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## Research article

# Political participation of businesses: A framework to understand contributions of SMEs to urban sustainability politics

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## ABSTRACT

Private sector actors both enable and inhibit sustainability-oriented policies at multiple scales. Yet, research on business sustainability predominantly emphasizes large corporations, while contributions of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are downplayed. Consequently, there is a dearth of conceptual tools to explain how SMEs construct and advance collective sustainability goals. The aim of this paper is to identify how SMEs participate in urban sustainability politics. To do so, we analyse empirical data collected through interviews with 76 businesses operating in Toronto, Vancouver, and London. Our results demonstrate that SMEs shape sustainability dynamics by participating in formal political processes and social movements, and by constructing and contesting discourses. Contrary to past research, our study highlights the ability of these firms to navigate urban decision-making processes and align business operations with political beliefs and identities. In light of these findings, we point to the need to recognise SMEs as actors with political agency.

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## Introduction

Global sustainability challenges are reaching unprecedented levels of urgency. To date, human activities have pushed four out of nine global environmental processes across the 'planetary boundaries', risking abrupt and irreversible shifts in the entire earth system (Steffen et al., 2015). In recognition of the complexity of these interconnected socio-environmental challenges, consensus is emerging regarding the need to generate responses based on collaboration across sectors, scales, and spheres of knowledge (Hamann and April 2013; Frantzeskaki et al., 2014). For example, the United Nations proclaim that reaching the Sustainable Development Goals requires action by all nations and partnerships between governments, the private sector, and civil society (UN, 2018). This reflects the need for traditional actors, as well as 'unusual suspects', to take an active role in the quest for social and environmental wellbeing.

Private sector stakeholders are pivotal actors in these efforts. With green growth and private sector innovation offering alluring pathways to environmental progress (UNCTAD, 2018; World Bank, 2012), businesses are coming to occupy the central stage of sustainability debates. Globalization, transnationalization, and neo-

liberalization have, at the same time, transformed corporations into actors wielding significant political power (Barley, 2007; Kobrin, 2009; Ruggie, 2004). Reflecting upon these trends, Scherer et al. (2014: 148) have called for "a fresh view concerning the political role of business in society ... [this requires] a new concept of the business firm as an economic and political actor". Yet, so far, small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are largely absent from such analyses (Wickert, 2016). Research on business sustainability originally emphasized large corporations (Spence, 1999), as organizations with significant consumption of environmental resources (e.g. CDP, 2017) and generation of waste (e.g. Griffin, 2017). By comparison with large businesses, the socio-environmental impact of SMEs is not only individually smaller and more difficult to measure, but SMEs are also understood to experience less direct stakeholder pressure and less interest in CSR programs (Perrini et al., 2007). Further, limited financial and human resources are widely cited as barriers to engagement in sustainability issues among SMEs (e.g. Biondi et al., 2000; Revell et al., 2010; Rizos et al., 2016). Nevertheless, scholarly interest in sustainability among SMEs is growing for multiple reasons. First, SMEs constitute the most common form of business, contributing a major share of employment and income in economies around the world (ISED,

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2016; Muller et al., 2018). While their individual environmental footprints are small, their aggregate socio-environmental impact is significant (Pedersen et al., 2010), making their exclusion from sustainability studies untenable. Second, various characteristics of SMEs make them distinct from large corporations, such as informality, spontaneity, and the influence of individual preferences on business operations (Jenkins, 2004; Lepoutre and Heene, 2006; Murillo and Lozano, 2006). These attributes warrant research explicitly on the sustainability engagement of this type of firm. Third, and relatedly, some of these organizational aspects suggest that SMEs may have an advantage in engaging with sustainability. For example, personal convictions of owners and managers play a key role in introducing sustainability programs in SMEs (Williams and Schaefer, 2013; North and Nurse, 2014) and in propelling sustainability entrepreneurship (Cohen and Winn, 2007; Schaper, 2016). Moreover, a nimble structure can favor rapid adoption of innovative solutions (Weber, 2005) or delivery of sustainability programs (Baumann-Pauly et al., 2013).

Scholars have begun to document governance strategies employed to support sustainability engagement among SMEs (Bradford and Fraser, 2008; Burch et al., 2016). However, attempts to understand how small businesses engage in formulation of political objectives remain rare (Wickert, 2016). The aim of this paper is to address this shortcoming by asking how SMEs participate in and shape urban sustainability politics. In asking this question, the paper engages with a stream of research grappling with the conceptualization of businesses as political and social actors (Néron, 2010; Pies et al., 2014; Rascher et al., 2007; Scherer and Palazzo 2007, 2011; Scherer et al., 2014; Westman et al., 2018). In response to concerns regarding theoretical ambiguity presented by Néron (2010), we introduce a conceptual framework that captures non-traditional forms of political engagement (Ekman and Amna, 2012). We apply the framework to data collected through interviews with SMEs in Toronto, Vancouver, and London. Our results demonstrate that SMEs play an active role in formal and informal political processes, although both forms have remained largely invisible in previous research.

