

EXPLAINING CONTENTIOUS ENERGY POLICY

Coxian Structural Forces, Environmental Issues, and the Keystone XL Pipeline

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Abstract: The Keystone XL (KXL) pipeline is one of the most polarised examples of contemporary American energy politics. The pipeline policy process has not been stable, so it should be analysed over time via a holistic, historical view of interacting dimensions. Robert Cox's theoretical notions of the "materials–ideas–institutions" balance are drawn upon to understand how actors' motivations behind policy development were re-shaped through temporal processes over nearly two decades. A critical feature identified is how such interacting dimensions became significant according to specific US presidential administrations: each, in turn, shifting the direction of decision-making around KXL. The article's originality lies in operationalising the theory to give an alternative, dynamic explanation for policy motivations around the KXL while also establishing a novel theoretical lens to generally view such policy development.

Key words: energy policy; policy motivations; Keystone XL; Coxian theory; global politics

Introduction

In 2008, the TransCanada Corporation decided to extend its proposed KXL oil pipeline route from Alberta in western Canada to refineries in Illinois and Texas and oil tank farms and a pipeline distribution centre in Oklahoma. This decision has since proved politically controversial in the US since the new route has significant environmental implications in states such as Nebraska. However, although the main political discussions around KXL have centred on environmental

considerations, the pipeline also involves international trade relations that support domestic economic benefits. How motivations (e.g. ideas, institutions, law, material in(capabilities), ideologies, global structure, agents' interests) for the pipeline are being determined therefore remains critical to understanding the politics surrounding KXL. Problematically for analysis, the discourse surrounding KXL has remained uncertain for several reasons, all subject to continual re-interpretation by different administrations: the contradiction between environmental and economic priorities; the wider context determined by oil prices; political party polarisation in the US; and US foreign policy perceptions. Does the question then arise as to how the state–economy–civil society nexus evolve through time?

Existing studies on KXL (Gravelle and Lachapelle 2015; Kojola 2015) only examine specific aspects of the recent KXL political process; this article argues that a more holistic historical perspective is required to understand policy development motivations through time better, thereby better contextualising contemporary debates. Existing works on KXL do not explore it using the various energy security concepts: climate change, economy-political structure (i.e. nationally and internationally), and temporal dynamics.

I advocate employing Robert Cox's interpretation of critical theory as an explanatory framework to address these gaps. His acceptance of "people as historical agents" (Budd 2008, 176) can potentially be operationalised within the KXL process to allow insight into how different actors have interacted over time to produce political outcomes, rather than offering a static "snapshot" picture of motivations. By understanding KXL as a historical process, this theory could also allow us to move beyond examining purely cause–effect relationships. Here, key theoretical determinants in Cox's theory (Cox 1981, 136), namely, structural forces (i.e. material capabilities, ideas and institutions) and their reciprocal relationships, should—in theory—be ideally equipped to decipher these complex interactions. A Coxian analysis could also help explain KXL's connection with the increasingly polarised nature of bi-partisan American politics, in addition to broader trade relations. I, therefore, follow his theoretical approach as examining how ideas, material capabilities and institutions have interacted at different times to shape the motivations and interests of actors at organisational, material and discursive levels in parallel to his global politics explanations.

In examining the potential of a Coxian analysis for analysing KXL, I initially critically review existing studies. The second section presents a new theoretical approach, drawn from Cox's research and subsequent interpretations. The third section describes the research design, methods of data collection and data analysis. A historical timeline of the KXL case is set out in the fourth section. The fifth section analyses the findings to determine critical insights and deficiencies in the theoretical assumptions as a precursor to further theoretical development. Lastly,

I conclude with an analysis of the contribution to the literature on KXL but also energy politics and wider International Relations (IR) themes.

Literature Review

The KXL case is one of the most significant controversial political topics in the climate change policy vs fossil fuels debate (e.g. Lazarus and van Asselt 2018; BBC 2019). One of the pipelines is an issue of energy infrastructure and the political economy of energy development (Bridge, Özkaynak, and Turhan 2018). Studies have focused on specific aspects of the KXL process. A critical review of this literature shows that significant gaps exist in our understanding, potentially addressable through a Coxian analysis. I argue that holistic, theoretically-driven analyses of the KXL policy process over time are required. A comprehensive account of the KXL requires understanding how events unfold over time.

Firstly, some studies lack attention to the temporal dimension of the case. For example, Gravelle and Lachapelle's (2015) study focuses on the economic benefits, energy security implications and environmental impacts of KXL. Decision-making processes are analysed through mass public opinion, political parties and the ideologies they embrace. That said, they only adopt a "snapshot" of events, meaning the historical nature of policy evolution is overlooked: a feature evident in both Kojola's (2015) study of media discourses in KXL and Bradshaw's (2015) analysis of oppositional perceptions to KXL. Kalen's (2012) study discusses the definition of national interests in the KXL case in a normative way historically, but the work was published when the KXL was becoming a front page. A work on KXL should include recent key points.

In contrast, some studies have chronological analysis (Babcock 2020) or regulatory background (Zhang 2020) but focus on institutional aspects, including constitutional challenges and congressional actions. However, the interpretation of global politics is lacking, which is the second aspect missing in the literature. Such a controversial policy requires international political dynamics as the internals, but none of the works has attention to international dynamics except international activism (Cheon and Urpelainen 2018).

Thirdly, common characteristics of many studies are focusing on the influence of specific actors, thereby only providing a partial view of events: in this respect, unions (Fair 2014); political parties (Gravelle and Lachapelle 2015); opposition groups (Avery 2013; Bradshaw 2015); media actors (Kojola 2015); environmental impacts (Erickson and Lazarus 2014); grassroots activism against fossil fuels (Ternes, Ordner, and Cooper 2020); variation in oil sands pipeline project outcomes (Janzwood 2020). In contrast, interactions between these groups as a factor in KXL political decision-making should be studied.

