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Green Backlash and Fossil Societies

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On January 30–31, 2025, IGCC convened a first-of-its-kind research incubator to examine the links between climate change, democratic backsliding, and public backlash against green policies. The conversation aimed to bridge the divide between scholars within the political and climate sciences to promote interdisciplinary studies at the crossroads between global environmental and governance challenges.

Workshop participants prepared memos before the meeting responding to two questions: *under which conditions can climate change and climate policies trigger a green backlash? And what are the consequences of climate change disruptions and green backlash for democracy?* These memos are now published as part of an ongoing IGCC essay series on Climate Change, Green Backlash, and Democracy.

About the Author

Paasha Mahdavi, associate professor of political science and affiliated professor of environmental science and management at UC Santa Barbara, explores the role of fossil fuel interests in green backlash.

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More and more research across the social sciences is uncovering the role of the fossil fuel industry (oil and gas in particular) in pushing back on climate policy and erecting roadblocks to thwart the clean energy transition. How has this translated to green backlash? In this memo, I first review existing research, and then provide two future work streams on green backlash from *fossil fuel actors*—the fossil fuel industry, governments reliant on fossil fuels, and individuals living in fossil fuel communities—by exploring (1) the role of national oil companies in international climate politics, and (2) the intensity of backlash across oil and gas communities. I conclude with a set of questions around the consequences of green backlash by fossil fuel actors on democratic governance.

Factors that Increase Green Backlash

I begin by first defining green backlash as *any formal or informal* opposition to climate policy. This includes opposition to climate policy that has yet to be formally proposed, enacted, or implemented.[1]

Perhaps the most common driver of backlash is the perception that the energy transition will increase costs. This perception is given more credence in light of climate policies that raise taxes or impose fees on fossil fuel usage, such as carbon taxes, road congestion fees, or household gas consumption taxes. Policies that directly increase costs on fossil energy lead voters to turn away from green parties towards right-wing parties (Colantone et al. 2024; Voeten 2025). At the extreme, cost increases through higher taxes on gasoline and diesel have sparked political protests and even regime change (Mahdavi, Martinez-Alvarez, and Ross 2022).

Beyond costs, green backlash can occur because of credible commitment problems over promises of a just transition in fossil fuel communities (Gazmararian and Tingley 2023). This pattern extends to green backlash in the American auto corridor, where local governments and unions were unable to credibly convince voters that their communities would gain from new investments in electric vehicle (EV) technology (Gazmararian and Krashinsky 2023). Identity politics may also be contributing to credible commitment problems, whereby individuals are less likely to trust industry promises on the benefits of climate policies when those industries are comprised of marginalized racial and ethnic groups (Zucker, Forthcoming). Perceptions of technology may also play a role; for example, the shale gas revolution led to backlash in coal towns, where voters

[1] This definition is drawn in particular from contributions at the IGCC Workshop on Climate Change, Green Backlash, and Democracy by Hélène Benveniste, William Nomikos, Dustin Tingley, and Mike Tomz.

blamed economic decline not on technologically driven factors, but rather on partisan factors and the Democratic Party's issue ownership over environmental regulations (Gazmararian, Forthcoming).

Fossil Actors Driving Green Backlash

Beyond these economic and political factors, research points to the role of fossil fuel interests in promoting backlash against clean energy. We see this occurring through direct lobbying against climate policies (Kim, Urpelainen, and Yang 2016; Brulle 2018), or seeding and spreading misinformation about the costs of clean energy among the general public (Oreskes and Conway 2011; Stokes 2020; Williams et al. 2022). Industry actors can further drive a wedge in climate policies through direct influence over regulators (Hughes 2012; Mildenberger 2020). There is also evidence suggesting that policymakers who drive backlash against green policies are rewarded for their efforts with greater campaign contributions from the oil and gas industry (Goldberg et al. 2020).

Fossil firms also engage in greenwashing by touting ambitious climate progress to investors and the public, while in practice committing to continued fossil extraction (Green et al. 2022; Mahdavi et al. 2022). ExxonMobil, for example, has rebranded itself as a firm that is "advancing climate solutions," claiming that it is "delivering on both sides of the "and" equation—meeting society's needs for energy and essential products and reducing emissions" (ExxonMobil 2024). In practice, this simply means producing oil and gas with fewer emissions during operations, not any meaningful switch to clean energy. Some firms, such as BP, have adopted internal carbon prices and published them to investors as a sign of climate action. Yet without integrating carbon prices into actual operations, firms see no reduction in emissions after adopting an internal carbon price, suggesting that this too is a style of greenwashing (Gianfrate 2024). Whatever form it takes, greenwashing by fossil firms could be thought of as *silent green backlash:* a rejection of climate action through tacit acceptance of the status quo as "progress."

There is also growing evidence of a green backlash in global financial markets. Shareholder activism and the growth of "stakeholder capitalism" initially pushed firms to adopt pro-climate strategies and to move away from fossil fuel investments (Piggot 2018). This culminated with shareholders of the largest investor-owned oil firm, ExxonMobil, voting to replace three members of the company's board of directors with pro-climate members (Phillips, 2021). However, these efforts have seen diminishing success in the past two years, as the data show that investor backlash to climate-related proposals has dropped average voter support for climate resolutions to under 17 percent in 2023 (Stewart 2023). Some studies speculate the backlash was driven by

U.S.-based oil and gas interests that politicized environmental, social, and governance (ESG) standards and tied ESG investing as part of a broader culture war over conservative values (Gordon 2023; Hilson 2024).