This paper is organized as follows. We first present our theoretical approach, arranged as a discussion of the evolution of conceptualizations of political participation and the role of businesses in sustainability politics. Next, we present our methodology. The following section presents our results, where we illustrate multiple forms of political participation among SMEs. In the ensuing discussion, we reflect on the subtle delimitations of the 'political' and how to distinguish political actions of SMEs from traditional CSR programs. The final section concludes with observations on ways forward for sustainability policy, especially regarding the need to recognise and enhance the political agency of SMEs.

### Private sector participation in sustainability politics

Theories on political participation have progressed to capture novel forms of contributions to political processes, and insights into the involvement of private sector actors in environmental politics have kept pace with these trends. In what follows, we consider the evolving understanding of private sector participation in political processes and how this relates to conceptualizations of SMEs as political actors.

#### *The evolution of theories on political participation*

Through the intimate connection between political philosophy and theories of democracy, political participation was long equated with electoral participation. In 1972, Verba and Nie introduced their seminal contribution on political life, which defined political

participation as acts attempting to influence selection of or actions by government personnel. Thus, political participation was explicitly understood as inseparable from *governmental* [sic] decisions and actions (Verba et al., 1972: 46–47). In 1979, Barnes and Kaase (1979) expanded this conceptualization by documenting the normalization of 'unconventional' political action, such as demonstrations and protests.

Since then, a pervasive and global trend of declining political participation has occurred, expressed especially through worldwide decreased electoral turn-out (Solijonov 2016). In 2008, Diamond (2008) referred to the stifling of democratic development—reduced freedom of election, expression, association, and faith in political systems—as a global 'democratic recession' (2008: 36). This was paralleled by documentation of declining levels of civic engagement, such as the study conducted by Putnam (2000), which illustrated diminishing social capital in the United States. At the same time, this decline was offset by the rise of novel forms of political expression (Dalton, 2014; Norris, 2002a). Norris (2002b) pointed to a transformation of political engagement, consisting of a shift towards new forms of organization, actions, and targets. Similarly, Dalton (2014) identified a move towards new forms of citizen participation, such as an increase in protests, civic group engagement, and political consumerism. This evolution runs parallel to an increasing academic interest in the messy, multi-actor process of governance (especially as it pertains to the environmental domain) rather than an exclusive focus on the organized, formal activities of government (Newell et al., 2012; Pierre, 2000).

New conceptual frameworks have been proposed to keep pace with this transformation. Teorell et al. (2007) suggested a typology encompassing five dimensions: traditional electoral participation, consumer participation, party activity, protest activity, and contact. Ekman and Amna (2012: 284) elaborated this approach by including "latent" forms of political participation, which incorporates civic engagement with potential political implications. This resulted in a framework based on manifest and latent political participation, with the former referring to actions aiming to influence a political outcome and the latter to actions or attitudes aiming to influence societal circumstances. The framework presented by Ekman and Amna (2012: 291) is a tool to identify "different types of political and civil participation, as a way of order our thinking in terms of the different types of phenomena we can empirically study".

#### *Participation of businesses in sustainability governance*

The shift in focus from 'government' to 'governance' in environmental politics has been accompanied by a growing interest in the role of private sector actors. Research employing a collaborative governance perspective highlights the contributions of private sector actors in formulation and implementation of policy objectives. For instance, partnerships represent strategies of consultation, mutual adaptation, and constructive dialogue between public and private sector actors (Frantzeskaki et al., 2014; Glasbergen et al., 2007; Pattberg et al., 2012). Partnership schemes involving public and private actors emerge in multiple forms, for example advisory boards and working groups, benchmarking activities, or joint campaigns (Bulkeley and Kern, 2006). Private-led sustainability partnerships are also used to influence regulation (Kolk et al., 2010), as in the case of the insurance industry advocating for the use of the precautionary principle in relation to climate change (Jagers and Stripple, 2003). Another collaborative governance approach is sustainability-oriented standard-setting initiatives involving the private sector, such as the Forest Stewardship Council (Pattberg, 2005).

Attention to the private sector in collaborative sustainability policymaking, however, rarely translates into studies of SMEs. One

exception is a study conducted by [Setzer and Biderman \(2013\)](#) on participation of SMEs in sustainability policy making in Brazil, which concluded that involvement was minimal. Another is an examination of opportunities of SMEs to influence global production networks, conducted by [Egels-Zandén \(2017\)](#), which pointed to benefits in relation to living wage policy. Overall, this oversight leaves unexamined a large and diverse set of actors that have a significant impact on resource use, consumption practices, and innovation.