Finally, in this respect, I argue that the influence of ideas in KXL is only understandable in relation to other motivations, such as material capabilities and key institutions (Barry 2013): factors that require a more holistic perspective. Therefore, research is required that helps interpret interactions between these dimensions over time to understand the motivations behind the development of policy in the KXL. How the various dynamics interact should be followed.

Theory

As discussed above, the KXL is not a static process and is only entirely understandable through a long temporal perspective. Logically, only theory taking a historical view can, therefore, credibly explain this process. Critical theory could provide a viable option due to its opposition to history-free explanations of social processes derived from its acceptance of “people as historical agents” (Budd 2008, 176). The framework of the KXL process investigation should unfold initially.

Historicism of Cox

One leading proponent of this line of argumentation is Robert W. Cox (1993a, 135), who asserts that “history generates theory” and “this theory is not absolute knowledge, not a final revelation or a completeness of rational knowledge about laws of history.” Thus, Cox adopts a specific epistemological position in arguing that no law-like explanation for social processes that change happens gradually. Since social existence is accepted as a non-law-like structure, understanding “how an order came about” becomes an essential factor rather than causally explaining why it happened (Hoffman 1987, 237). Social context then shapes/is shaped by contradictions and struggles rather than cause-effects relations. Rejecting positivist cause-effect relationships leads us to eschew law-like patterns, which can be done via uncovering rational “principles of order” (Cox 1992, 180). That view accepts accumulation but not repeating events.

At this point, Coxian interpretation should be positioned relative to Marxism. Cox (1981) focuses on interpreting the reciprocity between materials and ideas. Ideas and material conditions are intrinsically linked and irreducible. Thus, Cox does not present a historical materialist perspective as Marxism does, interpreting it as a balance between power and morality. The dominant power group defines the moral judgements of the legitimacy of its position (Cox and Schechter 2002). Neither military nor economic power, or even a combination of them, provides hegemony. In this sense, “in the structure of hegemony, cultural and ideological factors are decisive” (Cox 1992, 179). In contrast to Marxism, a mutual relationship between materials and ideas brings reciprocity between structure (social relations and physical production) and superstructure (ideology and political

organisations), which is inspired by Gramsci (Cox 1993a, 156). Thus, how hegemony is defined is the first reason why the Coxian critical approach is accepted. Secondly, the Coxian approach to state-society complexity has a contrary position to regime theory, which has a state-centric explanation and lacks non-state actors (Newell and Paterson 1998). However, state power is “discursively-and institutionally-mediated condensation of a changing balance of forces” (Jessop 2010, 343). Actors’ interests and motivations of decision-making should be investigated in parallel to transnational level dynamics (Cox 1993b).

The Framework of Cox and Its Conceptualisation on KXL

After providing a Coxian historical interpretation, how he sets up his framework can now be presented. Three forces interact in a structure: material capabilities, ideas, and institutions (see Figure 1). Definitions, contents, and relationships change in particular cases, but they are reciprocal with no one-way determinism. These concepts are abstract in the Coxian sense, so I have not found any studies operationalising them into a specific topic. However, these concepts are the ontological grounding of his IR interpretation. Operationalisation of forces would help us to filter collected primary data and to see how the process accumulates.

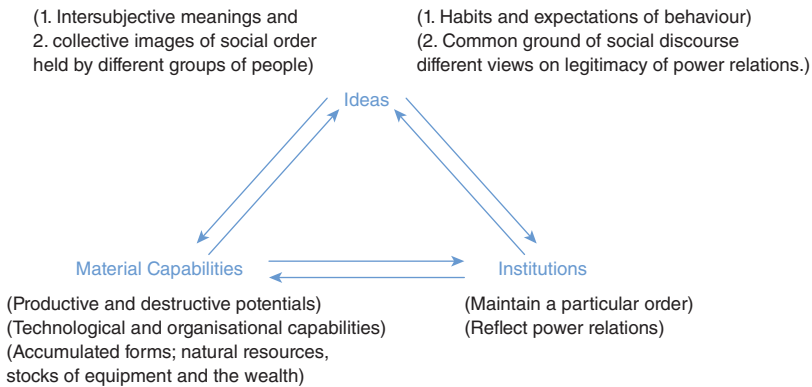


Figure 1. Structural Forces of Cox

Source: Cox (1981, 136).

However, as identified above, social context is composed of contradictions and struggles. Using a historical dialectic can help us to uncover them through seeking how the structure changes. Both events and processes are characterised by duration, which means “the amount of time elapsed for a given event or sequence of events” (Aminzade 1992, 459). While an event (short-term duration) is synchronic,

a long-term process (long-term duration) is diachronic, thereby requiring a historical understanding (Hämäläinen 2013, 9). Although the first duration shows “how the structure changes,” the latter gives insight into “why it happened” through inter-cyclical shifts of paradigms. The diachronic–synchronic nature of the theory should then be applied to the KXL study. KXL is implicated in the cycle of the energy security paradigm of the new millennium. It has been determined by successive oil crises and resource nationalism, specifically from exporters, increasing environmental consciousness, and fluctuations in oil prices.

As mentioned, structural forces are abstract concepts. Thus, the operationalised figure (see Figure 2) could easily be criticised. For example, political parties can be accepted under institutions that maintain a particular order. However, I believe that they reflect socio-cultural dynamics more than their roles in the institutional aspect. The energy vs environment debate in the KXL process will prove this later. Institutions are chosen to fill the roles of state, economy, and civil society. Lastly, material (in)capabilities are transformed into oil market dynamics; however, technological sufficiency is not the main discussion of KXL. In continuation of filtering data and describing the process according to operationalisation, the process will be discussed under the material, organisational, and discursive levels.

