

Carbon Populism and Representative Politics: On Why Fossil Fuel Firms Speaking for ‘The People’ Is a Bad Idea

Daniel Nyberg^a , Christopher Wright^b ,
Vanessa Bowden^c  and Peter Fleming^d 

^aThe University of Queensland; ^bThe University of Sydney; ^cThe University of Newcastle; ^dUniversity of Technology Sydney

ABSTRACT Despite growing recognition that countries around the world must transition to a low-carbon economy, global greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise. One way that decarbonization has been obstructed, we argue, is by fossil fuel firms intentionally conflating their agenda with ‘the people’, evoking notions of national identity, security and prosperity. We develop the concept of *carbon populism* to explain why big oil, coal and gas firms make representative claims typically associated with democratically elected governments. This adds a significant layer of difficulty for stakeholders endeavouring to enact decarbonization. Drawing on an in-depth study of fossil fuel industries in Australia (mainly coal and gas), we demonstrate how different forms of political representation in the public and political spheres influence national identity, expert knowledge and public policy. These artificial forms of representation legitimize fossil fuel industries’ political activities, authorize public policies that benefit it, and enable the industry to enjoy national dominance. We conclude by arguing that decarbonization can be achieved by rejecting carbon populism in favour of inclusive and participatory democratic representation.

Keywords: climate change, corporate political activity, fossil fuel industries, nationalism, populism, representative politics

INTRODUCTION

It is well established that fossil fuel interests have denied the severity of climate change (Oreskes and Conway, 2010) and delayed the carbon reduction initiatives required to halt it (Nyberg et al., 2023; Shue, 2023). Through corporate political activities in the political

Address for reprints: Christopher Wright, University of Sydney Business School, The University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia (christopher.wright@sydney.edu.au).

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sphere (e.g., lobbying and campaign funding) (Brulle, 2018) and the public sphere (e.g., political marketing and astroturfing) (Cho et al., 2011), the industry has hampered much needed legislation and policy intervention (Nanko and Coan, 2024). Industry leaders often defend the continuation of fossil fuel extraction by evoking the interests of the nation and its citizens (Wright et al., 2022). For example, in Canada, oil sands are framed as ‘a way to build the nation’ (Kuteleva and Leifso, 2020, p. 3); in the UK, the shale gas fracking industry claimed they were ‘keeping the lights on for British citizens’ (Nyberg et al., 2018, p. 246); and, in the US, Mobil Oil justified their advertorials in the *New York Times* by suggesting that ‘our nation functions best when economic and other concerns of the people are subjected to rigorous debate’ (Brown and Waltzer, 2005, p. 200). Thus, one reason for the lack of progress in climate policy, we suggest, are these forays into representative politics by fossil fuel corporations.

Corporate and industry engagement with representative politics is often viewed as proactively entering the political or public sphere (Hillman and Keim, 1995; Scherer et al., 2016), or alternatively, reacting to increasingly volatile business environments (Edman et al., 2024; Feldmann and Morgan, 2023). Firms may behave politically as corporate citizens (Matten and Crane, 2005) and seek to influence political decision makers for more favourable policies (Nyberg, 2021). There are also debates about how companies operate in populist (Blake et al., 2024) or nationalistic (Yue et al., 2024) settings. However, less is known about how corporations and industries try to construct and represent ‘the people’ in contestations over major social concerns and grand challenges. This is important since the legitimacy of political decisions relies upon claims to represent ‘the people’ and their interests. Therefore, the research question we seek to answer is: *how do industries seek to represent ‘the people’ and what are the implications for political decision-making?*

To address this question, we conducted a study of how the Australian fossil fuel industries constructed and represented ‘the people’ in (a) the political sphere where collective and binding decisions for society are made and enforced, and (b) the public sphere where people deliberate over common concerns and shape public opinion (Habermas, 1989). This comprehensive case study included: industry press releases and reports, media articles, and 77 interviews with fossil fuel industry executives, lobbyists, politicians, industry experts, and key NGOs engaged with the industry and government. The findings reveal how fossil-fuel industries make representative claims: (i) in the public sphere, shaping Australian identity and legitimizing their political engagement, and (ii) in the political sphere, validating particular forms of knowledge and authorizing public policies advancing their interests. The representative claims influence national notions of identity (‘who we are’), knowledge (‘what we know’), and policy (‘what we decide to do’). We conceptualize this development as *carbon populism* – a form of populism in which the future of the nation is discursively and materially bound to carbon-intensive industries. The concept of carbon populism proves useful in explaining the persistence and legitimation of fossil fuel expansion in countries with entrenched extractive sectors, despite the growing climate emergency and public concerns about it.

The paper contributes to management scholarship on government–business relations (Kourula et al., 2019; Wickert, 2021) by showing how fossil-fuel interests seek

equivalence with ‘the people’ through representative claims that allow them to speak and act on society’s behalf to justify continued expansion. More specifically, we contribute to the literatures on (i) Political Corporate Social Responsibility (PCSR) by explaining why firms cannot genuinely act on behalf of the people and the limited legitimacy of their representative claims when they attempt to do so (Goodman and Mäkinen, 2023; Rhodes and Fleming, 2020), (ii) corporate political activities (CPA) by detailing how artificial representation in different spheres legitimizes political activities, authorizes public policies that, in turn, enables the industry to continue their political activities of representing the people (Barley, 2007; Nyberg, 2021), and (iii) corporate populism (Nyberg and Murray, 2023) and nationalism (Yue et al., 2024) demonstrating how firms are contributing to the representative crisis (Tormey, 2015) within which they struggle to operate (Feldmann and Morgan, 2023). We also contribute to debates about political representation in political theory (Castiglione and Pollak, 2019a; Diehl and Saward, 2024; Disch et al., 2019), extending the ‘constructivist turn’ (Disch, 2015) by adding corporate actors – who are largely absent in these discussions.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we discuss the notion of representative politics and then turn to studies in our discipline regarding the role of corporations therein. After identifying a gap in the literature, we pose our research question (*how do industries represent ‘the people’ and what are the implications for political decision-making?*). The empirical study of the Australian fossil fuel industry comes next. Our discussion section answers the research question by developing the concept of carbon populism. Finally, we conclude by recommending measures to strengthen citizen representation in the political sphere and broaden their participation in the public sphere to advance decarbonization.

REPRESENTATIVE POLITICS

Following the representative crises in Western liberal democracies, there has been a renewed interest in representative politics in political theory (Castiglione and Pollak, 2019a; Diehl and Saward, 2024; Disch et al., 2019). The field seeks to understand what has been described as the end of representative politics (Tormey, 2015) and the erosion of Western democracies, reflected in declining political party membership (Urbinati, 2019b), the rise of right-wing populism (Fossum, 2023), and increasing citizen disengagement (Warren, 2019). Research shows that many political decisions are made by supranational institutions (e.g., the European Union and NATO), global financial organizations (e.g., the World Bank and IMF), and national political elites operating at a distance from citizens. These decision-making arrangements often weaken mechanisms of accountability between political authorities and the publics they claim to represent (Disch, 2019).

Key to these discussions is the separation of (i) representative democracy as a form of government, and (ii) representative politics as an element of the governing process (Castiglione and Pollak, 2019b). This distinction challenges the previously unquestioned relationship between modern democracy and representation (Pitkin, 2004). The first notion – representative democracy – emphasizes how processes of representation function within different types of democratic processes and how to improve

democratic governance. This is a normative solution to the crises of representation (Tormey, 2015), enabling democratic citizenship (Warren, 2019) in an approach that mainly considers the product of representation (Castiglione and Pollak, 2019b).

The second perspective – representative politics – is more interested in representation as a process independent of theories or practices of democracy. It recognizes that actors can advocate for the interests or perspectives of individuals and groups beyond formal constituencies (Mansbridge, 2003), thereby expanding the field of representation beyond voters and elected officials to include a wider range of actors operating across institutional and public arenas. It aims to understand how political identities are constructed (Hayat, 2019) and political representation takes place (Disch, 2019). This perspective foregrounds the performative and symbolic practices – such as claim-making and identity construction – through which diverse actors generate political authority and legitimacy, even outside formal democratic institutions. Because we are interested in the representative political claims of fossil fuel actors, it is this latter perspective, emphasizing the process of representation, that we develop.