While collaborative accounts of governance generally adopt an optimistic attitude vis-à-vis private sector actors, research based in a political economy perspective frequently emphasizes the capacity of businesses to resist sustainability-oriented progress. The discursive power of businesses stems from their ability to frame issues according to specific norms or values ([Barnett and Duvall, 2004](#)). For example, American fossil fuel firms were instrumental in shaping climate change discourses in the 1990s and early 2000s, by fostering a discourse of 'scientific uncertainty' ([Gaither and Gaither, 2016](#); [McCright and Dunlap, 2003](#)) and stressing the potentially negative consequences of a low-carbon transition ([Schlichting, 2013](#)). Firms also exercise structural power, which is linked with the assumption that states rely on private sector actors to generate growth and employment ([Lindblom, 1977](#); [Fairfield, 2015](#)). Large corporations also employ industry coalitions, lobbying, and campaign donations to influence policy outcomes ([Downie, 2017](#); [Coen, 1997](#); [Baumgartner et al., 2009](#)). For example, corporations have influenced climate policy by providing information to decision makers, lobbying, and participating in policy coalitions ([Kolk and Pinkse, 2007](#)). These studies, however, also refer predominantly to large, incumbent firms—actors with the resources and ability to coordinate and wield political-economic power. As a result, the ability of SMEs to influence policy outcomes is underexplored both in research on collaborative governance and by political economists.

### *Businesses as 'political actors'*

With corporations exerting increasing authority in former public domains, scholars have begun to investigate what it means for businesses to play a political role in society. [Scherer and Palazzo \(2011\)](#) highlight the blurred responsibilities of the public and private sectors and the rising ability of companies to address global regulative deficits. They propose that the concept of 'political CSR' captures these dynamics, understood as 'an extended model of governance with business firms contributing to global regulation and providing public goods' ([Scherer and Palazzo, 2011](#): 901). Building on Aristotelian theories of citizenship, [Pies et al. \(2014\)](#) suggest that businesses function as political actors if they engage in 'rule-setting interactions' (traditional involvement in policy making) or in 'rule-finding discourse' (efforts to 'create a shared awareness of the common interest' or 'play a constructive role' in political deliberation) (*Ibid*: 246, 247). [Néron \(2010\)](#) analyses four potential political roles of businesses.<sup>1</sup> This includes corporations as distributive agents (addressing social or environmental problems) and participants in political processes (taking part in decision-making processes). [Wickert \(2016\)](#) stands out in these debates through an effort to conceptualize how SMEs engage in political CSR by building awareness of political issues, employing collective action to address external issues, and embedding political CSR activities within internal operations.

<sup>1</sup> Two (corporations as political communities, and corporate policies as citizen issues) pertain to the internal operations of firms, and therefore do not elucidate influence on the politics of urban systems.

In summary, extant definitions of businesses as political actors encompass the following actions: directly addressing public issues ([Néron, 2010](#); [Scherer and Palazzo, 2011](#); [Wickert, 2016](#)), contributing to policy making/rule setting ([Néron, 2010](#); [Pies et al., 2014](#)), contributing to political discourse ([Pies et al., 2014](#)), and building awareness of political issues ([Wickert, 2016](#)). Reflecting on these definitions, [Néron \(2010\)](#) warns of conceptual ambiguity. Key concerns relate to differentiation and over-inclusion; perceiving all business roles as political (a new paradigm) makes it impossible to be theoretically precise about how this differs from traditional CSR. We aim to contribute to greater conceptual clarity by analysing business activities through [Ekman and Amna's \(2012\)](#) framework of political participation. As outlined in [Table 1](#), we have adapted their categories to understand the range of political expressions employed by SMEs. In doing so, we also extend the understanding of the political role of SMEs beyond existing 'anecdotal' evidence ([Wickert, 2016](#): 797).

### **Method**

Data for this study was collected through 76 in-depth interviews conducted with SMEs operating in Toronto, Vancouver, and London.<sup>2</sup> The sections below explain the rationale for our case study selection, data collection method, and analysis.

#### *Case study selection*

Enterprises exercise socio-political agency on multiple scales, including in communities and at the national level. In this paper, we focus on the influence of SMEs on urban politics for a number of reasons. First, cities are hubs of economic activity, investment and technological innovation, and urban areas constitute the space where most SMEs operate. Cities are also key arenas of political contestation and conflict, governance experimentation, and planned interventions (e.g. [Flint and Raco, 2012](#); [Marvin et al., 2018](#)). We understand urban areas as sites where these dynamics intersect - as spaces where businesses are likely to exercise political agency. A second reason is that cities operate as administrative units under the jurisdiction of one or multiple government authorities. In comparison with communities or regions, we expect businesses in cities to be able to interact with concrete government agencies in charge of urban policy. While this is also possible at a national and international level, urban political processes may be more relevant and accessible to SMEs. Third, with urbanization becoming a planetary phenomenon ([Brenner and Schmid, 2017](#)), the politics of cities have increasing relevance for the global quest for sustainability.