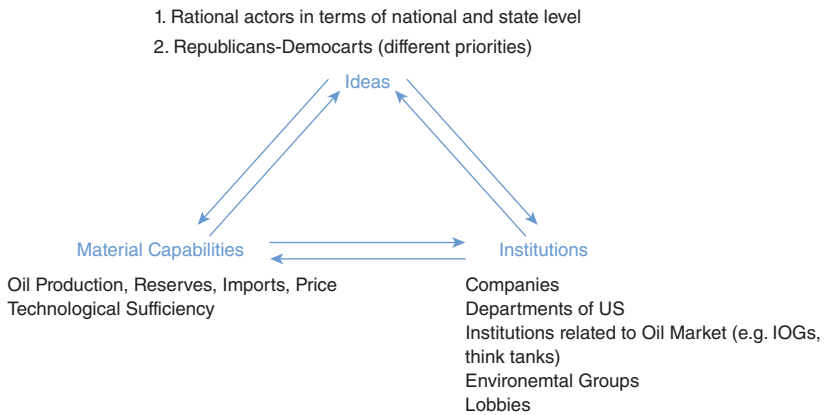


Figure 2. Operationalised Version of Coxian Forces on US Oil Policies

A Coxian and a neo-Gramscian analysis can also potentially depict global politics through an IR focus and be applied to energy governance in detail (Gill and Law 1989; Rupert 1995; Stephan 2011). Although there are no oligopolistic oil firms anymore, we are in the era of *trasformismo* of energy vs environment issues (Newell 2019). Coxian transformation would help us see the change in hegemony

and shift in state–market–civil society nexus in terms of oil/environment policy (Newell 2008). Since oil is still the most consumed energy source globally (BP 2019), it can reflect material, organisational, and discursive power relations (Levy and Newell 2005). To analyse the coherency between three levels, both a structure’s dynamics and its agent’s actions should be considered.

In addition to operationalising Coxian forces into the US oil diversification motivations, the interpretation of Cox on US hegemony should be discussed in order to see whether there is a connection between oil/environmental policy and US power in the world. Cox’s (1992, 179–180) five possible scenarios for the future hegemony on a global scale were: a revival of declining hegemony; an oligarchy of powerful states that have concert; the founding of new hegemony; non-hegemonic order, most probably based on an organisation of rival world regions; and counterhegemonic order. However, this study does not investigate the global governance of the oil market.

Methodology: Operationalising Cox

This study’s research design is a qualitative, mixed-method case study as part of a more comprehensive comparative research programme into US oil diversification (i.e. supplier countries and US states) motivations. A case study design allowed the application of theory by providing a temporal dimension to analysing KXL and using mixed methods and data sources (Yin 1994), adopting a “data-driven study” rather than a “data-centred approach” (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2009, 283), involving temporal, spatial, and contextual dimensions.

First, documentary (archival) data was collected from archives and online sources of, among other things, the US Department of State (DOS), the US Department of Energy, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and Congress-Senate. Data collection via online resources and archive studies were conducted to collect all the relevant information related to the KXL. However, only the documents that could help tell the story according to the Coxian triangle were selected, since not all documents could have been used. The relevant documents that can provide an impression of structural reality and agent’s interests on the one hand, and material reality and ideational factors, on the other hand, were filtered.

Second, in total, 17 interviews were conducted with critical policymakers (4), environmentalists including indigenous people (9), and think tanks and industry groups (4) involved with KXL and other aspects of US energy policy. Since fewer reports and online documents belong to the environmentalists, including indigenous people, their ideas, and interests have been prioritised during the interviewees’ selection. Interviews are referred to when they confirm each other or when they are coherent with empirical evidence, which was collected from online

documents. All the interviewees are mentioned as a number in the text, but their descriptions are below. Interviewees were selected according to the Coxian triangle's operationalised version of the US oil structure (see Figure 2). Actors that could potentially fill the positions in the figure were contacted.¹ Obviously, the balance between opposite and different sides had to be considered in this selection process. Interviewees are referenced to provide opposing views to provide a Coxian analysis on the KXL rather than for supporting this work's argument. Thus, the story of the KXL process has been created through respondents' answers. Since each of the respondents has a unique background and knowledge, they did not always provide comments that agreed with each other. Unfortunately, since oil companies are not open to talking about controversial issues, I could not reach out to the relevant oil company. Interviews were located in the USA and Canada during a five-month field trip in 2019. Questioning occurred according to a specific research protocol, with questions aimed at triangulating documentary evidence from the KXL.

The KXL Policy Process: A Descriptive Overview

The Bush Era: 2001–2009

To understand the motivations for the KXL pipeline, we must go back to the early 2000s. Here, political authority was influential in shaping US energy policy. The incumbent Bush administration favoured reliance on the exploitation of domestic energy supplies and “secure” sources from countries including Canada, as opposed to “unreliable” supplies from the Middle East. The second Gulf War in 2003 exposed US dependence on these sources, which led the administration to pursue a supply-side policy of oil diversification. Moreover, Bush withdrew the US from the Kyoto Protocol in March 2001 after just two months in office (The Heritage Foundation 2001), while the president's energy policy team was dominated by oil industry representatives (Cushman 2014). In addition, Bush's lack of environmental concerns meant he supported new oil pipeline construction and imports. A vital component of this policy was to source further oil supplies from Canada by building a new pipeline linking US oil processors to Canadian producers, primarily in Alberta.

In 2004, two Canadian companies (i.e. Kinder Morgan Canada and Enbridge) were responsible for oil imports from Canada to the USA. Although TransCanada was part of the US–Canada energy resources trade, it primarily exported natural gas. The company then proposed expanding its existing pipeline system to export oil to the US in the KXL development (TransCanada 2005). The development of new technology to extract Alberta oil sands/tar sands² for oil production supported this export trade. Albertan oil is largely comprised of bitumen which is “a thick,

sticky form of crude oil” (NEB 2019) and requires an environmentally destructive extraction process, which also generates significant climate emissions.