In this respect, our paper follows the so-called ‘constructivist turn’ (Disch, 2015) in understanding the constitution of representation across different settings. This turn deviates from Pitkin’s (1967) influential definition of representation as ‘a making present again ... of something which is nevertheless not present literally or in fact’ (Pitkin, 1967, pp. 8–9) by viewing political representation as forming the ‘identity of what is represented’ (Laclau, 1996, p. 87). Thus, constructivist theories view representation as performative, with ‘groups’, ‘interests’ or ‘identities’ constituted in the political process of representation. From this position, political representation is mobilized to ‘facilitate the formation of political groups and identities’ (Urbinati, 2006, p. 37) and their self-awareness as represented (Castiglione and Pollak, 2019a). For example, social movement organizations mobilize and aggregate ‘constituent perspectives and interest in the process of representing them’ (Disch, 2019, p. 5). Representation involves making something present. However, this does not mean that the represented are constructed from scratch. Rather, the political subject of representative politics ‘becomes recognizable as a unified and not merely aggregated entity only by means of representation’ (Disch, 2015, p. 490).

Important here is Saward’s (2006, 2010) theory of political representation as *claim making*. It is described as follows: ‘A maker of representation (M) puts forward a subject (S) which stands for an object (O) that is related to referent (R) and is offered to an audience (A)’ (Saward, 2010, p. 36). Representation is considered a process of ‘collective subject construction through the making of claims’ (Urbinati, 2019b, p. 183). For example, a maker (e.g., a politician, NGO, and activist), puts forward a claim to represent a referent (e.g., the people, a cause, and a group) to an audience (e.g., politicians or other citizens) in a specific context (e.g., media) through a symbol or image of the represented (i.e., ‘the people’ or ‘the environment’). Rather than speaking *for* a constituency (‘represent’ in the typical sense), claim-making solicits the represented to recognize themselves in a claim and support those who made it (Disch, 2019). This makes representative politics a dynamic and ongoing process that can be pursued by different actors (not just politicians) and across different spheres of society.

Within political theory, the idea of making representative claims by constructing a ‘people’ has been influential in understanding recent trends. For example, during the

global wave of anti-austerity and pro-democracy social movements that emerged after the financial crisis, social movements constituted the people in whose name they spoke through representative claims, such as the slogan ‘We are the 99 percent’ (Hayat, 2022). Similarly, populist authoritarian figures, such as US President Donald Trump, appeal to and side with ‘the people’ against ‘elites’ when evoking a crisis or threat (Moffitt, 2016). Missing in these discussions is the corporation and its claims to represent ‘the people’ in political contestation. How might big business and industries, both within nations and transnationally, make constitutive claims to represent the people in order to advance their commercial agenda?

CORPORATE POLITICAL REPRESENTATION

While the field of management and organization theory (MOT) lacks a systematic understanding of business and industry roles in representative politics, there are three adjacent discussions within MOT that are useful in scaffolding a position on corporate representative politics: (i) discussions concerning Political Corporate Social Responsibility (PCSR), (ii) the literature on Corporate Political Activity (CPA), and (iii) an emerging literature on corporate populism that unpacks the contested politics of representation.

First, PCSR scholars focus on the corporation as a political actor and its increasing legitimacy and role in public deliberations, democratic consultation, and political decision-making processes (Scherer et al., 2016; Scherer and Palazzo, 2011). An important contribution of this literature illustrates how representational politics is not limited to a principal-agent relationship on a territorial basis, with governments responsive to a national citizenry. PCSR highlights the prevalence of transnational arenas for certain public policy issues and considers how representative politics is influenced by private businesses as well as civil society actors (Scherer, 2018). Through private governance mechanisms, such as multi-stakeholder initiatives, firms enlist civil society actors and other relevant stakeholders to deliberate over rules for governing business activities (Di Nardo et al., 2025). In these initiatives, delegates represent stakeholder organizations, but there are also members that informally represent people or public values (Reinecke and Donaghey, 2022). By attending to deliberations outside formal democratic processes, PCSR highlights the possibility of claiming to act in the best interest of the people, without accountability in the form of elections (Hussain and Moriarty, 2018).

What these deliberations imply is the apparent legitimacy of representing the corporation in this ‘democratic’ dialogue. This is not mere self-representation; the actors make representative claims for other actors in front of audiences. For example, in a study of multi-stakeholder initiatives, Roussey et al. (2019) found that mining representatives claimed to represent the marginalized victims of the industry in its deliberations. However, the delegates also represented the mining industry. Thus, through representative claims, the industry was constituted as a legitimate actor in representative politics and subsequently contested the representation of the ‘victims’. The PCSR literature demonstrates how, through representative politics, corporate actors can reconfigure ‘the represented’ and marginalize those voices they claim to champion.

Second, the CPA literature has long examined how businesses seek to shape government policy to advance their interests (Hillman and Keim, 1995). CPA is typically defined as ‘any deliberate firm action intended to influence governmental policy or process’ (Getz, 1997, pp. 32–3). This body of work focuses primarily on the strategic practices firms employ to reduce legislative uncertainty and mitigate policy threats. These efforts target the political sphere, where elected officials and civil servants are formally expected to act in the public interest. Tactics include funding political campaigns and think tanks (Walker and Rea, 2014), establishing government affairs and public relations departments (Lawton et al., 2013), hiring lobbying, legal, and PR firms (Tyllström and Murray, 2021), and placing executives in influential public or political positions (Barley, 2007). In this way, CPA can align regulatory outcomes with industry preferences, culminating in regulatory capture (Dal Bó, 2006).

In addition to influencing policymakers directly, CPA can also enter the public sphere – the domain of civic deliberation over collective values and interests (Habermas, 1989). In the public sphere, firms shape representative politics by influencing public discourse, notably through political advertising and the provision of media content (Nyberg and Murray, 2020). Rather than lobbying officials alone, business interests shape what governments perceive as the ‘general will’ by constructing and mobilizing public opinion. For instance, Murray et al. (2016, p. 925) illustrate how the Australian mining industry created a ‘simulacrum—a representation of a representation—substituting for the public’ during its campaign against a proposed tax. In this case, the industry claimed to speak on behalf of ‘the people’, asserting representative authority that displaced genuine public engagement.

The literature on CPA demonstrates how firms and industries make representative claims in the political sphere of decision-making and the public sphere of civil deliberation and opinion-making (Nyberg, 2021). In these spheres, firms claim to represent the people in public disputes over, for example, policies and legislation (Murray and Nyberg, 2021). Firms also employ intermediaries to make representative claims on their behalf in the political sphere (Tyllström and Murray, 2021) and manufacture a pseudo public through astroturfing to act as ‘the people’ when making representative claims in support of the firm (Walker and Rea, 2014). Thus, rather than claiming to act in their own interests, CPA is employed for representative claim making for ‘the people’.

Third, claims of representing the people is further discussed in the emerging literature on corporate populism (see, e.g., Feldmann and Morgan, 2023; Sallai et al., 2024). While the literature is foremost interested in business operations in political environments dominated by populism, the definition of populism is important for understanding representative politics: theories of populism are premised on leaders’ or organizations’ claims to speak on behalf of ‘the people’ against ‘the elites’ (Johnsen et al., 2023; Nyberg and Murray, 2023). Populism is performative, both in constituting the people (Laclau, 2005) and staging for the people as an ‘audience democracy’ (Urbinati, 2019a). Firms and industries do not just respond to, but actively engage in populist politics when claiming to represent the people against governments or other national or international ‘elites’ (Nyberg and Murray, 2023). This includes leveraging nationalism in their strategies to align themselves with the people against antagonistic countries (Yue et al., 2024). Corporations thus play an active role in shaping who ‘the

people' are – and against whom they are mobilized – through competing representative claims.

