes being disrupted. The YouGov poll indicating majority opposition to shutting down London demonstrates a significant reversal from April – whereas most people supported XR in April, by October, respondents opposed actions that impacted transportation within London. As Neil Gunningham argues, “[there is] a risk that causing disruption, for days and perhaps weeks on end, will cause great resentment and a backlash against XR from frustrated commuters, businesses that are losing money and others unable to go about their daily routines” (Gunningham 2020, 30). While this type of backlash was also present in April (motorists yelling “get a job” to XR protestors blocking a bridge), the Canning Town action remains the most emblematic instance of it to date – there’s a big difference between hostile language in April and physical violence against XR by angry commuters in October. That difference also bears out in the polls mentioned above, which show that the public reversed from being majority supportive of XR in April to majority opposed in October (Ibbetson). This change is also reflected in the slew of op-eds arguing that despite the public disliking XR’s tactics, their tactics are in fact effective at keeping the climate on the agenda and increasing its salience – in other words, even defenders of XR realized that the public had begun to turn against them (Tryl, Lam, Mance, Sinclair).

Thus, there is moderate evidence to support the importance of the public in explaining XR’s outcomes in October 2019. XR’s impact declined as media coverage fell and became less friendly. The public increasingly disliked XR, and their protest had a smaller impact on the salience of the environment in public opinion polls. Additionally, the International Rebellion was poorly timed – Brexit drama was occupying almost all of the bandwidth of the media and public, which may explain both why XR had a smaller impact on public opinion and why that impact did not translate to policy change. On
the other hand, the environment reached the same level of salience in public opinion polls as in April 2019, but this did not produce a meaningful response from the Johnson administration. This cuts against the importance of the public in explaining policy outcomes insofar as it contradicts the theoretical expectation that policymakers will be responsive when an issue reaches high salience.

**Political Elites**

Prior to the International Rebellion, the external political context changed to be less favorable to XR. Most importantly, Theresa May resigned as Prime Minister following months of failed attempts to pass a Brexit deal through Parliament, and was replaced by Boris Johnson (Walker et al, Salter). In general, Johnson was more right-wing than May. For example, Johnson expelled moderate Conservative MPs from the party after they voted with Labour for a bill to prevent a no-deal Brexit – a dramatic step to which Theresa May had never resorted (McTague). Johnson’s voting record as an MP was generally not pro-environment, generally voting against emissions reduction measures between 2004-2020 (for example, he never voted for plans to financially incentivize low carbon emission electricity generation) (The Week UK). Johnson also received tens of thousands in donations from climate-denial groups during his runs for Mayor of London and the Conservative Leadership (The Week UK). While he was in May’s cabinet as Foreign Secretary, Johnson saw the number of officials in the Foreign Office working full time on climate change drop 25% (The Week UK).

In addition to the move to the right represented by Boris Johnson’s Premiership, the lead-up to the International Rebellion suggested that police would not be caught unawares again. The police planned to be much less tolerant of XR’s protests in October (Gregory). London’s head of police said in the lead up to October that a repeat of April would be “wholly unacceptable,” and that April “went well beyond the realm of what was reasonable and we would not tolerate that level of disruption again” (Gregory). This was likely a partial product of Conservative media, which was highly critical of the police
for failing to effectively clear XR protestors in April (Read, 12-13). A week before the International Rebellion began, reports indicated that specialist “protest removal” police squads would be brought to London from across the UK to counter XR’s use of locks and superglue to hold sites for days on end (Gayle et al 2019a). Additionally, there was discussion of making the police response to XR more agile and proactive (Gayle et al 2019a). This was in the context of existing law (the Public Order Act of 1986), which required that people be given the opportunity to stop committing an arrestable offense before police were allowed to arrest them, making it difficult for police to arrest XR protestors who could simply relocate and cause disruption elsewhere (Gayle et al 2019a).

As expected, political elites were less friendly to XR during the International Rebellion. The day after the Rebellion started, Boris Johnson publicly condemned XR as “uncooperative crusties... littering the road” who lived in “hemp-smelling bivouacs” (Gillespie). The police response was also harsher in October than in April (Taylor 2020a). Many police officers were pulled to London from around the UK to deal with the International Rebellion (Gunningham 2020, 14, Gayle et al 2019a). Two days into the Rebellion, London police activated Section 14 of the Public Order Act of 1986, which allows police to set conditions on non-mobile protests – this enabled them to attempt to corral protestors into specific areas around Westminster to lessen the disruption, and arrest anyone who didn’t comply (BBC 2019e). The addition of specialized protest police also made XR’s typical use of superglue and padlocks somewhat less effective – police had the tools to more quickly remove glued/locked-on XR members, whereas they had largely been blindsided by the use of glue and locks in April (Gayle et al 2019a).

Another example of the harsher police response was noted above. On the night of October 14th, nine days into the Rebellion, London Metropolitan Police used Section 14 to issue a blanket ban on all continued protest, (Gayle et al 2019b, Townsend). XR and a variety of civil rights groups immediately appealed the ban as unconstitutional, though the appeal was only processed weeks after the Rebellion had ended (Gayle et al 2019b, Townsend). While the ban did not end the protest (it drove more people
to join the next day), it showed an increasing willingness on the part of police to take harsh measures to crack down on XR and restore London to a non-disrupted normal (Dodd et al).

As noted in the introduction, the International Rebellion saw little policy response from the Conservative government to XR’s demands of a climate emergency declaration, binding citizen’s assembly, and net zero emission by 2025. Unlike in April, XR did not receive meetings with government officials in October (The Guardian Editorial Board). The lack of meetings may have been a product of internal disagreements about XR’s strategy between April and October resulted in de-emphasizing XR’s original focus on seeking negotiations with elected political officials (The Economist 2020).

There were far fewer mentions of XR in Parliamentary debates following the Rebellion, partially because there were no new pieces of legislation introduced as a result of the protest. One member of the House of Lords noted that “From the school climate strikes, the Extinction Rebellion protests and many more related campaigns, it is clear that stopping climate breakdown is at the top of the agenda for many people” (hansard.parliament.uk 2019b). Labour and Green MPs spoke favorably of XR in a Parliamentary debate in October, with Labour’s Environment Shadow Secretary saying, “Whatever anyone thinks about the recent protests, Extinction Rebellion has, alongside the youth climate strikes, dramatically shifted the conversation about climate and environmental breakdown” (TheyWorkForYou 2019c). However, Conservative and Independent MPs did not, arguing that while they too believed in greater climate action, XR was going about it in the wrong way. One Independent MP said, “I am with them in spirit, but not in effect. My worry is this: our constituents are, broadly speaking, sympathetic to what... [XR] wants to achieve... but they will soon start to turn a tin ear to an organisation that stops people travelling by public transport... there is also something deeply worrying if it is going to turn people we need to be supporting our cause away from it” (TheyWorkForYou 2019c). Another Conservative MP noted the images of XR protestors “we have seen in the press, who have defaced buildings and chained themselves to tube carriages” (TheyWorkForYou 2019c).
The above parliamentary debates did not achieve new legislation on emissions. The only positive response by the Johnson administration to the Rebellion was the announcement of a new cabinet committee on climate change, headed by Boris Johnson (Gov.uk 2019). The committee was announced near the end of the International Rebellion and pulled together ministers from different departments to coordinate the UK’s strategy to reach net zero emissions by 2050 and prepare for hosting the COP26 UN Climate Conference (Gov.uk 2019).

Even as Boris Johnson appeared to take (admittedly small) steps by forming the committee, his administration also began to work with police departments to design new legislation to make suppressing XR’s protests easier (Dodd et al). The Guardian noted that “The [police] source said government wanted to see more robust and proactive action from police: ‘They want ‘move forward’ tactics and to see the police are doing something and clearing the streets [of XR protestors]’” (Dodd et al). The Home Office (a government department) liaised with police departments to figure out ways to amend the Public Order Act of 1986, with one proposed change being to permit police to place restrictions on protests that caused “disruption” rather than “serious disruption” (Dodd et al). This was significant because the Public Order Act required that protests must cause “serious disruption” before police were allowed to restrict protest, which had meant that police were hamstrung in their ability to respond to XR (Dodd et al). By changing the law to enable police to restrict “disruption” in addition to “serious disruption,” police would have been able to legally ban or restrict XR’s future protests. XR members and civil rights lawyers decried the move to consider increasing police powers as a threat to the right to protest (Dodd et al). This suggests that the International Rebellion may have started a process that could produce not just a neutral outcome, but an actively negative one.

To what extent can these changes be attributed to the International Rebellion and XR? There is weak evidence that the establishment of Johnson’s climate change committee is causally related to XR’s mobilization. The fact that the change was announced at the end of the International Rebellion in a
press release touting Johnson’s environmental credentials suggests that it is plausible that XR caused the change. Additionally, given that the International Rebellion had at least a modest effect on public opinion, there is also some theoretical backing for linking the committee’s creation to XR. For example, it may be that the committee was announced to show that the government was doing something about climate change in an effort to win over voters prior leading up to the December elections.

However, there is nothing written about this committee in the context of XR, so it is impossible to definitively attribute the change to XR’s mobilization. Ironically, this lack of evidence is also a finding – media interest in XR declined in October, as noted above, making it harder to establish that the protest directly caused any changes. Moreover, the committee does not represent any new policy changes – it was created to ensure the UK would meet the existing emissions target of net zero by 2050. This means the creation of the cabinet committee does not represent any significant positive change for XR. In contrast, there is strong evidence that the talk of amending the Public Order Act to make it easier for police to restrict protest was directly and solely caused by XR – the process to begin drafting new legislation was initiated in direct response to the International Rebellion (Dodd et al). Government dissatisfaction with the police’s legal inability to clear the streets of XR fast enough drove them to begin the process of formulating new legislation to curtail XR’s ability to protest.

It’s important to point out that the International Rebellion had positive effects on Labour elites, even if it did not affect the Conservative administration. Following the International Rebellion, the Labour Party voted to endorse a socialist Green New Deal and net zero emissions by 2030 (as well as public ownership of energy companies and massive tax-based redistribution) at the party’s conference prior to the December snap elections (Knights 2019, Kinniburgh, 132). This cannot be attributed to the April Rebellion – it occurred months after XR’s meeting with John McDonnell, which only extracted a commitment to back net zero by 2050 and float the possibility of a 2030 target to party leadership. Additionally, following the conference, the Labour Party 2019 Manifesto put a “Green Industrial
Revolution” as its headline issue, calling for a massive expansion of investment in renewable energy, public transportation, and reforestation (Labour Party 2019a, 2019b). It wasn’t just a symbolic move either – prior to the election, Labour campaigned heavily on its “raft of policies to rapidly decarbonize the economy and invest in sustainable, well-paid, unionised jobs: its so-called green industrial revolution” (Taylor 2020a).

These changes were in large part caused by XR (Kinniburgh, 132, Knights 2019, Taylor 2020a). XR cannot take all the credit – the move to embrace a strongly environmental policy platform was certainly facilitated by the presence of an elite ally in Jeremy Corbyn (from Labour’s left-wing) as Leader of Labour (Knights 2019). That said, there is doubly decisive evidence that XR played the key role in driving the party to the left on the environment – one political theorist “credited the movement with ‘spooking’ previously hostile British trade unions into backing a hugely ambitious socialist Green New Deal resolution at the Labour Party conference” (Kinniburgh, 132). In other words, XR’s mobilization changed the positions of previously intransigent veto players (trade unions) that otherwise would have blocked aggressive decarbonization.

XR can’t take all the credit – Labour’s change in platform was also internally driven by campaigning from party activists, particularly Labour for a Green New Deal. Labour for a Green New Deal played an important role in changing the party’s platform – they brought the resolution to the conference, campaigned heavily for it, and the party’s final Manifesto closely resembled their proposal (Green Industrial Revolution is basically equivalent to Green New Deal) (Kinniburgh, 131). However, XR still played a key role – “A spokesperson for Labour for a Green New Deal, the group that drafted the resolution and campaigned heavily for its adoption, agreed that XR... played an important role in tipping public opinion—and some of the UK’s largest unions—in favor of radical climate action” (Kinniburgh, 132). In other words, even insiders from Labour for a Green New Deal agree that XR-driven changes to
public opinion were the precondition for their successful campaign – their campaign wouldn’t have succeeded had XR not “spooked” previously hostile trade unions.

