

The Politics of Environmental Networks

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Abstract

Environmental political networks research uses social network analysis to investigate the political processes underlying the complex relational dynamics of environmental governance. The analysis of internal political processes sheds light on the relational mechanisms of collaboration and contention that underpin coalition-building, mobilization, and environmental policy decision-making. Additionally, understanding environmental outcomes requires investigating external politics, namely, how environmental networks are embedded in broader institutional and political contexts. This editorial provides a brief overview of the internal and external politics of environmental networks and presents the conceptual and empirical contributions of the 11 articles that investigate both dimensions of environmental political networks by combining social network analysis with other methodological tools.

Keywords

environmental movements; environmental politics; environmental political networks; discourse networks; policy networks; political opportunities; social network analysis

1. How Politics Matters in Environmental Networks

The complexity of environmental problems stems from the involvement of diverse actors, high levels of uncertainty and conflict, and their often cumulative, systemic, cross-sectoral, and transboundary nature (Balint, 2011). Addressing these challenges as a society entails a redistribution of costs and benefits among actors with divergent interests, resources, values, and beliefs, rendering environmental decision-making

inherently political (Carter, 2018). Environmental politics, in terms of the collective choices concerning the means, goals, and governance of environmental problems (Kraft, 2021), unfolds as dynamic interactions—such as cooperation, resource exchanges, discursive challenges, joint membership, and event participation—among a pluralist landscape of government, business, and civil society actors exercising power and influence to shape environmental outcomes. These interactions are the foundations of processes of coalition-building, advocacy, mobilization, and contestation (Di Gregorio, 2012; Diani & McAdam, 2003; Saunders, 2013; Weible & Sabatier, 2005) and are conditioned by the broader institutional political context (McAdam & Tarrow, 2018). Understanding the power dynamics underlying these interactions is especially urgent today, as nativist, authoritarian, and anti-environmental discourses gain traction amid escalating ecological crises (Tindall et al., 2022).

Environmental political networks are complex meso-level structures of systems of interactions that are continuously produced, reproduced, and situated. Within these, political power is simultaneously wielded, negotiated, and contested. SNA is particularly well-suited to examine the complexity of environment–society interactions (Bodin et al., 2019) and the relational dimensions that are central to environmental political processes unfolding across multiple scales and political spheres (Berardo et al., 2017). This issue brings together contributions that use SNA to investigate how power-laden relationships influence environmental political processes and action. Analytically, we distinguish between: (a) the *internal politics* of environmental networks, that is, political processes internal to the environmental network under investigation; (b) the *external politics*, or broader institutional and political processes affecting environmental networks; and (c) how a deeper understanding of the interplay between the two helps explain environmental outcomes. The “internal” versus “external” distinction refers to the boundaries of the network under investigation (Laumann et al., 1989) and is used here as a purely analytical device. Both dimensions are integral components of the overall political process, jointly influencing how environmental networks operate. This issue showcases research exploring the internal and external politics of environmental networks and the interplay between the two. Ultimately, it underscores the centrality of politics in shaping environmental networked governance. Methodologically, all contributions to this thematic issue use SNA to investigate how meso-level environmental political networks operate and/or interact with broader political opportunities to determine environmental outcomes.

2. The Politics of Environmental Networks

Our approach to environmental politics adopts a dynamic and networked perspective on the mechanisms and patterned interactions that (re)configure power relations across (extra)institutional and discursive contexts (Fernández G. & Cinalli, in press; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). Environmental responses are viewed as emergent and sustained processes of recognition and (re)negotiation, in which micro- and macro-level dynamics are mutually constitutive (Knoke et al., 2021; Martin, 2009). In such political processes, the associated interactions and feedback relations between the internal and external political dimensions of environmental networks are agent-driven, structurally contingent, and imply some relational continuity.

2.1. The Internal Politics of Environmental Networks

Environmental political networks are not merely configurations of relationships, but structures mediating strategic interactions among actors seeking to influence environmental outcomes. Internal environmental

politics unfold through relational mechanisms (Hedström & Swedberg, 1996; Ocelík et al., 2022; Schneider, 2024) like collaboration and conflict. Such mechanisms take various forms and are key for resource exchanges (Klijn, 1997), framing processes and contestation (Lele et al., 2018), coalition building, and mobilization (Van Dyke & McCammon, 2010; Weible, 2023).