The scaffolding of these three literatures in MOT provides a useful starting point to understand how corporations engage in representative politics. By the same token, MOT literature provides no systematic theoretical account of how corporate political representation in different spheres influences each other, or the implications of this for how people or nations are constructed. Thus, we ask: *how do industries represent 'the people' and what are the implications for political decision-making?*

METHODS

Fossil fuels have been central to Australia's economic development and national identity, embedded in the country's settler-colonial history of resource extractivism and state formation (Baer, 2016). Coal mining, established during early colonization, became intertwined with regional livelihoods, export growth, and national prosperity narratives, while the expansion of the gas industry in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries consolidated Australia's position as a global energy exporter and strengthened the political influence of resource industries (Wright et al., 2022). These historical arrangements continue to shape contemporary political struggles over energy and climate policy.

Over the last 20 years, climate change and fossil energy have become a source of increasingly heated political debate in Australia (Crowley, 2021). In line with the sector's global resistance to climate mitigation, fossil fuel firms have been central participants in this controversy through public relations campaigns, lobbying, political donations and revolving door appointments between industry and government, all aimed at limiting the regulation of carbon emissions and promoting coal mining, gas extraction and coal-fired power generation (Wilkinson, 2020). The industry is not only intrinsically linked with statecraft through lobbying and public relations but also is a powerful voice in many communities around Australia (Wright et al., 2022).

Data Collection

To provide insights into the dynamics of representative politics, we adopted a qualitative research method involving extensive semi-structured interviews with key informants and a review of relevant media and industry documentation. Interviews have the advantage of richer and more detailed explanations of the relations between fossil fuel firms and their stakeholders, as well as the underlying motivations and justification of actions. Seeking to explore the apparent lack of transition to a low-carbon economy, we interviewed 77 corporate executives, lobbyists, industry association leaders, political representatives (including two former Prime Ministers and a former State Premier), as well as representatives from leading non-government organizations (see Table I). The interviews provided insights into the political sphere, something that is notoriously hard to obtain considering the lack of transparency of what goes on in lobbying meetings.

The participants in our research were all involved in the carbon energy sector albeit in varying capacities. Through an analysis of key media outlets in Australia (*The Australian*,

Table I. Interview participants

<i>Category</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Total</i>
Fossil Fuel Industry (Coal, Oil & Gas)	16	Director/CEO	6
		Environment/Climate Change Specialist	6
		Government Relations & Policy Specialist	2
		Client/Business Development Specialist	2
Energy Generation/ Retail	8	Director/CEO	2
		Transitions Specialist	2
		Business Development Specialist	2
		Government Relations & Policy Specialist	2
Lobbyists and Industry Groups	9	Director/CEO (Industry Group)	2
		Senior advisor (Industry Group)	3
		Lobbyist	4
Politicians, advisors & staff	22	Politicians (State/Local)	2
		Politicians (federal)	7
		Advisors/departmental staff (State/Local)	5
		Advisors/department staff (Federal)	8
Environmental NGOs	12	Director/CEO	6
		Campaigner/organizer	6
Trade union representatives	2	Union officials	2
Energy industry analysts	8	Industry analysts	6
		Academics	2
Total			77

The Australian Financial Review, *The Age/Sydney Morning Herald*, and *ABC News*), participants were identified as representatives of key organizations involved in the energy transition and with knowledge about climate change policy. Following ethics approval, potential interviewees were contacted by email and asked to participate in an interview regarding their engagement with the low-carbon economy. Transcripts were de-identified to encourage interviewees to speak freely. The interviews covered a consistent range of topics, including participants' length of time within their respective industries, level of engagement with policy making, political views, attitudes to and interactions with other stakeholders, opportunities and barriers to change, and opinions on climate science. Most interviews lasted around an hour and were conducted between 2019 and 2023. Interviews were fully transcribed and later coded in the qualitative data analysis software *QSR NVivo*.

In addition to the interviews, we also collected public documents and media releases from leading coal and gas companies in Australia as well as the key industry associations (the Minerals Council of Australia and APPEA/Australian Energy Producers) (29 items). These documents provided information about these businesses' activities in the public sphere. We undertook a review of major Australian media sources, parliamentary speeches, and public addresses by high-profile politicians for commentary on climate

Table II. Media and document sources

<i>Source</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i># docs</i>
Queensland Resources Council, Business Council of Australia, APPEA, Minerals Council of Australia	Industry association media releases	29
Parliament of Australia	Ministerial press releases and speeches	57
Hansard	Record of the proceedings of Australian Parliament and its committees	133
The Australian	Daily nationally distributed newspaper; owned by News Corp	44
The Sydney Morning Herald	Daily local newspaper owned by Nine Entertainment Co.	39
ABC News	National public broadcaster with online news website	89
The Guardian Australia	Online news website; owned by Guardian Media Group	48
Sky News Australia videos	Television news; owned by News Corp	42
Total		481

and energy politics. This utilized keyword searches of the media database Factiva, the parliamentary *Hansard* and specific industry association websites for the words ‘climate change’ and ‘fossil fuel’. The search was date-limited to 15 years, starting in 2009, with the beginning of political debate over the introduction of a carbon pricing mechanism and ending in 2024. This search resulted in a further 207 parliamentary documents and 311 media items which were also included in our qualitative data analysis (Table II).

Data Analysis

The analysis of the document and interview data was undertaken together through a three-stage coding process using the *QSR NVivo* software package. In the first stage of analysis, one of the authors undertook an initial process of ‘open coding’ of segments of text reflecting similar wording or activities into first order codes (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). These codes represented actors (e.g., ‘activists’, ‘students’, ‘politicians’, and ‘business leaders’), discourses (e.g., ‘transition’, ‘economy’, and ‘denial’), phenomena (e.g., ‘fossil fuels’, ‘climate change’, and ‘renewables’) and practices (e.g., ‘advocacy’, ‘alliances’, and ‘protests’). An emergent theme from our initial coding concerned how the fossil fuel industry justified the expansion of coal and gas in Australia and promoted their position as in the best interests of Australia, that is, representing the citizens’ interests. This led us to engage with the conceptual framework of political representation and how representation is articulated in different sectors of society but also to different audiences.

Following this recognition, we conducted a second stage of coding in which we sought to identify the different ways in which the industry made representative claims. Engaging with Saward’s (2006, 2010) components of representative claims, we coded

four elements present in these claims: the maker, the subject, the object and the audience. As an illustrative example of the coding of our data, we detected how the coal industry in Australia claimed to represent the people: the mining industry association, the MCA (maker), maintained that the mining industry (subject) represented the people of Australia and their interests (object), in the political marketing campaign aimed at Australian voters (audience). Thus, we coded the representative claims made in the documents, but also descriptions of representative claims in the interviews (see Appendix 1 for coding examples).

In the next step of the analysis, we investigated the practices and direction of the representative claims. That is, where the ‘maker’ issued these claims and the different ‘subjects’, ‘objects’ and ‘audiences’ for these claims. It became apparent that elements of representative claims were sometimes obscured, dependent on how and where they were made. For example, the industry (maker) sometimes claimed to be the people (subject) making representative claims on behalf of other citizens (objects) in social media (audience). At other times, a sympathetic media (maker) might identify the industry (subject) as acting on behalf of the nation (object) to media consumers (audience), or aligned politicians (M) might advocate the industry (S) as standing for the nation (O) which was offered to other politicians and the public sphere (A). Through the analysis, we identified six types of representative claims in the overlapping public and political spheres (detailed in the findings sections below with further examples in the Appendix 1).

In the final step of the analysis, we went back to political theory to align and compare our analysis with previous discussions of representation and influence (detailed in the Appendix 1). We identified what the political representations achieved in the public and political spheres, respectively, and the consequences of the representative claims: what the representative politics achieved in forming identities (‘who we are’), knowledge (‘what we know’) and public policy (‘what we decide to do’). These six forms of political representation created a loop that holds a grip over national politics; what we refer to as *carbon populism*. In the empirical sections below, we show the different types of representation in the public and political sphere as well as what the representative politics achieve in legitimizing the industry, authorizing public policy and enabling the continuation of political representation.

POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The fossil fuel industry engaged in a range of practices in making representative claims in the public sphere. In doing this, the industry: (i) claimed to act ‘as’ the people in *simulated representation*, creating an equivalence between the industry and the people; (ii) claimed to act ‘on behalf’ of or ‘for’ the people in *symbolic representation*; and (iii) acted as the media promoting the industry in a *staged representation*. These three forms of political representation constructed an identity of what Australia and Australians are in the public sphere.