Why did the Johnson administration not respond positively to XR’s mobilization? XR had grown in numbers and funding, which should have coincided with greater impact, yet it did not. Furthermore, climate change reached the same salience as it had following the April Rebellion, meaning it would make sense for a reelection focused Boris Johnson to push through broadly popular climate policy. Yet, despite consistent polling data showing most respondents wanted the UK government to do more about climate change, no policy change occurred at the federal level. It’s worth noting that no authors have written in detail about why the Johnson administration did not positively respond to XR beyond noting that he has been more hostile/repressive than May was. As a result, this section applies existing theory to make plausible conjectures that may explain the puzzle of the muted response to the International Rebellion.

First, the change in partisanship (May to Johnson) likely trumped increases in movement strength. The limited available evidence (e.g., his public comments and greater desire to use repression to clear the streets) suggests Johnson is significantly more hostile to XR than May was (Salter). This is exemplified by comments from one Labour MP in a Parliamentary debate, who pointed out that, “The Members sitting on the Government Benches look comfortable, unruffled and complacent, while the Extinction Rebellion protests are being fiercely suppressed on the streets just outside this House” (TheyWorkForYou 2019c). In other words, Conservatives attempted to ignore and repress XR in October, whereas they had met with them and responded with new policy in April. Given existing theory predicting that movements will have a hard time affecting policy under a hostile partisan government, this seems like an obvious explanation for why stronger mobilization did not translate into policy results. This explanation seems insufficient on its own though – if May saw an electoral advantage for her party
to legislating a new emissions target, Johnson should have too, especially given that he was actually facing reelection and public opinion would have supported new climate policy.

This apparent paradox can be explained by political learning on the part of party elites – specifically, they may have realized that XR participants are overwhelmingly left-wing, either voting for Labour or the Green Party – basically no Conservatives participated in the April or International Rebellions (Saunders et al, 4). While there’s no evidence that this data was available to party elites, it seems highly plausible that the left-wing lean of XR participants could have been gleaned from observing XR’s protests (which visibly draw on left-wing protest repertoires), regardless of XR’s attempt at apolitical framing (Spicer). In fact, Johnson’s comments labeling XR as uncooperative crusties living in hemp-smelling bivouacs seems to confirm this – Johnson saw XR participants as a modern version of left-wing hippies from the 1960s trying to recreate the summer of love (Graham). This shows that Johnson likely viewed XR not as “activist moderates” who represented the general electorate (and therefore were worth appealing to for electoral reasons), but as “activist extremists” who did not represent the general public (Lohmann 319-320).

This, paired with the change in partisanship, seems like the most plausible explanation for why Johnson did not meaningfully respond to the International Rebellion, while Labour elites like Corbyn did. Johnson realized that XR (and their passive supporters) did not in any way represent his primary constituents – they were not Conservative voters, and would vote Labour/Green regardless of what he did. Additionally, the widespread criticism in Conservative media calling for a harsher police response in April may have made Johnson realize that it would be electorally advantageous to repress XR to appeal to Conservative law-and-order voters. Additionally, given that XR lost majority support from the public in October, there was little reason to appeal to them by changing policy, especially if doing so would come at the cost of appeasing the Conservative base in the run-up to the December election. In this sense, XR’s misstep at Canning Town and failure to innovate new tactics meant that although they still
managed to impact the salience of climate change, the Conservative majority in Parliament likely saw few votes to be gained in making concessions to a group that was hated by their base and being lampooned by both right and left-wing media. In contrast, the Labour Party realized that XR had meaningfully changed the salience of the environment (especially among Labour/Green voters) and calculated that they could win more votes by making a Green Industrial Revolution their primary policy issue.

Second, the unfortunate timing of the International Rebellion seems to have played a significant role in mitigating the impact of the protest. Brexit was dominating the news cycle, public opinion, and the policymaking agenda. The extreme salience of Brexit in public opinion seems to have constrained XR’s ability to bring climate change to the top of the policy agenda. Even had the International Rebellion caused a significant alteration in the salience of the environment, the Johnson administration would have been too busy frantically trying to negotiate and pass a Brexit deal to make room on the policy agenda for climate legislation. Moreover, once the Brexit deadline had been extended and elections were called for December, Parliament only had two weeks (from the end of October to mid-November) before it was dissolved 25 days prior to the election, as is normal under UK law (BBC 2019i, Parliament.uk). Thus, there was realistically only a tiny two-week window between Brexit drama and Parliament’s dissolution in which climate policy could have been passed through Parliament – hardly enough time to draft, amend, and vote on substantial new legislation.

Third, the Johnson administration may not have believed a net zero target sooner than 2050 was politically or economically feasible. The CCC as an institution has an enormous amount of credibility within the UK, with one commentator arguing that it has effectively depoliticized climate change and transformed the issue into a mere technocratic problem (Judt 2020). As a result, political leaders may have stuck to the CCC’s recommendation (which had not changed from net zero by 2050) despite XR’s mobilization, believing that net zero by 2050 was the limit of what was possible (Judt 2020, The
Scotsman). While the CCC clearly did not limit the range of Labour’s imagination, it may have limited the range of what the Johnson administration thought was possible, as it seems to have in Scotland (The Scotsman). This may also explain why the only positive change made by the Conservative government following the International Rebellion was the creation of a committee to coordinate the push to meet the existing net zero target – changing the target was off the table, so (minor) action was taken to meet the existing target instead. Put another way, XR’s influence was hamstrung by the competing influence of a highly credible group of technocrats (the CCC) who did not endorse further policy changes.

The International Rebellion also had effects outside of federal UK politics. More cities declared climate emergencies following the International Rebellion – by XR’s third Rebellion in September 2020, 67% of UK cities had issued an emergency declaration, a significant increase (Smyth & Walters, 621). More significantly, on October 31st, Scotland signed an amendment to their version of the CCA into law, legislating a new target of net zero emissions by 2045 (Gov.scot 2021a). Furthermore, the law established a citizen’s assembly on climate change to deliver a report on what policies the Scottish government should take to reach their emissions targets (Gov.scot 2021b). While the law doesn’t require the government to accept the assembly’s recommendations, it does require it to respond and clarify which proposals it will adopt within six months of the assembly’s report (legislation.gov.uk).

It’s highly unclear whether Scotland’s amendment was in part caused by XR. It’s important to note that the process of passing the legislation began following the April Rebellion, so at best, can be attributed to both the April and International Rebellions (which had significant actions in Edinburgh) (The Scotsman, Taylor 2020a). The fact that the legislation partially meets two of XR’s demands (fast decarbonization and citizen’s assemblies) also is suggestive that XR’s ideas were influential in shaping the law’s contents. As argued in both last chapter and this one, XR’s mobilization played a decisive role in altering public opinion and getting XR’s core policy prescriptions into the political mainstream (The Guardian Editorial Board, Mance, Lam, Sinclair). Unfortunately, little is written about XR in the context
of Scotland’s new legislation, making it difficult to definitively prove that XR was the primary cause of the law being adopted. Additionally, during the process of formulating the legislation, multiple attempts to bring the date closer to XR’s desired date of net zero by 2025 were blocked, with the Scottish Environment Secretary citing that the CCC had recommended 2045 as the soonest feasible date for full decarbonization (The Scotsman). This suggests that the CCC was a significant alternate cause in driving the adoption of the legislation, though it’s likely that XR’s mobilization (especially in April) played a role in making net zero politically feasible to begin with (Mance, Sinclair, Lam). Regardless, this thesis is primarily focused on the federal level of the UK; as a result, it is beyond this chapter’s scope to evaluate in depth how XR’s mobilization has affected Scottish politics.

Overall, this section provides strong evidence for the importance of political elites in explaining movement outcomes. The shift from an unfriendly to hostile executive branch resulted in a more repressive response to XR’s mobilization and coincided with a decrease in policy responsiveness. This change, while partially attributable to Boris Johnson being to the political right of Theresa May, is also likely a product of political learning, whereby elites of both parties realized that XR was an overwhelmingly left-wing group and treated them accordingly. Labour actively responded to their demands, whereas the Conservative government had electoral reason to repress them to appeal to their base, which disliked XR. Notably, this result is in direct tension with the April Rebellion, where XR achieved significant policy gains despite an unfriendly administration.

**Conclusion**

In summary, this chapter analyzed the International Rebellion in October 2019. I argue that the few positive outcomes (the new cabinet committee, altered Labour platform, and Scottish net zero legislation) can plausibly be attributed to XR’s mobilization. That said, there’s much less definitive evidence that XR played a key causal role for these events than the changes following the April
Rebellions, in large part because little has been written about these changes in the context of XR. I argue that changes in non-movement-controlled variables played the primary role in reducing XR’s impact. Boris Johnson was more repressive than Theresa May and viewed XR as outside the Conservative constituency, while Brexit dominated the press and public opinion, making it difficult for XR to break through. Movement-controlled variables fare less well: movement strength appears unrelated to XR’s outcomes, validating existing theory which suggests that mobilization is necessary but insufficient to win policy change – large numbers don’t guarantee success against a hostile regime (Amenta et al 2019, 455). However, the International Rebellion does provide strong evidence for the importance of having a somewhat centralized organizational structure, insofar as decentralization following April enabled a highly damaging action to occur. Furthermore, this chapter highlighted the importance of innovating novel disruptive tactics – XR’s failure to innovate appears to have contributed significantly to their more muted impact on public opinion and the press. Thus, this chapter provides strong evidence for H3d, moderate evidence for H3b and H3c, and strong evidence against H3a.

The evidence presented in this chapter also makes the somewhat novel point that movements utilizing disruptive strategies may stagnate absent the introduction of new, novel tactics, meaning an unchanged independent variable could theoretically explain a change in the dependent variable. More broadly, this chapter also raises interesting questions about the relative importance of different variables at different points in a social movement campaign. Why did similar actors (e.g., Conservative and Labour elites) react differently across time to the same movement, with the same demands, utilizing basically the same tactics and framing? Why does the explanatory power of movement-controlled variables fare well in April, but not in October, and vice versa for non-movement-controlled variables? Put simply, why do some variables appear to matter more early in a campaign, while others matter more as a campaign ages? I attempt to answer these questions in the following chapter and the discussion following the three case studies.
Chapter 3: The Autumn and Impossible Rebellions

This chapter examines XR’s two most recent Rebellions – the Autumn Rebellion, which occurred in early September 2020, and the Impossible Rebellion, which occurred in late August 2021. The choice to examine two protest events in a single chapter is motivated by the fact that the events bear striking similarity across most of the variables of interest. XR used a nearly identical strategy for both events, the political context surrounding each protest was quite similar, and the protests are XR’s least successful Rebellions to date. The structure of the chapter is as follows. I begin with a brief introduction summarizing both protests. I then divide the chapter into four sections, discussing movement strength, movement strategy, the public, and political elites.

I argue that both protests can be accurately classified as failures. Specifically, I argue that while each event saw a few positive outcomes, the primary result of the Autumn and Impossible Rebellions has been the introduction of legislation that would significantly curtail the right to protest in the UK – a negative outcome, rather than a neutral one. I argue that the lack of positive policy outcomes is mostly explained by changes among political elites, and partially explained by decreases in movement strength. As in previous chapters, below are two tables summarizing key variables of interest in the Autumn and Impossible Rebellions.

