



THE CASE FOR STUDYING URBAN ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD

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The Urban Turn in Comparative Politics

Comparative politics scholars are increasingly turning their attention to subnational and urban politics in developing countries. There are many reasons to study city politics in the Global South. Over half of the global population lives in cities, and this figure is projected to rise to over 65% by 2050, with 90% of this increase taking place in Asia and Africa, as Latin America is already over 80% urbanized (UN DESA 2018). Urban population growth and decentralization trends have created more policy arenas for which local governments are responsible, and thus more spaces for citizen demand-making on government and ensuing political contestation. Political science scholarship focused on cities in developing countries has broken new ground on, for example, political order and urban violence, clientelism, and public services provision (see Post 2018), but has neglected a critical urban policy arena that is increasingly politically contested: the environment.

Despite growing attention to global environmental governance (Hale 2020), comparative politics scholars have been slower to examine this fertile area of research, and this neglect has been even more pronounced at the city level. Yet climate change mitigation planning is inti-

mately linked to city leadership and multi-level governance (Bulkeley and Betsill 2013), and pollution is responsible for one quarter of global deaths, most of which occur in low-income countries (WHO 2016), which are increasingly urban. Indeed, environmental problems permeate the lives of many residents in Global South cities (Hardoy et al. 2001), and comparative politics has not done enough to study this growing reality. Environmental issues are a key policy arena that drive politics at the subnational level and require study. For this to happen, however, we must overcome outdated assumptions that environmental politics is not politically salient or that it is too difficult to study in weak institutional environments like those that characterize much of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

There are many lenses through which to study the environment in the Global South, but existing research suggests that any environmental law, standard, or institution with real authority is such because of sustained pressure from collective citizen action. While social mobilization has played a big role in environmental policy-making worldwide, the role of organized citizen pressure in environmental institution building has been particularly pronounced in the weak institutional setting of the Global South. Thus, comparativists can draw important lessons



about the relationship between social accountability and institution building by examining political conflicts over environmental issues in these spaces.

Environmental Concern in the Global South and its Politics

Perhaps because of Inglehart's famous post-materialist thesis (1990; 1995) much of the scholarship on local environmental issues in developing countries has developed outside of political science. Inglehart argued that only countries that enjoy economic security will undergo a "value change" towards environmentalism, making environmental concern a "post-material" issue developed only in advanced industrial economies. Inglehart assumed that environmental concern would be visible only through formal institutions such as political parties, leading political scientists to associate a lack of ecological parties with low environmental concern and perhaps conclude that the environment was not politically salient and thus irrelevant for study in developing countries.

Other scholars outside of political science reject the post-materialist thesis, and have probed the varied manifestations of environmental concern around the world. Some have found that environmental concern is even higher in low-income nations (Dunlap and Mertig 1997) and that we should expect to see mobilization around slow harms that are framed as "claims of vulnerability" such as when a community's economic livelihood is at stake (e.g. Martinez-Alier 2002; 1991). In contrast, ethnographic research has documented the propensity for low-income communities to be faced with resignation and "environmental suffering" and thus fail to mobi-

lize (Auyero and Swistun 2009; Lora-Wainwright 2017). Recently, comparative politics literature has turned its attention to the rise in socio-environmental conflicts in some non-urban settings, such as political conflicts over extractives (Jaskoski 2014; Amengual 2018; Falleti and Riofrancos 2018; Arce 2014; Eisenstadt and Jones West 2017), forest protection (Kashwan 2017; Milmanda and Garay 2019; Andersson 2013) and conservation policy (Steinberg 2001). Thus, although political scientists have begun to revisit the uptick of environmental concern in developing countries, the focus has not been on how these dynamics shape city politics.

Yet this reality is ripe for change. Comparative politics scholars interested in cities and development can look to the environmental policy arena as a fertile area of study. Urban governments typically have authority over key policy arenas within which environmental goods are provided, regulated or consumed (although this authority may be shared between multiple tiers of government). These responsibilities might include regulating building codes; regulating industrial pollution; allocating land use permits; regulating environmental impacts from water and sanitation provision, landfills, incineration, and transportation; managing forests, parks, and waterfronts; and responding to environmental disasters such as flooding, landslides, and wildfires.

Environmental policy arenas in cities allow political scientists to study themes central to the discipline in new empirical terrain. First, environmental institution-building is tightly linked to social mobilization, and students of civic participation and collective action will be able to fruitfully link these bodies of research with conflicts over local policymaking in response to

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climate change. Second, regulatory politics, including issues of state capacity and firm-state relations, is also an arena that plays out in urban environmental policymaking and can be further probed in both democratic and nondemocratic settings. Third, similar to the study of clientelism, political scientists are well poised to study the relationship between electoral cycles and environmental goods provision and regulation. This is an area of great interest to the interdisciplinary study of climate change. Finally, many local governments enjoy autonomous authority over public services provision, which have important environmental causes and consequences that merit further study.

The Role of Citizen Mobilization: New, Existing and Future Research

In my research on environmental policymaking in Latin American cities, I have found that citizen collective action has been critical for building state capacity for enforcing environmental regulations. By focusing on slow moving harms, such as water and land pollution, my research highlights environmental problems that become part of the everyday landscape in many urban communities and thus become stymied by citizen and political inaction. For instance, my research with Lindsay Mayka focused on the role of litigation for social accountability in Bogotá, Colombia, which put urban river remediation on the policymaking agenda (Herrera and Mayka 2019). In another work, I argue that the historical legacies of pre-existing social movements—such as the human rights movements in South America—can create an infrastructure of institutions, NGOs and frames—that can issue-link with environmental issues, providing policy entrepreneurs a pathway towards slow harms remediation, as was the case in Buenos Aires, Argentina (Herrera 2020).

