Goals, Strategies, and Tactics

Continuity and Change in Extinction Rebellion in the United Kingdom

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Abstract: Extinction Rebellion emerged in 2018 in the United Kingdom, and their activism quickly attracted the media spotlight, leading to similar groups springing up around this world. This swift ascendancy led to considerable interest in what is new or different about them. In this article, we review existing theories about this, and add an additional perspective. We argue that their most innovative feature is how they connect their tactics to their goals—i.e. their disruptive strategy. We use an original survey of members to support this argument. Our conclusions help pinpoint what is innovative about Extinction Rebellion UK, as well as to better understand their lessons for the broader environmental movement, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: environmentalism, policing, repertoires of contention, social movements, survey research

Social movements have always been experimenters, finding creative ways to make a political impact, and environmental social movements are no exception (Asara 2016; Blee 2013; Dalton et al. 2003; De Moor et al. 2020; Farrer 2017; Giugni and Grasso 2015; Grossman and Mayer 2022; Klein 2014; Rootes 2013; Stavenes and Ivanovska Hadjievska 2021; Taylor and Van Dyke 2004; Wang and Soule 2016). They have formed new types of political parties (Bolleyer 2013; Grant and Tilley 2020), pioneered innovative campaigns to put pressure on elected officials (Doherty and Hayes 2014; Staggenborg 2020; Weyler 2004; Zelko 2013), and pushed the frontiers of direct action (Donovan and Coupe 2013; Farrer and Klein 2017; Lincoln 2021; Loadenthal 2017; Malm 2021;

Pellow 2014; Scheuerman 2021; Woodhouse 2018). In this article, we argue that Extinction Rebellion in the United Kingdom (henceforth, XRUK) represents an important new chapter in this history of experimentation. Since their formation in October 2018, they have quickly become one of the most high-profile environmental organizations in Britain. Together with other groups like Fridays for Future, they have been credited with drastically raising the salience of climate change (Almeida 2019; Gardner et al. 2022). But debate continues over what, if anything, is actually new or unique about XRUK (Bell and Bevan 2021; De Moor et al. 2020; Furlong and Vignoles 2021; Gardner et al. 2022; Malm 2021; Matthews 2020; Saunders et al. 2020; Scheuerman 2021;Smiles and Edwards 2021; Stuart 2022).[1]

Isolating what is new about them is the first step in understanding what made them prominent. It also contributes to a broader literature on social movement innovation (Blee 2013; Downey and Rohlinger 2008; Grossman and Mayer 2022; Snow et al. 2018; Taylor and Van Dyke 2004; Wang and Soule 2016) and social movement success (Gillion 2013; Klein 2014; Kountouris and Williams 2022; Snow et al. 2018). It is also relevant to activists developing best practices. Finally, given the timing of their emergence, studying XRUK also helps us to understand how social movement organizations—henceforth referred to as SMOs—confronted the COVID-19 pandemic.

Other scholars isolating what makes XRUK unique have hit upon two main targets. First, there are XRUK's ambitious and systematic goals (De Moor et al. 2020; Read and Alexander 2021). Second, there is their distinctive spin on confrontational tactics (De Moor et al. 2020). There is also a third perspective, which diverges from the premise that XRUK is unique at all, and instead highlights the similarities between XRUK and its predecessors (Fotaki and Foroughi 2021; Saunders et al. 2020; Scheuerman 2021). In this article, we make a different argument: XRUK is indeed innovative, but their core innovation is neither their goals nor their tactics: it is their strategy. Their goals may be particularly ambitious, and their tactics particularly confrontational, but to some extent these are perennial features of environmental SMOs (Doherty 2002; Frankland et al. 2008; Hutter and Vliegenthart 2018; Müller-Rommel and Poguntke 2002; O'Neill 1997; Richardson and Rootes 1995; Rootes 2013; Zelko and Brinkmann 2006). We argue instead that it is their strategy that sets them apart. They aim to achieve change through disruption, rather than through the more usual approach of signaling that an issue poses an electoral threat (Farrer 2017; Gause 2020; Hill 2022).

We test this argument by drawing upon secondary sources, and by conducting a new survey of XRUK members. Since XRUK is a grassroots-led group, this survey gives us important insights into the organization. It also has the added benefit of building directly on other studies using similar methodologies (De Moor et al. 2020; Saunders et al. 2020). Despite being limited by a low response rate, our main finding from the survey and from the secondary sources is that activists identify the strategy of XRUK, rather than the goals or tactics, as being the most novel aspect of the group. The strategy of XRUK is to use disruption, confrontation, and mass arrests to increase the political, social, and economic costs of a status quo that treats climate as an externality. Their strategy is to internalize this externality. Their actions do less to galvanize the public and politicians, and more to disrupt the status quo (Ahmed 2019; Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Gunningham 2019; Harwood and Hudson 2019; Matthews 2020). Rather than focusing on raising the electoral costs to politicians (Farrer 2017; Gause 2020; Hill 2022), they focus on raising the logistical costs to the public and the police, although crucially, without directly confronting the police (Scheuerman 2021). We argue that this strategy differentiates XRUK from other SMOs with radical goals and confrontational tactics.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we review previous work on SMO innovation and on XRUK by looking at three possible dimensions of innovation: goals, tactics, and strategy. This section is split into three subsections, bringing in secondary sources of data and literature, but each subsection ends by formulating hypotheses for our survey data about whether XRUK is characterized more by continuity or by change on that dimension. In the second section, we introduce our survey methodology. The third section reports both descriptive and inferential results from this survey. The fourth and final section concludes the article and offers directions for future research.