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<th>Internal Clusters</th>
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<th>External Clusters</th>
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<th>Medium (increased slightly)</th>
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<td>Failure</td>
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*The Autumn and Impossible Rebellions: A Brief Summary*

The Autumn Rebellion began on September 1st, 2020, while the Impossible Rebellion began on August 23rd, 2021 (Murray & Stohrer, Gayle 2021a). As with previous Rebellions, both events saw XR utilized nonviolent disruptive tactics with a street theatre element for 10+ days in London. Unlike past protests, both Rebellions saw XR shift its strategy to focus its actions on those it deemed responsible for the climate crisis, with protests targeting right-wing media in 2020 and the banks funding fossil fuel corporations in 2021 (Taylor 2020b, Gayle 2021b). This is in contrast to previous Rebellions, where XR had largely focused on causing generalized disruption (e.g., by blocking key traffic intersections) to the wider public. In both 2020 and 2021, XR faced a more repressive police response than in past events, with police officers having adapted to XR’s use of padlocks and superglue (Taylor 2020b, Gayle & Carrington). Neither protest saw as much media coverage as XR’s events in 2019, coverage was more negative (especially after a controversial action in 2020), and public opinion was barely altered following the protests (Gayle & Carrington, YouGov 2021a, 2021b).

Both protests were failures. No new climate policy was promulgated following either protest; the UK government did not meet XR’s demands for faster decarbonization or a citizen’s assembly. Instead, the Johnson administration introduced a bill (which is likely to pass) to expand the police’s powers to repress peaceful disruptive protest in response to the Autumn Rebellion in 2020 (Specia). The one positive outcome of XR’s recent protests is that they appear to have spooked the financial sector, with banks and investors not pushing for new oil drilling projects due to the recent wave of climate protests (Wallace).
**Movement Strength**

XR lost strength after the International Rebellion for two reasons. First, the backlash to Canning Town had real negative consequences. Following the International Rebellion, membership plateaued and donations fell – XR began to quickly burn through its cash on hand, spending much more than it was receiving (Nugent). XR’s waning strength caused the organization to alter its strategy. Many within XR argued its falling popularity with the public, falling donations, and declining membership were a product of Canning Town and other unpopular actions that had been pushed for by Roger Hallam’s faction (Nugent). These facts gave those seeking a shift in strategy ammunition to argue for a rethinking of some of XR’s core ideas (Nugent). These internal arguments are discussed in greater detail in the section on movement strategy.

The second reason for XR’s decline in strength was the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. XR’s planned third Rebellion was slated to use targeted disruptive actions intended to arouse the public’s sympathy, hoping that this would translate to increased donations and XR regaining solid financial footing (Taylor 2020a). However, these plans were ruined by the emergence of COVID-19, which forced XR to postpone their next planned Rebellion from May 2020 to September 2020 (Taylor 2020a). The forced postponement of the Rebellion wrecked XR’s finances – they had been banking on raising money following a May Rebellion and were forced to stop paying living allowances to many volunteers when they ran out of money in April 2020 (Taylor 2020a, Salter). This continued loss of resources drove changes to XR’s strategy, which are detailed in the next section.

The Autumn Rebellion, when it finally happened, saw lower attendance than in April or October 2019, though an exact number is not available (Taylor 2020b). While part of this is was likely a product of XR’s plateauing membership following the International Rebellion, a much larger cause of low attendance was COVID-19, with one journalist writing that “Numbers on the streets have been smaller – mainly because of the impact of the coronavirus pandemic” (Taylor 2020b). That said, the Autumn
Rebellion still managed to draw thousands to the street (Taylor & Murray). The limited available information suggests that XR has been perpetually low on funds since October 2019 – they ran out of money to pay their central team in early 2020, meaning the Autumn Rebellion occurred under significant financial constraints (Salter, Nugent).

The Autumn Rebellion did not bolster XR’s strength as hoped. A widely-criticized action near the end of the Autumn Rebellion (discussed in greater detail in the next section) resulted in XR losing the financial support of the Climate Emergency Fund, a significant large-dollar donor which had given XR $350,000 in the previous year (Carver). Additionally, the Autumn Rebellion resulted in the introduction of new policing legislation that would significantly restrict the right to protest and expand police powers to curb disruptive protests (Specia). While the bill has yet to be enacted, its introduction following the Autumn Rebellion signaled an increasingly repressive police response and somewhat more hostile partisan environment, increasing the cost of participating in XR’s protests. In other words, the policing bill’s introduction signaled a disincentive to joining XR, making it more difficult for XR to grow its ranks.

The Impossible Rebellion similarly drew smaller numbers than previous protests, with speculation that XR strategically chose a location for the opening ceremony to make it seem like their numbers were greater than they actually were (Gayle 2021a). That said, thousands still participated, though numbers on the street were lower than April 2019 (when XR had drawn 6,000-10,000 people to London) (Gayle 2021b). Despite losing a major donor following the Autumn Rebellion, XR did manage to raise £100,000 in 24 hours prior to the Impossible Rebellion – they were on slightly more sound financial footing than in September 2020 (Gayle & Carrington).

The crucial question is this: can XR’s failures in 2020 and 2021 be explained by the decline in movement strength? Journalists at the Guardian argue yes, writing “as the rebellion comes to a close, questions are being asked about whether XR has lost momentum. Numbers on protests have been fewer, media coverage has been far more critical and, save for the Green party, politicians have paid
little attention” (Gayle & Carrington). That said, there isn’t strong evidence for a direct link between XR’s smaller numbers/lower funding and their failure to achieve policy change. The reduction in movement strength does coincide with XR’s least positive outcomes to date, but correlation doesn’t necessitate causation.

However, it’s worth noting that XR’s diminished strength may have indirectly reduced their influence in two ways. First, just as XR’s overwhelming strength of 30,000 participants in October 2019 made widespread repression effectively impossible for British police, lower participation in 2020 and 2021 seems to have made it much more manageable for police to clear sites of protesters. In a later section, I argue that police were increasingly repressive and increasingly successful at repressing XR in 2020 and 2021. This change that was probably facilitated by the fact that there were far fewer protesters to deal with. Second, it is possible that XR’s diminished numbers resulted in reduced media coverage and a minimal impact on the environment’s salience in public opinion polls (detailed in the third section), which indirectly reduced their ability to impact policy. XR’s largest victory was a product of their ability to create a media frenzy and alter the salience of the environment, but they were unable to activate the public preference mechanism in 2020 or 2021. Smaller numbers may have made it difficult to break through in the media and reach the public’s eyes, especially since police were better at clearing protest sites quickly. Thus, there’s moderate evidence that the decline in XR’s strength contributed to their inability to drive policy change in 2020 and 2021.

Movement Strategy

Following the International Rebellion, two factors combined to drive a change in XR’s strategy – specifically, its framing and tactics. First, as noted above, XR ran out of money in early 2020. The group’s low finances forced it to become more loosely decentralized and volunteer-run; a paid national team still existed to coordinate Rebellions, but local chapters (which were entirely volunteer-run) took on
much more importance within the organizational structure given that the size of the paid team had been reduced significantly (Salter). This played a role in facilitiating a shift in XR’s framing, many local chapters had long been pushing for XR’s framing to be more explicitly left-wing, so their relative increase in importance translated to strategic change (Taylor 2020a).

Second, changes to XR’s framing and tactics were a product of widespread backlash to the Canning Town action, which proved a turning point for XR to make a variety of course adjustments (Nugent). XR’s ongoing attempt to maintain a friendly relationship with British police and emphasis on seeking arrest as a tactic had long drawn criticism from the left for alienating people of color and being blind to the racism embedded in the UK’s criminal justice system (Ahmed, Nugent, Taylor 2020a). While Roger Hallam’s faction was resistant to changing XR’s strategy and framing away from mass arrests and an apolitical analysis of the climate crisis, Canning Town was a turning point (Taylor 2020a, Nugent). Having seen the immense public backlash to a generalized disruption strategy that ended up harming working-class people of color, the faction that had advocated being more targeted to win the public’s goodwill emerged as dominant following a period of internal wrangling (Nugent, Taylor 2020a). As one XR member put it, “It was a turning point for us. The perspectives of marginalized groups are now at the forefront rather than just an addition” (Nugent). In a clear sign that the faction seeking a change in strategy had emerged triumphant, Hallam, who had long pushed against moving to the left and been criticized for XR’s racially problematic mass arrest strategy, formally left XR in July 2020 (Taylor 2020a).

The period of internal debate that occurred between the International and Autumn Rebellions resulted in two notable changes.

First, XR altered its framing. It began to move away from its previously apolitical framing of the climate crisis and towards a framing that emphasized climate justice (the idea that climate change will disproportionately impact the Global South) and the fact that “race and class oppression intersects with the climate crisis” (Nugent). Part of the hope was that this shift would draw more people of color to join
XR, as XR’s membership was overwhelmingly white (90%, compared to the UK’s general population, which is 86% white) (Saunders et al, 2-4, Nugent). This move to embrace racial justice (whereas XR had previously shied away from allying itself with other left-wing causes) was accelerated by the wave of racial justice protests which swept through the UK following the killing of George Floyd in summer 2020 (Nugent, Taylor 2020a). For example, one member of XR’s media team told a journalist that “Racism is a key factor in the causes and continuation of the climate and ecological emergency, and tackling it needs to run through all aspects of our work” (Nugent).

Second, XR’s tactics were substantially altered. The use of arrest as a tactic was de-emphasized following criticism from people of color that being arrestable was a privilege only white members had access to (Nugent). Moreover, XR decided to ditch the strategy of seeking to cause generalized mass disruption (e.g., targeting the public’s commutes), instead targeted those most responsible for the climate crisis with disruptive actions (e.g., staging protests against banks funding oil companies) (Nugent, Salter). This was tied to the change in framing. Rather than adopt a political neutral stance on the causes of the climate crisis, XR began to heavily emphasize the disproportionate role of the 1%, corporations, fossil fuel companies (and the banks financing them), right-wing media, and conservative government in perpetuating climate change (Salter, Nugent). As a result, XR’s 2020 strategy document outlined that it would choose its targets accordingly, rather than trying to bring London to a standstill (Extinction Rebellion UK 2020b, Nugent, Salter).

One notable shift precipitated by discussions following Canning Town was only fully realized in 2021, after the Autumn Rebellion. As part of their broader shift to the left to address the race criticism and build support among non-white communities, XR began to distance itself from the police and seek alliances with racial justice groups. The 2020 strategy document began a transition towards a “movement of movements” approach, in which XR would seek to embed itself in local communities and ally with other progressive movements (Extinction Rebellion UK 2020b, Nugent). The significant
outcome of this shift was that XR began to rethink its relationship with the police, in light of criticism from racial justice groups it was now try to ally with (Nugent, Salter). During the summer 2020 racial justice protests, XR released a statement apologizing for emphasizing arrest and being overly friendly to the police (e.g., XR protestors shouting “We love you” to police as they were being arrested, giving them flowers, etc.) and announced several changes to its internal recruiting process to make antiracism more integral to XR’s DNA (Extinction Rebellion UK 2020c). However, this change was more fully realized after the Autumn Rebellion. In the months prior to the Impossible Rebellion, the UK government introduced new policing legislation to significantly curtail the rights of protestors, aimed specifically at disruptive groups like XR and Black Lives Matter (BLM) (Specia, Extinction Rebellion UK 2021). XR participated in a number of protests against the legislation in partnership with BLM and, in a significant departure from its previous strategy, released a statement declaring it would no longer communicate with the police in advance of major protests (Extinction Rebellion UK 2021).

These strategic changes prior to each Rebellion were realized during each Rebellion. Tactically, the Autumn and Impossible Rebellions differed from XR’s past protests in significant ways. Both Rebellions largely eschewed attempts to hold protest sites for days on end, instead focusing on specific targets each day (Taylor 2020b, Nugent, Salter, Gayle & Carrington). Rather than attempt to caused generalized disruption to paralyze London, XR targeted their actions against those most responsible for the climate crisis (Taylor 2020b, Gayle 2021b). One major figure in XR explained this change, arguing that “in the past we have raised a very generalised alarm which needed doing... But there are things that are structurally important to understand about the causal reality of this crisis and I think we have done a fantastic job of drawing attention to them” (Taylor 2020b).