My research builds on earlier work on social mobilization around environmental issues. For example, in Brazil civil society groups have always had environmental expertise and created pressure on the state, moving between state agencies and NGOs (Hochstetler and Keck 2007). This is seen clearly in the alliance building between popular movements and technocrats to clean up “Death Valley” or Cubatão, Brazil which was once one of the most contaminated places in the world (De Mello Lemos 1998; Hochstetler and Keck 2007). More recently, scholarship on social mobilization around the environment has focused on litigation as a demand making strategy, for example in China (Stern 2013; Van Rooij 2010), Argentina (Botero 2018) and Brazil (McAllister 2008).

Political scientists interested in social mobilization have a rich tapestry of empirical developments to choose from when studying environmental movements in the Global South. Combining findings from environmental justice literature (Bullard 2000; Hofrichter 2002) with other political and social movements literature, comparative politics scholars can further interrogate the collective action underpinnings of mobilization surrounding environment. Framing, alliances, the role of NGOs, material resources, and prior organizational strategies are some factors that can be explored for movement formation in new waves of environmental contestation in Global South cities. Some of this existing work that focuses on the utility of environmental justice framing in the Global South context (Urkidi and Walter 2011; Carruthers and Rodríguez 2009; Diez and Rodríguez 2008) could be combined with questions central to comparative politics. For example, research could focus on how movements impact policy change, whether they depend on political parties or mayoral leadership, or how they navigate



multi-tiered governance agendas in climate change mitigation planning spaces. Another area of research is the relationship between national or urban regime change and environmentalism. Future research could build on how, for example, environmental movements expand after shifts from authoritarian rule, as was the case of Brazil (De Mello Lemos 1998) and Argentina (Herrera 2020), or how local environmental protests might contribute to national democratization movements as research on Taiwan and South Korea illustrate (Haddad 2015).

Future Research: Regulatory Politics, Electoral Cycles, and Public Services Provision

Regulatory politics at the urban level have been underdeveloped, despite the political influence of urban growth machines in Global South cities (Molotch 1976). Urban growth machines, whether real estate development or industrial plants, create structural challenges for environmental protections. Recent work by Kent Eaton reveals the tensions between politically connected land interests in Bogotá, Colombia, and efforts to regulate them in order to protect peri-urban natural reserves (K. Eaton 2020, 7–9). Social-political conflicts between real estate developers and urban environmental protections in the Global South is a fruitful venue for future research, particularly as these conflicts increase and become co-opted by partisan interests. Research suggests that social mobilization can sometimes provide a countervailing pressure to urban growth machines.

For example, research on agro-industrial plant pollution in Santa Fe, Argentina shows that regulatory enforcement “was made possible by a

mobilized community group that put pressure on the plant and developed linkages with regulators” (Amengual 2016, 164). Indeed, regulation as a coalition-building project in the Global South, requiring the support of both engaged citizens and non-state actors, deserves more scholarly attention, in particular for identifying the conditions under which such strategies are successful. How these dynamics play out in authoritarian settings, where social mobilization is likely to be more muted, also merits further study. New work could build on existing research focused on the explanatory role of centralized or decentralized institutional configurations for environmental compliance in China (Van Rooij et al. 2017; Kostka and Nahm 2017), and the role of citizen-led litigation (Stern 2013; Van Rooij 2010), and connect these types of institutional and citizen variables to urban political leadership.

A promising new area of research involves political cycles and environmental outcomes, focused largely on China. Local leaders experience high turnover as they are promoted in line with central directives, reflecting short time horizons that are at odds with implanting environmental policies in line with China’s top down model of environmental authoritarianism (S. Eaton and Kostka 2014). Indeed, scholars have documented a “political business cycle” where local leaders selectively enforce environmental regulations to reduce local industries production costs or attract new firms, generating pollution increases leading up to leader turnover (Cao, Kostka, and Xu 2019). More work on these dynamics in China will reveal how political cycles shape environmental goods provision in authoritarian settings. Extending this research to electoral cycles in democratic settings would be an excellent area for future research.

Scholars should continue to build on the logic of prior clientelism studies and find innovative ways to measure the relationship between electoral cycles and local environmental goods provision and regulation. This allows researchers to harness concepts and tools developed within political science to contribute to the interdisciplinary field of climate change politics, while also using environmental issues to address evergreen themes within political science.

Finally, comparative politics scholars could pay more attention to the environmental consequences of different types of public services provision arrangements in cities in the Global South. While the research on the politics of urban public services provision has increased (e.g. Herrera 2017; Post, Bronsoler, and Salman 2017; Auerbach 2016), few researchers focus on their environmental dimensions. Public services such as water and sanitation depend on water pollution mitigation strategies and regulation of over-extraction that could be more systematically incorporated into political analysis of these types of services (e.g. Keck 2002). Cities' political authority also includes waste management, where landfills generate methane gas,

and thus more could be done to study the politics of waste governance and climate change mitigation planning, the same goes for transportation, city governance, and CO2 emissions. As cities adopt climate change mitigation planning and local battles ensue about which subsectors will be targeted for greenhouse emissions reduction campaigns, important political battles will ensue. Distributional conflicts are likely to arise, for example, over urban greening projects that help in the fight against climate change but also disadvantage low-income communities (Wolch, Byrne, and Newell 2014), suggesting that conflicts over equity and representation will characterize environmental goods provision, not so dissimilar from dynamics political scientists have identified in the social welfare literature.

In sum, political scientists are well positioned to use concepts and methods developed to study topics as far ranging as civic participation, institutional design, coalition building, electoral cycles, regulatory politics, and social welfare equity, when contributing to an urgently needed literature on environmental politics in the places where most of the world lives. ●

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