Goals, Tactics, and Strategy in XRUK: Dimensions of Continuity and Change

Continuity in the Goals of XRUK

To understand what—if anything—makes XRUK unique, we begin by drawing from previous research on social movement innovation (Blee 2013; Downey and Rohlinger 2008; Snow et al. 2018; Taylor and Van Dyke 2004; Wang and Soule 2016). Some of this research treats

innovation as an independent variable, using it to predict success or failure (Jasper 2006; McAdam 1983). Other scholars treat innovation as the dependent variable, predicting its emergence as a result of factors like collaboration, timing, or organizational structures (Galli 2016; Staggenborg 2021; Wang and Soule 2016). Our article investigates to what extent the definition of "innovation," established in both these strands of literature, applies to XRUK.

To do this, we begin with a template often used in this research, which identifies the three main dimensions of group activity along which innovation can occur: the organization's goals, their strategies, and their tactics (Downey and Rohlinger 2008; Hardt and Negri 2019; Nelson and King 2020; Wang and Soule 2016). The goals of an organization are the policies that they want to see implemented, their strategy is the way they plan to reach those goals, and the tactics are the specific steps enacting that strategy. This roughly corresponds to the long-, medium-, and short-term activities of the group. Previous work on XRUK has studied possible innovations along all three of these dimensions, starting with their goals.

XRUK's goals are summed up in their "three demands": the UK government must declare a climate and ecological emergency; they must pledge to go carbon-neutral by 2025; and they must implement citizens' assemblies to decide the policies by which the 2025 target is achieved. De Moor and colleagues (2020) argue that these goals are innovative because they signify a "return to the state" after an era where environmentalists focused more on individual lifestyle choices (Stolle and Micheletti 2013). The sheer ambition of the goals also has been highlighted (Read and Alexander 2021; Stuart 2022). But in particular, their third demand, for citizens' assemblies, has been seen as setting XRUK apart from other environmental SMOs like Greenpeace or Friends of the Earth (Doherty and Doyle 2014; Zelko 2013). This is the idea that climate policy should be decided not by politicians but by deliberation between a randomly chosen group of citizens. They would be selected by lot, gathered together and given the best scientific briefings available regarding the climate situation, and asked to formulate a policy direction that would then be binding (Bussu and Fleuss 2022; Scheuerman 2021).

This third demand goes where many environmentalist groups fear to tread, by calling out the fundamental democratic deficit between, on the one hand, climate policy decisions made by the UK government, and, on the other hand, the effect of those decisions on people of other countries, on future generations, and on nature itself (Stevenson and Dryzek 2014; Vanderheiden 2008). A citizens' assembly suggests a new

way forward to rectify this deficit by empowering citizens, who might be better able than politicians to carefully consider the various effects of state policy decisions (Bua and Bussu 2023; Dryzek et al. 2019; Slaven and Heydon 2020). Citizen's assemblies may seem relatively disconnected from environmental goals, but they help XRUK intersect with other movements that deal with global justice and dissatisfaction with democracy. They question whether it is legitimate for parliamentary democracies to decide policies on issues like climate change—which have long-term and widespread impacts—without more meaningful participation from those affected by them (Bua and Bussu 2023; Dryzek et al. 2019; Grossman and Mayer 2022; Landemore 2015; Read and Alexander 2021; Stevenson and Dryzek 2014).

However, these demands alone may not be enough to make them unique. Other environmental SMOs have also had ambitious and systemic goals. Most scholars identify modern environmentalism as stemming from the social movements of the 1960s (Burchill 2002; Dalton 1994; Inglehart 1971; O'Neill 1997; Richardson and Rootes 1995). But from its earliest stages, environmentalism was already divided between narrowly focused conservation groups and broadly focused ecological groups (Dalton et al. 2003; Woodhouse 2018). Doherty (2002) defined the latter category as consisting of organizations united by three goals: social equity, ecological protection, and democratic participation. XRUK shares a lot with this tradition. Their insistence that climate-change mitigation policies follow the "polluter pays" principle means that they fit the criteria of social equity and ecological protection. Similarly, other ecological SMOs have also set extremely ambitious targets. Friends of the Earth has long pushed for postindustrialism, postcolonialism, and postmaterialism (Doherty and Hayes 2014). Greenpeace was founded to create a "revolutionary" consciousness that would spread around the world (Zelko 2013: 51). Other environmental groups like Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front advocate the overthrow of global capitalism (Kuipers 2009; Lincoln 2021; List 1993; Scarce 2006; Woodhouse 2018). XRUK builds upon rather than breaks from the history of ecological SMOs (Klein 2014).

Other similarities emerge when we examine the third demand. The idea of expanding democracy has a long history in environmental parties, interest groups, and SMOs (Doherty 2002). XRUK's main innovation was in advocating for citizens' assemblies (Smiles and Edwards 2021; Stuart 2022). But this demand actually dovetails with a long history of environmentalists trying to expand participatory democracy (Burchill 2002; Dalton 1994; Doherty and Hayes 2014; Frankland et al. 2008; Müller-Rommel and Poguntke 2002; O'Neill 1997; Pellow

2014; Richardson and Rootes 1995; Zelko and Brinkmann 2006). For example, the UK Green Party advocates for electoral system change (Lucas 2015), Friends of the Earth has pushed for changes to international organizations (Doherty and Doyle 2014), and many other ecological organizations have proposed institutional reforms to address the fundamental democratic deficit associated with climate policy.

Overall, the ambitious and systemic goals of social equity, and ecological protection, are not unique. This leaves only their call for citizens' assemblies. Although this goal has been presaged by other environmental SMOs calling for deeper democracy, citizens' assemblies are where the goals of XRUK are most clearly innovative. We use a survey of XRUK members to test whether this innovation is enough to make XRUK a qualitatively new type of group. We ask whether XRUK members see the specific demand for citizens' assemblies as important, or whether the specifics of the demand are less important, and they simply want to see greater democratic participation. We expect that when asked what the priorities of XRUK should be, most activists will highlight the standard goals of ecological organizations (Dalton et al. 2003; Doherty 2002; Woodhouse 2018), namely, social equity, democratic participation, and ecological protection. They will place less emphasis on citizens' assemblies specifically.