Both the DOS and the Bush administration supported TransCanada through Presidential Executive Order 13337 (2004). This sought to establish “energy-related facilities and land transportation crossings on the international boundaries of the United States” (DOS 2004). According to the order, US energy exports and imports should maintain safety, public health, and environmental protection. In this respect, a pipeline to transport oil sands oil from Alberta to the US should best serve “the national interest” (DOS 2004). However, no agreed/common definition of the national interest existed, so actors/institutions defined it according to their preferences. It was announced that the Secretary of State would consult with state, tribal, local, and federal government officials on the project. Again, different actors meant different considerations were in play. Environmentalists signalled their opposition to the pipeline; business-friendly national level institutions supported KXL, whereas some residents were happy to receive income from KXL construction and construction jobs (Interviewee-2, Interviewee-9).

Prior to the Executive Order, Canadian petroleum producers, primarily the TransCanada Corporation and ConocoPhillips, held initial discussions (TransCanada 2005; NEB 2005, 1; 2006). As a result, the project, which included new pipeline construction (3,000 km in length) and conversion of the existing natural gas pipeline systems (1,240 km), was scheduled to begin operations in 2008/2009. Canadian proponents of KXL described it as innovative and cost-competitive (TransCanada 2006a, 5). The industry then attempted to include all stakeholders in the planning process, as Canadian federal and state legislation required. TransCanada was careful to include the views of indigenous people (TransCanada 2006a, 17), considering their concerns in field studies, environmental and socio-economic assessments, engineering designs and other activities necessary to support the application (TransCanada 2006b). However, according to environmentalists (Interviewee-1, Interviewee-7, Interviewee-17), neither indigenous nor environmental NGO views were integrated into decision-making.

Nonetheless, KXL was accepted by the DOS (2008a, 2) as serving the national interest because of the proximity of the Canadian source (and its perceived security), the newly available supply of crude oil with minimum transportation requirements, and Canada’s status as a reliable and long-established US trading partner. These reasons are specified in the “Final Environmental Impact Statement” accompanying the federal permit approval application (DOS 2008b). However, this consensus of support for the project started to break down after the announcement of KXL expansion to the US Gulf Coast in 2008 (TransCanada 2008),

requiring both federal and state-level permits/approvals. At the time, Canadian oil imports were considered compatible with decreasing US domestic production and increasing domestic demand in the US. Oil prices had already been increasing since 2001 globally and peaked at \$141.47 per barrel (\$/b) in 2008 (see Table 1). The US saw the highest import quantity of oil in 2005 at 10,094 thousand barrels per day (tb/d) (see Table 2), whereas production was 5,000 tb/d in 2008, which was the lowest quantity since 1947 (EIA 2019).

Table 1. WTI Annual Oil Price (\$/b) during the Bush Administration

| 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 25.98 | 26.18 | 31.08 | 41.51 | 56.64 | 66.05 | 72.34 | 99.67 | 61.95 |

Source: EIA (2020a).

Table 2. US Net Imports of Crude Oil (tb/d) during the Bush Administration

| 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 |
|-------|-------|-------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|-------|
| 9,308 | 9,131 | 9,652 | 10,061 | 10,094 | 10,093 | 10,004 | 9,755 | 8,969 |

Source: EIA (2020b).

Table 3. US Crude Oil Production (tb/d) during the Bush Administration

| 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 5,801 | 5,744 | 5,649 | 5,441 | 5,184 | 5,086 | 5,074 | 5,000 | 5,357 |

Source: EIA (2020c).

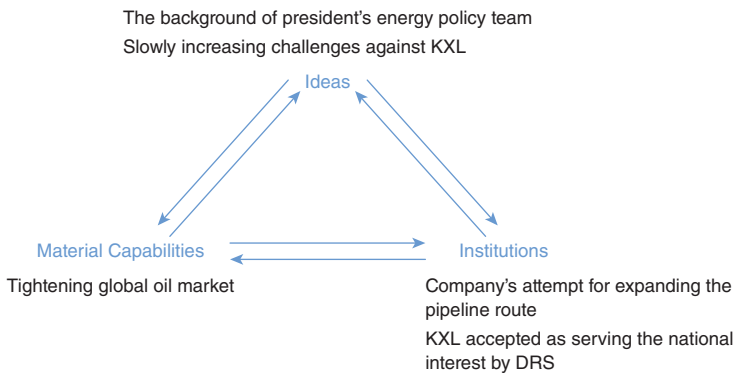


Figure 3. How the Triangle Worked during the Bush Administration

The Obama Era: 2009–2017

Changes to the KXL process started in the 111th United States Congress. The House of Representatives approved the American Clean Energy and Security Act of 2009, but it was never brought before the Senate for discussion or a vote (Congress of the United States 2009). The Act was not specifically about KXL, as it was a cap-and-trade bill³ under which government would set limits on national greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. The unsuccessful attempt at adopting the bill was a breaking point in US environmental politics (Interviewee-8) and symptomatic of broader polarisation in US politics. While Democrats supported the cap-and-trade bill, the right-wing Republican Tea Party Movement, whose members called for lower taxes and national debt reduction, was implacably opposed. This party polarisation of the issue was also reflected in an increasingly acrimonious bi-partisan national debate over gun control, abortion, and social issues (Interviewee-14).

By 2010, environmental issues became highly significant in US and Canadian politics. Oil pollution from the Deepwater Horizon accident on a US oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico triggered widespread debate over the environmental consequences of the KXL. Project opponents plastered dead-duck images in oil sands tailing ponds in major US cities (Sassoon 2010). These images led to increasing environmental consciousness in US society. Besides, 2010 was the warmest year ever, prompting further debate over climate change (*National Geographic* 2010).

By 2011, KXL was a high-profile national issue, as public participation and environmental considerations became prominent in the debate. A Congressional Research Service (CSR) report (Parfomak et al. 2011) provided the most precise description of this debate through its evaluation of opponents' and proponents' arguments under a national interest discussion. Opponents were against KXL because Canadian oil was considered environmentally dirty and promoted US dependency on fossil fuels. However, while some were against oil sands because they were Canadian oil (Interviewee-1), others opposed all fossil fuels (Interviewee-5). At the time, opponents (Interviewee-1, Interviewee-5) recommended transferring energy sources from fossil fuels to clean/renewable energy. According to proponents of KXL, this demand was not achievable in the short term because of car production technologies and citizen preferences for maintaining existing high consumption lifestyles (Interviewee-2, Interviewee-16).