Environmental policy networks research (Broadbent, 2016; Schneider, 1988; Ylä-Anttila et al., 2018) centers around environmental problems to examine how a diversity of policy actors collaborate and contest policy-making processes. In this issue, Kammerer and Ingold (2025) present a co-evolution study contributing to a long-lasting debate within the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) tackling the “chicken and egg” question around policy beliefs and coordination within the Swiss climate policy subsystem (Jenkins-Smith & Weible, 2025). They show that belief similarity and coordination reinforce each other over time, supporting the core ACF assumption concerning the persistence of coalition structures (Gronow et al., 2025).

Several studies of environmental networks within contentious politics address the collective action dilemma through SNA, showing how individual embeddedness in networks influences decisions to participate in collective action (Diani & Fernández, 2024). Contributions to this issue investigate the internal politics of environmental networks by analysing how structural and relational features shape political processes underlying environmental movements, with particular attention to tie formation and the mechanisms connecting mobilizing structures with framing processes. Several contributions explore how social movements respond to internal divisions between moderate and radical factions and find that, unlike in previous decades (Saunders et al., 2025), ideological differences have recently not resulted in fragmentation; instead, they have been resolved via diverse strategies (Ciordia et al., 2025; Ferro, 2025). For instance, Ferro (2025), examining the tensions within Fridays for Future activism in Italy, found that framing disputes between reformists and rejectionists were resolved by framing negotiation via deliberative decision-making.

Environmental discourses (Dryzek, 2013; Hajer, 1993) (de-)legitimizing particular policy responses have also been widely studied as networks (Leifeld, 2020). Studies include analyses of the evolution of prevailing themes, actors (Kammerer & Ingold, 2023), polarization (Fisher et al., 2013; Leifeld & Haunss, 2012), echo chambers, and discourse coalitions (Jasny et al., 2015; Kukkonen et al., 2017). In the past decade, such research has been expanded to increasingly influential social media discourses (Veltri & Atanasova, 2017), partisan sorting (T. H. Y. Chen et al., 2021), and framing dynamics (K. Chen et al., 2023). In this issue, Fleckenstein et al. (2025) show how internal coalition formation processes and discursive power shaped the adoption of the EU Nature Restoration Law. Several other contributions (Drecker, 2025; Hamilton & De Bièvre, 2025; Leifeld & Fisher, 2025; Nagel et al., 2025) examine in new ways how processes of framing (Benford & Snow, 2000), politicization (Palonen, 2000), and polarization (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008) expand or contract the negotiation space and policy change. Nagel et al. (2025) elaborate on how the (de)politicization dynamics in the German farmers’ protests anticipated policy change and led to a policy reversal at the expense of the environment. Hamilton and De Bièvre (2025) find that a “Baptist-Bootlegger” coalition of agricultural producers and environmental groups forged via opportunistic framing stalled the EU-Mercosur association agreement. The tension between ideological and opportunistic behaviors is one of the traversing themes of the thematic issue that two contributions address by exploring polarization dynamics (Drecker, 2025; Leifeld & Fisher, 2025). Leifeld and Fisher (2025) distinguish between intrinsic and instrumental polarization in the US climate debates, contrasting entrenched ideological positioning with opportunistic

amplification of ideological differences to mobilize constituency support. They find that polarization dynamics revolved around endogenous political events, such as elections or ratifications, and followed an instrumental logic.

2.2. *The External Politics of Environmental Networks*

Most research on environmental political networks focuses on their internal politics. Yet, environmental networks operate within broader political contexts that constrain or enable internal political dynamics and associated interactions. One long-standing critique of policy network approaches is their insufficient attention to the broader political and institutional context (Adam & Kriesi, 2007; Dowding, 1995). External political opportunities affecting environmental networks can be stable or volatile (McAdam & Tarrow, 2018). More institutionalised features, such as the openness of political regimes, the type of electoral system, the division of authority across levels of governance, and the geopolitical context, affect internal power constellations within environmental networks (Carter, 2018; Di Gregorio et al., 2019; Schneider, 2025). More dynamic, less institutionalised political opportunities that impact the power constellations and strategies in environmental movement networks, for example, include the level of fragmentation of government elites, broader political alignments, state openness, and the state's willingness to facilitate or repress contention (Saunders et al., 2025; Tarrow, 2011).

