

Université de Montréal

Rising tides, rooted lives

Exploring the governance of adaptation and climate immobility in Southeast Louisiana

Par

Sarah Munoz

Département de science politique

Faculté des arts et des sciences

Thèse présentée en vue de l'obtention du grade de doctorat (PhD)

en science politique

Avril 2024

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Université de Montréal

Département de science politique, Faculté des Arts et des Sciences

Cette thèse intitulée

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Exploring the governance of adaptation and climate immobility in Southeast Louisiana**

Présentée par

Sarah Munoz

A été évaluée par un jury composé des personnes suivantes

Denis Saint-Martin
Président-rapporteur

Pascale Dufour
Codirectrice

Erick Lachapelle
Codirecteur

Catherine Xhardez
Membre du jury

Elizabeth Marino
Examinatrice externe

Résumé

Alors que les changements climatiques s'accroissent et entraînent une augmentation des déplacements humains, la récente reconnaissance des « populations piégées » (*trapped populations*) dans la littérature a complexifié l'étude des migrations climatiques, offrant de nouvelles perspectives sur les individus qui, malgré leur vulnérabilité climatique, sont incapables ou peu enclins à se déplacer. Souvent attribuée à une capacité matérielle limitée pour la relocalisation et simplement considérée comme un échec d'adaptation, l'immobilité climatique demeure un objet encore peu compris, en particulier dans ses dimensions politiques et idéationnelles.

Cette thèse explore les structures institutionnelles, les intérêts et les idéologies qui façonnent l'immobilité dans le Sud-Est de la Louisiane, un état américain lourdement impacté par les changements climatiques. Puisant dans les outils conceptuels et méthodologiques de l'institutionnalisme discursif critique, cette recherche qualitative se penche sur la construction politique de l'immobilité climatique comme phénomène collectif et institutionnalisé. Elle s'appuie sur deux années de travail de terrain à distance et sur place (2020-2022), composé d'observations systématiques de réunions politiques (*meeting ethnography*, N=150), d'entretiens semi-dirigés (N=45), d'analyse de textes (N=74) et d'un terrain semi-immersif de trois mois. Les résultats montrent que l'immobilité climatique n'est pas simplement le produit d'une incapacité matérielle individuelle à s'adapter, mais prend racine dans des processus idéologiques et institutionnels plus larges. En Louisiane, la prédominance des intérêts pétroliers et gaziers en politique environnementale a limité les pratiques d'adaptation et encouragé des stratégies de résilience *in situ* individualisées et infrastructurelles. Dans les discours, la normalisation des phénomènes climatiques et le scepticisme partisan quant aux changements climatiques ont renforcé des perceptions biaisées du risque et une adaptation agnostique, c'est-à-dire déconnectée de la reconnaissance de l'accroissement du risque climatique. Simultanément, la méfiance envers le gouvernement et le profond attachement culturel et identitaire des Louisianais à leurs terres enracine la réticence des communautés à s'engager dans le mouvement. Ces pratiques, idées et intérêts, légitimés et renforcés dans le discours à différents niveaux politiques, sous-tendent l'incapacité des gouvernements à répondre au problème climatique de manière proactive, posant

comme objectif politique la préservation et la permanence des communautés côtières. Ces conditions engendrent ce que je conceptualise comme de l'immobilité planifiée, c'est-à-dire l'institutionnalisation de l'immobilité climatique.

Cette thèse comble certaines des lacunes théoriques et méthodologiques laissées par la nouveauté relative de l'objet d'étude qu'est l'immobilité climatique. Par une analyse néo-Marxiste, elle tente d'élargir les perspectives au-delà des explications matérialistes afin d'investiguer le caractère « piégeant » des processus idéationnels et institutionnels, et de leurs intérêts politiques sous-jacents. Elle met l'accent sur les dimensions normatives de l'adaptation climatique, fournissant un travail ethnographique original et approfondi sur les réalités vécues des changements climatiques et sur l'institutionnalisation de politiques maladaptives. En remettant en question le « biais de mobilité » dans la littérature et allant au-delà des analyses dichotomiques de l'immobilité comme choix ou contrainte, cette thèse fait plusieurs contributions théoriques à la fois à l'étude des mobilités climatiques et à la politique environnementale, et fournit un nouveau champ d'application à l'institutionnalisme discursif. Elle offre également de nouvelles données empiriques sur le rôle des décideurs politiques, de leurs idées et des intérêts extractivistes dans l'immobilisation des communautés à risque des changements climatiques en Amérique du Nord.

Mots-clés : immobilité climatique, adaptation, politiques publiques, énergies fossiles, intérêts, idéologies, institutions, perceptions, changements climatiques, discours.

Abstract

Climate change has long been recognized as a catalyst for human migrations, but the development of scholarship on “trapped populations” in the last decade has introduced new perspectives on those unable or unwilling to relocate despite intense climate impacts. Often attributed to limited material capacity for relocation or simply considered as a failure to adapt, climate immobility remains a poorly understood phenomenon, particularly in its political and ideational dimensions.

This thesis explores the institutional structures, interests, and ideologies that forge immobility in Southeast Louisiana, a state heavily impacted by climate change. Drawing upon the conceptual and methodological tools of critical discursive institutionalism, this qualitative research examines the discursive and political construction of climate immobility as a collective and institutionalized phenomenon. It relies on two years of remote and on-site fieldwork (2020-2022), consisting of systematic observations of political meetings (meeting ethnography, N=150), semi-structured interviews (N=45), text analysis (N=74), and a three-month long semi-immersive fieldwork. Findings reveal that climate immobility is not simply the product of individual material incapacity to adapt but is rooted in broader ideological and institutional processes. In Louisiana, the dominance of oil and gas interests in environmental policy has limited adaptation practices and encouraged individualized and infrastructural *in situ* resilience strategies. In discourse, the normalization of climate phenomena and partisan skepticism about climate change have reinforced biased risk perceptions and institutionalized agnostic adaptation, meaning adaptation disconnected from the recognition of increasing climate risks. Simultaneously, mistrust in governance and the deep cultural attachment of Louisianans to their lands reinforce communities’ reluctance to engage in movement. These practices, ideas, and interests, legitimized and reinforced in discourse at various political levels, underpin governments’ inability to proactively address the climate issue, with the political objective of ensuring the preservation and permanence of coastal communities. These conditions foster what I conceptualize as managed immobility, the government planning for non-movement and the institutionalization of climate immobility.

This thesis addresses some of the theoretical and methodological gaps left by the relative dearth of scholarship on the topic of climate immobility, particularly in political science. Through a neo-Marxist analysis, it attempts to broaden perspectives beyond materialist explanations to investigate

the “trapping” power of ideational and institutional processes and their underlying political interests. It emphasizes the normative dimensions of climate adaptation and situates the complexity of place and identity within larger political forces, providing original and in-depth ethnographic work on the lived realities of climate change and the institutionalization of maladaptive policies. By challenging the “mobility bias” in the literature and moving beyond dichotomous analyses of immobility as choice or constraint, this thesis makes theoretical contributions to both the study of climate mobilities and environmental policy and provides a new field of application for discursive institutionalism. It also offers new empirical data on the role of policymakers, their ideas, and extractivist interests in immobilizing communities at risk of climate change in North America.

Key words: climate immobility, adaptation, public policy, fossil fuels, interests, ideology, institutions, beliefs, climate change, discourse.

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Abbreviations

3Is: Institutions, interests, ideas

BSEE: Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement

CITF: Climate Initiatives Task Force

CMP: Coastal Master Plan

CPRA: Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority

CWPPRA: Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection and Restoration Act program

DI: Discursive institutionalism

FEMA: Federal Emergency Management Agency

GHOSEP: Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness

GLPC: Greater Lafourche Port Commission

GOMESA: Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act

HSDRRS: Hurricane & Storm Damage Risk Reduction System

LA SAFE: Louisiana's Strategic Adaptations for Future Environments

LA TIG: The Louisiana Trustee Implementation Group

LCC: Louisiana Chamber of Commerce

LDWF: Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries

LMOGA: Louisiana Mid-Continent Oil & Gas Association

LOGA: Louisiana Oil & Gas Association

LOOP: Louisiana Offshore Oil Port

MBSD: Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion

NFIP: National Flood Insurance Program

RESTORE Act: Resources and Ecosystems Sustainability, Tourist Opportunities, and Revived Economies of the Gulf Coast States Act

SLLD: South Lafourche Levee District

SLR: Sea level rise

US/USA: United States / United States of America

*To my friends and family,
For their never-ending support and laughter*

Acknowledgments

Writing these acknowledgments in both English and French reflects not only the linguistic duality that I have experienced throughout my whole life, but also the richness of my doctoral journey. Deepening my love of Quebec and discovering the cultural and ecological diversity of Louisiana, this journey of eight years in North America has been both challenging and immensely rewarding.

I first want to thank all who have opened their doors, turned on their computers, and supported this research one way or another. I am profoundly grateful for the time and knowledge that you have given me, and for demonstrating the value of Louisianan hospitality. For sharing your love of Gumbo, recommending the satirical Mardi Gras Krew du Vieux, introducing me to crawfish, baking me Louisiana pralines, and for all those moments spent on the water discussing life and local politics: I sincerely thank you. I also want to give a special shout out to the staff at Ochsner Medical Center in Belle Chasse that ensured I could finish this fieldwork. I left Louisiana with a hefty bill and one less organ than I entered the United States with (don't worry, it was just the appendix and I had health insurance). The nursing staff's kindness was integral to my recovery and sanity during those two hospital stays and I am grateful for their sympathy.

Mon entière gratitude va bien évidemment à ma direction, Pascale Dufour et Erick Lachapelle, sans qui cette thèse n'aurait pas vu le jour. Pascale, un grand merci pour ton soutien et ton écoute indéfectible, les innombrables lettres de recommandations et les échanges de courriels rassurants. Je n'aurais pas pu compléter ce doctorat sans cet appui solide et bienveillant, et je te suis infiniment reconnaissante pour ces moments de rires et de partage (parfois désespérés) autour de la politique française et américaine. Erick, je te remercie de m'avoir accueilli à l'Université de Montréal il y a maintenant huit ans et ouvert les portes de la recherche. Ton enthousiasme pour mes travaux m'a souvent encouragé et motivé à creuser mes réflexions et m'a confronté à de nouvelles perspectives intellectuelles. J'espère sincèrement que nos relations, qu'elles soient amicales ou professionnelles, avec vous, Pascale et Erick, perdureront au-delà de notre temps à l'université.

Je tiens également à souligner les professeurs et professeures qui ont marqué mon parcours doctoral. Laurence Bherer, Frédéric Mérand, Pascale Devette, Françoise Montambeault, Simon Thibault, Christine Rothmayr, Sophie van Neste, je vous remercie pour ces multiples collaborations

professionnelles. Je tiens aussi à remercier Caroline Brouillette qui, à travers le programme de mentorat, m'a montré la voie du militantisme climatique hors de l'université. To professor Amy Lesen, I want to express my gratitude for your guidance and help during my fieldwork in Louisiana. Thank you for your assistance with grant applications and for a captivating conversation about social and climate justice in New Orleans. Many thanks also to professors Craig Colten, Liz Skilton and Laura McKinney for their insights on this research project. Finally, I am grateful to professors Catherine Xhardez, Elizabeth Marino and Denis Saint-Martin for having accepted to read my work and be on this jury.

Je tiens aussi à souligner les organismes boursiers et centres de recherche qui ont permis à cette recherche d'exister. Je remercie les membres du CERIUM et du CAPED pour leur soutien à la rédaction ; ainsi que l'organisme Mitacs, le Centre pour l'étude de la citoyenneté démocratique (CÉCD-CSDC) et la professeure Jane Jenson pour leur soutien financier qui m'aura permis de mener à bien ce travail de terrain en Louisiane. Je remercie, enfin, toutes les personnes membres du CPDS et du CAPED pour avoir fait vivre les couloirs du troisième étage.

Je dédie cette thèse à tous mes amis qui m'ont soutenu et fait rire au fil des années. Je n'aurai pas pu le faire sans vous, et je vous en suis éternellement reconnaissante. Merci à Marie, ma *work wife*, pour ta bienveillance et pour ces précieux moments de partage, tapies dans notre bureau, à parler de la vie, de couture, ou de notre incompréhension partagée pour le monde académique. Le C-3122 avec toi va me manquer. Merci à Lucile pour ton écoute et ton soutien indispensable, pour nos *dates* et pour ta capacité à toujours trouver les mots dans les moments difficiles. Merci à Antoine pour ton aide et tes réflexions académiques, mais aussi pour tes éclats de rire, tes anecdotes, et nos moments de confusion. Merci à Arthur, avec qui j'ai commencé ce doctorat, pour toutes ces pauses à papoter et à infiltrer les buffets de conférences. Un énorme merci également à Zaïnab et Flora pour leur amitié et leurs encouragements, ainsi qu'à toutes les personnes qui ont marqué mon doctorat, Tristan, Johannes, Dimitri, Andréanne, Semih, Louis-Robert et tous les autres.

Je pense également à ceux qui m'ont permis de déconnecter du monde académique. Julie, ma *cro* depuis plus d'une décennie, j'espère que l'on se suivra encore longtemps à travers le monde ; Anaïs, merci pour ton oreille attentive et ton épaule solide ; Léa avec qui j'ai découvert le Canada et la poutine ; Mélissa, avec qui je partage la passion du textile ; Simon, Aman, Philo et Deanna

pour ces soirées au bowling ; Rachael for all of those thoughtful handmade gifts (especially that wonderful shrimp-on-an-oil-rig decal for my office).

J'adresse une pensée particulière à mes amis à quatre pattes qui m'ont tenu compagnie sous le bureau et m'ont forcé à sortir lorsque j'y étais coincée. Ninja, tu es le vrai héros de cette aventure.

Je suis également reconnaissante envers ma belle-famille, Sophie, Frédéric, Côme, Tibre et Françoise pour leurs généreux encouragements au fil des ans. Je pense ensuite à tous les membres de ma famille Munoz-Gouery qui, d'aussi loin, m'ont épaulé durant toute cette aventure doctorale. À ma mère, Florence, pour son fidèle soutien. Merci de m'avoir accompagné à chaque déménagement avec enthousiasme, d'avoir partagé avec moi tes passions et ton plaisir du voyage, et de m'avoir continuellement inspiré par ton travail et ta détermination. Merci également à mon père, Paul-Michel, sans qui je n'aurais pas pu réaliser (et surtout terminer) ce périple américain. Les promenades de convalescence sur les digues du Mississippi, les *fried pickles*, les motels pourris, Uhtred, les Waffle House, et toutes ces heures passées dans mon vieux van capricieux à traverser le Texas ne sont que quelques-uns des innombrables souvenirs que je chérirai pour toujours. Tout cela n'aura pas pu arriver sans vous, merci.

Enfin, je remercie tout spécialement Titouan. Je te suis reconnaissante pour ta patience dans ces moments où l'usure physique et mentale du doctorat prenait de l'ampleur dans notre vie. Je te remercie pour ton soutien et tes encouragements incessants au cours de ces treize dernières années, pour tous ces fous-rires et ces road trips. Merci de m'avoir forcée à sortir le nez de la thèse lorsqu'il le fallait, et de m'avoir apporté un nombre incalculable de Twix pour terminer cette rédaction. Ta résilience, ta curiosité intellectuelle et tes convictions militantes sont une source d'inspiration continue. Merci, encore et toujours.

Introduction

It was a crisp, beautiful March morning on the calm waters of Louisiana's Bird's Foot. Navigating the intricate canals of the Mississippi River delta on Caleb's small fishing boat, we delighted in the tranquility of the marshes and the sighting of a few alligators, beautiful egrets, and a little nutria swimming away into the tall grass. Occasionally, we would go over a pipeline and a sign that warned of the passage of oil and gas deep under the water, reminding us of the industry's presence in this delicate estuary. We had stopped the boat to admire the landscape when the whistling of a bullet pierced the air, falling into the water a few meters to our left. We looked up, surprised to see three hunters frantically chasing a squealing wild boar on their airboat. "This is insane", remarked Caleb, visibly infuriated by their lack of concern for our safety. He fired up the boat and quickly steered towards the hunters, hoping to confront them about the dangers of firing their rifles blindly in the tall marshes. But they angrily dismissed us for potentially ruining their hunt and continued shooting, swiftly maneuvering the airboat through the canals in pursuit of the boar. Caleb knew these men – it is a small community here in Southern Plaquemines – and promised to have a word with them later down in the harbor. The lands may be privately owned by oil and gas companies, but fishermen and hunters revel in their bountiful resources and often cross paths on the water. The Sportsman's Paradise, as it is often called. Out here, people seek tranquility, freedom, and the ability to hunt and harvest shrimp and oysters in peace. This close intimacy with the non-human world and inherent sense of liberty are foundational to the Louisianan identity and have fostered a profound attachment to land in the southern regions, the result of historic political forces that have pushed Cajun and Indigenous communities to the confines of the bayou. Now on the frontlines of climate change, however, their ability to remain on these fragile lands is compromised.

"There is a deeply rooted sense of and attachment to place and to one another in Southeast Louisiana. Yet, both are under threat, as the land disappears and communities disperse inland" (Simms 2021:2). This threat is experienced daily by Caleb, an eighth-generation recreational fisherman and ecologist, who has seen the dramatic crumble of the coast during his time on the water. It's a question of handling it, Caleb reflects, noting that he will never leave his home. But it is also a question of policy. Hurricanes may have gradually pushed people out of the deep ends of the coast, but so have increasing insurance prices and elevation standards. The inability of the

local government to fund flood protection, and the state’s focus on large-scale coastal restoration projects at the expense of community welfare have further weakened social systems and residents’ ability to cope with a changing climate. For this deep red state, the question of social adaptation seems vital. And yet, Caleb remarks, “Some people are not listening to the right radio stations, and they don’t want to acknowledge what is happening.¹”

1. Situating adaptation in a context of climate denialism and fossil fuel interests

The paradox of a climate denialist state experiencing some of the most drastic effects of climate change in North America constitutes the starting point of this investigation. In Louisiana, belief in anthropogenic climate change is significantly lower compared to national levels, particularly in the Southeast region where climate vulnerability is most pronounced (Marlon et al., 2022; 2024). Yet, climate change is expected to have an immense impact on populations and their distribution, especially along the US Southeast coast and urban centers (Robinson et al., 2020; Hauer et al., 2017). As Lustgarten (2020) remarks, “Census data show us how Americans move: toward heat, toward coastlines, toward drought, regardless of evidence of increasing storms and flooding and other disasters.” Surveys have found that only 10% of Americans have considered moving to avoid the impacts of climate change, while 82% have not, despite the intensification of extreme weather and sea-level rise across American shores (Leiserowitz et al., 2023). Meanwhile, insurance companies are slowly retreating from States like Florida and California where the climate risk is too high, while the State of Louisiana desperately tries to attract and maintain private insurers (Flavelle, Cowan and Penn, 2023; Crowley, 2023).

Simultaneously, climate denialism remains high among conservative voters, resulting in an estimated 15% of Americans who do not believe climate change is real (Gounaridis and Newell, 2024). National surveys have also shown that Republicans prefer fewer environmental regulations and smaller governments, with 72% still supporting offshore oil and gas drilling and only 12% seeing climate change as a priority for the country (Pew Research Center, 2015, 2020; Kennedy and Tyson, 2024; Lakoff, 2010). In Louisiana, this support continues to increase despite the

¹ Interview Caleb, ecologist and former councilmember. Empire, 22.02.04

relentless devastation of hurricanes in recent history (Katrina and Rita in 2005 and Ida in 2021, for example), and the acknowledgement of worsened flooding conditions due to the sinking of the coast (Spanger-Siegfried et al., 2017). Between 2021 and 2023, belief in anthropogenic global warming has receded, while support for offshore oil and gas drilling has increased by 6% in the Southeast, the portion of the state most impacted by climate change (Marlon et al. 2022; 2024).

Political beliefs and adaptation attitudes are foundational to understanding the making of climate (im)mobility in the United States, where partisan identity, the attribution of extreme weather to anthropogenic climate change, and pre-existing partisan beliefs have been shown to shape people's interpretations of risk and their support for adaptation measures (Singh and Swanson, 2017; Weber, 2013; Van Dijk, 2015; Haider-Markel and Joslyn, 2001; McCright and Dunlap, 2011a, 2011b). This is because perceptions of climate change exist through lenses and cultural worldviews, and through the framing of climate change in discourse (Wolf and Moser, 2011). For conservative and Republican communities, therefore, the experience of extreme weather events and sea-level rise may not necessarily lead to the recognition of increased risks and of the need for proactive climate adaptation and mitigation policies. This also entails not recognizing the potential consequences of climate change on (im)mobility.

In Louisiana, these conservative partisan attitudes are highly intertwined with the region's petro-culture. As Wilson et al. (2017:3) have simply put it, "We need to understand oil to understand everything else", and fossil fuels are an important element of Louisiana's identity (Parent, 2006; Theriot, 2014). The social and political *oil culture* of the State has seeped through political processes and environmental policies, shaped by elites' desire to preserve an extractivist economy. As Colten (2019) remarks, policies and legislation have centered around the continuation and expansion of energy production despite their effects on coastal land loss and climate change, facilitated by coastal restoration and protection efforts to preserve infrastructure and practices of extraction. In 2023, the new Republican Governor Jeff Landry has taken office with the goal of expanding Louisiana's fossil fuel industry against the "hoax" of climate change and has placed prominent figures of the energy sector in key environmental policy positions (Jones, 2024; Office of the Governor, 2024; Taylor, 2018). Evidence for the permeation of industry interests in politics sets the scene for the further investigation of the political fabric of adaptation and immobility. The salience of these interests in environmental politics and their entrenchment in a highly

conservative, climate-denialist political culture are key to understanding the region's resistance to mobility in the face of climate change (Colten, 2019).

The case of Southeast Louisiana is illustrative of the “immobility paradox”, the observation that despite alarming estimates of sea-level rise and extreme weather events, few communities are actually taking part in active relocation (Beine et al., 2019; Geddes et al., 2012). Navigating this paradox, this thesis questions: **why aren't communities exposed to sea-level rise and climate change impacts moving as expected?** Specifically, **how do political institutions, ideas, and interests shape immobility and adaptation practices?** Partisan ideology, fossil fuel interests, and cultural land attachments constitute the starting point of my inquiry into the puzzling experience of collective immobility that will be unraveled in this thesis.

2. The research problem: climate immobility as a collective phenomenon

Despite the ever-increasing effects of climate change felt in the US, Canada, and Europe – beating record high temperatures, devastating hurricanes, tornadoes, wildfires, and heat waves – governments are struggling to plan the proactive adaptation of our collective social systems, whether through movement or *in situ* strategies (NOAA, 2023; Cecco, 2023; Wyton, 2023). Research on immobility and adaptation in the last two decades has improved our understanding of the intricacies of mobility decision-making and vulnerabilities, but adaptation in general remains an understudied research topic in political science despite its inherently political nature (Javeline, 2014). Embracing Dolšak and Prakash's (2018:319) conception of adaptation-as-politics, I conceive of adaptation as related “to the issues of power, conflicting policy preferences, resource allocation, and administrative tensions”. Adaptation is more generally defined as the actions and policies taken to reduce the physical, social, and economic vulnerability of people, systems, and infrastructures to climate change (IPCC, 2014; McLeman, 2018; Dolšak et Prakash, 2018). In that regard, migration as adaptation has long been considered an effective tool to enhance economic and physical resilience against climate threats (Black et al., 2013; Felli and Castree, 2012).

While research has demonstrated that the increasing experience of extreme weather events, high temperatures, and droughts has impacted migration patterns globally (Leiserowitz et al., 2024; Šedová et al., 2021), the connection between environmental change and climate mobilities has

long been assessed on a global scale through quantitative analyses (Piguet, 2010a, 2010b; Boas et al., 2019; Noy, 2017; Myers, 1997). But this approach overlooks the diverse range of contexts and sociopolitical variables that shape the complex nature of climate change-related movement (Campbell and Warrick, 2014; Noy, 2017). As the “immobility paradox” suggests, at-risk populations may not be moving as expected despite intense climate change impacts (Beine et al., 2019). Among those are “trapped populations”, first conceptualized in 2011 as communities unable to engage in movement due to lack of material capacity (Black et al., 2011a). While it is commonly accepted that socioeconomically vulnerable people are less capable of migrating, perceptions of risk, identities and cultural values have also been identified as determinant factors of (im)mobility, expanding our comprehension of the particularities of local adaptation (Black et al., 2011c; Wiegel et al., 2021). Indeed, political and social processes shape which options communities have to respond to climate change, and how they may be affected by them. Climate change can’t be reduced to impacts, but must be understood through its influence on social, economic, environmental, cultural, historical, and political processes (Boas et al., 2022). This is also why “natural” disasters are best conceived as the product of political, social, and cultural arrangements that have pushed communities in certain areas, weakened social systems of resilience and, in certain cases, promoted a culture of immobility (Parker et al., 2018; Colten, 2015). These arrangements are at the heart of this investigation.

In critiquing the emerging concept of “trapped populations”, Ayeb-Karlsson et al., (2022:3) have pointed out that “Because immobility is easily construed as a condition of despair, those who are “trapped” are presumed to be in need of being rescued or liberated from their entrapment”. These dominant perspectives have promulgated support for migration-as-adaptation and the idea of immobility as a failure to adapt. But understanding the choice to stay, or the complexities of aspirations and capabilities in relation to movement remains largely understudied and a relatively novel field of research. As Wiegel et al. (2021:2) explains simply, “Academia had long neglected the complexities relating to staying in place in the context of environmental changes.” In particular, the role of governance in the making of climate immobility as a *collective* phenomenon – and not simply an individual-level decision – has received little attention in the field of climate mobilities and in political science itself (Thornton et al., 2023).

In this thesis, I engage with the critique that “trapped populations” and climate immobility are inadequately conceptualized. In fact, considering climate (im)mobilities as “the new normal” (Boas et al., 2019), I question the assumption that all people affected by sea-level rise will relocate and argue that immobility can in fact be part of a range of options and adaptation strategies. I endorse Boas et al.’s (2022) rejection of maximalist perspectives on climate mobilities which conceive of apocalyptic, mass-migration through large-N estimations of movement as the result of a linear relationship between environmental impacts and movement. Instead, the authors propose to use the concept of *climate mobilities*. It allows us to “pay attention to the multiplicities of climate change-related human mobility (involving immobility, relocation, circular mobility, etc.), its embedment in ongoing patterns of histories of movement, and the material and political conditions under which it takes place” (Boas et al., 2022:3366). Drawing on this perspective, I approach the making of immobility as a *collective* practice informed by structural interests, ideas and institutions shaped by their socio-cultural context.

I engage with the literature on climate mobilities for two main reasons. First, because there remains much to be understood of the political conditions of climate immobility. As previously mentioned, immobility itself is a relatively novel object of study which has been primarily studied through an economic lens, and largely conceptualized as a failure to adapt through mobility (Black et al., 2011b; 2011c; Wiegel et al., 2021; Ayeb-Karlsson et al., 2018). Due to this long-standing bias in the mobility literature, “climate immobility is, at best, in its infancy”, especially with regards to the multifactorial nature of climate movement and adaptation decision-making, including perceptions of risk, policy, or attachments to land (Thornton et al., 2023:2; Boas et al., 2019). Second, I draw on the idea of “co-existing mobilities” advanced by recent research to refute dominant dichotomous conceptions in migration studies (Zickgraf, 2019). I conceive of immobility and mobility as patterns of behaviors that exist along a spectrum, espousing Schewel’s (2019) paradigm of immobility. Movement is not fixed, people can become immobile at one time, and mobile at another. In this sense, immobility and mobility are not binary opposites (Zickgraf, 2022). Furthermore, (non)-movement is a pattern which must be “de-exceptionalized” and understood in relation to contexts, culture, and practices (Schapendonk et al., 2021). To apprehend the decision to move or to stay, the climate mobilities lens “gives analytical priority to understanding how people perceive and interpret climate changes in their surroundings in relation to their im/mobilities” (Boas et al., 2022: 3369). Viewing non-movement as a choice may also be

restrictive, especially in the context of climate change and intense environmental degradation which reduces adaptation opportunities for socioeconomically vulnerable groups. In fact, the constraining power of ideas and policies on people's recognition of risks and their vulnerability has blurred the line between voluntary and forced immobilities, broadening perspectives for the investigation of the intricate ways by which immobility is politically and socially constructed (Ayeb-Karlsson et al., 2018, 2022).

The goal of this thesis is, therefore, to provide nuance to our understanding of what it means to adapt to climate change and sea-level rise, and ground the analysis of the “multifaceted package of loss” associated with displacement (Lubkemann, 2008: 455; Seebauer and Winkler, 2020). All immobile populations are not simply “trapped”, and they may be subjected to various intervening forces, including political culture, land attachments, and partisan beliefs (Suliman et al., 2019). Climate immobility in general may best be seen as shaped by a series of patterns and factors which condition the agency and abilities of households and collective actors. As this research will show, communities may become “trapped” by partisan cognitive processes, maladaptative policies, and the vested interests of economic elites which shape strategies and opportunities for climate adaptation and mitigation. Simply put, this thesis is concerned with identifying the “trapping” force of political institutions and their effects on the collective making of climate immobility.

3. Theoretical approach and methods of investigation

I circumscribe this research to the North American context to go beyond the literature's present focus on small island states and developing nations, and introduce political ideology as an important factor in the making of collective immobility (Piguet et al., 2018). A focus on the United States allows me to mobilize theories on climate beliefs, motivated cognition, and partisan bias in the climate policy sphere, which have been extensively developed in the American context. I investigate the issue of climate immobility through the lens of discursive institutionalism – the fourth institutionalist approach in political science. This allows for a critical perspective on the *discourse structuration* of adaptation and climate change (the hegemonic framing of a certain issue) and their *discursive institutionalization* (meaning the transformation of structures or practices in ways that embody hegemonic discourses) (Carvalho, 2008). The aim of this theoretical approach is to identify the way immobility is shaped by institutions, interests, and ideas (the “3Is”) and to discern a *master discourse*, a frame a reference constituted by hegemonic interests and

representations. This *master discourse* enables the legitimization, circulation, and institutionalization of climate adaptation practices.

This discursive institutionalist approach is pertinent because environmental discourses have specific histories, rooted in material and institutional foundations, and serve an important function in policymaking. As Feindt and Oels (2005:163) point out, environmental knowledge and discourse “enable people to see and articulate certain features of the world but not others”, legitimate practices and policy choices and consolidate power. Indeed, climate change as a social construction takes on meaning through its integration into discursive formations “rooted in power relations, competing knowledge systems, and a contentious distribution of wealth and resources” (Marino and Ribot, 2012:325). Analytically, a discursive approach is thus valuable to understand the social contexts and meanings of political practices, their normative legitimacy, and permeation into social institutions (Bernstein, 2001). I embrace meso and macro levels of analysis to move beyond the literature’s focus on micro-level conditions and large-N studies of climate (im)mobility, allowing me to capture the structural and institutional conditions of adaptation.

This thesis adopts a critical discourse approach to investigate the making of immobility in Southeast Louisiana as a typical case study of environmental vulnerability. Beyond the level of the State of Louisiana, I specifically zoom in on three parishes² situated along the Gulf of Mexico: Terrebonne, Lafourche, and Plaquemines Parishes. I have adopted a tripartite methodology composed of non-participant observations (N=150), semi-structured interviews (N=45), and document analysis (N=74). The observation of political meetings was conducted in twenty-eight instances at two levels of governance, the State of Louisiana and parish level governments, and within both executive and legislative policy spheres. The objective of this meeting ethnography was to capture the way adaptation, climate change, and (im)mobility are discussed and debated. Political meetings are spaces where power is enacted, legitimized, and challenged, and offer a

² Although all other states in the USA are composed of counties, Louisiana is divided into 64 *parishes*. These areas are self-governed, whether by a local government or by a Police jury. Lafourche, Terrebonne and Plaquemines have local governments composed of a parish president and administration, and a parish council.

powerful lens through which to observe the making of politics and the discursive production of an issue (or lack thereof) (Brown et al., 2017; Sandler and Thedvall, 2017).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with government actors, environmental non-governmental groups, and residents of Southeast Louisiana. I analyzed the political discourses and meaning-making processes shared by these actors to uncover how adaptation and climate change risk are construed collectively (Reisigl, 2008). Finally, document analysis was conducted on government sources – bills, laws, reports, plans – to grasp the fabric of adaptation policies, their legitimation and institutionalization. This allowed for a deeper analysis of the performative power of language in public political spheres. It also enabled me to triangulate data and move beyond the politicization of critical discourse analysis (Weiss and Wodak, 2003). After this year-and-a-half long-distance fieldwork conducted online between 2020 and 2021, I completed a semi-immersive fieldwork in Southeast Louisiana from January to April 2022. This multisite ethnographic work allowed me to visualize the effects of climate change and finalize data collection with residents. It provided the opportunity to deepen my understanding of land attachments and practices of adaptation along Louisiana’s coast, substantially enriching my analysis of climate immobility.

4. Outline of the thesis

This thesis is divided into seven chapters. In the first chapter, I provide an in-depth review of the literature on climate mobilities. Starting with a discussion of the dominant mobility bias, I engage with the various academic perspectives on the “trapped populations” concept. Situating my analysis of Louisiana within the literature on climate adaptation, I then elaborate on four factors of (im)mobility, namely economic conditions, state governance, ideas, and attachments to place. Thereafter, I position my analysis within theories of climate immobility, drawing specifically on Schewel’s (2019) conception of the three immobilities – voluntary, involuntary, and acquiescent – to discuss the theoretical and empirical complexities of this object of study. These discussions lay the foundations for the second part of this chapter, which presents the theoretical framework of the thesis. I position my analysis within a critical discursive institutionalist approach to investigate the role of the “3Is” (institutions, interests and ideas) in the fabric of immobility. I explain how this approach is useful to capture the normative ideas and hegemonic interests carried through discourse, which shape power dynamics and secure consent for adaptation practices in

Louisiana. I end the chapter with a discussion of frames and discursive strategies as tools used to operationalize this theoretical framework.

Chapter 2 delves into the methodological approach of this thesis. I start by discussing the pertinence of meso and macro levels of analysis to capture ideas at the collective level. I then present Louisiana and the parishes of Terrebonne, Lafourche and Plaquemines as typical case studies of climate vulnerability and clarify the articulation of State and parish levels of governance in this analysis. Next, I elaborate on the three main types of data collected and discuss their use regarding the critical discourse perspective espoused in this research. I also develop on the on-site fieldwork conducted in Southeast Louisiana and present my methods for data analysis, the use of grounded theory and coding methods used to investigate the content of discourses and their substantive meanings in the practice of adaptation. Finally, this chapter opens a discussion on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, both in the restructuration of this research project and in fostering specific epistemological considerations for online-on-site fieldwork.

In Chapters 3 to 7, I present the empirical findings of this thesis. In Chapter 3, I lay the groundwork for a better understanding of the structural interests that have permeated environmental policies and are at the heart of the state's adaptation practices conducive to immobility. This chapter is crucial to understanding the desire for *permanence*, identified as the *master discourse* which legitimizes the institutionalization of immobility – of livelihoods, of industry, and of the status quo. I first expand on the idea of an *oil culture* imprinted into social practices and its populist legitimization in discourse by industry and policy actors. I argue that *oil culture* acts as a frame of reference for Louisianans and policymakers to preserve an extractivist industry at the expense of climate change policy and adaptation. In the second part of this chapter, I demonstrate how *oil culture* has seeped into institutions, embedding the interests of the fossil fuel industry into politics and effectively shaping both institutional capacity and the ability of governments to adapt.

In Chapter 4, I unravel the manifestation of these structuring interests on coastal policies and practices of adaptation in the state of Louisiana. I show that the political desire to preserve productivity and extractivist practices has confined coastal restoration and infrastructural strategies, instrumentalizing the climate crisis to advance industry interests. This has been done through the discursive positioning of fossil fuels as compatible with coastal protection and climate action, and the narrative of a *working coast* to be preserved through an extractivist model.

In Chapter 5, I link these structuring interests that have resulted in coastal restoration and protection policies to partisan ideologies and agnostic beliefs about climate change. I show that conservatives and climate denialists, in their desire to preserve fossil fuels and secure their own interests, have engaged in the *normalization* and *naturalization* of the coastal crisis and extreme weather events. The absence of attribution of these vulnerabilities to anthropogenic climate change lends support to the greenwashing practices of the energy industry and their political allies and is reflective of the depoliticization of adaptation in discourse. I attribute these discursive strategies to partisan dynamics in a context of high polarization and low public beliefs in climate change. This chapter sets the groundwork to understanding how partisan attitudes towards climate change are conducive to immobility by creating bias in people's perception of increasing risk. Climate change denialism also reinforces the belief in the possibility for *permanence*.

Chapter 6 ties these structural factors together by discussing the "trapping" power of adaptation practices. Made to preserve extractivist interests and reinforced by agnostic disbelief in climate change, adaptation is conceived as purely infrastructural. I make the demonstration that decisionmakers encourage immobility through infrastructures to secure economic activities and their tax bases along the coast. This approach further reinforces the political and social desire for *permanence*, reduces alternative adaptation options, and encourages residents to resist the federal government's nudge to move out of harm's way by discursively framing infrastructures as life-enabling in the long term. Finally, I show how home elevations are used to assert the desire for immobility, despite the maladaptive nature of these practices.

In the final chapter, I demonstrate how the *master discourse* of *permanence* is not only the result of top-down policy processes that have restricted adaptation opportunities for some residents to secure material interests, but is also sustained by a strong cultural attachment to place and a desire for freedom. Identity is deeply embedded within the fabric of Louisianans' relation to their non-human world and has fostered reluctance to leave. Simultaneously, the libertarian political culture has individualized adaptation and resilience, reinforcing historic mistrust in the government's ability to provide assistance to communities vulnerable to climate change. The appeal of freedom from government intervention and the desire to live out on the water provides a final push for the societal acceptance of institutionalized immobility.

This thesis aims to show that immobility as a collective phenomenon is constructed both in discourse through cognition and ideas, and in practice through policies which constrains the ability and willingness of communities to engage in movement. Through the investigation of political ideas, institutions, and interests, I propose a more nuanced and contextual understanding of the internal and external factors that inform the “immobility paradox”. By going beyond dichotomous conceptions of climate migration-as-adaptation and articulating analysis at the macro and meso levels, I show how immobility is political constructed and socially anchored, reflective of structural interests and ideas that shape perceptions of risk and guide adaptation. On a theoretical level, I attempt to deepen our understanding of the “trapping” forces that immobilize communities vulnerable to climate change by bridging the gaps between political science theories and the study of climate mobilities. Empirically, I move beyond the field’s focus on individual experiences and large-N economic explanations for non-movement to provide an in-depth and contextualized analysis of the institutionalization of immobility. The devastation of Hurricane Ida in 2021 and the uncontrollable subsidence of Southeast Louisiana’s coast attest of the critical significance of uncovering the political hurdles hindering communities’ ability to adapt, whether it be in place or through mobility.

Chapter 1. Currents of thought: ideas, discourses and institutional perspectives on climate (im)mobility

With many large cities and coastal communities facing chronic inundation³ and devastating environmental disasters, climate change has become a pervasive driver of human migrations (Pilkey and Pilkey 2019; Cattaneo et al., 2019). The field of environmental mobility, described by its most prominent authors Adger, Arnell, Black, Geddes and colleagues (2015) as a new “research frontier”, has focused on estimating the physical impacts of climate change and sea-level rise on coastal regions and explaining conditions of mobility (Piguet, 2010b). Resulting narratives on climate refugees and climate migrants have created a “mobility bias”, hampering research on non-movement under climate change (Schewel, 2019; Zickgraf, 2019). These research agendas have produced a “self-referencing narrative” whereby migration has become an expected adaptation strategy, essentializing the aspirations and capabilities of persons impacted by climate change (Boas et al., 2019:901; Black et al. 2011b). The recent emergence of “trapped populations” in the literature has altered this perspective, introducing new understandings of those unable or unwilling to relocate despite intense climate impacts.

This thesis addresses the gaps left by the relative novelty of the climate immobility object of study and the emerging “trapped population” concept. It attempts to broaden perspectives of immobility beyond materialist explanations of adaptation to investigate the “trapping” power of cognitive, emotional, and political processes. Decision-making around immobility and the question of choice in movement are complex, and few studies in the field have engaged with structural political explanations for adaptive behaviors beyond the individual level. More specifically, studies on (im)mobility patterns and conditions have largely focused on populations of the Global South where the effects of climate change are most present. As a result, little is known of the making of immobility in Western countries, especially as it relates to ideas, institutions and interests in contexts of high vulnerability.

³ Chronic inundation is defined as events where “high tide floods 10 percent or more of its usable, non-wetland area at least 26 times per year or, on average, every other week.” (Union of Concerned Scientists, 2017c:1).

This chapter presents the theoretical tools mobilized in this thesis. The first section dives into the mobility and immobility literatures to pinpoint the gaps in our understanding of adaptation and movement. It shows that the study of non-movement is still burgeoning in the political science field and calls for a more nuanced and contextualized perspective on the political conditions of immobility. The second part of this chapter sets out the theoretical framework that will be used to address the gaps identified in the literature. Articulated around the study of the “3Is”— institutions, interests and ideas –, this thesis draws on a critical discursive institutionalist approach to investigate the major political and ideational processes underlying practices of climate (im)mobility.

1. A review of the literature on climate (im)mobilities

This literature review aims to (1) situate climate (im)mobility and “trapped populations” within contemporary research in both the climate mobility field and migration studies; (2) map out the principal determinants of adaptation addressed in the climate literature; and (3) propose a theoretical roadmap for the political analysis of immobility. To do so, this section examines the relationship between mobility and immobility under climate change and introduces “trapped populations” as an overlooked and understudied object of research. Situating the Louisianan case within broader adaptation literatures, I emphasize economic conditions, policies, and land attachments in decision-making, while also identifying gaps to be addressed, particularly the role of governance and mediating factors in movement. My objective is to move beyond materialist explanations of immobility and contextualize the study of trapping forces. Finally, this section sketches out a typology of immobility and engages in a critical discussion of the concept.

1.1. The mobility-immobility nexus

As Cattaneo et al., (2019) remind us, there is no unified theoretical approach in field of climate mobility because of the variability of climate impacts, mobility patterns and external constraints on movement. For long, the field of climate mobility research has been dominated by three main objects of study: migration, displacement, and planned relocation (Zickgraf, 2019). As a result, focus has been placed on understanding the drivers of movement at the expense of discerning the forces that contribute to persons adapting in place (Schewel, 2019). Emerging in the 2010s, climate immobility remains a long-neglected topic in the social sciences, scantily researched in its own

right until recently and predominantly conceptualized as a lack of ability and agency in movement. The governance of immobility in particular is still largely understudied, making way for many potential contributions of political science research (Wiegel et al., 2021:2; Thornton et al., 2023). Rather than using the biased (and unprecise) term of climate migration, this thesis will embrace Boas et al.'s (2022; 2019) concept of *climate (im)mobilities* to critically engage with the multiplicity of movement and non-movement contexts. The following sections provide a more in depth discussion of the literature on climate mobilities and “trapped populations”.

1.1.1. Localizing human agency in climate mobility research

Originally dominated by large-N quantitative estimates of climate movement in the Global South, the climate mobility literature consolidated in the 1990s to focus on estimating population flows in terms of intensity and direction. Some of the most promulgated estimates which popularized the sensationalist figure of the “climate refugee” include the prediction of 50 million environmental refugees by 2010 (Myers, 1997), 25 million to 1 billion by 2050 (Byravan and Rajan, 2010), or 150 million by 2050 (Myers, 1993; Myers and Kent, 1995; Rigaud et al., 2018). Directly linking environmental degradation to movement was contested by many others who viewed such linear perspectives on mobility as “unhelpful and unsound intellectually, and unnecessary in practical terms” (Black, 2001:1; Hartmann, 2010; Bettini, 2013). For many, apocalyptic discourses on mass migration are antiquated and mobility should preferably be conceived as small-scale, contextual phenomenon (Boas et al., 2022; 2019). Since the 2010s, critical research has indeed endorsed the position that movement is affected by varying environmental and sociopolitical drivers and should not be perceived as a monocausal straightforward relationship between climate change and the ability to relocate (Black et al., 2011a; Geddes et al., 2012; Perch-Nielsen et al., 2008; Piguet, 2010b; Cundill et al., 2021; Suhrke, 1994).

In that vein, Gemenne (2011) rightfully argues that quantitative estimates of the impacts of climate change on human mobilities need to be tested against qualitative research and field observations, especially because sea-level rise interacts with local socioeconomic systems (Perch-Nielsen et al., 2008). Indeed, some country-level estimates suggest that migrations will not follow “business as usual” historical patterns of mobility (Robinson et al., 2020), which means that people may not react in a uniform fashion to climate change impacts. Large-N studies of “trapped populations” thus fail to account for the complexities of local-level decision-making and suffer from a lack of

data on various sociopolitical variables (Piguet, 2010a; Noy, 2017; Cattaneo et al., 2019). Some authors have attempted to bypass these factors by accounting for “objective” data such as population growth previsions and climate change scenarios. For example, Hauer et al. (2016) estimate that 13 million Americans will be impacted by sea-level rise, predicting massive population movements in the coming decades. Nonetheless, by adopting a large- or medium-N perspective, studies such as these fail to account for human agency and to capture a realistic picture of mobility on different scales. It supposes homogeneity in the aspirations and preferences of vulnerable groups in their decision to engage in mobility as an adaptation strategy, ignoring the often-strong desires of populations to remain in place and the political, economic, and social barriers to movement (Schewel, 2019; Felli and Castree, 2012; Wiegel et al., 2021).

In sum, the unreliable nature of quantitative estimates for climate-related movement has led to a myriad of previsions, few of which have revealed accurate (Gemenne, 2011; Huggel et al., 2015; Naser et al., 2023). They have also been conducive to a dehumanization of the “trapped” person (and its counterpart, the “climate refugee”), participating to the conceptual objectification of populations of the Global South and serving unhelpful theories on the rightful way to adapt. The lack of concordance between such estimates and actual movement suggests that conditions of mobility and immobility, as well as their varying manifestations, are yet to be fully understood.

1.1.2. Between choice and constraint: conceptualizing “trapped populations”

Three theoretical paradigms on “trapped populations” have emerged in environmental mobility research in the last decade since its first conceptualization in 2011, all engaging in generalized and aggregated conceptions of “immobility”. The first portrays immobility as a failure to adapt, the second accentuates the multifactorial nature of non-movement and questions the notion of constraint, and the third offers a critique of the “trapped population” concept.

Immobility as the failure to adapt

The 2011 Foresight report, written by six prominent authors in the field of climate migrations, pioneered the conceptualization of “trapped populations”, challenging the field’s dominant narrative of mass-migration. Richard Black and his colleagues argued that “millions of people will be *unable* to move away from locations in which they are extremely vulnerable to environmental change” (Black et al., 2011a:9). They contended that populations may be “trapped” by their lack of wealth, linking the ability to move to low levels of capital (Black et al., 2011c). The very little

research conducted on “trapped populations” following the Foresight report has reproduced this view of mobility as a factor of financial capacity, directly derived from neoclassical migration theory (Ayeb-Karlsson et al, 2018; Carling, 2002). This perspective has prevailed because of the relative novelty of this object of study and the currently limited knowledge of alternative explanatory mechanisms (Zickgraf, 2019). This class of research has thus adopted strong economic language, considered movement as a cost-benefit analysis, and focused on the risks involved with climate immobility and “trapped populations”, notably in terms of material loss (Adger et al., 2015). By emphasizing the economic character of vulnerability, it has neglected people’s right and willingness to remain in places that scholars and scientists may consider to be at risk. In discussing migration as adaptation in the context of extreme events, Black and his colleagues (2013:S39) portray immobility and the “right to move” of trapped populations as a policy challenge. On a more global scale, this line of thinking has manifested in the prioritization of international policymaking for migrants over those who may, voluntarily or involuntarily, stay immobile (Naser et al., 2023).

This perspective has limited individual agency and described non-movement as “falling into poverty traps” (Ayeb-Karlsson et al., 2018:563). Immobility in the face of climate change is considered as the failure to adapt and the inability to build resiliency through movement. The underlying theoretical premise of this perspective is that migration is an effective and rational adaptation strategy that affected communities should engage in, because immobility is linked with increased vulnerability. Analyses have centered on communities and households rather than individuals, equating the inability to move with financial shortcomings through sweeping generalizations (Black et al., 2011b; Nawrotzki and DeWaard, 2018). Critiques of this theory refute the supposition that all individuals have the same interests, aspirations and rationality but differ in their capacity to engage in migration – considered as a resiliency enhancing strategy against external shocks and poverty (Felli and Castree, 2012). It also suggests that mobility is simply the result of individual cost-benefit analyses based on rational-choice models, but fail to explain the choice of adapting in place. Rejecting the lens of supposed economic rationality in movement, Schewel (2019:11) argues, “when the preference to stay overrides compelling economic reasons to go, non-economic values and economic “irrationality” cannot be overlooked”.

The choice to adapt in place

Non-movement is not only a factor of constraints on mobility, but it can also be the result of preferences to remain in place. Scholarly work has recently started to expand our understanding of *voluntary* immobility, the choice to stay, and the emotional conditions of adapting in place. This branch of research aims to counter the “mobility bias” of the literature which has presented immobility as an inherently negative outcome of low capital and a failure to adapt (Schewel, 2019:4; Wiegel et al., 2021; Ayeb-Karlsson et al., 2018; Farbotko and McMichael, 2019; Adams, 2016; Naser et al., 2023).

According to this second perspective, movement is conditioned by the interaction of environmental change and other factors, particularly economic, social, political and demographic (Geddes et al., 2012). Non-relocation is conceptualized as a plausible response to climate change, influenced by differing preferences – wanting, needing and refusing to leave (Adams, 2016; Wiegel et al., 2021; Farbotko, 2023; King et al., 2014; Piguet, 2010a; Black and Collyer, 2014). Accentuating the notion of choice, Schewel (2019:20) remarks, “The desire to stay is far more common than disparities in wealth or population would predict.” Calling for a more nuanced view on different forms of immobility, the author proposes moving “migration decision-making models away from a rational economic calculus to include the non-economic values and “irrationality” that lead many to prefer to stay where they are.” Introducing such alternative theoretical conceptions of immobility aims to counter the “ill-founded narratives” on immobility as a problem to be resolved and populations to save (Ayeb-Karlsson et al., 2022:17). As an example, surveys conducted in the Peruvian Andes by Adams (2016) reveal that resource restrictions only constituted 26% of responses to the question “why did you choose not to leave?”, whereas 40% of respondents placed social and affective attachments to place as the primary cause of their immobility. This study indicates that intra-household dynamics and psychological factors are crucial determinants of non-relocation. It also accentuates a flexible and artificial perspective on choice, which may be better conceptualized along a continuum of interactive facilitators and constraints of mobility.

Despite providing more nuance to individual agency, this type of research has reproduced part of the security narrative widely conveyed in the Foresight report, accentuating the lack of legal protection frameworks and potential dangers facing those who are “trapped” or migrating (Ayeb-

Karlsson et al., 2018). It has also reproduced a binary perspective on mobility, seen either as choice or coercion, inflating the alarmist rhetoric on the risks of becoming “trapped” (Ayeb-Karlsson et al., 2018).

The critique of the “trapped” figure

The third branch of climate immobility research provides a critical analysis of the study of climate mobility. For Baldwin and Gemenne (2013), climate migrations are a paradox generated by its researchers, being both an empirical reality and a political construct. As such, it exists as a “speculative, virtual phenomenon” on a wider scale and as a potential reality for people exposed to climate change (2013:267). The authors argue that research on climate mobility needs to stray from estimates, linguistic debates and instrumentalization, towards strong qualitative research in order to apprehend the complexities of field-level decision-making on movement.

Although this branch of the literature is in its relative infancy, it convincingly warns of the political implications of creating “trapped populations” in policy and research. Researchers caution against the uncritical promotion of neoliberal channels of migration and resilience to “escape suffering” (Ayeb-Karlsson et al., 2018: 568; Sakdapolrak et al., 2016; Felli and Castree, 2012). This can be exemplified in Adger et al.’s (2015) paper which argued that global economic growth offered migration opportunities for population to avoid being “trapped”. Similarly to the more sensationalist “climate refugee” concept, the “trapped” figure has thus been conceptualized both as a victim and a security threat in a narrative whereby movement is considered to be the only desirable adaptation option and immobility is perceived as a condition of despair to be remedied by Western migration governance policies (Ayeb-Karlsson et al., 2022)⁴. In their critique of the Foresight report’s conception of migration and immobility, Felli and Castree (2012) further denounce the policy recommendations to migrate out of harm’s way, the “migration as adaptation” paradigm which they perceive as the neoliberal individualization of resilience.

This critical branch of research thus rejects the aggregation of aspirations and desires for migration as an escape from poverty exacerbated by environmental vulnerability, and the failure to

⁴ Similarly, Marino and Schweitzer (2016) have found great discordance between Indigenous residents of Shishmaref, Alaska, and hyperbolic media depictions of their climate vulnerability and forced movement, remarking that the victimization narratives are largely resisted by communities themselves.

encapsulate the different ideas, attachments, emotions and cultural contexts behind (im)mobility (Felli and Castree, 2012). This thesis is inscribed in the continuation of this research perspective.

1.2. Climate adaptation and (im)mobility determinants

As I have alluded to previously, decision-making about migration is thought to be determined by the interaction of environmental change, economic, social, political, and demographic factors (Geddes et al., 2012; Black et al., 2011a, 2011b; Boas et al., 2022; Black et al., 2013). It is unhelpful to assume populations automatically *choose* to stay, just as it is incorrect to presume that they are merely “trapped” by their material conditions. Challenging the one-dimensional conception of “trapped populations” or “climate refugees”, recent research conceives of movement and non-movement as shaped by perceptions, aspirations and capabilities (Boas et al., 2022; Adams, 2016; Farbotko and McMichael, 2019). Cattaneo et al., (2019) for example identify factors of wealth, financial and human capital, gender, age, health, availability of places to move to, and capacity to track what happens to property as determinant in (im)mobility decision making. Populations’ socioeconomic vulnerability is exacerbated by climate change and determines the breadth of their adaptation strategies based on social, human, institutional, natural and economic dimensions (Brookings Institution, 2014; Oliver-Smith and de Sherbinin, 2014; Gemenne, 2011; Van Praag, 2021). This includes factors such as the existence of government infrastructure, transportation, education levels, social networks, ecosystem resources, and financial assets. Situating the Louisianan context within the literature, this section reviews the main determinants of climate adaptation and mobilities found in existing research, namely economic conditions, state policies, ideas, and place attachment.

1.2.1. Economic conditions

Economic explanations for movement, as I have shown, have dominated the literature. Wealth and individual-level resources have been found to be a catalyst for movement especially in the context of slow-onset events such as temperature increases, for which mobility is generally voluntary and economically motivated (Cattaneo et al., 2019; Geddes et al., 2012; Koubi et al., 2022). In Louisiana, Dalbom et al. (2014: 45) reveal that the decision to “live with risk” or voluntarily relocate depends on individual and household socioeconomic conditions. This idea is corroborated by a recent survey which indicates that 66% of respondents would consider relocation if they were

financially compensated, identifying lack of funding as a major obstacle (Center for Planning Excellence, 2017). These decisions are indeed mediated by state involvement as well as past and present resettlement policies (Dalbom et al., 2014), which are themselves conditioned by governments' material interests and ideational conditions (Houle et al., 2015).

Beyond economic resources at state and household levels, material self-interests may also play a predominant role in framing environmental behaviors. Bishop (2014) underlines the strong link between a poor economy and declining support for environmental regulation in Louisiana, suggesting that perceptions of threats to local economy shape policy preferences in favor of oil and gas industries despite the risk of high pollution. However, the exact impact of specific interests among other contextual circumstances remains unclear in the context of adaptation; this variable's role often being inflated by broad analyses that fail to consider its variability among groups with different ideologies and in different institutional contexts. More importantly, the majority of the literature on climate (im)mobilities has investigated socioeconomic conditions at the micro-level, looking at how individual economic wealth and poverty condition mobility outcomes. Such a focus constitutes a gap in our collective understanding of the impact of structural interests and their co-constructed ideas on adaptive behaviors and movement.

1.2.2. Policies and the state

The state's responsibility in the historical spatial production of physical risk is also essential to comprehend the "trapping force" of institutions which foster climate vulnerability (Marino, 2015; Fraser, 2017; Zickgraf, 2019:4; Lewis and Ernston, 2019). Although studies of non-movement in political science are scant, policies have been found to influence both mobility and immobility (Zickgraf, 2019; Geddes et al., 2012). In Louisiana, state policies have marginalized certain populations spatially and through historical power dynamics, resulting in certain sociodemographic segments being made both more vulnerable to climate change and least able to benefit from state protection (Dalbom et al., 2014). Moreover, the lack of local government measures regarding climate change and the absence of "political will or leadership" have largely hindered adaptation efforts for communities who are left to "pray" for safety against environmental risks (Center for Planning Excellence, 2017:7-8). Resources and local policies are thought to "determine whether coastal communities are resilient and continue to thrive" in Louisiana (Union of Concerned Scientists, 2017c). The relationship between institutions and groups may also be

hindered by decentralization, notably because many places in Louisiana are unincorporated, meaning they lack formal municipal status and are instead governed by higher-level institutions, in this case parishes.

More broadly, studies point to the interrelation between individual beliefs, institutional regimes, and governance in shaping attitudes towards climate change. Brulle and Norgaard (2019) demonstrate that while climate change constitutes a potential cultural trauma, the ability of institutions to respond to this threat plays a large role in normalizing and rationalizing social interactions around climate change impacts and actions. Other research has also shown that local support from government entities, combined with access to resources and social capital, are a deciding element of the decision to voluntarily stay in place despite climate risks (Ahsan et al., 2022; Adger, 2003). In her ethnography of community relocation in Shishmaref, Alaska, Elizabeth Marino (2015) shows that colonial development, inadequate federal disaster policy, and community mistrust in governance are fundamental obstacles to relocation and the preservation of Indigenous culture in the context of climate change. Similarly, Kingston and Marino (2010) have shown that changes in political and economic structures imposed by US federal and state governments to relocated communities can result in the loss of control over resources, self-determination, and sense of community. Understanding the construction of immobility through the prism of institutional discourses and practices thus seems promising because of the established importance of political factors on restraining or facilitating movement and shaping attitudes toward climate adaptation.

1.2.3. Ideas as critical factors of immobility

One of the most under-researched dimensions of climate (im)mobility in the literature are ideas. There is still more to be understood of the ideational components of non-relocation, notably the cultural aspects of mobility and the cognitive dimensions of loss and place (Albrecht et al. 2007). Studies on non-movement have sometimes dismissed individual agency and psychological factors under a top-down and essentializing analysis of vulnerable “communities”, neglecting broader external (environmental and political) and internal (social and psychological) constraints on movement (Adams, 2016; Suliman et al., 2019; Schewel, 2019).

But more recent research has shown that immobility is the product of local and individual perceptions of environmental risk, linked to conscious household-level decision-making processes (Farbotko and McMichael, 2019; Adams, 2016; Koubi et al., 2016). In their study of voluntary immobility in Chilean Patagonia for example, Wiegel et al., (2021) show how ontological security and subjective sense of safety, which shape risk perceptions among local populations, contribute to their reluctance to move despite increasing environmental vulnerability. In Louisiana too, the question of perceptions and beliefs seems particularly impactful on adaptive behaviors. Despite some surveys indicating low levels of concern for climate change, with only 45% of Louisianans believing that global warming is harming Americans today and 39% concerned for their personal well-being⁵ (Howe et al. 2015), other data show that the vast majority of Louisianans are aware of environmental threats, some 91% of respondents believing flooding will increase in the near future (Center for Planning Excellence, 2017). Research has also shown that individual characteristics interact with the perception of climate change and transform the way information is received, depending on preexisting beliefs and preferences (Brügger et al., 2015). Individual recognition about the reality of climate change (and perception of weather events), acceptance of its human component, and concern about its impacts ultimately inform the way individuals shape their attitudes about climate action (Capstick et al., 2015; Wolf and Moser, 2011; Elrick-Barr et al., 2016). In turn, group perceptions of climate risk and threat drive public support for climate policies and shape adaptive behaviors, especially when imbued with cultural values and beliefs (Zahran et al., 2006; Leiserowitz, 2005; Bishop, 2014; Salite, 2019; Wiegel et al., 2021). This suggests that preferences are guided by perceptions which, along with other interacting factors, play an important role in promoting mobility as an adaptation option (Bardsley and Hugo, 2010)

In addition, Hoffman (2015) notes that there are strong biases linked with perceptions of climate-related risk, suggesting that acceptance and attitudes will be shaped by political, economic and social processes and their underlying ideological forces (Schuldt et al., 2011; Young and Coutinho,

⁵ It is worth noting that the concept of “global warming” is a highly politicized term in the United States. Schuldt et al. (2011) have shown that Republicans are much more skeptical of global warming than they are of climate change, highlighting the importance of wording in climate opinion surveys. This indicates a certain bias in responses to the Yale Climate Opinion Maps’ survey questions (Howe et al., 2015). In contrast, while the Center for Planning Excellence’s study has notable methodological shortcomings, its use of more neutral environmental terms like flooding, sea-level rise, or coastal erosion might have captured more accurate perceptions of risk. This difference in wording – and thus, in the politicization of phenomenon – could explain the difference in these survey results.

2013). Individual and group perceptions are thus an essential driver of decision-making because the threat of climate change is not defined in the same way for scientists and “the lay public” (Leiserowitz, 2005: 1434). This is particularly important in the context of mobility and could explain why people do not move according to large-scale prevision models. The public’s perception of environmental threat is mediated by various psychological and social factors, “including personal experience, affect and emotion, imagery, trust, values, and worldviews” (Leiserowitz, 2005: 1434). As such, beliefs and perceptions shape practices and understandings that define peoples’ “ecological habitus” (Brulle and Norgaard, 2019:15). These constructions are mediated by “cultural cognition”, the unconscious worldviews which filter the way people perceive risk and information, and form beliefs about those dangers (Hoffman, 2015; Kahan, 2012). This mechanism could explain why some research has found that living near environmental threats does not necessarily lead to stronger support for pro-environmental regulations (Bishop, 2014). In fact, populations may reject policies which they perceive as threats to their local economy even if the latter is based on polluting industries. These results testify of the intricate link between economic self-interests and ideas in shaping behaviors towards climate action.

Apprehending these attitudes is of notable importance to understanding practices in the United States, where the partisan-gap in the perception of climate change is well-established (Dunlap et al., 2016; Leiserowitz, 2006). Climate denial in particular has been historically constructed through strong ideological pressures from conservatives in a top-down fashion (Collomb, 2014; Brulle and Norgaard, 2019). In fact, attitudes and perceptions of global warming in the United States show signs of being heavily influenced by these political elite discourses, notably in their fluctuating nature and their tendency to reflect political changes. This has led to greater polarization in climate beliefs among the public (Capstick et al., 2015; Dunlap et al., 2016). In Louisiana, where 50% of adults identify as conservative and only 14% as liberal (Pew Research Center, 2014), political interests and ideology have been particularly influential in the failure of past resettlement projects. It is said that such efforts have often been hampered “for political or philosophical reasons”, a result of the well-established partisan nature of climate change action (Dalbom et al., 2014:3; Dunlap et al., 2016). It is important to note that opinions are mostly influenced by “symbolic attitudes or affective preferences”, namely partisan affiliation, nationalism and ideology (Bishop, 2014:5). This reinforces my interest in the nexus between ideology and institutions in framing attitudes towards climate mobility. Because collective and individual perceptions are constructed

through political and social forces, ideas play an important role in shaping people's climate adaptation strategies.

1.2.4. Identity and attachment to place

Another important component to decision-making processes on (im)mobility is place attachment. Climate change threatens symbolic, cultural and non-material objects such as traditions, knowledge, places and identity, all of which are central to adaptation processes (Adger et al., 2011). In particular, the literature has highlighted both sense of place and place attachments as core emotional and cognitive elements of adaptation. Sense of place is described as the “ways in which individuals attach meaning to the location in which they live”, while place attachment refers to the affective bonds one may have with the place they live (Adams and Adger, 2013:2). In certain communities, place-based connections and cultural identities have been determinant in individual attitudes towards (im)mobility, in particular their refusal to move despite intense climate impacts (Farbotko and McMichael, 2019; Adams, 2016; Suliman et al., 2019; Seebauer and Wrinkler, 2020; Costas et al., 2015; Huntington et al., 2018). These feelings can be considered as “internal factors” according to Schewel (2019: 12), who argues that decision-making is heavily influenced by people's preferences and attachments to their communities, social lives and places. In Nawrotzki and DeWaard's (2018)'s study on trapped populations, place is considered an important condition of both exposure to climate risk and decision-making processes. The authors introduce the concept of the “holding power” of places which trap poorer populations and increase mobility constraints. In their investigation of “place vulnerability”, the interaction of social and biophysical exposure to risk, the authors adopt an economic perspective and frame agency and resilience in terms of wealth, exemplifying the persistence of the Foresight report's heritage on the study of immobility.

Moving beyond these materialist perspectives, the integration of emotions into analysis can provide an essential dimension to understanding collective identities and their influence as motivations and objectives (Jasper, 2011). Emotions may be seen as a shared response to external events, an idea also conveyed by Wang et al. (2018) who show that emotional responses explain different levels of group support for climate policies. Adams and Adger's (2013) study on the role of place utility as a determinant of climate migration in Peru, for example, highlights that while economic and social factors are central to migration, non-economic cultural ecosystem services

(security, social networks...) are crucial components of place attachment and influence one's decision to relocate. In other words, "the loss of the characteristics to which people form attachment may take on a greater role in the decision to migrate", if environmental change undermines place utility (Adams and Adger, 2013:5). Despite their apparent importance, sense of place and place attachments have been neglected in the earlier literature on (im)mobility because the legacy of the Foresight report, which has encouraged 'migration as adaptation' in policy, overlooked the centrality of the emotional and cultural dimensions of one's aspiration to move (Felli and Castree, 2012).

Yet, place is at the core of the Louisianan identity and, as the present research will show, it is a fundamental aspect of adaptation decision-making processes. A survey reveals that although some may be willing to relocate if "someone cut them a check today", others point out that their livelihoods, family ties and attachments to place bind them to their home and inform their adaptation strategies *in situ* (Center for Planning Excellence, 2017:14). Indeed, Louisianans have very deep place attachments to their lands, constructed historically and informed by their cultural heritages (Colten, 2015; Simms, 2017; 2021; Gramling and Hagelman, 2005). Such attachments and identities are important factors of climate adaptation because they interact with beliefs and perceptions, and shape residents' decisions on relocation. Emotions and ideas can be difficult to disentangle, notably because they exist within what Norgaard (2011:5) calls a *double reality*, in which a "collectively constructed sense of normal everyday life" exists in parallel to knowledge of the radical threat of climate change. As I have previously noted, perceptions are guided by a group's shared values and ideas which yield strong emotional reactions to climate change (Hoffman, 2015), especially when it threatens "objects of care", i.e., places of attachment, culture and identity endangered by climate change itself (Wang et al., 2018). In this sense, ideas and emotions are significantly intertwined, as perceptions of environmental threat both condition and are conditioned by a person's emotional and cultural dispositions.

1.3. Identifying gaps and research paths in the climate immobility literature

Ayeb-Karlsson et al. (2018) have analyzed the twenty-one academic texts produced on "trapped populations" since the Foresight report, revealing a surprising lack of knowledge on those who do not move (Adams, 2016; Geddes et al., 2012; Zickgraf, 2019). Much remains to be known of the

study of climate immobility, which has often adopted either a macro or micro level of analysis. Studies such as those of Naser et al. (2023), Cundill et al. (2021) or Thornton et al. (2023) have offered insight on the global and regional governance issues pertaining to immobility, while others such as Bukvik and Owen (2017), Van Praag (2021), Wiegel et al., (2021), Ahsan et al. (2022) or Adams (2016) have investigated individual factors of decision making in relation to non-movement through survey studies. In terms of analytical factors, material capacity has primarily been researched in populations of the Global South, while cultural and place attachments have been mobilized in studies on Indigenous communities around the world (Farbotko and McMichael, 2019; Farbotko et al., 2015; Bronen, 2014; Suliman et al., 2019; Marino, 2015; Kingston and Marino, 2010). On the other hand, beliefs and attitudes related to climate change have usually been apprehended at the individual level in the context of support for Western environmental policies, but little is known of their impact on immobility or their relation to other political and cultural factors.

In fact, the way these different dimensions are linked and interact in the production of adaptation strategies have been inconsistently studied. Large- and medium-N studies have failed to account for what McLeman (2019) calls “mediating drivers”, key variables such as government regulations or cultural specificities which influence mobility decision-making. Specifically, Zickgraf (2019:4) notes that policies and political factors are not sufficiently understood beyond generalized explanations for government programs and bilateral agreements. As such, the influence of the “trapping forces” of institutions, governance and policy at the meso and macro level remains unclear. This constitutes the primary lens through which immobility is apprehended in this thesis.

It is also worth noting that the factors highlighted in these studies do not hold similar weight in conditioning movement. They are described as constraints and facilitators (Schewel, 2019), and often only affect immobility through their interaction with each other. The nature of this highly contextual dynamic, however, remains to be fully understood. As non-movement is portrayed simultaneously as a situation imposed onto communities and individuals, or a choice embraced and constructed consciously, the relative weight of varying factors remains unclear. More than that, I argue, the rigidity of such conceptions of immobility – a choice or a constraint – constitutes a major gap in our understanding of the way structures shape adaptation on a societal level.

To surpass these gaps in the political understanding of (im)mobility, I propose a move beyond reductive economic analysis in favor of multifactorial explanations for human (non-)movement. I contend that “trapped populations” as a theoretical concept and an empirical reality have been under-scrutinized in the climate mobility field, generally dominated by studies on voluntary or forced community displacement and patterns of migration. Indeed, Black and Collyer (2014:52) argue that there is much to be understood on the conditions of immobility, denouncing, as does Lubkemann (2008) and Schewel (2019), the “consistent focus on movement” which has rendered immobility invisible – particularly in the field of political science. Despite growing attention for climate immobility as a concept in its own right, the majority of research has used non-movement as a “control group” to study migration, and few analyses have investigated the complexity of structural political and social forces on immobility (Zickgraf, 2019:2).

1.4. Conceptualizing the three immobilities

In rejecting the rigidity of (im)mobility categories, Schewel (2019) proposes to understand immobility as both the result of structural constraints and a reflection of the aspiration to stay. Carling (2002) first conceptualized the aspiration-ability model to address the gaps left by rational cost-benefit analyses of migration and show that movement is a factor of both willingness and capacity. Basing his work on the Cape Verde case, his model allowed a look at the societal conditions shaping decision making for (im)mobility, notably economic development and restrictive immigration policies. Although this theory is appealing, I aim to expand beyond dualist ideas of choice and barriers.

Indeed, recent research has shown populations may desire to stay for sociocultural reasons, while simultaneously expressing the need to move or the inability to do so, complexifying the actual decision-making process (Zickgraf, 2019). In this research, I do not presume of people’s aspirations or capabilities, but instead consider immobility as constructed by intertwined political and social forces. To provide a more refined account of underlying structural processes, I transcend the aspiration-capability framework which rests solely on the study of macro and micro scales⁶

⁶ Carling (2002), who first conceptualized the aspiration-ability framework, argues that both are perceptible at two interactive levels. According to the author, the macro level is used to understand modes of migration and the reasons behind large-scale movement; while the micro-level allows for the identification of those who move or stay, as well

(Carling, 2002) and engage in a macro and meso level of analysis, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

To move beyond the simplistic voluntary-forced dichotomy often used in (im)mobility studies (Naser et al., 2023), I adopt Schewel's (2019) ideal types to suggest three categories of immobility as a theoretical foundation: voluntary, involuntary, and acquiescent. As defined by Schewel, (2019:7), (1) voluntary immobility is conceived as "having the ability but not the aspiration to migrate", meaning one is *able to* but *does not wish to* relocate. (2) Involuntary immobility is considered as "having the aspiration but not the ability to migrate", corresponding to "trapped populations" who *wish to move but can't*; and (3) acquiescent immobility is situated in between, relating to those who *remain by choice* and who, in any case, *lack the capacity to move*, essentially accepting their inability to relocate. In other words, acquiescent immobility refers to the "non-resistance to constraints" (p.8). While Schewel's model of immobility was not conceptualized for the context of climate change, I argue that it provides important theoretical foundation to better understand the structural and conjectural conditions of climate (im)mobility and refine our understanding of "trapped populations".

It is worth noting that I do not consider immobility to be fixed or uniform nor exist entirely as one of these categories. Immobility is shaped by varying aspirations and capabilities and exists along a spectrum. I consider the question of choice and the distinction between "forced" and "voluntary" to be artificial and fundamentally flawed because it supposes individuals hold the same interests and aspirations (movement) despite their varying preferences, and because all (non-)movement is made up of constraints and facilitators. Although these ideal types can be important tools to investigate different conditions and forms of movement and to refine the aggregate conception of "trapped populations", the difficulty of neatly classifying individuals as voluntary or involuntary non-migrants means that I do not use them to guide my investigation (Carling, 2002). I also aim to surpass dominant binary discourses that define migration in terms of push and pull factors external to actors, and in terms of members and non-members of mobility (Ayeb-Karlsson et al., 2018). Everett Lee (1966) first theorized the push-pull model in the mid-sixties and presented

as their individual characteristics. Although Carling recognizes the potential importance of meso-level factors, he does not incorporate them into analysis.

migration as the result of factors related to the place of origin, to the destination, intervening obstacles and personal factors, which he describes as “personal sensitivities, intelligence, and awareness of conditions elsewhere” (p.51). But Lee’s theory, while groundbreaking in the migration literature, focuses on individual-level conditions and disregards more structural factors like institutions or group ideologies. I thus engage with Schewel’s (2019) conception, which, like Ayebe-Karlsson et al. (2018), also rejects the push-pull dichotomy. She conceptualizes mobility decision making as the result of three types of factors; retain, repel and internal factors. Following in this line, I argue that voluntary, involuntary and acquiescent immobilities are fluid and not mutually exclusive, but the result of interactive forces, structural, external and internal to individuals, which may constrain and compel them to stay at different points in time.

I thus frame this analysis in a broader conception of “trapped populations” and consider immobility as a legitimate object of environmental movement theorization. I propose a reinterpretation of the notion of “trap” – not as a passive state of being imposed onto communities, but as an action constructed through interweaving interests, ideas and institutions. My theoretical focus, therefore, is not necessarily on who can be considered “trapped populations” and their individual characteristics, but rather on the “trapping” forces which institutionalize immobility. This research adopts a “minimalist” perspective in climate migration research which posits that mobilities are multifactorial, multifaceted, and cannot be reduced to the assumption that environmental impacts will automatically lead to displacement (Suhrke, 1994; Black et al., 2013; Sakdapolrak et al., 2016).

2. Theoretical and analytical framework

In light of the gaps identified in the literature review, this research will address three fundamental components of (non-)movement that have not yet been studied conjointly in the climate (im)mobility literature: institutions, interests and ideas. This analytical approach will be discussed in depth in the rest of this chapter. The first section discusses the epistemological foundation of this thesis and explores the critical epistemological approach to discourse and practices at the heart of my inquiry into climate immobility. The next section presents discursive institutionalism (DI) as a critical framework to capture the dynamics of institutions, ideas, and interests (the “3Is”). The final section discusses my use of frames as the principal conceptual tools to operationalize the above theoretical framework in the analysis of climate (im)mobility discourses and practices.

Frames as strategies for persuasion and interpretation of specific issues are both a tool by which political actors convey their ideas and satisfy their interests, as well as a gateway by which to apprehend these discursive constructions and the *master discourse*.

2.1. A constructivist and critical epistemology for investigating discourses

As outlined above, this analysis seeks to reinterpret the concept of “trapped populations” by challenging the dominant materialist theories on movement to incorporate larger institutional processes at play in adaptation decision-making. To do so, I am adopting a critical epistemological posture, discussed in this section.

2.1.1. Situating and interpreting climate (im)mobilities

This research is anchored in a constructivist and critical paradigm which seeks to gain insight on subjective meaning-making processes of climate (im)mobilities (Moses and Knutsen, 2012; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2011; Madison, 2005; Kubik, 2009; Quivy and Van Campenhoudt, 2006; Coman et al., 2016). In seeking a situated and contextualized analysis of adaptation, this thesis strays from the literature’s maximalist perspective and its broad, sweeping assumptions about climate induced movement⁷. My approach to (im)mobilities seeks more localized experiences from a constructivist perspective, viewing ideas, discourses and practices as social constructs (Flyvberg, 2001; Moses and Knutsen 2012; Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002; Fairclough, 1995; Thomas, 1993; Edelman, 1960). In line with the Frankfurt School of critical thought, this position accentuates the centrality of ideas as both molding individual perceptions of climate change and practices of adaptation, and as molded by the broader social, economic and political structures in which they take place (Giddens, 1986; Weiss and Wodak, 2003). Understanding such structures and the ever-evolving nature of ideas in the social world follows the interpretivist approach to knowledge, and echoes Flyvberg’s (2001) account of *phronesis*, which accentuates the importance of context and values in the understanding of human action. This approach will enable an “iterative-recursive process” focused on the meanings and contextuality of climate

⁷ The maximalist literature on climate mobilities, contrary to the minimalist perspective in which I inscribe this analysis, offers a more alarmist and determinist view on the link between climate change, environmental degradation, and mobility. Its aim was to offer estimates – often hyperbolic – of climate migration. See for example Myers (1997), Myers and Kent (1995), or Rigaud et al. (2018), discussed in section 1.1.1 of the literature review.

adaptation, favoring both strong theoretical foundations and a dynamic research model to understanding (im)mobilities (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2011).

Such an interpretative approach considers that actors have imperfect knowledge and complex motivations formed through cultural and social structures which inform both objective and subjective meanings and practices (Della Porta and Keating, 2008; Giddens, 1984). As a result, understanding the motivations behind climate adaptation decision-making cannot be achieved through large-scale analyses, but rather requires examination of the various structures of political and social life on a smaller, more situated scale (Flyvberg, 2001; Della Porta and Keating, 2008; Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002; Geertz, 1973; Przeworski and Teune, 1970a). In this approach, human beings are understood as agents, not objects. People are seen as “actively and collaboratively constructing (and deconstructing) (...) their polities, societies, and cultures (...). At the same time, those same political and cultural contexts frame these agents’ possibilities for thought, discourse and action” (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2011:46). Humans, therefore, are not entirely rational and are linked by complex cultural systems reflected in their institutions (Hall, 1997). In this light, social phenomena such as mobility, political mistrust, or climate denial, are understood as dynamic and fluid, and historically constituted (Schwartz Shea and Yanow, 2011). For this reason, I favor ideas and discourses as an analytical medium through which to understand the social and political worlds and meaning-making practices at the root of climate (im)mobilities (Schmidt, 2010).

2.1.2. Critical discourse analysis as a lens into social and political practices

In response to Della Porta and Keating (2008)’s words of caution against internally incoherent theoretical eclecticism, I embrace what they define as a pluralistic approach, constructing a diverse theoretical framework and employing multiple data generation methods. Such coherent eclecticism further echoes Bourdieu’s view of ‘cumulative conceptualization work’, which “could be the very characteristic of an innovative and productive theory formation, albeit a characteristic that has to prove its productivity in empirical applicability” (Weiss et Wodak, 2003: 9). Striving for such empirical applicability, I adopt a critical discourse foundation to ground and make coherent the use of discursive institutionalism to investigate the “3Is” (institutions, ideas and interests).

Critical discourse analyses emerged in the 1990s at the intersection of various fields of social science research, including linguistics, sociology and anthropology (Wodak, 2001). The approach, characterized as “discourse study *with an attitude*” (Van Dijk, 2015:466), finds its roots in neo-Marxist Gramscian theories on ideas and is primarily concerned with the role of discourse in the reproduction of power and hegemony. These critical theorists perceive discourse as a type of social practice, whereby “Each discursive event is dialectically tied to society insofar as it both constitutes and is constituted by social phenomena.” (Carvalho, 2008: 162; Fairclough and Wodak, 1997; Fairclough 1995). Van Dijk's (2015:474) conception of the effects of discourse as a form of “mind control” aligns with constructivist and sociological approaches to framing whereby discourse is a means of reproducing dominance and hegemony. In the context of high partisan polarization on climate change, increased mistrust in governmental narratives and the emergence of *alternative* facts, such “mind control” matters. In fact, this perspective highlights how discursive processes hold “strategic functions” and shape representations, sociocultural knowledge, institutions, and ideologies (Chilton and Schäffner, 1997: 212; Fairclough and Wodak, 1997; Van Dijk 2015; Wodak, 2001; Phillips et al. 2004). Echoing this, Jørgensen and Phillips (2002:61) conceptualize discourse not simply as contributing to the “shaping and reshaping of social structures but also reflect(ing) them”. In line with Fairclough's pioneer work on critical discourse analysis, the authors stress the dual focus of this theoretical position: the examination of discursive practices that (i) construct representations of the world, social relations, and power relations (discourse as a social practice), and (ii) that advance the interests of certain social groups (discourse as constituted and constitutive of power and hegemony). For Fairclough (1995), analysis must therefore encompass all dimensions of discourse: the social practice, the discursive practice (text production, distribution and consumption), and the text itself.

In using discourses as my primary analytical focal point, I conceptualize them for their productive aspects as both a meaning-making and a practice-making processes, further drawing on Fairclough's conception of discourse as having a “major role in sociocultural reproduction and change” (Fairclough, 1995: 2; Fairclough and Wodak, 1997). Despite a general lack of theoretical or methodological uniformity in critical discourse analyses, Fairclough's perspective on reproduction is widely accepted as a major tenet of the approach. Text (both written and spoken) as well as discursive and symbolic practices are regarded as “both structuring and structured actions”, bridging about macro and micro-level system reproduction (Weiss et Wodak, 2003 :10;

Giddens, 1984). In this sense, discourse constitutes a bridge between climate-related narratives (e.g., political discourses on climate change and risk) and adaptation practices (mobile and/or immobile). It is especially pertinent to capture the political and institutional dimensions of these practices because as Van Dijk (2015:474) points out, “Personal and social cognition thus influenced may finally in turn control the social actions that are consistent with the interests of powerful groups in general, and of the symbolic elites in particular.”

This is because, as Wodak (2001:10) put it simply, “language is not powerful on its own: it gains power by the use powerful people make of it.” This critical posture informs a fruitful theoretical prism through which to understand how, in practice, political and economic elite discourses on climate change, risks and adaptation, and their subjacent economic interests and partisan ideologies, shape social structures, institutions and public cognition of environmental events (Phillips et al. 2004; Reisigl, 2008; Perkins, 2011; Chilton and Schäffner, 1997; Gamson, 1992). In other words, I strive to understand how these interpretations, molded by elite discourses, further inform adaptation practices. This process is captured by Carvalho’s (2008) concept of *discursive effects* referring to the processes which structure, institutionalize or delimit debates, practices and institutions. In this light, discourse is both a representation of ideas and an interactive process by which ideas are conveyed (Schmidt, 2008). As such, it enables me to investigate the *institutionalization* of immobility.

In keeping with the Frankfurt School, the concept of ideology constitutes one of the three basic tenets of critical discourse analysis because it shapes the meanings and beliefs of individuals about their social world (Wodak, 2001; Fairclough, 1995; Habermas, 1988; Thompson, 1990). Language, here, is conceived as mediating ideology in social institutions. Discursive analysis can uncover, or “demystify”, the underlying ideologies that shape discourses in a particular context to understand the ways in which they inform social and political realities, notably as it pertains to influencing people’s beliefs and practices in the political world (Wodak, 2001; Weiss and Wodak, 2003:14; Perkins, 2011). Moving beyond positivist analyses of language, the critical approach draws on Habermas’ (1988) constitutive view of language as ideological, world-disclosing, and a medium of social domination (Lafont, 2019). For this reason, empirical analysis of elite and non-elite language and discourses can provide the tools for understanding the underlying rationales of climate (im)mobility and adaptation decision-making and its links to hegemonic interests.

Going further, Geertz (1964) conceptualizes ideology as a grid or system of beliefs, values and ideas by which individuals organize and interpret the world. He views ideology as linked to issues of power and control because it justifies and legitimizes actions, and consequently shapes public opinion. Despite their differences, I consider both Geertz' (1964) and Goffman's (1974) views on ideology as significant for this analysis of climate adaptation. While the first accentuates the structural and systemic sociocultural influences on groups' ideas, the second points to the situated role of language and communication in shaping values and beliefs. Considering Pellow and Brehm's (2013) call for broader environmental research on power and inequalities, I draw on both conceptualizations of ideology to broaden the scope of understanding of political discourses and frames as constitutive of, and constituted by, structural and conjunctural processes of climate politics. In this perspective, ideology exists at the macro and meso levels of political activity and is conveyed through elite discourses. But it also shapes individual interpretations of climate risk and hegemonic ideas on climate policy, and as a result, influences adaptive actions. Hence, I respond to Geertz's (1964) call for conceptualizing ideologies as systems of interacting symbols and meaning, rather than as independent or dependent variables used by public-opinion researchers (Fenster, 2005).

My doing so echoes Thompson's (1990:7) critical conception of ideology which "requires us to investigate the ways in which meaning is constructed and conveyed by symbolic forms of various kinds, (...) to investigate the social contexts within which symbolic forms are employed and deployed; and (...) to ask whether, and if so how, the meaning mobilized by symbolic forms serves, in specific contexts, to establish and sustain relations of domination." Through this approach, I investigate the discourses enacted in different institutional and social contexts by political and economic elite actors, as well as some non-elite stakeholders in climate policy, which shape and are shaped by these ideologically imbued institutions.

2.2. A discursive approach to the role of institutions, ideas, and interests

This research thus strives to uncover the "multiple 'truths' as understood by the human actors under study" by unveiling the beliefs and practices of climate (im)mobilities, the social and institutional contexts within which they are enacted, and the discourses through which they are constructed and legitimized (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2011:81). The multidimensional nature of climate change and the shortcomings of existing approaches on (im)mobility call for the

elaboration of an eclectic theoretical framework. I focus my attention on the investigation of three major dimensions of the political and social worlds: institutions, ideas and interests. These “3Is” enable me to reach beyond material factors of (im)mobility and incorporate interconnected ideational and institutional dimensions of (non-)movement. In keeping with a critical constructionist epistemology, I approach the “3Is” from the perspective of Schmidt’s discursive institutionalism. This section will first present the basic tenets of the “3Is” approach in public policy, before discussing the pertinence of discursive institutionalism and its critical framework for the study of power, hegemonic interests and discourses in the context of climate policy.

2.2.1. Investigating immobility through the “3Is” approach

The “3Is” approach first emerged in the late 1980s in Peter Hall’s work, one of the most influential scholars of this public policy approach. It is primarily concerned with the role of institutions, ideas and interests in shaping political change, a focal which has dominated work in political science but has only recently emerged in climate change comparative politics (Hecló, 1994; Lieberman, 2002; Streeck and Thelen, 2005; Purdon, 2015). Palier and Surel (2005) argue that the utility of the “3Is” approach lies in its ability to analyze the complex dynamics within the state and make this reality intelligible by sequencing the framework along the variables of interests, institutions, and ideas. By applying this approach to the study of the French welfare state, Palier and Surel demonstrate the interactive process through which institutions shape interests. In adding a discursive element as a mechanism for legitimation of these interests and policies, I perceive these “building blocks” as interactive and emphasize the reciprocal influences of each variable (Hecló, 1994:375; Purdon, 2015). The objective of such an approach, therefore, is to transcend the sole focus of public policy or comparative politics on institutions and interests, also identified in the climate (im)mobility literature (Purdon, 2015; Hall, 1997), and bring to light their interaction and co-construction with ideas (conveyed through discourse) within the elaboration of policies, their justifications, and the formation of interests.

In line with other post-positivist scholars, Hecló (1994:380) calls for the study of the “historical situatedness of ideas” as a way of better capturing the codependency between all factors. He identifies the ways in which institutions and ideas can interact with interests: institutions can coordinate preferences by shaping options for self-interest, and they can also contribute to the historical construction of understandings and promulgate socially embedded practices, as well as

provide the means for changing ideas about interests and preferences. “Bringing ideas back” into political science and approaching political phenomena through the overlap, friction and disjunction of these three elements fills the explanatory gap left by institutional approaches (Lieberman, 2002: 697; Purdon, 2015). On their own, ideational factors may not be sufficient to explain political change or continuity (Houle et al., 2015; Lieberman, 2002), but within the “3Is” approach, they may inform on the co-construction of interests as social constructs that mobilize beliefs and representations pertinent to climate change adaptation practices (Jobert, 2004).

Hall (1997:195) links this approach to the development of new institutionalism which opens avenues of reflections for the “fruitful interaction” between institutions, interests and ideas because it broadens conceptualizations of culture (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991). He remarks, however, that scholars remain faced with the difficult task of identifying interests clearly, for they are derived from a process of interpretation and the result of political contention by which actors struggle to define and interpret their interests. By investigating the formation and expression of interests and ideas as meaning-making practices competing for interpretation and hegemony within sociopolitical institutions, the “3Is” approach provides ample theoretical tools for the broader conceptualization of the co-constructed and interactive political forces which constrain and foster climate (im)mobility discourses and practices. I build on existing knowledge of climate adaptation which has focused independently on cultural factors, economic conditions of “trapped” communities, and broader governance issues. Through the “3Is”, I aim to bridge these explanations and contribute novel theoretical and empirical knowledge on the complex dimensions of climate (im)mobilities.

2.2.2. Discursive institutionalism: capturing normative ideas in institutional settings

My critical discursive approach amplifies the role of ideas in the co-construction of interests within institutions. I favor the perspective of discursive institutionalism to approach institutional analysis through the meaning-making processes behind political action and structures (Schmidt, 2008). Discursive institutionalism (DI), first conceptualized by Vivien Schmidt as the “fourth institutionalism”, is used here as an umbrella approach with which to investigate ideas, policies, representations and discourses on climate change and their interactive processes within institutions.

Of course, ideas have also been investigated in other traditions first described by Hall and Taylor (1996) as the three neo-institutionalisms, notably historical institutionalism for which the interaction of ideas and institutions has proven central in shaping human behaviors (Jenson, 1989; Lieberman, 2002; Schmidt, 2008, 2010; Béland, 2019). A major point of departure from the three traditions, however, resides in the conception of institutions. Discursive institutionalism emphasizes the role of discourse and ideas in shaping and reproducing social and political institutions. In this perspective, institutions are not solely regarded as external constraining structures, “formal and informal procedures, routines, norms” which underpin political action (Hall and Taylor, 1997: 938). Instead, institutions are conceived as conditioning symbolic and material practices and a space in which perceptions are formed and transformed. They are internal and external structures as well as social constructs to political agents whose ideas and discourses explain institutional change and continuity (Schmidt, 2008; Armstrong and Bernstein, 2008; Bourdieu, 1994). In line with constructivist considerations for humans as reflexive, sentient agents, DI considers institutions as both “structures (of thinking and acting) that constrain action and as constructs (of thinking and acting) created and changed by those actors” (Schmidt, 2010:14; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2011; Carstensen and Schmidt, 2016). Norms too, in this perspective, are dynamic and intersubjective social constructs (Schmidt, 2008). As a result, institutions are sustained by discursive processes of construction and interpretation. Discourse constitutes the “interactive processes by which ideas are conveyed” and bridges the gap between ideas and practices of political action (Schmidt, 2008:305). It enables the researcher to go “beyond ‘politics as usual’” to investigate the construction of political interests and values, and the ways through which they are legitimated (Schmidt, 2010:2). I argue, therefore, that discursive institutionalism is a particularly powerful approach to make sense of the “3Is” in climate adaptation.

It enables us to peer into the discursive processes taking place in various instances of political decision-making to seek out the ways by which political actors conceive of climate change, risks, and legitimate or discard climate adaptation policies. Two types of ideas are distinguished here: cognitive ideas and normative ideas. Cognitive ideas are constitutive of interests and provide “the guidelines and maps for political action and serve to justify policies” by identifying problems, technical solutions and policy instruments (Schmidt, 2008:306; Schmidt, 2002). Normative ideas, on the other hand, appeal to values and define the political and ideational goals of a policy, “attach values to political actions”, and legitimate policies by drawing on the ideals, norms and societal

values of the public (Schmidt, 2008:307; Schmidt, 2002). These ideational and discursive processes are constructed in what Schmidt (2010; 2008) conceives as *coordinative* policy spheres, where actors construct policy ideas, and deliberated in *communicative* policy spheres, where they are deliberated and legitimized. This analysis will mostly focus on the latter. I investigate the narratives mobilized by policy actors to legitimate their positions about relocation, climate change, or adaptive infrastructure, and convince other decisionmakers and the public of their ideas in order to enact policy changes or maintain power. This is nourished by the analytical concern of discursive institutionalists for the persuasive function of ideas (power *through* ideas) and their structuring function (power *in* ideas) (Schmidt, 2017; Carstensen and Schmidt, 2016). Focus is therefore placed not on explaining political change, but on exploring continuity through the ways by which ideas and discourses structure and legitimize adaptation policies and interpretations of climate change.

In fact, one of the strengths of the discursive institutionalist approach is its ability to capture institutional continuity or political stasis through the ways policy actors frame and define issues (Hope, 2011). Such continuity can be explained by institutional inertia, theorized for example by Brulle and Norgaard (2019) as the resistance to cultural trauma induced by climate change. It can also be understood as public quiescence in political affairs, which according to Murray Edelman's theory, is triggered by the use of values and symbols in discourses and governance (Edelman, 1960). He conceives of policies and political processes as "purveyors of symbols" (1960:695), and conceptualizes governance, including laws, as a symbolic system which shapes political preferences. Symbols, in this sense, serve to perpetuate the existing system and satisfying elite interests, which echoes what Schmidt (2008) describes as normative ideas. Edelman points to the public's tendency to respond positively to symbols that over-simplify and distort information because, he argues, they are susceptible to the manipulation of political symbols so long as they obtain symbolic satisfaction of their interests.

Akin to Marx's theory of false consciousness, Edelman's symbolic politics "distracts from the exploitative and destructive reality that occurs below the symbolic surface" (Fenster, 2005:3). In this sense, laws and programs are viewed as symbolic surfaces which enable elites to control governmental resources and processes through discursive manipulations (Edelman, 1964). This theory echoes Young and Coutinho's (2013) study on the construction of public ignorance, which

shows the rhetorical manipulation by which Canadian and Australian governments have shaped public interpretations of climate change. Discourse can therefore be conceived as an interactive process by which cognitive and normative ideas are articulated and conveyed, and as a “political spectacle” whereby decisionmakers mobilize symbolic values foundational to such normative ideas, in order to support and legitimize policies (Edelman, 1988; Schmidt, 2008). This approach echoes Thompson’s (1990:8) critical theory of ideology which posits that “symbolic forms or symbolic systems are not ideological in themselves: whether they are ideological, and the extent to which they are, depend on the ways in which they are used and understood in specific social contexts.” Ideas, therefore, are not conceived as unitary but investigated for their variations as they interact with others in different policy contexts (Purdon, 2015).

Discursive institutionalism also resonates with cognitive approaches in public policy, particularly that of French political sociologists Bruno Jobert and Pierre Muller who, in *L’Etat en action*, investigate the various intellectual processes by which policies are legitimated (Jobert, 2004; Jobert and Muller, 1987). In this perspective, programmatic ideas act as frames of reference, for policy actors to construct and situate their own worldviews and perspectives (Schmidt, 2008; Jobert, 2004; Giraud, 2004). Because I stray from a pure public policy approach focused solely on the confined circulation of ideas within government sectors, I prefer to mobilize Schmidt’s (2002) concept of *master discourse*. It captures the larger frame of reference, or sets of discourses, used in climate adaptation and the ways they legitimize and disperse dominant knowledge, beliefs and practices, reinforcing power structures within a society. The *master discourse* constitutes, and is constituted by, discourses, interpretations and worldviews reflective of hegemonic ideas and interests within broader societal and political institutions (Schmidt, 2002). The aim of this analysis, therefore, is to identify the *master discourse* conducive to the institutionalization of climate immobility.

However, one drawback of the public policy approach to ideas is its heavy state-centrism and policy-actor focus (Giraud, 2008). By expanding the concept of *master discourse* to actors that not only directly partake in policymaking, but more broadly compose the political landscape and participate in political processes as members of the public, organized groups (such as fossil fuel lobbies) or community leaders, I am able to capture the meaning-making structures that inform representations of climate change and the larger spectrum of normative ideas which legitimize

adaptation within an institutional space. This includes ideas encompassed in identities and culture (notably Cajun) and appeals to Louisianan and American values. Considered more than a symbolic structure, culture is the semantic space in which people construct their identities and represent themselves and others through images, messages, and actions (Kubik, 2009:37). It composes the *master discourse* and global frame of reference by which people understand social reality and interpret policies and policy ideas.

This broader perspective enables me to capture the construction of ideas beyond formal institutions, and the weight of cultural and identity in shaping interpretations and practices related to climate change, such as land attachments and traditional methods of adaptation (notably that of Indigenous and Cajun groups). It also allows for the analysis of a wider range of actors within institutional settings. This is exemplified in Zimmerman's (2016) analysis of the discursive strategies employed by non-governmental and extra-structural actors, notably think tanks, to frame politics and effect institutional change. In expanding our analytical reach beyond policymakers, I capture the wider array of actors engaged in a *master discourse* which exists as a tension between power dynamics and ideas, and underlies a broader struggle for the control a society's normative orientation and the production of meaning (Giraud, 2008). The concept of *master discourse*, in this sense, bridges the gap between ideologies, political rhetoric and public policy. It makes sense of the values and interpretations of social reality which inform climate and adaptation policies. These normative prescriptions are anchored in what Sabatier names the "deep core", the fundamental values constituted of diffused and long-lasting ideas in a society, as well as the "policy core beliefs", the fundamental policy decisions composed of cognitive and normative ideas in a given policy context (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Palier et Surel, 2005).

Ideas, therefore, represent a key variable in the "3Is" framework. To briefly summarize my theoretical approach discussed so far, I consider both discourses and ideologies to be constituted by, and be constitutive of, symbolic structures which enable social and political reproduction. In this way, the "3Is" form the basis upon which I deploy a critical discursive and ideational analysis. As Weiss and Wodak (2003:14) remind, one of the goals of discourse analysis is to "'demystify' discourses by deciphering ideologies". I draw on Schmidt's (2002; 2008) conception of the normative functions of discourse, whereby a political program is defined by its political and ideational goals, and mobilizes societal values and norms for legitimacy.

I use the concept of *master discourse* to understand the overarching, hegemonic discursive and ideational representations which guide policy decisions and interpretations of climate issues (Schmidt, 2002). Discursive institutionalism is particularly pertinent to the study of political continuity or stasis in adaptation policy and practice, notably because the *master discourse* constrains alternative ideas and interpretations of climate adaptation by legitimizing hegemonic ideologies and power structures (Hope, 2011). Analyzing the role of ideas in exerting political power therefore entails evaluating how “actors, through the use of ideational elements, seek to influence other actors’ normative and cognitive beliefs” (Carstensen et Schmidt, 2016:322).

My theoretical objective in mobilizing these concepts is to identify the hegemonic representations of climate change, and how these discursive structures inform a larger frame of reference – a *master discourse* - for decisionmakers and the public to interpret adaptation, risk, and mobility. In discursively framing climate issues within specific institutions, policy actors have the ability to promulgate interests, norms and institutionalize the status quo on climate policy (Hope, 2011).

2.2.3. Hegemony, consent, and the satisfaction of interests

Through a focus on power structures and ideologies, the discursive institutionalist approach brings attention to the third dimension of the “3Is”, defined by Hall (1997:176) as “the real, material interests of the principal actors, whether conceived as individuals or as groups”. In line with the critical approach developed in this chapter, I anchor my understanding of interests in a neo-Marxist perspective to include both material and immaterial interests⁸. Discursive institutionalism strays from rationalist explanations to conceive of interests as subjective, norm-driven, as well as constitutive of, and constituted by, ideas (Schmidt, 2008). By approaching interests in its discursive institutionalist conception, material reality is perceived as “the setting within which or in response to which agents may conceive of their interests”, meaning it is shaped by elite and non-elite discourses and interpretations (Schmidt, 2008:318). Such an approach draws on Gramscian materialism, foundational to critical discourse analysis, which views state ideological hegemony as “the process by which ruling elites secure consent to the established political order

⁸ Immaterial interests refer to non-economic interests, such as cultural, political and ideological factors which enable ruling groups to maintain hegemony and dominance over social and political institutions. They will be further discussed below.

through the production and diffusion of meanings and values” (Carragee et Roefs, 2004, p. 221; Carvalho, 2008; Fairclough, 1995; Gramsci, 1971).

In reflecting Gramscian conceptions of cultural and ideological hegemony, a critical DI perspective on interests diverges from traditional approaches of rational choice and “methodological individualism” (Hecló, 1994). It also moves beyond Marxist conceptions of interests as the sole result of material arrangements and strategic manipulations (Lieberman, 2002). Through discursive institutionalism, I rearticulate the investigation of interests beyond explanations of self-interests to incorporate material and immaterial interests shaped by ideas, practices and perceptions. This is because “all interests are ideas”, which means that “actors are not motivated by self-interest alone but rather have a wider range of reasons for acting—including moral, prudential, and “axiological” (norm-based)—many of which are not commonplace, do not have consequences for others, and do not directly affect their own self-interest” (Schmidt, 2008:317). It means that interests are shaped by cognitive and cultural structures, including the interpretation of available knowledge and beliefs about certain issues (Edelman, 1960; Fenster, 2005).

