

The Distributive Politics of Environmental Protection

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1 Introduction

In Latin America and the Caribbean, environmental and climate politics are central to political life. The greatest opportunities and challenges faced by the region in recent years have been shaped by the regulation of natural resources and environmental conflict. Drivers of deep social change across Latin America and the Caribbean – like the commodities boom, the transformation of the energy matrix, indigenous contestation, the expansion of the agricultural frontier, and shifting population dynamics – have either stemmed from or resulted in increased costs for the natural world.

Research on environmental politics in the region has grown exponentially in recent times and has attempted to address a variety of problems stemming from the deteriorating environment. However, this scholarship has not generated a broad research agenda similar to the ones that emerged around other key political phenomena, such as regime transitions, the nature of political institutions, or economic voting.

This Element seeks to address the lack of a comprehensive research agenda in Latin American and Caribbean environmental politics (LACEP) and helps integrate the existing, disparate literatures. The lack of a comprehensive research agenda is partly due to the nature of environmental challenges, which vary greatly and generate different, seemingly unrelated problems to be studied – such as deforestation, water scarcity, and climate change. But perhaps more importantly, scholars' interpretations of these problems diverge widely. Empirical studies of environmental politics in LACEP tend to revolve around two separate paradigms where the locus of change is found in either mobilized society or the state. These two major approaches have dominated LACEP. However, as we show in the following sections, a number of studies and scholars link social actors to the state and bridge the two literatures. Even so, in this Element, we leverage this natural division of labor in order to facilitate the organization of our review. Thus, we caution the reader that some of the scholarship overlaps these two approaches and is discussed in both society- and state-focused sections. Conversely, given our choice of state–society divide, we omit some discussion of the governance and common pool resources-centered literature.

The seeming disconnection between scholars of social mobilization and the state in LACEP is the result of different questions being asked. On the one hand, the literature centered on the mobilization of social groups vying for environmental protection mostly inquires about the conditions under which actors forge collective action (Baver and Lynch, 2006a; Carruthers, 2008a; Christen et al., 1998; Foyer and Dumoulin Kevran, 2017; Lewis, 2016). It offers less information on the conditions under which protests may lead to state intervention.

While the state is necessarily involved as the sanctioning institution of environmental protection, this literature often overlooks the many links between state and society in the environmental regulatory process. On the other hand, the literature focused on state actions frequently examines policymaking as a segmented process, sometimes paying little attention to the demands that trigger it (Aguilar-Støen, 2018; Alcañiz and Gutiérrez, 2020a; Sears and Pinedo-Vasquez, 2011; Steinberg, 2001; Tecklin et al., 2011). While state-centered studies may consider some of the direct societal ties that shape state behavior, they sometimes neglect the political mobilization behind these links (Lemos, 1998). Research questions focused on the state tend to ask instead about the institutional mechanisms and state capabilities that produce environmental protection and induce changes in environmental governance.

This Element helps unify the study of environmental politics in Latin America and the Caribbean around one broad research paradigm. We begin with the understanding that environmental politics revolves around state decisions. Political actors look for environmental problems to be addressed by the state. Building upon the literature on Environmental Justice (EJ), we argue that environmental politics is as much about the protection of the environment as it is about the distribution of environmental benefits and ills. The process of social grievance and state address is fundamentally distributive, whereby some reap the benefits from the appropriation and pollution of natural resources while others pay the costs of environmental deterioration (Martínez-Alier et al., 2010). That is why we ask LACEP central research questions: Who *benefits* from the appropriation and pollution of the environment, who *pays* the costs of climate change and environmental degradation (i.e., the depletion of resources plus pollution), who *benefits* from the allocation of state protections, and who *pays* the cost of it.

Inequality significantly shapes this distribution, as the rich can use private means to safeguard themselves from climate change and the deteriorating environment, while the poor must rely solely on state protection (Acsehrad, 2008). Giving existing asymmetries of power, some studies on the environment and rights (Acsehrad, 2010, 2008, 2006; Alimonda, 2008, 2006; Carruthers, 2008a; Falleti and Riofrancos, 2018; Martínez-Alier, 2004) often find evidence that large companies and the state are the winners of environmental politics, while the people directly affected by private or state projects and activities (either the poor or local populations) are always the losers as they cannot change the course of business and state decisions. Some scholars find evidence of historical participatory patterns that benefit powerful economic actors and the state over Indigenous and other affected communities (Falleti and Riofrancos, 2018).

