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State-level climate obstruction and discourses of climate delay: insights from Arizona

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This study applies the discourses of climate delay (DCD) framework developed by Lamb et al. (2020) to analyze Arizona legislative discourse surrounding House Bill 2686 (2020) and House Bill 2101 (2022), both of which had significant implications for state-level climate governance. Using qualitative discourse analysis of public hearing transcripts, I identify rhetorical strategies that obstruct climate action, particularly those used by utility representatives and their allies. The analysis reveals that delay tactics most often emphasized the negative consequences of climate action and promoted non-transformative solutions, especially those aligned with fossil fuel interests. In contrast, "redirect responsibility" and "surrender" strategies were used less frequently, and "whataboutism" was notably absent. This absence suggests that, in Arizona, obstruction is less about shifting blame and more about affirming local identity and resisting perceived external influence. Based on these findings, I propose an expansion of the DCD framework to include a new subcategory—"pride, identity, and culture"—to capture how regional cultural values influence climate discourse. This study contributes to climate policy scholarship by demonstrating how localized rhetorical strategies sustain climate inaction and by offering a refined framework for future research on discursive climate obstruction.

KEYWORDS

climate change counter movement, climate delay discourse, discourse analysis, utility influence, state-level climate obstruction

1 Introduction

In collaboration with politicians and outside organizations, corporations interested in preventing climate change mitigation policies have formed the basis of what scholars refer to as the "climate (change) countermovement" (CCM; Basseches et al., 2022; Brulle, 2021; McCright and Dunlap, 2015). This countermovement has put forth considerable effort and funding to sway public and political opinion against climate protection policies through policy briefs, books, media collaborations, and other strategies, often to a high degree of success (Basseches et al., 2022; McCright and Dunlap, 2015). Actors and organizations in support of anti-climate mitigation policies and against climate protection policies utilize a mixed set of discursive tactics to appeal to a broad audience and maintain the status quo of limited climate change mitigation efforts. As the need for climate mitigation becomes more critical, being able to identify and counter CCM discursive strategies in United States (US) states is key to implementing effective climate policy. This article focuses on recent CCM strategies in the state of Arizona and evaluates how discourse, specifically discourses of climate delay from utility companies, shape climate policy discussions and outcomes. Understanding the CCM is critical to uncovering how strategies of climate obstruction manifest, and this work is especially needed at the subnational level, such as in US states. The subnational level remains a key arena for new policy ideas and experimentation in climate policy (Engel and Miller, 2009; Jörgensen

et al., 2015; Warbroek and Hoppe, 2016). Scholars have called for more studies at the subnational level to provide a more nuanced understanding of CCM strategies and how obstacles to climate action may be overcome (Gurney et al., 2021).

Discourse matters; political discourse has been recognized as a form of "political action" (van Dijk, 2015) owing to its potential influence over decision-making and policy outcomes. Approaches to discourse analysis can be broadly divided into two categories: descriptive and critical (Fairclough, 1995). In this regard, Fairclough (1995) differentiates between descriptive and critical approaches by the level of explanation they attain to; while descriptive approaches are either non-explanatory or provide explanation only at the "local" or individual speaker level, critical approaches aim to provide more "global" explanations addressing the underlying systems and structures which both shape and are shaped by discourse. The latter, more critical approaches have formed the basis of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which van Dijk defines as a body of research primarily studying "the way social-power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context" (2015, pg. 466).

In recognition of the significance of discourse in shaping policy decisions, discursive strategies of the CCM have seen increasing attention in recent climate change scholarship (see Almiron et al., 2020; McKie, 2019; Sassan et al., 2023; Supran and Oreskes, 2021). Lamb et al. present a major contribution to this work in their 2020 article "Discourses of Climate Delay." This article, having since been widely cited, proposes a typology of such discourses. However, despite the importance of investigating discursive CCM tactics, few studies have assessed how it may manifest within varying contexts, or whether it is effective in performing critical analyses rather than simply descriptive ones. This limited empirical application restricts understanding of how these communication strategies may function across spatial, cultural, or sectoral boundaries, thus presenting a critical area for future research.

In this article, I contribute to this underexplored area of research through a discourse analysis of Arizona state legislative sessions pertaining to two of the most significant energy-related bills passed in the state in recent years: 2020 House Bill (HB) 2,686, and 2022 House Bill (HB) 2,101. These bills were selected based on their significant potential impacts, the high level of controversy surrounding each, as well as their categorization by the Sierra Club as high-priority energy-related bills (Sierra Club Grand Canyon Chapter, n.d.). Utilizing the Lamb et al. (2020) discourses of climate delay (abbreviated as DCD from here on) framework, I identify and categorize instances of climate obstruction phrasing used during legislative sessions regarding each of the two bills and examine how dominant utility companies are shaping this discourse. Through this integration, I assess which forms of climate obstruction discourse appear, along with why they appear and how these may contribute to climate inaction in Arizona. Ultimately, my results allow development of more targeted interventions to counteract CCM narratives, thereby fostering a more conducive environment for effective climate change mitigation policies.

While Arizona's political landscape has gradually shifted toward a more moderate or "purple" identity (meaning relatively even amounts of Democrats and Republicans), delay discourses remain effective because they are tailored to resonate with the ideological commitments, economic interests, and cultural identities of key political actors. These strategies are particularly potent in contexts where elite policymaking is decoupled from public opinion—such as in Arizona, where Republican legislative control, utility-aligned lobbying, and institutional inertia continue to outweigh broader trends toward public support for climate action. In this context, discourses of delay serve not just to obscure facts but to sustain legitimacy, deflect responsibility, and protect incumbent regimes. Following Norgaard (2011) analysis of socially organized denial, these rhetorical strategies enable individuals and institutions to acknowledge the reality of climate change while resisting the scale of change it demands. Delay, then, is not simply misinformation—it is emotional and political sense-making in a system invested in the status quo. Thus, the DCD framework remains a powerful lens because it captures the function of these discourses: not to deny science outright, but to maintain political and psychological equilibrium amid growing climate pressures.

In the remainder of this paper, I first provide an overview of the CCM in Section 2, describing its composition and strategic toolset as well as the significant role of utilities within it. In Section 3, I describe Lamb et al. (2020) DCD framework. Following this, I describe my case selection in Section 4, and then detail the methods and materials I used to perform the discourse analysis in Section 5. In Section 6, I present the discourse analysis results along with discussion evaluating Arizona legislative sessions in accordance with the DCD framework. Here, I identify patterns within the various categories and provide exemplary statements from the transcripts, and I compare my findings to those of the Brown Climate and Development Lab (2023). I conclude in Section 7 by summarizing my findings and providing recommendations to researchers who wish to employ the DCD framework in future studies, as well as to scholars or activists who wish to counteract delay discourses.

2 The climate (change) countermovement

The strategic deployment of climate delay discourses by elite actors is closely tied to the broader political and economic formation known as the climate (change) countermovement, or CCM. In defining the CCM, Brulle (2013, pg. 682) encourages "view[ing] it as a cultural contestation between a social movement advocating restrictions on carbon emissions and a counter-movement opposed to such action." The network of CCM actors holds significant financial and political power and has been known to attack climate protection policy in several ways. Their strategies include advertising and distributing propaganda which often conveys scientists and government institutions as untrustworthy (Mann, 2015; Povitkina, 2018), lobbying political officials (Brulle, 2018; Meng and Rode, 2019; Nyberg, 2021), partnering with conservative think tanks (Brulle, 2018; Nyberg, 2021), and contributing to election campaigns (Basseches et al., 2022; Woods, 2021).

Further, Brulle (2013) describes the composition of this movement as including corporations and allied trade associations, advocacy front groups, and conservative think tanks, among others. In the US, this includes institutions like the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, and the Heartland Institute—organizations that have received extensive funding from oil and coal interests while producing and

disseminating materials aimed at undermining the scientific consensus on anthropogenic climate change (Oreskes and Conway, 2010; Jacques et al., 2008). These institutions helped pioneer what Oreskes and Conway (2010) call the "tobacco strategy," a communication model built not on disproving science but on sowing public doubt and regulatory inertia. Within the US, this countermovement has taken on a particularly influential form, rooted not only in the short-term profit motives of fossil fuel corporations but in the long-standing ideological commitments of conservative and libertarian political cultures. As Collomb (2014) outlines, US climate denialism is uniquely potent due to its entanglement with commitments to small government, free markets, and an idealized "American way of life" centered on consumer freedom and national exceptionalism. In Arizona, these dynamics are especially pronounced due to the electoral structure of the Arizona Corporation Commission and the outsized influence of investor-owned utilities (IOUs) like Arizona Public Service (APS) and Southwest Gas (SWG), both of which have been accused of engaging in obstructionist tactics, including strategic campaign contributions and public messaging.

The industries, organizations, and political actors comprising the CCM are known to obstruct climate change mitigation policy at local to international scales (Basseches et al., 2022). Connections across the CCM are not restricted by subnational or national borders. The network of corporations, political actors, and others adjacent to climate change policymaking and action are often global in scale. Fossil fuel companies in particular are known to hold global connections and power. Gurría (2013), a Mexican economist and diplomat, explains this phenomenon in terms of "carbon entanglement," the idea that governments are incentivized to support fossil fuels because of the revenue they bring in, leading to entrenchment and political inertia. In the US, several state and local governments have even filed lawsuits against members of the fossil fuel industry, including ExxonMobil, Chevron, Shell, and BP, specifically for obstructing climate action (Connecticut official state website, 2020; Li et al., 2022; Mindock, 2022; The official website of the City of New York, 2021). Thus, in this case study of Arizona legislative sessions, I will not be evaluating a closed political or economic system, but rather, a small segment of an internationally connected network of actors that share strategies and cooperate to maintain the status quo of climate change inaction.