In the Autumn Rebellion, XR targeted a wide variety of actors it deemed most responsible for the climate crisis, particularly Parliament and right-wing newspapers (Taylor 2020b, Harris, Rose 2020b). In a similar vein, the Impossible Rebellion spent its second week targeting the City of London (the
municipal zone within London home to most banks/financial institutions) for its financing of fossil fuel projects (Gayle & Carrington). For example, one action during the Autumn Rebellion saw XR blockade a slaughterhouse to highlight the role of meat production in driving emissions, while a day during the Impossible Rebellion saw XR pour or spray blood-red paint onto the buildings of multiple banks that had been investing in fossil fuel projects, highlighting these organizations’ ties to “blood money” (Taylor 2020b, Gayle 2021b). These actions were in keeping with past Rebellions (which had also featured street theatre aimed at specific bad actors); the main difference was that the Autumn and Impossible Rebellions were almost exclusively targeted actions, whereas past Rebellions had also attempted to hold protest sites for two weeks to block traffic and “shut down” London.

Targeting choices during the Autumn and Impossible Rebellions were partially driven by the introduction of new specific new demands in addition to XR’s original three demands (which were to declare a climate emergency, reach net zero emissions by 2025, and do so via a citizen’s assembly) (Harris, Gayle 2021a). The Autumn Rebellion began at Parliament, where XR demanded the government pass the Climate and Ecological Emergency (CEE) Bill, which was written by a group of scholars, scientists and XR members and introduced by a Green Party MP (Harris). The CEE Bill (which has not been passed) would largely meet two of XR’s demands by establishing a citizen’s assembly to oversee a much more rapid transition to net-zero emissions (Harris). The Impossible Rebellion also introduced an immediate demand to “stop all new fossil fuel investment immediately” (Gayle & Carrington). Thus, XR’s targets during each Rebellion were calibrated to new demands they introduced – Parliament was targeted to raise awareness about the CEE Bill, while the City of London was targeted to put pressure on banks and the government to stop investing in fossil fuels.

Both Rebellions also saw evidence of XR’s move to build alliances with racial justice groups. One XR member who was highly involved in the shift to the left noted that the Autumn Rebellion was “the most diverse rebellion so far… There is still loads of work to do on this but we are learning … we are
having good conversations with other groups, listening and making sure we are much better at making sure everyone knows they are welcomed.” (Taylor 2020b). Similarly, actions during the Impossible Rebellion were explicitly framed by XR members as being about “highlighting that racial, social and climate justice are all intertwined” (Gayle 2021b).

XR’s decision to target climate culprits resulted in a highly controversial protest near the end of the Autumn Rebellion – the Newscorp action. On September 5th, 2020, an XR group successfully used trucks and bamboo structures to blockade the printing presses of five major right-wing newspapers, preventing newspapers from being sent to newsstands for the day (Taylor 2020b). The Newscorp action was near-universally condemned. Boris Johnson’s Conservative government slammed the move as an attack on the freedom of the press, and Home Secretary Priti Patel floated the possibility of legally categorizing XR as an “organized crime group” (Rose 2020b, Busby). Additionally, Labour leader Keir Starmer condemned the action as “an attack on the cornerstone of democracy,” and other Labour MPs backed him (Taylor 2020b, Rose 2020b). The newspapers targeted by the action also published pieces condemning XR, and the rest of mainstream media was highly critical of the action (Taylor 2020b). Some observers argued that the fallout from the Newscorp action was entirely predictable, and that XR had made a significant blunder that cost them the public’s favor (Rose 2020b). XR learned not to target the press in 2021 – the Impossible Rebellion did not feature a similarly unpopular action.

That said, unlike Canning Town, XR groups largely backed the Newscorp action, arguing that it was important to highlight that five billionaires (including oil billionaire Rupert Murdoch) own 80% of the British press, which has resulted in climate change being deprioritized in coverage (Taylor 2020b, Busby). The action was framed simply: “5 crooks control our news” (Taylor 2020b). While the action had a negative impact on the public’s view of XR (with many complaining on social media that their daily papers were gone from newsstands), it doesn’t appear to have caused the same level of discord within XR as Canning Town did (Taylor 2020b). One member of XR’s media team stated that the Newscorp
action had been “really galvanising across the movement,” bringing new energy to XR (Taylor 2020b). As one Guardian journalist explained after interviewing numerous XR members, “for XR... the action was deemed legitimate and necessary. They argued that much of the rightwing press, owned by a handful of billionaires, have played a key role in downplaying the climate crisis” (Taylor 2020b). The Newscore action, like Canning Town, drew a massive amount of (highly negative) media coverage, whereas media coverage of the Autumn Rebellion had previously been relatively low (Taylor 2020b).

Did XR’s strategic changes alter its ability to influence policy? Strategic changes appear largely unrelated to policy outcomes – despite modifying their framing to appeal to their activist base on left and changing their tactics to appeal to the public, XR did not draw larger numbers to their protests, and their public image did not improve. As noted above, the 2020 and 2021 protests were both more racially diverse than past actions, suggesting that XR did somewhat improve its image on the left, which may have improved its sustainability over the long run. However, this change hasn’t (yet) translated to greatly increased movement strength in terms of raw protest participation, suggesting the effects of changed framing are still unclear.

XR’s shift towards targeted disruption had ambiguous consequences. On the one hand, there is substantial evidence that the Newscore action backfired, drawing public ire and contributing to the government’s decision to seek an expansion of police powers (detailed in sections three and four). Targeted disruptive tactics weren’t only costly to XR though – targeting financial institutions appears to have been effective at driving positive changes among private sector actors and did not anger the public. This means targeted disruption’s record is overall mixed – targeting the press seems to have a mostly negative impact, whereas targeting banks seems to have been beneficial. Overall, the key takeaway is that negative perceptions of XR remained durable among the general public even after their shift towards targeting climate culprits (detailed in section three). This suggests that public goodwill is easy to lose, hard to keep, and even harder to win back.
Two final points are worth making. First, while XR’s strategic changes do not appear to have had a discernable effect on UK federal policy, it’s worth highlighting that they appear to have made XR more sustainable over the long run. The Newscorp action and move to the left appear to have re-unified the movement following the post-October 2019 factionalism. For example, Gail Bradbrook, the other co-founder of XR, said that “There’s definitely been a contraction in XR... But I see it stabilising and getting stronger” as a result of the strategic changes (Gayle & Carrington). Second, it’s possible that the shift to targeted disruption was not a large enough change of tactics to alter XR’s downward trajectory. The next section argues, much like chapter two, that XR’s inability to innovate novel forms of disruption in 2020 and 2021 contributed to their declining impact on public opinion and the media.

The Public

Between the International and Autumn Rebellion, the landscape of public opinion polls of issue salience dramatically shifted. COVID-19 functionally replaced Brexit as the single issue dominating public consciousness (Ipsos-MORI 2021b). The environment was moved down the political agenda and public opinion was primarily concerned with the fight against the pandemic (Salter). Thus, even though the UK left the EU in January 2020, XR faced a similar difficulty heading into the Autumn Rebellion (and, to a lesser extent, the Impossible Rebellion) as they had in October 2019, when Brexit was the single most important issue in public opinion polls and XR struggled to make a dent.

The issue landscape was more favorable to XR prior to the Impossible Rebellion. The month before the Impossible Rebellion began, the IPCC released the first part of its sixth assessment report, which warned of coming “unprecedented and irreversible changes” to Earth’s climate due to climate change (Gayle & Carrington). Additionally, as measured by public opinion surveys of issue salience, the COVID-19 pandemic was less dominant in the news cycle prior to the Impossible Rebellion, likely due to
the UK’s successful vaccination campaign (Ipsos-MORI 2021b). The pandemic was still the primary issue in August 2021, but the portion of the public rating it as the most important issue had fallen notably.

Thus, the key surprise is that the Autumn and Impossible Rebellions had such similar impacts on the public. Media coverage of both Rebellions was considerably lower and less favorable than in October or April 2019 (Taylor 2020b, Gayle & Carrington). As measured by Google Trends, searches for XR spiked in September 2020 and August 2021, but by significantly less than in either of their major 2019 Rebellions (Google Trends 2021d). The Autumn Rebellion’s “more targeted actions... caused neither the same level of disruption or gripped the public imagination to the same extent as they did last year” (Taylor 2020b). The primary difference between the two events was the Newscoorp action, which cause XR to shoot up the news agenda and sparked a “heated public debate” in September 2020 (Taylor 2020b). Media coverage of the Autumn Rebellion was highly critical following the Newscoorp action, labeling XR’s action as an attack on press freedom (Taylor 2020b).

The Impossible Rebellion also received limited media coverage, and it contained no highly controversial action (like Canning Town or Newscorp) that brought XR back into high-profile infamy (Gayle & Carrington). While some commentators suggest that media coverage was also more critical of the Impossible Rebellion than coverage in 2019, the evidence is less clear (Gayle & Carrington). XR had no “breakthrough” protest action during the Impossible Rebellion that resulted in huge amounts of critical media coverage, meaning they received less coverage, but that coverage was somewhat more favorable than following the Autumn Rebellion (Gayle 2021a).
What explains the decline in media coverage? Three reasons emerge. First, the switch from generalized to targeted disruption meant that XR was less worthy of news coverage; its protest could more easily be ignored, as they weren’t massively impacting London’s population as they had in 2019 (Taylor 2020b). Second, and perhaps more importantly, XR was (again) unable to innovate novel tactics that could capture media interest. Leo Barasi, a prominent advocate of the position that the April Rebellion played a key role in changing climate change’s salience, argues that XR is “running into diminishing returns... Media coverage of climate change is more widespread than it was before the 2019 protests, and what XR are doing isn’t so novel now.” (Gayle & Carrington). While targeting disruption represented a significant strategic shift, the tactics themselves were not novel in the sense that XR stuck to its mold of nonviolent civil disobedience/direct action, with a flair for street theatre (e.g., blood money, or the giant pink table). The targets changed, but the tactics themselves remained largely the same – recycling the same tactics had diminishing returns. Third, Barasi’s argument also points out that XR may have paradoxically been a victim of their own success – XR increased media coverage of climate change in general, but no longer represents an exciting, new story (Lam). In other words, British media covers climate change more than previously, but its coverage focuses on stories that will hook readers, which XR has struggled to do in recent actions.

The Autumn and Impossible Rebellions also did not improve the public’s view of XR. Despite adopting more left-wing framing and targeting actions against entities that the public typically dislikes (e.g., fossil fuel companies and the banks financing them), XR’s popularity has not increased since October 2019. Polling data is much more limited for 2020 and 2021 than for 2019. One YouGov poll conducted after the Impossible Rebellion found only 19% of people felt either very or somewhat positive towards XR, 19% felt somewhat negative, 30% felt strongly negative, and the remaining 31% replied “don’t know” (YouGov 2021b). In other words, almost half of those surveyed felt negatively towards XR, while only 19% felt positively. Additionally, YouGov’s data from 2020-2021 indicates that
although XR is widely known among environmental groups (74% of people have heard of them), it is not widely liked, typically drawing around 18-19% support and 38% opposition (YouGov 2021c). The image below from YouGov displays this data – XR’s fame measures how many people have heard of them over time, while their popularity measures the portion of those surveyed who feel positively towards XR.

![Image of POPULARITY & FAME TRACKER graph]

Additionally, XR’s 2020 and 2021 protests had almost no discernable effect on the salience of climate change in public opinion polls. In Ipsos-MORI’s polls, the environment increased in September 2020, but by much less than in previous Rebellions – the vast majority (77%) of respondents listed COVID-19 as the most important issue facing the UK (Ipsos-MORI 2020). YouGov’s polling shows no discernable change in the salience of the environment/climate change following the Autumn Rebellion either (YouGov 2021a). Thus, the Autumn Rebellion seems not to have had a major impact on public opinion.

