The University of Chicago

Until They Hear Us:

Motivations, Justifications, and Effects of Extreme Climate Change Activism in the 21st Century

By Samuel R. Klein

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts in Environmental, Geographic, and Urban Studies and Sociology

Faculty Advisor: Professor Kristen Schilt

Environmental and Urban Studies Preceptors: Professor Christopher Kindell and Anna Selden

April 11 , 2025

Abstract

Anthropogenic climate change, manifested in rising global temperatures and unstable weather patterns, is a growing existential threat to societies around the world. As negative effects have proliferated and governmental responses have remained slow, many citizens have taken to the streets to protest ongoing fossil fuel emissions. This thesis project examines the extreme instances of climate activism, where protestors use unconventional, disruptive methods to make their voices heard. From throwing soup on famous paintings to crashing videogame tournaments with spray paint, extreme climate activism is a divisive phenomenon that is seen by some as creative form of resistance and by others as misguided or counterproductive. This study employs a mixed-methods analysis of qualitative interview data and quantitative survey data to examine the motivations, justifications, and effectiveness of extreme protest tactics. Most of these data are collected on protestors from two case study organizations, the prominent UK activist groups Just Stop Oil and Extinction Rebellion. There are three major findings of this study: climate protestors are motivated through educational exposure and dual senses of frustration and altruism, they justify their actions through historical precedent and an argument of moral necessity, and their methods are partly effective as symbolic actions that attract attention but are largely ineffective in gaining public sympathy. Protestors continually adapt their methods to fit their needs, and these findings offer insights into the viability of disruptive tactics as a mechanism for social change. This project ultimately finds that extreme climate activism is a divisive yet necessary piece of the environmental resistance movement; it concludes by recommending future research on the frequency and effectiveness of extreme tactics.

I. Introduction

In March 2022, Louis McKechnie, a 21-old British mechanical engineering student, walked onto the pitch of a Premier League football game between Everton and Newcastle. Wearing a bright orange shirt declaring "Just Stop Oil", he proceeded to zip tie his own neck to Everton's goalpost and stand defiantly on the pitch. Louis stopped the match for a full ten minutes as support teams struggled to remove him. They eventually fetched a gigantic bolt cutter and hauled him off the pitch among jeers and insults from the crowd. In a press interview after the incident, Louis said "since doing this action I've received hundreds of death threats" (Warren 2022).

Later that year in October, 21-year-old Phoebe Plummer and 20-year-old Anna Holland entered the National Gallery in London and threw cans of Heinz tomato soup onto the painting "Sunflowers" by Vincent van Gogh. They knelt down to the ground, pulled out bottles of superglue, and stuck their hands to the wall beneath the painting as soup dripped down the frame. Phoebe, with brightly dyed pink hair, asked pointedly "What is worth more, art or life . . . Are you more concerned about the protection of a painting or the protection of our planet and people?" (Gayle 2022). In a highly publicized trial in September of 2024, Phoebe was sentenced to two years in jail and Anna was sentenced to 20 months.

In March 2023, Niamh Lynch, a 21-year-old from Oxford, and Rajan Naidu, a 73-year-old from Birmingham, sprayed orange powder paint on Stonehenge. In April 2024, 35-year-old actor Nate Smith walked onto the stage of a Broadway showing of Ibsen's *Enemy of the People* by declaring "I object to the silencing of scientists" (Veltman 2024). And on

November 6th, 2024—to protest the second election of Donald Trump as President of the United States—Joseph Aggarwal, 25, spray painted the U.S. Embassy in London.

This is a paper about frustrated people. It is about their struggle to be heard, their struggle to fight climate change, and their struggle for their future through the process of climate activism. Climate activism encompasses an expansive variety of ideas and strategies; most generally, it refers to any action that is taken with the intent of 1) recognizing climate change as an urgent problem and 2) taking steps to prevent or alleviate its negative effects. Like any type of protest, climate activism seeks to upset the status quo and disrupt business-as-usual practices. As a reflexive process, activism is categorized by the public based on the level of disruption, ranging from private or innocuous protests like going vegan all the way to dangerous or threatening activism like climate terrorism.

Specifically, this project focuses on extreme activism tactics. This term is highly subjective; protestors themselves may not view their actions as extreme, while the public or media may denounce relatively standard tactics as extreme. Here, I define extreme activism as disruptive and direct confrontational protesting, in particular actions that put protestors at risk of injury or arrest. Furthermore, these extreme actions are largely symbolic and are meant to attract attention. They are carefully controlled tactics that avoid violence towards other people. In this paper, I explore the meaning of extreme climate activism, and how it relates to legal protesting and even ecoterrorism. I examine the rationale and motivations behind extreme climate protesting and discuss how members of extreme activist groups justify these chosen methods; in addition, I observe how individual protestors view their role as activists and how effective their methods are in achieving their goals. The purpose of this project, put simply, is to represent and share the feelings of climate activists within their unique cultural

contexts. Now is an especially important time for this type of holistic, empathetic research to be done, as climate protestors have become an increasingly persecuted group both legally and in popular discourse. In this project, I use my collected data to share valuable insights into the tactics, shortcomings, and strengths of protest culture; ultimately, I argue that extreme climate protesting is necessary and justifiable as a mechanism of social change.

In the sections that follow, I provide additional background and context on the topic of extreme climate protesting, as well as an overview of my conceptual framework that clearly defines my guiding research questions. Next, I examine the existing academic literature on climate activism, sorting and connecting the work around three themes emerging from my research questions—namely the methods, justifications, and effectiveness of extreme activism. I then introduce my methodology; in this section, I describe my mixed methods approach—which combines data from personally conducted ethnographic interviews with activists, existing public interviews with activists, and qualitative surveys polling both activists and the general public—and provide a table with details on each of my different data sources, including profiles that provide context for each of my interview subjects. Finally, I present my findings and discuss how they answer each of my three research questions. I conclude by discussing key takeaways from my project and the role of extreme climate activism as a tool for social change.

II. Background and Context

In 2019, a sixteen-year-old climate activist from Sweden stood before the entire world at the U.N. Climate Action Summit. With determination in her eyes, Greta Thunberg spoke directly to world leaders:

> You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and

> all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you! ("Transcript: Greta Thunberg's Speech")

In her fiery speech, Thunberg would successfully impart the feelings and frustrations of an entire generation. To Thunberg and countless other young people across the world, the recent history of climate change had been a story of inaction.

Climate change first became a recognized global issue with the establishment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 1988; the subsequent series of IPCC Assessment Reports provided details and warnings on climate change to a concerned international audience. A growing scientific consensus identified the greenhouse effect, a result of by human CO2 emissions, as the mechanism driving climate change. The international community eventually took action with the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, which essentially committed industrialized countries to limiting and reducing greenhouse gas emissions ("What is the Kyoto Protocol"). However, the Protocol only became active in 2005, was abandoned by the United States, and left out major carbon-emitting developing countries like India and China. Global emissions continued to rise, world temperatures and climate-related disasters continued to rise, and most world leaders turned a blind eye.

The UN tried again in 2015 with the Paris Agreement, which required all countries to set emission-reduction pledges aimed at collectively limiting the amount of global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels (Maizland and Fong). Global warming of 1.5 degrees will already come with global consequences: the most recent IPCC report predicts heat waves, rising seas, crippled ocean ecosystems, and massive species extinction. Unfortunately, countries have not even been able to keep on track for 1.5 degrees of warming. Giant emitters like the United States, China, India, and the EU continue to emit

billions of metric tons of greenhouse gases, and current predictions by the Climate Action Tracker show 2.7 degrees of warming by 2100 (“The CAT Thermometer”).

The repeated failures of international climate change agreements like the Kyoto Protocol and Paris Agreement can be traced back to individual countries. The Group of Twenty (G20) consists of the top twenty economies in the world; these nineteen countries, plus the European Union and recently the African Union, are together responsible for over *80%* of global emissions. G20 accounts for 85% of gross world product (GWP) and 75% of international trade (“About G20”). G20 directly allows and even supports the indiscriminate growth of harmful fossil fuel industries. And not unsurprisingly, G20 countries have been the most sluggish to take action, with President Donald Trump pulling the United States out of the Paris Agreement during his office in 2025 (Maizland and Fong).

During her speech in 2019, Greta Thunberg called out this inaction. She was tired of the same old story of climate change, a story of G20 leaders blindly pursuing profits while the world slowly burned. She was done with empty bureaucratic promises. She wanted the U.N. Summit to understand her frustration and anger, as a young person who had been robbed of a happy and healthy future:

> For more than 30 years, the science has been crystal clear. How dare you continue to look away and come here saying that you're doing enough, when the politics and solutions needed are still nowhere in sight.
> You say you hear us and that you understand the urgency. But no matter how sad and angry I am, I do not want to believe that. Because if you really understood the situation and still kept on failing to act, then you would be evil. And that I refuse to believe. (“Transcript: Greta Thunberg’s Speech”)

Thunberg’s sentiment is shared by citizens around the world, who are increasingly acting on their strong feelings about government inaction. Climate change protesting has risen steadily in recent years. In an analysis of almost three thousand protest events between 2006

and 2020, Ortiz et. al. found that protests have become an increasingly frequent global phenomenon (2022, 14).

