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Sincerity as Strategy: Green Movements and the Problem of Reconciling Deliberative and Instrumental Action

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ABSTRACT
Social movements seek to influence views on environmental issues and put pressure on policy-makers in a range of related areas. But alongside their specific goals, they also often strive to create space for genuine deliberation about the need for societal transformation. This ‘dual orientation’ places them theoretically between social movement studies’ focus on strategic considerations and the ‘sincere’ (truthful) communication envisioned by democratic theorists to be a condition for ‘authentic’ deliberation, in which actors genuinely seek to understand each other’s views. Engaging with both fields of theory, a framework is developed for separating actions that are strategic, sincere and employ sincerity as strategy. Actors choose sincerity as a strategy when they practice truthful reasoning as a means to advance their interests in the public sphere. As illustrated by green movements, the concept captures how activists may handle three risks in public discourse: commercialization, politicization and idealization.

KEYWORDS Environment; social movements; Habermas; sincerity; contentious politics; deliberative democracy

Recent developments in deliberative theory and social movement studies have raised new questions about the relationship between deliberation and contentious action. Deliberative theorizing after the ‘systemic turn’ – meaning a focus on societies’ capacity for inclusive deliberation – has come to emphasize that various forms of communication, including those associated with contentious politics, may be as important for public deliberation as acts that are part of controlled spaces for public reasoning (Mansbridge et al. 2012, Stevenson and Dryzek 2014). Meanwhile, social movement scholars have moved beyond forms of protest action to explore activists’ participation in deliberative processes within movements and in the larger public sphere.
(Della Porta 2005, Haug and Teune 2008, Öberg and Uba 2014). In light of these developments, it no longer seems fruitful to maintain a separation between deliberative and contentious forms of action. Recent scholarship suggests instead that sincerity, in the sense of being open and truthful about the basis of one’s views, is the crucial condition for authentic deliberation, that is, deliberation that is characterized by exchanges of views and perspectives for the sake of mutual understanding (Habermas 1996, Owen and Smith 2015). The question, then, is what it would mean for movements engaged in in political struggle to be sincere, and what difference sincerity would make for their pursuit of strategic goals.

The question is particularly important for movements that aim not only to promote specific opinions and political reforms, but also to restructure public discourse to make space for authentic deliberation, that is, movements whose goals are both substantive and procedural (Smith 2003, ch. 5). According to this perspective, some political issues require a type of reasoning that is not facilitated by electoral competition and cannot be solved properly by the commercial market. The reason is that these spheres are characterized by instrumental reasoning (with the goal of winning an election or selling a product), which often conflicts with the critical self-reflection crucial in dealing with complex political problems. An expanded public sphere for authentic collective reflection has, therefore, been viewed as necessary to address complex issues. Environmental problems illustrate the significance of this argument (see Eckersley 2004, Torgerson 2000, Drzyek 2013). For green movements, social change is needed not just to promote particular green ideas but also to create space for grassroots participation and public deliberation that is part of a higher quality of life and needed to expand reflexive thinking (see Goodin 1992; Stevenson and Dryzek 2014). Theoretically, green movements thereby occupy a difficult middle position between the social movement focus on strategically oriented action and deliberative theory’s emphasis on sincerely oriented deliberation. A major challenge is to find a way to combine these two orientations – sincerity and strategy – which are conceptually at odds. To combine them, it is essential to examine the relationship between strategically advancing movement goals and the sincere orientation that seems to require that actors refrain from strategic reasoning altogether.

Here, I examine the relationship between strategy and sincerity and its implications for political activism, developing a third position which I term sincerity as strategy. Sincerity as strategy refers to the purposeful employment of sincerity to advance interests in the public sphere. To do so, I draw on Habermas’ suggestion that movements may act with a ‘dual orientation’, combining strategy (goal advancement) and sincerity (the promotion of mutual understanding). By analytically separating these two orientations of action as two kinds of action, it becomes possible to distinguish between
actions that are strategic; sincere; and employ sincerity as strategy. I argue that the last type of action often has stronger potential than actions that are only strategic, which are cynical or opportunist, or actions that are purely sincere, which are idealistic. In the long run, to advance political ideals, movements need to consider both dimensions, and act in ways that are strategically sound and sincere.