Discursively, the CCM is known to take diverse and tailored approaches in their communication and messaging. McKie (2019) explains that these organizations use multiple strategies, suggesting an effort to appeal to various groups. Some of these strategies involve denialism, while others align with the broader consensus. For example, Bohr (2016) describes how industries may "frame scientific knowledge as an attack on economic freedom when utilized to guide policy governing environment-economy relationships" (p. 812). Stoddart et al. (2022) observe that major carbon-polluting companies have moved away from old tactics of outright denial as public opinion has swayed toward acknowledging anthropogenic climate change and promoting climate action. This ties into the DCD framework; while Lamb et al. (2020) acknowledge that outright climate denial, skepticism, and ad hominem attacks on scientists have been mainstays of the CCM, they focus instead on a fourth, less-discussed set of strategies: "policy-focused discourses that exploit contemporary discussions on what action should be taken, how fast, who bears responsibility and where costs and benefits should be allocated," which the authors refer to as "climate 'delay' discourses" (pg. 1). The effectiveness of these strategies is evident in the US, where public uncertainty about climate change lags behind scientific consensus, and where climate policy often becomes entangled in broader partisan and cultural "wars." As Collomb (2014) argues, for many in the American Right, accepting climate change implies acknowledging market failure and embracing collective, state-led solutions, which has proven to be an ideological red line.

Utilities have been increasingly recognized for their role within the CCM. Utilities systems across the US are highly variable and complex, with a mix of private and public ownership (Greenberg and McKendry, 2021 as cited in Basseches et al., 2022). Though the actions of utility companies are largely dependent on state partisanship (Adua and Clark, 2021), these companies are some of the most common and influential organizations in prominent coalitions opposing climate change mitigation policy in the US (Brulle, 2021). Findings from Williams et al. (2022) suggest that electric utility industry organizations in the US have engaged in strategic communication strategies designed to prevent pollution restrictions. Utilities hold a key role in state-level energy initiatives (Adua and Clark, 2021) due to their market-based and technical control over energy distribution, as well as their political power and flexible corporate structures (Basseches, 2020). For example, the utility sector successfully funded the defeat of a 2018 carbon tax policy in Washington state despite the state's favorable political climate for environmental initiatives (Bromley-Trujillo and Holman, 2020). Culhane et al. (2021) argue that utilities not only work to block climate policy from being enacted but also push for amendments to make surviving policy more favorable to the industry. Most US residents purchase electricity from private utilities, or IOUs (Lindstrom and Hoff, 2019). Borenstein and Bushnell (2015), Basseches (2020), and Basseches et al. (2022) explain that variations in the ways that states attempted to break up vertically integrated utilities and introduce retail competition led to differing perspectives toward climate protection policies among key actors. Further, they explain that "despite their political power, the degree to which utilities undermine climate [protection] policy is unclear" (Basseches et al., 2022, pg. 32). Here, I aim to shed light on the degree and mechanisms of this influence through an analysis of the discursive strategies used by utilities representatives and their allies in Arizona.

3 Discourses of climate delay

Lamb et al. (2020) describe discourses of climate delay as discourse put forth by the CCM in contemporary discussions which influence the rate and scale of climate action. The authors propose that discourses become arguments of delay "when they misrepresent rather than clarify, raise adversity rather than consensus or imply that taking action is an impossible challenge" (pg. 5). The authors take a deductive approach, having generated an initial typology of discourses based on expert elicitation which they further refined by drawing from various external sources. From this strategy, Lamb et al. (2020) ultimately characterize these discourses of climate delay as negotiating one or more of the following questions: (1) Is it our responsibility to take action? (2) Are transformative changes needed? (3) Is it worth it to mitigate climate change? and (4) Can we mitigate climate change? From these fundamental questions, the authors group discourse

strategies into four major categories: "emphasize the downsides," "push non-transformative solutions," "redirect responsibility," and "surrender to climate change." Figure 1, borrowed from Lamb et al. (2020), visualizes their DCD typology.

Lamb et al. (2020) break down "emphasize the downsides" into three subcategories. First, "policy perfectionism" refers to the idea that we should only implement perfectly crafted solutions with universal support. This is considered problematic given that such solutions do not exist, thus waiting for them to be constructed is a hazardous diversion of valuable time and effort. The second and third categories of emphasizing the downsides are "appeal to well-being" and "appeal to social justice." Within these two subcategories, economic arguments are often utilized. For example, some argue that focusing too heavily on climate change mitigation could threaten economic growth and job stability, minimizing the necessity of climate action. This prioritization is largely misguided, as the impacts of climate change are expected to harm economic growth and increase poverty overall (Defries, 2019), thus short-term economic impacts are considered above long-term benefits from effective climate policy. In addition, it is critical to examine the question: economic growth/wealth accumulation for whom? In many cases, wealth accumulation continues to be channeled to the most wealthy, further increasing unprecedented levels of global economic inequality (Chancel and Piketty, 2021). Even when economic rhetoric focuses on potential benefits to low or middle-class households, this may be obscuring significant benefits to powerful and wealthy actors. Moreover, the appeal to social justice and well-being often manifests in extreme arguments that claim ending fossil fuel use would lead to catastrophic consequences, overstating the disruptive nature of a planned transition and underestimating societal benefits.

The second broad category, "pushing non-transformative solutions," involves advocating for superficial, insignificant, or unproven climate change interventions that do not address the root causes of climate change and/or do not lead to significant and lasting emission reductions. Overemphasis on climate geoengineering, or large-scale artificial manipulation of the climate system, is one example. These proposed techniques include methods such as stratospheric sulfur injection, cloud whitening, and orbital mirrors and sunshades (Boyd, n.d.). The deployment of these experimental technologies poses significant technical, financial, and ethical challenges that have yet to be surmounted (Hamilton, 2014; Stephens and Surprise, 2020). Despite these concerns, many high-polluting industries have begun promoting and funding research into

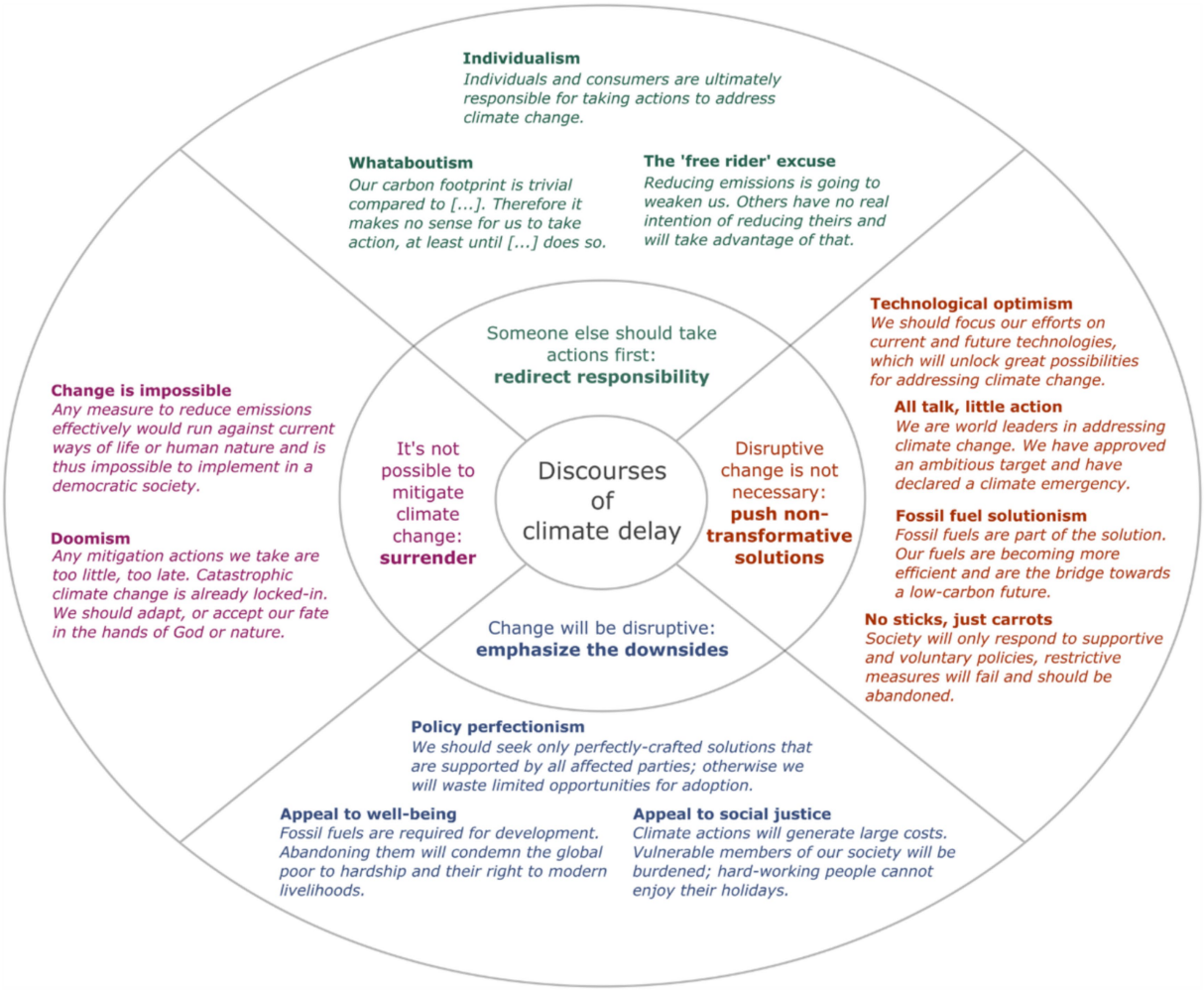

FIGURE 1
A typology of climate delay discourses. Source: Figure 1 in Lamb et al. (2020), reproduced under CC BY 4.0 license.