Table 1 Number of protests in 2006–2020

	2006–2010	*2011–2015*	*2016–2020*	*Total*
East Asia and Pacific	98	144	136	378
Europe and Central Asia	119	319	368	806
Latin America and the Caribbean	92	164	171	427
Middle East and North Africa	53	85	70	208
North America	44	111	126	281
South Asia	26	37	38	101
Sub-Saharan Africa	76	138	155	369
Global Protests	68	83	88	239
Total	576	1081	1152	2809

Source Authors' analysis of world protests in media sources 2006–2020, see: https://worldprotests.

Around 13% of these protests have been attributed to climate justice; these protests are intended to bring attention to the urgency of climate change and the unfair repercussions affecting many developing countries (2022, 47). Some of these protests have had worldwide influence. In 2018, a year before her speech to the U.N., Thunberg started skipping school to protest the lack of climate urgency during the Swedish parliamentary elections. Other schoolchildren, inspired by her actions, began joining her school strike every Friday; the protest soon went viral on social media and became known under the *#FridaysforFuture* hashtag (Wiig 2021, 7). In 2019, the now-independent Fridays for Future movement organized the single most popular climate protest event in history: 7.6 million people participated in the Global Week for Future that September (Wiig 2021, 8). Climate protests also received international attention in 2022. Small groups of protesters from activist organizations Just Stop Oil and Extinction Rebellion attracted significant media coverage for their provocative tactics, such as throwing soup on paintings, physically blocking highways, and even

sabotaging cement plants (Gordon 2023). Even scientists have begun to take to the streets in recent years. The Scientist Rebellion movement has seen climate researchers arrested for occupying and glueing themselves to Shell HQ in London, and the JP Morgan Chase building in LA (Kalmus 2022).

This recent timeline of activism demonstrates a rising frequency in the adoption of extreme protest tactics as a way to gain attention and apply pressure to institutions. As humanity enters a new era of global climate crisis, these methods will continue to evolve to meet protestors' goals. My research aims to understand disruptive climate activism as an emergent phenomenon; in doing so, I adopt a sympathetic approach toward activists to understand their strong feelings regarding climate change and relate their actions to the broader public.

III. Conceptual Framework

My research project is intended to explore several topics related to extreme climate protesting. The questions I answer through my research are:

1) What are the motivations driving activists to participate in extreme climate change protesting?

2) Why do activists believe they are justified in disrupting social norms and breaking laws?

3) How effective are extreme protests in achieving their goals?

To answer these questions, I examine the existing literature on extreme climate activism, analyze interview responses from personal and public interviews, and review public survey data on activist demographics and public opinion polling. I use two case study organizations, the widely publicized activist groups Just Stop Oil (JSO) and Extinction Rebellion (XR), to present an ethnographic analysis on the phenomenon of extreme climate action. Both JSO and XR are based in the UK but represent two distinct approaches to direct action. Since their founding in 2022, JSO has consistently been one of the most insistent voices for climate action, physically

disrupting and blockading sporting venues, art galleries, oil terminals, and airports. Hundreds of protestors have been arrested and twenty-six have been imprisoned for their controversial actions, and JSO shows no signs of slowing down; in January 2025 protestors spray-painted "1.5 is dead" on Charles Darwin's grave as a response to the world surpassing the 1.5 degree C warming threshold outlined in the Paris Agreement. In contrast to JSO, XR has demonstrated an evolving relationship with extreme climate action. Founded in 2018, XR has historically utilized disruptive protest methods—supergluing themselves to buildings and blockading roads—throughout the UK, US, Australia, and various European cities. However, on January 1st, 2023, XR announced a shift away from this style of publicly disruptive protests in a statement titled "We Quit" ("We Quit"). The organization has since focused their efforts on building public support and attendance for creative protest events—like the Berlin Treptower Festival that I attended in 2024 to conduct interviews. My selected sources of data, detailed more fully in Section V: Data and Methods, are intended to show the similarities and differences between JSO and XR as case studies for extreme activist organizations.

My project's scope, therefore, is focused on protest occurring in Western Europe during the early 21st century, more specifically after Greta Thunberg's revolutionary school strikes in 2018. Her unflinching actions, along with steadily rising global temperatures and a proliferation of environmental disasters, have emboldened activists around the world to use whatever means at their disposal to protest climate change. Geographically, Western Europe has emerged as a locus of these strikes, a trend potentially stemming from its democratic political systems and traditions of free speech.

A main argument of my paper is that extreme climate protests are effective and necessary to achieve the goals of climate change activism. To demonstrate this, I draw from the framework

of sociologist Herbert Haines, who introduced the idea of positive and negative radical flank effects (RFEs). The RFE framework argues that the actions or very existence of radical groups brings attention to the same issues addressed by moderate groups, and also makes them look more reasonable in comparison (Haines 2013: 1). Without reminders of just *how far* people will go to fight climate change, more moderate climate change efforts would receive a fraction of the attention and support. Using this RFE framework and interview evidence, I show that extreme protesting—despite causing public annoyance and possible alienation of supporters—is ultimately crucial in keeping climate change at the forefront of the public's mind as a real and urgent issue. There are many arguments made by the public and some academic sources that point characterize extreme climate activism as ineffective and even counterproductive; I examine these claims in my following literature review section, and I argue that they focus too much on negative public opinion and fail to recognize the broader strategy of disruption. Activism is meant to upset people stuck within the status quo. If social change is to be achieved, the status quo of climate inaction must be uprooted through any disruptive means—especially civil disobedience.

IV. Literature Review

With climate protests increasing worldwide, both in number and severity, there exists a comprehensive body of scholarly literature on the subject. The academic discussions of extreme climate protesting are complex and multifaceted; however, these discussions can be generalized into three general subsections, including A) the definition and methods of extreme protesting, B) the morality and justifications behind extreme protesting, and C) the effectiveness of extreme protesting.

Definition and Methods of Extreme Protesting

Academics in the field of social change generally agree that there exist a myriad of protest types and tactics. Protesting can occur on a range from peaceful and nonviolent to law-breaking and even violent. Extreme protesting, when sorted onto this range, can be defined as separate from both explicitly violent and nonviolent protesting. Extreme protestors put their bodies at risk to violence when they glue themselves to roads to block traffic; despite this, the protestors themselves are nonviolent and believe they are protesting on behalf of human life. In the context of this paper, "extreme protesting" is a bucket term for protest that uses direct confrontation and civil disobedience as tactics to fight climate change. Sociologist Dana Fisher describes this style of extreme protesting as "direct action". She writes that,

> Direct action involves disruption and civil disobedience, including nonviolent and violent tactics like sit-ins, general strikes, vandalism, monkeywrenching, and even riots. Direct action is being used to achieve a range of climate-related goals by a growing list of groups. These more confrontational efforts by climate activists fall into two main categories: direct action to elicit shock and gain public and media attention, and direct action to disrupt as part of a broader campaign. (2024, 94)

As Fisher notes, there are a variety of protest methods and tactics that can be identified using her definition of confrontational direct action. Organizations worldwide are engaging in this type of extreme protesting. For this project, I use the activist groups Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil as case studies to examine specific tactics and strategies that are intended to disrupt and shock. These two organizations have become the most notable groups engaging in extreme activism in recent years, with their acts of protest garnering millions of views on social media along with a variety of academic examinations.

One such examination is by Berglund and Schmidt, who examine the use of extreme tactics by Extinction Rebellion (XR) in their book *Extinction Rebellion and Climate Change*

Activism. In it, they write that "XR explicitly draw on the liberal tradition of civil disobedience being justified as a last resort, since all other avenues have been tried and tested and that time is running out. XR also show a fidelity to law when they accept the legal consequences of disobedience" (2020, 25). This analysis points to the general strategy of extreme protest groups: grab attention and justify their actions. Members of XR choose to block traffic by gluing themselves to the road because it is a shocking and annoying action. Motorists will be upset, and the protestors may be arrested for their actions, but the ultimate result is widespread attention. Videos of linked protestors being run over by cars, pushed to the ground by irate drivers, and pepper sprayed by the police have millions of views on YouTube. Major news organizations cover the violence against protestors and spread the details of their cause throughout the public sphere. And the XR protestors, by accepting the legal punishment for their actions, demonstrate just how far some people are going to make their voices heard on climate change.

To organizations like XR and Just Stop Oil, there is no other choice but to use extreme tactics in the face of governmental failures to stop climate change. In an infamous display of protest in October of 2022, two members of Just Stop Oil threw tomato soup on Vincent van Gogh's "Sunflowers" at the National Gallery in London (Yoder 2022). They proceeded to glue themselves to the wall beside the painting, give a speech on the importance of addressing the climate emergency, and were later removed and arrested. The painting was unaffected, since the soup had only hit the protective glass covering. Regardless, the public was outraged. Many people questioned the connection between climate change and targeting a Van Gogh, and others argued that such extreme action alienated the public and decreased support (Mann 2022). However, the soup incident was seen as hugely successful for Just Stop Oil; they had ultimately opened a global dialogue about what extremes are appropriate to fight climate change. Compared

to other non-confrontational protest tactics at their disposal, worldwide attention wasn't a bad outcome. Emma Brown, a spokesperson for Just Stop Oil, told PBS News later in 2022:

> If we take action that people can ignore—so if we stood in some park somewhere with a placard, and people didn't know about it, it didn't disturb them, they didn't even hear about it—that would be a completely ineffective form of protest . . . we're going to be noisy, we're going to be disruptive, we're going to be unignorable, we're going to be a pain in the ass until you listen to us. (PBS News Hour)

This message of desperation and justified rule-breaking is the ultimate goal of extreme protest tactics. By toeing the line between violent and nonviolent protest with civil disobedience and direct confrontation, activist organizations like Just Stop Oil and XR attempt to shock society into action.