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However, we understand that the distribution of environmental costs and benefits, similar to the distribution of the costs and benefits of industrialization, may be complicated by different political conditions, institutions, and agencies. We believe that the winners and losers of climate change and environmental degradation cannot be known a priori. Drawing from the literature on distributive politics and some of the studies reviewed in this Element, we argue that the distributive outcomes of environmental politics depend on the interaction among an array of social, economic, and state actors. More specifically, we find that often studies show that given certain conditions, affected populations can change the course of state decisions. At times, communities become winners of environmental politics when broad protectionist coalitions are built, bringing together diverse social, state, and even economic actors. A distributive politics approach facilitates less predetermined expectations on positions and outcomes, identifies crosscutting coalitions, and calls for a more open and dynamic analysis of the interaction of all actors involved in environmental politics.

Defining Environmental Politics

Environmental politics refers to the policy preferences, interests, and values as well as the system incentives that shape the actions of social, economic, and state actors defining and contesting environmental policy. Centered on the politics of environmental policies (or the lack thereof), this definition allows us to pay attention to the evaluative and strategic drivers as well as the contextual conditions of political action. While values, interests, and policy preferences describe actors' attributes, system incentives include both the governance arrangements and the economic and political contexts that shape those attributes and the resulting political actions.

The politics of environmental policies revolve around how and why decisions about the environment and the use of natural resources are made and implemented (Bull and Aguilar-Støen, 2015). The core of environmental policies lies in the state regulation of environmental protection, which becomes the aim of environmental politics. Environmental protection involves the preservation of the environment and the prevention of likely hazards as well as the remediation of harms already done. As we will discuss further, our approach to environmental politics focuses on the distributive effects of both hazards and harms, and preservation and remediation. The presence and absence of environmental policies affect the distributive costs and benefits of different actors.

Distributive effects ultimately refer to the actors' values, interests, and preferences: which values, preferences, and interests are better served by

environmental policies. Interests constitute the benefits that are obtained from a certain object or a certain action, while preferences involve a choice between several objects or actions. If our interest is to maximize profits or to contemplate the landscape, we can do both in different ways. For example, we may prefer to produce soybeans rather than raise pigs, or we may prefer to look at a lake rather than a desert.

Value, in turn, is what makes a thing worthy of being appreciated, desired, and sought after. It is the quality that we appreciate in a certain object – for example, nature or the environment – and that guides our actions and our relationship with that object. In his analysis of the early ecologists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for example, Worster (1977) distinguishes two competing perspectives that still resonate in contemporary environmental conflicts. “Arcadian” ecology gives nature an intrinsic value that must be respected and which leads us to live in harmony with it, recognizing ourselves as just one part of that organic whole that we call nature. The “Imperial” tradition, on the other hand, conceives of nature as a resource for the progress of humanity, which must be dominated and transformed by human beings for their own glory and benefit. Throughout the Element, we will alternately talk about values, interests, and preferences. But it is important to note that we understand these three terms to be strongly connected. As Habermas states, interests, the preferences derived from them, and values cannot be thought of separately as “interests are connected with ideas [values] that justify normative validity claims” (Habermas, 1996: 69).

Environmental and distributive effects, thus, are intimately connected. Environmental effects refer to the state of the environment: how environmental policies or the absence of them impact the current and future conditions of the environment. Yet environmental effects are measured and evaluated by the involved actors on the basis of their distinct values, preferences, and interests (Martínez-Alier, 2004). For example, from an “eco-efficiency” perspective, provincial authorities and business actors saw gold mining in Esquel, Argentina, as a beneficial activity that could be compatible with environmental protection if adequate technologies and controls were set up. In contrast, an array of local actors opposed open-pit mining under the view that any development project for the city had to be grounded on local, small-scale activities such as agriculture, forestry, and tourism, which in their perspective were imbued with a higher appreciation of the environment (Walter and Martínez-Alier, 2010). Similarly, the environmental effects of forest certification in the Amazon were seen in different ways by different actors (Fearnside, 2003). Those who believed in “sustainable management” and were interested in securing cattle pasture defended certification as the best way to protect

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biodiversity, while those committed to “untouched forests” saw certification and management as disastrous for biodiversity.