Simulated Representation

The fossil fuel industry displayed a form of simulated representation in social media by presenting itself through its communications as the people. For instance, during 2017,

multinational mining giant Glencore spent millions of dollars financing a social media campaign of pro-coal messaging. This campaign sought to sway public opinion towards the benefits of coal energy by creating ‘grassroots’ social networks such as ‘Energy in Australia’ on Facebook. This campaign espoused the benefits of ‘clean coal’ technology, questioned climate science and attacked renewable energy as unreliable and driving up electricity costs (Knaus, 2019). By funding astroturfing – creating a fake grassroots movement to disguise corporate sponsorship – the industry’s policy agenda appeared as a form of spontaneous citizen activism. By constructing itself as the vanguard of public sentiment, these funded social movements could attack renewable energy from the position of the people.

In our interviews, a lobbyist for the fossil fuel industry outlined the technical work involved in getting the message out via social media campaigns:

‘So, third party endorsement and campaigning is really important now. It’s not Labor or Liberal Party saying “BHP is good” and it’s not BHP saying “it’s good”, it’s the assistant principal of the Townsville State School who are on digital media, social media, who are all reading the *Townsville Bulletin* ... It’s actually saying “BHP is good because it’s good for me, my family, my community”’ (I56, Director, lobbying firm).

In these forms of representation, the maker of the claim is here seen to be a citizen, with the industry as the subject; the industry thus acts as the subject in making claims about themselves as the object. In doing this, they forge an identity of the people that is equivalent to that of the industry by simulating to act ‘as’ the people in the public sphere (Habermas, 1989).

Symbolic Representation

In the second form of political representation in the public sphere, the fossil fuel industry campaigned heavily through television, radio, newspapers and social media to present itself as acting on behalf of ‘the people’ and a cornerstone of national identity. These practices worked towards building legitimacy for the industry as an important voice defending the interests of all Australians. A key practice was marketing and advocacy concerning the industry’s role in representing citizen’s interests and identities. An example of such campaigning occurred when the government proposed carbon pricing legislation. It led to a coalition of mining, energy and industrial interests that mounted a coordinated public relations blitzkrieg against what was labelled a ‘carbon tax’ (Crowley, 2017). The campaign included full-page advertisements in major newspapers, television commercials, talks and public rallies. These messages argued that the legislation threatened employment, regional economies, government revenue and the national economy. The coal industry in particular targeted electorates where they claimed jobs would be lost. The campaign was ultimately successful. After briefly introducing the legislation, the then Labor government was voted out, and the policy immediately repealed (Crowley, 2021).

By highlighting the role that fossil fuels played in everyday life, the industry identified its own interests as representative of the broader public and therefore the well-being of Australian citizens and the national interest. An emotive and localized discourse of regional development and job creation became a prominent theme of the industry’s public

campaigns, forging a positive symbolic link between citizens' concerns and the industry's ongoing expansion. As the head of a state mining association stated in an opinion piece in one of the country's major newspapers:

'Every day in New South Wales more than 22,000 hard working men and women put on their hi-vis shirts and hard hats and go to work at one of the most arduous jobs around, a job that contributes so much to the state—coal mining ... our miners live in the towns near where mining takes place. They shop at the local supermarket, eat at the local cafes, their kids play for the sports team on the weekend. They are major contributors to the fabric of their local community'. (Galilee, 2019)

By centring the discussion on employment, the industry spoke to the public as representative of the community – the idea was to position the industry as integral to the 'fabric' of the community. Fossil energy was presented as fundamental to the Australian way of life and embedded within the average citizen's daily experience. In this form of political representation, the industry (maker) claimed that mining workers (subject) represented the interests of Australia (object) in the public sphere, with the audience consisting of both the people they constructed and the politicians they intended to influence. The industry claimed to 'stand for' or symbolize the people in representing them (Pitkin, 1967).

Staged Representation

Access to the nation's major media outlets also provided the fossil fuel industry with a powerful public megaphone for the dissemination of its justifications and critiques of environmentalists and political opponents. In particular, the Rupert Murdoch-owned News Corporation (the country's dominant media organization) proved to be a staunch supporter of the coal and gas industries, and its mastheads reproduced many of the key messages of the industry through sympathetic news items, editorials and opinion pieces. We interviewed a former Prime Minister who described how the fossil fuel industry benefitted from such a friendly media environment:

'You cannot underestimate their importance given that the Murdoch media controls 70 per cent of the nation's print media. They have the media monopoly in every capital city virtually, except Perth. They own 13 of the 14 newspapers in Queensland. They are the dominant media players in every other state capital. Therefore, if each day they are running a story fed to them by the carbon lobby about the impact of what is proposed on the economy and jobs, what's the mission statement there? It's to put the government on the defensive, and it's also to open up fault lines within the government'. (162)

In addition to this supportive media, paid newspaper advertorials (or 'special advertising features' and lift-outs that read like news pages) provided the industry another means of representation in the public sphere. A good example of this occurred in December 2024 when News Corporation tabloids in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Adelaide produced near identical front-page 'exclusive' reports and lift-out features promoting the importance of the nation's gas industry. Under headings such as 'Only gas can save

us now' and 'Step on the gas: Only way to avoid higher bills, blackouts', the executives of major energy corporations provided supportive quotes and railed against regulatory obstructions to the industry's expansion. It was only when readers turned to the back of these 'special reports' that it was revealed they were in fact advertising features proudly sponsored by the major gas companies themselves (Morton, 2024).

Through staged representation, the fossil fuel industry (as the maker of the representation) could present itself as objective newspaper commentary which positioned the industry (subject) as acting for the well-being of the nation (object) to the readership of the newspapers (audience). These advertorials in print and television networks promoted the fossil fuel industry as a champion of Australia, using its business operations to serve the nation's economic interest. By mobilizing a sympathetic media, the fossil fuel industry could shape representative politics behind the scenes, presenting itself as part of the public sphere in promoting its economic contribution to the economy and local employment. The public is treated as a staged audience (Habermas, 1989), with industry aligning the voice of the public sphere with the industry's agenda.

POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN THE POLITICAL SPHERE

A second theme in our analysis focused on how the fossil fuel industry claimed to represent the people in the political sphere. Access to the political sphere was based on industry claims that it could use its expertise in energy and knowledge of climate policy to advance Australian interests. This was based on an identity the industry had constructed in the public sphere and claimed to represent in the political sphere. By doing this, they (i) claimed to act on behalf of the people in a form of *substitutive representation*, (ii) claimed to act on behalf of the politicians in a form of *proxy representation*, and (iii) claimed an equivalence between the political sphere and their interests through *captured representation*. The knowledge of energy issues and endorsement to act on behalf of politicians authorized the industry as experts in handling energy policy.

Surrogate Representation

Our analysis identified a range of practices through which the industry sought to leverage its political influence, principally through lobbying, networking, and industry association representation. Political lobbying took various forms. For the largest multinational corporations, gaining an audience with a national leader or a resources/energy minister was a straightforward affair. As the director of an energy NGO noted: 'if the head of BHP wants to talk to the Prime Minister, the Prime Minister will meet with him' (I77). Fossil fuel and energy companies further cultivated political influence by hiring external lobbying firms to advocate on their behalf. A former federal politician recalled:

'... the fossil fuel industry was very well organized with all their lobby delegations who came around ... they were always in the Parliament, always at *Aussies* (parliamentary café), drinking coffee with whoever they could line up. They were very proactive. They had a lobbying firm, lobbying for them, who would bring delegations through, quite regularly, from the different sectors'. (I46)

Corporate political party donations were another way access to government decision makers could be secured. As a former state Premier acknowledged: ‘the money does count. It gives access’. (I14).