We selected Toronto, Vancouver, and London as case study cities that represent major economic centres in the Global North and urban areas at the forefront of business sustainability. Toronto and Vancouver have adopted ambitious sustainability programs, including efforts to build green economy hubs ([City of Toronto, 2008](#); [VEC, 2018](#)). London is likewise known for its ambition in sustainability ([GLA, 2012](#)). Rather than aiming for cases that allow for explicit comparison or statistical generalization, these cities offer information-rich case studies likely to provide thick descriptions of engagement of SMEs in urban sustainability politics. The three cases also represent largely English-speaking urban areas with distinct political systems, which allows for examination of political interactions between the private sector and government authorities in different settings. In Canada's federal system, the

<sup>2</sup> This included 27 interviews in Toronto, 25 in Vancouver, and 24 in London. Full details on the respondents are listed in [Appendix A](#).

**Table 1**  
Operationalization of Ekman and Amna (2012) categories for political participation adapted to SMEs.

Form of participation	Definition	Participatory activity	Indicators
Formal political participation	Voting, supporting electoral candidates, 'contacting' or 'communication' with elected politicians (Ekman and Amna, 2012: 290)	Contact with politicians	'Contacting' or 'communication' with elected politicians
	Membership "in apolitical party, a trade union, or any organization with a distinct political agenda" (Ekman and Amna, 2012: 290)	Political appointments	Holding political appointments within a government apparatus (advisory bodies, committees, etc.)
Activism	'Membership in ... groups or parties that deliberately stand outside of the parliamentary sphere (Ekman and Amna, 2012: 290)	Membership in advocacy groups	Membership in policy-oriented bodies outside a government apparatus (industry coalitions, lobbying groups, etc.)
Civic engagement	"Individual or collective actions intended to influence societal circumstances" (Ekman and Amna, 2012: 291)	Issue engagement through informal networks	Participation in social movements, network-based communities, etc.
		Addressing social issues	Addressing social issues (e.g. homelessness, youth activities, etc.)
Involvement	"Attention to—and interest in—political and societal issues. This category encompasses the feeling or awareness of being a member of society, to be a part of a political context" (Ekman and Amna, 2012: 293)	Addressing environmental issues	Addressing environmental issues (e.g. recycling, reducing energy consumption, etc.)
		Identification with a political identity	Alignment with political identity (e.g. veganism, feminism, etc.)

political power at the provincial level is relatively strong, whereas the greater Toronto and Vancouver areas do not operate under a single government authority. Sustainability policies can, however, be issued at lower government levels, including region, city, municipality, town and township. By contrast, the Greater London Authority plays an important role in the development of strategic urban sustainability plans, while local authorities (boroughs) are in charge of specific policy domains (such as waste management and social policy). The three cities are also distinct with regards to the focus of their sustainability politics, the presence of social movements, and their history of engagement in environmental planning. As the political agency of SMEs is an emerging field of research, we selected the case studies to allow for exploration of a diversity of political expressions of small businesses. We see this as a first step towards documenting the political agency of SMEs, which in the future can be complemented by research in a greater diversity of settings (e.g. small urban areas, rural areas, or cities in the Global South) and by studies using a comparative lens.

#### Data collection

Our selection of firms was based on a strategy of including businesses with a known engagement in environmental or social issues. The rationale was to uncover mechanisms through which businesses participate in sustainability issues in society. The sample is therefore not representative of the broader business population, but reflects dynamics of firms operating at the forefront of business sustainability (it is not intended to reflect SMEs with a negative or passive attitude towards sustainability). Previous studies show that the drivers behind the interest in sustainability among SMEs varies across sectors (Battaglia et al., 2014; Garay and Font, 2012; Torugsa et al., 2012), size (Baumann-Pauly et al., 2013), and geographical setting (Shrivastava and Kennelly, 2013). We therefore compiled a diverse sample in terms of size, sector, location, and form of sustainability engagement. The sample encompassed businesses with internal and external social and environmental programs, ranging from initiatives such as waste reduction, supporting organic production, or ecological protection, to the support of social organizations or employee empowerment (the full list of businesses in each city are presented in Table 5, Table 6 and

Table 7).<sup>3</sup> To compile the sample, we searched existing online databases in combination with a snowball sampling strategy employed throughout the interview process.

All interviews followed a semi-structured format of 30 minutes to one hour duration. Most interviews were performed in person (two were conducted by phone). The core questions explored company and individual attitudes towards social and environmental challenges, the nature of sustainability engagement, participation in policy processes, perceptions of government, and collaboration with other organizations.