This complex arrangement of elite and non-elite interests is anchored in DI’s dual conception of interests as material and immaterial. Going further, Edelman (1960) distinguishes between interests in resources, such as goods, and interests in symbolic reassurance, which entails the suppression of threats to the group and could be associated with immaterial interests. Immaterial interests shape power structures, symbols and values to maintain a certain social order beyond economic coercion. This means that actors have both an interest in public policies as purveyors of symbols on specific social representations, and as tools to secure the satisfaction of their material interests. Discursive practices, in this critical perspective, act as processes by which power relations and interests are produced, legitimized or challenged. In fact, “language indexes power, expresses power, is involved where there is contention over and a challenge to power” (Weiss and Wodak, 2003: 15).

Despite Palier and Surel (2005) noting that interests have been the most identifiable of the “3Is” due to the prevalence of the rational approach, capturing both immaterial interests and material interests remains difficult within constructivist paradigms. But as Jobert (2004) remarks, providing evidence of interests remains crucial for the study of beliefs and ideas in public policy. Discursive

institutionalism responds to this requirement by using programmatic ideas and discourse as a gateway to apprehending actors' perceptions of an issue, thereby accounting for "interest-based ideas" (Schmidt, 2008:319; Lieberman, 2002). Interests, in this manner, are intrinsically linked to policies, programs and discursive processes and subsequently shape practices because "Personal and social cognition (...) may finally in turn control the social actions that are consistent with the interests of powerful groups in general, and of the symbolic elites in particular, thus closing the circle of the discursive reproduction of power and domination" (Van Dijk, 2015: 474). In that regard, ideas are a fundamental tool to capture and make sense of the interests of policy actors (Lieberman, 2002). Policy frames and discourses reflect and carry power dynamics and the interests of hegemonic actors (Carragee and Roefs, 2004; Entman, 1993). I therefore seek out the expression of interests and strategies in discourse by examining how it enables the reproduction of power, ideologies, and hegemony through policymaking and adaptation practices (Fairclough, 1995; Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002).

As such, I adhere to Hall's (1997) critique of interest-based approaches which conceive of interests as fixed by socioeconomic characteristics. He argues, "most people have multiple interests, often associated with the multiple roles they play in the world, some of which conflict with each other, and many of which are subject to multiple interpretations" (p.197). For this reason, Hall favors the identification of interests through a process of interpretation, whereby interests are not static, homogenous, or given by institutions or socioeconomic conditions. Instead, he argues, "interests must be seen not as givens, but as objects of contestation" (p.197). Through the study of ideas and practices, I focus on those varying interests and the way they are construed, expressed, and aim to influence policies and other actors' interpretations of issues. In doing so, I identify the actors engaged in the policy process, their dynamics, and the (discursive) strategies deployed to reach their goals (Palier and Surel, 2005).

I aim to capture the material and immaterial interests as conveyed within *cognitive ideas* (constitutive of interests and which define the problem and solutions), and *normative ideas* (which legitimize the policies) (Schmidt, 2008, 2002). They are connected insofar as "public policies have value to interested groups both as symbols and as instruments for the allocation of more tangible values" (Edelman, 1960:695). Edelman further conceives of policy formulation as "a 'mix' of symbolic effect and rational reflection of interests in resources" (p.703), whereby law and policy

are utilized, through discourse and symbols, to satisfy the material and symbolic interests of elites. In fact, according to this theory, “the state, captured by a small set of interests, persuades its citizens of its value through the management and exploitation of legitimating symbols” (Fenster, 2005:8). These interests are identifiable through the study of the symbols, frames of reference and ideologies circulated within these communicative and deliberative spheres (Carragee and Roefs, 2004; Entman, 1993). In other words, cognitive and normative ideas reflected in policy choice, adaptation practices and their public discursive legitimization provide information on the interests of actors.

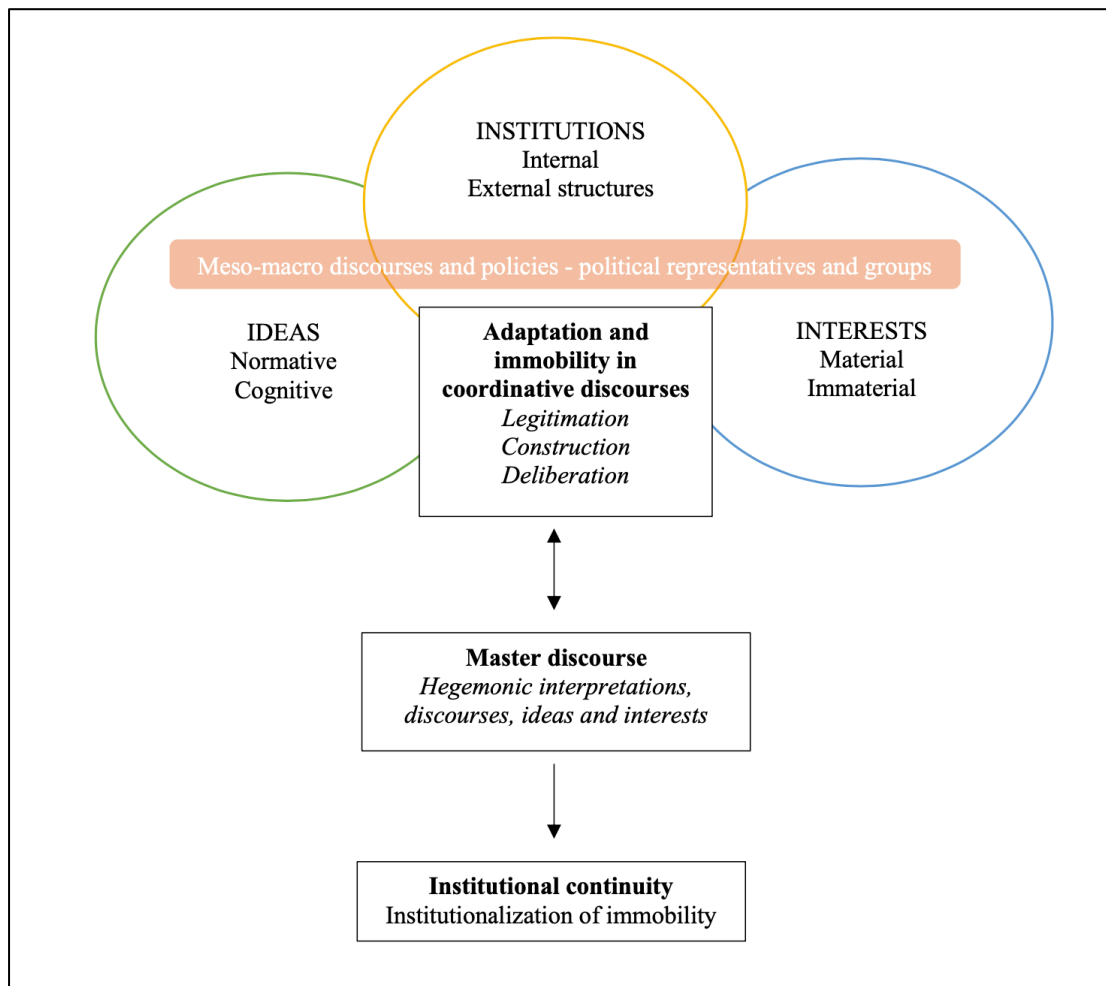


Figure 1. – A discursive institutionalist analysis of institutions, ideas and interests in the making of climate immobility

This approach is also greatly concerned with questions of power and hegemony in the satisfaction of elite interests. For Gramsci (1971), the ruling class cannot lead without consent, meaning if the public has detached from the ruling ideologies. In order for hegemonic beliefs about climate

change and adaptation to shape adaptation practices, therefore, consent and approval must be secured. In turn, this enables the ruling class to satisfy their material and immaterial interests. This theoretical perspective is important in two ways. First, it enables me to identify the ideologies and beliefs that express hegemonic interests (such as those linked to extractivist economies, for example). Second, and of particular theoretical importance, it nuances current understandings of “trapped populations” and immobility. Because the state secures consent through ideological hegemony, immobility practices shaped or institutionalized by the state may not be conceived solely as imposition or coercion through public policy. In fact, this suggests that ideas enable elites to frame adaptation policies to secure their own interests, and in doing so, forge consent and support for hegemonic representations of risk and climate change. Adaptation and (im)mobility may thus be both imposed by the state onto communities, as well as accepted by them.

To briefly sum up the theoretical foundations I have laid here, this research investigates the institutional construction of immobility through a critical discursive institutionalist approach for the study of three key political dimensions: institutions, ideas and interests. By examining the relationship between language and ideology, I aim to decipher the discourses and ideas about climate change and adaptation, the policies and beliefs which they shape, and the vested material and immaterial interests which they subsequently aim to satisfy, and which inform decision-making. I mobilize the concept of *master discourse* to theorize the dominant narrative which reinforces and entrenches power structures, ideologies and elite interests (see Figure 1). This approach departs from other neo-institutionalist traditions because it emphasizes the central power of ideas in shaping hegemonic discourse, policymaking and beliefs about (im)mobility. The next section presents the operationalization of this theoretical framework and the tools used to capture ideas, interpretations and interests within these institutional spaces.

2.3. Operationalizing discursive institutionalism: frames as a lens into ideas, interpretations and practices

In his discursive institutionalist study of the interactive process by which think tanks transmit ideas and effect institutional change within Asian security institutions, Zimmerman (2016) identifies three political discursive strategies: problem framing, networking, and institutionalization. My analysis focuses on the first and last discursive strategies, problem framing and institutionalization, and draws on framing theories to operationalize the theoretical framework described previously.

This is because, as Wolf and Moser (2011:562) explain, “How climate change is framed can fundamentally affect how the issue is perceived.” Problem framing is an essential part of discourse and is conducive to the institutionalization of ideas, securing their influence over policy in the long term (Zimmerman, 2016). Through a politolinguistic approach (Reisigl, 2008), I analyze the discursive practices of political actors, whether governmental or non-governmental, in different spheres of political practice. Frames as discursive strategies are important insofar as they carry ideologies which shape and influence the public’s worldviews (Geertz, 1964), bringing to light the effects of discourses and ideas on interpretations highlighted above. They are defined as “organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world” (Reese, 2010:17). Biases are formed through these narratives and consequently inform perceptions of climate-related risk, leading me to argue that adaptation beliefs and practices will be shaped by the discourses which convey political, economic and social ideas and ideologies about climate change (Schuldt et al., 2011; Young and Coutinho, 2013; Hoffman, 2015). Frames, in this light, are constitutive of the *master discourse* which shapes interpretations and maintains political structures. This final section presents frames as the primary analytical tools mobilized in this thesis to capture ideas and discourses.

2.3.1. Emphasis framing: a critical constructivist approach to frames

To capture the interactive process between ideas, discourses and practices as described above, I am mobilizing frames as analytical tools constitutive of discourses. Framing has mostly been deployed in analyses of media communication (Reese, 2010; Entman, 1993), social movements (Benford and Snow, 2000; Snow, 2008), or public opinion (Chong and Druckman, 2007). My analysis draws on the sociological tradition of framing analysis which emanates from Goffman’s conception of framing as “a means of understanding how people construct meaning and make sense of the everyday world” (Cacciatore et al., 2016:10; Goffman, 1974; Carragee and Roefs, 2004; Gordon, 2015). The conception of frames mobilized here therefore draws on a more interpretive, critical constructivist paradigm. In line with my overarching epistemological position, I respond to D’Angelo’s (2002) call for a multiparadigmatic approach to framing and adopt both constructivist theories of framing (inspired by Goffman, Snow and Benford) and critical traditions (led by Entman and Reese, among others).

I consider frames as leading a “double life, both as rhetoric weapons to advance elite interests and as the cognitive structures that enable citizens to understand political issues” (Kinder and Nelson, 2005:103). Frames are meaning making processes “embedded in a web of culture, an image that naturally draws attention to the surrounding cultural context and the threads that connect them” (Reese, 2010:18; Benford and Snow, 2000; D’Angelo, 2002). They exist within the “order of discourse”⁹, the sum of discourses and overall structure and practice of language in a specific context (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). In this way, frames are constitutive of the *master discourse* by which elites legitimize ideas, and policy and non-governmental actors interpret political issues (Matthes, 2011). This framing process takes place within a discursive field, described by Snow (2008:8) as “the contexts in which meaning-making activities, such as framing, are embedded”.

This approach to framing differs from that of the cognitive paradigm. Despite significant theoretical insights on the effects of framing on public opinion, I stray from its individual-level analysis of equivalence-based framing, which looks at how equivalent information is presented, to instead focus on the selection of facts over others, defined as *emphasis framing* per the sociological tradition (Chong and Druckman, 2007; Cacciatore et al., 2016; Iyengar, 1996; Haider-Markel and Joslyn, 2001).

Emphasis framing conceives of the framing process as the conscious selection of information by elite speakers. In other words, emphasis framing is the process by which elites call attention to specific issues while ignoring others, effectively narrowing perspectives and ideas about a topic (Kinder and Nelson, 2005). Following the Gramscian conception of hegemony and ideology, this critical constructionist approach is concerned with the distribution of power and hegemony in the framing of social issues. These processes are considered for their ideological nature in constructing meaning and reflecting elite interests (Carragee and Roefs, 2004; Entman, 1993; Reese, 2010; Gamson 1992; De Vreese, 2005). This perspective goes beyond the main analytical approach of

⁹ The “order of discourse” is conceptualized similarly to the *master discourse* in critical discourse analysis, although it refers more strongly to the language (discourses and genres) used for social practice (ex: welfare discourse, neoliberal consumer discourse).

the media communication tradition, criticized by the sociological paradigm for their failure to link analysis to broader issues of political and social power (Carragee and Roefs, 2004).

Frames are thereby conceived as an ideological process, and an expression of power and understandings of the social world, constructed and conveyed to achieve a specific political objective (Reese, 2010; De Vreese, 2005). This framing process can manifest in four ways according to Matthes (2011): (i) competition of frames, which signifies a struggle for hegemonic representations of an issue, (ii) frame selection and modification, whereby policy actors reshape and modify frames, (iii) frame dynamics, in which frames and counter-frames evolve over time, and (iv) frame consistency, the repeated pattern of frames to shape interpretation and evaluation of issues. This typology echoes Snow's (2008) conception of consensual and contested discursive fields within which actors frame specific events. Operationalizing my theoretical framework through this approach allows for the capture the narratives around climate change, their meanings, and infer on the discursive intent of policy actors and their underlying interests. I therefore focus on seizing two particular purposes of political rhetoric, *probare*, political justification and legitimation, and *monere*, political control (Reisigl, 2008). Frames and rhetoric mobilized by political actors, therefore, exert a *persuasive* power over their audience, as they seek the satisfaction of symbolic and material political interests.

In fact, "Frames articulate and maintain ways of reasoning about public issues, creating issues in discourse" and serving specific interests through the maintenance of such understandings of social reality (Reese, 2010:22). These frames, when deployed within institutional settings, reinforce institutions' capacity to convey some meanings about social reality "by providing members with categories and procedures for classifying events, issues and people" (Miller, 1997:4). I further conceptualize the power of ideas by invoking, once again, the discursive institutionalist literature. Ideational scholarship such as Gramsci or Foucault has touched on the relationship between ideas, hegemony and the production of subjectivity, but DI proposes a more agency-oriented perspective on the role played by elites in "wielding ideational power, along with the interaction between elites and groups less powerful in terms of resources or institutional position" (Carstensen et Schmidt, 2016:320).

Two types of ideational power will be investigated in this research: (i) the persuasive power *through* ideas, defined as the ability of actors to convince others through discourse (for which we

investigate various frames and discursive strategies); and (ii) the structural power *in* ideas, the institutional constraints imposed on the ideas of actors through the hegemony of certain ideational agents (analyzed as a *master discourse*) (Schmidt, 2017; Carstensen et Schmidt, 2016). While the first illustrates the way ideas may be used to influence other actors, the second reflects the background ideational process, such as discursive practices and systems of knowledge, “affect which ideas enjoy authority at the expense of others” (Carstensen et Schmidt, 2016:329). This research investigates both to apprehend the framing processes and their potential constraints on climate change adaptation beliefs and practices.

2.3.2. Capturing discursive strategies to operationalize discourse analysis

Weiss and Wodak (2003) suggest defining categories of analytical concepts to capture the content of specific discourses and situate how they are mobilized and what functions they fulfill. The identification of *discursive strategies* answers this analytical imperative and constitutes a central tool in this analysis. Discursive strategies are defined by Carvalho (2008:169) as an action of framing, or “forms of discursive manipulation of reality” to achieve a goal. Drawing on Entman’s (1993) theories, Carvalho identifies various discursive strategies, such as legitimation (normative justification of an idea), or politicization (attributing political status to an object). Identifying framing through discursive strategies enables us to capture and make sense of the cognitive and normative ideas conveyed in political discourses by operationalizing what Fairclough endorses as the critical analysis of ideology and hegemony promulgated through written and spoken text. It focuses on the substantive meanings present in language and the “presuppositions, implicatures, metaphors, and coherence” of discourse (Fairclough, 1995: 74). Frames, whether macro (such as the War on Drugs) or micro (such as pro-business terms) are conveyed through specific words and images within discursive fields (Snow, 2008; Reese, 2010; Entman, 1993; D’Angelo, 2002).

In this investigation, I capture the use of specific strategies such as frame repetition, absence of alternative frames, and presence of “strong frames”, which according to Chong and Druckman (2007:111) convey symbols, partisanship and ideology through the use of fear, exaggeration or prejudice (Matthes, 2011). These serve the persuasive nature of political rhetoric, whether through *logos* (sound argumentation), *ethos* (reaching consent through gentle emotions), and *pathos* (arousing intense emotions) (Reisigl, 2008). In the context of climate change, such frames may be especially pertinent to identify the underlying ideologies and interpretations of risk promulgated

in discourse by interested elites. Although I do not seek to grasp the effects of frames on individual attitudes directly, the study of framing and strategies provides insight on the discursive process by which elites shape meaning, interpretations and the salience of climate related issues in institutional discourses. In sum, “Frames articulate and maintain ways of reasoning about public issues, creating issues in discourse” (Reese, 2010:22).

However, policy frames do not automatically translate into agenda setting. Callaghan and Schnell’s (2005) investigation of framing processes in American politics reveals that the transfer of such frames onto the public agenda necessitates moderating forces, which include a favorable election, positive media attention, the expansion of a conflict, or exogenous shocks from a significant event. In the investigation of climate policymaking, the latter moderating force is of particular relevance. This analysis will make sense of the discursive framing of extreme weather events and ongoing climate impacts, such as hurricanes, erosion and land loss, in decision-making spheres. Politicians can use exogenous events, such as extreme weather, to shape the terms of the debate and direct public attention to specific issue frames (Callaghan and Schnell, 2005). Frames are therefore mobilized by elites using a discursive strategy to make salient certain interpretations of an event over others (e.g., as related to anthropogenic climate change or not), direct or deviate attention to certain issues, effect public opinion and shape the political agenda (on climate adaptation) (Entman, 1993; Matthes, 2011; De Vreese, 2005).

Drawing on discursive institutionalist theories of *master discourses*, these frames can be understood as arising from shared representations and ideas about political and social issues (Jobert, 1989; Schmidt, 2002; Giraud, 2008). In their respective studies on framing responsibility for poverty and terrorism, and gun violence in the United States, Iyengar (1996) and Haider-Markel and Joslyn (2001) illustrate how issue presentation in policy formulation can shape beliefs about blame attribution and reinforce existing partisan interpretations of events. However, like constructivist studies on media framing, they remark that the extent to which frames shape beliefs is dependent on ideological dispositions and existing knowledge (D’Angelo, 2002; Gordon, 2015). In the context of climate change in the United States, such partisan perspectives may be further reinforced by the discursive strategies used to make salient specific interpretations of climate events (climate change denial, partisan discord over climate policy, extractivist interests, for

example). These co-occurring ideas in turn constitute a global frame of reference on climate adaptation – the *master discourse*.

Discursive strategies work because they appeal to, and reinforce, existing values, frames of reference and worldviews. Gordon (2015), in drawing on Goffman’s approach to framing, mobilizes the notion of intertextuality – the interrelatedness of ideas within texts and discourses – to make sense of way frames draw on people’s prior knowledge and experiences to infer meaning and interpretation about an issue. Frames constitute a “cultural structure of meaning” which guides how elites portray information (Reese, 2010:37; Matthes, 2011). They illustrate the “power in ideas”, the ideational and institutional structures that actors mobilize to convey their ideas to the public, and which enable agents to depoliticize specific ideas “to the degree where they recede into the background, meaning that they become so accepted that their very existence may be forgotten, even as they may come to structure peoples’ thoughts about the economy, polity and society” (Carstensen et Schmidt, 2016:329; Schmidt, 2017). According to discursive institutionalist tradition, ideas (as well as the frames carried through discursive strategies and the larger *master discourse* within which they are inscribed) exert a persuasive power over individual interpretations, *habitus* and political practices. This explains why the influence of these discursive strategies by elites can trickle down to people’s decision-making about adaptation and mobility.

3. Conclusions

While the concept of “trapped populations” has enabled the introduction of immobility as a legitimate object of study in climate mobility research in the last decade, it has also promoted an overwhelmingly materialist conception of non-movement (Ayeb-Karlsson et al., 2022). Staying is conditioned by economic constraints, a theory which assumes that people who do not engage in voluntary migration are necessarily poor and unable to move (Black et al., 2011c). I contend, however, that immobility is the result of complex decision-making processes that don’t solely rest on the inability to move. By shifting focus onto the political framing and making of immobility, I investigate the specific institutional contexts that shape adaptation policies, practices and perceptions. The goal of this research is to provide new perspectives on the “immobility paradox” by exploring the institutionalization of non-movement in Southeast Louisiana.

To do so, this research adopts a critical discursive institutionalist perspective to examine the influence of institutions, ideas, and interests on making mobility and adaptive strategies. I use discursive institutionalism to guide my analysis of both the persuasive function of ideas (power *through* ideas) and the structuring function of ideas (power *in* ideas). These ideas form the more structural basis through which interests are co-constructed, debated, and legitimized within institutional contexts. Discourses as meaning-making processes function as social practices within society, and as a medium of analysis, are a gateway through which to apprehend ideology, hegemony, and interests within institutions and beyond. Adopting a neo-Marxist critical discourse perspective allows for the identification and analysis of the narratives and ideologies that shape the institutional context in which adaptive policies are developed and implemented, and which exert an influence on communities' opportunities and constraints on mobility.

The analytical objective is to identify the *master discourses*, rhetoric and symbolic constructs which shape beliefs and practices, and satisfy the material and immaterial interests of elite actors. Frames and discursive strategies are a useful analytical tool to capture these discourses. Frames are conceived here as ideological processes which elite actors use to construct meaning about climate change and risk, increase or decrease the salience of specific issues, and structure broader interpretations of (im)mobility. My analytical approach strays from major framing studies on media communication or cognitive processes to focus on elite discourses, and capture the power of ideas, the ways by which political agents construct the *master discourse* for policy actors and non-governmental agents to form adaptation strategies.

Before delving into the analysis of these discourses and practices, the next chapter presents my methodological approach to the study of climate immobility in Southeast Louisiana.

Chapter 2. Delta dynamics: methods of investigation in Louisiana's Southeast

Louisiana's coastline has long been known for its vibrant culture and beautiful landscapes, a rich tapestry of music, cuisine and history embedded in the marshlands. But today, the State faces significant climatic and environmental challenges, grappling with coastal erosion, subsidence and extreme weather events, weakening its social and cultural fabric. Despite these increasing vulnerabilities, strong conservative voices are rising from Louisianan policymakers against climate policies. The newly elected US House Speaker, Louisiana representative Mike Johnson, and the new Governor Jeff Landry both questioned climate science and opposed clean energy policies while endorsing the continued production of fossil fuels (Friedman, 2023; Taylor, 2018; Jones, 2024). Local Republicans also recently celebrated the party's "super majority" in both chambers of the Louisiana Legislature after one of the last-standing Democrats, Rep. Francis Thompson, switched his party affiliation to red (Hilburn, 2023). In this context of conservatism, policymaking on adaptation at the State and local levels has remained limited, despite the continued increase of socioenvironmental vulnerabilities. Reflective of the "immobility paradox", Southeast Louisiana represents an intriguing theatre for hegemonic ideas and interests about vulnerability, risk and climate change to play out in the formation of immobility.

As I have remarked in the first chapter, the goal of this research is to move beyond essentializing estimates of climate movement to explore and understand the lived realities of climate adaptation and decision-making processes. As Wiegel et al. (2021:3) point out, immobility is a factor of perceptions of risk and ontological security, and thus calls for a "people-centered" methodology to capture the interpretations and experiences of climate risk. I respond to this call for a qualitative and contextualized approach by delving into the case of Southeast Louisiana's making of climate immobility. The aim of this chapter is to present the context of this research and the various methods of investigation deployed in this thesis.

The first section of this chapter situates my analysis at the macro and meso levels and identifies the units of analysis. The next section goes over the case study selection and provides background information on Louisiana and the three regions under investigation. The third section presents the tripartite methodology for data collection (observations, interviews and textual analysis) and

discusses triangulation. This will be followed by a presentation of the on-site fieldwork conducted in Louisiana, as well as a discussion on data analysis, specifically the use of grounded theory and methods of coding. Finally, the chapter will touch on the adjustments made to data collection in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and discuss some of its impacts on research.

1. Levels and units of analysis

Studies of climate mobility have largely approached adaptation decision-making from the micro level perspective, seeking to understand movement at the individual level among a myriad of cases. I aim to demonstrate that immobility can also be a phenomenon forged at the collective level. I investigate immobility as the expression of meso-level political practices of institutional actors and reflective of larger, macro-level economic and political structures. This analytical focus will be discussed in this section.

1.1. Apprehending macro and meso-level political practices

This research engages in analysis of immobility as a meso and macro-level phenomenon. This approach is pertinent because it leaves space for discovery by moving beyond generalized assumptions in the climate mobility field, providing more nuanced and situated accounts of the factors shaping (im)mobility (Boas et al., 2019). I adopt a holistic perspective by which adaptation practices cannot be understood without considering the collective structures within which they are inscribed (Coman et al., 2016). Considering immobility as a meso-level phenomena, expressed at the micro level and shaped by structural factors, therefore takes into account the structural dimensions of climate decision-making, including socioeconomic configurations, culture and identity related norms and practices, and historically constructed ecological vulnerability. This is because who is vulnerable to disasters and the impacts of those disasters are the result of larger societal structures and distributions of power (Black et al., 2013).

Articulation immobility at this level of analysis derives from a critical discursive understanding of micro contexts as reflecting larger macro phenomena, because discursive practices are both structured and structuring processes (Weiss and Wodak, 2003). The meso-level bridges the gap between the micro-level (discourse and language, beliefs and experiences) and macro-level (power, inequality) through analysis of social cognition and social structures as an interface between society and discourse (Van Dijk, 2015; Tilly, 1984). This approach fulfills Hecló's (1994)

call for a better articulation of these two levels of analysis where analysis of systemic phenomena doesn't assume individual behavior, and vice versa. This is important to understand the processes by which discursive practices at the state and elite level shape policymaking on climate change, and subsequently impact collective practices of (im)mobility. Situating immobility at a meso and macro-level of analysis thus enables a better articulation of the interaction between structural forces and group behaviors, understanding individual decision-making as the result of collective factors. In doing so, I aim to construct a middle-range theory of (im)mobility to inform policymaking and knowledge on climate adaptation practices in similar contexts.

1.2. Capturing hegemonic ideas through policy actors

Analysis is focused on the political actors engaged in practices and discourses on climate adaptation and (im)mobility. I do not adhere to the unit of analysis of “trapped communities” developed in the literature because it reflects a biased normative stance and presumes harmony and unity among groups of individuals (Zickgraf, 2019; Buggy and McNamara, 2016). As these authors suggest, this unit of analysis ignores the complexities, diversity, inequalities and power dynamics within social groups. It also excludes the policymaking actors, central to this analysis, that make and enact decisions on adaptation, and disregards the overlap of different forms of immobility (voluntary, involuntary and acquiescent). As I have discussed previously, the *master discourse* in climate policymaking is dominated, shaped and maintained by “cultural authorities who act as key gatekeepers within business or policy communities” (Hall, 1997:186; Hope, 2011). These various political and institutional actors constitute my units of observation.

I investigate political and economic elites (oil and gas lobbyists, politicians, administrators, government agencies...) acting as the cultural producers and gatekeepers of ideas, as well as some non-elites (environmental activists, community leaders...) who partake in these ideas and practices. The reason I have captured a variety of discourses beyond political and economic elites, such as those of fishermen or environmental activists, is to circumscribe the limits and scope of hegemonic discourses on risk and adaptation. These non-elite voices are not representative of entire communities, and I do not aim to understand the resistances, circulations, or relative weight

of various discourses in the making of hegemonic ideas¹⁰. Rather, I capture the penetration of dominant ideas within institutions to understand their scope and how they shape immobility at the collective, political level. I include the voices of some non-elite actors to understand the articulation and anchoring of the *master discourse* within policy spheres that ultimately constrain alternative ideas about climate change adaptation, even among those who may be critical of the state and its adaptation practices, and institutionalize immobility.

I thus focus on both the governing structures of climate policy, and the groups which interact and circulate ideas within them. Analysis operates at two levels of governance. First, decisionmakers and stakeholders organized at the level of the State of Louisiana, where I investigate policymaking and discourses that frame adaptation perspectives for the region. Second, local policymakers, organized groups (fishermen, environmental non-profits...) and residents situated in local governance where climate change is experienced and interpreted, and adaptation is put into practice. Similarly to Norgaard's (2011) investigation of the social organization of climate change denial, I look at the collective interpretations that emerge and shape individual action (or non-action) on climate risk.

Norgaard draws on the concept of "thought communities", the categorization of individuals who share similar beliefs, values and perspectives on climate change (Cramer Walsh, 2009; Norgaard, 2011). I seek to understand values, perspectives, attitudes, and interpretations of events, but do so to identify the elaboration of *collective* ideas about climate risk. These collective beliefs constitute a *master discourse*, constructed within different spheres of governance and policymaking and maintained by institutional actors, and which permeates the interpretations of different groups, even in their critical positions.

2. Case selection

¹⁰ Although it is not an analytical focus for this study on immobility, my analysis does show that the *master discourse* is contested and debated by different thought communities, such as Indigenous groups or environmental activists, who organize the discursive field within which political conflicts and struggles operate (Jobert and Muller, 1987). Rather than investigating this variety of discourses for their subversive character, I study alternative or critical discourses in relation to hegemonic ideas about adaptation and risk to understand the extent to which it has penetrated collective interpretations and enabled the institutionalization of immobility.

How do political institutions, ideas, and interests shape immobility and adaptation practices? To answer this question, I favor a *small-N* approach to provide a comprehensive investigation of the political conditions of (im)mobility (Weiss and Wodak, 2003; Hall, 2003; Purdon, 2015; Tilly, 1984; Della Porta and Keating, 2008; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2011). Qualitative scholars like Geertz (1973) and Edelman (1960) argue that thick, interpretive descriptions can enlighten on the conditions of ignorance and irrationality (beliefs, feelings and behaviors) in a way that statistical modeling cannot. Insofar as traditional studies on climate (im)mobilities have favored positivist, *large-N* analyses, I aim to move beyond predictive models of migration, and instead focus on situated ideas to provide a refined analysis of the complexities of human decision-making in relation to climate change. In doing so, I follow Purdon's (2015) call for a departure from *large-N* accounts of climate policy, toward small case analyses within the "3Is" discursive institutionalist framework, better suited for theory-building and conceptualization.

The following section presents the choice of researching immobility in Southeast Louisiana and the selection of Terrebonne, Lafourche and Plaquemines Parishes as typical case studies of climate vulnerability.

2.1. Louisiana: the "ground zero" of climate vulnerability in North America

As I have previously discussed, climate (im)mobility research has focused on low-lying Pacific Islands, Latin America, and the Global South, seeking to estimate and understand patterns of (non-)movement in the context of low-income and vulnerable communities, while leaving cases in the Global North largely under-studied (Piguet et al., 2018; Farbotko et McMichael, 2019; Adams, 2016; Farbotko et al., 2015; Noy, 2017; Šedová et al., 2021; Thornton et al., 2023). In the United States alone, however, thirteen million people are estimated to be at risk of chronic inundation by 2100, 70% of which are concentrated in the Southeastern region (Hauer et al., 2016). These vulnerabilities are taking place within the borders of the world's second highest greenhouse gas emitter and in a context of high partisan polarization around issues of climate change (European Union, 2023). Along with the deliberate organization of climate change denial by conservatives and their industrial allies, individual perceptions of personal risk remain low among the public, exemplifying the reach of interests and partisan beliefs on adaptive behaviors (Ballew et al., 2019). The American context is also interesting because climate movements are not expected to follow

“business as usual” migration patterns (Robinson et al., 2020). By interacting with preexisting socioeconomic vulnerabilities and beliefs, climate change is not perceived nor received in a unified way across the country, disproportionately affecting certain US regions and urban centers.

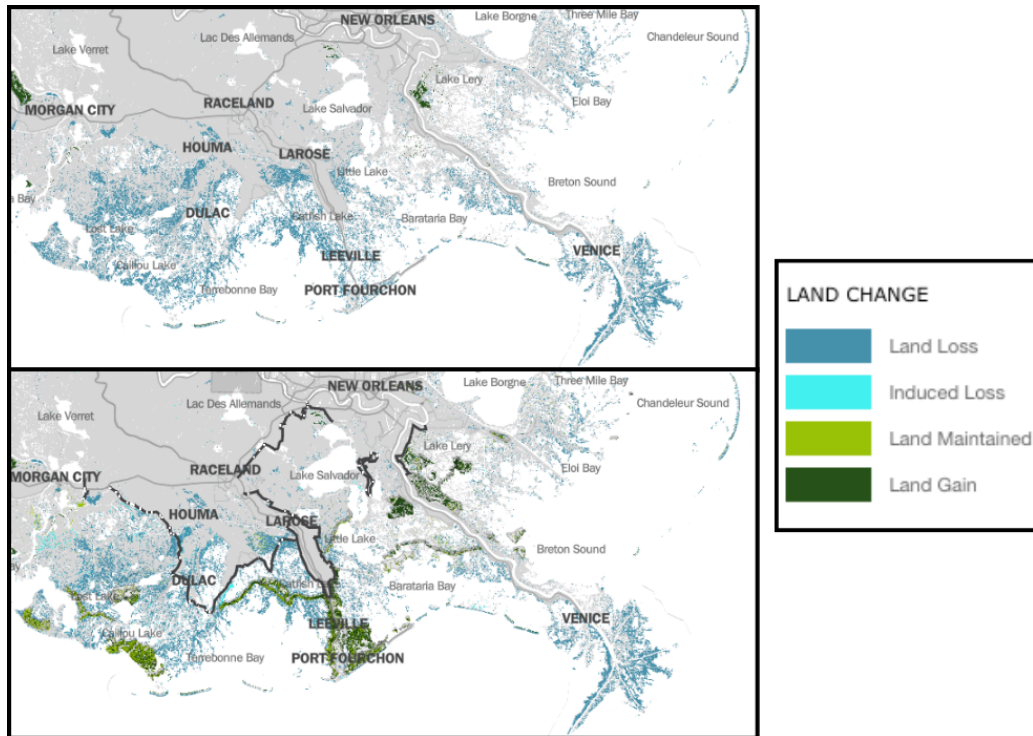


Figure 2. – Estimate of coastal land loss under a high scenario of climate change over the next thirty years, without and with the implementation of Louisiana’s Master Plan

Source: CPRA Master Plan data viewer (CPRA, 2023). Image created by Sarah Munoz (2024).

In fact, Spanger-Siegfried et al (2017) estimate that half of the communities most at risk by 2035 are already socially and economically vulnerable and that today’s 80% of chronically inundated communities are located in Louisiana. Standing “at ground zero of climate change”, the State is experiencing one of the highest rates of sea-level rise in the world (Rossi, 2019:904; Maldonado et al., 2013; Spanger-Siegfried et al. 2017; Gotham, 2016b). Fifty-nine Louisianan municipalities have been identified as being at high risk today, some of which are experiencing chronic inundation over 98% of their lands (Union of Concerned Scientists, 2017a, 2017b). Figures 2 and 3 show the extent of coastal land loss under a high climate change scenario, concurring with the IPCC’s forecasts, with and without the full implementation of the State’s 50-year, 50-billion-dollar Coastal Master Plan (Pörtner et al., 2022). Despite the ambitions of this plan, full funding has yet

to be secured¹¹. Land loss over a majority of the State’s Southeastern coast will be inevitable and substantial in the coming decades.

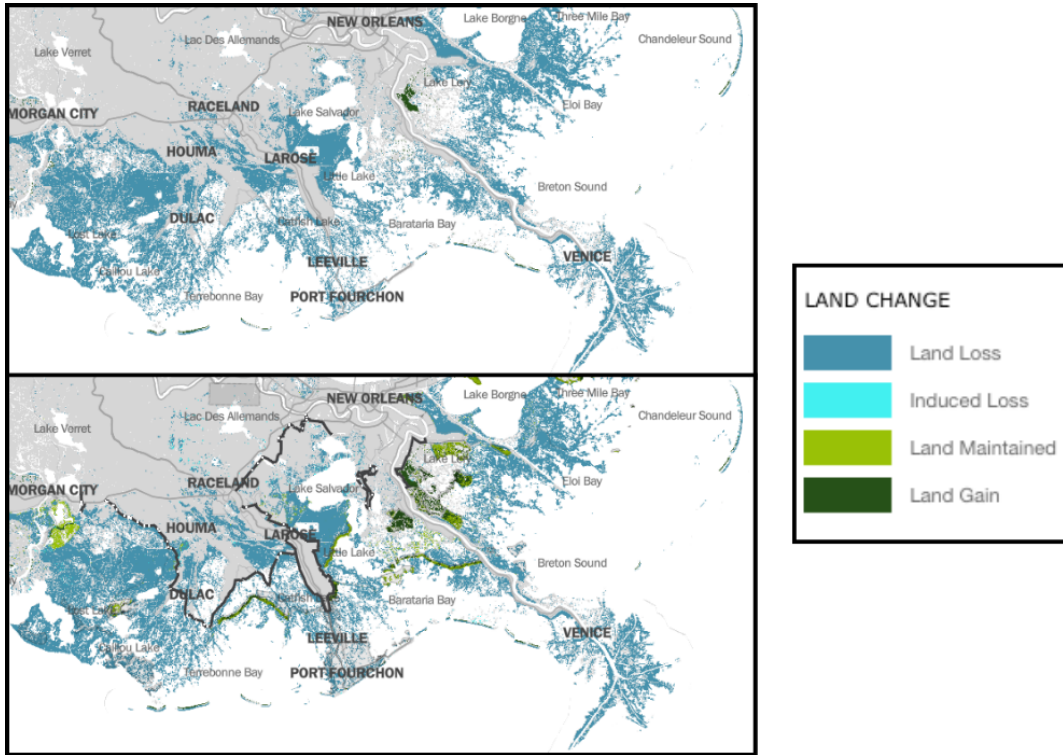


Figure 3. – Estimate of coastal land loss under a high scenario of climate change over the next fifty years, without and with the implementation of Louisiana’s Master Plan

Source: CPRA Master Plan data viewer (CPRA, 2023). Image created by Sarah Munoz (2024).

Despite the State’s efforts to slow down land loss, Louisiana currently loses the equivalent of a football field of land to the Gulf of Mexico every hour and a half (Couvillion et al., 2011). Theriot (2014:2) notes that “For decades, coastal Louisiana has been one of the fastest sinking wetland regions in the world.” The State accounts for 80 percent of wetland loss in the United States and since 1930, “nearly two thousand square miles of Louisiana’s wetlands have been converted to

¹¹ The State of Louisiana has yet to secure funding for the entirety of its Master Plan, and these predictions are based on its full implementation (Davis et al., 2014). It is also important to remark that there are striking political problems associated with some of its projects, including strong public opposition to the Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion project (see [Chapter 7](#)) and vested economic interests in the choices of project implementation (notably in Lafourche Parish where land gain projects are designed to protect access oil and gas infrastructure, rather than people, see [Chapter 4](#)).

open water”. Some studies predict that the Mississippi River delta will be underwater by 2100 and warn of the drastic acceleration of sea-level rise in the United States. It is said that over the next thirty years, the predicted rise will be equivalent to that of the previous century (Pilkey et Pilkey, 2019; Sweet et al. 2022). This severe process will put at risk the 1,148,000 coastal residents of Southeast Louisiana, from Orleans Parish to Terrebonne, already made vulnerable by the subsidence of a weakened coast on which they are highly economically, socially and culturally dependent (US Census Bureau, 2021; Hemmerling et al. 2020). Figure 4 illustrates the coast’s flood risk estimated in the next 30 years with and without the full implementation of the Master Plan. While the Master Plan’s infrastructures (indicated in the lower map with hard lines) would reduce flood risk for residents of Terrebonne Parish (identified by the towns of Dulac and Houma) and Lafourche Parish (identified by Larose and Raceland), it would not considerably lessen flood risk in Plaquemines Parish, stretching from below New Orleans to the Bird’s Foot town of Venice.

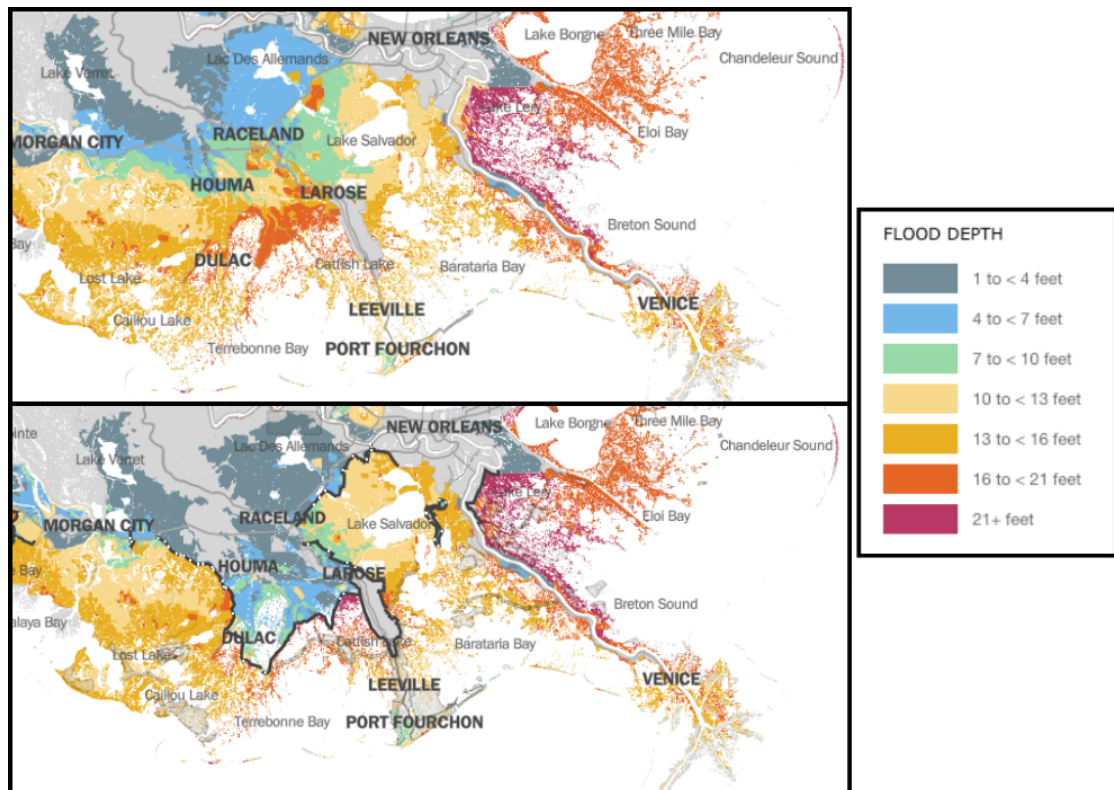


Figure 4. – Estimate of coastal flood risk over the next thirty years, without and with the implementation of Louisiana’s Master Plan

Source: CPRA Master Plan data viewer (CPRA, 2023). Image created by Sarah Munoz (2024). Note: The projected flood depth resulting from storm events of various intensities is measured at a 1.0% annual exceedance probability under a high environmental scenario.

The drivers of Louisiana's intense coastal crisis are threefold. (1) the leveeing of the Mississippi River enabled the development of extractivist and maritime commerce by cutting off the natural sedimentation process of the Delta, engendering land subsidence; (2) the carving of the coast for oil and gas activities led to sea water intrusion into marshes and destroyed natural coastal barriers; and (3) anthropogenic climate change increases sea levels, erosion, storm surges and intensified climate hazards (Gotham, 2016b; Colten, 2016; Theriot, 2014; Day et al., 2007; Carruthers et al., 2017; Priest and Theriot, 2009). As one of the nation's most vulnerable places, this Southern State is also the theatre of historic partisan climate denial and embedded oil and gas interests (see Table 1 and Annexes 12 and 13), rendering it an ideal case for the study of the institutional and ideational making of "trapped populations" and climate immobility in the North American context.

In fact, despite facing severe climate change impacts, very few inhabitants have opted for relocation. The residents of the Isle de Jean Charles town are some of the few Louisianans to have actively engaged in proactive community resettlement. But despite being awarded a \$48 million grant from the federal government to do so, many still refuse to leave their land behind (Varney, 2019; Weir and Clarke, 2019; Baurick, 2022). Research on community resettlement prospects in Louisiana shows that the decision to move is conditioned by economic factors (Dalbom et al., 2014), but some studies have nuanced this argument. Local testimonies reveal that some of the inhabitants of this small, inundated community are refusing to leave despite federal funding because they "struggle with the idea of giving up on their ancestral properties", revealing fractures within communities over the decision to move (Rossi, 2019:904; Weir and Clarke, 2019). These feelings of reluctance can be considered as "internal factors" according to Schewel (2019: 12), who argues that decision-making is heavily influenced by people's preferences and attachments to their communities, social lives and places. A survey conducted in Louisiana reveals that although some may be willing to relocate if "someone cut them a check today", others point out that their livelihoods, family ties and attachments to place bind them to their home and inform their adaptation strategies in situ (Center for Planning Excellence, 2017:14). Drawing on Nawrotzki and DeWaard's (2018) concept of "place vulnerability" and Marino's (2015) idea of "tenacity of home", I aim to accentuate the importance of places in conditioning both exposure to climate risk and decision-making processes.

Although the Isle de Jean Charles relocation is not the focus of this thesis¹², it exemplifies the need to look beyond the aggregated and essentialist notion of “trapped communities” to understand the range of factors conditioning different types of immobility. I contend that current socioeconomic disparities in Louisiana, widespread distrust in government, strong place and community attachments, as well as highly politicized climate beliefs and perceptions, have shaped climate adaptation strategies (Dalbom et al., 2014; Colten, 2015; Spanger-Siegfried et al., 2017).

2.2. Terrebonne, Lafourche and Plaquemines as typical case studies

This research investigates institutions, ideas and interests at two levels of governance, the State of Louisiana and local-level governments, specifically those of Terrebonne, Lafourche and Plaquemines Parishes. These counties are located along the Gulf of Mexico below New Orleans and face alarming rates of both relative sea-level rise and subsidence, a “double threat” to their coastal integrity (see Figures 2, 3 and 4) (Gramling and Hagelman, 2005). They are also particularly vulnerable to hurricanes, the most impactful in recent history having been hurricanes Juan (1984), Katrina (2005), Rita (2005), Gustav (2008), Ike (2009), Laura (2020), Delta (2020), Zeta (2020), and Ida (2021). Figure 5 situates and delimitates Terrebonne, Lafourche and Plaquemines Parishes in Louisiana.

These three parishes were selected as *typical* case studies to investigate the political response to climate change in Louisiana in a representative context of risk and adaptation (Seawright and Gerring, 2008; Patton, 1990; Palinkas et al., 2015). They are prime examples of climate vulnerability and feature both immobility and mobility (i.e., the progressive and individualized depopulation of the most southern coastal areas, described in Annex 15). As I will further demonstrate in this analysis, this slow depopulation is a significant policy challenge for local and State decisionmakers and shapes the institutional context of climate immobility. This

¹² The Isle de Jean Charles case is unique in Southern Louisiana. I have visited the town during fieldwork and have discussed this case with some participants in interviews, but I will not be focusing on this case for various reasons. Firstly, it has already attracted considerable media and research attention and residents have expressed researcher fatigue, according to multiple sources. Secondly, the conditions of this relocation are specific to this Indigenous community and are not reflective of other contexts of high vulnerability in Southeast Louisiana. As such, I do not believe this case to be suitable for this study of immobility as a collective and institutionalized phenomenon. However, the lessons learned from this case remain extremely pertinent to understand the interplay between the institutional construction of vulnerability and the limits of state responses to relocation, and certainly inform analysis.

methodological choice ensures that selection is not made on the dependent variable – immobility – at the risk of skewing results (Geddes, 1990). I do not engage in a comparative design to identify differences or similarities between the three parishes, but rather I use them as representative cases of climate vulnerability that enable me to zoom in the Louisianan context and circumscribe this research geographically. The objective of this analysis, therefore, is to investigate the ways in which (im)mobilities are constructed and institutionalized *within* a specific context.

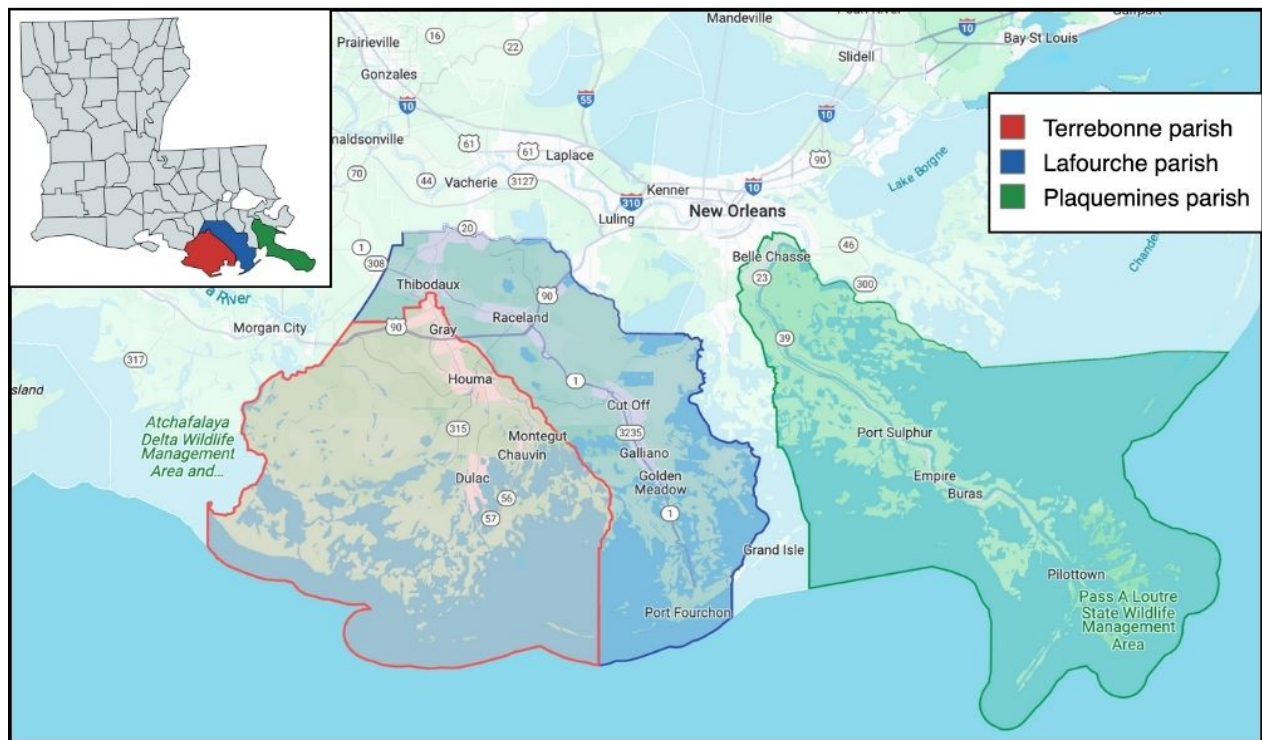


Figure 5. – Map of Terrebonne, Lafourche and Plaquemines Parishes in Louisiana

Source: Sarah Munoz (2024)

The sociodemographic similarities of the three parishes, as shown in Table 1, provide us with important contextual elements to carry out a pattern-matching investigation. Selection of typical case studies is based on the existence of some stable, cross-case relationship, i.e., climate vulnerability, and where “the puzzle of interest to the researcher lies *within* that case”, i.e., climate immobility (Seawright and Gerring, 2008: 299; Goertz and Mahoney, 2012; Patton, 1990). Terrebonne, Plaquemines and Lafourche were selected for their geographic proximity and shared vulnerability to climate change, hurricanes and land loss, providing fertile grounds for investigating adaptation decision-making. This enables the exploration of the political construction

of (im)mobility across a wide region of shared culture, identities, and institutional practices, and gain greater accuracy and validity for data and results.

Table 1. – Sociodemographic portrait of Terrebonne, Lafourche and Plaquemines, relative to Louisiana and the United States

		Terrebonne	Lafourche	Plaquemines	Louisiana	USA
POPULATION	Population	109,580	97,557	23,515	4,657,757	331,449,000
	65 and over	14,90%	16%	14%	16,6%	16,8%
RACE	White alone	70,70%	80,50%	69,40%	57%	62%
	Black/African American	19,20%	13,50%	21,30%	31%	12%
	Hispanic/Latino	5,10%	4,40%	7,90%	7%	19%
	Indigenous/Native	6,20%	3%	1,90%	1%	1%
	Asian	1,10%	0,90%	4,30%	2%	6%
EDUCATION	High school graduate	80,60%	80,10%	85%	86,2%	88,9%
	Bachelor's or higher	15,80%	16,90%	18,20%	26,4%	35%
HOUSING	Median value of homes	\$155,600	\$158,800	\$202,700	192,800\$	\$244,900
	Households with internet subscription	81,20%	79,70%	83,90%	85,5%	90,3%
ECONOMY	Labor force (16+)/employment rate	58,40%	57,50%	56,90%	53,4%	58,6%
INCOME AND POVERTY	Median household income	\$52,224	\$54,530	\$65,234	\$52,087	\$69,717
	Per capita income	\$27,495	\$28,220	\$30,788	\$30,340	\$37,638
	Poverty rate	15,70%	14,50%	16,60%	19,6%	12,8%
POLITICS	Vote for Donald Trump in 2020 election	74,3%	79,4%	67,3%	58,5%	46,8%
CLIMATE OPINIONS	Global warming is happening	61%	62%	58%	65%	72%
	Global warming is caused by humans	45%	46%	44%	48%	57%
	Has personally experienced the effects of global warming	39%	37%	41%	40%	46%
	Global warming will harm me personally	40%	39%	40%	42%	47%

Sources: US Census Bureau (2021; 2023); USA Today (2020); Marlon et al. (2022).

Plaquemines Parish offers slight variation with regards to certain geographic¹³ and sociodemographic variables, such as total population, median household income, partisan voting in the 2020 election and racial composition, explained by unique historic, environmental, and economic factors. Lower population, for example, is explained by fewer hurricane protections and the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 (G21; Annex 15). Nevertheless, these variations are not sufficient for a cross-case comparative design like the most-similar or the most-different (Przeworski and Teune, 1970b), given that all three cases are representative of my object of interest: a shared experience of climate vulnerability and relative (im)mobility. Beyond these conditions, the parishes also offer interesting context to understanding the importance of perceptions of risk and ideas about climate change. As can be seen in Table 1, Terrebonne, Lafourche and Plaquemines, despite their exceptional vulnerability, hold significantly lower individual beliefs in global warming and personal risk relative to the United States and Louisiana, all of which will be discussed further in Chapter 5. The selection of these “information-rich” typical cases of study, therefore, is made to provide representative and complex contexts in which multiple actors and dimensions interact to produce the conditions of climate vulnerability (Patton, 1990:169; Palinkas et al., 2015).

2.3. Articulating State and parish-level analysis

I investigated discourses and practices in the *policy* sphere, where policy actors (experts, public officials, interest groups) discuss and coordinate ideas, and the *political* sphere, where they communicate, translate and deliberate on them with politicians, activists, spokespersons and the public (Carstensen and Schmidt, 2016). Within the State of Louisiana, these two discursive aspects exist at the legislative level (House and Senate), and the executive level (State agencies, Governor’s Office...), as well as through their public forums. Due to the interconnected and trans-governmental nature of the climate change problem and its salient impacts on local life in Louisiana, articulating analysis at both the State and parish levels enabled me to capture the

¹³ Plaquemines Parish has geographic particularities not shared with the other cases under study. The parish is split in two by the Mississippi River, and each side is traversed by a single road, highway 23 on the West bank and highway 39 on the East bank. Because of its unique geography encompassing the mouth of the river, Plaquemines is the only parish where land is being built naturally through sedimentation. However, due to intensive industrial activity, oil and gas canal dredging, saltwater intrusion and extreme climate events, Plaquemines Parish is still experiencing severe land loss (see Figures 2 and 3).

interactions, deliberations, and the circulation of ideas within these two spheres of governance. Incorporating both levels of policymaking was pertinent in the context of Louisiana because, as Parent (2006:128) reminds, “state politics invades almost every phase of local politics”. Parish governments, in this sense, were “designed simply to be the administrators of state policy”, created and nurtured by the State of Louisiana. These specific relationships were evident in the circulation of actors and ideas in various spheres of observation.

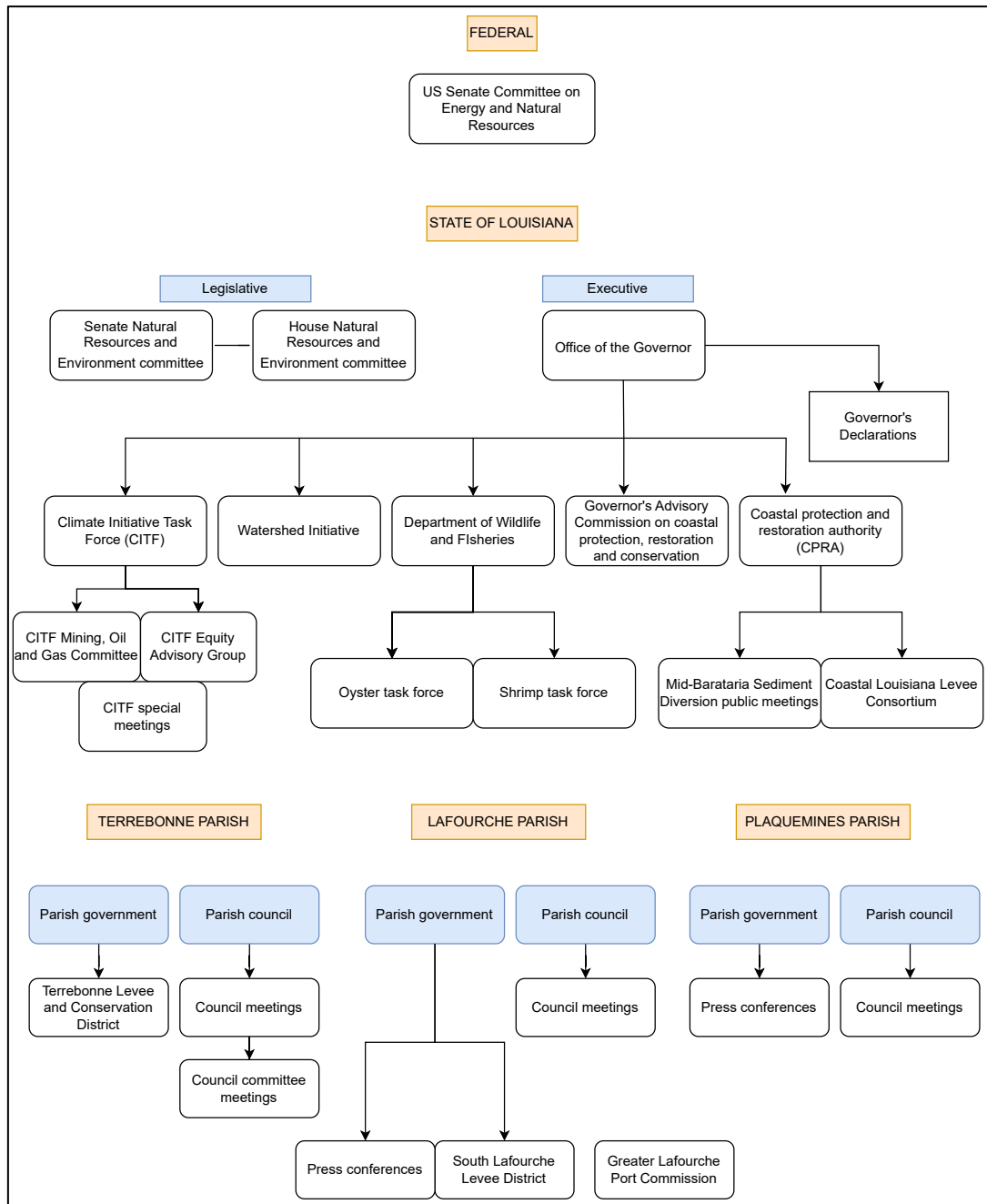


Figure 6. – Organigram of observed instances of governance

I looked at both the elaboration of hegemonic ideas and policies about adaptation and (im)mobility, and their manifestation on the ground. I was able to follow and trace specific policy actors, such as parish presidents, Governor John Bel Edwards, oil and gas lobbyists, or the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority Chairman Chip Kline¹⁴, as they interacted at both levels of governance and in various political settings. Mapping out the circulation of discourses and practices across spheres of governance and how they manifest within the three cases of study also enabled me to seize the local dimensions of policymaking, interpretations and experiences of vulnerability. Seeing how hegemonic ideas are relayed across different levels of governance is important to capture with greater finesse the dynamics between residents and policies on issues of climate change and adaptation. In other words, I was able to grasp both the *coordinative* discourses of ideas and interpretations about climate adaptation practices, and the *communicative* discourses through which they legitimate their choices. Figure 6 presents the articulation of different State and parish level instances observed for this analysis.

As a brief reminder, I draw on the discursive institutionalist conception of institutions as “structures (of thinking and acting) that constrain action and as constructs (of thinking and acting) created and changed by those actors” (Schmidt, 2010:14). This posture expanded analysis beyond the institutionalized modern state to capture the spheres (of governance) and cultural settings (norms, values) in which symbolic forms, ideologies and practices are produced and reproduced. I investigated different contexts of decision-making on climate change and the diverse political actors which operate within them to capture the interpretations and circulation of hegemonic ideas constitutive of the *master discourse* on immobility. This includes various legislative spheres, public forums, and industry-related gatherings, in which environmental groups, local elected officials, state representatives, fishermen, residents, and oil and gas industry lobbyists interact. Though non-elite actors are not necessarily representative of their communities, capturing these interactions was useful to map out the existence of various interpretations of the issue, the way

¹⁴ The Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) is the most significant agency in Louisiana on matters of environmental adaptation. It was created after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005 to develop and implement the Coastal Master Plan. The agency and its representatives, especially its chairman Chip Kline (at the time of this fieldwork), were the most prominent environmental policy actors observed during this fieldwork.

frames are constructed and mobilized to defend specific ideas, practices and policies across political contexts.

To provide a brief summary of my approach so far, I have chosen to investigate the institutional and discursive construction of climate (im)mobility in Southeast Louisiana as a prime example of vulnerability to climate change in the North American context. Drawing on a *small-N* qualitative research design, I investigated two levels of governance. At the level of the State of Louisiana, I examined the interactions of various policy actors (residents, activists, lobbyists, politicians) in the legislative and executive spheres, in the making of discourses on adaptation. I also zoomed in on three parish governments to capture the circulation of these ideas and practices, and the experiences of (im)mobility at a local level. The parishes of Terrebonne, Lafourche and Plaquemines have been selected for the salience of climate change-related issues, their geographic and cultural proximities, and their consistent political interactions with the State of Louisiana. These cases enabled the close study of the penetration of ideas and interpretations within policy processes and discourses across both levels of governance and through multiple actors. This analysis favors a rich and complex description of the institutionalization of immobility, the circulation of elite ideas across political settings, and their interactions as they shape adaptation practices at the collective level.

3. Methods of virtual data collection and triangulation

To provide such a refined analysis of discourses and policies, this research uses a tripartite qualitative methodology composed of (1) direct non-participant observations (N=150), (2) semi-structured interviews (N=45), and (3) document analysis (N=74).

This tripartite methodology is employed to triangulate data and avoid “simply politicizing” critical discourse analysis (Weiss and Wodak, 2003:21). Triangulation is the basis of qualitative research, and along with data saturation, enables the construction of a robust theory (Olivier de Sardan, 2008). The objective is to look for “dimensionality, ambiguity, and possible contradictions” of multiple sources of data, for the “understanding of human meaning-making in context” (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2011:86, 108). Triangulation, as per the critical discursive approach, is thus made by the cumulative analysis of multiple sources of data, and the use of linguistic analysis and discourse theory. It enables the researcher to ground analysis within situated socio-institutional

variables and broader sociopolitical contexts where discursive practices are embedded (Weiss and Wodak, 2003). I therefore strived for consistency of evidence and considered that a singular method was not sufficient to ensure the robustness of data (Shdaimah et al., 2009).

Fieldwork and data collection took place from June 2020 to April 2022 in three stages: pre-fieldwork for case selection and fieldwork preparation (from June to September 2020); long-distance online data collection (November 2020 to December 2021); and on-site fieldwork (January to April 2022). This is a relatively typical period of Louisiana policymaking. It included two hurricane seasons, allowing me to capture different contexts of environmental hazards and their policy responses, as well as the observation of a full legislative cycle. The next sub-sections will present the three methods used for data collection.

3.1. Direct non-participant observations

The first method, non-participant observations, was used to understand the general political context in which climate change adaptation and mitigation policies are discussed and implemented, as well as to capture the cognitive and normative ideas conveyed to the public. Direct non-participant observations are a tool of data collection in which the researcher does not actively participate in the social action but observes it as an outsider, minimizing interference with the subjects (Quivy and Campenhoudt, 2006; Ciesielska et al., 2018). Political meetings were chosen for observation because it is “where power is produced and enacted, dynamics of identity and hierarchy are negotiated, and organization is produced, determined and challenged” (Sandler and Thedvall, 2017:1). Highly pertinent in ethnographic research, they are “specific and productive arenas in which realities are dramatically negotiated” (Brown et al., 2017: 11). In this sense, meetings are makers of meaning, its articulations, and resistances. They affect how power is structured, how it is distributed and organized (Sandler and Thedvall, 2017).

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, meeting ethnography was conducted online (see section 6 of this chapter). Although it has been criticized by some ethnographers as “lurking”, online non-participant observation can be a valuable tool for the qualitative researcher (Myles, 2020; Marhefka et al., 2020; Santana et al., 2021; Irani, 2019). It effectively allowed me to capture the discursive practices of actors and systematize analysis of the social and political contexts in which these discourses emerge (the representative dimension) and the events which organize this social

reality (the constitutive dimension) (Myles, 2020). The purpose of employing discourse analysis through non-participant observation is therefore to trace the ontogenesis of social phenomena and the processes responsible for their creation and maintenance by observing them in their discursive contexts. It enables the discovery of categories and interpretations that actors convey of specific social situations, and from their own perspectives (Peretz, 2007).



Photo 1. - Different platforms for the online observation of political meetings

Source: Sarah Munoz (2024)

Due to the decentralized system in American politics, observations were conducted on two levels of government: the State of Louisiana for the “bigger picture” on climate change mitigation, and local parish governments for the “day-to-day” perspective on environmental risk and adaptation (Table 2). In total, 150 observations were completed across 28 different instances (see Annex 1

for the full list)¹⁵. Observations took place over twelve months, from November 2020 to December 2021, marking the ends of each year’s hurricane season. This timeframe was useful to delimit the time of observation and capture the before, during and after of hurricane events as markers of political life in Louisiana. In doing so, I was able to observe the narratives and practices surrounding disaster preparation and recovery, as well as the differences in salience of climate issues outside of hurricane seasons to map out the occurrence of certain frames relative to climatic events. In other words, conducting observations within a one-year timeframe was pertinent to capture the life cycle of political discourses and practices related to climate events, the fluctuating concerns of both policymakers and residents, and the emphasis or disappearance of specific frames and ideas in relation to environmental and climatic issues.

Table 2. – Distribution of observations across levels of governance

Level of governance	N of instances (n=28)	N of observations (n=150)	% of sample
Federal	1	1	1%
State	16	62	41%
Parish	9	85	57%
Other / non-governmental	2	2	1%

The observations were carried out over different platforms (see Photo 1 for examples). Due to the relatively mild COVID-19 pandemic restrictions in the State of Louisiana, meetings were mostly held in present and livestreamed on either Zoom, YouTube, GoToMeeting, or Facebook. At the peak of COVID-19, when restrictions prevented them from meeting in person, some gubernatorial meetings were held entirely on Zoom. Observations were conducted using a grid in order to systematize analysis (Guikas et al., 2016). It included descriptive elements (type of meeting, number of persons present etc.) and analytical elements (contents and occurrences of discussions

¹⁵ It should be noted that although more state-level instances were observed (16 state-level instances vs. 9 parish-level instances), more parish-level observations were conducted overall (85 meetings vs. 62 state-level meetings). This is because state-level instances held fewer meetings during the year of observation than local-level institutions (for example, the House Natural Resources and Environment committee only met four times, whereas local parish councils met about twenty times each during the year). To compensate for the disparity in the number of meetings across levels of governance, I increased the number of instances observed at the state level. This was useful to gain a broader perspective on the various political spheres in which climate change and adaptation policies are discussed, framed and institutionalized; and understand how these ideas circulate and inform local practices.

on climate change and adaptation/relocation themes, by who, in what terms, disagreements etc.) (Annex 2). Some meetings were partially transcribed to capture and analyze actors' frames and discursive strategies more faithfully. This depended on the relevance of the meeting, the type of stakeholder present, and the format of diffusion (recording or livestream).

The selection of instances for observation was first done during pre-field work, conducted mid-2020, when the three parishes (Terrebonne, Lafourche and Plaquemines) were identified for analysis. Focus was placed on parish council meetings as the principal instances of observation at this level of governance. An important factor in this choice was the degree of rurality of this region and the unincorporated status of most of the places of residence across Southeast Louisiana. For example, while in Plaquemines there are no incorporated areas¹⁶, only one town in Terrebonne (Houma) and one in Lafourche (Thibodaux) are incorporated, meaning they have the status of municipality and have their own governing council. Other areas are considered census-designated places and unincorporated communities and as a result, are governed by their parish governments.

At the parish level, I also observed some levee district meetings, the ruling bodies for levee and flood protection systems. However, I eventually dropped these instances from data collection because of the unequal technical accessibility of meetings between Terrebonne and the other parishes¹⁷, and the unequal administrative composition of the governing body. While Terrebonne Parish had one levee district, Lafourche had two, and Plaquemines had none (the parish council endorses the role). Given my objective of systematic observation (Hall, 2003; Tilly, 1984), I focused on the legislative spheres of governance more easily accessed and comparable in nature, i.e., parish councils.

Other parish-level and State-level instances of observation were selected through criterion-based purposeful sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015; Schensul and LeCompte, 2013). I selected spheres of

¹⁶ Even Belle Chasse, the political and urban center of Plaquemines Parish which holds 93% of the parish's population according to the last US Census (2021), is an unincorporated community and census-designated place. As a result, it does not have its own governing council.

¹⁷ Disparities in the technical abilities of the parishes made certain meetings difficult to access. For example, Lafourche and Plaquemines used YouTube and Vimeo to livestream and store all videos of their meetings, while Terrebonne was more irregular in the diffusion of their recordings, making systematic observation sometimes more challenging. This was the case for the Terrebonne levee district whose recordings were most inconsistent.

policymaking in which climate and environmental issues were specifically debated, or where policies and ideas that could influence climate adaptation were shaped, discussed or implemented¹⁸. In order to capture non-government actors' representations and practices at the State-level, I also observed meetings of the Shrimp and Oyster task forces. Fishermen have been one of the more organized and vocal groups implicated in environmental policy. This enabled me to put into perspective and situate interview data gathered from individual fishermen and residents of lower Louisiana on both issues of environmental vulnerability and controversial state projects.

Finally, I conducted other episodic observations which illuminated the practices of non-state actors at specific times in Louisianan politics. This included the annual meeting of the Louisiana Oil and Gas Association, as well as the Coalition Against Death Alley protest against Senator Bill Cassidy, who had denied the existence of Cancer Alley¹⁹. The objective here was to capture non-governmental discourses on environmental issues to better understand their various representations and contestations, and the penetration of hegemonic ideas into alternative political arenas. At the governmental level, some non-systematic meetings were also selected for their relevance to this study, such as some Governor's declarations, one US Senate hearing in which Louisiana's Governor John Bel Edwards testified on environmental issues, and some State-level public hearings on specific restoration projects to capture the concerns of residents, their interpretations of climate change and perspectives on personal risks.

3.2. Semi-structured interviews

¹⁸ Selection of instances was inductive, some were added or removed during pre-fieldwork and the beginning of fieldwork based on their pertinence for the study. For most of the instances, I observed all meetings conducted during the year of observation. For a small number, I observed only meetings where agenda items included discussions on coastal problems, flooding, hurricanes, recovery, oil and gas, or other adaptation related issues. This was the case for the Terrebonne Policy, Procedure and Legal committee meetings; Community Development; and Planning Committee meetings, and Public services committee meetings, for which I chose only to observe those with items related to elevations, flooding, recovery, buy-outs. This was because observations at this level were very time-consuming and not necessarily pertinent due to the lack of discussion of agenda items during these committee meetings.

¹⁹ The term "Cancer Alley" designates the 137 km strip along the Mississippi River, between New Orleans and Baton Rouge, host to over 200 petrochemical plants and refineries and high rates of cancer among residents (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

The second type of data collected is semi-structured interviews. I conducted interviews with 45 participants both in person and virtually through Zoom or by telephone²⁰ over two years of fieldwork (June 2020-April 2022). I held repeat interviews with four of those participants, one of whom I met as much as three times in Louisiana. I also engaged in regular email exchanges with a couple of participants for over two years. Although one-shot interviewing was more convenient due to the pandemic, repeat interviews allowed for a deeper understanding of specific issues (Charmaz, 2001). I concur with prior research that telephone or Zoom interviews do not seem to yield different results from face-to-face interviews (Santana et al., 2021; Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004)²¹, although I remark that recruitment was significantly more challenging due to the greater difficulty of forming social bonds and organic encounters (see section 6 of this chapter).

Similarly to the selection of instances for observations, I engaged in criterion-based selection of participants. This approach is based on what the researcher is looking to study, and criteria is arbitrary and informed by prior fieldwork (Schensul and LeCompte, 2013; Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 1990). Engaging in the analysis of political rhetoric as “the use of rhetorical means of persuasion by professional politicians” (Reisigl, 2008:97), I broadened the scope of research to encompass discourses by “non-professionals”, i.e., fishermen, residents, and activists. I consider political rhetoric (by political professionals), and rhetoric in the political sphere (by non-professionals) as two distinct, yet complementary, political discourses and meaning-making processes. I do not consider these non-elite actors to necessarily be speaking on behalf of their cultural communities but use their voice to delimit the scope and contours of hegemonic discourse.

Thirty percent of my sample is composed of government actors (elected officials, state representatives, and government employees at the parish and State levels), twenty-nine percent is comprised of non-state actors in relation to environmental issues (NGOs, activists). The remainder

²⁰ I always left participants the choice of either medium of communication because some were more comfortable talking over the phone. This is in part due to personal preference, but also because of the vast inequalities in technological capacities and accessibility between respondents (this issue is also noted in the literature as a major challenge in pandemic virtual interviews, see Sah et al., 2020). The phone (texting and calling) provided easier access to those without computers or stable internet connections. See the conclusions of this thesis for a discussion on the limits of technology in data collection.

²¹ There is no apparent and significant difference in the overall results from in-person or long-distance interviewing, after analysis.

of my sample is composed of local fishermen, resident, journalists, engineers and academics in Southeast Louisiana (see Annex 3). The goal was to generate a broad understanding of climate adaptation as experienced by various stakeholders in their approach to vulnerability, risk and decision-making processes. The process of recruitment included both criterion-based sampling and snowball sampling, as I also relied on participants to introduce me to other persons of interest for interviews (Patton, 1990). This was highly useful during on-site fieldwork in Louisiana (see section 4 of this chapter). I also recruited some participants for interviews based on observations, during which I took notice of specific persons of interest, whether politicians or not.

I conducted semi-structured interviews, meaning that discussions were guided by a pre-determined set of questions but also included open-ended follow-up questions based on the content of the interview (Roulston, 2010). Interview grids were constructed from pre-field research, existing studies and theory, as well as insights from field observations debuted a few months prior to the start of the interviewing process. I thus engaged in an interactive process of data collection between observations and interviews, using both for analytical control as I contextualized interview data within observed political processes, and vice-versa (Myles, 2020; Roginsky, 2020). Grids were composed of a similar overall structure to systematize analysis but were adjusted depending on whether the participants were situated in a specific parish or at the State level, and their sector of representation (fishermen and residents, political representatives, and environmental advocacy groups). These interview grids are presented in Annexes 4 to 7. Interviews were transcribed manually and anonymized to protect participants' identities in the writing process. As part of the ethics guidelines, political representatives were asked to give consent to the disclosure of their position, left unspecific in certain cases (for example, by not distinguishing the agency for persons working in State government). This choice was made to provide some context for analysis while respecting anonymity.

Interviews lasted an average of one and a half hours, ranging from 45 minutes to 3 hours, some lasting as much as an entire day spent with participants during on-site fieldwork. I adapted the content of interviews to describe the impacts of climate change without referring to the concept itself, instead asking about coastal land loss, hurricanes, or rain events. Similarly, during recruitment, the information and consent form for the project did not include the terms climate change (see Annex 8). Talking about climate change can be “politically disabling”, according to

Koslov (2019:6), because respondents may not believe in it. As Marino and Schweitzer's (2009) have shown in their research, not talking about climate change is a useful strategy in certain contexts to better capture local experiences and understandings of environmental change. This is highly pertinent for Southeast Louisiana where, as shown in Table 1, belief in anthropogenic global warming is lower than at State and national levels, which means that experiences and perceptions have a greater chance of being disconnected from the acknowledgement of climate change (Marlon et al., 2022).

3.3. Document analysis

The third type of data collected are documents. I analyzed 74 written texts from governmental sources to triangulate the data gathered from observations and interviews. Engaging in a critical discursive approach, I contend that “texts can never be understood or analyzed in isolation – they can only be understood in relation to webs of other texts and in relation to the social context” (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002: 70). In fact, documents “provide a mechanism and vehicle for understanding and making sense of social and organization practices”, and to examine the process of production, consumption and the content contained within them (Coffey, 2013:367). Document selection was therefore also based on purposeful sampling because I sought depth of information with regards to specific discourses revealed in observations and interviews (Patton, 1990). A high number of documents were collected throughout the two-year fieldwork, ranging from governmental reports to public comments compilations. After analysis of observations and interviews, I redefined the sample of documents around major events in climate policy (such as the development of specific adaptation projects that I had followed throughout our fieldwork), and adaptation programs. See Annex 9 for the full list of documents and their corresponding codes.

The main objective of this purposeful sampling approach was to understand how governmental actors discuss issues related to environmental or climatic vulnerability and adaptation, to seek out their discursive strategies and their public justifications. To that end, the first type of texts are institutional documents produced at various levels of government and related either to adaptation or coastal issues (parish Master Plans, state Master Plans, reports, resiliency plans, fiscal documents). The second main type of document is of a legal nature (bills, resolutions, ordinances, and laws) at the federal, State and parish levels. This is useful to get a more in-depth understanding of the types of policies, their content, and how they are framed and worded.

The corpus also includes letters and press releases from government entities or political elites about events or issues that shaped the political landscape in Louisiana during fieldwork (such as the Biden pause on new oil and gas leases of February 2021, or the advancement of coastal projects by the CPRA, the State's environmental agency). This enables me to get insight on decisionmakers' interpretations of events, as well as how governmental entities publicly framed events and programs. Another type of documents are public comments submitted by fishing industry actors on various coastal restoration projects across parishes. This provides more in-depth material on their relationship to coastal projects, the state, and their natural environment. It allowed for better triangulation of the data collected on this important stakeholder group. In addition to these texts, some Facebook comments made on parish government posts at the time of Hurricane Ida were also collected, as they provided some insight on the experiences and views of residents of their own risks and relations to their government representatives on the issues of hurricane evacuation and hazard mitigation. It should be noted however that they are insufficient for systematic analysis and are used only as anecdotal insights on these events due to the limited number of posts collected.

In line with qualitative content analysis which focuses on a smaller amount of data for richer, more complex analysis, I engaged in a structural analysis of the content of these documents, investigating the themes, representations, ideologies and functions of discourse (Quivy and Van Campenhoudt, 2006). Using document analysis in this way is especially pertinent for a constructivist analysis of practices because texts are a system of symbols and signs that construct and sustain social realities, and institutional documents standardize political actors' interpretations of events, categories, and procedures (Miller, 1997; Coffey, 2013).

4. On-site field work in Louisiana

After a year of online observations and long-distance interviews (November 2020 – December 2021), and once the restrictions linked to the COVID-19 pandemic had been lifted, I entered the third stage of data collection: on-site fieldwork. It took place between January to April 2022, during which time I scoured all three parishes, Terrebonne, Lafourche and Plaquemines. Due to the long-distance and virtual nature of most of the data collection, on-site fieldwork was an important step to triangulate results between the *online* and *offline* worlds, engaging in multisite ethnography (Roginsky, 2020).

The overall objective of this on-site fieldwork, while not entirely ethnographic, was to observe life in Louisiana and to get a sense of adaptation practices *down the bayou*. I strayed from a pure ethnographic method because I had already collected most of the data and focused on macro and meso-level political and institutional processes, meaning that on-site fieldwork was not fully immersive nor entirely participatory (Schatz, 2009). Two objectives were fulfilled through this method: (1) the visualization of climate change impacts and adaptation infrastructures (levees, elevations...) throughout the three parishes; and (2) interviews with hard-to-reach participants.

Fieldwork was structured around participatory observations of my surrounding environment. Over the course of three months, I explored each of the three parishes at length. I identified places of interests based on the contents of observations and interviews, during which I gathered information on specific communities at risk of climate change, infrastructural projects of protection, or highly vulnerable areas where land loss is most poignant. Upon visiting the parishes and these places of interests, I gathered data through photographs and ethnographic observation notes on life in these areas (community life, urban planning, types of housing and flood-proofing structures etc.). Experience of place in this way was useful to deepen analysis and understanding of the risks, the ways of life and the expression of climate adaptation. Through this, I got a clearer sense of the urban/rural geographic divide in the experience of vulnerability to climate risk and proximity to natural spaces, which also shape interpretations and beliefs about climate change (see Chapters 5 and 7). In this sense, on-site fieldwork allowed me to contextualize and situate the data collected and achieve stronger triangulation (Roginsky, 2020).

Another crucial objective of this on-site fieldwork was to conduct complementary interviews. As I had already collected most of the data from Montreal, I used this time in Louisiana to conduct interviews with actors who had been difficult to reach, especially local officials and residents of Louisiana. Given the high degree of rurality and the geographic spread of the population in Terrebonne, Lafourche and Plaquemines, especially in the most southern regions, organic and spontaneous recruitment through places of socialization was highly difficult without a long-term immersive ethnography. I therefore engaged in purposeful sampling and snowball sampling and relied entirely on the contacts made during long-distance interviewing, a few of which I saw again on site for touring and whom I asked to introduce me to friends or colleagues. Complementary interviews on-site were important to gain more insight on the lived realities of climate change and

on the process of adaptation decision-making through direct observations and interactions with people engaged in it. In doing so, I was able to complement my initial analysis, infer or confirm results, visualize adaptation practices, and ground theorization.

5. Data analysis

I engaged in a constructionist, grounded theory analysis of observations, interviews and documents, “concerned with how participants create their social worlds using spoken and written words (whether these words are solicited through interviews or naturally occurring in the field).” (Marvasti, 2013:361). Observation notes and analytical grids, as well as transcribed interviews and documents, were centralized into NVivo. A first phase of open coding was carried out to identify and label general themes across written and spoken texts; followed by a phase of axial coding to construct links between codes and create a structure through which I developed theory (Terrell, 2015; Lejeune, 2019). This coding method allowed for the subsequent investigation of each category or theme and is constitutive of the grounded theory approach. I analyzed each code in relation to its context and occurrence across observations, interviews and documents to identify patterns and situated meaning.

Grounded theory is an approach by which the researcher engages in an interactive process of data collection and analysis, akin to an abductive research process, to develop empirically anchored theory. The constructivist grounded theory approach thereby builds interviews to garner specific data conducive to theorization on how participants construct meanings and actions (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2001). In this way, the researcher first moves inductively into the research process and proceeds to anchor data collection within theorization, and vice-versa, constructing both simultaneously and directing data collection and analysis with intent (Norman, 2014). In deploying research in three phases (pre-fieldwork, long-distance data collection, and on-site fieldwork), I engaged in a reflexive, grounded theory process whereby previous stages of research and analysis informed the development of the project.

Coding in a grounded theory method through inductive open and axial coding is done by using active terms, defined as *action codes*, to describe the data (such as “deploring lack of federal assistance”, or “contesting FEMA regulations”, for example). The objective is to “move the researcher away from topics, and if they address structure, they reveal how it is constructed through

action” (Charmaz, 2001:685). Apart from observing practices of adaptation and policymaking, I also investigated the content of language to illustrate the discursive manifestation of ideas and interests, because substantive meanings in language and discourse are ideologically imbued. In fact, “Lexical meanings are of course important, but so too are presuppositions, implicatures, metaphors, and coherence, all aspects of meaning” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 74). A third stage of coding thereby also targeted vocabulary, metaphors, speech exchanges and presuppositions to investigate the three dimensions of political rhetoric for persuasion: *logos* (factual argumentation), *ethos* (gentle emotion) and *pathos* (instigation) (Reisigl, 2008). This included recurring wording and frames (for example, the use of Mother Nature to describe environmental issues), and as well as the action conveyed through discourse, such as “language implying uncontrollability of event”, “alluding to conspiracy” or “eliciting fear of industry leaving”, for example.

Codes were then collapsed and regrouped to identify the trends, major rhetoric processes and framing strategies, organized into seven large categories described in Annex 10. This was done in both observation notes where I manually transcribed parts of pertinent conversations, as well as in interview transcripts and texts to triangulate the salience of written and spoken discourse. As a result, I was able to identify discursive strategies in different political contexts with accuracy.

In sum, I used inductive coding through *action codes* and linguistic codes to identify the frames produced by elite actors, and in combination with a process of theoretical analysis, generate a discursive analysis grounded in theory. Providing robustness and theory-generation abilities to inductive processes of research, “a constructivist grounded theory may contain characters and plots, although they reflect reality rather than dramatize it”, a story in which “the researcher’s piecing together a theoretical narrative that has explanatory and predictive power” (Charmaz, 2001:691; Normand, 2014). In essence, the results presented in this thesis are anchored in both theory and empirical data, and can inform practical knowledge on climate policy and governance in the Louisianan context (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

6. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic

The start of this research project coincided, unfortunately, with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, I was in the midst of finalizing my original research project on individual practices of climate immobility when the sudden onset of the virus forced the shutdown

of universities and borders in North America. By May, it became evident that these confinement measures would persist, compelling me to reconsider my approach to study adaptation practices in Louisiana from a distance. The following sections provide details on the reconfiguration of this project and the epistemological hurdles it engendered.

6.1. Maneuvering the COVID-19 pandemic

The present project was heavily adapted to the restrictions brought forth by the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially designed as a year-long ethnography in two towns of Southern Louisiana, the research proposed investigating climate (im)mobilities from the micro-level through immersive observations and interviews with individuals directly impacted by climate change and concerned with immobility. Travel restrictions and safety policies forced a redesign of the research project. I extended my case studies to three parishes, rather than two towns, as a way of improving long-distance access to respondents, given that the towns initially selected were very rural, low in population and unincorporated²². I modified the level of analysis from the micro-level to the meso- and macro-levels because of the difficulties of accessing rural individuals with low connectivity²³. This was also necessary because ethnography, meaning the ability to form relationships with participants and observe their daily practices, is not possible long-distance given that the method entails being “neck-deep” in a research context (Schatz, 2009).

I refocused the research problem around state practices and institutionalization, rather than individual decision-making processes, to gain greater field accessibility through online methods of observation and interviews with stakeholders active at the policy level²⁴. This change took place during pre-fieldwork (June-September 2020), during which time governments and administrations in Louisiana were also adapting their meeting conditions to safety guidelines, expanding their

²² Meaning they have no governing council of their own and are instead governed by the Parish governments.

²³ As shown in Table 1, around 80% of residents of Terrebonne, Plaquemines and Lafourche have internet connection at home. The southern parts of the parish are more rural, more sparsely populated, and therefore, more difficult to reach long-distance for interviews. See Sah et al. (2020) for a discussion on the challenges of virtual communication in pandemic times.

²⁴ Although the majority of my interview participants are persons implicated in policy, whether advocacy or decision-making, I also included some individual-level perspectives from on-site discussions with residents of Louisiana. This variety provides further robustness and stronger theorization. However, given the uncertainty of the pandemic, accessing these individual-level perspectives were not guaranteed. This is why the research design focuses on state and stakeholder practices and discourses to capture immobility as a collective process, rather than an individual one.

public outreach through livestreams and recordings. I investigated the different online opportunities for data collection, scouring institutional websites and observing a few meetings to ensure the feasibility of this new research orientation. On a positive note, it enabled me to broaden the scope of the research and inscribe climate (im)mobility within its larger political context, going beyond individual-level experiences. This reconfiguration was indeed beneficial, in retrospect, for novel theorization on immobility as a collective, institutionalized practice. Although different from my original ethnographic objective, remodeling the research problem also allowed for a more precise and dense analysis. It multiplied the sites of observation that otherwise would not have been physically accessible due of the geographic distance between State-level meetings in Baton Rouge and local-level meetings across the parishes, for example, and the impossibility for a researcher to be multiple places at once. This new approach also provided the unique opportunity to partially transcribe meeting discussions and capture with more precision a larger variety of discourses, thereby significantly enriching my data collection.

6.2. “Why are you studying us?” Positioning the researcher for online data collection

Although online observation and long-distance interviews provided new and exciting opportunities to study political processes, it also posed some difficulties for navigating online and offline positionality. During long-distance interviewing, many participants interrogated my motives for researching Louisiana from afar, as it appeared more surprising to do so than any classic on-site ethnography might have been. This geographic and cultural distance raised specific epistemological considerations regarding positionality and access to participants. The status of “outsider” to Louisiana and the long-distance nature of these conversations created a social distance between researcher and participants. In some cases, this was beneficial. It allowed certain participants to speak more freely, to explain and describe things more thoroughly, to expand on their culturally anchored interpretations which might have otherwise been taken for granted. But in other cases, it increased the social distance with participants and complicated recruitment for interviews, given that neither a foreign university affiliation nor a virtual presence incentivized stakeholders to participate in the project.

This experience echoes Bizeul’s (2007) thoughts on the difficulties of ethnographic work which he deems inextricable from the researcher’s own social trajectory, life experiences and perceived

identity. As Mauger (1991) also remarks, presentation of self during research depends on the representation participants have of the project and the researcher, and this impacts the intelligibility of the data collected. In fact, the way the researcher is received and perceived by participants is dependent on the amount of time spent in a community and the social relations forged within it, i.e., the socialization process between researcher and the milieu of study (Emperador Badimon, 2017). Other scholars have noted that virtual research in pandemic times has rendered qualitative research more difficult because of the limited access to geographically isolated groups and the challenge of building trust and relationships with communities virtually (Santana et al., 2021). In my case, geographic distance and the “outsider” status have somewhat impacted recruitment and access to fieldwork.

This experience of long-distance research also shaped my position when transitioning from online to in-person data collection. As Wood et al. (2020) argue in their reflections on the impact of the pandemic on ethnographic research, “restarting in-person social scientific research (...) will be an enormous logistical and ethical challenge.” And it was. Online research can create a sentiment of being a “lurker”, also noted by Myles (2020), which made the transition from a year of online observations of stakeholders to on-site fieldwork with said participants socially peculiar, at times, considering I had been anonymously “following” them for over a year prior to meeting. This experience can best be described as a passage from *incognito* observation to observation *à découvert*, or in plain sight, which fundamentally shifts the researcher’s positionality to their field of investigation, as well as participants’ modalities of involvement and interaction with the researcher (Emperador Badimon, 2017).

Positionality and the passage from virtual to in-person interaction also stimulated self-reflections on the social distance between researcher and participants. Such distance was less tangible during the observation of elites in institutional settings which tended to erase cultural differences through a focus on policy. But it was made salient during the three months of fieldwork in rural Louisiana, where the cultural, socioeconomic and political distance was greater. These reflections resonate with Bizeul’s (2007:74) critique of what he calls the collective judgement of the researcher, “as a newcomer endowed with the prejudices due to his background, therefore attentive to unusual

behavior, and then as a representative of a known external world.”²⁵ In fact, Bizeul argues, it is when a researcher frequents a social milieu to which they are a stranger that they are put back in their place in the social universe, rendering the research process a form of social confrontation. This social distance was effectively lessened by what Mauger (1991) calls an *intermediary*, in my case bilingualism and French culture, which provided a cultural bridge through which to form relationships with participants. It enabled me to navigate the multiple identities associated with perceptions of different groups, while also juggling the simultaneous need for social distance in sociological analysis and for proximity to develop trust and empathy with participants (Bizeul, 2007; Emperador Badimon, 2017).

Still, this outsider status and limited time for immersive on-site ethnography prevented me from reaching out to certain social groups, particularly Indigenous communities, despite their centrality in questions of climate injustice, vulnerability, and adaptation. Excluding these groups from data collection was a conscious decision made to avoid reproducing power inequalities between researcher and participants, a fundamental concern of critical researchers for their own positionality which could have been attenuated by prolonged immersion and the co-construction of a research protocol in pre-pandemic times (Madison, 2005). It also stemmed from the acknowledgment of these groups’ research fatigue, relayed by local researchers close to these communities during pre-fieldwork interviews. Instead, I decided to focus on capturing the voices of communities present in the policy field, through contestation of adaptation projects (such as fishermen and affected residents), expression of grievances against governments (such as parish residents during council meetings), or organized activist groups present in various spheres of policymaking (NGOs and environmental movements).

Overall, despite some challenges and necessary adjustments, I believe that the on-site fieldwork was absolute crucial to strengthen this pandemic project. As a qualitative researcher, it was

²⁵ Translated from French: « L’étude du chercheur ne peut cependant faire l’impasse sur ce jugement collectif qui s’impose doublement à lui, d’abord comme nouveau venu doté des préventions dues à son milieu, dès lors attentif aux conduites inhabituelles, ensuite comme représentant d’un monde extérieur connu... » (my translation).

important to get a real-life feel of context for coherency and the alignment of my methodological and epistemological postures.

7. Conclusion

Methodologically, this research innovates in the use of virtual data collection by moving beyond the scope of *netnographic* approaches to utilize the online world as a *tool* for capturing real-life events and social processes. While the COVID-19 pandemic has hampered a lot of opportunities for qualitative research, it has also provided new avenues of research through the lens of a camera and a computer screen. A tripartite methodology, complemented by on-site fieldwork for an online/offline multisite ethnography, permits the comprehensive capture of discourses, ideas, and practices, otherwise unattainable via traditional in-person observation methods. With a two-year long semi-immersive fieldwork, I have been able to map out the fabric and institutionalization of climate immobility in Southeast Louisianan politics through the expression of interests, ideologies, and practices at both macro and meso-levels. Articulating immobility at those levels has allowed for an in-depth understanding of structural and conjectural processes which shape adaptation in a context of high climate vulnerability.

The rest of this thesis will delve into the making of collective practices of climate immobility. The next two chapters, Chapters 3 and 4, will go over the influence of hegemonic interests in Louisianan politics and their expression in environmental policy, undergirded by the Dominant Social Paradigm. In Chapter 5, I will analyze the framing and interpretations of climate change and discuss their significance for the problematization and politicization of risk. The last two chapters, Chapters 6 and 7, will explore the practices of immobility, both in its political construction and its resonance across communities.

Chapter 3. Drilling deeper: examining the sway of Louisiana’s “oil culture” on its institutional landscape

The oil and gas and petrochemical industry, they're not somebody that deserves respect or mercy. In Louisiana, we've traded the old way of life for new ways of death.

Daniel, lifelong environmental activist and biologist

This chapter investigates what Dunlap and Van Liere (1984) identify as the Dominant Social Paradigm (DSP) in American environmental policy, meaning society’s dominant and institutionalized values, beliefs and ideologies foundational to environmental concern. Drawing on a Gramscian view of hegemony, the DSP encompasses political, economic and technological dimensions to secure elite interests and “voluntary compliance of the masses through the popularization and acceptance of a worldview that is consistent with their expressed agenda” (Shafer, 2006: 121). Developed during the expansion of the New World and American industrialization, the Dominant Western Worldview at the heart of the neoliberal DSP rests upon the belief in human ingenuity and rightful domination over nature, embodying modern extractivist practices derived from colonial expansion (Catton and Dunlap, 1980; Murrey and Mollett, 2023; Acosta, 2013). These values have further expanded to include support for private property rights, unlimited economic growth and free enterprise, laissez-faire government (limited government regulation), liberty and economic individualism, material abundance, faith in technology and science’s ability to resolve environmental degradation (Dunlap and Van Liere, 1984; Shafer, 2006). In the United States, individual and collective commitment to the DSP results in “support for practices and policies that lead to environmental degradation or to opposition to policies needed to create a more ecologically sustainable society” (Dunlap and Van Liere, 1984:1014).

The present analysis, through a critical discursive institutionalist approach to the “3Is”, investigates the foundations of socio-institutional inertia on climate change in Louisiana (Brulle and Norgaard, 2019). More specifically, it investigates the interests that have been socially internalized and institutionalized, and which structure policymaking on climate adaptation. Because climate change challenges the establishment of the neoliberal DSP, states may attempt to maintain the economic status quo, fossil-fuel dominated institutions and the satisfaction of their

interests within what Newell and Paterson (2010) and Brulle and Norgaard (2019) call climate capitalism. Inscribed in this paradigm is the extractivist economy of Louisiana, born of the social and cultural institutional arrangements which maintain economic productivity and its hold over environmental practices. As Calvão et al. (2023:11) remind us, the specific context in which “embodied and narrated practices” of extractivism take place is fundamental to understanding the material and social reproduction of an extractivist economy and the lived experiences of its communities. The dominant neoliberal paradigm in which the state of Louisiana operates has been recognized to have aggravated the social and environmental disaster of Hurricane Katrina of 2005, deepening social, racial and environmental injustices in New Orleans (Brand and Baxter, 2020).

In other words, this chapter investigates the ways in which material and immaterial interests²⁶ structure the state’s institutional landscape and ensure the reproduction and permanence of economic institutions amidst the climate crisis. The DSP is conceived here as an ideational structuring base for dominant interests, whereby ideas and interests are mutually constitutive. For this demonstration, this chapter will concentrate on interests first, while ideas will be investigated more thoroughly in the following chapters. As a reminder, material reality is perceived in the discursive institutionalist approach as “the setting within which or in response to which agents may conceive of their interests”, meaning it is shaped by elite and non-elite discourses and interpretations (Schmidt, 2008:318). Interests and ideas, therefore, are co-constructed.

It is argued that the extractivist Dominant Social Paradigm has come to embed practices and ideas of liberal environmentalism in governance, the belief in the compatibility between environmental concerns and the tenets of a market economy (Bernstein, 2001). This analysis is important to understand the structural dimensions of climate adaptation policymaking and political elites’ response to environmental vulnerability. I also introduce the master discourse of *permanence*, at the heart of the practice of immobility. Discursive institutionalist Schmidt’s (2002) concept of *master discourse* is useful to understand the interpretations, worldviews and hegemonic ideas that constitute and are constituted by political and social institutions. In identifying *permanence* as the

²⁶ Immaterial interests are understood here as the expression or fulfillment of symbolic reassurance, cultural practices and ideas that enable the ruling class to maintain hegemony over political and social institutions (see [Chapter 1](#); Edelman (1960) on symbolic reassurance in politics). The satisfaction of symbolic or immaterial interests relate to the political gains associated with oil culture, social identities, local values.

master discourse in Louisiana’s landscape, I make the argument that policy practices and collective adaptation behaviors are anchored in the strive to preserve its political, economic, and cultural institutions, as we shall uncover throughout this thesis.

The following demonstration situates the objective and constructed interests of political and economic elites and their discourses. The chapter is structured in two parts. The first section delves into *oil culture*, the social and cultural manifestation of a fossil-fuel dominated society, and the discourses which have institutionalized this identity. The second section investigates the effects of *oil culture* on policymaking through the intricate ties between politicians and industry actors and the impact of a fossil-fuel dependent economy on institutional capacity.

1. Liquid legacies: *oil culture* and the legitimacy of dominant oil interests in discourse

Louisiana is a state of many paradoxes, one being the simultaneous public and political support for an extractivist economy and for state-led environmental protection and restoration (Hochschild, 2016). The narratives supporting the continued development of oil and gas reinforce beliefs in this “self-identified energy State” and have “cemented an increasingly false idea that traditional energy resources represent our State’s whole economy and identity”²⁷. Although environmental actors dispute the industry’s narratives on the benefits of fossil fuels for the State²⁸, the historical development of an *oil culture* has cemented the hegemony of the Dominant Social Paradigm into local politics, community life and adaptation practices. I identify two facets of *oil culture* to be distinguished in this chapter. First, a societal *oil culture*, meaning the penetration of hegemonic ideas about extractivism into social institutions, legitimized by frames of identity and livelihoods. Second, a political *oil culture*, the manifestation of interests in political institutions through ties between political leaders, the industry and public policy, designed to perpetuate the Dominant Social Paradigm in which such interests are anchored and reproduced.