In their lobbying, fossil fuel executives and lobbyists emphasized their expertise in the development and protection of the nation’s resource security and interconnected this with the notion that they were representing the national interest. The industry constructed itself as the reliable experts needed to implement good economic policy, and the creators of public value through employment, revenue for public coffers and broader economic growth. As one lobbyist explained, this frequently involved simply presenting government ministers with a proposal that stressed the employment and economic outcomes that would result:

‘if you had a major project right, so you’re [name] lobbyist and I’ve got to go up to George Street in Brisbane where Parliament House is and up to Capital Hill in Canberra, I would walk up with my folders and documents saying, “Hey Prime Minister, Treasurer, Environment Minister, Mining Minister, I’m representing a company. We’re going to dig up X millions of tonnes of coal and we’re going to create 10,000 jobs and all this money.” That’s how you did it okay. So it was about the economic benefits, revenues, royalties, jobs, dah dah dah, infrastructure’. (I56)

Executives justified this activity by arguing that governments and policymakers did not have the requisite knowledge to understand the policies they were creating; thus, companies framed themselves as able experts who could help government make sound decisions advantageous for all Australians. Through surrogate representation, the industry (maker) put forward fossil fuel projects (object) that represent the will of the people (subject) to the politicians (audience). The industry acts on behalf of people who are not their constituents (Mansbridge, 2003).

Substitutive Representation

While politicians and government departments were technically responsible for developing policy, participants argued that they lacked insight regarding the complexities of the industry and its importance to national prosperity. The industry’s knowledge was indispensable since politicians themselves did not have the expertise to act in the best interest of the nation.

The other dimension to it all is that I think literacy around energy, energy economics and energy policy is pretty low in Australia by comparison to other places I’ve worked. [Interviewer: Do you mean in the general community or levels of government?] Levels of government. ... It’s complicated stuff ... At the detail level it’s different, but the bias amongst policymakers and probably most sections of the media in Australia – the bias is towards “you’ve got to prove to me why development is good” and their starting position will be “I’ll object to it unless you can convince me otherwise”. (I6, senior manager, energy company)

For this interviewee, policymakers were ‘anti-development’ and in desperate need of education regarding the national importance of resource development and expansion.

This view was sometimes shared by governmental ministers. Industry interviewees describe being asked to help them understand the implications of its policies:

So [the energy minister] asked me to go and brief all the backbenchers and talk to them about the impacts and whatever. So, I spent a bit of time in Canberra at his request talking to his backbenchers. (I20 CEO energy company)

That fossil fuel industry officials were asked to assist government clarify its own policy decisions is common; however, the way in which expertise was constructed by this Minister (i.e., to lobby their own backbench) reveals troubling levels of corporate penetration into government. As the manager of one energy company noted, this did not always occur in an open and public manner:

So, if there was a parliamentary inquiry or something like that, or a Senate hearing, I'd go to that and kind of be the expert. But behind closed doors, there was a lot of interaction with State Governments, Federal Government. (I50)

In the processes of both policy development and building consensus around those policies, industry representatives argued they were able to fill what they construed as a void of expertise, developing policy alongside politicians, but then also acting as their substitute when seeking agreement (Pitkin, 1967). In a substitutive representation, the industry (maker) was asked by government (subject) to lobby for them or represent them to an audience of fellow politicians.

Captured Representation

The blurring divide between politics and the fossil fuel industry was particularly evident in the social embeddedness of industry representatives and executives within the political sphere. This involved personal and prior professional relationships. A common theme was the concept of a 'revolving door' between industry and government. For example, several reports have listed the career trajectories of retiring politicians and bureaucrats as they move into senior industry and consulting roles (Corbett, 2016; Manning, 2014), as well as industry representatives taking up political advisory appointments (Lucas, 2018). This inter-connectedness of industry and politics included both of the country's major political parties, highlighting a strong capital-state nexus that is committed to the continued expansion of fossil energy resources (Baer, 2016).

The close linkages between the fossil fuel sector and politics also infiltrated political bureaucracy, with one respondent who had worked at senior levels in environmental administration noting how mining companies often seconded staff to work with planning departments on mining approvals:

'I've seen this first-hand; I've been a part of this. They sit in meetings together; they decide how to address issues together when they're also the Consent Authority. The linkages between the fossil fuel industry and governments aren't just royalties based, they're personal and that was a strategy of the fossil fuel industry'. (I2)

This close ‘understanding’ between different levels of government and the fossil fuel sector were often explicitly highlighted in the public statements by politicians expressing their loyalty to the resources sector. The industry was depicted as the backbone of the Australian success story and deserving of a seat at the table. Examples included: advocating for the appointment of a former resources minister to chair a peak mining industry association (Chan, 2016); the Federal Treasurer displaying a lump of coal in the parliament and declaring its national benefits (Murphy, 2017); and a former Minister for Resources posting a heartfelt note of farewell to the Australian mining sector on Facebook: ‘It has been such an honour to represent the Australian mining sector over the past year’ (Vorrath, 2017). As a senior mining union official confided: ‘Yes, there is a revolving door of consultants and management personnel between ministerial offices and industry groups, and companies. There always has been!’ (I16).

As a result, the division between industry and politics became increasingly cloudy in terms of who politicians represent and whose interests they act on behalf of. In practice, as one former state Premier explained, knowledge of these relationships and presumption of shared interest filtered through the governance system:

Some of them will develop a cosy relationship where they talk to the public servants. Public servants are ill-advised to do that, but they might imagine that the lobbyist, being a former politician or chief of staff to a former politician, has got influence with their masters and that they might assume without anything being said. (I14, former state Premier)

This close relationship indicates the extensive penetration of industry into government. As far as the audience is concerned, this revolving door means that the maker and the subject of representative claims are difficult to tell apart. There is an equivalence of industry and politicians, with the industry themselves developing the policies impacting their industry. The equivalence of the fossil fuel sector and politicians comes full circle when politicians, rather than the industry itself, advocate for the sector. In this captured form of representation, politicians act as representatives of industry rather than citizens (Dal Bó, 2006).

CARBON POPULISM

Our findings demonstrate how the fossil fuel industry has engaged in different forms of representation in the public and political spheres. In this section, we further illustrate the political implications of these forms of representation in explaining the development of what we term ‘carbon populism’ (see Figure 1). Carbon populism contains three key aspects: the Australian identity (‘who we are’), the useful knowledge in advancing Australia’s interests (‘what we know’), and the legislative public policies promoting Australia’s interests (‘what we decide to do’). In the sections below, we show (i) how the political representation in the public sphere legitimizes the influence in the political sphere, (ii) how the political representation in the political sphere authorizes energy policy, and (iii) how these policies strengthen the industry to further enable its representation in the public sphere.

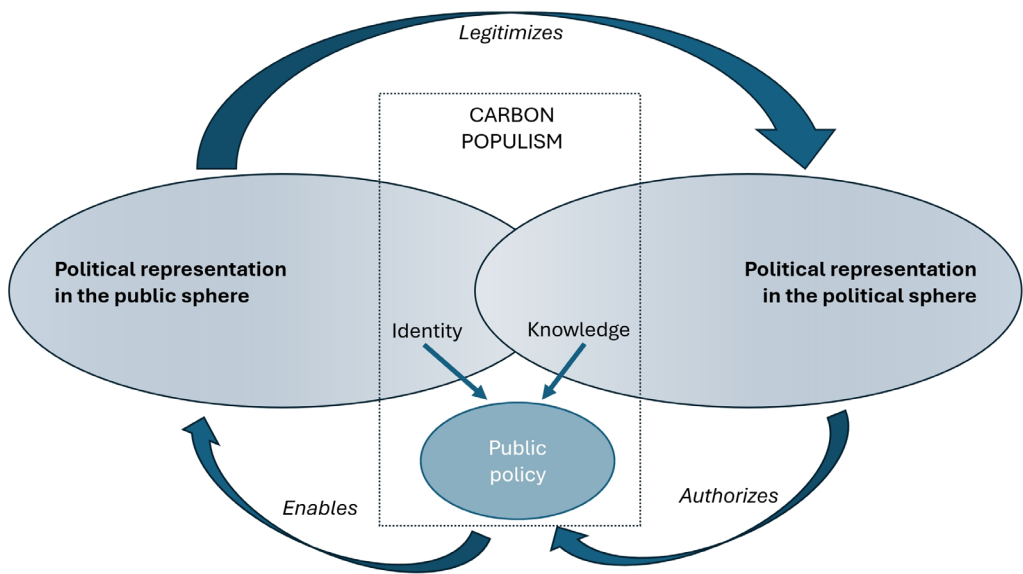


Figure 1. The workings of carbon populism

Creating a People that Legitimizes the Fossil Fuel Industry

Through political representation in the public sphere, the industry constructed the people's identity. They also differentiated this identity from those who were opposed to the expansion of the industry. In this way, the industry was able to claim they represent 'the people' and champion, what it had itself constructed, as the national identity/interest against those demanding its curtailment.