geoengineering, raising the question of whether industrial support for geoengineering may simply be another form of greenwashing that serves to reinforce existing wealth and power inequities and the structures that support them (Stephens and Surprise, 2020). Lamb et al. (2020) break this category down into four subcategories: (1) "technological optimism," referring to overdependence on future technological advancements to address climate change, (2) "all talk, little action," which includes setting targets or declaring climate emergencies without engaging in meaningful change, (3) "fossil-fuel solutionism," or the idea that fossil fuels are part of the solution to climate change, and (4) "no sticks, just carrots," referring to the idea that only voluntary climate protection measures should be implemented while restrictive mandates should be avoided.

"Redirecting responsibility," the third category, refers to removing blame from actors who have historically polluted the most while emphasizing that others should act first (Brown Climate and Development Lab, 2023, pg. 5). Lamb et al. (2020) break down the category of redirecting responsibility into three major components: "individualism," "whataboutism," and "the free-rider excuse." However, for the purposes of this research, the categories of "whataboutism" and "the free-rider excuse" have been combined into a single subcategory due to significant similarities and overlap. "Individualism" can be utilized to emphasize the impacts of personal lifestyle choices while ignoring the powerful entities, institutions, and entrenched systems which shape these individual-level choices. "Whataboutism," wherein actors use the lack of action or higher emission levels of other entities as an excuse to not act on climate change themselves (Lamb et al., 2020), is another discursive tool used to redirect responsibility. This form of redirection emerges in the following example, a quote from current US president Donald Trump: "Gore wants us to clean up our factories and plants in order to protect us from global warming, when China and other countries could not care less. It would make us totally noncompetitive in the manufacturing world, and China, Japan and India are laughing at America's stupidity" (Clean Air Council, 2017).

Finally, the fourth discourse of climate delay, "surrender," is further divided into two major subcategories: "change is impossible," and climate "doomism." Lamb et al. (2020) explain that framing centered on the impossibility of change involves claims that strong climate policies will hurt society, politics, and/or humanity "to the extent that their final implementation is doomed… reif[ying] the current state of things and den[ying] the ability of societies to organize large socio-economic transformations" (pg. 4). "Doomism" discourse, on the other hand, emphasizes how any actions we take now will not be enough to counteract climate change. This can lead to fear and apathy, which may dissuade engagement in climate action. Both forms of surrender discourse discourage working toward meaningful change in the realm of climate action.

A growing body of research has applied DCD within various European contexts (for examples, see Nisbett et al., 2024; Pringle and Robbins, 2022; Tito et al., 2024). However, fewer studies have examined how DCD manifest in real-time discussions of climate policy and decision-making in the US, and even fewer at the state level. To the best of my knowledge, the Brown Climate and Development Lab's application of Lamb's framework to analyze offshore wind in Rhode Island (Brown Climate and Development Lab, 2023) is the only such state-level study. Here, I examine how the CCM, and particularly the dominant utility companies in Arizona, may be using the DCD as described by Lamb et al. (2020). Given the high level of variability in climate action—and attitudes toward it—across US states, exploring Arizona's specific context provides an opportunity to assess unique regional factors in DCD manifestation and operation. While Rhode Island has generally demonstrated a proactive stance on climate action, Arizona has historically opposed or restricted the development of significant climate policies. This analysis therefore represents a critically needed application of the DCD framework in a state where the CCM has strong influence and has already blocked climate mitigation opportunities.

4 Case study: House Bill 2686 and House Bill 2101 in Arizona

In this section I describe the selection of Arizona as the region of interest for this study, followed by descriptions of each of the two critical Arizona energy bills for which legislative sessions will be analyzed. For each bill, Arizona House Bill 2686 (2020) and Arizona House Bill 2101 (2022), I provide a summary of the bill's text along with an overview of concerns expressed during the legislative sessions, exploring the implications of each in regulating emissions and addressing climate change.

4.1 Region: Arizona, United States

Arizona presents an ideal research location for this study for several reasons. Van Evera (1997) provides several criteria for evaluating case selections including appropriateness for controlled comparison with other cases, and Arizona as a case selection is particularly suitable for this purpose. The US operates under a federalist system in which each of the 50 states maintains its own legislative, executive, and judicial branches. Most state legislatures, including Arizona's, are bicameral, with a House of Representatives and a Senate. This parallel structure allows researchers to conduct controlled comparisons across states. Therefore, my results can be compared with existing empirical case studies of similar nature as well as future research efforts to assess the generalizability of my results to other US states.

The unique political environment in Arizona also adds to its value as the location for this case study. During the legislative sessions analyzed in this study, the Arizona State Legislature was controlled by a Republican majority in both chambers. The governor's seat, however, is currently held by a Democrat, Katie Hobbs, who was elected in 2022. This split partisan control adds further complexity to Arizona's political dynamics. While Arizona has traditionally leaned conservative, in recent years it has come to be seen as a "swing state," wherein support for the two major political parties is relatively equal. This partisan shift is strongly shaped by geographic and demographic factors. 59% of Arizona's voters reside within the Phoenix metropolitan area (Arizona Secretary of State, 2024), which was once considered strongly Republican but has recently seen increasing shares of Democratic voters (Norrander, 2024). Pima County, hosting about 15% of the state's voters as its second largest county, has a majority Democrat population (Arizona Secretary of State, 2024). The remaining 13 counties are largely rural with conservative majorities, with a few exceptions including Santa Cruz and Apache county, which

have majority Latino and majority Native American populations, respectively (Norrander, 2024). In general, Arizona has seen a growing demographic of Hispanic/Latino voters, which is thought to be one of the contributing factors in the state's shift toward more moderate politics (Burtch-Buus, 2024). This urban–rural divide reflects broader national patterns, where urban areas are more likely to support climate policy and rural regions are more likely to oppose it (Speiser and Hill, 2021; van der Bles et al., 2023).

This geographic and political complexity is especially relevant in the context of climate policy. States under Democratic control are more likely to enact climate regulations and renewable energy initiatives, while states under Republican control are more likely to enact policies obstructing climate regulation (Bromley-Trujillo and Holman, 2020). Arizona's divided political structure therefore offers a useful lens to study how climate discourse plays out in contested political environments.

To the best of my knowledge, only one study directly applying the DCD framework to evaluate US state political processes has been conducted (see Brown Climate and Development Lab, 2023), and no prior peer-reviewed research has specifically examined climate obstruction discourse within the context of Arizona. This suggests an underexplored area in the literature where insights from Arizona could contribute to evaluating the generalizability of findings from other regions to the US as a whole. Additionally, by viewing Arizona as a node in the larger climate countermovement network, this case study provides insight into the specific ways that corporations, political actors, and others adjacent to climate change policymaking act together at global scales to initiate and maintain climate obstruction at local to international levels.

One key set of actors in this process are utility companies, who wield considerable political influence in Arizona and across the United States. Utilities, particularly IOUs, play a powerful gatekeeping role in shaping climate and energy policy due to their close relationships with regulators, financial resources, and critical control over infrastructure. In Arizona, major utilities have historically opposed energy market reform and decarbonization policies. For example, the state's largest IOU, APS, spent over $30 million in 2018 to defeat Proposition 127, a ballot initiative that would have required utilities to source 50% of their energy from renewables by 2030 (Kasper and Grubb, 2018). Studying utility-aligned rhetoric is therefore essential for understanding the broader architecture of climate obstruction in the state.

Overall, the population and political climate of Arizona is shifting, transforming with it the dialogue surrounding climate issues in the state. Despite these changes, state policymakers have remained largely hostile toward climate initiatives thus far. Conducting my study within Arizona therefore provides unique insight into how climate discourses may manifest in swing states and/or states where climate issues are still considered highly divisive and controversial. This case study can also be easily compared to subnational climate policy research happening across the US and internationally to assess the global significance and prevalence of identified climate delay discourse strategies.

4.2 Arizona House Bill 2686 (2020)

Arizona House Bill (HB) 2686 (2020) was introduced by Representative Rusty Bowers, who was serving as Speaker of the Arizona House of Representatives at the time, and sponsored in the Senate by Senator Karen Fann, then the Senate President; both were Republicans. The bill has six major components. First, the bill mandates that municipalities in need of building permits send copies of the permit to the county assessor and the director of the Arizona Department of Revenue, and notify them when a permit expires. Second, it states that municipalities and counties cannot deny building permits based on the utility provider chosen to serve the project. Third, the bill prevents discrimination against specific utility providers through excessive fees. Fourth, it mandates that cities and towns cannot require a transaction privilege tax license or a business license as a condition for issuing a building permit, although they can require a business license application within 30 days of receiving a permit. Fifth, the bill states that if a building or addition was constructed without a permit, municipalities and counties cannot require a subsequent owner to obtain a permit for that prior construction when applying for a new permit, unless public safety is impacted. Sixth, city codes, ordinances, and plans must not restrict the operation of authorized utility providers. According to the bill, municipalities are therefore prohibited from imposing fines or other penalties that would limit the authority of utility providers to operate or serve customers. Thus, the bill effectively prevents municipalities in Arizona from restricting natural gas in future construction.

