

# **Policymaker interviews: Protest outcomes and success factors**

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# Policymaker interviews: Summary

## 1. Summary

Social Change Lab conducted semi-structured interviews with three UK civil servants who currently work or worked for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) and/or Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). We asked several questions about the impact of social movement organisations (SMOs) and protest on UK policymaking. The common themes that emerged (with illustrative quotes in italics) were:

- **Most SMOs have little impact, but a small number have achieved significant impacts on UK policy**, primarily across animal welfare and climate change.
  - *“Although most protests are probably low-impact, some especially high profile protests (such as Extinction Rebellion or Black Lives Matter) seem like they may have had an impact.”*
- **The impact of SMOs on policy is often indirect, as it is mediated via public opinion, news coverage, or pressure on elected MPs**. However, they also believe that some examples such as Extinction Rebellion and anti-live export protests had direct (positive) policy impacts.
  - *“The impact of protest and grassroots movements is likely to be mediated by public opinion and shifting the Overton window, rather than direct impacts on policy making.”*
- **Protests sometimes play a role as a significant public opinion signal to policymakers, but other factors often play a larger role**. These other factors might include current affairs, polling or conversations with ministers and MPs.
  - *“Grassroots movements tend to play a small role in informing public opinion overall as civil servants are generally well-read on the news and current affairs, which provide more compelling public opinion signals.”*
  - *“Larger and more frequent protests provide much more compelling public opinion signals relative to small protests.”*
- **Protests had moderately large impacts on public discourse and the salience of certain issues**, especially in the case of racial justice, climate change and live exports.
  - *“Live exports protests were quite successful in raising the salience of live export as an animal welfare issue, keeping it high on the political agenda and ultimately played a role in it ultimately being banned in the UK”*

- All interviewees thought that ministers or civil servants would rarely, if ever, attribute a certain policy to grassroots organisations or protest pressure.
  - *“Both civil servants and ministers will very likely not say a policy proposal was due to a grassroots organisation or movement influence”*
- **Civil servants most often mentioned the factors below as important factors for SMOs to influence policy, in this order:**
  - 1) **Numbers** - the size and frequency of the movement organisation and protest
  - 2) **Diversity** - Does the SMO span various sectors within society, or is it made of “the usual suspects”?
  - 3) **Disruption** - Is nonviolent disruption applied correctly or has it led to negative consequences?
  - 4) **Evidence-based** - Does the SMO make evidence-based asks and communicate well?
- Less important but also potentially relevant success factors were i) Media Coverage, ii) Lack of opposition, iii) Elite allies, iv) Working on less politicised issues and v) Nonviolence.

Whilst we believe three civil servants is a sample size too small to draw conclusive evidence from, we think it supports findings from our interviews with experts, literature reviews, and [other research](#). Full conversation summary notes can be seen in [this table](#).

## Contents

<b>1. Summary</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2. Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>3. Methodology</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>4. Results focusing on protest outcomes</b>	<b>5</b>
4.1 Overall Impact	5
4.2 Impacts on policy making or policymakers	6
4.3 Public opinion signals or impacts	7
4.4 Public Discourse	8
4.5 Causal influence of grassroots movement organisations	9
4.6 Attribution of impacts	10
<b>5. Results focusing on protest success factors</b>	<b>11</b>
5.1 Numbers	11
5.2 Diversity	12
5.3 Disruption	12
5.4 Evidence-based	13
5.5 Other	14
<b>6. Conclusion</b>	<b>14</b>

## 2. Introduction

A key question for SMOs is whether they influence policy, and how this influence might occur. To better understand the mechanisms for which grassroots organisations and protest movements could influence policy, we wanted to interview UK civil servants in departments that had faced external grassroots pressure from SMOs in the past 3-4 years, which led to us seeking out civil servants from BEIS and DEFRA. Our key research questions were:

- 1) What impact, if any, have social movement organisations or protests had on policymaker **awareness, attitudes and intended actions** around certain issues?
- 2) What impact, if any, do they have on policymakers' perceptions of public priorities?
  - a) How does this relate to other signals of public opinion e.g. polling or media coverage?
- 3) To what degree, if any, do you think we can attribute a policy change to the activities of protest movements?
- 4) Are there certain characteristics that make some movements more influential than others?
  - a) For example, how does the size, target, levels of disruption, etc. affect the impact they have?