From this perspective, Ciordia et al. (2025) present a conceptual framework showing how external contextual features—political opportunity structures, as well as socio-economic and cultural contexts—interact with relational factors to shape coalition behavior in the environmental collective action field. They examine how the 2011 transformative event of ETA's abandonment of violence in the Basque Country influenced phases of environmental contention. Their analysis distills nuanced differences in the interactions between shifts in broader political conflicts and the role of ideological congruence and pragmatism in coalition-building for environmental action. A similar transformative event, the German energy transition in 2011 that phased out nuclear energy, is the focus of the analysis of Schneider (2025). The article uses an ecology of games approach (Lubell et al., 2014) to investigate how broader structural conditions, in combination with the Fukushima disaster, contributed to explaining this drastic nuclear policy reversal. The unique historical legacy of environmentalism and Green Party political achievements in Germany, facilitated by federal multi-level electoral competition, bicameralism, and a proportional electoral system, was among the structural forces shaping coalition-building and power constellations in the national climate-energy policy network.

Further, in their study on environmental movement networks, Saunders et al. (2025) show how the more volatile political opportunities are mutually co-constituted with environmental movement organizations' (EMOs) tactics and status. EMOs' perceptions about governmental openness (de Moor & Wahlström, 2022) interact with EMO status vis-à-vis the government and their collective action repertoires, affecting collaborative behavior. Two studies that advance our knowledge of climate change polarization consider the role of broader political processes in this issue. Drecker (2025) investigates the role of broader electoral campaigns on climate Twitter debates in Germany. Findings reveal a cyclic pattern for partisan polarisation, while affective polarization levels—reflecting deep divides between climate advocates and obstructionists—remained largely stable. In a study on climate change polarization in the US, Leifeld and Fisher (2025) investigate how “endogenous” national-level climate-related political events versus “exogenous” climate

change disasters and higher-level international events impact polarization in the US climate policy domain. They find that political entrepreneurs exploit polarization strategically to their electoral advantage and to impact climate (in)action, a clear recognition that policy actors can affect windows of opportunity, bending them to their advantage.

Finally, environmental decision-making unfolds within complex multi-level governance systems (Betsill & Bulkley, 2006) where internal and external dimensions of political networks come together. Local self-governance arrangements (Ostrom, 2014) intersect with subnational, national, and international environmental governance processes (Di Gregorio et al., 2019; Nagel & Bravo-Laguna, 2022). Internal network dynamics, such as collaboration and conflict, operate from micro to macro levels, shaping relational processes and coordination across governance levels. Their multi-level character generates feedback loops and strategic interactions across levels (Roger et al., 2019), such as the well-recognized "boomerang effect" (Keck & Sikkink, 2014). Lehotský and Černoch (2025), in this issue, find a similar effect, as the debate on the cross-border dispute about the Turów mine initially resembled a multi-level polycentric structure, with local organizations mobilizing EU institutions to bring the issue into the national-level agenda. However, later discourse centralization around national governments sidelined both local and EU-level actors, enabling reframing toward technological fixes, and neglecting the environmental damage of ongoing coal production. While Nagel et al. (2025) investigate the internal politics of agricultural protests in Germany, they also recognise how increased politicization of agricultural debates escalated to higher levels of governance from individual member states to the EU level.

3. The Politics of Environmental Networks: Methodological Approaches

This issue presents new empirical research that investigates interdependencies and relational dynamics of environmental political networks. Specifically, it illustrates how SNA (Wasserman & Faust, 1994) allows for unpacking the role of internal network features on environmental politics. Conversely, studying the external processes and dynamics shaping environmental political networks often demands the use of mixed methods, longitudinal or comparative network analysis. Hence, this issue showcases how mixed methods (Bellotti, 2015) help connect endogenous network processes to broader contexts. Schneider (2025) applies a survey- and interview-based SNA design incorporating multidimensional scaling, hierarchical clustering, discourse network analysis (DNA; Leifeld, 2016) for boundary definition purposes, and Exponential Random Graph Models (Lusher et al., 2013) to identify drivers of information exchange among energy network actors. Saunders et al. (2025) compare environmental networks over time by combining interviews with an organizational network survey analysis. Thematic analysis of interview data elucidates how actor perceptions of national political opportunities shape network patterns. Further network data provide information on internal strategies, relations between activists and the government, and collaboration patterns. Fleckenstein et al. (2025) use DNA and process tracing to examine how discourse coalition processes translate into policy change. DNA allowed for identifying coalitions around the adoption of the law and assessing the influence of discourse coalitions. Process tracing helped capture the broader political and social dynamics within and across discourse coalitions. Ferro (2025) uses participant observation-based frame analysis and a survey as sources for an ERGM analysis that identifies drivers of tie formation in environmental networks. Specifically, qualitative frame analysis helped identify the orientation of EMOs (i.e., rejectionist vs reformist approaches to climate change) and assess how homophily affects internal collaboration.