In addition to its mention by key actors and classification as a high-priority energy bill by the Sierra Club (Sierra Club Grand Canyon Chapter, n.d.), this bill was also selected for its relevance in conversations on climate policymaking and obstruction at the state level. Though the bill itself reads as relatively innocuous and straightforward, there are less obvious implications in restricting the use of natural gas. HB 2686 arguably qualifies as a climate obstruction bill given that it directly prevents the regulation of greenhouse gas emissions through the phasing out of natural gas construction within municipalities. As a result of the bill's passing, cities and towns in Arizona are no longer allowed to discriminate against certain types of utilities when it comes to issuing building permits, which in turn provides ongoing protection to future natural gas expansion efforts while simultaneously restricting cities in their ability to regulate emissions and create cleaner energy infrastructure (Whitman, 2020). Conflict regarding city vs. state authority often results in state preemption laws which seize power from local governments on a given issue (Basseches et al., 2022; Einstein and Glick, 2017; Riverstone-Newell, 2017). Given that no Arizona cities had attempted to or succeeded in enacting a natural gas ban in future construction, this bill can be considered preemptive.

Based on data collected from the video recordings and transcriptions of Arizona State Legislature meetings holding HB 2686 on the agenda, supporters of the bill included Republican representatives of the Arizona House and Senate, the Arizona Corporation Commission (ACC), SWG Corporation, the Balanced Energy Solutions Coalition, and the Arizona Propane Gas Association. The ACC, which is more powerful than Public Utilities Commissions in other states and is often referred to as the "fourth branch of government" (Arizona Corporation Commission, 2020), emerged as a particularly important player in this case. The ACC oversees the incorporation of businesses and organizations, securities regulation, and railroad/pipeline safety in addition to typical utility oversight (Arizona Corporation Commission, n.d.), and they tend to align politically with business interests. Supporters of HB 2686 also included

representatives of both the fossil fuel and utilities sectors (including the Arizona Propane Gas Association and SWG Corporation), both of which have been powerful actors in the CCM (Brulle et al., 2021; Li et al., 2022). On the opposing side, major actors included the Grand Canyon chapter of the Sierra Club, the Arizona chapter of Chispa (a pro-climate action organization with Hispanic leadership), the Southwest Energy Efficiency Project, and most Democratic representatives in the Arizona State Legislature.

At the January 28th, 2020 House Natural Resources, Energy & Water Committee meeting [2686:1], sponsor of the bill Representative Russell Bowers [R] explained that HB 2686 was drafted in response to municipal initiatives in California (most notably, Berkeley[1]) to mitigate the effects of climate change by banning the use of natural gas in future construction. Representative Bowers and others, however, often refer to these local initiatives simply as 'natural gas bans' within the legislative sessions analyzed, lacking critical nuance regarding the impacts of these policies on current natural gas users. Media publications have also replicated this tendency (see Barnard, 2021; Cagle, 2019). While an outright ban implies costly and difficult forced conversion of appliances for current customers, existing regulations have instead focused largely on preventing the expansion of natural gas rather than mandating a retroactive conversion of existing systems. Although natural gas is commonly described as a "clean" fossil fuel, recent studies by the Environmental Defense Fund found that the Environmental Protection Agency has underestimated methane emissions from natural gas production by up to 60% compared to direct atmospheric measurements taken at oil and gas sites (Environmental Defense Fund, 2018). Natural gas also produces carbon dioxide pollution; the Energy Information Administration estimates 1,645.6 MMT of CO2 came from natural gas production in 2020, or about 36% of total US emissions that year. Policies which limit natural gas production are effective means of reducing carbon emissions given the well-known contributions of methane to global climate change.

4.3 Arizona House Bill 2101 (2022)

Arizona House Bill (HB) 2101 (2022) was introduced and sponsored by Republican Representative Gail Griffin, who continues to serve in the Arizona House of Representatives as Chair of the Natural Resources, Energy and Water Committee at the time of writing. HB 2101 alters several components of electric energy regulation in the state. The bill repeals and amends certain sections of a 1998 state law that set a timeline and framework for opening power generation to market competition. Consumer protection is addressed in the bill regarding how service changes should be presented to customers, including stipulations on transparency and misinformation. The bill also includes provisions to protect provider trade secrets and other confidential information from disclosure. It outlines procedures for appealing decisions made by public power entities, as well as setting requirements for the installation of electric and natural gas facilities in new residential structures. By introducing new sections such as 30–810 and 30–811, the bill also clarifies expectations for the provision of energy services and addresses coordinated scheduling of generation or transmission and buy-through programs. The final major component of the bill is an amendment to the scope of the exemption from antitrust laws for conduct by a public service corporation, stating that corporations holding a certificate of public convenience and necessity are exempt from antitrust statutes, allowing them to engage in activities that would otherwise be restricted under antitrust laws.

Several concerns were raised in legislative sessions by the bill's opponents regarding its potential environmental and financial implications. First, the bill imposes limitations on models like community choice aggregation which allows communities to utilize cleaner energy sources independently of public utilities companies, significantly limiting potential impacts from local clean energy initiatives. Additionally, due to the system of guaranteed returns for incumbent utilities and disincentives for new entrants including inefficiency fees, the bill has been argued to discourage competition and innovation in the energy sector. Concerns were also expressed regarding the lack of cost-effective renewable energy options from established utilities, likely in part due to lack of competitive pressure; this bill could thus keep energy prices higher and disincentivize transitioning to renewable energy by further restricting competition in favor of incumbent utilities. Finally, the bill may present barriers to the implementation of newer, more efficient energy services leading to higher consumer costs, including fees that would compensate incumbent utilities for unused capacities and inefficiencies.

Groups with representatives speaking in favor of the bill included Republican representatives of the Arizona House and Senate, the Salt River Project (SRP), and Tucson Electric Power (TEP). Speakers opposed to the bill included many Democratic representatives of the Arizona House and Senate as well as representatives from the Sierra Club, the Retail Energy Supply Association, and NRG Energy. Notably, during the legislative sessions examined, many speakers with ties to larger organizational interests seemingly attempted to disaffiliate themselves with these interests through their lobbying registration. For example, Russell Smoldon, who spoke in favor of the bill as a representative of his personal company E3 Strategies, stated that he had worked for SRP for more than two decades. This pattern manifested among opponents of the bill as well, such as Antonio Silva, who registered to lobby as an individual but mentioned that their business is a subsidiary of NRG Energy.

The bill had been assembled following an application by Green Mountain Energy to provide customers in Arizona with local solar energy. The company states that the bill effectively repeals the statute which would have enabled them to receive a license to operate in the state (Green Mountain Energy, 2022). Green Mountain Energy planned to provide a 100% renewable energy rate plan to customers, increasing the proportion of energy generated from renewable sources in the state, which the US Energy Information Administration (2023) currently estimates to be about 17% in Arizona. This exemplifies how HB 2101 may inhibit the rapid and necessary shift away from fossil fuels. Additionally, the Arizona Corporation Commission (ACC) voted on February 6th, 2024 "to direct ACC Staff to draft rules to repeal both the Renewable Energy rules and mandates, and the Electric and Gas Energy Efficiency rules and mandates" (Arizona Corporation Commission, 2024). This equates to repealing both the

1 The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit has since overturned the Berkeley ordinance, ruling that it is preempted by federal law under the Energy Policy and Conservation Act on January 2nd, 2024.

2006 mandate for energy providers to deliver at least 15% of energy from renewable sources by 2025, as well as energy-efficiency rules adopted in 2010 which would have required electric and gas utilities to achieve 22% energy savings by 2020. Without any formal mandate, plans by state utilities to replace much of their coal generation with natural gas rather than renewable energy may be bolstered.

5 Materials and methods

Here I first present the legislative sessions analyzed, describing how each will be referred to throughout the remaining text. I then detail the methods I utilized in performing the discourse analysis, specifying how I employed the DCD framework using NVivo software to identify discourses of climate delay throughout the legislative sessions.

5.1 Legislative sessions

The bills analyzed in this study were chosen on the basis of: (1) significant potential impacts on Arizona's climate governance, (2) high levels of surrounding controversy, and (3) the significant role of incumbent utilities as key actors in each bill. Additionally, each bill has been selected based on its classification by the Sierra Club as a high-priority bill in the 'Energy' or 'Energy, ALEC, & Industry Bills' categories (Sierra Club Grand Canyon Chapter, n.d.). The Sierra Club is one of the US's largest and oldest environmental organizations (Coley and Schachle, 2021), and their datasets have often been used in climate and environmental research papers (see Elliott and Löfgren, 2022; Gao et al., 2022; Savitch, 2003).