To develop my argument, I first discuss the literatures on social movements and on deliberation, clarifying the distinction between strategic and sincere orientations. Then, I develop a theoretical framework for ‘sincerity as strategy’, before illustrating its usefulness by discussing the response of the transnational climate change movement to three risks in public deliberation: commercialization, politicization and idealization. In conclusion, I argue that the analytical framework of sincerity as strategy captures important challenges faced by the movement better than ‘one-dimensional’ views that see and judge action in the public sphere from either a strictly strategic or a strict sincerity perspective.

**Strategic and sincere orientations**

Deliberative democratic theory refers to the understanding that ‘the public deliberation of free and equal citizens is the core of legitimate political decision making and self-government’ (Bohman 1998, p. 401). For deliberative theorists, public deliberation between free and equal citizens is an ideal, ‘impossible to achieve but serving in many circumstances as a standard against which to measure practice’ (Mansbridge et al. 2010, p. 80). This idea of deliberative democracy goes back to Habermas, who asserts that the ‘ideal speech situation’ may work as an implicit reference point whenever persons seek to understand each other through communication, in contrast to ‘success-oriented actors who mutually observe each other as one observes something in the objective world’ (Habermas 1996, p. 360). The ‘ideal’ helps to constitute a societal sphere for communication that is different from the arenas of the market, where people seek economic profit, or party politics, where actors seek political support. The sphere of public deliberation is characterized by authentic communication between citizens who regard one another as equals during deliberation.

There have been at least two ways of interpreting Habermas’ argument, which correspond to two different views of what is required of those who participate in public deliberation. The first view, which has dominated empirical research on deliberative democracy, is that participants need to respect a certain form of deliberation (e.g. Steenbergen et al. 2003, see Ercan et al. 2017). To understand each other, participants should follow certain norms of communication, like justifying claims, transparently presenting the premises of their reasoning and listening to others. The focus on form
allows for imagining and debating institutional arrangements that hold participants accountable to standards that enable sound public reasoning (e.g., Fung and Wright 2003). Without such spaces, other forms of action conducive to the profit-making of the market and the strategic reasoning of party politics may endanger reasoned discussions.

The second view is less focused on the concrete expressions that the goal of mutual understanding might take. Instead, the underlying orientation toward mutual understanding is important. This second view does not exclude any form of exchanging views, *a priori*, as irrelevant to public deliberation. It also does not relieve any form of action from normative requirements (see also Owen and Smith 2015). It is reasonable, this view suggests, that expressions of deliberative orientation vary depending on the context and the background of participants. A sincere speaker would be expected to adjust their speech to the specific circumstances and to the persons with whom they wish to speak. From this perspective, deliberation takes place as people agree to approach a topic sincerely for the sake of understanding one another through whichever form of communication seems appropriate. According to Habermas, anything from media debates to theater performances and rock concerts, and even civil disobedience, may have this sincere orientation and should, therefore, be acknowledged as a significant part of the public sphere (Habermas 1996, pp. 374–384).

The difference that this approach based on orientation, or ‘stance’, makes for research on public deliberation is illustrated by the division of labor between deliberative democratic theory and social movement studies. The objects of study frequently overlap, but the perspectives differ significantly (Meyer and Tarrow 1998, Della Porta 2005). Even as movement scholars have used various insights from deliberative theory, they have not engaged with the idea of sincere action as different from purely strategic action. In the following passage, Polletta captures the difference between seeing actors in the public sphere as sincere ‘deliberators’ or as strategically acting ‘protesters’:

Deliberators try to persuade each other of the merits of their views through reasonable appeals to shared values. They are open to changing their minds. They are convinced that the opinions they arrive at jointly will be taken seriously by decision makers. Protesters try to shake people out of their lethargy through acts of disruptive action. (2015, pp. 222–223)

Polletta shows that from the perspective of deliberation, participants are assumed to be oriented toward mutual understanding. Protesters, on the other hand, are assumed to want to accomplish a goal, seen to advance the common good, by persuading others. Protesters are, therefore, seen to be less open to changing their views through exchanges with others, unless such exchanges reveal that other paths would appear more advantageous.
As strategic actors, they calculate the best action based on the actual and expected actions of others, which may affect the success of different options. Strategic actors do not, as participants in authentic deliberation might, change their views based on exchanges with others, through which they come to question their own values and the means to best fulfill them.