²⁷ Public comment by Logan Burke, Climate Initiatives Task Force meeting 2, Zoom, 20.12.21

²⁸ The narrative of the State benefitting from the energy industry was adamantly pushed during, for example, the Joint Natural Resources Committee Hearing on Biden Executive Orders. During this meeting, oil and gas actors and political leaders at the State and parish levels defended industrial activities against President Biden’s climate policies and halt of oil and gas leases in the Gulf of Mexico. (House and Senate Natural Resources and Environment committees, Louisiana State Legislature, Baton Rouge, 21.02.10)

The oil and gas industry is a significant contributor to the Dominant Social Paradigm in Louisiana. Despite its steady decline since 2014 (see Box 1), it has maintained a consequential grasp on the practices of policymaking and on the cultural fabric of society. Theorists argue that the DSP doesn't necessarily have to be dominant "in a statistical sense" to be held by dominant groups because it is used "by these groups to legitimize the institutions and practices of a market economy." (Shafer, 2006:123; Cotgrove, 1982). In environmental politics, this manifests as the third dimension of power by which the ruling elite and their business interests shape the preferences of individuals with regards to environmental regulations and their acceptance of existing power structures and inequalities, exercising ideological influence "to reflect the interests of capital" (Carter, 2018:191; Lukes, 1974). Despite the share of oil revenues declining in local and state economies, the reduction of jobs in the industry, and the increase in environmental activism across the region (Annex 13), Louisiana's Dominant Social Paradigm continues to form a stable basis for extractive, free market, private property and individualist ideals. Necessary to the continued satisfaction of elites' oil and gas interests, these ideas are legitimized in discourse continuously, across various spheres of public life, and through specific frames (jobs, coastal restoration, and small government) in order to secure public consent over ideas. As Theriot (2014:10) reminds us, "This overdependence on oil and gas revenue is a thread that weaves its way throughout the state's history in the twentieth century. This thread—and the exploitation that often accompanied it—has also become a part of Louisiana's value system." This section investigates the foundations of *oil culture* and its legitimation to demonstrate how extractivist interests have come to dominate the social and cultural fabric of Louisiana.

Box 1. - A brief history of the development of the oil and gas industry in Louisiana and the coastal land loss crisis

As Theriot (2014:3) explains, "Over the last half-century, there have been two essential storylines that have influenced Louisiana's current state of affairs: the development of the offshore oil and gas industry and the coastal erosion crisis." Louisiana's environmental history (and present) is intricately intertwined with that of the oil and gas industry, as it has come to exert an unavoidable influence over the state's economic, political and cultural life and landscapes. The first successful commercial oil well was drilled in Louisiana in 1901, rapidly positioning the state as a key player in the nation's energy production. In 1923, seismic exploration was introduced in the Gulf region to expand production, and in the 1940s, offshore drilling spread through Louisiana's coast. Soon after the great flood of 1927, still considered one of the worst disasters in American history, large-scale flood-control infrastructural systems were built to control the Mississippi River, and in its path, cut off the natural flow of sediments required to sustain the wetlands and land building process along the coast (Maret et Cadoul, 2007). Apart from playing a role in navigation and flood control, these structures also benefited the nascent oil and gas economy in Southeast Louisiana, turning "the historic settlements along the natural bayou banks into

logistical support centers for exploration and production activities” (Theriot, 2014:9). In fact, these infrastructural developments launched “the dawn of a Louisiana gold rush” on fossil fuels (Tidwell, 2010:35; Colten, 2019).

Oil and gas infrastructure began to weave through the marshlands and open the coast up to offshore activities, and by the end of the 1960’s, around 500 offshore platforms had been constructed (Department of Natural Resources, nd; Colten, 2019). Intense pipeline construction and canal dredging carved up the coastal marshes and expanded the state’s energy infrastructure, preparing it for the expansion of activities into deep-water operations in the 1990s. Simultaneously, as onshore and offshore expanded across the State (see Annexes 12 and 13), coastal erosion, land loss, marsh loss, and sea-level rise increased (Foy, 1990). While the leveeing of the Mississippi River has been branded



as a predominant cause in such ecosystem loss (see [Chapter 5](#)), the development of the oil and gas industry, its many canals and activities have also accelerated the intrusion of saltwater into the marshes and the destruction of natural barriers (see the intersected, linear canals in the photo above) (Gotham, 2016b). In fact, as Tidwell (2010:35) describes it, “there are few stretches of Louisiana marsh today that are not scissored by at least one or two canals, and some areas – seen from the air – look like intricate city maps”. Yet, extractivist practices continue to be defended in political and cultural discourse, and through major tax incentives for industry actors (see section 2.2 of this chapter). These environmental changes are now placing both coastal residents and energy infrastructure at risk. While policies favoring industry development may have been beneficial throughout the 20th century, as Dunlap and Van Liere (1984:1014) remind us, “a societal value system may become maladaptive if the conditions facing the society change”. This change today is the coast’s integrity and ability to provide protection to coastal residents.

Nevertheless, the energy industry remains an important sector of Louisiana’s economy. In 2021, Louisiana handled 52% of the country’s liquified natural gas production, a sector which continues to grow in the state, and represented one-fifth of the nation’s refining capacity (US EIA, 2022). According to the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources, Louisiana is the 9th largest producer of crude oil and 3rd of natural gas in the United States, but has been steadily declining in terms of employment, barrel production, and state royalties since 2014 (see Annex 13) (O’Brien, 2021). This decline is attributed to lower oil prices and competitive production costs and is projected to continue. During this fieldwork, the decline of the industry was repeatedly noted by industry actors and environmental groups. While the latter often proposed Louisiana embark on new economic pathways (renewable energies), oil and gas actors and their political partners have continuously voiced their desires to revive the industry, often blaming federal climate policies for further jeopardizing its prosperity. For some local observers, the political backlash against federal climate policies signals the realization that the energy industry is declining. “There’s a push to try to politicize the issue and say it’s a Joe Biden administration thing. It’s not true at all. The writing has been on the wall for a long time. Big companies are consolidating, they’re

picking up, they're leaving. Shell recently closed a bunch of its refineries, and that's not because of the pandemic", argues an environmental policy advisor²⁹.

This section focuses on the ways political actors legitimize the satisfaction of oil interests in policy to garner public consent. In other words, I examine the *objective* interests (capital accumulation and the permanence of economic institutions) and the *constructed* interests used to sustain them (the protection of Louisianan energy identity and families against climate policies). I demonstrate that these interests are satisfied by the penetration of a political and cultural *oil culture* and its discursive legitimation at macro and meso levels. This section starts by defining *oil culture*, its grasp on Louisianan politics and the way it shapes individual attitudes towards fossil fuels and environmental issues. The following sub-sections investigate the *jobs* and the *little guy* frames used to garner public support for extractivist practices. Both frames are used to ensure the perpetuation of economic structures and ultimately shape attitudes about climate change risk and adaptation.

1.1. "Oil field trash and proud of it": defining *oil culture*

Upon discussing the development of the sense of pride and identity linked with the production of oil and gas in Louisiana, lifelong activist Daniel smiles as he remembers a bumper sticker he's once come across. It read, "Oil field trash and proud of it". He explains,

People had talked about the exploitation of workers. But the workers don't want to feel like they're being exploited, they want to feel like they're part of a thing like "the robust United State of America which runs on oil and gas". It's a pride thing. So yes, there is an oil and gas culture.³⁰

Running deeper than a simple reliance on jobs or economic activity, the attachment to oil and gas appears to be culturally and societally rooted. On the Lafourche Parish Government (2020) website, for example, is proudly displayed the parish's motto, "Feeding and Fueling America", serving as a reminder of the vital role of fossil fuels in parish life. According to Jason P. Theriot, author of *American Energy, Imperiled Coast*, pride in Louisiana's oil and gas business stems from intergenerational experiences and shared benefits from the industry. Alluding to what I

²⁹ Interview Vanessa, restoration advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.18

³⁰ Interview Daniel, biologist and lifelong environmental activist. Telephone, 21.03.03

conceptualize as *oil culture*, he writes. “We all recognize the immense benefits and opportunities provided to our people from oil and gas development in South Louisiana. The oil field is part of the very fabric that makes up the culture of the Louisiana Gulf Coast. It is a big part of who we are” (Theriot, 2014: x). This allegiance has shaped Louisianans’ outlook on the relationship between climate change and fossil fuels. Daniel continues, speaking of an *obligation* to the industry.

Most people buy into it, nearly a hundred percent. Unless something drastic happens to them personally, or in their neighborhood, they’re bought out. They’re brainwashed. And I say that with a certain sadness because when I grew up, most of my classmates in elementary school, high school, college, were clothed and fed by the oil and gas and petrochemical industry. Most of the classmates were already obligated to the oil and gas industry for their existence. That is still the case today. And because of that, the head of the household is not going to tolerate his teenage son saying, “Dad you work for one of those companies that’s ruining the climate. You’re one of those people putting out greenhouse gases”. They are locked in. We don’t have value-added economics here, we just have exploitation of the raw materials and the workers. But it’s not the workers’ fault, they can’t overcome their individual situations.

Recounting his experience of *oil culture* in the 1960s and 1970s, the activist uses terms like “brainwashed”, “locked in” and “bought out” to insinuate that some residents may be unable to think critically about oil and gas and about an alternative economic and societal paradigm. Echoing Hochschild’s (2016) and Bell and York’s (2010) analyses of the conservative allegiance to the energy industry, it suggests that their worldviews are fixed by this economic dependence, and their loyalty influenced by financial incentives (notably jobs) to consent to the industry’s grasp on societal and political processes. As authors in the extractivist literature have shown, the production of identities is arranged and produced by material conditions, histories, epistemologies and knowledge within specific territories within which corporations and power interact (Calvão et al., 2023; Murrey and Mollett, 2023). In Louisiana, the complex dependency between natural and human environments and extraction has fostered what I define as a cultural *oil culture*, whose reproduction has been ensured by political and corporate actors within social, cultural and political institutions, as well as by communities engaged in the reproduction process of extractivism. Extractivism here is understood as more than mere extraction of resources under capitalism (Post, 2023; Pineault, 2018). It is defined as “a system or ideology, a representational and symbolic space linked to the use (and abuse) of nature-as-resource” (Szeman and Wenzel, 2021:516). Extractivism is therefore an ideological system, a “hegemonic complex” inscribed within capitalism and the DSP (Pineault, 2018:142). Through discourse, it creates and maintains the social imaginaries

necessary for the social and political acceptance of Louisiana's fossil-fuel economy amidst immense environmental and climatic vulnerabilities. In practice, these attachments have been cemented by the provision of jobs and some form of welfare by energy corporations. The following sub-sections demonstrate how oil culture has seeded into social institutions.

1.1.1. The entrenchment of oil culture

Oil culture and political narratives work to create public consent for the continued production of oil and gas by entrenching the belief that it is vital to the State and its parishes. Speaking of the public's acceptance of the prevalence of industry's interests in governance, Anthony, an environmental activist, deplors, "I think they're totally unconscious. It's in the culture, it's just accepted". Corroborating this observation, George, a Lafourche councilman, estimates that 90% of his constituents like the oil and gas industry. As Cramer's ethnography in rural Wisconsin reminds us (2016:209), we "need to acknowledge that interests are subjective" and interpretations anchored in people's respective identities whose rationality cannot be presupposed. In another conversation, a local Plaquemines fisherman refutes the idea of foregoing fossil fuels, further demonstrating the entrenchment of *oil culture* and some of the public support it receives.

If we shut the valve in the winter then all the people would freeze up north, I don't think they'd like that. To me, you're always gonna have to have oil and gas, and just about everything that's made, all plastics, is made with some type of oil. (...) But without it, I guarantee they would scream when it's cold and they couldn't get no heat, natural gas.³¹

This movement towards 'all green' and all of that, they're not ready for that. I don't think people understand the products that you get, and the service we gain out of the carbon-based industry, oil and gas, and even coal.³²

A striking illustration of the public's support for the oil and gas industry is the large-scale protests that emerged after the Department of the Interior implemented a six-month drilling moratorium offshore following the Deepwater Horizon spill, still considered one of the nation's worst environmental catastrophes. Despite the initial shock as "Coastal residents and government officials watched in agony as oil washed ashore, contaminating estuaries, beaches, and fragile marshes", support for the industry quickly resurfaced in opposition to the moratorium (Theriot,

³¹ Interview George, Lafourche Parish council. Telephone, 20.08.19

³² Interview Leon, fisherman and fishing advocate. Telephone, 21.03.04

2014:2015). Such substantial popular and political loyalty to the industry despite its impacts on the natural environment “symbolized the depth to which oil and gas had become so deeply imbedded in the psyche, lifestyle, culture, and economic well-being of people from south Louisiana” (Theriot, 2014:216). As one respondent in the environmental sector argues, the close connection between the industry and the people of Louisiana exists because the industry is not just an abstract entity but is composed of the individuals who reside in the area. Oil culture, therefore, has become deeply ingrained because the people themselves are an integral part of the community and the industry. This is especially true for fishing communities who embraced the development of offshore platforms as a way to maintain their coastal activities (Gramling and Hagelman, 2005). This intertwining of the industry with the community has led to its entrenchment in the political, social, and cultural landscape.

They're just people that work there [in the oil and gas industry]. And these people live in communities, and they have friends, and maybe some of their friends are politicians. I know we think of the oil and gas industry as this entity, but it's not. It's just comprised of a bunch of people who have a life too. You're gonna act like a person, a friend, a father, a mother, a cousin. That's why it's entrenched. And it's even more so entrenched because the oil and gas industry employs so many in Louisiana. They're part of the community.³³

“We are an energy state. We’ll continue to be an energy state”, argued Matthew Block from the Governor's Office, reiterating the centrality of *oil culture* and the state’s unwavering and unquestionable commitment to oil and gas³⁴. This type of rhetoric has entrenched the belief that Louisiana’s identity itself is inseparable from fossil fuels and that moving away from such extractive practices and beliefs would be difficult. “You can’t simply just snap your fingers and have it happen”, corroborated the director of a local environmental group working in close relations with the state on coastal restoration³⁵. As theorists of the DSP argue, the perpetuation of a society’s norms, beliefs and institutions are the result of generational social learning and work to maintain the dominant paradigm, which in this case, can be identified as the entrenchment of *oil culture* (Shafer, 2006).

³³ Interview Hannah, climate policy advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.22

³⁴ Joint Natural Resources Committee Hearing on Biden Executive Orders. House and Senate Natural Resources and Environment committees, Louisiana State Legislature, Baton Rouge, 21.02.10

³⁵ Interview Elizabeth, coastal restoration advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.01 and 21.02.12

It's associated with this long-standing assumption that I call an "energy identity". Louisiana no longer really depends on oil and gas for our economy, it's no longer the major driver. Yet, we are caught up in this identity that it is all we are and all we can be.³⁶

The oil and gas industry has a lot riding on having people in this area believe that we cannot survive without that industry. There are certainly media campaigns, policy advocacy campaigns, and I'm sure they have a huge lawyer bill that they're paying to fight climate change adaptation, mitigation policies at every level.³⁷

At the local level, private corporations have inserted themselves into the coastal community through the funding of local infrastructures, disaster relief, community service, training and education programs. The development of public relations campaigns by oil and gas companies expanded in the 1970s on a national scale, initiated by Mobil Oil Company (now ExxonMobil) and soon followed by others like Shell and Chevron, in an attempt to influence the public's opinion of their activities and reduce public support for regulations (Brulle et al., 2020). Such campaigns focused on "presenting corporations as responsible corporate citizens, taking appropriate action to address climate change" (Brulle et al., 2020:93), a strategy which I have witnessed in various political spheres, including the state legislature and the Climate Initiatives Task Force. In his welcoming remarks to the CPRA board after Hurricane Ida (2021), Nicholls State University president Jay Clune noted that their university members had suffered "devastating losses of houses, livelihoods and transportation", and had "benefited from the generosity of Shell" and other foundations and corporate donors³⁸.

The oil industry doesn't always gets the favorable press showing that they're doing this [i.e. restoration], but I can tell you, you have the Shell oil company, Chevron, Exxon, BP, that are actually spending a lot of dollars on research and partnering with the parish and the state for training programs in the community college system. They don't always get the favorable press of it because a lot of people like to focus on the negative. They're not just taking their profits and leaving, they're invested in the community as well.³⁹

BP had to do something because it was their thing [i.e. the Deepwater horizon oil spill]. They're doing more stuff for the environment now, they're donating and stuff like that.⁴⁰

There's a weird symbiotic relationship with oil and has and culture in our state. You know Jazz Fest, this enormous music festival that happens in New Orleans, is supported by Shell

³⁶ Interview Stephanie, renewable energy advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.08

³⁷ Interview Victoria, local research. Zoom, 20.11.09

³⁸ Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) board meeting, Thibodaux, 21.10.20

³⁹ Interview William, Terrebonne Parish council. Telephone, 21.05.12

⁴⁰ Interview Ethan, local Terrebonne journalist. Telephone, 20.08.30

directly. There's this fear that if you get rid of Shell, there won't be music anymore. That's just not true, but there's this idea that culture can only be supported by those deep pockets. Unfortunately, the weird part of it is that it also means that these corporations throw pennies at communities for, I don't know, a music festival for a weekend out of the year, and the whole rest of the year, they're just extracting. They'll throw a little bit of money at a church for a playground, and the rest of the year the members of that church are dealing with having a refinery in their backyard and all the things that this means.⁴¹

The narrative of a billion-dollar industry that is part of the local community stems from the populist tropes used to legitimize the political satisfaction of industry interests over social policies and climate justice. Nevertheless, it has failed to convince many environmental groups who accuse corporations of exaggerating the extent of their community involvement for public relations.

They would love to present themselves as being partners to environmental protection and whatever. They'll always say that. The reality is that they throw a million here, a million there, to actual environmental work. They gave us a million dollars five or six years ago, and they've basically given us nothing since. People like us have to say, "they've been our partners". People feel indebted to them even though they were basically given nothing over most of the years. If they paid their tax amount, maybe they'd be doing a lot more, but they're not.⁴²

The extractivist Dominant Social Paradigm as an ideological system in which *oil culture* is embedded, therefore, maintains ideas about the relationship between human society and natural resources and inevitably creates tension between groups with a subsistence relationship to resources and those who commodify nature within an extractivist economy (Bridge, 2009; Szeman and Wenzel, 2021; Bell and York, 2010). The dominant relationship in Louisiana – that of extraction – has been legitimized through economically, culturally and socially anchored discourses. It has also been cemented by the state's history of resource extraction and early communities' instrumental relationships to the coast, conducive to the larger local acceptance of an extractivist economy (Gramling and Hagelman, 2005).

1.1.2. Introducing the master discourse of *permanence*

The "capitalist pressure to extract" and preserve these economic institutions has fundamentally shaped Louisiana's approach to climate policies (Pineault, 2018). I argue that this state's fundamental rationality for the preservation of its economic and political structure is inscribed

⁴¹ Interview Stephanie, renewable energy advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.08

⁴² Interview Lauren, coastal restoration advocacy group. Telephone, 21.02.23

within the *permanence master discourse*. The master discourse acts as a frame of reference by which people interpret and legitimize ideas and policies – in this case, the need to perpetuate an extractivist economy and the social institutions with which it is intertwined (Schmidt, 2002). At the discursive level, the objective of preserving fossil fuel production undergirds all policy practices and has been explicit in political and economic elites’ desire to “resurrect” the industry⁴³.

Louisiana is in such a tremendous position to be able to provide this type of solution [i.e., carbon capture and sequestration]. This is going to be critical as we look toward maintaining our offshore oil and gas industry and being able to maintain the industry. I think this is the type of information that we need to present as solutions that we can continue our offshore oil and gas industry and be part of that solution at the same time.⁴⁴

As I flew over [the parish] yesterday, I was brought to tears. We are going to rebuild it back, bigger and better than ever. We are going to produce more oil and gas here for Chett [i.e. Chiasson, executive director of the Greater Lafourche Port Commission] (*laughs*) and our country than we ever had before, and we’re going to get it done.⁴⁵

The master discourse of *permanence* thus transpires through the explicit desire to maintain and prolong the longevity of industrial coastal activities. The messaging of the oil and gas industry within policy spheres and relayed by policy actors perpetuates the belief in a sustainable future for economic activities in Southeast Louisiana, without publicly questioning the impact of sea-level rise and subsidence on its long-term viability (see Photo 2, for example). As a result, individuals permeable to industry discourse may have limited awareness of the implications of climate change and its potential long-term consequences, especially because “when you’re in a place like Louisiana, you’re talking about a source of revenue and economic activity that ultimately puts people food on the table. So, you know, it ends up becoming a deeply personal topic to many of the people that live in Louisiana”.⁴⁶ But this *master discourse* inhibits a political discussion on the long-term viability of coastal life. Reflected in the Coastal Master Plan’s inability and unwillingness to challenge the activities conducive to environmental and ecological crises, the state is perpetuating, in both discourse and practice, a destructive extractivist model (Randolph,

⁴³ Senator Hewitt, Senate Natural Resources and Environment committee, Louisiana State Senate, Baton Rouge, 21.04.21.

⁴⁴ Lori Leblanc, Louisiana Mid-Continent Oil & Gas Association, at the Governor’s Advisory Commission on Coastal protection, restoration and conservation meeting, Zoom, 21.02.09

⁴⁵ Lafourche Parish president Archie Chaisson on his hopes for the future of Lafourche Parish after the devastation of Hurricane Ida. Lafourche Parish government press conference for Hurricane Ida, Facebook Live, 21.09.02

⁴⁶ Interview Andrew, State of Louisiana government. Zoom, 21.03.08

2018; Colten, 2019). Yet, as many participants have pointed out and as repeated boom-and-bust cycles have shown, oil and gas resources are unstable and the global push for an energy transition reinforces the unsustainability of this model.



Photo 2. - “Growing Louisiana Together” highway billboard by Shell

This highway billboard by the oil and gas company Shell reads “Growing Louisiana Together” atop a photo of persons planting trees and the hashtag “Make the future”. It illustrates the way industries position themselves as central actors in the long-term environmental adaptation of Louisiana. It also suggests that ecological practices such as tree planting are sufficient to ensure a future along the coast while pursuing economic and industrial growth. It resonates with the agnostic adaptation discourse by suggesting that non-systemic actions are sufficient to ensure permanence (or the future) of life and activities (more in Chapter 5). Source: Sarah Munoz (2022)

1.2. Legitimizing a cultural *oil culture*: using jobs for public consent

“Here, it’s Christianity, football, and the oil and gas industry”, jokes local journalist Ethan. The industry is a pillar of Louisianan life because “people either are in the oil and gas industry or have a family member in the oil and gas industry. That’s the way of living.” For this reason, Ethan argues, people are apologetic for the industry’s environmental effects because they believe that “they do so much more good than bad”. For them, the economic benefits and the livelihoods supported by the employment of the industry outweighs their environmental damages. This rationale constitutes a sunk cost, one of the dragons of inaction described by Gifford (2011) as the result of the cognitive dissonance occurring when one person has a direct financial and personal

stake in the fossil fuel industry (constituting *objective* interests), and which curbs that person's willingness to act on climate change.

The framing of oil and gas around *jobs* has been widely promulgated by both industry and governance actors to sustain this popular support and the belief in a positive balance between economic outcomes and environmental externalities. For some environmental activists, it is a myth that the industry has worked hard to promote⁴⁷. This discursive strategy resonates with what Supran and Oreskes (2021) have identified as the “socioeconomic threat frame”, promulgated by oil and gas corporations and their political allies to argue that binding climate policies are a threat to prosperity. A striking example of this frame is the political reaction to President Biden's new orders which halted leases in federal waters (The White House, 2021)⁴⁸. Local politicians drew on a jobs-centered narrative, arguing that stopping fossil fuel production would be “harmful to our people” and to “the family sitting around the table”⁴⁹, equating environmental regulations to “death by a thousand cuts”⁵⁰. By engaging with populist rhetoric, decisionmakers at the state and parish level echo larger Republican narratives endorsed on the national stage about oil and gas jobs. “These are jobs that lift families out of poverty and put children through college”, defended Senator John Barrasso of Wyoming during a US Senate hearing about President Biden's moratorium on oil and gas leases in the Gulf of Mexico⁵¹.

By making this link, industry actors and their political allies entertain a discursive opposition between the environment (and policies made to protect it) and the livelihoods of the people (focusing on the alleged loss of jobs and economic security associated with such policies). This narrative is upheld by what Cotgrove (1982) refers to as optimistic, technology-driven, industrialist *Cornucopians*, who differ from environmentalists in the very foundations of their worldviews.

⁴⁷ Interviews with environmental advocacy organizations, Zoom, February and March 2021

⁴⁸ Following President Biden's announcement of a pause on oil and gas leases at the beginning of 2021, a special joint session of the Louisiana Senate and House of representatives was convened. This decision sparked a wave of political outrage in Louisiana among defenders of the fossil fuel industry and brought together executive and legislative spheres. Over the course of four hours, industrial spokespersons, elected officials, and representatives of the State of Louisiana took turns to defend the industry.

⁴⁹ US Senator Cassidy during the Joint Natural Resources Committee Hearing on Biden Executive Orders. House and Senate Natural Resources and Environment committees, Louisiana State Legislature, Baton Rouge, 21.02.10

⁵⁰ Congressman Garrett Graves, *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Full Committee Hearing to Examine Offshore Energy Development, U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, Washington (DC), 21.05.13

Adding to Catton and Dunlap's (1980)⁵² and Dunlap and van Liere's (1984) pioneer work on the DSP, this industrialist position is conceptualized as the belief in human's ability to control their environment, the potential for economic growth, job creation, instrumentalism and domination of nature, and technological innovation to address environmental problems. This perspective rests on cognitive structures and symbol systems informing the Dominant Social Paradigm through which actors interpret the world and their environment. It resonates with the Louisianan experience because of the predominance of the *jobs* frame in political discourses.

1.2.1. Developing a fossil-fuel dependence for employment

The development of the *jobs* narrative emanates from the transformation of Louisiana's economic system in the mid- to late 19th century during which large-scale energy extractivism expanded. "On one hand, it completely transformed the state's economy. It provided high-paying jobs and improved standards of living for tens of thousands. This newfound wealth allowed families to send their children to college, a luxury experienced by few from the area prior to the 1950s" (Theriot, 2014 :13). The narrative linking industry to employment and higher standards of living continues to thrive in political discourses today to oppose constraining environmental or climatic regulations on the energy sector. "The oil and gas industry supports one in nine jobs in our State", argued Congressman Clay Higgins before the Senate and House⁵³. It provides a service that "keeps our nation running", despite being "plagued for some time now by state-based regulations", according to the Republican leader. "Acting to suppress production in the near term only weakens our ability to provide jobs, provide affordable energy, and provide for critical environmental efforts.", argued another.⁵⁴

Terrebonne Parish President Gordon Dove too argued against President Biden's moratorium on oil and gas leases by expressing concern, in a parish resolution, "about the health, safety, welfare,

⁵² Catton and Dunlap (1980) trace the origins of Western anthropocentrism to the development of the New World under European expansion, whereby optimism and faith in progress, exploitation of natural resources and discovery of fossil fuels, followed by the industrial revolution, forged what the authors call a "Dominant Western Worldview". It encompasses four main beliefs: (1) humans are separate from and dominate the non-human world, (2) humans chose their goals and master their destiny, (3) the non-human world is plentiful and provides "unlimited opportunities for humans" (p.18), and (4) progress is the solution to any problem and is always desirable.

⁵³ Joint Natural Resources Committee Hearing on Biden Executive Orders. House and Senate Natural Resources and Environment committees, Louisiana State Legislature, Baton Rouge, 21.02.10

⁵⁴ Ibid.

and economic stability (jobs and tax base) of the citizens of Terrebonne Parish” (L21). For environmental activists, this hegemonic narrative stems from “unquestioned assumptions”⁵⁵ about the overall advantage of energy jobs in the state, despite their steady decline since 2014. The grip of this narrative on decision-making processes has established the normative legitimacy of policy prioritizing industry interests over environmental protection. It constitutes what Nelson (2004) calls “issue categorization”, the political rhetoric of assigning priority to competing policy goals – employment in the industry and environmental policy. It is notably used by state leaders to legitimize pro-fossil fuel policies, despite their environmental impacts. Timothy, working on climate adaptation within the State of Louisiana government, explains how the importance of jobs places the state in a difficult position to move away from an extractivist economy. Hannah, a policy analyst for an advocacy group, on the other hand, argues that the emphasis put on *jobs* impedes policy change and broader structural reform, revealing a divergence between the State government and environmental advocates on the *jobs* discourse.

The reality is that so many people in this state owe their job to some kind of refinery or a petrochemical plant, or offshore oil work, or at least somebody in their family does. What do we do? We can't just flip a switch and say we're done with oil. It's a big part of our economy, we can't leave those workers without anything. We can't do that.⁵⁶

The emphasis is always on jobs, jobs, jobs, and it's at the sacrifice of communities and environment. And as long as we continue doing that, we're never gonna be better. Those environmental laws are absolutely associated with loss of jobs. But it also goes back to this very siloed view on an extremely complex system. The reason people are worried about their jobs when we talk about environmental regulations is because our education system isn't equipped to train them for other jobs that might be emerging.⁵⁷

The narrative that regulations or taxes would drive industry away is one that has been largely promulgated in political spheres and to the public to preserve extractivist activities, maximize economic gains and draw on populist rhetoric to secure public support. State Senator Fesi for example directly links mobility to oil jobs by arguing that 10,000 people that have left Lafourche and Terrebonne due to the leaving of oil and gas companies to Texas⁵⁸. Economic conditions and employment are framed as primordial in mobility decision-making to garner local support for pro-

⁵⁵ Interview Anthony, climate advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.03.21

⁵⁶ Interview Timothy, State of Louisiana government. Zoom, 21.03.01

⁵⁷ Interview Hannah, climate policy advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.22

⁵⁸ Lafourche Parish council meeting, Mathews, 21.10.26

industry policies. The importance of livelihoods has been highlighted as a factor of adaptation by other studies, such as that of Addo and Danso (2017) who find that flood victims in Ghana have dismissed voluntary and permanent relocation as an adaptation tool by fear of losing income and the ability to work in the oil fields. In Louisiana, the preservation of oil and gas jobs and a labor force, framed in public discourse as essential for the region's economic vitality and identity, has become a convincing argument for political elites to encourage voluntary immobility.

Box 2. - Supplanting the state to secure fishermen's consent for industry practices

A manifestation of *oil culture* is the annual Shrimp and Petroleum Festival of Morgan City, which brings together two pillars of South Louisianan livelihoods: the fishing and fossil fuels industries. This special relationship dates to the first offshore oil well drilled off the coast of Morgan city. The oil industry mobilized the coastal expertise of fishermen to provide knowledge of navigation and transportation, eventually offering coastal residents like Cajuns and fishermen the ability to work offshore and maintain traditional activities (Gramling and Hagelman, 2005). By offering a secondary occupation for fishermen, the energy sector has placed itself as a replacement for the State's lack of social safety nets and welfare for those left feeling particularly disenfranchised by the various political decisions that have jeopardized the fishing industry⁵⁹. After the Deepwater oil spill for example, BP hired many local fishermen to clean-up and provide expert knowledge on the coast, dampening their resentment towards the oil corporation. A fisherman explains.

Let me tell you, BP put the fishermen to work, laying out boom, searching for oil, searching for oiled animals. They paid fishermen while they were out of work. They also compensated the fishermen for losses. But our state doesn't have enough money to compensate us for what they're going to do (*cf. he is talking about the damages to the fishing industry from the coastal restoration project Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion*).⁶⁰

As the energy company supplanted the state in compensating fishermen and providing economic opportunities to address their grievances, their support for the industry grew. In fact, Captain Antoine further argues, oil and gas activities provide an important outlet for fishermen's economic interests. They compose what Bishop (2014) has identified as a community of interest, who livelihoods are dependent on industry and who, consequently, remain favorable to their practices despite the recognized damages caused by oil spills. For a local activist, the role industry has endorsed in supplanting the state's failings – in terms of welfare and representation – has crystallized this *oil culture* among Cajuns living *down the bayou*.

The oil and gas industry in the Gulf of Mexico, oil platforms are mainstay fishing outlets for the charter captains that go offshore. They fish around the rigs. Now, they claim that digging these pipeline canals in the interior marshes caused erosion, but as far as the fishermen, I don't

⁵⁹ Such decisions have included the repeated openings of the Bonnet Carré spillway which have decimated shrimp and oyster grounds (Colten, 2019; interview Gabriella, telephone, 21.03.31). Historic mistrust between Cajuns and government have seeded the ground for fishermen groups' defiance of the State and the CPRA, enhancing their loyalty to industrial actors instead. See [Chapter 7](#) for more on group disenfranchisement and mistrust in decisionmakers.

⁶⁰ Interview Antoine, fishing and restoration advocacy organization. Telephone, 21.04.21

think we have any beef with the oil companies. Other than the BP oil spill which was an event that, you know, that happens.⁶¹

The idea is that oil is the big daddy, it's the patron. We don't have (national) senators, we don't matter. We only matter if the oil industry matters, this is like a White Cajun insecurity.⁶²

Oil and gas provided Louisianans with many economic advantages and one of the highest growth rates in the country between 2014 and 2018, described as a sort of “euphoria” (Hochschild, 2016:90). The significance of these economic interests in people’s livelihoods profoundly shaped their relationship to coastal issues, especially fishing communities for whom distrust in institutions and government’s ability to carry out services is greatest (Cope et al., 2016).



Fishing boats in the Venice harbor, Plaquemines Parish. Source: Sarah Munoz (2022).

1.2.2. Public beliefs in the jobs frame

Caleb ponders the complexity of navigating his own internal multiple identities, being an ecologist, a fisherman and a former employee of the energy industry. His time in oil and gas enabled him to buy his first boat and pay off his pilot license, providing him with ample financial means at a young age and the ability to make a living on the bayou, where he wants to spend his life, as did his father and grandfather before him. These opportunities, he explains, is why the industry holds a special place in many coastal residents’ hearts and why their feelings towards fossil fuels are not inherently negative despite the evidence of ecological damage.

⁶¹ Interview Antoine, fishing and restoration advocacy organization. Telephone, 21.04.21

⁶² Interview Patrick, environmental advocacy organization. Telephone, 21.02.17

Industry has a lot of power here, and they operate in oblique ways. They do things that are out of sight. Sure, they put people to work. I worked in the oil and gas industry. I was 26 years old; I had an airplane and a sailboat. They were paid off. I made good money, but I think that's one of the reasons sometimes people look past this stuff.⁶³

[Oil workers] are often conflicted, working people who want to fish, working people who just want to maintain a cultural life way that the United States makes very difficult to maintain. And the oil and gas industry has been in previous generations – not my generation – a way to maintain that unstable equilibrium.⁶⁴

For some local fishermen, this relationship is thus one of necessity. For others, their impacts on the coast must not be overlooked. For some Cajuns especially – which a lot of fishermen are – their dependence on nature, proximity to the landscapes of the bayou, and traditions anchored in the extraction of natural resources (hunting, fishing, trapping) sustains their Louisianan identities⁶⁵. Capitalism creates an epistemology for people to rationalize problems and solutions based on “the capitalistic ideals of neoliberal economics that inherently maintain financial power structures” (Smerecnik and Renegar, 2010:155). In their study of the aftermath of a pipeline accident in Yellowstone River Valley for example, Emerson et al. (2021) find that public support for the industrial status quo was rationalized, in discourse, by cultural beliefs in its necessity for the community. I find similar discursive legitimation for public support in Louisiana. “Some people would think that we're like cats and dogs”, comments Thomas, a fourth-generation oysterman, “but we've always had relationships”⁶⁶.

Do we like the mess that they leave us? Hell no. But in the same sense, when you say “Are you against them?”, hell no! You have to make a living, you know.⁶⁷

People would say “we'd rather have a few dirty years and a good salary for a long time, than to have to lose our jobs”. There's no question on most people's minds that the oil industry is an important provider of jobs and livelihoods, and they don't want to see it go away. So, they're tolerant.⁶⁸

⁶³ Interview Caleb, ecologist and former councilmember. Empire, 22.02.18

⁶⁴ Interview Patrick, environmental advocacy organization. Telephone, 21.02.17

⁶⁵ Interview Benjamin, local researcher. Zoom, 20.08.28. See also Annex 16 for data on commercial fishing reliance.

⁶⁶ Interview Thomas, fisherman. Telephone, 21.05.14

⁶⁷ Interview Leon, fisherman and fishing advocate. Telephone, 21.03.04

⁶⁸ Interview Benjamin, local researcher. Zoom, 20.08.28

People on the coast have a love hate relationship with oil and gas. There's no one who believes that oil and gas hasn't harmed the coast. Those days are gone, I think. There are many who believe that it's a necessary harm because that's how they make their living.⁶⁹

This informs a particular form of place attachment which Adams and Adger (2013:2) refer to as *place dependence*, described as the “instrumental bonds formed through the ability of a place to help a person meet goals and aspirations”. These ecosystem services are an important element of place attachment, and their loss due to environmental degradation shapes decisions to migrate. In lower Plaquemines especially, reliance on commercial fishing is high among communities who are also most at risk in terms of social and economic vulnerability (Annex 16). Conversations with fishermen in Southeast Louisiana reveal that this dependence on the productive aspects of the coast motivates their support for industrial activities and their continuation, deemed essential to the satisfaction of the American Dream.

If you're a fisherman, if you're a person in Louisiana, White, Cajun, Native, Black, whoever, and you're of our water culture, the oil industry is a way to maintain your water culture, and succeed in the American dream.⁷⁰

People in Louisiana have a unique relationship with the oil and gas industry. I don't think it's something you see in places outside the Gulf. People are working in oil and gas, they're outdoorsmen, they love to hunt and fish, some of them are commercial fishermen themselves. And there was always a sort of symbiotic relationship. We understand you got to have impacts, even to the extent that the canals that were dug and some of the facilities that were erected ... Some of the things that the oil and gas industry provided put out some benefits. But then, when you had the Deepwater Horizon spill, it felt like a betrayal.⁷¹

God put his hand on Plaquemines Parish. There's nowhere else in the world... Oil, gas, sulfur, seafood, any kind of seafood you want, freshwater, saltwater. You could throw a seed on the ground here and it'll grow. Show me any other place in the world that you can do that.⁷²

The oil industry and the local jobs it provided transformed the traditional rural, agrarian society in coastal Louisiana, where the French-speaking Cajuns and other groups had for generations cultivated a lifestyle and identity built around farming, fishing, and family cohesion. The Cajuns initially rejected the intrusion of the oil men—*les maudits Texiens* (damn Texans)—into their communities in the early days of exploration and production. Oil field jobs gradually began replacing traditional occupations, however, and by the 1960s, at

⁶⁹ Interview Justin, environmental lawyer. Zoom, 21.03.04

⁷⁰ Interview Anthony, climate advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.03.21

⁷¹ Interview Joseph, conservation advocacy organization and fisherman. Telephone, 21.04.15. The Deepwater Horizon spill of 2010 is the largest oil spill in American history. It was caused by the explosion of the offshore platform operated by BP, which killed 11 workers and spread oil over 149,000 square meters across the Gulf of Mexico.

⁷² Interview Tony, Plaquemines councilmember, Empire, 22.02.18

the height of offshore expansion, the oil and gas industry became the dominant economic engine in the region, thus cementing a long-term—and sometimes tenuous codependence with the people of the Gulf Coast. (Theriot, 2014: 10)

Environmental policy experts believe that the myth of *oil culture* has been largely exaggerated by industry and policy actors to maintain its hold on the Louisianan public and legitimize extractive practices despite the recognition of increasing climatic and environmental degradation. Although not all interviewed participants agree with the idea that industry support is diminishing, most recognize that the industry itself is losing ground in the state's economy.

Unfortunately, it means that there are a lot of people who don't currently depend on the oil and gas who believe that they need to be supportive of that and not of environmental regulations. This is one of the bigger challenges, actually. The difficulty is that, still, the oil and gas sector has been allowed to say "well, we're so much better than we were, and it's not just us, other countries are just as bad as we are". It's almost impossible to state how powerful the message and that communication strategy are because it means that people make decisions that are not in their best interests.⁷³

People are starting to doubt the narrative though, just because people are realizing there's just less people who work in oil and gas than they did before. A lot of people down here don't work in oil and gas. It's still such a small industry, and it has an outside mystique that isn't real.⁷⁴

Whether or not the strength of the *jobs* narrative is diminishing in its effects on public opinion, it remains a powerful discursive tool widely used by both policy and industry actors because it can potentially shape public opinion about an issue and its relative importance to another (Nelson, 2004). Issue categorization as a framing strategy is effective because the imprint of the industry on the cultural and community life along the coast is immense, and this presence as sponsors of the community – through local festivals, donations and disaster relief – cements their influence over public attachment, especially as it relates to their employment and livelihoods. A Louisianan researcher remarks that there exists a strong correlation between people's jobs and their place of residence, especially for part of the population residing in the lower ends of the parishes whose livelihoods are intrinsically linked to the industry. "Ultimately", she argues, "if you're employed but your home has been washed away from coastal erosion or wetland loss, then where does your loyalty lie? Does it lie to your home or to your job? They can't exist independently."⁷⁵ The

⁷³ Interview Stephanie, renewable energy advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.08

⁷⁴ Interview Lauren, coastal restoration advocacy group. Telephone, 21.02.23

⁷⁵ Interview Victoria, local research. Zoom, 20.11.09

centrality of livelihood concerns and local allegiance to an extractivist economy is evidenced by the significant growth of public support for expanding offshore oil and gas drilling off the US coast – a 6% increase between 2021 and 2023 (Marlon et al. 2022; 2024).

They've repeated that same thing 100 years. These business industrial concerns will say, it's the end of the world as we know it. You're going to lose all your jobs, and blah blah blah. And it never happens. Just like they say, if we give this massive tax break, it's going to trickle down. It never happens. The rich just get richer. So, do people believe it? Not everyone believes. But there are a lot of people who believe it, because they've been told successively that their job depends on it. And if you're told by your boss that your job depends on you showing up and supporting me, you do it. And in many, many, many instances, you believe it. But is it true? That's a different issue. It's the difference between fact and belief.⁷⁶

People are very cautious to blame the oil and gas industry because, essentially, they are employed by it. You don't you don't want to bite the hand that feeds you, right? Which is why there has never been a successful lawsuit in Louisiana against the oil and gas company not backfilling the channels that they dredged. (...) When you're saying "I'm going green", you feel like your job is threatened because whatever they're doing is not within your skill set.⁷⁷

By conflating economic interests with those of the people, industry and their political allies are leveraging what people value most. "It's because it's their jobs. Their jobs are being called into question.", explains Victoria. As environmental policy analyst Stephanie points out, people tend to prioritize their financial well-being. Given the economic challenges faced by many Louisianans and the prevalence of poverty, these narratives create a perception of a trade-off between environmental policies and financial security, choosing between environmental integrity and their individual livelihoods – once again echoing the "socioeconomic threat frame" associated with climate policies (Supran and Oreskes, 2021)⁷⁸. In their study on the ideological grasp of the energy sector in West Virginia, Bell and York (2010:115) find, echoing the Louisianan case, that "many will even fight for the companies polluting their communities or destroying their ecosystems because they fear further job losses if environmental regulations are tightened." Attributing this loyalty to ideological manipulation on the part of industry elites, the authors find that this has structurally cemented an energy identity conducive to community allegiance to extractive industries. Residents "still look at [the industry] as a job provider, and they still have a lot of

⁷⁶ Interview Justin, environmental lawyer. Zoom, 21.03.04

⁷⁷ Interview Hannah, climate policy advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.22

⁷⁸ Interview Stephanie, renewable energy advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.08

reverence for the industry. They almost romanticize it, the way people would policemen or firemen, in Southeastern Louisiana.”⁷⁹ As a result, Christopher notes, people are divided over the coastal lawsuits. Although Plaquemines Parish is proceeding with them for financial reasons, this approach is not widely endorsed. “The residents who prefer the jobs over the one-time payout from the lawsuit, are pro-oil and gas, they want those industries to thrive”. Consequently, he explains, they are not “willing to admit that the industry is starting to phase out.” For one environmental activist, this allegiance has become too entrenched for some residents to disassociate their worldviews from that of the industry’s.

There’s a queen of the Shrimp and Petroleum festival. She has a tiara with an oil derrick and a shrimp wrapped around it, literally. It’s just cognitive dissonance everywhere you look. I don’t know how else to say it... It’s a source of humor, but people somehow have come to believe not only that these things can live in symbiosis, but that they *must*.⁸⁰



Photo 3. - The Queen of the Shrimp and Petroleum festival

Source: Louisiana Shrimp and Petroleum festival website, 2021.

She laughs, recounting the costume she designed herself for Mardi Gras the year prior, poking fun at the queen of the Shrimp and Petroleum festival, a hard-hatted shrimp atop an oil rig embroidered

⁷⁹ Interview Christopher, local journalist. Telephone, 20.08.20

⁸⁰ Emphasis added. Interview Stephanie, renewable energy advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.08

onto the dress (Photo 3). But her smile fades quickly, disenchanted by the entrenchment of fossil fuels in the State’s economy and the evident societal reluctance to give up *oil culture*, pillar of the Dominant Social Paradigm on which hegemonic beliefs, values and cultural cues are founded.

I went as the Shrimp and Offshore Wind festival queen (*she smiles*). I made myself a tiara of a windmill and shrimp. Because what we need is to use the expertise that we have gained in offshore energy development. There is this hesitance to lean into it because somehow, it means you’re cannibalizing the industry that has meant so much.

1.3. Populist rhetoric and the instrumentalization of Cajun identity

In Louisiana, public consent is sought through populist discourse targeting lower classes of voters to oppose federal climate policies (Hochschild, 2016). “The cost of every product at Walmart is going up”, argued a representative of the General Attorney’s office during the House and Senate committee meeting on Biden’s moratorium⁸¹. Misleadingly using the example of the Yellow Vest movement in France, he pushed the *jobs and livelihoods* framing at the forefront in his advocacy for oil and gas preservation.

The cost of fuel and energy to the transportation sectors in Europe rose so dramatically, it in essence created civil rioting on the streets of Paris and everywhere else, by people who are protesting the exorbitant cost of fuel that was affecting their jobs. But guess what? [With these policies] the cost of diesel and the transportation costs will translate into higher costs everywhere, not only at the gas pump, at Walmart, pizza delivery. Everything we do is going to cost more.

To further activate these popular concerns, local elected officials have mobilized identity politics and public opinion against environmental policies to secure their objective interests. These are reflected in what I call the *little guy* rhetoric, a persuasive approach which emphasizes the interests, concerns or struggles of ordinary Louisianans. As Parent (2006:24) reminds us of the state’s political culture, “an oil-and-gas-based economy was perfectly conducive to populist politics”.

1.3.1. The symbol of the “little guy”

Populist in nature, this type of framing aims to convey a sense of empathy and solidarity from the politicians towards individuals at the mercy of larger government institutions or corporations, by highlighting the perceived injustices or disadvantages faced by an iconic and symbolic “little guy”

⁸¹ Joint Natural Resources Committee Hearing on Biden Executive Orders. House and Senate Natural Resources and Environment committees, Louisiana State Legislature, Baton Rouge, 21.02.10

archetype. In Lafourche Parish especially, local officials have embraced this rhetoric to argue for industry tax breaks and against further regulation of oil and gas. Upon discussing the expansion of the foreign trade zone (and tax-free zone for offshore companies) in Port Fourchon, Parish President Chaisson argues that “if we don’t do this, the pipes are gonna leave” and that it will “move those 40 or 50 jobs”⁸², echoing Senator Fesi’s concerns for job-related mobility. Expressing his endorsement, councilman Lorraine remarks, however, that they should proceed with caution. “The little guy is gonna say, but what about me? He’s just as important as the big guy”, suggesting that another industry tax exemption would elicit a sentiment of injustice from local workers. Nevertheless, the motion passed unanimously without much debate, illustrating the readiness of politicians to favor economic development and corporations by using the *jobs* frame to legitimize fiscal advantages.

This powerful rhetoric device plays into the emotions embedded within *oil culture* and the fear of losing livelihoods. It conflates the interests of the “little guy”, the ordinary Southern Louisianan, with that of corporations and state governments trying to retain economic activity. Historically, politicians used the boom of Big Oil and tax revenues to embrace populist messaging. Parent (2006:24) explains, “any populist politician at that moment would not only make promises to poor, frustrated rural White people, but could deliver on these promises”. Energy revenues allowed the state to forego taxing its residents, while entrenching the political power and interests of corporations into its institutional fabric. Discussing the lawsuits filed by some parishes against oil and gas companies for damages to coastal wetlands (see Box 5), Mike Moncla, the interim president of the Louisiana Oil and Gas Association, warned during the lobby’s annual meeting that legal actions are “throwing hardworking men and women under the bus”⁸³. This narrative trope was further communicated by oil and gas representatives and local politicians in their defense against the coastal lawsuits, instrumentalizing Louisianans in their defense of the industry.

We ask you to not take part in anything having to do with suing these oil and gas companies that are funding us. They are the ones that are putting the food on the table for your constituents. They are the ones who are supporting their softball teams, and baseball teams, and soccer teams. They are the ones who are reinvesting in this area to bring Lafourche back stronger and prouder than ever. To sign on in litigation against them, is just not right. *We*

⁸² Lafourche Parish council meeting, Mathews, 20.11.10

⁸³ LOGA’s State of the Industry 2020, Louisiana Oil and Gas Association, Zoom, 20.11.16

*represent BP, we represent Shell. We represent the Mister Plaisance of Lafourche Parish, and if you didn't get your heartstrings pulled by him, I think you're just dead. We need you to stand with the constituents, we need you to stand with oil and gas because they are funding all of the coastal restoration and preservation. They are the main hand that feeds that.*⁸⁴

In placing themselves as the representatives of a generic “Mister Plaisance”, industrial actors align their interests with that of the community they claim to be a part of and represent, both culturally and economically. By implying that they advocate equally for multi-million dollars oil companies as they do any individual residents of Louisiana, they are suggesting that both entities deserve equal empathy and that an assault on one is equivalent to an assault on the other. Resonating with the idea that *oil culture* has disseminated into the fabric of Louisianan society because its members are “part of the community”⁸⁵, this position enables its representatives to use this rhetoric to cater to popular sentiments and defend industry interests. In doing so, they discursively construct their interest not as profit accumulation or the perpetuation of the dominant extractivist economy, but as the protection of Louisianans themselves.

That's something you should be proud of because let's face it, at the end of the day, those people that put on those hard hats and those steel-toed boots and kiss their families goodbye, they look like you, they sound like you, *they are you*. You see them at church, you seem em at the ballgame, you know their families. It's important we do the right thing.⁸⁶

I appreciate the opportunity to be here with you today to speak *on behalf of the hundred thousand Lafourche residents*, a majority of who wake up every day and put on their hard hats, and their coveralls, and their work boots, and go to work in the oil and gas industry. (...) *The overall assault on an industry that actually feeds and fuels our nation is a slap in the face to every American and to every Louisianan.* (...) For me, it's a very proud and emotional moment to stand here, as parish president, to lead the charge and to help fight will all of you, and to continue *to protect the hardworking men and women of Louisiana.*⁸⁷

A swift stroke of the President's pen has the power to *shut down the offshore industry and decimate the livelihoods of hardworking men and women along America's Gulf Coast*, especially those who live, work and play in Louisiana's Cajun coast. In Louisiana, our

⁸⁴ Christy Zeringue, South Central Industrial Association, Lafourche Parish council meeting, Mathews, 21.10.26

⁸⁵ Interview Hannah, climate policy advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.22

⁸⁶ Scott Angelle, Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement (BSEE), Greater Lafourche Port Commission board meeting, Cut Off, 20.12.09

⁸⁷ Archie Chasson, Lafourche Parish president, Joint Natural Resources Committee Hearing on Biden Executive Orders. House and Senate Natural Resources and Environment committees, Louisiana State Legislature, Baton Rouge, 21.02.10

offshore workers are the blue-collar workers who proudly do a job producing American energy.⁸⁸

A “totally fictional universe”⁸⁹ and a “fucking lie”⁹⁰ according to activists, the *jobs* frame has failed to convince some environmental groups which continue to oppose the hegemonic narrative by which environmental and climate policies are a threat to the State’s economy. “There's no way that they speak for the people”, argues Patrick, a community outreach activist from a local organization⁹¹. He recounts speaking to oil workers who contacted him unanimously to give him information about industry activities but feared being fired for speaking out. “They care about the environment very, very much. And they know a lot about the environment. And what's going wrong with the environment”, he explains about industry workers he’s spoken with. He doubts the populist discourses of lobbyists on the political scene and expresses disbelief at their claims of representation because most companies are not Louisiana-based.

I'm pretty sure that no one has really talked to the workers about their future and when they claim to speak for the workers, they barely even speak for companies in Louisiana. Most of the companies that make up the Louisiana Mid Continental oil and Gas Association aren't even in the United States, much less Louisiana. There's Shell, not even in the United States. There's Hilcorp, Texas petroleum, there's a lot of companies based in Houston, and some based in Dallas.

And yet, by promulgating the predominant framing of the oil and gas industry as a target of federal climate policies proposed by Democrats, industrial actors and their political allies have constructed a narrative that positions Louisianans as the inadvertent victims of these policies. This portrayal simplifies and essentializes the identities of Louisianans, reducing them to being synonymous with the oil and gas industry, and simultaneously humanizes the industry.

1.3.2. Leveraging the Cajun identity for public support

Lori Leblanc, a prominent lobbyist for the industry, takes this rhetoric a step further by appealing to the Cajun identity of many industry workers and reappropriating this cultural heritage for the industry itself.

⁸⁸ Lori Leblanc, GEST, Lafourche Parish president, *ibid*.

⁸⁹ Interview Patrick, environmental advocacy organization. Telephone, 21.02.17

⁹⁰ Interview Justin, environmental lawyer. Zoom, 21.03.04

⁹¹ Interview Patrick, environmental advocacy organization. Telephone, 21.02.17

They build our precious wetlands, and they sustain our unique cultural heritage for many generations to come. This has now become about survival of our Cajun culture. This is our very own – I would like to say - Cajun environmental justice movement to protect and ensure the sustainability of our culture. (...) We urge the president to come to Louisiana, eat the crawfish in Crowley, the jambalaya in Jeanerette, and the gumbo in Golden Meadow. And then he can see for himself how Louisiana can balance between being an energy state and an environmental treasure.⁹²

Exploiting the Cajun identity and distorting the concept of environmental justice in this way enables the industry to further position itself as an ally to Southern Louisianans whose livelihoods and identities rest on their experience of their natural environment. For local researcher Benjamin, the oil and gas industry has deeply influenced identity in the southern parts, notably because it has “broadened horizons for people in Cajun country” by “breaking the insularity of Cajundom.”⁹³ As we have previously discussed, the industry has not only provided economic opportunities for Cajuns to preserve their traditional ways of life in the bayous but has also allowed them to earn a living. This interplay between identity and industry enables the oil and gas sector to leverage public support, as it capitalizes on the interconnectedness and dual nature of Cajun identity. As local journalist Christopher remarks, “People who live down the road⁹⁴, if they’re not in the fishing industry, odds are, they’re connected to oil and gas somehow.” He notes that these strong ties lead them to support the industry and wish for its preservation, “people want to stay put because having the oil and gas industry around there creates a lot of secondary jobs. Restaurants serve the people who work the oilrigs when they come in, restaurants serve the refinery contractors who do maintenance work, or even landscaping or whatever.”⁹⁵ Designed to maintain power, such legitimization of extractivist activities cements a culturally grounded collective energy identity, premised on its connection to the Cajun heritage.

2. Pipelines of power: the effect of oil culture on institutions

⁹² Lori Leblanc, GEST, Lafourche Parish president, Joint Natural Resources Committee Hearing on Biden Executive Orders. House and Senate Natural Resources and Environment committees, Louisiana State Legislature, Baton Rouge, 21.02.10

⁹³ Interview Benjamin, local researcher. Zoom, 20.08.28

⁹⁴ “Living down the road” refers to those communities that live in the southern parts of the coastal parishes, nearest to the Gulf of Mexico. It is often associated with the Cajun lifestyle.

⁹⁵ Interview Christopher, local journalist. Telephone, 20.08.20

The first part of this chapter has examined the political narratives seeking to secure public support for extractivist industry practices. In this section, I look into the effects of *oil culture* on policy processes, practices and institutions. The political hegemony of industry and its influence over the State's economic trajectory has crystallized the dependence of governments on a declining industry and has unmistakably weakened institutional capacity. At the State level, the predominance of energy interests has hindered the development of effective and comprehensive environmental and climate adaptation programs; while at the parish level, it has thwarted the ability of governments to carry out public services and provide adaptation assistance.

2.1. Who pays the bills? Embedding industry interests in politics

Energy corporations have yielded significant political power in American politics for decades (Powell, 2011; Geary, 2019). At the federal level, a recent study has shown that fossil fuel companies financially reward legislators who vote against environmental policies, empirically substantiating the back-room political power of Big Oil on legislation (Goldberg et al., 2020). In Louisiana too, the fossil fuels industry has benefited from overwhelming political support and a history of state corruption by powerful interest groups (Parent, 2006). According to the Open Secrets organization which references campaign donations to elected officials, Louisiana Congress members have received millions of dollars from oil and gas companies, positioning the sector in the top 3 largest donating industries in 2022 with a total of \$1,3 billion spent on parties and elected officials (Open Secrets, 2022c, 2023). In fact, all speakers that have been explicitly vocal against federal climate policies during this fieldwork have been funded by major oil and gas corporations and lobbies, including the Louisiana Oil and Gas Association which has also aligned its defenses on those of Republican elected officials (see Boxes 3 and 4). The list of Louisiana legislators funded by the industry includes, at the federal level, Mary Landrieu, the Democrat who brokered the GOMESA deal⁹⁶, having received more than \$1,700,000 during her time in office; and Republican Bill Cassidy, recipient of a similar sum and who has been very vocal about defending

⁹⁶ GOMESA is a federal oil and gas sharing program enacted in 2006 which the State of Louisiana uses to fund coastal restoration programs. At the discursive level, it is also a cornerstone of political rhetoric to justify the safeguard of industry practices and position individual companies as “saviors” of the coast (see section 3 of [Chapter 4](#)).

the industry from federal climate policies (Open Secrets, 2023). This section examines these power dynamics between political elites and industry.

Box 3. - The rhetoric lobbying effort of the fossil fuel industry in the United States

The fossil fuel sector continues to exert considerable political influence on climate policies, all the while resisting an energy transition and reluctantly diversifying its activities (Green et al., 2022; Gupta, 2021). Investigative research and journalism have shown that, despite knowing about the climate impacts of their activities as early as the 1970s, major corporations have attempted to preserve their current economic models by discrediting climate science and misleading the public (Correia, 2021; Supran et al., 2023).

Although Glen Lyons, the regulatory and policy advisory for ExxonMobil reaffirmed the oil giant's commitment to climate change and the Paris agreement during a meeting of Louisiana's Climate Initiatives Task Force⁹⁷, investigations have found that the company has long been funding anti-climate change lobbying and the spread of climate denial through lobbies and think tanks such as the Heritage foundation, the Cato Institute and the American Enterprise Institute, amongst others (Adam, 2009; Powell, 2011). The "most profitable company in the history of the world" has used the same tactics as the tobacco industry to fund climate denialism, continuing its attacks on climate science even when other energy companies had backed down (Powell, 2011:11; McCright and Dunlap, 2011b; Supran and Oreskes, 2021). Despite having taken an interest in solar energy earlier than ExxonMobil, BP has historically engaged in similar discursive framing to individualize responsibility for climate change to successfully rebrand the industry's role and evade policies, including the co-optation of the "carbon footprint" concept (Supran and Oreskes, 2021; Munoz, 2023; Solnit, 2021; Kaufman, 2021).

These discursive strategies exist in parallel to corporations' massive lobbying efforts on the national scale, with Louisiana's largest oil companies – ConocoPhillips, ExxonMobil, Chevron, Shell, BP and Phillips 66 – together having spent more than \$37,000,000 in lobbying donations to elected officials in 2022 – more than likely to legislators in opposition to environmental policies (Open Secrets, 2022c; Goldberg et al., 2020). In fact, within Louisiana's congress itself, Republican Representatives and State Senators Orgeron, McCormick, Schamerhorn, Devilier, Schexnayder, Coussan, Bourriaque and Graves⁹⁸, amongst others, have been vehemently opposed to federal climate policies during this electoral cycle. They have also received campaign donations from major oil and gas companies and lobbies, including the Louisiana oil and gas association, Phillips 66, Chevron and ExxonMobil, to name a few, further supporting the findings of Goldberg et al. (2020) on Big Oil's funding of anti-environmental policy legislators (Open Secrets, 2022c; 2023).

2.1.1. Making ties with Big Oil

⁹⁷ Climate Initiatives Task Force Mining, Oil, and Gas Committee meeting 1, Governor's Office of Coastal Activities, Zoom, 20.12.15

⁹⁸ Garrett Graves is also the former chairman of the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA), the State's environmental agency.

During the House and Senate meeting in opposition to President Biden’s leasing moratorium – the most significant example of the overt ties between corporations and politicians -, Tyler Gray of the industry group the Louisiana Mid-Continent Oil and Gas Association (LMOGA) and Chairman Representative Jean-Paul Coussan, who has received campaign donations from Chevron, Cheniere Energy, the Louisiana Oil and Gas Association and Koch Industries (Open Secrets, 2019), gave quasi-identical speeches in defense of the energy industry. These discourses testify of the shared political interest between private and public actors and their political coordination on the legislative front. As one lifelong Louisianan environmental activist explains, “The oil and gas industry has made sure they are in a key position within government agencies, or that the elected officials are their men or women.”⁹⁹ State Senator Orgeron – who has received campaign donations from Exxon Mobil and Phillips 66 (Open Secrets, 2021), for example, presented a bill urging President Biden’s administration to lift its pause on offshore oil and gas leasing¹⁰⁰. Noting his fine knowledge of the sector because he had “worked in the oil and gas industry for twenty years in my adult life”, he expresses his disapproval of any federal constraints on their economic activities. The vigorous political and cultural resistance against a move away from an extractivist Dominant Social Paradigm, evidenced by the immense public and corporate backlash against any federal policy which threatens the oil and gas industry, testifies of the difficulties of envisioning a true paradigm shift. As Shafer (2006:127) reminds us, “If a competing paradigm threatens the interests of ruling elites, it will be vigorously resisted in a struggle for hegemony”¹⁰¹.

⁹⁹ Interview Daniel, biologist and lifelong environmental activist. Telephone, 21.03.03

¹⁰⁰ Senator Orgeron presents his bill as “Talking about offshore oil and gas supporting many, many Louisiana jobs, supporting Louisiana’s economy, Louisiana in this supporting the nation, from energy dependent, to energy independent, to energy dominant. It also talks about GOMESA, how in order to fund our coastal restoration efforts, coastal resiliency efforts, we rely on those royalties.” Senate Natural Resources and Environment committee, Louisiana State Senate, Baton Rouge, 21.06.01.

¹⁰¹ It could be argued, however, that changes may be incremental rather than sudden junctures to end extractivist practices – as could signal the creation of the Climate Initiatives Task Force by Governor Edwards in 2020. For interview respondents however, there are little signs of hope that Louisiana would abandon its extractivist economy. With Republicans reentering the gubernatorial office in 2023, it is unlikely that efforts made towards combatting climate change would continue. In fact, the newly elected Republican Governor Jeff Landry and has already expressed his support for the free market against President Biden’s push for the renewable sector, and his desire to expand the fossil fuel industry against the “hoax” of climate change (Office of the Governor, 2024; Jones, 2024). The struggle noted by Shafer (2006) is evidenced by the pushback from Landry against the progress made by his predecessor, to ensure the perennity of the energy sector in Louisiana’s future.

Such struggle has been repeatedly observed during fieldwork whenever looming federal climate policies threatened oil and gas production. Blatant concern for the preservation of extractivism as an economic model for the State, and the presence of energy lobbyists recurrently observed in meetings and everyday political life (including State and parish level legislative), substantiate findings on the immense lobbying efforts of oil and gas companies for US legislators. Totalling a whopping \$125 million dollars in 2020, ConocoPhillips, ExxonMobil, Chevron, BP and Shell are placed in the top 10 biggest donors (Open Secrets, 2022c). In Louisiana too, the industry's hegemonic interests appear to dominate the political agenda across various instances of decision-making.

The manifestation of this alleged capture of government processes is apparent at the local level in explicit discursive defense of industry interests, or in policy decisions including oil and gas developments. While fossil fuels may not be extensively discussed in Plaquemines' council meetings compared to other parishes, the frequent issuance of building permits to oil and gas companies and the consistent abstention of certain elected officials to vote make evident the ties between elected officials and industry. On the Plaquemines council sit William Beau Black employed by Shell Oil as a security advisor, Mark Cognevich employed by a company specialized in oil clean-ups and whose boards of directors is composed of big oil and gas companies such as Shell, BP and Chevron; or Trudy Newberry whose husband services oil wells (Bridges, 2018). These ties reflect the wider context of Big Oil's influence on political processes and anti-climate policies in Louisiana and the United States (Parent, 2006; Franta, 2022).

In Lafourche Parish, councilmembers have adamantly defended the industry against coastal lawsuits targeting companies, made to address the damages done by industry activities to the coast (see Box 5). The council meeting room filled with smiles and joyful banter between local elected officials and oil and gas representatives as the floor opened to their testimonies. Lobbyists rapidly started invoking the indispensability of oil and gas for the local community in outbursts of dramatic storytelling, drawing on narratives of their vitality to *jobs* and *coastal restoration* and framing the lawsuits as a direct attack on Lafourche and Terrebonne residents.

The revenues from the oil and gas industry are critical to Lafourche Parish, as you all know, when you consider 9 out of the top 10 taxpayers are tied to the oil and gas industry. (...) In the wake of Hurricane Ida, the plaintiff attorneys are working on this scheme (*i.e. the coastal lawsuits*) while our members (*i.e. energy companies members of the Louisiana Mid-Continent Oil and Gas Association*) stepped up and contributed over \$10M in local relief

efforts, hundreds of thousands gallons of fuel and countless volunteer hours to help our friends and our neighbors get back on their feet. This resolution puts all of these jobs, these revenues and critical coastal restoration projects at risk.¹⁰²

One of the places we have the strongest support for people in this industry is Lafourche Parish and Terrebonne Parish. The people of Lafourche and Terrebonne, as you all know – many of you have participated in events we’ve done over the years – and parish president and Senator Fesi have been very supportive. The people in this parish believe in the industry. They believe in it more than anybody else in Louisiana.¹⁰³

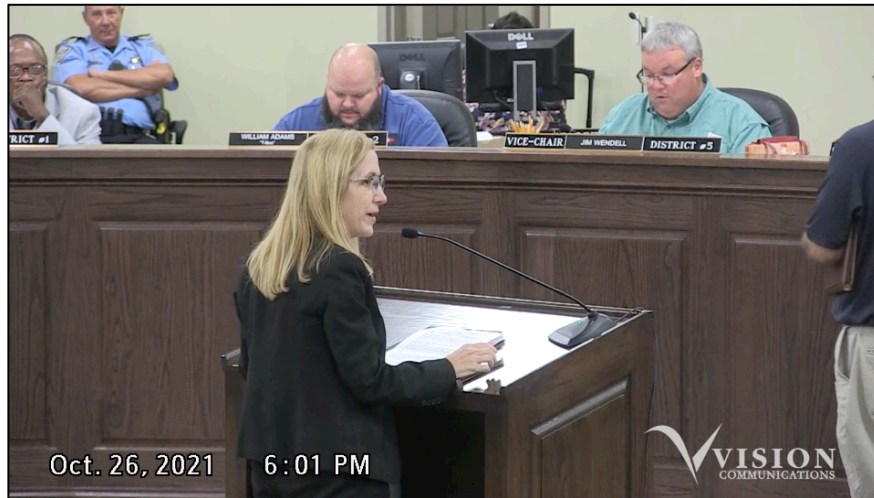


Photo 4. - Oil and gas lobbyist Lori Leblanc speaking before the Lafourche Parish council

“Well said, thank you”, responds Lafourche Parish councilmember and chairman Autin to one of the testimonies, displaying his explicitly support for the industry’s claims. The growing frustration among councilmembers starts to resound through their statements. Visibly irritated, councilmember Adams exclaims, “It’s exactly like a [law]suit, and we don’t sue oil companies”, before putting his microphone away in a swift hand motion. Building on this sentiment, Parish President Archie Chaisson declares his vehement opposition to oil lawsuits, noting that he’s been accused of corruption by the Louisiana Bucket Brigade, a local environmental organization. He retorts, “If there’s anybody in the room right now doing this for the right reasons, it’s me, because I haven’t been paid for by nobody.” Resounding against his claims of impartiality, some elected officials explicitly acknowledged their links to the industry during that same meeting: Republican

¹⁰² Lori Leblanc, LMOGA, Lafourche Parish council meeting, Mathews, 21.10.26. Also on Photo 4.

¹⁰³ Marc Ehrhardt, executive director of the energy industry advocacy group Grow Louisiana Coalition, Lafourche Parish council meeting, Mathews, 21.10.26.

State Senator Fesi proudly admitted to being “in the pipeline business”, councilmember Lorraine recollected his past work in the oil fields, or councilmember Gros recognized his many friends in the oil and gas industry. Everyone is linked to the industry, have argued many of my respondents, testifying of the extent to which *oil culture* has embedded the political field. After a lengthy session of expressed commitment to fossil fuels, council Chairman Autin concluded that he’d like for an ordinance to be drafted to prevent future resolutions against the industry to be brought to the council. In a display of empathy, he remarked that he “feels for Chett”, the executive director of the Greater Lafourche Port Commission which governs Port Fourchon, Louisiana’s main oil and gas base situated in Lafourche.

2.1.2. Bullying and power dynamics in politics

All throughout these observations, the expression of explicit ties between politicians and industry is barely masked. The rapid growth of the industry in the early 20th century entrenched political corruption in Louisiana at all levels of governance (Parent, 2006).

Louisiana politics and corruption are almost synonymous. That is at every level of abstraction that I have come into contact with; local, state, it doesn’t matter. There is a lot of corruption. Oil and gas has so much money involved in it, that every time you have more money and power ties up, you’re going to have more corruption.¹⁰⁴

The day Huey Long¹⁰⁵ was assassinated, is the day that oil and gas climbed on top of the heads of the Louisiana political system. From that on, you've had oil and gas really pushing the politics of Louisiana. And those guys still walk around, and they bully everybody in Baton Rouge. If you don't do exactly what oil and gas wants... They come after you. And there's no compromise, there's no reason. It's all a political exercise of power. That has really driven a lot of the policies is to be oil and gas friendly.¹⁰⁶

In my opinion, they've been the bully in the playground. I don't think that they care about anything but their financial bottom line.¹⁰⁷

They donate a lot of money to legislators; they do a lot of lobbying. Sometimes, they’re only people who the legislators are hearing from, it’s not like you have wind or solar people walking around the capital talking to legislators constantly. Legislators are very much in the

¹⁰⁴ Interview Victoria, local research. Zoom, 20.11.09

¹⁰⁵ Huey Long was Governor of Louisiana from 1928 to 1932 and was subsequently elected as a US Senator. During his time in the gubernatorial office, the Democrat challenged the industry’s influence over Louisianan politics, and sought to fight big corporations’ power over policies and regulations.

¹⁰⁶ Interview Justin, environmental lawyer. Zoom, 21.03.04

¹⁰⁷ Interview Hannah, climate policy advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.22

bag of oil and gas. They kind of have to keep passing policies that keep us fossil-fuel dependent.¹⁰⁸

This “bullying” exercised by energy lobbyists, noted by many respondents involved in environmental advocacy, creates an imbalance in political power among diverse stakeholders. The structure of interest group mobilization in politics has privileged for-profit businesses in their capacity to influence policy (Stone, 2002). Lobbying can thus be conceptualized as a form of legislative subsidy for selected decisionmakers who already share their interests, being “akin more to a gift than a trade” (Hall and Deardorff, 2006:72). Echoing what environmental non-profit policy director Lauren has observed in her experience at the state level, one councilmember from Terrebonne Parish remarks that the council does indeed prioritize communication with oil and gas companies rather than with environmental groups, who according to him, tend to focus more on federal and state politics¹⁰⁹. As a result, this direct line to politicians has enabled industry actors to assert the satisfaction of their interests within the governance apparatus by capturing regulatory processes.

They get things passed and they capture our government. Many of the regulatory problems we're having now, is a result of oil and gas structuring it in such a way as to create the regulatory problem. I mean, right now they're causing all this land loss and still no one is saying “you can't do that”. But the policy is, (*he mimics*) energy independence is our national interest.¹¹⁰

One of the big levee districts, which includes the city of New Orleans, filed a suit against the oil industries, or oil companies, for accelerating land loss. And they fought back through the governor, through the head of the Coastal protection agency (CPRA) and they claim these suits were illegal and unfounded. And the governor revamped the board of director of this levee district in retaliation. That was because the governor was very beholden to the oil companies and didn't want this kind of suit. They always say, “Well, the oil companies will leave”. But they're not going anywhere! (He *laughs*). That was one indication of the power of oil companies.¹¹¹

Environmental groups have expressed difficulties in countering the industry's influence on politicians, despite the activism of certain communities like those rallied against petrochemical

¹⁰⁸ Interview Lauren, coastal restoration advocacy group. Telephone, 21.02.23

¹⁰⁹ Interview William, Terrebonne Parish council. Telephone, 21.05.12

¹¹⁰ Interview Justin, environmental lawyer. Zoom, 21.03.04

¹¹¹ Interview Benjamin, local researcher. Zoom, 20.08.28

companies in Cancer Alley¹¹². Environmental attorney Justin argues that the inadequate oversight of the environmental consequences of the oil and gas industry is directly connected to the considerable influence that this sector wields over government agencies, particularly the Department of Natural Resources, which Justin asserts “is basically owned by the oil and gas industry”¹¹³. This results in weak enforcement of environmental regulations, insufficient funding and staffing for regulatory agencies, and a lack of legal requirements for the industry to account for issues related to subsidence. He remarks, “industry, particularly on the exploration side, has been able to exempt themselves from so many of these rules that would otherwise apply”, noting a roll-back in industry regulations under the Trump administration, especially the Clean Air Act. Corroborating these remarks, observations have made clear the encroachment of oil and gas lobbyists at all levels of governance, whether at the state Climate Initiatives Task Force, the Governor’s coastal advisory commission, or within local council meetings. For environmental groups, the political power of oil and gas has rendered advocacy immensely difficult.

It's kind of like our government is a hill. And we're pushing a very seriously large walk up the hill, the NGOs. And the oil and gas industry is pushing in the opposite direction. And we're on a hill because they've already captured the government. It's not a level playing field. It's also a war of beliefs and where non-truths pervade. The hill gets steeper, because political interests come into power, parties come into power who were more responsive to oil and gas, or who just don't care.¹¹⁴

Personally, if I get to the legislators, I see their lobbyists there a lot. It's obvious that they're very present and always making comments. I don't know but I'm assuming they're making a lot of donations. Those are the main places that I'd see them affecting action.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Louisiana’s “Cancer Alley” is a 137 km-long strip of over 200 heavy petrochemical industries along the Mississippi River, between Baton Rouge and New Orleans (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Residents and activists have found some success, for example in shutting down the construction of the Formosa plastics facility. Yet, as their fight against multinational corporations continues, the industry’s giants have fought back, creating the Industry sustainability council composed of sixty companies (including Chevron, Dow, ExxonMobil) to safeguard economic activities in the area. Their activities include “informing” and “educating” the public on these issues, promoting technologies for reducing carbon emissions, and overt support for political candidates and parish officials to provide them with “information necessary to make decisions” (Radtke, 2023). It is also worth noting that despite a judge’s ruling to revoke the permit of Formosa Plastics, the company has announced that it still intends to build its petrochemical plant in Louisiana (Volcovici, 2022).

¹¹³ Interview Justin, environmental lawyer. Zoom, 21.03.04

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Interview Lauren, coastal restoration advocacy group. Telephone, 21.02.23

They are the most powerful lobby in the state. A lot of legislators work for petrochemical companies or work for law firms that service them. It's just a very strong political nexus, there.¹¹⁶

Unfortunately, because these large corporations have sighted themselves in communities who have been ignored for generations, [community voices] aren't the voices that are heard when it comes to legislation. The voices that are heard are the ones with lobbyists, and those are not the communities that are impacted.¹¹⁷

Behind closed doors, the overwhelming political power of oil and gas is acknowledged by some policy actors. Upon discussing the prominent role afforded to industry actors within the state's Climate Initiatives Task Force, a policy advisor of the State of Louisiana admits to the power differential between corporations and the Governor himself, which explains his decision to give them an important voice in the making of climate policies.

We know that we cannot get anything past if everybody's not on board. Basically, the big industries can shut something down if they don't like it. They do have a lot more influence in the legislature than the Governor would like. He wishes he had that much, I think.¹¹⁸

The Governor's heart is in the right place, but he hasn't quite mastered what he wants to do given the fact that his legislature is overwhelmingly Republican and he's Democrat, and overwhelmingly beholden to and supportive of the petrochemical industry. I think he's looking to the Climate task force to come up with solutions for him. I think he recognizes the problem is real. But at the same time, he wants jobs in the state. That's why his departments continue to approve these horrible things like Formosa^{119, 120}.

The governor, I do believe, is genuine in his desire to protect this state and protect people who live in this state. I think the difficulty is acknowledging the influence of money that has come, not just within our state, but from these multinational corporations.¹²¹

More than that, it appears the overwhelming influence of the petrochemical industry within decision-making processes has curbed the Governor's ability to impulse change in environmental policy. Capturing various levels of governance and institutions, oil and gas interests effectively sway the state's ambitions with regards to climate change. As will be later argued in this thesis,

¹¹⁶ Interview Anthony, climate advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.03.21

¹¹⁷ Interview Stephanie, renewable energy advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.08

¹¹⁸ Interview Timothy, State of Louisiana government. Zoom, 21.03.01

¹¹⁹ Formosa Plastics is a controversial petrochemical company that has been blocked by a judge's ruling revoking their permitting for a new plant in Louisiana because of its potential violation of federal air standards. Considered extremely polluting, it has been vehemently resisted by local environmental groups and marginalized communities (Volcovici, 2022). See footnote 112.

¹²⁰ Interview Anthony, climate advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.03.21

¹²¹ Interview Stephanie, renewable energy advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.08

this “unshaken” and “unshakable” hold on the status quo has impeded social and political change necessary for the recognition of climate and social vulnerabilities, future climate risks, and holistic policies for climate adaptation.

2.1.3. The perceived victimhood of economic elites

During meetings in the Senate and the House on President Biden’s orders to halt oil and gas leases in the Gulf of Mexico, the conceptualization of the climate problem appears solely focused on greenhouse gas emissions, disregarding its human and non-human impacts. Republican Representative Garret Graves – who served as chairman of the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) and has received more than \$850,000 in campaign contributions from oil and gas companies in his career (Open Secrets, 2022d) – draws on this conceptualization to promote carbon capture technologies. He engages in the common Republican narrative which identifies emissions, rather than fossil fuels, as the main cause of climate change.

This reasoning effectively targets consumption rather than production to prohibit structural change, furthering the framing of climate change as an individual consumer issue (Supran and Oreskes, 2021; Smerecnik and Renegar, 2010). He states, “Many people have identified oil and gas, what we have in Louisiana, as the enemy. The reality is, it’s the emissions that are causing the problem, and many people in the Biden Administration can’t separate that.”¹²² Portraying corporations as passive suppliers of fossil fuels, elected officials have voiced their opposition to federal regulations by drawing on the lexical field of *death*, arguing that they would “kill the industry”, result in “chopping up the needs of the industry”, and even “put us into a death spiral”.

The general population has endorsed the concept of too many regulations and [the belief that] if we didn’t have all these regulations, we’d have more jobs. The public believes that. And since they believe that, the politicians feel comfortable saying things in public like, we want to help business thrive so we don’t want any more regulations.¹²³

Congressman Higgins goes further by using the concept of “radicality” to describe President Biden’s policies, arguing that “If fully enacted, the radical Biden climate agenda will cost upwards of 6 million American jobs. This is real number, that’s frightening.” Although he conceded in a

¹²² Joint Natural Resources Committee Hearing on Biden Executive Orders. House and Senate Natural Resources and Environment committees, Louisiana State Legislature, Baton Rouge, 21.02.10

¹²³ Interview Daniel, biologist and lifelong environmental activist. Telephone, 21.03.03

later exchange with Congressman Devilliers that President Biden is “not a radical communist”, the employment of politically divisive terms enables them to politicize the debate along popular lines of controversy and ideological discord. Their discourse delegitimizes their opponents by implying they are threats to American values of democracy and individual freedoms. Framing climate policy through these discursive devices also enables the Republican party to appear moderate, rational and objective, in the face of what is perceived as an extreme menace. As Bernstein (2001:268) explains, “the supporters of “free market” environmentalism seem to misunderstand many of the compatibilities of current formulations of sustainable development with their position, thus they set up any environmental intervention as a target for attack.” Opposing carbon taxation or renewable energies by implying it would strangle the industry constitutes, in this sense, a form of climate denialism (Jacques and Knox, 2016). Such discourses equating environmental regulations with the loss of industry and a tragedy for Louisiana are omnipresent in political spheres, but according to activist Colette Pichon-Battle, they reflect a lack of consideration for the health and safety issues faced by affected communities.

In addition to the global climate crisis that we’re continuing to contribute to at a higher rate than the national average, our people are sick. Our communities are dying. So, the choice is: do we lose the jobs that are harming and making communities sick? The answer should and could be at least evaluated, as “yes, we should let them go”.¹²⁴

For some environmental activists, the real obstacle to a stronger economy thus lies in recognizing that the oil and gas industry, considered “a vestige of our past”, continues to define Louisiana's identity despite the state no longer being dependent on it¹²⁵. Policy analyst Stephanie remarks that when elected officials “who are very much beholden to those sectors” feel threatened by federal climate policies, they “lose their minds” and contend that the state would declare bankruptcy should President Biden continue his policies¹²⁶. These narratives perpetuate the idea among the

¹²⁴ Colette Pichon-Battle, Gulf Coast Center for Law & Policy, Climate Initiatives Task Force meeting 6, Governor’s Office of Coastal Activities, Baton Rouge, 21.07.29

¹²⁵ Interview Stephanie, renewable energy advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.08

¹²⁶ It should be noted that President Biden’s pause on oil and gas leases in the Gulf of Mexico has since been lifted. The executive order was challenged by the State of Louisiana and others in federal courts and extensively contested by various policy and industry actors during this field work. As of March 2023, the federal government has opened more than 73 million acres of federal waters for leasing sales from oil and gas companies. This change in policy is attributed to the negotiations of the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 between Democrats and Republicans, during which Senator Manchin of West Virginia required new oil and gas leases to be authorized (Chappell and Brady, 2023).

public that “the development of actual protective measures means that this other thing will end”, and discursively oppose environmental policy to the wellbeing of the state. As Jacques and Knox (2016:846) remind, this political backlash and the promulgation of dominant narratives about safeguarding the industry emanates from the dominant neoliberal social paradigm.

The authors continue, “Opposition to renewable energy, energy taxes, and a fear of government overreach and abuse of power are all seated in a rearguard ‘immortality project’ meant to protect a specific ontological identity rooted in Western, and specifically US, power and dominance extended through a neoliberal world order, which climate change denial broadcasters deeply internalize”. This deep internalization radiates throughout the Louisianan political class at both levels of governance and legitimizes their opposition to federal regulations against industrial activities and absolve their responsibility for climate change. On a larger scale, this included anti-climate policy lobbying, climate denial funding, and a communications and policy strategy individualizing the responsibility to address climate change (communicating on individual-level carbon footprints, policies targeting consumer responsibility over systemic responsibility...) which obscures the need for structural and social change (Supran and Oreskes, 2021; Solnit, 2021; Kaufman, 2021).

Box 4. - Fossil fuels versus renewable energies: securing the Dominant Social Paradigm

The fear of “cannibalizing” the industry with renewable energies is evidenced by the continued public support for fossil-fuel based economies, and the political reluctance to embrace renewable energies. “All of us in this room, including myself, have friends and family who work in the oil and gas industry. This is an issue that we’re really going to grapple with”, argued a representative of the Sierra Club Louisiana during a congressional hearing¹²⁷. Wishing to reassure the legislators, he continued, challenged by the roaring commotion in the room as he spoke of climate change and energy transition. “We are not talking about putting oil industry out of business. I think there will be a place for oil industry. But to reduce emissions, we’re going to need to transition away from fossil fuels.” Within the state legislative sphere as well as at the local level, discourses on the supposed inability of non-fossil fuels to keep up with the demand perpetuate the framing of oil and gas as indispensable, and a pillar of Louisiana.

Bending the truth about the actual reasons for the Texas grid freeze in 2021 – in reality caused by the inability of the natural gas and electrical infrastructures to perform in freezing temperatures and the unwillingness of oil and gas players to sacrifice profits by connecting the Texan grid to others in the

This shift exemplifies the important links between oil and gas interests and the Republican politicians that work to secure them. It also suggests that both State and Federal governments are beholden to these interests.

¹²⁷ House Natural Resources and Environment committee, Louisiana House of Representatives, Baton Rouge, 21.04.28.

country (Cai et al., 2022; Buchele, 2023) – state representatives McCormick and Schamerhorn¹²⁸ both frame renewables as the principal cause of rolling blackouts and a liability to residents’ safety in contexts of high climate risk, absolving the energy industry’s role in the crisis.

REP. MCCORMICK. Renewable energies are not dependable, we learned that during the last freeze, we had the rolling blackouts.

REP. SCHAMERHORN. I agree with you. We’re rich in oil and gas. The (Biden) administration today is trying to go Green with everything, and I agree with what you said, the freeze that we had shut it all down. Even in Texas, as big an oil and gas state as they are, they’re trying to go Green with windmills and stuff like that, and they froze.¹²⁹

“It’s like they’re operating on blind faith and just moving in this religious direction of renewable energies without thinking practically about how you do it”, even argued state representative Frieman in another legislative meeting of the House¹³⁰. The political movement towards renewables energies is framed as irrational and subjective by drawing on the language of faith and religion to discredit its proponents –the Biden administration and the Democratic party. It echoes the dismissive attitude of techno-optimists regarding environmentalists’ skepticism of a “big-tech future” for the climate crisis, seen by proponents as a lack of rationality towards uncritically accepted technological salvation. “In other words, there is no plausible future scenario in their thinking that allows for a low energy/electricity future energy pathway.” (Barry, 2016: 112-113).

In another discursive attempt to bring the debate into one of partisan ideology, US Congressman Garrett Graves, previously at the head of the CPRA and who has received over \$850,000 in donations from energy corporations in his career (Open Secrets, 2022d), argues that federal climate policies are “virtue signaling” designed to promote what he calls a “unicorn objective”. He referred to decarbonization and energy transition by reframing federal policies along economic interests and partisan lines.

I don’t think they’re truly thinking about what the outcome is economically. This ideology that many folks on the more liberal side have, I think they believe that this is the right thing, but they’re looking at this “unicorn objective” and not thinking about the practical implications or the steps to get there.¹³¹

Undermining the credibility of proposed policies, this framing supposes that they are based on dogma or ideology, rather than scientific evidence. It also suggests that such policies are not objectively evaluating the merits of moving away from a fossil-fuel based economy, and as such, are biased in their assessment of the oil and gas industry’s role in the climate crisis. These discursive framing of climate change is inscribed in a history of American climate denialism funded and promulgated by conservatives and energy corporations on a national scale, which has fueled polarization along partisan lines by framing climate change as a Democrat hoax (Powell, 2011). For one activist, these frames compose a larger rhetoric trend

¹²⁸ Both representatives McCormick and Schamerhorn have received campaign donations from major oil and gas corporations, including Phillips 66 and ExxonMobil (Open Secrets, 2022b; 2022e).

¹²⁹ House Natural Resources and Environment committee, Louisiana House of Representatives, Baton Rouge, 21.04.28.

¹³⁰ Joint Natural Resources Committee Hearing on Biden Executive Orders. House and Senate Natural Resources and Environment committees, Louisiana State Legislature, Baton Rouge, 21.02.10

¹³¹ Ibid.

by elected officials to discredit renewables and frame fossil fuels as the only credible option for Louisianans and Americans.

It really is about communication as storytelling. Senator Kennedy, who is one of the Louisiana senators, last week referred to things like solar and wind as “unicorn urine”. That is a communication strategy that says that the only thing that is real is the black stuff you pump out of the ground.¹³²

As Wilson et al. (2017) remind us, the biggest challenge of moving away from fossil fuels will not be to find new forms of energy, but to politically and socially transition the values and practices that have sustained petrocultures.

2.1.4. Tackling accountability

For local journalist Ethan, allegiance to industry is very strongly associated with partisan affiliation, which mediates attitudes on issues like COVID, climate change, and the coastal lawsuits (Box 5).

There’s even legislation right now to throw out these lawsuits that parishes have filed - it’s done by a Republican from here [Terrebonne Parish]. Republicans down here are not for this suing oil and gas companies. You’re red or blue, and that’s how you see things, unfortunately.¹³³

Political support for the industry against the lawsuits is evidenced, for example, by the adoption of a bill in May 2020 by the Louisiana State Senate, which prevents parish governments from suing oil and gas companies. State Senator Hensgens, the sponsor of the bill and received of campaign donations by Chevron, Cheniere Energy and Atmos Energy (Open Secrets, 2022a), defended his position. “This (bill) was introduced due to a troubling number of lawsuits by local governments”, the Senator argued (Bridges, 2020). In using the term “troubling”, he signaled that local government instigations against private corporations are abnormal, unsettling and undesirable. Echoing the dominant framing of coastal land loss as the product of the leveeing the Mississippi River (Chapter 5), State Senator Fesi of Houma (Terrebonne) further defended the idea that oil and gas companies were not responsible for land loss and had in fact spent “millions and millions of dollars on restoration”, a point vehemently refuted by many environmental groups¹³⁴.

¹³² Interview Stephanie, renewable energy advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.08. The “unicorn urine” catch phrase is one that Senator Kennedy has used to discredit Democrat climate policies (see Fox News reporting, Keene, 2022).

¹³³ Interview Ethan, local Terrebonne journalist. Telephone, 20.08.30

¹³⁴ See the framing used by oil and gas companies in section 3 of [Chapter 4](#).

Before the Lafourche Parish council, the Senator reiterated his denial of the role of industry in the coastal crisis.

To blame oil companies for land loss... We need to go all the way back to 1920 when they leveed the Mississippi off. That's what's not explained here [in the lawsuit]. When we stopped the Mississippi River from going down Bayou Lafourche, we killed our whole land, marshes and everything. When I was a kid going over the Leeville bridge, they had cattle grazing on both sides. Oil companies had nothing to do with that washing away. So, we're sitting here barking up the wrong tree, on who to blame it on, when every one of these oil companies got permits, it was all legal, they didn't do anything wrong.¹³⁵

“But the reason they weren't required to [address coastal damages] then, is because they owned everybody. They still own everybody”, argues Justin, an environmental lawyer.¹³⁶

Box 5. - The controversial oil and gas lawsuits in coastal Louisiana

Forty-two lawsuits have been filed in Plaquemines, Jefferson, St Bernard, St John the Baptist, Vermilion and Cameron parishes since 2012. The lawsuits are targeting more than 200 energy companies for their role in accelerating land loss and causing damage to the natural environments with canals and industrial activities (Skinner, 2022). Among the three parishes investigated in this research, Plaquemines is the only one to have taken a stand against oil and gas companies, filing suit against giants such as Chevron, ConocoPhillips and ExxonMobil. Terrebonne and Lafourche Parishes have explicitly refused to partake in the coastal lawsuits for fear of driving industry away (McGill, 2023). Reelected on the promise that he would litigate oil companies, Plaquemines councilmember Michael explains that this political stance carries personal risks, given the entrenchment of energy interests among the public. “It’s not a politically popular situation when the oil and gas industry has so much pull through the state. I mean, in my reelection campaign, the amount of anonymous, illegal mailers that are sent out slandering me is unbelievable.”¹³⁷ State senators for Terrebonne and Lafourche Parishes have also voted in favor of bill SB359 which seeks to prevent local parish governments from suing oil companies (Bridges, 2020). As one councilmember has explained, “parishes like Terrebonne are reluctant to engage in the suits because the economy here is very dependent.”¹ These events are inscribed in a longer history of major fossil fuel companies, notably ExxonMobil, Chevron and ConocoPhillips, disavowing accountability for climate change (Supran and Oreskes, 2021).

My observation of political discussions on these issues reveals that the defense of industry practices at the local and state levels is also anchored in the belief that companies are not responsible for coastal land loss and are instead an ally to parishes because their revenues are tied to coastal restoration programs (see Chapter 4). This position has been particularly defended by State Senator Fesi of Terrebonne. As is argued in this thesis, these narratives reflect the grasp of *oil culture* and interests in contemporary environmental politics.

¹³⁵ Senator Fesi, Lafourche Parish council meeting, Mathews, 21.10.26

¹³⁶ Interview Justin, environmental lawyer. Zoom, 21.03.04

¹³⁷ Interview Michael, Plaquemines Parish council. Telephone, 21.07.27



Oil well in a canal, Plaquemines Parish. Source: Sarah Munoz (2022)

This position testifies of the incredible hold of *oil culture* in the dominant perspective relating to environmental damage, its causes and solutions. In fact, “People see [the industry] not a destroyer of nature, but as working with nature because they’re extracting a resource”¹³⁸. In accordance with the extractivist DSP, elected officials have generally ignored, in discourse, the interconnected nature of fossil fuels, climate change and coastal land loss. This explicit and discernable hesitancy of many to openly criticize or incriminate the industry resonates with the belief among decisionmakers and part of the public that oil and gas companies “want to do the right thing, and we’re very happy with that”¹³⁹. According a parish director of coastal restoration, accusations of environmental harm are exaggerated and relate to past activities, which present day companies allegedly don’t engage in anymore. In fact, litigation is unnecessary because “we don’t want to bite the hand that feeds us”. This type of rhetoric in defense of the oil and gas industry is widespread in local and State politics and suggests that Louisiana *needs* oil and gas, instilling the

¹³⁸ Interview Benjamin, local researcher. Zoom, 20.08.28

¹³⁹ Interview Brian, parish director of coastal restoration. Telephone, 21.03.05

fear that further regulations, taxes, and litigation will drive them away¹⁴⁰ (Hochschild, 2016; Supran and Oreskes, 2021).

2.2. The effect of oil and gas dependency on institutional capacity

In proposing a bill to establish Louisiana as a fossil fuel sanctuary state, Representative McCormick raised an important issue in local governance; the complete dependence of local levels of government on oil and gas revenues¹⁴¹. He expressed concern about the ability of local governments to compensate from lost revenues due to federal climate policies, and the public services reliant on these funds. He explained, “In my area, a large portion of our income comes from oil and gas. Our school system, our hospitals. In the little, small town I’m in, there’s an old oil field there, probably a hundred years old. Without that oil field, we wouldn’t have a hospital.”¹⁴² In all three of the parishes under study here, the fossil fuel industry represents a vital source of revenue on which local governments are dependent to carry out adaptation programs, provide disaster assistance, and maintain flood protection infrastructure, amongst others. This economic dependency and the capture of government by industry interests which has locked in this reliance has weakened their institutional capacity.

2.2.1. Grappling with a declining economy

Upon debating the impacts of President Biden’s moratorium on oil and gas leases, Lafourche Parish president Archie Chaisson claimed a reduction in industry activities would result in a 15% revenue loss per year for the parish, representing fifteen million dollars annually¹⁴³. “It’s not just the sheer reduction of revenue based on the offshore vessels and the Port, it’s the trickle-down effect. It’s the hardware stores, it’s our local businesses, it’s the safety stores, it’s the gas stations”, Chaisson argued. In a sorrowful attempt to rally popular opinion in defense of industry, he declared, “it’s the threats to these families and the thousands like them that have kept me up the

¹⁴⁰ Interviews with environmental activists, January-March 2021. Also repeatedly heard during the Full Committee Hearing to Examine Offshore Energy Development, U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, Washington (DC), 21.05.13

¹⁴¹ House Committee on Natural Resources and Environment, Louisiana State Legislature, Baton Rouge, 21.04.28.

¹⁴² House Committee on Natural Resources and Environment, Louisiana State Legislature, Baton Rouge, 21.04.28.

¹⁴³ Joint Natural Resources Committee Hearing on Biden Executive Orders. House and Senate Natural Resources and Environment committees, Louisiana State Legislature, Baton Rouge, 21.02.10

past few weeks”. Despite acknowledging the threat to institutional capacity and, by extension, to the people themselves, political leaders at all levels of government have failed to consider alternatives to this situation of dependency. “The people of Louisiana better realize, and a lot of them do, that oil and gas *is* Louisiana, and without it, our tax base will be devastated”, affirmed Terrebonne Parish president Gordon Dove, drawing on the energy identity imaginary¹⁴⁴.

“Port Fourchon is the bread and butter of Lafourche Parish”, further explained George, a Lafourche councilmember¹⁴⁵. With a sense of pride in his parish’s efforts to develop and rejuvenate the industry despite the current downward economic trend¹⁴⁶, he explained how the government is counting on the development of the Louisiana Offshore Oil Port (LOOP) to further boost the area’s economy. The industry’s decline and its impact on job losses and declining revenues is an immense point of concern for the elected official. With a certain chagrin, he notes, “the main thing down here in this community is oil and gas, and seafood. The only thing that's keeping Fourchon going is deep water drilling. If it wasn't for deep water, we'd be in trouble.” Local political support for the oil and gas industry in the parish can be attributed to the significant reliance of the parish government on the revenues generated by the industry, crucial for funding essential services and infrastructure projects.

There are parishes depend very largely on oil and gas revenues to be able to do anything; pick up the trash, all the stuff they have to do. That’s been the case in Louisiana for a very long time. This unwinding of that relationship is going to be really tough.¹⁴⁷

In some of these parishes, a lot of the major revenues come from oil and gas. But every session of the legislature, they keep having bills to cut the amount of taxes that oil and gas have to pay. If you had oil and gas actually paying taxes, you would have a whole lot more money down there to do work. (...) If GOMESA revenues are low, which they have been for the past few years, it affects the ability of local governments to take care of these things.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Interview George, Lafourche Parish council. Telephone, 20.08.19

¹⁴⁶ At the time of this fieldwork (2020-2022), the oil and gas industry was showing signs of slowing down. Royalties, employment and production have been steadily declining since 2013 (Annex 13). During the State of the Industry meeting of the Louisiana Oil and Gas Association (Zoom, 20.11.16), for example, LOGA President Mike Moncla deplored a substantial financial loss for member companies who “couldn’t sell their barrels” due to the “little drilling going on” at that time, denoting thirty-two sector bankruptcies in Louisiana. He attributed these economic difficulties to taxes, the high price of the barrel, and geopolitics. Similarly, among local government actors, the diminishing activities, royalties and revenues from the oil and gas industry have been repeatedly noted as a point of concern for their local and state economies. See Annex 13 for more data on the decline of oil and gas royalties, production and employment in the State of Louisiana. See Box 1 for a discussion of the economic downturn of the oil and gas industry.

¹⁴⁷ Interview Timothy, State of Louisiana government. Zoom, 21.03.01

Down in Terrebonne and Houma, they've had to piecemeal their own money together because they're not getting that money from CPRA.¹⁴⁸

Concern over the decline in royalties and its effects on government services has been widely expressed in Lafourche, Plaquemines and Terrebonne, increasing their reliance on federal assistance to fund their critical flood protection infrastructure. In Lafourche for example, the majority of the \$9.4 million received as part of President Biden's American Rescue Plan has been dedicated to infrastructure and drainage projects, "because that's where we have the most critical need", due to the decline in oil and gas royalties, "which is how we fund most infrastructure and drainage", Lafourche Parish President Chaisson explained¹⁴⁹.

In other parishes too, the budgetary dependence on continued energy production has weakened institutional capacity. "The parish is in a bind", deplored Plaquemines councilmember Blink to members of the public complaining about the failings of the publicly funded ferry system which connects both banks of the parish across the Mississippi River. "We had 15 million dollars in oil and gas revenue ten or twelve years ago. Last year, we had four. It's just math, we can't have what we used to, no matter how much we wish or pray for it."¹⁵⁰ Declining population and decreased oil and gas royalties in Plaquemines have severely impacted the local government's ability to fund flood protection, including levee systems, as well as other public services. "We have to be real about it", the local councilmember continues. "I can't emphasize enough that without those [infrastructures], we can't have a society here". Although the Plaquemines Parish comprehensive Master Plan acknowledges the need for diversification to prepare for the industry's diminishing supplies (G23), the relatively slow anticipation of such diversification has resulted in their continued reliance on fossil fuels. "We can't do nothing, we don't have the money", laments one parish councilman¹⁵¹. "It tremendously affected the budget of the parishes because the revenues are gone! Oil and gas revenue are so low now that we can barely make it. Exactly, we're *not* making it.", another explains¹⁵².

¹⁴⁸ Interview Lauren, coastal restoration advocacy group. Telephone, 21.02.23

¹⁴⁹ Lafourche Parish council meeting, Mathews, 21.05.25

¹⁵⁰ Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Belle Chasse, 21.01.14

¹⁵¹ Interview Tony, Plaquemines councilmember, Empire, 22.02.18

¹⁵² Interview Michael, Plaquemines Parish council. Telephone, 21.07.27

2.2.2. Binding government to continued energy production

These financial difficulties are attributed to the boom-and-bust cycles of the energy market – meaning the periods of growth and rising prices of oil and gas, followed by an economic downturn. The amount perceived in royalties is tied to the price of energy, which inextricably binds parish budgets and borrowing capacity to external market forces. The survival of many parishes, including job availability and government funding for public initiatives, thus hinges on the continued production of fossil fuels. This dependence has placed Plaquemines Parish in the “uncomfortable” position of having to borrow to “make it through the end of the year”, because of the insufficiency of the \$250,000 received monthly from oil and gas royalties¹⁵³. “I don’t see any way around it”, solemnly remarks the parish administrator during a council meeting. Admitting to the parish’s financial inability to respond to another “Katrina-life scenario”, he further explains how unviable their operating budget has become. “At the time of Katrina, we had \$100 million in the bank. Right now, I’m looking at about \$11 million to make it through the year.” In one resolution authorizing the parish administration to apply to the Louisiana Community Development Block Grant program to secure funding for water projects, the government recognizes the severity of the situation with regards to its water system.