The North American-Made Energy Security Act (HR 1938) (Congress of the United States 2011) stated that oil imports from Canada through the pipeline were favoured above politically unstable sources, thereby strengthening bilateral trading and supporting employment: a view endorsed by TransCanada (2012). According to polls conducted by Anderson Insight for the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (AICAPP), American society supported oil imports from

Canada rather than Mexico, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela: 78% approved of KXL in 2011 and 2012 (AICAPP 2012). While the pipeline had not yet become a completely polarising issue across society, people from 25 indigenous tribes met at the Protect the Sacred Gathering to protest against the oil sands projects in South Dakota in January 2013 (Protect the Sacred Gathering 2013). By this point, the debate was gaining broader public momentum.

On November 10, 2011, President Obama (White House 2011a) declared his support for a DOS announcement asserting requirements for additional information on KXL to enable an open and transparent permit process. Obama also emphasised this need to Canadian Prime Minister Harper (White House 2011b). These events happened just before the 2012 elections, making them more politically salient. Thus, while environmentalists (Interviewee-5, Interviewee-7) complained about the fossil fuel industry's power over the election process through media and elites lobbying, environmentalists' power to influence this process should not be ignored (Interviewee-14, Interviewee-10). A new energy security paradigm that includes environmental concerns has brought new institutional power (i.e. environmentalist) to the system. President Obama sided with environmentalists because of their pressures on his party. He declared his interest in KXL (Interviewee-11), helping the issue become a symbol of the presidency's environmental credentials. Moreover, environmental grassroots activism's effect on the Democrats was significant in addition to the institutional aspect (Interviewee-17).

On January 18, 2012, the DOS (2012) announced that it would not approve KXL because of inadequate information. The government did not reject the project. Moreover, later in 2012, Obama expedited the southern leg of the project. This reflects the context where the president decides. Conversely, the Obama administration (Zichal 2012) announced that the government sought to boost domestic energy production and increase efficiency. Although US domestic production is generally light sweet oil instead of heavy crude, it is still fossil fuel. It is difficult to distinguish what then environmentalists or President Obama opposed, whether it was oil sands, fossil fuel, production of fossil fuel, or distribution of fossil fuel. In terms of fossil fuel production and distribution, proponents argued that new technologies were better than old ones (Interviewee 11). Moreover, the climate change issue is not a production but rather a consumption issue (Interviewee-16). The administration's priorities were also compatible with national energy independence targets. To support this argument, two examples given were US crude oil production, which had reached its highest level since 2003, and oil imports, which had been falling since 2008 (see Tables 5 and 6).

The DOS (2013) released the "Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement" (DSEIS) in March 2013, but the EPA (2013) criticised the DSEIS as insufficient. Regarding the oil trade, the US was not the only country that cared

about diversification: Canada also considered the diversification of its buyers. Here, the NEB (2013) released a report titled “Market Diversification for Canadian Oil and Gas.” Diversification was accepted as a key target to increase the benefits of resources for Canadians and ensure public health, safety, and environmental protection. At this point, environmentalists’ arguments (Interviewee-8) that KXL was an export rather than an import project are supported. While Democrat and Republican administrations had different positions in terms of KXL in the US, both conservative and liberal governments supported it in Canada. Economic priorities proved too much even for an environmentally friendly liberal government (Interviewee-2). According to the Pew Research Center (2013), 65% of Americans continued to favour KXL, with 82% of Republicans in support compared to 51% of Democrats. On the other hand, in the first half of 2014, NGO protests increased, and new organisations were set up, such as Reject and Protect⁴ and the Cowboy Indian Alliance (National Geographic Blog 2014). Grassroots activism and its power on KXL are clearly visible at this point.

Support for KXL increasingly reflected a Republican–Democrat split, with the former party overwhelmingly favouring KXL. In November 2014, the House of Representatives (HR 5682, Congress of the United States 2014) voted in favour of KXL, while the Senate of the United States (S. 2280, Senate of the United States 2014) voted against the northern portion of KXL. In the House of Representatives, while 221 Republicans supported the project, only 31 Democrats voted in favour: 161 Democrats were against it. In the Senate, while 59 Senators (45 Republicans and 14 Democrats) supported it, 41 Senators (39 Democrats and 2 Independents) were against it. In 2014, according to the Pew Research Center (2014), a majority of Americans (59%) favoured building KXL, which was down from 2013. Whereas 83% of Republicans favoured building the pipeline, only 43% of Democrats supported the project (Pew Research Center 2014). The percentage of Democrat supporters had fallen 11% since 2013. Polarisation of US politics had mutual impacts on KXL. Support for KXL reflected Democrat or Republican affiliation (Interviewee-14).

In January 2015, the House of Representatives (HR 3) and Senate of the United States (S. 1.) both passed the KXL Act (Congress of the United States 2015), directly challenging Obama’s authority. Despite intense lobbying by energy and business interests (API 2015; Frontiers of Freedom 2015; NAM 2015; UCC 2015), the president vetoed the Act (Senate of the United States 2015). Obama emphasised national interests (White House 2015a). He then denied another subsequent KXL application (White House 2015b). For him (White House 2015b), KXL did not serve the national interest because there was no meaningful economic contribution to job creation, lower gas prices, and the environment. Obama was also considering his political legacy on climate change (Russel and Benson 2014). His

decision reflected increasing US support for the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change process, culminating in the 2015 Paris agreement (Interviewee-6). However, material factors helped Obama: the oil price was relatively low, and US domestic production had been increasing (see Tables 4 and 6). According to a poll (West Virginia University 2015), only 57% of Americans favoured KXL. Another showed that 80% of Republicans supported it compared to 39% of Democrats (CNN & ORC 2014).