Morality and Justifications of Extreme Protesting

Disruptive climate action is a complex moral undertaking. As discussed previously, methods of extreme protest involve actions that are designed to attract attention. Blocking roads, gluing hands to walls, and throwing soup on paintings are all actions that directly disrupt the standard rhythms of society. For many, these disturbances represent a threat to individuals and public function. Direct climate action is often equated with *eco-terrorism*, a term critiqued by Steve Vanderheiden in his article *Eco-terrorism or Justified Resistance?* Vanderheiden examines the Earth Liberation Front (ELF), an activist organization that was labeled as the leading domestic terrorist threat in the U.S. by the FBI in 2001. Since its formation in 1992, ELF has attacked property associated with environmental encroachment and exploitation; their most well-known public action was burning a ski resort expansion reducing the critical habitat of the Canadian lynx. Vanderheiden uses the language of Michael Walzer's just war theory to critically examine the morality of this type of environmental action. He notes that, due to their explicitly stated and carefully enforced

principles of nonviolence against living things, ELF's actions do not constitute traditional definitions of terrorism and are instead closer to economic sabotage or *ecotage* (2005, 426). However, Vanderheiden concludes that ecotage fails to justify its extensive property damage with any concrete positive results; instead, "ecotage presents the risk of directly violating its own principles" by alienating the public or inadvertently causing harm to people (2005, 445). As noticed by Vanderheiden, attempts at social change through radical methods often have unintentional consequences that may be counterproductive to the goals of the activists.

This paradoxical relationship is referred to as the activist's dilemma. Simply put, the activist's dilemma describes an underlying challenge of social change: the more radical the action directed at upsetting an existing status quo, the less public support it will receive. Feinberg et. al. proves this phenomenon through six studies that lay out a psychological process model between protest extremity and public attitudes. He finds that "extreme protest actions not only negatively affected attitudes toward the movement, but typically also reduced support for the movements' central positions" (2017, 17). These results make intuitive psychological sense. Society is upheld through implicitly shared rules that make up our perception of 'civility', such as not harming others and not infringing on private property. Any action that threatens to violate these implicit rules—even actions with the best of intentions—will be met with skepticism and decreased support. Feinberg describes this process being consistent across groups with varying political views: "observers viewed these [extreme] actions as more immoral, leading to reduced feelings of emotional connection, less social identification with the movement, ultimately resulting in lower levels of support for the movement and its cause" (2017, 17). Climate change activists must

balance the risks of extreme action with its potential benefits: mass media attention and pressure on organizations.

Despite the questionable moral grounds of civil disobedience, protestors justify their actions with arguments of ethical necessity. The climate crisis represents a major existential force that threatens to completely disrupt human societies; for young protestors, this threat of disruption will come to a head during their lifetimes. By breaking the rules of standard society with disruptive, symbolic acts, activists are signaling to those in power that serious change *must* come; if not through traditional democratic means, then through radical individual actions. In an ethnographic study of young protestors in Britain, Pickard et. al. note that "young environmental activists are . . . building on the existing repertoire of contention and expanding it collectively, making them more disruptive and creative, in response to frustration with the perceived inefficacy of other forms of action" (2020, 272). As Pickard notices, climate protestors—and the broader environmentalist movement—have inherited a longstanding tradition of social resistance. What Pickard terms as an "existing repertoire of contention" can be understood as protest tactics used successfully by the historic social movements for equal civil rights, women's suffrage, and Indian independence. These collective protests are celebrated for upending the status quo, using confrontational yet non-violent tactics to demonstrate the injustice and inaction perpetrated by those in power. Environmental activists attempt to carry on this tradition, morally justifying extreme actions by pointing to increasingly extreme risks posed by the climate crisis.

Furthermore, climate activists are known to often adopt positive and inclusive protest frameworks to manage moral skepticism about their intentions. The importance of framing

climate resistance is discussed by Milstein et. al. in their article *Make Love, Not War?*, where they examine the radical ocean protection organization Sea Shepherd as a case study. They identify two distinct paradigms that have been used to define Sea Shepherd and similar activist organizations: "We argue that direct action, or non-violent and violent public action with the aim of transforming the status quo, may be framed primarily as in opposition to current extractive and destructive practices – *against* framing – or as a collaborative means to co-creating thriving ecosociocultural [*sic*] presents and futures – *with* framing" (Milstein 2020, 297). Both frameworks—being *against* environmental destruction and being *with* communities embracing positive change—are used in different scenarios to define the goals and actions of radical environmental organizations. *Against* frameworks most directly represent the frustration and urgency that underly the goals of activist groups, but social media and internet culture are quick to seize upon confrontational tactics and stigmatize activists as being *against* social order. Therefore, activist organizations must also rely on more positive *with* framing that reassures the public of their intentions to make the world a better place. After analyzing her interviews from XR activists, Pickard concludes that "they show dedication to what they consider 'radical' peaceful protest actions rooted in their concept of kindness . . . they feel supported by their peers and hopeful about the potential for their movement to make a difference in a resolutely peaceful and kind way" (2020, 273). This internal group feeling of solidarity in the face of crisis is common in many climate activist groups; this connection is especially appealing to young people across the world eager for both change and a sense of belonging. In their 2022 survey of Australians ages 15-24, Arnot et. al. find that "young people perceive that climate justice protests produce positive outcomes, including awareness raising, individual and collective empowerment,

and establishing a culture of unity and shared goals among young people about responses to the climate crisis" (6). Arnot's results demonstrate the power of positive and inclusive framing of climate resistance. In Australia, this *with* framing has been successful in convincing a large demographic to sympathize with and potentially support resistive climate protesting; only with this sort of mass public approval and backing can activist organizations truly exert pressure to achieve their goals.

Effectiveness of Extreme Protesting

Social resistance is, first and foremost, an attempt to alter society in some way through acts of protest. These acts are seen as successful if they achieve the goals of activists; for the environmentalism movement in general, the biggest goal is to fight the global warming effect by reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Existing literature points to several social mechanisms through which protestors achieve this goal; climate activism has been shown to influence voting behavior, put pressure on policymakers to pass pro-climate legislation, and sway public opinion and online discourse to frame climate change as an urgent issue (Ozden 2022, 4). At their most effective, social protests can snowball into a full-blown mass movement, uniting the voices of people around the world to achieve sweeping change.

Realistically, environmental protests are highly political actions that have varying appeal to different constituents. Studies in the United States have demonstrated that support for environmental action is directly predicted by political party: in 2019, 84% of Democrats agreed with the goals of climate activists, while only 50% of Independents and 23% of Republicans were supportive (Bugden 2022, 2). This trend is part of growing culture of hyper-partisanship in the US and around the world, where stances on political issues are determined primarily by in-group (us) and out-group (them) disagreement. Bugden's

experimental survey reveals how this partisan divide has led to difficulty in environmental protests gaining traction: “the overriding dynamic in shaping how partisans respond to protest is not sympathy to a cause but sympathy to a group . . . the fact that the issue is associated with and/or presented by an outgroup is sufficient grounds to reject it” (2022, 10). This dynamic presents a unique challenge to environmental movements, which aim to unite people directly with the urgency of their cause. Rising partisanship has led to increased criticism of climate action—especially more extreme or disruptive tactics. These critics are quick to defend the status quo by pointing out the moral complications of direct action.

Regardless of the challenges of partisanship, the most fundamental goal of extreme protests is to increase public support and discourse surrounding climate change. Studies on the effectiveness of climate activism have achieved mixed results. Feinberg et. al. recognizes the power of extreme protest behaviors in making headlines and gaining attention—especially in the sensationalist era of social media (2017, 6). However, his behavioral response study on these tactics found that bystanders felt decreased feelings of social identification and decreased support for activists’ causes (2017, 17). For casual protest observers, exposure to more extreme or disruptive tactics crossed some line; they were not able to relate and commiserate with protests that used extreme tactics. Extreme tactics may be effective at attracting widespread attention, but perhaps counterproductive in building support and sympathy for climate activism. However, other studies have challenged this idea. Oz and Glover conducted a set of three surveys in the UK before, during, and after significant protests by Just Stop Oil and XR; they found that the disruptive protests did not lead to a loss of support for climate policies, and furthermore that surveyed

citizens were marginally more likely to participate in future environmental activism (Oz 2022). Even though disruptive tactics may be off-putting to some bystanders, this effect seems to be endemic to specific organizations rather than the environmental movement as a whole.

This phenomenon has been identified in existing literature as the "radical flank effect". Sociologist Herbert Haines identifies the radical flank effect (RFE) as a complex interaction between radical and moderate branches of a social movement and public opinion. He argues that positive RFEs occur when the actions or even existence of radical groups benefit more moderate factions; radicals may draw massive attention to issues shared by moderate groups, or unintentionally help moderate groups appear more reasonable and responsible in comparison to them (2013, 1). Many have identified the environmentalist movement as a potential site of positive RFEs, including both Feinberg and Oz (2017, 21 and 2022). Under this framework, extreme climate activism serves a necessary—if somewhat sacrificial—purpose. Disruptive tactics provoke mass attention, some of which is negatively directed as extreme activist organizations like Just Stop Oil or XR, but most of which helps further the goals of more moderate climate organizations like conservation nonprofits, climate policy think tanks, or environmental charities.