In these interviews, we largely focused on the **outcomes** of protest movements, but still asked some questions about factors that make some SMOs and/or protests more influential than others. **This report is split into two sections, with the [first section](#) analysing the outcomes civil servants believed SMOs had achieved, or were likely to achieve. The [second section](#) analyses the factors that civil servants believe make some SMOs more successful or compelling than others.**

### 3. Methodology

We spoke to 3 UK Civil Servants who either currently work or formerly worked in the following two UK Government departments: the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) and the Department for Environmental, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). We asked six civil servants, but some didn't participate due to lack of time, or concerns about the research jeopardising their current roles. We found these civil servants through our networks and personal contacts. In the future, we would like to talk to more civil servants to have greater reliability in our results and reduce the risks of bias due to the people in our personal networks.

We conducted semi-structured interviews using [this set of questions](#) and anonymised the conversation notes for privacy reasons. **The quotes given below were lightly paraphrased, and sometimes cleaned up to improve clarity.** The civil servants we spoke to approved the anonymised conversation summary notes afterwards, which you can find [here](#). As a note, they're a synthesised version of full conversations, so some details were left out.

We used thematic analysis to analyse this interview data and coded it using [taguette](#). The tagged data can be seen here for [SMO outcomes](#) and [success factors](#). We quantified the number of claims made by the policymakers, as well as the sentiment (e.g. positive or negative), and strength of the claim. For example, if a policymaker said *"I think that Extinction Rebellion (XR) had a meaningful influence on the UK government's climate policy"* we marked this as a moderate strength positive claim under the tag of Policy. We counted the number of unique claims made by the policymakers, such as if they made two similar claims about the same group they were discounted, but if they made remarks about both Extinction Rebellion and Black Lives Matter, we interpreted this as two individual pieces of evidence. Some claims had multiple tags (for example, if it was relevant to both public opinion and policy), so they may appear in the analysis in several different sections.

We classified claims as large if we thought they had significant counterfactual impacts e.g. a policy was brought forward by several years, or it had noticeably large impacts on public discourse. If we thought that the counterfactual impact was small, e.g. a policy was brought forward by several months, it was codified as small. For outcomes in the middle of these two, they were codified as moderate.

## 4. Results focusing on protest outcomes

### 4.1 Overall Impact

**Across our interviews, we found that the consensus view from the three civil servants was that protest movements, such as Extinction Rebellion (XR) or Black Lives Matter (BLM), can have significant overall impacts, but this happens in a minority of cases.** Specifically, they thought that in the case of BLM and XR, these both had consequential impacts on UK policymaking, and the attitudes of policymakers. However, they also thought that these were the exceptions, due to their high amounts of media coverage and activist turnout, which was significantly higher than most movement organisations. We roughly categorised the number of claims into the following groupings:

Sentiment of claim	Small	Moderate	Large
Positive	3	1	0
Negative or negligible	1	0	0
Unclear	0	0	0

Select quotes:

#### **Positive but small impact, in certain cases:**

- “Although most protests are probably low-impact, some especially high profile protests (such as Extinction Rebellion or Black Lives Matter) seem like they may have had an impact.”
- “Extinction Rebellion may have brought forward commitments on net zero by a few months, and Black Lives Matter quite likely changed internal policies regarding race.”

#### **Positive and moderate impact:**

- “A small advocacy group with a limited budget can meaningfully influence hundreds of millions or even billions, if it affects Government policy”

#### **Negative and small impact:**

- “Some groups seemed a priori counter-productive e.g. Insulate Britain. Making a large amount of the public hate you doesn’t seem good, although not conclusively bad”

## 4.2 Impacts on policy making or policymakers

Whilst our participants generally thought the effects of protest movements on policy were often indirect and mediated via channels such as public opinion, they also believed XR and [anti-live export protests](#) had significant impacts on UK policymaking. Specifically, one civil servant thought that XR may have sped up the [declaration of net-zero by 2050](#) by several months, and that grassroots pressure likely caused other climate policies to be passed quicker. Another civil servant thought that the anti-live export protests played a significant role in the UK ultimately getting live exports from the UK banned. However, a common sentiment was that direct impacts on policy are rare, and often pressure is applied indirectly via other mediums such as local politicians or public opinion, explored further below.