Legislative sessions relevant to HB 2686 (2020) and HB 2101 (2022) are examined here to understand if and how specific climate obstruction discourses were employed, as well as how the climate countermovement manifested in the legislative discourse through incumbent utilities. Video recordings and transcripts for all legislative sessions analyzed were retrieved from the Arizona State Legislature's official website, where they are posted as part of the public record. For HB 2686, these 2020 legislative sessions include:

1) House Natural Resources, Energy & Water Committee—January 28th
2) House Rules Committee—February 3rd
3) House Caucus—February 4th
4) House Committee of the Whole—February 12th
5) Senate Floor Session—February 13th

For HB 2101, the 2022 legislative sessions analyzed include:

1) House Natural Resources, Energy & Water Committee—January 18th
2) House Rules Committee—February 7th
3) House Majority Caucus—February 8th
4) House Minority Caucus—February 8th
5) House Committee of the Whole—February 14th
6) House Committee of the Whole—February 23rd
7) Senate Floor Session—March 8th
8) Senate Floor Session—April 19th.

Throughout the remainder of this paper, these legislative sessions are referred to by their bill number and their place within this list in the format [BILL #:LIST #], i.e., the House Natural Resources, Energy & Water Committee—January 28th meeting will be coded as [2686:1], the House Rules Committee—February 3rd coded as [2686:2], and so on.

5.2 Methods

To perform this discourse analysis, I first developed a codebook based on Lamb et al. (2020) DCD typology using NVivo software. In accordance with this typology, the codebook contained the following four broad categories and their respective subcategories:

1) Emphasize the Downsides: a. Appeal to Well-Being; b. Appeal to Social Justice; c. Policy Perfectionism
2) Push Non-Transformative Solutions: a. Technological Optimism; b. All Talk, Little Action; c. Fossil Fuel Solutionism; d. No Sticks, Just Carrots
3) Redirect Responsibility: a. Individualism; b. Whataboutism (combined here with The 'Free Rider' Excuse due to overwhelming similarities)
4) Surrender: a. Doomism; b. Change is impossible

These categories are summarized and defined in Figure 1, which I borrow from Lamb et al. (2020).

The DCD framework was chosen for its simple yet comprehensive classification system, which lends itself easily to the deductive manual coding process used here. Additionally, while Lamb et al. (2020) present a critically useful guide for identifying climate obstruction rhetoric, few studies have since applied their typology to empirically evaluate the manifestation of DCD across varying contexts. This discourse analysis thus expands upon existing literature on climate decision-making by evaluating the applicability of the DCD framework in a case study of the Arizona State Legislature.

I retrieved video files and transcripts for all relevant legislative proceedings for each of the bills through the official Arizona State Legislature website and uploaded them to NVivo for analysis. Utilizing a deductive approach, I manually coded the transcripts to identify potential instances of climate obstruction discourse in accordance with the codebook as described above. Coding instances were then examined in order to: (1) select examples of quotations that best exemplify each category, (2) identify patterns in how each form of delay manifests within the context of these legislative sessions, and (3) determine relative occurrence rates among the various DCD categories and assess their potential for critical analysis, thus expanding upon the theoretical DCD framework through empirical application of its typology.

6 Results and discussion

Figure 2 provides a summarizing visualization for the distribution of coding occurrences observed, with "emphasize the downsides" comprising the bulk of coding instances (49.2%), followed by "push non-transformative solutions" (36.1%), "redirect

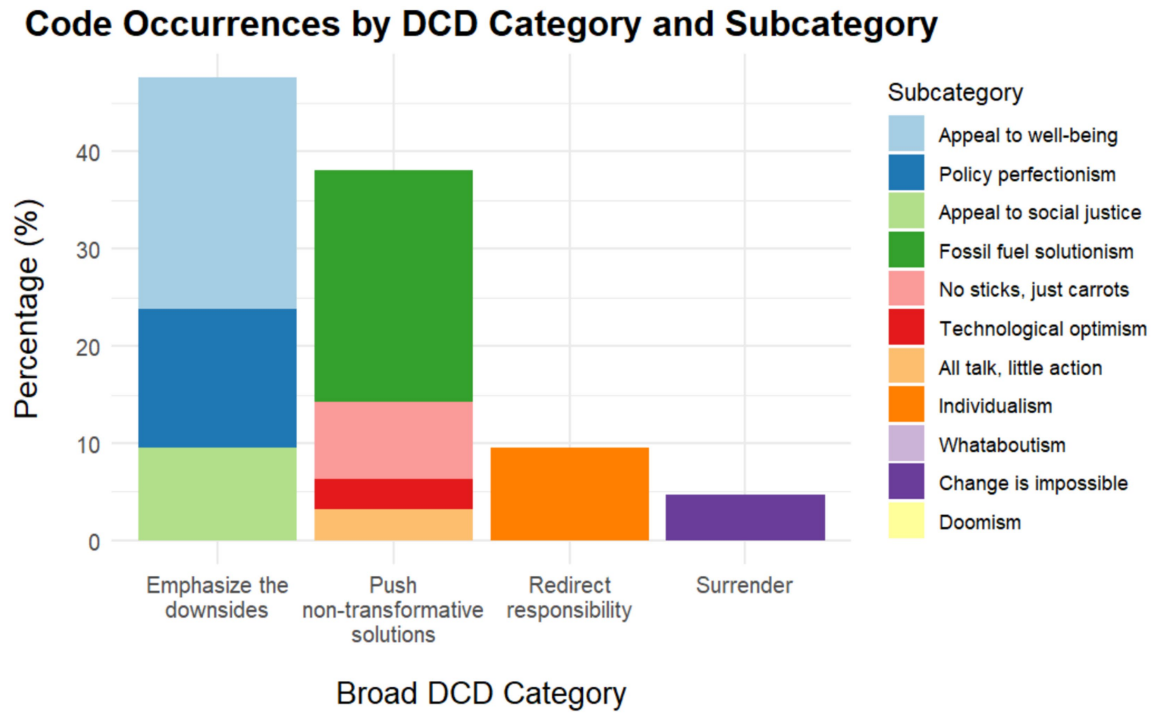

FIGURE 2
Percentage distribution of code occurrences across DCD broad categories and subcategories. This figure presents the percentage distribution of code occurrences across the DCD categories and subcategories within Arizona State Legislature sessions surrounding Arizona House Bill 2686 (2020) and Arizona House Bill 2,101 (2022). Each bar represents a broad category, with segments showing the relative percentage of subcategories within each category.

responsibility" (9.8%), and "surrender" (4.9%). My results regarding the distributions of subcategory code instances are also portrayed in the figure.

In the following subsections, I present some of the most prominent examples of climate obstruction quotes for each category from the legislative sessions examined. I first describe how and why each coding instance analyzed here is categorized as it is. I then explore patterns in how these categories and subcategories tended to manifest within the legislative sessions evaluated. Additionally, I investigate the absence of certain subcategories and potential implications.

6.1 Emphasize the downsides

Among the four broad categories within the DCD typology, "emphasize the downsides" was most commonly applicable within observed transcripts, comprising 49.2% of coding instances. Though it is unclear why this category triumphed, I theorize that the dominance of "emphasiz[ing] the downsides" as a discourse strategy in the legislative sessions analyzed relates to the general rejection of climate change mitigation and adaptation policies within the Arizona State Legislature. This discourse strategy requires minimal recognition of climate change as an issue worth addressing, thus it can easily be utilized by legislators and others who do not believe in climate change or do not support climate action.

The most applied subcategory within "emphasize the downsides" was "appeal to well-being," comprising 50% of coding instances within the broader category. A few examples made in support of HB 2686 are presented below:

> "Prohibiting use of natural gas in Arizona would eliminate many high wage jobs associated with the natural gas industry [and] harm our ability to compete for out of state economic development opportunities."—Garrick Taylor, representing Arizona Chamber of Commerce and Industry [2686:1]
>
> "If you want to see Arizona's tourism and restaurant industry collapse, then you make every restaurant in Phoenix or Tucson or any city, you make them cook on an electric stove. These cities will become culinary deserts that nobody will come to."—Representative John Kavanagh [2686:4]
>
> "What if we have a county that says we don't like mining anymore because we don't think it's clean enough, so we're not going to allow mining in our county anymore? What would that do to Arizona's economy? No business is going to want to move to Arizona. If you have 91 cities and towns and 15 counties who all have the ability to decide what energy they will or will not have or many other things they want, [businesses will not] move here because it can be changed so quickly on the whim of a council."—Senator Karen Fann [2686:5]

Within this category, many arguments made in support of the bills utilized economic reasoning. These statements reinforce the status quo in their prioritization of economic stimulation and growth.

Such rhetoric mirrors what Painter et al. (2023) term "response skepticism," a common discourse in right-wing media globally that deflects climate action by emphasizing economic burdens and personal sacrifice. This framing aligns with a deregulatory worldview in which government intervention, especially environmental regulation, is treated as inherently harmful to economic growth and individual freedoms. Within this framework, the costs of environmental regulations are considered unjustifiable if they negatively impact economic sectors, regardless of their importance for maintaining long-term ecological sustainability. The speakers quoted above reinforce this narrative through their "appeal[s] to well-being" which shape perceptions of economic necessity, portraying natural gas as critical for maintaining economic stability. Thus, in their statements, they arguably call upon the shared economic skepticism and anti-regulatory values of their audience—fellow legislators, lobbyists, and Arizona citizens—to invoke fear and resistance toward proposed changes to entrenched economic and social practices. Such use of economic alarmism to rationalize inaction reflects what Brooks and Wingard (2023) identify as an "ecomodern enactment of implicatory denial," wherein actors acknowledge the threat of climate change in abstract terms but reject substantive interventions through appeals to stability, prosperity, or order. Though speakers rarely deny climate science outright, their talk deflects meaningful change by foregrounding threats to local economies or cultural identities.

