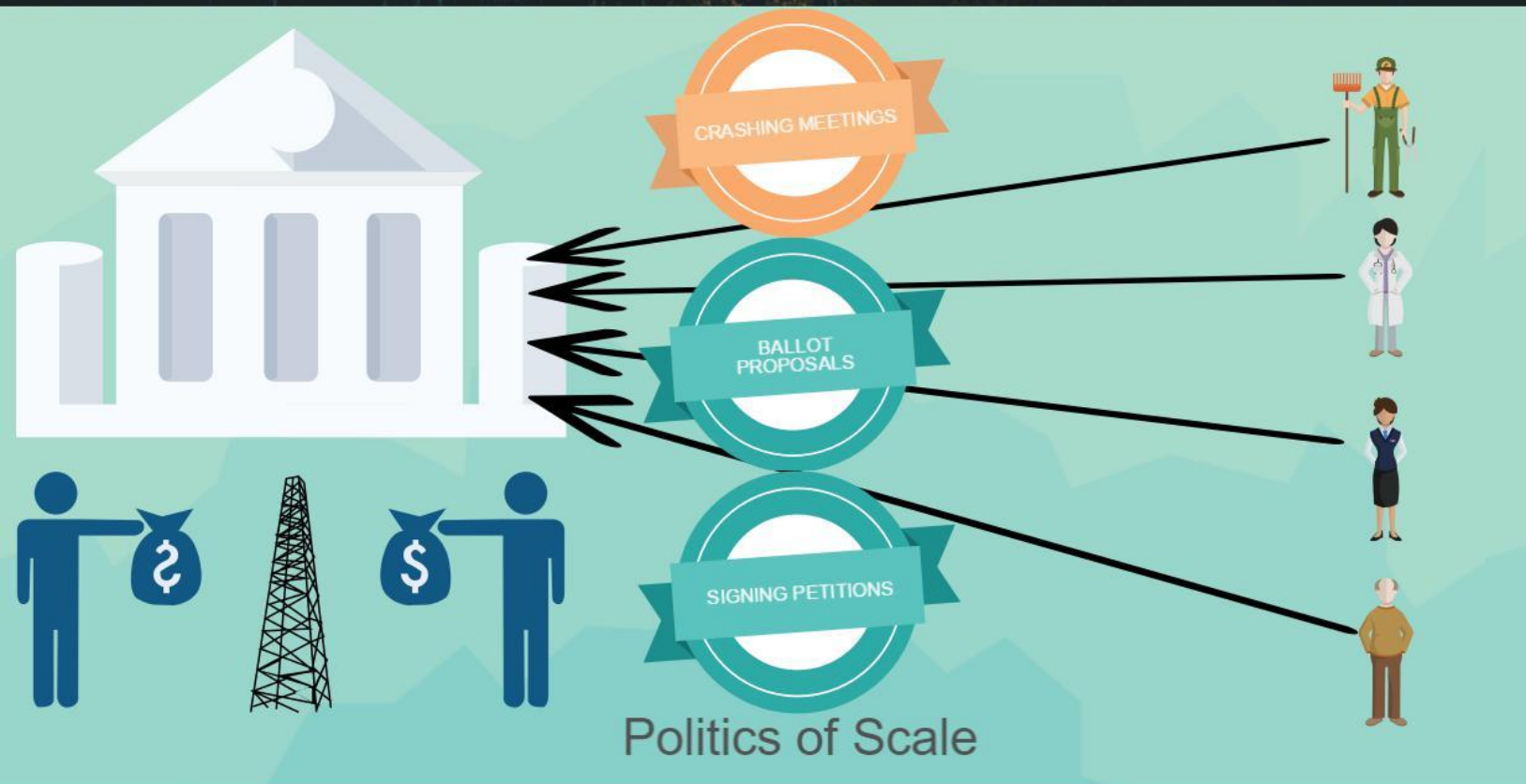


The Use and Effectiveness of a Politics of Scale in Anti-Fracking Movements in Colorado

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- X** Coalition Unity
- X** Grassroots Support
- X** Higher Relatability

Abstract

This project examines the tactics used to create a politics of scale by Colorado anti-fracking activists and the effectiveness of the politics of scale in inducing legislature banning fracking in the state. The use of fracking has caused controversy in both the state and the nation due to its potential risks to air quality, water quality, and public health. While it substantially increases the production capacity of natural gas and oil, it can potentially release dangerous chemicals into the air and local water sources. Through the lens of Smith and Kurtz' definition and analysis of politics of scale, I examine sources from *The Denver Post* and the petition sent out by local protesters to determine the tactics used to create the politics of scale in Colorado. In addition, I use articles by Jeffrey Cook and the website of an anti-fracking coalition to examine the effectiveness of the movement. This analysis suggests that the movement, although it used methods such as signing petitions, holding marches, and crashing oil and gas task force meetings among other tactics, there was not enough unity and use of surprising tactics to create a politics of scale that would actual lead to a change in the legislature. From this, we can learn what tactics and what traits are needed to create a successful politics of scale, which can help us (citizens and political activists) create movements that lead to real change both at the state level and beyond.