As the Obama presidency was finishing, a new presidential election campaign started. All four Republican candidates (i.e. Rubio, Carson, Bush and Trump) supported the KXL project (Rubio 2012; McCormick 2014; Bush Center 2015; Schleifer 2015), whereas both Democratic candidates (Clinton and Sanders) (*New York Times* 2012; Sanders 2012) were against it. When Clinton was a member of the Obama administration in 2010, she was inclined to approve it but changed this view during the election campaigning. Trump's election as president then led to a new phase in the KXL story.

Table 4. WTI Annual Oil Price (\$/b) during the Obama Administration

| 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 61.95 | 79.48 | 94.88 | 94.05 | 97.98 | 93.17 | 48.66 | 43.29 | 50.80 |

Source: EIA (2020a).

Table 5. US Net Imports of Crude Oil (tb/d) during the Obama Administration

| 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 8,969 | 9,172 | 8,888 | 8,459 | 7,596 | 6,993 | 6,898 | 7,259 | 6,811 |

Source: (EIA 2020b).

Table 6. US Crude Oil Production (tb/d) during the Obama Administration

| 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 5,357 | 5,484 | 5,667 | 6,521 | 7,494 | 8,789 | 9,446 | 8,852 | 9,371 |

Source: (EIA 2020c).

The Trump Era: 2017–2021

On January 24, newly-elected US President Trump invited TransCanada to refile an application for a Presidential Permit (White House 2017). In his controversial “America First” presidential election campaign, Trump expressed support for the fossil fuel sectors, so this move was unsurprising. Here, Trump emphasised the

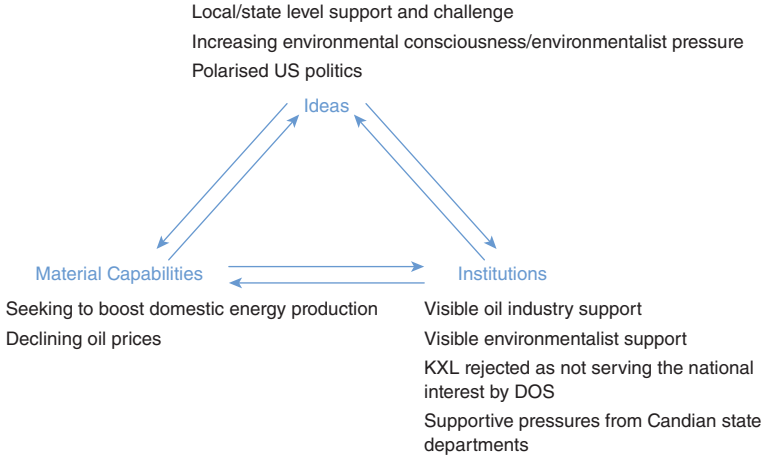


Figure 4. How the Triangle Worked during the Obama Administration

role of KXL in creating jobs, enhancing energy security, providing affordable and reliable energy for Americans, and tax revenues for state and local levels. Moreover, a new term, “energy dominance,” was adopted instead of “energy independence” (Interviewee-17). A regionally integrated market (e.g. the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement), it was argued, could help achieve it.

This event prompts a discussion of whether Cox’s (1992, 179–180) scenario of “a non-hegemonic order lacking effective universal principles of order and functioning as an interplay of rival powerful states” appointment is true or not. There is a debate on the declining US hegemony and the international liberal order (Maull 2019). This changing order and its supporting institutions have been linked to increasing social forces. Although economic and technological advancements have contributed, declining belief in institutions has led society to participate more actively in policy processes. Social forces, including populism and grassroots activism, have had evident influence. Opposition was voiced by residents close to the line of the proposed pipeline. The Price of Oil (2017) announced that it received more than 460,000 comments against KXL from indigenous farmers, ranchers, Nebraskans, and activists. Their “No KXL Promise” letter⁵ announced that re-routing would not work.

Canada was also supportive of the permit decision. The CAPP (2017) announced that Canada’s energy future relied on overcoming five challenges: low commodity prices, pipeline capacity, industry competitiveness, regulatory uncertainty, and access to new markets. In November 2018, a Judge of the United States District Court for Montana (2018) blocked construction. The court ruled that the administration had failed to follow established rules and procedures for decisions. However, later on, the

Nebraska Supreme Court decided KXL was in the national interest.⁶ The government’s (White House 2019) new permit would lead the company (TransCanada 2020) to start construction of KXL and expect it in service in 2023. However, among President Joe Biden’s first Executive Orders was to reverse the KXL. How Biden reacts to KXL is highly compatible with Obama’s second term with his “climate leadership” emphasis (White House 2021). It seems that the KXL “problem” of US environment and energy politics will remain an attention-grabbing topic.

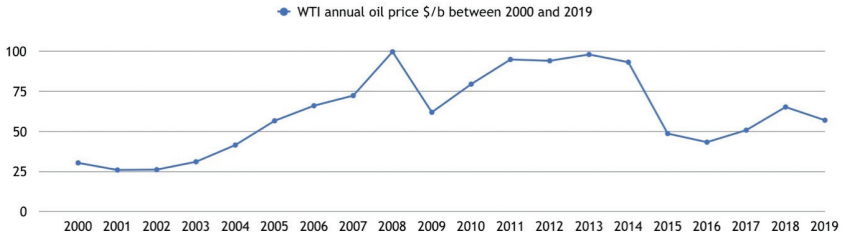


Figure 5. WTI Annual Oil Price (\$/b) between 2000 and 2019

Source: (EIA 2020a).

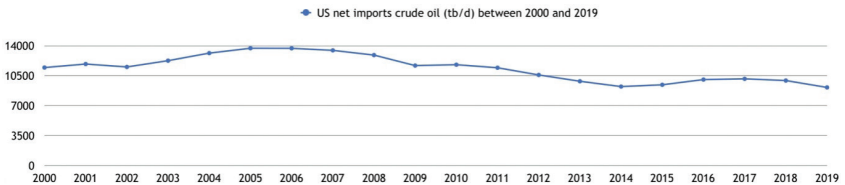


Figure 6. US Net Imports of Crude Oil (tb/d) between 2000 and 2019

Source: EIA (2020b).