It is important to use data on activists' perceptions when testing theories about what makes XRUK innovative, because XRUK consists of largely autonomous local collectives, rather than activists following a charismatic leader or being beholden to a central board (Matthews 2020; Pellow 2014, Rüdig and Sajuria 2020; Saunders et al. 2020; Westwell and Bunting 2020). Understanding the preferences of individual activists is vital for understanding the overall direction of the organization (Farrer 2017; Fraussen and Halpin 2018). Since similar surveys of members have been conducted for other environmental organizations (De Moor et al. 2020; Saunders et al. 2020), it also helps us compare XRUK to other groups and answer our central questions about continuity and change. Our first hypothesis is therefore as follows:

> *H1: The top priorities of XRUK members will be climate change, government action, and democratic participation. Citizens' assemblies will be a lower priority.*

Continuity in the Tactics of XRUK

Our second hypothesis deals with the second dimension of continuity or change: tactics. The "repertoires of contention" research tradition

studies SMO tactics by treating them as acts of claims-making. The SMO makes a political claim in some public way, a state actor then responds, and the entire performance is visible to the public (Doherty and Hayes 2014; Downey and Rohlinger 2008; Snow et al. 2018; Wang and Soule 2016). Effective tactics are acts of claims-making that showcase four factors: the worthiness of the cause, the unity of the movement, the number of people in the organization, and the commitment of the activists (Snow et al. 2018). Perhaps the most important tactics for environmental groups are the "insider" repertoire of informational meetings and legislative pressure used in lobbying, and the "outsider" repertoire of more confrontational demonstrations and marches. Almost all environmental groups are clearly oriented toward one of these sets of tactics. Conservation groups tend toward the former, and ecology groups tend toward the latter (Dalton et al. 2003; Dür and Mateo 2013; Farrer 2017; Kollman 1998; Staggenborg 2020; Weiler and Brändli 2015). One way to understand whether XRUK has been tactically innovative is to examine whether its actions are drawn from one of these repertoires, or whether they introduce new elements.

Bailey (2014, 2020) collected data on UK social movement actions covered in *The Times* and/or *The Guardian*. For each action, the data gives the identity of the activists, the reason for the action, and also whether the action was "informational," for example a petition or an open letter, or "confrontational," for example a disruptive or illegal protest. These concepts map closely onto the "insider" and "outsider" distinction (Kollman 1998). Figure 1 below plots Bailey's (2014, 2020) data. It shows all environmental SMO actions in the United Kingdom from 2015 to 2019, covering before and after XRUK emerged. The first panel shows XRUK actions, and the second panel shows all other actions by environmental group. The figure illustrates two main points. First, according to this coding scheme at least, XRUK actions fit into the standard repertoires; that is, they did not necessitate an additional category alongside "informational" and "confrontational." Second, the mix of tactics is somewhat different from those of their contemporaries. Among all other environmental groups, 50.5 percent of actions in this period used outsider tactics, whereas for XRUK it was a statistically significantly higher 67.6 percent. This is an important shift. But their innovation is one of degree rather than kind. Their tactics may be innovative in other ways,[2] but on the aggregate level at least XRUK's tactics have been only somewhat innovative (Lee 2021; Matthews 2020; Read and Alexander 2020; Saunders et al. 2020; Westwell and Bunting 2020).
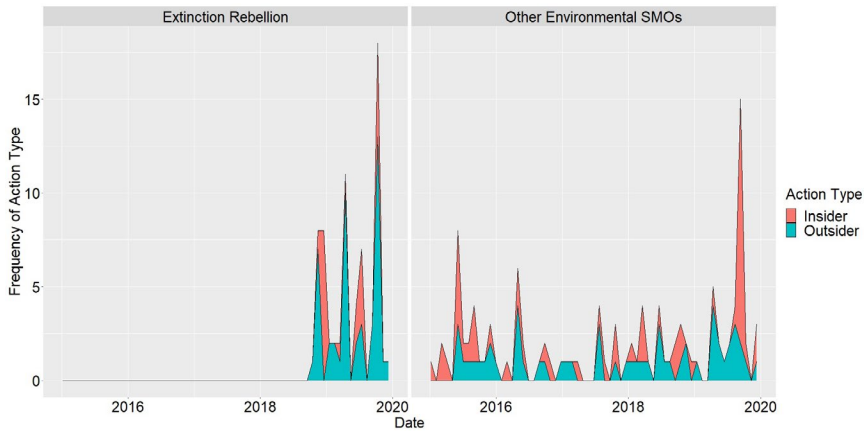
Figure 1. Environmental Protest Types in Britain, 2015–2019

Given this aggregate-level evidence, we expect to find further evidence of only limited tactical innovation in our survey of XRUK members. *H2* predicts that XRUK members will evaluate "outsider"' tactics as both more instrumentally and more expressively rewarding than "insider" tactics. Previous research has found that activists derive two types of utility from activism (Bäck et al. 2011; Brennan and Lomasky 1993; Schuessler 2000). First, activism has instrumental utility—that is, if the activism is successful, then it will affect political outcomes, but second, activism has expressive utility—that is, regardless of the outcome of the activism, activists will derive a self-esteem boost from expressing their identity amongst like-minded people. We expect that, as has been found for other "outsider" groups (Bäck et al. 2011; Doherty 2002; Farrer 2017), XRUK activists will see outsider tactics as both more instrumentally and more expressively rewarding. Therefore:

> *H2: XRUK activists will evaluate outsider tactics as more effective, and more personally rewarding, than insider tactics.*

Regarding both the goals and tactics of XRUK, prior evidence suggests more continuity than innovation. We can now move on to where we expect more innovation: their strategy.

