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

### **Introduction: Fracking and Its Use in Colorado**

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 Afterwards, the fluid is also withdrawn and then treated, often kept in small ponds on-site while the well is in operation.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 and Tinney, 10). In addition, wastewater from fracking can contaminate local water sources, introducing carcinogens (Paulson and Tinney, 15) and endocrine disruptors (Law 28).<sup>1,2</sup> It is important to note, 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). Unsurprisingly, the use and regulation of fracking has been the subject of much debate. Before examining a specific case of anti-fracking protests in Colorado, it is necessary to first understand the regulation of fracking there.

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?”). Because of the emphasis on business and the subsequent

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

<sup>2</sup> 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.

putting aside of environmental interests, protestors have begun to push back against the policies of the COGCC. Recently, local anti-fracking activists have attempted to create a politics of scale to bring their cause to the state level. In this project, I will examine how the activists create a politics of scale, and the degree to which that politics of scale is successful in the changing of legislation towards banning fracking, which may have implications on the use of politics of scale in an even larger context.

### **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 and 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 and bring it to attention on a state or national level. The criteria for a successful use of politics of scale will be drawn from the aforementioned authors’ discussion on community gardens in New York, where although the local activists were not able to prevent the gardens from being auctioned, they used a politics of scale to raise enough money to buy them at the auction (Smith and Kurtz, 209). Despite not being able to prevent the gardens going to auction, the local groups ultimately succeeded in their overall goal of keeping the community gardens.

To analyze how the local groups in Greeley create a politics of scale, I will be analyzing news articles from *The Denver Post* surrounding the protests that they have conducted. These articles provide an accurate and relatively unbiased view on the actual events that occurred, which can shed light on the actual tactics used by the activists. An actual copy of a petition sent out to citizens of the Arapahoe County area will also reveal the rhetoric that the activists use to create their politics of scale. To examine the effectiveness of this politics of scale, I will use Jeffrey Cook’s scholarly articles to look at the activist groups in the political structure of the Colorado government, as well as the website of one of the coalitions of smaller local anti-fracking movements. Also, I will use a news article from *Energy in Depth* to examine the effectiveness of local events at enlarging the supporter base for the movement. I will, however, take into account the fact that this article is biased, coming from a site that very clearly opposes anti-fracking movements. Despite that, this article provides a solid basis for interpreting the tactics and effectiveness of the politics of scale of the protesters.

### **Results: Tactics Used and Their Effectiveness**

In order to create a politics of scale, the Colorado protesters use a mixture of both straightforward and unconventional techniques. 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. In order to do this, protesters used a more unconventional tactic: crashing a meeting of the Colorado oil and gas task force that was created to address the issues of anti-fracking protests (Finley). 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 were not met. Late last year, a Boulder County anti-fracking group unveiled a set of new ballot proposals which called for greater mandatory setbacks<sup>3</sup> 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). Although the Arapahoe County protesters have designed their petition for the local government, they have taken great care to mention in the petition the COGCC and their policymaking. It is, however, a weak attempt at creating a politics of scale, one that is tied very closely with the locales from which the activists come.

Further analysis of the coalitions involved in the anti-fracking protests and the structure of the legislation in Colorado reveals that the politics of scale created by the movement is not very effective. 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. 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 failed to do so. 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). If a movement does not have a strong supporter base, it cannot create an effective politics of scale to elevate the movement.

It is important to recognize, however, that another contributor to the ineffectiveness of the politics of scale created by the anti-fracking activists is the Colorado government itself. It is well-known in Colorado that the state government, especially the energy sector, serves more as a friend to energy companies than a regulator. Anti-fracking legislation can also be hard to pass in and of itself, because of how the COGCC operates in an “iron triangle”. The iron triangle refers to the strict inner circle of legislative committees, bureaucrats, and favored interest groups that shape policy. 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 outside interest groups to have any influence. Combined with

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<sup>3</sup> 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.

the large influence from oil and gas drilling companies in Colorado, the potential influence that the anti-fracking activists could have is diminished. Because of the poor quality of the politics of scale created by the activists, though, the actual influence on legislation that the movement had was negligible. The only partial success is the ongoing debate about fracking within the race for the governor's seat, but that still is only a debate about the extent to which state and local governments should be allowed to regulate fracking, not the actual use of hydraulic fracturing. In terms of effectiveness, the politics of scale created by the local activists was partially successful in bringing up the issue to the forefront of state (and to a degree interstate) debate, but in terms of actually achieving a moratorium on the use of fracking, the politics of scale was ineffective..

### **Discussion: The Bigger Picture**

The answer to the question posited at the beginning is simple, then: through the use of tactics such as crashing meetings, sending petitions, and proposing ballot initiatives, the anti-fracking activists of Colorado create a politics of scale that is 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 solutions to 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 traits of an effective politics of scale.

Because of the disunity of the coalitions of community activists, the overall movement failed to create a widespread movement that represents itself in full force whenever the opportunity arises. It was probably because of this disunity that caused the repeated failure to get the ban of fracking onto the state ballot in the end. In an ideal politics of scale situation, the community and small local activist groups should be able to exchange ideas and tactics among each other, something that was not present in the Colorado anti-fracking movement. 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. A goal of politics of scale is to enlarge the original goal of the movement, to add people to the support base. In order 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 take note.

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