Conclusion

With environmental protests growing around the world, both in frequency and radicalness, there is a burgeoning field of academic work dedicated to understanding extreme activism. Existing literature can be divided into three main categories: definitions and methods of extreme protest, the morality behind using disruptive tactics, and effectiveness of these tactics in achieving the goals of activist organizations. Within each of

these topics, there is appropriate debate around using extreme tactics as a tool for social change. Scholars note the plethora of challenges facing extreme activists, from moral skepticism regarding their actions to potential alienation of bystanders. However, the existing literature ultimately finds extreme activism to be a powerful tool for bringing much-needed disruption to global systems of exploitation and consumption that have facilitated the current climate crisis.

In my project, I analyze a wide range of data to expand on this argument holistically. Previous literature has generally tackled extreme climate activism with a piecemeal approach, focusing on either protest methods, arguments of justification, or most commonly measuring effectiveness via public opinion. My research approach includes public opinion data but relies primarily on protestors' voices to examine all these topics in tandem. In this way, my work fills a gap in the literature regarding activist's motivations and human experience performing extreme types of protest.

V. Data and Methods

Extreme climate activism represents a disruptive and stigmatized form of social resistance. The fact that so many activists are increasingly turning to these methods is a trend warranting academic investigation. In my analysis, I employ a mixed methods approach, drawing on ethnographic interviews, publicly available news interviews, and survey data to answer three multifaceted sociological questions. What are the different motivations driving activists to engage in modes of extreme activism, which risk arrest and negative social backlash? How do activists go about justifying actions that go against existing laws or norms? And how can the effectiveness of extreme tactics be measured and understood?

For my first two research questions, I asked activists directly about their motivations and justifications for direct climate action. While in Berlin for a study abroad program in September of 2024, I visited XR's Living Resistance Festival in Treptower Park. Climate activists had been legally occupying the park with tents for the past several days, holding live music performances, t-shirt and bag printing workshops, and collaborative talks with other local activist groups. I talked with the activists at the informational tent about my interest in conducting interviews for my undergraduate thesis; one of them, L, followed up about a week later to discuss direct action and their experiences as an activist. My other ethnographic interview came through a friend's contact, J, who worked at Greenpeace during the 1980s. With both initial interviewees, I deployed the snowball method to recruit more interview participants. I also reached out through activist organization websites, social media accounts, and Reddit communities. I received helpful general information, but disappointingly no further interview subjects. There are several possible reasons explaining the difficulty of obtaining interviews; lack of monetary incentives and sensitivity of the topic limited my ethnographic approach. Future research drawing on interviews with activists should prioritize building personal connections within activist organizations and providing incentives to promote broader recruitment.

To address my final research question and supplement my existing interview data, I turned to the wealth of online data on extreme climate activism. I focused my search on high-profile media interviews with activists and existing survey data on activist demographics and public opinion of radical tactics. Activism is a highly variable activity, which encompasses actions ranging from peaceful demonstrations to highly publicized law-breaking. I have endeavored to capture this range of climate action with my chosen data sources; it is my goal to fairly represent voices coming from different locations both within climate activist and public

spheres. Analyzing media interviews with a diverse set of activists allows me to draw productive general conclusions about the motivations and justifications of climate protestors; the survey datasets from YouGov and the Center for Understanding Sustainable Prosperity (CUSP) provide quantitative insights into protestors' makeup and their effectiveness. Summarized in the table at the end of this section are the differentiated sources I am drawing upon in my thesis project.

For my personally conducted interviews, I have protected the identity of the activists by referring to them only with pseudonyms. However, I use the full names of activists appearing in publicly available interview data since their stories are published and easily accessible.

I analyze my data in two distinct ways. First, I perform a themed analysis of my ethnographic interviews and chosen online media interviews. I identify and explore the distinct motivations that activists have for directly protesting climate change; I also synthesize their most frequent justifications for extreme action. Second, I perform a statistical analysis of the survey data from YouGov and CUSP and distill the relevant findings into graphics showing the demographic makeup and effectiveness of climate activist organizations. Through this methodology, I systematically present the findings specific to each of my three guiding research questions.

Data Title	Data Source	Unique Perspective- Reason for Inclusion
Interview with L from XR	Ethnographic Interview	Young protestor from Berlin focusing on legal means of protest.
Interview with J from Greenpeace	Ethnographic Interview	Experienced protestor who has been participating in activism since the 1980s.
Interview with Oliver from JSO	Rock Paper Shotgun Gaming Journal	Protested by disrupting a popular public event,

		the Eurogamer Expo Tekken Tournament.
Interview with Phoebe from JSO	National Public Radio (NPR)	High profile "spokesperson" for JSO who participated in their most infamous protest action.
Interview with Jo from XR	The Commons Social Change Library	Worked as a protest organizer and directly challenged Black Rock Inc.
Interview with Etienne from XR	Climate Change Unfolding Podcast	Former Olympic Gold Medalist who became an activist, risking his good reputation for a cause he believes in.
YouGov Survey Data	The Open Science Framework Database (OSF)	Quantitative public opinions of JSO and their tactics.
CUSP Survey Data	The Center for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity (CUSP)	Quantitative socio-demographic profile of XR activists.

VI. Results and Analysis

To achieve a holistic understanding of the phenomenon of extreme climate activism, I employed a mixed method analysis of personally conducted interviews, existing online interviews, and published survey data. I comprehensively examined these data and grouped together recurring themes that addressed each my three research questions. First, I sorted my data looking for which *motivations* were most mentioned by climate activists: I found that exposure and awareness of the climate crisis through education, frustrations with current climate action, and a sense of personal agency and altruism were the most shared motivators driving protestors toward direct action. Second, I examined the most frequently mentioned *justifications* for protestors: I found that the protestors were most likely to mention successful historical precedents and make an argument of moral necessity—while mentioning clear moral limits—to

justify extreme methods of civil disobedience. Third, I answered the question of *effectiveness* both quantitatively by using public opinion data and qualitatively using protestors' impressions: I found that extreme action was ineffective in that it garnered largely negative responses by the public and media, but effective in that it increased public discourse around climate change and served as a powerful symbolic stand with that inspires future activism. In my sections below, I further explain each finding and share key quotes and visuals as supporting evidence.

Motivations of Climate Activists

Activists spoke about various processes and motivations that led to them joining extreme activist organizations and participating in disruptive action themselves. In the following section, I explore my three major findings: activists gain awareness of climate emergency through education, express frustration with the inefficacy of both current policies and traditional protesting, and rely on values of agency and altruism to guide their decision making.

Finding 1: Awareness of the Climate Crisis through Education

Key Quote: *"I began to learn more, watched talks on the Internet, read articles and talked to a few people, and really started to realize what a dire position we are in right now—an emergency situation. I was trying to do my bit I suppose, take responsibility for certain parts of my life and reduce my impact"* – Etienne from XR (Ward 2019)

For most climate activists, the foundational step in their path to activism is education. Etienne, in the quote above, describes how he only realized the "dire position" of a world threatened by climate change after doing informal research online. Once he understood the issue as an "emergency", he realized he had to take action. During my interview with L from XR Berlin, she explained that her concern with climate change was first developed at her undergraduate university, which included mandatory sustainability classes. This initial exposure

to climate issues was then expanded through a student club called Economy and Environment and led to her "getting into the topic more and more." This process of increasing climate awareness is mirrored by Oliver, a Just Stop Oil activist who originally started protesting when he started his undergraduate career at a London university. He explained that being under lockdown during Covid "gave me more time to think, reflect, look these things up" (Evans-Thirlwell 2023). After being exposed initially to climate change as a large and complex issue, climate activists seem to dig deeper into the issue and seek validating information to make sense of the crisis. To this end, activists usually turn to scientific papers on climate change: J from Greenpeace reported how he followed climate science in the popular press, but later realized "climate action is critical" after sitting down and reading "peer-reviewed climate science." Education among activists, then, is critical for them establishing specific worldviews and motivations for collective action. This education does not have to be formal schooling, as evidenced by Etienne's quote above about researching on the Internet; however, initial exposure to climate issues from formal schooling is common among protestors.

According to quantitative studies, higher education is found to be a commonly shared characteristic between climate activists. In their 2019 demographic survey of XR activists, the UK-based Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity (CUSP) found that protestors participating in mass civil disobedience actions in London were highly educated (see Figure 1 below). "85% hold at least a university (or equivalent level) degree", the report found, "a figure over twice the national average, with over a third holding a postgraduate degree" (Saunders, Doherty, and Hayes 2020, 13). Education seems to be a defining demographic feature of activists, serving as a predictive pre-requisite that instills specific worldviews encouraging direct action.