Innovation in the Strategy of XRUK

Strategy is the connection between tactics and goals: it is the chain of logic that implies the former will lead to the latter. We argue that XRUK

has a novel strategy based on practical disruption rather than symbolic pressure, and we derive three additional hypotheses. Environmentalists had previously relied on either the insider tactics of niche parties (Ezrow 2010; Farrer 2017; Grant and Tilley 2019; Meguid 2008; Meyer and Wagner 2013; Spoon 2011; Van Haute 2016), or on the standard repertoire of outsider tactics like protests and demonstrations (Malm 2021; Matthews 2020; Read and Alexander 2020; Rootes 2013; Scheuerman 2021; Woodhouse 2018). But at best, SMOs using outsider tactics had only achieved slow and incremental changes.[3] This led newer groups like XRUK to search for strategies that could wring more leverage from these outsider tactics. They found inspiration in the research of Chenoweth and Stephan (2011). This research asked whether—in authoritarian countries—struggles for democracy were more effective if they used violent or nonviolent strategies. Their key finding was that if at least 3.5 percent of the population engaged in nonviolent civil disobedience, the regime would be overthrown. XRUK took this finding and applied it to their own struggle—not for democracy in an authoritarian country, but for a major policy change in an industrialized democracy. Matthews (2020) suggests that this may be an extrapolation too far—a criticism which has actually been echoed by some XRUK members (Read and Alexander 2020). However, this strategy, and the 3.5 percent target, lay at the heart of much of XRUK's approach from 2018 up until December 2022 (De Moor et al. 2020; Harwood and Hudson 2019; Lee 2021; Malm 2021; Matthews 2020; Read and Alexander 2021; Saunders et al. 2020; Scheuerman 2021; Slaven and Heydon 2020). Rather than using electoral pressure and democratic institutions to incentivize change (Farrer 2017; Gause 2020; Hill 2022), they used logistical disruption to force change.

XRUK used protests to block infrastructure, used arrests to plug up bureaucratic machinery, and used demonstrations as an opportunity not only to prefigure a utopian future, but also to highlight a dystopian present. Hardt and Negri (2019) had earlier called for this type of strategy, labeling it a "social strike." Such a strategy would lead to a situation, they believed, where "the power of refusal spreads across the social terrain. Disruption of the social order and suspension of capitalist production become indistinguishably linked" (Hardt and Negri 2019: 150). Disruption of the status quo can therefore put more than just electoral pressure on politicians; it generates logistical, social, and economic pressure. If outsider tactics were employed on a scale that prevented the operation of the status quo, the government would be forced to change course, even if the movement that employed these

tactics was never very popular (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011). Rather than trying to galvanize voters, XRUK attempted to make do without them.

However, although they could afford to be somewhat less popular, they could not afford to lose the moral high ground. The strategy relied on the disruption being seen as morally legitimate, and so the "rebellion" in Extinction Rebellion was never meant to directly challenge the state or its security apparatus. Scheuerman (2021) describes a high-profile occasion where XRUK activists delivered flowers to a police station to thank the officers for their professionalism after a demonstration. Bell and Bevan (2021) describe how this gesture alienated communities—especially people of color—who had experienced aggressive over-policing. For these communities, cooperation with the police is not necessarily a sign of moral legitimacy. Therefore, XRUK's strategy of disrupting infrastructure through civil disobedience, then getting arrested to overwhelm the system even further, but all the while being peaceful so as to maintain moral legitimacy, still had an important flaw. It did little to address the disproportionate consequences to XRUK activists of color of getting arrested (Armendariz-Caballero et al. 2020; Bell and Bevan 2021; Lee 2021; Saunders et al. 2020). Despite this critique, we still expect the majority of XRUK members to identify this strategy as crucial to the identity of the organization.

This leads us to our third and fourth hypotheses. We expect that XRUK members will rate outsider tactics as bringing particularly high instrumental utility. We also expect that they will not want these outsider tactics to involve a confrontational relationship with the police.

H3: XRUK activists will give especially high evaluations to outsider tactics on the dimension of being instrumentally effective, rather than on the dimension of being personally rewarding.

H4: XRUK members will endorse a non-adversarial rather than an adversarial relationship with the police.

Our fifth and final hypothesis looks at how this disruptive strategy may itself be disrupted. This was not part of our project as it was initially conceived, but when we were designing the survey in early 2020, it was impossible not to question whether the political strategy of XRUK could adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic. Our survey was administered in April 2020 at the beginning of a tense lockdown. We expected that XRUK activists would want their unique disruptive strategy to continue in some shape or form, despite considerable uncertainty about how

severe the pandemic would be and how the British government would respond. We give this expectation an exploratory test by asking participants an open-ended question about what they think XRUK's unique contribution should be to a society dealing with COVID-19 and by measuring how many of these responses mention a disruptive strategy.

> *H5: We expect that XRUK activists will want their disruptive strategy to continue in some way when pandemic conditions occur.*

In the next section, we use an original survey of XRUK members to test these hypotheses and provide corroborating evidence for our argument about the novelty of their strategy.

Survey Methodology

In order to test our hypotheses, we conducted an original survey of XRUK members. We sent the survey invitation to everyone on the "XRUK members" email list. Anyone can sign up to this list, and it consists mostly of people who signed up at an in-person event. A weekly UK newsletter began going out to this list in early 2020, and our survey was included in the thirteenth of these weekly newsletters, on the 15th of April 2020, with a reminder sent in the following week. Although we could have used in-depth interviews or a more targeted survey of influential organizers, getting the perspectives of general activists is crucial given how influential they are on the direction of XRUK (Read and Alexander 2021).