This difference of perspectives is reflected in the literature on social movements. While they have found it fruitful to explore the deliberative aspects of movements in forms of action (e.g. Della Porta 2005, p. 340, Medearis 2004), social movement scholars have so far not engaged with the idea of communicative action. They have used deliberative theory as a framework to explore decision-making procedures within movement organizations (Della Porta 2005, Haug and Teune 2008), to examine the ‘deliberativeness’ of the claims made by social movement activists (Öberg and Uba 2014), and to study the public sphere as an alternative target for movement action (Giugni 2008, Bosi and Uba 2009). For social movement scholars, deliberation is a method of internal decision-making, a form for expressing grievances, a target for messaging, or a set of enabling and constraining conditions for accomplishing the movement’s ends. In deliberative democratic theory, by contrast, the public sphere is meant to capture the idea that citizens may reach out to one another, not to simply persuade others, gain their support or sell a message, but to collectively aim for a better understanding of the world they share. This often involves defending the legitimacy of one’s perspective, but also being open to changing one’s views when confronted with new information. This idea, deliberative democrats claim, is a basic condition for civil society activism to play a significant role in democratic politics.

Deliberative democratic theory and social movement studies thus have different views of activism in the public sphere. Habermas’ distinction between strategic and communicative action has sought to show that sincerity and strategy are, indeed, two distinct action orientations belonging to different realms of society. Strategic action has a rightful place in the arenas of politics and markets, and in the case of movements is critical for defending public interests. However, while strategic action can contribute to important changes in discourse and society, it does not in itself create and sustain conditions for authentic public deliberation, without which any social order will be shaky and decisions badly informed (Habermas 1996). A stable and vibrant democracy requires inclusive and critical deliberation as a mechanism of legitimization. The public sphere, therefore, needs to be defended by actors who refuse to reduce public deliberation to a struggle for advantages, and constantly guarded against a purely instrumental logic of action, which may well be acceptable in the commercial market, electoral politics, and state administrations, but is at odds with authentic public reasoning. However, the relationship between strategy and sincerity is
complex, because even as they are conceptually at odds, they may, if care-
fully employed, serve movements best when they are combined.

**Sincerity as strategy**

Habermas’ theory creates a bridge between deliberative theory and social
movement studies by highlighting the role of movements in public sphere
deliberation. Their role, according to Habermas, is neither to engage purely
strategically in public deliberation to advance their conception of the
common good, nor to simply aim for mutual understanding through
authentic collective reasoning. Instead, their role is to do both at once –
to act, that is, with a ‘dual orientation’. Movements, according to Habermas,
help maintain the communicative structures of the public sphere, while
using them for their own purposes:

> actors who support the public sphere are distinguished by the dual orienta-
tion of their political engagement: with their programs, they directly influence
the political system, but at the same time they are also reflexively concerned
with revitalizing and enlarging civil society and the public sphere as well as
with confirming their own identities and capacities to act. (Habermas 1996, p.
370, emphasis in original)

Thus, social movements may bring new issues to public awareness and
defend the spaces for public reasoning that make such actions possible.
From the deliberative perspective, actions that are only strategic – oriented
solely toward changing public opinion or influencing specific political
decisions – will not contribute to the societal structures that make critical
discourse possible. But it also matters that they are not only sincere, that is,
that they are not only aiming to defend principles of authentic deliberation,
but also pursue more specific, strategic interests. The public sphere of
critical and rational communication ultimately rests on the engagement of
actors that advance their particular viewpoints and, at the same time,
actualize and thus preserve, or even expand, this sphere’s constitutive
rationality of action (see also Cohen and Arato 1992, p. 531).

How is it possible to be both strategic and sincere? The dual orientation
seems to be a difficult achievement because, in theory, these are incompatible
orientations. To be strategic is to consciously use the frames and arguments
that advance one’s interests. To be sincere, by contrast, is to ‘say what one
means and mean what one says’ (see Bächtiger et al. 2010, p. 37). There is,
however, a strategic aspect of sincerity, specifically in its relationship to
authentic deliberation, that is, its relationship to genuine and open exchange
of views for the sole purpose of mutual understanding. Being sincere in the
context of deliberation means to act with a true commitment to norms of
authentic deliberation – norms of listening and exchanging views, allowing
for the possibility of reflexively changing one’s views in light of new knowledge (see Williams 2002, Bohman and Rehg 2014). Hence, authentic deliberation is the aim for which sincerity is the means (Dryzek 2000, Bohman and Rehg 2014). In other words, sincerity is a strategic move to achieve authentic deliberation, because it is a necessary part of action that can shift the terms of conversation. Of course, authentic deliberation does necessarily follow because some actors insist on sincerity. For this reason sincerity, on its own, may also make us vulnerable to the ill will of actors that are not sincere. The challenge is to combine strategic thinking with sincerity in a way that is mutually reinforcing.

