

The Expansion of Primary and Secondary School Students Participation in European and American Climate Governance: A Case Study of “Fridays for Future” Movement Organized by Greta Thunberge

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Abstract: Climate change is a major global challenge facing mankind today. Climate governance is not simply environmental governance and technological governance, but global governance that requires the participation of everyone. Taking the “Friday For Future” campaign launched by Greta Thunberg as an example, this paper discusses the expanding trend of primary and secondary school students’ participation in climate governance of Europe and America, and analyzes the impact of this campaign. It is found that the enlargement of primary and secondary school students’ participation in Europe and America is mainly reflected in three aspects: scale, governance demands and age level. On the one hand, the “Fridays for Future” campaign has raised the global people’s attention to climate governance issues, on the other hand, it has the negative impact of spreading populism, misinformation and bad behavior demonstration.

1. Introduction

Climate change is a major global challenge facing mankind today. Actively responding to climate change is not only about the present, but also an important measure to leave green water and green mountains for generations to come. Teenagers, as the main bearers of the consequences of climate change, will become the main force in dealing with climate change in the future. In 2018, Greta Thunberg protested outside the Swedish Parliament for three weeks to draw people’s attention to the global climate change issue. Since then, many countries in Europe and North America have successively witnessed “Fridays for Future”-climate change protests. Continuing to this day, the movement shows the expansion of children’s participation in climate change combat in Europe and America. Taking the “Fridays for Future” movement launched by Thunberg as an example, this paper discusses the expanding trend of primary and secondary school students’ participation in climate governance in Europe and America, and analyzes the impact of this campaign.

2. The Scale of Participation of Primary and Secondary School Students in Europe and America has Expanded: “Fridays for Future” Campaign

The climate change movement means to reduce the negative impact of climate change on people and the planet by influencing political, economic and social changes [1]. Researchers generally believe that it is necessary for children to participate in climate governance. The climate change movement has never been simple environmental governance or technical governance, but a global governance that requires the participation of the whole people and jointly promotes social changes. Children have the right and obligation to participate in it [2]. “Fridays for Future” is a youth-led and -organised movement that began in August 2018, after 15-year-old Greta Thunberg and other young activists sat in front of the Swedish parliament every schoolday for three weeks, to protest against the lack of action on the climate crisis [3]. The movement continues to this day, which highlights the expansion of children’s participation in climate governance in Europe and America. The following context will analyze the expansion of scale, governance demands and age levels in detail.

2.1. The Expansion of the Participation Scale

The movement spread to almost all European and American countries, and it is its long-lasting, and widely-influencing which far exceeded people's expectations. From November 2018 to February 2019, the "Fridays for Future" campaign has spread nearly all over the European countries, with more than 10,000 people marching in their countries. In addition to the large-scale activities planned by the Fridays for Future website, students' strikes in different forms frequently occur in various countries which are difficult to accurately count. In addition, the movement also went deep into small and medium-sized cities in Europe and America. Generally speaking, children living in these areas seldom participate in such a major issue as climate change, but they actively participated in this campaign and took to the streets. For example, on June 21, 2019, around 40,000 protesters from 15 countries rallied in Aachen, a German border city, as part of a student movement demanding bold action to combat climate change, which attracted children from many neighboring countries to participate in [4].

2.2. The Expansion of Governance Demands

It is traditionally believed that teenagers tend to narrowly regard climate governance as a simple environmental issue, so they scarcely seek solutions or paths in the political field, and can only carry out activities in the technical field based on consensus [5]. Obviously, the "Fridays for Future" movement rejected this view practically. In this campaign, primary and secondary school students from all over the world did not talk only about climate, but generally called for "Change the politics instead of the climate" and put forward systematic and clear-cut governance demands. For example, Belgian students hope that Congress will pass the "Climate Law" as soon as possible, so that domestic federal entities can carry out substantive cooperation on effective climate policies; American students demand that all presidential candidates should put forward their own environmental climate ideas, and hope that Congress can pass the "Green Deal" bill to accelerate the country's energy transformation process [6].

2.3. The Expansion of Age Level

In the past, many youth governance activities focused on college students and adults, but "Fridays for Future" focused on primary and secondary school students from all over the world, and the strike wave appeared in many primary and secondary schools rather than universities. Thunberg-style leaders have emerged in various countries, and most of them are under 18 years old. For example, Anuna DeWever, the organizer of the Belgian movement, is a 17-year-old high school girl, and Linus Steinmetz, the initiator of the German movement, was only 15 years old. The "Fridays for Future" movement in the United States is inspired by these three girls, who are 13-year-old Haven Coleman, 13-year-old Alexandria Villasenor and 16-year-old Isra Hirsi [7].

3. The Influence of "Fridays for Future"

The most direct impact of the "Fridays for Future" campaign is to promote European and American children to face the challenge of climate change and actively participate in the process of climate governance. However, the impact of this movement is by no means confined to the children's group, but has a significant impact on the whole European and American society. First of all, the diverse and noisy opinions of political parties in various countries have prompted more people to pay attention to the climate governance campaign initiated by primary and secondary school students, which has triggered a large number of public discussions on how to guide children to participate in climate affairs and how adults take on more governance responsibilities in various media. In addition, the limitation of primary and secondary school students' understanding of climate issues will aggravate the social polarization that has already appeared in European and American societies. Therefore, the "Fridays for Future" campaign may aggravate the differences and conflicts between different social groups in climate governance, making it difficult for the society to reach a broad consensus.

4. Conclusion

The enlargement of primary and secondary school students' participation in Europe and America is mainly reflected in three aspects: scale, governance demands and age levels, among which the movement has spread to almost all European and American countries, and its scale and persistence far exceeded people's expectations. In this movement, primary and secondary school students from all over the world did not only talk about climate, but generally shouted the slogan of "Change the Politics instead of Climate" and put forward systematic and clear governance demands. "Fridays for Future" is mainly for primary and secondary school students from all over the world, and the strike wave appears in primary and secondary schools rather than universities. The "Fridays for Future" campaign is a landmark event for European and American primary and secondary school students to expand their participation in climate governance, which shows children's initiative and creativity in climate governance. However, the whole movement also bring about the negative influence of spreading populism, misinformation and demonstration of bad behavior. It is suggested that policy makers, educators and social science researchers need to discuss and think about how to guide children to participate in the climate governance movement in an orderly way.

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