WHEREAS, the present budget crisis brought on by low oil prices has placed Plaquemines Parish in a situation where it cannot afford to improve the Parish water system from general revenue¹⁵⁴

The high poverty rates and low population density continue to strain the parish’s ability to compensate with sales and property taxes. “We don’t get much money off a Dollar store. Walmart is a big money maker. They tried to put one in Belle Chasse years ago, and the people voted it down because it would hurt the Mom and Pop stores”.¹⁵⁵ For Caleb, a former councilman, diversification through the development of port activities would be possible but would further the heavy industrialization of the parish at the expense of people’s living environments.

¹⁵³ Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Pointe-a-la-Hache, 21.03.25

¹⁵⁴ Resolution N.21-163, Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Belle Chasse, 21.06.10

¹⁵⁵ Interview Tony, Plaquemines councilmember, Empire, 22.02.18

There's a lot of deep-water frontage here. The port is well positioned to take advantage of that. But it's going to be really hard, and really bad on the population here. There's a robust plan to do this, but it's going to make the population center of the parish unlivable, nearly.¹⁵⁶

As a way of attracting industry in Plaquemines to maintain critical revenues through energy production, the Venture Global project, a liquified natural gas (LNG) export facility, has been promised a \$834 million tax exemption over ten years despite the parish's great financial precarity and the extensive damages of these activities on Louisiana's coast (Elbein, 2023; Sneath, 2023). Enraged, councilmember Richie Blink accused the administration of placing the industry's profits over the people of Plaquemines, both in terms of reducing the parish's ability to fund and provide basic services, as well as by turning Plaquemines into an industrial wasteland¹⁵⁷. Plaquemines residents are already exposed to a higher level of air toxicity and cancer risks relative to Lafourche and Terrebonne, due to the parish's greater industrialization (Annex 16).

"We're in a crisis mode of water", further deplored councilmember Rousselle. As the new LNG plant Venture Capital will increase demand on the already-fragile Port Sulphur water plant, the tax exemption is perceived as an unfair burden to residents. This stems from an already strained relationship between the public and their administration, often accused of being unable to provide government services such as infrastructure maintenance and urban planning impacted by extreme environmental and climatic vulnerabilities¹⁵⁸.

PARISH ADMINISTRATOR. When the parish gets hit by hurricanes year, after year, after year, it causes major problems. We're stuck, we're on our feet trying to respond to these storms. And as the budget and revenues dwindle down, we're really doing the best we can to recover from these events.

COUNCILMEMBER RICHIE BLINK. You hit the nail on the head, funding, right? A nine-billion-dollar facility, they're not paying property taxes for ten years. You know how many of our problems we could solve with eighty-eight million dollars? A lot. This is just an industrialized floodplain. People are a secondary thing here, it seems. This council cannot be

¹⁵⁶ Interview Caleb, ecologist and former councilmember. Empire, 22.02.18

¹⁵⁷ Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Pointe-a-la-Hache, 22.03.24

¹⁵⁸ Of the three parishes under study here, Plaquemines is the one in which I have observed the most significant expression of mistrust and accusations of mismanagement and incompetence from residents during council meetings. These sentiments have also been corroborated during interviews with community members and councilmembers who have explained that a history of corruption has reduced trust in the Plaquemines government (see section 2.2, [Chapter 7](#)).

giving any more industrials tax exemptions, particularly the second phase of Venture Global. We need to start solving our own problems.¹⁵⁹

The parish government’s focus on economic growth, pursued through competitive tax exemptions for major industry players, is paradoxically jeopardizing their operating budget and ability to provide government services, including new infrastructure and flood protection maintenance. Frustrated by the situation, Councilmember Blink encapsulates the basic issue at the heart of their simultaneous reliance on industry and institutional failure to utilize the wealth generated by those activities. “We can’t handle basic infrastructure for citizens, and there’s breakneck growth all around us”, he deplors¹⁶⁰. “[Local governments] are totally vulnerable, and they really don’t understand the health consequences”, explains an environmental activist regarding the distribution of industry tax breaks to mitigate loss of energy revenues. “They don’t understand the alternatives. It’s a culture. If we give them the tax exemption, there’ll be more jobs. That’s the untested, unproven assumption.”¹⁶¹ These policy decisions are thus the result of the interpersonal ties between government actors and industry, which further perpetuate the extent to which the satisfaction of these capitalistic interests have permeated institutions.

In other words, local policy actors are both enticed and compelled to sustain extractivist practices. The penetration of oil and gas interests into political institutions has entrenched dependence of local governance on oil and gas production. But simultaneously, this dependency on a declining economy has reduced parish governments’ institutional capacity to provide services, including the funding of flood protection. As we shall see in the next chapter, their allegiance to the energy sector has also thwarted their embrace of climate and adaptation policies.

Box 6. - The environmental activist pushback against industry tax exemptions

“In Louisiana, the Great Paradox was staring me in the face – great pollution and great resistance to regulating polluters”, wrote Hochschild of her ethnographic work on Louisianans’ acceptance of the industry’s ravages (2016:21). In Terrebonne Parish, the rationale for providing tax credits to industry is anchored in the *jobs* frame and further legitimized by the intra-parish competition to attract energy corporations on which governments are dependent. Although Terrebonne has started diversifying its economy through manufacturing plants and port activities, one councilman explains that “it’s always competitive because you’re always fighting – I say fighting, but your challenges are to compete with other

¹⁵⁹ Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Pointe-a-la-Hache, 22.03.24

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Interview Anthony, climate advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.03.21

communities and what they have to offer versus what we have to offer.”¹⁶² As a result, tax exemptions and credits are a preferred policy tool despite its impacts on institutional financial capacity.

This Industrial tax exemption program (ITEP) is an economic development incentive program designed to attract industrial investment through property tax exemptions. It is the subject of backlash from environmental groups who believe that these exemptions have an important impact on the State’s institutional capacity to provide educational, health and infrastructural services to its residents. Remarking that the taxes that would have otherwise been received by the State would be allocated to school funding, local environmental policy expert Hannah denounces the alignment of interests between government actors and their industry allies. “The people who would grant [the tax exemption] were friends of oil and gas, so they just give each other favors, they don’t worry about how that affects school budgets – and we don’t have grade schools, and they’re struggling, it’s terrible.”¹⁶³



Valero oil and gas refinery in Norco, on the outskirts of New Orleans. Source: Sarah Munoz (2022).

“We’re basically subsidizing Exxon to make oil, which is insane because they’re polluting us”, ironizes Justin, an environmental lawyer representing a local organization in their fight against ITEP. “These personal relationships that are being built for the sole purpose of manipulating school board members into granting them this \$24 million tax exempt”, Hannah further deplores, “which our schools could very much use. I think prisons are better than our schools.” With the same sorrow, another environmental policy activist decries, “it’s taking money away from schoolchildren and the quality of their education. The state’s 50th in education. It’s really a bad thing.”¹⁶⁴ Concerned about the superiority of industry interests over the provision of government services, Justin concludes, “Ultimately, we need to decide as a matter of policy, whether we’re going to be emphasizing the future of our children versus our immediate gratification.”¹⁶⁵

Over 2/3 of these incentives are given for projects that create no new jobs. And they’re not really incentives because the projects have already been built and the facilities are already there. As a matter of policy, it’s insane. And yes, we get a tremendous amount of pushback. But this system

¹⁶² Interview William, Terrebonne Parish council. Telephone, 21.05.12

¹⁶³ Interview Hannah, climate policy advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.22

¹⁶⁴ Interview Anthony, climate advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.03.21. It is important to note that in 2023, Louisiana has ranked 46th in education, but 50th overall in the country. Other rankings of importance include pollution (rank 49), infrastructure (rank 49), and economy, which includes growth and labor market (rank 50) (US News, 2023).

¹⁶⁵ Interview Justin, environmental lawyer. Zoom, 21.03.04

operated largely under a cloak, largely with the laws actually hiding the impact of these decisions for about 90 years or 100 years.¹⁶⁶

A “pitiful mess”, according to one lifelong environmental activist¹⁶⁷, who believes that the political justification of such policies – attracting and retaining companies and *jobs* – is misguided because the fundamental objective of energy companies is to exploit oil and gas. “They built their refineries and their ship channels and their pipelines, they’re not going to leave. There’s no way they could leave, they’d be stupid to leave”, he argues. “The governments here are so afraid of these companies leaving, that they will just throw money at them”, further agrees Hannah.

3. Conclusions

This chapter has laid the groundwork to understand the structural and systemic foundations of climate adaptation in Southeast Louisiana, as shaped by the desire to ensure the perpetuation and permanence of political and economic institutions conducive to capital accumulation. This desire for *permanence* constitutes the principal *master discourse* which, as we shall see throughout this thesis, is foundational to adaptation activities along the coast and undergirds climate immobility. *Permanence* constitutes the main rationale for policymakers to preserve industrial interests and cultural institutions and is manifested in both discourse and policy practice (e.g., coastal infrastructures, prevention of movement, the “saving” rhetoric, the desire for multigenerational experience of place – all of which will be developed further throughout this research).

With the slow emergence of what Dunlap and his colleagues have named the New Environmental Paradigm – a shift in core values undermining the belief that growth is unlimited and that human domination over nature is legitimate –, economic elites supportive of the Dominant Social Paradigm have fought to preserve the industrial and neoliberal hegemonic status quo (Dunlap and van Liere, 1978; Dunlap et al., 2000) According to Shafer (2006:128), it is expected that elites “will marshal their resources against any perceived threats to “business-as-usual” in the institutionalized socioeconomic order.” The author identifies two ways in which this backlash is carried out. First, to “discredit or marginalize threats posed by ecological issues”; and second, to “attempt to convince stakeholders that their actions are in fact consistent with an ecological worldview.” In Louisiana, the present research has identified both. To secure their hegemony over

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Interview Daniel, biologist and lifelong environmental activist. Telephone, 21.03.03

oil culture and extractivist policymaking as the climate problem intensifies, industry actors have effectively framed their activities as essential for Louisianans through the *jobs* and *little guys* frames, fervently opposing climate policies and industry regulations by appealing to the economic interests of the public.

Jobert and Muller's (1987) concept of "corporatisme à la française" which designates the mobilization of *référentiels*, originally embodied by a certain social group to influence policy and reform (Giraud, 2004), echoes what we could call in this context, *corporatisme à la Louisianaise*. This analysis has revealed the complex interplay between fossil fuel interest and the governance of environmental vulnerabilities, legitimized by appeals to identity and livelihoods to garner public support for the perpetuation of an extractivist model. Such corporatism is further advanced by the immense power yielded by oil and gas companies over environmental policy at the federal, state and parish levels (Parent, 2006). Data has revealed the embeddedness of oil interests within environmental agencies and legislators, including former CPRA Chairman Garrett Graves who has, throughout his career in the Louisiana Senate and the Environment and Natural Resources committee, received over \$800,000 from major industry players such as Valero, ExxonMobil, Chevron and Kosh Industries (Open Secrets, 2022d). Juxtaposing the year-long observation of environmental policymaking and its more vocal participants with data on campaign funding, I find that those Republican leaders who have yielded the most power in shaping pro-fossil fuel environmental policy and opposed federal climate policies have all been funded by companies which, in other instances, have paradoxically proclaimed their eco-conscience and stewardship of the environment. These results lend strong support to other research on the power of industry on American politics and the funding of anti-climate policies (Goldberg et al., 2020; Hall and Deardoff, 2006; Franta, 2022). These intricate ties testify of the difficulty for adaptation policies to be enacted on a regional and local scale, where a political *oil culture* has permeated institutions.

More than that, it has been found that the satisfaction of extractivist interests relies on the dissemination and perpetuation of a societal *oil culture* and the permanence of current social, political and economic arrangements. The deeply engrained logic of fossil fuel production constitutes a cultural and ideological rationale in Southeast Louisiana and has fostered public consent for extractivist practices despite the ever increasing ecological and climatic vulnerability of its coastal residents. The concept of extractivism, which has been predominantly developed in

the literature on Latin America to describe a system of resource extraction, suggests that economic practices in Louisiana transcend simple wealth extraction (Post, 2023). The cultural and ideological rationale which both motivates and results from extractive practices has engrained the social imaginary of fossil fuels within the cultural and political fabric of institutions. This analysis borrows from Szeman and Wenzel's (2021) call to consider extractivism not as a mere synonym of capitalism, but as a dynamic aspect of it. While the material accumulation of wealth is foundational to the Dominant Social Paradigm, extractivism is embedded within the cultural production and power relations that it reproduces (Pineault, 2018). The next chapter examines the way these interests have structured environmental adaptation policy in Louisiana to enable the perpetuation of an extractivist economy. In doing so, I argue, it has dehumanized policy solutions and rendered invisible the problem of (im)mobility.

Chapter 4. Fueling the debate: unraveling fossil fuel interests in the making of adaptation policies

At root, what we need to manage, as we have always needed to manage (but more often than not failed to do so or even acknowledge) is our relationships to each other and the earth.

Barry (2016:117)

Whether it be through the leniency of industry regulations or state-driven urbanization, governments bear an active role in the production of risks. This is because states are concerned with fostering conditions conducive to economic growth, which often involves producing high levels of risks (Tierney, 1999). In Louisiana, the penetration of industry actors in various spheres of policymaking, described in Chapter 3, has been conducive to the enhancement of productive resources along the coast. Inherently destructive, extractivist practices have severely damaged ecosystems, converting wetlands to open water and fragilizing coastline defenses (Acosta, 2013; Foy, 1990; Theriot, 2014). The need to reduce damage to economic infrastructures and preserve extractive viability has compelled the state to engage in a large-scale process of restoration through its Coastal Master Plan (Gotham, 2016b). Simultaneously, the escalating vulnerability of the region to climatic events, such as hurricanes, heavy rains, and flooding, and their disruptive effects on industries and communities, urged the development of protective infrastructure in the form of levees, seawalls, pumps and other hardened structures, termed the *multiple lines of defense strategy*¹⁶⁸.

This adaptation strategy finds its origins in the European colonial expansion of the 1700s, during which elevations and levees were first utilized by governments in Louisiana (Maret et Cadoul, 2007). Since then, coastal restoration and protection has perdured with the principal objective of maintaining economic structures. Inherently political, this approach is “concerned with the

¹⁶⁸ The “multiple lines of defense” strategy is pursued by the State’s Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) and is defined in the Coastal Master Plan as “a combination of restoration, structural, and nonstructural risk reduction projects to reduce coastal storm surge event impacts” (G13:3). As Chairman Kline explained during a CPRA board meeting (Belle Chasse, 21.06.16), the State’s focus on the multiple lines of defense encompasses barrier islands, dredging, marsh creation, restoration works, in conjunction with other hurricane protection projects and levees. This techno-optimist strategy will be further detailed in [Chapter 6](#) as it relates to the government planning of immobility. In this chapter, I examine these adaptive measures as means of preserving economic structures.

production and distribution of societal benefits and risks” (Gotham, 2016b:801). It touches on shared social meanings and collective identities embedded within the natural coastal environment and reflects a struggle for access to resources. In the political realm, these struggles, risks and strategies are the products of elite discourses and practices.

This chapter investigates the way by which structural interests permeate environmental policy in Louisiana. It is sectioned into three parts. First, I will explore the way coastal adaptation has been designed to preserve productivity and the material interests of private actors. Second, I will examine the legitimation of these interests in environmental adaptation policies, particularly through the instrumentalization of coastal restoration in discourse. Finally, analysis will focus on the fossil fuel industry’s framing of its compatibility with climate change action.

1. Protecting industry: securing interests through coastal restoration and infrastructures

The State’s approach to the land loss crisis has been largely driven by engineering innovation and large-scale projects with the expressed objective of stunting subsidence and preserving the “Sportsman’s Paradise”¹⁶⁹. These efforts emerged in the 20th century¹⁷⁰, when state policies first encouraged production and expansion of industrial activities through coastal restoration planning (Colten, 2019). Weaving canals and pipelines through the marshes created substantial damage to their natural environments, embedding considerations for productivity within the state’s coastal conservation efforts (Theriot, 2014; Gotham, 2016b). But this approach has been criticized by environmental actors for its inherent contradictions (Gotham, 2016a). Altering the long-term sustainability of the coast by enabling the perpetuation of economic and political systems at the heart of the coastal problem, I have found that these risk reduction measures serve the satisfaction of extractivist interests. In fact, as Colten (2019:429) explains, “promotion of oil extraction enabled the industry to expand and become a prominent economic force in the coastal region and an activity the state wants to protect in its current restoration planning”. This section investigates

¹⁶⁹ The “Sportsman’s Paradise” is a widely conveyed image designed to enhance the natural productive resources of the coast at the disposition of Louisianans and industries (fishing, trapping, extracting), further exemplifying the utilitarian and resource-focused worldview of some coastal actors. More in Box 7.

¹⁷⁰ See Annex 11 for a chronology of State and Federal environmental policies

the making of this arrangement, with the development of public-private partnerships in coastal policy and the use of infrastructures to safeguard economic centers.

1.1. The interests of public-private partnerships for the coast

Although it calls for the protection of culture and Louisianan identity, the state's Coastal Master Plan seems to engage in what Adger et al. (2011:20) term the "shallow politics of national interest", meaning the ultimate focus is on the material impacts of climate change. In the Plan, the first three benefits to coastal adaptation are identified as related to fishing, oil and gas, and agriculture (G6). Lauren, a policy director for an environmental non-profit, explains how coastal restoration, infrastructures and environmental programs cater to the economic interests of the Gulf of Mexico and to the benefit of industrial activities (Colten, 2016; Nost, 2019; Randolph, 2018).

Most of our economy really is driven from the coast. There's just so much tourism on the coast and liquid natural gas, which is booming. Coastal protection is important to protect the economy down here. The other thing is that we have the Mississippi River, which is the main outlet for most exports and a lot of imports in the country. That navigation channel and all the land around it have to be maintained to protect the channel.¹⁷¹

The state actively enables the industry to maintain economic activity by implementing measures that support and facilitate their operations. This is done recognizing that the industry represents a significant stakeholder in coastal projects, and their collaboration to state efforts is necessary to enact the Coastal Master Plan. In Terrebonne for example, the parish government entered into an agreement with pipeline owner EnLink for the company to provide a right-of-way for the State to pursue a restoration project above Lake Boudreaux. Intended to prevent flooding and damage to levees, this agreement describes the oil and gas company as a partner in coastal restoration and flood prevention. It exemplifies the considerable importance of industries for the enactment of mitigation and adaptation programs¹⁷². As Timothy from the State of Louisiana government explains, the state's dependence on cooperating companies is due to their ownership of the lands on which coastal restoration programs are being conducted.

It is more complicated in Louisiana than in other places because our coastline is almost 80%, maybe higher, privately owned. We have all these high-tech models to tell us where the best place to make an investment is. If we restricted that to only public lands, then we would not

¹⁷¹ Interview Lauren, coastal restoration advocacy group. Telephone, 21.02.23

¹⁷² Terrebonne Parish council community development and planning committee meeting, Houma, 21.01.11

be able to make the best investments. So, we depend on partnerships to go out and do these projects. A lot of landowners are large oil and gas companies. They're important players.

As Theriot explains, the concern felt by energy companies for coastal matters increased in the early 2000s and 2010s when they came to realize that “pipeline ruptures, followed by disruptions to the delivery of important energy resources to the rest of the country, could cost companies several million dollars” (2014:214). A position still endorsed today, as Clair Marceaux, Cameron Port Director, remarked before the CPRA board that coastal restoration “matters for the protection not only of the land itself, it matters for the protection of our culture and our way of life, it matters for the industry that is working to drive our nation.”¹⁷³ In this light, adaptation is undertaken “in response to environmental change in an effort to perpetuate a society”, advancing the goal of *permanence* (Colten 2019; 417).

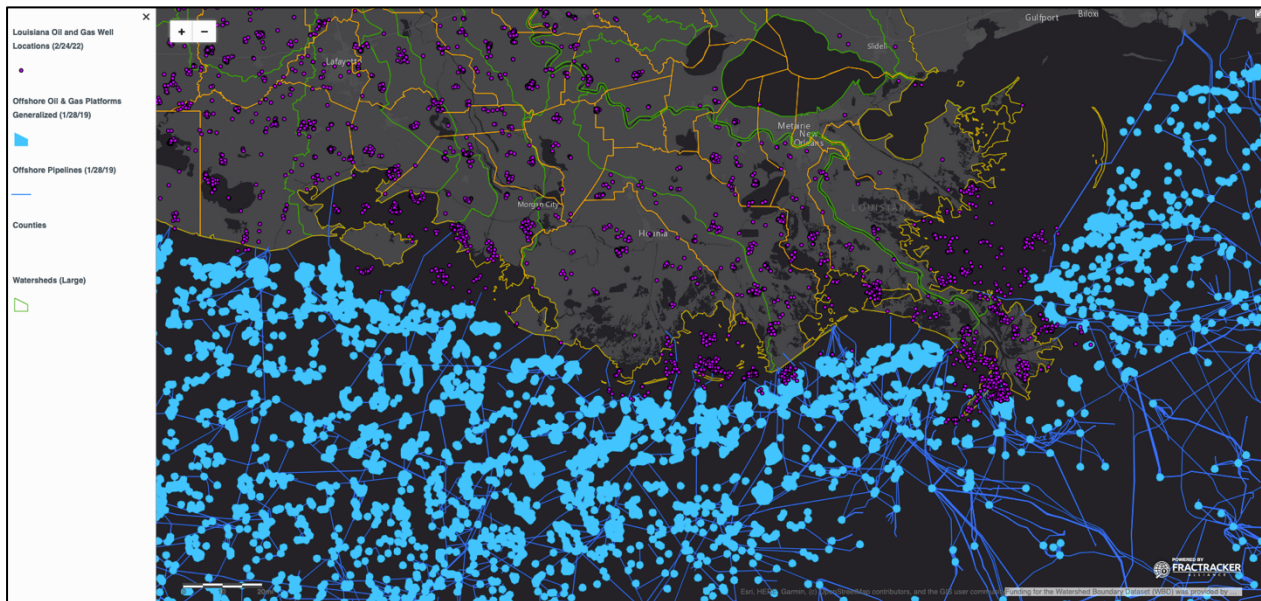


Figure 7. – Oil and gas infrastructure in Southeast Louisiana

Source: Fracktracker Alliance (2019).

At the parish level, the industry’s involvement is welcomed. One Terrebonne councilmember even portrays corporations as holding an honorable, morally grounded posture toward environmental stewardship. “I think that the lawsuits have motivated the oil industry and gotten them involved, and they’re really stepping up”, he argues with sincerity. “They’re investing millions, hundreds of

¹⁷³ Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) board meeting, Lake Charles, 21.07.21

millions of dollars now in research and development of all sorts of things to help with coastal restoration projects, working on the ecology of the land.”¹⁷⁴ Corroborating this position, a parish director of coastal restoration recognizes the particular benefit oil and gas companies gain from collaborating with governments on environmental projects and rejoices in their partnership.

I think we work very well with the oil and gas industry, which just happens to be a major, if not the major employer in Terrebonne Parish. We have a lot of oil and gas structure here. We’re crisscross with pipelines, which we have to deal with when we do restoration projects on barrier islands. But they work with us! Continental Land and Fur, ConocoPhillips and Apache Minerals, those three companies own most of the wetlands in Terrebonne Parish. They’re very good to work with when it comes to doing coastal restoration projects, marsh creation on their property. After all, they benefit from that. They don’t have to pay for it, all they have to do is provide the land rights. We got good relationships with them.¹⁷⁵

I’m not saying that they didn’t do anything which may have been questionable 50 years ago, but things have changed. It is a beneficial relationship with us. They are providing their employees as volunteers to help with cypress tree planting efforts and many projects that are related to restoration. Now, in some cases they may provide direct funding. We’ve got a project where it was strictly a public-private partnership to do a freshwater diversion. It creates more marsh, nourishes marsh, and that gives us an opportunity to plant a lot of cypress trees in those areas. And Shell participates in that. If we were engaged in litigation with the oil companies, that may not be the case. I know recently Shell donated to Terrebonne Parish a 41-acre tract of land that we’re going to be able to use for flood risk reduction. I mean, that was a major deal that may not have happened if our approach to oil companies had been more hostile.¹⁷⁶

It can be argued, however, that these strategic partnerships are not primarily driven by collaboration for the betterment of Louisiana, but rather by economic interests and private benefits, including securing administrative favors against the coastal lawsuits (described in Box 5). Despite these enthusiastic perspectives on energy companies’ involvement in state programs, their evident interests in preserving productive infrastructure fail to convince environmental lawyer Justin of corporations’ genuine intentions.

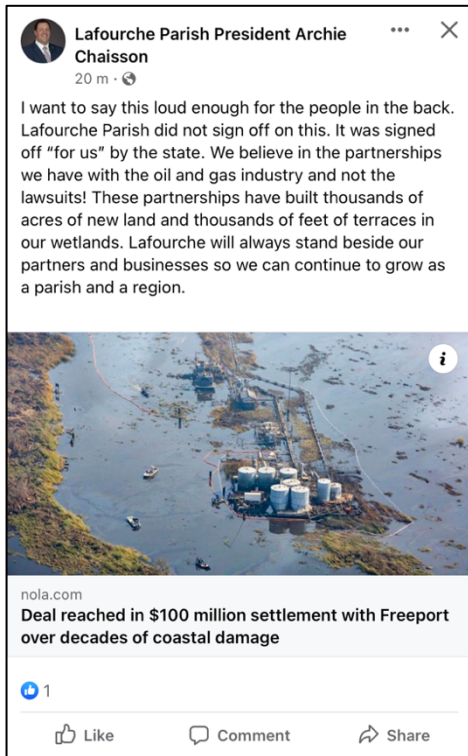
Oil and gas companies never funded coastal restoration; they resisted it. For years, the [oil and gas industry] landowners have been saying, “they make us sign these leases, they make us restore the damage we do”. And the answer is no, they don’t. You fucking own it. Apache Oil Company and ConocoPhillips own 80% of the land that we’re talking about. It’s literally about 1.8 million acres. Between about 1840 and 1880, [the State] sold millions of acres, the entire coast. All the march is owned basically by oil and gas. Some of them, like

¹⁷⁴ Interview William, Terrebonne Parish council. Telephone, 21.05.12

¹⁷⁵ Interview Brian, parish director of coastal restoration. Telephone, 21.03.05

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

ConocoPhillips, yeah, they'll spend a few dollars here and there. But they resist the state when the state tries to come in and do restoration projects, because they say “well then, you're going to want the title to the land”. So, that’s bullshit.¹⁷⁷



For some industry actors, companies’ willingness to participate in restoration is genuine – albeit motivated. “Pipelines and restoration are sometimes in conflict, right. At the end of the day, our client companies want restoration and want to work with the entities that are restoring these areas”, argued a retiree from a pipeline company explains in a public comment before the CPRA board¹⁷⁸. According to Joseph, an avid recreational fisherman and director of a conservation group, many oil and gas companies have been receptive to his group’s efforts to be included in large-scale restoration projects. Despite believing in their good faith, he too remarks their inherent interests in participating in such efforts – restoring land to further its exploitation down the line and maintain favorable public opinion.

I think it’s good public relations, but they’re also landowners and they want to see enhancements done to their lands. Healthy wetlands and barrier islands provide protection to their investments. In some cases, they just want to be seen as good neighbors, good stewards of the resource, to the people who live in the community and work for the organizations. They all have a very willing conservation heart and I think they understand that their activity has an impact on the ecosystems and the environment, and they made a corporate decision to try to offset some of that.¹⁷⁹

The interests playing out in coastal programs thereby go beyond ensuring the sustainability of coastal Louisiana for ecological reasons. The role of collaborator played by individual companies is both economically convenient and a matter of public relations and communications about their involvement in coastal restoration. More than that, there is inherent motivation to enhance the productive nature of coastal Louisiana and safeguard the industry's infrastructure against

¹⁷⁷ Interview Justin, environmental lawyer. Zoom, 21.03.04

¹⁷⁸ Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) board meeting, Baton Rouge, 21.04.21

¹⁷⁹ Interview Joseph, conservation advocacy organization and fisherman. Telephone, 21.04.15

environmental hazards through public funding. For the State of Louisiana government, it is a priority and integral to the planning process of their coastal restoration strategy.

[Oil and gas companies] have these really massive facilities. It doesn't do anybody any good to have them go underwater or get destroyed by a hurricane. That would put a lot of people out of work, it would shut down an important economic engine. The vulnerability of those facilities is something we're able to think through on the Coastal Master Plan, on the planning side, as we prioritize investments.¹⁸⁰

In doing so, according to Caleb, the State only seeks to “subsidize projects in order to privatize their benefits”¹⁸¹. Pointing to a map of the Louisiana coast that he stores on his fishing boat, he notes that the restored marshes conveniently protect the infrastructure of Port Fourchon, the Lafourche oil and gas base that handles 95% of offshore production in the Gulf and 15% of national oil (see Figure 8).

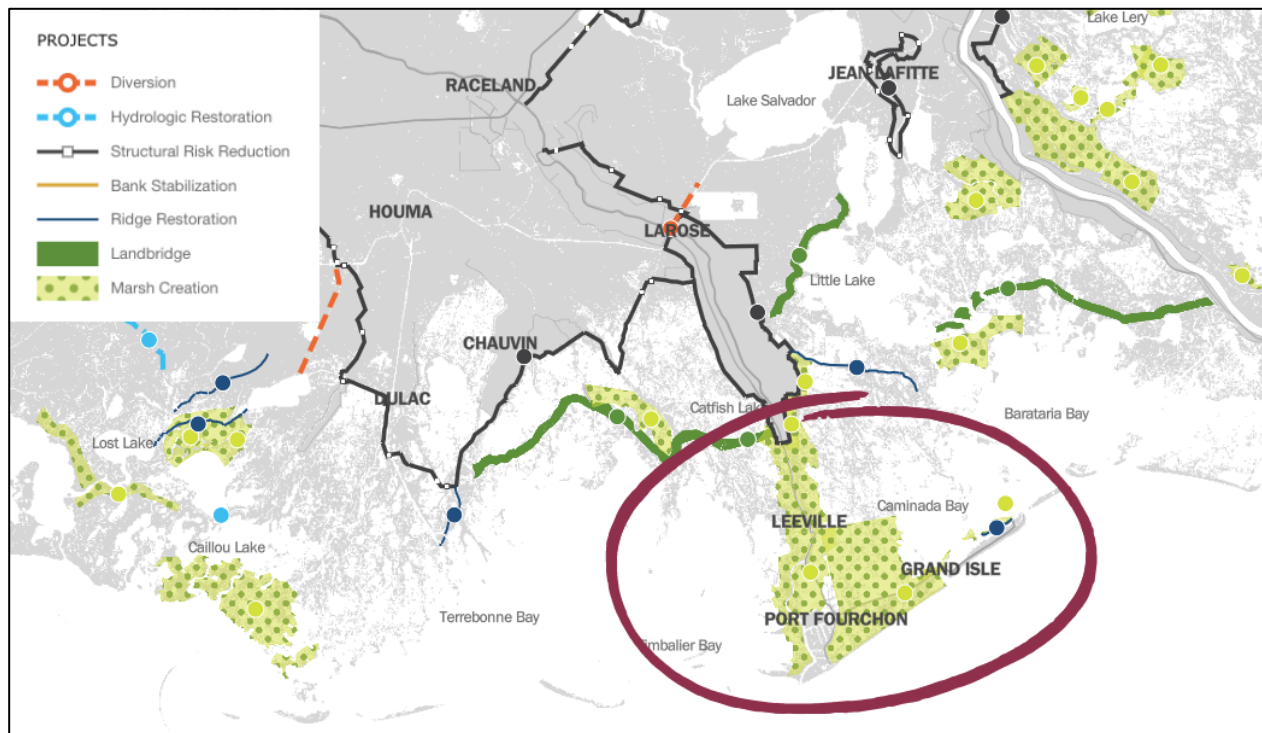


Figure 8. – Map of the Coastal Master Plan restoration projects around Port Fourchon

The red circle indicates a large marsh creation project located in an uninhabited/low population area and designed to protect Port Fourchon. Source: CPRA Master Plan data viewer (CPRA, 2023). Image made by Sarah Munoz.

¹⁸⁰ Interview Timothy, State of Louisiana government. Zoom, 21.03.01

¹⁸¹ Interview Caleb, ecologist and former councilmember. Empire, 22.02.18

The state's interest may not lie in the intrinsic value of ecosystems, therefore, but in the protection of publicly funded oil infrastructure. Using public funds rather than seeking retribution from oil and gas companies responsible for the destruction of coastal wetlands and challenging the very activities that have created the land loss crisis, the state is transferring the cost of adaptation onto communities. In doing so, according to Colten (2019) and Gotham (2016a), it fails to provide a sustainable response to the coastal crisis for its residents.

1.2. Preserving productivity with coastal infrastructures

Whether it be at the State or the parish level, public investments in coastal infrastructure and restoration have thus been designed to protect tax revenue and economic activities across the board¹⁸². A clear illustration of this is CPRA chairman Chip Kline's enthusiastic endorsement of the benefits of the State's coastal infrastructure for the industry during the christening a vessel in Port Fourchon, a couple of months after Hurricane Ida (2021).

The last five weeks, people have questioned why we continue to pump millions and millions of dollars into levees, flood protection and drainage. And it's because of days like yesterday, where you see a 250-foot vessel that's going to work for Shell for five years, that produces good paying jobs for residents, not only Lafourche but also Terrebonne and all of Southeast Louisiana, as well the nation's energy independence. Something that we all fight for on a day-to-day basis.¹⁸³

"It's why this agency exists. It's to protect the people, businesses and communities of South Louisiana", proclaimed CPRA Chairman Kline before the agency's board¹⁸⁴. In Plaquemines Parish, Phillips 66 and Chevron oil refineries, as well as the \$21 billion Venture Global liquified natural gas plant (Stewart, 2023), have necessitated continued hurricane protection and infrastructural investments despite the low population residing in the southern ends of the parish (see Annex 15). Infrastructures have also been used as an argument to attract corporations fleeing the vulnerability of Port Fourchon, but their inadequacy, according to Parish attorney George Pivach, has deterred industries¹⁸⁵. Upon seeing the poor drainage and levee systems which led to Highway 23 staying flooded for an extended period after Hurricane Gustav in 2008, the companies

¹⁸² Interview Christopher, local journalist. Telephone, 20.08.20

¹⁸³ Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) board meeting, Thibodaux, 21.10.20

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Pointe-a-la-Hache, 21.07.22

stopped asking to come, he deplored. Conflating the need to attract oil and gas industries in the parish and the interests of residents, he advocated for enhanced coastal infrastructures, “It’s important we have levees constructed to protect the people of Plaquemines Parish.”

In Lafourche, the \$463 million elevation of the LA-1 highway leading to the unpopulated industry base Port Fourchon is also designed to protect its access during hurricanes and climate hazards in the longer-term (Lafourche Gazette, 2022). Building “as high as they can afford”¹⁸⁶, this project exemplifies “the ongoing struggle to sustain and protect a critical energy hub within an eroding and flood-prone coastal environmental” (Theriot, 2014:196). It has become, in essence, the “national poster child’ for at-risk energy infrastructure in America” (Theriot, 2014:200). For the elevated highway to be successful, the Parish and Port Fourchon are also depending on levees to protect the roads leading to it. “None of that \$800-million investment would be worth anything if we can’t keep that part of the road” dry, explains levee district manager Wesley.



Photo 5. - View from the LA-1 highway, towards Port Fourchon across the open water

The new elevated highway ensures long-term access to Port Fourchon despite rising seas and disappearing marshes. Source: Sarah Munoz (2022).

Despite being unsure of their long-term efficacy, local policy actors interviewed for this research have shown a clear willingness to utilize risk mitigation strategies to serve their economic interests.

¹⁸⁶ Interview Wesley, levee district manager. Galliano, 22.02.09

For them, it is preferable to increase levees and elevate roads rather than to retreat, justifying their investments as means of preserving both cultural and economic assets in the region.

We've flood proofed the Port [Fourchon]. We've raised it as high as we can, we barely got by [Hurricane] Ida. Had we flooded, that would have been the beginning of the end of people living down here. You would still have industry here, but people as a community, and the thing that makes a community nice, would have gone. That would have been industrialized, it still would have been worth something. It may not be worth it for those industries to move now.¹⁸⁷



Photo 6. - View of the submerged road below the LA-1 highway, towards Port Fourchon

Wetlands have converted to open water that is now encroaching on existing infrastructure.
Source: Sarah Munoz (2022)

As I've previously touched on, the interest-based link between coastal adaptation and fossil fuels is made clear by the restorative practices surrounding Port Fourchon, Louisiana's premier oil and gas base. During a Greater Lafourche Port Commission meeting¹⁸⁸, executive director Chiasson acknowledged that the administration had sought to address environmental concerns through infrastructural and engineering projects with the CPRA and the Corps of Engineers. These projects included dredging and canal deepening activities, such as those conducted in the Port Fourchon

¹⁸⁷ Interview Wesley, levee district manager. Galliano, 22.02.09

¹⁸⁸ The Greater Lafourche Port Commission (GLPC) was established in 1960 to exercise jurisdiction over Port Fourchon. It is the exclusive manager of the Port, its industrial property and activities.

Belle Pass Channel and Belle Pass Emergency Dredge¹⁸⁹. These efforts have been undertaken primarily to ensure the continued operations of Port Fourchon, “meet the immediate needs” of their industry tenants by widening channels of navigation, and pursue economic development (GLPC, 2021). The dredge material extracted is said to be used to restore marshes around the port, conferring on these industrial development projects an ecological function while upholding the interests of the oil and gas industry in the Gulf region. It is noteworthy that the contribution of canals to severe environmental degradation and land loss has been widely documented (Foy, 1990; Theriot, 2014; Maret and Cadoul, 2007; Gotham, 2016b), albeit not acknowledged by the organization in any of their public meetings.

The dual interest of restoration projects is further exemplified in the CPRA’s announcement of the restoration of Caminada Headland, a 13-mile stretch of beach and dune in Lafourche Parish, which will increase the protection of Port Fourchon against climate events. In a press release, the agency praises the growth of Port Fourchon’s activities through environmental restoration to “enhance our sustainability and security over the long term” and secure their market share, reaffirming the CPRA’s commitment to the expansion of their extractivist activities (PR9). Further testifying of the hegemony of the Dominant Social Paradigm which favors infinite growth and domination over nature, the interconnection between oil and gas activities and environmental protection is consistently promulgated as a justification for the state’s extractivist path. On the Greater Lafourche Port Commission’s website, the mission statement reads, “We do this to grow our economy and preserve our environment and heritage.” (GLPC, nda).

Despite the industry’s interests in maintaining and preserving their infrastructure, some policy actors believe the state entertains a depoliticized relationship with industry groups. This is the case for policy actors from the State of Louisiana government, who argue that the industry’s focus on ensuring the sustainability of the coast and its resources is devoid of a political agenda. Timothy asserts, “When we talk to the oil companies, it’s less about projects, it’s more about the long-term viability of this place. It’s really not political.”¹⁹⁰ Yet, I argue, the long-term benefit of ensuring the industry’s viability *is* political, because it serves the satisfaction of interests of both economic

¹⁸⁹ Greater Lafourche Port Commission board meeting, Cut Off, 21.02.11

¹⁹⁰ Interview Timothy, State of Louisiana government. Zoom, 21.03.01

and political elites which, as we have seen throughout Chapter 3, are intricately linked (Gotham, 2016b).

2. Shoreline illusion: the instrumentalization of coastal restoration

Oil culture as a structural element of the Dominant Social Paradigm in Louisiana has cemented the belief in the necessity of preserving fossil fuels for the region and its residents, which in turn, has greatly hindered institutional capacity at the state and parish levels. Having demonstrated the extent to which fossil fuel interests have permeated political institutions and adaptation programs, this section presents the processes by which these interests manifest in environmental policy discourse. The first part delves into the inconsistent recognition of the role of fossil fuels in climate change. The second section investigates the *working coast* imagery as the principle discursive tool used in environmental policy to legitimize adaptive projects centered on preserving industrial activities. Finally, I will demonstrate that the development of coastal policies funded by fossil fuel has solidified this co-dependence between energy production and coastal restoration.

2.1. The contentious recognition of the fossil-fuel-climate change nexus

The framing and political recognition of issues are important mechanisms for the public understanding of collective problems and the attribution of responsibility, especially as it relates to anthropogenic climate change (Iyengar, 1996; Jacques and Knox, 2016; Haider-Markel and Joslyn, 2001). In his essay on climate denial, Frank Fischer (2019:138) remarks that knowledge is a social construct and the “discursive by-product of social processes”. It is inherently tied to social groups and bonds public perceptions to the way a problem is identified and publicized within a community. For this reason, I concur, the framing of climate change and fossil fuels in political discourse is important to grasp the construction of risk and vulnerability in collective practices of adaptation.

2.1.1. De-fueling the coastal crisis

The systematic observation of political meetings has revealed that anthropogenic climate change is purposefully absent from most policy and discourses in the State legislature, particularly in House and Senate sessions of Environment and Natural resource committees. In these spheres, environmental issues have been primarily framed in terms of protecting or enhancing the

productivity of natural resources and energy reserves. Drawing on an economic frame of reference reflective of the extractivist Dominant Social Paradigm, lawmakers have directed their attention to specific issues to bolster the state's oil and gas and fishing resources and revenues¹⁹¹. Clear examples of this are the proposal to establish Louisiana as a sanctuary state for fossil fuels to shield them from federal legislation¹⁹², their support for carbon capture and storage to enhance the value of existing pipeline infrastructures¹⁹³, or the regulation of certain species to preserve the fishing industry¹⁹⁴. Within these discussions, the failure to problematize the protection of natural resources past their productive character indicates the prevalence of instrumental ideas in the legislature.

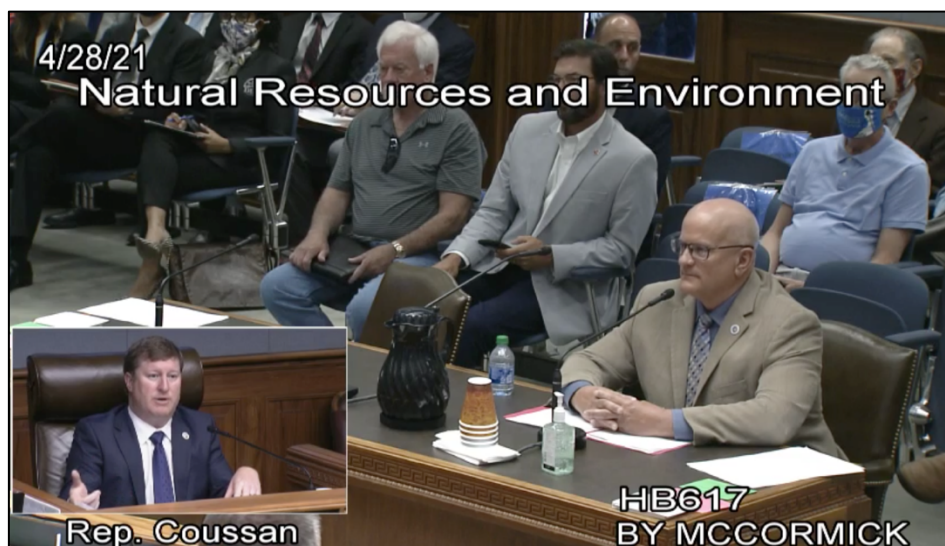


Photo 7. - Rep. McCormick proposing a bill to establish Louisiana as a fossil fuel sanctuary

These positions are also reflective of the Dominant Social Paradigm, which asserts human dominion over the non-human world (Shafer, 2006; Catton and Dunlap, 1980). Framing environmental problems in terms of natural resources and productivity deviates attention from the long-term effects of industrial activities on climate-related risks because it places emphasis on specific characteristics of the problem – mainly economic – and restricts the terms of the debate and the scope of solutions. In creating these causal stories about environmental problems, “political

¹⁹¹ House Committee on Natural Resources and Environment, Louisiana State Legislature, Baton Rouge, 21.05.05

¹⁹² House Committee on Natural Resources and Environment, Louisiana State Legislature, Baton Rouge, 21.04.28.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Senate Natural Resources and Environment committee, Louisiana State Senate, Baton Rouge, 21.06.21 and 21.04.29.

actors use narrative story lines and symbolic devices to manipulate so-called issue characteristics, all the while making it seem as though they are simply describing facts” (Stone, 1989:282). These political narratives are anchored in a productivist and extractivist framework, from which stems the State’s inconsistent and ambiguous recognition of the climate problem and its link to fossil fuels. John Bel Edwards made history by being the first Governor to recognize climate change as a threat to Louisiana in 2020. The Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA), the State agency created after Hurricane Katrina, has also recently been relatively vocal about climate impacts along the coast. However, the acknowledgement and acceptance of the root causes of climate change remain tentative¹⁹⁵.

During one Climate Initiatives Task Force meeting for example, a representative of the Governor’s Office of Coastal Activities remarked that climate risks and climate action had not been incorporated into the interim report because, while they acknowledge the importance of including *why* the Task Force is necessary to Louisiana, there is no need to “come to agreement right now on what those reasons are”¹⁹⁶. The hesitancy of the State to point to the effects of human actions permeates all political discourses, whether it be during meetings of the CPRA board, Governor’s Advisory Commission, or local parish councils. Overall, my findings reveal a general tendency to evade the topic of fossil fuels’ responsibility in climate change, a polarizing issue in the United States and the result of historic lobbying efforts from the industry to protect their interests (Collomb, 2014). This further plays into the “climate capitalism” perspective of the State (Newell and Paterson, 2010; Kirby and O’Mahony, 2018: 205), which translates the belief that carbon can be managed by financial actors and “business as usual can be ‘greened’; a capitalist, growth-based economy can be made more resource efficient, consumerism less resource intensive” (Newell and Paterson, 2010; Barry, 2016: 108).

Here, we have a balanced approach, a collaborative approach, an approach which brings oil and gas to the table to help develop solutions from the ground up, to address the effects *and*

¹⁹⁵ Interviews with environmental advocacy groups. Zoom, February and March 2021

¹⁹⁶ Climate Initiatives Task Force meeting 3, Governor’s Office of Coastal Activities, Zoom, 21.01.25

causes of climate change. Here in Louisiana the oil and gas industry works with environmental organizations and state agencies on climate policy.¹⁹⁷

CPRA Chairman Chip Kline’s affirmation of a “collaborative approach” with industry actors to “address the effects *and* causes of climate change” is uniquely reflective of the state’s paradoxical approach to the coastal crisis, as it claims to address its causes while perpetuating an extractivist economy. I find that this type of narratives entertains a purposeful ambiguity on the causes of climate change because it fails to ever directly and explicitly mention what they are.



Photo 8. - An orphaned well in Adams Bay

Orphaned wells are abandoned oil wells. They pose a threat to navigation and continue to emit methane until they are plugged up. Adams Bay is situated off the Empire marina in Plaquemines Parish where mounts and Indigenous lands are converting to open water. Source: Sarah Munoz (2022).

As Ogunbode et al. (2019) have shown, attribution in the context of climate change matters. The state’s ambiguity is reinforced by the fluctuant position adopted by Louisiana Governor Edwards, who both pushes for climate action through the creation of the Climate Initiatives Task Force and opposes President Biden’s federal climate policies for their impacts on the oil and gas industry. “We are dedicated to fighting climate change”, proclaimed Governor Edwards, but must do so

¹⁹⁷ Chip Kline, Chairman of the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA), Joint Natural Resources Committee Hearing on Biden Executive Orders. House and Senate Natural Resources and Environment committees, Louisiana State Legislature, Baton Rouge, 21.02.10

with “clean oil and gas”¹⁹⁸. In a letter addressed to former President Donald Trump, the Governor boasted about the state’s coastal protection and restoration projects which, he argued, enabled the preservation of Louisiana’s energy industry and the “Sportsman’s Paradise”¹⁹⁹, indicating a largely instrumental perspective on the non-human world (LT4).

Our efforts are not just focused on projects alone. We’ve also announced new policy initiatives by working with the Governor to create the Climate Initiatives Task Force. To look at proposals on how we can reduce Louisiana’s greenhouse gas emissions so that we are no longer just reacting to the impacts of climate change, but also addressing the causes of climate change.²⁰⁰

The rain, the flooding that we’ve seen across South Louisiana this week is just another, and the latest, reminder of why these projects are so important. We know severe weather is going to hit, and if recent history is any indication, it’s going to become more frequent and more severe.²⁰¹

Once again, the absence of explicit recognition of these “causes” resonates against their proclaimed commitment to enhancing fossil fuel activities in political instances with a Republican majority (i.e., the legislature), displaying the paradoxical position of State level officials. The Governor’s discursive juggling between climate objectives and economic interests is best illustrated in the executive order for the creation of the Climate Initiatives Task Force itself (L13). Created in August 2020, it is tasked with making recommendations for Louisiana to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050. The contents of the executive order reveal a technology-centered and economic approach to the climate problem, which starts by acknowledging the importance of oil and gas for the State. The first line of the order reads, “Louisiana’s working coast is a national treasure, exporting over \$120 billion in annual goods, servicing 90% of oil and gas activity in the Gulf of Mexico...”. The third paragraph finally acknowledges land loss and vulnerability to climatic events, while the fourth recognizes their impacts on human communities. It is not a coincidence that this executive order – the first time a Governor of Louisiana had acknowledged

¹⁹⁸ Full Committee Hearing to Examine Offshore Energy Development, U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, Washington (DC), 21.05.13

¹⁹⁹ See Box 7.

²⁰⁰ Chip Kline, CPRA chairman, during the Governor Edwards and CPRA announcements, Coastal Protection & Restoration Authority, Facebook Live, 21.05.19

²⁰¹ Governor Edwards, *ibid.*

climate change in the political history of the State –, begins by highlighting the importance of oil and gas.

Because fossil fuels have been framed as crucial to both the economy and the fight against climate change, the main objective of this Task Force has been to preserve the energy sector while recognizing the necessity to curb its carbon emissions. A policy advisor for the State of Louisiana government, confident in the state’s approach of “building a big tent” to include all stakeholders and the compatibility between ecological values and extractive industry practices, explains the consensual role of the state and provides insight into why the CPRA and the Governor’s Office hold seemingly paradoxical positions.

The conflict is not there in terms of the ultimate goal. Whether it’s the Climate Task Force or coastal [restoration], protecting communities, infrastructure, restoring habitats, those are all common goals that we all hold. We’re stronger if we are able to unite in that direction and it takes strong leadership from the top, from the Governor, from my boss Chip Kline. All down the line, playing the role of leader and glue, and holding the coalitions together, it’s important to make sure we’re moving in the same direction.²⁰²

This predominant economic framing at the state executive level therefore reveals the tension between implementing mitigation measures to address climate change and maintaining Republican support for the environmental agency through overt commitment to what they consider to be the “most highly regulated oil and gas produced anywhere in the world”²⁰³. But this discursive strategy reflects a history of conflating economic and environmental issues in Louisianan politics, described by Theriot (2014) as having built the necessary consensus in both Baton Rouge and in Washington for the implementation of policies for the restoration of coastal Louisiana and the region²⁰⁴. Yet today, commitment to oil and gas dominates policymaking for climate adaptation. According to

²⁰² Interview Nathan, State of Louisiana government. Zoom, 21.03.17

²⁰³ Chip Kline, Governor Edwards and CPRA announcements, Coastal Protection & Restoration Authority, Facebook Live, 21.05.19

²⁰⁴ Manifestations of the conflation between economic and environmental interests are found in various documents and discourses. For example, the Constitution of 1974 poses both the health and welfare of the people in relation to preserving natural resources, *and* natural gas as a “public interest” (L22). The Coastal Master Plan focus on economic resources as the first element of their “Treasured Coast” and the productivist *working coast* imagery (G6:24). The Wetlands conservation and restoration Act of 1989 states that wetland loss threatens industrial development and advocates for a “balance between development and conservation” (L16:7), illustrating the vested interests of ecological restoration for industry. The Flood control act of 1936 adopts an economic rationalization for the leveeing of the Mississippi River, revealing the primacy of the preservation of commerce and economic interest in the state’s infrastructural policies (L12).

Lauren, policy director of a coastal restoration non-profit, politicians and industry leaders' united defense of the industry in the face of federal climate policy reveals how little the state is engaging with effective mitigation and adaptation strategies, at the benefit of fossil fuel activities.

We had a hearing last week on oil and gas and the executive orders that Biden came out with. It was just a lot of complaining for multiple hours about how they're going to kill the oil and gas industry. There's no forward thinking for what a future in Louisiana needs, including retreat and adaptation. They're not gonna do anything proactively.

Although Chairman Kline recognizes that “Our state is literally disappearing before our eyes”²⁰⁵, the hegemonic interest-based interpretation of the problem within state governance has created discursive ambiguity around climate change, its causes, and policy solutions. As Stone (2002:226) reminds us, “Finding the true or ultimate cause of harms in these policy areas is not what is at issue. Rather, the fight is about locating moral responsibility and real economic costs on a chain of possible causes. The location is dictated more by the political strength of different groups, such as the tobacco industry or the gun lobby, than by any statistical proof or causal logic.” By simultaneously commending the industry, naming climate change, and adopting strategic vagueness on issue resolution, state actors use climate change as a rhetorical weapon to advance their interests – the moral satisfaction of climate change recognition for a liberal public and the maintenance of a fossil-fuel based economy for a conservative audience. As community organizer Gregory remarks, “There's a great deal of economic interest in denying climate change”²⁰⁶.

Box 7. - The Sportsman's Paradise in the political imaginary

This image is particularly conveyed by elected officials and shared by Louisianians engaged in hunting, fishing, or industrial activities. For instance, on his website, State Representative Clay Higgins proudly promotes the imagery of the Sportsman's Paradise and exemplifies the economization and instrumentalization of natural resources. “In Louisiana – the Sportsman's Paradise – we share a deep respect and appreciation for the abundant natural resources in our state. Outdoor recreational activities, including hunting, fishing, and camping, are not just favorite past times of Louisiana residents, they are also economic drivers for the state bringing hundreds of thousands of out of state visitors each year.” (Higgins, 2022).

In the flagship political imaginary of the Sportsman's Paradise, natural resources are exploitable commons which serve to satisfy economic interests. It reveals a resource-focused perspective whereby the state's diverse ecosystems and wildlife are viewed as exploitable assets, utilized for recreational

²⁰⁵ Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) board meeting, Belle Chasse, 21.06.16

²⁰⁶ Interview Gregory, community-based organizations coalition. Zoom, 21.03.16

purposes, and yielding great economic and cultural value – revealing both material and immaterial interests in the coast. This perspective treats the non-human world as a means to an end, namely its contribution to local economies through tourism, hunting and fishing. As such, it ignores the intrinsic value of place. Joseph, an avid fisherman and lifelong Louisianan, links the destruction of the coast’s integrity to a sense of loss of place and ability to enjoy its resources.

There are a lot of places that I’ve fished over the last thirty years that either look completely different or really have been taken off the map. None of that exists anymore. None of those bayous. None of those lakes and bays. There’s no definition to that anymore, it’s just wide-open water. The marshes have disappeared. It’s sunk. It’s been eroded. It’s hard to swallow, sometimes. Because it really has cost us an enormous amount of opportunities to fish and to hunt.²⁰⁷

As Bridge (2009:1220) reminds us, resources are a “relational understanding to the non-human world”. More than that, the author argues, the way something is regarded as a resource “tells us more about a society than it does about the substance itself”.



Fishing boats in the canal of Pointe-au-Chien, Terrebonne Parish. Source: Sarah Munoz (2022)

2.1.2. Dehumanizing adaptation

The only instance in which climate change has been mentioned during this 2020-2021 legislative cycle has been during the Joint Natural Resources Committee Hearing on Biden Executive Orders. In response to President Biden’s climate policy, Louisiana Republican leaders and their industrial allies have been compelled to acknowledge climate change and its link to their extractivist economy, targeted by the federal moratorium. However, their framing of the issue failed to

²⁰⁷ Interview Joseph, conservation advocacy organization and fisherman. Telephone, 21.04.15

consider its social and environmental consequences for Louisiana, and instead reduced it to the issue of greenhouse gas emissions. During a four-hour long legislative meeting, political and economic elites argued against federal climate policies by suggesting that systemic changes are not necessary, considering the promise of carbon capture and storage technologies (CCS) to reduce emissions. By emphasizing the saving grace of technology, these frames shape public perceptions of structural issues and the necessary response to political problems. In other words, they attribute responsibility and create support for policies aimed at preserving economic interests above structural change (Iyengar, 1996; Hall, 1997; Dunlap and Van Liere, 1984). Beyond the limited practicality and unproven capacity of CCS technologies today, the ‘neoliberalization’ of adaptation prevents collective systemic transformations of economic structures and deflects from their role in climate change (Douglas, 2023; Felli and Castree, 2012).

The omission of a direct connection between climate change and the increased severity of climate-related events further reflects a phase of climate politics which Anshelm and Hultman (2014) term the *hegemonic ecomodern managerial politics*. Focused on utopian promises of hydrogen economies and low-carbon technologies, it offers “a compromise structured around the promise of a gradual transition to a low-carbon economy through the creation of carbon dioxide markets and climate-friendly consumption that would not threaten existing energy companies” (Anshelm et Hultman, 2014:169). Such narratives have also effectively dehumanized the debate and favored agnostic adaptation, which ignores the anthropogenic character of climate change²⁰⁸ by focusing on the non-human dimensions of climate change and ignoring its fundamental role in the production of inequities (Kuh, 2015; Koslov, 2019). These findings corroborate existing studies that show political ideology mitigates support for adaptation policies (Carman et al., 2022; Bateman and O’Connor, 2016). In the first iteration of the terms “climate change” – more than one hour into the session – the Secretary of the Department of Natural Resources Tom Harris, frames the reduction of oil and gas as futile in combatting climate change, going so far as to portray it as a risk to the nation. This effectively alters the problem's interpretation, reframing it as an issue of economic security, conveniently conflating this argument with the *jobs* frame to garner public

²⁰⁸ The concept of agnostic adaptation will be further developed in [Chapter 5](#).

support, and portraying fossil fuels not as a contributing factor to climate change but as an entity existing in parallel and whose catalyst character for the climate problem is not recognized.

While Louisiana recognizes the value and necessity of taking strong action to combat climate change, an artificial reduction of domestic supply doesn't achieve that end, and instead creates potential to destabilize the nation's energy infrastructure and energy security, increase energy costs and put thousands of Americans out of work for no real environmental gain.²⁰⁹

Here, what constitutes the “environment” is blurry and vague because it seems conflated with climate change impacts yet remains imprecise about what type of “gain” it refers to. This framing resonates with the industry's discursive use of generic terminology regarding “the environment”, entertaining ambiguity both about what it designates and the identification of its problems. Such framing also serves to convey broad, ambiguous statements about the oil and gas sector's activities which allow them to claim that they are working for the “betterment of the environment”²¹⁰ without detailing what this entails. These narratives effectively separate human and non-human worlds by calling to a broad, undefined and almost-mystical picture of “the environment”²¹¹.

The lack of consideration for the social, human, and non-human consequences of climate change, whether at the executive level or within the House and Senate Natural Resources and Environmental committees, reveals the predominance of “economism”. It is the belief that growth and income are the most important goals and that “this process of growth and accumulation cannot be interrupted without endangering the economic position of those who benefit from it” (Andreasson, 2005:61). It is evidenced by Republican resistance to any policy that might curb capital and industrial growth, evidenced by the uproar of President Biden's moratorium on oil and gas leases in the Gulf of Mexico (Nisbet, 2009; McCright and Dunlap, 2011b). Acting as a frame of reference for decisionmakers, the extractivist Dominant Social Paradigm constrains their interpretations of the issue and the creation of causal stories about the coastal problem, and consequently, their discursive framing of climate change as an economic challenge. Because they are ideas about causation and involve “strategically portraying issues so that they fit one causal

²⁰⁹ Tom Harris, Secretary of the Department of Natural Resources, Joint Natural Resources Committee Hearing on Biden Executive Orders. House and Senate Natural Resources and Environment committees, Louisiana State Legislature, Baton Rouge, 21.02.10

²¹⁰ Brett Chiasson, Greater Lafourche Port Commission meeting, Cut Off, 21.02.11

²¹¹ See [Chapter 5](#), section 1.3. on the *naturalization* discursive strategy

idea or another” (Stone, 1989:283), discourses within the legislative sphere contribute to the perpetuation of the extractive model in coastal Louisiana, despite its role in the climate crisis.

2.2. Harvesting the coast: extractivism and the *working coast* imagery

In his defense of the state’s fossil-fuel-based economy, integral to the funding of the Coastal Master Plan, CPRA Chairman Chip Kline has often mobilized the imagery of the *working coast*²¹².

If you’re looking to make climate policy that can both increase community resilience and mitigate greenhouse gas emissions, while still maintaining a working coast and productive economy, then you should look no further than the state of Louisiana. (...) We’re a state that has a coastal program that relies heavily on the revenues generated from oil and gas production to restore and protect our coast.²¹³

Conveying the idea of Louisianan exceptionalism, the *working coast* concept is defined in the State’s Coastal Master Plan as such:

Our coast defies tidy categories. It’s not just a three-million-acre conservation area, nor is it an industrialized zone bereft of natural habitats and vibrant communities. Somehow, south Louisiana manages to be many things at once: a center of culture, a haven for wildlife, and an economic hub of national importance. These roles might seem mutually exclusive, and in most other places they probably would be. But in south Louisiana we make these different roles work together, all while delivering a wealth of goods and services to our state and nation. This is the value of Louisiana’s Working Coast. (G12:32)

The *working coast* is an evocative image mobilized in political discourse to legitimize the simultaneous endorsement of extractivist and restoration policies. It draws on the symbol of the Louisianan coast as a place of plentiful and exploitable natural resources, one of the basic beliefs in the Dominant Western worldview underlying the DSP (Catton and Dunlap, 1980; Chong and Druckman, 2007). Accentuating the productive aspects of the coast – the state’s contribution of billions of dollars to the country’s economy from fishing and fossil fuels (G6) -, the Master Plan banks on the idea of Louisiana being able to reconcile economic growth with environmental protection, attributing an instrumental purpose to their natural resources. “Nowhere in the nation is there a region that simultaneously offers globally important habitat and the breadth of economic

²¹² See section 2.2. of [Chapter 4](#)

²¹³ Chip Kline, Chairman of the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA), Joint Natural Resources Committee Hearing on Biden Executive Orders. House and Senate Natural Resources and Environment committees, Louisiana State Legislature, Baton Rouge, 21.02.10

assets and human capital found in coastal Louisiana”, the Master Plan reads (G6:26). Pinning the plan’s funding on “meeting the energy demands of the nation”, the State’s approach aimed to foster both a “sustainable” coast and economy through simultaneous industrial growth and coastal restoration (Theriot, 2014:210).

The *working coast* flagship concept thus allows for adaptation planning around the protection of the oil industry as the lifeblood of this productive coast and reflects the inherent interests of the “science-policy” model (Nost, 2019: 34). This policy perspective originated in Louisiana in the 19th century, at a time when the federal government and private developers sought to utilize swamps and marshes for agriculture (Colten, 2019). The conservation efforts of the Progressive Era in American politics developed in the state legislature to promote oil and gas production and extractive activities, augmenting the conservation and preservation of productive resources (Colten, 2019; Grismore, 2018). This rationalization is reflective of the mindsets of decisionmakers who, according to Burge et al., (2020:32), are “not fully appreciative of the affects key industries have on environmental problems.”

Box 8. - A day on the boat: navigating the economic value of place

"Intermittent signs, emphatic and ugly to the eye, mark the pipeline’s presence: DANGER: DO NOT DREDGE OR ANCHOR”, wrote Mike Tidwell of the Louisianan bayou, describing the visible imprint of the oil and gas industry on the landscapes of the Gulf (2010:34). During my time scouring the wetlands on Caleb’s boat, we



came across many of those pipeline signs. Whether at a canal intersection, overtaken by marsh grasses, or even at the very entrance of the Isle de Jean Charles Indigenous land (Photo A). The reminders of these infrastructures’ presence are overwhelming to the sight, even amidst the tranquility of the open water. As you make your way across the Mississippi River, along the coast or through the canals, you’ll find both gigantic structures and relics of the industry in the form of abandoned rusty natural gas spheres or orphaned oil wells (Photo B).

As we sail across Adams Bay, at the edge of Empire (Plaquemines) and head towards Scofield Island, a barrier island restored by the CPRA, Caleb points to the open water. This is where he learned to swim, when it was once marsh three decades ago. We continue into the Gulf and find another abandoned oil well (Photo 8). He expresses his frustration at the neglect of energy companies and observes that the state doesn't seem to show concern, despite knowing who it belongs to. Without any lights on the well, a collision with a boat could cause an oil leak and damage to both lives and property. If this were in federal waters, he continues, they would probably be forced to do something, testifying of the major leniency the industry has been afforded in state politics.



After a walk on the barrier island to witness coastal restoration firsthand, we come back onto the boat and head for the Mississippi River, crossing a few dolphin pods hunting in the open water. Caleb points to the marsh banks where natural deposits of oysters have reinforced the shoreline (Photo C). He deplores that these techniques are not used more frequently by the CPRA. They have natural advantages at a low cost for the state, he argues. Caleb bends down over the boat and grabs an oyster, chucks it and hands it to me. It couldn't be any fresher. He remarks that the scientific discourse of the CPRA tends to dismiss or marginalize alternative forms of knowledge, particularly when individuals are unable to articulate their perspectives

in a manner that aligns with the CPRA's standards. He remembers being shut down by someone from the Governor's Office of Coastal activities in a condescending manner, who sarcastically suggested that he should "send them his manifesto".

Caleb remarks that he's never seen the scientists out on the river on cold and windy days like these. They always seem to come when the weather is beautiful. He wonders, how much can they really know about the coast? He acknowledges that no one person can possess all the knowledge, but he feels that the CPRA has disregarded residents in favor of their chosen experts. This condescending attitude has frustrated fishermen and locals. An ecologist at heart, he wishes he could be more involved in the planning of restoration in the area. But even when he can speak up, he deplores, "I'm overruled by people with degrees", despite him being out on the water five days a week. "And that's me with my title²¹⁴, imagine the fishermen!". For him and other locals in the area, there are alternative ways to do coastal restoration, other than large-scale infrastructural projects. Yet, they believe, CPRA is



²¹⁴ He is a former councilmember.

driven by self-interest. There is considerable money involved in restoration and the agency has specific stakeholders to please (and potentially enrich), Caleb denounces.

We continue into the Mississippi delta. It's a very cold day, the alligators are staying warm at the bottom of the river. A few birds are out hunting, but not as many as usual, according to Caleb, "it's too cold out". We pass many pipeline warning signs "DANGER: DO NOT DREDGE OR ANCHOR" planted into the marsh. We stop along a bank for Caleb to show me some trees he has planted himself – one of his many personal endeavors to reduce coastal land loss and preserve the marshes. On the other bank, facing his growing cypress trees, sits a giant oil and gas refinery (Photos D and E). It takes the last of the water out of the fuels before shipping them through pipelines across the US. With a smile, he remarks, "someone could be turning on their stove in New York with this oil right now". Excessively noisy, the refinery is disturbing the serenity of the Mississippi marshes.



A while later, we stop the small fishing boat to admire the surrounding wildlife. Caleb notices on his screen that we're hovering twenty-seven feet²¹⁵ above a pipeline that has been uncovered, probably from erosion or the moving sediment of the river canals (see Photo F).

CALEB. Do you see the exposed pipeline on the sonar? (*Points to the sonar screen of his boat and starts moving the boat over the pipeline*) It's like a giant snake on the bottom. What could possibly go wrong

(*sarcastically*)? Check this out, there is a second pipeline that crosses it, do you see that? They're rubbing together. That's not good at all. If I'm not mistaken, I believe the pipeline at the bottom is active. It was probably buried when it was installed. It might have been 12 feet under the mud. People need to take care of their infrastructure, lest be an accident.

SM.²¹⁶ Don't they have regulations for that?

CALEB. Sure. But you don't have to come out here to take care of yourself because nobody's looking.

LUCILE. It would require somebody to double-check.

CALEB. I've talked to people about it. I don't even know whose pipeline it is!



Randolph (2018:8) further remarks that "As an instrument of restoration, the Master Plan could be thought of as an extraction machine", notably because it enables the continuation of an extractivist economy and its consequential social, racial and environmental costs (Calvão et al., 2023; Murrey and Mollett, 2023). Extractivism is embedded within the moral imperative for wealth production and unlimited economic growth at the heart of the DSP, casting doubt on the actual possibility of

²¹⁵ Twenty-seven feet is approximately eight meters.

²¹⁶ SM refers to the researcher.

reconciling industrial growth and coastal restoration altogether (Shafer, 2006). As Edelman (1960: 600) reminds us, “Emotional commitment to a symbol is associated with contentment and quiescence regarding problems that would otherwise arouse concern.” The mobilization of imagery and symbols such as the *working coast* or Sportsman’s Paradise²¹⁷ serve to legitimize agnostic policies – meaning they are detached from belief in climate change – and enable quiescence from decisionmakers regarding the origins of the problem – the extractivist Dominant Social Paradigm.

“It sometimes stuns me to think about the resources that we have as a nation, our opportunities to provide for an economy, hobs, and resources that our nation needs”, complained US Senator Murkowski in opposition to President Biden’s climate policies, “but sometimes we put in place policies that hand cuff us in our ability to do anything”²¹⁸. In this light, environmental resources, coastal adaptation, or any appreciation of the non-human world is conveyed through the lens of economic interests or framed through ideas of productive capacity and opportunity.

2.3. Drilling for restoration: the codependence of coastal funding and fossil fuels

The instrumentalization of the coastal crisis can also be perceived in the way coastal funding has been tied to fossil fuels. Reinforcing codependence between environmental action and extractivist activities, this policy set-up serves to legitimize productivity. Based on the idea that without restoration “the coastal economy will fail”, the necessity of fossil fuels for the implementation of the Master Plan is regularly conveyed by the CPRA and the Governor (Colten, 2016: 8). This narrative finds its origins in the intensive political rebranding efforts of the energy industry (Box 9). Aiming to link economic interests to restoration practices through the industry-funded political campaign “America’s Wetlands”, it eventually led the United States Congress to adopt the Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act (GOMESA) in 2006. This federal revenue sharing program through which proceeds generated from offshore oil and gas production in the Gulf of Mexico are

²¹⁷ The Sportsman’s Paradise is another widely conveyed image designed to enhance the “natural” resources of the coast at the disposition of Louisianans and industries, further exemplifying the utilitarian and resource-focused worldview shared by coastal actors. More in Box 7.

²¹⁸ Full Committee Hearing to Examine Offshore Energy Development, U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, Washington (DC), 21.05.13

redistributed among coastal states constitutes an important funding source for restoration, as well as a major argument in defense of industrial activities for policy actors. Support for offshore drilling grew in both Washington and Baton Rouge, as did State leaders' outcry for the compensation of the impacts of industrial activities on coastal land loss. Framing this connection enabled the State to garner larger financial resources for adaptation projects – from GOMESA and the BP oil spill settlement, amongst other funding mechanisms – while also expanding economic activities onshore and offshore (see Box 10).

Box 9. - Framing the coastal crisis through the America's WETLAND campaign

The instrumental perspective of the coast is best embodied on a larger scale by the oil industry's heavy lobbying for the rebranding of Louisiana's crisis through the America's WETLAND campaign, "to make it a national issue because we provide important fisheries and oil"²¹⁹. This narrative, similar to that of the *working coast*, exemplifies how influential economic interests and industries are to the framing of ecological issues in Louisiana. The America's WETLAND awareness campaign, funded by Shell, emerged in 2002 to focus coastal efforts on sediment diversions and levees rather than economic reform. It birthed a "massive, industry-led public relations campaign" about protecting "America's energy coast" and its wetlands (Randolph, 2018:14). The campaign aimed to redefine "the problem as both economic and environmental, and ultimately established a link between a sustainable ecosystem and the future of America's energy coast". It focused on the economic impacts of land loss to rally political support and identify "the synergies among the different groups invested in coastal Louisiana's future" (Theriot, 2014:185). Through this framing, political leaders succeeded in linking oil and gas extraction to environmental restoration, pressing federal governance for a larger share of energy revenues from the Gulf.

The rebranding of coastal land loss through the America's WETLAND campaign embodies the making of political problems through causal ideas, whereby problem definition can be conceived as a "process of image making" about the cause, blame and responsibility of an issue (Stone, 1989:282). To uphold specific practices and policies protective of an extractivist industry, political leaders and industry actors perpetuated in discourse and policy the causal idea of a coastal crisis caused by the leveeing of the Mississippi River. This contributes to legitimizing controversial restoration projects such as sediment diversions, which aim to restore the natural flow of sediments from the Mississippi River to deteriorating wetlands (Blum and Roberts, 2012). Despite knowing of the direct causality between oil and gas activities in the Gulf and the ensuing land loss crisis, state leaders pursued continued production and the expansion of Port Fourchon in the 1990s, right after the enactment of the federal program to fund wetland restoration, the Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection and Restoration Act (Colten, 2016; Theriot, 2014). In fact, "For decades, many in Louisiana had accepted and supported the trade-offs between the economic benefits of offshore development and the onshore environmental problems associated with it." (Theriot, 2014:188).

But this strategy embedded into the state's restoration policies the belief that ecosystem sustainability and industrial growth are compatible and should be pursued with all industry and environmental actors at the table. R. King Milling, a New Orleans businessman and oil and gas lawyer, became the America's WETLAND campaign's spokesperson in the late 1990s, defending the inclusion of business and industrial

²¹⁹ Interview Benjamin, local researcher. Zoom, 20.08.28

actors into environmental policymaking and downplaying the responsibility of current extractive practices in the coastal crisis. He argued, “There were a lot people screaming ‘oil and gas problem’ and they did this and they did that. As a lawyer, [I know] they did a lot of things in the later part of the last century . . . of course nobody knows who THEY are because these are not the same companies that are here today”, resonating with State Senator Fesi’s line of defense against the coastal lawsuits²²⁰ (Theriot, 2014:191). Pushing the framing of land loss as a long-term economic problem, Milling later expanded his reach in the State’s environmental policy by becoming chairman of the Governor’s advisory commission on coastal protection, restoration and conservation. An avid defender of economic development, “No one had linked the economic costs associated with continued coastal erosion quite like Milling.” (Theriot, 2014:192). His relentless defense of the oil and gas industry throughout meetings that I observed was striking and confirmed the embeddedness of extractivist interests in environmental policymaking. During a Governor’s Advisory Commission meeting for example, upon discussing the potential for carbon capture and sequestration in Louisiana, Milling remarked that industry actors “are a significant part of our economy, and so we’ve got to figure out some way to find out what they can do and how they can assist us in dealing with these issues. Not on a competitive basis, but on an educational basis, because it’s in their best interest and clearly in Louisiana’s best interest.”²²¹

This political strategy created consensus among elected leaders in Baton Rouge and Washington for stronger environmental policies, but also rendered evident the economic interests of such a strategy: prolonging the ability of the State and industries to extract and produce oil and gas by restoring the productive capacities of the coast and protecting their infrastructure. “Only by sustaining the ecological systems that support America’s energy needs could the nation continue to receive the benefits derived from Louisiana’s coastal wetlands over the next half century” (Theriot, 2014:219). In the form of a vicious circle, the economic benefits extracted from oil and gas production are serving to finance coastal protection and restoration programs, themselves necessary for the continued exploitation of natural resources and private gains. The recognition of the encroaching coastal crisis gave impulse to the State’s use of oil and gas revenues for coastal restoration, but also increased its dependency on self-interested industry actors.

The oil and gas industries could go to legislature every year and say, “we’re paying for the State, everything you do, so don’t give us that new regulation, or give us another break”. The fact that the State had traded the old way of life for new ways of death and got itself in that trap of being obligated to a patron that was totally selfish, was not good. The State of Louisiana was just going along with whatever that oil and gas petrochemical industry leadership wanted them to do because the State felt that it had to. Eventually though, they

²²⁰ See section 2.1.4, Tackling accountability ([Chapter 3](#)).

²²¹ Governor’s Advisory Commission on Coastal protection, restoration and conservation meeting, Zoom, 21.02.09

started thinking, how can we get a bigger share of all of those billions and billions of dollars that the big companies are making, we need a bigger cut.

The US Congress started passing different ways to reallocate the money. It said, you complain about the coast being disrupted, use that money from the oil companies to fix your coast. So, that's how that got started. It wasn't that there was some great sincere revelation or reaction on climate change or coastal ecology, or anything else. It was a revelation of being ripped off and trying to get a better share. That's how that money started coming in.²²²

Between 2022 and 2024, the environmental agency is set to receive over \$267 million designated for funding coastal restoration and infrastructure from oil and gas revenues (CPRA, 2020). When addressing the Biden administration's recent halt on offshore oil production in the Gulf of Mexico, Governor Edwards insisted on the necessity of this industry to fund the State's efforts to fight off subsidence. He wrote, "GOMESA impact assistance allows us to put more restoration and protection projects on the ground and helps expedite those projects because it's a dependable funding source."²²³ Due to a lack of economic diversification and the political bargaining for coastal restoration to be funded by fossil fuel revenues in the early 2000s, the fate of the industry has become intrinsically tied to that of environmental policies. Such dependence compels political leaders to defend energy productivity and the private interests of energy companies in the face of federal climate policies.

Revenue from the outer continental shelf production is fueling the most ambitious green infrastructure investment program in the world, between the investments in our coastal restoration through the CPRA, and our protection projects via the Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act, GOMESA.²²⁴

GOMESA was the source of what we were gonna use to restore our coasts. But with the Biden Administration taking the means out of this fund source, how are we going to restore our coasts?²²⁵

I cannot stress enough the importance of the GOMESA sharing program to our program here, in Louisiana. We use those dollars to cash flow our entire operation. These aren't just conservation-type projects. There are projects that protect people, businesses and livelihoods.

²²² Interview Daniel, biologist and lifelong environmental activist. Telephone, 21.03.03

²²³ Testimony by the Honorable John Bel Edwards Governor, Full Committee Hearing to Examine Offshore Energy Development, U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, Washington (DC), 21.05.13

²²⁴ Rep. Jean-Paul Coussan, Co-Chairman of the House Environment and Natural Resources Committee, Joint Natural Resources Committee Hearing on Biden Executive Orders. House and Senate Natural Resources and Environment committees, Louisiana State Legislature, Baton Rouge, 21.02.10.

²²⁵ Senator Bret Allain, *ibid.* In this particular quote, Senator Allain questions President Biden's climate policies which had put a halt on oil and gas leases in the Gulf of Mexico. Note that Senator Allain has been funded by Chevron during the 2021 election year (Open Secrets, 2021).

It is our coasts that takes the brunt of those impacts, it's our coast that sustains that infrastructure, that protects that infrastructure, and it is our coast that allows that revenue to be generated to begin with.²²⁶

Our local communities depend on energy production not only for economic stability, but also for the protection and resiliency of our coast. Revenues from oil and gas activity in the Gulf of Mexico are a primary funding source for critical coastal restoration and hurricane protection projects that help make our communities safer and stronger.²²⁷

By contending that fossil fuels represent a critical “tool” for Louisiana, political leaders frame any policy that poses a risk to oil and gas activities as a threat to their coastal programs. In discourse, this rhetorical association places oil and gas as a *sine qua non* condition of environmental adaptation. Such framing has been adopted at both state and parish levels by industry actors and elected officials. In a resolution of the Lafourche Parish council in protest against President Biden’s moratorium, for example, the primary consequences of a decline in oil and gas production are framed as environmental.

WHEREAS the future production of these oil and gas resources and consequently the funding of conservation, recreation, restoration and protection and further consequently the denial of environmentally advantaged, low carbon intensity barrels of production as a substitution for higher carbon intensity barrels of production from foreign sources...(L1)

As production declines, the future of state adaptation is thus compromised. CPRA Chairman Chip Kline reminds the Louisiana Senate that “When those [BP settlement] dollars dry up, we’re essentially back to where we were in 2007 and 2008. That is, state mineral revenues and GOMESA revenues. That’s why you see us in [Washington] DC a lot, pushing Congress and the Presidential administration for additional oil and gas revenues.”²²⁸ A parish director of coastal restoration further explains,

Hopefully, GOMESA is going to be around for a long time. Most coastal projects are so expensive that local [governments] cannot afford to pay for them. The typical marsh restoration project through CWPPRA²²⁹ runs anywhere from \$25 to \$35 million dollars over

²²⁶ Chip Kline, Chairman of the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA), *ibid.* Accentuating that the coast “allows that revenue to be generated”, Chairman Kline further conveys the instrumental perspective embodied in the State’s environmental practices, aiming to restore resources for their productive character to enable further oil and gas activities, which in turn, fund their restoration.

²²⁷ Tyler Gray, president of the Louisiana Mid-Continent’s Oil and Gas Association, *ibid.*

²²⁸ Senate Natural Resources and Environment committee, Louisiana State Senate, Baton Rouge, 21.04.21.

²²⁹ The Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection and Restoration Act, or Breaux Act, is a federal law adopted in 1990 and designed to fund the restoration of coastal wetlands.

the 20-year life of that project. There's no way we can make that kind of financial commitment to do those things.²³⁰

Unable to pursue coastal programs without fossil fuels, it appears the State is both unable and unwilling to disengage from fossil fuel activities. For this reason, state-level discourses may appear contradictory – simultaneously opposing any policy that would jeopardize the energy sector while proposing to “address the causes of climate change”²³¹ and implement policies for a “sustainable coast”²³². As Justin deplors, this relationship of dependence between government and industry is sustained adamantly.

As Louisianans, we decide our government has a policy of reinforcing old fuel, reinforcing oil and gas and not understanding that change is coming. They're refusing, they're pushing back on the change. Because our new economy one day will happen, but we're spending all our dollars supporting The Dirty destructive industry.

We're asking the federal government to spend hundreds of billions of dollars to restore our coast, and yet we are unwilling, politically at the State level, to do the things necessary to prevent the continued destruction of our coast.²³³

This unwillingness stems from the unequivocal pressure from industry actors towards policymakers by discursively conflating the interests of industrial actors, communities, and the coast. In one of many meetings within the state legislative and executive spheres of environmental policy where industry representative Lori Leblanc lobbied decisionmakers, she pushed for the Governor to oppose President Biden's policies. She portrayed federal policy as an attack on industry production, GOMESA revenues, and as such, on coastal restoration and hurricane protection for communities. In doing so, she crystallized the industry's reappropriation of Louisianan concern for the coastal crisis.

It needs to be on everybody's radar that we talked about suspending future lease sales, the impacts to GOMESA revenues, which then impacts our ability to have coastal restoration and hurricane levee protection projects. If we don't have those, then we're not protecting our communities. Then, that in turn of course affects the jobs that are created not just by the

²³⁰ Interview Brian, parish director of coastal restoration. Telephone, 21.03.05

²³¹ CPRA chairman Kline, Governor Edwards and CPRA announcements, Coastal Protection & Restoration Authority, Facebook Live, 21.05.19

²³² CPRA chairman Kline, Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Belle Chasse, 21.04.08

²³³ Interview Justin, environmental lawyer. Zoom, 21.03.04

industry itself, but also by the coastal restoration industry. I want to make sure it's on your radar and everybody else's radar.²³⁴

The *jobs* frame is mobilized here to link the threat of federal climate policies to the livelihoods of those working in the coastal restoration sector. This narrative is also sustained by the CPRA's discursive emphasis on the jobs created by coastal projects. In one CPRA board meeting for example, Bren Haase highlighted the 260 jobs linked to two projects in Grand Isle and the Terrebonne Basin, partly funded through GOMESA²³⁵, exemplifying the centrality of economic concerns in discourse and practice. Despite state and local agents reiterating their commitment to oil and gas, some policy actors have expressed growing concern over the long-term sustainability of this relationship. According to Timothy of the State of Louisiana government, the BP oil spill drastically changed the funding landscape for coastal restoration projects in Louisiana, but the deadline associated with the payout of the settlement and the steady decline of the industry since 2014 jeopardize the implementation of the Coastal Master Plan. These conditions cast doubt on the sustainability of this co-dependency.

We have to know what's coming in the future in order to make good decisions because these projects take so long to design and permit, and the conditions on the ground change so much. (...) The fact that the state is so tied to it could be a problem in the future. We should be thinking about a world where GOMESA is a smaller piece of our revenue stream and not a bigger and bigger piece (...) At the same time, right now, we can't do without that \$200 million that come from oil and gas. We need it. It's tough. t's tough politically and it's tough too because our state economy reflects that just as well.

Box 10. - Funding mechanisms for state coastal programs

According to the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority's 2023 fiscal year report, state adaptation projects are funded primarily by the BP settlement following the 2010 Deepwater horizon spill (65,6%), state revenues (16,5%), oil and gas revenues through GOMESA, which in 2019 represented \$94,7 million (11,4%) and federal funding (6,6%) (Healthy Gulf²³⁶; G18). The State's share is comprised of mineral revenues and state surplus funds, while the federal share consists of the Coastal Wetlands Planning Protection and Restoration Act (CWPPRA), to which the State provides a 15% match. The BP settlement funds are estimated to total \$6,8 billion, and a minimum of \$5 billion used for coastal restoration. The funds will be received over a 15-year period ending in April 2031 (allocated through the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the RESTORE council) (G18; G6; PR10). In a press release, CPRA Chairman Chip Kline praised the BP settlement for being a consequential funding source for the state's Master Plan. He argued, "The oil spill reinforced our responsibility to protect our coast and has given us

²³⁴ Governor's Advisory Commission on Coastal protection, restoration and conservation meeting, Zoom, 21.02.09

²³⁵ Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) board meeting, Zoom, 21.01.20

²³⁶ Documents received by private correspondence.

the resources to construct game-changing coastal restoration projects in South Louisiana that have been envisioned for decades” (PR4).

In essence, these funding streams indicate that the oil and gas industry is directly, indirectly, and involuntarily, funding coastal restoration. First, through the BP settlement scheme stemming from one of the biggest environmental disasters in US history; and second, through the GOMESA funds which redistribute national energy revenues among producing states. In this light, the narratives of an industry proactively funding coastal restoration are widely exaggerated to further the belief in the sector’s indispensability and environmental engagement in Louisiana.

3. Greening the drill: the framing the industry practices

As I have so far demonstrated in this chapter, the oil and gas industry has positioned itself as a privileged partner of state coastal adaptation programs, despite the modest nature of their actual involvement and great reluctance to take decisive action on climate change. This final section investigates the discursive framing which has cemented the belief of an ecofriendly industry in political and public discourses and reinforced the legitimacy of their involvement in adaptation policy. The analysis will focus on the ways in which industry discourses have framed their own activities and how political elites have circulated and legitimized these ideas. These discursive efforts work to construct the interest of economic and political elites as the protection of Louisianans against restrictive climate policies. They secure their *objective* interest, the perpetuation of an extractivist economy under the Dominant Social Paradigm.

3.1. Saviors of the coast: the rhetorical importance of fossil fuels

As we’ve discussed in the entrenchment of *oil culture* in Chapter 3, industry actors have secured broad public consent for their activities by framing oil and gas activities as essential to the very survival of Louisianans, instrumentalizing the fact that their revenues are used for the implementation of coastal restoration programs. Yet, analysis of CPRA’s revenue sources for fiscal years 2023-2025 by local NGO Healthy Gulf reveals that oil and gas revenues only account for 11,4% of the agency’s funding, while BP litigation accounts for 65,6%, the rest being made up of State and Federal funding streams (see Box 10). In essence, the oil and gas industry discursively inflate their actual contribution to coastal restoration to legitimize their push for the preservation of their activities.

In his speech before the Louisiana House of Representatives for example, Ben Malbrough, President of the Bayou Industrial Group, a business and industry organization representing oil and gas companies, corroborates the widely defended idea that GOMESA ensures the “survival” of the region, both economically and ecologically. He draws on the *master discourse* of *permanence*, associated with maintaining life in adverse conditions (namely, the coastal crisis) to link long-term immobility in the region and continued extractivist activities. Exaggerating the industry’s concern for the “survival” of Louisianans, he frames the necessity of fossil fuels for *in situ* adaptation and life-enabling. This contributes to portraying non-movement as a voluntary and coveted and disregarding the role of environmental degradation in forced movement and the need for community-based adaptation practices (Geddes et al., 2012; Piguet, 2010a; Black et al., 2011c). In a letter to Congress, his lobby reiterated the association of their activities to a greater common good and frames the energy sector as a *savior*.

For Fiscal Year 2019 alone, Louisiana received over \$155 million for dedicated coastal projects from revenues generated by the healthy Gulf of Mexico offshore oil and gas industry. It is vital that we secure this funding source to preserve and protect our valuable and irreplaceable coast. (LT7)

These [GOMESA-funded projects] allow us and our member companies and residents to live in the bayou region, that ultimately allows us to efficiently produce the energy that fuels America. (...) It can’t be stated enough that GOMESA is simply a matter of survival for us, in the bayou region that will allow us to live there.²³⁷

Sharing this sentiment, Chett Chaisson, executive director of the Greater Lafourche Port Commission, passionately defended the industry’s indispensability before the Lafourche Parish council, as they discussed the coastal lawsuits to redress environmental damages along the coast (Photo 9). In his discourse, he furthers the *permanence master discourse*, arguing that the industry is single-handedly responsible for the continued survival of the coast.

Without the oil and gas industry, Port Fourchon wouldn’t be there. South Lafourche wouldn’t be in the right place where it needs to be. Everything outside that levee system would not exist because we would not have been able to rebuild it and repair it and continue to move forward.²³⁸

²³⁷ Joint Natural Resources Committee Hearing on Biden Executive Orders. House and Senate Natural Resources and Environment committees, Louisiana State Legislature, Baton Rouge, 21.02.10

²³⁸ Chett Chiasson of the Greater Lafourche Port Commission, Lafourche Parish council meeting, Mathews, 21.10.26.

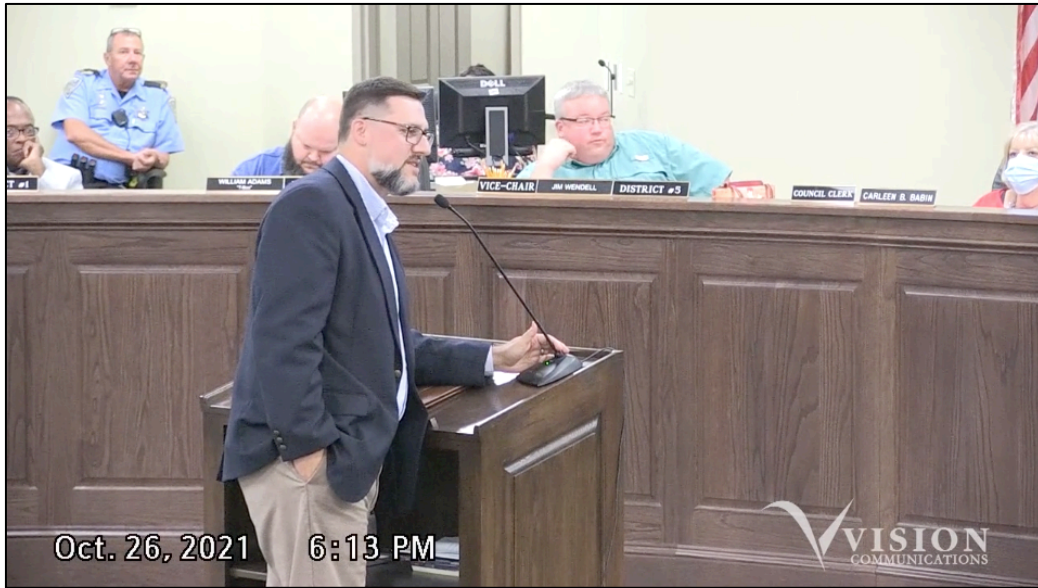


Photo 9. - Chett Chaisson, executive director of the Greater Lafourche Port Commission, speaking before the Lafourche Parish council in defense of the energy sector

Fossil fuels, therefore, are *needed* to ensure the future of coastal Louisiana. Energy corporations, in this light, are *saviors*. In similar fashion during the annual meeting of the Louisiana Oil and Gas Association, interim president Mike Moncla reaffirmed the industry’s commitment to “working with the state and leaders to protect coasts”, framing the coastal lawsuits as an impediment to restoration and protection²³⁹. He portrayed the industry as actively contributing to environmental protection, emphasizing that it that has already done its part in reducing emissions, while asserting the indispensability of oil. This rhetoric is also widely conveyed by local politicians to simultaneously support the oil and gas industry, oppose the State's actions on oil and gas reparations, and discursively link the presence of the industry as an environmental benefit. These discourses are inscribed in a larger communications strategy to promote of a positive image of fossil fuel companies, which has been found to increase corporate reputation and reduce public and political demand for legislation and regulation (Brulle et al., 2020).

During legislative debates about the federal energy moratorium for example, fossil fuel proponents further reversed President Biden's reasoning by arguing that a decrease in fossil fuel activities

²³⁹ LOGA’s State of the Industry 2020, Louisiana Oil and Gas Association, Zoom, 20.11.16

would increase the state's environmental vulnerability by limiting the petroleum revenues that currently support coastal programs²⁴⁰. This political rhetoric serves to further enhance the industry's normative legitimacy and public beliefs in its vitality for the state through the *saviors* frame. "The oil and gas industry has a lot riding on having people in this area believe that we cannot survive without that industry", argues local researcher Victoria about this deliberate framing strategy. "There are certainly media campaigns, policy advocacy campaigns, and I'm sure they have a huge lawyer bill that they're paying to fight climate change adaptation, mitigation policies at every level." This observation is reflected in current research on fossil fuel corporate framing and political influence. Supran and Oreskes (2021) and Supran et al. (2023) reveal that the tactics of ExxonMobil to disseminate the belief that fossil fuels are indispensable serve to push the individualization of consumer responsibility to climate change and preserve their productivity.

Senator Cassidy's comments, who has received more than \$1,700,000 in campaign contributions from the oil and gas industry (Open Secrets, 2023), serve as an example of this discourse. During the US Senate hearing in May of 2021, he argued for a collaborative effort to address climate change and fight against coastal erosion, citing the "critical" role of oil and gas revenue in these efforts²⁴¹. Such rhetoric implies a disconnect between the industry and the problems of climate change or coastal erosion, positioning the former as the solution to the problem rather than a contributor. In a similar vein, Congressman Orgeron remarked, upon discussing a bill for carbon capture and storage.²⁴² "Everybody here wants to be a good steward of the environment", he argued, despite the state legislature's consistent unwillingness to recognize the environmental and climatic impact of industrial activities and Republicans' refusal to sacrifice economic gains.

The idea that oil companies like to talk about as though they are, out of the kindness of their heart, providing all this funding to coastal Louisiana. They're paying their taxes, they're doing what the government told them they had to do. They were doing that anyway, and then the federal government decided that it was smart to start sharing that money. I don't mind if

²⁴⁰ Joint Natural Resources Committee Hearing on Biden Executive Orders. House and Senate Natural Resources and Environment committees, Louisiana State Legislature, Baton Rouge, 21.02.10

²⁴¹ Full Committee Hearing to Examine Offshore Energy Development, U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, Washington (DC), 21.05.13

²⁴² House Committee on Natural Resources and Environment, Louisiana State Legislature, Baton Rouge, 21.04.28.

they brag on their investments, I just don't want anybody to think that we have to cater to them to keep that money flowing. That's not the case.²⁴³

“They're the ones who lobby heavily against higher regulation by the state”, argues Hannah, a policy analyst from a local environmental non-profit. She remarks that a prime example of the industry's practices which testifies of their absence of care for the community is their use of groundwater from aquifers to run their refineries. Using millions of gallons of freshwater per day, they have been unwilling to change their practices because of the cost. “And meanwhile, we have saltwater intrusion into our aquifers which don't replenish very soon”, remarks the environmental activist, visibly disgruntled. “They're not required to care. And internally they don't give a shit, 'cause, they're making money, right?”, comments Justin.²⁴⁴

As Shafer (2006:128) reminds, the promotion of an image of corporate environmental responsibility “suggests that corporate elites recognize the presence of ecological concerns (which conflict with the prevailing myths of the DSP) among their stakeholders, and the threat that such concerns pose to organizational well-being.”

3.2. Spinning the narrative: fossil fuel rhetoric and the illusion of climate compatibility

As elites rally to preserve the Dominant social and economic paradigm, Shafer (2006:128) argues, their efforts “should be directed primarily toward constructing and maintaining an image that is consistent with ecological concern” and “ecological stewardship”, especially if faced with evidence of public support for environmental protection. This is the case in Louisiana. I have previously argued that economic elites – and their political allies – have discursively defended the idea that industrial activities are a net benefit for Louisiana to enhance their cultural legitimacy. These discursive efforts to portray a pro-climate agenda, however, has often been critiqued as a façade to support market-based policies (Gupta, 2021). In this section, I will elaborate on two intertwined framing techniques used by economic elites: the *not-an-either-or* and “*green*” *oil and gas* frames.

²⁴³ Interview Timothy, State of Louisiana government. Zoom, 21.03.01

²⁴⁴ Interview Justin, environmental lawyer. Zoom, 21.03.04

3.2.1. The “not-an-either-or” frame

In their defense of fossil fuels, political leaders at all levels of governance have failed to explicitly acknowledge the link between climate change and human industrial activity, diverting attention from recognizing social and climate vulnerabilities to focus on the impact on Louisianans whose jobs will be affected by a decrease in oil and gas production (i.e., the *jobs* frame). Given the absence of such accountability, the widespread *not an either-or* frame appears somewhat paradoxical. It simultaneously refutes industry’s responsibility to climate change and promotes the belief in the compatibility between energy production and environmental preservation. I argue however that such a narrative is in fact coherent with the industry’s positioning within adaptation practices and policies to secure the perpetuation of an extractivist model. The preservation of this position hinges on the public and political acceptance of the compatibility of industry activities with environmental adaptation, given Louisiana’s exceptional vulnerability. Rejecting President Biden’s supposed “all or nothing approach”, both policy and industry actors have embraced the *not an either-or* frame to oppose regulations and federal climate policies that would hinder oil and gas production. Observations reveal the consistent repetition of this frame in their shared defense of industry activities.

I truly believe that having *to choose between energy and the environment is a flawed narrative*. Emissions reductions and economic growth are *not mutually exclusive*.²⁴⁵

We do not have to choose between reducing emissions and meeting energy needs. *We can do both*.²⁴⁶

I think the message you’re going to hear in various forms today (...) that it is *a false choice* to say we can only have one or the other; we can have oil and gas exploration and environmental protections. We know in Louisiana that *we can do both*.²⁴⁷

The idea that we must choose between energy and the environment is fundamentally flawed. In Louisiana, *we know that we don’t have to choose*. Emissions reductions and economic growth are not mutually exclusive.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁵ Representative Jean-Paul Coussan, Joint Natural Resources Committee Hearing on Biden Executive Orders. House and Senate Natural Resources and Environment committees, Louisiana State Legislature, Baton Rouge, 21.02.10

²⁴⁶ Secretary Tom Harris, department of natural resources, *ibid*.

²⁴⁷ Matthew Block, Governor’s Office, *ibid*.

²⁴⁸ Tyler Gray of the trade association Louisiana Mid-Continent Oil and Gas Association, *ibid*.

It's a *false choice*, we gotta balance both!²⁴⁹

BIG [Bayou Industrial Group] believes that it is possible to have both a robust oil and gas industry that creates jobs and economic opportunity alongside a healthy and sustainable environment to live and work for generations. *Economic and environmental benefits are not an either/or decision*. In Louisiana, *we can, and we do, have both*. (LT6)

“We are not an “either/or” agency: WE CAN DO IT ALL!!!!!!!”, wrote Scott Angelle of the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement (BSEE) in his PowerPoint presentation to the Greater Lafourche Port Commission board meeting²⁵⁰. “It’s about doing all of them because we know how to walk and chew gum”, he argued before the commission in charge of the Lafourche oil and gas base, Port Fourchon. The *not an either-or* frame serves to present the environment and industrial activities as interconnected and to rationalize ongoing energy production despite the existing coastal crisis and the role of fossil fuels in climate change. On a broader scale, it is inscribed in what Supran and Oreskes (2021) identify as the “fossil fuels savior” frame²⁵¹ within industrial discourse, which presents production of fossil fuels as inevitable and technological innovation as the solution to climate change. In Louisiana, the *not an either-or* frame diminishes the sense of urgency to transition away from fossil fuels by proposing the possibility of a world where both fossil fuel production expands, and coastal land loss is effectively addressed, thus ensuring the *permanence* of economic institutions. Rebranding the industry’s operations in Louisiana was a decisive communications strategy to further anchor this frame into political narratives.

In 2010, many speculated that America had to make a choice, we were either gonna be one or the other, robust production OR safe operations; robust production OR environmentally sustainable operations (*he points to his PowerPoint*). In 2017, a “We can do it all” approach commences. In 2020, an improved brand emerges. We have safe operations, we have environmentally sustainable operations, and we have robust production. It’s not either-or,

²⁴⁹ Senator Cassidy, Full Committee Hearing to Examine Offshore Energy Development, U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, Washington (DC), 21.05.13

²⁵⁰ Greater Lafourche Port Commission board meeting, Cut Off, 20.12.09.