#### Data analysis

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded using the software Nvivo. The codes aimed to capture factors shaping involvement of SMEs in sustainability politics, based on indicators created from the categories of participation presented by Ekman and Amna (2012) (see Table 1). The codes were first analysed using a semi-quantitative approach, to determine how commonly they appeared throughout the transcripts. Second, they were analysed using a qualitative approach to identify mechanisms related with the four categories, in terms of how actions of SMEs contribute to political processes in the city, which actors and issues were targeted, and how these actions were related to broader business objectives.

#### Results: Participation of SMEs in urban sustainability politics

As explained in the sections below, our empirical material revealed a myriad of ways in which owners and managers of SMEs participate in political processes. This included traditional engagement and formal membership in policy coalitions, as well as engagement in social movements and informal issue networks.

<sup>3</sup> Our focus on cities may have implications in terms of profile of SMEs, in comparison with small cities or rural regions. For example, we expect a lower representation of agricultural businesses, forestry or renewable energy farms – although our sample includes SMEs engaged in urban farming, urban forestry and renewable installations in the built environment.

**Table 2**  
Overview of formal political participation.

Theme	#	Illustrative examples
Contact with politicians	10	'We've gotten support from [the city], but we're also continuing the dialogue about new ways to have more deeper social impact, all the way to city counsellors who I've had conversations with, asking the city manager, "how can you create a social hiring strategy within the city staff?"' (I32).
Political appointments	13	'We sat on that advisory board and just went through the living wage calculation process and provided our input on the assumptions where we could. And that resulted in the updated living wage calculation for Toronto' (I26).

### Formal political participation

Out of the 76 firms in our sample, we identified ten businesses who referred to traditional 'contacting' strategies and thirteen firms (four and nine, respectively) that held political appointments or formal positions in advisory bodies (Table 2).

Most respondents employing 'contacting' strategies described pre-existing personal relationships with government representatives (typically managed by one individual in the company or a lawyer working for the firm), which were employed strategically for years to influence political agendas. These relationships sometimes evolve from individual communication to formal positions on advisory bodies. We also spoke to respondents of firms with no pre-existing contacts, who expressed optimism about engaging local elected politicians. As stated by a manufacturing firm:

I've seen how the levers of policy can impact small businesses. When I arrived at Company X two years ago, I said: "Why don't we call our MLA?", or "Why don't we call our MP? They're supposed to be working for us" (I29).

We identified thirteen businesses that occupied formal political appointments or advisory positions. These roles cut across a range of social and environmental issues related to formal plans, standards, and policy strategies. For example, it included a chairmanship in a committee on climate change, representation on the Toronto Food Council, advisory positions related to the London Plan, and an advisory position in the Minister's Advisory Committee for poverty reduction in British Columbia. This range shows that owners and managers of SMEs target policy makers at different government levels. The position of SMEs in a multi-level governance system (e.g. Betsill and Bulkeley, 2006; Bulkeley and Kern, 2006) became evident, in terms of their ability to link their activities with political processes unfolding on different scales. For example, issues of local concern (e.g. waste management or community space management) are directed towards councils or boroughs, whereas broader sustainability issues (poverty alleviation or spatial planning) are elevated to higher level authorities. The inclusion of SMEs in formal political processes also represents an opportunity for forerunners to highlight the needs of broader SME communities, as stated by a representative of a zero-waste store:

Our CEO is a member of the food policy council and she has also been part of the consultation process of the city's zero waste goals. And these greater city goals are related to [questions such as] 'how does this impacts small businesses?', 'how can small businesses consolidate towards this?'. Because this is often the consideration when there is policy coming in (I28).

### Activism

In our sample, we documented different forms of political activism. While we did not come across engagement in protests and demonstrations, we identified eleven firms that participated in advocacy coalitions and twenty businesses employing civil society

organizations or informal networks to raise awareness about socio-environmental issues (Table 3).

Membership in industry associations is used for multiple policy-related ends: raising industry-wide social and environmental performance (I15), making sure that new standards do not harm members (I67), and showcasing leading solutions, such as vertical farming (I5; I20). Industry memberships allow SMEs to compete for influence with large corporations, as explained by a proponent for organic food production:

The integrity of the organic industry needs to be maintained ... ensuring that big business doesn't start to say, "Oh, well, instead of it being 95 percent chemical-free to qualify for organic, what if we did 85 percent?" ... It doesn't take much for a large company to lobby to have one of those standards changed ... While I can't independently influence policy, I can by being part of a larger organization (I27).

