Environmental Groups in Australia

Bruce Tranter
University of Tasmania

Contact
Dr Bruce Tranter
School of Sociology
Private Bag 17
University of Tasmania
Hobart, Tasmania,
Australia, 7001.

Email:
Bruce.Tranter@utas.edu.au
Phone: 03 6226 2362
Fax: 03 6226 2279

Keywords: environment, social movement, Australia, postmaterial, green, brown

Environmental Groups in Australia

Introduction

With the prolonged drought and climate change two of the most important environmental issues in Australia (Phillips et al. 2008), the 'environment' is again centre stage as a political issue. Media coverage of climate change issues has been heightened by evidence of human induced global warming. Yet it remains unclear how public concern translates into action over such issues. Evidence from the Australian Election Studies suggests environmental group membership has increased in recent years, yet drawing upon international data, Ivanova and Tranter (2008) found willingness to pay higher taxes or prices for environmental protection decreased in many countries between 1993 and 2000. In this context it is timely to consider how willing Australians are to act upon, rather than merely exhibiting concern over environmental issues.

In this research I consider support for protest and non-protest oriented environmental movement organisations (EMOs) in Australia, the characteristics of their members and the type of issues they prioritise. If environmental organisations have become increasingly institutionalised and environmental issues are ensconced in mainstream political culture (Rootes 2004; Pakulski et al. 1998), have the social and political background of activists changed? If Australians are generally more 'green' as gauged by concern over environmental issues, increased recycling practices and reducing water usage, do environmental groups champion more radical issues, and if so, is this reflected in the social and political background of members? New data from the 2007 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) are presented here. Diverging from

previous survey based studies I distinguish different types of environmental groups and different levels of engagement.

Social Movement Organisations

Environmental movement organizations (EMOs) play a prominent role in the environment movement, with their leaders, along with green politicians comprising the public face of the movement. *Conservation* groups whose members are 'concerned with wildlife and other preservation issues' but do not challenge 'the dominant social paradigm', are distinguished from *ecologist* groups who tend to 'focus on the environmental issues of advanced industrial societies' and 'may call for basic changes in societal and political relations to address these problems' (Dalton et al. 2003:758). Ecologist groups are more likely than conservation groups to engage in protest activities (Dalton et al. 2003: 758), with tactics varying "from spectacular forms of direct action, as in the case of Greenpeace" to "expert and patient lobbying, the preferred tactics of Friends of the Earth" (Dobson 1990:3). According to McAllister and Studlar (1999: 790) 'committed members are motivated by a strong sense of the urgency of green environmental concerns, an urgency which is largely absent among ordinary members and the rest of the population'.

Perhaps the most prominent protest based EMO in Australia is The Wilderness Society (TWS), with a large membership base estimated at approximately 50,000 in 2007.[1] With a small group of professional campaigners TWS has used a variety of tactics since the Franklin River campaign in the early 1980s, employing protest, conventional and increasingly innovative means for achieving its goals. 'Conservation' organisations such as Landcare, Bushcare and Coastcare have tended to adopt a lower profile

approach. Such groups do not engage in protest actions but attract large numbers of volunteers who participate in activities such as replanting native vegetation following deforestation, or attempt to halt the erosion of coastlines. Some environmental leaders in Tasmania also claimed that funding under the Howard government flowed much more freely toward non-protest, than protest based organizations (Tranter forthcoming).

Social Background of Environmental Activists

Variations in the level of concern over environmental issues has been explained in terms of value priorities, age, gender, education, place, and social class (e.g. Inglehart 1990; McAllister and Studlar 1999, Tranter 1996). Inglehart (1990) argues that citizens of advanced industrialised countries, particularly those born after the Second World War are more likely to hold postmaterial values, to prioritise free speech and seek greater say in political decision making. Alternatively, materialists are more concerned about economic and security issues. Values are claimed to be generationally based, with those born after WWII more postmaterialist than their predecessors. Postmaterialists are more likely than materialists to emphasise environmental protection, so those who grew up during the relative affluence and safety of the post war period are more likely to hold postmaterialist values and be more concerned about the environment than older generations.

In a meta-analytic review Zelezny et al. (2000: 444-45) found 'women reported significantly more general environmental concern than men' and 'greater participation in proenvironmental behaviour/activism'. Tranter (1997) found tertiary education, particularly in the social sciences and humanities were most likely to be environmental activists and participants in protest actions. Social and cultural professionals, and those

educated in the social sciences and humanities are pro environmental in their attitudes and behaviour both in Australian and elsewhere (Tranter 1997; Brint 1984). The background of participants is expected to differ according to the repertoire of the group and whether members are active or passive. Protest groups are expected to be supported by younger, more postmaterialist participants than non protest groups, with active members also expected to be younger and more postmaterialist than passive members.