Sentiment of claim	Small	Moderate	Large	Unclear
Positive	4	9	2	0
Negative or negligible	1	0	0	0
Unclear	0	0	0	4

### Positive but small impact:

- “During the height of XR in early-2019, civil servants in BEIS were working much harder (e.g. staying later) than normal, to get out certain climate policies such as the net-zero declaration. It’s plausible that this was due to additional external pressure from social movements such as XR or Fridays for Future.”

### Positive and moderate impact:

- “I think that Extinction Rebellion (XR) had a meaningful influence on the UK government’s climate policy but it was part of a wider recognition that the public cared deeply about climate change and it might have also caused alienation.”

### Positive and large impact:

- “These protest groups were successful ultimately, in that live exports did get banned.”

### Negative or negligible impact:



- “[Protests] probably wouldn’t change [policymaker] attitudes much largely because civil servants already have firm views or would only change their views on the basis of more standard empirical evidence.”

**Unclear:**

- “There aren’t many clear examples I can think of, as policymakers will generally not attribute policy changes or proposals due to changes in public opinion.”

### 4.3 Public opinion signals or impacts

In general, the civil servants we interviewed thought that protests *sometimes* played a role as a significant public opinion signal to policymakers but that other factors often played a larger role. For example, policymakers were more likely to form views on public opinion from reading the news, so protest was a weaker indicator of public sentiment. However, protests often lead to news coverage of an issue, which in turn might signal something about public priorities to the policymaker. Additionally, large and diverse protests with lots of media coverage are much more likely to be taken as reliable public opinion signals relative to protests with few people in attendance. This is consistent with our [other research](#) on interviews with experts and literature review on success factors, which adds some weight to this finding.

Sentiment of claim	Small	Moderate	Large	Unclear
Positive	5	4	1	0
Negative or negligible	0	0	0	0
Unclear	0	0	0	2

**Positive but small impact:**

- “Grassroots movements tend to play a small role in informing public opinion overall as civil servants are generally well-read on the news and current affairs, which provide more compelling public opinion signals.”

**Positive and moderate impact:**

- “Larger and more frequent protests provide much more compelling public opinion signals relative to small protests.”

**Positive and large impact:**

- “Live exports protests were quite successful in raising the salience of live export as an animal welfare issue, keeping it high on the political agenda and ultimately played a role in it ultimately being banned in the UK”

**Negative or negligible impact:**

- “Some groups seemed a priori counter-productive e.g. Insulate Britain. Making a large amount of the public hate you doesn’t seem good (although not conclusively bad).”

**Unclear:**

- “Disruptive protests will mean people are more annoyed but it’s unclear how this overall affects policy making (e.g. trade-off between increased salience and higher frustration at specific organisation/protest)”

### 4.4 Public Discourse

**Civil servants we interviewed largely believed that protests had moderately large impacts on public discourse and the salience of certain issues.** Specific examples that were mentioned where they believe that protests had a significant impact on issue salience were badger culling, racism, live exports and climate change. It was also reported that protests helped to shift the [Overton Window](#) (the range of policies acceptable to the general public) of some issues, meaning that issues are framed in different ways due to the protest. An example is XR shifting the Overton Window on climate, by introducing new narratives such as “[climate emergency](#)” and [net-zero by 2025](#) into public discourse.

Sentiment of claim	Small	Moderate	Large
Positive	1	5	2
Negative or negligible	0	0	0
Unclear	0	0	0

**Positive but small impact:**

- “It seems more likely that protests would have impact through upstream effects such as influencing public opinion, shifting the Overton window and minds of decision makers, which would then filter into policy.”