For instance, the growth in climate activism and protests against fossil fuel expansion, were characterized by the industry as a disruptive agenda which threatened employment and economic growth. As a media release from a resource association stated in response to an environmental campaign against new coal mines, '... green activists are holding back massive job creating resources projects at a time when regional Queensland is crying out for employment' (Queensland Resources Council, 2019). Environmental activists were portrayed by the industry as unrepresentative of the Australian population. In a speech to an industry audience, the CEO of one of the country's largest gas companies described climate protestors as out of touch with the interests of mainstream citizens:

They have no regard for the cost-of-living pressures facing ordinary Australians in the outer suburbs of our cities and in rural and regional Australia. In fact, they want to make things harder for them by diverting taxpayer money away from essential services like health, into subsidies for uneconomic energy technologies and the Teslas garaged in the wealthiest electorates in the country (Rabe, 2023).

By excluding certain voices, the industry could claim to represent the national identity. As conservative Prime Minister Scott Morrison declared to an annual resource industry

gathering: ‘we have always believed in playing to our strengths, not undermining our strengths as a nation. And unquestionably the resources sector is a foundational strength of the Australian economy’ (Morrison, 2019). This legitimizes the industry’s involvement in the political sphere, since they are presented as acting on behalf of Australia and Australians (an identity they took part in creating).

The Knowledge that Authorizes Policy

The industry’s representation within the political sphere accentuated their knowledge of energy questions and even how to address climate change. Civil society organizations and researchers critical of the industry and its advocacy for fossil energy expansion were dismissed as lacking sufficient knowledge of global trade economics. While critics complained about how multinational mining companies minimized tax, reduced royalty payments and often avoided environmental standards, the industry responded that they were the only organizations capable of harnessing the value of the nation’s resources and resulting economic prosperity. As a gas industry association chairperson argued in an editorial:

‘Despite what our detractors say, our industry is doing a lot of heavy lifting when it comes to tackling climate change. These are facts professional activists constantly ignore. But our challenge isn’t to fight the professional activists who ignore credible science, attack shareholders and dismiss experts’. (McConville, 2021)

By repeating the common refrain concerning the industry’s centrality to the Australian economy and framing naysayers as ‘detractors’ who ‘ignore credible science’ for their own ‘professional’ interests, industry rhetoric positions itself as the apotheosis of truth while discrediting criticisms raised by others.

By contrast, industry representatives presented public policies favouring their investment in resource extraction as essential if economic development and job creation were to eventuate. As a senior manager in a major coal company outlined:

If you want to create jobs and investment in a country, you have to have people prepared to put their hand in their pocket and take the risk, and governments understand that. So, governments can’t do that on their own, they realise that companies like ours and others – construction, all those big companies – if you want somebody to invest and create jobs and have a healthy economy, you’ve got to have the right policy environment to facilitate that outcome. (I10)

The political acceptance of this industry rhetoric was evident in statements made by politicians who championed the industry’s policy positions. As a conservative federal politician stated in a parliamentary speech:

This is the crazy way that people think. We in Australia put our costs up, shut our mines down, put people on the dole ... Be realistic. Shut industries down and move them overseas, and those same industries that do the same job overseas will actually produce more CO₂ on the planet. (Commonwealth of Australia, 4 December 2018, p. 9364)

Critics of the fossil fuel industry, being ‘crazy’, should consequently have no say in the development of energy policy. Rather, and considering their expertise, the fossil fuel industries themselves were best placed to develop these policies. Their expertise on resource management, energy security and trade made their policy involvement inevitable. A fossil fuel public relations manager described the rationale:

... our industry body actually advocates on behalf of our industry in relation to policy, and that is the body that would work with government in relation to advocating our policy desires, criticising when we think they get it wrong. But most likely working proactively with government through their various channels to ensure that we have a policy outcome that is good for business and investment and employment, and all the things that government like to talk about. (I10)

This is how industry, often working in tandem with government, claimed to act on behalf of the people, while providing talking points to government that were framed as beneficial to the industry, government and most importantly, the nation.

Public Policy that Enables Political Representation

The acceptance of the fossil fuel industry’s authority over energy and economic policy further reinforced and enabled their political representation in the public sphere, bringing the process of carbon populism full circle. For instance, proposals to open new coal and gas projects invariably received favourable government support, often in the face of spirited local and environmental opposition. Commenting on the proposal to construct a new mega coal mine by an Indian resources company in Queensland, one observer noted the way in which the government provided unbridled support and incentives for the project:

Anastacia Palaszczuk (Queensland Premier) came out and gave the priority infrastructure status for Queensland, which essentially meant fast-tracking the project, which was crazy. Then Matt Canavan (Federal Resources Minister) came out and said he was going to use \$1 billion of public money to subsidise the project! (I25)

Similarly, critics noted how governments provided significant financial benefits to the fossil fuel industry in terms of royalty payments and fuel tax rebates. As one economist noted regarding the industry’s sway over public policy:

I keep pointing out, well, there’s actually 10 or 20 billion bucks of royalties every year that you’re not getting from the gas industry, so that could fund a hell of a lot of your promises. The diesel fuel rebate is a \$2 billion subsidy to the coal industry. Why are you giving a tax haven-based, tax avoiding group of foreigners a massive subsidy? (I11)

While the industry was loathe to publicly profess their influence over public policy issues such as development approvals, industry subsidies, resources tax, and royalty

payments, proposals to increase the regulation of the industry or the payments that it made to government often resulted in a swift and coordinated political response. For instance, as a senior manager in a major coal company said of the industry's response to the government proposal to increase the tax on the industry's profits:

So, the industry's running a very collective, concerted, collaborative campaign to actually highlight to government the frustrations that we're feeling ... we did that with the [RSPT] at a federal level. When we work together collectively, we are very influential. (I10)

This outsized political influence fed through into the public sphere in the way in which mining companies and industry associations would seek to play off political representatives against each other in competition for resource projects and the potential economic and employment opportunities that might follow. An example is described by an industry observer:

They [coal company] basically created a bidding war between councils where they would say we're going to create jobs – we might go to this council unless you give us more. So, you had this extraordinary situation where local governments that are relatively cash strapped were coming up with their own subsidies to try and attract [company name] business ... (I25)

Indeed, environmental organizations promoting decarbonization and tougher emissions reduction targets from government acknowledged the disadvantage they faced in challenging the political power of the fossil fuel industry. As the head of an environmental advocacy group emphasized:

They're very professional and they're very good at what they do ... If you follow the amount of media they get, the policy submissions they put in, the consistency of their arguments – even this argument about gas displacing coal in Asia, this is 3D chess stuff. They're thinking three steps ahead of everybody else. (I22)

Thus, the industry's influence over policy outcomes around resources, energy and climate gave them a significant advantage in political representations in the public sphere.

DISCUSSION

The findings above demonstrate how the fossil fuel industry shapes public discourse and influences political decision-making on energy policy. The key features of identity, knowledge and public policy constitute the foundation of what we conceptualize as *carbon populism* – a concept that describes how fossil fuel interests become equivalent with a nation's view of itself and its future (see Figure 1). The concept of carbon populism provides a compelling explanation, one not hitherto explored in the literature,

for how fossil fuel industries sustain their dominance not merely through economic or political might, but by becoming central to how the nation imagines itself and its future trajectory.