Research Aims

The social and political bases of Australian different environmental groups are examined here. The data includes responses to new questions from the 2007 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) designed by the author to delineate 1) members of protest based environmental groups from non-protest groups; 2) members active in groups from passive members as well as a standard question distinguishing 3) participants in environmental demonstrations from non-demonstrators. Secondly, I examine how different environmental groups prioritise environmental issues. For example, how does support vary for Green as opposed to Brown issues (Pakulski et al. 1998)?

Data and Method

Data from the Australian Election Study (AES) (1990 to 2007) are presented to estimate the proportions of environmental group membership in the population of Australian adults and enable comparisons over time. However, the main source of data is the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) collected in 2007. The AuSSA is a systematic sample drawn from the 2007 federal electoral roll. It has 2583 cases with a response rate of 39% (Phillips *et al.* 2008).

The author designed questions for inclusion in the AuSSA to measure environmental group membership more precisely than it has been previously in Australia. The questions distinguish firstly, between members of environmental groups who played active roles in environmental groups from those who merely subscribed or made donations but did not participate as members. Secondly, an attempt was made to distinguish members of protest and non-protest groups, to examine further the contention that members of non-protest environmental group members are more conservative than protest group members, and that they differed according to other socio-demographic characteristics.[2]

Analyses

Levels of environmental group membership have been increasing steadily, from 2.9% in 1990 to 7.2% in 2007 (Table 1). Unfortunately, the AES question does not distinguish between types of groups or different forms of engagement, but the 2007 AuSSA data suggests there are considerable differences in the average age of environmental activists in protest compared to non-protest groups.

[Table 1 about here]

The full AuSSA sample ranges in age from 17 to 98, with a mean of 50.87 and a median of 51. The median age of active members is 56 compared to non-active members with 46, suggesting environmental activists are ageing. However, these initial figures may be misleading, because they do not take into account the *type* of group people belong to. Comparing the median age of protest group members (42) with non-protest group

members (56) is informative, as it suggests that while active members are older, members of the more radical groups tend to be much younger, even if they are not active participants. Participants in environmental demonstrations are also younger (43.5) than non-participants (51).

In order to examine this association further, active and passive members were split according to group type (i.e. protest and non-protest). While the frequency for active protest members is very small (n = 11) and the estimate for this category may be unreliable, active protest members (Median 51) are much older than non-active protest members (41.5), with non-active, non-protest members (55) and active non-protest members (56) older still. Younger people are more likely to participate in environmental protests and to join groups that engage in protest actions, but are less likely to be *active* in such groups. Similar age effects are apparent in the multivariate models even after controlling for the influence of other independent variables (Table 2).

The regression results indicate[3] tertiary education distinguishes active and non-members and active and passive members, although has only weak effects for the remaining dependent variables. Secular and middle class identifiers are more likely to be passive members than non-members. The consistent predictors across three of the four measures of environmental activism are left-right ideology and value orientations. The left are more likely than the right to be passive members, members of protest groups and to participate in environmental demonstrations. Postmaterialists are more likely than materialists to be active rather than non-members, passive rather than non-members and demonstrators rather than non-demonstrators. While the small samples for the analyses of protest versus non-protest members (n 163) and active versus passive

members (177) suggests cautious interpretation is required, all other analyses are based on large samples so the findings are likely to hold among the population of Australian adults.

[Table 2 about here]

In the final column of Table 2, I contrast passive members of environmental groups with active members as a predictor of protest group membership. Passive members are four times (OR 4.15) more likely than active members to belong to protest based environmental groups rather than non-protest groups. This may be partly due to the question design, as Greenpeace was one of the examples of a protest group stated in the question and Greenpeace consists mostly of 'members' who donate money to fund professional activists but do not themselves participate in protests. However, it could also indicate that the most active members of environmental groups do not belong to protest groups that tend to prioritise Green rather than Brown environmental issues. This hypothesis is examined in Table 3.

Factor analysis of environmental issues questions (not shown) indicated that pollution, climate change and waste disposal issues loaded on a distinct factor (i.e. 'Brown') while logging of forests, wildlife destruction; soil degradation and loss of biodiversity loaded on a 'Green' dimension. These findings are important in themselves. They reflect the routinisation of climate change as a mainstream issue, as in previous research based on 2001AES data, Pakulski and Tranter (2004) found the 'greenhouse effect' to be a Green issue (i.e. loaded on a 'green' dimension).[4]

Support for the Green and Brown environmental issues scales (scored 0 = low concern; 100 = high) are modelled using the same independent variables in Table 3 with OLS regression, although on this occasion, variables representing active and passive members of environmental groups are also added. The results suggest that controlling for social background, passive and active members score 5-6 points higher than non-members on the Brown issues scale. Passive members score 9 points higher than non-members on the Green scale, yet the estimate for active members is only of borderline statistical significance ($p = .058$).