Introduction: Fracking and Its Use in Colorado

The use and regulation of fracking has been the subject of much debate throughout the country, due to the potential environmental and health risks that accompany its economic benefits. In this project, I will examine how various anti-fracking groups in Colorado have been attempting to ban the use of commercial fracking throughout the state for many years through the use of politics of scale to enlarge their argument beyond the borders of their counties and onto the floor of the state legislature.

Before examining a specific case of anti-fracking protests in Colorado, it is necessary to first understand the basic process of fracking and what it entails. Fracking, or hydraulic fracturing, is a process for extracting natural gas and oil from shale rocks and other geological formations. Current fracking procedure involves drilling downwards into gas- and oil-rich bedrock, and then horizontally to increase the amount of gas and oil collected per fracking well (Finkel xv). After the wells are drilled, the pipes are filled with fracking fluid, which is a mixture of water, various chemical additives, and sand or silica to keep cracks in the rock open. The fluid exerts pressure on the rocks, allowing for natural gas and oil to escape from the rocks and pass upwards to the surface. Afterwards, the fluid is also withdrawn and then treated, often kept in small ponds on-site while the well is in operation. This, along with other parts of the fracking process, can cause serious environmental issues.

Along with the oil and natural gas from the rock beds, fracking fluid also brings up “heavy metals, radioactive materials, volatile organic compounds (VOCs), and hazardous air pollutants such as benzene, toluene, ethylbenzene, and xylene (BTEX)” (Finkel xvi). While all of those are hazardous to the environment, VOCs in particular have a lasting impact on the atmosphere, because they are very readily vaporized and then continue to exist in the atmosphere sometimes for hundreds of years. In terms of human health, there are many stages in the fracking process that harm the human health. The sand used in fracking fluid can become aerosolized and be breathed in by the workers, causing a lung disease known as silicosis (Paulson & Tinney 10). In addition, wastewater from fracking can contaminate local water sources, introducing carcinogens¹ (Paulson & Tinney 15) and endocrine disruptors² (Law 28). It is important to note,

¹ Carcinogens are chemicals that are known to increase the risk of cancer. In fracking, some common carcinogens include benzene and radioactive material (Paulson & Tinney 10-13).

² Endocrine disruptors are chemicals that mimic hormones naturally found in the body, such as estrogen and androgens. Accumulation of these in water sources has been known to cause hormonal disorders in people.

however, that not every gas well releases dangerous chemicals into the water supply and the atmosphere; to say that none of them do would also be a lie (Finkel ix).

Due to these detrimental effects, “fractivists” in Colorado have been using tactics such as demonstrations, petitions, and ballot proposals to bring small issues to the public eye. I will examine how anti-fracking activists created public arguments about their cause using politics of scale, and the degree to which those tactics were successful. This may have implications on the use of politics of scale in an even larger context, and also helps us to understand what this method should achieve. As activists and citizens, we can then take this information and apply it to other situations to create change in our country.

Methods: Politics of Scale in Localist Movements

Politics of scale is defined by Christopher Smith and Hilda Kurtz as “the ways in which social actors draw on relationships at different geographical scales to press for advantage in a given political situation” (Smith & Kurtz 199), a way that activists can draw on different sizes of regions (tangible or otherwise) in order to advance a cause. Simply put, it allows for a small local group to blow up its cause, attract the support from a much broader and preferably non-local group of people, and bring it to attention on a state or national level. Central to the idea of politics of scale is the formation of coalitions of local groups. It not only encourages unity of local groups into one larger, more cohesive activist front, but also allows for a more diverse range of locales to become part of the movement. In the case studied by the authors of community gardens in New York, forming a coalition allowed the gardeners to widen the physical space represented by their movement, which in turn provided a larger following and attracted more non-local interest in the movement (Smith & Kurtz 203).