The theme of economic rationalization also manifests within instances of the "appeal to social justice" category, which comprised 20% of coding instances within the "emphasize the downsides" category. The following quote demonstrates this form of economic framing:

> "We're seeing municipalities limit consumer choice. And who does it hurt the most? It hurts those that can least afford homes. And this is a direct attack on homeowners when we are experiencing a shortage of affordable homes. With House Bill 2686, we can assure that municipalities and counties cannot hinder the ability of a person to use the services of a utility provider that is authorized to provide utility service."—Representative Nancy Barto [2686:4]

Here, Representative Barto argues that the use of natural gas is essentially a homeowner's right. Additionally, she contends that this right is at risk of being revoked without protection from HB 2686. Representative Barto appeals to the emotions of the audience by invoking images of the struggling homeowner under "direct attack." In doing so, she appeals to social justice through her arguments that this bill will have negative economic impacts for those who are already among the most economically marginalized.

Regarding "policy perfectionism," which made up the remaining 30% of "emphasize the downsides" coding instances, this strategy largely manifested in the legislative sessions as cautionary tales of climate action taken across other areas of the US. California in particular was brought up throughout the legislative sessions for both bills. For HB 2686, cities in California like Berkeley which had banned natural gas in future construction were cited as examples to be strictly avoided. Similarly, for HB 2101, energy deregulation in the state of California was presented as a negative example to discourage retail energy competition within Arizona. The following statements made by supporters of these bills exemplify these sentiments within the legislative sessions:

> "We have been able to observe what happens in cities like Berkeley, California that take these radical steps to tell people 'this is what you will use whether you like it or not' for one agenda reason or another."—Representative Mark Finchem [2686:4]

> "13 cities and one county in California have already done this. They've already banned natural gas as well as a city in Massachusetts. So this is already happening. It was stated that it's not happening here. So, what's the worry? I am proud to get ahead of the game here and make sure that it doesn't happen here in Arizona. So, like my constituents say in my Mohave County, don't California my Arizona."—Representative Leo Biasiucci [2686:4]

> "We just don't want to be California. We don't want to fall into their problems that they have."—Representative Gail Griffin [2101:1]

> "And yet we want to let these X, Y, Z-ers come in and we want to turn [Arizona] into California or Texas. I'm not for them to do that at all."—Representative Kevin Payne [2101:3]

These claims represent "policy perfectionism" by dismissing imperfect but progressive steps toward mitigating climate change. Thus, rather than proposing that Arizona should not act to address climate change due to the inaction of others, as would be expected through the "whataboutism" subcategory of "redirecting responsibility," a more common sentiment expressed in the legislative sessions was that Arizona should not act due to the *action* of others.

The absence of a subcategory to reflect this sentiment within the DCD framework may be one indicator that the framework is most applicable in settings where climate change is acknowledged as a problem by the speaker utilizing the discourse, at least to some degree. While Lamb et al. (2020) propose that discourses of climate delay, rather than climate skepticism or climate denial, "pervade current debates on climate action," I propose that this may not be the case in all settings. In cases where climate skepticism or climate denial still prevail, the DCD framework may benefit from pairing with additional frameworks, such as FLICC (False Experts, Logical Fallacies, Impossible Expectations, Cherry Picking, and Conspiracy Theories; Cook, 2020).

6.2 Push non-transformative solutions

Within the "push non-transformative solutions" category (which made up 36.1% of total overall coding instances), the subcategory of "fossil fuel solutionism"—the idea that fossil fuels are part of the solution to climate change—comprised most (62.5%) of the coding instances. This subcategory is tied with the "emphasize the downsides" subcategory of "appeal to well-being" in terms of their share of total coding instances, with both making up 23.8% of overall code occurrences, respectively. The prevalence of "fossil fuel solutionism" within the legislative sessions examined may allude to the strong political and financial ties observed between Arizona legislators and the fossil fuel industry. For example, HB 2686 is widely thought to

have been crafted and handed to legislators by SWG Corporation, evidenced by the following statement made by Representative Kirsten Engel toward SWG representative Matthew Ligouri [2,686:1]: "I think you are responsible for the bill, is my understanding." Additionally, sponsors of the bill Representative Rusty Bowers and Senator Karen Fann received $4,500 each in campaign contributions from SWG the prior year, making SWG both of their largest single contributors (Whitman, 2020). Some standout examples of fossil fuel solutionism are presented in the quotes below:

> "We've seen in other states that they have swept us into the melee of electric only, and that's creating problems for people who are our customers of propane gas and prefer the use of propane gas because of a variety of factors, including environmental benefits, cost benefits and so on."—Barry Aarons, representing Arizona Propane Gas Association [2686:1]

> "We don't have the ability to have all renewables in storage at this point in time. You have to have some sort of transition, and it has to involve the opportunity to have natural gas."—Russell Smoldon, representing B3 Strategies [2101:1]

These statements portray fossil fuels as both necessary and beneficial to the environment, working to legitimize their continued use. This aligns with efforts to protect the existing energy system and delay transformative policy. Nielsen (2023), in his study of televised climate debates, describes how competing perspectives are often presented as balanced, even when one side reinforces the status quo. While his focus is media, a similar dynamic appears here. Fossil fuel advocates adopt the language of pragmatism and environmental concern to appear reasonable. This presentation masks unequal power and creates the impression that continued fossil fuel use is not only acceptable but also responsible. Another example of fossil fuel solutionism is presented below:

> "Southwest Gas is doing many things to, what we're calling "decarbonize" our pipeline… We can harvest methane from decomposing carbon, we can clean that methane up to pipeline quality gas, and we can inject that gas back onto our pipeline to offer to customers who want that green portfolio."—Matthew Ligouri, representing Southwest Gas [2686:1]

Ligouri's statement overlaps with the "all talk, little action" and "technological optimism" subcategories of pushing non-transformative solutions as well, each of which comprise 8.3% of code instances in this category. The "all talk, little action" category encompasses instances where governments, corporations, or organizations commit publicly to climate action, but make no meaningful progress while doing so. Given that SWG seems to promise a "green portfolio" without any plans to move away from fossil fuels, this statement can be categorized as such. This also demonstrates technological optimism, referring to the belief that we can rely on future technologies to address climate change. As a lobbyist for SWG, and thus a direct representative for both the fossil fuel and utility industries, Ligouri's statement may arguably reflect broader greenwashing efforts of the CCM. Though not named specifically as a discourse strategy within the DCD framework, greenwashing represents the act of deceiving the public by over-emphasizing environmental efforts while underfunding more impactful environmental efforts (Becker-Olsen and Potucek, 2013). Ligouri's statement thus presents a textbook example of this practice; using misleading terminology such as "decarbonize" and "green portfolio," Ligouri implies that meaningful progress is being made toward making fossil fuels ecologically sustainable. Even if widely implemented, this methane capture process would likely serve only to promote natural gas production. Any emission reductions resulting from this process would likely be limited by the rebound effect, or the phenomena by which improvements to efficiency correspond to increases in resource use (York and McGee, 2015; York et al., 2022), sometimes counteracting benefits entirely. In focusing on small-scale changes such as methane capture, Ligouri's statement diverts attention away from more comprehensive and systematic changes, such as moving away from fossil fuels altogether.

An additional example of how the "all talk, little action" category manifests within these Arizona legislative sessions is found in the following comment from Representative Mark Finchem:

> "To say that the state of Arizona is not doing anything about air pollution is just patently false. We have an [Arizona Department of Environmental Quality] that aggressively is monitoring motor vehicles that have been on the road. Just went through a motor vehicle test, passed. Yeah, it's a 2006 Chrysler 300, and it's within tolerances. I can't afford an electric vehicle. The very same electric vehicle that is driving on a road for free, but is also not contributing to HERF and any of that, that get special treatment for plates that also has a subsidy for people who want to buy one. That's not what I call an equitable society. Natural gas is a clean, is the cleanest fuel for cooking. I've tried electric, can't stand it. And I'm a pretty darn good cook."—Representative Mark Finchem [2686:1]

This statement exemplifies "all talk, little action" through its implication that because the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality mandates emissions testing for motor vehicles, air pollution within the state is being properly addressed. Within the same statement, Finchem then goes on to imply that electric vehicle incentives are harmful because they contribute to inequitable conditions. Further, he states that natural gas is "clean," despite extensive evidence demonstrating the harmful impacts of pollution from its extraction and use, contributing to poorer indoor and outdoor air quality (Amirkhani Ardeh et al., 2020; Nicole, 2014; Sarofim et al., 2015). He thus discourages electric vehicles and stoves among his constituents who may view him as an authority. One could argue that he is speaking solely of personal preferences in using gasoline-powered vehicles and natural gas stoves. However, given that he is voicing these preferences within his role as a state legislator, these preferences may have direct implications for his policy decision-making processes. Beyond the potential ideological influence he wields given his position of power, he also has greater direct control over legislative decisions than the average person, and these preferences are likely to be reflected within his voting record. Therefore, though Representative Finchem argues that Arizona is doing enough to address air pollution, his statement within the context of his position as a legislator inherently contradicts this claim.