The analyses indicate that non-protest groups such as Landcare are more likely than protest groups such as TWS to contain active members. However, active members tend to be less concerned than passive members about Green issues such as forest depletion, loss of biodiversity and climate change.

[Table 3 about here]

Conclusion

Twenty five years ago a ruling by the High Court of Australia prevented the damming of the Franklin River, a major victory for environmental protestors. In the decades since, the institutionalisation and routinisation of EMOs has seen a reduction in protest actions and an increase in conventional lobbying tactics (Rootes 2004; Pakulski et al. 1998). The leaders of EMO moved away from protest actions because the mass media were no longer interested (Hutchins and Lester 2006; Jensen-Lee 2001) and because environmental protests have been curtailed by legislation, such as the imposition of

heavy penalties on anti-logging protestors in Tasmania (Brown 2004). These and other factors, such as the formlessness of contemporary issues like climate change may have also impacted upon the social composition of environmental groups.

Perhaps due to the relatively pedestrian issues and increasingly conventional tactics employed by contemporary EMO, active participation in protest based groups is less attractive for younger people than it once was. In 2007, participants in environmental demonstrations are leftwing and postmaterialist, but not younger than average. Those who *join* protest oriented environmental groups (i.e. donate or subscribe) are likely to be leftwing and younger, however, the people most likely to be *active* in environmental groups tend to be *older* than average and tertiary educated – their political orientation and value priorities are relatively unimportant predictors of being active. Young people 'join' environmental groups but the survey results suggest they are more reluctant than their elders to actually participate.

Is 'the environment' then - or at least environmental activism - still the domain of the young? The unsatisfying answer is yes and no. The environmental movement is no longer a 'new' social movement, and while young people are perhaps more environmentally aware than ever before, they may associate involvement in environmental groups with the behaviour of their protest oriented parents and grandparents. The 'new' forms of direct action from the protest era of the 1970s, 1980s and even early 1990s have waned, increasingly replaced by the conventional lobbying of government and business. As the movement has changed, so too has the medium chosen to promote issues and mobilise members. Contrived media events (e.g. 'ferals' protesting in forests) are now avoided by EMOs, as they alienate the environmentally

concerned but non-radical mainstream.[5] Direct actions have given way to the conservatively dressed environmental spokesperson, often resembling the ubiquitous 'suits' of politicians and business people. Mobilisation has always occurred through networks in the environmental movement but the expansion of the internet has seen the rise of cyber activism. Cyber campaigns are now as familiar to younger activists as the direct actions and physical confrontations were to earlier generations of environmentalists. Smaller scale, particularly NIMBY groups still resort to protest actions (Rootes 2004), but at least for EMOs, the time of the mass protest appears to have largely passed.

References

Brint, S. (1984) ' "New-Class" and Cumulative Trend Explanations of the Liberal Political Attitudes of Professionals' *American Journal of Sociology* 90(1): 30-71.

Brown, B. (2004) *memo for a saner world,* Camberwell, Victoria: Penguin.

Dalton, R., S. Recchia and R. Rohrschneider (2003) 'The Environmental Movement and the Modes of Political Action' *Comparative Political Studies* 36(7): 743-771.

Dobson, A. (1990) *Green Political Thought: an Introduction,* London: Harper.

Hutchins, B. and L. Lester (2006) Environmental Protest and Tap-Dancing with the Media in the Information Age' *Media, Culture and Society,* 28: 433-451.

Inglehart, R. (1990) 'Values, ideology and Cognitive Mobilisation in New Social Movements' in R. Dalton and M. Kuechler (eds.) *Challenging the Political Order* Cambridge, Polity Press: 43-66.

Ivanova, G. and Tranter, B. (2008) 'Paying for Environmental Protection in Cross National Perspective' *Australian Journal of Political Science,* 43(2): 169-188.

Jensen-Lee, C. (2001) 'The Future of Environmental Issues on the Mainstream Political Agenda' *Australian Journal of Social Issue*s 36(2): 139-51.

McAllister, I. and D. Studlar (1999) 'Green versus Brown: Explaining Environmental Commitment in Australia' *Social Science Quarterly* 80(4): 775-92.