To first provide context on the political theater in which the Colorado activists are operating in, I will look at two articles by Jeffrey Cook to bring to light the political structure of the Colorado government and the process by which decisions are made. That information will be crucial to framing the actions and the tactics that the protesters used in their attempt to create a politics of scale. I will analyze articles from sources such as *The Denver Post* and several petitions sent out from Arapahoe County to determine what sort of techniques were used by the protesters. The articles from *The Denver Post* provide an unbiased view of the actual events as they occurred, and the petitions will allow me to analyze the actual rhetoric of the protesters and how that contributes to the general effect of the movement. A source that will allow me to determine the effectiveness of the movement is the website of Fracking Colorado, an anti-fracking coalition composed of many smaller, local groups. Through the characteristics of this coalition, I can analyze how the composition of the movement supporters contributes toward the general effect of the movement. Also, I will use articles from *Energy In Depth* to examine the effectiveness of the activists at attracting a large support base for the movement. While *Energy In Depth* provides a pro-fracking biased view of the events that are described in the articles, it nonetheless provides a solid basis for interpreting the tactics of the politics of scale of the protesters through the pictorial evidence used in the articles.

Results: Tactics Used and Their Effectiveness

To understand the actions and consequences of the anti-fracking movement, it is important to first understand how fracking policies are made in the Colorado government. Fracking is regulated by the Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Committee (COGCC), a branch of the Department of Natural Resources. While it is a branch of the state government, local (city) governments are allowed to send one delegate to be a representative at COGCC hearings. These

hearings are held roughly every month and a half, and generally consist of various issues brought up by drilling companies. Although much of the fracking rules are made through these series of formal hearings, a considerable amount are also made as a result of informal deals between the COGCC and the stakeholders of oil and gas companies (Cook, “Who’s Pulling the Fracking Strings?”). This creates a relationship in the government in which the policymakers of the state, especially in the energy sector, serve more as a friend to energy companies than as a regulator (“Who’s Pulling the Fracking Strings?”). This creates a much stronger bond between, something that begins to look like an “iron triangle”. In politics, the iron triangle refers to the strict inner circle of legislative committees, bureaucrats, and favored interest groups that shape policy. The ties in between the three groups is so strong in some cases that it is nearly impossible for smaller interest groups to have an impact on the lawmaking process. Jeffrey Cook refers to the Colorado fracking regulation as being a “dominant subsystem with cracks” (“Who’s Regulating Who?”), indicating a fairly strict iron triangle with only a small amount of room for strong, influential outside interest groups to have any say in decision-making.

In order to become strong and influential, the Colorado protesters used a mixture of both straightforward and unconventional techniques to create a politics of scale. Among the more “expected” of the techniques used by the protesters is the proposal of ballot initiatives calling for a statewide ban on fracking. A coalition of activists from locales around the state called for a statewide ban, enlarging the scale of their focus from local areas to the entire state. Despite their rather loud attempts, the ballot initiatives were largely ignored by the government. In order to create more noise, the protesters used a more unconventional tactic: crashing a meeting of the

Colorado oil and gas task force³ that was created to address the issues of anti-fracking protests (Finley). While the task force was meeting inside, activists staged a protest right outside the building, causing a large scene in broad daylight. This tactic was in a sense unconventional because of the way that the protesters did not necessarily demonstrate in a place that they would be seen by a large number of people, but by the people that the protests were directed toward. By doing this, they brought immediacy to the debate and also brought it to the attention of the larger public in the state capital. However, the demands of these protesters (to create a new, more environmentally-conscious task force) were not met. Late last year, a Boulder County anti-fracking group unveiled a set of new ballot proposals which called for greater mandatory setbacks⁴ for drilling wells from homes and schools, and more local control over decisions about the use and regulation of fracking (Bunch). The protesters, in the face of setback, are actively attempting to maintain the topic of fracking regulation at the state government level. Elsewhere in the state, an Arapahoe County anti-fracking movement sent a petition to both the local and state governments, in which they mention that is “intended for the Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission and [Colorado] state legislators” (Fracking Colorado).

What was the effect of all this? In short, not much. The petitions were primarily designed for the county government, and because of this only off-handedly mentioned the state government. In the most recent petition, it is mentioned that the petition will be given “to the Arapahoe County governing bodies, at the municipal and county levels” (2011), and only off-handedly mentions the COGCC and “our state legislators” (2011). It is, in any case, a weak

³ The task force was created after the first wave of anti-fracking protests by the Colorado governor as a compromise with the protesters. However, the protesters believed that the task force had not done enough to regulate the use of fracking in Colorado and then began to protest again (Finley).