A different possible answer to the question of how to be both strategic and sincere is that actors may alternate between the two orientations depending on what is required in a given situation (Olson 2011, Polletta 2015). Mansbridge et al. (2010) argue, similarly, that participants ideally engage sincerely and openly in a potentially transformative exploration of shared interests, while at the same time ‘keeping an appropriate grasp on one’s own self-interest and potential conflicting interests’ (pp. 79–80). By doing this, participants may better understand how interests overlap and how conflicts of interest can be resolved. However, Habermas’ argument is neither that actors should alternate between rationalities as they see fit, nor that they should perform two different tasks at once – being open and sincere and also securing their own interests. Rather, to have a dual orientation is to recognize the strategic advantages of being sincere, and to prioritize the basic, long-term interest in authentic deliberation over short-term, particular interests.

Sincerity as strategy, as conceptualized here, suggests that reasoning can be sincere in intention and, at the same time, be strategically advantageous. This would be the case when being sincere actually serves the actors’ interests, because sincerity is a condition for gaining others’ acceptance and recognition. This strategic interest in sincerity is not developed in Habermas’ theory. In fact, while it is clear that the public sphere requires practices of sincere communication to exist, Habermas’ theory says little about when and how sincerity might be strategically wise. Empirical research has shown that actors in the public sphere often act in accordance with their principles but also instrumentally adjust to circumstances for their enterprise to be sustainable (Mitchell and Schmitz 2014). Combining sincerity and strategy requires an explanation for why actors may have an interest in acting sincerely, rather than purely strategically, when participating in public deliberation. Why, for example, would a movement appeal to reason rather than framing its messages for maximum effect – in the form, let us say, of immediate political support or commercial success? Why would it not find purely instrumental framing necessary and most efficient to compete for impact with other actors in public spheres? Habermas does
not offer any strategic reasons for why actors should choose sincerity over pure instrumental reasoning, suggesting instead that actors may benefit strategically from the communicative structures of the public sphere (which they are ‘making use of’, 1996, p. 369). However, I argue that it is possible to see how sincerity may become strategically reasonable by pairing it with theories explaining the importance of norms and customs that make people’s conduct predictable. Three examples of such theorizing serve to show that Habermas’ ideal of authentic communication is actually strengthened by thinking in terms of applying sincerity as one’s strategy.

First, March and Olsen’s conceptualization of ‘the logic of appropriateness’ specifies conditions under which it should appear reasonable for actors to set aside individual preferences (and a ‘logic of consequences’) for the sake of doing what appears right and socially acceptable (March and Olsen 1998). The logic of appropriateness is meant to capture action that is shaped by social identities, norms, and institutions, in contrast to (strategic) actions that follow a logic of consequences, which are calculated based on actors’ interests and expectations of results. Using these concepts, March and Olsen emphasize that individual behavior often cannot be satisfactorily explained without the background knowledge of the way citizens build communities through a ‘common understanding embodied in rules for appropriate behavior’ (March and Olsen 2010, p. 161). Through social practices, they implicitly ‘give their allegiance to a set of norms, beliefs, and practices embodied in political institutions’ (ibid), which continue to influence actions by providing social incentives and sanctions. The norm of sincerity is upheld by actions that confirm and reinforce the norm, thereby making sincerity important for avoiding social sanctions and being rewarded for good conduct by social recognition.

Second, Bourdieu’s theory of social practice suggests further reasons to consider sincerity in strategic terms. From this perspective, the idea of authentic communication is a feature of specific social fields, such as science and journalism, where actors have a strategic interest in truthfulness. Actors often take sincerity for granted in these fields due to a common understanding that they share an ‘interest in truth, instead of having, as in other games, the truth which suits their interests’ (Bourdieu 1975, p. 31, see also 1998, p. 145). They have reasons to submit to norms of sincerity because they ‘profit’ symbolically and socially from doing so (1998, p. 85). From this perspective, such interest is the basic condition of sincerity. Similarly to March and Olsen, Bourdieu shows that incentives for sincerity can be maintained and reflexively modified through social action.