²⁵¹ This “fossil fuel savior” frame conceptualized by Supran and Oreskes (2021) is not the same as the *saviors* frame identified in this analysis, as the latter pertains to fossil fuel revenues used to fund coastal restoration and protection efforts. Supran and Oreskes’ (2021) concept of the fossil fuel “saviors frame” relates to discourses suggesting that companies are passive suppliers, customers are responsible for demand, and anthropogenic climate change is uncertain.

none of us come from either-or families, we're not going to do it this way or do it that way. We know what the word "and" means.²⁵²

The widespread use of this narrative presents the coastal crisis as unidimensional, often foregoing the bigger picture on environmental and climatic vulnerabilities. Instead, it focuses attention solely on one aspect of the problem, "environmental sustainability" or "environmental responsibility"²⁵³, but prohibits any real discussion of the systemic nature of the coastal issue and its unequal impacts on vulnerable populations. During a meeting of the Greater Lafourche Port Commission, for example, executive director Garrett Chiasson defended, "the things that we're doing for the betterment of the environment, not in spite of industry but because of industry."²⁵⁴ Proclaiming the "eco-friendliness" of oil production, this compatibility expressed through the *not an either-or* frame stems from the belief that fossil fuels can coexist without causing significant harm to the environment. But their conceptualization of the environment is generic, vague and dehumanized, as it fails to consider the interconnectedness with climate change and long-term ecological and social harm.

3.2.2. Making "green" oil and gas

The industry's rebranding strategy is inscribed within a national level effort to yield influence over climate policies (Holden, 2020a, 2020b). In Ohio for example, conservative lawmakers – coordinating with an industry group – have adopted a bill to legally rebrand natural gas as a form of "green energy", piggybacking on recent European Union reframing of nuclear and natural gas as "clean" (Joselow, 2023; Rauhala and Ariès, 2022). This discursive strategy has also been coupled with the promotion of free market *laissez-faire* for the self-regulation of energy production in the context of climate change (Supran and Oreskes, 2021). In Louisiana, the rhetoric shared between political elites and industry actors promotes the belief that industry is clean and self-regulated through market forces and private motivations.

²⁵² Scott Angelle, Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement (BSEE), Greater Lafourche Port Commission board meeting, Cut Off, 20.12.09

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Greater Lafourche Port Commission board meeting, Cut Off, 21.02.11

The oil and gas industry is the cleanest and safest industry in any industry. I'm in the pipeline business. If we drop one drop of oil on the ground, we get documented to say "you better not do that again". It's a whole changed industry.²⁵⁵

When it comes to how we try to figure all this out, when we're not sure if oil and gas has a future in America: offshore oil and gas has a future in America! Why? Because you've performed the right way, industry has made it their business to regulate, and the results are very clear when it comes to the environment, when it comes to production, when it comes to the safety; we check all those boxes.²⁵⁶

We are going to produce oil and gas somewhere in the world. You can either produce it in the United States with our environmental standards, or you can do it in a country like Iran, or Russia, or Nigeria, using their environmental standards.²⁵⁷

Private companies are running cleaner operations, and that's not happening through government mandates. It's happening because innovation is good for business. The result is cleaner, more efficient fuel production.²⁵⁸

The natural gas and oil industry continues to prioritize reducing environmental impacts while producing enough energy to transition away from dependence on less reliable foreign energy sources. As a result of our industry's long-standing commitment to the environment and billions of dollars' worth of investments in infrastructure and technology, total emissions have fallen dramatically while production has significantly increased.²⁵⁹

Restricting or ending US oil production will not address climate change. In fact, restricting US oil production will lead to higher levels of greenhouse gas emissions.²⁶⁰

We have the lowest carbon emissions overall for the most part, in the world of industrial nations. That's the message that we're portraying.²⁶¹

We have amazing jobs for high school education people, and we have the cleanest oil in the world. So why is this pause even considered?²⁶²

²⁵⁵ State Senator Fesi, Lafourche Parish council meeting, Mathews, 21.10.26

²⁵⁶ Scott Angelle, Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement (BSEE), Greater Lafourche Port Commission board meeting, Cut Off, 20.12.09

²⁵⁷ Senator Cassidy, Joint Natural Resources Committee Hearing on Biden Executive Orders. House and Senate Natural Resources and Environment committees, Louisiana State Legislature, Baton Rouge, 21.02.10

²⁵⁸ Congressman Higgins, *ibid.*

²⁵⁹ Tyler Gray, LMOGA, *ibid.*

²⁶⁰ Mike Moncla, Louisiana Oil and Gas Association, *ibid.*

²⁶¹ Executive director Chett Chiasson, Greater Lafourche Port Commission board meeting, Cut Off, 21.02.11

²⁶² Senator Cassidy, Full Committee Hearing to Examine Offshore Energy Development, U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, Washington (DC), 21.05.13

Oil and gas are framed as “clean”, “safe”²⁶³, and necessary to fund adaptation, environmental conservation, and regulate climate change²⁶⁴. Foundational to this *greenwashing* rhetoric is the idea that American oil and gas production is environmentally friendly, and that retaining oil and gas activities is the most environmentally sound approach because of its existing regulations. In fact, any domestic climate policy that hinders activities would not impact climate change because other countries would continue to produce fossil fuels. For local environmental actors, these narratives fail to question the inherent negative externalities of energy production for Louisianan communities themselves, casting doubt on the industry’s intentions and the efficacy of these self-regulations.

You heard probably during the [21.02.10 House and Senate] hearing that “if we go out of the country, it will be worse environmental regulations there”. Maybe. But then, we also wouldn’t have to bear all the burden of having poor health, among all these other things. Honestly, I don’t see much of them being good at adapting. When they do say that they’re doing a good job, it’s more because of a bottom-line issue. The oil and gas industry probably sees the writing on the wall that they’re not going to last forever. So, they are pushing over the cleaner energy but it’s not because they want to be good stewards. It’s because they need more money, they’re going to need to have an economy that works for them.²⁶⁵

They're exempted from hazardous waste laws, they're exempted from solid waste laws, they're exempted from the Clean Water Act. They're exempted from a lot, a lot, a lot of things. They are subject to some regulation at their refineries. But even then, that's where they're getting all the tax breaks.²⁶⁶

They’re a bunch of crybabies. It doesn’t matter if they’re on top of the world, if they’re in an economic cycle or if they’re at the bottom of the trough; they’re going to act like crybabies. The whole idea of being overregulated is just nonsense.²⁶⁷

Such narrative tropes are also intertwined with discourse on the (alleged) efficacy of carbon capture and sequestration technologies, which according to industry actors, testifies of their willingness to address their carbon emissions. This *greenwashing* rhetoric is inscribed in the belief that “salvation is to be found in a plethora of glossy reports promoting green-growth, higher efficiency, utopian technology and the financialization of all we hold dear” (Kirby and O’Mahony,

²⁶³ Greater Lafourche Port Commission board meeting, Cut Off, 20.12.09

²⁶⁴ Full Committee Hearing to Examine Offshore Energy Development, U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, Washington (DC), 21.05.13

²⁶⁵ Interview Lauren, coastal restoration advocacy group. Telephone, 21.02.23

²⁶⁶ Interview Justin, environmental lawyer. Zoom, 21.03.04

²⁶⁷ Interview Daniel, biologist and lifelong environmental activist. Telephone, 21.03.03

2018: vii). Extensively pushing for carbon capture and sequestration technologies within the state-wide Climate Initiatives Task Force to offset their contribution to climate change while resisting policies which would hinder production is, according to a policy advisor of the State of Louisiana government, “a way for industry to say ‘going green’ does not mean that I’m done and that this business is over”²⁶⁸.

A prime example of *greenwashing* discourse comes from industry lobbyist Lori Leblanc. Already mentioned in the previous chapter for her use of the *little guy* frame, this heavily involved industry representative had framed the importance of oil and gas to fund coastal projects as a matter of survival and perpetuity for the Cajun people, mythicizing the investment of fossil fuel revenues into coastal projects. “This is our very own – I would like to say - Cajun environmental justice movement to protect and ensure the sustainability of our culture.”²⁶⁹ She co-opted the concept of environmental justice by conflating the interests of industry and a historically marginalized group, the Cajuns, and by portraying the industry as ideologically, morally or emotionally invested in environmental protection (when, as we have discussed, these motives may be related to material and immaterial interests). The cooptation of social movements through corporate environmentalism embodies what Smerecnik and Renegar (2010) have coined as “capitalistic agency”, meaning the capitalistic approach to pro-environmental behavior. In their study of BP’s use of green marketing campaigns and acts of conservation to brand the oil giant as environmentally responsible, the authors find that these actions serve to constrain the scope of environmental behaviors, thereby individualizing action and reducing other behaviors which may jeopardize profits by decreasing consumption and production of fossil fuels.

Disregarding their responsibility in climate change, *greenwashing* discourses in Louisiana aim to position corporations as leading actors and *saviors* in environmental issues without addressing the potential need for economic transformation. There thus exists a duality in their appreciation of environmental adaptation: as something in which the industry is invested (through revenue sharing and carbon capture and storage (CCS) technologies) and as something that threatens its long-term

²⁶⁸ Interview Timothy, State of Louisiana government. Zoom, 21.03.01

²⁶⁹ Joint Natural Resources Committee Hearing on Biden Executive Orders. House and Senate Natural Resources and Environment committees, Louisiana State Legislature, Baton Rouge, 21.02.10

sustainability (with regulations, taxes and climate policies). It reveals a paradox anchored in the industry's problematization of the issue and their narrow understanding of "the environment" and climate change. The framing of issues solely as one of CO2 emissions reveals their limited conception of environmental sustainability. In fact, Timothy of the State of Louisiana government remarks that the overwhelming discussion of CCS technologies in the Climate Initiatives Task Force is "a way for industry to say going green does not mean that I'm done and that this business is over"²⁷⁰. In their study of the effect of the concepts of "carbon emissions" and pollution on the public, Commerçon et al. (2023) find that greenhouse gases doesn't connote harm, while using the term "carbon" (pollution, emissions) conveys more significantly the seriousness of climate change. These findings are important in this context insofar as political and industry leaders have repeatedly focused their framing efforts on greenhouse gas emissions, which – whether deliberately or coincidentally – sways the debates away from serious considerations for addressing the damages caused by climate change.

4. Conclusions

Some researchers have argued that both science and climate change policy have overwhelmingly focused on the material and instrumental impacts of climate change, disregarding its outcomes on cultural, symbolic and non-material objects (Adger et al., 2011). The demonstration made in this chapter supports this critique of climate governance. The dehumanization of policy solutions for adaptation and the centrality of concerns for the preservation of the productive character of the coast reinforces the absence of a human-rights and social justice approach of the State of Louisiana. As Adger and his colleagues argue (2011: 20), "In the end, it is institutions and laws that create the space and mechanisms by which values in identity and sense of place can be incorporated into the calculus of climate change." The manner by which the state has carried out its adaptation can be referred to as enclosure. Defined by Sovacool et al. (2015:616) as the penetration of private interests into adaptation projects and policy, whereby "projects become enclosed as part of the strategy of wealth accumulation", it results in the exclusion and limitation of communities' access to resources and decision-making processes. In effect, this can lead to

²⁷⁰ Interview Timothy, State of Louisiana government. Zoom, 21.03.01

another process described as entrenchment, the aggravation of socioeconomic inequalities and disempowerment. In terms of policy practice, this approach has involved the development of coastal infrastructure to support economic activities (ports, industrial facilities, pipelines), as well as the enhancement of natural resources to ensure the satisfaction of economic gains through their restoration.

In discourse, political and economic elites have garnered public and political support for the preservation of the productivity of their ecosystems through various discursive devices, such as the *working coast* imagery, and the *saviors*, *not an either-or* and *green fossil fuels* frames. These narratives have pushed the belief that policymakers are equally concerned for economic interests and environmental protection. In practice however, discourses and policies reinforce the primacy of corporate profits over other societal or environmental concerns. Through coastal infrastructures and restoration policies inscribed in the Coastal Master Plan, local and State governments aim to perpetuate industrial activities, increase attractivity, and preserve Louisiana’s productive capacity despite environmental strain (Burge et al., 2020). These practices and ideas, I argue, are the manifestation of the *permanence master discourse* which acts as a frame of reference for climate adaptation.

To summarize the findings presented in Chapters 3 and 4 so far, I have demonstrated that political and economic elites have used various discursive framing to both construct and secure their interests and legitimize them in climate adaptation policymaking (Table 3). Distinguishing between objective interests (the permanence of economic institutions) and their interests constructed in discourse (the protection of Louisianans), I find that political and economic elites discourses aim to secure public consent and normative legitimacy for their extractive practices, playing on concerns for the preservation of identity and livelihoods.

Table 3. – The framing of objective and constructed interests

Objective interest	Frame		Type of actors engaged in discursive framing	Constructed interests
	Economic	Cultural		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> State and parish economic development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jobs The “little guy” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pillar of Louisiana Energy identity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Political elites – State, parish (executive and legislative) Industry actors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Protection of workers and Louisianans against Big

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capital accumulation and profits • Perpetuation and permanence economic institutions (the Dominant Social Paradigm and extractivist economy) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Not an either-or” • “Green” oil and gas 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government climate policies • Protection of productive coastal resources and Cajun lifestyle
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As we shall explore further in the next chapter, these material and immaterial interests also coexist with, reinforce and sustain limited belief in the human component of climate change. In fact, as will be demonstrated, these interests are foundational to the climate skepticism of decisionmakers and reinforce bias in collective perceptions of risk.

Chapter 5. Bias in the Bayou: navigating perceptions and agnostic beliefs about climate change

How much is this erosion caused by human intervention – whatever that might have been, canals or right-of-ways –, and how much do y'all perceive it to be by Mother Nature, changing her course and scope as she goes? It's gotta be a combination of both, or is it one or the other?

- Louisiana Representative Neil Riser²⁷¹

In his allocution to the Louisiana House committee on Natural Resources and Environment, Representative Riser questioned the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) on the causes of land loss in Louisiana to make sense of the agency's infrastructural plan against the coast's rapid erosion. The striking absence of climate change in his framing of the problem – as either the result of engineering which he qualifies as *human intervention*, or of a mythicized “Mother Nature” – illustrates the overwhelming disconnect between experience and observation of environmental changes, and recognition of global climate change at the policy level. As Singh and Swanson (2017) remark, climate change in the United States is heavily politicized but suffers from a lack of consensus among decisionmakers and the public on the actions to undertake. The content of public policies and solutions are affected by the framing of climate issues, in turn influenced by political and public opinion ideas (Singh and Swanson, 2017; Nisbet, 2009). Frames are critical because they allocate responsibility for action on climate change, whether in terms of policymaking or individual practices (Wolf and Moser, 2011). For this reason, discourses on the coastal crisis, its causes and solutions are foundational to adaptation beliefs and practices, whether in terms of policymaking or community practices. In other words, environmental problems are social and discursive constructions and the product of ideas about climate change (Feindt and Oels, 2005).

This chapter investigates the structural, foundational ideas that shape policy choices and practices in Louisiana. As I have previously argued, risk perceptions and subsequent adaptation practices

²⁷¹ House Committee on Natural Resources and Environment, Louisiana State Legislature, Baton Rouge, 21.05.18

are mediated by the interpretations, beliefs and narratives conveyed in discourse by policy actors and which inform distinct interpretive communities about climate change (Leiserowitz, 2006; Hine et al., 2013). These narratives are shaped by ideologies – often partisan – and conveyed through frames and discursive strategies used to elicit specific understandings and emotions about climate change (Morin-Chassé and Lachapelle, 2020; Carman et al., 2022). In fact, “The articulation of an environmental problem shapes if and how the problem is dealt with” (Feindt et Oels, 2005:162). To pinpoint these ideas, I draw on two types of literatures: the literature on cultural cognition and the formation of beliefs about climate change; and discursive studies of political issue framing on climate change. In bringing these two together, I strive to uncover the structural ideas foundational to adaptive behaviors and immobility, revealing the power of language and ideology in shaping representations of risk and climate change, and ultimately, immobility.

The objective of this chapter is therefore to analyze the claims and narratives which structure beliefs about climate change, the coastal crisis, and the needs for adaptation in Southeast Louisiana. The demonstration will focus on discourse structuration, a specific discursive effects of climate change framing conceptualized by Carvalho (2008). This refers to the process of domination of certain terms across different discursive spaces. It is useful to make sense of hegemonic narratives and framings by tracing their circulation across various policy spheres. This demonstration will highlight two mechanisms foundational to discourse structuration in Louisiana: the *agnostic vulnerability* discourse and the inconsistent politicization of climate change. I argue that they are conducive to voluntary and acquiescent immobilities and emanate from the desire to perpetuate existing political and economic structures that we have investigated in previous chapters.

1. Clouded judgments: exploring climate change skepticism

This first section provides a more general outlook on beliefs and risk perceptions in Louisiana, as evidenced by large-scale public opinion surveys. Establishing the link between experience of climate change and variable levels of belief is important because it suggests that ideology may play a moderation factor in shaping perceptions of risk, despite intense climate exposure (Baron and Kenny, 1986). Risk perception is socially constructed and is defined as “a person’s subjective judgment or assessment of risk” (Gardezi and Arbuckle, 2020:83). It is heavily determined by previous experiences of climate events and emotions at the individual level (Leiserowitz, 2006).

Drawing on these insights, the next section explores Louisianans' eclectic problematizations and framings of the coastal crisis and of their vulnerabilities, embodied by the *agnostic vulnerability* discourse. Specifically, it identifies discursive frames to show how specific narratives have come to dominate public and political understandings of risk, centered around the normalization and naturalization of weather events.

1.1. Identifying climate beliefs in Louisiana

Proximity to the effects of climate change has been identified as a key factor shaping personal beliefs about associated risks. Research has demonstrated that direct exposure to the impacts of climate change, such as extreme weather and environmental degradation, can increase an individual's perception of risk and their belief in the reality of the phenomenon (Brody et al., 2008; Blennow et al., 2012; Konisky et al., 2016). However, in Louisiana where the experience of risk due to hurricanes and other weather events is generally salient, belief in anthropogenic climate change remains relatively low, with only 47% of residents believing in global warming (Marlon et al., 2022)²⁷². In fact, only 42% of Louisianans believe that it will harm them personally, 46% affirming that they would not be harmed at all, corroborating existing studies on climate change not being perceived as a personal risk (Whitmarsh, 2009; Lorenzoni et al., 2006; Vulpe, 2020).

Even more surprising, the denial and disbelief in being affected by anthropogenic climate change increases in Plaquemines and Terrebonne Parishes, where 48% of residents don't believe that they are personally vulnerable. In Lafourche, this proportion reaches 50%. When asked about whether or not they have already experienced the effects of global warming, around 60% of residents in these highly impacted parishes believe they haven't (see Table 4). These estimates suggest that proximity to climate events and environmental degradation may not correlate directly to a higher belief in the reality of climate change and recognition of risk. This is because, as Brügger et al. (2015) argue, the experience of climate change interacts with preexisting beliefs,

²⁷² Although past studies have shown that the terms "global warming" and "climate change" are understood differently in the general American public (see Whitmarsh, 2009; or Schuldt et al., 2011; Jang and Hart, 2015), more recent studies have demonstrated a shift in public opinion which indicates that the terms no longer have a differentiated significance (Soutter et Möttus, 2020). Although this is still debated (see Schuldt et al. 2020), I understand the terms to be relatively synonymous for the general public, similarly to their use in the Yale Climate Opinion maps series in which "global warming" is used in survey questions to test Americans' belief in climate change.

mental representations, and knowledge. This is notably important because while Terrebonne, Plaquemines and Lafourche are among the most vulnerable areas of Louisiana and the United States, their residents hold consistently lower levels of belief in climate change and risk perceptions compared to the rest of the State and the nation (see Table 4). Simultaneously, they also have higher levels of expressed support for fossil fuel industries²⁷³. This suggests that while the experience of risk is higher, other ideational and political factors are moderating their interpretations of their own vulnerability and its causes. While Louisianans may be socially adapted to their climatic environments, I concur that political affiliation and agnostic beliefs about vulnerability explain this discrepancy. Some studies have shown that vulnerability to climate change and high levels of CO2 emissions is correlated positively to climate skepticism, particularly in the United States where political conservatism, low trust in government, and gender also play an important role in shaping these beliefs (Tranter and Booth, 2015; McCright and Dunlap, 2011a; Kahan et al., 2007). What’s more, Ogunbode et al. (2019) have shown that for the experience of extreme weather events to change people’s attitudes, they must attribute those events to climate change, which is contingent on their psychological, political affiliation and social conditions.

Table 4. – Climate change related opinions in Southeast Louisiana (2021)

		Terrebonne	Lafourche	Plaquemines	Louisiana	USA
BELIEFS	Global warming is happening	61%	62%	58%	65%	72%
	Global warming was caused mostly by human activities	45%	46%	44%	48%	57%
	Global warming was caused by natural changes	35%	37%	39%	36%	30%

²⁷³ The Yale climate opinion maps reveal a jump of 6 percentage points in Terrebonne and Lafourche and 3 percentage points in Plaquemines in public support for the expansion of offshore oil and gas between 2021 and 2023 (Marlon et al., 2022; 2024). Simultaneously, belief in anthropogenic climate change, in the personal experience of its effects and general worry for global warming has decreased in all three parishes. Between 2021 and 2023, belief that one has personally experienced the effects of climate change has decreased by 2% in Terrebonne, 1% in Lafourche, and 3% in Plaquemines. This suggests that attribution of vulnerability and experiences of weather events to climate change is not increasing in this region despite the acceleration of land loss and hurricane damages.

RISK PERCEPTIONS	Global warming is affecting the weather	51%	51%	49%	57%	64%					
	Global warming will harm me personally (yes / not at all)	40%	48%	39%	50%	40%	48%	42%	46%	47%	45%
	Has personally experienced the effects of global warming (yes / no)	39%	61%	37%	62%	41%	59%	40%	59%	46%	54%
BEHAVIORS	Worried about global warming	54%	54%	55%	58%	65%					
	Discuss global warming (never)	73%	74%	73%	71%	64%					
POLICY SUPPORT	Hear about global warming in the media (once a month or less often)	73%	72%	74%	73%	66%					
	Expand offshore drilling for oil and natural gas off US coast	64%	65%	69%	63%	49%					
	Corporations should do more to address global warming	59%	59%	62%	63%	70%					
	Require fossil fuel companies to pay a carbon tax	55%	55%	53%	66%	68%					
	Local officials should do more to address global warming	50%	49%	49%	54%	59%					
My Governor should do more to address global warming	48%	48%	46%	52%	57%						

Source: Yale Climate Opinion Maps, Marlon et al., (2022)

In Myers *et al*'s “chicken or the egg” study of the link between experience and pre-existing beliefs shaping Americans’ interpretations of global warming, they find that those with existing engagement on the issue are more likely to interpret their experience “in a manner that strengthens their pre-existing beliefs” through motivated reasoning (2013:345). These insights suggest that proximity to climate change interacts with political ideology to mitigate people’s interpretations of their own experiences and beliefs about risk (Weber, 2013). This is not to say that direct

experience of climate change does not shape risk perception and behavior - individuals are indeed aware of the risks and adjust their behavior accordingly. However, the extent to which people adopt a particular adaptation strategy depends on their interpretation of their experiences, the social significance of extreme weather and its relationship to anthropogenic climate change. Simply put, adaptation action is predicated on perceptions and climate change beliefs (Elrick-Barr et al., 2016; Costas et al., 2015). These interpretations are shaped by discursive framing which impacts individuals' beliefs about climate change and policy, interacting with partisan identities and preexisting knowledge (Singh and Swanson, 2017; Weber, 2013; Van Dijk, 2015; Haider-Markel and Joslyn, 2001; McCright and Dunlap, 2011a, 2011b; McCright et al., 2014). In fact, "every aspect of the social fabric is encompassed in social discourses, which provide guidelines for people's behavior and help them with making sense of the world they live in" (Vulpe, 2020:256). As the present chapter will show, political discourses have significantly hampered attribution by *naturalizing* and *normalizing* weather events. This is anchored in conservative efforts to downplay the risks of climate change to maintain existing political and economic institutions and protect them against government intervention on climate change (Lakoff, 2010). The social fabric of *oil culture*, embedded in the Dominant Social Paradigm, can thus shape interpretations of climate risk. In fact, Kilbourne et al. (2002) argue, belief in the DSP is directly correlated to decreased environmental concern.

Box 11. - Comparing beliefs and risk perceptions in places of high vulnerability

The situation in Louisiana is unique because of its extreme vulnerability to sudden climate disasters, rapid erosion, and sea-level rise. Nonetheless, Yale University international climate opinion surveys allow for some comparison with two other regions with similar risks, namely Asian and Pacific islands at great risk of erosion and hurricanes, or with similar levels of development like the Netherlands, a pioneer in flood protection and sea-level rise infrastructure²⁷⁴. Considering the resemblance in climate exposure and risks between Pacific islands and Louisiana, one might expect their beliefs and attitudes towards climate change to be comparable. However, survey results show that perception of risk as a current and future threat is higher in Pacific islands, and of equivalent levels in the Netherlands and the United States (Leiserowitz et al., 2022) (Annex 14). The European country shows the least worry in climate change (59% stating they are very or somewhat worried compared to 82% of Pacific islanders and 68% of Americans), and the

²⁷⁴ Note that the survey uses different terminology than the US Climate opinion maps (Marlon et al., 2022). For the international survey, the researchers have framed the questions using "climate change", while their surveys for American audiences frames the questions using "global warming". Although the effect of these terms is still debated (see footnote 272), I find that results at the national American level differ between these two studies. For example, on the question "climate change/global warming is happening", there is an eleven-percentage point difference.

smallest belief that they will be harmed personally by climate change (32% of Netherlanders). This may be explained by the relative absence of immediate climate risk experienced there because of slow-onset climate change (sea-level rise), infrastructures of protection, and the absence of sudden climate disasters on a regular basis, which could mitigate perceptions of urgency and personal risk. On the other hand, Asian and Pacific islands, and certain regions of the United States, are prone to repetitive catastrophes such as hurricanes, tornadoes, typhoons or heavy rainfall, which increases the salience of risk. The stark differences in risk perception and belief between them might be explained by the existence of protective infrastructure in the United States and the Netherlands relative to Asian and Pacific islands. As I shall demonstrate in this thesis, infrastructure acts as a mediator of risk perception and increases the confidence of communities in their safety (Chapter 6). Similarly, state involvement in disaster mitigation and institutional capacity have been shown to also increase such confidence (Council of Economic Advisors, 2023), while the combination of slow-onset erosion and protective or restorative measures reduces the perception of risk and decreases willingness to relocate (Mineo-Kleiner, 2017; Bouchard-Bastien, 2022). In Asian and Pacific islands where heavy infrastructures and institutional capacity are limited, individuals may feel a greater sense of urgency and personal threat, notably because they experience greater personal impacts in the event of sudden disasters. This may explain islanders' strong belief that climate change should be a national priority (77%), compared to the US and the Netherlands (61%). These surveys reveal that belief in climate change and perception of risk differ geographically in contexts of high vulnerability, whether to climate disasters or slow-onset sea-level rise. Louisiana and the three coastal parishes under investigation hold especially low levels of beliefs in comparison to regions of similar risk, such as Asian and Pacific islands. The argument developed in this thesis is that exposure to risk, moderated by institutional capacity, fossil fuel propaganda, infrastructures, and strength of belief in climate change can explain variability in risk perceptions.

1.2. Is it really climate change?

“I’ve lived here my whole life, and I don’t understand the political issues. This place really is a paradox”, deplures Caleb, as we look over the water from his boat. He continues, noting his heavy involvement in the political life of his parish. “I truly do not understand how climate change can be staring people in the face, quite literally getting water in their homes, and nothing changes.”²⁷⁵ Despite the increased recognition of risk to hurricanes among the public and decisionmakers, and “a long vigorous effort for the last thirty-forty years to encourage people to think about coastal land loss”²⁷⁶, the explicit recognition of climate change as a factor of vulnerability remains sparse across all levels of policy. But as Koslov (2019:11) remarks, “The stakes of talking—and not talking—about climate change are high.” So high in fact, that the failure to problematize climate change has produced what Koslov (2019) and Kuh (2015) term *agnostic adaptation*; meaning

²⁷⁵ Interview Caleb, ecologist and former councilmember. Empire, 22.02.04

²⁷⁶ Interview Benjamin, local researcher. Zoom, 20.08.28

“adaptation without the why – the divorce of adaptation from knowledge or acceptance of climate change being humans’ fault.” Agnostic beliefs, as we shall see, are fundamental in the context of immobility.

Despite the established link between climate change and the increased frequency and severity of extreme weather events, my findings show that the association between these experiences and climate change is not widely made in public discourse and beliefs. This is also evidenced by survey data from Lafourche, Plaquemines, and Terrebonne Parishes, where only half of residents believe that global warming is affecting the weather (Table 4). Although local stakeholders interviewed disagree on Louisianans’ level of belief in climate change, some argue that it is progressively increasing. The experience of storms, for example, is said to have enhanced people’s awareness of coastal issues, support for restoration and the need for greener infrastructure to avoid flooding inside the system –away from pumps and towards retention ponds, for example.²⁷⁷

Anytime there’s a big hurricane or a huge storm event, people start to believe in climate change a little bit more. The thing is, a lot of people here grew up on the coast, so they understand and see the landscape. Overtime, as they watch their favorite camps get flooded, they do start to realize that climate change exists and is real. They don’t really necessarily know how it should be fixed or disagree on how it should be fixed, but they do understand the issue.²⁷⁸

Yet, findings reveal a discrepancy between some advocacy actors’ observations of climate beliefs and discourses on climate change at the policy level. According to Wolf and Moser (2011), the framing of climate change, notably the imagery used and the stories told, fundamentally affects perceptions. How have these issues been framed and interpreted?

1.2.1. The Mississippi levee narrative

I find that the coastal crisis is problematized in various ways across different political spaces: as caused by geographic properties (New Orleans as a bowl prone to flooding, or Southern Louisiana as a swamp, for example²⁷⁹), urban development in Louisiana (notably slab and grade building

²⁷⁷ Interview Alexander, biologist and State of Louisiana government. Telephone, 21.06.02

²⁷⁸ Interview Lauren, coastal restoration advocacy group. Telephone, 21.02.23

²⁷⁹ Interviews with local residents. Louisiana, February and March 2022

practices less resilient to flooding²⁸⁰), as well as oil and gas activities²⁸¹, which have significantly weakened coastal integrity. But a hegemonic type of framing emerges throughout observations and interviews. It portrays the coastal crisis as the result of leveeing the Mississippi River, and the environmental problem as one of land loss and flooding quasi-exclusively. This causal story offers a strategic explanation about environmental vulnerability. Causal stories are defined by Stone (1989; 2012:207) as “ideas about causation, strategically crafted with symbols and numbers”, that assign responsibility for a problem to political actors (in this case, the US Corps of Engineers’ leveeing of the river) and legitimize and empower others to fix it (the CPRA). Crafting one about an “inadvertent” cause – the unintended consequence of purposeful human action (Stone, 2012:208-211), the Chairman of the CPRA argues that “Before the Mississippi River was leveed, you were catching oyster and brown shrimp. The land loss crisis in this State started when the Mississippi River was leveed. That is a *fact*.”²⁸²

And yet, as consensus over the urgency of coastal land loss grows among political leaders, the recognition of other contributing causes remains sparse. “To blame oil companies for land loss... We need to go all the way back to 1920 when they leveed the Mississippi off”, argued State Senator Fesi in defense of the industry.” Promoting the energy sector’s investments in coastal restoration – which we have seen is an exaggerated claim to minimize the industry’s role in the coastal crisis – the Republicans’ use of the Mississippi levee narrative absolves fossil fuels from both land loss and anthropogenic climate change, preserving public consent for extractive practices (Bridges, 2020; Colten, 2016). This interpretation is shared by most policy actors observed and interviewed.

²⁸⁰ Center for planning excellence (2017), and interviews with local residents and activists. One of them for example remarks, “There are parishes in Louisiana that don't remember that they're part of a coast. Like Livingston Parish, all the historic structures are built on piers, but they have adopted the settler, the White American model of “we're going to build this subdivision with slab on grade homes and we're going to fill in wetlands to do it.” And that’s how that’s the only way we can build the parishes’ tax base. This is the local government thinking. It's very, I guess, colonized. Even though people’s grandfathers’ houses are built the old way, all of the new construction is slab construction in coastal wetlands. In the places that are storing the floodwaters. And they're not updating any drainage plans once they fill wetlands with this slab on grade construction.” Interview Patrick, environmental advocacy organization. Telephone, 21.02.17

²⁸¹ A representative of LA TIG, The Louisiana Trustee Implementation Group implemented to restore natural resources injured during oil spills in the Gulf of Mexico, remarked that oil and gas activities have tripled the rate of erosion along the coast of Mexico. Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion (MBSD) Virtual Public Meeting 1, GoToMeeting, 21.04.06

²⁸² Chairman Chip Kline, Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Belle Chasse, 21.04.08. Emphasis added to reflect tone of voice.

Wesley, a levee district manager, for example, strongly believes that the engineering which started in the 18th century (Annex 11) is the root of coastal issues, which he identifies primarily as land subsidence. “Subsidence is the cake, and sea-level rise is the icing in South Louisiana”²⁸³, he playfully asserts. Disconnecting the phenomenon from climate change and instead engaging with the Mississippi levee narrative, he remarked defensively, without being asked about sea-level rise,

People talk about sea-level rise, that’s the big fear everywhere in the world. Not here! That’s so much secondary to subsidence. Subsidence is our problem. The river levees are maintaining control. The hurricane levees became a larger problem because of some of that subsidence.²⁸⁴

In another interview, Lafourche councilmember corroborates this narrative. “In the old days, the river would overflow and then it would create the stuff at the bottom of the river, the silt would build up the land”, the lifelong Lafourchean argues. “Now the rivers don’t have a chance to overflow the banks because there are levees. We’re losing a lot of our habitats, for where the shrimps and all lay their eggs. We’re turning a lot to water, there’s water all around us.”²⁸⁵, he remarks with despair. Exemplifying the highly contested and ambiguous nature of climate change in Louisiana, the reluctance to make the connection to coastal vulnerability remains a considerable obstacle to holistic public policies for mitigation and adaptation.

1.2.2. Balancing livelihood and environmental concerns

The experience of environmental change and the recognition of land loss is widespread, especially for communities living off the coast’s resources. Gabriella from the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries remarks that fishermen are at the forefront of this consciousness, despite their reluctance to endorse anthropogenic climate change.

I don’t think that fishermen will ever mention climate change, because they probably don’t believe in it. But they are on the coast, they live in the coast, they see changes. They see the erosion. They see the floods.²⁸⁶

²⁸³ Interview Wesley, levee district manager. Galliano, 22.02.09

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Interview George, Lafourche Parish council. Telephone, 20.08.19

²⁸⁶ Interview Gabriella, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries. Telephone, 21.03.31

But while fishermen in lower Plaquemines may experience these changes, they frame the issue of land subsidence in terms of its effects on their fishing practices. For them, land loss is an issue of natural resources and economic outcomes, rather than a problem of ecological vulnerability. Whether in House committees, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) meetings, or the Oyster and Shrimp task forces, fishermen frame extreme weather events in terms of their economic impacts. “Nobody’s making any money. I don’t buy clothes, I don’t buy shoes, I do whatever it takes for my family”, as he calls out the LDWF representative during a Shrimp task force meeting. “I see people hungry every day. You don’t see them, I do!”²⁸⁷ In their representation, the environmental problem is not one of intrinsic ecological vulnerability but is mediated by their more immediate concerns for the fishing economy.

This is because, according to Scruggs and Benegal (2012), short-term conditions create a shift in beliefs and priorities in such a way that people’s immediate economic concerns overtake their potential worries about climate or environmental change. According to the Finite pool of worry and Finite pool of attention theories, people have limited emotional resources. Their capacity to worry about or give attention to an issue decrease as worry about another increases (Weber, 2006; Hansen et al., 2004; Sisco et al., 2023). In her ethnography of climate denial in Norway, Norgaard (2011:9) finds that people, while aware of climate change, do not spend their time thinking about the risks. Instead, she writes, “they spent their days thinking about more local, manageable topics”. This is also true of Louisianans. In fact, survey results indicate that 74% of residents in Southeast Louisiana do not engage in regular discussions about global warming (see Table 4, Marlon et al., 2022). Environmental issues may not necessarily be experienced or understood as pressing problems, and as a result, are overshadowed by residents’ more immediate economic concerns, especially if mediated by ideology and partisan beliefs (Petrovic et al., 2014). Ethan and Christopher, two journalists in Terrebonne, explain that this absence in everyday discourse is due to the lessened importance of environmental issues relative to everyday livelihood concerns. This nonattention to climate change has been linked to Maslow’s (1970) “hierarchy of needs”, whereby “solving the problems of the present” take precedence over climate change (Norgaard, 2011:75).

²⁸⁷ A fisherman during the Louisiana Shrimp Task Force meeting, Baton Rouge, 21.03.31

Is it something that the average person is talking about every day? No, it's probably not. But people are aware that it is an issue. I remember learning in school that in fifty years, Houma is gonna be at the Gulf²⁸⁸. Now, they probably don't talk about it so much. People are more focused on employment and stuff like that. People down in Dulac²⁸⁹, they probably talk about it more because they're losing their lands, but that's way down there in South Terrebonne.²⁹⁰

People are worried about cost of living, they're worried about jobs, they're worried about the day-to-day things. Climate change and coastal restoration, and all that type of stuff, it definitely factors into people's thinking. But you don't necessarily hear about it on a day-to-day basis, because people are more concerned with their living situations, their work situation, and if their families are doing alright, things like that.²⁹¹

The people didn't care that this stuff was going away, until it got to the point where that disappearance and that interruption of how that cycle works started to affect fishing productivity, started to impact coastal communities because they were becoming more vulnerable to hurricanes. People started noticing, "hey the bayou I used to fish is now three times wider than it used to be."²⁹²

As these statements reflect, this awareness to potential risk is mediated by proximity to the issue – the salience and experience of a climate event²⁹³. But in general, as Christopher remarks, "they've got bigger fish to fry!"²⁹⁴, referring to the prevalence of day-to-day economic concerns for residents. This suggests that even though proximity is a factor, direct experience of risk does not automatically result in attribution of extreme events to climate change (Ogunbode et al., 2019).

1.2.3. Constructing agnostic vulnerability

The eclectic recognition of the problem is thus attributable to the fluctuant importance of environmental issues in people's problematization of vulnerability. In fact, when asked about what they consider to be the most pressing issue in Louisiana today, respondents point to one of two things: coastal restoration, identified mostly by environmental activists and governance actors involved in environmental policy; or economic decline, highlighted principally by residents and local elected officials. This duality stems from the relatively consistent exposure of residents to

²⁸⁸ Houma is the largest city in Terrebonne, situated in the North-Eastern part of the parish. Since 1932, the coast has advanced 10 miles inland toward the city (The Courier, 2019).

²⁸⁹ Dulac is a census-designated place located south of Houma. It is surrounded by lakes, canals and bayous and is close to the Gulf of Mexico.

²⁹⁰ Interview Ethan, local Terrebonne journalist. Telephone, 20.08.30

²⁹¹ Interview Christopher, local journalist. Telephone, 20.08.20

²⁹² Interview Joseph, conservation advocacy organization and fisherman. Telephone, 21.04.15

²⁹³ Salience of an event and proximity is also mediated by infrastructures in Louisiana. See [Chapter 6](#).

²⁹⁴ Interview Christopher, local journalist. Telephone, 20.08.20

environmental and climatic risks, including hurricanes, erosion or rain events, and the inconsistent framing of these experiences as a source of extreme vulnerability. The principal interpretations of environmental issues in political spheres are centered around coastal restoration – considered a distant, impersonal problem – and hurricanes – lived as episodic events. This follows an American tendency to disassociate oneself from the impacts of climate change, conceiving it as distant in space and time (Whitmarsh, 2009; Lorenzoni et al., 2006; Vulpe, 2020). Scarlett, a Lafourche resident and former employee of Lafourche Parish, explains,

[People] see the impacts of climate change but I'm not sure they relate it to climate change. I'm not sure that they see it in the totality of what it is. Some of that might be education, too, or lack of. Or maybe they're some of those people that don't want to watch the news anymore, saying it's too depressing.²⁹⁵

Corroborating these insights, Caleb, a local ecologist in Plaquemines, argues that low levels of belief in climate change have altered people's understanding of their own experience. He remarks, looking over the Venice harbor at the lower end of the parish.

You can see they're having to build docks on top of the docks. There's a lighthouse that was built in the 1880s at the end of the Bird's Foot [*i.e.*, *the Delta*], and the bottom of the door was a meter and a half above sea level. Today, only the top of the door is visible when tides are extremely low. Down there, it's looking like 3 or 4 meters every century [of sea-level rise].²⁹⁶

This inconsistency in the attribution of environmental decline to climate change is further exemplified by the discordance between Plaquemines' comprehensive Master Plan and the discourse promulgated at the political level. While the document clearly identifies climate change as a cause of depopulation in the parish and a threat for coastal communities (G24), I observed the total absence of climate change in council meeting discussions. More than that, one councilmember revealed, passing a resolution for the recognition of climate change as a source of vulnerability has been incredibly difficult due to insufficient popular and political support²⁹⁷. This discrepancy between one governmental document acknowledging anthropogenic climate change and its near total dismissal in everyday politics exemplifies the grasp of agnostic beliefs over

²⁹⁵ Interview Scarlett, former employee of Lafourche Parish government. Thibodaux, 22.03.16

²⁹⁶ Interview Caleb, ecologist and former councilmember. Empire, 22.02.18

²⁹⁷ Recounted in an email and text exchange with Samuel, a local journalist, in 2022

policymaking in the public sphere. For George, a councilmember in Lafourche Parish, vulnerability to flooding is even exaggerated. “We don’t flood like some people think”, he asserts, while remarking the loss of their ecosystems to the leveeing of the Mississippi. “People up North think that we’re feet deep in water. That’s not true. We have levees.”²⁹⁸

My findings indicate that discussions of risk by government officials and members of the public are also subject to variations depending on the occurrence of a specific event, such as a hurricane. Throughout the year, I observed a significant increase in discussions regarding environmental risk during hurricane seasons 2020 and 2021 and during the rainy events of March and April 2021, and a substantial decrease of such discussions during the intervening periods. The lack of acknowledgment of vulnerability, mediated by direct exposure to an event (or lack thereof), reduces the prominence of environmental problems on government agendas and in the public consciousness. Michael, an elected councilmember in Plaquemines Parishes, reveals that perceptions of vulnerability are conditioned by sudden events.

SM²⁹⁹. Is environmental risk something that people notice in their daily lives?

MICHAEL. I don’t think they walk around everyday thinking about it, no. It’s when the threat comes that they start being concerned.

SM. It’s not talked about during council meetings. Why do you think that is?

MICHAEL. Because they have some sense of security, and like I said, it’s not a daily threat. It’s a threat when hurricane season comes around. As far as normal rainfalls, it’s not considered as a threat, unless we have pump break downs or something to that effect. (...) I think people realize the risk is there, but I don’t think they live with it every day. They understand, they kind of get a pattern down to when they have to react, they’re more prepared today than they were in the past, for sure.

Environmental vulnerability is conceptualized around sudden and intense events (such as a hurricane), or as the ecological need for coastal restoration – the state’s dominant environmental focus to secure its economic interests (Colten, 2016). As a result, broader environmental issues are absent from local conversations about vulnerability. “I think maybe twenty percent of the people really understand what the risk is”, laments Caleb. “I think many people are just completely

²⁹⁸ Interview George, Lafourche Parish council. Telephone, 20.08.19

²⁹⁹ SM refers to the researcher

oblivious and maybe they're not listening to the right radio stations, so to speak. Maybe not thinking that sea-level rise is real.”³⁰⁰ In essence, this phenomenon constitutes what Norgaard (2011) has identified as socially organized denial.



Photo 10. - A bent hurricane evacuation route sign after the passage of Hurricane Ida

Source: Sarah Munoz (2022).

This perspective constitutes a larger frame of reference for political action which I conceptualize as *agnostic vulnerability* – the eclectic and inconsistent interpretation of vulnerability detached from climate change. I build the discourse of *agnostic vulnerability* on what Koslov (2019) and Kuh (2015) term *agnostic adaptation*, defined as the actions, policies or behaviors of adaptation that exclude climate change from their conception. In my conceptualization, *agnostic vulnerability* refers to a discourse and way of thinking from which these agnostic adaptive practices emerge. Agnostic adaptation is maladaptive because it overlooks the fundamental problems associated with climate change, and therefore “can constrain future adaptation efforts” by “addressing the symptoms rather than the causes” (Carman et al., 2022: 578). As a result of the state’s predominantly agnostic strategy, the CPRA has failed to measure the success of its projects beyond the amount of land created and the reduction of physical impacts of storms on the coasts.

³⁰⁰ Interview Caleb, ecologist and former councilmember. Empire, 22.02.18

Criticizing the lack of concern of the State for climate change, ecosystems or food security, Caleb gets frustrated, as he points to the surrounding wild marshes from his boat, “They could build a parking lot here and call it a success.”³⁰¹ I argue that this conception of adaptation, largely disconnected from climate mitigation concerns, emanates from the larger discourse of *agnostic vulnerability*. It perceives vulnerability as the result of the leveeing of the Mississippi River and prevents the questioning of systemic and extractivist practices which underlie the issue at hand (Burge et al. 2020; Colten, 2019).

The state isn’t expanding their view of the coast as they really should to incorporate the impacts of climate change. They just look at the area that’s immediately losing land and the up-stream inland areas aren’t getting nearly as much attention.³⁰²

There’s still a long, long way to go on a lot of different issues. Climate relates to coastal but it’s not the only thing related to coastal. It’s one more piece to the puzzle, but it’s a pretty big puzzle.³⁰³

As Carman et al. (2022) have shown, the framing of a problem – whether in terms of climate change or extreme weather – shapes adaptation responses to events, notably because Republicans are less likely to support adaptation policies when the issue is framed as “climate change”. This is because political ideologies are composed of systems of frames activated in discourse and which inform environmental practices and attitudes (Lakoff, 2010).

In Louisiana, I find that discourses tend to focus exclusively on the description of these phenomena but fail to problematize or politicize them further, as we shall see in the second part of this chapter. This is particularly visible in parish council meetings during which elected officials and members of the public acknowledge with great concern the increase of flooding or hurricanes, and inquire about technical solutions such as pumps, levees, or drainage. Identified causes range from a pump

³⁰¹ Interview Caleb, ecologist and former councilmember. Empire, 22.02.26

³⁰² Interview Benjamin, local researcher. Zoom, 20.08.28

³⁰³ Interview Elizabeth, coastal restoration advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.01 and 21.02.12

station valve being removed³⁰⁴, to unmaintained ditches³⁰⁵, the absence of drainage³⁰⁶, the need for additional floodgates³⁰⁷ or additional pump stations³⁰⁸. The repetitive nature of these experiences is largely reported in both the public's and politicians' discourses, but remains informed by *agnostic* interpretations of vulnerability. This feeds into the idea of natural cyclicality, conceptualized by Vulpe (2020) as the main interpretive repertoire for climate skepticism – whereby events are framed as part of a natural and continuous cycle. It is also the result of conservatives' efforts to promulgate frames to the public to “get their ideas out” about climate change and shape their understanding of environmental issues according to the conservative moral system (Lakoff, 2010:73). This system promotes support for free market and the instrumentalization of the environment, while rejecting government interference, regulations and climate science.

Conservative ideology and the DSP, I argue, reinforce the cultural legitimacy of *naturalization*, *normalization* and *spiritualization* discourses and shape attitudes towards adaptation policies, disbelief in increasing climate risk, and ultimately, the necessity of mobility. The following sections investigate these discursive strategies which contribute to shaping and which are shaped by the *agnostic vulnerability* discourse.

³⁰⁴ Terrebonne Parish council meeting, Houma, 21.06.09

³⁰⁵ Terrebonne Parish council meeting, Houma, 21.07.14. One resident complains about severe flooding in the Lecompte subdivision, which he attributes to unmaintained drainage ditches. “We’re eight feet above sea level, where we’re at, and I had water come into my home. For the last three years, it’s been coming once or twice a year. Most ditches in the subdivision haven’t been cleaned out in years, I wanna say twenty years.”

³⁰⁶ For example in Plaquemines Parish council meeting of 20.12.10 (Pointe-a-la-Hache), one woman argues against a public works project because her property has been flooded many times and she asks for drainage to be implemented first. “The land drains from the levee and goes outward from the levee. Every inch of this is where my land should be draining, and it’s not! I’ve lost every garden we’re planted. I’ve had horses with no place to stand. At the end of today, everybody’s probably going to go home and move on. But I can’t, it’s full of sludge.”

³⁰⁷ Terrebonne Parish council meeting, Houma, 21.03.24. Council member Trosclair argues, “The tidal waters, the high water from the rain event, reiterates the need for the two floodgates that we’ve been in discussion for, one for Bayou Terrebonne (...) and one at Company Canal Road, and the pump stations and the Bayou Terrebonne lock stations. (...) We’re not going to stop with the drainage problems until we prove that we either solve it, or we prove that we can’t solve it for whatever reason.”

³⁰⁸ Terrebonne Parish council meeting, Houma, 21.03.24. One resident complains about the repetitive flooding of her property – four times in ten years. “I was here three years ago, was promised the world, and never got it. And I was flooded. How much longer do we have to wait? Ya’ll are putting pump stations all over, we need a bigger pump station.”

1.3. Normalizing climate events: natural disasters, Mother Nature, and uncontrollability

The discourse of *agnostic vulnerability* acts a frame of reference for beliefs and behaviors. It is constructed and circulated using discursive strategies, defined by Carvalho (2008:169) as an action of framing, or “forms of discursive manipulation of reality” to achieve a goal. Drawing on Entman’s (1993) theories, Carvalho identifies various discursive strategies, such as legitimation (normative justification of an idea), or politicization (attributing political status to an object). Here, I find that agnostic vulnerability is reinforced by the discursive *normalization* of climate events across all spheres of policymaking. Many respondents, including local elected officials, believe that similar climate risks exist throughout the United States, and in this sense, normalize the salience of vulnerability in Louisiana.

When you have a Katrina storm like that, then nothing could protect them. It’s no different than a wildfire or earthquake, or tornadoes in the rest of the country. There’s nothing you could do for a tornado, wildfires, they’re eating up homes continuously. It’s just overall an environment that we’re living in that is deteriorating.³⁰⁹

Folks live in places where it snows, and they have earthquakes, so... People don’t understand why people in Louisiana just don’t move or live somewhere else, and maybe they don’t want to, maybe they can’t, maybe they don’t have the money to. Maybe they’re a fisherman and their boat is tied up to their backyard. I think we need to get away from that discussion because I could certainly ask somebody in California why they choose to live where they live.³¹⁰

Climatic events such as hurricanes, therefore, are normalized in the Louisianan experience (Box 12). They are seen as a disturbance to sidestep³¹¹, or referred to simply as “storms”³¹², the “elements”³¹³ or even “this thing”³¹⁴. Another example is the political framing of the 2016 floods in Louisiana as a “one-time, freak thing”³¹⁵. According to Gregory, who works for a community-based non-profit coalition, this framing was a strategic political rhetoric conveyed by local politicians in Baton Rouge to build acceptance for planning and zoning decisions to allow urban

³⁰⁹ Interview Michael, Plaquemines Parish council. Telephone, 21.07.27

³¹⁰ Interview Elizabeth, coastal restoration advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.01 and 21.02.12

³¹¹ Lafourche Parish council meeting, Mathews, 21.02.09

³¹² Terrebonne Parish Levee and Conservation District regular meeting, Houma, 20.12.02

³¹³ Lafourche Parish government press conference for Hurricane Ida, Facebook Live, 21.08.27

³¹⁴ Lafourche Parish government press conference for Hurricane Ida, Facebook Live, 21.08.28

³¹⁵ Interview Gregory, community-based organizations coalition. Zoom, 21.03.16

development in floodable lands. They discursively minimized the problem, discarding NOAA’s³¹⁶ designation of these lands as a flood risk.

A lot of people, including people in the government, saw it as a one-time thing. I guess what I discovered is that the builders and developers really had a lot of calling the shots in terms of what the response was. Behind the scenes, there’s an awful lot that goes on. I’ll give you an example. The NOAA maps showed an area that was at a flooding risk in the case of a category 3 hurricane. When it came to developing a map showing what areas were high risk and which ones were low risk, those areas were designated as low risk. That was the map that was adopted by the planning and zoning commission.³¹⁷

Normalization of climate events, therefore, serves an instrumental purpose. In one Greater Lafourche Port Commission board meeting³¹⁸ for example, commissioners discussed the impacts of Hurricane Zeta (2020) on port activities. Content by the limited amount of damage sustained, they describe the hurricane as a sort of inconvenience to their business-as-usual activities. Normalized in discourse for its occurrence, no link was made to anthropogenic climate change, nor did they acknowledge the intensification of climate events. Their long-term adaptation plan was summarized as the need for “some repairs so we can further enhance the protection of Port Fourchon and Fourchon island on the backend.”³¹⁹, revealing their belief in their ability to continue their activities in the long-term.

Box 12. - Normalizing resilience and hardship

In Lafourche Parish, hurricane damage is extensively noted in its aftermath but is never problematized in the long term nor linked to increasing climate change. Evocative language is used to convey intensity about the events, with terms such as “demolished”³²⁰, “slaughtered”³²¹, “devastated”³²², or “getting our butts whipped”³²³. Emanating from the *agnostic vulnerability* discourse, these narratives accompany a recognition of intensity and risk, but point to technical and logistical causes. As a result, despite being a recurrent point of interest in council meetings, hurricanes are discussed in terms of relief efforts (sandbags, ice, temporary shelters, clean-up of debris), amidst discussions on the logistics of state and

³¹⁶ NOAA is the National oceanic and atmospheric administration, a federal scientific and regulatory agency charged with monitoring weather, oceanic and atmospheric conditions.

³¹⁷ Interview Gregory, community-based organizations coalition. Zoom, 21.03.16

³¹⁸ The Greater Lafourche Port Commission oversees activities in Port Fourchon, Lafourche Parish. The Port services 95% of the Gulf of Mexico’s deep water energy production, “handles 10-15% of the nation’s domestic oil, 10-15% of the nation’s foreign oil, and is connected to 50% of US refining capacity.” (GLPC, ndb).

³¹⁹ Greater Lafourche Port Commission board meeting, Cut Off, 20.11.12

³²⁰ Lafourche Parish council meeting, Mathews, 20.11.10

³²¹ Ibid.

³²² Climate Initiatives Task Force meeting 1, Governor’s Office of Coastal Activities, Baton Rouge, 20.11.09

³²³ Lafourche Parish council meeting, Mathews, 21.03.23

federal assistance. This was the case for Hurricane Ida who spread devastation across the three parishes. Six months after the event, demolished houses and debris were still omnipresent. The incredible violence of the storm was repeatedly noted across all press conferences during and after the event³²⁴ and during council meetings, with a strong focus on destroyed homes and infrastructural damages (including electricity, phone lines, services...). By September 2nd, 2021, three communities in Lafourche Parish were still underwater because of levee overtopping and were being drained by pumps, an operation which would last another four days. Overall, parish officials strongly accentuated how devastating the event was.



Each day I get a call from this 81-year-old lady, one of my constituents that had four and a half feet of water in her house. She is living in a car right now, living in a car with her cats and dogs. So, I want to tell you that we are all in this together, that everybody's suffering.³²⁵

I have no house, three streetlights around my house are... some of them are missing, some of them are not on, I have a bunch of parts of streetlights in my yard. (...) As I sit in a meeting and I look around the room, I see a lot of tired, exhausted people who are just out of options. I don't want to say out of money, but out of resources. I've been trying for several weeks to buy a camper, so my family has a place to live. Just like everyone else, just like John Q. Public, I'm out there homeless like you.³²⁶



Yet, they remain very hopeful and confident in their ability to recover, accentuating community resilience and strength. To do so, they played into in-group identities, reaffirming the strength of character of the

³²⁴ I observed Lafourche and Plaquemines Parish press conferences from August 26th to September 5th, 2021 to capture government discourses and practices related to the emergency management of Hurricane Ida. Terrebonne Parish did not livestream their press conferences on social media.

³²⁵ Chairman Autin, Lafourche Parish council meeting, Mathews, 21.10.12

³²⁶ Council member Wendell, Lafourche Parish council meeting, Mathews, 21.10.12

people in facing these events “even if they had nothing left”³²⁷. In Plaquemines for example, Parish President Lepine affirms “You’re Plaquemines Parish residents, you’re so resilient. They’ve thrown so much at you, so many times.”³²⁸ Placing blame on an elusive “They” and framing their response in terms of resiliency fails to problematize the ecological and socioeconomic vulnerability of residents affected by the storm. Consequently, this framing *normalizes* the devastation as something the people had been through before and could get through again.

Damages houses in Lafourche and Terrebonne after the passage of Hurricane Ida (2021). Source: Sarah Munoz (2022)

This normalization is forged by shared representations of climate risk and conveyed in discourse by *naturalizing* events – meaning climate risk is brought into the normal order of existence as the result of natural ecological and weather-related processes. In Louisiana, this was observed through the dichotomous opposition of “natural disasters” and “man-made disasters”. A reinforcing discursive strategy for *naturalization* is the *spiritualization* of non-human environments and climatic events using metaphoric language of “Mother nature” and “God”. Finally, the *naturalization* and *normalization* of vulnerability is established by accentuating the *uncontrollable* character of events. This discourse contributes to shaping adaptation policies and behaviors away from addressing climate change, its underlying causes, and long-term consequences. It constitutes the “accidental” causal story of public policy, which relegates political problems to the realm of fate, ensuring that “no one can be held responsible” (Stone, 2012:209).

1.3.1. “Natural” versus “man-made” disasters

When I built down here, I knew we were outside of the levee system and could accept that, if we had natural disasters. But I can't accept that my investment and my way of life will be totally altered for a man-made project.³²⁹

I chose to invest money outside of the levee protection, so I accepted that responsibility for storms, but not man-made damage.³³⁰

³²⁷ Council member Autin, Lafourche Parish council meeting, Mathews, 21.09.28

³²⁸ Plaquemines Parish government press conference for Hurricane Ida, Facebook Live, 21.09.01

³²⁹ Cindy, resident of Myrtle Grove (Plaquemines Parish) during the Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion (MBSD) Virtual Public Meeting 2, GoToMeeting, 21.04.07. She, alike most residents of Myrtle grove, is fiercely opposed to the state project because it will increase flooding in her neighborhood.

³³⁰ Mary, resident of Myrtle Grove (Plaquemines Parish). Ibid.

The aggrievement of Cindy and Mary, two residents of Myrtle Grove in Plaquemines Parish arguing against the Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion project of the state³³¹, exemplify the dichotomous interpretation of disasters prevalent in both public beliefs and among decisionmakers. The *naturalization* of climate-related events – framing them as “natural” disasters – ignores the catalytic role of political, social, and economic systems in forging vulnerabilities and the impacts of events. A striking example of this is Hurricane Katrina (Laska and Morrow, 2006). As Parker et al. (2018) remind, “Who is in harm’s way, and the sort of harm they are in the way of, are products of human decisions and social arrangements.” As a result, “natural” disasters do not exist and vulnerability to hazards cannot be conceived as natural or accidental (Tierney, 1999). In fact, they may better be conceived as “social” catastrophes (Cabane and Revet, 2015). Yet, the dichotomous conception of the cause and nature of these issues – as “natural” or “man-made”, permeates all discourses. For shrimpers of the Lafourche Barataria Basin, “The fishing industry will adapt to natural coastal changes, but man-made diversions will be the end of all fishing industries” (P2). This conceptualization tends to naturalize coastal changes, relegating any and all ecological transformation to non-human causes, and establishing a clear divide between the ecological environment and the realm of human activities.

CPRA executive director Bren Haase further reflects this idea as he explains the rationale behind coastal restoration: “We need healthy, robust wetlands because those healthy, robust wetlands are able to withstand natural disasters and man-made disasters”. Here, natural disasters are equated with hurricanes and climatic stressors, while man-made disasters are most likely linked to oil spills – a discursive association widely circulated by various types of actors across all spheres of policymaking in relation to the Deepwater Horizon spill of 2010³³². The *naturalization* of disasters implies that the State does not have control over climatic issues, and can only manage direct,

³³¹ The Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion project aims to address coastal land loss in Plaquemines Parish by diverting sediment from the Mississippi River toward areas of the coast that have been starved off by the leveeing of the river (CPRA, nd; Colten, 2019). It is heavily contested by residents and fishermen groups because it will cause flooding to surrounding communities by raising their water levels and change salinity levels in the basins, which will cause the decline of fisheries and kill certain marine mammals.

³³² The Deepwater Horizon spill of 2010 is the largest oil spill in American history. It was caused by the explosion of the offshore platform operated by BP, which killed 11 workers and spread oil over 149,000 square meters across the Gulf of Mexico. It decidedly shaped interpretations of man-made environmental disasters, notably because the payout received from the settlement is funding coastal restoration today ([Chapter 4](#)).

human-induced problems in Louisiana – meaning human activities whose consequences impact the non-human world suddenly, such as oil spills or river diversions. This ignores the anthropogenic character of both climatic events and their consequences, whether sudden or slow onset (Parker et al., 2018). As Laska and Morrow (2006) argue, disasters are the product of history, land development policies, and social vulnerability. As a result, public policies designed to attenuate the risk of events (through hurricane protection systems, for example) may fail to account for the social dimensions of disasters.

This is particularly poignant in Plaquemines Parish’s comprehensive Master Plan (G20). The document acknowledges its “natural threats”, which it cites as being floods, hurricanes, and storm surge. It reads, “the Parish will continue to battle land subsidence and the loss of coastline. Another storm is always around the corner—and living with that threat is a way of life in Plaquemines Parish.” (p.6). Qualifying these threats as “commonplace” and a “way of life”, the government’s problematization of risk both *normalizes* and *naturalizes* climate events and the coastal crisis, effectively dehumanizing their interpretations and discursive representations of ecological and environmental stress as a fact of life with no link to human activities³³³. Governments and communities, therefore, are simply to adapt to these threats and accept their existence. The idea of disassociating climate change and weather events is linked to partisan identity, whereby Republican support for adaptation behaviors and policies has been shown to be affected by the terms “climate change” versus “extreme weather” (Carman et al., 2022). As this study and my findings suggest, the *naturalization* discursive strategy plays an important role in legitimizing the state’s techno-optimist approach to adaptation (more in Chapter 6). But while it can elicit stronger support from conservatives weary of using terms like climate change, it can also diminish action for addressing the underlying, structural causes of vulnerability – including environmental racism and inequalities, maladaptive drainage policies, or extractivist practices (Holden et al., 2011; Murrey and Mollett, 2023; Barra, 2021; Hemmerling et al., 2020; Maldonado et al., 2013; Marino and Ribot, 2012). As a result, *naturalization* depoliticizes the climate problem to both generate greater political action – enabling protection and restoration efforts through Republican support

³³³ Devoid of the terms “climate change”, the plan instead frames the parish’s adaptation needs as better infrastructure for economic growth (G20), anchoring its rationale into *economism* (Andreasson, 2005). It reads, “Plaquemines’ unpredictable environment demands a resilient and stable economic base.” (G20: 13).

for the land loss crisis – and simultaneously diminishes other types of policy action – on the causes of climate change and its social impacts.

1.3.2. The imagery of Mother Nature and God

“You’re fighting against the natural weather, nature and how nature operates”, argued a Terrebonne Parish councilmember as he described the limitations of the parish’s flood control structures³³⁴. Relegating the environment to the realm of “normalcy” has been a consistent rhetoric observed throughout this fieldwork. In observations and interviews, it was reinforced by the discursive strategy of *spiritualization*, embodied by the metaphoric language of “Mother Nature” and “God”³³⁵. In Plaquemines, council meetings open with a prayer thanking God for the natural resources of the parish, suggesting that the environment is seen as a divine gift rather than a product of human society³³⁶. The religious subframe is especially prominent during climatic events. In one meeting, councilmember Barthelemy intervened in a discussion on their compromised flood protection infrastructure.

I don’t think we’re going to resolve anything before the next wave of water that’s coming in because we don’t have anything in place to accommodate that. So, we just pray to God that it won’t be as extensive as it was yesterday and the day before.³³⁷

Relinquishing uncertainty in the outcome of the flood to divine intervention perpetuates the idea that climatic events are beyond human control and exist independently from human arrangements. It contributes to the spiritualization of climate change, described by Fair (2018) as an important epistemological explanation for adaptive behaviors in local contexts. Religion has been identified in risk perception research as a particularly important mechanisms of interpretation of environmental changes, especially in attributing responsibility and determining whether human action can influence climate events (Wiegel et al., 2021; Wolf and Moser, 2011). In certain places like India, religious convictions have been linked to a reduction in flood preparedness because of

³³⁴ Interview William, Terrebonne Parish council. Telephone, 21.05.12

³³⁵ The imagery of Mother Nature referred to here is different from the construct of Mother Nature or “Mother Earth” in Indigenous cultures. In this context, it tends to naturalize environmental phenomena, rather than embody a spiritual and traditional dimension.

³³⁶ For example, in Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Pointe-a-la-Hache, 20.11.12. The Chairman starts, “We thank god for granting us with these natural resources”.

³³⁷ Council member Barthelemy, Plaquemines Parish Council meeting, Pointe-a-la-Hache, 21.03.25

beliefs in divine plans and reverence for nature (Mishra et al., 2010). Although it has been shown in the context of Evangelical Americans that the religious framing of climate impacts has augmented support for climate policy and advocacy by emphasizing the ethics of justice and the preservation of God’s creation (Wardekker et al., 2009; Wilkinson, 2010), the discourses found in Louisiana’s local governance sphere have not been geared toward stewardship. Instead, I have found, *spiritualization* has been used to disengage from the human responsibility in climate events and sacralize the non-human world.



Photo 11. - A sign reading “Jesus Christ reigns over Grand Isle”

This sign is located at the entrance of Grand Isle, an inhabited barrier island devastated by Hurricane Ida in 2021. Source: Sarah Munoz (2022).

These findings resonate with Hochschild’s (2016:177) analysis of the Great paradox in Louisiana. In her typology, she identifies *worshippers*, those who engage in “meaningful renunciation” and fatalism to accept their environment’s degradation. Similarly, the “Mother Nature” imagery, conveyed in various political discourses, disregards historic human intervention on its environment, and maintains the sacralization of the non-human world.

Our estuary is very delicate. It was put together by Mother Nature. You can go all around the world, you’ll never find what we have here in Plaquemines Parish. That’s what makes Plaquemines Parish, Plaquemines Parish! Whatever we grow here, it’s the best. (...) Maybe

God did it that way. If we're going to be vulnerable to hurricanes, then I gotta give em a little something, so let's give them the best natural resources.³³⁸

I'll make a quote that my dad keeps telling me. God laid his hands on Plaquemines Parish and it's unlike anywhere else in the world. Nowhere else you can go catch all the seafood, the wildlife, oil, gas, sulfur. Nowhere.³³⁹

It's a Sin that what God gave us, they want to take away (*i.e. the industry*). God made the fishermen. Jesus himself was a fisherman. Yet, Mr. Kline and his buds from CPRA think they're bigger than God. They're bullies.³⁴⁰

This discursive strategy creates a normative perception of the environment as a resource to be utilized, particularly because it is used here to defend fishing resources against the state's Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion project. It also normalizes the occurrence of hurricanes without acknowledging their growing intensity, and as a result, neglects to critically examine or politicize these issues. Attributing their vulnerability to hurricanes to "God" disregards that loss of resilience and risk are social constructs and the products of past political arrangements, notably selective hazard mitigation policy, private sector-led urban development, and maladaptive drainage policies (Colten and Giancarlo, 2011; Gotham, 2016a; Randolph, 2018). Ascribing vulnerability to divine forces or "Mother Nature", therefore, prevents taking action to address their underlying causes.

For one elected official in Terrebonne Parish, the objective of the local government is to control "Mother Nature" as best as they can, because "You're fighting against the natural weather, nature and how nature operates."³⁴¹ This narrative echoes the "ways of nature" frame conceptualized by Moernaut et al., (2018), the idea of a natural system independent on human intervention which constitutes a major frame of reference for climate skepticism (Vulpe, 2020). Moernaut et al. further note that in the promulgation of this frame, causes and solutions to the climate problem are decontextualized and the responsibility of humans is minimized because climate change and weather events are considered external to human activities. As a result, "Nature is a distant object which mainly exists to fulfil human (economic, scientific, aesthetic...) needs." (2018:232). Hence, "Mother Nature" – also termed "Gaia" in some research – can be conceptualized as "performer

³³⁸ Council member LaFrance, Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Belle Chasse, 21.04.08

³³⁹ Council member Cognevich, Ibid.

³⁴⁰ Mitch Jurisich, oysterman and Chairman of the Oyster task force, Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Belle Chasse, 21.04.08

³⁴¹ Interview William, Terrebonne Parish council. Telephone, 21.05.12

metaphors” because it mediates our relationship to the non-human world by conveying Western conceptions and experiences (Milstein, 2016). As a form of symbolic mediation, the *spiritualization* discursive strategy promulgates the idea that humans are spectators of Nature, producing a discursive and material disengagement from their responsibility in molding it (Wolf and Moser, 2011). In fact, it has been shown to reduce support for mitigation altogether (Houser, 2018).

1.3.3. The “uncontrollable” narrative

The *naturalization*, *normalization* and *spiritualization* of climate events contribute to legitimizing the belief that climate change is not a contributing factor to the environmental problem and downplay the idea of increasing vulnerability in the long term, accentuating the *uncontrollable* character of extreme weather events. This echoes the analysis of Vulpe (2020:266, 268) who finds that the discursive repertoire of control promulgates the idea that “humans’ agency cannot make a difference as regards the natural environment” because cycles of nature are “uncontrollable, unalterable, and unpreventable”. Climate change denial further shapes the interpretation of human control because as Vulpe (2020:258) explains, “arguments that climate change is not caused by anthropogenic sources echo traditional risk perceptions by viewing climate phenomena as providential and impossible to prevent or alter.” Such interpretations of *uncontrollability* reduce the range of public policy solutions because “human actions cannot reduce ‘natural’ climate change” (Houser, 2018 :58). As a result, it reduces support for mitigation and shapes beliefs about appropriate responses to climate-related events, even encouraging wishful thinking from decisionmakers, “Hopefully we get back to more reasonable weather patterns”, hoped a CPRA representative in the aftermath of the 2020 hurricane season³⁴².

Lafourche Parish’s Multi-jurisdiction Hazard Mitigation Plan update exemplifies the intricate link between *naturalization* and the implication of uncontrollability, which absolves governments of the responsibility for mitigation. It reads, “Natural forces are powerful and most natural hazards are well beyond our ability to control”³⁴³. This narrative is repeated across various meetings. In

³⁴² CPRA representative, Governor’s Advisory Commission on Coastal Protection, Restoration and Conservation, Baton Rouge, 20.11.18

³⁴³ Resolution 28, Lafourche Parish council meeting, Mathews, 21.01.12

one Lafourche council meeting after Hurricane Ida for example, councilmember Wendell remarks, “I don’t think any amount of planning, or any amount of money could have made this any better, this was just catastrophic.”³⁴⁴ It suggests that human capabilities are limited in both controlling the climatic event itself and its consequences. It feeds back into *spiritualization* and *naturalization* which, to an extent, exonerate political leaders from the responsibility of climate mitigation by separating the human and non-human realms. Adaptation, therefore, confronts an unstoppable nature.



Photo 12. - Speakers at the July 2021 CPRA board meeting

This idea circulates from policy circles to the public. “Over the past 50 or so years the industry has successfully adapted to the gradual changes faced by an ever-changing coast”, explains an oysterman of the Barataria Basin (P2), suggesting powerlessness in coastal deterioration. In another instance, this public comment made by a local resident to CPRA board members illustrates how the widespread framing of an uncontrollable nature shapes interpretations of risk and sentiments of helplessness.

We all got flooded. We all consider ourselves victims, and I got the scars to prove it (*raises wrist*). What we’re concerned about is the future. (...) We know that nature is nature, and it’s all inclusive but we have to continue to maintain our homes. I’ve lived in my home since

³⁴⁴ Lafourche Parish council meeting, Mathews, 21.10.12

1971. My two grown sons live in this city (...) and we've been people who work for this neighborhood our whole lives.³⁴⁵

As Gramling and Hagelman (2005:132) remind, “Residents are aware of their disappearing environment and what it means both physically and culturally”. The recognition of the increasing intensity of climate-related events is salient in both popular and political discourse at the State and parish levels. Yet, the absence of problematization of these experiences outside of the *naturalized* frame of reference for interpreting climate events impedes discussions of causes and solutions. As the excerpts below show, these interpretations are shared by residents, administration and elected parish officials, state-level actors, as well as some non-governmental organizations. This illustrates the circulation of beliefs in the *uncontrollable* character of weather events across various types of actors and stakeholders both in the policy sphere and across society at large.

Some areas flooded because “of **unprecedented rain**”, we hadn't had that in a while.³⁴⁶

Houses keep getting flooded below sea level. “This is not just one event. This is not the second event, this is not even the third or fourth event since I've been a councilman. **This is a continuous event.**”³⁴⁸

About 40 years ago, like many citizens of Louisiana, I became aware of the dire straits and the dire rates of land loss that our coast was experiencing. Like many, I have watched the Barataria Basin dissolve before my eyes, and I have experienced the **increasing ferocity of hurricanes** hitting our coast.³⁴⁹

Back then, when [coastal restoration] was mentioned to a lot of other folks down here, almost everybody said, “our marshes are healthy, don't worry about it”. We know this isn't the state we're in today. We know today we probably have over 25% of Plaquemines Parish gone. (...) What we've lost is our marsh land, our estuaries, our wetlands. That's what we need to rebuild, that's what it's about. (...) We're under the time gun to do it right now. **When I grew up, and most of you folks are the same here, we had a category 1 or 2 (hurricane) and nobody had to leave Plaquemines Parish, nobody had to leave home at all. Nowadays, there's a 1 or 2 you leave. Nowadays, you leave no matter what, because of the loss of marshland.**³⁵⁰

³⁴⁵ Public comments, Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) board meeting, Lake Charles, 21.07.21

³⁴⁶ Certain parts of the excerpts were made bold to add emphasis.

³⁴⁷ Administration representative, Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Pointe-a-la-Hache, 21.03.25

³⁴⁸ Council member Navy, Terrebonne Parish council meeting, Houma, 21.03.24

³⁴⁹ David Muth, National Wildlife Federation, Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion (MBSD) Virtual Public Meeting 2, GoToMeeting, 21.04.07

³⁵⁰ Resident, Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Belle Chasse, 21.04.08

We've been dealing with this for five and a half years now, and **every time, it gets worse and worse**. I know we've had some major rain events lately, and we understand that there's going to be some flooding, but our neighborhood floods on just a regular rain event.³⁵¹

The streets are completely flooded. "**I've never seen so much water in three years**. Even with 10 inches of rain, I never that (kind of) water."³⁵²

I'm 60 years old. I've been a resident of 53rd Street (i.e., a subdivision) my whole life. **We are seeing more water now, than we have ever seen before**.³⁵³

I drove to Gonzalez today to take care of some business, and **I never saw that much water** since before 2016.³⁵⁴

The last three years have been historic (...). Of the three strongest storms to hit our state, two happened in the last fifteen to sixteen months.³⁵⁵

In conclusion, ideas about the *natural* character of climate events are informed by the *agnostic vulnerability* discourse circulated between public and political actors at both the State and local levels, mostly Republicans and political conservatives. The hegemonic representation of extreme weather events and environmental degradation as *natural* reveals the disconnect between the experience of risk and the interpretation of this risk as linked to anthropogenic climate change. The Yale climate opinion maps show that close to 40% of residents of Lafourche, Plaquemines and Terrebonne believe global warming is caused by natural causes (Table 4), and yet, this idea embodies the quasi-totality of discursive representations at the governance level. The disconnect between experience of risk and belief in climate change corroborates research on the mediating impact of motivated cognition, nuancing the theory that proximity necessarily leads to higher levels of belief (Weber, 2013; Brügger et al., 2015; Blennow et al., 2012). In fact, Marino and Schweitzer (2006) have shown that people may experience the effects of climate change without understanding them as such, which explains the absence of climate change in discourse at all levels.

2. Partisan winds: the politicization of climate change

³⁵¹ Resident (Cut-Off), Lafourche Parish council meeting, Mathews, 21.04.27

³⁵² Resident (Larose), Lafourche Parish council meeting, Mathews, 21.04.27

³⁵³ Resident (Cut-Off), Ibid.

³⁵⁴ Council member Melvin, Lafourche Parish council meeting, Mathews, 21.05.25

³⁵⁵ GHOSEP director Tringle, State, Coastal Louisiana Levee Consortium, Baton Rouge, 21.12.13

According to Blennow and Persson (2009), individual adaptation to climate change is guided not only by economic, social, and political arrangements, but also by the strength of one's belief in climate change. Through a study on Swedish forest owners, the authors show how consequential these beliefs motivate adaptation, and thus, provide evidence for the link between (im)mobility as adaptative behavior and ideational processes around climate change. In the United States, a recent study has also shown that conservative leaders remain highly influential, noting that the spread of misinformation by Donald Trump has cemented climate denialism among 15% of Americans (Gounaridis and Newell, 2024). This is because, according to Fischer (2019:139), "public perceptions are interpreted through a distinctive form of reason that is shaped by the circumstances under which a problem is identified and publicized (...) and the social traditions and values of the community as a whole". McCright and Dunlap's (2011a) study on conservative White Americans, the "cool dudes", lends support to Kahan et al., (2007) theory of identity-protective cognition. This theory suggests that individuals tend to engage in motivated cognition to protect their cultural identities, forming perceptions about risk that reinforce their existing worldview. This "White male" effect entails that political conservatives have higher system-justification tendencies, especially in favor of preserving the "industrial capital order which has historically served them well", because they embrace and defend the positions of White male conservative political elites (McCright and Dunlap, 2011a:1165; Kahan et al., 2007). For this reason, the politicization of climate change in elite political discourse can significantly shape public beliefs about the need and means for adaptation. This section focuses on the politicization of climate change in elite discourse to investigate the partisan dimensions of attribution and disbelief.

2.1. Powerful persuasions: the role of elite discourses on climate change

The absence of anthropogenic climate change in public discourse signals limited recognition and belief from conservative political elites. Beyond the State legislature and executive levels, observations of political meetings at the parish level reveal that climate change and global warming are completely absent from discourse and policymaking in Terrebonne, Lafourche and Plaquemines. Caleb, who has served on a parish council, explains that climate issues are not salient in public opinion, which translates into feedback for elected officials to diverge their attention onto

other topics³⁵⁶. Michael, another councilmember, remarks on the contrary that the agenda is driven by decisionmakers in a top-down manner, and this shapes residents' participation and reactions³⁵⁷. Effectively, there seems to exist a feedback loop whereby the content of policies is shaped by the salience of climate issues in political discourses and public opinion, which also informs elected officials' agenda-setting and framing of policy (Campbell, 2012; Béland, 2019). The direction of this influence – whether policy attention to climate change is driven by public opinion (and lack of belief), or by policymakers' omission of the issue in discourse (which shapes people's apathy to climate change) has yet to be determined. Nevertheless, I contend that political elites structure the debate and discursive opportunities for the public to comprehend the extent to which they are vulnerable to environmental threats and attribute this vulnerability to anthropogenic climate change, ultimately circumscribing the scope of adaptive strategies.

Kinder and Nelson (2005:103) note that public opinion “depends in a systematic and intelligible way on how, and especially whether, issues are framed in democratic debate”. As such, public opinion is intrinsically shaped by elite frames who structure interpretations and discourses (Gabrielson and Entman, 2005). The source of the frames, in this context, is important. It has been shown to impact the public's interpretation and understanding of climate change and global warming, because it interacts with their partisan beliefs (Whitmarsh, 2009; Schuldt et al. 2011; Schuldt et al., 2020; Petrovic et al. 2014; Singh and Swanson, 2017). Past studies have documented how distorted media and political communication in the United States has skewed public understandings of the anthropogenic causes of climate change, long rendering the American public one of the most misinformed in Western countries (Dispensa and Brulle, 2003; Brechin, 2003). It has been largely argued that the objective of biased framing of the climate crisis has served the satisfaction and preservation of corporate interests under the Dominant Social Paradigm (Shafer, 2006). In fact, Kinder and Nelson (2005) conceptualize frames as elite rhetorical “weapons” to advance their interests, as well as meaning-making processes for public to understand political problems. Echoing the eclectic interpretations of vulnerability described above, findings reveal

³⁵⁶ Interview Caleb, ecologist and former councilmember. Empire, 22.02.18

³⁵⁷ Interview Michael, Plaquemines Parish council. Telephone, 21.07.27

that the varying salience of environmental issues in everyday life diminishes the importance, in policymaking and public opinion, of climate change.

SM. I've noticed that climate change isn't talked about on the parish council.

CALEB. Yeah, it's conspicuously absent.

SM. Is it because councilmembers don't believe in climate change?

CALEB. There are more immediate issues. They're pandering to what their constituency thinks is important. And maybe people don't think it's important or they're not talking about it like it's important. There are some residents who care about it and think it's important, but they are the minority, not the majority.

SM. Do people ask about it? Or is it that the council doesn't talk about it, so the people don't ask about it?

CALEB. Yeah. I don't think hierarchy is the right word, but there is a stratification of things that are important. There are different things that are more pressing, more immediate. But I don't think there's anything that's more immediate than climate change.³⁵⁸

At the individual level, some interview respondents suggest that a lack of education and communication about climate change results in low levels of engagement with the issue, which corroborates existing studies about the inconsistent knowledge of the public on climate change (Whitmarsh, 2009). Gifford (2011) considers such ignorance to be one dragon of inaction because lack of knowledge impedes climate-related actions and efficient adaptation. A lower education level has, in fact, been linked to increase immobility, suggesting that climate (il)literacy plays a fundamental role in mobility capacity and decision-making (Cundill et al., 2021). Over lunch with Caleb and I, Lucile, a high school biology teacher, explains how politically charged conceptions of the climate problem have permeated the education sector and impaired her ability to teach³⁵⁹.

CALEB. There are people here that absolutely think that climate change is some sort of hoax. Or something that's not to be...

LUCILE. When we did that presentation for a project we're working on to get coastal resources into the classroom, I submitted to give a talk to teachers and was told to take the "sea level" and "climate change" information out of it because it's too controversial.

SM. Amongst teachers?

³⁵⁸ Interview Caleb, ecologist and former councilmember. Empire, 22.03.26

³⁵⁹ Interview Lucile, biology teacher. Empire, 22.03.26

LUCILE. Amongst teachers that are required to teach about climate change in their classroom.

SM. So, they're not teaching about climate change.

LUCILE. They're supposed to. They have standards that they have to meet for testing. They have a climate change standard, but we were asked to remove it.

Corroborating Lucile's experience, a study on the values and knowledge of US teachers has found that unscientific claims are prevalent inside American classrooms on the topic of climate change, contributing to the spread of climate illiteracy and skepticism (Plutzer et al., 2016).

2.2. Divided discourse: problematizing climate change in a context of polarization

As I have argued so far, the discourse of *agnostic vulnerability* has both shaped and been shaped by the content of political discourse on environmental problems. Even as Governor Edwards' advancements in cross-agency coordination and cooperation to enhance the State's resiliency, the topic of climate change remains evasive. In Act 315, adopted in 2023 by the House to establish a statewide Chief Resilience Officer, risks are simply defined as "environmental" or "disaster" related, referring to inland and coastal flooding (L20). Despite showing increasing political concern for adaptation, this act exemplifies the difficult inclusion of climate change into policy and its problematization in a context of high partisan polarization.

2.2.1. The interests of not talking about climate change

Avoiding the topic of climate change serves the status quo, "offering stability even amidst decidedly unsettling effects" (Koslov, 2019:4). It has been well established that partisan identity correlates with recognition of climate change impacts, with conservatives and Republicans being less likely to agree with them and party-driven polarization having accelerated since the 1990s in the United States (Petrovic et al., 2014; Morin-Chassé and Lachapelle, 2020; Collomb, 2014; Leiserowitz et al., 2021; McCright and Dunlap, 2011b; Nisbet, 2009). Others have demonstrated that belief in the existence of climate change related migration, and concern about climate change, are strongly associated with political party affiliation in the United States, with Republicans being less inclined to support climate action and pro-immigration policies (Gillis et al., 2023). In similar fashion, a recent study by Carman et al. (2022) has shown that willingness to engage in adaptation is predicated on political ideology in the case of "climate change" framing, but not when the

problem is described as extreme weather. In sum, the politics of talking or not talking about climate change are intimately partisan in the United States and reflect broader political interests.

In Louisiana, I have found that climate change is largely absent from State-level meetings concerned with adaptation, during which hurricanes have been generally discussed for their immediate devastating impacts rather than their connection to broader climate changes. During the February 2021 CPRA board meeting for example, Laurie Cormier, representative of Calcasieu-Sabine basin in Southwest Louisiana, remarked with emotion how her region had been devastated by the latest extreme weather events³⁶⁰. In 2020, six consecutive hurricanes made landfall in the area. During the following winter, an exceptional arctic storm was declared a Major Disaster by Governor Edwards, as it brought freezing temperatures, snow, and power outages to an unprepared region (Office of the Governor, 2021). Yet, during that CPRA board meeting, political leaders failed to conceptualize or problematize these extraordinary events. As Mrs. Cormier remarked with sadness, “I’m pretty emotional. We are not okay over here right now”, Chairman Kline shifted the conversation towards the hope brought on by the promise of infrastructural projects funded by the BP oil spill settlement³⁶¹.

Box 13. - Climate change in the Coastal Master Plan

The absence of climate change in the Coastal Master Plan is said to have contributed to its political acceptance³⁶². Although climate change is briefly mentioned in the first edition of 2012, then again in its renewal in 2017, it remains unproblematized and disconnected from hurricanes and from fossil fuels as a cause of land loss – to which they refer to simply as “human impacts” as a way of downplaying the role of the industry (G6:ES-2). Instead, oil and gas are described repeatedly as assets to the region, whose infrastructures are to be protected from storm surge. In the latest edition of the Coastal Master Plan of 2023³⁶³, the recognition of climate change is greater and for the first time, links the phenomenon to intensifying risks. The text reads,

Climate change will increase flooding in coastal communities, as tides get higher and roads flood more frequently. Drainage becomes more difficult as water levels rise, flooding fields and yards and causing excessive inundation of previously vibrant wetlands. (G17:23).

³⁶⁰ Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) board meeting, Zoom, 21.02.19

³⁶¹ After the Deepwater Horizon oil spill of 2010, considered one of the biggest environmental disasters in the history of the country, the State of Louisiana has been set to receive \$6.8 billion from the settlement reached by BP, the federal government, and the five states included in the lawsuit. In Louisiana, this money has been put toward coastal restoration and protection (Thompson, 2015).

³⁶² Interview Vanessa, restoration advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.18

³⁶³ Analysis for this thesis stops in 2022, but for the purpose of making an up-to-date argument, I included a quick review of the 2023 Coastal Master Plan.

While the 2017 Coastal Master Plan noted the uncertainty of climate change impacts (G6:47), this signals a change in the State’s framing of environmental and climatic vulnerability. It also suggests novelty in the State’s approach to integrating climate change in its adaptation strategy because it draws on Governor Edwards’ recent official recognition of the phenomenon upon the creation of the Climate Initiatives Task Force. The recognition of climate change remains nevertheless absent from the legislative sphere and at the local policy level where conservative ideas dominate policy debates. I contend that the very lack of problematization and politicization of climate change beyond its recognition in a policy text due to its partisan nature renders the text political in itself, because it caters to Republican and conservative ideas of environmental risk. It contributes to the framing of the climate problem, an “interpretive storyline” about an issue, who is responsible and how it can be addressed, shaping how the public understands it (Nisbet, 2009:15). It is also important to note that while Governor Edwards did signal a change in the State’s approach to climate vulnerability, the 2023 election of climate-skeptic and fossil fuel supporter Republican Governor Jeff Landry suggests that these efforts may be overturned (Jones, 2024).

A similar discursive dismissal of the social and political causes of “natural” disasters occurred during one meeting of the Coastal Louisiana Levee Consortium (CLLC)³⁶⁴. Upon discussing the 2020 hurricane season, board chairman Dwayne Bourgeois proposed moving beyond the item, noting they didn’t “want to relive it”, and that “everyone wants to put it behind them”. The failure to problematize their vulnerability and focus on fossil-fuel funding for infrastructural adaptation are the results of a larger unproblematized perspective on risk. The ambiguous connection between climate change, industrial activities and the coastal crisis is a political strategy to reframe interpretations of the issue. Such discourses construct public ignorance and lessen political commitment to climate action, as a way of preserving capitalist structures (Young and Coutinho, 2013). It stems from the consolidation of Republican ideals and interests in politics, echoing Collomb’s (2014) argument on the strength of conservative climate change deniers in forging public opinion, policy regulations and promulgating their own economic interests and ideals. Mirroring national industrial and conservative actors’ work to form an anti-environmental countermovement, Louisiana’s current political landscape reflects the “Republican Revolution” of the 1990s, whereby the conservative movement’s opposition to climate science and policy became crystallized in American politics (McCright and Dunlap, 2011b; Nisbet, 2009; Powell, 2011).

2.2.2. The partisan dynamics of attribution

³⁶⁴ Coastal Louisiana Levee Consortium, Zoom, 20.12.10. The Coastal Louisiana Levee Consortium is an Advisory commission of the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority Board. It gathers representatives of all levee districts in Louisiana annually.

The recognition of climate change remains highly politicized and polarizing in the United States in general and is reflected in the public’s interpretations of the coastal crisis as distinct from climate change (Boykoff and Boykoff, 2004).

Everyone is aware that weather is becoming more erratic. It’s kind of undeniable that hurricanes have gotten more frequent and severe. Now, if you use the word climate change, that brings in a political dimension. If you talk to folks who are climate change deniers and you say things like “do you notice that the weather has changed”, they will agree to the impacts, even though they might not agree to use the term climate change.³⁶⁵

People aren’t like “climate change is happening!” down here too much. They know that coastal erosion is happening. Climate change is one of the issues that was very politicized, that was definitely a “Democratic” thing. Unfortunately, down here, you kind of side with one way. Like you side with the Republican party, and it stipulates what the Republican policies are and what the government says about that kind of stuff.³⁶⁶

We’ve *just* gotten to a point where we can actually say climate change, Louisiana is not a place where you actually say it. Our Governor said it for the first time in 2020. He said it. He said climate change. I think that in and of itself is big. You’ve got fishermen who probably won’t use climate change. It’s associated with the liberal terms, right? You don’t talk about things that are more closely connected to the Democratic establishment.³⁶⁷

It was a real hurdle to start using the word climate change, but it was not a hurdle ever to talk about land loss, sea-level rise and these kinds of things. Those have been really part of the conversation at least since the 1990s in Louisiana.³⁶⁸

I guess an improvement in 2017 is there’s more realism about climate change, and it has sparked this Governor’s task force, which is the first time... This is unimaginable, I don’t know if you understand. I got this job going to Baton Rouge, talking about climate change and I would get booed! I would get booed in Baton Rouge (*he laughs*).³⁶⁹

For Scarlett, who used to work for the Lafourche Parish government, salient partisan divisions have seeped into local politics to the point of crystallizing people’s electoral behavior and positions on environmental issues.

SCARLETT. More and more people in my area are saying “I’m Republican and I vote Republican no matter who it is”. But if that’s not the best person for the job...

SM. Are issues related to the environment polarizing?

³⁶⁵ Interview Victoria, local research. Zoom, 20.11.09

³⁶⁶ Interview Ethan, local Terrebonne journalist. Telephone, 20.08.30

³⁶⁷ Interview Vanessa, restoration advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.18

³⁶⁸ Interview Timothy, State of Louisiana government. Zoom, 21.03.01

³⁶⁹ Interview Patrick, environmental advocacy organization. Telephone, 21.02.17

SCARLETT. Yes. They're just more divisive, I would say. It's not like we work together on a cause anymore. It's like the Republicans are this, and the Democrats are this. Forget that! What's the best issue? Aren't we put here on earth to help others? How are you helping others if you're just looking at your pocketbook?

For Terrebonne journalist Ethan, every societal debate has become polarized in Louisiana. Like Scarlett, he remarks that political allegiance often steers individual positions.

Everything down here [is partisan]. Even COVID is politicized down here! They got people thinking it's a hoax, they got people thinking there are too many extreme measures being taken by Governor Edwards, who is a Democratic governor. If you're a Republican, this is what other Republicans down here are saying, then you're probably going to agree.³⁷⁰

Reinforcing identity-protective cognition and allegiance to group membership attitudes on climate change and policy, conservatives are more likely to dismiss the “do-gooder, know-it-all liberals” and their claims of anthropogenic climate change (Lakoff, 2010:75; McCright and Dunlap, 2011a; Kahan et al., 2007). Political practices and public interpretations of the problem are further affected by the salience and problematization of climate change in partisan discourse, especially when dominated by conservative appeals to the *naturalization* and *normalization* of environmental vulnerability. Considering the polarizing nature of the climate problem, some state officials have opted for a more subtle approach to discuss the coastal crisis – framing the issue in terms of resource preservation to depoliticize the issue and garner conservative support³⁷¹. The director of a major hunting and fishing non-profit organization in Louisiana explains that his organization has aimed to design policies and legislation devoid of partisan ideas by accentuating the protection of productive coastal resources. In that regard, the instrumental perspective of the Dominant Social Paradigm, deeply ingrained into the political culture and “hardly ever questioned by either liberals or conservatives”, seems to permeate partisan divisions in the State (Shafer, 2006:126; Cotgrove, 1982; Dunlap and Van Liere, 1984)³⁷². For Joseph, his lobbying efforts in the State legislature aim to garner support from both aisles by bridging their common interest in the Sportsman's Paradise.

³⁷⁰ Interview Ethan, local Terrebonne journalist. Telephone, 20.08.30

³⁷¹ Interview Benjamin, local researcher. Zoom, 20.08.28

³⁷² It is important to note that although certain principles of the DSP such as support for small government tend to be more strongly endorsed by conservatives, the adherence to the DSP cannot be reduced to a liberal-conservative dichotomy because both ideologies operate and support fundamental DSP ideas like private property right and the free market (Shafer, 2006; Dunlap and Van Liere, 1984).

It's always helpful if you get a Republican and a Democrat to support the bill. Democrats tend to favor legislation that limits human interaction and human activity with natural resources, and Republicans are more open to allowing extractive activities. When organizations like ours get involved, the issues become less partisan because there are Republicans and Democrats that like to hunt and fish. And the fact is, healthy habitats and wildlife are good for all of us.³⁷³

For other policy experts, environmental issues are non-partisan because of their salience in everyday life. Andrew, a former adaptation project planner for the State of Louisiana, and Hannah, an adaptation specialist at a local non-profit, explain.

Louisiana has been affected by so many different large scale disaster events, it has been affected by so many different flooding events that everybody has either been directly impacted or they know somebody close to them that has been. And so that that tends to dissipate partisan political rancor pretty quickly.³⁷⁴

It's right in front of our doorsteps. There's no denying about it, and you can be as conservative as you are. But when you go out fishing and you don't recognize your backyard anymore because the landscape has changed so much, you're not denying that things are changing. What happens is that they don't deny climate change, but they might differ on the causes of it. People are very cautious to blame the oil and gas industry because essentially, they are employed by it. So, you don't you don't want to bite the hand that feeds you, right?³⁷⁵

As we have seen in previous chapters, the prevalence of *oil culture* and its link to livelihoods shapes interpretations of the issue and impedes its attribution to anthropogenic climate change. I concur that beyond shared experiences of the coast and collective recognition of land loss, it is the *political interpretation* of these events that shapes attribution and partisan divisions, and trickles down to public (dis)belief in climate change and vulnerabilities, ultimately shaping adaptation strategies. This means that the *naturalization* of events may lead to greater support for adaptation policy from Republicans as well as to “party sorting” and ideological sorting – meaning the transfer of elite political positions and polarization over an issue onto the general public (McCright and Dunlap, 2011b; Fiorina and Abrams, 2008). And while belief in global climate change among Americans has increased over time, political polarization along ideological and party lines remains strong (Soutter and Mottus, 2020). According to McCright and Dunlap (2011b:171), this is because political elites “selectively interpret or ignore new climate change studies and news stories

³⁷³ Interview Joseph, conservation advocacy organization and fisherman. Telephone, 21.04.15

³⁷⁴ Interview Andrew, State of Louisiana government. Zoom, 21.03.08

³⁷⁵ Interview Hannah, climate policy advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.22

to promote their political agendas”, which in turn frames their respective publics’ understanding of the issue. Corroborating these remarks, Brulle and Norgaard (2019:17) further note that “Most commonly, individuals select news sources that confirm their beliefs that climate change is a hoax or uncertain, and label climate change advocates as ideologues.”

2.2.3. Funding disbelief

More generally, skepticism about climate change is reinforced by partisan dissident voices which cast doubts and disbelief about scientific consensus on climate change. Conservative leaders and fossil fuel corporations have historically funded anti-climate science lobbies and think tanks, and used polarized the topic of climate change to fuel climate denial (Powell, 2011).

A couple of Louisiana congress people at the time, in 1989-1990, said the primary reason Louisiana is losing its coastline is because of climate change caused by greenhouse gas emission caused by the oil and gas industry. These were the last of the Democrats. This was before there was this concerted campaign to discredit climate science.³⁷⁶

These widespread beliefs, consequently, have encouraged *agnostic adaptation* and non-decision-making on climate change (Vulpe, 2020; McCright and Dunlap, 2010). In the United States, only 58% of Americans believe that most scientists agree that global warming is happening, while studies have concluded that 98% of scientists are, in fact, in consensus over the issue – reaching 100% in agreement that it is caused by human activity among top researchers in the field (Leiserowitz et al., 2023; Myers et al., 2021). Yet, anti-reflexivity about climate change remains high in the context of hegemonic neoliberal ideology, indicating “the success of systemic repetition of neoliberal frames that normalize the out-of-hand rejection of sustainability problems such as climate change” (Jacques et Knox, 2016:845; McCright and Dunlap, 2010; Powell, 2011). Anti-reflexivity is defined by McCright and Dunlap (2010) as the American conservative countermovement against environmental science which has successfully undermined the enactment of climate policies since the 1990s to protect the industrial capitalist system. Challenging climate science also has the effect of entertaining ignorance, uncertainty, and inaction among the public (Gifford, 2011). In Louisiana, this fosters *non-decision* on climate adaptation, defined by Jobert (2023) as the gap between the proclamation of an urgency to act and the

³⁷⁶ Interview Benjamin, local researcher. Zoom, 20.08.28

persistence of inaction, a containment process from lobbies and political actors that “prevents” action (p.2).

Some local officials and residents realize what needs to happen, but people are so in denial about climate change and risk, that they’ll gloss over all that and look the other way, just so they can get the \$2500 campaign contribution. It’s really ridiculous what’s been allowable here.³⁷⁷

These anti-climate narratives are reinforced by the cultural credibility heuristic, meaning the tendency of individuals to rely on the expertise of those they perceive as sharing their interests and values (Kahan, 2012). In the Louisianan context, I argue that anti-reflexivity is secured through discursive strategies encouraging disbelief in the role of climate change in the coastal crisis, opposing energy taxation and the overhand of federal governance. For one policy analyst of an environmental advocacy group, “If we had a whole Democrat congress down here, maybe things would change.”³⁷⁸ In other words, the polarizing nature of climate change and its science may have more to do with conservative ideology and politics – such as the rejection of federal carbon taxation in defense of industrial capitalism -, than about the science itself (McCright and Dunlap, 2011b; Campbell and Kay, 2014).

2.3. Masking politics: weaponizing science to depoliticize adaptation

The State’s *agnostic* approach to adaptation and vulnerability has been accompanied in discourse by a “science” narrative which has further depoliticized environmental issues. As Feindt and Oels (2005:168) remind, “Knowledge about nature is historically and socially situated just the way all knowledge claims are.” Yet, the Governor’s Office and the CPRA have continuously defended an *objective* coastal science to rationalize and legitimize ecology-centered adaptation and mitigation projects (Colten, 2019; 2016). The State’s long-term strategy of “adaptive management” against coastal land loss and storm events has, according to the 2017 Coastal Master Plan, placed Louisiana “at the forefront of using science and innovation to plan a sustainable future for our coastal communities” (G6:ES-2;11). This framing has been explicitly used to depoliticize the issue

³⁷⁷ Interview Caleb, ecologist and former councilmember. Empire, 22.02.26,

³⁷⁸ Interview Lauren, coastal restoration advocacy group. Telephone, 21.02.23

of coastal land loss, but in doing so, has failed to address the political arrangements which enable the perpetuation of the root causes of climate change and environmental degradation.

We are still committed to one of CPRA's strongest pillars, and that is to utilize the best available science to inform our decisions. Not the best politics, but the best science.³⁷⁹

Everything that we do in the coastal program, we are maximizing the role of science. Because that's the only way to have credibility in the program that you are administering and it's also the only way to minimize the role of politics.³⁸⁰

In fact, for the State of Louisiana government, depoliticizing adaptation strategies enables them to create consensus in the partisan sphere by emphasizing the role of science in policy, thus removing partisan interests from the CPRA's activities³⁸¹. But public discourse on the use of "science" for environmental restoration and protection has in fact rationalized market-based adaptation mechanisms, removing charges of self-interest and ideology within the State's approach. Senators, congressmen, and State officials have used this line of reasoning to defend oil and gas industry practices against federal climate policies. As I have previously noted, they have emphasized existing efforts to reduce CO2 emissions through carbon capture technologies, anchoring their position in a narrowly defined view of science – one which excludes social sciences and closes off the political debate on the role of fossil fuels in climate change. In doing so, state adaptation has foregone considerations for the historic and long term social, cultural and political dimensions of the problem and further depoliticized adaptation to serve the satisfaction of extractivist interests (Colten, 2019).