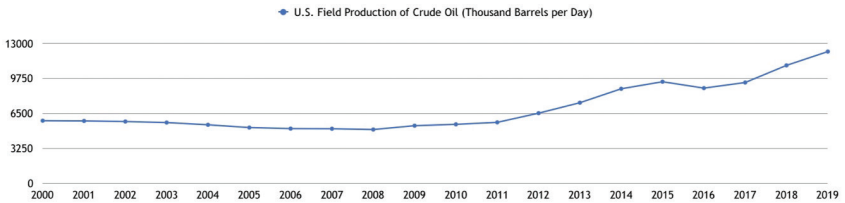


Figure 7. US Crude Oil Production (tb/d) between 2000 and 2019

Source: EIA (2020c).

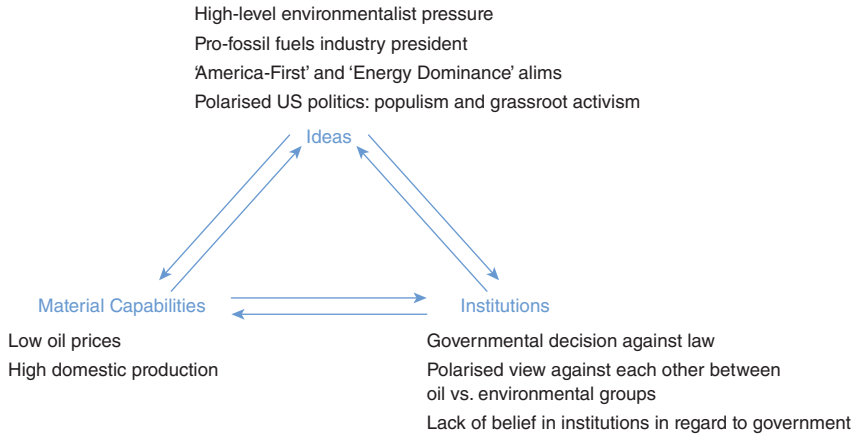


Figure 8. How the Triangle Worked during the Trump Administration

Discussion: The Value of a Coxian Perspective

To what extent can a Coxian analysis shed light on these complex events? Analysis shows that Cox's (1981, 136) structural forces are operationalised in the KXL process to explain policy motivations and actors' interests, but some challenges exist to its application.

During the Bush era, motivations for the adoption of KXL can then be interpreted as overwhelmingly material interest and structure-based. A supply–demand imbalance in global oil markets was caused by instability in Middle East supplies and increasing demand in Asia. It combined with increasing oil prices to enhance the motivations for KXL. Moreover, imports from Canada were considered safer and cheaper than imports from the Middle East, while technological advances had made oil sands oil more accessible. In addition to material capabilities, the Bush administration's close relations with the oil industry and withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol show how much individual actors' ideas were also crucial to the project. However, the picture then changed with the instalment of a new presidential administration, changing global oil market dynamics, and shifting US domestic politics and foreign policy.

The Obama era was characterised by the growing importance of ideas, particularly around environmentalism, and their promotion by increasing institutional power. The climate change issue was a significant trigger and reflection of this divergent politics. Obama's personal desire to reduce US GHG emissions and enhance international leadership led to increasing public participation in the KXL process, with environmental groups more active in campaigning against it. This

participation led to more polarised ideas and institutions, with a backlash from corporate interests and Republicans. With lobbyists, the media, and elites attempting to influence the pipeline decision, KXL became a national discussion topic, even within government departments. Increasing material capabilities (e.g. decreasing oil prices, technology, increasing domestic production) also fuelled institutional polarisation. In the meantime, the US was struggling with a collapsing international liberal order (Maull 2019). US domestic and foreign policy began to change dramatically with the collapse of its hegemony.

The influence of structural forces on KXL changed again in the Trump era. Trump came into power after Obama and nominally reflected the same political party values and ideas as Bush. However, the context of Trump's "America First" decision-making on KXL was partly determined by both Bush's and Obama's policies. The US hegemonic position, including its liberal order, changed. Material capabilities such as oil prices, OPEC's power, and the fear of a global supply–demand imbalance have fundamentally altered since the Bush era. Polarised ideas have led to clashes across institutions (including the parties) over KXL. During the Trump era, these clashes increased the importance of material capabilities for oil diversification. Consequently, there was a domestic-focus momentum (e.g. "energy dominance") in the US, and it was not only shaped by Trump's personal views. The evolution of structural forces is the main determiner of national interest. We also see the changing structural sphere (i.e. world order) as another national interest shaper in the Trump administration.

In this respect, it could be argued that the theory has significant "value" in helping interpret the complex accumulation of energy policy in KXL that moves analyses beyond the single aspect snapshot studies available to date. A focus on the interaction between material capabilities, ideas, and institutions shows how each dimension was essential to policy accumulation at specific points in time, thereby allowing a deeper explanation. Initially, material capabilities, primarily oil prices and US domestic energy security, were promoted by corporate interests and then the Bush administration to support the KXL policy. Over time, ideological concerns over the environment became more pre-eminent in the Obama presidency within the context of a broader Republican–Democrat "culture wars" debate, thereby limiting policy development. Finally, the theory helps show how, under Trump, ideas and material capabilities were used again as the primary motivation for reinstating the KXL project within a wider "America First" ideological agenda and reduction in US global hegemony. By providing a broad level of analysis, the theory shows how structural forces have interacted to dictate the accumulation of policy over a long period in ways that other theoretical approaches cannot.