We also identified engagement in issue-organizations related to novel political issues, such as genetically modified products or food justice. For example, we spoke to a grocery store that acted as co-founders of the international Non-GMO Project (I17). Such engagement occurs outside the boundaries of parliamentary politics, but has an explicit political objective, such as the introduction of standards for non-GMO products or passive housing. A range of strategies are used to promote political agendas, including promotion at traditional 'business' events, arranging workshops and lectures, and engagement through social media. For example, businesses operating zero-waste stores relied on Instagram accounts, blog spaces and Facebook groups as channels to raise awareness, connect with social movements, share best practices, and advocate for new regulation (for example against plastic packaging) (I56; I63). This suggests a heterogeneity of organizations (social movements, charities, community groups, social media networks) and targets (governments, industries, consumers) employed by SMEs to change perceptions in relation to socio-environmental concerns.

### Civic engagement

As our selection of firms was based on including businesses with a known sustainability engagement, all the firms in our sample displayed some form of civic engagement (Table 4).

Within our sample, many firms pursued social projects as an integrated part of their business model, such as through social housing, social hiring, or social lending. However, social interventions were also often expressed through efforts to build a thriving and inclusive local environment, for example through provision of community spaces, arranging local events, and supporting charities. Environmental actions were the most frequently observed engagement in our sample of firms (employed by 47 SMEs). Many of the SMEs had an environment-focused purpose, product or service, including firms working with sustainable food production, renewable energy and energy efficiency, ecological preservation, and waste reduction. In addition, many firms with a social profile had attempted to improve their environmental profile through actions such as recycling, car-

**Table 3**  
Overview of political activism.

Theme	#	Illustrative examples
Membership in advocacy groups	11	'They are member organizations that we are part of ... Particularly around policy they are very effective at helping to craft policy positions and then going to meet with policy makers and regulators to make sure that our voice is visible' (I69).
Issue engagement through informal networks	20	"We're trying to create a community of people who are trying to move consumers onto a circular economy model ... things like Stuffster and the Restart Project where they teach people how to fix things" (I75).

**Table 4**  
Overview of civic engagement.

Theme	#	Illustrative examples
Addressing social issues	36	'It's interesting that you mention community because that's actually a big driving force in terms of what we do ... every year we take on a community project ... We rebuilt the children's playground in high park after it was burned down' (I4).
Addressing environmental issues	47	'We speak of lifecycles and really understanding exactly where raw materials are from ... [The leather] needs to be a certified European waste product from the meat industry ... [the packaging] is made of plant sheets' (I59).

pooling and commuting, sustainable sourcing, or reducing energy consumption. Notably, civic actions adopted by SMEs in our sample often fulfil functions traditionally handled by government. We spoke to businesses supporting new Canadians to become an integrated part of the workforce, for example by providing on-site training and skills development (I15) and credit support for refugees (I35). We also spoke with businesses providing employment for individuals with mental health issues (I8) or battling poverty and homelessness (I32).

#### *Involvement*

Our interviews revealed that many owners and managers of SMEs in our sample experience a sense of belonging with a political group or identity, which translates into their business models and/or activities. For example, we spoke to food service and retail businesses founded in vegan principles (I53; I24; I56). An entrepreneur operating a waste-free grocery store explained that vegan ethics were the chief principle shaping her business decisions:

when people come in, they always care about plastic free. For me, number one is vegan. That's why I'm doing this. Secondary to that and almost as important is plastic free (I56).

Similarly, we spoke to businesses guided by feminist principles and inspired by the LGBTQ movement. This included a business providing female hygiene products, which has embedded a message of empowerment, gender equity, and overcoming body taboos into their core business operations (I29). In another case, an owner of a consultancy firm explained that advocacy work in relation to the feminist, LGBTQ, and Black Lives Matter movements intermingle with her identity and the activities of the business (I42). While at an anecdotal stage, these testimonies point to the inseparable nature of individual political convictions and business ethics in sustainability-oriented small businesses.

#### **Discussion: understanding SMEs as political actors**

Traditional political participation was the least common form of strategy employed by SMEs in our sample to engage in socio-environmental issues, which mirrors long-standing knowledge on the decline of party politics as the main channel of political engagement in society. Nevertheless, SMEs engage in dialogue with politicians and occupy advisory positions in policy making bodies. Here, our study points to a major blind spot in existing knowledge. Previous research has highlighted the lack of interest of small businesses in policy processes (Setzer and Biderman, 2013) or even

in sustainability overall (Chasse and Boiral, 2017; Revell et al., 2010). By contrast, our results show that representation of progressive SMEs on policy councils and in planning processes is an important mechanism shaping urban sustainability politics.