Prior to the Impossible Rebellion, the environment reached record levels of salience in Ipsos-MORI’s polls, shooting up 16% to second place (after COVID-19) from July to mid-August (Ipsos-MORI 2021a). This is near-certainly due to the release of the first part of the IPCC’s sixth assessment report, which made international headlines in late July and early August for its grim predictions about the coming impacts of climate change (Ipsos-MORI 2021a). The September Ipsos-MORI poll (following the Impossible Rebellion) saw the salience of the environment drop 9% to fourth place (Ipsos-MORI 2021b). YouGov’s polling shows a similar result, with climate change increasing in salience over summer 2021,
but not noticeably spiking following the Impossible Rebellion (YouGov 2021a). The IPCC report makes it difficult to discern if the Impossible Rebellion had any impact on the salience of climate change, as a fall in salience was practically guaranteed once the IPCC report left the news cycle, regardless of XR’s actions. It’s possible that the drop-off would have been larger absent the Impossible Rebellion, but the available data doesn’t provide evidence for this one way or the other.

Why has the public continued to view XR unfavorably? One line of argument suggests that XR’s use of left-wing framing contributed to their low popularity – they addressed criticism from other progressive movements, but in doing so, adopted language that increasingly alienated the political right (Spicer, Gunningham 2020, 22-23). Additionally, negative media coverage of the Canning Town and
Newscorp actions played a key role in durably turning the general public against XR. Most importantly, while XR largely dropped the strategy of generalized disruption in 2020, the public still seems to have grown increasingly annoyed by XR’s disruptive tactics over time (Mance, Tryl). People associate XR with frustrating disruptions to their commutes, even though the group’s strategy has moved away from such actions (Mance, Lam, Sinclair). For example, one anti-XR op-ed during the Impossible Rebellion highlighted the disruption to commutes and the capital, noting that “purely anecdotally, the reaction on the streets seems to be weary resignation at best, outright annoyance at worst” (Wilson). In other words, the public is fatigued with disruption to their daily lives and has grown increasingly annoyed with XR, which is reflected in XR’s low favorability (Wilson). XR’s defenders seem to acknowledge this, with numerous op-eds arguing that while the public dislikes XR for disrupting their daily lives, this is typical of successful disruptive groups (Mance, Sinclair, Lam, Tryl). For example, one of these op-eds argues that “this has led to murmurs that XR is damaging the climate cause — too annoying, too divisive... When it was founded in 2018, neither the Tories nor Labour were committed to net zero... social change isn’t just about popularity... XR keeps climate at the top of the agenda” (Mance). In other words, both XR’s detractors and defenders agree that disruption has become increasingly unpopular with the public.

Why has XR had a declining impact on climate change’s salience? A large part of the explanation is poor timing. In 2020, COVID-19 swamped the issue agenda; the pandemic was so salient in September 2020 that it functionally acted as Brexit had in October 2019, crowding out other issues (Ipsos-MORI 2020). Much of the public was still overwhelmingly concerned with their own economic precarity (Taylor 2020a, Ipsos-MORI 2020). In 2021, the story was different – the pandemic had dropped significantly in salience by August 2021, and the IPCC report had already brought climate change into the news cycle (Ipsos-MORI 2021a). However, in 2021, XR’s Rebellion drew little media coverage relative to past events, so the lack of a discernable impact on public opinion makes sense, as theory expects that high (and ideally, positive) media coverage is the link between mobilization and movement impact on public
opinion (Kolb, 62-63). Additionally, XR’s inability to innovate novel tactics reduced their impact on public opinion; they failed to “capture the public’s imagination,” and similar looking protests to past events resulted in media disinterest (Taylor 2020b).

Thus, I suggest there is limited evidence against the importance of the public in explaining XR’s failures in 2020 and 2021. On the one hand, the media/public landscape in 2020 and 2021 was considerable more climate-focused than prior to the April Rebellion, with the environment consistently ranking as a relatively high salience issue. Despite this, XR’s mobilization in 2020 and 2021 produced little policy progress. This provides evidence against the importance of the public as an enabling/constraining factor for movement influence. Additionally, I argue in the next section that the public had little importance due to changes in political elites – despite the general public wanting greater climate policy, the UK government moved to the right following the 2019 general election, making new climate policy a non-starter. Even when the environment had a massive spike in salience following the IPCC report, there was no change in the UK’s emissions targets, which provides some evidence against the idea that politicians are highly responsive to public opinion.

That said, the evidence presented above does not wholly cut against existing theory, in the sense that it accords with scholars who see public opinion primarily as a mechanism of movement influence, rather than an enabling/constraining factor. The media gave XR little coverage in 2020 and 2021 and were more critical than they had been previously. Additionally, public opposition to XR cemented in 2020 and 2021, and XR largely failed to alter the salience of the environment. In other words, XR failed to activate the public (the public preference mechanism) in 2020 and 2021, so it’s not surprising they saw few positive outcomes. I argue that XR’s inability to alter public opinion was driven by a mix of factors, including COVID-19 swamping the agenda, XR’s failure to innovate novel tactics, and low media coverage. Thus, the evidence against the importance of the public is only limited, rather than moderate or strong.
Following the International Rebellion, there was a major change in the external political context. The Labour Party suffered a historic defeat in the December 2020 elections, capturing its smallest vote share and fewest seats in decades (Walker). While this resolved the problem of Brexit – Johnson’s Conservative Party now had a commanding majority of Parliament and exited the EU in January 2020 – it also represented a definitive partisan shift to the right (Walker, BBC 2019j). This did not bode well for XR’s prospects. One member of XR succinctly explained, “XR has three aims… None of these is happening… The best chance… would have been a Corbyn Labour Party victory at the last UK general election. But that failed” (Gunningham, 15). Many saw the December election as a missed opportunity for XR – prior to the election, XR was still using the “beyond politics” framing; it staged protests against both parties, rather than endorsing Labour (Taylor 2020a, Carver). Given the Labour Party’s vastly superior climate policy package, many XR members were deeply unhappy with the choice; one suggested to a journalist that the organization had “founder’s syndrome” insofar as it was still following Hallam’s original framing of remaining outside of electoral politics (Taylor 2020a, Carver). Another said bluntly, “There are some of us who have been in meetings all day really trying to stop this… It is crazy, depressing, but we lost. It is going ahead” (Taylor 2020a). The developments listed above (Hallam’s departure and XR’s reorientation towards a more left-wing strategy) occurred in early and mid-2020; during the election campaign, Hallam’s faction still had significant sway. That said, XR cannot be blamed for Labour’s loss – a variety of factors (Corbyn’s unpopularity, declining vote shares in rural areas, and a confused position on Brexit) were cited by one report as the primary drivers of the election result (Carver, Walker).

In addition to the significant change in partisanship following the December election, Labour’s defeat also resulted in XR losing prominent elite allies. Corbyn resigned as Leader of the Opposition in
early 2020 and was replaced with Keir Starmer (BBC 2019, Finn). Starmer subsequently spent much of his first year making moves against Labour’s left-wing, arguing that Corbyn’s radicalism explained the party’s crushing defeat, and seeking a return to a more centrist Tony Blair-esque position (Finn). Despite campaigning for Labour’s top position on a left-wing platform, once Starmer won, he quickly went to work changing Labour’s internal electoral rules to disadvantage the Labour left in future campaigns for the leadership (Finn). More importantly, Starmer began to back away from the progressive platform he campaigned on, including the Green New Deal/Green Industrial Revolution (Finn). This step was part of Starmer’s general belief that Corbyn’s radicalism lost Labour the 2019 election, and that moving to the center would help the party at the next election (Finn). Notably, while Starmer’s platform still calls for a Green Industrial Revolution (as Corbyn’s did), one campaigner for Labour for a Green New Deal recently argued that Starmer’s refusal to back public ownership of the energy industry represented a “big step back from [Corbyn in] 2019” (Taylor 2021a). Thus, prior to the Autumn and Impossible Rebellions, XR had witnessed a significant partisan shift against its interests and lost key elite allies in the Labour Party.

Given the change in the regime’s partisanship and Johnson’s hostility to XR, it’s unsurprising that during each Rebellion, XR was met with a substantial increase in repression by the police, compared to previous protests (Taylor 2020b, Taylor & Murray, Gayle & Carrington). Crucially, both events saw strong evidence that the police were adapting to XR’s tactics and had become more effective at clearing protest sites quickly. During the Autumn Rebellion, police invoked the Public Order Act of 1986 to place unworkable restrictions and fines on XR, ordering protestors to sites that were not on major streets (Taylor & Murray). One XR member noted the police “are a lot more stringent, and much more feisty this time round ...It’s very, very different... I think it’s disgraceful, it remains to be seen whether this is legal” (Taylor & Murray). Another member said, “The response is much more robust than in October, they are not spending much time allowing us to block roads but we didn’t expect it to be the same” (Taylor & Murray). Additionally, the police threatened to use pandemic legislation imposing £10,000
fines on large gatherings against XR, though its unclear from publicly available information if/how many fines were actually issued (Taylor & Murray). In one emblematic case, XR protestors attempted to glue their hands to the road to block Boris Johnson’s convoy to Parliament but were immediately dragged off the road by police and arrested – “The protest was over almost before it had begun and minutes later the prime minister’s motorcade sped past unhindered.” (Taylor 2020b). In other words, police were prepared for XR’s tactics.

During the Impossible Rebellion, this trend continued. When XR erected a giant table with the sign “come to the table” in Convent Garden, hoping to hold the site for days to start conversations with ordinary citizens, police managed to isolate and remove the installation within a day (Gayle & Carrington). XR had learned somewhat from the rapid police response during the Autumn Rebellion. In 2021, rather than hold major sites, “actions were designed to be more fluid. Broadcasts... told supporters where to go each morning, with marches coalescing at pop-up occupations intended to catch police – who were no longer given advance warning of actions – off guard” (Gayle & Carrington). However, this strategy made it difficult to hold “crisis talks” with ordinary citizens, as XR was unable to semi-permanently hold protest sites (Gayle & Carrington). Police responded to pop-up XR protests rapidly, surrounding protest installations to prevent XR from sending reinforcements before sending in removal teams to cut XR members loose and arrest them (Gayle & Carrington). Additionally, the Impossible Rebellion saw the first widely reported instance of the police using physical force against XR; “police drew batons and scaled a vintage open-top bus... smashed windows on the bus and wrestled with those onboard, putting activists in headlocks and throwing punches at them” (Gayle & Carrington).

This dynamic is important to highlight. Both XR and the police adapted their tactics to try to out-maneuver each other. XR’s strategy of targeted disruption was partially a product of their realization that the police were becoming increasingly hostile over time (Gayle & Carrington). After the police were much more successful at rapidly removing XR protestors during the Autumn Rebellion, XR adapted by
ending its policy of informing the police where protests would occur in advance (Gayle & Carrington).

Despite this, the police showed increased determination to prevent XR from holding sites or causing disruption in August 2021 and were much more prepared to deal with XR’s use of locks and superglue than in 2019 (Gayle & Carrington). The increasingly hostile police response to XR maps well onto changes in partisanship – as the administration and Parliament became more hostile to XR, so too did the police, largely at the direction of the Johnson administration (Salter).

The most direct policy consequence of the Autumn Rebellion was a highly negative one for XR. In the months after condemning XR as “organized criminals” for the NewsCorp action, the Johnson administration introduced a new policing bill to strengthen police powers to regulate disruptive protest (Specia). Specifically, the bill would give police the ability to use their discretion to criminalize protests they deem to be a “public nuisance,” whereas existing law sets a much higher bar for restricting protest (Specia). Moreover, the bill contains new provisions that increase prison sentences for certain types of “criminal” protest and allows police to shut down and criminalize a protest for noise-related reasons (Specia). While the policing bill has not yet been enacted, it passed the House of Commons (the Parliamentary body with actual legislative power) in July 2021 (bills.parliament.uk). Given that the House of Lords has very little power to alter or reject legislation, it seems likely that the policing bill will be enacted (Encyclopedia Britannica).