Education levels of XR activists

Highest educational qualification	Apr 2019 (%)	Oct 2019 (%)	Combined (%)	UK climate marches (%)
GCSE, equivalent or lower	3.2	2.5	2.4	0.7
A Level or equivalent	6.4	7.6	7.1	3.1
HND	2.1	4.2	3.3	9.7
Degree or equivalent	52.1	50.0	51.2	42.7
Higher degree (MA/MSc, PhD)	36.2	33.1	34.6	43.8
Other	0.0	2.5	1.4	N/A
Total (n)	94	118	232	586

Note: data are presented in columns. The n is smaller than the overall sample size due to missing data.

Figure 1: Table from CUSP 2020 Survey on XR Activists.

Finding 2: Frustration with Current Climate Action

Key Quote: *"I joined back in August, largely out of a sense of efear and despairing. I tried all the more traditional forms of activism . . . So I saw what Just Stop Oil was doing, and for the first time I felt a bit of hope that I could do something to secure myself a future"* – Phoebe from JSO (Quiroz 2022)

One of the most powerful and frequently cited motivations for extreme activist tactics was frustration, both with current governmental responses to climate change and with the ineffectiveness of indirect activism. Phoebe, in the quote above, was driven to join JSO and later engage in disruptive protest through deep frustration with "more traditional forms of activism". They felt that extreme action offered new avenues to affect positive change that were not available through other means. Other activists like J feel frustration with exploitative corporations remaining unchecked; he explained that the culpability for the

current rate of climate change largely falls on the fossil fuel industry, “who disrupt—for profit—the natural environments that capture and store carbon”. Fossil fuel companies and other extractive corporations are rarely checked by national governments, who prioritize short-term economic gain over long-term security and public health. Etienne, an XR protestor based in London, noticed the glaring contradictions in this prevailing trend: “we are in an emergency . . . in other parts of the world there’s already problems happening . . . and currently we’re not doing anything about it, and business as usual is continuing. There’s no slowdown in ecocidal behaviors, I feel like I must take action” (Ward 2019). In the absence of top-down regulatory measures, activists like J and Etienne feel as if they have no choice but to protest.

Even after becoming climate-aware, implementing eco-friendly changes into their lifestyles, or participating in traditional protests many activists remain discouraged. Phoebe Plummer, one of the activists who threw soup on the Van Gogh painting in 2022, explained in an interview with NPR that they have tried everything from signing petitions and going on marches to going vegan. “I was so frustrated that I saw it not going anywhere”, they said, “I saw it not making any meaningful change” (Quiroz 2022). Oliver from JSO echoed this sentiment: “I was fed up with just going along and holding a placard and standing in a town centre” (Evans-Thirlwell 2023). This perception of traditional protest methods not being enough or not being noticed led many activists to consider taking more extreme action. Oliver explained, “I thought, if I’m not willing to be arrested for this, maybe that means I’m not taking it seriously enough” (Evans-Thirlwell 2023). Similarly, L expressed how her conviction as an activist stemmed from frustration in prior sustainability projects she had worked on: “I began to realize this is all nice and good but it’s moving very slowly, and if we really want to make a difference

in climate change then I need to venture from 'yeah, I like to talk about it' to being an activist". For people like Phoebe, Oliver, and L, frustrations about the climate crisis not only motivated them to begin protesting, but to protest using direct and disruptive methods that even risked arrest.

Finding 3: Agency and Altruism

Key Quote: *"What I and other activists do may not ultimately be enough, but for my grandchild and future grandchildren, for the natural world and for those who are most affected by climate injustice, doing nothing is not an option"* – Jo from XR (Hammond and McIntyre 2022)

Many activists were found to be motivated by a strong sense of self-sacrifice and awareness of their own agency as individuals. As shown by Jo's quote above, activists tended to adopt an altruistic perspective that considered the welfare of all individuals, including future generations. According to the CUSP report, 95.8% of the hundreds of XR activists surveyed were motivated partly through "acting out of a sense of civic duty and moral responsibility . . . XR activists are much more likely to state that they are motivated to act out of solidarity than out of self-interest" (Saunders, Doherty, and Hayes 2020, 4) (See Figure 2 below).

This shared feeling of moral responsibility among climate protestors has been a powerful motivator underpinning social movements throughout history; people organize and disrupt the status quo to affect positive change, and they do it out of a feeling of helping secure something greater than themselves—their futures, their kids, and the wellbeing of all. Oliver declared he is doing it because "it is mine and everybody else's lives that are at stake here" (Evans-Thirlwell 2023). J agrees with the scale of the issue, saying that "preserving life of all living things is a leading priority and calling for all of us". Notably, the altruistic intentions of activists like Oliver and J are directly shown through their actions. Speaking of grand ideals is one thing, but extreme

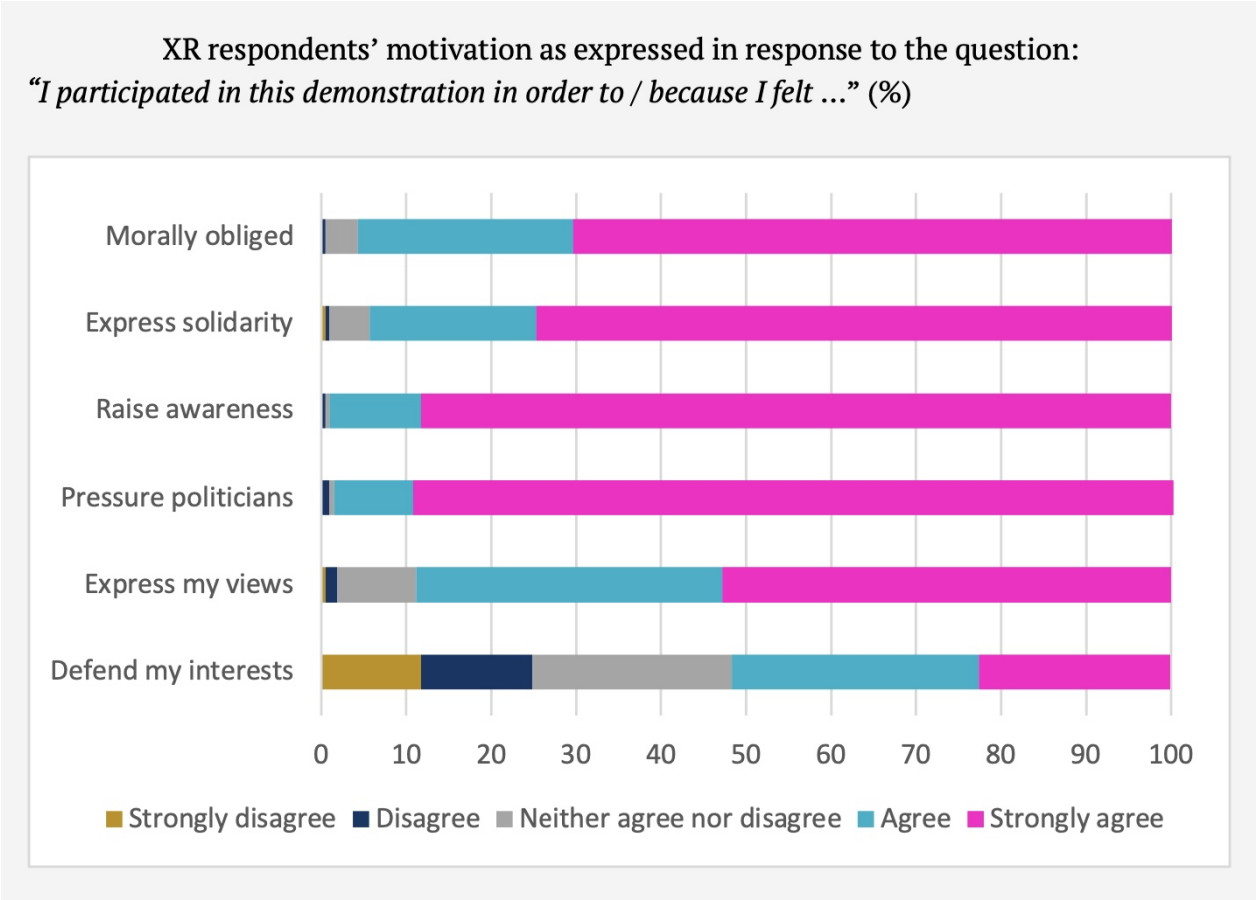

Figure 2: Graphic from CUSP 2020 Survey on XR Activists, with 232 respondents.

activism necessarily involves an element of self-sacrifice. Etienne notes that "there is a cost here . . . We're in this situation and it might mean personal sacrifices like choosing not to fly anymore" (Ward 2019). These personal sacrifices vary between activists; some may risk arrest or public shaming, while others may give up flying or go vegan. However, any level of self-sacrifice demonstrates a degree of altruism and willingness to act, characteristics that are powerful motivators for fighting against the abstract, outsized threat of climate change.

Justifications of Disruptive Action

In this section, I examine which arguments activists employ to justify their direct actions. They most commonly validate their actions using arguments of historical precedent and moral

necessity, while recognizing their actions are most defensible when they express clear moral limits.