Pakulski, J. and B. Tranter (2004) 'Environmentalism and Social Differentiation: a paper in memory of Steve Crook', *Journal of Sociology,*40(3) 220-59

Pakulski, J., B. Tranter and S. Crook (1998) 'Dynamics of environmental issues in Australia: concerns, clusters and carriers' *Australian Journal of Political Science,* (33) 2: 235-53

Phillips, T., D. Mitchell, B. Tranter, J. Mitchell and K. Reed (2008) *The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, 2007. [Computer file]*. Canberra: Australian Social Science Data Archive, The Australian National University, 2007.

Rootes, C (2004) 'Environmental Movements' in D. Snow, S. Soule and H. Kriesi (eds) *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements,* Oxford: Blackwell.

Tranter, B. (forthcoming) 'Leadership and Change in the Tasmanian Environmental Movement', *The Leadership Quarterly*.

Tranter, B. (1997), 'Environmentalism and Education in Australia' *Environmental Politics* Summer 6 (2): 123-143.

Tranter, B. (1996), 'The Social Bases of Environmentalism in Australia' *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*, August 32(2): 61-84.

Zelezny, L., Poh-Pheng, C., and C. Aldrich (2000) ‘New Ways of Thinking about Environmentalism: Elaborating on Gender Differences in Environmentalism’ *Journal of Social Issues* 56 (3): 443–457.

Table 1: Environmental Group Membership (%)

AES	1990	1993	1996	2001	2004	2007
Member	2.9	4.5	2.4	5.4	6.5	7.2
Considered Joining	21.5	18.9	12.2	20.8	19.1	22.6
Not Considered Joining	59.8	50.9	48.3	46.9	45.8	48.0
Would Never Join	15.7	25.6	37.1	26.9	28.6	22.2
N	(1995)	(2366)	(1763)	(1966)	(1769)	(1855)

AuSSA	2007
Active Members	2.6
Non-active members	5.4
Non-member	92.0
N	(2510)
Is the group a…	
Protest oriented group	2.8
Non-protest group	4.3
Total	*7.1*
N	(183)

Sources: Australian Election Studies (1990-2007); Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2007

Table 2: Social bases of Environmental Group Members and Demonstrators (odds ratios)

	Demonstrators vs Non-Demonstrators	Active vs Non-Members	Passive vs Non-Members	Active vs Passive	Protest vs Non-Protest Members	Protest vs Non-Protest Members
Men	0.87	1.14	0.81	1.40	1.21	1.19
Age (years)	0.991	1.024*	0.998	1.024*	0.972*	0.980
Degree	0.93	3.04**	1.19	2.34*	1.12	1.39
No Religious Denomination	1.35	1.28	2.06*	0.60	1.88	1.89
Middle Class	1.46	1.40	1.54*	1.03	0.63	0.61
Left-Right (scale)	0.793**	0.874	0.884*	0.977	0.782**	0.781*
Postmaterial (scale)	2.423**	1.915**	1.562**	1.197	1.117	1.227
Non-Active Member	-	-	-	-	-	4.15***
Nagelkerke R^2	.12	.10	.07	.11	.25	.32
N	(2,168)	(2,057)	(2,122)	(177)	(163)	(161)

* p< .05; ** p< .01.
Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2007).

Table 3: Green and Brown Issues by Membership Types (OLS Regression)

	Green	Brown
Intercept	66.8	79.8
Men	-4.2***	-5.9***
Age (years)	0.069*	0.023
Degree	0.8	-2.5**
No Religious Denomination	1.2	0.4
Middle Class	-0.5	-1.0
Left-Right (scale)	-0.95***	-0.81***
Postmaterial (scale)	5.06***	2.29***
Active Member of Environmental Group	5.1	6.3**
Non-Active Member of Environmental Group	9.4***	5.4**
Non-Member (referent)	0	0
R^2	.09	.07
N	(2,068)	(2,115)

* p< .05; ** p< .01 *** p< .001.

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (2007).

[1] This estimate is based upon personal correspondence with a movement staffer.

[2] The questions were: A4 Are you a member of an environmental group or organisation? 1 Yes, an active member; 2 Yes, a non-active member; 3 No, not a member.
A5 Is the group you are a member of ... 1 Protest-oriented (e.g. Wilderness Society, Greenpeace, etc.); 2 Non-protest oriented (e.g. Landcare, Bushcare, etc.). A6 Have you taken part in a protest or demonstration about an environmental issue in the past five years? 1 Yes 2 No

[3] Other independent variables were examined, including urban versus rural location and states, but showed weak effects so were excluded from the final regression models.

[4] The change in question wording from 'greenhouse effect' to 'climate change' may also have influenced the results.

[5] A successful exception was the 'Weld Angel' – Allana Beltran – who perched high on a tripod in the Tasmanian Weld Valley forest protest.
http://www.news.com.au/mercury/story/0,22884,22366040-921,00.html.