Environmental Actors

From a distributive perspective, there is no way to distinguish independently the effects of a given human activity or environmental policy from the interests and preferences of the involved actors. Different actors have distinct preferences regarding environmental protection, which in turn shape how they interpret policies and their effects (Fearnside, 2003; Göbel and Ulloa, 2014; Lewis, 2016; Martínez-Alier, 2007; Martínez-Alier et al., 2010). Three types of actors are dominant in LACEP: state (e.g., policymakers, environmental officials, and government scientists), social (e.g., nongovernmental organizations or NGOs, local activists, Indigenous and peasant groups), and economic actors (e.g., private firms, agricultural producers, and state-owned companies). While the distinction between state and nonstate actors is usually clear-cut, we differentiate social and economic actors based on their profit orientation. Economic actors are profit-oriented, whereas social actors are nonprofit-oriented and may include elite and voluntary organizations and grassroots groups.

Social and economic actors do not have monolithic interests and preferences. Nevertheless, general trends can be identified when both groups are compared across cases of environmental conflict. Social actors involved in environmental politics typically prefer new or higher regulation and protection standards. Economic actors typically prefer to avoid or reduce regulations and protection standards. Yet, some economic actors occasionally may favor higher environmental protection and regulation in order to secure their economic interests – such as small-scale farming or tourism – against competing activities – such as mining or industrial agriculture (Alvarado Merino, 2008; Christel, 2019; McCaffrey and Baver, 2006; Murillo and Mangonnet, 2013; Urkidi and Walter, 2011; Walter and Martínez-Alier, 2010). They may also prefer environmental regulation as a means to mitigate skyrocketing social unrest and judicial pressures (Amengual, 2016, 2013; McAllister, 2008). Similarly, even if they agree on the need for more regulation, different social groups may hold different values and preferences as regards the same issue, as shown by the so-called people in parks debate – that is, the debate over humans living in protected areas. While some organizations favor the full protection of areas without people, others see the creation of large protected areas for natural conservation as causing harm to native peoples living on or near those lands and as ultimately offering less protection for nature because they lack the support of local residents (Fearnside, 2003).

The policy preferences of state actors are even harder to determine than those of social and economic actors. While some state actors charged with the implementation of environmental policies are alleged to prefer more regulation and higher protection standards, others prefer to lower protection standards or to avoid regulation altogether in support of economic production. These opposing preferences reflect the paradoxical nature of the modern state. The state is a bureaucratic organization that depends on capital accumulation as the source wherefrom to extract taxes at the same time that it operates within a society imbued with social, political, and ideological conflicts and from which it must extract its legitimacy (O'Connor, 1998; Offe, 1992; Polanyi, 2001). The modern state is thus subject to an inherent contradiction between the logic of capital accumulation and the logic of democratic legitimacy, and it must simultaneously respond to the requirements of both. This contradiction permeates the advance of environmental regulation in Latin America and the Caribbean in a paradoxical way. In order to protect the environment, the state needs additional funding. In many of the Latin American and Caribbean countries, budgetary surpluses often come from the extraction of natural resources (Lewis, 2016).

Never were the internal contradictions of the state sharper than over the last commodity boom, especially between 2004 and 2014. During this time, most Latin American and Caribbean governments (regardless of their progressive or conservative ideology) passed new environmental regulations and invested in conservation policies while simultaneously benefiting from windfall profits and revenues from extractive activities and the export of commodities (Bull and Aguilar-Støen, 2015; Castro et al., 2016; Svampa, 2019; Zimmerer, 2011).

On the one hand, the contradictory nature of the modern state generates multiple orientations and conflicts among state agencies with disparate goals (Göbel and Ulloa, 2014; Harrison, 1996; Hochstetler and Keck, 2007; McAllister, 2008; Merlinsky, 2013a; Scheberle, 2005), which in turn are exacerbated by the struggle between the different levels of government (Fearnside, 2003; Gutiérrez, 2018; Urkidi and Walter, 2011; Walter and Urkidi, 2016). On the other hand, it creates opportunities for the mobilization and influence of social organizations concerned with environmental protection (Gutiérrez, 2018; Hochstetler and Keck, 2007). As we show throughout the Element, the variation in the policy preferences of state actors is crucial to understand the politics of environmental policy and its effects. To a large extent, the success and failure of environmental protection initiatives rest on the collaboration and forged coalitions between state and social actors (Amengual, 2013; Castro et al., 2016; Christen et al., 1998; Gutiérrez, 2020, 2018; Hochstetler and Keck, 2007; Kauffman and Terry, 2016; Lemos, 1998;

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Lemos and Looye, 2003; McCaffrey and Baver, 2006; Steinberg, 2001; Walter and Urkidi, 2016).