Third, the concept of sincerity as strategy has a logic similar to Fung’s concept ‘accountable autonomy’, which conceptualizes the need in sessions of citizen deliberation of both autonomy – independence from administrative or political influence – and accountability – regulating practices of
deliberation and intervening when necessary to maintain the orientation toward mutual understanding and creative problem-solving (Fung 2001). While the concept was developed in the context of institutions that facilitate citizen deliberation for input on local decision-making, its logic can be fruitfully extended to the public sphere at large. Like ‘sincerity as strategy’, the constituent parts of the term ‘accountable autonomy’ appear to be in tension, but are mutually supportive. By maintaining the rules of deliberation and the spirit of open and constructive reasoning, through top-down interventions if necessary, citizens can remain independent from political administrative rationalities and maintain an orientation toward mutual understanding and authentic problem-solving. The mechanisms of accountability provide incentives to abide by norms of authentic deliberation.

Sincerity as strategy refers to the purposeful employment of truthfulness to gain long/term advantages in the public sphere. Actions that are both sincere and strategic constitute and sustain the public sphere, and thereby creates and maintains a platform for further engagement. Sincerity as strategy is the recognition that one’s strategic actions can either support or undermine the public sphere of sound argumentation, depending on whether they embody the norm of sincerity. It means to hold oneself and others accountable to the norm of sincerity, thereby insisting on its continued relevance. To do so strategically is to do so knowing that this norm is the basic condition for addressing important societal concerns that cannot be properly addressed in spheres characterized by instrumental reasoning. This is not to suggest that all actors at all times should choose sincerity as their strategy. Rather, some actors – such as movements that do wish to raise issues that are not easily addressed in contexts where discussions are dominated by instrumental reasoning (e.g. by political or commercial interests) – should find sincerity to be strategically advantageous, because it helps shift the terms of discussion in a favorable direction. In contrast, instrumental action risks further undermining the chance to do this, as might non-strategic sincere action.

Sincerity as strategy adds analytical depth to understanding the challenges facing movements in public spheres. As illustrated in Figure 1, the idea of sincerity as strategy makes it possible to see that the actions of movements are not simply positioned along a scale from pure sincerity to purely strategic action, or from idealism to cynicism. Rather, they may see sincerity as a strategy and think strategically about how to best achieve authentic public deliberation. Sincerity as strategy is not a location between sincerity and strategy. It does not require a balancing act, because it is not a matter of finding equilibrium. Instead, it recognizes that there may be a strategic interest in shifting the debate toward sincerity – in which case, sincerity does not make an action less strategic – and, conversely, a sincere
intention in strategically influencing the terms of debate in an advantageous direction. Figure 1 is meant to illustrate that thinking of sincerity and strategy as two poles of one single dimension limits the imagination of possible actions. It is possible to move from pure sincerity (idealism) to more strategically advantageous action without becoming any less sincere, if one moves from (a) to (c), instead of from (a) to (b). Conversely, a movement may shift from purely instrumental considerations to more sincerity without becoming any less strategic, if it moves from (b) to (c), rather than from (b) to (a).

There are risks associated with strategic action without sincerity (a) and sincerity without strategy (b), which illustrate the fruitfulness of this framework. Two risks are associated with strategy without sincerity: commercialization and politicization; and a third risk is associated with sincerity without strategy: idealization. The framework makes us see each of these risks differently from previous research. Previous research in social movement studies has shown that commercial and political interests structure opportunities for movements so that some ideas and agendas may become influential, while others are difficult to promote (Polletta 1999). By contrast, the perspective advocated here suggests that to be influential, movements depend not only on effective framing, but also on the existence of a public sphere that is not dominated by instrumental reasoning, but also makes space for authentic deliberation. Sincerity as strategy considers the communication structures of the public sphere to be crucial for the possibility of addressing important and complex public concerns, allowing actors to discursively rearticulate dominant understandings, for example of ‘green growth’ and ‘green economy’ (Barry 2012, Ferguson 2015), to push public discourse toward authentic deliberation.

The risk of commercialization, first, presents itself as movements shift from a radical, sometimes utopian, statement of purpose (a) to carefully
adjusting their tactics and programs for maximum impact (b). In previous research, this move has been conceptualized primarily as ‘selling out’, or diluting the movement’s message into a more easily acceptable version, which implies de-radicalization (Kirkpatrick 2010). The point may often be to tactically use existing discursive openings to promote the movement’s cause. The trade-off is that this strategy closes the conversation off to ideas and arguments that cannot easily be framed in terms of commercial success. The analytical framework described above shows that the way to avoid this risk is not necessarily to move back along the scale toward idealism. Rather, it becomes possible to see the third alternative (c), which is to strategically apply sincerity to shift the terms of discourse. This framework underscores the problem with ‘branding’ and ‘selling’ messages, which implies accepting the intrusion of market rationality in the public sphere. Such intrusion encourages cynicism and undermines other possible strategies, including actions strategically oriented toward mutual understanding.