Regarding the "no sticks, just carrots" subcategory (comprising 20.8% of coding instances within the broader category) of pushing non-transformative solutions, which refers to the idea that only

voluntary climate protection measures should be implemented while restrictive measures should be avoided, I found that all identified examples of this form of rhetoric also fit within the "individualism" subcategory of redirecting responsibility. To avoid repetition, discussion of such statements have been relegated to the following section on redirecting responsibility.

6.3 Redirect responsibility

"Redirect responsibility" (comprising 9.8% of total coding instances) is broken down here into the two subcategories of "individualism" and "whataboutism." 100% of coding instances within this category fell into the subcategory of "individualism," referring to the idea that the responsibility to address climate change ultimately lies with individuals and consumers. This sentiment is expressed in the following quote:

> "We live in a country that's based upon individual freedoms. We have a constitution that is based on individual freedoms and it's ridiculous that any government elected will get down to that level where they tell somebody how they can heat their house. We have cities up north that would like to regulate, you know, the water that hits your roof and, you know, and tell you what kind of electricity you have to install in your garage for an electric vehicle. It doesn't make any sense. That's not the job of an elected body. It's not the job of your local government to be mandating and micromanaging how citizens want to choose to live their lives."—Representative Bob Thorpe [2686:4]

Beyond its use as a discourse strategy, individualism represents a foundational and widespread ideology in the US (Walls, 2015). Lukes describes individualism as representing "operative ideals of nineteenth-and early twentieth-century America," including "a spontaneously cohesive society of equal individual rights, limited government, laissez-faire, natural justice and equal opportunity, and individual freedom, moral development, and dignity" (Lukes, 1973, pg. 59). While acknowledging how individualism may be used for empowerment, Lukes also notes how individualism can be used to undermine collective action and reinforce existing power structures. Through its emphasis on personal achievement and competition, Lukes explains that individualistic rhetoric can legitimize social and economic inequities; in the US specifically, it has been used to justify and rationalize disparities created through free-market competition. I argue that the statement presented here falls into the latter, more harmful form of individualistic rhetoric as it seemingly discourages collective action or institutional change regarding climate change. Instead, it encourages individuals wanting to address climate change to do so on their own by appealing to shared American cultural values of individualism and freedom. In doing so, Representative Thorpe manages not only to excuse himself from responsibility in creating system-level change as a state legislator but, further, to portray any attempt to create such change as an attack on personal liberties. This kind of reasoning mirrors what Wullenkord (2022) identifies as implicatory climate denial, particularly rationalization and avoidance, which serves as a psychological strategy to protect individuals from uncomfortable emotions or perceived threats to autonomy and privilege.

Similarly, redirection of responsibility away from government and onto the individual is exemplified in the following statements. As explained in the prior subsection, in addition to falling within the "individualism" subcategory of redirecting responsibility, these statements exemplify the "no sticks, just carrots" subcategory of pushing non-transformative solutions by advocating for voluntary action rather than enforced restrictions. The following quotes demonstrate this sentiment in their encouragement of consumer-level renewable transitions rather than systematic changes to the state's energy infrastructure:

> "[HB 2686] preserves the status quo. If an establishment wants to go all electric, they can."—Garrick Taylor, representing Arizona Chamber of Commerce and Industry [2686:1]

> "[HB 2101] does not affect the ability of customers to adopt solar panels, battery systems…"—Representative Gail Griffin [2101:5]

Here, government climate intervention is discouraged through the argument that establishments or customers can instead voluntarily reduce their own impacts. Through encouragement of voluntary measures, Taylor's statement arguably serves to redirect discussion away from more effective climate change solutions, thus reinforcing the CCM's climate obstruction power within the Arizona legislature. At the same time, these statements represent a redirection of responsibility away from the government onto consumers. This also aligns with 'response skepticism' (Painter et al., 2023), particularly the discourses that emphasize individual burden. These narratives, common in right-wing media globally, serve to delay systemic action by shifting the conversation away from institutional responsibility and toward consumer choice.

The "whataboutism" subcategory of redirecting responsibility was notably absent from the observed transcripts. "Whataboutism" refers to the tendency to minimize one's own emissions by comparing them to other groups who are doing even less to address climate change or who are emitting even more. These narratives tend to suggest that we should not be worried about climate change, either because it is under control or simply not our problem. While comparisons to other states and cities across the US were made during the observed legislative sessions, these statements tended to indicate that states and cities taking action to combat climate change were in fact going too far, and that Arizona should avoid taking similar actions. As demonstrated in the statement examples provided above under the "policy perfectionism" subcategory of emphasizing the downsides, it seems to in fact be a point of pride for many speakers that Arizona is doing less to mitigate climate change than states like California.

6.4 Surrender

Few instances of delay discourse in the form of surrendering to climate change were identified within the legislative session transcripts, comprising 4.9% of total coding instances. All such instances were coded more specifically under the subcategory of "change is impossible," such as the following statements made in support of HB 2101:

> "We are low in affordability and very strong in customer satisfaction… It's hard to figure out what, how to beat that. It

> seems like you're only to go down from there, and that's just a risky proposition." Molly Green, representing the Salt River Project [2101:1]
>
> "We have to legislate in Arizona, not utopia. And I don't want to risk my constituents losing air conditioning because of a theory that may or may not work."—Representative Teresa Martinez [2101:3]

Here, Molly Green suggests that progress is impossible because the current system, wherein SRP is a powerful incumbent utility, cannot be improved upon. Representative Martinez's statement similarly suggests that due to the potential risks of climate action, it is best to avoid action entirely. Broadly, both quotes imply that making changes to our energy system is unrealistic and would lead to unforeseen consequences. The "change is impossible" subcategory reflects how submersion within dominant ideologies and cultural and institutional norms can lead to the acceptance of current affairs as natural or innate. As an incumbent utility representative and a state legislator, respectively, both Molly Green and Representative Martinez live within and benefit from current socio-political structures while also contributing to their maintenance and enforcement. Thus, such sentiments may reflect a desire to maintain the systems that currently grant them elevated financial and political status. As Wullenkord (2022) explains, this kind of implicatory denial, specifically the rationalization of inaction or avoidance of responsibility, often functions as a psychological defense against the discomfort of acknowledging one's role in systemic change. Thus, for legislators and industry representatives who benefit from the current energy regime, maintaining belief in the impossibility or undesirability of change may help protect their sense of competence and autonomy.

No examples of the second category of surrender, "doomism," were identified within the transcripts. This subcategory refers to the idea that we should not take action to prevent climate change because it is already too late; mankind has doomed itself, along with the rest of the planet, to an apocalyptic fate. I argue that this form of argument may be less prominent within the Arizona legislature due to a lack of belief in climate change among state legislators. Unlike the other forms of delay discourse, this subcategory uniquely requires fear toward and acknowledgment of the consequences of climate change. To suggest that we are already too late to address climate change thus requires a belief in climate change in the first place. Instead, some legislators exhibited distrust toward the science of climate change in general. Among these examples, the following quote stands out in significance:

> "I think it's important when we're looking at issues that we not only look at issues that echo our position, we also need to look at the other side of that coin. And so when it comes to climate change, I would throw out a book title that I encourage everybody to read. The book is called *The really inconvenient truths* by Iain Murray. It talks about climate change. It talks about a lot of issues that, again, if you're going to have a good, solid basis of understanding, you have to look at both sides of a discussion and not just one."—Senator Rick Gray [2686:5]

A quick look at the book referred to, the full title of which is *The really inconvenient truths: Seven environmental catastrophes liberals do not want you to know about—because they helped cause them*, reveals that it heavily undermines the scientific consensus on climate change. In the introduction to Part I, Murray misrepresents uncertainty within findings from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2018) as negating anthropogenic climate change, proposing that global climate models are no more than "guesswork based on guesswork" which "Al Gore and the green lobby use to advance their case for a complete realignment of the world's economic system" (Murray, 2008). This appeal to "both sides" mimics what Nielsen (2023) describes in televised climate debates, where structured contrasts between ideological perspectives can lend legitimacy to contrarian viewpoints, even when they reject scientific consensus. This quote further suggests that at least some state legislators are consuming and disseminating misinformation about climate change which contributes to denial and skepticism. Thus, it is somewhat unsurprising that "doomism" as a tactic of climate delay was inapplicable within this context.

6.5 Discourses of climate delay in Arizona vs. Rhode Island

As stated previously, only one study (Brown Climate and Development Lab, 2023) directly applying the DCD framework to analyze US state level climate decision-making processes has been identified by the author. In this study, the Brown Climate and Development Lab combined both the DCD and FLICC (False Experts, Logical Fallacies, Impossible Expectations, Cherry Picking, and Conspiracy Theories; Cook, 2020) frameworks to analyze climate discourse surrounding offshore wind development in Rhode Island. They specifically examine rhetoric deployed by Green Oceans, an offshore wind opposition organization, finding that they rely heavily on the three broad categories of "emphasize the downsides," "redirect responsibility," and "push non-transformative solutions." Much like in my own findings, the "surrender" category of DCD was the least commonly deployed. As I theorize regarding my own results, this may be because "surrender" discourse, particularly the "doomism" subcategory, largely requires one to accept and understand the dangers of climate change. While Green Oceans publicly acknowledged the implications of climate change, its opposition to green energy initiatives suggests that this acknowledgment may be more rhetorical than sincere. In this sense, the limited appearance of "surrender" in both cases may reflect a broader strategic pattern: when audiences expect climate concern, actors instead emphasize technocratic or economic objections while minimizing the urgency for action.