**Positive and moderate impact:**

- “Racial inclusion generally seems higher up the agenda in the Civil Service and other institutions due to the protests in 2020.”
- “Protestors kept it high on the political agenda for years (it started in the 80s and it got banned in June 2021 after the UK left the EU)”

**Positive and large impact:**

- “Live exports protests were quite successful in raising the salience of live export as an animal welfare issue, keeping it high on the political agenda and ultimately played a role in it ultimately being banned in the UK”

## 4.5 Causal influence of grassroots movement organisations

**Our interviewees often mentioned that the impact of social movement organisations was likely to be indirect, rather than directly influencing policy. For example, they thought it was much more likely that policy would be influenced through the media coverage of protests, shifting public opinion, signalling changes in public opinion, local activists applying pressure to MPs and shifting attitudes of policymakers.** They also thought that public opinion does play an important role in policymaking, so one plausible causal explanation is that protests affect public opinion, and public opinion affects policy.

Pathway	Frequency of claim
indirect effect	7
direct effect	2

**Indirect effect:**

- “Grassroots movements and protest probably influence individual policymakers via media coverage but not in a formalised way e.g. stakeholder engagement.”
- “The impact of protest and grassroots movements is likely to be mediated by public opinion and shifting the Overton window, rather than direct impacts on policy making.”

**Direct effect:**

- “Net zero is the big one - XR probably (although not definitely) influenced that.”

## 4.6 Attribution of impacts

**A common theme that emerged from our interviews was that ministers or civil servants would rarely, if ever, attribute a certain policy to grassroots organisations or protest pressure.** The key reasons given for this was that civil servants need to appear impartial and make policy decisions based on empirical evidence, and that it might lead to other groups using similar tactics to pressure policymakers.

Claim	Frequency
Attribution is unlikely	3

### Attribution is hard to prove

- “Both civil servants and ministers will very likely not say a policy proposal was due to a grassroots organisation or movement influence”
- “Any influence on policymaker options/decisions would be unlikely to be made explicit, as it could be (seen as) actively going against good practice for policymakers or even the civil service code”

## 5. Results focusing on protest success factors

For the factors below, numbers, diversity, disruption and being evidence-based, these were mentioned by all three civil servants, bar “evidence-based” which was only mentioned by two. There are other factors that were only mentioned by one civil servant in the “Other” section below. **Civil servants most often mentioned the factors below as important factors for SMOs to influence policy, in this order:**

- 1) **Numbers** - the size and frequency of the movement organisation and protest
- 2) **Diversity** - Does the SMO span various sectors within society, or is it made of “the usual suspects”?
- 3) **Disruption** - Is nonviolent disruption applied correctly, or has it led to negative consequences?
- 4) **Evidence-based** - Does the SMO make evidence-based asks and communicate well?

Less important but also potentially relevant factors were i) Media Coverage, ii) Lack of opposition, iii) Elite allies, iv) Working on less politicised issues, v) Nonviolence.

Crudely, we counted the number of unique claims made by policymakers in support of various success factors, which can be seen below.

Success Factor	Number of mentions
Numbers	9
Diversity	4
Disruption	3
Evidence-based	3

### 5.1 Numbers

**It was unanimous amongst civil servants we spoke to that a larger social movement or protest would be a much more compelling signal to policymakers.**

This was, by a large margin, the factor that was most mentioned in our interviews and **what our respondents believed was the most important success factor of social movement organisations in terms of influencing policy.** The main reason for this being that larger numbers would signal higher levels of public support, which policymakers should consider in their roles. Similarly, they thought that more frequent protests would also signal higher levels of public support, although this was a less important factor.

Select quotes:

- “Movements that attract large numbers (e.g. thousands or tens of thousands) are much more likely to be acknowledged as public opinion signals relative to small protests.”
- “Larger and more frequent protests provide much more compelling public opinion signals relative to small protests.”
- “Bigger movements generally seem to be more persuasive and compelling”

## 5.2 Diversity

**Diversity of the SMO was the second most important factor in terms of SMOs being able to influence policy**, with all three civil servants mentioning this factor. Specifically, if the SMO is seen to be mobilising from across broad sectors of society, this would provide a more compelling public opinion signal relative to relatively homogenous groups. In addition, if the protest attracted “unusual suspects” who are often not seen at protests, this would make that SMO or protest event even more compelling than normal.