The email list contained approximately 180,000 email addresses at the time of our survey, and we received 138 responses. This means our response rate was approximately 0.08 percent. This is undoubtedly very low, but it is not unusual in the context of email newsletters. For comparison, in a study of 5.5 billion emails sent from July 2019 to June 2020, the average click-through rate for links embedded in weekly newsletters was 3.63 percent and the average overall click-through rate in the United Kingdom was 2.51 percent.[4] Our survey was embedded toward the end of a weekly newsletter that was several pages long, and it went out to a large group with heterogeneous levels of commitment. It also occurred in the first weeks of an unprecedented global pandemic, which may have reduced the salience of environmental issues. The response rate of 0.08 percent makes more sense within this context. It is also worth noting that we followed best practices in terms of survey design

(Dillman et al. 2014), used question-wordings that have been validated by prior literature, and extensively pre-tested the survey for readability and length. Thus, we argue that the response rate is largely a function of the context.

This sample size imposed some constraints on our analysis, but this data was still useful for exploratory purposes. The survey included approximately 60 questions, beginning with basic demographics, then moving on to in-depth questions about how participants joined XRUK, how they evaluate insider and outsider tactics, how XRUK dealt with activist burnout, and how XRUK should deal with the COVID-19 pandemic.[5] We will now use participants' responses to these questions to test our five hypotheses:

> H1: The top priorities of XRUK members will be climate change, government action, and democratic participation. Citizens' assemblies will be a lower priority.

> H2: XRUK activists will evaluate outsider tactics as more effective, and more personally rewarding, than insider tactics.

> H3: The higher evaluations that XRUK activists will give to outsider tactics will be more pronounced on the dimension of being effective than on the dimension of being personally rewarding.

> H4: XRUK members will endorse a non-adversarial rather than an adversarial relationship with the police.

> H5: We expect that XRUK activists will want their disruptive strategy to continue in some way when pandemic conditions occur.

Demographic Data

Before testing these hypotheses, we begin by showing the descriptive statistics from the survey questions measuring age, gender identity, racial identity, disability status, education, and class. Many of the variables are coded dichotomously, including the variables measuring different genders, racial identities, and classes. For those variables, the "mean" indicates the percentage of respondents answering "yes" to a given question. For example, in terms of gender, Table 1 shows that 32 percent of our sample were men, 3 percent were trans/nonbinary, and the remaining 65 percent were women.

Table 1 replicates previous findings about how XRUK has mobilized significant constituencies of women, especially younger women (De

Table 1. Demographic Variables in Survey of XRUK Activists

Variable	Obser-vations	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min.	Max.
Age	78	47.32	19.63	19	82
Gender: Man	133	0.32	0.47	0	1
Gender: Trans/Non-Binary	133	0.03	0.17	0	1
Gender: Woman	133	0.65	0.48	0	1
Racial Identity: White	127	0.96	0.20	0	1
Disability: Any	124	0.23	0.42	0	1
Disability: Mental Health	124	0.10	0.30	0	1
Education	123	3.02	0.93	0	4
Class: Middle Class	114	0.53	0.50	0	1
Class: Working Class	114	0.14	0.35	0	1

Moor et al. 2020; Saunders et al. 2020). For example, Saunders and colleagues (2020) received mail-back surveys from 103 activists attending XRUK events in April and 129 attending similar events in October 2019. They found that 64.5 percent of respondents were women and that 19.7 percent of their respondents were under the age of 25. We found that 19.23 percent of our survey respondents were under the age of 25. Saunders and colleagues (2020) also found that XRUK activists have higher levels of formal education, compared to both the UK average and the average of surveyed climate protestors from the 2009–2010 marches. Similarly, we found a high average level of education in our sample and relatively low working-class representation. Substantively, these similarities provide further reinforcement for previous findings about the youth, education, and middle-class profile of XRUK activists. Methodologically, these similarities are reassuring, since despite our small size we were able to replicate prior results.

There are two other findings from Table 1 that are worth highlighting. First, XRUK is overwhelmingly white. Saunders and colleagues (2020) did not collect data about the racial identity of respondents, but did supplement their survey data by following the cases of arrested activists. Of 132 court cases they attended, the activist defendant was white in all but two cases. So it is not surprising that we found that 96 percent of our respondents identified as white (Bell and Bevan 2021). Second, we also asked about the disability status of our respondents, with answer options available for sensory, mobility, learning, mental

health, and other disabilities. Of 124 participants who answered this question, three had sensory/mobility disabilities, four had learning disabilities, and nine had other unlisted disabilities, but the largest single category was mental health disabilities with 12 participants. Thus, around 23 percent of XRUK participants had some form of disability. This reinforces the importance of learning about the inclusiveness of the movement, the effects of activism on burnout and mental health, and whether the able-bodied activists had different views on confrontational protests and interactions with the police.

Findings

We now move to testing our hypotheses. First, we examine *H1*, which is about whether the three purported goals of XRUK match the stated goals of participants. Our survey asks this question indirectly to avoid social desirability bias. Instead of asking directly whether respondents agree with the goals of XRUK, we asked why participants joined XRUK in the first place. In consultation with XRUK members and based on prior research, we developed a list of issues including climate change and democratic reform. We asked participants to rate the importance of each of these issues in their decision to join XRUK on a five-point Likert scale. This allowed participants to say whether they agreed with the stated priorities of XRUK without explicitly using the same language as XRUK. Figure 2 below shows the results, plotting the percentage of respondents rating each issue from "very unimportant" to "very important" to their decision to join. We find partial support for *H1*. The issues that more people rated as "very important" to their decision to join were climate change, concern for the next generation, frustration with the effectiveness of prior environmental groups, and mass extinction. Agriculture, water, and food were also moderately important. Citizens' assemblies, on the other hand, were the least important reason.