XR’s Rebellions played a large role in causing the policing bill to be introduced. The bill’s expansion of police powers is quite similar to the changes envisioned following the International Rebellion (Dodd et al). Furthermore, Home Secretary Priti Patel explicitly said the bill was response to the fact that “In recent years, we have seen a significant change of protest tactics, with protesters exploiting gaps in the law which have led to disproportionate amounts of disruption,” pointing at XR’s tactics of blocking roads and gluing themselves to buildings (Specia, Russell). XR partnered with BLM in the UK to issue a joint statement condemning the policing bill as an attack on the right to protest; both
groups saw it as a direct response to their disruptive protests (Russell). XR was not wholly responsible for the introduction of the legislation – it was also a response to other left-wing movement groups – Paten’s statement also mentioned BLM protests from summer 2020 which toppled statues of racist historical figures (Specia, Russel). Additionally, the legislation cannot be totally attributed to the Autumn Rebellion, as it represented a response to the cumulative effect of the International and Autumn Rebellions – the idea of expanded police powers originated after police failed to curb the International Rebellion in October 2019 (Dodd et al).

Neither the Autumn nor Impossible Rebellion produced significant new policy changes in XR’s favor. As noted earlier, journalists argued that XR has lost the momentum, “save for the Green party, politicians have paid little attention [to recent protests]” (Gayle & Carrington). The attention XR did get from Boris Johnson was negative – after the News Corp action, Johnson said, “A free press is vital in holding the government and other powerful institutions to account on issues critical for the future of our country, including the fight against climate change… It is completely unacceptable to seek to limit the public’s access to news in this way” (Slawson & Waterson).

That said, two months after the Autumn Rebellion, Boris Johnson announced £12 billion of new spending as part of a “Green Industrial Revolution” plan to invest in offshore wind, nuclear and hydrogen energy, electric vehicles, public transit, and more (Gov.uk 2020). While at first glance, this appears to be a significant policy change plausibly influenced by XR’s mobilization, it is not. The spending is intended to help the UK achieve net zero emissions by 2050, not sooner, meaning it is in keeping with the existing target (Gov.uk 2020, Vetter). Energy policy experts were critical of the plan, arguing that it was the “bare minimum” requirement for the UK to have a shot of meeting the net zero by 2050 target (Vetter). In other words, this was not a new positive outcome – it was merely the government following through on its legal obligation to meet the target that was legislated after the April Rebellion. No new spending or federal policy was undertaken following the Impossible Rebellion. Though Johnson touted
his environmentalist credentials in late 2021 (in one case, saying “Young people around the world are already paying the price for the reckless actions of their elders”), this was a product of the UN COP26 negotiations that the UK was hosting (McGrath). Johnson rhetorically positioned the UK as a global leader on climate change to look good at the conference without taking new policy actions (NBC News).

Thus, the Autumn and Impossible Rebellions appear to basically be failures. They produced no new positive gains in policy at the federal level and resulted in a repressive policing bill that looks likely to be enacted and will have strongly negative effects on XR. Why did the Johnson administration respond in this way, especially given that public opinion supported greater action on climate change?

First, COVID-19 likely had an impact on the prospects for new environmental policy. The pandemic caused the UK to enter a deep recession by mid-2020 (Parrington). Given that the pandemic was dominating public opinion polls of issue salience (especially for the Autumn Rebellion), the government’s focus was naturally going to be on promoting economic recovery, rather than adopting new environmental policy (Taylor 2020a, Ipsos-MORI 2020).

Second, the blowout election victory following Labour’s aggressively green policy platform in December 2019 may have been read as a signal that the electorate was basically satisfied with the 2050 net zero target, making further policy action unnecessary. While polls still show a majority of the UK electorate want the government to take greater action on climate change, the fact that Johnson won by historically large margins against a much greener opponent demonstrated that the electorate didn’t care enough about climate change to actually vote differently or punish the less green candidate. In other words, the idea that climate change would significantly determine people’s vote was discredited by the December 2019 election results, giving Johnson full latitude to take action against climate protestors, rather than for them. More recently, climate change rose in salience following the IPCC report, yet Johnson did not commit to more aggressive decarbonization. One possible reason for this is
that the next elections are not anytime soon; Johnson had no pressing electoral incentive to change policy following a temporary spike in the salience of the environment.

Third, Johnson is simply more of a right-wing partisan – as noted in chapter two, he views XR as a movement of the political left, so there’s little reason for him to capitulate to them. Additionally, growing public hostility towards XR, particularly by Conservative voters, may have made the policing bill appear an electorally shrewd idea. On pretty much any news article about XR in the right-wing press, the most widely-liked comments are typically calls for XR protestors to be put in prison or fined significantly (e.g. “They should all be arrested and put through the Courts and heavily fined or locked up”) (Gant & Chaudhary). In other words, Johnson’s administration (especially after Parliament’s partisan composition moved even further to the right) was already predisposed against XR and saw the policing bill as a way to increase future turnout among law-and-order Conservative voters.

All this said, there were a few minor positive outcomes of XR’s 2020 and 2021 Rebellions. The Autumn Rebellion raised awareness for the CEE Bill (which, if passed, would make huge progress towards XR’s second and third demands) (Harris). The bill received signatures by many Green and Labour MPs following the Autumn Rebellion (Harris). It also received a first reading in Parliament during the Autumn Rebellion, but has not progressed further – nor is it likely to, given the conservative composition of Parliament (Mortimer). While the legislation has attracted the support of 130 MPs, in a 600-member Parliament, enactment is unlikely (Zero Hour, Mortimer). The CEE Bill’s albeit minor progress can certainly be attributed to XR, as XR members helped write the bill and the Autumn Rebellion was focused on drawing attention/support to the legislation (Mortimer, Harris). However, given that the legislation seems highly unlikely to pass, attracting support from left-wing MPs hardly represents a significant positive outcome.

The Impossible Rebellion had somewhat more meaningful positive outcomes in the private sector. Following the Impossible Rebellion, analysts at Morgan Stanley publicly stated that XR has
“ushered in an era of permanently expensive petrol by forcing oil companies to slash their growth plans” (Wallace). Specifically, “Big businesses are set to invest almost exclusively in managing and running down their existing oil fields rather than opening new wells because their major shareholders have been spooked by waves of protests... companies no longer want to increase supply despite relatively high crude prices... shareholder pressure on oil companies not to increase investment in oil projects is so strong companies are on the whole not increasing investment” (Wallace). This outcome cannot be fully attributed to the Impossible Rebellion, as it represents the cumulative effect of “waves of protests,” rather than a single event. However, it still marks a significant positive outcome, and somewhat validates XR’s choice to target banks investing in oil across multiple Rebellions. Even absent new policy, high oil prices will help facilitate the energy transition, as renewables can more easily out-compete fossil fuels on price if fossil fuel prices are high (Wallace). That said, XR cannot take sole credit for the reduction in new oil investment – other climate protests also likely played a role, as did external developments like a major 2021 court decision against Shell and climate-focused activist hedge funds (Wallace). Unfortunately, further analysis of this development is largely outside the scope of this thesis, which is focused on XR’s impact on public policy, not the private sector.

This section argues that the Autumn and Impossible Rebellions provide strong evidence for the importance of political elites in explaining XR’s failure to impact policy. The increasingly right-wing partisan composition of Parliament and increased demands by the government for police crackdowns on XR clearly play a key role in explaining the failure of both protests. The argument is nearly sounds circular – the government moved to the right following Labour’s election loss, which explains increased hostility to XR, a left-wing movement. Increasing public animosity to XR among Conservative voters incentivized Johnson’s government to crack down via increased repression. Thus, while the public still broadly supports increased climate policy, Johnson’s electoral incentives have resulted in him cracking down on XR (to boost his approval among the Conservative base) while paying lip-service to climate
action to please the general public. Keir Starmer’s takeover of Labour following Corbyn’s resignation has resulted in the party shifting to the right, meaning XR’s 2020 and 2021 protests had little impact on the other major party (in contrast to October 2019). During the protests, XR’s inability to hold semi-permanent sites due to increased repression meant that it had less chances to interface with the public and shift public opinion (Gayle & Carrington). This was a product of police adaptation – XR recycled its tactics, and over time, police officers became more adept at responding to XR’s actions.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the Autumn and Impossible Rebellions. I argue that both events were failures, and XR’s least successful protests to date. The change in partisanship appears to have been the primary driver of XR’s declining fortunes. Labour’s crushing defeat in the December 2019 elections produced a much less green Parliament and proved that the Conservatives would not lose elections for being insufficiently aggressive in tackling climate change. As a result, the Johnson administration could safely commit to increased repression to please anti-XR Conservative voters without fearing electoral consequences. Successful repression also reduced the impact XR’s protest on public opinion and kneecapped XR’s ability to cause major disruption. Additionally, XR was weaker in 2020 and 2021 than in 2019 – it was low on funds and its protests saw lower attendance. Smaller protests that failed to substantially innovate new tactics resulted in lower media coverage and a much smaller impact on public opinion. As a result, XR failed to activate the public preference or disruption mechanisms, which had previously won it major victories in April 2019. Thus, the Autumn and Impossible Rebellions provide evidence for H3a and H3c.

This chapter further developed the argument introduced in chapter two that novel tactics are important. XR’s decision to roughly keep their core tactic of non-violent civil disobedience relatively unaltered in 2020 and 2021 seems to have contributed to their “inability to capture the public’s
imagination. Commentators seem to agree that recycling the same tactics has had diminishing returns. Additionally, shifts in XR’s strategy seem to have not produced shifts in public or government perceptions of XR. Despite the fact that XR was much less focused on causing generalized disruption, the public remained hostile to XR in 2020 and 2021, suggesting that unpopular actions have durable consequences on public perceptions of a movement.

This chapter also highlighted the dynamic evolution of interactions between XR and the British police. While each actor began adapting to each other in October 2019, the Autumn and Impossible Rebellions showed much clearer evidence of this process. Police became increasingly adept at countering XR’s signature use of lock-ons and supergluing and learned how to effectively dismantle protest installations, whereas they had previously struggled to remove XR protestors/installations in 2019. In response, XR stopped informing the police of protest locations in advance, though this change was only somewhat effective at countering the more repressive police response. This is unsurprising – it makes sense that police adapted to XR’s tactics over time, and the fact that XR was unable to innovate new tactics meant that they were somewhat limited in their ability to counteract the increasingly repressive police response.
Discussion

This section synthesizes the results of the previous three chapters. The first section discusses how each hypothesis fares, and how well my results agree/disagree with existing theory on social movement outcomes. The second section outlines the two primary theoretical contributions generated by this thesis. The third section briefly discusses XR’s possible routes forward.

Results and Implications for Theory

How have the hypotheses fared in light of the above analysis of XR’s four major Rebellion protests? Strikingly, no variable (or cluster of variables) receives complete confirmation. Every independent variable has evidence against its importance in at least one Rebellion. External variables (partisanship, repression, media, public opinion) perform poorly in April 2019 (April Rebellion), while internal variables (protest attendance, resources, organization structure, tactics, framing) perform poorly in October 2019 (International Rebellion). Below are two tables summarizing my results. Cells are **bolded** when they have strong evidence supporting their explanatory power during a particular Rebellion, **underlined** when they have moderate evidence supporting their explanatory power, and **italicized** when there is strong or moderate evidence against their explanatory power.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internal Clusters</th>
<th>Movement Strength</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outcome</strong></td>
<td><strong>Date</strong></td>
<td><strong>Mobilization</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success</td>
<td>Apr19</td>
<td>6-10k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-success</td>
<td>Oct19</td>
<td>30k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure</td>
<td>Sep20</td>
<td>2-6k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure</td>
<td>Aug21</td>
<td>2-6k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Clusters</td>
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<tr>
<td>Success</td>
<td>Apr19</td>
<td>Unfriendly</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Semi-</td>
<td>Oct19</td>
<td>Unfriendly-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>success</td>
<td></td>
<td>Hostile</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|         |        |                |           |        | Medium (increased)
| Failure | Sep20  | Hostile        | High      | Medium | Unfavorable      |
|         |        |                |           |        | Unfavorable      |
|         |        |                |           |        | Medium (increased slightly) |
| Failure | Aug21  | Hostile        | High      | Low    | Mixed            |
|         |        |                |           |        | Unfavorable      |
|         |        |                |           |        | High (decreased) |

What conclusions can be made about the hypotheses this thesis studies? H1 and H2 argued that variations in the policy outcomes of movement mobilization could be explained by movement-controlled and non-movement-controlled factors, respectively. H3 argued that variations in the policy outcomes of mobilization are explained by a mix of both movement-controlled and non-movement-controlled factors. H3 had four sub-hypotheses, for each of the four clusters of variables. H3a argued that movement strength explained policy outcome variation, H3b argued the same for movement strategy, H3c argued the same for the public, and H3d argued the same for political elites.

