Devin Judge-Lord, APW comments

I really enjoyed reading this paper. This paper sheds light on the effect of public comments in concerns regarding environmental justice in rulemaking. The paper felt practical and relevant to our current political climate in the sense that it explored the concern that environmental concerns often affect minorities and the socioeconomically disadvantaged.

First and foremost, I wanted to applaud you for your extensive text data collection. As someone who understand how laborious it is to scrape text data, how annoying text data is to work with, how text data in one broad category is pretty much never in one consistent format, and the amount of computing power necessary to analyze text data—this is some incredible text data collection. And that’s great! You have a great corpus to work with.

Now, to the regulations and public comment process. I found your introduction to be extremely abstract. As someone who isn’t familiar with policymaking literature, I would have appreciated an example of a concrete policy and a concrete comment. I initially assumed that a public comment would be like, a blog comment, but after going on regulations.gov, I noticed that there is a significant range of how public comments are formatted and written based on the resources and expertise of the organization submitting the comment. In essence, not all public comments are created the same. And from the beginning, I also wanted you to define “activist” as it seems like it is covering a very general umbrella and malleable group of people throughout the paper.

The process of public comments actually reminds me a lot of the work on amicus briefs on the Supreme Court. Both the Court and these government agencies have this channel for the public to submit their views on a particular topic, and certain organizations are more influential in public opinion. There seems to be a lot of parallels here, and I’d recommend looking at the amicus briefs literature. Specifically, I’d look at Paul Collins’ work where he and his coauthors used plagiarism software to see whether briefs come from similar sources. That could be worthwhile to look into—to consider how similar the public comments are for a particular document. I know you’re focusing on “unique” comments, but these comments could potentially be citing the same sources or statistics, so while the actual comment is not the same, the comment contains similar information.

I think you can improve on how you present your results. Currently, the faceted colored bar graphs, e.g., figure 6 and 10, do not effectively convey how influential the EJ comments are because the bars are so small! I would actually turn the y-axes into percentages and label with percentages with the proportion in parentheses. I know that you are working with small counts, so maybe there is a more honest way to represent the results—but it’s something to think about.

I also wondered how long the periods for public comment lasted. Are these periods dependent on anything? And given your hypotheses, your paper is very focused on the one-way relationship between the commenters and the agencies. But it made me wonder whether the agencies themselves are limited in what they can do in response to public comments. Are there public commenting periods that are done as a courtesy, not because the agency actually wants to solicit opinion? Who are the other stakeholders? Are the public commenters aware of the other stakeholders?

I have some questions and observations about the term “environmental justice.” I’m familiar with the concept but I have never heard of the term. My knee-jerk reaction is that it sounds like a fairly partisan phrase—that perhaps, only liberal-leaning organizations use the term. And I wonder if there are terms that are synonymous to “environmental justice” that some organizations use to present a more persuasive case towards agencies that work with contractors/subcontractors/communities that may be less friendly towards certain environmental or social justice policies?

Overall, I found this paper to be so informative and a great way to use text data to evaluate the extent of their actual influence on policy. I’m looking forward to seeing how this paper develops!