Finding 1: Historical Precedent

Key Quote: *"The whole idea of using civil disobedience, which is what XR has built their theory of change on, comes situations where that has worked. So Rosa Parks not getting up for a white lady, Ghandhi's peaceful protests, all these things that were technically overstepping social norms. It's all a frame of reference question, and we need to shift the frame of reference"* – L from XR

For climate change activists, throwing soup on paintings and gluing themselves to roads are not simply blind acts of desperation; they are part of a deliberate strategy, based on the historical precedent shown by social movements. L, in the quote above, explains how disruption has historically been used to shift public frames of reference and shatter complacency with harmful social norms. "This is why Just Stop Oil uses these tactics of civil resistance," explained Phoebe in her NPR interview, "because history has shown us that civil resistance works" (Quiroz 2022). As individual actors concerned with changing their world for the better, activists sort themselves into resistance organizations that provide them with structure, solidarity, and a shared language of social change that takes inspiration from the success of previous movements. Etienne points out that often the most effective forms of protest are the law-breaking or extreme tactics used infamously by past protestors: "Martin Luther King got arrested, Ghandi went on hunger strikes, stuff like this when they are asking people to listen to their grievances. You can go to regular marches and get literally nothing on the news the next day . . . it's a bit disappointing" (Ward 2019). For current protestors struggling to make their voices heard, the

successes in activists in generations past offer both inspiration and a justification for extreme tactics.

Finding 2: Moral Necessity and Moral Limits

Key Quote: *"The civil disobedience model is what happens when people feel like they got no choice . . . For me this peaceful idea is absolutely crucial, the idea of breaking the law in the most mellow way possible, literally sitting in a row on a bridge and saying 'I'm not going to move'* – Etienne from XR (Ward 2019)

Many activists chose to justify the use of disruptive actions to protest the climate crisis by making an argument of moral necessity. Normal protesting was not sufficient to make these activists' voices heard. Many felt that they had to match the extreme nature of the climate crisis with their own unconventional, loud responses: Oliver points out that "the world is absurd and ridiculous. There's something funny about all of the world's governments knowing that continuing to licence [*sic*] fossil fuels is causing climate breakdown, that it is, in the end, going to kill their own citizens . . . maybe a more kind of absurd protest can point that out" (Evans-Thirlwell 2023). This justifying philosophy of matching response to the severity of the issue is also shared by Phoebe Plummer, who noticed that "a lot of people, when they saw us, had feelings of shock or horror or outrage because they saw something beautiful and valuable and they thought it was being damaged or destroyed. But, you know, where is that emotional response when it's our planet and our people that are being destroyed" (Quiroz 2022). By targeting the Van Gogh *Sunflowers* painting—something treasured by society—Phoebe and other members of JSO were making a pointed argument about what we choose *not* to protect and care about.

Even while defending the use of extreme measures to fight climate change, activists were also adamant about maintaining clear moral limits to their protesting as part of their justifications. J argues that "well thought out and peaceful climate activism is always justified" and further explains that "peacefully disrupting climate-destroying business as usual is positive environmental activism". For him, the morality of activism is conditional: protesting only remains justifiable if its methods remain well-intentioned and carefully executed. These ethical boundaries are explicitly stated and disseminated by activist organizations: Oliver says, "on a practical and on a philosophical level, what Just Stop Oil is about is preventing the violence of the climate crisis and not using violence in any way ourselves" (Evans-Thirlwell 2023). This type of mission statement, shared by activists and the organizations in which they operate, is necessary in justifying protest activities and grounding them as responsible, ethical forms of resistance.

Effectiveness of Disruptive Action

In my final section regarding the effectiveness of disruptive action, I find varied measures of effectiveness depending on activists' goals. Extreme tactics are ineffective in achieving positive public response and sympathy, but are effective in achieving increased discourse on climate change and by inspiring those who are sympathetic as a symbolic stand.

Finding 1: Negative Response by the Public and Media

Key Quote: *"In the protests themselves, there's generally very little public reaction . . . there's a clear 'you-guys and us' or 'you and them' separation. And if I'm talking about the public in terms of media or what people online are saying, it has really gone toward the negative"* – L from XR

According to both protestor interviews and survey data, much of the public response is negative or against the protests. L points out that activists, as disruptors of the status quo, are often stigmatized as the 'other'. This characterization causes them to either be ignored or be seen unfavorably by the public and media. The 2024 YouGov survey by the University of Bristol asked over a thousand members of the U.K. public their opinions on Just Stop Oil and their tactics (see Figure 3 below). Only 16% of those surveyed said that they had a favorable view of JSO; this statistic represents a broader trend of skepticism and doubt toward the effectiveness of protests (Davis, Berglund, and Finnerty 2023). Despite an overwhelming 82% of this sample agreeing that climate change is an important issue, they regularly labeled any direct protest addressing climate change as immoral: 56% said blocking access to Parliament was never justifiable, 70% said that spray-painting government buildings was never justifiable, and 55% said that blocking access to oil refineries was never justifiable (Davis, Berglund, and Finnerty 2023). These statistics make sense: any disruptions to the status quo of societies is likely to be met with skepticism and counter-resistance. L says that "a lot of time you get the argument 'the way you're [protesting] is hurting me, the regular working-class people'". Protestors damaging oil pipelines are met with anger at the thought of rising gas prices, and protestors blockading roads are met with frustration and annoyance at the short-term inconvenience to motorists.

In this way, protest movements with disruptive tactics risk alienating and angering the public; this can be understood as a fundamental disconnect between protestors' big-picture concerns—*cars are destroying the environment*—and the publics' short-term considerations—*I need to get to work on time*. In his interview, Etienne spoke of the inherent difficulties of squaring these two worldviews: "we need to bring the public perception along with us, so we're always pushing what the public is prepared to listen to and what they're prepared to do. And that

is a delicate balance" (Ward 2019). This delicate task of protestors is made even more difficult by the proliferation of negativity on the internet, where people can spew unproductive or misinformed arguments without any personal repercussions. As a result of these challenges, climate protests often perceived negatively or ignored altogether. Findings from the YouGov survey show that disruptive actions are likely to be met with public disapproval; therefore, protest does not align with activists' goals of sympathy and recruitment and is ineffective.

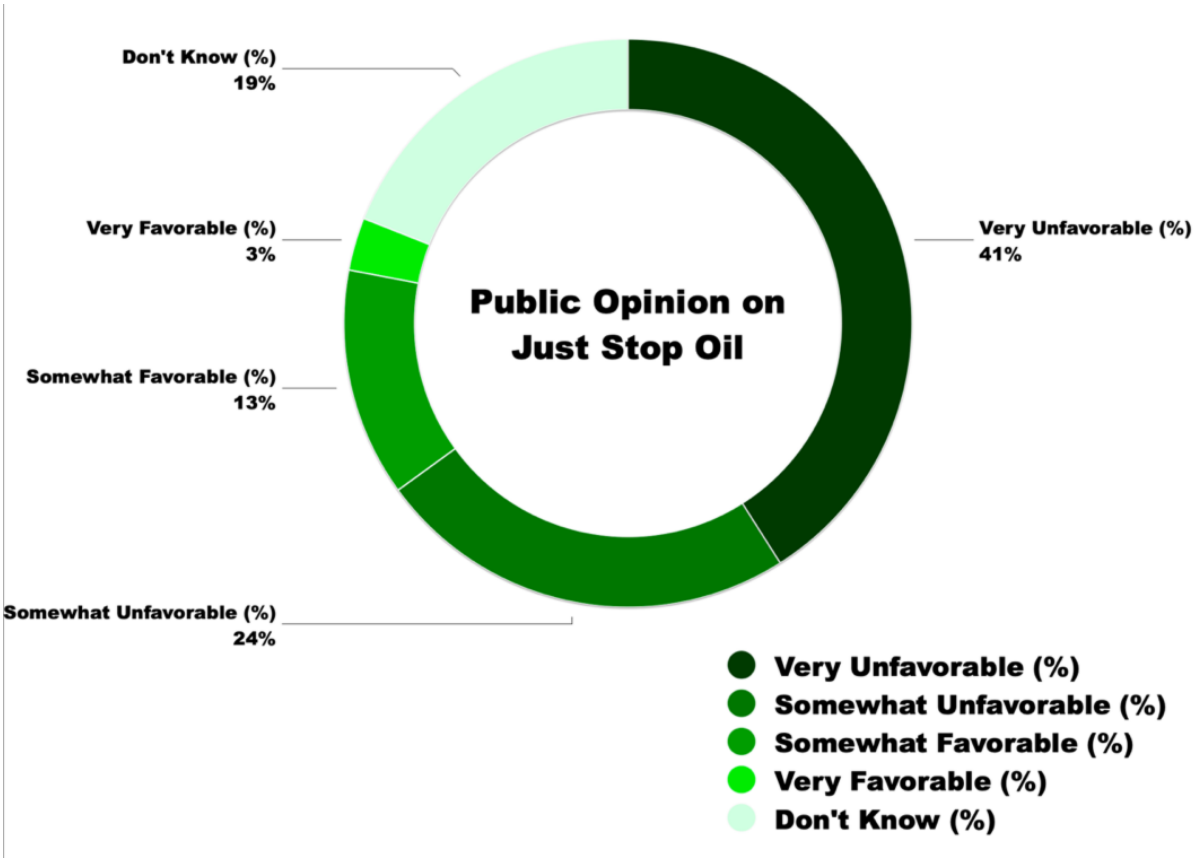

Figure 3: Graphic on Public Opinion from YouGov Survey Data

Finding 2: Increasing Public Discourse

Key Quote: *"The action [against BlackRock] was covered in just about all the financial newspapers around the world as well as all the London papers, the New York Times, Al Jazeera,*

etc. And the message was clear, 'BlackRock, get out of funding fossil fuels'" – Jo from XR (Hammond and McIntyre 2022)

While findings from both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews suggested that extreme protest tactics were ineffective in swaying public support, activist testimonies suggest that disruptive tactics were effective in another way: increasing public discourse surrounding climate change. L had this to say on the topic of extreme activism: "I think it's effective in prodding the public discourse. This is just my perception, but I'd say five years ago people were not talking about the topic enough, and five years later its super hip to be sustainable. And no political parties can get around to at least addressing climate . . . it's impossible to not address it". This relatively new, widespread public awareness and discussion of climate issues may be partly due to the rising frequency and intensity of extreme weather events; but climate activism like Greta Thunberg's school strikes and JSO's soup incident have received worldwide attention and helped demonstrate the urgency of the matter. Jo describes above how the protest against BlackRock that she helped organize was covered in several high-profile publications, demonstrating that people around the world are hearing about the issue. Phoebe, one of the soup-throwers, plainly stated that "our action in particular was a media-grabbing action to get people talking, not just about what we did, but why we did it" (Quiroz 2022). The widespread attention that came after—despite much of it being outrage—aligned with the goals of the protestors and therefore made the disruptive action a success.