Broadly, my results confirm H3: Variation in the policy outcomes of social movement mobilization can be explained by some combination of both movement-controlled and non-movement-controlled factors. Specifically, I suggest that H3b (that outcomes are explained by changes in movement strategy) and H3d (that outcomes are explained by changes among political elites) receive the strongest evidence for their significance. H3a (that outcomes are explained by changes in movement strength) and H3c (that outcomes are explained by changes in the public) receive partial evidence for them and partial evidence against, making it hard to definitively come down on one side or the other.

It is crucial to emphasize that my results are not incredibly strong. H3b and H3d have high explanatory power only in some cases, and not others – H3d performs poorly in April 2019 and quite
well afterwards, whereas H3b performs well in April 2019 and less well afterwards. In plain terms, XR’s strategy played a key role in its early success, while the partisan shift to the right played a key role in XR’s subsequent declining impact.

How do these results fit into existing theory on movement outcomes? I suggest these results are broadly in line with existing work suggesting that both movements’ choices and the external political context are important. My results especially align with theory emphasizing that the impact of movements is mediated by the partisan composition of the government. XR’s greatest success occurred in the least unfavorable partisan circumstances they encountered, and partisanship is the variable that has the strongest evidence for its importance across all four cases. My results fall largely in line with scholars who suggest that changes in a movement’s framing or strength (either in numbers or money) will not significantly influence policy outcomes when facing a hostile government. Thus, my results provide the most evidence for political mediation models, which suggest that movements must alter their strategies to fit their political context and hold that movement influence is mediated by the external context (especially partisanship) (Amenta et al 2019, 456, Amenta et al 2010, 299). My results also demonstrate the utility of using Felix Kolb’s mechanisms to make claims about causality – there is clear evidence that XR’s successes were a product of its ability to activate the disruption and public preference mechanisms. Partial success in October 2019 saw these mechanisms activated (but less so, relative to April), while failures in 2020 and 2021 coincided with neither mechanism being activated.

However, my results also raise questions for existing theory. First and most significantly, the case of the April Rebellion contradicts theoretical expectations that movements will not see significant policy changes when operating against an unfriendly government. Second, the mixed results concerning the importance of resources, framing, and protest attendance challenge theory which ascribes these variables with high explanatory power. This is an interesting divergence, particularly given that the literature on social movements has tended to emphasize framing and resource mobilization as two of
three core approaches (McAdam et al, 1-20). Third, the level/favorability of media coverage appears to only be related to policy outcomes insofar as it mediates XR’s impact on public opinion – I find little evidence that media coverage directly affected public policy. This suggests that the inclusion of the media as an independent variable may not be necessary when studying movement outcomes, so long as public opinion is included in a study’s design.

Fourth, the mixed results concerning public opinion are somewhat puzzling. While XR’s ability to alter the salience of public opinion plays a key role in explaining their success, the general salience of the environment prior to XR’s protests appears to be often unrelated to policy change (e.g., when the environment was extremely salient following the sixth IPCC report). This is somewhat puzzling insofar as it challenges both theory that expects public opinion to significantly constrain movement influence, and theory expecting politicians to be highly responsive to public opinion for electoral reasons. One possible solution to this paradox is the suggestion that public opinion is highly important during moments of political transition – especially elections. The transition of May to Johnson saw public opinion influence May’s decision-making, as she wanted to leave a positive legacy by passing broadly popular policy following her Brexit failure. The 2019 general election saw Brexit and the NHS dominate the agenda in the run-up to the election, so while the environment was highly salient, voters were far more focused on other issues. In 2020 and 2021, no election was forthcoming, so the Johnson administration had little incentive to respond to changes in public opinion on specific issues. Thus, it’s possible that if XR was capable of making the environment a top two issue for the next general election, they might drive meaningful policy change and/or assist Labour and the Greens electorally.

**Novel Theoretical Contributions**

In addition to being a new case and testing existing theory, I argue that the case of XR generates two novel theoretical insights. First, I argue that XR can be used as a blueprint to develop a more refined
model of the causal mechanisms by which movements alter policy. This refinement graphically represents the relevant clusters of independent variables, and crucially, what pathways each variable must traverse to alter policy. I present what I term the “Interactive Political Mediation Model,” which largely conforms with the political mediation approach taken by Edwin Amenta and others. Below, I explain what each arrow represents in the context of the above chapters on XR and explain what this model adds to existing theory.

Conventional model

Interactive Political Mediation Model

What does this model represent? My model places political elites at the center -- elected officials are gatekeepers who have sole control over public policy and legislation. This accurately reflects the theory summarized in the literature review, where I argued that almost all existing theory assumes politicians (political elites) are focused on winning elections. The relevant independent variables influence policy by altering the electoral calculations of political elites. Stronger movements are seen to represent a larger constituency and larger portion of the electorate, while certain tactics, frames, and
organizational structures (i.e., strategies) may resonate with elites or pose a greater threat to their electoral prospects. The media and public opinion influence what policies should be electorally optimal. Based on this information, political elites alter policy to increase their odds of winning the next election – their decisions are conditioned by their partisanship, and they use repression if they view it as less costly than meeting a movement’s demands.

However, movement strength and strategy can also alter the public, and thereby indirectly influence policy. Stronger movements which adopt tactics and framing which resonate with the media and general public may win favorable news coverage and alter public opinion, and thereby indirectly drive a change in policy, as political elites change policy in response to changes in public opinion (e.g., April 2019, for XR). Moreover, movement strength and strategy interact with each other – movements may alter their strategy to try to win more numbers and funding (as XR did when they lost donations following Canning Town), and growth in movement strength may drive changes in strategy as new members join an organization (e.g., XR’s move to more decentralized power after membership exploded following the April Rebellion, or shift to leftist framing as new members disagreed with Hallam). Declines in movement strength also may alter the movement’s strategy (e.g., XR running out of money in 2020 driving the organization’s strategy to the left, as local chapters gained more power). The public also interacts with movement strength and strategy – public backlash to unpopular protest actions can drive a tactical reassessment or depress the rate of donations/recruitment, thereby reducing movement strength (i.e., the backlash following Canning Town, which did both of these things).

Additionally, political elites influence movements and the public, rather than only being influenced by them. Elites can choose to use repression (or not), which may affect a movement’s strength or drive a movement to change its tactics/framing to adapt to a harsher state response (e.g., XR’s decision to stop informing police of protests in advance following the harsh response to the Autumn Rebellion). Elite partisanship may also force a movement to alter its strategy (something XR has
only barely started to do in response to Johnson’s hostility). Additionally, political elites can refuse to change policy in response to public opinion (e.g., Boris Johnson refusing to alter policy despite widespread public support for changes) and can push their own framing in media outlets (e.g., calling XR’s Newscorp action an attack on the free press).

This model makes two arguments which refine existing theory. First, political elites are central to whether movements will influence policy. All pathways to policy change by definition run through elected officials who have the power to pass legislation. Some pathways are more direct than others – for example, a strong movement may directly compel policy concessions by creating such a significant disruptive crisis that it is cheaper for elites to make concessions than opt for repression. Others are more indirect – movements may cause changes in public opinion and raise an issue to the top of the agenda, making election-wary political elites change policy to win more votes. My argument is not that political elites are more important than other variables, but rather that the pathways by which movements may change policy necessarily run through political elites.

This argument is in agreement with existing theoretical literature to the extent that it lines up with conventional accounts of the causal mechanisms by which certain independent variables are thought to operate (e.g., stronger movements influencing electoral calculations). This model is also in broad agreement with the political process model (which emphasizes the importance of political opportunities in explaining movement outcomes) and the political mediation model (which argues movements will see policy changes when their actions convince political elites that changing policy is in the elites’ interests).

However, it diverges from the conventional model (outlined above), which sees all independent variables as equal contributors to the dependent variable of policy change. To be clear, the “conventional model” is not a model used explicitly by scholars. However, it is implied by the methods used in many studies of movement outcomes, especially those which use qualitative comparative
analysis (QCA) or linear regressions to gauge which independent variables explain movement outcomes. Scholars utilizing QCA or regressions implicitly assume that all independent variables could be directly related to policy outcomes. For example, QCA might find the combination of high mobilization + disruptive tactics + political opportunity = policy change, or a regression will find that mobilization, political opportunity, and resonant framing have a statistically significant effect on policy outcomes. The methodological problem with these models is that they assume a potential direct connection between certain variables and policy change that is causally impossible, and therefore has the potential to be empirically flawed (e.g., assuming mobilization/movement strength could be directly related to outcomes). This doesn’t necessarily invalidate findings which utilize QCA, but it is concerning, given the field’s increasing reliance on QCA and linear regressions (e.g., McAdam & Boudet, 120, McAdam & Su, 699, Giugni 2004, 219, Cress & Snow 2000, 1071, McCammon et al, 62, Kolb, 286).

My interactive mediation model also makes the argument that no decision is made in a vacuum. Movement decisions are internally controlled, but externally influenced by feedback from the public and political elites. Political elites control their own decisions, but their hands can be forced by a sufficiently motivated public or highly effective movement. The public’s opinion can be molded by political elites, the media, and movements themselves. Everything interacts, and no variable is truly independent from another. This is damning for multivariate linear regressions, which methodologically require each independent variable to truly independent from each other for results to be meaningful. It is also necessarily ignored by scholars utilizing QCA, as QCA only tests which combinations of independent variables produce change in the dependent variable, rather than examine connections between independent variables.

This argument about variable interaction is far more important than the argument about the causal centrality of political elites. Even if scholars utilizing certain statistical methods are implicitly mis-specifying the causal pathways of movement influence by ignoring the fact that all pathways run
through political elites, their methods can still produce meaningful results. However, if it is the case that independent variables change due to dynamic interactions (e.g., public backlash altering movement strategy), then statistical examinations of movement outcomes will consistently fail to understand A, why the values of certain independent variables change over time, and B, the actual how of movement influence. In other words, ignoring interactions between independent variables is a surefire way to fundamentally misunderstand how and why a movement’s campaign transpired the way it did.

Thus, while scholars frequently lament the heavy skew in the movement outcomes subfield towards case study research, my argument suggests that statistical methods have methodological blind-spots that omit crucial nuances. This suggests an underexplored avenue of research, in which scholars utilizing a case study methodology could attempt deeper explorations of the ways certain independent variables interact to dynamically influence each other. This could help provide a more comprehensive explanation of why movements sometimes win (and sometimes lose). Understanding how certain variables interact could be the key which unlocks a more nuanced explanation of how certain variables combine in winning combinations which produce a movement’s desire policy change.

My examination of XR also suggests a second novel theoretical insight – that different sets of variables may dominate at different points in time within the lifespan of a movement campaign. While existing theory expects certain variables to retain their explanatory power across an entire campaign, my analysis of XR suggests that this is not always the case. Early in XR’s existence, movement-controlled factors appear to have significant explanatory power, whereas non-movement-controlled factors seem unrelated to policy outcomes. In other words, agency trumped structure – XR succeeded despite an unfriendly government and the environment being low on the agenda. Novel disruptive tactics, novel framing, and a competent organizational structure altered public opinion to win significant victories, despite an unfriendly political context. In contrast, later mobilizations saw structure trump agency – XR was unable to win significant gains (despite larger protests/greater resources) because of changes in the
external political context. A hostile partisan environment, increasingly successful repression by police who adapted to XR’s tactics, and an increasingly frustrated/fatigued public diminished XR’s impact.