Around half of the participants who answered this question also left an open-ended comment. Many of these focused on the urgency of the science and the newness of XRUK. Two separate, representative comments succinctly illustrate our argument:

> Everything else we've tried in four decades has failed to reduce GHG emissions. Mass civil disobedience is something new. (Participant 1)

> Having wasted much time and energy on conventional campaigning, I welcomed the opportunity of a new, far more direct approach. (Participant 2)
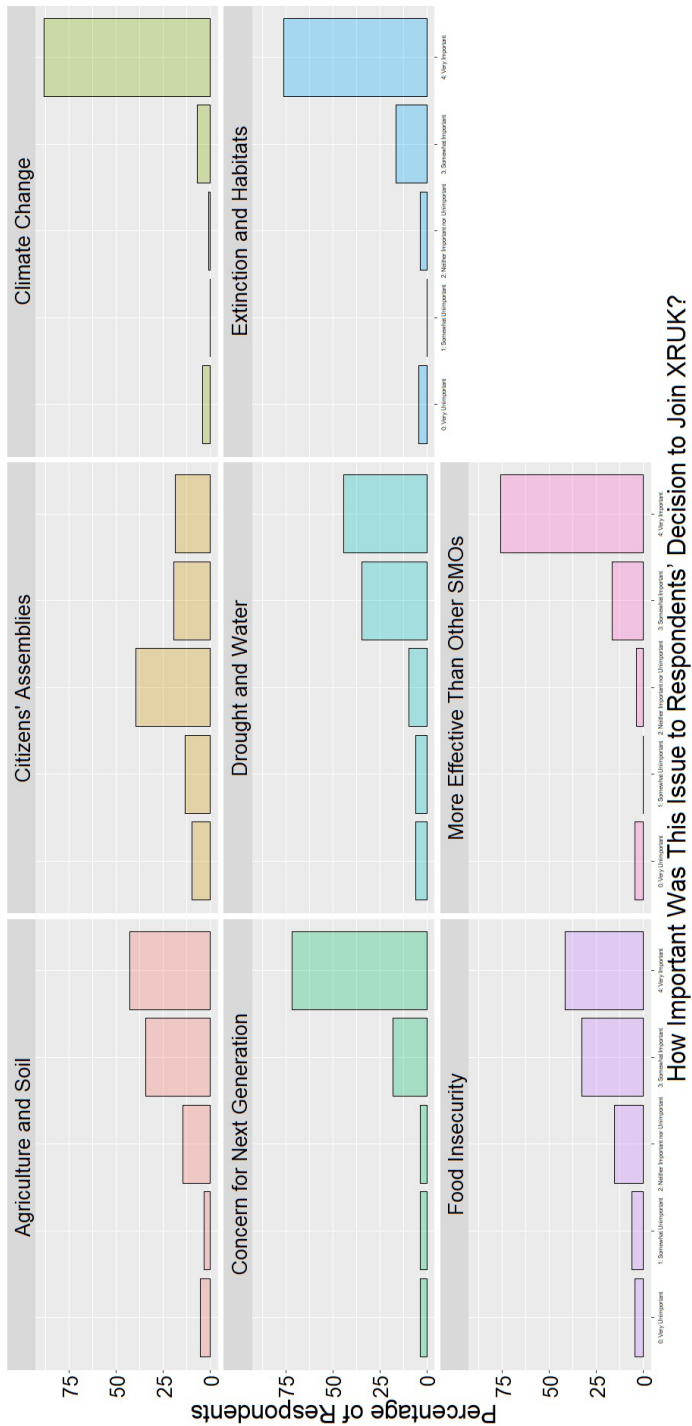
Figure 2. Citizens' Assemblies Were Not an Important Reason Why People Joined XRUK

These comments imply that XRUK had a new way of achieving a long-held goal rather than a new goal. Figure 2 and the associated qualitative comments show that citizens' assemblies did not appear to be the most important issue motivating activists to join. Instead, "classic" environmental goals were more prominent.

H2 and *H3* examine what we argue is the most novel part of XRUK: their strategy for creating social change not through electoral pressure, but through disruption to the everyday operation of the state—limited only by avoiding direct confrontation with the police. First, we expected that XRUK activists would see outsider tactics as preferable to insider tactics, and second, we expected that this preference would be particularly strong when tactics are evaluated for their instrumental utility. Our survey asked respondents to evaluate ten common social movement tactics: five insider tactics and five outsider tactics (Dalton et al. 2003; De Moor et al. 2020; Saunders et al. 2020). The question asked respondents to give each of these tactics a rating from 0 to 4, first for the effectiveness of that tactic at influencing policy and second for the effectiveness of that tactic at expressing activists' views. Figure 3 shows the means of these evaluations. Outsider tactics were generally ranked higher overall, both in terms of expressive and in terms of instrumental utility. But it is also noticeable that three of the five insider tactics were statistically significantly rated as worse on instrumental effectiveness than expressive effectiveness at the 95 percent level, but this was only true of two of the five outsider tactics, and the substantive difference was much smaller.