The risk of politicization, second, similarly reduces the complexity of societal concerns to fit the logic of electoral competition. Previous research (e.g. Coy and Hedeen 2005) has discussed the risk of cooptation – the absorption of challengers into the structures of political power; this is one way in which sincerity is undermined by pure strategic reasoning in the political sphere. Both commercialization and politicization may lead potential audiences to be skeptical of a movement’s interests. The framework proposed questions whether these risks arise due to too much strategic reasoning or too little sincerity, which, the framework clarifies, are not the same. The strongest types of actions in this framework are those that are both sincere and strategic.

The third risk appears when actors reason sincerely but not strategically (a). Deliberative democratic theorists have been frequently criticized for proposing that actors act as if the public sphere has already realized, or approximated, the ideal of public reasoning (Olson 2011). Sincerity as strategy responds to this critique by suggesting, following institutional theories, that the norm of sincerity requires incentives and sanctions, strengthened through social practices that confirm the norm. While sincerity as strategy involves an orientation toward mutual understanding, it does not require actors to expect others to (already) share this orientation; it requires actors to push public discourse in that direction by insisting on norms of sincerity.

Idealization has often been seen as deliberative theory’s basic problem. Habermas is criticized for failing to see how references to reason in public deliberation risk rationalizing existing inequalities and practices of domination. By recommending that citizens act as if ‘the conditions for an ideal situation have been sufficiently met’ (Habermas 1987, p. 323), the theory
risks aggravating the marginalization of actors whose views and opinions are outside of dominant understandings of reasonableness (Holdo 2015). It is argued that deliberative theory lacks realism; it does not acknowledge how public spheres are shaped by economic and political interests (Shapiro 2004). The implication of this claim is that actors should move from idealism (a) toward realism (b). Sincerity as strategy offers a third possibility: it advises actors not to expect that public spheres operate according to the presuppositions of Habermas’ theory. In real public spheres, deliberators do not consider reasons with all the seriousness they deserve. But sincerity as strategy means purposely pushing public deliberation toward that ideal, in which we mutually agree to take each position seriously.

**The climate change movement: sincerity, strategy and sincerity as strategy**

To illustrate the usefulness of this framework for understanding the challenges facing green movements, I will discuss the example of transnational climate change activism. The climate change movement consists of various groups that share the common goal of increasing awareness and priority of ecological, social, political, economic and other problems posed by climate change (Stevenson and Dryzek 2012). While each of these groups has its specific focus – e.g. climate justice, corporate responsibility, fossil fuel divestment, sustainable development – they form one (broad) movement by raising climate change as a public concern. It is ‘a loose, but nonetheless highly active umbrella structure which is supported, shaped, and used by a multiplicity of civil society actors who are active in climate politics’ (Garrelts and Dietz 2014, p. 7). The two-dimensional framework of sincerity and strategy is fruitful for understanding the challenges these groups face as a movement. I will limit this discussion to the three risks of commercialization, politicization, and idealism to show how to respond to them by adopting sincerity as strategy, versus acting purely sincerely or purely strategically.

Commercialization is the risk of adjusting too much to the rationality of the market. Climate change activism has often demanded priority for ecological over economic reasoning. However, discourse on climate change has become increasingly dominated by claims that there is no conflict between environmental and economic concerns, and that climate change is important for economic and commercial reasons, either because economic sustainability requires environmental sustainability or because green solutions are profitable (see Dryzek 2013, p. 163). For example, climate-friendly technological innovations offer ways to profit from climate change discourse, which many see as one of the strongest incentives to take responsibility to reduce emissions. Popular products are frequently advertised as environmentally
friendly choices and business leaders seek to improve the public perception of their brands through public endorsements of plans to reduce emissions. Thus in 2006, Richard Branson stated, after a meeting with Al Gore, that he would develop a new business ideal that would ‘help Virgin to make a real difference in the next decade and not be ashamed to make money at the same time’ (quoted in Klein 2015, p. 231). Everyday climate-friendly consumption (e.g. of food and clothes) is also frequently framed as a kind of personal politics that can appeal to citizens in their roles of consumers, by taking advantage of their willingness to use such consumption as a social marker (Laidley 2013).