Evidence shows that it [*i.e. the Biden plan*] would result in worse environmental, worse economic outcomes. Show the data, show the facts, and push energy policy in a direction that actually represents Louisiana's interests and America's interests.³⁸²

I wanna be clear, this isn't political, this is black and white data.³⁸³

³⁷⁹ Chairman Kline, Governor Edwards and CPRA announcements, Coastal Protection & Restoration Authority, Facebook Live, 21.05.19

³⁸⁰ Governor Edwards, Ibid.

³⁸¹ Interview Nathan, State of Louisiana government. Zoom, 21.03.17

³⁸² Congressman Garrett Graves, Joint Natural Resources Committee Hearing on Biden Executive Orders. House and Senate Natural Resources and Environment committees, Louisiana State Legislature, Baton Rouge, 21.02.10

³⁸³ Representative Frieman, *ibid*

[My office has prepared scientific data to help] deliver this message back to your constituents and to advance the cause of reason.³⁸⁴

The governor will follow science and data and will work with the industry to find ways to have a voice within the new Biden administration and advocate on behalf of Louisiana workers and Louisiana industry, and frankly, because we know our state economy depends so much on oil and gas.³⁸⁵

We argue for sound, science-based policy. LMOGA is here as a resource for policy. We are working diligently with the regulators at the department of Interior.³⁸⁶

[We work with Shell, Chevron, Water Institute of the Gulf, and the CPRA] to put the science behind the best location to place future dredge material.³⁸⁷

“We want people to stay focused on the science and the data”, but the Biden admin is throwing this all away.³⁸⁸

By striving for a non-partisan stance and emphasizing a foundation in “science” while sidelining community perspectives (Box 14), social sciences, and the economic structures contributing to climate change, State actors aim to garner support from both political aisles and the public, seeking broad consensus and approval for their infrastructural and engineering strategy. “CPRA is an organization that I think has done a very good job of taking the politics out of these coastal projects and inserting the science of how these things need to move forward”, further defended Senator Allain³⁸⁹. This push for depoliticization has served to discursively distance oil and gas interests from restoration projects at the local level and defend a supposed disinterested approach to coastal land loss, despite blatant political and economic elite interests in coastal restoration (Chapter 4). In fact, a parish director of coastal restoration asserts that environmental issues exist outside of what he terms the “political realm”, meaning the space for party contention.

I’m not aware of any political obstacles to the environmental issues locally. Terrebonne Parish understands those environmental concerns. The State of Louisiana understands those environmental concerns. And the [US Corps of Engineers] understands those environmental

³⁸⁴ Congressman Clay Higgins, *ibid*

³⁸⁵ Matthew Block, Governor’s Office, *ibid*

³⁸⁶ Tyler Gray, LMOGA, *ibid*

³⁸⁷ Chett Chiasson, Port Fourchon, director for the Greater Lafourche Port Commission, *ibid*

³⁸⁸ US Senator Murkowski (Alaska), Full Committee Hearing to Examine Offshore Energy Development, U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, Washington (DC), 21.05.13

³⁸⁹ Senate Natural Resources and Environment committee, Louisiana State Senate, Baton Rouge, 21.04.21

concerns. We all kind of work together in that to try to keep it out of the political realm as much as possible.³⁹⁰

Yet, the absence of climate change in all observed spheres of decision making and the explicit interests associated with coastal adaptation policies suggest that the environment is an inherently political problem. Environmental crises are politically constructed and are the products of social arrangements. Their solutions are inscribed within the Dominant Social Paradigm and the liberal democratic state (Parker et al., 2018; Carter, 2018). Denying the politicized nature of environmental problems, therefore, serves the satisfaction of those interests and to legitimize the perpetuation of economic institutions at the heart of the coastal crisis.

Box 14. - The dismissal of coastal voices

The science discourse has been central to legitimizing the State’s engineering focus for mitigation and adaptation, rationalizing the “science-policy” model of the Master Plan and the working coast approach described in Chapter 4 (Nost, 2019; Colten, 2016). Proposing an ecology-based approach rather than a people-centered approach, the accent is put on dredging, diversions, marsh creation and barrier island restorations, excluding traditional ecological knowledge and neglecting insights from groups like fishermen and Indigenous groups for community resilience (Hemmerling et al., 2020; Barra, 2016). In favoring large-scale infrastructural projects, the CPRA has sidelined the lived experiences of community stakeholders along the coast.



Fishing boats in the Venice harbor, Plaquemines Parish. Source: Sarah Munoz (2022).

³⁹⁰ Interview Brian, parish director of coastal restoration. Telephone, 21.03.05

Antoine, a fourth-generation fisherman and president of a fishing and restoration advocacy organization, is fervently opposed to the State's diversion projects. "We've warned about how devastating these projects are going to be to our environment, to our dolphins, to our coastal communities, to our economy", he deplors. "But they just don't listen." Instead, Antoine argues, the CPRA is "going by science" while ignoring their traditional ecological knowledge. "That's what fishermen out on the water every day, what we see, what we know. It's like a sixth sense. But they don't take into consideration our planning, or our thoughts, our livelihoods."³⁹¹ The State's disregard for public dissent of projects such as the Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion is inscribed within a history of socioeconomic and racial struggles over coastal science in Louisiana. Monica Barra's (2021; 2016) research has shown that science and engineering have been used to legitimize mitigation projects such as the Bohemia Spillway to serve economic investments, while dispossessing Black communities of land and wealth. Corroborating these findings, a lifelong resident of Plaquemines recalls in interview that the State had forced the relocation of communities and cemeteries for the construction of the spillway, because \$43 million dollars' worth of oil had been discovered on the site³⁹² (Marcus, 1986). "The spillway was just an excuse", yet it was "framed as an engineering necessity", noted Barra (2021:274). The tensions between interest-ridden coastal science and disenfranchised communities have increased public skepticism of restoration science, especially among fishermen and racialized groups. (Hemmerling et al., 2020; Randolph, 2018).

3. Conclusions

As Feindt and Oels argue, a discursive analysis allows us to understand that concepts like *nature* and the *environment* are not fixed, but rather are constructed through ongoing environmental policy decisions and everyday actions. The authors argue it "allows one to ask if environmental policy is about nature and the environment at all or rather about a redistribution and reconfiguration of power in the name of the 'environment'" (2005 :163). Corroborating these insights, my analysis demonstrates that the production of knowledge around coastal issues emanates from shared interpretations of vulnerability and conservative efforts to depoliticize the coastal crisis.

I conceptualize the discourse of *agnostic vulnerability* to understand the collective failure to attribute the causes of extreme weather and coastal land loss to climate change. As a result of the deeply partisan divide on the question of climate change in Louisiana, discourses and beliefs from both political leaders and the public have perpetuated agnostic interpretations of the problem, its causes, and solutions, notably through the discursive strategies of *naturalization*, *normalization*, and *spiritualization*. These interpretations have consequently shaped policy responses away from

³⁹¹ Interview Antoine, fishing and restoration advocacy organization. Telephone, 21.04.21

³⁹² Interview Caleb, ecologist and former councilmember. Empire, 22.02.26

climate change mitigation and adaptation, focusing attention on infrastructural solutions to land loss to preserve the State’s extractivist economy (Randolph, 2018). Negating climate change, a political rhetoric particularly prominent among White conservative Republican leaders, enables the perpetuation of these ideas and practices because it avoids reckoning with one’s role and contribution to the problem (Koslov, 2019; Whitmarsh, 2009; Kinder and Nelson, 2005; Singh and Swanson, 2017; Collomb, 2014; Schuldt et al., 2011; McCright et al., 2014; Lakoff, 2010; Tranter and Booth, 2015). The diffusion of climate denial, or at the very least, agnostic interpretations of environmental problems, as an organized and ideologically imbued political program has been shown to directly shape – and lessen – public concern about climate change in the United States and influence perceptions in adaptive capacity and the motivation to adapt (Brulle et al., 2012; Jacques and Knox, 2016; Salite, 2019; Costas et al., 2015). These discourses shape the *permanence master discourse*, foundational to the institutionalization and legitimacy of climate immobility.

These discourses and beliefs have also been influenced over the last forty years by oil and gas narratives and political discourses concentrated on coastal land loss to advance restoration programs (Colten, 2016), at the expense of recognizing the root causes of climate change and its effect on accelerating these issues³⁹³. This is the result of active communication efforts from the fossil fuel industry to root biased beliefs of climate change into *oil culture*. Let’s for example highlight the propaganda movie, “The Louisiana Story”, produced in 1948 by Standard Oil Company. It tells the story of a young Cajun boy whose family gains wealth from their employment in the industry, resonating with the shared histories of many Cajuns in Southeast Louisiana. These efforts to promote a socially and environmentally conscious industry and to frame climate issues simply as land loss or *natural* hurricanes, have normalized environmental risk in Louisiana and shaped policies away from fundamentally reconsidering the ideological, economic, and political foundations of climate vulnerabilities to maintain the status quo³⁹⁴ (Burge et al., 2020). The next chapter will demonstrate how these *agnostic* beliefs, fueled by the desire to perpetuate the Dominant Social Paradigm, have engendered specific adaptation practices conducive to immobility.

³⁹³ Interview Benjamin, local researcher. Zoom, 20.08.28

³⁹⁴ Interview Hannah, climate policy advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.22

Chapter 6. Grounding resilience: the making of immobility

In this chapter, I seek to understand the “trapping” effect of adaptation practices at macro and meso levels. I argue that the lack of non-structural adaptation strategies offered by the state play a major role in shaping adaptive collective behaviors and immobility. As policy advisor Stephanie remarks, “People absolutely perceive the environmental risks. The question is, are there other options and have elected decisionmakers supported other options outside of the oil and gas industry, and the answer is largely no.”³⁹⁵ To understand why practices of adaptation exclude movement and elicit immobility, I delve into the *institutionalization of discourses*, meaning the transformation of structures or practices in ways that embody the hegemonic discourses described in the previous chapters (Carvalho, 2008). This discursive effect – the process or effect of a discourse beyond a given text – can be conceived as the result of *discourse structuration* – the hegemonic framing of certain issues – in this case of adaptation, extreme weather events, and climate change. I will demonstrate how such policies and discourses are preventing relocation, notably through the absence of policy planning for retreat, the expressed willingness to prevent depopulation and the push for elevations as a strategy conducive to collective immobility. This chapter makes the argument that these governance practices and ideas, co-constructed by the master discourse of *permanence*, form what I have termed *techno-optimist managed immobility*.

I conceptualize *managed immobility* in opposition to the more conventional policy perspective of *managed retreat*. Managed retreat is one of the three types of sea-level rise mitigation policies, along with protection and accommodation policies, which will be further discussed in this chapter. Managed retreat is defined as the “the strategic relocation of structures or abandonment of land to manage natural hazard risk” and minimize environmental impacts (Hino et al., 2017: 364; Verchick and Johnson, 2014). It includes the planned moving of people, homes, businesses, and infrastructures to safer areas (Ajibade et al., 2020; Alexander et al., 2012). Managed retreat is preemptive, often government-led, and designed to avoid the sudden displacement of populations in the event of increasing environmental and climatic risks. In my conceptualization of *managed immobility*, I echo the government-led character of retreat to suggest that immobility has clear

³⁹⁵ Interview Stephanie, renewable energy advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.08

political underpinnings because it is planned, preventive of individual relocations, and induced by government policies.

The *techno-optimist* character of managed immobility stems from the belief in human ingenuity and the improvement of technologies in response to actual and future climate threats (Sebileau et al., 2022; Arvesen et al., 2011). More specifically, drawing on Barry's (2016:108) definition of techno-optimism, it can be understood as the "exaggerated and unwarranted belief in human technological abilities to solve problems of unsustainability while minimizing or denying the need for large-scale social, economic and political transformation." Techno-optimism, in this regard, is based on accepting the status quo, i.e. the capitalist, growth-oriented socioeconomic system in which climate change adaptation policies are implemented. In the context of Louisiana and for the purpose of this analysis, I consider coastal restoration engineering and grey flood-protection infrastructures as technological advancements because they are part of the principal technological option for climate adaptation in coastal zones (Klein et al., 2001). I draw on Danaher's (2022:54) conception of technology as a set of tools used to resolve problems as well as "a cultural product imbued with meaning and value". As such, the technologies of adaptation used in Louisiana must be understood for their instrumental purpose, and as the products of political, social, and cultural arrangements. Techno-optimism here thus refers to the totality of technological production in society (Danaher, 2022).

Techno-optimist managed immobility, therefore, can be defined as the government planning for the non-movement of populations, businesses, and infrastructure despite increasing climate risks, based on the fundamental belief in infrastructural and technological solutions and with the objective of maintaining populations and economic structures in place. In other words, it refers to the *institutionalization* of practices of climate immobility.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I have explained how private extractivist interests have captured environmental adaptation policy in Louisiana, and reinforced *agnostic* representations of vulnerability. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how the State of Louisiana and parish governments have engaged in techno-optimist managed immobility and discuss the implications of this political strategy for adaptation. I show that these interests and ideas have forged adaptation policymaking conducive to immobility in the context of climate change. I investigate two ways in which this policy approach has contributed to the government planning of immobility. First, from

the perspective of state and local governments (macro level), engineering and flood protection has dominated policymaking at the expense of other adaptation strategies, legitimized in discourse as a life-saving strategy and used to curb depopulation trends along the coast. This policy orientation has been legitimized by what I term a promise of permanence, conducive to a false sense of security and the political desire to perpetually rebuild and “save Louisiana”. These policy approaches and ideas have encouraged the use of elevations as a risk-reducing measure for communities (meso level). But they have also increased maladaptation by restraining material capacities and potentially trapping residents in place. Immobility, whether voluntary, acquiescent, or forced, can thus be conceived as the result of policies made to encourage structural adaptation and constrain alternative adaptation opportunities, themselves legitimized by the *permanence master discourse* and institutionalized as *managed immobility*.

1. Trapping policies: the role of infrastructures in preventing movement

Louisiana’s history of structural adaptation consolidated in the early 20th century as hurricane and storm damage increased. New Orleans’ Lake Pontchartrain’s armoring and the subsequent expansion of hurricane levees and seawalls cemented political support for these technical solutions to the coast’s evident vulnerability (Colten and Giancarlo, 2011; Colten, 2019; Maret and Cadoul, 2007). Today, infrastructures of flood protection have become the dominant adaptation strategy for both local governments and the State of Louisiana’s long-term plan for coastal resilience (Manning Broome et al., 2015). The governments are engaged in two of the three mitigation options described by Alexander et al. (2012) and Klein et al., (2001), protection and accommodation, foregoing the third option, retreat. Protection policies are defense structures such as beach nourishment, ecological protection, gates, seawalls and levees, and constitute a resistance strategy for governments (Verchick and Johnson, 2014; Manning Broome et al., 2015). Accommodation policies are designed to reduce the impacts of sea-level rise through structure elevations, drainage, and flood proofing (Alexander et al., 2012). This section will demonstrate how these policies are inscribed in a larger desire to prevent depopulation, encourage repopulation, and forego managed retreat as a potential adaptive response to climate vulnerability.

1.1. Striving for technosalvation and creating a “puzzle”

Technosavation is a dragon of inaction described by Robert Gifford (2011) as the overconfident belief that technology will solve problems associated with climate change. This barrier to climate action is evidenced by both the State’s and local governments’ quasi-exclusive focus on infrastructural adaptation to achieve long term coastal protection while preserving existing economic and social institutions. These efforts have rationalized practices in part responsible for their environmental vulnerability, i.e., industrial activities, and aim to maintain the status quo through man-made infrastructures and hard engineering solutions (Randolph, 2018; Burge et al., 2020). Anchored in the belief that large-scale societal transformations are not necessary to respond to the environmental and climate crises (discursively disconnected from extractive practices and *naturalized*), this approach is sustained throughout all political spheres. Timothy, of the State of Louisiana government, explains the state’s rationale.

We can’t put a bunch of little band-aids along the coast, it’s not going to get us where we need to get. We’re having to put these huge, huge investments on thousands of acres of marsh, thousands of acres of barrier island, really big diversions, or really big levee systems.³⁹⁶



³⁹⁶ Interview Timothy, State of Louisiana government. Zoom, 21.03.01

Photo 13. - Infrastructural protections across Southeast Louisiana

Top left: the Pointe-aux-Chênes floodgate, Terrebonne Parish

Top right: Diamond pump station atop a hurricane levee facing out toward the Gulf of Mexico, Plaquemines Parish

Bottom left: Empire floodgate, Plaquemines Parish

Bottom right: a burrito levee on the shore of Grand Isle, uncovered by Hurricane Ida

Source: Sarah Munoz (2022)

At the parish level, infrastructures are the main point of concern for elected councilmembers and administrations, whether during climatic events or not. My year-long observations reveal the overwhelming presence of concerns for pump construction and repairs, canals, levee maintenance and road elevations in all parish-level council meetings. The objective is expressed clearly: to build a large “puzzle” and “seal in” the coast³⁹⁷. Simply put, “We’re still in the mindset of ‘build it higher’, ‘build it better’, ‘add more here’”³⁹⁸.

But the dilemma is not the same in all three parishes. Lafourche benefits from the most extensive hurricane protection system, compared to Terrebonne and Plaquemines, and this has significantly impacted its residents’ refusal to relocate. In her study on place attachments in Southeast Louisiana, Simms (2017) remarks that Lafourche residents interviewed have expressed no interest in relocating due to environmental factors because they feel protected, instead linking their potential movement to the oil and gas industry, a point I have discussed in Chapter 3. In Terrebonne, however, the author finds greater concern among residents for potential relocation and greater hopes in the government’s ability to finish the levee system to prevent such movements. These hopes have been repeatedly communicated in public meetings during my fieldwork. Councilmember Guidry of Terrebonne Parish, for example, explained, “After we do a few more jobs in Steve [Trosclair]’s district, the whole of Terrebonne Parish should be sealed up from any kind of hurricane problems and water-related problems we could have”³⁹⁹. In political discourse, the idea of ensuring permanence of life in the region is premised on the belief of putting an *end* to vulnerability through infrastructure, and thus, the denial of increasing anthropogenic climate risk.

³⁹⁷ Terrebonne Parish council meeting, Houma, 21.08.11

³⁹⁸ Interview Rachel, local researcher. Zoom, 20.09.03

³⁹⁹ Terrebonne Parish council meeting, Houma, 21.08.11

It's all part of a system that's going to be here to protect Terrebonne Parish for generations to come. (...) This is another little piece of the puzzle that we've been doing. (...) They're gonna build the lock system by Morgan city, and they're gonna build one system by Larose. We're gonna be completely sealed in.⁴⁰⁰

Everything we do is one step forward, it's one more part of the puzzle that we're putting together for drainage and doing better for our parish. I know there are still some places where we have problems, and we're working on it, just give us a little bit of chance. Keeping the parish dry and completing the puzzle is a priority in Terrebonne Parish.⁴⁰¹

In Lafourche and Terrebonne Parishes, the Morganza-to-the-Gulf 96-mile-long levee project has been estimated by the Corps of Engineers to cost a whopping 3 billion US dollars, with a third of this funding already lined up by State and local partners, according to a flood protection advocacy organization. "I think people are very excited that they're finally going to have some flood protection that is significant.", conveyed the group's executive director, Vincent⁴⁰². As he explains the lengthy and difficult process of levee creation for this on-going project, he rejoices in its existing successes. "Even with the eight-foot levees, we only had eleven houses flood for hurricanes last year (*i.e., in 2020*), when during Ike, we had 11,000 homes floods in Terrebonne and Lafourche. To go from 11,000 to 11 is awesome." In Terrebonne council meetings as well as in the Senate, these statistics are repeatedly used to justify the \$1 billion in flood protection the parish has spent on levees and pump stations. "We did our job.", asserted councilman Guidry⁴⁰³. "We've saved way more money than the levees actually cost, probably", further justified Senator Fesi⁴⁰⁴. "When hurricane Barry came two years ago, (...) this was the first time we didn't have to muck up water out of our substation.", also rejoiced Joe Ticheli, General Manager of SLECA in his presentation on the Ashland substation before the Terrebonne council⁴⁰⁵. Despite these efforts, Simms (2021) remarks, Terrebonne still ranks among the highest for both per capita disaster assister assistance requests and repetitive losses.

⁴⁰⁰ Councilman Guidry, Terrebonne Parish council meeting, Houma, 21.02.10

⁴⁰¹ Councilman Guidry, Terrebonne Parish council meeting, Houma, 21.08.11

⁴⁰² Interview Vincent, flood protection advocacy organization. Telephone, 21.08.03

⁴⁰³ Terrebonne Parish council meeting, Houma, 21.03.24

⁴⁰⁴ Senate Natural Resources and Environment committee, Louisiana State Senate, Baton Rouge, 21.04.21.

⁴⁰⁵ South Louisiana Electric Cooperative Association (SLECA). Terrebonne Parish council meeting, Houma, 21.05.12

The Morganza-to-the-Gulf hurricane protection system is considered a strategic piece of the *puzzle* strategy, as the plan to complete a system that ties in with floodgates would barricade Terrebonne Parish against climate disasters. “We can pretty much button up this entire parish, if we need to, to protect from storm surge.”, explains the parish director of coastal restoration Brian⁴⁰⁶. During heavy rain events especially, councilmembers have reassured the public that their priority is flood proofing, aiming for 100% efficiency across 200 pumps in Terrebonne, and with the long-term objective of ensuring the parish would “dry out” upon completion of the *puzzle*⁴⁰⁷. Considered to be the “third line of defense” by Terrebonne Parish administrators after barrier islands and coastal marshes, the intricate infrastructural system composed of levees, pumps and floodgates is designed to work together, with locks and floodgates described as “critical links” and “companion pieces” between them (PR8). This strategy, according to Brian, is designed to ensure the long-term survival of Terrebonne Parish. “We’re not going to stop with the drainage problems until we prove that we either solve it, or we prove that we can’t solve it for whatever reason”⁴⁰⁸, confirmed councilmember Navy about the parish’s long-term engagement in protective adaptation.

These policies are responsive to bottom-up demands for infrastructures to ensure longevity in place. Corroborating what I’ve observed in council meetings, local journalist Ethan explains that residents “want more. They’re angry. They’re asking for more stuff like pumps, and are the pumps on and is the levee working right.”⁴⁰⁹ Across all three parishes, the push for flood protection infrastructure in the form of drainage, pumps and raised levees has overwhelmed councils. At the State level, praises and demands for more infrastructure has also been observed. “We’re in a race against time to construct and save our State”, declared CPRA Chairman Kline before the board, accentuating the necessity of further barricading a “disappearing” Louisiana⁴¹⁰. As Koslov (2016) and Verchick and Johnson (2014:695) remind about Louisianans’ avoidance of retreat, “We

⁴⁰⁶ Interview Brian, parish director of coastal restoration. Telephone, 21.03.05

⁴⁰⁷ Council members Toups, Amedee and Babin in Terrebonne Parish council meeting, Houma, 21.05.26. Councilman Amedee, Terrebonne Parish council meeting, Houma, 21.03.10

⁴⁰⁸ Terrebonne Parish council meeting, Houma, 21.03.24

⁴⁰⁹ Interview Ethan, local Terrebonne journalist. Telephone, 20.08.30

⁴¹⁰ Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) board meeting, Belle Chasse, 21.06.16

Americans are more interested in fortifying our castles or building them higher than in moving out of harm's way.”

Box 15. - The shortcomings of techno-salvation: budgets and maintenance of gray infrastructures of flood protection

This research has found that adaptation is largely *agnostic*, often discussed solely in terms of flood response and drainage and failing to incorporate intensifying climate change. In Lafourche Parish, for example, questions about the efficacy of the Cyprien pump station were raised by residents and councilmembers alike during the heavy rain events of March, April and May 2021, as the administration struggled to keep up with the flooding of roads and neighborhoods⁴¹¹. Even as Parish President Archie Chaisson recognized the inherent limitations of their drainage system and temporary pumps in the face of such intense climatic events causing the pumping stations to fail, there was an absence of reconsideration for their long-term ability to maintain this strategy. Instead, the blame was placed on the administration for failing to upkeep canals and repair pumps rapidly enough, while levees were presented as the most important issue to the parish. In June of that same year, Zeke Matherne, a Lafourche resident, poked holes in the parish’s engineering approach. “I’m concerned, if we get six inches of water, we’ll be dead in the water, again”, he deplored before the council⁴¹². President Chaisson’s rebuttal aimed to absolve the Parish by claiming that no system could handle the rain event they had suffered, revealing their recognition of their technology’s limitations to mitigate climate threats. In Terrebonne too, residents have questioned these strategies. “There’s not a pump in the world that can handle that kind of rain.”, one resident noted⁴¹³. Mentioning that his elected officials have depicted the episode as an extraordinary “hundred-year rain event”, he remarks that his house has flooded eight times in the past fourteen years alone. “I don’t know if that seems like a little to y’all, but it seems like a lot to me.”

The repetitive financial and psychological strain of intensifying rain events is made clear to local parish councils during heavy rainfall events but fails to translate to broader perceptions of long-term risk. According to one State policy advisor, federal and state governments have attempted to rebrand the “hundred-year storm” concept “to get people away from thinking that ‘one of those big storms hit last year, I’m not going to live to a hundred so I’m good, I don’t have that risk anymore’”⁴¹⁴. These discursive elements, observed particularly at the local level, have cemented erroneous beliefs about probable risks after extreme storms like hurricanes Katrina (2005) and Ida (2021) and the capacity of gray infrastructure to protect them in the long term. “Our levees are great, but nothing says that they can’t break. If they don’t break, you’ll never flood here, but if they do break, you’ll have some problems”, explained George, a long-time councilmember in Lafourche⁴¹⁵. In fact, according to the State of Louisiana government, “there is no such thing as a hundred percent protection, worry-free, guarantee. We are trying to reduce risk as much as possible, but there still remains some risk.”⁴¹⁶ It has also been found that the operation and maintenance of the federal hurricane protection system, integral to the Coastal Master Plan, have not been sufficiently addressed by the State, and that the burden of funding will most likely impact parish governments (Davis et al., 2014). Reflective of the master discourse of *permanence*, political discourses praising the infallibility of the system have dominated public discourse. But four important limitations

⁴¹¹ Lafourche Parish council meeting, Mathews, 21.03.23; 21.05.25

⁴¹² Lafourche Parish council meeting, Mathews, 21.06.22

⁴¹³ Terrebonne Parish council meeting, Houma, 21.03.14

⁴¹⁴ Interview Nathan, State of Louisiana government. Zoom, 21.03.17

⁴¹⁵ Interview George, Lafourche Parish council. Telephone, 20.08.19

⁴¹⁶ Interview Nathan, State of Louisiana government. Zoom, 21.03.17

have been recognized; (1) the intensity and difficulty of living in this area, (2) drainage issues in areas with infrastructure, (3) potential and repetitive failures of levee systems and pumps, (4) the difficulties of raising their homes and infrastructures to adapt.

1.2. The absence of retreat policy in adaptation planning

Managed retreat or relocation policies are generally unpopular and resisted by governments and decisionmakers because it entails unbuilding land, dismantling infrastructures, and losing population settlements in certain areas (Koslov, 2016). The Master Plan’s focus on engineering has been criticized for being an incomplete response to environmental vulnerability because of its disregard for non-infrastructure solutions, including urbanization planning, energy and development regulations, and mobility (Manning Broome et al., 2015). In fact, although relocation is considered by the Louisiana Strategic Adaptations for Future Environments process (LA SAFE) and other stakeholders⁴¹⁷ as a viable strategy to reduce exposure to flood risk (G9; Colten, 2016), local and State governments are not engaging with adaptation planning for movement because their objective is to retain constituents, services, and economic structures (Koslov, 2016; Verchick and Johnson, 2014). “They don’t want to see people move away because they would lose their tax base and politicians would lose their positions”, argues Benjamin. “So, there’s no push from local politics to explore or support assisted relocation, they don’t want people to leave.”⁴¹⁸ Andrew, a former project manager for the Isle de Jean Charles relocation, corroborates this perspective.

If you're a mayor of a town that has lost population over a period of time, you may not be necessarily inclined to advocate for a program that's ultimately going to enhance that flight of people from the town that you represent.⁴¹⁹

This is also supported by the conclusions of the LA SAFE 2019 report and surveys which find the absence of state assistance for relocation is hindering residents’ ability to move in the context of increasing risks (G7).

⁴¹⁷ Interviews Benjamin, local researcher. Zoom, 20.08.28; Daniel, biologist and lifelong environmental activist. Telephone, 21.03.03; Natalie, local researcher. Zoom, 20.08.17

⁴¹⁸ Interview Benjamin (local researcher, Zoom, 20.08.28), corroborated by John, a local engineer who notes that local governments are self-interested in their desire to maintain populations so that communities don’t “dry up” (telephone, 21.04.09)

⁴¹⁹ Interview Andrew, State of Louisiana government. Zoom, 21.03.08

1.2.1. Encouraging investments in at-risk areas

The desire of policymakers to encourage immobility through infrastructures of protection has also incentivized investments in risky areas (Lustgarten, 2020; Montz and Tobin, 2008; Koslov, 2016). It is the case for example in the town of Grand Isle, located beyond Port Fourchon in the Gulf of Mexico, and where the energy company Entergy is now investing millions of dollars to bury electrical lines as a way of reducing hurricane damage to infrastructures (Vidal, 2022). With the hope of “rebuilding the community” after Hurricane Ida (2021), investments in such at-risk areas testify of the bottom-up and top-down push for immobility and the lack of proactive planning for eventual relocation. “It’s just more economical” to run power lines underground from Port Fourchon into Grand Isle, the only inhabited barrier island along the coast, explains Vincent⁴²⁰, who has worked on the Morganza-to-the-Gulf and LA-1 elevation projects⁴²¹. Jefferson parish, which has jurisdiction over Grand Isle, wants “tax revenue from the summer, it’s a lot of monies for them”, he continues, providing insight into the economic interests of the local government for maintaining populations in these risky areas through sustained infrastructure maintenance and development.

At the State level too, the government struggles with simultaneously addressing environmental risk and responding to current economic needs. Andrew, a former project planner for the State of Louisiana, explains why retreat from vulnerable and productive areas is not politically conceivable.

The same series of places along Louisiana’s coast that are most vulnerable also are broadly the same places that are significant drivers of Louisiana’s economy. So, you can't necessarily effectuate a whole evacuation or retreat from the places that are most vulnerable because there are good reasons why those communities exist. They are a source of commerce that Louisiana has not figured out how to replace in the near or long term.⁴²²

Yet, as the Union of Concerned Scientists (2017c) warns, perpetuating risky investments in coastal areas will compromise the ability of communities to adapt to a changing coast. In fact, the

⁴²⁰ Interview Vincent, flood protection advocacy organization. Galliano, 22.02.09

⁴²¹ The LA-1 elevation project is made to secure access to the oil and gas base Port Fourchon despite subsidence (see [Chapter 4](#), section 1).

⁴²² Interview Andrew, State of Louisiana government. Zoom, 21.03.08

organization reminds, phasing out this development is crucial given the projected chronic inundation of 90 to 100% of land areas in Terrebonne and Lafourche Parishes by late century.

1.2.2. Retreat as a last resort

For this reason, the prospect of relocation, whether large-scale or community-based, remains absent from the 2023 Coastal Master Plan despite recognition of the increased risks from climate change to communities, flooding, hurricanes, and land loss (G17). Acquisitions are considered only as “voluntary” nonstructural risk reduction options and are only recommended for residential properties at risk of 14 feet of storm surge-based flooding (G17:56). This strategy is part of the \$11.2 billion Master Plan budget, along with elevations and floodproofing, but is considered a last resort option (Manning Broome et al., 2015). The Plan reads, “if the higher scenario is realized, elevating homes in some areas would lift homes so high that the increased potential for wind damage begins to be an issue; in these instances, voluntary acquisition may become the most viable approach.” (G17:84).

The Master Plan’s meagre considering for relocation as a desirable adaptation tool fails to be accompanied by significant proactive policy planning (G6; Davis et al., 2014). It is framed as a distant possibility should the infrastructural strategy of the State fail to ensure permanence. Disinclination for government-led relocations is also apparent in the Plan’s accentuation of a vague “community-level” drive for this strategy. It reads, “If other communities decide this is a good option for them, we will all have to work together—residents, state and local agencies, and funders—to decide how relocation should happen.” (G12:7). This suggests the State government would not propose relocations for Louisiana as a policy option, instead offering support to communities who expressly wish it and establishing an exclusively reactive and bottom-up perspective on the governance of mobility. The Plan’s lack of a clear implementation process, total reliance on voluntary participation, and absence of proactivity in its view of relocation as a last resort do not suggest that this policy solution would be put into action soon. Instead, it seems mobility is conceived as a failure to adapt through other means (Cattaneo et al., 2019). During one CPRA board meeting for example, Chairman Kline expressed his opposition to dredging

techniques advocated for by fishermen groups⁴²³. “If we do nothing but dredge, coastal Louisiana has only 20 to 30 years left”, he explained. Pushing for larger engineering efforts, he argued that the State had to continue in this direction “so that we don’t have to relocate a large portion of our population”. Presenting retreat as a failure of engineering policies reaffirms the push for permanence and removes relocation from the political imaginary of acceptable adaptation practices in the short to medium term.

1.2.3. The policy taboo of relocation

“As far as relocation [goes], they either don’t take it seriously at all, or they try to make it sound absurd”, notes with regret lifelong environmental activist Daniel. “[The politicians] try to shut down any thought of relocation”⁴²⁴. He recounts a particular coastal hearing which he attended as a public commentor, during which he suggested the eventual need for the relocation of New Orleans, should climate change accelerate. Garrett Graves, former chairman of the CPRA and current US congressman, “went ballistic”, Daniel remembers. “He started hollering, saying ‘I live in New Orleans and I’m not going to move, that’s crazy’”. For the director of a coastal restoration advocacy organization, relocation is one of the toughest conversations to have in Louisiana, and for this reason, this discussion has not yet happened on any kind of large scale either at the State or local levels⁴²⁵. These findings corroborate existing research on the hesitation of policymakers in the United States to acknowledge relocation as a viable adaptation strategy and to strategically implement mechanisms to facilitate mobility for at-risk areas (Bukvic and Owen, 2017). This reluctance to discuss relocation and endorse policy frameworks conducive to movement stems from historic unsustainable development plans along US shores and a failure to recognize the potential benefits of proactive policy planning. In fact, as Koslov (2016:363) argues, “many officials treat unbuilding land and removing it from the market as the greater risk, though the profits to be gained from remaining in dangerous places are more uncertain and short-lived than the rewards of retreating from them are”. Hard defenses as the sole adaptive strategy against the

⁴²³ Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) board meeting, Belle Chasse, 21.06.16

⁴²⁴ Interview Daniel, biologist and lifelong environmental activist. Telephone, 21.03.03

⁴²⁵ Interview Elizabeth, coastal restoration advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.01 and 21.02.12

threat of relocation, therefore, can be considered maladaptive, because it increases the vulnerability and exposure of communities in the long-term (IPCC, 2014).

Levees fail. And they will always fail. The funding will run out, the levee will sink. And the levees destroy the wetlands. If you don't fund a wetland, it will generally survive. Even with climate change, they can do some adaptation, right? But if you destroy the wetlands with a levee? It loses its flood protection.⁴²⁶

As the final section of this chapter and Chapter 7 will demonstrate, communities have also expressed great reluctance to engage in state-led relocation, especially acquisitions and buyouts. The sensitivity of the topic of relocation in Louisiana has the State treading carefully around the emotionally charged issue of buyouts and resettlement⁴²⁷. Here, *emotions* interlace with governance and efficiency in policymaking and programs. One local researcher remarks that this is because retreat is a “dirty word” in Louisiana, a sort of taboo that has impeded adaptation. He notes, “there’s an organization called Restore or Retreat, it’s an NGO that’s all about restoration, but it’s not about retreat, and they’re saying ‘if you don’t restore, we’re going to be forced to retreat’”. The term “retreat” is a dirty word, it is a vulgar word in South Louisiana.”⁴²⁸ For the director of a coastal restoration advocacy organization, “the name was certainly intended to be forceful and to get people to think about if we didn’t act soon, what choices that we might have to face in the future.”⁴²⁹ In this sense, using retreat as threatening or negative outcome can be viewed as a way to nudge discussions of the long-term risks of environmental adaptation. For elected officials, it is also a way to legitimize and garner public support for state policies, notably accommodation and protection projects (elevations, restoration, and hardened infrastructures), because retreat remains highly unpopular in public opinion (Alexander et al., 2012; Koslov, 2016). As Table 5 below shows, the mention of mobility, whether in terms of relocation, displacement or buyouts, has remained sparse in local government meetings. The rare instances in which movement has been mentioned have described it as a negative outcome, whether of flood insurance rates (see section 3.2. of this chapter), hurricane, poor flood protection or state projects set to increase

⁴²⁶ Interview Anthony, climate advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.03.21

⁴²⁷ Interview Charlie, State of Louisiana government, Zoom, 21.06.14

⁴²⁸ Interview Benjamin, local researcher. Zoom, 20.08.28

⁴²⁹ Interview Elizabeth, coastal restoration advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.01 and 21.02.12

flooding. It seems, therefore, that mobility in general remains an undesirable and under-discussed topic among local governments and their constituents, especially in relation to environmental risk.

Table 5. – Mentions of mobility in local council meetings

Instance	Number of mentions	Term used	Attributed cause
Plaquemines council (N=20)	4	Relocation	Possibility negatively associated with the lack of flood protection (21.05.27)
		Relocation	Possibility negatively attributed to high flood insurance costs (21.10.28)
		Relocation	Residents asking for help relocating or elevating in response to FEMA regulations (21.06.10)
		Buyouts	Mentioned as a negative consequence of the Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion project (21.04.08)
Terrebonne council (N=22)	2	Buyouts	Residents asking for a government buyout due to high cost of flood insurance (21.03.24)
		Temporary displacement	Linked to evacuations from Hurricane Ida (21.10.13)
Lafourche council (N=22)	2	Temporary displacement	Associated with Hurricane Ida damage (21.09.28)
		Relocation	Residents denouncing potential forced relocation from high cost of flood insurance and FEMA regulations (21.10.26)

According to a former State employee for the Office of Community development, the idea of potential threats to long-term living in coastal Louisiana generates a certain political discomfort, a conclusion also corroborated by policy director of a restoration organization, Lauren, who remarks a “detachment from reality” by elected officials who are unwilling to recognize their constituency’s vulnerability.

There are no politicians in Louisiana that I'm aware of that have been proactive in suggesting that there are places within Louisiana that are not going to be viable into the future. There's a difficulty there because when you discuss it in abstract with government officials, you can get a degree of honesty that suggests that, yeah, not everywhere in Louisiana is going to exist as it currently exists at the same quality of life. But when you ask for specificity, no elected politician is going to suggest that the jurisdiction that they represent might not be there 50 years from now. And so, there's this sort of detachment from reality that's inherent with that political system in Louisiana. Nobody is prepared to specifically point to the places that maybe aren't going to make it over the long haul and suggest that maybe that's not where we should be expanding significant resources to try to preserve.⁴³⁰

⁴³⁰ Interview Andrew, State of Louisiana government. Zoom, 21.03.08

It's unpalatable. I don't think any politician wants to be the one to tell their residents that you can't live here anymore, that everyone has to get out. Nobody wants to hear that they can't live somewhere, that they're not going to protect that area for them.⁴³¹

Instead, Andrew argues, politicians have adopted a very optimistic outlook on engineering as a cure-all that is unrealistic for future adaptation and impedes the adoption of holistic, long-term planning that includes relocation.

1.2.4. Putting a stop to movement

Beyond proactive policy for movement, this research finds that local policymakers are also actively trying to refrain mobility. Described as both “aggressive” and “very successful” by Terrebonne’s coastal program manager, the parish’s elevation program has been designed to keep residents and structures “safe”⁴³². In Plaquemines, councilmember LaFrance recounts his meeting with US Senator Bill Cassidy on Hurricane Ida recovery, during which relocation was not considered a viable government-encouraged adaptation strategy, instead focusing on elevation grants, housing, and levees⁴³³. This is prevalent in all political meetings across all three parishes, as no mention of alternatives to levee lifts, maintenance, expansion, or creation has been discussed during the time of observations. This has been the dominant policy strategy since the 1950s in Louisiana and is reflected today in decisionmakers’ quasi-exclusive focus on engineering and its fundamental role in enabling immobility (Colten and Giancarlo, 2011). “What we’re doing now is putting a stop to [depopulation]”, proudly explained Terrebonne councilmember William about their infrastructural strategy’s intent to limit mobility⁴³⁴. For him, further discussions on relocation are unnecessary because their infrastructural plan is on its way to completion, rendering these discussions obsolete. Corroborating this general dismissal of relocation talks, a parish director of coastal restoration notes,

I don't think [relocation] is going to be a reality at all, at least within the next 50 years. Assuming that everything that we have in place right now continues to function as it was

⁴³¹ Interview Lauren, coastal restoration advocacy group. Telephone, 21.02.23

⁴³² Interview Brian, parish director of coastal restoration. Telephone, 21.03.05

⁴³³ Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Pointe-a-la-Hache, 21.10.14

⁴³⁴ Interview William, Terrebonne Parish council. Telephone, 21.05.12

designed, then there's no reason why it will not because of the constant maintenance that the system requires. And the parish has been real good about that.⁴³⁵

As a result of restraining their tools and dismissing retreat, focus is placed on enhancing infrastructures for greater resilience. Described as “the right one” by CPRA Chairman Kline after Hurricane Ida, the levee strategy is praised for its successes during intense climatic events⁴³⁶ and reinforces decisionmakers' confidence in their policy choices and investments in hardened infrastructures⁴³⁷. But as we have seen, these justifications are anchored in an *agnostic* conception of risk and, as such, are devoid of consideration for increasing climate change, sea-level rise, and intensified storms. In fact, government documentation shows, community relocation as a state-led hazard mitigation strategy is only considered as a response to potential surge increases from government projects, such as the Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion or Morganza levees (G5).

Yet, non-governmental reports and interviews have shown that community-wide resettlements in Lafourche, Terrebonne and Plaquemines will be necessary in the future (G7, G8, G9)⁴³⁸. For many stakeholders, both individuals and local governments lack a long-term vision, and fail to recognize the interconnected nature of various adaptation needs and to preemptively address coastal residents' current and future needs for assisted relocations⁴³⁹. The prevailing political culture characterized by a preference for small government and conservatism is impeding their ability to adapt, driven by reluctance to bear costs and an expectation that the federal government will continue to intervene after disastrous climate events⁴⁴⁰.

But for State planning manager Charlie, the issue is one of issue hierarchy. She described the local policy approach as “the squeaky wheel gets the grease”⁴⁴¹, meaning governments are focused on the salience of issues which grasp the public's attention. The absence of relocation discussions in

⁴³⁵ Interview Brian, parish director of coastal restoration. Telephone, 21.03.05

⁴³⁶ Coastal Louisiana Levee Consortium, Baton Rouge, 21.12.13

⁴³⁷ Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) board meeting, Thibodaux, 21.10.20

⁴³⁸ Interviews Lauren, coastal restoration advocacy group. Telephone, 21.02.23; Caleb, ecologist and former councilmember. Empire, 22.02.18; Christopher, local journalist. Telephone, 20.08.20

⁴³⁹ Interviews Timothy, State of Louisiana government. Zoom, 21.03.01; Charlie, State of Louisiana government, Zoom, 21.06.14; Lauren, coastal restoration advocacy group. Telephone, 21.02.23

⁴⁴⁰ This was observed after every hurricane or extreme weather event in council meetings, during which Administrations and council members urged the federal government for assistance.

⁴⁴¹ Interview Charlie, State of Louisiana government, Zoom, 21.06.14

local council therefore doesn't necessarily mean elected leaders want to stifle that option, according to Charlie, but that they're *reflecting* their constituents' reluctance to engage in talks of mobility. Both local administrations and local publics seem to focus their attention on the more visible, immediate problems, rather than long-term issues. Local governments' inherent competition for state and federal resources and their disparate institutional capacities limit their ability to plan proactively. But beliefs about policy needs and risks do not exist in a vacuum devoid of power and politics. They are shaped by political and economic powers which condition the social acceptability of risk, mold discourses and impose risk onto communities (Tierney, 1999). The absence of public demands or consideration for relocation in everyday politics, therefore, must be understood as a reflection of larger political and economic dynamics.

1.3. "Saving people's lives": immobility as a people-centered policy

Engineering policies that prevent relocation and depopulation have been framed as a strategy for the people. "People have been born and raised in this parish, they've got roots here, they don't want to leave. So, we have an obligation to fight to keep what we have, and even make it better", a parish director of coastal restoration rationalizes⁴⁴². This sense of obligation has generated a people-centered framing for policy. "They're getting to realize that we're much safer with those levees and everything else we're trying to do in the parish", Brian continues. For others, residents have been supportive of the levee strategy to be able to remain and avoid forced retreat, thus preserving their connections to the land and their Cajun or Indigenous identities.

If we don't step up to the plate as a community with resilient infrastructure, then people are going to be forced [to leave] over time, due to it being so costly to live here. What that means is the French culture disperses. So, from a cultural point of view, I think we're trying to be as proactive as we can to save our physical communities and save our culture.⁴⁴³

When people look at the question "do we restore the coast or not", they often are for it because it means that they don't have to leave. They don't have to pack up their house, they don't have to sell their house, they don't have to change their lifestyle. You got the family ties, the Churches, the cemeteries, all of those kinds of things that keep people rooted in place.⁴⁴⁴

⁴⁴² Interview Brian, parish director of coastal restoration. Telephone, 21.03.05

⁴⁴³ Interview Vincent, flood protection advocacy organization. Galliano, 22.02.09

⁴⁴⁴ Interview Benjamin, local researcher. Zoom, 20.08.28

The desire for persistence, described by Colten (2015) as the willingness to conserve a certain lifestyle and roots in place, is correlated to strong public support for *in situ* adaptation and mitigation policies, including restoration and, as we have seen, infrastructures of protection. Accounting for multigenerational permanence, elected officials and government agents frame their policies as a direct response to this bottom-up desire for *in situ* adaptation. “Oh yeah, that’s the whole reason!” enthusiastically exclaimed Wesley, a levee district manager. Brian, a parish director of coastal restoration, goes even further by framing the parish’s preservation of industry as an obligation driven by their concern for the immobility of communities.

If we left and we didn’t try to maintain what we have in terms of hurricane protection and coastal restoration, then these structures will fail over time. The people are going to have to find another place to live. Our fishing industry will no longer exist in the way it does now. Our oil and gas industry is going to be severely impacted by this. There’s too much infrastructure in coastal Louisiana that needs to be here to support what we have. I mean, people have been born and raised in this parish, they’ve got roots here, they don’t want to leave. So, we have an obligation to fight to keep what we have, and even make it better.⁴⁴⁵

Discussing the benefits of the levee system, Vincent and I sit across from Wesley in his temporary office in Galliano – the levee district’s building having been damaged by Hurricane Ida, they have sought shelter elsewhere. I ask them directly if they believe the system is enabling people to remain in Lafourche and Terrebonne despite environmental risks. “Absolutely”, asserts Vincent⁴⁴⁶. “If we don’t have the infrastructure, we don’t have a community. If we don’t have the levee protection, it may be gradual, but people will move away if the risk is too high”, he fears. “To keep people here, we’ve got to advance on this.” For them, it is a matter of preserving both populations and a large section of the economy – particularly oil and gas – revealing the hegemonic interests vested within the cultural desire for permanence. “A state doesn’t want to lose a whole section of its economy. People will move away, then they lose population. Every state has self interest in trying to protect its citizens and the investments that have been made in that state”, Vincent continues.

Fearing depopulation and relocations, infrastructure is positioned in discourse as a practical response for preserving people’s ability to remain on their lands. This narrative conflates economic interests with those of residents whose desire for immobility is used to legitimize infrastructural

⁴⁴⁵ Interview Brian, parish director of coastal restoration. Telephone, 21.03.05

⁴⁴⁶ Interview Vincent, flood protection advocacy organization. Telephone, 21.08.03

adaptation and the political push for immobility. St-Bernard parish president Guy McInnis, for example, praises the HSDRRS system⁴⁴⁷ because “it protects a culture and a heritage that we enjoy today, and it prolongs that. For however little bit that it prolongs that life, we are very appreciative in St Bernard parish.”⁴⁴⁸ Life in Louisiana, therefore, cannot exist without infrastructure. “We can’t live down here unless there are levee systems”, noted Lauren⁴⁴⁹. “Without flood protection and jobs, people have no choice but to move”, further deplored Vincent⁴⁵⁰.

Accentuating their desire to “keep residents safe”⁴⁵¹, these narratives often frame immobility as a bottom-up request and infrastructures as a responsive policy obligation, drawing on the desire for *permanence* to legitimize their willingness to preserve and safeguard livelihoods, places and social structures in place. But through these people-centered narratives transpire the material and immaterial interests associated with planned immobility, interlocking the preservation of economic structures and infrastructures of production along the coast with that of the pillars of Louisianan culture and identity.

1.4. Southern revival: the push for revitalization and repopulation

Mobility decision-making is the result of the complex interaction between political, social and economic conditions (Geddes et al., 2012; Black et al., 2013). Some attribute movement in Southeast Louisiana to material capacity, echoing economic theories of trapped populations and the role of resources and employment opportunities in shaping decision making (Black et al., 2011a; Van Praag, 2021).

Sometimes people are stuck where they are. They don’t have the money to move. Maybe it’s a family house. Maybe it was inherited, and they don’t have clear title to be able to sell it, so they can’t move on. If anybody has any means at all, I think they’re moving a little bit more

⁴⁴⁷ The Greater New Orleans Hurricane & Storm Damage Risk Reduction System is a large-scale infrastructure composed of pump stations, levees, floodwalls, surge barrier walls and floodgates designed to protect the greater New Orleans area from hurricanes. It was designed in response to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and was completed in 2018 by the US Corps of Engineers.

⁴⁴⁸ Governor Edwards and CPRA announcements, Coastal Protection & Restoration Authority, Facebook Live, 21.05.19

⁴⁴⁹ Interview Lauren, coastal restoration advocacy group. Telephone, 21.02.23

⁴⁵⁰ Interview Vincent, flood protection advocacy organization. Telephone, 21.08.03

⁴⁵¹ Parish President Lepine, Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Pointe-a-la-Hache, 21.09.23

north, depending on what those means are. Maybe they can only afford to move thirty miles north, instead of being right on the coast.⁴⁵²

Yet, others also choose to stay because “their office is across the street”⁴⁵³. Similarly, for Elizabeth of a coastal restoration advocacy organization, households with the financial means to relocate have already started moving northward, but this doesn’t mean that all who remain immobile are necessarily trapped⁴⁵⁴. “For some, this is where they wanna be”, she explains. Due to this cultural attachment, local officials have expressed the objective of bringing people back to southern areas. These areas have historically attracted growing populations but their exposure to periodic hurricane forced the relocation of community settlements⁴⁵⁵ (Gramling and Hagelman, 2005).

Research has shown that rural-to-urban migration is set to steeply increase as climate change accelerates and produces shifts in ecologies and hazards for communities (Wolsko and Marino, 2016). Over the past twenty years in Southeast Louisiana, socioenvironmental stressors have generated progressive populations movements (Simms, 2021). Speaking about Leeville, a community outside of the levee system in Lafourche Parish, Vincent recounts. “Twenty years ago, there were 22 people according to the census, that lived in Leeville. Storms have hit, it’s down to six. Now, it may be less.”⁴⁵⁶ Such slow depopulation from the most southern areas has been linked to desire to escape repetitive flooding and intense winds (see Annex 15; G7). “Retreat from the coast is so gradual that most people won’t notice it”, remarked Lauren, the policy director of a restoration organization.

But residents have identified depopulation as a concerning phenomenon along the coast (G8; G9). “I can remember when I was a kid in Golden Meadow back in the 60s, you might have had five or six thousand people living there”, recounts George, a long time Lafourche councilmember. “It’s a 3-mile town. Today, if you got 1500 people, it’s plenty.”⁴⁵⁷ Deploring his community’s dispersal, George laments. “It’s not a bad community, it’s just a dying community”. In the southern part of

⁴⁵² Interview Scarlett, former employee of Lafourche Parish government. Thibodaux, 22.03.16

⁴⁵³ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁴ Interview Elizabeth, coastal restoration advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.01 and 21.02.12

⁴⁵⁵ The relocation of Cheniere Caminada, a fishing community located near Grand Isle, is one of the most prominent examples. The relocation was pushed in motion after a hurricane killed over 2,000 residents in 1893.

⁴⁵⁶ Interview Vincent, flood protection advocacy organization. Galliano, 22.02.09

⁴⁵⁷ Interview George, Lafourche Parish council. Telephone, 20.08.19

the Barataria-Terrebonne estuary, Gramling and Hagelman (2005: 129) recount, “some of the residents (...) have moved inland three times from the place where they grew up, in a disorganized retreat from the environment they know and love”.

According to LA SAFE documents, severe and repetitive flood events, and sea-level rise have pushed population north, “disrupting community cohesion” and lower parishes’ social fabric (G8:7; G7). The erosion of the social fabric of coastal communities through individual relocations can alter the provision of services, social networks of resilience and adaptive capacity in general because social capital is one of the three principal adaptive mechanisms for climate change, along with mobility and ingenuity (Colten, 2016; Gardezi and Arbuckle, 2019; Wall and Marzall, 2006). In Plaquemines particularly, the parish had already begun showing early trends of population shifts from south to north during the 1990s and early 2000s, and population loss was greatly accelerated by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 (G22). While the 2000 and 2010 US census data has shown stark depopulation from all southern regions towards Belle Chasse, the main urban center in the north of the parish, this trend has slowed and (partly) inverted since the 2010s (Annex 15; G8).

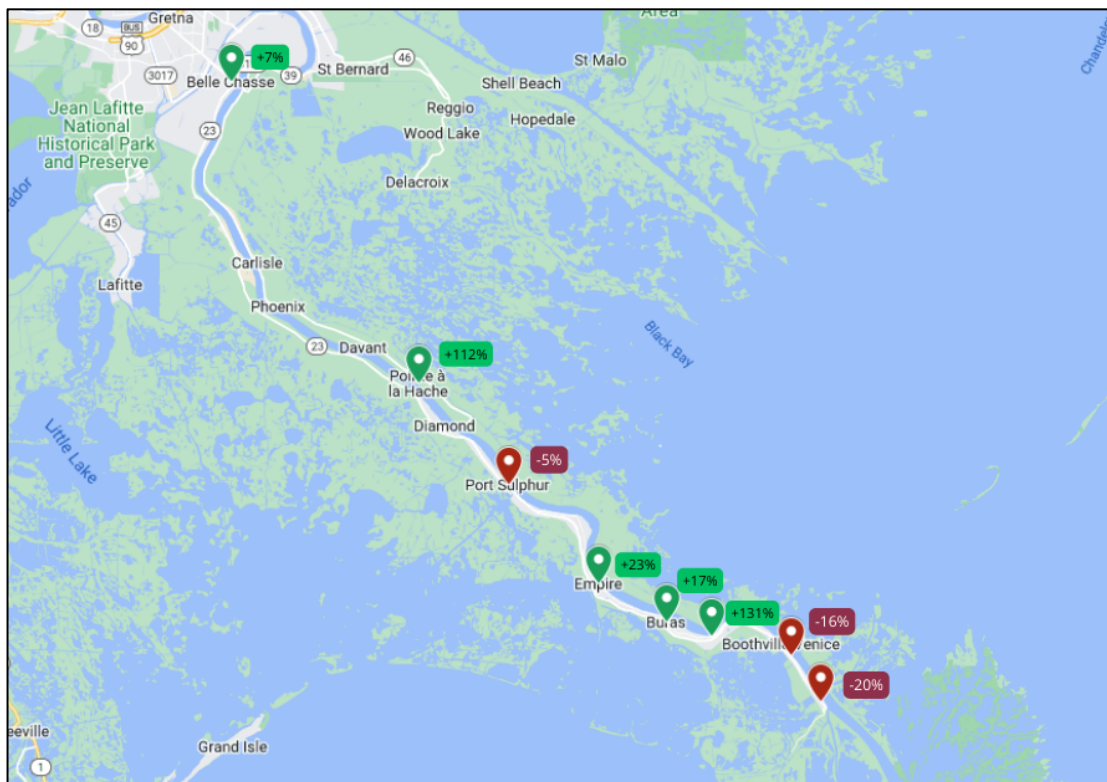


Figure 9. – Plaquemines Parish population changes, 2010-2020

Data source: US Census (2012; 2021). Map source: Sarah M. Munoz

The census analysis presented in Annex 15 reveals that residents have started coming back to southern areas, notably Buras, Triumph, Empire and Pointe à la Hache. Although Belle Chasse has seen a 121% population increase since 2000 (only +7% between 2010 and 2020) while all other areas have seen *overall* decline, the repopulation of certain areas has taken place despite accelerated environmental vulnerability. Empire, Pointe à la Hache and Triumph have seen, respectively, a 23%, 112% and 131% population increase since 2010 (Figure 9). These numbers coincide with the development of the *puzzle* strategy and the augmentation of hardened infrastructures of protection since Hurricane Katrina. The Plaquemines Parish Master Plan reveals a clear intent for “government-led policy and investment decisions” to “drive population growth”, particularly accentuating “strategic coastal restoration efforts, land use decisions and economic development pursuits” (G24:1). Levee improvements, which the Master Plan considers to be “intrinsically tied” to economic development and population growth (G24:3), are also a tool used explicitly by the local government to repopulate southern areas, again unveiling the material interests embedded in such infrastructural strategies. These policy decisions and their outcomes are known as the “levee effect”, whereby levee developments encourage development in flood-prone areas and decrease people’s awareness of risk (Montz and Tobin, 2008; Javeline, 2014). Ultimately, these biased perceptions also decrease the sense of urgency associated with voluntary, proactive relocation (Mineo-Kleiner, 2017; Bouchard-Bastien, 2022).

While Terrebonne and Lafourche Parishes have not seen such a clear trend in their most southern areas, decisionmakers have also expressed repopulation as a policy objective. According to LA SAFE reports, 25% of coastal residents have thought about moving from their current home (G8:59), while many have expressed concern about the difficulties associated with funding infrastructure and sustaining services in depopulated areas. In Terrebonne specifically, community consultations have revealed residents’ concerns for regular flooding, loss of jobs and businesses, and ongoing depopulation (G9). For local officials, movement is changing the political distribution of power in territories by shifting population concentrations towards urban centers, thereby posing

a challenge to the political representation of southern bayous⁴⁵⁸. Elected officials and administrators, as a result, have used infrastructures and market-based incentives such as industry tax breaks to attract populations and businesses. One councilmember for Terrebonne explains how the levee system is slowing depopulation and increasing population numbers along the coast.

Now that we have the system and they've seen how it's working, we're starting to see [depopulation] slow down. We're hoping... We've seen some of the businesses actually go back to their previous buildings and start operating again.⁴⁵⁹

Corroborating these insights, parish director of coastal restoration Brian rejoices in the construction of dollar stores in bayou communities, a sure sign of current repopulation and the outcome of the parish's defense strategy. Previously abandoned by big supermarket chains due to their climate vulnerabilities, coastal communities are now seeing the return of both businesses and populations, a direct result of the Morganza-to-the-Gulf levee system, according to Brian.

Since Morganza, and everything else that we've done in terms of lines of defense, the bayou communities are beginning to come back. People are moving back down there, and one of those surest signs is the growing proliferation of dollar general stores. Those bayou communities are not served anymore by supermarkets. They were flooded too frequently, and it got to be too much of a hassle to keep them open, so they closed them. So, Dollar general stores are being built. That's telling you something about the population moving back to those bayou communities.⁴⁶⁰

This repopulation is also heavily praised by Terrebonne Parish President Gordon Dove⁴⁶¹. Describing his government's efforts at completing the Houma Navigation Canal, a critical piece of the *puzzle*, Dove acclaims residents' immobility as a positive outcome of their engineering efforts. "That's why you see dollar stores opening up in Pointe au Chien and Montegut, you have people staying down the bayou."⁴⁶² But not all stakeholders believe in the sustainability of these adaptation approaches. For one environmental policy analyst,

⁴⁵⁸ Interviews Michael, Plaquemines Parish council. Telephone, 21.07.27; Interview Tony, Plaquemines councilmember, Empire, 22.02.18; Caleb, ecologist and former councilmember. Empire, 22.02.18

⁴⁵⁹ Interview William, Terrebonne Parish council. Telephone, 21.05.12

⁴⁶⁰ Interview Brian, parish director of coastal restoration. Telephone, 21.03.05

⁴⁶¹ As of 2024, Gordon Dove has become the new Chairman of the CPRA (Hutchinson, 2024). As I remark in the conclusions of this thesis, this nomination suggests that the State will continue to engage in techno-optimist policies for adaptation and engineered immobility, given the new Chairman's inclinations for the *puzzle* strategy.

⁴⁶² Terrebonne Parish council meeting, Houma, 21.07.28

At some point, you're going to get hit by so many hurricanes, and you're going to have your house destroyed so many times, that you're not going to be able to take it anymore. It's not even a forced retreat. It's just that you're going to have to leave because you can't rebuild more and more times.⁴⁶³

While repopulation through infrastructures is explicitly pushed by policy officials as a way of sustaining economic activities, the occasional recognition of the realities of intense climate impacts reveals that some are nonetheless conscious of the uncertainty of this future. “For this community, it still makes sense to be here. But not forever.”, remarks Welsey, a levee district manager⁴⁶⁴.

2. Anchoring down: the promise of permanence

Despite the higher costs associated with hard defenses and their negative impacts on neighboring areas, they have been the preferred choice of Louisianan decisionmakers (Koslov, 2016; Tobin, 1995). These infrastructural policies at the State and local levels have generally aimed to prevent collective relocation, favoring the maintenance of a business-as-usual policy objective despite the slow depopulation of communities within and outside of the levee system due to passing hurricanes (Burge et al., 2020; G9). As I have noted previously, depopulation presents a problem for tax base retention and economic activities (G7; Jerolleman, 2020; Koslov, 2016). “There's a change in the natural environment where people can witness land erosion over time and experience those acute impacts from hurricanes and other disaster events”, explained a former project planner for the Isle de Jean Charles relocation. “But they're also watching this sort of social breakdown in which they're seeing their neighbors, their friends, and their family members move away.”⁴⁶⁵ In essence, the potential of relocation represents a threat to economic and cultural preservation which infrastructures are designed to avoid. “The reason I work on infrastructure for my community is that it will give our community resiliency from the threats of tidal inundation and sea-level rise, that threatens our broader South Louisiana French culture”, Vincent defends⁴⁶⁶.

⁴⁶³ Interview Lauren, coastal restoration advocacy group. Telephone, 21.02.23

⁴⁶⁴ Interview Wesley, levee district manager. Galliano, 22.02.09

⁴⁶⁵ Interview Andrew, State of Louisiana government. Zoom, 21.03.08

⁴⁶⁶ Interview Vincent, flood protection advocacy organization. Telephone, 21.08.03

But the total reliance on levees and other infrastructural adaptation measures has fostered a false sense of security and reduced people's awareness of risk (Montz and Tobin, 2008). In this section, I demonstrate how infrastructures have created collective bias and the loss of social memory of resilience, foundational to the bottom-up push for elevations as adaptation and immobility. Underlying these interpretations and practices, the master discourse of *permanence* transpires in the political desire to "save" Louisiana. This section investigates the expression of immobility and *permanence* in discursive practices.

2.1. Infrastructures as bias and the false sense of security

As a result of the inconsistent politicization of climate impacts and the hegemony of *agnostic* representations of risk, people may be willing to take on certain risks regarding future climate events. This is because of the uncertainty of their intensity and occurrence, and as some advocacy actors argue, because "that uncertainty is almost irrelevant over the certainty of having a job."⁴⁶⁷

I think they're somewhat oblivious to it. They're like, 'oh, we're so used to dealing with hurricanes. We know flooding, it's OK'. I think people are willing to take on the risk.⁴⁶⁸

The way [the state] presents [the coastal crisis] is like the sky is falling and we have to do something right away. It's not. It's not gonna fall tomorrow. It's not gonna fall in our lifetime, maybe.⁴⁶⁹

The *normalization* of climate events increases doubts about future climate risk and inevitably precludes long-term adaptive practices, notably by fostering a false sense of security through infrastructural adaptation. In this light, levees and other structural measures are framed as lifesaving, efficient and sufficient. In Terrebonne, the *puzzle* system is consistently praised and portrayed as significant progress in terms of ensuring the safety of the people⁴⁷⁰. In Plaquemines, levees are deemed essential to upkeep community life. "I can't emphasize enough that without those, we can't have a society here", pleaded councilmember Blink in the hope of raising a tax for flood protection⁴⁷¹. Establishing a direct link between desired immobility, permanence, and

⁴⁶⁷ Interview Hannah, climate policy advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.22

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁹ Interview Thomas, fisherman. Telephone, 21.05.14

⁴⁷⁰ Terrebonne Parish council meeting, Houma, 21.02.10

⁴⁷¹ Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Belle Chasse, 21.01.14

infrastructures, he echoes the dominant framing of levees as essential to “keep residents safe”⁴⁷². “Anytime you’re behind a levee, you do feel safer obviously”, confirmed environmental policy director Lauren⁴⁷³. The safety provided by levees is real, State planning manager Charlie further validates, but they also perpetuate biased feelings of safety in vulnerable areas⁴⁷⁴. This is called the “levee effect”.

Studies have shown that communities living in areas with levees often develop a false sense of security, ultimately increasing the cost of flooding and the risk posed to people and property (Montz and Tobin, 2008; Koslov, 2016). Because decisionmakers must protect the substantial investments made in these regions, Charlie argues, there are difficulties associated with rethinking policy approaches to flood risk and nature-based solutions. I argue, however, that they also inhibit thinking about risks overall, especially the long-term risks associated with climate change because it maintains the belief that levees and pumps will provide the same level of safety consistently throughout decades.

Climate (il)literacy, biased knowledge of risk and lack of public understanding has been repeatedly pointed out by policy actors as an issue⁴⁷⁵. CPRA Chairman Kline, for example, remarked that the public doesn’t always understand how much “we’re doing to protect them”.⁴⁷⁶ He deplores the agency’s difficulties to get people to understand how much risk they were facing as Hurricane Laura was approaching in August 2020. For some, the problem lies in the conflicting and often inaccurate discourses held by policymakers.

It’s not clear if the state told everybody how much risk they’re under. I think the state might be scared to tell everybody how much risk they’re under because then people will want to be relocated but there’s no money to relocate them.⁴⁷⁷

The public is not educated to distinguish between risk to property, financial risk, and risk to life. They don’t understand it and the politicians, if they do understand it, they don’t really

⁴⁷² Parish President Lepine, Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Pointe-a-la-Hache, 21.09.23

⁴⁷³ Interview Lauren, coastal restoration advocacy group. Telephone, 21.02.23

⁴⁷⁴ Interview Charlie, State of Louisiana government, Zoom, 21.06.14

⁴⁷⁵ Interview George, Lafourche Parish council. Telephone, 20.08.19; councilmember Babin, Terrebonne Parish council meeting, Houma, 21.02.10; councilmember Blink, Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Pointe-a-la-Hache, 21.03.25

⁴⁷⁶ Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) board meeting, Baton Rouge, 21.05.19

⁴⁷⁷ Interview Natalie, local researcher. Zoom, 20.08.17

try to help the public and they're being negligent. I guess there is a tendency among some politicians to make grandiose claims and over promise in order to make their own efforts and their own position, statute, and status, look more impressive.⁴⁷⁸

As one policy advisor for the State of Louisiana government explains, political messaging on the hurricane protection system changed after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. "Pre-Katrina it was a hurricane protection system, now it is branded as a flood risk reduction system", he explains. "You want to signal to the public that there is no such thing as a hundred percent protection, worry-free, guarantee."⁴⁷⁹ In changing the language associated with hurricane levees, the objective of the State was to increase residents' awareness of climate risks, away from believing only one big storm could hit in a lifetime. "They don't want people to feel like the system is there to protect their lives", further explains a local engineer⁴⁸⁰. In fact, he argues, hurricane protection systems were never designed to protect lives, but reduce damages to property. Yet, local politicians have continued to frame the *puzzle* and levee systems as lifesaving. "The pump station and the levees are going to serve people, they're going to *save* the lives of people", for example proclaimed Terrebonne councilmember Navy during one local meeting⁴⁸¹.

Some politicians like to encourage people to think that these levees are there to protect them. Those politicians feel more important by saying that this is what they're trying to do. But the Corps of Engineers and most of my professional colleagues are very uncomfortable with the idea of communicating to the public that these systems are there to make them feel safe. It's like telling somebody you can drive a car and not put a seatbelt on.⁴⁸²

If you're sitting around telling everybody that you've built a levee but you still need to go out and spend 500\$ or 1000\$ a year on flood insurance, then they feel like they haven't done enough. Sometimes, the public gets mad at them, "what do you mean, I still have to buy flood insurance!" Well, you do!⁴⁸³

I'd rather be on the ground. I'm really not going to stay here during the storm, but I feel my home is safe with the levee system that I have.⁴⁸⁴

⁴⁷⁸ Interview John, engineer. Telephone, 21.03.12

⁴⁷⁹ Interview Nathan, State of Louisiana government. Zoom, 21.03.17

⁴⁸⁰ Interview John, engineer. Telephone, 21.03.12

⁴⁸¹ Terrebonne Parish council meeting, Houma, 21.02.10. Emphasis added.

⁴⁸² Interview John, engineer. Telephone, 21.03.12

⁴⁸³ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁴ Interview Thomas, fisherman. Telephone, 21.05.14

Levees “disconnect our residents from seeing the coast”, deplored a representative from Jefferson parish before the Governor’s Advisory Commission⁴⁸⁵. “It has separated our community from knowing we are a coastline”. Experience of the coast is associated, here, to a better understanding and perception of environmental problems. As Wolf and Moser (2011) point out, individuals’ understanding of climate change risk is limited and due, in part, to their perceptual filters (media, culture, education) and their detachment from their natural environments. In this regard, hurricane infrastructure can be said to have impacted residents’ engagement on coastal matters in urban centers. Those outside of the levee system are considered more aware of the risks and climate impacts on their livelihoods because proximity to events is linked to increased understanding of lived risk, creating a specific divide between urban and rural dwellers’ perceptions⁴⁸⁶.

SM. Do people feel some sort of danger?

George. Not really, they feel pretty comfortable, unless they go fly a helicopter and see what’s on the other side. Then, they’d probably pack up and leave (*he laughs*). It’s just that a lot of them don’t know how bad the erosion is.⁴⁸⁷

For one local journalist, the emotion of *fear* itself is mitigated by proximity to the coastal crisis.

Those who live way in the south of Terrebonne or way in the south of Lafourche, they kind of see what’s happening, they are kind of fearful. Others more inland, in the Houma area or in Houma itself [*i.e., Terrebonne’s main urban center*], are not so aware with the shores coming up to ‘em. I think they’re understanding that there’s a problem, but I can’t say they’re fearful.⁴⁸⁸

Proximity, therefore, is mediated by structural adaptation. “By building levees and draining these wetlands, the hurricane protection system would provide a false sense of security (or allow an erosion of social memory) and allow more people to move into harm’s way”, corroborated Colten et Giancarlo (2011:12). Having chosen to heavily invest in hardened protection measures, the State of Louisiana has created bias in some residents’ perception of coastal issues. This bias, I argue, is at the heart of their adaptive strategies.

⁴⁸⁵ Governor’s Advisory Commission on Coastal protection, restoration and conservation, Zoom, 21.04.13

⁴⁸⁶ Interviews Victoria, local research, Zoom, 20.11.09; Ethan, local Terrebonne journalist. Telephone, 20.08.30; Anthony, environmental advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.03.21; Charlie, State of Louisiana government, Zoom, 21.06.14

⁴⁸⁷ Interview George, Lafourche Parish council. Telephone, 20.08.19

⁴⁸⁸ Interview Ethan, local Terrebonne journalist. Telephone, 20.08.30

Box 16. - Institutional incapacity as a factor of bias

Beyond elected officials' unwillingness to discredit their infrastructural strategies, inaccurate representations of risk for communities are also a factor of institutional incapacity at the local policy level. Flood plain managers, according to State planner Charlie⁴⁸⁹, rely on maps that account for "historic" flood risk, not accounting for today's projections of rain fall and flooding. This entails that accurate and actual flood risk is not communicated to the public, creating confusion among residents about their flood insurance premiums within the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP). "It's built on assumptions that are not totally to date in terms of what are the actual risks and risk exposure you're having today", explains Charlie. "I would say that with those small communities, they're often not in a position to understand this well". In parishes with limited institutional capacity, this means that flood plain manager using outdated maps also don't have the capacity for broader, more holistic planning, including not issuing building permits for areas that are at present or future risk. While the State is working on increasing awareness of future risks among flood plain manager, Charlie argues the problem extends to those residents who have received building permits based on outdated flood maps and who might not understand they're at risk today. Corroborating these insights on residents' limited understanding of risk in these areas, Hannah explains. "They're just happy to fulfill their American dream of homeownership and they're not really looking at, OK if I have a 30-year mortgage, is the ocean going to be in front of my house in 30 years?" *Agnostic* understandings and experiences of hurricanes have made certain communities "somewhat oblivious" to long-term risks, while land developers have long maintained their influence over lenient planning and regulatory processes in at-risk zones.⁴⁹⁰ These circumstances further exemplify how policy practices and actors "impose risk onto others" and "lobby for particular positions on the acceptability of risk" (Tierney, 1999:236).

2.2. Losing the social memory of resilience

These biased understandings of risk and the false sense of security associated with infrastructural and non-structural adaptation have also fostered the loss of social memory of resilience. Social memory is defined by Colten and Giancarlo (2011:8) as the "long-term reservoir of knowledge about what tactics and procedures worked best to anticipate, reduce, respond to, and recover from a hazard event". The authors make the argument that the gradual dismantle of social memories in hazard mitigation policymaking in Louisiana has contributed to the erosion of resilience among communities and institutions. In fact, their analysis reveals, vulnerability is politically constructed by the absence of incorporation of past experiences in policy, in part due to the private sector's minimization of hurricane risks and flooding and its deep-rooted influence in shaping public safety

⁴⁸⁹ Interview Charlie, State of Louisiana government, Zoom, 21.06.14

⁴⁹⁰ Interviews Hannah, climate policy advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.22; Gregory, community-based organizations coalition. Zoom, 21.03.16

interests. As a result, “the memory of past hurricanes never seemed to penetrate the institutions with the responsibilities to manage urban growth or develop emergency operations plans” (Colten et Giancarlo, 2011:12).

For State planning manager Charlie, the social memory loss of resilience is related to the slow onset character of climate change. “I think the storms have been so spread out that people recover, and they think there’s not going to be another storm for another ten years.”⁴⁹¹ Although she remarks that these beliefs are changing as hurricanes become more frequent, risk proximity mitigated by infrastructures remains a factor of overconfidence. During one South Lafourche levee district meeting, a CPRA representative warns residents within the levee system not to forget how damaging hurricanes can be, articulating the link between memory loss, infrastructures and the North-South and urban-rural divide created by levee system.

Just a few minutes South of the levee system, there’s such a stark difference. We do get really complacent in general, whether we live in this system or out there in Houma. (...) People get complacent, they think it’s a minor storm that comes through. But you just have to go outside the system, go to Leeville or something, and it’s pretty devastating. And people forget very easily, you have to be vigilant, stay on top of the levee system.⁴⁹²

“People forget how bad it was”, chuckles South Lafourche Levee District Director Windell Curole with resignation when discussing the devastation of hurricane Juan in 1985, before the construction of the levee system. “Had we had 2 million dollars in 1980, there’s a chance we would’ve been able to build the levee, and most people wouldn’t have flooded”⁴⁹³. Beyond the bias generated by infrastructural developments, I argue that these skewed beliefs in climate risks also emanate from the hegemonic frame of reference of *agnostic* beliefs about climate change. Climate skeptics “perform a discursive construction of the future and reconstruction of the past” and they “temporarily relocate climate change risks in a distant future by presenting them as a non-immediate threat, as not part of our present and not part of our foreseeable future” (Vulpe, 2020: 264). This serves to promote the idea of a continuous and stable climate that is hospitable to human life. The normalization of climate events, therefore, in combination with local politicians’

⁴⁹¹ Interview Charlie, State of Louisiana government, Zoom, 21.06.14

⁴⁹² South Lafourche levee district meeting public meeting, Galliano, 20.11.09

⁴⁹³ Ibid.

discourses on the efficiency of engineering to ensure the permanence of economic activities and life in Southern Louisiana, can effectively reduce people's awareness of long-term changes in climate and coastal issues, and thereby orient their adaptation strategies toward hardened, *in situ* practices such as elevations or levees. This is because "the environmental discourse that constitutes an environmental problem enables and constrains the available policy options and the range of legitimate actors for its resolution" (Feindt and Oels, 2005:169). In fact, as Nathan, a policy advisor for the State of Louisiana government explains, changes in climatic events are yet to be integrated into new understandings of risk and hazard mitigation planning.

The past is always a great indicator of risk. People understand from their parents, friends, community, passing down that communal knowledge about risk, but my concern is looking forward to new risks with climate change for example, as hurricanes are intensifying faster in the Gulf and you have a day to evacuate or prepare versus a few days.⁴⁹⁴

The dismantlement of protective policies for the benefit of urban development and infrastructural adaptation, leading to the "erosion of resilience", are the result of this social memory loss for climatic events (Colten and Giancarlo, 2011:7). This social amnesia manifests among communities as the absence of thinking of adaptation issues outside of hurricane seasons. According to councilmember Michael, "It's not that every day you walk around and worry about it. It's when the threat comes that they start being concerned"⁴⁹⁵. This concurs with my observations of uneven attention given to climatic events at the local level, based on their salience at a certain moment in time. In practice, this may lead local administrations overwhelmed with disaster preparedness and recovery. The Lafourche public works director for example described climate events as "out of sight, out of mind" for most people, asking residents for more proactivity in addressing their drainage issues before events⁴⁹⁶. Social memory, therefore, is an important vector of resilience because it "serves as a reservoir of practices, knowledge, values and worldviews" essential to address ecological issues (Colten, 2019:418; Adger, 2000). Its disruptions by the failure of institutions to incorporate shared histories of social resilience impedes the inclusion of mobility as

⁴⁹⁴ Interview Nathan, State of Louisiana government. Zoom, 21.03.17

⁴⁹⁵ Interview Michael, Plaquemines Parish council. Telephone, 21.07.27

⁴⁹⁶ Lafourche Parish council meeting, Mathews, 21.04.13

a valuable adaptation strategy, historically used by communities along the Gulf of Mexico (Colten, 2015).

2.3. Striving for permanence

“With the work CPRA is doing, we have a real shot. As long as we get temporary protection from those levees, we have a real shot for Lafitte’s permanence”⁴⁹⁷. Lafitte Mayor Kerner’s words of hope for the future of this sinking small town situated along the bayou, between Plaquemines and Lafourche Parishes, illustrate a widespread belief among political leaders and community members across the coast: infrastructure will ensure the permanence of life in Southern Louisiana. This perspective is molded by the strong desire to remain along the coast, as well as by risk perceptions of the short to long-term future, themselves conditioned by beliefs about the causes of the issue at hand. As I have demonstrated in Chapter 5, the focus of policies on land loss as the result of Mississippi leveeing and the depoliticization of “natural” disasters (i.e., hurricanes) alters beliefs about personal risk and the need for future adaptation. It encourages judgmental discounting, the act of undervaluing present and future risks of climate change (Gifford, 2011). Such discounting reduces the willingness to engage in climate action. Studies have shown a direct link between belief in climate change and partisan affiliation in the US, and interpretations of projected future risk to neighborhood and community. Those who believe climate change is responsible for flooding – mainly Democrats – also tend to perceive larger flood risks in the future (Albright and Crow 2019; Bruine de Bruin et al., 2014). These findings are significant because politicized belief about climate change and agnostic representations of vulnerability (identified in Chapter 5) subsequently affect how an individual may conceive of their long-term exposure to risk, and thus, may influence their adaptation strategies.

As Durnova et al. (2013:3) remind us, “discourse is first and foremost the means by which actors perceive the world, and consequently functions as a way to transform it”. The *permanence master discourse* fulfills this function in governance by provide a frame of reference for policymaking on climate risks. Whether at the parish or State level, I have observed a strong underlying desire to prolong life on the coast, expressed in different discursive contexts of policymaking to legitimize

⁴⁹⁷ Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) board meeting, Baton Rouge, 21.11.17

and rationalize infrastructural adaptation strategies. During one CPRA board meeting for example, Terrebonne Parish president Gordon Dove praises their efforts aimed at guaranteeing the eternal longevity of his parish. He exclaims, “Terrebonne is protected today with the numerous coastal restoration programs that we have. We were able to get Louisiana in the shape that will *forever protect* the people of Louisiana and Terrebonne Parish”⁴⁹⁸. Drawing on an *agnostic* interpretation of adaptation and ignoring the increase in climate events and the continuing decline of coastal conditions, the reference to desired *permanence* suggests a direct correlation between infrastructural policies and eternal protection. With infrastructures painted as fixed for the long term, it conveys the idea of the everlasting effect of structural adaptation and assumes the unchanging nature of environmental and climatic conditions in the future. Infrastructures, in this sense, are deemed essential for the long-term immobility of communities, and immobility is considered a desired goal of policy.

This *permanence* master discourse is widespread at various levels of governance but is especially prominent among local officials. “I hope this community, this parish, survives long term”, wishes Brian, a parish director of coastal restoration, placing all hopes in their engineering efforts to restore ecological “lines of defense”⁴⁹⁹. Despite displaying uncertainty in Louisiana’s future, he expresses confidence in their ability to face ecological and climatic distress.

There’s a lot of question marks for the future, but in the meantime, we got a job to do here over the next three years or so (i.e., *the end of his mandate as Director*), to adapt, to maintain our resilience, survive hurricanes, and we’ve done a pretty good job at that so far. I think because we have people who are dedicated to resiliency, to adaptation, *we’re going to make it*.

The notion of a long-term and sustainable future is also implicit in the way Lafourche Parish has designed its resiliency plan (G10). It starts by noting: “A primary concern of residents is the need to plan for anticipated future land loss and support coastal restoration efforts in order to protect the lifestyle that Lafourche citizens love and value” (p.7). The use of the term “protect” suggests a desire for the continuation of the current way of life, which entails the long-term existence of the

⁴⁹⁸ Terrebonne Parish president Gordon Dove, Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) board meeting, Baton Rouge, 21.03.10

⁴⁹⁹ Interview Brian, parish director of coastal restoration. Telephone, 21.03.05

area. This is further exemplified in the plan's mission statement in which some parish residents express their desire for preserving perennial life down the bayou, far from any considerations for community relocation: "Parish residents expressed a desire to increase the quality of life of all residents and to create a community in which their children and their children's children want to continue to live" (p.10). Relocation, as a result, is absent from that plan, which instead focuses on reducing hazard risk, and enhancing infrastructure and economic development. In discourse, this reinforces, and is reinforced by, the *master discourse of permanence*.

2.4. "Saving" and rebuilding Louisiana

Discourses presenting *permanence* of life as feasible and desirable also reduce, in political imaginaries, the acknowledgment that there is real possibility that there might not exist a long-term future on the coast – by the State's CPRA Chairman's own rare admission to the potential need for large-scale relocations in the event of unfruitful restoration efforts⁵⁰⁰⁵⁰¹. In an emotional exchange after Hurricane Ida, Mayor Camardelle of the small town of Grand Isle along the Gulf of Mexico, pleads for rock lines along the shore to reduce storm surge, and expresses his fatigue of asking politicians for help⁵⁰². "We're disappearing every day. Now is the time to wake up America, it's time to save the whole coast.", he cries out, mobilizing the *permanence master discourse* through terms like "saving". His voice is breaking and trembling, and he is on the verge of tears. "Grand Isle is not going to last. It's worth saving. I'm going back to Grand Isle (*he starts to cry*)." CPRA's Chairman Chip Kline retorts, "We're going to save Grand Isle with you.", promising that the State agency and the US Corps of Engineers would come up with a plan.

As Stone (2012:227) explains, "People choose causal stories not only to shift the blame but also to cast themselves as the most capable fixers." In this case, the causal story about environmental

⁵⁰⁰ This exemplifies the sometimes-contradictory positions of the State's leading environmental policy actor on environmental vulnerability and adaptation. As I have argued noted, the CPRA employs different arguments to advance their political objectives. It tends to change depending on the type of project and audience to which they are appealing (defending the Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion to address climate and environmental vulnerability versus passing their yearly plan through a Republican Senate, for example).

⁵⁰¹ Chairman Chip Kline during the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) board meeting of 21.06.16 in Belle Chasse (Plaquemines), arguing that the coast would only have twenty to thirty years left if the Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion project doesn't work.

⁵⁰² Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) board meeting, Baton Rouge, 21.11.17

vulnerability emanating from depoliticized subsidence and land loss – an *inadvertent* cause – places the CPRA’s restoration and infrastructural policies, funded by oil and gas activities⁵⁰³, as the only solution to this emotionally charged issue. For Lafitte Mayor Kerner, the need to sustain life in these most vulnerable areas is evident. “We’re not going to keep retreating, because if we keep retreating, all you’re doing is putting the next community at risk. I think Lafitte, Grand Isle and the communities that are still there are worth saving.” Mobility, therefore, is an undesirable outcome of vulnerability. For policymakers, it is a problem to be solved through infrastructure and engineering solutions.

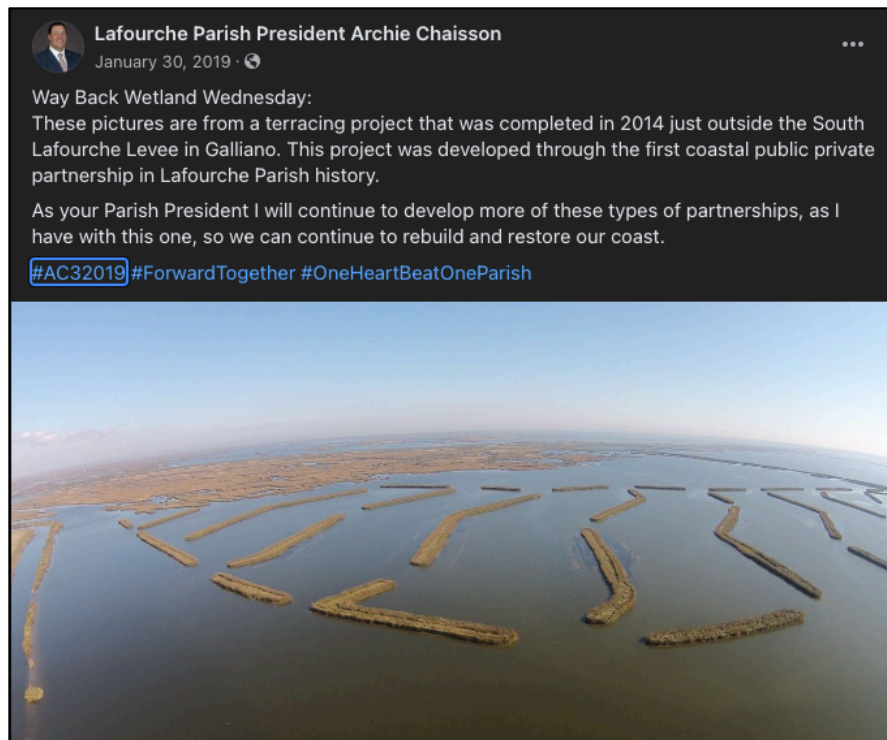


Photo 14. - Lafourche Parish President Archie Chaisson praising restoration projects

This Facebook post by Lafourche Parish President Archie Chaisson highlights the desire to “rebuild” and “restore” the coast through public-private partnerships for coastal restoration (2019).

This linguistic field, foundational to the *permanence master discourse*, is regularly mobilized by state actors to associate their infrastructural policies to the perpetuation of coastal life. In one

⁵⁰³ The large majority of CPRA’s activities and the Coastal Master Plan are funded by the money received from the Deepwater horizon spill settlement, as well as royalties from the oil and gas industries’ activities through the federal Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act (GOMESA). See [Chapter 4](#).

particularly tense Plaquemines Parish council meeting during which Chairman Kline faced off with aggrieved fishermen on the issue of the Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion, he mobilizes the discourse of *permanence* to defend the restoration project and create a causal story around subsidence. “The science shows that this is the only sustainable way to save (*people start shouting behind him*). It is the only sustainable way to save your parish (*they continue shouting, a security guard comes to calm them down so Chairman Kline can continue*). I’m going to do everything I can to do this project because I believe it’s the only way to save your parish”.⁵⁰⁴ Repeatedly emphasizing the possibility of “saving” Louisiana, policy actors convey the idea that the relocation of coastal residents is not part of the political toolbox. It encourages, once more, the feasibility and desirability of a long-term future on the coast.

The idea of persistence is also mobilized in the repeated desire to rebuild after hurricanes. Recovery is premised on “coming home” and rebuilding “bigger and brighter”⁵⁰⁵ after hurricanes. FEMA, the Federal emergency management agency, implements disaster policy in the United States under the Stafford Act of 1988. The objective of the agency is to reduce the loss of life and property by mitigating the effects of disasters and aiding in the preparedness, response, and recovery of communities. Recovery is defined in the Act as “rebuilding communities so individuals, businesses, and governments can function on their own, return to normal life, and protect against future hazards” (L5:99). The inherent logic of the nation’s principal policy mechanism for disaster reduction is therefore premised on the *permanence* of life in vulnerable areas, regardless of their long-term inhabitability. As Elizabeth Marino remarks in her ethnography on community adaptation in Shishmaref, Alaska, “Current US policy on disasters makes an organized relocation problematic at best and impossible at worst” (2015:75). Echoing the Louisianan context, the author finds that climate movement is largely hampered by the inadequate institutional fabric of adaptation policy in the country.

This is because relocation is considered as a short-term response to a critical hazard. During Hurricane Ida in 2021, this policy focus on rebuilding is made clear at the local level as the public

⁵⁰⁴ Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Belle Chasse, 21.04.08

⁵⁰⁵ Plaquemines Parish government press conference on Hurricane Ida, Facebook Live, 21.09.05

is reassured in the government’s desire for everyone to return home. “We love you, we want you to come back, we wanna see your pretty face. But we want to make it safe. That’s our job here, to make a safe community so we can build big and brighter.”⁵⁰⁶ There is no perspective in which residents of Plaquemines or Lafourche, even those in more vulnerable areas, should leave permanently, and the future is envisioned in long-term reconstruction.

The hope and resiliency we have here in Lafourche Parish, we know that God will protect us and continue to rebuild our community. And we are going to rebuild it back, bigger and better than ever.⁵⁰⁷



Photo 15. - Damage from Hurricane Ida in Grand Isle

Source: Sarah Munoz (2022)

This paradox, where increased climate risk is recognized alongside the determination to stay, may serve as a political discourse crafted to reassure the public during challenging times. It aligns with political practices focused on adaptation, recovery, and long-term immobility. In Terrebonne too, a paradox unfolds in a council conversation about the administration’s inability to handle flooding from the rain event. After blaming the National Flood Insurance Program “killing our

⁵⁰⁶ Plaquemines Parish government press conference on Hurricane Ida, Facebook Live, 21.09.05

⁵⁰⁷ Lafourche Parish president Archie Chaisson on his hopes for the future of Lafourche Parish after the devastation of Hurricane Ida. Lafourche Parish government press conference for Hurricane Ida, Facebook Live, 21.09.02

communities” and forcing relocations despite home elevations, policymakers ultimately reverted to “business as usual” discussions on recreation modernization for the parish, indicating their commitment to long-term immobility⁵⁰⁸.



Photo 16. - Houses damaged by Hurricane Ida, Grand Isle

Source: Sarah Munoz (2022)

3. “Raising homes, raising hopes”: the maladaptive push for elevations

As Gotham (2016b) remarks, risk-reduction measures are not simply imposed onto a passive public by policy actors and institutions in Louisiana. Instead, my research corroborates, the desire to remain in these areas has also exerted bottom-up pressure for protective infrastructure at the expense of relocation plans, reinforced by the political promise for *permanence*. At the collective level, this is evidenced by the wide embrace of elevations as *in situ* adaptation. Encouraged by the State and local governments, this strategy is embodied in the “Raising homes, raising hopes” (G12) motto of the Coastal Master Plan, indicative of the general political drive for accommodation policies rather than retreat. In this section, I demonstrate how elevations, the most prevalent

⁵⁰⁸ Terrebonne Parish council meeting, Houma, 21.03.24

nonstructural strategy in Southern Louisiana, are a tool for both voluntary and involuntary immobility and reinforce *agnostic* beliefs about risk.

3.1. Elevated living: a stilted geography

“Elevation is the salvation to inundation. Without flood protection, nothing else matters when you live in a subsiding delta”⁵⁰⁹. Everyone in the room chuckled as South Lafourche Levee District Executive Director Windell Curole repeated his motto during his presentation before the CPRA board. After Hurricane Ida (2021), Plaquemines Parish President Lepine sent a letter to the Louisianan congressional delegation on “the importance of finishing that levee reach, elevation of homes, anything that we can keep our residents safe”⁵¹⁰, illustrating the government’s focus on these accommodation strategies. This approach has been historically favored because it preserves Southeast Louisianans’ strong attachments to the land and their ways of life. It allows them to maintain a connection to the land and its cultural elements, fostering reluctance for relocation northward, even if it’s “eventually going to happen”⁵¹¹.

I think most people, if you give them money, their choice would be to raise their house very high and stay until something really, really, terrible happens. Nobody’s gonna move until they have to.⁵¹²

This is their way of life, and they don’t want to give it up. But I feel like they’re not gonna have a choice before long. If you drive down the road, whether on the east bank or the west bank [of Plaquemines Parish], you’ll see a lot of houses that are up on concrete stilts. More of them are like mobile homes, single wide or double wide trailers up on cinder blocks stilts twenty feet in the air. That’s for when the next Katrina washes through, it won’t wash their home away, it’ll just run underneath them hopefully.⁵¹³

It’s kind of shocking if you drive down Plaquemines, down the bottom of the Bird’s foot. All the houses are raised way up high, like trailer houses are up on sixteen-foot footers. I think that’s a result of people also being connected to their land, and I don’t necessarily mean land that they own. I mean, culturally, a place that is important to them, that was important to their family.⁵¹⁴

⁵⁰⁹ Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) board meeting, Thibodaux, 21.10.20

⁵¹⁰ Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Pointe-a-la-Hache, 21.09.23

⁵¹¹ Interview Stephanie, renewable energy advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.08

⁵¹² Interview Natalie, local researcher. Zoom, 20.08.17

⁵¹³ Interview Christopher, local journalist. Telephone, 20.08.20

⁵¹⁴ Interview Stephanie, renewable energy advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.08

In Plaquemines, one resident asked the parish council for help to elevate her home, further illustrating the bottom-up push for infrastructural adaptation⁵¹⁵. This emanates from the combination of a near-absence of state assistance in individual adaptation and increasing financial pressure of the Federal emergency management agency (FEMA) elevation requirements. She argued for help “to do what they are asking us to do”, in reference to governments’ overwhelming push for individual elevations as a means of adapting⁵¹⁶. “Otherwise”, she continues, “this is going to be just a strip of dirt with nothing but a handful of meth-heads on it, if we don’t get help raising our homes.” Explaining that she wants to build a brick home instead of another trailer, she deplores, “But we can’t rebuild this parish in any way shape or form without those grants”. When conflicted about one’s choice to remain in risky areas, elevations, whether government-subsidized or not, can thus become a tool to ensure one’s immobility against relocation.

I do know people who have moved to West Texas, there are other who have moved. I want you to know we are real people; we have a home. One of my neighbors is going to have her home elevated instead of moving.⁵¹⁷

Similarly in Terrebonne, residents struggle between the constraints of elevations and forced movement. Even after having moved up the twenty miles from Dulac to Dularge thinking that she was going to be “out of the water”, one resident explains she was still unable to afford the \$8,000 in yearly flood insurance required for her regularly flooded home.

When I first moved to Hidalgo, I had flood insurance on my house. But insurance told me that because [flooding] was an “existing thing”, and it kept on going, because my house had been flooded before I bought it... “*They dropped you?*” asks councilmember Derik Guidry. “Yes” she replies.⁵¹⁸

“Y’all either can buy me out, or help me”, she demanded the council. Having already been approached by the government about a buyout, the low evaluation of her home had prevented her from accepting. “What can I buy for \$49,000?”, she asked, rhetorically. While seemingly forced

⁵¹⁵ Resident, Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Belle Chasse, 21.10.28

⁵¹⁶ In the 21.10.28 Plaquemines Parish council meeting for example, during which the parish’s floodplain manager encouraged elevations. “The cost to elevate and properly mitigate a structure pays for itself after the next flood event! It also allows you to get right back to your life without sustaining substantial damage again”, he argued, with support from councilmembers.

⁵¹⁷ Resident public comment, Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) board meeting, Lake Charles, 21.07.21

⁵¹⁸ Terrebonne Parish council meeting, Houma, 21.03.24

to remain in a vulnerable area with no insurance protection, her cry for help ended with one councilmember promising the administration find funding for home elevations. “I really don’t want to move sir. I love Dularge”, she pleaded. As we shall see in the next chapter, these attachments to the land certainly play a role in the resistance to change and movement among some communities (Adams, 2016; Simms, 2017). For Justin, an environmental lawyer representing the Indigenous Pointe-au-Chien community in Terrebonne and Lafourche, elevations are a tool utilized for voluntary immobility and a decision made for cultural preservation. He explains,

Pointe-au-Chien, they've decided not to leave. It's where they are literally culturally connected. It's their homeland. They've decided not to leave. So, what they've done is they've raised their homes about 10, 14 feet in the air. Even though that there's some levee protection to save them.⁵¹⁹

Elevations have long been part of the adaptation toolbox in Louisiana (Colten, 2019; 2016). In the 1950s however, American urbanization trends popularized the slab-on-grade development in urban and suburban areas, augmenting vulnerabilities to flooding (Dubinin et al., 2017). Today, elevations are the most encouraged method of adaptation because they directly reduce risk, insurance premiums, and increase the viability of historically flooded areas. Clarence Brock, a resident of the East Bank in Plaquemines, one of the more impoverished areas of the parish, explains how elevations have become the principal adaptation strategy after Hurricane Katrina destroyed the majority of the area and led to a steep decline in population for the parish (G21).

In Katrina, on the East Bank, from Pointe à la Hache to Phoenix, we lost everything. Every home was destroyed. And it was done by water. That’s why they’re doing the elevation thing.⁵²⁰

In the small town of Grand Isle, an inhabited barrier island situated after Port Fourchon in the Gulf of Mexico, Mayor Camardelle noted that home elevations were raised to eight feet after the passage of Hurricane Betsy (1965); to twelve feet after Hurricane Andrew (1992); and finally, to 14 feet after Hurricane Katrina (2005)⁵²¹. Hurricanes have become a marker for adaptation policy

⁵¹⁹ Interview Justin, environmental lawyer. Zoom, 21.03.04

⁵²⁰ Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Belle Chasse, 21.06.10

⁵²¹ Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) board meeting, Baton Rouge, 21.11.17

at the federal and state levels. Driving across all parishes, the multiplicity of elevations doesn't go unnoticed. The further south I go, the higher the stilts (Photos 17, 18, 19).



Photo 17. - Elevated home for sale along the highway near Triumph, Plaquemines Parish
Source: Sarah Munoz (2022)



Photo 18. - Elevated home with a lift on Isle de Jean Charles, Terrebonne Parish

Source: Sarah Munoz (2022)



Photo 19. - Elevated home with a parked boat along highway 23, Plaquemines Parish

Source: Sarah Munoz (2022)

3.2. Flood insurance and the shadow of forced movement

Beyond the willingness to remain in place, elevation has become a requirement to access the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP). “If your home is damaged by more than 50%, FEMA considers it as substantially damaged. If you’re going to renovate or rebuild, you have to bring it up to a new elevation”, explains Scarlett, a former employee of Lafourche Parish⁵²². But with few government subsidies, this strategy has become a very costly necessity for residents. A Terrebonne resident complains to the council,

Every time it rains, we’re on pins and needles. To get on the program [for subsidized elevation], they say we must have flood insurance. We have flood insurance, and they say it’s a two-year waiting list plus. At 4,000 dollars a year, waiting two years, that’s 8,000 dollars and I’m still on the ground.⁵²³

⁵²² Interview Scarlett, former employee of Lafourche Parish government. Thibodaux, 22.03.16

⁵²³ Terrebonne Parish council meeting, Houma, 21.03.24

Local elected officials consider that elevations are necessary in cases of hurricane flooding but believe that the levee system has enabled residents to live without significant risk⁵²⁴. Instead, they believe that it is the ever-increasing NFIP elevation requirements that are posing a threat to Louisianans' ability to live in the region. In essence, this policy is debated and contested as a threat to the collective ability of residents to remain in place.

3.2.1. The federal nudge for relocation

Across all three parishes, the Federal emergency management agency (FEMA), in charge of disaster relief and the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP), has been repeatedly designated as the cause of forced depopulation and mobility for southern areas. They have been accused of trying to get Southern Louisianans to relocate to avoid having to pay for the reconstruction of flooded and hurricane-damaged homes, gradually encouraging retreat over rebuilding (Verchick and Johnson, 2014). In fact, policy director Lauren argues, “If you didn’t get bailed out by FEMA [at every hurricane], then you would probably leave.”⁵²⁵

The objective of NFIP requirements was to force communities to internalize risk and think about the dangers of developing in certain areas. For the first time recently, the flood insurance program has been encouraging Americans to leave flood-prone areas because it is becoming “too expensive to maintain the status quo” (Lustgarten, 2020). But by improving levees to reduce insurance costs, local decisionmakers have decreased public awareness and contributed to a false sense of security (Montz and Tobin, 2008). In fact, this federal policy nudge is intensely resisted among local decisionmakers. For Louisiana Senator Fesi, local governments must actively prevent parish depopulation, especially when linked to FEMA’s rebuilding and elevation requirements. In framing the levee systems solely as a tool to lower insurance rates, and lower insurance as a benefit for low-income residents, he disregards the risks of living in these areas. He perpetuates the idea of flood insurance regulations being the cause of population movement (adding to, as we’ve already heard from Senator Fesi in a previous chapter, the loss of oil and gas jobs in the state).