This raises the possibility of a novel theoretical insight: movements should tend to have an advantage early in a campaign, but the state should tend to have an advantage over the long run. In other words, movement-controlled variables will tend to have higher explanatory power early in a campaign, while non-movement-controlled variables will have higher explanatory power later in a campaign. While it’s impossible to generalize from a single movement in a single country, the dynamics highlighted by my analysis seem to plausibly apply in other cases. However, I limit my argument to movements utilizing disruptive tactics in established democracies.

Why might this argument be the case? Early in a campaign, disruptive movements’ tactics are more likely to be novel – even if the tactics are inspired or borrowed from previous movements, they are being used by a new group in a new context. This has two effects. First, it is more likely to generate significant media coverage (new protest groups with interesting tactics make for good news), and thereby alter public opinion. Additionally, the group’s newness should partially immunize it from public opposition derived from daily routines being disrupted. Second, a new disruptive group is more likely to face an unprepared police response. This enables the protest to continue for longer, which both increases its impact on public opinion and increases the disruption costs imposed, making policy change more likely (via the disruption and public preference mechanisms).

Additionally, early in a new campaign, politicians have limited information about the group – detailed information on the movement’s membership and demographics is not available, and public opinion research may not have clearly established what the median voter thinks of the movement’s cause. This means that politicians lack information over whether the movement’s members are part of their political party/primary constituency or not. This is good for the movement – politicians whose platform already align with the movement (e.g. left-wing parties and the labor movement) will already
be predisposed to respond. Additionally, politicians whose goals do not traditionally align with the movement (e.g., right wing parties and the environmental movement) will be unsure how many of their voters are part of the movement, making them more likely to respond than they otherwise would be. Thus, while political elites lack information concerning whether a new movement group is representative of the general public/their partisan constituency, it will be somewhat more likely that politicians calculate that it is electorally optimal to change policy.

However, over time, these factors change. First, the public is likely to grow frustrated and fatigued from repeated disruption to their daily routines. The normalization of contention should limit the movement’s ability to affect public opinion, especially if the media decides further protests are less worth covering, as they are less likely to grab readers’ attention. The solution to this problem is to continually innovate – movements must come up with new, novel ways of causing disruption to regenerate crises, regain media attention, and hopefully win over the public (or at least raise the salience of their chosen issue). However, innovation is likely to be incredibly difficult, especially if a movement experiences early victories and believes that simply reusing its tactical playbook will be sufficient to win further gains. Additionally, a movement’s core DNA (its theory of change, framing, etc) is likely to be hard to alter, making it hard to significantly adjust course to generate novel tactics.

Second, the state can adapt to the movement’s tactics over time, tipping the scales in its favor. The longer a movement exists, the more opportunities police will have to learn how to effectively counter innovative disruptive tactics and better neutralize protest events. This also puts pressure on the movement to adapt and innovate new ways of causing disruption that cannot be easily neutralized by repression. This dynamic should typically favor the state, which has more resources and a long institutional memory of policing protest. In other words, movements must continually stay one step ahead by coming up with disruptive tactics that not only differ from the movement’s repertoire of
contention, but from *all other* repertoires of contention that police forces have already encountered and learned how to neutralize.

Finally, the longer a movement exists, the more likely it is that politicians will acquire detailed information about the movement’s membership, demographics, and public opinion of the movement and its cause. This means that partisanship will naturally gain more influence over time; unfriendly partisans will realize that the movement is largely composed of people who will always vote for the other party and may gain confidence that their party’s base is opposed to the movement and its goals. Thus, whereas disruptive campaigns may see concessions from unfriendly politicians early on, this is less likely to happen over time. However, if movements adapt to changing circumstances by taking actions that threaten the electoral prospects of unfriendly politicians, they may see new gains. For example, if a movement successfully innovates new tactics that have a significant disruptive impact, it may compel concessions due to the fear elected officials have of being punished at the ballot box for failing to resolve a crisis in a timely manner.

The theoretical contribution of this argument is three-fold. First, it emphasizes the importance of innovating novel tactics, adding to a small literature suggesting that movements utilizing novel tactics are more likely to cause policy change (Taylor & Van Dyke, 279, McAdam & Su, 701). Second, it provides a novel suggestion – that structure and agency may matter differently at different points in time (and in a somewhat predictable fashion, for movements utilizing disruptive tactics). Third, it provides an interesting methodological suggestion, which is that movement outcomes can be fruitfully studied by examining *individual episodes of contention*. This is particularly salient to cross-national multi-case studies, which, by analyzing an entire campaign as a single unit, overlook the possibility that internal/external factors vary in importance over a campaign’s lifespan.

*XR’s Future*
I cannot end this thesis without briefly discussing XR’s future. What could XR change to regain influence over policy in the UK? My findings suggest that XR’s declining impact is primarily explained by the partisan shift to the right represented by the Johnson administration and the December 2019 election. Furthermore, it seems that Conservative politicians have (correctly) calculated that XR’s members and passive supporters will basically never vote for them; XR is a movement of the left which overwhelmingly votes Labour/Green. Three possible routes forward appear worth considering. First, XR could adapt to the Johnson administration by moderating its demands and tactics in an effort to appeal to Conservative voters and politicians – in other words, a return to framing the climate crisis apolitically. This seems both unlikely to happen and unlikely to work. XR’s shift to embrace other left-wing movements and core identity as a disruptive actor utilizing civil disobedience both mean that it would be highly difficult for the movement to so significantly reverse course, and that such a course alteration would be unlikely to win over Conservative support regardless – rebranding is hard.

Second, XR could alter its strategy to be more electorally assertive, actively campaigning for Labour/Green politicians, via conventional or unconventional means. Given that the Conservative Party appears unwilling and unlikely to push for faster decarbonization, it seems that XR needs to get different politicians into office to have a better shot at achieving its goals. This strategy also has problems though. First, it would likely be difficult to convince XR members to use conventional political/electoral channels to pursue change, given that XR’s core framing is that conventional politics has failed, so civil disobedience is the only remaining option. This trouble would further be compounded by XR’s decentralization – no central authority could compel XR chapters to adopt the new strategy. Second, this change would risk polarizing climate change as a left-right political issue, which could be detrimental to the climate movement’s prospects in the long run (Rose 2020a, 132). Third, Labour would have to win national elections for this strategy to pay off, a prospect that remains uncertain and may take several years to materialize, by which time it may be too late to avert a 1.5 degrees Celsius world.
Third, XR could alter its tactics to be more novel/unique. A new set of disruptive tactics capable of winning public support and countering the police’s increasingly repressive response could potentially help XR regain the levels of media coverage/public opinion impact it saw in 2019. Moreover, if XR used novel actions to recapture the public’s eye and raise the salience of the environment in the lead-up to the next election, they might tip the balance of the election towards Labour and the Greens. However, it’s unclear what these tactics could be/look like. One recent argument suggests that the climate movement should begin using sabotage (of pipelines, SUVs, and more) as a tactic, though this would likely conflict with XR’s ironclad commitment to non-violence (Malm, 67-68). What is clear is that XR’s current repertoire has become largely normalized; the public (and media) is fatigued with XR’s Rebellions. Innovating novel disruptive tactics has its own problems. First, it is simply quite difficult to come up with new ideas that would be hard for police to adapt to – lock-ons and supergluing worked for a time, but it’s unclear what could substitute now that the police have become more adept at responding to XR. Additionally, it is hard to come up with new ideas for civil disobedience actions that haven’t already been recycled to death (sit-ins, die-ins, marches, etc). Second, sticking with disruptive tactics risks an increasingly harsh state response so long as the Conservatives remain in power. With the passage of the policing bill looming, any novel disruptive tactics run the risk of only intensifying the current trend towards repression and public backlash against XR. If XR opts to stick with disruption as its primary mechanism for change, it will likely need to cause a novel disruption that cannot simply be stomped out by repression or waited out for two weeks, and would actually compel concessions. With XR’s limited protest attendance in 2020 and 2021, it’s unclear what that would look like, or how it would be possible.
Conclusion

This thesis examined the policy outcomes of Extinction Rebellion’s mobilization in the UK from 2018-2021. I argue that XR played a primary role in causing significant changes in public policy in April 2019, and that XR won despite unfavorable odds due to their unique tactics, organizational structure, and framing. I argue that subsequent protests did not achieve the same level of success due to changes in the external political context. Despite growing in strength, the UK government became increasingly hostile to XR’s interests following Boris Johnson’s ascension to the Premiership and commanding victory in the December 2019 election. Brexit and COVID-19 also limited XR’s impact on public opinion in October 2019 and September 2020, and COVID-19 reduced XR’s numbers and funding. The change in partisan environment meant that XR’s most recent protests have only seen the introduction of a repressive piece of legislation to expand police powers, intended to make it easier to neutralize XR’s protests. Despite its inability to change policy following April 2019, XR has had other positive impacts – it permanently increased the importance of climate change in public opinion polls, pushed the Labour Party to endorse much more rapid decarbonization, and contributed to new emissions legislation in Scotland and a decline in investment in fossil fuels.

This thesis tests a variety of hypotheses about the factors influencing the policy outcomes of social movement mobilization. My results largely fit into existing theoretical literature, insofar as I find that XR’s strategy played a crucial role in their early victories, while partisanship played the key role in explaining their declining impact. This accords well with scholars who emphasize that both factors internal to a movement (e.g., strategy) and external to a movement (e.g., partisanship) influence the policy outcomes movements achieve. However, my findings also diverge from existing theory by pointing out that movements sometimes achieve substantial gains despite facing unfriendly governments, and that resources, framing, media coverage, and public opinion may sometimes have
little explanatory power. Moreover, none of the independent variables I examine have perfect explanatory power, somewhat weakening the strength of my results.

I also make novel contributions to existing theory on social movement outcomes. I posit a novel refinement of the political mediation model which centers the importance of political elites and emphasizes the interactions between clusters of independent variables. This refinement produces a helpful graphical representation of the causal pathways of movement influence. It also critiques existing theory, which tends to implicitly assume that variables operate totally independent from one another, and suggests a new avenue of research by which scholars could develop a more holistic understanding of the process by which movements sometimes win. My analysis also highlights the importance of innovating novel disruptive tactics, especially given that the public becomes increasingly frustrated with disruption as time passes, and the police learn to adapt to a movement’s tactics. This generates the theoretical suggestion that movements utilizing disruptive tactics may be more capable of making their own destiny early in their lifespan, whereas the external political context becomes more important in determining movement outcomes as time passes. This has bearing on the structure-agency debate in political science and suggests a possible avenue for future research in which scholars examine individual episodes of contention as their unit of analysis, rather than entire campaigns.

To conclude, I must emphasize that the subject of this thesis is not just relevant for scholarship. Four years ago, Doug McAdam lamented the lack of grassroots climate mobilization in the US (McAdam 2017, 189). Today, the situation has changed, with Sunrise, XR, School Strikes, and more groups having emerged (de Moor et al, 1). Despite this, the situation is still bleak, with the world on track for 2.4-2.7 degrees Celsius of warming by century’s end, even after the recent UN COP26 negotiations – an outcome that will guarantee global climate disaster (Milman et al). As the Secretary General of the UN puts it, “We can either save our world or condemn humanity to a hellish future” (Milman et al). The urgency of the climate crisis calls desperately for further scholarly research on the climate movement’s
outcomes – we do not have time to wait for XR’s campaign to “end” before analyzing their outcomes, as is customary in the social movement literature. This thesis is a first attempt to answer the question “how can the climate movement win,” but in many ways, the question remains unanswered. Yet, we need to know what social movement actors might do to tip the scales towards a safe planetary future. For my generation, such knowledge will literally be the difference between life and death.
Works Cited