Other contributions in this issue adopt longitudinal studies to mitigate the limitations inherent to the static nature of SNA by unpacking historical trajectories. Hence, Kammerer and Ingold (2025) use Stochastic Actor Oriented Models (Snijders et al., 2010) to clarify a long-running debate among ACF scholars on the relationship between beliefs and internal coordination. Next, Hamilton and De Bièvre (2025) applied a combination of DNA, text analysis, and linear regression analysis on temporal network data to investigate trade negotiations. Quantitative text analysis uncovered the logic behind internal coalition formation, whereas DNA identified narratives and alignment across groups. Linear regression analysis helped identify the extent to which narrative salience led some groups to adopt narratives advanced by other groups. In turn, Lehotský and Černoch (2025) use qualitative longitudinal DNA to study the extent to which dispersion of authority, state control, and bargaining dynamics characterized the evolution of the Turów mine dispute. Similarly, Nagel et al. (2025) use DNA to examine the evolution of farmer protests, capture the evolution of polarization in the debate, and analyze the theoretical nexus between politicization and policy change. For his part, Drecker (2025) applies a longitudinal network design to climate policy discourse to understand the extent to which electoral dynamics explain the varying polarization of partisan and non-partisan actors. Leifeld and Fisher (2025) also address the evolution of polarization by recognising multi-level governance features and combining national-level with state-level data. Time series measures capturing structural polarisation and detecting periods of structural stability in discourse networks help distinguish between the effects of exogenous events and endogenous political dynamics on polarisation. Finally, Ciordia et al. (2025) use Quadratic Assignment Procedures regression analysis (Krackhardt, 1987) to examine how broader political shifts are associated with interorganizational collaboration in environmental collective action fields and identify dyadic features shaping collaboration over time. Their study analyzes successive network snapshots across time to describe changes in collaboration patterns between shifting political moments.

4. Conclusion

This thematic issue calls for re-centering environmental network research around the political processes that shape these structures. The contributions to this issue advance our knowledge of internal environmental politics in three interrelated ways. First, they reveal the richness of actors, actions, and the contested and overlapping domains that constitute environmental political networks, spanning from elite networks, environmental movement, and collective action fields, to interest groups, multi-actor policy, and discourse networks. Second, they uncover how this heterogeneity generates distinct relational dynamics, where pragmatic collaboration coexists and often collides with identity—or ideology-driven political action. Third, they highlight the specificity of negotiation in environmental politics, increasingly involving complex, cumulative, and systemic environmental challenges spanning across sectors, multi-level governance processes, and involving contrasting value systems from anthropocentric to ecocentric, reformist to radical, and dynamics combining collaboration, contention, resistance, and conflict. In doing so, these studies offer crucial insights into governance processes and power dynamics of a diversity of environmental political networks.

While focusing on internal politics is crucial to understand how environmental networks operate, elucidating how these are embedded into broader institutional contexts and socio-political processes is often needed to explain environmental outcomes. This thematic issue shows that the networked political processes internal to environmental domains and the broader political processes or contexts that influence environmental networks co-evolve through mutual influence. To better understand policy change and environmental

outcomes, future research needs to examine how the two interact. Longitudinal, comparative, multi-method, and mixed research designs, as in part documented by this issue's contributions, are well-suited to investigate both and span across internal and external political divides. Such methodological pluralism allows for exploring beyond network mapping and tie-formation explanations. It also shifts focus to the interactions between the power-laden internal environmental network processes and the broader political processes that jointly shape the trajectories of environmental change.

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