⁵²⁴ Interview Michael, Plaquemines Parish council. Telephone, 21.07.27

⁵²⁵ Interview Lauren, coastal restoration advocacy group. Telephone, 21.02.23

If we don't help people get back in their houses, and we wait too long and we procrastinate, people are going to leave. It looks like a lot of the rules of FEMA are pushing us to move out and leave our hometown. The most ridiculous thing. If you're repairing more than 50% of what the value of your home is, you gotta follow all kinds of regulations and raise it, then what is our levee system for? We're spending all this money on these levee systems, and it doesn't not to make a difference. We gotta get some common sense.⁵²⁶

As of June 2023, Louisiana and nine other states have filed suit against FEMA over the flood insurance program (Wilson, 2023). They argue that the new flood insurance rates are unaffordable and unsustainable, and according to one interviewee, "it's pricing us out of our homes"⁵²⁷. This political conflict reveals divergent understandings of vulnerability. On the one hand, the federal government is nudging relocation through elevated insurance rates because environmental risks are increasing; and on the other, some residents and the Louisiana government, expressing *agnostic* understandings of vulnerability, are denying the need to relocate. Instead, they are pleading for their desire to remain in place and denouncing increased economic vulnerability caused by federal policy. "The more expensive it will be to insure a house in a flood zone, the more people are going to be forced to move", rationalized Gregory from a non-profit coalition, confirming that insurance, more than anything else, will cause forced relocations⁵²⁸. There thus appears a strong discrepancy between the federal government's objective of removing residents from at-risk areas, and State and local governments' resistance to relocation, instead framing population movements initiated by the federal state as a tragedy. "If you elevate, you save the federal government money. If you are not elevated, it cost them money", summarized Lafitte Mayor Timothy Kerner⁵²⁹.

While the State may have attempted to transform people's understandings of real risk, many observers don't believe those risks are understood. For local engineer John, people's distorted views are akin to that of smokers who downplay their own personal risks. For others, it is the result of outright denial and blissful ignorance comparable to that of living with the threat of nuclear war. In their study of coastal living in Portugal, Costas et al. (2015) show that perception of risk is linked to the public's low understanding of risk, dread, worry and awareness, clashing with scientists' reports on the need for future relocation in their areas. Similarly, Wiegel et al.'s (2021)

⁵²⁶ Louisiana Senator Fesi, Lafourche Parish council meeting, Mathews, 21.10.26

⁵²⁷ Email exchange with Samuel, local journalist. November 2023.

⁵²⁸ Interview Gregory, community-based organizations coalition. Zoom, 21.03.16

⁵²⁹ Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) board meeting, Baton Rouge, 21.11.17

study of voluntary immobility illustrates the possible discordance between experts and local populations in understanding risk and its effect on residents choosing to remain in place. “That’s too horrible to think about, so let’s not”, contended environmental activist Anthony on the prospect of relocation in Louisiana⁵³⁰. Caleb, a former councilmember, even estimates that only 20% of the population truly understands the risks, suggesting misinformation, and ideological and partisan bias to be the cause.

It’s a very risky place to live. Hurricanes are now becoming much more prominent, much stronger, residents are starting to acknowledge that. Some people are not listening to the right radio stations, so they will repeat mindlessly what they’re hearing.⁵³¹

But for local engineer John, people’s distorted perception of risk is mostly linked to insurance. It “starts to distort a lot of decisions”, he deplores. “People think, I only have to build my house so high, or I can build right over that line and I have no risk.” He describes immobility as a “priority list”, a form of cost-benefit analysis made by individuals with their understanding of personal risk, and the benefits and costs of relocating. For him, the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) has failed in its attempt to engage people in recognizing the risks of living in floodplains. Corroborating findings from Montz and Tobin (2008), John remarks, “The whole reason for flood insurance in the NFIP was to get people to own some of their own risk so it would discourage them from doing risky things. Well, it doesn’t! It encourages them to do risky things.” Framing the program as a “distortion of reality”, John’s critique of flood insurance echoes with others. For Andrew, a former project planner for the State of Louisiana, insurance is creating bias in people’s perceptions because it does not reflect the true risks of living along the coast to preserve the value of real estate and remain affordable (Lustgarten, 2020; Javeline, 2014).

If you were to change the program in such a manner that it suddenly rated everybody based on a true understanding of current and future risk, in a place like Louisiana, it would amount to essentially a rapid evaporation of wealth via real estate equity.⁵³²

Levees are considered a risk-reducing measure, notably used to decrease FEMA insurance because administrations have used them to negotiate the federal agency’s flood maps and rates. But the

⁵³⁰ Interview Anthony, climate advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.03.21

⁵³¹ Interview Caleb, ecologist and former councilmember. Empire, 22.02.04

⁵³² Interview Andrew, State of Louisiana government. Zoom, 21.03.08

2021 review of those maps led to a drastic increase in insurance prices, intended by the federal government to more accurately reflect the risks of living in Southern Louisiana, and nudge residents to relocate to higher ground. For John, local officials have maintained this ambiguity in appraisal of risks to maintain favorable public opinion on their infrastructural decisions. But in doing so, they are perpetuating skewed understandings of the risks associated with living with hardened infrastructures, engaging in what the field of critical sociology of risk conceptualizes as state-produced risks (Tierney, 1999).

3.2.2. Local despair, resistance, and the threat of informal migration

As we sit in his pick-up truck driving down the long highway to the Empire marina at the bottom of the parish, local councilmember and lifelong resident of Plaquemines Tony shares his reservations about FEMA’s flood and elevations policies.

TONY: I’ve got a 21-foot levee on both sides of me. If another Katrina comes and floods us, I’m still underwater eight feet. So, what will going up 13 feet [in home elevation] do? From St Bernard to New York, and Jefferson Parish to Mexico, they don’t have levees, and they don’t have to go up.

SM. Why do you think FEMA is imposing such extreme elevation requirements?

TONY. They want us out of here.⁵³³

Openly blaming the CPRA and FEMA for “emptying” the coast” with the new flood risk maps on which NFIP insurance rates are based, one councilmember interviewed has termed the consequences of these flood policies “cultural genocide”⁵³⁴. In Plaquemines, the flood maps are said to “put the nail in the coffin” on the East Bank because “it’s gonna make it very difficult to build a home or put a trailer, you’re going to have 14 or 15 feet in the air”⁵³⁵, essentially becoming “sky islands”⁵³⁶ (see Photos 17, 18, 19, 20). Soaring insurance prices, decreasing oil and gas revenues, and increasing environmental threats are said to be the cause of diminishing populations, dwindling revenues, and expanding flood-prone regions for which insurance rates will continue increasing. Insurance, in this sense, can constitute a ‘tipping point’ for residents in their decision

⁵³³ Interview Tony, Plaquemines councilmember, Empire, 22.02.18

⁵³⁴ Interview Caleb, ecologist and former councilmember. Empire, 22.02.18

⁵³⁵ Councilmember Blink, Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Belle Chasse, 21.01.14

⁵³⁶ Interview Caleb, ecologist and former councilmember. Empire, 22.02.18

to move away (Simms, 2021). The anticipated financial strain of the 2021 rate increase will likely force residents to leave, according to political representatives in the State legislature and across parish councils. During one particularly lengthy and agitated council meeting on the new flood insurance rates, councilmembers and residents alike took to the stand to protest what they perceived to be the impoverishment and forced relocation of residents in the south. In this context, vulnerability is framed not as being environmental, but economic.

We're facing a really daunting task at hand. Some of these people have been literally and figuratively forced to the ends of the earth for a lot of different reasons. There are literacy issues, there are education issues, there's just a whole host of reasons why people are living where they're living. It's not like this is Florida. We're not here for the views, we're here because there's a very acute economic need.

This policy is going to be severely detrimental to Plaquemines Parish. I live in Empire, my house is four feet off the ground, I don't have money to elevate my home. There are tons of unpermitted structures throughout the parish. What do y'all intend to do, knock on people's doors and say hey, you have to bulldoze your house? We're going to force people out of their homes so that the people in Belle Chasse (i.e., *the parish urban center*) and other people who have flood insurance won't lose them".⁵³⁷

"It's not the water that's running people out of the bayous and lower parts of this parish, it's the damn insurance running us out!", exclaimed Councilmember Guidry of Terrebonne⁵³⁸. This perspective further exemplifying the hegemonic *agnostic vulnerability* discourse whereby risk is not envisioned in terms of the threat of increasing climate change. In a fit of frustration, he laments the decline of the Southeast region. "We've got all these communities down these bayous that are dying out, people are moving out." Other elected officials have corroborated these remarks, noting that residents have started moving away from the Gulf shores where insurance prices are higher than in metropolitan areas further north due to the greater risk estimated by FEMA's flood maps⁵³⁹. "The price of flood insurance, that's what's killing our communities", Guidry deplored. "People on the far end of the parish, the young people are not going to stay down there. And the old people, we're going to die out", also affirmed Clarence Brock before the Plaquemines council⁵⁴⁰. "The

⁵³⁷ Councilmember Blink, Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Belle Chasse, 21.10.28

⁵³⁸ Terrebonne Parish council meeting, Houma, 21.03.23

⁵³⁹ Interviews with George, Lafourche council, telephone, 20.08.19; Wesley, levee district manager. Galliano, 22.02.09; and Vincent, flood protection advocacy organization, 21.08.03 by telephone, and 22.02.09 in Galliano; Gregory, community-based organizations coalition. Zoom, 21.03.16

⁵⁴⁰ Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Belle Chasse, 21.06.10

southern eastern side of the parish is going to be emptied out, we're going to have a run-on real estate, the tax base is going to be severely eroded", further argued councilmember Blink⁵⁴¹, fearing for the parish's capacity to ensure public services for its population.

Caleb, Tony and I continue to discuss life along the coast as we're driving down to the Empire marina, expressing fear for what they feel will be a bleak future for the parish⁵⁴². I ask what they think will happen to Plaquemines. Tony remarks that the parish will die out, while Caleb, sitting next to me, mimics being underwater.

SM. Why do you think that people stay?

TONY. It's home. Before I became councilman, you would have never heard this out of our mouths. But I'm running for reelection. If I win, after those four years, I'm gone. If I don't get reelected, I might be gone sooner.

SM. Why would you want to go?

TONY. The cost of living. If I retire right now, I can't afford insurance and all of that here.

SM. What does the long term look like for Plaquemines?

TONY. It don't look good.

CALEB. A lot of shallow, open water. Couple of little ridges here and there.

TONY. I live on the same property my family came to live on in the 1700s. Bad thing is, I'll be the last one.

"With regret", described Gramling and Hagelman (2005:132), "[coastal residents] are watching their children and grandchildren move "up the bayou" and out of contact with the ecosystem." This process of informal migration, defined by Simms (2021), occurs over several generations as a result of environmental stressors, and results in the loss of community and sense of place. It seems, therefore, that the threat of depopulation and forced relocation is not conceived in terms of environmental vulnerability nor politicized as a consequence of climate change, but rather as a problem of federal insurance policy that will trigger the loss of a heritage and community. The assumption made across the board is that without rising insurance rates, residents would be able

⁵⁴¹ Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Belle Chasse, 21.10.28

⁵⁴² Interviews Caleb and Tony, Empire, 22.02.18

to remain in place through voluntary elevations and government-funded flood protection infrastructure. This situation enables policymakers to legitimize immobility policies, such as an exclusive focus on infrastructure, as well as fossil fuel preservation to ensure its funding. Disregarding their inherent climatic and environmental vulnerability, this perspective further depoliticizes and un-problematizes the issues of coastal land loss, increasing disasters and slow onset climate change. Infrastructures of protection, here, are utilized as a way of reducing insurance costs and are therefore directly correlated to the prevention of mobility.



Photo 20. - A stilted home for sale, damaged by Hurricane Ida, Plaquemines Parish

This elevated home sits behind the hurricane protection levee and sea wall (visible in the background). Both infrastructures are designed to protect this area from the hurricanes coming in from the Gulf of Mexico. Source: Sarah Munoz (2022).

3.3. Elevations as maladaptation

Home elevations are a tool used collectively to stay in place and promoted in policy and discourse at all levels of governance. But they also render residents more vulnerable to wind, constituting a physical barrier for an aging population in the long term. Scarlett explains how elevations are a deciding factor for mobility.

In the projects I was involved with in Plaquemines Parish after hurricane Isaac [2012], the government said that some of them had to build their elevated house 18 or 19 feet up. That's really high. If somebody is in their fifties, and they're going to be in there another twenty years, that's a real strong thought-process for them. Do they stay, or do they move? Because who at 70 is going to want to climb steps to get to that high of a house?⁵⁴³

Increasingly maladaptive, elevations are expensive, impractical for older individuals, and have become a necessary requirement to access flood insurance. Without it, residents are left to bear the costs of flood and hurricane damage, hindering their ability to rebuilt after disasters. Soaring costs have further impoverished residents, exacerbating socioeconomic inequalities and deepening disparities in adaptive capacities among social groups. Elevations and insurance are a determinant factor of community resilience, but rising insurance premiums due to accelerating climate risks and poor economic conditions are thwarting communities' ability to engage in these market-based mechanisms of adaptation. In Terrebonne Parish for example, it is estimated that 70 to 80% of coastal homeowners don't have flood insurance (Simms, 2021). "When you have an insured community, they bounce back from a disaster. When it's uninsured, they don't", deplores levee district manager Wesley⁵⁴⁴. The inability of residents to afford rising costs of flood insurance thus threatens their individual and collective resilience through the threat of forced relocation and reduced public services (Gotham, 2016b). Trapped by previous policies that enticed construction in risky zones at low-cost, communities are now being asked to pay insurance according to their actual flood risk, further deepening their economic capacity for alternative adaptation strategies, including mobility.

Flood risk 2.0 is just being implemented. So as not to shock people, the cost of flood insurance can only increase by 18% per year. But for some people, that's going to happen five or six times. It's going to increase 18% each year, five or six years in a row, until the flood insurance cost reflects the *actual* risk. When these people's homes are destroyed, they're probably not going to have flood insurance, and as the cost increases, that's money that they can't put aside for elevations. There's not a lot of grant funding available for elevation. It's forcing people off the coast....⁵⁴⁵

It costs 40,000\$ for a mobile home, and an elevation is going to cost 170,000\$. The average home on the east bank is 17 feet high. We can't afford that. We cannot afford that. We can't afford our flood insurance because we can't afford to elevate our homes. The ones who can afford to [elevate] won't be able to use their homes. Going up steps 17, 18 feet up high...

⁵⁴³ Interview Scarlett, former employee of Lafourche Parish government. Thibodaux, 22.03.16

⁵⁴⁴ Interview Wesley, levee district manager. Galliano, 22.02.09

⁵⁴⁵ Interview Caleb, ecologist and former councilmember. Empire, 22.02.18

The average person is over 60 years old; they can't do it. If we do get our home elevate, how are we going to do any maintenance to our home?⁵⁴⁶

They'll say, "must either be moved or elevated". They can't even rebuild their homes. I feel really bad for the old people. What are the old people going to do? You've lived in a house most of your life, and all of the sudden, some faceless bureaucrat is telling you, you can't live here anymore?⁵⁴⁷

It's a matter of time that we're gonna get flooded again. If we do, we can't replace our homes because we won't be able to get our houses elevated. And if we do get elevated, we won't be able to use them.⁵⁴⁸



Photo 21. - A resident of Plaquemines Parish addressing the council

Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Belle Chasse, 21.06.10. Source: Sarah Munoz

“The elevations are hurting us”, Plaquemines resident Clarence Brock deplored, standing at the podium before the council⁵⁴⁹. After his address, another resident takes the stand to denounce how her inability to meet their flood insurance criteria has exacerbated her physical, emotional, and

⁵⁴⁶ Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Belle Chasse, 21.06.10

⁵⁴⁷ Interview Caleb, ecologist and former councilmember. Empire, 22.02.18

⁵⁴⁸ Resident, Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Belle Chasse, 21.06.10

⁵⁴⁹ Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Belle Chasse, 21.06.10

financial vulnerability. Feeling neglected by the federal government and deploring the absence of funding mechanisms for recovery, she fears having to reside in a hurricane-devastated trailer home.

Please don't rely on FEMA giving someone like me who needs \$80,000 to elevate a home. FEMA ain't coming. They're not helping people like me down at the lower end of the parish. I got nothing. Hobbo [*i.e.*, *Councilmember Cognevich's nickname*] was at my place yesterday with the fire department trying to get a tarp for a place that shouldn't be standing. I'm going to try to live in it because I can't get a permit, because I can't raise it, because I can't afford it.⁵⁵⁰

These testimonies reveal that elevations as policy can be considered both adaptive and maladaptive. Maladaptation is defined as an “action taken ostensibly to avoid or reduce vulnerability to climate change that impacts adversely on, or increases the vulnerability of other systems, sectors or social groups” (Barnett and O’Neill, 2010:211). Mitigation and adaptation practices and discourses can generate risk and produce “new injuries”, including undermining traditional strategies, alienating communities, or undermining local livelihoods (Marino and Ribot, 2012:322). Maladaptation is thus related to poor planning, failing to anticipate consequences or the overemphasizing of short-term outcomes (IPCC, 2014). Reducing incentives to adapt and limiting the choices made available are considered maladaptive practices. This includes infrastructural developments that commit capital and institutions to path dependent trajectories, decreasing their flexibility to respond to changing economic, social or climatic conditions and eventually creating high adaptation costs and vulnerabilities. It corresponds to what Sovacool et al. (2015) define as entrenchment maladaptation, by which inequalities and disempowerment of vulnerable groups are ultimately aggravated by adaptation projects. These consequences are embodied in the “levee effect” – whereby levee construction and insurance practices encourage people to underestimate their risks and build homes in risky areas (Javeline, 2014; Montz and Tobin, 2008).

In the case of Southern Louisiana, maladaptation transpires from institutional dependence on declining oil and gas revenues, failure to reduce this dependence, and commitment to exclusive infrastructural adaptation which has decreased the adaptive opportunities and capacities of communities and governments. The general disregard for social planning, and the structure of

⁵⁵⁰ Resident, Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Belle Chasse, 21.10.28

policies made to individualize home elevations for flood insurance have further entrenched this maladaptation. It is simultaneously forcing residents to elevate, reducing alternative adaptive options, and trapping them in place through financial commitment, as well as increasing others' socioeconomic vulnerability through the loss of insurance and elevation. These policies are a “shell game meant to keep growth going even when other obvious signs and scientific research suggest that it should stop” (Lustgarten, 2020).

4. Conclusions

In discussing the upcoming migratory and adaptive challenges facing the United States, Lustgarten (2020) calls attention to the “cost of resisting the new climate reality”, meaning the acknowledgment that it may soon become unaffordable and impractical to invest in defensive infrastructures. In this chapter, I have approached the making of immobility at the *macro* and *meso* levels of governance by providing an outlook on the structural policies that are fashioning and facilitating collective non-movement.

I have argued that infrastructural policies, particularly the levee system and elevations, are directly linked to the problem of (im)mobility. Levees are reducing the cost of insurance and enabling some residents to remain by increasing their sense of security, while nonstructural adaptation such as elevations have contributed to “trapping” others. Government encouragements for homes elevations can reduce their financial capacity for alternative adaptation strategies such as relocation. When they are unable to afford elevations, they may become “trapped” in homes impossible to insure or difficult to sell, making their exposure and recovery from extreme weather events more arduous. In terms of policy, local and State governments are actively trying to prevent depopulation and even drive the repopulation of coastal areas to maintain cultural, industrial, and fiscal activities. In that regard, retreat is framed as a negative outcome and a failure to adapt. These practices, I argue, are inscribed within the *permanence master discourse* because policymakers and residents actively seek immobility through infrastructural practices. I conceptualize this type of adaptation governance as *managed immobility*, meaning the *institutionalization* of immobility. Non-movement is the result of government planning for the preservation of societal and economic structures in place and the protection of extensive investments.

Nonetheless, surveys have shown that a quarter of coastal residents have thought about moving from their current home (G8), and many researchers and stakeholders believe in the inevitability of relocation once certain environmental thresholds are reached (Hemmerling et al., 2020; Verchick and Johnson, 2014; Gotham, 2016b; Dalbom et al., 2014; Bardsley and Hugo, 2010). “Unless Jesus comes back and stops the ocean, the information we have on sea-level rise is so compelling that I’m convinced that people are either going to relocate or drown. It’s that simple”, affirmed lifelong environmental activist Daniel⁵⁵¹. In discussing what he believes will happen in the future, environmental lawyer Justin recounts a discussion he had with the chief of the Pointe-au-Chien Indigenous community. “Maybe Chief Albert is right, maybe the best strategy is to move”, he wonders. “Maybe his instinct is right. If we want to preserve this, we need to move the entire community. And we need to move North again. Maybe that's how they will survive, but it won't be the same. What were the graveyards of their ancestors will be underwater and will be part of the sea at that point. That's what I fear.”, he concludes, tearfully.

Yet, the policy vacuum around mobility has resulted in market-based mechanisms of resilience and the individualization of resilience, whether through migration “as adaptation” or micro level adaptive behaviors. It embodies what Felli and Castree (2012:1) term as the neoliberalization of adaptation. In other words, dismissing the need for political and economic transformations and viewing adaptation as an individual response to external shocks produces “‘adaptable’ human subjects”. In doing so, the state relinquishes institutional responsibility and seeks to produce “autonomous” civil societies, anchoring adaptation in individual actions and market mechanisms. Inscribed within the Dominant Social Paradigm, these adaptive practices are designed to perpetuate a certain status quo – preserving industries, economies and Louisiana as it is (Burge et al., 2020). The state’s techno-optimism thus represents a powerful mechanism of inaction because it “can be an ideological force that may hinder” from engaging in adaptation “even when they perceive that risks associated with climate change are serious” (Gardezi and Arbuckle, 2020:84; Gifford, 2011).

⁵⁵¹ Interview Daniel, biologist and lifelong environmental activist. Telephone, 21.03.03

Chapter 7. Delta bonds: land attachments and the desire for freedom

In some way, all of us native to South Louisiana have a connection to the wetlands, either through work or play or some link to a past heritage. Some say that it is in the blood.

Theriot (2014: vii)

“Southeastern Louisiana is a landscape replete with distinctive, locally based customs, cultures, people, and history, and it would be a tragedy to stand aside and lose it”, argued Jessica Simms (2017:408) in her ethnographic work on attachments to place. Sense of belonging and the emotional connection to land have been identified as significant deterrents to mobility in the context of climate change, because place binds people to their identities, livelihoods, and histories (Seebauer and Winkler, 2020; Gramling and Hagelman, 2005; Farbotko and McMichael, 2019). In this final chapter, I demonstrate how land attachments in Southeast Louisiana and the individualization of resilience, reflective of the state’s adaptation policy approach, have been conducive to concomitant voluntary, forced and acquiescent immobilities. Ultimately, I argue, it is the desire for *permanence* – of community and identity – that informs interpretations and practices of adaptation and fosters consent for the institutionalization of immobility among some communities.

I have previously shown that structural policies of accommodation and protection against climate risk have dominated adaptation in Southern Louisiana. Encouraging elevations and heavily investing in hurricane protection infrastructures has facilitated collective immobility by discouraging or impeding relocation. Ideationally, partisan beliefs in climate change have shaped Louisianans’ interpretations of long-term risk and adaptation needs. In this chapter, I focus on the cultural aspects of immobility practices at micro and meso levels. I argue that the state’s “trapping” policies have individualized resilience and increased some communities’ reluctance⁵⁵² to move by bolstering cultural attachments to land, mistrust in governance and feeding into political culture.

⁵⁵² While I venture into a micro-level analysis in this chapter, I do not claim that these interviews and observations are representative of intra-group dynamics and community-wide perspectives. Instead, I draw on these individual discourses to highlight some non-elite perspectives on adaptation and (im)mobility.

1. Seeking to stay: the importance of land attachments

A survey conducted by the Center for Planning Excellence (2017) revealed that 66% of respondents would contemplate relocating if offered financial compensation by the state, citing insufficient funding as a major obstacle to movement. Yet, as this fieldwork and other research has shown, retreat remains largely resisted in the region in part due to attachments to place and reluctance to engage in government-led adaptation schemes. Local researcher Benjamin further describes this chosen immobility as the rejection of any government-imposed movement⁵⁵³. “There are a lot of people who were quite vocal and adamant that they will not move”, he remarks, “that they don’t want to move, they will not be moved, and that the government can’t move them”. For environmental activist Daniel, this reluctance to mobility is “mental inertia”. He explains, “The people don’t want to be told you’re living where you ought not to be living. They just don’t want to be living something like that, because it insults not only them, but their ancestors.”⁵⁵⁴ In this section, I investigate the micro-level resistance to movement observed among some residents and communities, and situate it within its cultural and social context.

1.1. The problem of buyouts and the reluctance to move

In Myrtle Grove, a small community situated outside of the hurricane protection levee system in Plaquemines Parish, I am meeting Kelly and Fred, a couple of retirees⁵⁵⁵. Their house is raised on stilts – as is the entire neighborhood – and it overlooks the open water of the Gulf of Mexico. Fred is excited to show me the small lift that he has built inside the house, making it easier for them to access the main floor. Their neighbor Graham arrives, and we take place around the kitchen table where two of Kelly’s polydactyl cats are lounging around – the same as Ernest Hemingway’s, she proudly tells me.

Myrtle Grove is going to be experiencing an accelerated rate of sea-level rise due to the State’s Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion project, which aims to reduce coastal land loss by diverting the Mississippi River into Plaquemines’ coast. “They’re talking about raising bulkheads”, explains

⁵⁵³ Interview Benjamin, local researcher. Zoom, 20.08.28

⁵⁵⁴ Interview Daniel, biologist and lifelong environmental activist. Telephone, 21.03.03

⁵⁵⁵ Interview Fred, Kelly and Graham, retirees. Myrtle Grove, 22.03.05

Graham. The little barriers on the edge of the land around the neighborhood are keeping the water from overtopping the streets, but they've already had to be raised in the past. The increased flood risk from the CPRA's project will force residents to tear down their boathouses and to raise the seawalls to further barricade the subdivision. "Well, I asked them, you can raise it to five feet, but what happens the first time we get a five-and-a-half-foot tidal surge, and this entire subdivision is flooded, how you going to get it out?", Graham continues, exasperated. With little flood mitigation planning in place for these communities, buyouts have been discussed, to the great dismay of residents. "I'm a native Louisianan. I would only move if I had to get away from Louisiana", explains Kelly. She takes out photos of the flooding during Hurricane Ida six months earlier, the whole neighborhood was underwater for two weeks. It took another three for the water to subside. Kelly has never evacuated in her life, and she doesn't plan on leaving now. Will they leave if they must? Their neighbor Graham remarks that he doesn't want to retreat either, feeling happy where he is, while her husband Fred jokes, "I guess I will go further south, I'll go the other way. Further into the Gulf, why not?", he laughs.



Photo 22. - Vacant for-sale lots and elevated homes in Myrtle Grove, Plaquemines Parish

Source: Sarah Munoz (2022).

In their opposition to the State's most controversial restoration project, some Myrtle Grove residents have expressed their refusal of potential forced relocation. "It's a condemnation of Myrtle Grove", one deplored⁵⁵⁶. "We won't be able to live there" due to the projected tidal flooding, and they "won't be able to get out" because of the loss of value of their properties. Unable to remain in flooded areas and unwilling to relocate, these residents feel trapped. Walking me out of their house to the driveway, Kelly points to the construction work on the other side of the street. They're building a levee by the highway, she explains, but they've deliberately excluded Myrtle Grove. "The government doesn't think it's worth saving since it's going to be underwater from the diversion project anyway", Fred sighs. "You can go to all the state and parish council meetings you want, it doesn't change anything, they don't listen", Kelly concludes, disillusioned.

Retreat and migration are considered by some scholars to be valuable risk-reduction strategies (Verchick and Johnson, 2014; Wolsko and Marino, 2016), but government-led programs, such as buyouts, have remained sparse in Southern Louisiana. In the United States, individual relocation is offered under the Voluntary Buyout Program, carried out through four funding mechanisms which include the Hazard Mitigation Grant (Marino, 2015). But Americans have been largely disincentivized from engaging with these programs, designed for voluntary, individual relocations. Marino's (2015) ethnography on Indigenous Alaskan communities demonstrates how federal programs are incompatible with the community dimension of relocation and insufficient to meet their cultural needs. Adding to this, the administrative complexities, the lack of capacity of local governments, and the prolonged waiting periods for assistance have been a major deterrent for voluntary enrolment (Varian, 2023).

In Louisiana, the Office of Community Development has developed a program that enables buyouts for residents that do not meet the necessary criteria for the Hazard Mitigation Grant program⁵⁵⁷, but for many, reluctance to engage in government buyouts is still high. The under-evaluation of homes has pauperized residents in rural areas who may be both unable to afford

⁵⁵⁶ Senate Natural Resources and Environment committee, Louisiana State Senate, Baton Rouge, 21.04.14

⁵⁵⁷ Interview David, Office of Community Development. Zoom, 21.04.05

elevations, flood insurance, and relocation. Their exclusion from the National Flood Insurance Program – should they not be able to afford elevations or the new insurance rates described earlier – also further marginalizes residents who are *de facto* excluded from federal buyout and elevation programs despite their severe climate vulnerability. For Andrew, a project manager who has participated in the Isle de Jean Charles relocation project, this policy further increases socioeconomic precarity.

If you don't have flood insurance to begin with, you're not going to land on either of those lists [*i.e.*, *the repetitive loss and severe repetitive loss lists*], and if you're not on either of those lists, you're not likely to be offered a buyout through FEMA, or approved in elevation projects that are funded through Hazard Mitigation grant programs. There ends up being a situation in which somebody can't receive assistance because they don't have a flood insurance policy, and they don't have a flood insurance policy because they can't afford it.⁵⁵⁸

For one Plaquemines councilmember, buyouts have not been considered by the parish government because elevations have been the chosen strategy and the levee system, pump stations and drainage are considered to provide sufficient protection⁵⁵⁹. They also don't believe that the public would be responsive to such policies, arguing that even Indigenous communities outside of the levee system “would probably never accept a buyout”⁵⁶⁰. Strong cultural and identity-related attachments to land have legitimized elevations, despite their inherent flaws, as a tool to prevent depopulation.

It's just a handful of permanent residents who are outside of Morganza. We have offered to buy them out and relocate them, but for whatever reason, - and it's a voluntary program – may have chosen not to take advantage of that. That's their prerogative.⁵⁶¹

Nobody wants to hear about them moving families or communities. But that's where we are right now. We're getting there rapidly. The people that live there, that were born and raised there, and grew up there. It's a hard, hard pill to swallow. Well, I mean, I'm not saying they don't want to be safe, and they don't want to move. They just don't want to abandon their community.⁵⁶²

1.2. Local attachments to *in situ* adaptation

⁵⁵⁸ Interview Andrew, State of Louisiana government. Zoom, 21.03.08

⁵⁵⁹ Interview Michael, Plaquemines Parish council. Telephone, 21.07.27

⁵⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶¹ Interview Brian, parish director of coastal restoration. Telephone, 21.03.05

⁵⁶² Interview Alexander, biologist and State of Louisiana government. Telephone, 21.06.02

For Caleb, leaving is inconceivable. He recounts how Indigenous and Cajun communities have been historically pushed down the bayou, forced to settle on a land that they now call home. High levels of socioeconomic vulnerability among these rural communities are now keeping residents in place, both by choice and by force, while governmental buyout programs anchored in market dynamics and individualism fail to respond to the cultural needs of communities (Marino, 2018).

The thing is, I don't have a very large piece of land, but there's no way the state is going to find something like that for me somewhere else. Where I could have a safe place to live with that level of acreage, near a place where I could make it economically. People were literally and figuratively forced to these ends of the Earth. It wasn't by choice. And today, some of these people have diverted off the Trail of Tears⁵⁶³ to go down here, especially in areas south of Houma. You have these situations where there's literacy issues, inequalities, people that are economically depressed and suppressed. They're just held back for a number of reasons. Those are the people that are stuck on the tendrils of land, these dead-end roads, these bayous that peter off into the sea.⁵⁶⁴

Communities were promised levee systems after Hurricane Katrina to enable them to stay in place and rebuild their homes safely. Since then, however, changes in elevation requirements and flood insurance are forcing some residents to reconsider their lives within what FEMA deems at-risk zones, dampening those promises of techno-salvation. During one heated conversation in Plaquemines, councilmember Blink defends *in situ* adaptation⁵⁶⁵. "In my experience, I think people want to stay where they're at, and they want help adapting in place". Looking around the crowded room, he continues, "A quick survey here. I see some folks who live inside the levee system in Belle Chasse, but others not. If you could take a buyout, right now, and get an equal value for your property and go somewhere else, would you? Show of hands. One, two... no? And who wants to adapt in place? Raise your house or something like that?", he asks, as most of the public raises their hands.

The reluctance for buyouts and the strong desire to keep elevating to adapt in place resonates across the room. One resident takes the stand, demanding levees and elevations to avoid retreating. "To the question, do we want to leave our area... I'm gonna tell you myself. I'm 66 years old, God

⁵⁶³ The Trail of Tears refers to the forced removal of Indigenous tribes east of the Mississippi (Cherokees, Chickasaws, Choctaws, Creeks, and Seminoles) by the US Government between 1830 and 1850 (National Parks Service, 2023).

⁵⁶⁴ Interview Caleb, ecologist and former councilmember. Empire, 22.02.18

⁵⁶⁵ Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Belle Chasse, 21.06.10

willing I'll make 67 in July. I've been in Plaquemines Parish, in Phoenix, the whole 67 years. That's where I want to stay, that's home. To leave home is not easy." His inclination is clear, he is unwilling to relocate despite the increasing risks. "My property is not for sale", he continues. "I built that house by hand. That's irreplaceable. I lost my house in Katrina, I rebuilt in the same spot. It's not for sale." Exemplifying the substantial bottom-up push for infrastructural adaptation in place, Louisianans' high rates of lifelong immobility and the general refusal for state buyouts (Colten, 2015), his remarks reveal that techno-optimist discourses resonate with cultural attachments and have shaped people's chosen adaptation strategies. "We don't want to leave; we want a levee. We want a levee.", the resident pleaded. The desire for *in situ* infrastructural adaptation as a way of preventing relocation is thus strongly expressed by both residents and policymakers in all meetings on the topic⁵⁶⁶. In essence, these sentiments have fostered a feedback mechanism to legitimize and secure consent for the institutionalization of immobility.

The State has had a role not necessarily just in keeping people in place, but in supporting people's decision to stay in place. I think the two are very distinct and it's important to separate that. It's that people are deciding to stay there and the State is reconciling with the fact that these individuals are *choosing* to stay in these locations.⁵⁶⁷



⁵⁶⁶ This is shown across many meeting at both State and parish levels in which the public has participated. A lot of residents have come before decisionmakers to explain their vulnerabilities and ask for further infrastructural protection, usually in the form of levees and drainage.

⁵⁶⁷ Interview Rachel, local researcher. Zoom, 20.09.01

Photo 23. - Reinforcements along the Isle de Jean Charles Island road

These rock reinforcements are a water control structure installed in 2021 by the Parish to prevent the complete flooding of the island road, the only access to the Isle de Jean Charles community because most surrounding land and marsh have disappeared. Source: Sarah Munoz (2022)

1.3. Seeking ontological security

“The main adaptation strategy is not moving”, admitted Stephanie⁵⁶⁸. “People aren’t ready to move, aren’t ready to leave. I mean, I’m not”, she laughs, corroborating Koslov’s (2016) observations on the general American reluctance to retreat. More than that, “living here is a commitment”, recounts an Isle de Jean Charles tribal member (Maldonado, 2015:199). Non-movement is explained in the literature on climate mobility as the belief in the ability to cope with the risks of environmental change or disaster, or the inability to relocate (Naser et al., 2023). For some communities, immobility is a *preference* linked to their ontological security, meaning they may not find that the pressures of migration are sufficient reasons to relocate, especially if that would endanger their local customs, values and identities (Wiegel et al., 2021). This desire reflects what Marino (2015) describes as the *tenacity of home*. In Louisiana, I find that these emotions are fundamental to climate immobility. Many fishermen, Cajuns, lifelong Louisianans, and Indigenous communities have argued that their attachment to land, ways of life, and the fear of losing identity and community are paramount to their desire to stay and adapt in place.

Even the people who live outside [the levee system], the Native American communities who are perhaps some of the most exposed, they’re not clamoring to relocate. They’re clamoring for protection. We’re seeing the older generation really resistant to it. The public aren’t demanding it either.⁵⁶⁹

Where would they move? Some people will not move. Some people want to be on the land where they were born and where their fathers were born, and their families are born. They refuse to move on or adapt to change.⁵⁷⁰

It’s not just that people want to live where their job at the petrochemical plant is, so that they can get to it within 15 minutes. [It’s that] it is a beautiful place to live. That part of it is why

⁵⁶⁸ Interview Stephanie, renewable energy advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.08

⁵⁶⁹ Interview Benjamin, local researcher. Zoom, 20.08.28

⁵⁷⁰ Interview Gabriella, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries. Telephone, 21.03.31

a lot of the ancestors were there, even before the petrochemical industry got there. People wanted to settle there.⁵⁷¹

There's a tradition that is handed down from parents to children that people really value a quality of life in Louisiana, even in impoverished areas. When you start talking about the prospect of retreat, you're really asking people to give up something that is culturally significant to them and really makes up a significant piece of their identity. That's an extremely difficult decision to make, it's emotional. To take Isle de Jean Charles as an example, there are people that I worked with directly that had lived on Isle de Charles their entire lives. They had never lived anywhere else. They came from generations of people before them that had all lived on Isle de Jean Charles their entire lives. Even when somebody could have a sober conversation and say, look, I understand there's no future on this island, that doesn't make it any easier to leave.⁵⁷²

There are a lot of people who were quite vocal and adamant that they will not move. They've been on this parcel of land for 5-6 generations, their daughters will grow up and marry and bear children and be buried here, just like they are and their grandparents.⁵⁷³



⁵⁷¹ Interview Daniel, biologist and lifelong environmental activist. Telephone, 21.03.03

⁵⁷² Interview Andrew, State of Louisiana government. Zoom, 21.03.08

⁵⁷³ Interview Benjamin, local researcher. Zoom, 20.08.28

Photo 24. - Residents of the Isle de Jean Charles expressing their resistance to climate change

An elevated house in the Indigenous community of Isle de Jean Charles, which has lost 98% of its territory and is the first to receive federal funding for community-wide relocation. The signs read “Isle de Jean Charles is not dead, climate change sucks” and “Climate change not worth s***”, expressing their resistance to the fatality of movement and climate vulnerability. Source: Sarah Munoz (2022).

Why do you think that people stay? I asked Scarlett, as we sipped an Iced Tea in a café in downtown Thibodaux. “It’s the sense of community, more than anything else”, she replied⁵⁷⁴. It is also because water is a risk, would remark another one of my interviewees, but one that makes this place special (see Box 17). It is both a place of culture, the “office” of fishermen, and a place that low-income Louisianans may have difficulty leaving. Research on land attachments in Louisiana has demonstrated that many residents “consider the land where they reside an integral part of their lives, intricately and inseparably stitched throughout most aspects of their existence” (Simms, 2017:408; Colten, 2015). Place attachment is fundamental to the belief in, and desire for, *permanence*. In an interview for a local newspaper, Indigenous community members from Grand Bayou explained that relocating “would kill our culture and our future entirely”. Leader Rosina Philippe clarified further. “For us, home is more than the building you live in. It’s everything in the environment that surrounds you. If you leave, you become someone else. You are no longer the same person. No longer the same people.” (Marshall, 2016).

Simms (2021:7) reveals from her fieldwork on relocation in Southeast Louisiana a fear associated with *solastalgia* and the loss of place, “For some residents, there is a deep sense of grief and heartache in conceding that a tipping point for migration exists.”, she writes. Although the case of Indigenous groups is unique because of historic injustices associated with land dispossession, colonialism, and political marginalization, their immense desire to remain in place testifies of the complexities of planning for movement (Marino, 2015; Kingston and Marino, 2010). “It is part of us, essential to our life way. We can’t live without it”, explained Grand Bayou leaders (Marshall, 2016).

⁵⁷⁴ Interview Scarlett, former employee of Lafourche Parish government. Thibodaux, 22.03.16

Place-based distress engenders feelings of loss of identity, cultural disarticulation, or disruption of place (Albrecht, 2005; Albrecht et al., 2007). It represents what Askland and Bunn (2018) conceive as ontological trauma. Climate change induced mobility, therefore, threatens the “spatialization” of identity, meaning it jeopardizes locality and place, a key dimension in the formation of collective identities, shared experiences and customs (Martin, 2010; Farbotko, 2015; Kingston and Marino, 2010). Echoing conditions found in Louisiana, Seebauer and Winkler (2020:2) remark that this emotional bond to place is especially strong “if the place lived in is perceived as unique and irreplaceable, and if residents feel a strong personal or intergenerational connection to the locality.” These sentiments have been found to ignite total rejection of government-led relocation in other places of coastal risk, such is the case in Portugal where residents’ biased perceptions of risk and attachments to land have motivated voluntary immobility (Costas et al., 2015). In the Alaskan town of Shishmaref, residents have also expressed concern about the preservation of their social capital and cultural integrity in the case of rural-to-urban migration, especially linked to the potential disconnect from their traditional territory (Wolsko and Marino, 2016). These profound attachments, identity, and sense of place still have yet to be fully incorporated into adaptation practices and policymaking (Adger et al., 2011; Kingston and Marino, 2010).

Box 17. - The cultural value of water and the devastating erosion of Indigenous lands

Despite its potential threat, water lies at the heart of the Louisianan identity. For the inhabitants of the coastal region, their attachment to the place and culture is remarkably strong. They have one of the highest rates of “residential persistence” in the country: 78% of Louisianans live where they were born (Colten, 2015).

Water forms a significant part of this cultural attachment to the land because it bears witness to a particular resilience among the region's inhabitants. The isolation of the wetlands created the dependence of First Nations and European settlers on water transportation, intimately binding Southern Louisianan culture to its biophysical environment (Gramling and Hagelman, 2005). Today, collective identities are shaped by their awareness of “loss” and their ability to (re)build in the face of storms, hurricanes, and floods (Simms, 2017). The fragmentation of marshes and the submergence of land in the Gulf of Mexico directly impact the sense of belonging of groups whose identity is rooted in their place of residence (Maldonado, 2015). Thus, it is the daily experience of this place that creates their shared understanding of the region's risks and treasures (Burley et al., 2004). In the bayou, this sense of belonging formed by proximity to water underlies the social and economic fabric of their way of life. As noted in Lafourche's government environmental adaptation and resilience plan, “wherever you live in Lafourche, you are connected to the water. (...) Water provides the economic sustenance and cultural heritage that defines life in Lafourche.” (G10:5)

Water thus represents a true way of life for a portion of the population, especially for certain Indigenous communities reliant on subsistence fishing. Often living outside the coastal levee system and lacking infrastructural protections, many of these communities suffer the ravages of oil exploitation and climate

change (Maldonado, 2015; Marshall, 2016). Despite the risks, some refuse to abandon their lands. This is the case for the community of Grand Bayou, a small fishing village at the end of Plaquemines Parish accessible only by boat, which believes that relocating their village would destroy their culture and future. But after the departure of several hundred residents, the survival of the remaining forty or so individuals continues to be threatened by the gradual erosion of their territory (Yeoman, 2020).



Grand Bayou village harbor. Source: Sarah Munoz (2022)

In a report produced by different Indigenous communities for the National Climate Assessment, residents of Grand Bayou share their experience with the loss of land. “Our bayous were paradise for kids because they love the water, fishing, swimming, canoeing and connecting with elders. But that paradise is changing. Folks from Grand Bayou used to go out and tie up to the chenieres and go swimming, but now there is only old tree stumps. The kids can’t play outside because there is no land” (Grand Bayou Village et al., 2012:12).

The story of land erosion in the Grand Bayou community, like other Indigenous communities in Louisiana, goes beyond climate change. “The state says we are a 'vulnerable' community. But how did we become vulnerable, and who is responsible for it?” reminds Philippe, a resident of the community (Marshall, 2016). In addition to the levee policies of the Mississippi River which led to the collapse of the bayou, and the oil exploitation that dug up and destroyed the marshes, the violent industrial colonial history towards Indigenous communities has weakened their territories and social protections (Maldonado, 2018; Kingston and Marino, 2010). More recently, the devastating impact of Hurricane Ida is a painful reminder of these vulnerabilities (Bowman, 2021).

1.4. The multigenerational experience of place

Persistence of life despite ecological vulnerability appears to be a sense of pride for residents in their pursuit of multigenerational experience of place. During one senate committee meeting, a fisherman notes “I’ve been on the back of a shrimp boat since I was 12 years old. That’s a long time. I’ve seen a lot of stuff happen; I’ve seen a lot of things change”. Another remarks, being a 3rd generation fisherman, “I’ve been on the bayou my whole life.”⁵⁷⁵ These testimonies express pride in their persistence along this coast and the hope of passing down their knowledge of the water and ways of life. A resident continues, “I’ve been a resident down there a long time, been in and out. It’s a great place. I want to see it stay.”⁵⁷⁶ Along with the assertion of their lifelong commitment to this place comes a plea for a future there, anchored in their collective sense of place and expressed in discourse through recollections of their lived experiences. As Wertsch (2008) explains, memories are not only individual but also collective cultural tools for representing the past shared by members of a group. As a result, nostalgia can provide comfort to a community facing loss through an “emotionally mediated process of nostalgic reflection as part of an attempt to cope with on-going changes to a landscape important to their sense of individual and collective identities” (Bennett, 2009). At the heart of this emotional attachment is the desire to preserve collective identities. In fact, as Burley et al. (2004:50) write of community resilience in southern Terrebonne, “faced with the long-term certainty that land will be lost, and the omnipresent threat of a big storm wiping them out, local residents continue to express a strong and hopeful sense of community.” Gotham’s (2016b) research corroborates these findings, accentuating that Louisiana’s fishermen advocate for the preservation and restoration of fisheries by drawing on a strong sense of place attachment as a central point of identity construction and a space for environmental mobilization.

I don’t know where to start. I guess I’ll say this. Born and raised here in Terrebonne Parish, been dealing with flood issues since I was a kid. I remember when I was a kid, flooding in the lower end of Dularge where I’m originally from. I’ve been living in the upper Dularge area for thirty years.⁵⁷⁷

⁵⁷⁵ Senate Natural Resources and Environment committee, Louisiana State Senate, Baton Rouge, 21-04-29

⁵⁷⁶ Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion (MBSD) Virtual Public Meeting 3, GoToMeeting, 21.04.08

⁵⁷⁷ Resident of Dularge, Terrebonne Parish council meeting, Houma, 21-03-24

I'm a resident of Louisiana. I'm raising three little girls here, and I want them to have the opportunity to live here safely into the future. I hope they will grow to enjoy the traditions and the bounty of Louisiana. I'm hoping they will all become skilled fishermen.⁵⁷⁸

If the government wants to move forward [i.e. with the Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion project], they should do so by a real buyout of the fishermen. A real buyout. But I don't want a buyout, I want a fourth and fifth generation for my kids.⁵⁷⁹

As Korjonen-Kuusipuro and Meriläinen-Hyvärinen's (2016) ethnographic work on forced displacement in Finland shows, the feeling of loss of a home (*domicide*) or of a place (*topocide*) instigates emotional reactions that may be passed down to the next generation, illustrating the multigenerational nature of attachment to land and desire for *permanence*. These notions resonate with the more widely known idea of *solastalgia*, first conceptualized by philosopher Glenn Albrecht as the distress provoked by the loss of place (2005; Albrecht et al., 2007). Social instability, idealization of the past, feelings of cultural dislocation and erosion of the sense of belonging are the lived experiences of *solastalgia* under environmental stress. These sentiments are at the heart of some Louisianans' plea for *permanence* along the coast and reluctance to engage in relocation. At the end of a three hour-long conversation, I ask Justin, an environmental lawyer for various Indigenous and fishing communities in Southeast Louisiana, what he hopes will happen in the future. He pauses to think and starts to tear up. "What I hope is going to happen, is not going to happen." Choked up, he continues. "I'm getting older and I'm losing hope, this is honestly the truth. A lot of my professional life has been devoted to pushing that rock up the hill. For much of what I love, I'm now convinced that I'm going to drown before it gets up the hill. It hurts"⁵⁸⁰.

2. Individualizing resilience: the final push for immobility

In this section, I bring this micro-level resistance to movement back into the collective making of immobility by focusing on political culture and ideals. I argue that the absence of social and adaptation policies has led to the individualization of resilience as a factor of immobility. Foundational to this individualization of resilience is the political culture of Louisiana, and more broadly, of the United States. De Tocqueville's (1848) described the uniqueness of American

⁵⁷⁸ Kimberly Reyher, Executive director of Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana (CRCL), Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion (MBSD) Virtual Public Meeting 3, GoToMeeting, 21.04.08

⁵⁷⁹ Fisherman from Buras, Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Belle Chasse, 21.04.08

⁵⁸⁰ Interview Justin, environmental lawyer. Zoom, 21.03.04

political culture as individualistic and in pursuit of freedom. In Louisiana, this distinctiveness is reinforced by a history of southern traditionalistic culture and immigration (Parent, 2006). Rampant corruption, political instability and extractivist-based populism have increased libertarianism and small-government ideas, foundational to the disengagement of the state from proactive adaptation. In this final section, I argue that some communities' desire to adapt *in situ* and the State's disengagement from retreat and social adaptation policies are symptomatic of a larger political culture of individualism and mistrust in government. This detachment from collective and state-led adaptation takes root in past injustices, reinforced by the American and Louisianan value of freedom.

2.1. The liberal welfare state and libertarianism

As a result of the state's focus on hardened defenses, coastal restoration, and individual home elevations for adaptation, resilience and adaptation in general have been largely individualized. The history of individualized resilience in Southeast Louisiana finds its roots within what Brand and Baxter (2020) term the "neoliberal disaster landscapes" of the region. The decline of the social welfare state, economic recessions, and the oil crisis of the 1980s deteriorated socioeconomic conditions for many of the poorer populations (Peck and Tickell, 2002; Peck, 2003). The rise of the "workfare state", a symbol of the American neoliberal welfare reform which grew under the Reagan Administration and consolidated with Bill Clinton in the 1990s, inversed the principles of the welfare state and instead promoted market-based mechanisms, selectivity, and local discretion (Peck, 2003). It epitomized the liberal welfare state, as conceptualized by Esping-Andersen (1990), in which individualization and market-based policies commodify the citizen and limit the redistribution of social benefits.

These mechanisms are reflected in the way Louisianans have so far adapted through individual home elevations, insurance, and with limited socioeconomic protections. As a reminder, 70 to 80% of persons in Terrebonne are not enrolled in the National Flood Insurance Program due to high costs, which have been discussed previously as an incentive by the federal government to encourage individual retreat (Simms, 2021). But the absence of safety nets for disaster recovery further increases socioeconomic and environmental precarity and deepens disparities between groups' adaptive capacity. The enhancement of social capital constitutes soft infrastructure and is essential for the climate adaptation of social and administrative systems, according to Dolšak and

Prakash (2018). Yet, it remains largely dismissed by policymakers who prefer the satisfaction of more immediate and visible adaptation demands for hard infrastructure. The following sections investigate the relationship between State and parish governments within this political culture, and the inability of local governments to respond to the individual and collective need for adaptation.

2.1.1. Needing and dismissing Big Government

Paradoxically, local officials have blamed their precariousness on the federal government. Throughout the year, they have simultaneously disregarded the inherent fabric of the American liberal welfare state and promoted libertarian and limited government ideals, to which 71% of Republicans adhere (Pew Research Center, 2019). During one Lafourche Parish meeting, councilmember Melvin goes on a rant vilifying bureaucracy, the carbon tax, gun restrictions and even LGBTQ rights, all faults he attributes to Big Government⁵⁸¹. “In the USA, this is how government should be (*he pulls out a small roll of red tape*), but unfortunately, this is how government is sometimes (*and then pulls out a big roll of red tape*).” While most parish representatives have, at one time, endorsed small government ideals in council meetings, they have also deplored what they perceive to be a lack of federal assistance after hurricanes. Interestingly, Louisiana State government was ranked the third most dependent on federal government assistance out of all fifty states, and its residents ranked 22nd most dependent compared to other Americans (Kiernan, 2023). Continuously shifting blame to the federal administration, Terrebonne councilmember Guidry argued, in reference to their local efforts for the *puzzle* strategy, “It’s our federal government that has let us down. We as a parish have done an excellent job”⁵⁸². Drawing on populist narratives of “hardworking Americans” versus an elusive “them”, he continues.

Big Brother’s got so much money, they’re sending all these monies to these foreign countries, they left ninety-something billion in Afghanistan for terrorists. But we can’t take care of the people of Terrebonne Parish, Louisiana? It’s a sad situation in the United State when we can’t take care of our own taxpaying people, people that work hard.

Selectively foregoing the “workfare” ideals of the Republican party to which these councilmembers belong, councilman Trosclair further deplores what he considers as the inhuman

⁵⁸¹ Lafourche Parish council meeting, Mathews, 21.04.13

⁵⁸² Terrebonne Parish council meeting, Houma, 21.09.29

treatment of Terrebonne residents by the federal government following Hurricane Ida, which he parallels to the Mexican border crisis.

They've got a big border crisis with illegal immigrants that are being inhumanely treated at the border. I guarantee you, the next day, the federal government was on top of it. We've been inhumanely treated here for 34 days, and the government ain't stepped in. (...) At least afford the United States citizens, *legal* citizens of the United States, the same opportunities you're affording the illegals trying to come across the border. It's all I'm asking, give us the same treatment. We don't want to be treated as second-class citizens.⁵⁸³

The in-group and out-group rhetoric and disregard for the Republican Party's role in the dismantle of social protections since the 1980s reveals the paradoxical rhetoric of conservative elected officials who simultaneously defend limited government intervention and libertarianism, while also deploring perceived federal inaction in the aftermath of hurricanes. Beyond populist rhetoric, I argue that these arguments are intended to deflect from the institutional incapacity of local and State governments, which has bred resentment and profound distrust. "Our parish is broke", "We can't even get garbage cans right now", complained Fred and Kelly, a couple of retirees from Myrtle Grove⁵⁸⁴. In Plaquemines, residents have even rejected a tax proposal to fund the flood protection system due to their significant skepticism in their government's ability to handle basic services⁵⁸⁵. "The parish can't even cut the grass right now. How do they realistically expect to take care of the levees?", sighed Caleb, a lifelong resident of lower Plaquemines⁵⁸⁶. Councilmember LaFrance, alike his peers, was not surprised by the people's lack of trust. He explained that his constituents had defended their refusal of the proposed millage due to perceived corruption among the government's administration and because they were resentful of the many tax exemptions granted by the parish to oil and gas companies, which have eaten away at the parish's flood protection budget⁵⁸⁷.

2.1.2. The incapacity for local assistance

⁵⁸³ Terrebonne Parish council meeting, Houma, 21.09.29

⁵⁸⁴ Interview Fred and Kelly, retirees. Myrtle Grove, 22.03.05

⁵⁸⁵ It is worth noting that, contrary to Plaquemines where distrust in governance is highest, Lafourche and Terrebonne residents have voted in favor of a tax to fund their local flood protection system, a point of pride mentioned repeatedly in interviews and observations, considering their conservative political leanings.

⁵⁸⁶ Interview Caleb, ecologist and former councilmember. Empire, 22.02.18

⁵⁸⁷ Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Pointe-a-la-Hache, 21.04.22

Indeed, the parish's dependence on oil and gas revenues and the subsequent decline of the industry, as described in Chapter 3, has weakened local governments' capacity to render services. As Timothy from the State of Louisiana explains, governments are struggling to provide crucial local funding to upkeep flood protection systems.

If you don't have enough money to fix the roads and run the schools and pick up the trash, why are you asking me to spend for this thing that's not even going to show up for twenty years? For this hurricane that might come but it might not, you never know.⁵⁸⁸

Throughout the year, all local governments have requested federal assistance to provide temporary housing while relying on non-profits and private companies like Shell or the Red Cross to provide disaster relief. The embeddedness of the Dominant Social Paradigm in adaptation policies and parishes' limited institutional capacity have contributed to the endorsement of personal responsibility, entrepreneurialism, and private over public solutions to collective problems of disaster resilience and urban planning (Brand and Baxter, 2020). Over the year, residents have been urged to stay "weather aware"⁵⁸⁹, to be responsible for their own preparedness to hurricanes and "get a game plan"⁵⁹⁰, and to elevate their homes on their own dime.

Disaster recovery after the 2020 hurricane season exemplifies this government push for individualized resilience and non-interventionism. A disagreement emerged between Plaquemines councilmember LaFrance and the parish president on the responsibility of the local government to provide assistance to residents⁵⁹¹. The councilman requested parish aid for "the needy" who cannot afford to clean up their homes after the disaster, while President Lepine resisted the government's role in assisting residents, instead encouraging individual reclamations to the federal government. He argued that what constitutes a "needy" person can't be clearly defined and that government funds should not be used to help individual people, regardless of their socioeconomic status. This observation corroborates other interview data denouncing the strong relinquishment of the charge of adaptation onto the individuals. Victoria for example remarks that, for communities, "resilience means nobody has your back (*she laughs*)."⁵⁹² She relays the general sentiments that the state "is

⁵⁸⁸ Interview Timothy, State of Louisiana government. Zoom, 21.03.01

⁵⁸⁹ Lafourche Parish council meeting, Mathews, 21.03.23

⁵⁹⁰ Governor Edwards media briefing on severe weather and flooding, GHOSEP, Facebook Live, 21.05.18

⁵⁹¹ Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Pointe-a-la-Hache, 20.11.12

⁵⁹² Interview Victoria, local research. Zoom, 20.11.09

not dealing enough, or doing enough of what they need.” Do you trust the government to help you? I asked Antoine, a lifelong fisherman and activist. “No. We’ve never had any help from the government yet”⁵⁹³, he replied, resigned. Sharing a similar sentiment, Caleb seems cynical of government intervention for the community. “We help each other, but we are on our own”.⁵⁹⁴

Research shows that targeted social protection schemes have, in certain contexts like Brazil, facilitated adaptation through mobility and prevented survival migration or economically “trapped” populations (Cattaneo et al., 2019). More broadly, studies on displacement have highlighted that state involvement is determinant in the success or failure of community adaptation to climate change. Bronen (2010, 2014), for example, argues that a lack of institutional capacity, whether from traditional governance structures or state agencies, has largely hindered the relocation process of Alaskan communities. Similarly, Fernando et al., (2010) demonstrate that state involvement in adaptation and mitigation is essential to reduce the negative effects of climate change disasters, urging for better policies to diminish vulnerabilities among those most affected. Overall government assistance to areas affected by disasters is essential to assist recovery and response to shocks by more vulnerable populations (Cattaneo et al., 2019). In contexts where state planning for adaptation is lacking or government involvement in providing security to vulnerable groups, social capital is essential for resilience (Adger, 2003). This is particularly important because Louisiana ranks first in the United States for poverty, with a 19,6% poverty rate and more than 800,000 Louisianans surviving below the poverty line (Benson, 2022; Gilligan, 2023). Poverty in the United States is deemed substantially higher and more extreme across 26 OECD countries, notably due to a weak social safety net and relatively low wages (Confronting Poverty, 2024). The collapse of the American welfare state and the individualization of resilience has thus compromised adaptive capacities and mobility perspectives for many residents. As capacity for adaptation is a function of a person’s access to resources (Adger, 2003:9), Caleb reminds,

It takes money to leave. It takes money, you have to have funds to be able to that. It’s a very heavy lift. When you leave, it also costs money to keep up your former structure there. Maybe you could sell it, but who’s buying it?⁵⁹⁵

⁵⁹³ Interview Antoine, fishing and restoration advocacy organization. Telephone, 21.04.21

⁵⁹⁴ Interview Caleb, ecologist and former councilmember. Empire, 22.02.26

⁵⁹⁵ Interview Caleb, ecologist and former councilmember. Empire, 22.02.04

Advocacy groups have noted that affordability of both relocation and adapting in place is a large factor of decision making for individuals, when both the cost of rebuilding in place and that of moving is immense (Appenbrink et al., 2018). LA SAFE has called for the establishment of a housing relocation fund to assist residents' relocation. They remark that poor socioeconomic capacity is increasing people's environmental risk and reducing their ability to withstand the costs of living in at-risk areas. The report notes, "People who want or need to move to areas of higher ground often do not have the resources to relocate and purchase homes in new communities. Stressed with living in a high-risk area with degraded property values, they may have limited funds for moving, closing costs, and down payments." (G8:128). A poignant example of the outcome of individualized resilience and poor state planning for disaster recovery lies in the deepening of poverty after the 2016 Baton Rouge floods, where the failure of the social system forced residents to recover on their own and drastically expanded socioeconomic inequalities⁵⁹⁶.

2.2. Mistrust, historic injustice and the appeal of freedom

Small state ideals that have formed the liberal welfare state and reduced social safety nets for adaptation have also diminished residents' willingness to engage in government-led adaptation programs, furthering the individualization of resilience. Mistrust in governance has been repeatedly observed throughout this fieldwork and has been largely documented by other researchers as an obstacle to state-led risk reduction planning (Hemmerling et al., 2020; Colten, 2015; Gotham, 2016b). For some Cajun fishermen, resistance to the State's adaptation and mitigation projects stems from their distrust in the government's intentions. "They have power like the Gestapo", asserts Thomas, a fourth-generation oysterman, about the CPRA's political practices⁵⁹⁷. This final section investigates the community resentments and values of freedom, anchored in American libertarian political culture, and which sustain and legitimize individualized adaptation and voluntary immobility.

2.2.1. Community resentments

⁵⁹⁶ Interview Gregory, community-based organizations coalition. Zoom, 21.03.16

⁵⁹⁷ Interview Thomas, fisherman. Telephone, 21.05.14

For local researcher Benjamin, this lack of trust is deeply rooted in historic policies and practices. He notes, “There has been corruption, and the Cajun community was long ostracized... Kids used to be spanked in school if they didn’t speak English. This was the 1930s, 40s, and 50s even. They literally beat the French out of these kids!”⁵⁹⁸ Simultaneously, histories of racial injustice, racism, and the forced displacement of African American and Indigenous communities along the coast, whether through forced appropriations for oil and gas interests or slavery, cemented communities’ marginalization from political power, resources, and representation (Barra, 2021; Brand and Baxter, 2020; Holden et al., 2011).

As a result, mistrust in governments has become strongly engrained generationally. “That engendered distrust for public officials”, continued Benjamin. “And those kinds of things run deep, and people don’t necessarily know the underlying reason, but even if it was just their grandparents who suffered directly, the antipathy or distrust for government gets handed down generation by generation”. This is also noted by local researcher Natalie, who considers that the general wariness of communities for their governments is based on past injustices. “There’s very little trust in government here, especially communities of color, poor communities, Native American communities, African American communities. They have an extended distrust based on institutionalized racism and ways that they feel they’ve been lied to and mistreated.”⁵⁹⁹ Natalie further notes that these past practices heavily impact the confidence that people have in the state’s ability to move them or buy them out in a fair manner, explaining the immense reluctance of residents to engage in government buyouts. According to her, this is one of the biggest obstacles to mobility, along with cultural attachments and financial inequalities. “It’s a staggering problem”, she concludes.

Trust in the process of planned relocation and in the suitability of a new site are essential to the success of movement (Seebauer and Winkler, 2020). The lack of consultation and partnership between civil society and state agencies has been largely noted as an obstacle to adaptation, accentuating distrust in institutions and eventually leading to further reluctance to relocate (Schade, 2013; Oliver-Smith and de Sherbinin, 2014). This is especially the case in Louisiana

⁵⁹⁸ Interview Benjamin, local researcher. Zoom, 20.08.28

⁵⁹⁹ Interview Natalie, local researcher. Zoom, 20.08.17

where the history of poorly managed state relocation programs, racist urban politics, and broken promises have fostered deep community mistrust for climate resettlements plans (Dalbom et al., 2014). This has led people to doubt their governments' good intentions when promoting adaptation policies (especially after the terrible mismanagement of emergency relief for Hurricane Katrina which led to what Adams et al. (2009) have termed chronic disaster syndrome for displaced communities in New Orleans), resulting in their disengagement from state-led programs.

In Plaquemines for example, Black communities living in Bohemia were forcibly removed to make way for a flood control structure designed by the US Corps of Engineers, which was later revealed to be the site of \$43 million dollars' worth of oil and gas revenues (Barra, 2021; Marcus, 1986). The effect of these historic decisions can still be seen today. Many respondents have noted that communities would not react positively to the state telling them to move⁶⁰⁰. Nathan, who works for the State of Louisiana government, frames relocation as an "individual preference", arguing that this mistrust from communities is the reason for the state's disengagement from relocation decisions and policy⁶⁰¹.

People don't want to be told that they can't live where every generation of their family lived. After an event, everyone always says we'll rebuild. No one ever says we're going to give up. People don't like the idea of being told they can't live somewhere. They want to live where they've always lived, and they want things to be the same as they've always been.⁶⁰²

Telling people that you want them to leave their homes, it's not a popular thing to do. No, don't move me away from my land, especially when you start talking about some communities that have been historically disadvantaged and have had land stolen. You're talking about Indigenous communities, Black communities. There's a significant mistrust for government, and if government comes in and tells me that I'm at a risk for something, I'm going to be skeptical about it. But why? It's always the "why".⁶⁰³

Listen, the State can change laws and I guess they can do whatever they want to do, but I wouldn't leave unless I was legally mandated to leave. This is my life, this is where I've always been.⁶⁰⁴

⁶⁰⁰ Interviews Nathan, State of Louisiana government. Zoom, 21.03.17; Wesley, levee district manager. Galliano, 22.02.09; Antoine, fishing and restoration advocacy organization. Telephone, 21.04.21; Vanessa, restoration advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.18

⁶⁰¹ Interview Nathan, State of Louisiana government. Zoom, 21.03.17

⁶⁰² Interview Lauren, coastal restoration advocacy group. Telephone, 21.02.23

⁶⁰³ Interview Vanessa, restoration advocacy organization. Zoom, 21.02.18

⁶⁰⁴ Interview Antoine, fishing and restoration advocacy organization. Telephone, 21.04.21

There's a uniquely American aspect of culture in which we're just sort of anti-authoritarian, we don't like to be told to do by government. In a place like Louisiana, I think there's a cultural element in which people are fiercely protective of their private property rights. I don't think it would be a good approach in Louisiana and a lot of other places for government to essentially parachute in and say you have to leave.⁶⁰⁵

This mistrust in state adaptation policies is also due to the purposeful exclusion of certain communities from hurricane protection systems, in particular Indigenous and Black communities. “The levee was built, the flood walls came, but they put us outside the flood walls. All the damage were done to us. We’re being penalized”, deplored a Plaquemines resident of the East Bank⁶⁰⁶. This political decision, made after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, has implications for their ability to get insurance, to fund their home elevations, and ultimately, for their mobility as the area is becoming increasingly depopulated, impoverished, and isolated from public services (Smith, 2023). For many who remain, the economic and physical vulnerability of life is immense.

Victoria remarks that along with the physical marginalization of levees comes the realization by residents that infrastructural investments are being made to the benefit of larger, more populous city centers, New Orleans in particular. This inequality in investment is being felt as an injustice by some residents, fostering a sentiment of neglect and further accentuating the individualization of their adaptation. “It’s definitely not lost on these communities that New Orleans is inside the levee system and gets a lot of protection as a result of that, and they’re kind of left to their own devices.”⁶⁰⁷ It seems, therefore, that individualized adaptation is also relative to the marginalization of certain communities from political centers and shaped by the geography of the state’s infrastructural investments. These policy decisions have been repeatedly described as a cost-benefit analysis by the State and the federal Corps of Engineers. Vincent, who lobbied the State for levee projects in Terrebonne and Lafourche, explains that infrastructural projects are decided based on their “value to regional economic output”⁶⁰⁸. In other words, the value of protecting communities is primarily economic. This interest-based approach puts a dent in the “cultural” justification pushed in the Master Plan and further confirms the interests vested in the

⁶⁰⁵ Interview Andrew, State of Louisiana government. Zoom, 21.03.08

⁶⁰⁶ Plaquemines Parish council meeting, Belle Chasse, 21.06.10

⁶⁰⁷ Interview Victoria, local research. Zoom, 20.11.09

⁶⁰⁸ Interview Vincent, flood protection advocacy organization. Galliano, 22.02.09

state's adaptation strategy. A prime example is the Indigenous community of the Isle de Jean Charles who was voluntarily excluded from the levee system, and for which the federal government has now allocated, through the national resilience competition, \$48 million to relocate – the first in Louisiana (Baurick, 2022).



Photo 25. - Houses damaged by Hurricane Ida on Isle de Jean Charles

The Isle de Jean Charles is located out into the marshes in Terrebonne Parish and connected to the mainland by a single road. The State viewed its inclusion into the hurricane protection system as too costly. The drastic loss of land and increased vulnerability to hurricanes are now forcing residents to relocate inland. Source: Sarah Munoz (2022).

This case suggests that the exclusion of communities from protection systems further accentuates their vulnerability, and without proper funding to alleviate that vulnerability through adaptation measures such as government-funded relocation, the community is left to adapt on its own, despite its historical socioeconomic marginalization. For tribes which lack federal recognition, such as the Isle de Jean Charles, there are few options for support beyond the State. But mismanagement and erasure of Indigenous voices in planning processes have further weakened the community's cultural integrity in the relocation. "This isn't our dream come true. Where are the people of Isle de Jean Charles? Not at that place they took from us.", deplored Jean Charles Choctaw Nation Chief Albert Naquin (Baurick, 2022).

2.2.2. The value of freedom

Marginalization from political and urban centers is also anchored in the libertarian ideals of freedom from Big Government, also a byproduct of this heavy mistrust from Cajun communities. "Perhaps no idea has mattered more in American history than the idea of freedom (...) freedom defines what America is", wrote George Lakoff (2006:3,5). Of particular significance in South Louisiana, freedom is at the heart of many residents' desire for proximity to their natural environment, away from urban centers and government injunctions. The ability to navigate waterways freely represents a fundamental aspect of their lifestyle, characterized by a certain tranquility and autonomy, and the appellation of Louisiana as "God's country"⁶⁰⁹. The historic movement of Cajuns to more isolated areas of Southern Louisiana increased their dependence and attachments to wetlands and its productive fishing and trapping resources, enabling them to maintain their French heritage against the government's pressure to conform to the American model (Gramling and Hagelman, 2005). For certain people like Caleb, this attachment is at the heart of his refusal to move North to New Orleans' outskirts, despite the desire of other members of his household to relocate⁶¹⁰. The unique appeal of Louisiana's wetlands to its cultural communities is difficult to shake. As wrote Wayne Parent (2006:132), "Perhaps no other tract of

⁶⁰⁹ Interview Vincent, flood protection advocacy organization. Galliano, 22.02.09

⁶¹⁰ Interview Caleb, ecologist and former councilmember. Empire, 22.02.26

land in the continental United States is as isolated from civilization as the farthest reaches of Southeastern Louisiana”.



Photo 26. - The isolation of the bayou

For communities in Southeast Louisiana, the freedom associated with proximity to the bayou is foundational to their cultural attachment to land. Source: Sarah Munoz (2022).

Why do you stay down here? I asked Leon, a local fisherman. “Because we love where we live! Freedom! Being a fisherman used to be about being free”, he replied with enthusiasm. “You don’t have to worry, you work for yourself. It’s got its advantage, that’s why we live down there. We used to be cut off from the big cities and all that people. We could do what we wanted.”⁶¹¹ For another fourth-generation Cajun oysterman, Thomas, the desire for freedom from government is innate. “Us fishermen, we generally take care of ourselves. All I ever ask is that they give me good water.”⁶¹² A similar sentiment is shared by Fred, a retiree living in Myrtle Grove in lower Plaquemines, a small subdivision excluded from the hurricane protection system upon its completion, and which is at risk of increased flooding from the Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion

⁶¹¹ Interview Leon, fisherman and fishing advocate. Telephone, 21.03.04

⁶¹² Interview Thomas, fisherman. Telephone, 21.05.14

state project. “I feel I’m more concerned about what they’re going to do *to* me than what they will do *for* me”, Fred complained⁶¹³. “Just leave me alone to live my life and I’ll be fine. I’ll take care of myself. They don’t have to take care of me. I’ve gotten to 68 by taking care of myself.” I ask him, Kelly, and Graham, all sitting across the kitchen table, if they prefer a small government approach to these problems. “I would be more into a no government approach”, replies Fred, as they all laugh. “No government would be fine.”

Reflective of the Dominant Social Paradigm and American values of freedom, libertarianism, and laissez-faire governments, these foundational ideas have shaped attitudes towards adaptation (Dunlap and Van Liere 1984; Shafer, 2006). In combination with the injustices felt from the State’s projects that are set to flood their community, their mistrust for the government’s ability to provide any assistance or enhanced socioeconomic adaptation capacity has deepened. This desire for freedom from the state also accentuates skepticism for climate change, which Tranter and Booth (2015), amongst others, have shown is correlated to political conservatism and low trust in government, particularly among White men in the United States (McCright and Dunlap, 2011a).



Photo 27. - View of the Gulf of Mexico from the Empire marina, Plaquemines Parish

⁶¹³ Interview Fred, Kelly and Graham, retirees. Myrtle Grove, 22.03.05

The Empire marina is surrounded by a hurricane levee (visible here) and the Empire floodgate, which ensure protection from weather events and quick access to the open water for local fishermen. Source: Sarah Munoz (2022).

As Lustgarten (2020) reminds us, this problem is not exclusive to Louisiana. “Policymakers, having left America unprepared for what’s next, now face brutal choices about which communities to save — often at exorbitant costs — and which to sacrifice. Their decisions will almost inevitably make the nation more divided, with those worst off relegated to a nightmare future in which they are left to fend for themselves.” If the state continues down the path of what Felli and Castree (2012:5) describe as “roll out” neoliberalism, whereby adaptation is individualized and anchored in market mechanisms, the reluctance and incapacity of communities to move – whether relocation is initiated by the government or not – will increase. “If anybody’s gonna move anybody, it’s gonna be the state government”, remarked Natalie, a local researcher. Yet, stifled socioeconomic capacity and heavy distrust in the state’s adaptation policies seem to have given way to simultaneously voluntary, forced, and acquiescent immobilities, embedded within Louisiana’s “neoliberal disaster landscape” (Brand and Baxter, 2020).

3. Conclusions

This chapter has focused on the desire for permanence and immobility at the individual and community level. Based on existing research and resident testimonies in meeting observations and interviews, I have argued that some people’s reluctance to engage in government buyouts and relocation is rooted in deep place attachments and the search for ontological security. Attachment to place has been repeatedly highlighted in the literature as a crucial factor of voluntary immobility in the context of climate vulnerability in Alaska, Peru, Pacific Islands, as well as Portugal (Huntington et al., 2018; Korjonen-Kuusipuro and Meriläinen-Hyvärinen, 2016; Adams, 2016; Marino, 2015; Suliman et al., 2019; Costas et al., 2015). Sense of place and *solastalgia* play fundamental roles in shaping one’s desire to remain despite environmental risk, and are largely expressed in Louisianans’ reluctance to relocate (Albrecht, 2005; Albrecht et al., 2007; Askland and Bunn, 2018; Dalbom et al., 2014; Grand Bayou Village et al., 2012). The potential loss of traditional lands and ways of life, community cohesion, and social networks are fundamental problems for communities whose identity and self-determination are jeopardized by government-led top-down relocation (Kingston and Marino, 2010).

Simultaneously, mistrust in governance and American libertarian values have also shaped some residents' desire for immobility by individualizing adaptation. This is evidenced by policymakers' disinclination to offer assistance for adaptation, and by community who often resent government intervention. Planned immobility, as an outcome of a political interest in preserving productivity and biased beliefs about climate change and risk, has furthered this individualization of resilience. Increasing socioeconomic disparities in residents' ability to adapt to their changing environment, attachments to land, mistrust in governance, and the absence of state welfare and interventionism have reinforcing cooccurring immobilities. Norgaard (2011:204) has noted that the fabric of US political culture, lack of trust in government institutions, belief in American exceptionalism and the superiority of the American way of life "leave Americans uniquely at a loss in terms of what to do with climate change". Individualism especially fuels collective denial on climate change by disempowering people and, in the case of Louisiana, further alienates them from proactive adaptation.

I have shown that immobility as a collective practice is reflective of the master discourse of *permanence*. Striving for cultural permanence, some communities are seeking to perpetuate their life along the coast in fear of dissipating their identities, social fabric, and cultural ontologies. Intertwined with resentments against the state and desire for freedom, sense of place and political culture are immense deterrents to mobility.

Conclusions: Embracing permanence and the longing for immobility in Louisiana's climate narrative



Photo 28. - Louisiana landscapes

Source: Sarah Munoz (2022)

Making my way across the bayous of Southeast Louisiana, I was struck by the serenity of its rural tapestry. The further I drove down toward the Gulf, the more dominant nature became, homes and human activities blending in with the landscapes. But occasionally, against the vastness and tranquility of the surrounding marshlands, industrial intrusions stood out in a poignant reminder of the region's paradoxes. A few times, I drove my van over the levees to look out into the Gulf and gaze at the wetlands. The marshes gradually dissipated before turning to open water and revealing the immensity of the water's breadth. The roads meandering around the crumbling shore

felt like a balancing act between an encroaching nature and the preservation of our access to the depth of the bayous. Down the roads of Plaquemines, Lafourche or Terrebonne, various efforts to hold off storm surges and rising tides also melted into the landscape. The evidence of vulnerability was striking and testified to the challenges of grappling with the region’s changes and disruptions.



Photo 29. - Roadside walls and sandbags, Plaquemines Parish

Source: Sarah Munoz (2022)

Why aren’t communities exposed to climate change moving as expected? This is the question I have attempted to answer throughout this thesis. I have inscribed this problem in the continuation of Boas et al.’s (2019:901) critique of the migration-as-adaptation “self-referencing narrative” whereby large-N analyses have projected movement as an expected response to climate vulnerability. Instead, I have shown that mobility and immobility are spectrums along which political, economic, and social dimensions interact to structure processes of adaptation. Conceiving of immobility as a *collective* process, rather than an individual-level one, I have uncovered the conditions of its *institutionalization* in the context of Southeast Louisiana.

Research on climate change has long focused on mitigating greenhouse gas emissions. While adaptation has, in the past decade, risen to the forefront of scientific concerns, it remains an understudied topic among political scientists (Javeline, 2014; Dolšak and Prakash, 2018). More specifically, analysis of mobility as adaptation has been described as a new research frontier for the understanding of the human impacts of climate change (Adger et al., 2015). But while climate mobility studies have gained prominence in the past two decades, immobility as a legitimate object

has been largely overlooked (Zickgraf, 2019; Wiegel et al., 2021; Thornton et al., 2023). This thesis has zoomed in on the intricacies of immobility as a *collective* and *institutionalized* practice to nuance the unidimensional concept of “trapped populations” (Black et al., 2011a). To understand how immobility is made, I have sought to capture the influence of the three main “building blocks” of political science – institutions, interests, and ideas (Hecl, 1994: 375). I have investigated the context of Southeast Louisiana and three parishes in particular – Plaquemines, Lafourche and Terrebonne – as typical cases of climate vulnerability, both slow and onset (land loss and flooding) and sudden (from extreme weather events). Through the theoretical framework of critical discursive institutionalism, I have captured the construction, institutionalization, and legitimation of adaptation and immobility practices. In this neo-Marxist perspective, I have called attention to their underlying ideas and the structuring forces through which power and hegemony are enacted and consent for adaptation is secured. I sought to define the *master discourse* which undergirds immobility policies and practices, meaning the interwoven dominant discourses that inform the direction of polity and provide a vision for political elites. This conceptual tool enabled me to theorize the shared interpretations, ideas, and worldviews of *permanence* (Schmidt, 2008). I argue that the master discourse of *permanence* is reflective of, and aims to secure, hegemonic extractivist interests, reproduced and embedded within broader political institutions and at the heart of adaptive practices (Schmidt, 2002).

The demonstration was sectioned into two theoretical chapters and five empirical chapters to uncover the macro and meso level mechanisms of climate immobility and their expression in policies and practices. In Chapter 1, I engaged with current academic debates and concepts relating to “trapped populations” and the study of immobility, and presented the discursive institutionalist approach used in this investigation of interests, institutions, and ideas. Chapter 2 then exposed the methods of data collection and analysis and provided context for the Louisianan case study. Starting the empirical demonstration in Chapter 3, I examined the structural interests that have permeated political decision-making processes in the State, and which allow us to understand the fabric of environmental policies discussed in Chapter 4. I then showed in Chapter 5 how the normative legitimation of these extractivist interests in coastal restoration have shaped beliefs about extreme weather events and vulnerabilities, reinforcing skepticism and agnostic adaptation among decisionmakers and the public. These interests and beliefs, I argued in Chapter 6, have been conducive to the use of infrastructures and elevations as primary adaptation tools, further

entrenching the desire for permanence among low-lying communities, local elected officials, and state leaders. This desire for immobility has also been shaped by strong land attachments and a libertarian political culture described in Chapter 7, whereby heavy mistrust in government institutions and the absence of state welfare have individualized resilience, reducing capacities and aspirations for mobility. This cultural and ideational dimension, I argue, sustains the institutionalization of immobility.

This concluding chapter will present and discuss the primary results of this research, before delving into its contributions, both theoretical and empirical, and its limitations. I will end this thesis by discussing some policy lessons for the governance of climate immobility, as well as potential avenues for future research.

1. Main results

Climate immobility is not simply the product of individual-level factors of decision making about adaptation. As I have shown in Chapter 1, early research has attributed the movement and non-movement of individuals to material capacity, considering immobility as a failure to adapt and migration as a rational and effective adaptation strategy (Black et al., 2011b; Nawrotzki and DeWaard, 2018; Ayeb-Karlsson et al. 2018). In this thesis, however, I have defended the conceptualization of immobility as a *collective* and *institutionalized* phenomenon. I have found evidence for what Norgaard (2006) has called “socially organized denial” in the form of *managed immobility*, meaning the fabric of immobility by institutional actors.

As per the discursive institutionalist tradition, institutions are structures internal to political agents, whose ideational and discursive abilities allow us to capture institutional change and stasis – in this case, the legitimation and institutionalization of climate immobility practices (Schmidt, 2008). I have been able to identify both normative and cognitive ideas that enable this institutionalization. Cognitive ideas are constitutive of interests and serve to justify policies by identifying problems and solutions (e.g., *naturalized* weather events and infrastructural adaptation), while normative ideas legitimize these policies by drawing on collective ideas and norms shared by the public (e.g., *agnostic* vulnerability, *oil culture* and attachments to land) (Schmidt, 2008). Through these cognitive and normative ideas, political and economic elites have actively constituted a global frame of reference (the *permanence* master discourse) for the interpretation of climate change risk

and policy solutions. In line with discursive institutionalist thought, I have found evidence for the *discourse structuration* of adaptation and climate change (the hegemonic framing of the coastal crisis around *agnostic* beliefs) and the *institutionalization of discourse*, meaning the transformation of structures or practices in ways that embody and amplify hegemonic discourses downplaying climate risks (Carvalho, 2008). The demonstration made in this research shows that the *permanence master discourse*, penetrates ideas and public policies, and rationalizes the institutionalization of immobility (Figure 10).

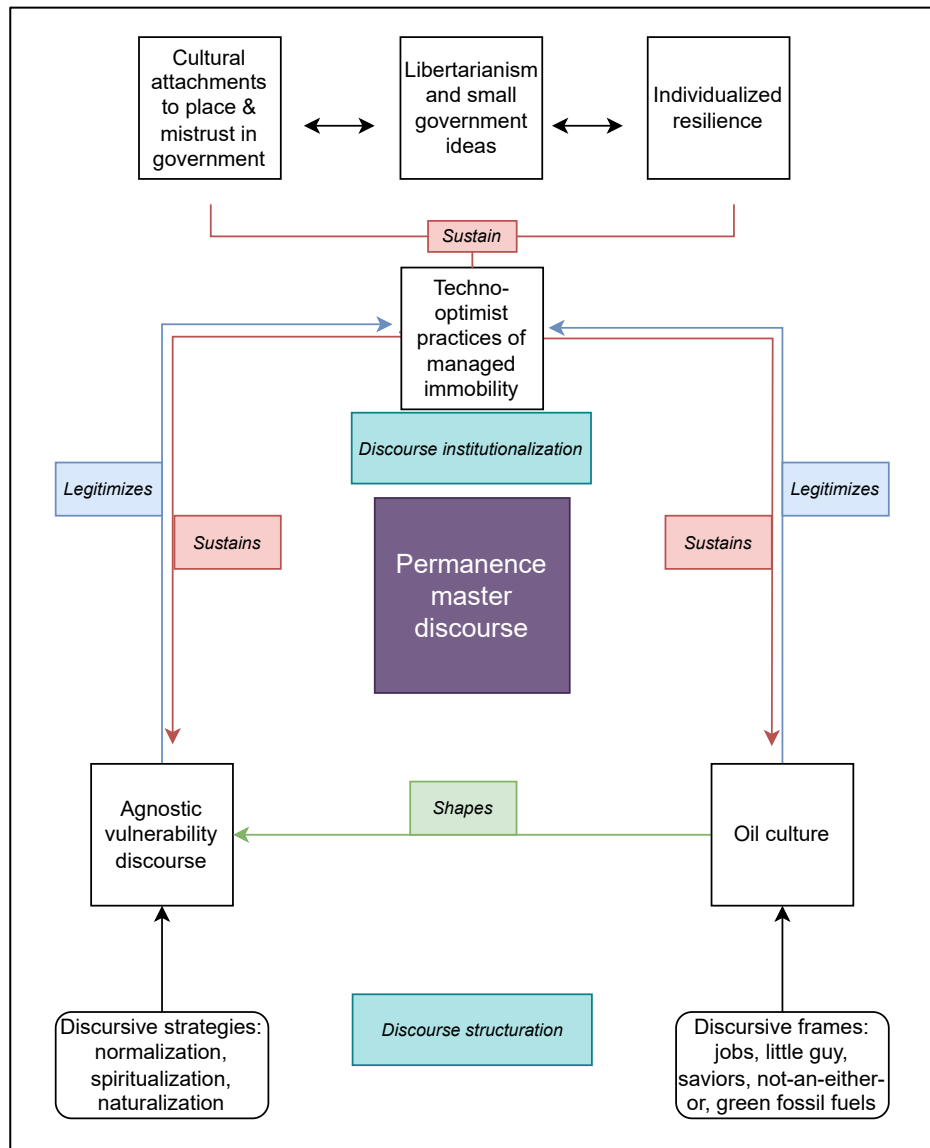


Figure 10. – Theorizing the master discourse of *permanence*

It first takes shape in the desire to maintain macroeconomic structures based on the continued production of fossil fuels and entrench the political support for oil and gas into the fabric of a societal *oil culture* (Chapters 3 and 4). It is also co-constructed through political discourses emphasizing the desirable eternality of life and economic activities despite recognition of ecological vulnerabilities (Chapter 6) and resonates with coastal Louisianans' attachment to their lands and livelihoods and desire for multigenerational life in southern regions (Chapter 7). My findings highlight the normative functions of discourse which mobilizes societal values and norms to legitimize *permanence* in political programs and policies. This embedment is enabled by what Gramsci (1971) identifies as an essential element of ideological hegemony, the assurance of public consent, meaning that ideas enable elites to frame adaptation policies to secure their own interests, and in doing so, forge consent and normative legitimacy for hegemonic representations of risk and climate change. Oil culture (Chapter 3), climate skepticism (Chapter 5), values of freedom and libertarianism and community attachments to land (Chapter 7) are used to legitimize immobility. These ideas circumscribe the contours of public debates on adaptation policies (notably around elevations, insurance, and infrastructures), and inform the public's appraisal of climate risk (Schmidt, 2002; 2008) (Chapter 6).

In the case of Louisiana, extractivist interests embedded in the Dominant Social Paradigm (DSP) have exerted a structuring force on the way institutions and policy makers forge ideas and policies to adapt to a changing climate. The Dominant Social Paradigm refers the American society's dominant and institutionalized values, beliefs, and ideologies foundational to collective environmental attitudes (Dunlap and Van Liere, 1984). It forms a structuring ideational base onto which interests are formed and co-constructed, meaning that the ideas and interests of political agents are co-constructed through the Dominant Social Paradigm. The DSP is built on the belief in human ingenuity and domination over nature, facilitating neoliberal extractivist practices, unlimited economic growth, and economic individualism (Catton and Dunlap, 1980; Murrey and Mollett, 2023). In Louisiana's petro-culture, oil and gas have become deeply engrained into the fabric of political identities and institutions (Parent, 2006; Theriot, 2014) (Chapter 3).

This entrenchment of oil and gas industry interests in politics, through the capture of government and the state's failure to rein in fossil fuel influence, has shaped the way environmental policy is framed and construed. I have shown that the state's choice of coastal restoration and hard

infrastructures of protection over other forms of social adaptation, despite their inherent shortcomings for long-term adaptation and reduction of threats, is the result of the energy industry's power in governance (Chapter 4). With the goal of protecting an extractivist economy, these policy choices have been legitimized by various discursive devices and narratives. Elected officials and economic elites have sought to secure consent through material and immaterial representations using the *jobs* and *little guys* frames, which instrumentalize Cajun identities and livelihood security by playing on communities' dependence to a fragile fossil fuel economy (Chapter 3). Discursively, the State has also mobilized the *working coast* imagery which aims to position extractivist practices as essential to coastal restoration programs, anchoring the belief in the compatibility between fossil fuels and adaptation, and entrenching the state's dependence on non-renewable energies (Chapter 4). These discourses and interests are at the core of the *permanence master discourse*, which ultimately serves to provide normative legitimacy for the preservation of structural economic institutions.

Louisiana's Dominant Social Paradigm has been conducive to the sustainability of what Post (2023) calls imperialist modes of living. Nascent of both subjectivities and everyday practices derived from extractivism, this concept reflects the internalization of norms and attachments to a paradigm in which material security is protected, and which subjects want to preserve. Some commentators have interpreted the increased engagement of oil and gas corporations toward non-fossil energies and technologies as evidence for the sector's willing economic transition (Bach, 2017). But I argue that in the Louisianan context, the simultaneous embrace of carbon capture and storage technologies and the political defense of continued production reveals their reluctance to structural change. This conclusion echoes Andreasson's (2005) notion of *economism*, the belief in inviolable and sacrosanct profits and growth. In that regard, environmental and climatic adaptation is important so long as it does not interfere with the satisfaction of the industry's interests.

Aiming to ensure economic productivity and protect populations and industrial structures from extreme weather events, state and local political officials have engaged in the *puzzle* strategy (Chapter 6). This policy strategy is legitimized by the desire to "seal in the coast"⁶¹⁴ using large-

⁶¹⁴ Terrebonne Parish council meeting, Houma, 21.08.11

scale infrastructures, essentially forming a puzzle of levees, seawalls, flood gates and pumps. But securing material and immaterial interests through these accommodation and protection projects also supposes the maintenance of a resident population to prolong industrial activities and legitimize the millions spent on infrastructural developments. The provision of services to rural communities in Louisiana is already strained by a limited tax base and the scarcity of resources for local governments (Jerolleman, 2020). Striving to preserve southern areas, relocation has been largely unpopular in public policy to avoid their further depopulation, the loss of tax bases and economic activities (Alexander et al., 2012; Koslov, 2016). Instead, immobility has been sold by the promise of infrastructures of protection, while elevations have been pushed, in both policy and discourse, as the most effective form of adaptation (Manning Broome et al., 2015). But while these strategies are encouraging non-movement, they are also reducing some residents' ability to engage in other forms of adaptation by "trapping" them physically and materially, and reducing their perceptions of long-term risk.

Beyond hard infrastructure, adaptation also requires the implementation of what Dolšak and Prakash (2018) term soft infrastructure, meaning the social, organizational and technical capacities of social systems to respond to climate stress. The state's approach is inscribed in a larger tendency of policymakers to favor hard infrastructural protection over other mechanisms of adaptation (the enhancement of social capital and resilience) because it "allows leaders to demonstrate that they are solving a problem" (Dolšak and Prakash, 2018:330). As we've seen in Chapter 6, this has been explicit in local and state officials' self-congratulatory discourses on the efficacy of pumps, drainage, and levee systems after hurricanes and the completion of their *puzzle*. But this strategy devoid of social adaptation has disregarded long-term solutions, amplifying what professor Horowitz (2019) warns is a "looming crisis" for Louisianan's flood protection, as banks, insurance companies and people start to leave the region. In Chapter 7, we've understood this absence of state concern for soft infrastructure as the result of a libertarian political culture, the disengagement of American politics from welfare and assistance, and the embrace of small government ideals.

Research has shown that reactive policies such as disaster relief are more rewarded by voters than proactive policies, creating further incentive for policymakers to disregard social adaptation (Healy and Malhotra, 2009). With the objective of achieving "long-term solutions to coastal protection" through hurricane protection infrastructure (L8), Louisianan governments have shaped

beliefs about the future by promulgating ideas of multigenerational permanence, made to secure specific interests along the coast (Chapter 7). In doing so, decisionmakers are actively resisting policy nudges from the federal state to prepare Americans to absorb some of the risks of living in flood-prone areas and to consider relocation, notably by raising national flood insurance costs – a form of libertarian paternalism from the federal government (Lustgarten, 2020; Thaler and Sunstein, 2008) (Chapter 6). The expressed desire to maintain population levels, and in some cases repopulate southern areas, testifies to the inherently dislocation of policy objectives between the State and federal governments in relation to adapting to climate change.

These assumptions about the feasibility of ensuring permanence through infrastructure is explained by the strong correlation between belief in technological solutions and lessened support for mitigating climate policies, as well as minimized perceptions of climate risks (Gifford, 2011; Sebilleau et al., 2022) (Chapter 5). Because it is reflective of the Dominant Social Paradigm, the *puzzle* strategy is premised on the efficacy of human ingenuity to stave off the sudden and slow onset of climatic and environmental hazards. It rests on a dissonance between the recognition of increasing risk and the public justification of engineering methods anchored in judgmental discounting, the act of undervaluing present and future risks of climate change (Gifford, 2011). As Barry (2016:107) explains, technology and techno-optimism “cannot be viewed in a vacuum as if it were free of political ideology, gender relations, culturally dominant views of the good life, or class and power relations within society.” Techno-optimism, in that regard, is a constitutive element of the Dominant Social Paradigm in which climate adaptation policies and practices are shaped. For this reason, the technology-focused strategy of governments in Louisiana to mitigate the effects of climate change cannot be viewed as neutral in the policy sphere (despite their proclaimed apolitical character) because they are fundamentally politicized. In fact, they play a crucial role in shaping Louisianans’ perceptions of risk and adaptive needs.

Studies have noted that proximity is a driver of belief and low levels of belief in the US can be due to lack of direct perception (Albright and Crow, 2019; Demski et al., 2017; Baccini and Leeman, 2021). Because climate events are highly tangible in Louisiana, my analysis investigated the hegemonic discursive representations of environmental issues as fundamentally shaping public and political interpretations (Chapter 5). My results are consistent with research on motivated reasoning suggesting that ideological predispositions rather than experience of climate change are

a better explanation in the case of Louisiana. This is not because such experiences don't shape behavior towards risk, but rather because adaptation strategies depend on the way people interpret that risk or experience and attribute its causes – in this case, as being related to anthropogenic climate change or not (Weber, 2013; Myers et al, 2013). Frames reveal ideological dispositions to climate change – and in turn, how they affect beliefs on climate change and the future. Thus, it is not just a matter of experiencing climate change, as some studies have suggested, it is about *how* they interpret that experience that shapes how they adapt – especially in relation to their comprehension of long-term risk and sustainable adaptation needs. Interpretations of future risks are fundamental because they influence adaptation strategies for both governments and communities. Disbelief in climate change – or at the very least, lack of acknowledgment of climate change in policymaking – fundamentally structures the views of long-term needs and reorient strategies away from relocation and mobility. This is because it fosters a false sense of security devoid of considerations for ever-increasing and intensifying climate change and anchors the belief in stable and unchanging conditions of vulnerability that can be addressed through infrastructural policies of protection (Chapter 6).

I have thus shown that this support for policies conducive to immobility are constituted by politicized beliefs in *agnostic vulnerability*, shaping interpretations of adaptation for the future (Chapter 5). Drawing on Kuh's (2015) concept of *agnostic adaptation*, I conceptualize the disconnect between the recognition of vulnerability and the reality of anthropogenic climate change as *agnostic vulnerability*. As Vulpe (2020:258) argues, perceptions of climate change play a big role in shaping temporality, especially as climate change skepticism forges interpretations of risk over the long term. This analysis confirms that the question of attribution matters for adaptation (Ogunbode et al., 2019; Elrick-Barr et al., 2016). Surveys have shown that flooding was a top concern for 91% of respondents in Southeast Louisiana. Two thirds of respondents identified wetland loss as a top concern and approximately half of the respondents expressed worry about the interrelated risks of sea-level rise, subsidence, saltwater intrusion, habitat loss, and erosion (Center for policy planning 2017:3). Yet, the absence of attribution of those impacts to anthropogenic climate change has greatly reduced support for policy options beyond coastal restoration and infrastructural protection. As Shafer (2006:122) and Kilbourne et al. (2002) remind us, "Individuals who are more committed to the DSP are less likely to adopt an ecological worldview, and less likely to be concerned about environmental issues." This suggests that while

the DSP does influence behaviors and attitudes, partisan attribution and cultural factors may also play into adaptation decisions.

Hochschild's (2016) ethnography of the Great Louisianan Paradox revealed how right-wing ideologies have shaped Louisianans' relation to the oil and gas industry and their own environmental vulnerability. These partisan attitudes, constitutive of the master discourse of *permanence*, permeate ideas about the need to adapt through mobility and the causes of vulnerability. Agnostic vulnerability discourse is constructed through the discursive *normalization, naturalization, and spiritualization* of climate events (i.e., referring to extreme weather events as *natural* in Louisiana, attributed to "Mother Nature", or linked to God). These discursive strategies are widely employed by elected officials to downplay anthropogenic climate change and feed into partisan disbelief and attitudes towards climate risk and *agnostic* adaptation.

In fact, politicians use exogenous events such as hurricanes and rain events to shape the terms of the debate and direct public attention to guide issue interpretation and framing (Callaghan and Schnell, 2005) (Chapter 5). This framing shapes problem attribution and reinforces partisan interpretations of weather events, reducing the ability of decisionmakers and residents to think about their increasing vulnerability and adaptation in the context of man-made climate change (Iyengar, 1996; Haider-Markel and Joslyn, 2001). Through discourse, political elites make salient certain interpretations of an event over others, direct or deviate attention to certain issues, affect public opinion and shape the political agenda (Entman, 1993; Matthes, 2011; De Vreese, 2005). This is efficient because beliefs are rigid, American opinions are resilient, and this leads to the internalization of a single frame of thinking about an issue – in this case about agnostic risk in the short to long term (Kinder and Nelson, 2005; Singh and Swanson 2017). In sum, conservative beliefs about the *normal* nature of extreme weather events lend credibility to the state's absence of proactive climate policy and mobility strategy in the long term by distorting interpretations of risk.

As Gifford (2011:291) reminds us, skepticism of climate change "leads to ignorance about (a) which specific actions to take, (b) how to undertake actions of which one is aware, and (c) the relative beneficial impacts of different actions." Uncertainty about climate change risks due to the skepticism espoused by Republicans and polluting industries also decreases demand for action on climate change among the public (Chapters 5 and 6). As such, biased perceptions of risk due to

uncertainty in the existence of climate change shape behaviors and responses to climate change. In the context of Louisiana, this includes reluctance to engage in relocation or support for mobility policies. This is because, as Tierney (1999) points out, the public's perceptions do not exist in a vacuum, and are shaped by the ways corporate and institutional actors frame risks. Risk assessment, in this sense, serves a political function. Denial of climate risk, therefore, is structurally embedded within social institutions, just as "individual acts of avoidance are socially structured" (Norgaard, 2011:212).

Finally, political culture, attachments to land and mistrust in governance have deepened some Southern Louisianans' desire to remain in their homes along the coast, legitimizing immobility practices and further entrenching the master discourse of *permanence* (Chapter 7). My findings show that the reluctance to engage in proactive mobility as an adaptation strategy emanates from the search for ontological security, meaning the desire to maintain identities connection to their environment (Wiegel et al., 2021). In Louisiana, the *tenacity of home* is particularly poignant for those communities whose livelihoods depend on proximity to natural resources, or whose political histories have forced their settlement into the most southern parts of the coast (Marino, 2015; Barra, 2021; Brand and Baxter, 2020; Dalbom et al., 2014). This is especially the case for some Cajun communities, Vietnamese fishing communities, and Indigenous groups who have expressed the most resentment and mistrust toward government institutions⁶¹⁵. The necessity for certain communities to maintain connection to their traditional subsidence territories and their ways of life has been shown to greatly deter climate mobility for fear of losing social capital and cultural integrity (Wolsko and Marino, 2016; Kingston and Marino, 2010). Place, here, is fundamentally embedded in the sense of identity and its loss raises questions about the integration of cultural concerns and emotional attachments into the governance of migration.

Rooted in these attachments to place is the appeal of freedom and individualism, two core American values entrenched in collective political culture (de Tocqueville, 1848; Lakoff, 2006).

⁶¹⁵ This conclusion is based on existing ethnographic research on Louisianan communities and corroborated by my findings. However, although I have captured some individual voices in political meetings and interviews, I do not perceive them as necessarily representative of their whole communities due to limitations in data collection, and I consider that there exists intra-group disparities and contestations.