Our results also demonstrate that SMEs deploy 'non-traditional' engagement channels (Dalton, 2014; Norris, 2002a) to advocate for socio-environmental values. This result is not surprising, in light of the well-documented transformation of political engagement in society. We propose that extra-parliamentary activities of this sort be considered 'political' when they explicitly aim to influence a political outcome. Such a definition reveals engagement in an array of activities long understood as political (such as social movements), which in an SME context have hitherto been rendered invisible. At the same time, this result connects with another established insight in the environmental policy sciences, namely that policy is shaped through contestation over discourse that unfolds across a diversity of social organizations (Fischer and Forester, 1993; Hajer, 1995). Beyond actors typically considered to populate issue networks, we argue that SMEs are part of shaping and deconstructing sustainability narratives.

Further, our interviews demonstrate the ability of SMEs to address deficits in public performance, akin to Scherer and Palazzo's (2011) notion of political CSR, or Neron's (2010) notion of corporations as distributive agents. SMEs likewise play a role in communities – the local version of tackling global regulatory vacuums. Our results point to underappreciated abilities of individuals in SMEs to align business operations with political beliefs and identities, displaying the intricate interconnections that exist between personal convictions, political activism, and business operations of small business owners. We agree with Scherer and Palazzo (2007, 2011) about the need to shift beyond simplistic rational-economic theories of the firm (c.f. Westman et al., 2018). Our data supports the view that operations of 'private sector actors' blend seamlessly into the supposedly distinct 'political' realm, building momentum for socio-environmental change through complex, uncoordinated, bottom-up dynamics. Even so, we share Neron's (2010) concerns regarding differentiation between political actions and CSR. The actions outlined above can be construed as philanthropic projects typical of social enterprises and ecopreneurs. To avoid conceptual confusion, we suggest that business actions directly addressing socio-environmental issues be interpreted as civic rather than political actions. This can also be understood as 'latent' political participation: actions adopted out of interest in the political system and out of civic duty, with potential but no explicit ambition to influence a political process.

## Conclusions

Through this paper, we aimed to introduce a fresh perspective on political participation of firms, which encompasses formal participation, activism, civic engagement, and involvement based on political identity. Our analysis suggests that SMEs engage in all four types, which opens up the possibility of a broader understanding of what constitutes political agency of private sector actors.

Through the rising interest in sustainability-oriented business models (Schaltegger et al., 2016), the relevance of these findings is likely to increase. In particular, the two latent forms of political participation discussed in this paper (civic engagement and involvement) constitute core components of operations of eco-preneurial ventures, social enterprises, and benefit corporations. At the same time, direct political participation is likely to be an essential element in expanding the market of these firms. In this context, efforts to shift standards and regulations (by formal political participation), or individual mindsets and values (through political activism), could constitute strategies to break through institutional barriers required for business viability or growth. This on-going co-construction between SMEs and their social environment, especially with regards to informal rule making, will likely play an important (and under-theorized) role in transitions towards sustainable systems of production and consumption at the urban level.

Looking ahead, our study suggests entry-points to support more effective sustainability policy. In terms of formal participation, our analysis demonstrates the need for decision-makers to seek engagement of progressive SMEs to accelerate sustainability innovation. Communication and political appointments can contribute to greater sensitivity to the interests of small business communities, as well as to advancing the uptake of social and technical solutions. With regards to participation in policy coalitions, there are similar benefits to be gained, as well as opportunities for SMEs to work collaboratively to gain clout vis-à-vis established industrial players. This form of engagement should, in our view, be seen as complementary to traditional policy strategies (supportive regulation, economic incentives, and capacity building). In relation to activism, engagement, and involvement, the main insights relate to the porous boundaries between what traditionally has been understood to constitute the

spheres of the 'private' and 'public' sector and 'civil society.' Our results indicate that policy makers could cast wider nets in their business sustainability strategies and collaborate with SMEs not only through business support strategies, but also broader public engagement programs.

Finally, we believe that this study addresses a deficit in recognition (Fraser, 1996) of SMEs as political actors. SMEs have gained acknowledgement as contributors to economic and technological development (ISED, 2016; OECD, 2010). Yet, few political leaders speak of SMEs as beacons of social-environmental achievement. One of our respondents exclaimed: 'It would be great to have more ... recognition of that kind of business ... I think that is always a good motivating factor for people - to be able to be recognized in what they're doing' (I42). SMEs can be, and often are, more than engines of growth. They can challenge norms of social inclusion, improve lives of marginalized groups, and experiment with solutions to protect urban ecosystems. These contributions can be made more visible once SMEs are recognized as actors with political agency.

## Declarations of competing interest

None.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Linda Westman:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - original draft. **Janetta McKenzie:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - original draft. **Sarah Lynn Burch:** Funding acquisition, Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - original draft.