Previous research has discussed the risk that ideas for reducing emissions become de-radicalized to be competitive on the market, which makes deeper transformations more difficult to achieve (Goodland 1995, Hajer 1995, p. 67). This critique can easily be articulated in terms of an idealism–realism continuum (a)–(b), suggesting that the problem is too much adjustment to market demands and giving up idealistic principles. By contrast, sincerity as strategy (c) would mean a shift from both (a) pure sincerity and (b) purely strategic action without becoming either less sincere or less strategic. Commercialization, from this perspective, makes it difficult to initiate discussions that do not aim for profit, but to address public concerns (see Dryzek 2013, p. 163). The climate change movement has met that challenge partly by developing their own norms and identities and they have gained advantages in the public sphere by holding other actors accountable to norms of sincerity. Nevertheless, commercialization of green politics has made it harder to discuss environmental issues without evaluating arguments on their business potential. The production and presentation of climate change knowledge also increasingly transgresses ‘the traditional boundaries between science and politics and the borders between the academic and commercial worlds’ (Jamison 2010, p. 811). This blurring risks undermining the credibility of a climate movement that is grounded in science, as it becomes difficult to laypersons to distinguish between genuine science and the science mobilized in the service of economic interests. Commercialization thereby risks undermining authentic discourse in which the force of reasoned arguments is favored over commercially successful messages targeting people as consumers.

The second risk, politicization, refers to adjusting too much to the political sphere. Climate change discourses as well as activists have entered politics through interest groups that lobby decision makers in Washington, Brussels and elsewhere, successfully forming political parties and winning parliamentary seats. Such developments have affected policy-making on green issues, and have arguably contributed to significant changes in the larger public discourse on environmental concerns (Dryzek et al. 2003, Garrelts and Dietz 2014). But the question is how the inclusion of these actors in political arenas affects the possibilities to engage in authentic
deliberation and the potential for change. As with commercialization, the risk of politicization has been discussed along a continuum from idealism to realism, or from radicalism to cooptation (e.g. Ho 2001). When actors in the climate change movement enter party politics, become lobbyists, or negotiate with political leaders, they tone down their radical ideals. As Stevenson (2014) has shown, actors committed to green radicalism are inevitably pressured to privilege strategic considerations over consistency and sincerity when acting within political institutions. For example, at the 2009 UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, Bolivian president and leader of ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America), Evo Morales, claimed to represent the discourse of green radicalism. However, as Stevenson shows, this discursive representation of green radicalism became inconsistent when it confronted the limits imposed by the structures of international politics. ALBA’s representatives both distanced themselves rhetorically from green radicalism when this seemed useful and behaved in ways that contradicted its core values. In other words, they moved between (a) sincerity and (b) strategy.

The risk of politicization is that environmental concerns are forced into discursive structures that are unfavorable to authentic deliberation about complex issues, like ethical questions of justice and responsibility. If established political discourse sets the terms of debate on environmental issues, it becomes difficult to discuss, for example, whether environmental concerns may be prioritized over economic interests. Instrumental reasoning alone cannot help maintaining a rational public sphere where complex concerns can be discussed. While the example of ALBA does not suggest that movements should reject cooperation with actors in the political sphere, it does suggest that the instrumental orientation of the political sphere constrains the space for authentic deliberation.

Sincerity as strategy maintains a critical distance from business interests as well as interest group and party politics. It means insisting, strategically, that discussions about climate change concerns must not be dominated by commercial and political interests. ‘Green radicalism’ (Stevenson and Dryzek 2012) is one example of how sincerity as strategy may manifest itself in climate change deliberation. It holds that sustainability is irreconcilable with unconstrained material growth and current structures of political power. For example, the civil society forum Klimaforum09 at the 2009 Copenhagen summit initiated debates based on the idea that green ideas must not adjust to discourses of economic growth or to political realism (Stevenson and Dryzek 2012, p. 197). Green radicalism refuses to be moderate for the sake of incremental change and refuses to accept political cooperation on terms set by electoral politics. However, this refusal is not what makes green radicalism an example of sincerity as strategy, as the framework does not require a rejection of political parties or capitalism.
Rather, green radicalism exemplifies sincerity as strategy because it seeks to separate public deliberation from the logics of the market or politics, claiming instead that climate change issues need to be addressed in the public sphere of authentic deliberation. Sincerity as strategy helps make it possible, without making it necessary, to question green economic growth and reject green party politics.

On one hand, sincerity as strategy means taking the other side seriously and expecting the same in return. It suggests rejecting instrumental thinking and confronting others as equal participants in a conversation oriented toward mutual understanding. At the same time, however, it rejects a return to idealism as a solution and questions the false choice between (a) sincerity and (b) strategy. Sincerity as strategy avoids idealism, the third risk, by strategically plotting to shift the terms of debate away from commercialism and politics, toward authentic deliberation.