These takeaways from Figure 3 are reinforced when we dig into this data more deeply. For each of the 103 respondents who filled out this entire battery of questions, the average expressive and instrumental utility for outsider tactics was 3.17 (95% confidence interval 3.02–3.32) and 2.92 (2.79–3.05), respectively. For insider tactics, the average evaluations were 2.83 (2.66–2.99) and 2.36 (2.20–2.51), respectively. So in both cases, the outsider tactics were rated statistically significantly higher than the insider tactics. This demonstrates strong support for *H2*. However, we find only weak and not statistically significant support for *H3*. The average difference between outsider and insider tactics in terms of instrumental utility is 0.57 (0.40–0.73), but in terms of expressive utility it is only slightly lower 0.35 (0.18–0.51). This suggests that outsider tactics are valued more than insider tactics and that instrumental utility may be part of the reason why, but our small sample size leaves us unable to draw firm conclusions. However, our argument is backed up by the open-ended comments that respondents left at the end of
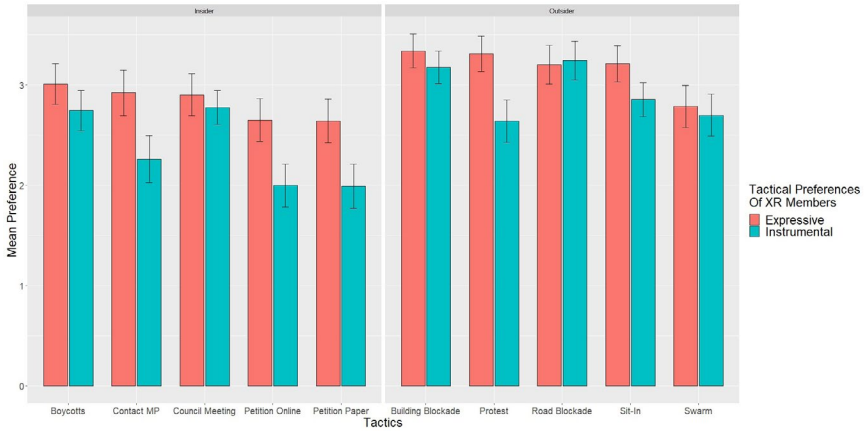
Figure 3. The Expressive and Instrumental
Utility of Insider and Outsider Tactics

this battery of questions. One respondent summarized XRUK's tactical repertoire as "Nonviolent civil disobedience where we risk our liberty but keep the public on board" (Participant 3), and others voiced similar perspectives:

> We have to disrupt government or business in a considerable amount of time or impact to be effective, if we're able to be ignored then we won't make a difference. (Participant 4)

> People get very hot under the collar about XRUK's direct action. My view is that it is necessary—nothing else has worked. People need to become inconvenienced. (Participant 5)

These comments, and many others in a similar vein, illustrate that XRUK activists pursue a disruptive strategy not for expressive reasons—they are not simply "troublemakers" or "extremists" looking to make headlines; rather, they are careful activists looking for the best way to achieve their goals.

We now turn to *H4*, which tests another argument, namely that activists will endorse disruption over persuasion—with the caveat that disruption is limited by direct opposition to the police. Our survey includes three questions relevant to this hypothesis. First, we asked respondents about their approach to the strategy of disruptive civil disobedience. Second, we asked respondents about their view of getting arrested. Third, we asked them about their general attitudes to protest

policing. The clearest test of *H4* is the first of these three questions. We asked respondents to rate, on a scale from zero to ten, their level of agreement with the following statement: "Nonviolent direct action has an essential role to play in addressing environmental challenges, even though defenders of the status quo might discredit it." Out of 114 respondents who answered this question, 68 of them gave the full ten-out-of-ten agreement with this statement, and the mean response was 9.13. As predicted by *H4*, disruptive tactics have clear support within XRUK. Similarly, we asked activists for their views on getting arrested at protests, and out of 114 respondents, 98 percent supported it and only two said: "It is something no activist should do." But crucially, this support is limited. The strategy behind getting arrested is to be disruptive but not aggressive or confrontational. This notion came across in two follow-up questions about protest policing more generally. Respondents were asked to rate, on a seven-point Likert-style scale, whether they agreed that police usually act fairly at XRUK events and whether police are usually helpful to activists at XRUK events. Figure 4 shows the responses to these questions, revealing generally high levels of support for the way police behave at protests.

Our results provide clear support for *H4*. XRUK activists do not, as a rule, see the police as their enemies. In order to avoid symbolic costs and maintain "moral legitimacy," they do not take an aggressive approach with the police. The rebellion aspect of XRUK is not about rebelling against the police, it is about imposing internal costs on the system in the same way the system imposes external costs on the environment
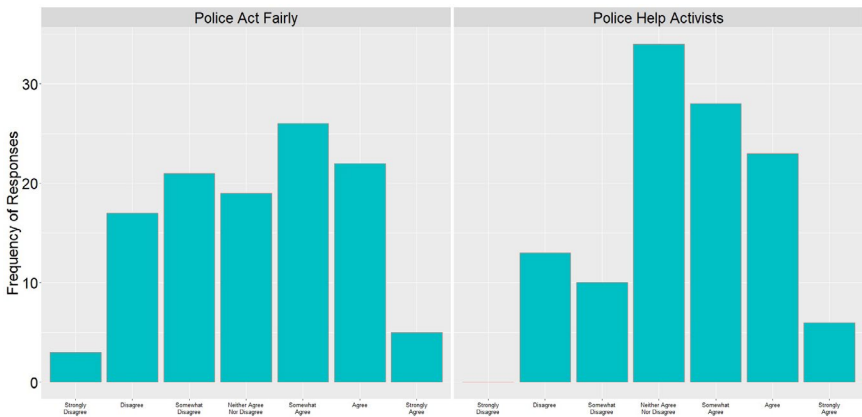

Figure 4. XRUK Attitudes toward Policing

(De Moor et al. 2020; Lee 2021; Matthews 2020; Read and Alexander 2020; Saunders et al. 2020). By getting in the way of the status quo, they can reveal the otherwise invisible and external costs that the status quo inflicts on the climate. These findings help show that what makes XRUK different is not their attention-grabbing tactics, but the strategy behind them.