Indigenous groups' key role during the KXL process can be viewed as another strong role of the theory. The second subsection of Cox's (1981, 136) ideas is based on

“the nature and the legitimacy of prevailing power relations, the meaning of justice and the public good, and so forth.” KXL is one example that proves a clash of competing perspectives. The pipeline project would run across several indigenous communities, who still represent a key issue in US politics. How much they feel ignored by federal or even state governments is related to the historical origin of white settler colonialism (Price 1950). In this case, those lands that host pipelines are not only living spaces for the communities, but they are also accepted as sacred. While the material importance carries fewer desires, there is also motivational determination for those communities. Thus, such opposite perspectives on “justice and public good” between indigenous communities and the white settler groups, which sponsored the pipeline project or were charged with deciding on its construction, have shaped the process.

It has been observed that we do not only see the change of hegemonic power and its connection with the KXL policy process but also how shifts have been experienced in the state–market–civil society nexus dramatically in parallel to the decline of hegemony. While it was a policy under the market dimension, the participation of transnational civil society expectations has brought the state departments (within and across both countries) into the process in a more visible way. A simple market-oriented policy has become a complex issue. Civil society has been successful in slowing the construction, but transnational market dynamics have won. Although there are no oligopolistic oil firms anymore, the dominance of oil still continues on the market. It proves the *trasformismo* argument (Newell 2019). Moreover, the change in hegemonic power is also proved by the lacking coherency between organisational, material, and discursive powers. In the end (during the Trump administration), there was an acquiescence pursuit at both domestic and international levels (i.e. discursive level), nor organisational coherence in the state–economy–environment nexus (i.e. organisational level). A Marxian sense of the contradiction between private and public interests has become the most visible point (i.e. material level). Finally, while the KXL process is analysed coherently in this study, President Biden’s decision proves the discussion’s truthfulness in showing the interferences of political dynamics into a policy’s motivations. Biden’s decision is only a continuation of Obama’s second term.

That said, there are problems with applying a Coxian analysis. Firstly, one major area of omission is social dynamics as crucial determinants in the accumulation of policy. As Sinclair (2016, 517) argues, Coxian terminology is rather narrowly predicated on production processes and fails to account for the increasing political influence of social cleavages in the new millennium, for example, the rise of issues such as gender, race, sexual orientation, disability, and age. Within KXL, it was evident that the rise of environmentalism as both a recognisable social dynamic and a set of ideas also fundamentally shaped policy. Thus, Sinclair’s (2016) notion of social dynamics with the ideas–material capabilities–institutions

model provides a more holistic explanation of structural forces. Secondly, in terms of the operationalisation of Coxian structural forces, I have been faced with the difficulty of distinguishing between them. As Cox himself emphasises, these concepts are heuristic instruments. This, of course, results in an extensive definition of the different forces at work within historical structures. For example, it is not always clear where ideas stop and institutions start.

Conclusions

I suggest that a Coxian IR interpretation could be operationalised in the KXL process to uncover US energy policy motivations. The KXL case illustrates how materials and ideas and structure and agency interact through temporal processes. This interaction does not happen in a simple cause–effect relationship. As a symbol of environmental issues, the KXL can also reflect and reflect upon the polarisation of US politics. According to the findings, US policy is shaped by the interaction between ideas–material capabilities–institutions.

These findings have specific implications for the current KXL literature. Firstly, the analysis provides a historical perspective that moves knowledge beyond the “snap-shot” picture and specifically chosen topics afforded by existing studies. Thus, contemporary debates are more effectively contextualised. Secondly, the study also considers the change of US position globally and its connection with very controversial topics. These are essential elements, both theoretically and empirically, which are addressed in this study. The third point is closer to the empirical side, investigating KXL according to various energy security conceptions rather than specific topics. In addition, primary data collected from the documents and interviews has enriched the empirical knowledge. Expressly, interviewees’ comments have provided new data and various perspectives regarding state–economy–civil society nexus.

Although my aim is not to develop universally applicable explanations, I believe that the operationalisation of a Coxian interpretation for uncovering US energy policy motivations could help explain other importer countries’ (e.g. European Union, China, Japan) approaches. Therefore, productive future research investigations could be undertaken comparatively at the inter-state level or within states (intrastate), further to develop our understanding of supplier and importer motivations. On the other hand, the importance of social dynamics is seen in the new millennium. A Coxian IR approach should consequently be revised to match the reality of the new millennium. At this point, the importance of social dynamics can be interpreted as new structural spheres (Sinclair 2016, 517). Future research could focus on creating a neo-Coxian analysis that could add insightful and novel perspectives on energy policy in other countries and help distinguish conceptualised structural forces in a specific topic.

Appendix: List of Interviewees

- Interviewee-1: a member of environmentalist NGO
- Interviewee-2: a member of energy industry group
- Interviewee-5: a member of environmentalist NGO
- Interviewee-6: a policymaker from DOS
- Interviewee-7: a member of environmentalist NGO (Canada)
- Interviewee-8: a member of environmentalist NGO
- Interviewee-9: a member of energy industry group (Canada)
- Interviewee-10: a member of a think tank, previously worked for EIA
- Interviewee-11: a member of energy industry group (Canada)
- Interviewee-14: a member of the industry group, previously worked in DOE
- Interviewee-16: a policymaker from the Government of Alberta
- Interviewee-17: a person from Indigenous people

Notes

1. Interviewees were asked about their motivations and other actors' motivations from their perspectives. Orientations of questions were at three basic levels: state departments; economic actors (oil companies in upstream and midstream sector, labour unions); and civil society (environmental consideration) expectations.
2. While the first was used in a positive way, the latter was accepted by environmentalists in the literature. We used oil sands without attributing positive or negative perceptions.
3. Cap-and-trade involves a system whereby a cap is set on national emissions, which gets stricter over time with allocations for emissions issued to polluters within this overall cap (EDF 2019).
4. See <https://rejectandprotect.org/>. Accessed July 13, 2018.
5. See <http://nokxlpromise.org/call-to-action/>. Accessed July 13, 2018.
6. See <https://supremecourt.nebraska.gov/courts/supreme-court/opinions>. Accessed October 6, 2020.

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