The Distribution of Environmental Costs and Benefits

Environmental politics is not only about the protection of the environment (i.e., what is to be protected) but also about the distribution of environmental costs and benefits (i.e., from whom and for whom it is to be protected). All environmental struggles are grounded in distributive conflict and all environmental policies entail distributive effects, even if the LACEP literature does not always analyze them explicitly. Examining the United States and Great Britain, Dobson (1998) contends that environmental sustainability and social justice are not necessarily compatible objectives – if they are not framed as opposite goals. The distinction between conservationism and the environmental justice movement illustrates well the tensions between sustainability and social justice. Conservation policies may very well help preserve certain ecosystems without solving social inequality problems such as access to natural resources and means of livelihood, exposure to pollution, and protection from environmental risks and disasters (Sachs, 1999).

Nevertheless, abundant studies in LACEP show that the kind of environmentalism that has developed in the region combines environmental and social concerns (Acsehrad, 2010; Baver and Lynch, 2006a; Carey, 2009; Carruthers, 2008a; Cartagena Cruz, 2017; Hochstetler and Keck, 2007; Martínez-Alier et al., 2016; Sedrez, 2009; Silva, 2016; Svampa, 2012; Viola, 1992). This literature emphasizes the intertwining of environmental degradation and social justice, such as the destruction of traditional ways of life, access to land, and local livelihoods (Carruthers, 2008b; da Rocha et al., 2018; Leguizamón, 2020; Martínez-Alier, 2008; Perez Guartambel, 2006; Rodríguez et al., 2015; Sundberg, 2008; Ulloa, 2017; Urkidi and Walter, 2011). This scholarship finds that the communities most affected by climate change and the destruction of the natural environment are not just impoverished ones, but critically ones defined by ethnic, racial, and gender lines (Ahmed et al., 2021; Alcáñiz and Sanchez-Rivera, forthcoming; Bledsoe, 2019; Futemma et al., 2015; Mollett, 2014; Perry, 2009; Rodríguez-Díaz and Lewellen-Williams, 2020; Tormos-Aponte, 2018; Vélez et al., 2020; Vida, 2020).

Indeed, over the past decades and across much of the region, we see Indigenous actors directly engaging in environmental issues. The rise of different ethnic coalitions is especially salient in Mexico, Central America, and the Andean countries. The ethnic divide is central to explaining outcomes in environmental politics (Armesto et al., 2001; Azócar et al., 2005; Carruthers

and Rodriguez, 2009; Gonzalez, 2021; Inoue and Moreira, 2017; Orta-Martínez et al., 2018; Paredes, 2018; Paredes and Kaulard, 2020; Pragier, 2019; Valladares and Boelens, 2017; Wong, 2018; Zaremborg and Wong, 2018). We believe the LACEP literature will continue to catch up with this reality. We anticipate and hope it will help increase the visibility of Afro-Latin Americans' environmental grievances, especially those of Afro-Caribbean actors, who are even more marginalized from the LACEP literature.

By making explicit the distributive nature of environmental politics, we reveal the interaction of key actors in conservation struggles – and their interests and preferences – as well as its influence on green policies and the protection of the environment. The quest for environmental protection, we maintain, entails important questions about the costs and benefits that actors face, which in turn are shaped by the preferences and interests of these actors. On the one hand, environmental politics involves the winners and losers of the appropriation and pollution of the environment: who *benefits* from and who *pays* the costs of harms and hazards. On the other hand, it refers to the winners and losers of environmental protection policies: who *benefits* from the preservation and remediation of the environment and who *pays* the cost of the policies designed and implemented to achieve them. Even if we understand that in the long run, everyone will either pay the cost of environmental degradation or benefit from greater protection, what is at stake in real-world environmental politics are the lifetime calculations and aspirations of the actors involved (Hornborg, 2009).

The distributive nature of environmental politics is dynamic. If effective, environmental policies should change the costs and benefits that actors face. For example, one would expect the losers of environmental degradation to become the winners of environmental protection. Furthermore, we would also expect the winners of environmental degradation to bear at least some of the burden of remediation as well as the opportunity costs of restricting or banning a given polluting or degrading activity. This is why we pay special attention to the changing distributive effects of environmental degradation and policies in our survey of the LACEP literature.