⁴ A setback is the minimum distance that a drilling well can be from other structures, such as houses or schools. Current Colorado law puts setbacks at 500 feet, while the proposed amendments increased that fourfold to 2000 feet.

attempt to enlarge the anti-fracking movement outside of Arapahoe County, and its lack of resolve in addressing the state government prevented it from having influence there. Another reason for this lack of influence was the lack of grassroots support for the movement. Further analysis of the coalitions involved in the anti-fracking protests and the structure of the legislation in Colorado revealed that the unity of the constituents of the coalition was low. The “About Us” page on the website of the anti-fracking coalition Coloradans Against Fracking contains a long list of local organizations that are part of the group. At first sight, it seems as if many local groups have successfully connected across the state to create a larger, more influential movement. However, several of the local organizations listed as being in the coalition are not related to fracking. Among the unrelated groups are Breast Cancer Action and CREDO, a mobile network operator company. In addition, some of the organizations listed are either hardly credible or downright fake, such as Kids Against Fracking and Question Alliance, respectively. While an online search did not provide any results for “Question Alliance”, a search for “Kids Against Fracking” led to a website that was very poorly made and likely not the hub of any activity. The page consisted of poorly aligned solid color rectangles with text written in basic fonts (Comic Sans and Times New Roman) paired with black and white photos of children holding anti-fracking signs. Overall, the coalition does not have a cohesive supporter base from which it can easily raise the issue of fracking bans statewide, which is a part of the lack of legislation change regarding fracking. This lack of support can also be seen in the demonstrations by the activists. In a news article from *Energy In Depth*, Randy Hildreth explains the lack of actual support for anti-fracking measures in an anti-fracking march during the GOP presidential debate in Boulder. While it was said that the march “would ‘draw 10,000 people’ to protest the [Republican] candidates’ positions [on fracking]” (Hildreth), the march in fact did not

have close to that many participants. In fact, there were hardly any anti-fracking activists at the event, which was instead populated by other movements such as gun-control activists (Hildreth). The movement failed to rally widespread support for the cause.

To a degree, the movement was able to enlarge the anti-fracking cause beyond its local roots. The issue of fracking regulation has become part of the ongoing gubernatorial race, with the different candidates being forced to take a position on the matter. However, it is not a position about the actual use of fracking, but at what level of government it should be regulated (at the state or local levels). In the end, though, nothing has changed. No anti-fracking legislation has been passed, and the protests (after many years) are still being strung out longer (Finley).

Discussion: The Bigger Picture

It becomes clear, then, how the Colorado fracking activists attempted to create a politics of scale and the subsequent successfulness of that: although the “fracktivists” used tactics such as crashing meetings, sending petitions, and proposing ballot initiatives, the politics of scale created was ultimately unsuccessful at causing their desired changes to be made. This case reveals the difficulty of creating a successful politics of scale, but also offers key insight into the problem of how to make change in a government notorious for its political gridlock. From this case, political activists and ordinary citizens alike can begin to understand the most important traits and methods of an effective politics of scale.

The most crucial tactic is unity of the support base and communication between local groups in larger coalitions. This would allow for a more varied strategy for getting the attention of the lawmakers at a higher level, leading to more influence in the legislative process. Although coalition unity is important for successfully bringing a movement to the attention of high-level

politics, the tactics used to bring that movement to the forefront are just as important. One of the things that the Colorado movement did right was the way in which they used unconventional methods to bring their cause to the attention of legislators. While ballot initiatives and petitions were to be expected, crashing a task force meeting was not as expected and therefore most likely made a larger impact on the public perception of the anti-fracking movement as a virtue of its newsworthiness. A goal of politics of scale is to enlarge the original goal of the movement, to add people to the support base. To do that, the movement must try to raise awareness in the citizens of a large region, because that will spread the influence of the idea to a point that legislators will be forced to notice.

What has become clear through the protesters' attempts to use politics of scale is the importance of passing legislation. While awareness of issues is sufficient in some situations, legislation is a guarantee of change, especially in terms of environmental issues. In the case of Colorado, it is highly unlikely that the oil and gas companies would willingly cut their production and lose massive profits in the name of environmental justice. Once we understand what makes an effective politics of scale, we can begin to crack the seemingly unbreakable ties of Congress and K Street, knowing that in the end only legislation guarantees change.

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