This massive public attention, while not all positive, can have extremely positive effects for climate action. In his interview, Oliver mentioned a radical flank effect occurring after JSO members climbed onto signs above the M25 highway in London, explaining "there was polling immediately before that, and immediately after that, in which it was asked how many people

were willing to support Friends Of The Earth, that much more moderate NGO sort of climate campaign, and the number of people who said they'd support it before and after those protests on the gantry went up by more than 100,000" (Evans-Thirlwell 2023). This is one example of how protestors view their actions as positive and effective. Their willingness to put their bodies and livelihoods in harm's way for their cause encourages people to think about the issue and take steps, however small, to do their part as well.

In this way, recruitment for future protests is another positive effect of disruptive action. Protests that are loud enough to make news headlines are also loud enough to pop up in Instagram feeds, school discussions, and even personal friendship circles. The CUSP survey shows that 48.3% of XR protestors first heard about XR demonstrations in 2019 through online social media platforms; in addition, 41.8% heard through friends and 44.4% heard through existing members of XR (Davis, Berglund, and Finnerty 2023) (See Figure 4 below).

Ways of hearing about the demonstration

Channel of information	Apr 2019 (%)	Oct 2019 (%)	Combined (%)
Radio or TV	5.8	10.9	8.6
Newspapers (online or print)	11.7	15.5	13.8
Alternative online media	24.3	29.5	27.2
Adverts / flyers / posters	21.4	24.0	22.8
Partner / family	22.3	11.6	16.4
Friends / acquaintances	44.7	39.5	41.8
School / work	1.9	4.7	3.4
Fellow members	31.1	55.0	44.4
Organisation	17.5	50.4	35.8
Online social media	55.3	42.6	48.3
Total (n)	103	129	232

Notes: data are presented in columns. The columns add up to >100% because multiple answer options are possible.

Figure 4: Table from CUSP 2020 Survey on XR Activists.

Finding 3: Powerful Symbolic Stand

Key Quote: *"Breaking the law [protesting] in this way is a huge thing to do, but it's also hugely powerful and its very symbolic. Its saying 'I no longer respect your authority because you're letting us down, and so I'm not going to play the game anymore. I'm going to be disobedient'"* – Etienne from XR (Ward 2019)

Putting aside public opinion and engagement, activists reported feeling the effectiveness of civil disobedience on a much more personal level. For many interviewees, protesting was a profound exercise in personal agency; it was powerful for them to stand up to authority and fight for what they believed in no matter the risks. Etienne explained that "I'm not just doing it for the fun of it, and of course there are consequences to it, but I believe the consequences of inaction are worse . . . it's just willfully ignoring a problem, bottling it away, which I think is a psychologically unhealthy thing to do. It's bad for your soul" (Ward 2019). By protesting, Etienne is listening to his conscience and overcoming his fear of shame; his actions are all the more meaningful by virtue of him being an Olympic gold medalist. Etienne has a lot of reputation to lose by getting arrested, making his individual actions become deeply symbolic and effective in making a case for climate action. Oliver also mentioned the strength of disruptive protesting in his interview, saying, "one of the things that makes it powerful is that it's not a sign, or a petition or something that has that really low level of sacrifice. It's saying, 'I'm willing to be arrested or to be rammed by a coach, these are risks that I'm willing to take, because the risk of climate breakdown is so much greater'" (Evans-Thirlwell 2023). With symbolic, risky actions, it is hard to predict when and how they will be received by the public. Greta Thunberg's school strike quickly became an international phenomenon, while Etienne's arrests and imprisonment have only recently achieved coverage in prominent news like the Guardian. However, the

symbolic actions of every protestor have great potential to inspire others and a deeper personal power for activists to affirm their worldview and values; in this way, direct climate action is effective and consistent with protestors' goals.

Summary of Findings

A thematic analysis of my data revealed several key trends. Climate activists were most frequently mentioned becoming motivated to participate in extreme action after being exposed to crises through formal or informal education; after learning of the crises, their frustration at the lack of action and moral senses of altruism and agency compelled them to act themselves. Regarding how disruptive climate activists justified their actions, I found that most protestors cited historical precedent and moral necessity as the most common arguments. As for the question of effectiveness, I found that survey data showed a negative public perception of extreme activists and their methods. However, I also found that public discourse notably increased as a result of extreme action and that activists saw their own actions as powerful symbols of resistance that have the potential to inspire others. In my conclusion, I further synthesize these results as part of my broader argument of the necessity of disruptive protest.

VII. Conclusion

During the early 21st century, sustained government inaction on successfully limiting the emissions of greenhouse gases has been met with widespread public response. Much of this public response has manifested in expressions of climate activism, or acts of protests aimed at pressuring governments to restrict greenhouse gas emissions. This activism exists at a variety of levels, from individualized lifestyle changes to broad international social movements like the Fridays for Future school strikes. In this paper, I examined protest methods that are often seen by the public as "extreme" climate activism. Actions like spray-painting private property or

landmarks, organizing mass sit-ins and blocking roads, and even more creative actions like throwing soup on paintings are considered extreme because they violate either established social norms or existing laws. Extreme activism involves great risks to the protestors themselves; they are often arrested and imprisoned, verbally harassed by the public, and physically harmed by police. Regardless, protestors around the world willingly accept these risks, putting their bodies and reputations on the line to affect social change. Holistic research on extreme climate activism is both interesting and necessary at this current time; the frequency of these protests is increasing throughout the world and backlash has grown ever harsher, all while global warming and climate-related disasters increasingly pressure global systems.

In this paper, I adopted a mixed methods approach to understanding the phenomenon of extreme climate protesting. Through my analysis of three main sources of data—private ethnographic interviews, media interviews, and surveys—I examined several themes related to extreme climate activism. I found there to be complex motivations driving protestors to resort to extreme tactics. Most notably, activists discussed a process of being exposed to the severity of the climate crisis through education; this exposure caused them to react with a sense of frustration about current climate inaction, along with a strong personal sense of altruism in tackling the issue themselves. Activists often felt like they had no choice but to use their own bodies as symbolic tools, embodying an action-driven philosophy of achieving social change through any personal means available. To these activists, actions that inconvenienced other groups—public motorists, oil companies, finance conglomerates—were justified through an argument of moral necessity. Activists expressed firmly that throwing cogs into the gas-guzzling, consumption driven business-as-usual machine was necessary to avoid drastic human harm and suffering in the future, and that their strategy of civil disobedience was based on the successful

historical precedents of global civil rights movements. By planting their feet firmly and refusing to budge on their moral convictions, climate activists aimed to reveal the contradictions and injustices inherent in exploitative global systems.

The question remains, however, if these forms of protest have the capacity to be effective in bringing about social change. Qualitative surveys of public awareness and opinions suggest that extreme protest methods are effective in attracting public attention and increasing discourse around climate-related issues—however, not all this discourse is positive. Extreme tactics were found to alienate the public and caused them to view extreme organizations in an unfavorable light. However, this study suggests that even when these actions are viewed unfavorably, they achieve the necessary effect of keeping climate change on people's minds. The radical flank effect offers a framework to visualize the impact of extreme actions outside of their immediate popularity.

There are several limitations to this study that are worth noting. By adopting a mixed methods approach, I was able to simultaneously explore several complex research questions; however, this strategy also weakened the generalizability of my findings. I relied partly on existing interviews on various media networks, each with a different set of questions and approaches to interviewing. Standardizing the interview questions would have allowed for more organized comparisons of activists' responses. In addition, my study is largely focused on only two case study organizations based in the U.K.; laws regarding extreme activism vary greatly in non-European parts of the world, so my findings cannot be extrapolated outside this region.

This project adds to a robust body of literature on climate protesting and invites future research on the environmental movement and strategies of achieving social change. The role of individual social status is a fascinating question to consider—activists with a large online

presence, even activist celebrities or influencers, may become an emerging trend that changes the nature of extreme protest. Future research that systematically analyzes online activist channels—such as activist forums, social pages, and websites—would provide valuable insights into how disruptive protest is planned and marketed among those sympathetic to the cause. This project can serve as a starting point for this future research, and stands as a general sociological exploration of unique, direct tactics employed by activists aiming to enact positive change in the world.