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## Appendix A. List of respondents

**Table 5**  
List of businesses in Toronto

No.	BUSINESS TYPE	DATE	SECTOR
1	Land management	2018.02.16	Real estate
2	Urban gardening/forestry	2018.03.27	Agriculture, forestry & fishing
3	Urban gardening/forestry	2018.03.29	Agriculture, forestry & fishing
4	Architecture	2018.04.03	Professional, scientific & technical activities
5	Urban gardening/forestry	2018.04.03	Agriculture, forestry & fishing
6	Printing	2018.04.04	Manufacturing
7	Engineering	2018.04.04	Professional, scientific & technical activities
8	Courier service	2018.04.06	Professional, scientific & technical activities
9	Café	2018.04.09	Accommodation & food services
10	Consultancy (energy)	2018.04.10	Professional, scientific & technical activities
11	Education	2018.04.30	Education
12	Engineering	2018.05.01	Professional, scientific & technical activities
13	Urban gardening/forestry	2018.05.01	Agriculture, forestry & fishing
14	Urban gardening/forestry	2018.05.03	Agriculture, forestry & fishing
15	Café	2018.05.07	Accommodation & food services
16	Consultancy (sustainability)	2018.05.11	Professional, scientific & technical activities
17	Food retail	2018.05.15	Retail trade
18	Building management	2018.05.16	Real estate
19	Food distribution	2018.05.16	Retail trade
20	Architecture	2018.05.22	Professional, scientific & technical activities
21	Restaurant	2018.05.22	Accommodation & food services
22	Grocery store	2018.05.23	Retail trade
23	Brewery	2018.05.23	Accommodation & food services
24	Food services	2018.05.25	Accommodation & food services
25	Food retail	2018.05.28	Retail trade
26	Finance	2018.06.05	Finance & insurance
27	Food retail	2018.06.22	Retail trade



**Table 6**  
List of businesses in Vancouver

No.	BUSINESS	DATE	SECTOR
28	Food retail	2018.04.05	Retail Trade
29	Manufacturing	2018.04.16	Manufacturing
30	Food retail	2018.04.18	Retail Trade
31	Consultancy (start-ups)	2018.04.18	Professional, scientific & technical activities
32	Waste management	2018.04.19	Administrative & support, waste management & remediation services
33	Communication/Media	2018.04.24	Information communication
34	Communication/Media	2018.04.24	Information communication
35	Financial institution	2018.04.24	Finance & insurance
36	Eco products	2018.04.24	Retail trade
37	Consultancy (sustainability)	2018.04.25	Professional, scientific & technical activities
38	Solar energy	2018.04.26	Manufacturing
39	Consultancy (organizational)	2018.05.04	Professional, scientific & technical activities
40	Food services	2018.05.08	Accommodation & food services
41	Consultancy (sustainability)	2018.05.11	Professional, scientific & technical activities
42	Consultancy (sustainability)	2018.05.11	Professional, scientific & technical activities
43	Consultancy (energy)	2018.05.16	Professional, scientific & technical activities
44	Architecture	2018.05.22	Professional, scientific & technical activities
45	Packaging	2018.05.23	Manufacture
46	Grocery	2018.05.24	Retail trade
47	Eco products	2018.05.25	Manufacture
48	Grocery	2018.05.29	Retail trade
49	Eco products	2018.05.29	Retail trade
50	Eco products	2018.05.30	Retail trade
51	Food retail	2018.06.06	Retail trade
52	Fishing	2018.06.13	Agriculture, forestry & fishing

**Table 7**  
List of businesses in London

No.	BUSINESS	DATE	SECTOR
53	Café	2018.06.04	Accommodation & food services
54	Urban gardening/forestry	2018.06.04	Agriculture, forestry & fishing
55	Fashion store	2018.06.15	Retail trade
56	Grocery	2018.06.15	Retail trade
57	Architecture	2018.06.15	Professional, scientific & technical activities
58	Architecture	2018.06.18	Professional, scientific & technical activities
59	Fashion store	2018.06.19	Manufacture
60	Hostel	2018.06.19	Accommodation & food services
61	Graphic design	2018.06.20	Information communication
62	Food distribution	2018.06.20	Accommodation & food services
63	Grocery	2018.06.20	Retail trade
64	Event organizer	2018.06.20	Services
65	Finance	2018.06.20	Finance & insurance
66	Consultancy (sustainability)	2018.06.21	Professional, scientific & technical activities
67	Architecture	2018.06.21	Professional, scientific & technical activities
68	Office management	2018.06.21	Professional, scientific & technical activities
69	Finance	2018.06.25	Finance & insurance
70	Café	2018.06.26	Accommodation & food services
71	Consultancy (sustainability)	2018.06.26	Professional, scientific & technical activities
72	Solar energy	2018.06.27	Finance & insurance
73	Bakery	2018.06.27	Accommodation & food services
74	Eco products	2018.06.28	Manufacture
75	Eco products	2018.07.11	Retail trade
76	Eco products	2018.07.23	Manufacture

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