Several examples of critical self-reflection by activists and academics involved in climate change discourse exemplify this insistence on sincerity while resisting the idealization of existing conditions of deliberation. The Copenhagen conference left a large part of the climate movement disappointed – at this critical moment, some activists debated tactical mistakes and improvements to their repertoire of action, remaining in the purely strategic corner (b). A third group decided that political adjustments had gone ‘too far’ and had proven ineffective; it was time to return to the movement’s radical ideas of sustainable development, which meant moving away from strategic calculations back to ideals in corner (a) (see RTNA 2010 and Dietz 2014 for a discussion of this debate). However, the sense of failure also generated a critical discourse on the structures of public spheres, as well as how to open them up to environmental reasoning.

As several involved in these discussions recognized, shifting the terms of debate in a productive direction would mean carefully avoiding actions that would further undermine authentic discussions by applying purely strategic reasoning to gain support. Similarly, while academics and journalists have criticized climate change activists for viewing communication instrumentally to influence policy-making and public opinion, this critique has not necessarily asked activists to disregard strategic considerations. The problem has not only been this one-sided focus on impact – which can be seen as an adjustment to the logics of the commercial market and political sphere (see Revkin 2007, Nisbet 2009) – but how to combine strategic thinking with sincerity. In other words, the alternative to purely strategic action is not to simply reject strategic reasoning to revive radical thinking; it is to strategically strengthen the norms of sincerity and authenticity and hold participants accountable. The international fossil fuel divestment movement, sparked by 350.org in 2012, exemplifies sincerity as strategy by consciously shifting the terms of climate change discourse (Gunningham 2017, p. 29). The movement
has employed two main strategies. One of these is primarily strategic: to provide economic incentives to divest (Alexander et al. 2014, p. 5). The second exemplifies sincerity as strategy by bringing ethical norms to bear on economic behavior; the movement challenges institutions such as universities, local and regional governments and religious institutions to live up their own ethical standards when handling their economic assets. The campaign strategically uses shaming to influence economic behavior and builds its public recognition on networks of civil society groups. But it also builds its discursive power by consistently acting in the sphere of public deliberation, not accepting debate on terms set by either oil-intensive corporations or politics (Ayling and Gunningham 2017, Gunningham 2017). It makes a sincere case for privileging ethics over profit by arguing for keeping fossil fuels in the ground, and it does this strategically, knowing that shifting the terms of discourse from economics to ethics would benefit the movement.

**Conclusion**

Green movements may act strategically to expand spheres of authentic deliberation in response to three specific risks in public discourse: commercialization, politicization and idealization. I have focused on the case of the climate change movement, which has faced each of these risks. The framework of sincerity as strategy captures how the movement has found ways to be both strategic and sincere, which illustrates the argument that the choice between these rationalities is a false one. By maintaining and expanding the sphere of authentic public deliberation, green movements may improve their opportunities to make deeper impacts in deliberative systems.

Researchers, as well as activists, could engage further in debates about the most suitable kinds of action to promote their various causes. For example, there might be contexts in which sincerity is the most strategically beneficial avenue, but also other contexts in which it is not, and where commercialization or politicization are actually more productive strategies. Making green consumption a matter of social distinction has contributed creatively to climate change awareness, and so has the accomplishments of green parties in several countries. Nevertheless, my argument here suggests that the latter strategies come with a significant trade-off, because such actions support terms of discourse that make it more difficult to address deeper issues of ethics and systemic failures. One might similarly ask if there are important trade-offs with making sincerity one’s strategy. Indeed, many researchers and activists would be right to ask whether we have time to care about the terms of discourse, as climate change appears to call for immediate action. To choose sincerity as strategy, and not strategies that appear more efficient, means accepting the risk that environmental change...
will cause serious harm in the short term, and that when we finally achieve authentic deliberation it might be too late to do much about the changing climate. On the other hand, the climate change movement is currently struggling to maintain its credibility as a force that is both independent of political and economic interests and realistic with regard to means and ends. Sincerity as strategy provides an analytical tool to study how movements handle these choices in light of the risks and possibilities that come with each option.

**Note**

1. The distinction between sincere and strategic action does not help to distinguish between strategically acting to pursue one’s own individual interest and strategically acting to pursue public interests. Movements differ from other strategic actors (e.g. business people) in that the goal is typically to advance a certain conception of the common good.

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