This ideological tactic makes it difficult for governments to make meaningful interventions to decarbonize their economies. Indeed, challenging the mining industry is tantamount to challenging the very fabric of Australian identity. This false (but effective) equivalence explains why politicians – even those with a decarbonization agenda – approach the topic with such striking reticence, lest they be accused of being unpatriotic and against their own people. In this manner, carbon populism allows the industry to equate climate mitigation with an assault on core Australian values and heritage (Goods, 2022); discredit scientific expertise about global warming as misguided or dangerous (Irwin et al., 2022); and conflate fossil fuel extraction with the national interest, positioning the industry as a courageous protector of Australia's economic security and prosperity (Wright et al., 2022). Carbon populism also explains the otherwise scandalous state support the industry attracts, including through subsidies, tax breaks, and infrastructure investments (Skovgaard and van Asselt, 2019), effectively foreclosing transformative energy alternatives.

In countries where carbon populism is established, fossil fuels are not just commodities but carriers of national meaning. It persists because it translates economic vulnerability into patriotic pride, making decarbonization politically and culturally controversial even when economically rational. For example, fossil-fuel production in the US, particularly oil and gas, has long been linked to freedom, independence, and the 'American way of life' (LeMenager, 2014). Further promoted by President Trump's 'drill, baby, drill' and 'America first' agenda (Guliyev, 2020), carbon production in the US has become tied to patriotic self-sufficiency. A similar connection between fossil fuels and populism can also be found in Canada, where political narratives distinguish Canadian oil as 'ethical' compared to Middle Eastern sources, cultivating moral legitimacy for continued extraction (Kuteleva and Leifso, 2020). The concept of carbon populism can then explain forms of political representation, where depiction of climate advocates and experts as 'elites' are seen as undermining the will of 'the people' (Fiorino, 2022).

The concept of carbon populism helps explain how fossil-fuel power operates not only through material infrastructures, but also through the representational dynamics that sustain them. Our concept extends Mitchell's (2009) idea of 'carbon democracy' by showing how the political possibilities structured by carbon-based energy systems are stabilized through populism. By constructing equivalence between fossil-fuel extraction and the will of 'the people', industry actors embed their interests in public discourse and state policy. Other forms of carbon populism can possibly be observed, where identity claims are linked to political parties (e.g., China) or charismatic leaders (e.g., Venezuela).

Contributions

Our analysis of carbon populism and its infiltration of representative politics offers three significant contributions to management scholarship regarding

business-government interactions. First, the literature on PCSR has convincingly demonstrated that political representation in democratic politics goes beyond the principal-agent relationship apropos the electorate and their representatives (Scherer, 2018). However, there is limited consideration of the implications that business influence has in representative politics (Goodman and Mäkinen, 2023). Our paper provides much-needed empirics in this respect by explaining how representative politics in different spheres exclude citizen participation and voice concerning representative claims. Thus, we find that the firm-cum-political actor actually undermines inclusive and participatory representation when claiming to represent national identity via populist rhetoric.

Unlike the PCSR literature's emphasis on legitimacy for business involvement in democratic participation (Scherer et al., 2016), our study suggests that firms cannot act as legitimate democratic representatives; they are not formally authorized by the citizenry nor can they be held accountable. Rather, and as illustrated by our case, their activities in the political and public spheres largely benefit the industry. By claiming to act on *behalf* and *as* the people, the industry constructs a dubious equivalence between its interests and those of the nation, posited as an aggregated unity of the people. By excluding citizen participation and voice, this equivalence derives from hegemony rather than legitimacy (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Industry dominance is based on the capacity to (re-)present its particular agenda as the general will of the people. This hegemonic practice is performative in that its representative claims inform how citizen interests are perceived in the political sphere and what kind of demands are voiced in the public sphere. These representative claims we refer to as carbon populism.

Second, the concept of carbon populism contributes to the CPA literature by surfacing the democratic implications of the business and government interface. Our findings concur with critical CPA scholars who question the assumption that CPA is a desirable component in healthy democracies (e.g., Barley, 2007; Nyberg, 2021). However, this literature has not investigated how CPA influences representative politics, which we have argued is a major area of corporate activity in the fossil fuel industry. Our findings advance this domain of scholarship by demonstrating how CPA in the public and political spheres shapes public policy through national identity construction and policy expertise. Beyond the reciprocal benefits between firms and politicians (as well as between firms and media organizations) as outlined in the findings sections, carbon populism pinpoints the negative 'externalities' of CPA in the form of undercutting representative processes, which can lead to reduced confidence in democratic institutions more generally (Katic and Hillman, 2023).

Carbon populism inevitably trades in an artificial representation, since the aggregated unity of the people is manufactured to mirror industry interests. So, when industry lobbies in the name of the people, they are lobbying on behalf of their own construct which they promote in the public sphere. This artificial representation is an important part of CPA, since it explains related practices like astroturfing (Walker and Rea, 2014) and campaigns to influence political decision making (Murray and Nyberg, 2021). Indirect CPA in the public sphere not only targets the public as an audience or electoral constituency. Rather, carbon populism constructs what big fossil fuel firms believe to be the nation's or people's best interest, thereby changing the firm's field of interaction with political

decision makers and related stakeholders (den Hond et al., 2014). Indeed, when industry interests become synonymous with the nation's interest, there is no longer any need for extensive lobbying.

Third, we contribute to emerging debates on corporate involvement in populism (Feldmann and Morgan, 2023; Sallai et al., 2024) and nationalism (Stutz and Matala, 2025; Yue et al., 2024). To date, these debates have mainly concerned how business interacts with populist or nationalistic leaders or within populist or nationalistic contexts. We advance this discussion by explaining how firms and industries promote populism ('we are the people') and nationalism (e.g., Australian identity) through representative politics. Furthermore, carbon populism, at least partly, explains why nation states too bind national identity and economic destiny to carbon-intensive industries – even in a country like Australia that regularly posts record-breaking temperatures, has experienced unprecedented bush fires and most strikingly, the progressive ruination of 'national treasures' such as the Great Barrier Reef.

The basic premise of carbon populism can then be generalized to other industries, where the industry's prosperity is rendered equivalent to the nation's interest. We propose that connecting an industry to national identity is especially heightened when that industry is challenged by foreign competitors (e.g., US steel confronting competition from China), facing legislative threats (e.g., climate change legislation in fossil fuel industries), or seeking market dominance (Nyberg and Murray, 2023). Similar strategies are currently being employed by large US tech firms. In what can be described as AI populism, CEOs are publicly framing AI leadership as central to who 'we' are as a nation by casting the US–China competition as a struggle for civilizational primacy and security (Rikap and Lundvall, 2021). Like carbon populism, this ideological formation symbolically correlates the industry's agenda with the national (or even planetary) future when securing national funding and lax legislation.

Finally, we also contribute to the discussion on representative politics in political science (Castiglione and Pollak, 2019a; Diehl and Saward, 2024; Disch et al., 2019) by demonstrating how corporations influence politics through representative claim making. The case study empirically extends this debate by itemizing the different types of representations that are made in representative politics. Our argument implies that it is not always clear who the claim makers are when an actor makes representative claims. Exploiting social media algorithms, agents can strategically reproduce claims from an unwitting claim maker.

Importantly, our study indicates that whether claims of representation are accepted or rejected by the constituents is *secondary* to the performative aspect of claim making. What makes a claim successful in representative politics is not a matter of acceptance or rejection by target audiences; it is a matter of bringing the represented (e.g., 'the people') into being. It is not designed to persuade per se but nudge the national debate slightly towards a carbon fuel future. Saward's (2010) elements of representative claims are still useful for understanding carbon populism in this regard, even though empirically the elements are often fused together. More important is the need to interrogate the power relations underlying representative politics; who speaks for whom and why?

CONCLUSION

By claiming to represent the ‘will of the people’ – a democratic motif like no other – carbon populism is dangerous because it is designed to halt much needed decarbonizing initiatives. Carbon populism thus flies in the face of genuine representative democracy. The industry’s voice in politics is not based on legitimacy; to the contrary, public opinion suggests that people are generally sceptical about business and their interactions with government officials (den Hond et al., 2014).