The individualization of adaptation, notably though the state's primary focus on large-scale infrastructure strategies, has further disconnected some community members from the desire to engage with government-led adaptation. The collapse of the American welfare state and the inability and unwillingness of local governments to assist residents in adapting has further fragilized their social and economic capital, compromising their adaptive capacities and mobility perspectives (Adger, 2003; Bronen, 2010; 2014; Fernando et al., 2010). In essence, I argue that economic and material stress reinforces immobility. It takes root in American libertarianism and the workfare state which have individualized the charge of adaptation and disengaged the state from questions of mobility. Should adaptation in place be the most viable strategy for these communities, the structure of governance and social systems must be reimagined (Wolsko and Marino, 2016).

2. Discussion: redefining “trapped populations” and immobility

Communities vulnerable to climate change – especially Indigenous communities – have generally been depicted as “victims” or “security threats” in media coverage engaging in hyperbolic and dramatic storytelling about climate change (Marino and Schweitzer, 2016; Ayeb-Karlsson et al., 2022). This research aims to move beyond the victimizing narrative of the “trapped population” figure (Ayeb-Karlsson et al., 2022). Instead, I have found that institutions may exert a *trapping* force on communities, moving our understanding of immobility beyond materialist explanations.

My analysis has shown that immobility is located along a spectrum of choice and constraint, molded by different political and social processes which influence perceptions of risk, opportunities for adaptation and ideas about mobility. Through these findings, this thesis engages with Schewel's (2019) and Carling's (2002) reflections on the aspiration-capability framework for immobility, designed to bridge structural constraints to movement and individual aspirations to stay. By providing a meso-level perspective through the exploration of governance mechanisms, ideas, and discourses, I show that communities may have low capability due to maladaptive policy choices but also low aspiration for movement for cultural and political reasons.

Reflecting on Schewel's three immobilities – voluntary, acquiescent and involuntary – this demonstration engages with the idea that immobilities are not mutually exclusive nor fixed in time, but instead the result of convergent historical political and social processes which blur the line

between voluntary and forced non-movement. I have shown that mobility decision making is the result of retain, repel and internal factors which constrain and compel them to stay at different points in time, informing the spectrum of choice in adaptation (Schewel, 2019). For many Southern Louisianan residents and Indigenous communities, like that of Grand Bayou in Plaquemines for example, immobility is a choice borne out of the desire to remain close to the Gulf of Mexico, on ancestral lands and away from large urban centers. But it is also the result of a lack of government assistance for planned relocation and buy-outs. For others, acquiescence is manifested in the widespread use of home elevations which expresses both the willingness to remain and restricts the ability to leave. For some Cajun fishermen, staying close to the water is a decision molded by identity and emotional attachments to a certain way of life, as well as financial and economic imperatives relating to their activities, whether in the fishing or energy industries. These micro-level behaviors are the result of larger meso- and macro-level processes that have institutionalized immobility at this point in time, molding the spectrum on which individuals engage in different types of immobility.

Conceptualizing immobility as multifactorial, rather than simply a choice, an imposition, or the result of low material capacity, may thus be a better way to grasp the complex reality of simultaneous voluntariness and involuntariness in *in situ* adaptation. Central to this interpretation is the causal role of ideas. Ideas are crucial to the making of climate (im)mobility because they interact with social structures and identities to secure public consent for the hegemony and satisfaction of elite interests (Bernstein, 2001; Gramsci, 1971). In the case of Louisiana, ideas and discourses are fundamental to understanding *why* immobility is pursued in policy and legitimized. They also allow us to identify the process of *non-decision* around movement which leads to the institutionalization of immobility. Non-decisions, meaning the gap between expressed political ambition (addressing climate risk) and the limited actions undertaken, illuminate the constraints placed on proactive adaptation policy. Jobert (2023) highlights that non-decisions are the result of a problem being overshadowed by dominant values and frames of reference that are not conducive to its incorporation into the political agenda, as well as a lack of policy instruments capable of addressing it. For mobility policy to emerge, therefore, ideas, discourses, and political agendas must align with institutional capacity and political will. As Norgaard (2011) has noted of socially organized denial, Americans' non-response to climate change is anchored in the societal desire to keep going "as normal", and the failure to incorporate knowledge of increasing climate risk into

their sense of reality. My findings thus lend support to previous research on American inaction and non-decisions on climate change by going deeper into the institutionalization of maladaptive practices and non-movement as a legitimized political program.

“Trapped populations”, therefore, are best conceptualized beyond micro-level material conditions to reflect the underlying structural governance processes that fashion (im)mobility. With this in mind, I propose a reinterpretation of the notion of “trap” – not as a passive state of being for communities, but as a political effect or action constructed through interweaving interests, ideas and institutions. In essence, immobility is best conceived through the “trapping” forces exerted and construed at the structural, macropolitical and policy levels. Immobility in itself is not necessarily a failure to adapt, but must instead be viewed through the degree of maladaptation that it produces. Policy failure with regards to (im)mobility, therefore, pertains to the disengagement of the state, the individualization of the burden of adaptation, and the lack of policy planning for both mobility *and* immobility.

Ayeb-Karlsson et al. (2022) also raised concerns about the unethical nature of the “trapped” figure, because it is based on authoritative declarations of uninhabitability, involuntariness in non-movement, and of where people should reside and how they should adapt. “The gravity of the way that the trapped figure is framed lies in the narration of immobility as a problem” (p.17). This thesis did not aim to reproduce narratives of fear around the “trapped” figure (or the “climate refugee” symbol), nor does it subscribe to the idea of immobility as a failure to adapt (Munoz, 2024). Instead, it warns of the potential outcomes of poor policymaking and maladaptive practices on communities whose vulnerability to climate change has been politically, historically, and socially constructed. Identifying the “trapping” effect of ideas, interests, and institutions in this research does not pass judgment on the *need* for relocation or on residents’ decisions regarding their own adaptation. I do not aim to critique their rationality or agency in participating in cultural and political institutions, nor do I deny the contestations or resistances that exist among communities. The objective here is not to predict or prescribe, but to identify the shortcomings of policymaking in the context of increasing vulnerabilities to climate change. As Marino and Ribot (2012) remind us, maladaptation is borne of the unevenly distributed vulnerabilities to climate risk, produced by sociopolitical and economic processes which marginalize, exploit, and exclude vulnerable populations. It can occur from poor policy planning at the service of political interests

and can enhance the exposure of communities to climate change impacts. As private insurers are retreating out of Louisiana, Florida, and California, amongst others, it seems urgent to reconsider the viability of individualized adaptation and market-based incentives for resilience in the fabric of US policy (Flavelle et al., 2023; Crowley, 2023). This thesis has shown that maladaptive governance can increase the vulnerability of North American communities, which remain understudied in much of the literature on mobility and adaptation (Piguet et al., 2018). In fact, I argue, the question of climate migration-as-adaptation must be asked beyond the field's focus on the Global South because Western nations have shown the limits of their political and social systems in responding to the climate change problem, and the complex consequences of path dependent maladaptive practices.

My findings suggest a failure of American policymakers to endorse relocation and expand policymaking to alternative adaptation strategies because of the reluctance to revisit unsustainable development practices along the shorelines (Bukvic and Owen, 2017). These maladaptive practices are resulting in reactive disaster management and a failure to plan for inevitable population movements. They will ultimately result in overwhelmed urban centers and engorged urban infrastructures, deepening socioeconomic inequalities in adaptive capacity (Hauer et al. 2017; Adger et al., 2015). While these reactive and maladaptive practices remain prominent in most Western nations, some recent examples of proactive relocation management are emerging. In Miquelon, for example, French authorities are beginning to plan community resettlement in response to the threat of rising seas (Ostre-mer la 1ère, 2023). But in the case of Louisiana, evidence shows these policy practices are still far and few. Even in the case of the Isle de Jean Charles, designed as a “prototype” for future community relocations, the State's mismanagement and disregard for community input dented the project's success (Baurick, 2022). The attribution of relocation funds through the National Disaster Resilience Competition further illustrates the neoliberalization of adaptation, and the shortsighted efforts of governments in addressing community needs in the context of climate change.

Some commentators have noted that the failing of proactive social adaptation is imprinted into the fabric of American practices. “Americans have been conditioned not to respond to geographical climate threats as people in the rest of the world do”, wrote Lustgarten (2020) in the New York Times. They are “more insulated from the shocks of climate change. They are distanced from the

food and water sources they depend on, and they are part of a culture that sees every problem as capable of being solved by money”. Expanding analysis of climate mobilities and “trapped populations” beyond developing contexts thus proves pertinent to illuminate the normative implications of poor adaptation governance and the making of vulnerability at our doors.

It also moves the conversation towards the identification of structural factors and thresholds to understand adaptation needs and (im)mobility pathways (Adger et al., 2009; McLeman, 2018). This research invites perspectives on immobility and “trapped populations” to look beyond the search for “Western managed and controlled strategies of assisted migration, planned relocation, and resettlement” and to rethink what many have defined as the “age of migration” (Ayeb-Karlsson et al., 2022:17; Schewel, 2019: 20). Rejecting the idea that “trapped” communities *must* be rendered mobile, I argue for greater attention to be given to the needs, wants and contexts of climate-vulnerable communities. This responds to what Gaillard (2012) has termed the “climate gap”, the significant disparity between the amount of attention given to climate change on the international political scene, and considerations for everyday concerns of communities at risk. The disconnect between local realities and systems of governance has fostered colorblind adaptation and disregard for populations’ lived experiences (Koslov, 2019). Immobility, as it has been conceptualized through the “trapped” population concept, is also an expression of this climate gap.

3. Contributions

This research has provided novel perspectives on communities immobilized in contexts of high climate vulnerability. The following section discusses both theoretical and empirical contributions.

3.1. Theoretical contributions

This thesis’ first contribution is the novel empirical and theoretical knowledge it provides to the field of climate adaptation and (im)mobilities from a political and discursive perspective. Traditional approaches to immobility have conferred onto “trapped populations” an exclusively economic character, often neglecting structural political and ideational conditions related to non-movement and conceiving of immobility as a failure to adapt (Felli and Castree, 2012; Zickgraf, 2019; Black et al., 2011b). Going beyond this perspective, I have investigated the polity, policy, and political dimensions of climate adaptation to capture broader socioeconomic processes

conducive to the institutionalization of immobility (Reiseigl, 2008). By investigating the “3Is” (ideologies, interests, and institutions) from a critical discursive institutionalist approach, this thesis adds to the neo-institutionalist literature and provides novel, fertile ground for investigating structural and political processes of climate adaptation beyond materialist frameworks.

Although other research perspectives such as historical institutionalism could be helpful to grasp the construction of policymaking, my consideration of immobility as, simultaneously, an outcome of policy, a behavior, and an adaptation strategy, suggests that classic theories are insufficient to capture its varying ideational, discursive, cultural, economic, and social dimensions. My eclectic framework also expands the use of critical discourse and framing theories beyond traditional analyses of media communication or public opinion, venturing into the analysis of ideology, power, and hegemony of elites at the institutional level. In this critical discourse approach, discursive practices are “both structuring and structured actions”, bridging about macro and micro-level system reproduction, and enabling us to make sense of meaning-making and a practice-making processes of immobility (Weiss et Wodak, 2003 :10). This enables me to bridge the commonalities of critical discourse analysis (the strategic functions of discourse in the reproduction of dominance and hegemony) and discursive institutionalism (whereby discourses legitimize and disperse dominant knowledge, beliefs and practices, and reinforce power structures within a society). I contribute to a better understanding of the circulation of ideas and their effects on (im)mobility practices within institutional contexts. In doing so, I have responded to Purdon’s (2015) call for a deeper exploration of the linkages between climate change, the state, markets and society.

I also engaged with the nascent literature on climate immobility by providing an under-researched ideational perspective, viewing ideas as a moderator for beliefs about vulnerability and adaptation. The literature’s focus on the economic conditions of non-movement has fostered bias in our understanding of “trapped” populations, and this thesis has attempted to address this considerable gap (Ayeb-Karlsson et al., 2018; Cattaneo et al., 2019). I draw on Gramscian perspectives on cultural and ideological hegemony, as well as political theories of perceptions of risk and partisan beliefs to understand climate immobility, and make a notable contribution to broaden and refine theoretical approaches to climate mobilities in general. By importing political science theories to the study of climate non-movement, I have moved beyond the micro and macro-level focus of the

literature (Chapter 1), instead showing ideas as a structuring force in governance and group behaviors.

Finally, I have introduced the concept of *managed immobility* to further politicize the making of immobility beyond individual-level decision making processes. Due to the relative novelty of immobility as an object of study in its own right, non-movement has not yet been conceptualized as an institutionalized and programmatic policy tool. The concept of *managed immobility* echoes (and is opposite to) the established concept of “managed retreat”, which constitutes the third primary risk mitigation policy after accommodation and protection policies (Alexander et al., 2012; Koslov, 2016). I define *managed immobility* as government planning for the non-movement of populations, businesses, and infrastructure despite increasing climate risks, based on the fundamental belief in infrastructural and technological solutions and with the objective of maintaining populations and economic structures in place. This concept reflects the programmatic nature of *in situ* policies which aim to prevent large-scale and progressive retreat of populations and industries. *Managed immobility* is not prescriptive in nature, but rather acts as a theoretical tool to capture the political and structural foundations of immobility, meaning that non-movement is the result of broader government and policy processes that shape opportunities for adaptation. This concept aims to bring to light the drivers of mobility, those political factors which drive migration and that have scantily been included in the study of climate (im)mobility to date (McLeman, 2019). Capturing the institutionalization process of immobility through the concept of *managed immobility* thus brings to light the decisive role of macro and meso-level interests, political ideologies, and governance practices.

3.2. Empirical contributions

The empirical contributions of this research are fourfold. First, in moving beyond the general tendency of the climate mobility literature to focus on large-N estimations of movement or to view immobility as an individual or community-level decision, this thesis offers novel data on (im)mobility as a collective and politically structured phenomenon. As I have shown in the literature review (Chapter 1), the study of climate mobility has often aggregated experiences to establish patterns of movement (Myers, 1993; Byravan and Rajan, 2010); or zoomed in on small-scale cultural communities, such as small Pacific islands Kiribati and Tuvalu, the Alaskan Indigenous community of Shishmaref, or villages in the Peruvian Andes (Farbotko and

McMichael, 2019; Marino, 2015; Adams, 2016). In this research, I engage in macro and meso-level analysis of a single case study to show that immobility can also be understood within its broader institutional and social context.

Second, I provide original data on the *institutionalization* of climate immobility and the role of political forces within state processes. Research has focused on mobility outcomes, whether short or long term at the expense of more comprehensive understandings of non-movement (Black et al., 2013). In the most prominent theories of mobility, immobility is considered a negative outcome of a failure to adapt, notably in the context of exposure to climate disasters whereby poorer individuals are “trapped” by their conditions (Ayeb-Karlsson et al., 2022). My findings show, however, that immobility is a factor of larger institutional processes and structural conditions whereby communities may both choose and be compelled to non-movement by external (environmental and political) and internal (social and cognitive) forces. In providing such nuance, I have offered empirical data on the real-life, contextual experience of immobility for communities experiencing the devastating effects of climate change. I have shown how decision-making processes are complex, contested, and legitimized, carefully recording the political processes that underlie (mal)adaptation and (im)mobility.

Third, I have engaged in innovative techniques of data collection in the highly unusual context of a global pandemic. Although netnography has become quite developed and well-documented, it focuses on social activities occurring in virtual spaces, such as social media (Hine, 2015; Kozinets, 2010). In contrast, I have used online methods as a gateway, a lens through which to observe phenomena taking place in the “real” world. The combination of online and on-site qualitative data collection offers many advantages to grasp a full, comprehensive picture of the institutionalization process of climate immobility. While the pandemic restricted my access to micro-level data, it also allowed me to capture broader political mechanisms by multiplying sites for observations, which would not have been observable through conventional ethnographic work. This type of online methodology remains underutilized and under-researched and thus represents a significant methodological contribution to political science and climate mobility studies. It also signifies the untapped potential of using virtual observations of political meetings to expand the scope of data collection in qualitative methods through online mediums, benefiting from new modes of communication used by institutional actors in a wider range of instances and places of political

action. The notion of multisite ethnography has been used and debated in the field of anthropology since the 1980s, but its development in political science remains timid (Hannerz, 2003). Using online and offline worlds as different sites in which political practices and ideas are developed enable triangulation and robustness for ethnographic data (Roginsky, 2020).

Finally, and in the same vein, the use of meeting ethnography in conjunction with multisite online-on-site research has provided novel empirical insights on the pertinence of collecting data on the institutional processes of climate (im)mobility. Online, direct non-participant observation of political meetings as a tool has been largely under-utilized in climate mobility studies, to the extent of my knowledge. Meetings as arenas where power is structured and distributed, and where actors debate, negotiate, and articulate ideas, offer a promising space for research (Sandler and Thedvall, 2017; Brown et al., 2017). This methodological choice, therefore, makes a valuable contribution to the more traditional ethnographic approach usually mobilized in the study of climate adaptation and vulnerability.

In sum, this thesis offers significant theoretical and empirical contributions on the object of climate immobility, which is “at best, in its infancy” in both the fields of political science and climate mobilities (Thornton et al., 2023:2). In environmental policy, I have developed conceptual tools to grasp the effects of policymaking on climate adaptation and immobility, an object of study rendered invisible in political studies by a “consistent focus on movement” (Black and Collyer, 2014:52; Lubkemann, 2008; Shewel, 2019). In the field of climate mobilities, I have introduced a critical discursive institutionalist approach that has been fruitful to deepen existing theories on “trapped” populations and integrate a political science perspective and methodology to the study of immobility and its *institutionalization*, a field largely dominated by economic or cultural approaches (Zickgraf, 2019; Ayeb-Karlsson et al., 2018). The finesse of multisite online and on-site data collection and the study of political meetings have also offered a promising new approach and a refined understanding of the collective processes and experiences of climate adaptation. Overall, questions of governance and institutions have generally been absent from the study of climate (im)mobility, leaving ample space for political science contributions (Thornton et al., 2023).

4. Limits

Despite clear advantages to virtual fieldwork, such as the multiplicity of instances of observations and the increased accuracy of data collection, this method also has limitations. The first is in the bias it creates in the observation of discourses by filtering those without access to technology (Irani, 2019; Santana et al., 2021; Sah et al., 2020; Moyle et al., 2020). I concur with Otto and Haase's (2021) reflections on the effects of the pandemic on representational justice for marginalized or stigmatized peoples, and their ability to participate in research in times of virtual data collection. Although governments deploying online outreach enabled greater transparency of political processes during the pandemic, it also simultaneously restricted access to public forums for some groups, including those less technologically inclined. Public meetings on Zoom for example, while providing the ability for long-distance observation, created a bias in the type of persons able to engage in political processes. In fact, I noted an over-representation of organized interest groups in public forums held entirely online, such as the three Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion virtual public meetings held by the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority⁶¹⁶. These meetings attracted national and regional non-profit organizations and professional activists almost exclusively. Very few residents attended, despite the highly controversial nature of this project and extensive in-person contestation of local stakeholders.

This disparity in virtual engagement is an obstacle to capturing residents' and communities' perspectives, because it creates a bias in the type of participants present in political meetings – often politicized, well-versed in institutional processes, and with strongly defined opinions on issues. As a result, reaching less politicized, less polarized opinions was more difficult from afar. Even in local settings such as parish council meetings, grievances were expressed by politicized residents whose presence in meetings was recurrent, and potentially less representative of their overall community. Nevertheless, I was able to balance out the relative polarization of these discourses through interviews. I asked respondents about specific ideas heard in observations to situate them within their discursive and political contexts and grasp whether they were common worldviews shared by a larger group. Exhaustivity for this type of data was also reached with the

⁶¹⁶ The Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion project is a highly contested adaptation project in Louisiana. Local residents and fishermen have organized against it at various levels of governance (State legislature, local parish councils...). Yet in the three virtual public forums held, only a handful of residents were able to attend, while NGOs composed the vast majority of attendees.

marked recurrence of topics and points of grievance across council meetings and public forums, ensuring their reliability for this analysis. Bias is further lessened by targeting macro and meso-level interpretations and practices of climate change adaptation. Nonetheless, it is important to note that, broadly speaking, online methods of observation and long-distance interviewing do pose challenges to the representativeness of individual resident discourses captured in political meetings.

Another limit of this data collection is capturing emotions. This was especially poignant in observations of the interactions between fishermen and state representatives in meetings of the Oyster and Shrimp task forces, amongst others. Their heated exchanges regarding the Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion project touched on issues related to cultural loss, economic precarity, sentiments of betrayal and heavy grievances toward the State, and was often heavily emotionally charged (tears, outbursts of anger...). Observing these scenes through the lens of a camera and the surface of a screen thwarts the researcher's ability to fully experience the emotions of a social conflict. In the case of telephone and Zoom interviews, the virtual nature of discussions also prevented the observation of body language, nonverbal cues, and more importantly in a couple of cases, my ability to provide comfort to persons experiencing emotional distress (also discussed by Irani (2019) as a major drawback of virtual interviewing).

Furthermore, the success of observations was dependent on technological accessibility and stability, on the part of both the researcher and the organizers of the meeting. In a handful of cases, organizers had failed to turn on the camera, or set it up to capture the full assembly, thus restricting my ability to watch the meeting and identify its participants. To use another example, the poor quality of the livestream of the protest organized by the Coalition Against Death Alley, in a context of high winds and surrounding traffic, significantly hampered audio quality. On a methodological note, observing demonstrations virtually also presents the inconvenience of inhibiting the experience of context, the before and after protest, and organic meetings and interviews with activists. The effects of these limits were mitigated by the high number of observations which enabled me to reach exhaustivity in data collection despite some technical challenges.

Another limitation of this research is the lack of detailed data on the differentiated experience of immobility within social groups. I have been able to identify broad tendencies among communities, such as some Cajun fishermen who I have found to be more reluctant to engage in

movement from observations and interviews, or Indigenous communities who have been more vocal about their desire for relocation, while simultaneously expressing worry and some reluctance for government-led resettlement perspectives. Nonetheless, I have not been able to go into depth about the particularities of these individual experiences and have essentialized communities for the sake of analysis. Although I have fulfilled my objective to assess immobility at macro and meso levels, I believe a more comprehensive understanding of the lived realities and disparate voices within those communities would be beneficial to provide a refined account of the effects of structural economic and political forces on individual and community adaptation. Though they were not the object of my study, accessing these individual experiences was made difficult in a context of high rurality and limited access to technology.

Similarly, the exclusion of Indigenous voices from my research can also be considered a limitation of my data, considering the salience of their vulnerability to climate change in Louisiana. In terms of observations, councils and state-level meetings were devoid of these voices, testifying of their political marginalization from decision-making processes. I also made the methodological choice of not including these communities in interview data collection because I could not ensure the necessary prolonged ethnographic immersion for the co-construction of a research protocol in the context of a global pandemic. As I have discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis, I also wanted to avoid contributing to these communities' research fatigue, knowing that residents of the Isle de Jean Charles, for instance, have been the object of many journalistic and academic inquiries sensationalizing them as America's first "climate refugees" (Boyd, 2019; Davenport and Robertson, 2016; Varney, 2019). Overall, while the search for individual micro-level voices was not the objective of this research because I sought to capture structural political processes of immobility, the lack of a more refined account of different groups' experiences can be considered a limitation and an avenue for further research.

5. Implications and policy lessons

Considering the social significance of these findings in a context of increasing climate change and social inequalities in the United States and abroad, this thesis offers a few political insights and lessons for the governance of climate vulnerabilities. As I have shown, it is fundamental to question the political forces that reduce adaptation opportunities and capacities, and to think about tools for proactive adaptation to climate change, should policymakers be willing and resources

available. Lessons learned from this case suggest that policies should focus not only on facilitating movement when appropriate and desired by communities, but also account for the effects of informal migration on host communities, as well as those who do not wish to leave or cannot afford to. Climate migrations must be governed from the perspective of populations leaving, those receiving them, and those who do not leave, and this has not been well incorporated into policy so far.

1. The importance of host communities

As Robinson et al. (2020) remind us, the impacts of sea-level rise will extend beyond American coastlines and exert disproportionate impacts on receiving communities in urban centers. Landlocked areas in the United States are expected to receive an influx of residents from coastal regions (Hauer et al., 2017). As this research has shown, these flows have already been happening in Southeast Louisiana in the form of rural-to-urban informal movements. In Plaquemines for example, the northern urban center Belle Chasse has seen a 121% population increase between 2000 and 2020 (Annex 15). In council meetings, the question of political representation and the inability of their infrastructure (schools, housing, hospitals, and other services) to account for these population shifts have been repeatedly invoked as a point of contention and concern. In fact, the Louisiana Strategic Adaptations for Future Environments process (LA SAFE) project concludes, “In lower-risk areas to which people are moving, tax bases are growing, but the infrastructure is overburdened” (G7:10). On the other side, communities that are losing residents are seeing their tax bases depleting and their ability to fund and provide services jeopardized. The absence of proactive management of population shifts for receiving and losing communities poses many risks, including strained infrastructure, poverty, lack of investments, housing, and unemployment (Adger et al., 2015). Opening a window into the future, Lustgarten (2020) further describes of American perspectives, “Such a shift in population is likely to increase poverty and widen the gulf between the rich and the poor. It will accelerate rapid, perhaps chaotic, urbanization of cities ill-equipped for the burden, testing their capacity to provide basic services and amplifying existing inequities.” Policies must therefore account for future informal processes of migration through improved building standards, land use practices, investments in infrastructure, services, and employment, in order to prevent many of the social risks associated with the lack of proactive policy planning for mobility.

2. Providing support for communities and individuals seeking to relocate or stay in place

This research has shown that residents willing to engage in proactive mobility are faced with little government support or planning. Financial, logistical, and material assistance should anticipate these needs, as well as enhance the preservation of community links and cultural bonds. LA SAFE, for example, calls for the establishment of a housing relocation fund to assist individuals in their desire to move (G8:128). Other research has suggested that policymakers consider relocation on a case-to-case basis to account for the cultural particularities of communities (Bukvic and Owen, 2017). Overall, there is a need to increase the resilience of mobile or immobile communities through alternative adaptation strategies beyond hard infrastructure, including social protection policies, agricultural climate mitigation assistance, enhanced social capital and technical capacities; and rural livelihood diversification (Cattaneo et al., 2019; Dolšak and Prakash, 2018; Ellis, 1998; IPCC, 2014). Future planning must support the self-determination of communities. It should address past inequities, such as the exclusion of marginalized communities from decision-making processes and colorblind adaptation policies that have further increased inequalities and inequities, and depoliticized coastal restoration and protection policies in Louisiana (Barra, 2021). The reduction of socioeconomic disparities in the ability to move or adapt *in situ* is fundamental to providing support and accounting for the differentiated needs of (im)mobile communities and individuals. Preparing for informal migration and progressive depopulation also entails supporting areas that are losing populations through cultural preservation and social policies to avoid social disarticulation and support those who wish to remain. In that regard, civil society implication is essential to offset the potential consequences of poorly managed top-down adaptation programs (Schade, 2013; Maldonado et al., 2013). Including local experiences and traditional knowledge in policy designs for smaller-scale projects can also support culturally centered governance that incorporates the needs of different communities in their adaptation choices. This would entail reframing the Master Plan around more of a participatory model of planning to include traditional ecological knowledge from coastal and marginalized voices, taking for example the LA SAFE project.

3. Addressing biased understandings of risk

Existing research, supported by the findings of this thesis, have shown that biased understandings of risk encourage life in risky areas and further decrease social and economic capacities to adapt

(Costas et al., 2015; Blennow et al., 2012; Elrick-Barr et al., 2016; Bukvic and Owen, 2017). Better communication through accurate flood risk maps is needed for residents to better understand their levels of climate exposure and make adaptation decisions accordingly. Conjointly, investments must be made in areas that will provide economic opportunities without inciting movement toward climate-vulnerable regions that could “trap” individuals through their personal investments in housing or elevations. Funding educational and training programs to divert jobs and employment toward more sustainable industries would also increase socioeconomic resilience while reducing allegiance to economic practices that are conducive to a biased understanding of risk. More concretely, this entails larger state investments in the renewable sector and the educational sector, which could prove difficult considering the extent to which the State is embedded in fossil fuel development and its existing struggle with providing education services, ranking 46th in the nation for education and 50th overall (US News, 2023).

6. Concluding remarks and avenues for future research

My objective with this research was to provide a more nuanced and contextualized perspective on why communities adapt the way they do. I have shown that adaptation is conditioned by structural political, economic, and social processes that influence the range of capabilities and aspirations of individuals and communities. Navigating the cultural intricacies of Southeast Louisiana was a window into the realities of climate change, its challenges, and contradictions, and into the complexities of social adaptation in a Western state. This case tells us many things about the difficulties of moving forward despite evidence of risk and vulnerability. The competing logics of governance and the actors who fashion collective immobility are still very much implicated in the making of adaptation at all levels. Gordon Dove, Terrebonne’s parish president at the time of this fieldwork, has since been named the new chairman of the CPRA (Hutchinson, 2024). During this fieldwork, he aggressively defended the parish’s infrastructural approach and framed immobility and repopulation as a positive outcome of the parish’s policy efforts. It stands to reason to think that in his position as the head of the state’s environmental agency, Dove will continue the state’s techno-optimist approach, further removing alternative adaptation strategies from its toolbox – including proactive mobility and social policy planning. Simultaneously, on the national stage, Louisiana Representative Mike Johnson (R) has become the new House speaker, further entrenching climate denialism and fossil fuel championing on the American political stage

(Friedman, 2023; Jackson, 2023). Challenged by Republican legislators, the Biden administration has also backtracked on its climate goals and re-opened more than 73 million acres of federal waters for leasing sales from oil and gas companies in the Gulf of Mexico (Chappell and Brady, 2023).

At the State level, the newly elected Republican Governor Jeff Landry has fervently defended the oil and gas sector, engaging with the jobs rhetoric, and dubbing climate change a “hoax” (Taylor, 2018). The new head of the gubernatorial office stands to undo much of the historic progress made by former Democratic Governor John Bel Edwards in recognizing and addressing the state’s climate crisis. In this changing course, Landry has promised to grow the fossil fuel industry and elected several prominent figures of the energy sector to key positions in the State Government to foster a better “business climate” within all environmental bureaucracies (Jones, 2024). Tyler Gray, one of the most influential fossil fuel lobbyists that I have followed during my fieldwork, was named Louisiana’s new Natural Resources Secretary; Tony Alford, president of a Terrebonne oilfield has become the chairman of the Governor’s Advisory Commission on Coastal Protection; and oil industry executive Benjamin Bienvenu the Commissioner of Conservation within the Department of Energy and Natural Resources. This overhaul of key environmental policy positions signals that the State of Louisiana is further ingraining and institutionalizing industry interests into government and moving deeper into climate change inaction and denialism.

Far from wanting to end this thesis on a discouraging note, I must point to the many promising avenues for future research offered by the topic of climate immobility. The fruitfulness of incorporating ideas into the study of adaptation suggests that a deeper exploration of the relationship between infrastructure policies and risk perceptions could shed light on policy feedback mechanisms in the context of climate change. Building on Simms’ (2021) ethnographic work in Lafourche which showed that the parish’s stronger infrastructural system decreased residents’ sense of personal risk, this perspective could inform the extent to which public investments influence public perceptions of climate change and attitudes toward risk mitigation strategies in a context of heightened climate risk. Another promising avenue for research revolves around the role of environmental and social activists in mobilizing civil society and decisionmakers for relocation and adaptation policy in Louisiana. While I have interviewed climate policy experts and organizers for this research, my analysis has not focused on their role

in shaping policies and ideas about adaptation. The data has shown, however, their presence in the policy arena and the complex dynamics and imbalance between powerful energy industry interests and ecological voices in influencing policy. This perspective is especially pertinent because Governor Edwards was the first to address the realities of climate change in the creation of the Climate Initiatives Task Force, suggesting novel space for climate and social activism in local politics despite recent changes to the gubernatorial office. Finally, a follow-up study could observe processes of immobility at the individual level to capture the influence of previously identified macro and meso-level mechanisms at the micro level. Understanding the personal motivations, challenges, and ideas around adaptive (im)mobility in this context would enrich our comprehension of the grassroots dynamics of adapting to climate change in regions where policy planning can be maladaptive.

My respondents have expressed hope, fears, and optimism for the future of their communities in Louisiana, oscillating between confidence in their ability to remain, and despair for the potential tragedy of cultural disarticulation. For one lifelong resident of southern Plaquemines, the recognition of his sinking land has pushed him to reimagine what it means to live on the water. His plan is to build a floating home from the abandoned plastic tubs that he finds scattered by industry pollution throughout the bayou. The parish will be underwater, he is sure, but he will adapt, forever attached to his life on the coastline. In the Indigenous community of Grand Bayou, the idea of transforming homes into houseboats has also emerged, with floating pens for livestock hauled into protective harbors during storms (Marshall, 2016). Reimagining the conditions of life along Louisiana's vulnerable coast will be a challenge for these communities whose attachments to land are so profoundly anchoring them in place. But it offers hope that community imagination and resiliency will prevail in the face of the ever-increasing menace of climate change and institutional inertia. With this in mind, I leave my readers with the lyrics to the Band of Heathens' rock rendition of Hurricane, an ode to Louisianans' bold and tenacious spirit⁶¹⁷.

Thirty miles on the Gulf Stream
I hear the south wind moan
The bridges getting lower
The shrimp boats coming home

⁶¹⁷ For the full effect, you can listen to "Hurricane" [on YouTube](#).

The old man down in the Quarter
Slowly turns his head
Takes a sip from his whiskey bottle
And this is what he said

I was born in the rain on the Pontchartrain
Underneath the Louisiana moon
I don't mind the strain of a hurricane
They come around every June

The high black water, a devil's daughter
She's hard, she's cold and she's mean
But nobody taught her, it takes a lot of water
To wash away New Orleans

Man came down from Chicago
He gonna set that levee right
He says, "it needs to be at least three feet higher
It won't make it through the night"

But the old man down in the Quarter
He said "don't you listen to that boy
The water be down by the morning
And he'll be back to Illinois"

I was born in the rain on the Pontchartrain
Underneath the Louisiana moon
I don't mind the strain of a hurricane
They come around every June

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Annexes

Annex 1. List of political instances for observation

Name of instance	N of observations (n=150)	% of sample	Level of governance
Bucket Brigade / Coalition Against Death Alley protest	1	1%	Other/non-governmental
Climate Initiative Task Force (CITF)	11	7%	State
Coastal Louisiana Levee Consortium	2	1%	State
Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority (CPRA) board meeting	10	7%	State
CPRA public hearings	2	1%	State
CITF equity advisory group	3	2%	State
CITF mining, oil, and gas committee	3	2%	State
CITF special meeting on industrial decarbonization	2	1%	State
Governor's declarations and press conferences	2	1%	State
Governor's advisory commission on coastal protection, restoration and conservation	3	2%	State
Greater Lafourche Port Commission (GLPC)	3	2%	Parish
House Natural Resources and Environment committee	4	3%	State
Lafourche Government press conferences	5	3%	Parish
Lafourche Parish council	22	15%	Parish
Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries commission	3	2%	State
Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion (MBSD) virtual public meeting	3	2%	State
Oyster Task Force	5	3%	State
Plaquemines Parish council	20	13%	Parish

Plaquemines Government press conferences	6	4%	Parish
Senate Natural Resources and Environment committee	4	3%	State
Shrimp Task Force	3	2%	State
South Lafourche Levee District	2	1%	Parish
Louisiana Oil & Gas Association (LOGA)	1	1%	Other/non-governmental
Terrebonne Levee and Conservation District	1	1%	Parish
Terrebonne Parish council committees	4	3%	Parish
Terrebonne Parish council	22	15%	Parish
United States Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources	1	1%	Federal
Watershed Initiative	2	1%	State

Annex 2. Observation grid

Meeting name:
 Organizer:
 Date:
 Time:
 Type: online/offline
 Platform (of observation):

General observations
Type of meeting (formal, informal, political, public...)
Number of persons in attendance
Types of persons in attendance (public, private actors, public officials...)
Duration of meeting
Objective/activities of the meeting
Discourses and actions
Main topics of discussion
Who is speaking (status...)
Who is interacting
Duration of interactions
Is climate change mentioned + how (context, duration, type of exchange...)
Is adaptation/relocation mentioned + how (context, duration, type of exchange...)
Evaluation of climate change (positive or negative)
Evaluation of adaptation/relocation (positive or negative)
Attitudes (frustration, confidence, fear...) and reactions
Disagreements between actors
Agreements between actors

Annex 3. List of interview participants

1. Political representatives and state actors

Name	Position	Location	Date
George	Parish councilmember	Telephone	20.08.19
Timothy	State of Louisiana government	Zoom	21.03.01
Brian	Parish director of coastal restoration	Telephone	21.03.05
Andrew	State of Louisiana government	Zoom	21.03.08
Nathan	State of Louisiana government	Zoom	21.03.17
Gabriella	Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries	Telephone	21.03.31
David	Office of Community Development	Zoom	21.04.05
William	Parish councilmember	Telephone	21.05.12
Alexander	Biologist and State of Louisiana government	Telephone	21.06.02
Charlie	State of Louisiana government	Zoom	21.06.14
Michael	Parish councilmember	Telephone	21.07.27
Wesley	Levee district manager	Galliano	22.02.09
Caleb	Ecologist and former councilmember	Empire	22.02.04; 22.02.18; and 22.03.26
Tony	Parish councilmember	Empire	22.02.18
Scarlett	Former employee of Lafourche Parish government	Thibodaux	22.03.16

2. Advocacy groups

Name	Group	Location	Date
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Nicholas	Conservation advocacy organization	Zoom	21.01.22
Elizabeth	Coastal restoration advocacy organization	Zoom	21.02.01 and 21.02.12
Stephanie	Renewable energy advocacy organization	Zoom	21.02.08
Patrick	Environmental protection advocacy organization	Telephone	21.02.17
Vanessa	Restoration advocacy organization	Zoom	21.02.18
Hannah	Climate policy advocacy organization	Zoom	21.02.22
Lauren	Restoration advocacy group	Telephone	21.02.23
Daniel	Biologist and lifelong environmental activist	Telephone	21.03.03
Gregory	Community-based organizations coalition	Zoom	21.03.16
Anthony	Climate advocacy organization	Zoom	21.03.21
Joseph	Conservation advocacy organization and fisherman	Telephone	21.04.15
Antoine	Fishing and restoration advocacy organization	Telephone	21.04.21
Vincent	Flood protection advocacy organization	Telephone and Galliano	21.08.03 and 22.02.22

3. Other

Name	Occupation	Location	Date
Natalie	Professor	Zoom	20.08.17
Christopher	Local journalist	Telephone	20.08.20

Benjamin	Professor	Zoom	20.08.28
Ethan	Local journalist	Telephone	20.08.30
Jessica	Researcher	Zoom	20.09.01
Rachel	Professor	Zoom	20.09.03
Samuel	Local journalist	Telephone	20.10.22
Victoria	Professor	Zoom	20.11.09
Justin	Environmental lawyer	Zoom	21.03.04
Leon	Fisherman and fishing advocate	Telephone	21.03.04
Asher	Resident	Telephone	21.03.11
John	Engineer	Telephone	21.03.12 and 21.04.21
Thomas	Fisherman	Telephone	21.05.14
Kelly	Retiree	Myrtle Grove	22.03.05
Fred	Retiree	Myrtle Grove	22.03.05
Graham	Retiree	Myrtle Grove	22.03.05
Lucile	Biology teacher	Empire	22.03.26

Annex 4. Interview grid for pre-fieldwork

This grid was designed for pre-fieldwork during which interviews were conducted on local researchers and some local stakeholders (environmental non-profit advocacy groups...).

1. General information on Louisiana

What is the general attitude of Louisianans regarding environmental degradation? What is their attitude regarding climate change?

How is resilience perceived by communities themselves?

What can you tell me about Lafourche, Terrebonne and Plaquemines?

2. Governance, Louisianans and climate change

I feel like climate change is not something that is often talked about or really politicized. What do you think about this?

I've searched for municipal and parish level documents on climate adaptation, but they're lacking. What do you think about this?

Have you found a strong political interest in environmental issues?

What is the relationship between citizens and their elected officials like?

How do people living in unincorporated towns feel regarding their representatives at the parish level? Do you think this particular lack of local government structure has an impact on adaptation?

3. (Im)mobility in Louisiana

Is the Isle de Jean Charles situation unique in Southern Louisiana? Are there other municipalities that have debated whether or not they should move?

Is relocation something that is often talked about amongst Louisianans? In what terms do they speak about it?

What particular social groups have expressed more reluctance or motivation to move due to climate change?

What would you say are the biggest obstacles to mobility in the region?

Annex 5. Interview grid for fishermen and residents

Questions were adapted based on the type of participant (fisherman or general resident) and based on the location to account for parish-specific issues.

1. Attitudes on environmental adaptation

According to you, what are the biggest challenges in Southern Louisiana today?

Can you talk to me about the problems with chronic flooding and coastal erosion? How has it affected you?

What do you think are the root causes of these environmental issues?

Are these sorts of things talked about with your community in general?

What changes to the coast have you seen over the years? Over the last 5 years?

Why do you choose to stay where you live? Would you ever consider moving away?

What would you do if the state told you that you had to leave the coast?

What recent events have most impacted your industry and livelihoods? How has the government helped you recover from this event?

2. Relationship with the state and adaptation projects

What do you think about the State's approach to environmental problems?

How have you voiced your concerns to the CPRA/state? What kind of response to you get?

Do you trust the government to help you? How do you think the government should respond to these issues?

How would you describe the relationship between fishermen and the State?

According to you, what should the federal, state or local governments be doing on these issues?

And what do you think is doable, in practice?

3. Relationship with oil and gas

How do you feel about the oil and gas industry?

In what ways has the Deepwater spill impacted oystermen and the fishing industry/impacted your relationship to the industry?

Who should be responsible for bearing the costs of adaptation to environmental issues, according to you?

In your opinion, what has been the role of the oil and gas industry in environmental issues/adaptation?

4. The future

What would you say are the biggest threats to your industry and community life?

How do you think you're going to have to face those threats?

How do you see the future in Southeast Louisiana? And the future of the coast?

What do you personally hope is going to happen in the future?

Annex 6. Interview grid for political representatives

1. Attitudes on environmental adaptation

According to you, what are the biggest challenges in Southern Louisiana today?

Tell me about flooding, hurricanes, land loss. How do these issues impact on Louisiana? Is it something that you think people notice in their daily life?

You've been in office for X years. Have you noticed changes in the way people talk about these issues, or view these issues?

What do people believe are the causes of these problems?

Tell me about current adaptation in your parish/Louisiana.

Can you tell me about the levee system? Why is this approach important?

Why do you think people choose to stay where they live?

Do you think relocation is something that would be necessary if flooding and shoreline erosion continue?

Is relocation something that is sometimes talked about?

2. Governance

At what level of governance do you think that issues related to flooding, shoreline erosion and other environmental problems should be dealt with?

What are the major political obstacles, according to you, to better deal with environmental issues locally?

3. Oil and gas

What has been the role of the oil and gas industry in environmental policies/adaptation?

In your opinion, what *should* be its role in adaptation?

What kinds of programs or partnerships has the government done with the industry?

What do you think about the litigations of some parishes against the oil and gas industry?

How do you juggle demands from the industry and from environmental groups?

4. State-civil society relations and the future

How would you describe the relationship between communities and the government?

How do you think that people would react if the government told them they had to move?

How do you communicate with them regarding environmental issues? Have you noted a strong interest from your constituents for these questions? If not, why?

What do you believe are the biggest obstacles to community resiliency and adaptation in Southern Louisiana in relation to environmental issues?

In what ways do you think that Louisiana will have to adapt in the future?

What do you personally hope is going to happen in the future?

Annex 7. Interview grid for environmental advocacy organizations

1. Attitudes on environmental adaptation

According to you, what are the biggest challenges in Southern Louisiana today?
Tell me about flooding, hurricanes, land loss. How do these issues impact on Louisiana? Is it something that you think people notice in their daily life?
What is the general attitude of residents of the parish regarding environmental issues?
What do people believe are the causes of these problems?
What kinds of adaptation strategies are most employed at the moment?
Do you think relocation is something that would be necessary if flooding and shoreline erosion continue?
Why do you think people choose to stay where they live?
Is relocation something that is often talked about?
Why do you think is it not advocated more by the government?
What do you believe are the biggest obstacles to relocation?

2. Governance

What do you think of the State's strategy with regards to addressing environmental issues?
What do you think about the levee system approach taken by the government to protect communities?
What could be the alternative to this type of approach, in your opinion? Is changing course possible, and desirable?
Who should be responsible for bearing the costs of adaptation to environmental issues, according to you?
In your opinion, what has been the role of the oil and gas industry in environmental policies/adaptation?
What are the major political obstacles, according to you, to better deal with environmental issues locally?

3. State-civil society relations

How would you describe the relationship between the State and those communities affected by climate change?
Do people trust the government?
What has been the role of the non-profit sector in shaping environmental policy and adaptation?
How does your organization work on these issues, and who with?
What do you believe are the biggest obstacles to community adaptation in Southern Louisiana in relation to environmental issues?
What do you personally hope is going to happen in the future?

INFORMATION FORM

Adapting to environmental events: The case of Southern Louisiana

You are invited to participate in a doctoral research project. Before accepting, please take the time to read this document presenting the conditions to your participation. Do not hesitate to ask any question or inquire further information on this project.

Researcher information

I, Sarah Munoz, am the principal researcher. I am a doctoral student in political science at the University of Montreal, working on adaptation to environmental issues. My thesis directors are Pascale Dufour and Erick Lachapelle, professors of political science at the University of Montreal.

Project information and research objectives

This interview constitutes fieldwork for my doctoral thesis. My research is concerned with understanding adaptation related to environmental events in Southern Louisiana. More specifically, it aims to understand how certain adaptation strategies are formed and implemented politically. By adaptation strategies, we mean the various programs and policies (e.g. levees, restoration, relocation...) that are designed to prevent loss and damage to communities dealing with events such as flooding and land erosion.

Your role

This interview aims to garner your experience and local knowledge of policies and community life in Louisiana. The interview will be conducted at your convenience and is projected to last from 40 minutes to one hour and a half. You are free to choose the location of the interview. If the interview is conducted indoors, appropriate measures for COVID safety will be taken (distancing, masks...) throughout the entire interview. Please note that your participation in this research project will not be financially compensated. You are not obligated to answer any question if you do not feel comfortable doing so. Interviews will be recorded in audio only, with your permission (see page 2).

Using the data

These interviews are used for data collection. Your involvement and identity will not be divulged in any piece of writing related to this research project, including the thesis itself.

However, it should be noted that given the public nature of your activities, it is possible that your participation in this project may be recognizable. Special measures will be taken to ensure your anonymity, including the omission of your name and place of residence in any publication. However, it is possible that your official party affiliation (if applicable) or position could be disclosed to provide context clues for analysis. Although your identity will not be divulged, we ask that you provide specific consent to the potential disclosure of these two characteristics (see page 2). You can always inquire about the material used and retract your consent, should you deem it necessary to protect your anonymity. Please note that all data will be destroyed seven years after the end of this research project.

Confidentiality

The content of our discussion will be kept confidential. The data gathered from the interview will be kept in a safe location, on a personal computer and storage systems to which I have exclusive access. The interview is designed solely for the purpose of this research project at the University of Montreal and no data will be used for any other project under any circumstances. Please note that the data collected will not be depersonalized in order to facilitate analysis and research. Should you wish for data to be depersonalized, please notify the researcher directly.

Please note that there are limits to conducting interviews over Zoom or by telephone, and it is not possible to guarantee total confidentiality during our discussion. For example, the platform's web servers may be located in the United States and therefore be subject to American law which authorizes the United States intelligence community to access computer data, without consent or informing private users. Moreover, when conducting interviews over the phone, it is possible that someone in close proximity could overhear the content of our discussion. It is important to plan for this interview to be conducted in an intimate location. I am committed to conducting this interview in such a location in order to prevent, to the best of my abilities, any breach in confidentiality.

The right to opt out

Your participation to this project is entirely voluntary and you can, at any moment, withdraw from the research on a simple verbal notice and without justifying your decision, without any consequences for you. If you decide to opt out, please contact me via email or telephone at the contact details indicated below. At your demand, all information gathered on you will be destroyed. However, if the publishing process has been started, it will not be possible to destroy the data or results of the study. It will nonetheless be possible to remain anonymous in any published piece.

For any question pertaining to this research project, or to opt out of the project, please communicate with me via email at sarah.munoz@umontreal.ca.

For any concern about your rights or the responsibilities of the researchers regarding your participation to this project, you can contact the Ethics committee of research in arts and sciences by email at cerah@umontreal.ca or by telephone at (+1) 514-343-6111 #39051, or on the website <http://recherche.umontreal.ca/participants>.

Any complaint relating to your participation to this project can be addressed to the ombudsman of the University of Montreal by calling at (+1) 514 343-2100 or by communicating via email at ombudsman@umontreal.ca (the ombudsman accepts collect phone calls).

CONSENT

Participant declaration

- I understand that I can take my time before giving my consent to participate to this research
- I understand that by participating to this research project, I am not renouncing any of my rights nor am I freeing the researchers from their responsibilities
- I have taken notice of the present information and consent form and I accept to participate to this research project.
- I consent to the **audio recording** of the interview.
- I consent to the disclosure of my position and/or official party affiliation (if applicable).

Researcher commitment

I have explained to the participant the conditions under which the research project is taking place. I have answered questions in the best possible manner and have ensured the comprehension of the project. I am committed to the respect of what has been agreed upon in this present information and consent form.

Date:

Signature:

Annex 9. Documents for analysis

- **Government documents**

Code	Name	Institution	Date of publication
G1	Plaquemines Parish comprehensive Master Plan, community assessment, coastal	Plaquemines Parish government	2010
G2	Plaquemines Parish comprehensive Master Plan, community vision	Plaquemines Parish government	2010
G3	Plaquemines Parish comprehensive Master Plan, community agenda, coastal	Plaquemines Parish government	2010
G4	Larose to Golden Meadow system	US Corps of Engineers	August 2012
G5	Terrebonne Parish Hazard Mitigation Plan update 2020	Terrebonne Parish government	June 16, 2020
G6	Louisiana's comprehensive Master Plan for a sustainable coast	State of Louisiana	2017
G7	Lafourche Parish adaptation strategy	LA SAFE	April 2019
G8	Plaquemines Parish adaptation strategy	LA SAFE	April 2019
G9	Terrebonne Parish adaptation strategy	LA SAFE	April 2019
G10	Lafourche Parish comprehensive resiliency plan	Lafourche Parish government	April 8, 2014
G11	Lafourche Parish hazard mitigation plan update	Lafourche Parish government	September 2015
G12	CMP Appendix B: People and the landscape	CPRA	2017
G13	CMP Appendix E. Flood risk and resilience program framework	CPRA	October 2017
G14	Flood risk and resilience program	CPRA	August 2018
G15	Appendix F2: Nonstructural implementation strategy	CPRA	2012
G16	Lafourche Parish multi-jurisdiction hazard mitigation plan update 2020	Lafourche Parish government	2020
G17	2023 Coastal Master Plan	CPRA	2023
G18	CPRA Fiscal Year 2023 Annual plan	CPRA	2020
G19	Building a hurricane resistant coast	South Lafourche Levee District	October 14, 1999
G20	Plaquemines Parish comprehensive Master Plan, executive summary	Plaquemines Parish government	2010

G21	Community Agenda Plan Elements- Section A: Population and Demographics	Plaquemines Parish government	2010
G22	Plaquemines Parish comprehensive Master Plan, community assessment, population demographics	Plaquemines Parish government	2010
G23	Plaquemines Parish comprehensive Master Plan, community assessment	Plaquemines Parish government	2010
G24	Plaquemines Parish comprehensive Master Plan, Populations and Demographics, Plan Elements - Section A	Plaquemines Parish government	2010

- **Legal documents**

Code	Name	Institution	Date of publication
L1	RESOLUTION NO. 21-232. A resolution in support of resuming federal offshore leasing in the Gulf of Mexico	Lafourche Parish council	August 10, 2021
L2	Act 8, Senate Bill 71	Louisiana Senate	2005
L3	RESTORE Act	US Department of the Interior	July 2012
L4	Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act (GOMESA)	US Legislature	2006
L5	Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act	FEMA	May 2019
L6	Renewal of state of emergency, coastal Louisiana	State of Louisiana	April 26, 2021
L7	Regional Flood Protection Authorities	Louisiana State Legislature	2006
L8	RS 49~214.1. Hurricane protection, flood control, and coastal restoration	Louisiana State Legislature	1989/2012
L9	RS 49~214.6.3. Functions and responsibilities; hurricane protection and flood control	Louisiana State Legislature	2009
L10	RESOLUTION NO. 2018-06-01. A Resolution Authorizing Action Against the Plaquemines Parish Government Regarding Failure to Issue Permits Relative to the Mid- Barataria Sediment Diversion and Enforcement of the Coastal Master Plan	CPRA	June 20, 2018

L11	RS 56~638.2	Louisiana State Legislature	2014
L12	Flood Control Act of 1936	US Legislature	1936
L13	Executive order JBE 2020-18. Climate Initiatives Task Force	State of Louisiana, Governor's Office	August 19, 2020
L14	House resolution 71. To urge and request the administration of President Biden to immediately end the pause on offshore oil and natural gas leasing	Louisiana State Legislature	2021
L15	House bill 617. Establishes Louisiana as a fossil fuel sanctuary state	Louisiana State Legislature	2021
L16	Act 6. Wetlands conservation and restoration	Louisiana State Legislature	1989
L17	Resolution No. 21-99 expressing opposition to the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion Project	Plaquemines Parish government	April 8, 2021
L18	Marine Mammal Protection Act Waiver for the Mid-Barataria Sediment Diversion	US Department of Commerce	March 15, 2018
L19	Executive order JBE 2020-19 Coastal Resilience	State of Louisiana	2020
L20	House bill 526 / Act 315. To establish a Chief resilience office; an Interagency Resilience Coordination Team; and a Louisiana Resilience Task Force	Louisiana House of representatives	2023
L21	Resolution. In support of resuming federal offshore leasing in the Gulf of Mexico	Terrebonne Parish government	August 20, 2021
L22	State constitution. Article IX. Natural Resources	State of Louisiana	1974
L23	CPRA-RESOLUTION-NO.-2016-09-21. To obtain a waiver or reduction of Louisiana's cost-share obligation for the HSDRRS	CPRA	September 21, 2016
L24	Fact sheet: Proposed consent decree with BP for the Deepwater Horizon/Macondo well oil spill	US District Court, Eastern District of Louisiana	March 22, 2016

- Letters

Code	Name	Author	Institution	Date of publication
LT1	LCC letter to President Trump	Lin Kiger	Louisiana Chamber of Commerce	April 24, 2020
LT2	Plaquemines Parish Government letter to CPRA	Kirk Lepine	Plaquemines Parish government	June 29, 2020
LT3	Testimony of Governor Edwards to the US Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee	Governor Edwards	Office of the Governor	May 13, 2021
LT4	Governor Edwards letter to President Trump	Governor Edwards	Office of the Governor	March 8, 2017
LT5	Governor Edwards letter to House Majority Whip Steve Scalise	Governor Edwards	Office of the Governor	August 29, 2017
LT6	Bayou Industrial Group to the Climate Initiatives Task Force	Jennifer Armand	Bayou Industrial Group	January 25, 2021
LT7	Bayou Industrial Group to US Senators and Representatives of Louisiana	Jennifer Armand	Bayou Industrial Group	September 30, 2020
LT8	LMOGA letter to President Trump	Tyler Gray	Louisiana Mid-Continent Oil and Gas Association	April 2, 2020
LT9	Parish president Chaisson letter to President Trump	Archie Chaisson, III	Lafourche Parish government	April 12, 2020
LT10	Parish president Dove letter to President Trump	Gordon Dove	Terrebonne Parish government	April 6, 2020

- **Non-governmental reports**

Code	Name	Institution	Date of publication
N1	The economic impact of the oil and gas industry in Louisiana	LMOGA & American Petroleum Institute	October 5, 2020

- **Public comments**

Code	Name	Institution	Date of publication
P1	Oysters - Barataria	LA Seafood Future	2019
P2	Shrimpers - Lafourche Barataria	LA Seafood Future	2019
P3	Shrimpers - Terrebonne basin	LA Seafood Future	2019

P4	Oysters - Terrebonne basin	LA Seafood Future	2019
P5	Crabbers - barataria	LA Seafood Future	2019

- **Press releases**

Code	Name	Institution	Date of publication
PR1	GOMESA state payments critical to state's coastal protection	CPRA	May 23, 2017
PR2	\$122 Million Allocated for Post-Hurricane Ida Repairs to Grand Isle	CPRA	June 3, 2022
PR3	Governor Edwards Announces \$2.6 Billion in Army Corps of Engineers Funding	CPRA	January 19, 2022
PR4	CPRA Highlights Decade of Restoration Since Deepwater	CPRA	April 20, 2020
PR5	Gov. Edwards, Terrebonne Officials Announce Three Barrier Island Projects	CPRA	September 13, 2019
PR6	State Identifies Additional Strategies to Enhance Holistic Coastal Resilience	CPRA	December 1, 2022
PR7	Gov. John Bel Edwards Proclaims Coastal Industry Week in Louisiana	CPRA	April 24, 23
PR8	Gov. Edwards Breaks Ground on HNC Lock Complex	CPRA	November 8, 2021
PR9	Coastal Caminada Restoration Important to Economic Future of Port Fourchon	CPRA	March 9, 2017
PR10	Louisiana's Share of Federal Offshore Oil & Gas Revenue in FY19	CPRA	April 26, 2019

1. Adaptation and environmental change

1.1. Causes and climate change

E.g. Attributing the crisis to the leveeing of the Mississippi River

E.g. Feeling fatigued with vulnerability

E.g. Disbelief in climate change

1.2. Conceptualizing issues

E.g. Talking about Mother Nature

E.g. Framing the problem as economic

E.g. Implying uncontrollability

1.3. Mobility

E.g. Expressing mistrust in state relocation

E.g. Accusing FEMA

E.g. Refusing to move

E.g. Expressing uncertainty about movement

1.4. Preparing, adapting and recovering

E.g. Contesting FEMA regulations

E.g. Supporting coastal protection

E.g. Requiring FEMA assistance

E.g. Wanting to return home

1.5. Seeing the crisis

E.g. Noting changes in the environment

E.g. Recognizing the risk of living here

E.g. Reminiscing of past events

1.6. Seeking infrastructures

E.g. Boasting about infrastructures' success

E.g. Promoting elevations

E.g. Asking for more pumps

2. American political trends

2.1. Alluding to conspiracy

2.2. Promoting small government

2.3. Using fear of economic outcomes for climate policy

2.4. American pride and patriotism

3. Community and land

3.1. Choosing to live here

3.2. Praising the land

3.3. Using strong emotional language

4. Environmental activism

4.1. Calling out politicians

4.2. Accusing the agencies of lying or corruption

4.3. Opposing restoration projects

5. Oil and gas industry

- 5.1. Branding the industry as a good neighbor
- 5.2. Framing the industry as a matter of national security
- 5.3. Pride in the industry
- 5.4. Promoting carbon capture and storage

6. Public policy

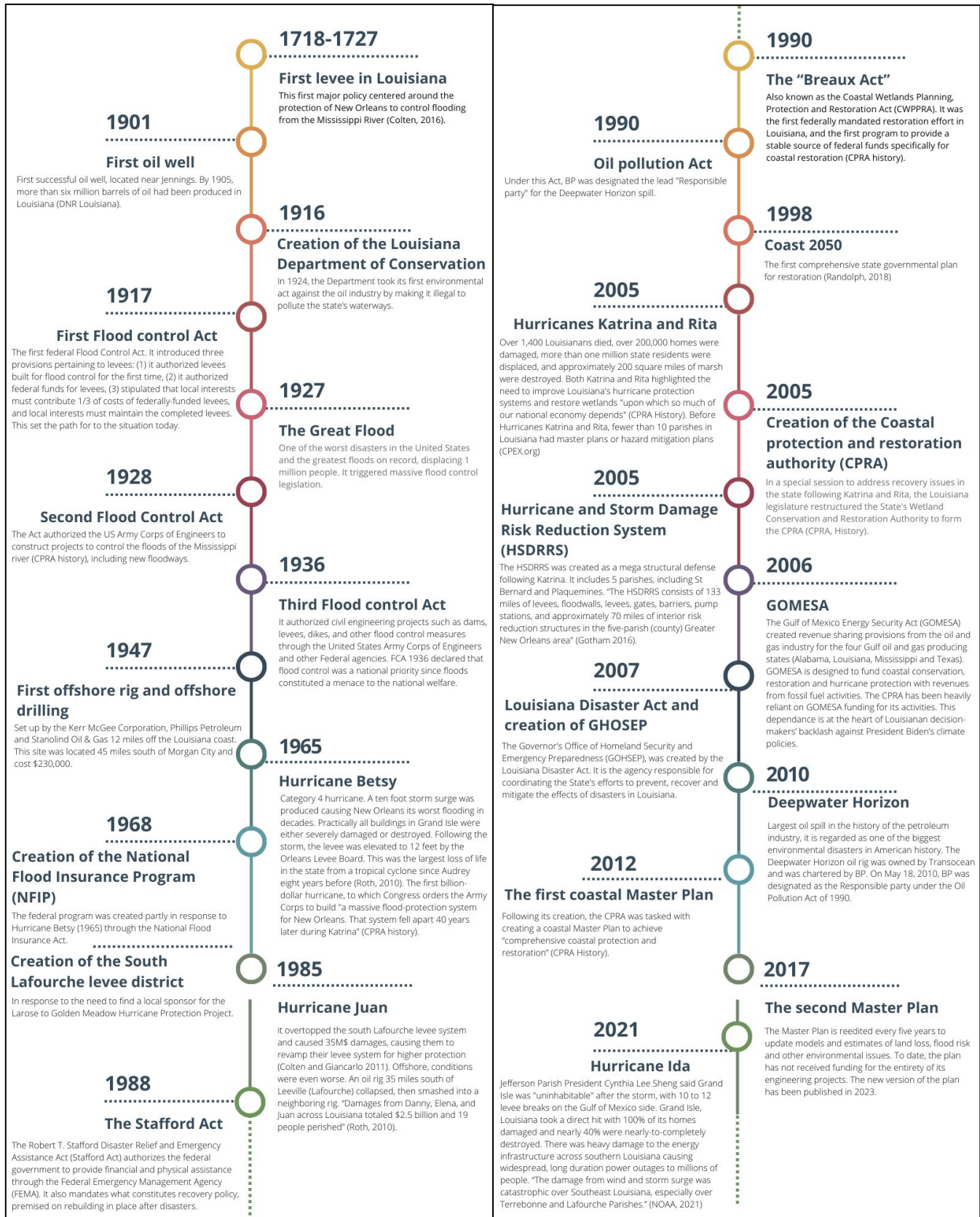
- 6.1. CPRA and adaptation
 - E.g. The working coast narrative
 - E.g. Securing funding for coastal projects
- 6.2. Industry in politics
 - E.g. Encouraging collaboration with industry actors
 - E.g. Promoting “clean” oil and gas
 - E.g. Promoting privatization or private incentives
 - E.g. Opposing federal climate policy
- 6.3. Local level politics
 - E.g. Feeling neglected by higher levels of governance
 - E.g. Promoting taxation for flood control
 - E.g. Complaining about budgetary problems

7. The future and hope

- E.g. Expressing confidence in the future
- E.g. Looking to the future as normal
- E.g. Wanting a future here
- E.g. Noting oil and gas as the future of Louisiana

Annex 11.

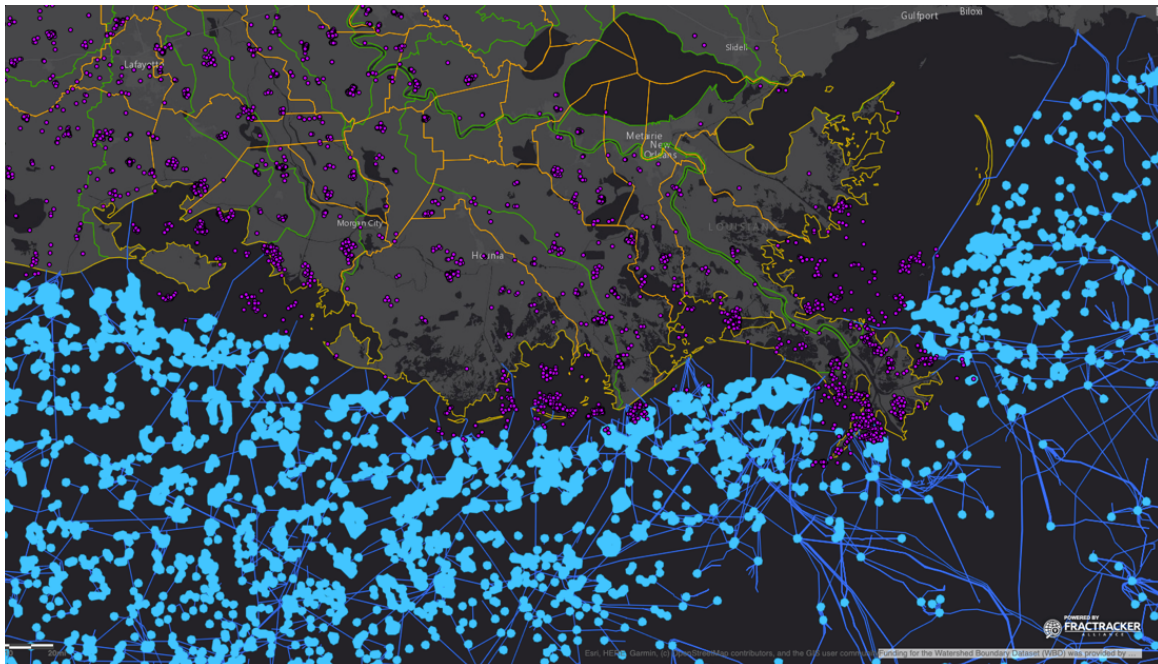
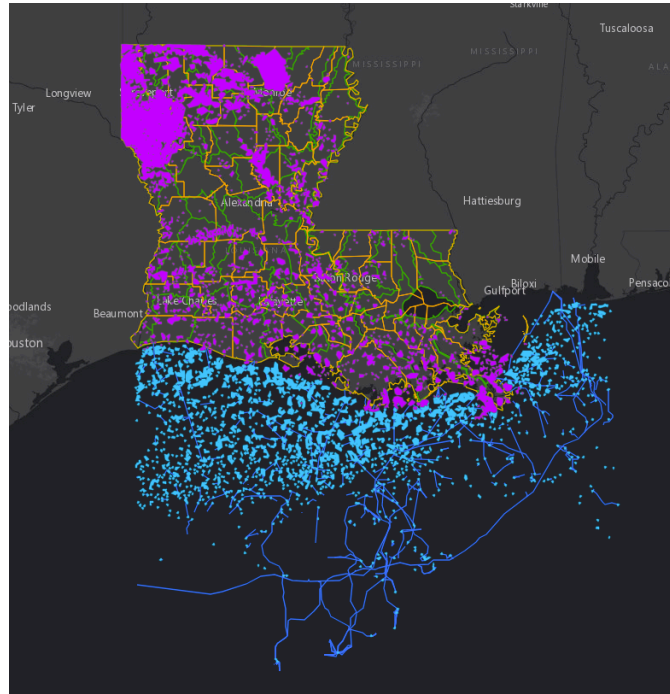
A chronology of environmental policies



Annex 12. Louisiana's oil and gas industry infrastructure

Source: Fractracker Alliance (2019)

Legend: oil and gas wells (pink), offshore oil and gas platforms (blue), offshore pipelines (blue lines)



Annex 13. Overview of the energy industry: employment, production and royalties

Figure 1. Employees of the Mining and logging industry in Louisiana

Data source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022). Data analysis by Sarah Munoz.

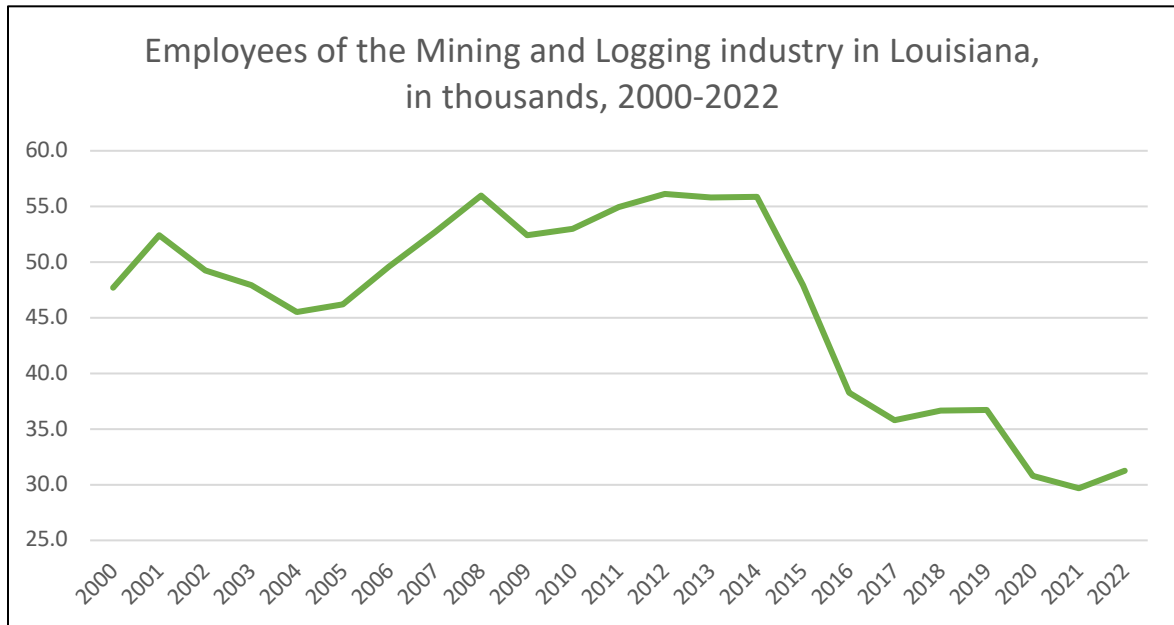


Figure 2. Total oil production in Louisiana

Data source: O'Brien (2020). Data analysis by Sarah Munoz.

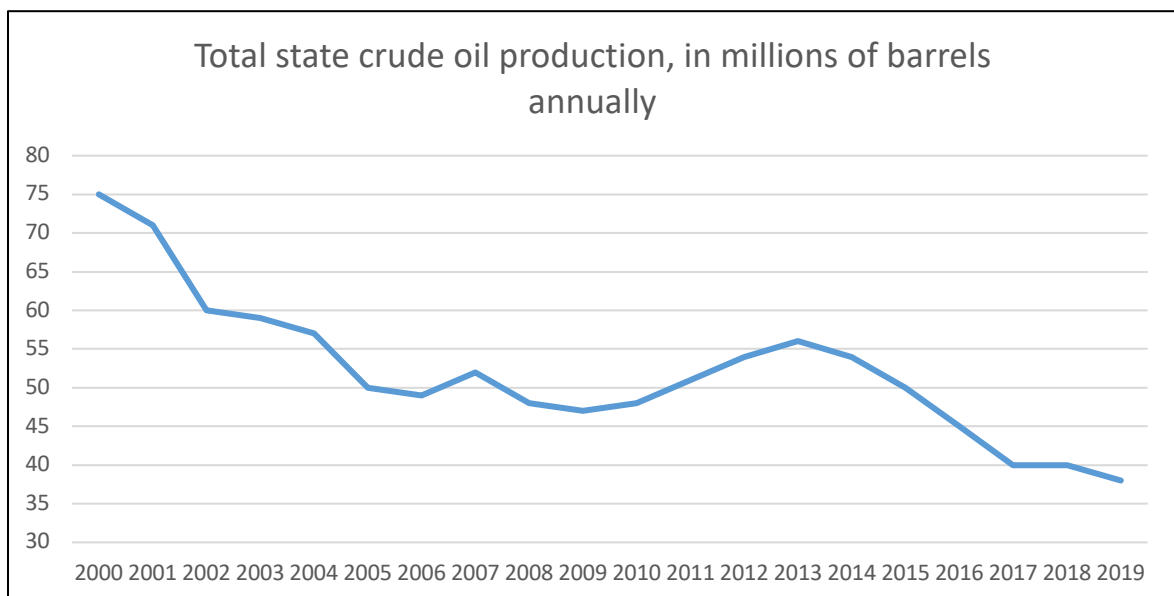
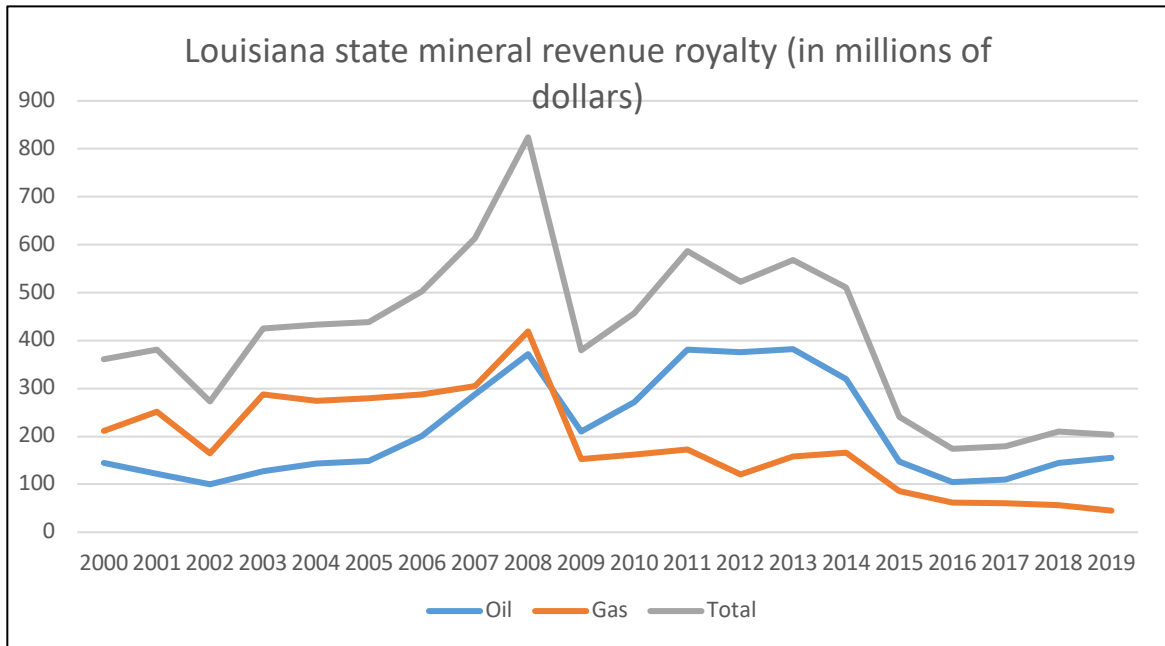


Figure 3. Louisiana state mineral revenue royalties from mining, oil and gas activities
Data source: O'Brien (2020). Data analysis by Sarah Munoz.



Annex 14. Comparing beliefs and risk perceptions between the United States, Asian and Pacific islands, and the Netherlands

Data source: Leiserowitz et al., (2022). Data analysis by Sarah Munoz.

		USA			ASIAN AND PACIFIC ISLANDS			NETHERLANDS		
BACKGROUND	Heavy protective infrastructure	Yes			No			Yes		
	Type of climate risk	Hurricanes, sea-level rise			Hurricanes, sea-level rise			Sea level rise		
BELIEFS	Climate change is happening	83%			86%			87%		
	Climate change was caused mostly by human activities	52%			43%			51%		
	Climate change was caused by natural changes	15%			15%			10%		
RISK PERCEPTIONS	Climate change will harm me personally (yes (a great deal + a moderate amount) / only a little / not at all)	52%	18%	20%	67%	12%	3%	32%	45%	10%
	Climate change is personally important (yes (extremely+very) / Somewhat / No (not too + not at all)	48%	23%	28%	75%	16%	9%	29%	38%	33%
	Climate change is a threat in the next 20 years (very serious/ somewhat serious / not at all)	41%	31%	22%	62%	23%	4%	23%	48%	17%
	Worried about climate change (very and somewhat worried combined)	68%			82%			59%		
POLICY SUPPORT	Who is most responsible for reducing causes of climate change? Government / Businesses / Individual people	25%	36%	21%	31%	23%	28%	35%	37%	14%
	Climate change should be a national priority (high / low)	61%	39%		77%		22%		61%	38%
	Support for increasing renewable energy (more / less)	74%	10%		70%		7%		74%	10%
	Support for reducing fossil fuels (Less fossil fuels / more)	58%	20%		35%		40%		70%	11%

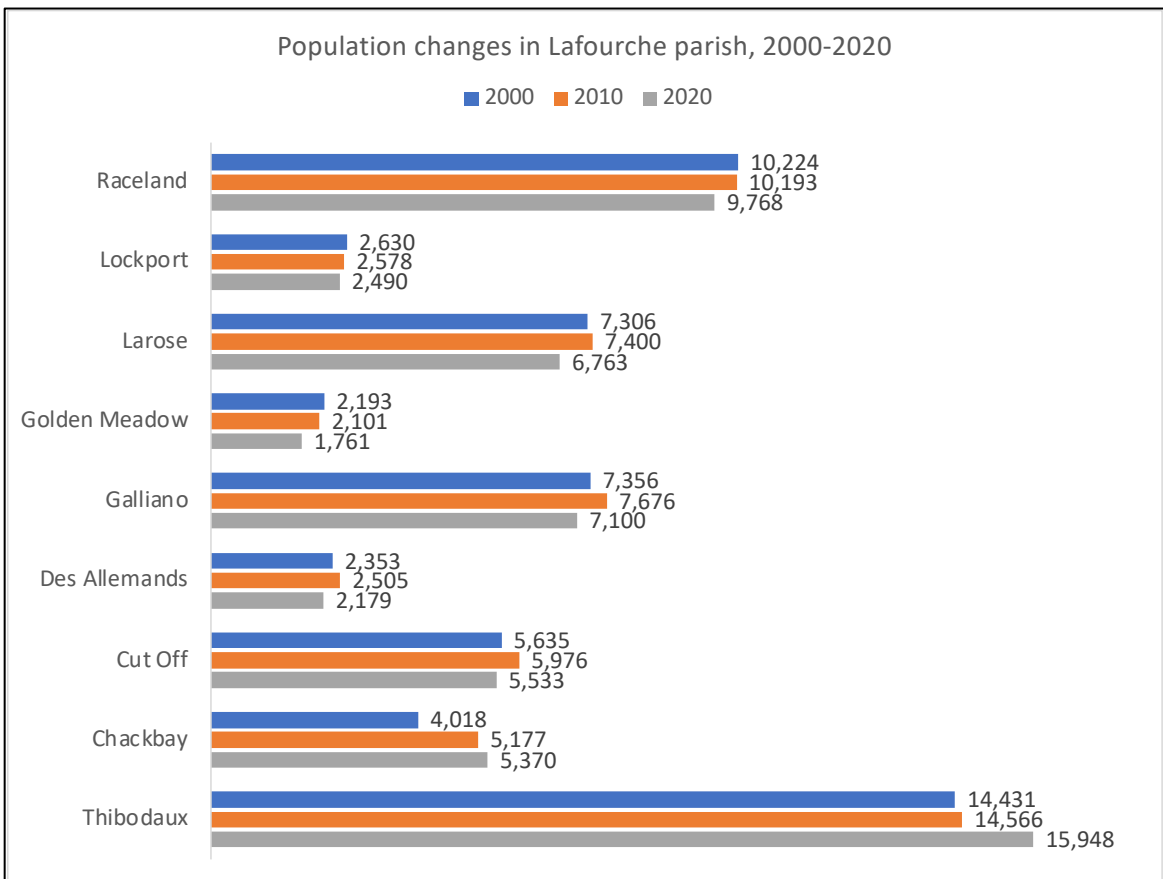
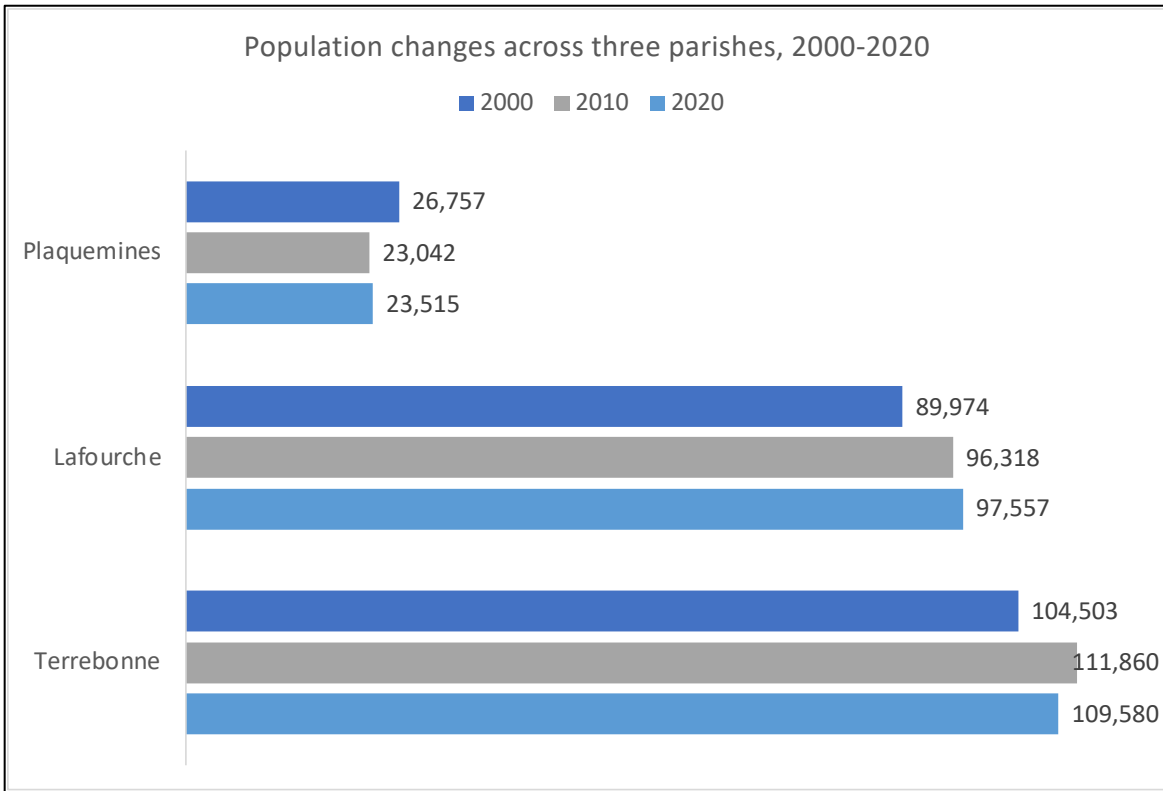
Annex 15. Population changes in Lafourche, Terrebonne, and Plaquemines Parishes

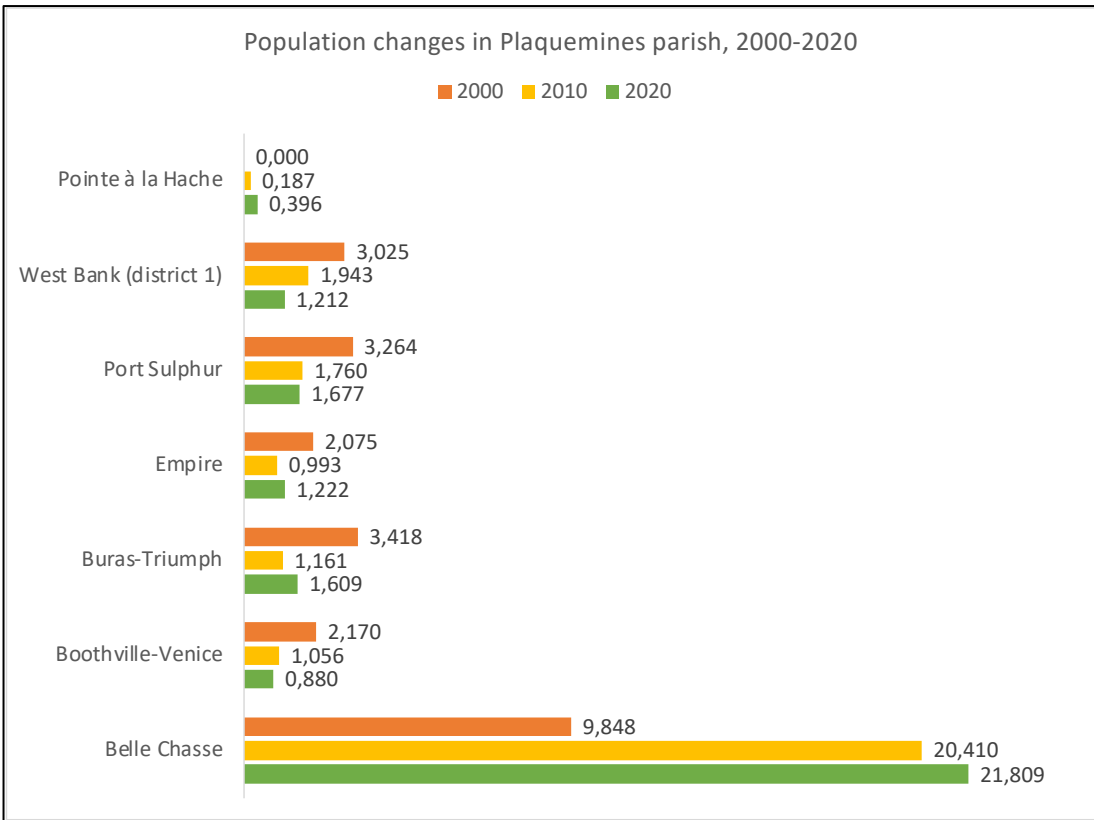
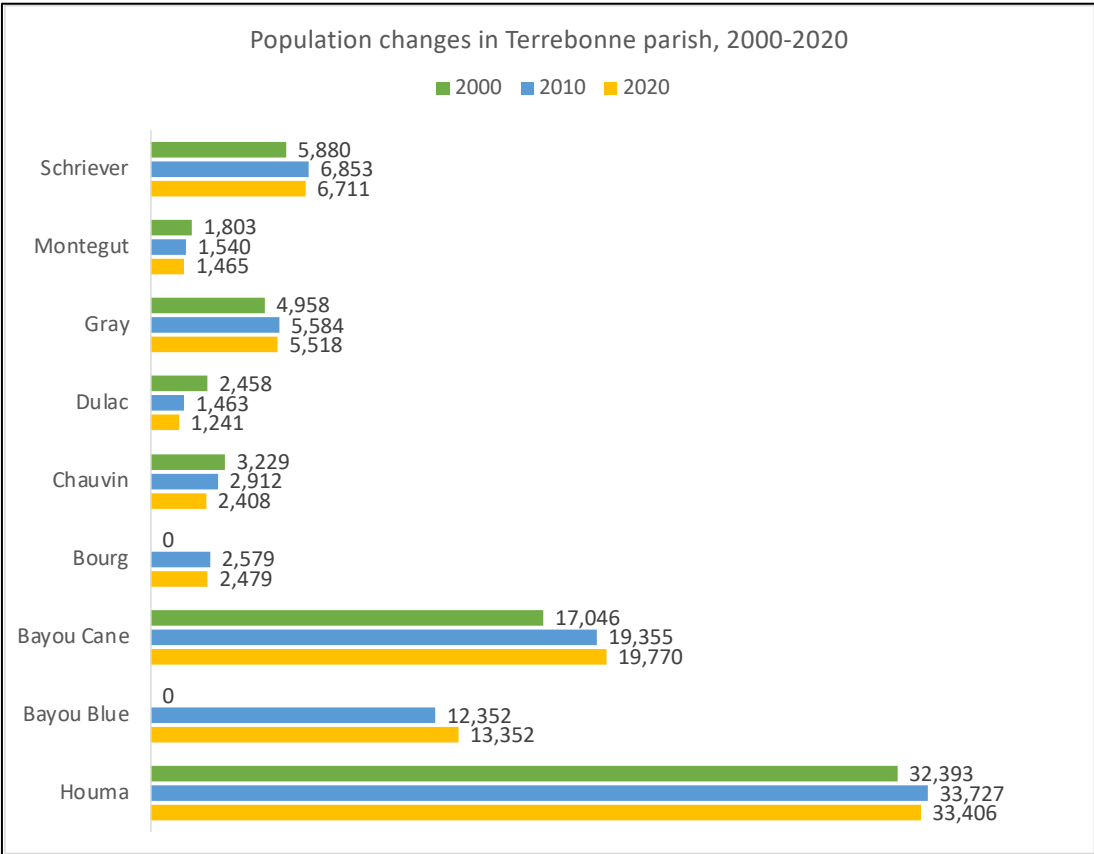
The following graphs, map, and table compile US Census bureau data from 2000, 2010 and 2020. They depict an overall trend of slow depopulation from the most southern areas of each parish towards urban centers. Successive hurricanes, in particular Hurricane Katrina (2005), have been a major cause of depopulation in all parishes, confirmed by parish government analyses (G21). In Plaquemines Parish however, the 2010 and 2020 census reveal progressive repopulation of Empire, Triumph, Buras and Pointe-a-la-Hache in the southern end.

Data source: US Census Bureau (2003; 2012; 2021).

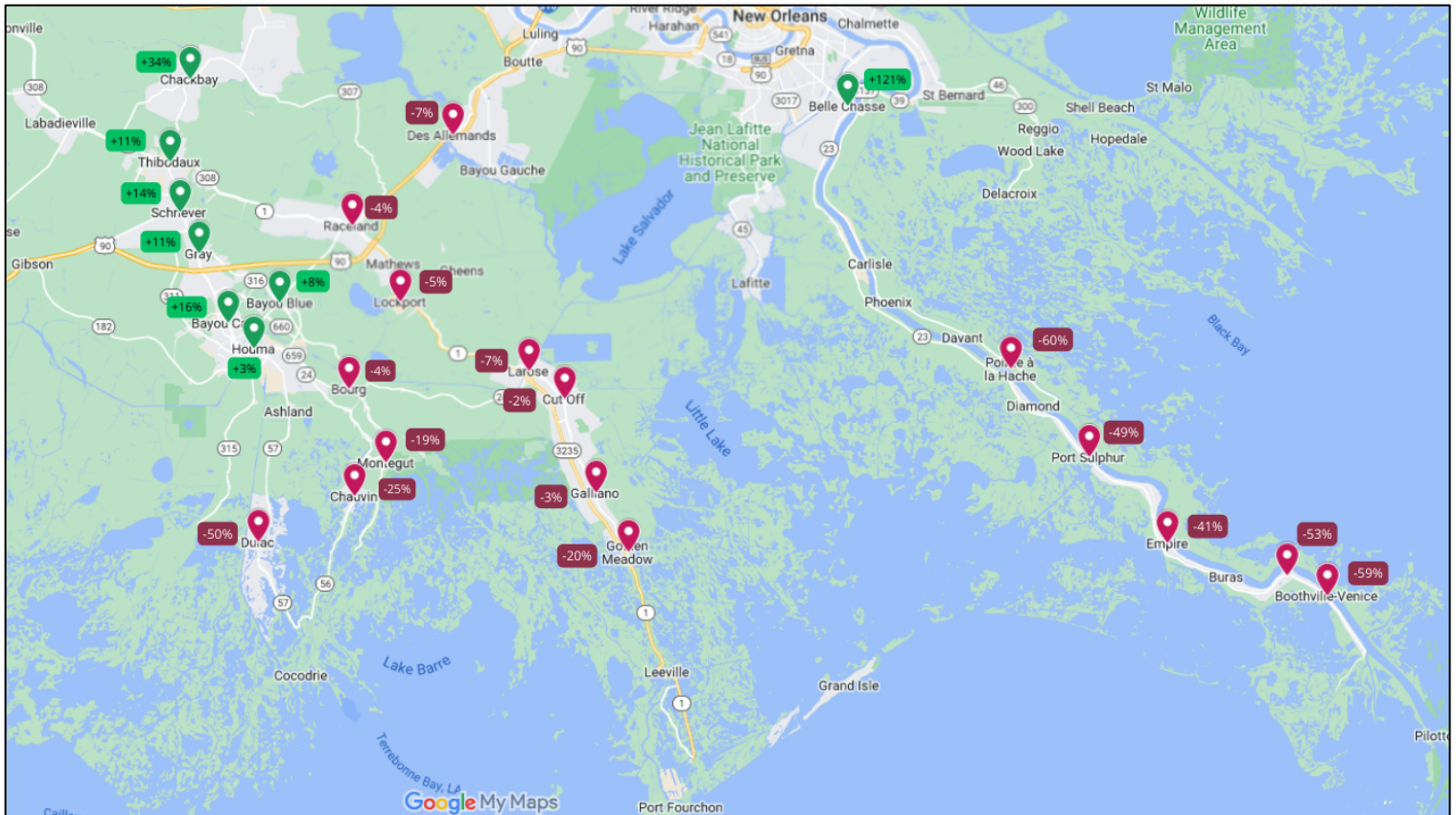
Data compilation and analysis: Sarah Munoz

Parish	Places	2000	2010	Change 2000-2010	% change 2000-2010	2020	Change 2010-2020	% change 2010-2020	% change 2000-2020
Terrebonne	Parish total	104,503	111,860	7,357	7%	109,580	-2,280	-2%	5%
	Houma	32,393	33,727	1,334	4%	33,406	-0,321	-1%	3%
	Bayou Blue	n/a	12,352	n/a	n/a	13,352	1,000	8%	n/a
	Bayou Cane	17,046	19,355	2,309	14%	19,770	0,415	2%	16%
	Bourg	n/a	2,579	n/a	n/a	2,479	-0,100	-4%	n/a
	Chauvin	3,229	2,912	-0,317	-10%	2,408	-0,504	-17%	-25%
	Dulac	2,458	1,463	-0,995	-40%	1,241	-0,222	-15%	-50%
	Gray	4,958	5,584	0,626	13%	5,518	-0,066	-1%	11%
	Montegut	1,803	1,540	-0,263	-15%	1,465	-0,075	-5%	-19%
	Schriever	5,880	6,853	0,973	17%	6,711	-0,142	-2%	14%
Lafourche	Parish total	89,974	96,318	6,344	7%	97,557	1,239	1%	8%
	Thibodaux	14,431	14,566	0,135	1%	15,948	1,382	9%	11%
	Chackbay	4,018	5,177	1,159	29%	5,370	0,193	4%	34%
	Cut Off	5,635	5,976	0,341	6%	5,533	-0,443	-7%	-2%
	Des Allemands	2,353	2,505	0,152	6%	2,179	-0,326	-13%	-7%
	Galliano	7,356	7,676	0,320	4%	7,100	-0,576	-8%	-3%
	Golden Meadow	2,193	2,101	-0,092	-4%	1,761	-0,340	-16%	-20%
	Larose	7,306	7,400	0,094	1%	6,763	-0,637	-9%	-7%
	Lockport	2,630	2,578	-0,052	-2%	2,490	-0,088	-3%	-5%
	Raceland	10,224	10,193	-0,031	0%	9,768	-0,425	-4%	-4%
Plaquemines	Parish total	26,757	23,042	-3,715	-14%	23,515	0,473	2%	-12%
	Belle Chasse	9,848	20,410	10,562	107%	21,809	1,399	7%	121%
	Boothville-Venice	2,170	1,056	-1,114	-51%	0,880	-0,176	-17%	-59%
	Boothville	n/a	0,854	n/a	n/a	0,718	-0,136	-16%	n/a
	Venice	n/a	0,202	n/a	n/a	0,162	-0,040	-20%	n/a
	Buras-Triumph	3,418	1,161	-2,257	-66%	1,609	0,448	39%	-53%
	Buras	n/a	0,945	n/a	n/a	1,109	0,164	17%	n/a
	Triumph	n/a	0,216	n/a	n/a	0,500	0,284	131%	n/a
	Empire	2,075	0,993	-1,082	-52%	1,222	0,229	23%	-41%
	Port Sulphur	3,264	1,760	-1,504	-46%	1,677	-0,083	-5%	-49%
West Bank (district)	3,025	1,943	-1,082	-36%	1,212	-0,731	-38%	-60%	
Pointe à la Hache	n/a	0,187	n/a	n/a	0,396	0,209	112%	n/a	





Population changes across three parishes, 2000-2020



Note 1. Massive decline in population in lower Plaquemines due to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005. According to the parish government, the population had reached an all-time high in July 2005, a month before Katrina hit. After that, it rapidly declined and started a downward trend for the parish (G21). But since 2010, there has been an increase in population in southern areas (+131% in Triumph, +23% in Empire and +112% in Pointe-a-la-Hache). Despite population returning to these areas, there remains an overall population loss comparative to 2000 levels throughout the parish, with the exception of the urban center Belle Chasse on the East bank.

Note 2. In Plaquemines, Pointe-a-la-Hache didn't exist prior to the 2010 census. There was redistricting for the 2010 census: Buras-Triumph was split, Boothville-Venice was split, and Pointe-a-la-Hache census district was created. To compare the 2000, 2010 and 2020 censuses, the district 1 census encompasses the whole West Bank, *including* Pointe-a-la-Hache.

Note 3. In Lafourche, changes for the 2010 census also include Cut Off gaining area from Larose, and Larose losing area to Cut Off. However, census shows that both towns have lost population, which means this redrawing of town lines doesn't change the fact that there is overall loss of population in this area.

Note 4. In Terrebonne, Bayou Blue and Bourg were created at the 2010 census. Dulac lost area.

Annex 16. Social vulnerability indicators for coastal communities

This data indicates the social and environmental vulnerability of communities in Terrebonne, Lafourche, Plaquemines and Grand Isle. It highlights the reliance of southern communities on fishing practices, their heightened social and economic vulnerability, as well as their industrial and environmental disruptions.

Data sources: NOAA Fisheries Community Social Vulnerability Indicators (CSVIs) (NOAA, 2018); Environmental Justice (EJSCREEN) Block Group Data (USEPA) (Environmental Protection Agency, 2018).

Data compilation and analysis: Sarah Munoz.

Parish	Census designated place	Poverty	Commercial fishing reliance	Personal disruption	SLR risk	Storm surge risk	2017 Air toxics cancer risk (percentile)	People of color (percentile)	Low income (percentile)	2017 Air Toxics Respiratory Hazard (percentile)	EJ Index: Hazardous waste proximity (percentile)
Terrebonne											
	Houma	High	Low	Med-High	High	High	34-92	9-84	8-89	32-92	22-96
	Bayou Blue	Medium	Low	Med-High	n/a	High	45-63	45-53	48-82	48-63	48-65
	Bayou Cane	Medium	Low	Medium	High	High	49-75	49	90	48-76	36-77
	Bourg	Low	Low	Medium	n/a	High	5-70	23	74	4-68	15-63
	Chauvin	Med-High	Med-High	High	High	High	34-51	20	43	38-52	50-55
	Dulac	High	Med-High	High	High	High	88	80	96	88	66
	Gray	Med-High	Low	Medium	High	High	53-74	63-80	57-72	53-74	55-64
	Montegut	High	Medium	High	High	High	64	35	88	63	60
	Schriever	Medium	Low	Med-High	High	High	26-90	82	76	31-86	44-72
Lafourche											
	Thibodaux	Medium	Low	Med-High	Medium	Med-High	53-86	22-85	47-98	65-77	67-76
	Chackbay	Low	Low	Med-High	High	High	10	7	58	15	44
	Cut Off	Medium	Medium	Med-High	Low	High	32-59	46	37	47	28
	Des Allemands	Medium	Medium	Med-High	High	High	16-73	25	4	22-70	48-62
	Galliano	Medium	Low	Medium	Low	High	49-63	34-58	75-79	47	34-61
	Golden Meadow	Med-High	Med-High	Med-High	Low	Med-High	49-55	28	31	46-55	32-41
	Larose	Medium	Low	Med-High	High	High	46-59	39	51	44-59	21-60
	Lockport	Medium	Medium	Med-High	High	Med-High	48-56	17	79	48-56	36-48
	Raceland	Medium	Low	Med-High	High	High	57-92	51-88	65-97	55-89	50-72
Plaquemines											
	Belle Chasse	Medium	Low	Low	Low	High	4-63	12-67	2-68	38-62	7-69
	Boothville-Venice										
	Boothville	High	Med-High	High	Low	Med-High	60	59	76	60	59
	Venice	Med-High	High	Medium	Low	Med-High	58	51	72	58	58
	Buras-Triumph										
	Buras	Med-High	Med-High	Med-High	Medium	Med-High	60	65	35	59	59
	Triumph	Medium	Low	Medium	Medium	Med-High	61	51	86	60	59
	Empire	High	High	High	Medium	High	65	87	80	64	66
	Port Sulphur	High	Medium	High	Medium	High	76	93	97	73	64
	West Bank (district 1)						80	100	97	76	65
	Pointe à la Hache	n/a	Medium	High	n/a	Med-High	80	100	97	76	65
Jefferson											
	Grand Isle	Medium	High	Med-High	High	High	52	18	74	54	56

Note 1. The scale is from low to high.

Note 2. Percentiles are compared to the US.

Note 3. Hazardous waste proximity: Count of hazardous waste management facilities within 5 km (or nearest one beyond 5 km), each divided by distance in km.

Note 4. Air Toxics Respiratory Hazard Index: the sum of hazard indices for those air toxics with reference concentrations based on respiratory endpoints, where each hazard index is the ratio of exposure concentration in the air to the health-based reference concentration set by EPA.

Note 5. Air Toxics Cancer risk: Lifetime cancer risk from inhalation of air toxics, as risk per lifetime per million people.

Note 6. SLR means sea-level rise.