This strategic tailoring of rhetoric to different audiences is where the comparison between Rhode Island and Arizona becomes especially instructive. Green Oceans' audience mainly comprised Rhode Island residents. Rhode Island ranks third among all US states in terms of having the highest majority of residents who believe that climate change has been happening (approximately 86%; McDonald et al., 2020). Thus, it is logical for Green Oceans to tailor their messaging strategies to indicate concern toward climate change, whether or not the organization truly holds this concern. In my case study of the Arizona State Legislature, however, the audience was not the Arizona public overall, which already has lower concern for climate change than the Rhode Island public, but the legislators themselves, as speakers attempted to influence the legislators to vote one way or another on the two bills of interest. Throughout the time

period of both bills, the Republican Party has held the majority in both the Arizona House of Representatives and the Arizona Senate. Republicans tend to prioritize climate change less than Democrats do, as indicated by Kennedy and Johnson's (2020) statements that Democrats are much more likely (82%) than Republicans (38%) to believe that climate change is affecting the community they live in. The speakers at the legislative sessions of interest largely avoided any pretense of concern for climate change, aligning with the prevailing attitudes of the Arizona State Legislature, where the Republican majority has historically demonstrated limited prioritization of climate issues. This aligns with findings by McKie (2019), who argues that CCM organizations use multiple strategies to appeal to various groups.

These patterns reinforce the idea that delay discourses function not just to mislead but to preserve legitimacy and coherence in contexts where climate action threatens entrenched political and economic structures. In Arizona, this includes both institutional power (e.g., utilities) and ideological identity, elements which help explain the emotional and rhetorical power of delay even as public support for climate action grows. Contrast between these states further illustrates how discourses of delay are not static but instead are actively shaped by perceived values of the target audience. Recognizing this discursive flexibility is essential for those working to resist climate obstruction. Messaging that appeals to climate science or urgency may resonate in places like Rhode Island but fall flat in legislatures like Arizona's, where obstructionists do not need to perform climate concern. In these cases, more effective counterstrategies may involve emphasizing energy independence, regulatory overreach, or political accountability, rather than solely invoking climate ethics. This also highlights the need for climate advocates to anticipate rhetorical shifts, especially in conservative-dominated policy arenas, and prepare targeted rebuttals grounded in local values.

The Brown Climate and Development Lab additionally identify Green Oceans as frequently deploying various FLICC discourse strategies, particularly "fake experts," "logical fallacies," "cherry picking," and "conspiracy theories." These are important forms of climate obstruction discourse which are not encompassed by the DCD framework. Several of these categories are applicable to my own findings as well; for example, the statement by Senator Rick Gray in the prior section could be coded under "fake experts" and "conspiracy theories." By combining DCD with FLICC, the Brown Lab was able to more comprehensively capture the full spectrum of climate obstruction rhetoric, a move I argue is especially important in contexts like Arizona, where climate skepticism and denial remain overt. Williams et al. (2022) similarly combine DCD with another approach put forth by Supran and Oreskes (2021) in their evaluation of the American electric utility industry's role in promoting climate denial, doubt, and delay, allowing them to comprehensively identify climate obstruction discourse beyond just delay. In both cases, the combination of analytical tools provided a more nuanced understanding of obstruction than any single typology could offer. For future researchers and advocates, this suggests that hybrid frameworks may be more effective in decoding and ultimately dismantling climate delay rhetoric in real-world policy settings.

7 Conclusion

In this study I have applied Lamb et al. (2020) discourses of climate delay framework to evaluate legislative sessions surrounding Arizona House Bill 2686 (2020) and Arizona House Bill 2101 (2022). The DCD framework proved well-suited for critically analyzing state-level climate discourse in the US as it enabled systematic categorization of rhetorical strategies that impede climate action and illuminated tactics associated with the CCM. While the framework has been widely referenced, few studies have applied it empirically, making my study both novel and important for evaluating and advancing the utility of the DCD framework. By applying it in the context of Arizona legislative debates, this research helped expose how climate obstruction operates through language in policy spaces, which is a necessary step toward counteracting the CCM and building momentum for meaningful climate policy. The findings underscore that identifying obstructive discourse is not only an analytical exercise but a strategic imperative for advocates and policymakers. Understanding how these discourses operate at the state level offers critical insight into systemic barriers to effective climate action and to fostering policy environments that prioritize sustainability. This study also highlights the adaptive nature of delay rhetoric, illustrating the value of frameworks like DCD in decoding opposition strategies and informing more targeted, context-sensitive responses.

The most frequently identified delay category in these legislative sessions was "emphasize the downsides," accounting for nearly half (49.2%) of all coding instances. This category's prominence likely reflects the Arizona State Legislature's general rejection of climate change mitigation and adaptation policies, as it requires minimal acknowledgment of climate change as an issue. Within this category, "appeal to well-being" was the most common subcategory (50%), with many arguments relying on economic reasoning that reflects widely shared preferences for market-based growth and limited government intervention. The next most frequent categories were "push non-transformative solutions" (36.1%) and "redirect responsibility" (9.8%). "Fossil fuel solutionism" dominated the former, suggesting strong political and financial ties between Arizona legislators and the fossil fuel industry, while the absence of "whataboutism" in the latter may reflect pride in Arizona's lack of climate mitigation efforts. The least common category, "surrender" (4.9%), exclusively featured the subcategory "change is impossible," with no examples of "doomism," possibly due to a general disbelief in climate change among legislators. Comparing these findings with the Brown Climate and Development Lab (2023), I propose that varying levels of climate change recognition shape messaging strategies tailored to different audiences, and I argue that combining the DCD framework with others, like FLICC, may enhance analyses in contexts where climate skepticism remains prevalent.

Whether one considers it necessary to combine DCD with other frameworks, one suggestion to improve the DCD framework is to replace "the 'free rider' excuse" subcategory of "redirect responsibility." As mentioned prior, I found the "whataboutism" and "the 'free rider' excuse" subcategories to be virtually indistinguishable. A more fruitful subcategory to replace "the 'free rider' excuse" may be "pride, identity, and culture." I draw this conclusion based largely on the absence of "whataboutism" in the examined legislative sessions, wherein speakers would be expected to express that Arizona should not act to address climate change due to the inaction of others. While no such statements were found, a more common sentiment expressed in legislative sessions was that Arizona should not act due to the *action* of others. Speakers expressed pride in maintaining the culture of Arizona as distinct from more climate-focused states, like California, which they

frequently mocked for its attempts at progressive climate action. In these cases, the speakers' identity as Arizonans, distinct from Californians or Texans, became forefront in their arguments. Therefore, a "pride, identity, and culture" subcategory may have proven beneficial in identifying such instances, where responsibility is redirected by appealing to maintaining shared cultural values and norms. My suggested replacement aligns with arguments put forth by Nicolini (2024), who proposes that transnational economic actors probe a "strategic" use of the law which normalizes ecological catastrophe and promotes consumerism as the means to a greener future. In turn, Nicolini argues that the socio-climatic consequences of our economic systems are "dismissed with a mix of persuasion, pride, and prejudice" (2024). The wide body of literature examining linkages between personal identity, pride and culture, and environmental political tendencies (for examples, see Mayer and Shelley, 2018; Olausson, 2010; Ridanpää, 2021; Schneider et al., 2017; Wilson et al., 2017) similarly suggests the need for recognition of these factors within climate discourse frameworks.

While the DCD framework enables useful categorization of obstructive rhetoric, it does not fully capture the emotional and cultural labor behind these discourses. As Norgaard (2011) argues, denial is not simply the absence of knowledge, but a socially organized phenomenon through which individuals and institutions maintain coherence and comfort in the face of overwhelming ecological reality. Much of the Arizona legislative discourse performs this double-move: acknowledging climate concerns in the abstract while simultaneously denying their implications through policy stasis, technological idealism, or economic exceptionalism. Recognizing these rhetorical strategies offers more than academic insight; it provides a roadmap for those seeking to challenge climate obstruction in politically hostile environments.

For advocates, policymakers, and organizers, the patterns uncovered in this study highlight the importance of anticipating common delay strategies and preparing targeted responses. Economic fear-mongering might be countered with data on clean energy job growth; appeals to cultural identity might be met with locally grounded narratives about climate resilience, water security, or energy independence. By understanding that obstructionists tailor their language to specific audiences, as demonstrated by the contrast between Arizona and Rhode Island, resistance efforts can become more strategic, more adaptive, and ultimately more effective.

In this way, the DCD framework, and future adaptations of it, can serve not only as an analytical tool, but as a guide for real-time intervention. By decoding the language of delay, we enable more precise, context-sensitive resistance to the forces that stand in the way of meaningful climate action. This research affirms that delay is not merely a product of ignorance or denial, but a deliberate strategy to preserve institutional stability and ideological identity. By understanding delay as both a political and affective process, as Norgaard (2011) suggests, we can better equip ourselves to challenge not only the logic but also the legitimacy of inaction.

Data availability statement

Publicly available datasets were analyzed in this study. This data can be found at: https://www.azleg.gov/.

Author contributions

PE-A: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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