Appendix: Interview Questions

- How did you first get involved in climate activism?
- What makes climate activism an important issue to you?
- What do you think is the future of our climate?
- Who or what do you think is "responsible" for the current rate of climate change, if anyone?
- How would you define "extreme climate activism"?
- What have been some memorable experiences you've had as a climate activist?
- Have you ever been publicly tried or incarcerated for protest actions?
    - What was that experience like?
- Do you feel your actions were justified?
    - Broader: Is extreme climate activism justified or even necessary?
- Do you ever find yourself scared, nervous, or threatened as a protestor?
- How has the public reacted to your protests?
    - How do you feel about that?
    - Do you think climate activism can (or should) be destigmatized by the public?
    - How do you think climate activism is portrayed in media, and do you feel this is fair?
- Describe what motivated you to engage in extreme climate activism, which might be considered civil disobedience.
- Do you think extreme climate activism is important or helpful?
- Do you think extreme climate activism is effective?
- What can regular people do in the face of accelerating climate change?
    - What can the "world" do in the face of accelerating climate change?
- How do you think public protesting can affect change?
- Would you like to add any other comments or discuss any topics?

Bibliography

"About G20." Rio, Capital of the G20, 2023. https://www.g20.rio/en/about.

Arnot, Grace, Samantha Thomas, Hannah Pitt, and Elyse Warner. "'It Shows We Are Serious': Young People in Australia Discuss Climate Justice Protests as a Mechanism for Climate Change Advocacy and Action." Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health 47, no. 3 (June 2023): 100048. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.anzjph.2023.100048.

Berglund, Oscar, and Daniel Schmidt. Extinction Rebellion and Climate Change Activism: Breaking the Law to Change the World. Cham: Springer Nature, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-48359-3.

Bugden, Dylan. "Does Climate Protest Work? Partisanship, Protest, and Sentiment Pools." Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World 6 (January 2020). https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023120925949.

Davis, Colin J, Oscar Berglund, and Samuel Finnerty. "Public Opinion on Climate Protest." Open Science Framework. October 1, 2024. osf.io/r2qhn.

Evans-Thirlwell, Edwin. "An Interview with Just Stop Oil about Protest, Playfulness and Invading EGX." Rock Paper Shotgun. October 26, 2023. https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/an-interview-with-just-stop-oil-about-protest-playfulness-and-invading-egx.

Feinberg, Matthew, Robb Willer, and Chloe Kovacheff. "The Activist's Dilemma: Extreme Protest Actions Reduce Popular Support for Social Movements." Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 119, no. 5 (November 2020): 1086–1111. https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000230.

Fisher, Dana. *Saving Ourselves: From Climate Shocks to Climate Action*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2024.

Gayle, Damien. "Just Stop Oil Activists Throw Soup at Van Gogh's Sunflowers." The Guardian, October 14, 2022. https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/oct/14/just-stop-oil-activists-throw-soup-at-van-goghs-sunflowers.

Gordon, Noah, and Benjamin Press. "Climate Protests: Tracking Growing Unrest." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 12, 2023. https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2023/01/climate-protests-tracking-growing-unrest?lang=en.

Haines, Herbert H. “Radical Flank Effects.” *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*, January 14, 2013. https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470674871.wbespm174.

Hammond, Holly, and Iain McIntyre. “‘You Can’t Eat Money’: An Interview with Extinction Rebellion Activist Jo Flanagan.” The Commons Social Change Library. March 22, 2022. https://commonslibrary.org/you-cant-eat-money/.

Haugestad, Christian A.P., Anja Duun Skauge, Jonas R. Kunst, and Séamus A. Power. “Why Do Youth Participate in Climate Activism? A Mixed-Methods Investigation of the #FridaysForFuture Climate Protests.” Journal of Environmental Psychology 76 (August 2021): 101647. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2021.101647.

“IPCC Climate Change Synthesis Report.” IPCC, 2023. https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/syr/.

Kalmus, Peter. “Climate Scientists Are Desperate: We’re Crying, Begging and Getting Arrested.” The Guardian, April 6, 2022. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/apr/06/climate-scientists-are-desperate-were-crying-begging-and-getting-arrested.

Maizland, Lindsay. “Global Climate Agreements: Successes and Failures.” Council on Foreign Relations, December 5, 2023. https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/paris-global-climate-change-agreements.

Malm, Andreas. *How to Blow Up a Pipeline: Learning to Fight in a World on Fire*. New York City, New York: Verso, 2021.

Mann, Michael. “Throwing Soup at Art Shifted People’s Views of Climate Protests-but Maybe Not in the Right Way.” Penn Center for Science, Sustainability, and the Media, November 16, 2022. https://web.sas.upenn.edu/pcssm/news/throwing-soup-at-art-shifted-peoples-views-of-climate-protests-but-maybe-not-in-the-right-way/.

Milstein, Tema, Lyn McGaurr, and Libby Lester. “Make Love, Not War?: Radical Environmental Activism’s Reconfigurative Potential and Pitfalls.” *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 4, no. 2 (February 12, 2020): 296–316. https://doi.org/10.1177/2514848620901443.

NPR. “Transcript: Greta Thunberg’s Speech at the U.N. Climate Action Summit.” National Public Radio, September 23, 2019. https://www.npr.org/2019/09/23/763452863/transcript-greta-thunbergs-speech-at-the-u-n-climate-action-summit.

Ortiz, Isabel, Sara Burke, Mohamed Berrada, and Hernán Saenz Cortés. *World protests: A study of key protest issues in the 21st Century*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.

Oz, James, and Sam Glover. “Disruptive Climate Protests in the UK Didn’t Lead to a Loss of Public Support for Climate Policies.” Effective Altruism Forum, June 20, 2022. https://forum.effectivealtruism.org/posts/YDtsGHmDJMsAWB7Wt/disruptive-climate-protests-in-the-uk-didn-t-lead-to-a-loss.

Ozden, James. “Protest Movements Could Be More Effective than the Best Charities (SSIR).” Stanford Social Innovation Review: Informing and Inspiring Leaders of Social Change, April 14, 2022. https://ssir.org/articles/entry/protest_movements_could_be_more_effective_than_the_best_charities.

Pickard, Sarah, Benjamin Bowman, and Dena Arya. “‘We Are Radical in Our Kindness’: The Political Socialisation, Motivations, Demands and Protest Actions of Young Environmental Activists in Britain.” *Youth and Globalization*2, no. 2 (December 31, 2020): 251–80. https://doi.org/10.1163/25895745-02020007.

Quiroz, Lilly. “The Activist Who Threw Soup on a van Gogh Says It’s the Planet That’s Being Destroyed.” NPR. November 1, 2022. https://www.npr.org/2022/11/01/1133041550/the-activist-who-threw-soup-on-a-van-gogh-explains-why-they-did-it.

Saunders, Clare, Brian Doherty, and Graeme Hayes. “A New Climate Movement? Extinction Rebellion’s Activists in Profile”. CUSP Working Paper No. 25. Guildford: Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity. July 2020. https://cusp.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/WP25-XR-report_final.pdf.

"XR: Climate Protesters enter Shell HQ and Scientists Glued to Government Building.” Posted April 13, 2022, by Guardian News. YouTube, 2 min., 31 sec. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQZtA8MtqNI.

Vanderheiden, Steve. "Eco-Terrorism or Justified Resistance? Radical Environmentalism and the 'War on Terror.'" *Politics & Society* 33, no. 3 (September 2005): 425–47. https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329205278462.

Veltman, Chloe. "'We Want to Help': Why Climate Activists Are Trying Something New." NPR, April 5, 2024. https://www.npr.org/2024/04/05/1242840734/climate-protest-broadway-extinction-rebellion.

Ward, Sam. "Olympic Gold to Extinction Rebellion Activist - An Interview with Etienne Stott." Climate Change Unfolding. July 18, 2019. https://www.climatechangeunfolding.com/episode16/.

Warren, Jessica. "Just Stop Oil Posterboy, 21, Reveals Death Threat Hell after Tying His Neck to Goalpost ." Daily Mail Online, April 5, 2022. https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10688313/Just-Stop-Oil-posterboy-21-reveals-death-threat-hell-tying-NECK-goalpost.html.

"We Quit." Extinction Rebellion UK, December 31, 2023. https://extinctionrebellion.uk/2022/12/31/we-quit/

Wiig, Benedicte. "Climate Activism amongst Young Norwegians and Their Understanding of the #FFF Movement." Norwegian University of Life Sciences, 2021. https://nmbu.brage.unit.no/nmbu-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2837013/wiig2021.pdf?sequence=1

"What Is the Kyoto Protocol." UNFCCC Secretariat. https://unfccc.int/kyoto_protocol.

"Why Activists are Targeting Famous Art to Protest Climate Change." Posted December 10, 2022, by PBS NewsHour. YouTube, 5 min., 57 sec. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cK1spdjQxP0

Yoder, Kate. "Climate Activists Are Getting Disruptive. They Don't Expect You to like It." Grist, December 21, 2022. https://grist.org/protest/confrontational-climate-protests-civil-disobedience-soup-van-gogh/.