This Element accomplishes two goals. First, Sections 2 and 3 offer comprehensive surveys of the social mobilization-centered and state-centered studies, allowing readers to take stock of the rich literatures that have emerged over the past twenty to thirty years around LACEP. We help make sense of the extant research by highlighting the values, interests, policy preferences, and system incentives that shape the actions of social, economic, and state actors defining and contesting environmental policy in the region. Our organization of the sections reflects the focus of the LACEP literature on either the state or social actors. In our discussion, we also include the role of business and contend that

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the scarce attention paid to this actor is a shortcoming of the literature. We see this as a weakness of the society-centered approach, given that often business interests are independent from state interests in a majority of Latin America and the Caribbean. We believe there is a growing need to understand the environmental impact and especially the distinct preferred policies of different economic actors around the water–energy–food–environment nexus (Mahlknecht et al., 2020). This need will only become more urgent as climate policies dominate the political agenda of the region.

Second, this Element leverages the revealed preferences and incentives of social, economic, and state actors in the existing literatures to answer the central questions of distributive politics: *who* gets *what* under *which* conditions. We understand the *who* of this question to be either state, social, or economic actors seeking protection or status quo (i.e., the *what*) when facing a given environmental hazard under specific political and economic conditions. By asking the same questions of the social mobilization- and state-centered studies, this Element accomplishes its second goal, which is to help forge a new research agenda in LACEP focused on the distributive costs and benefits of degrading and protecting the environment. Furthermore, this agenda helps reveal when distributive benefits and costs are negotiated across crosscutting cleavages and when decisions that are adversarial to environmental protection are eventually overturned.

LACEP in Context

Before we begin our discussion of the LACEP literature, a brief comparison with other regions of the world is in order. Considering the region's impact on climate change and similar to other economies of the Global South, Latin America and the Caribbean countries have been low CO₂ emitters. However, size matters. Countries with larger populations and economies, such as Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, and to a lesser extent, Colombia and Venezuela, release significant amounts of methane gas and nitrous oxide. Within this group of countries, Brazil has the greatest impact on climate change, as the region's largest country and emitter of greenhouse gas (GHG) with the highest deforestation rates of the Amazon rainforest. Not surprisingly, Caribbean states contribute little if any to global warming but as island-nations are extremely vulnerable to climate change. Caribbean countries are at the frontline of exposure and vulnerability to sea-level rise and record-breaking storms, coupled with high levels of poverty. Islands like Puerto Rico, Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic – located in the so-called Hurricane Alley zone – are continually under threat of mass human casualties, infrastructure destruction, and losing

population to climate-induced migration. In 2017 alone, the Caribbean nations suffered catastrophic devastation when they were hit in quick succession by Hurricanes Harvey, Maria, and Irma (Alcañiz and Sanchez-Rivera, forthcoming; Rodriguez-Díaz and Lewellen-Williams, 2020).

The Latin American and the Caribbean region exhibit some of the highest levels of income inequality in the world. Driven primarily by historic land concentration, poverty and land exclusion worsen even further for Indigenous and Afro-descendant citizens (Ahmed et al., 2021; Mollett, 2014; Pragier, 2019; Vélez et al., 2020; Vida, 2020; Wong, 2018; Zaremborg and Wong, 2018). In Latin America and the Caribbean, Indigenous and Afro-descendant citizens are less likely to have access to safe drinking water and sewage systems, and to hold formal rights to land and property (Ahmed et al., 2021; Freire et al., 2015; Zegarra et al., 2007). Similarly, and as the literature on environmental justice shows, impoverished ethnic and racial communities disproportionately overlap with industrial sites that pollute, pressure, and degrade their natural environment (Freire et al., 2015). Consequently, conflict stemming from water and land insecurity, and mining and other extractive developments intersect – and are exacerbated by – social inequalities resulting from ethnicity and race.

Finally, Latin American and Caribbean countries are extremely biodiverse. Brazil alone holds approximately 20 percent of global water supply and biological diversity (see the Convention on Biological Diversity). Conversely, due to climate change, global warming, and demographic and agricultural stressors, the region's biodiversity is at high risk. In 2018, Latin America and the Caribbean had 629 mammal species, 1,716 fish species, 1,117 bird species, and 5,439 plant species under threat (United Nations Environmental Program and the World Conservation Monitoring Centre, and International Union for Conservation of Nature, Red List of Threatened Species).

Figures 1 through 4 compare Latin America and the Caribbean to the other great regions of the world (Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, East Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Central Asia, and North America) along four key indicators of climate change. As the figures clearly show, the region's emission levels in CO₂ (Figure 1) and methane (Figure 2) are low and comparable to emissions from Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. However, when we examine renewable energy consumption (Figure 3), Latin America and the Caribbean appear closer to North America and Europe and Central Asia. In contrast, when we look at the region's forest area as a percentage of land area (Figure 4), Latin America and the Caribbean are ahead of all other regions, even with growing rates of deforestation.