Finally, we do not find support for *H5*. In exploring the open-ended responses about what XRUK's unique contribution to activism during the pandemic could be, there was little enthusiasm for continued disruption. This ran contrary to our expectations. Instead, respondents focused on four possible contributions XRUK could make: the regenerative culture of XRUK and community support (Westwell and Bunting 2020), the opportunity to implement large-scale changes, the need to communicate a message of fragility, and, finally, the chance to step back from an overly disruptive XRUK strategy. We include representative examples of these four types of comments below, each from a different respondent. First, we saw a desire to build community:

> Locally, I am aware of XRUK activists taking a leading role in setting up support networks. Our protest actions have trained us to support each other, act decisively and keep our cool in chaotic circumstances. We are also used to acknowledging that we, as a society, are in a crisis and are vulnerable. This has built our resilience in this new pandemic crisis. (Participant 6)

Second, several respondents compared climate change to the pandemic, and argued that if society could make large-scale changes to deal with the pandemic, it might encourage people to see that it would also be possible to make large-scale changes to mitigate climate change:

> To point out the climate change is a far greater potential disaster than COVID-19, and that if the world can come together to act on COVID-19 it could do even better to tackle the climate. (Participant 7)

Third, many respondents developed the theme of fragility. The pandemic was seen as a signal that nothing should be taken for granted: radical changes in both positive and negative directions were possible:

> Make people aware that our society is fragile and that when political will exists—supported by public understanding—we can all make amazing changes together. No going back to 'business-as-usual'; that's what's got us into this mess. (Participant 8)

Finally, there was little support for continued disruption:

> I feel like we need to be ready to hit the ground running when the COVID crisis is over, if it is over, with clever ways to pressure for No Going Back—but I have no idea how! But I think we shouldn't waste energy now in trying to do ineffective or unsettling things during lockdown for the sake of it. (Participant 9)

This final comment, which was echoed by multiple other respondents, represents a significant challenge for XRUK. Some prominent activists were dissatisfied with the disruptive strategy XRUK had been pursuing (Matthews 2020; Read and Alexander 2020), arguing that it is a strategy designed for authoritarian contexts (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011) and that small groups cannot generate the same disruptive momentum in a democracy (Matthews 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these concerns. Indeed, many respondents focused on the need for community rebuilding rather than disruption during the pandemic. This sentiment potentially helps shed light on XRUK's eventual abandonment of their disruptive strategy in December 2022. Publishing an open letter entitled "WE QUIT" on their website, they declared that they would move towards more community-building activities, rather than disruptive activism. Although this was framed as a period of experimentation, with the possible resumption of disruption in the future, it may also signal that the organization is moving toward the more common strategies used by other SMOs—that is, putting pressure on politicians through electoral threat (Farrer 2017; Gause 2020) rather than logistical disruption.

Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that what makes XRUK new is not their goals or their tactics, both of which are shared by many other environmental SMOs. Instead, what sets them apart is their strategy—the path they map between tactics and goals. We demonstrated this in a number of ways. First, we reviewed secondary sources. We found evidence that XRUK's strategy is not to emphasize the electoral relevance of their issue but rather to disrupt everyday life and demand change as a result. Second, we surveyed activists. Our survey respondents had a clear preference for outsider tactics, and there was some suggestive evidence that the strategic value of these tactics was the reason why. Furthermore, XRUK activists endorsed direct action even when unpopular and even

when it involves arrest. This clearly demonstrated that they were on board with disruptive tactics. However, we also found evidence that activists wanted a relatively cooperative relationship with police, and that they did not place a high priority on the deeper critique of democracy that lies behind the XRUK call for citizens' assemblies. This indicates that the activists recognized and endorsed the novelty of XRUK's strategy but that there were also limits on the extent to which they were willing to challenge the system.

Finally, our survey illustrates that activists, while attracted to much of what makes XRUK new, were also uncertain about whether it was on the right path for the future. Since their strategy was new, it was also likely to be more fluid, especially in the wake of challenges to their approach. Disruptive strategies can be challenging to maintain in the face of a public backlash (Ahmed 2019; Ellefsen 2018; Farrer and Klein 2017; Gause 2020; Gillion 2013; Koopmans and Olzak 2004; Wasow 2020). They can also be challenging in a different way for activists, who can feel burned out or alienated by a no-holds-barred approach (Bell and Bevan 2021; Westwell and Bunting 2020). These twin challenges are not merely hypothetical—they have been the ruin of many SMOs in the past (Beckwith 2015; Bell and Bevan 2021; Fotaki and Foroughi 2021; Lee 2021; Matthews 2020; McAdam 1983; Read and Alexander 2021; Snow et al. 2018; Westwell and Bunting 2020). Therefore, despite XRUK's meteoric rise, their strategic future is still up for debate.

This is especially true given the shifts in context created by Brexit, the re-election of a Conservative government in 2019, and the COVID-19 pandemic with its associated lockdowns. We have provided initial evidence that XRUK's strategy is essential to what makes it new, but further research may be able to ascertain in more detail how this fluctuating context has affected XRUK, as well as the pros and cons of different strategies. Our argument implies that the strategy of XRUK is likely to be more fluid than their goals or tactics, and this problem will likely be difficult for the organization to resolve. Their recent shift away from disruption in December 2022 is unlikely to be the final chapter.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. Although the simple goal of maintaining the organization is also important (Knoke 1990).
2. Qualitative analysis of XRUK actions has paid new attention to elements of performance, of self-care, and intergenerational cooperation, as well as other differences from prior activism (Saunders et al. 2020; Westwell and Bunting 2020). Further research may be able to investigate these elements in more detail.
3. Some environmental organizations had moved away from electoral politics toward international efforts (Doherty and Hayes 2014) or green consumerism and other forms of DIY politics (De Moor et al. 2020; Stolle and Micheletti 2013).
4. See https://www.getresponse.com/resources/reports/email-marketing -benchmarks (accessed 15 June 2023).
5. The actual text of the survey is shared as an online appendix. The survey was approved by Knox College IRB, and informed consent was obtained through the form included in the appendix.

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