Furthermore, corporate claims that they represent the interests of ‘the people’ inevitably lack democratic credibility given they have not been elected and cannot be held to account by the electorate. Thus, when industry associations or lobbying firms suggest to political decision makers that they are simply conveying the sentiments of the nation, this is a ‘nation’ they have concocted. Carbon populism hurts representative democracy in other ways. For example, industry lobbying can limit the participation of citizens’ representation in the public sphere. In Australia, fossil fuel industries have campaigned for harsh new protest laws that seriously restrict citizens’ democratic rights (Irwin et al., 2022). Similar attempts to legislatively criminalize civil disobedience and peaceful protest has been endorsed in other Western representative democracies (Gulliver et al., 2023).

We finish with two suggestions for combating carbon populism and strengthening representative democratic processes in favour of decarbonization. First, in the political sphere there is potential to improve citizen inclusion in political representation through public forums, citizen panels and assemblies. For example, the Citizens Convention for Climate assembly to reduce France’s carbon emissions in 2019/2020 generated numerous lucid policy ideas. Although mostly market-friendly proposals were implemented, the assembly still showcased the possibilities of citizen inclusion and representation in the political sphere. Further shifting power away from central governments to local communities with stronger municipal councils or cooperatives might foster democratic decision-making and reduce the concentration of power. We think this is important because pluralistic decision making is arguably more difficult to influence by dominant industries and would challenge their influential role in authorizing public policy. Overall, as a counterpoint to the empty (yet sometimes seductive) rhetoric of carbon populism, expanding the use of referenda, citizen initiatives and recall elections at local and national levels would allow citizens more direct representation.

Second, regarding the public sphere, early use of social media (e.g., Twitter and Facebook) signalled some promise for increasing public platforms that evinced genuine deliberative dialogue. Unfortunately, corporate ownership and programmed algorithms have limited the democratic potential of most social media (Zuboff, 2019). This raises the possibility of alternative electronic fora, not owned and controlled by private firms or single individuals, to increase citizen political representation in the public sphere. Building ‘people’s platforms’ (Taylor, 2014) to digitally facilitate public consultation, online voting and real-time feedback on policies could render more participatory representation, especially if these platforms are available to all citizens. E-democracy could channel information and communications technology not only towards expanding decision-making participation/representation opportunities but also provide ways of tapping the creative

commons, a rich reservoir of community ideas, proposals and solutions concerning these urgent issues.

In conclusion, we recognize that our recommendations for tackling carbon populism and jumpstarting the decarbonization process (in Australia and elsewhere) may sound naïve or unrealistic. Then again, perhaps that perception is more symptomatic of the sheer dominance of capitalism today, where alternatives are deemed utopian and pie-in-the-sky. For us, more inclusive forms of participation are a crucial part of the puzzle when it comes to addressing the climate emergency. A genuinely democratic transition to a low-carbon economy is critical if future generations are to avoid carrying the horrific burden that the current power structure seems happy to hand them on a silver platter.

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APPENDIX 1

REPRESENTATIVE CLAIMS IN THE PUBLIC AND POLITICAL SPHERES

	<i>Claim-making</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Public sphere			
Simulated representation	Citizens (M) put forward the industry (S) which stands for the people (O) and is offered to the public sphere (A)	Industry represents itself <i>as</i> the people (e.g., astroturfing, social media campaigns). The representation is simulated to act 'as' the people in the public sphere (Habermas, 1989)	'Data analytics are sort of the side which we use, which is just another research tool yet again which is you do a sweep of the obvious platforms, what are people talking about. You start to gather information – and this isn't data harvesting or mining – this is just, you put a sweep out. It's all available via Facebook or whatever, they have their algorithms in place. You pick up very, very quickly shifts in people's bias and prejudice'. (I56, lobbyist) 'Then you've got APPEA (gas industry association) – they have a bunch of social media accounts. They have one called @brighter-withgas and @energyinformationaustralia. There's half a dozen of them. But they've gone into the territory of making YouTube videos about cooking, because cooking with gas. That's PR'. (I22, director climate NGO)
Symbolic representation	The industry (M) puts forward the industry (S) which stands for the people (O) and is offered to the public sphere (A)	Industry campaigns speak <i>on behalf</i> of the people (e.g., press releases, political marketing). The industry 'stands for' or symbolizes the people (Pitkin, 1967)	'... without our industry providing the energy and vital inputs for everyday products, there would have been no hand sanitiser, no computers to work from home with, and no phones to keep in touch with loved ones. Throughout the pandemic, Australia's oil and gas companies have continued to provide the energy that drives the nation. We support tens of thousands of good-paying jobs'. (McConville, 2021). 'Industry proud of keeping lights on'. <i>The Australian</i>, 15 June, p. 1) 'In fact often in the local communities that are affected we have people there full-time, so people from this office ... We had a shopfront in [town name] where people could just walk in and look at maps of where the pipeline was going; why it was good; how many jobs it was going to create; what the opportunities were for locals to be employed in the building of this thing ... The feedback that we had when it was commissioned and since then has been all really positive. So people welcome it'. (I6, gas company executive)

	<i>Claim-making</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Staged representation	The media (M) puts forward the industry (S) which stand for the people (O) in the public sphere (A)	Through media relations, the industry acting as the media in the public sphere (e.g., advertorials, social media campaigns). The public is treated as a staged audience in the public sphere (Habermas, 1989)	‘I think the big factor is the way in which right wing politics, which you cannot separate from right wing media because it is effectively an ecosystem, each one reinforcing and amplifying and revalidating the other. It has turned what should be matters of physics – and engineering and economics, if you like – into loopy religious issues of identity and belief. This sort of populous right-wing ecosystem has demonstrated that you can actually get people to believe in complete bullshit!’ (I67, former Prime Minister) ‘It’s the fundamentals of the nature of politics which is the power of a media monopoly here which dictates so much of what happens in politics, and in Queensland where I am, which determines the outcome of federal elections, and where Murdoch has 13 of the 14 newspapers’. (I62, former Prime Minister)
Political Sphere			
Surrogate representation	The industry (M) puts forward a fossil fuel project (O) that represent the will of the people (S) to the politicians (A)	The industry puts forward projects that they claim benefit Australia (e.g., lobbyists). The industry acts on behalf of people who are not their constituents (Mansbridge, 2003)	‘... they prefer doing it this way because they can conduct their influence secretly and non-transparently through highly paid lobbyists and through the sort of campaigns that you see right around the world. Look at the history of the smoking industry and cigarettes, tobacco, that’s kind of how they operate. In secret, heavily funded research, intense lobbying, et cetera, and the funding of verbal parties as well’. (I62, former Prime Minister) ‘... so what happened is that you’ve got this professional grouping emerging to front-run the industry campaigns ... they put a policy to government and increasingly managed to gain influence over the way a climate policy developed’. (I21, former CEO oil and gas company)

	<i>Claim-making</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Substitutive representation	The industry (M) puts forward a project or information (S) which stands for the industry (O) that is related to a politician (R) and is offered to other politicians (A)	Industry provides 'expertise' for developing government policy (standing in for politicians and public servants). The industry acts as a substitute or agent for politicians (Pitkin, 1967)	'There's a lot of news monitoring, background briefings to journalists. There's a lot of briefings with government and departmental liaison and policy development'. (I29, energy company manager) 'We do a lot of technical work through our COAL21 experts. They're based in Brisbane. A lot of their work feeds to not only project development but a message for government on this is what industry is doing to reduce fossil fuel emissions, noting that we all understand how important fossil fuels is to Australia's economy'. (I18, advisor, coal industry association)
Captured representation	Politicians (M) puts forward the industry (S) which stands for Australia (O) and is offered to other politicians and the public sphere (A)	Links between industry and politicians becomes embedded through strong relationships (e.g., revolving doors). Politicians act as representatives of industry rather than citizens (Dal Bó, 2006)	'I think industry has actually been working quite closely with the governments in terms of what they actually wanted out of the process. It's helped, actually, deliver the preferred policy that the Labor Party's taken to the last two elections, and also tried to work with the previous coalition government ... So I'd probably say the industry's had a bigger impact than what the environmental movement has'. (I24, Manager Government Relations, energy company) ... the mining industry is deeply embedded in the political system of Australia as well as it is in the media landscape ... So I think the 'PR is important but all it does is lend a veneer of respectability and values to a really interlocking relationship between the fossil fuel industry and the government'. (I36 Director, communications agency)