Select quotes:

- “There was quite a bit of excitement about those protests, and with the school strike specifically it felt less political given it was children rather than trained political activists.”
- “Diverse groups or movements are also a positive yet weak signal for public opinion, showing the issue is supported by a broader range of people rather than the usual suspects.”
- “Otherwise, grassroots groups need to give sentiment that lots of people agree, or it has a very diverse backing to be compelling.”

## 5.3 Disruption

**Nonviolent disruptive action received mixed views** from civil servants, with some arguments being given for and against this particular strategy. There was reasonable consensus that it's context dependent - and that there have been cases where it has worked well as well as cases when it has been counterproductive to the cause.

Select quotes:

- “Non-violent direct action seems to attract the most attention. This can go both ways - it can cause a lot of inconvenience and shut things down and make people annoyed, or it can make people pay attention to whatever issue is being protested about.”
- “Disruptive protests will mean people are more annoyed but it’s unclear how this overall affects policy making (e.g. trade-off between increased salience and higher frustration at specific organisation/protest)”
- “The Canning Town example is the big example of when a protest went wrong, and Insulate Britain might be another one.”

## 5.4 Evidence-based

Somewhat unsurprisingly, **civil servants thought SMOs were more compelling if they provided evidence-backed asks**. In addition, they noted that SMOs that avoid hyperbole or otherwise false claims were more likely to be listened to by policymakers.

Select quotes:

- “Otherwise, movements who generally seem reasonable, use evidence and communicate well are more likely to be listened to than those who don’t.”
- “Don’t make hyperbolic or unsubstantiated claims e.g. overplaying the extinction risks from climate change as XR sometimes has.”

## 5.5 Other

In this section, we list success factors that were only mentioned by a single civil servant, or they otherwise had fairly weak views on.

### Nonviolence

Whilst nonviolence vs violence wasn’t explicitly discussed, it seemed fairly obvious that the civil servants thought nonviolence was a better strategy relative to violence

- “Non-violent disruptive protest is likely to get the most attention, but whether the attention is positive or negative is contingent on the circumstances.”

### Media Coverage

- “However, big or visible news in the media about social movements or protests could possibly inform policymaker perceptions of public priorities.”

### Lack of opposition

- “Having a small vocal group can be useful if there isn’t much opposition”
- “A caveat is that if you become big enough to also get a vocal opposition, this might be bad”

### Elite allies

- “Have good connections e.g. know a minister personally”
- “Have a good relationship with your local MP(s) who can then advocate to ministers on your behalf”

### Less politicised issues

- “Protests related to issues that are already highly politicised (e.g. Brexit) are less likely to have any impact on policy, as civil servants and ministers already have opinions and clear ideas about the issue.”
- “There is however some clear variation here e.g. defence and security policy is less likely to be influenced by protest.”

## 6. Conclusion

Based on this research, we believe that social movement organisations, particularly ones using protest as a primary tactic, can be influential in achieving a range of positive outcomes. **Namely, civil servants believed that in some cases, SMOs had significant impacts on UK policy or policymakers, across climate change, animal welfare, and racial equality.** However, we also found that we think these significant impacts are limited to a small number of cases, and most SMOs don’t achieve large impacts.

**Additionally, we found that civil servants believe that the size, diversity, evidence-based communication style and disruptive tactics of SMOs are positive predictors of success.** There were some mixed views around disruption, with examples where the respondents believed it had clear negative consequences, but also examples where it has achieved its aims. There were also other factors mentioned that might influence success to a lesser degree, namely i) Media Coverage, ii) Lack of opposition, iii) Elite allies, iv) Working on less politicised issues, and v) Nonviolence.



Whilst we believe this is not conclusive evidence on its own, particularly due to a small sample size of three policymakers, we believe it might be useful in conjunction with other [research](#). This is particularly true if the findings of this research align well with other results, which we believe it does. The sample size was limited to this small group due to the difficulty in recruiting policymakers to take part in these interviews, due to concerns around their participation leading to negative consequences within their role. Despite this, one factor that might make these interview findings more reliable is that we recruited these policymakers not via our networks in social movements, but via other communities we are involved in. This means we should have no a priori reason to think that the policymakers we spoke to are biased towards protests or SMOs.