What are the mechanisms through which industry actors stoke backlash? Two new studies reveal differing tactics used by industry in the United States through social media campaigns and via influence in higher education. Kinol et al. (2025) show how coordination on the social media platform X (formerly Twitter) across oil, agrochemical, and plastics trade groups creates echo chambers of climate denial and misinformation about climate science, with industry groups then strategically reposting these messages to government agencies and mainstream media. Separately, Hiltner et al. (2024) document industry involvement in university partnerships and scholar sponsorships in order to promote fossil fuel-friendly reports and research products. This "new climate denialism," as the authors note, manifests in industry funding for research that subtly counters climate action with non-transformative solutions such as blue hydrogen, biofuels, and carbon dioxide removal.

National Oil Companies and Backlash Against International Climate Policy

How do fossil interests promote green backlash in international climate negotiations? There is growing research on the role of oil lobbyists at COP meetings pushing for less ambitious climate agreements (Pulver 2023). What is less understood is the role of state-owned enterprises, particularly national oil companies (NOCs). These entities often serve as the voice for oil and gas producing governments in the international arena, in part given their direct engagement in foreign affairs through international investments (Cheon 2023).

Given their inherent reliance on the future viability of oil and gas, NOCs have clear incentives to block climate ambitions at the global stage. Indeed, investigative journalist accounts show that NOCs have undermined progress on international agreements towards decarbonization. At COP29 in Baku, NOCs led by Saudi Aramco and Azerbaijan's SOCAR lobbied other governments to remove provisions to transition away from oil and gas agreed upon at the prior COP (Friedman 2024). NOCs also successfully removed calls to shutdown oil and gas production in United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports, instead pushing for technologies like carbon capture to prolong oil extraction (Westervelt 2022).

However, backlash is not inevitable from NOCs. Some have clear financial incentives to promote modest decarbonization efforts. For example, the Oil and Gas Decarbonization Charter—a voluntary international initiative by 30 NOCs and 20 international oil companies (IOCs) to eliminate methane emissions by 2030—was spearheaded at COP28 by the United Arab Emirates through its state-owned Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC). Behind the scenes, ADNOC's director Sultan al-Jaber led a concerted effort to pressure reluctant NOCs to commit to methane reductions. This was driven in part by ADNOC's comparative advantage in selling technical assistance for methane reduction technologies as well as the potential gains from securing financial backers for methane abatement by other NOCs (Mahdavi 2024). Further, NOCs like Colombia's Ecopetrol and Norway's Equinor may see themselves as the logical national champions of the energy transition, as an effort to remain relevant if and when governments must move away from petroleum.

These countervailing forces raise the question of whether and how oil and gas producing countries and their NOCs affect international climate politics. Future research could evaluate the mechanisms through which NOCs affect climate negotiations, including whether or not the tactics used are different from the existing playbook that international investor-owned oil companies use to stymie climate progress. Further, if these pathways are different, what drives these differences? Is it the distinction in profit-seeking motivations between NOCs and other oil companies? Is it a difference in time horizons, whereby NOCs and their governments are playing a longer game than the rest of the field? Or is the principal-agent dynamic driving different behaviors, where NOCs are imperfect agents to their government principals, while IOCs mostly conform to their boards' strategies?

What Transition? The Absence of Backlash in Oil and Gas Towns

There may be reason to question the intensity of a green backlash at the domestic level in fossil societies even while a backlash is occurring at the international scale. For example, individuals living in oil towns in Malaysia do not see the transition as problematic, because they believe it will open up more opportunities for gas development—reflecting a distortion of what the transition implies in practice (Tan and Lima de Oliveira 2025). Likewise in Iraq, where residents of Basra, the most refinery-intensive city in the country, are largely supportive of the transition because they view it as an economic opportunity to expand petroleum production while reducing its environmental footprint on the city's air and water quality (Khani 2025). Yet at the international level, both Iraq and Malaysia rejected calls for a fossil fuel phaseout at COP28 and reiterated their opposition again in Baku at COP29. This would be an

interesting opportunity for further research to unpack the dissonance between foreign and domestic positioning of the transition by the actors who are most involved in promoting backlash.

The lack of backlash also extends to oil and gas communities in the United States where, unlike coal communities, individuals perceive that the future viability of petroleum is strong and that the transition will not affect economic conditions anytime soon. Indeed, there may not be an existential crisis associated with climate policies if they are not perceived as threatening the status quo. This lack of current backlash may provide a window of opportunity to advance transition policies that alleviate or prevent backlash in the "mid transition" between the status quo and full fossil fuel phaseout (Grubert and Hastings-Simon 2022). One such possibility is through economic development plans to build local economic resilience to the transition (Clarke et al. 2024). For example, some strategies subsidize local job opportunities for asset decommissioning—relevant for places facing declining production, such as California, onshore Louisiana, and the Barnett Shale in Texas—or foster opportunities for training in jobs with petroleum-adjacent skillsets such as geothermal drilling. However, future research will have to address whether such economic development strategies and jobs are viewed favorably by individuals, enough so as to prevent backlash when the transition fully arrives in these communities.

Consequences for Democracy

Extensive work on the "political resource curse" has shown that fossil fuel wealth—namely, the revenues from the sale and export of oil, gas, and coal—weakens the conditions for democracy and strengthens autocrats by providing ample revenues for elite cooptation and mass repression (for a review, see Ross 2015). By fostering backlash to green policies, fossil fuel *actors* reveal new avenues to eroding democratic governance. We can think of each of these avenues as specific mechanisms through which green backlash could impact democracy and democratic erosion, along the lines of the consequences for democracy from climate change broadly construed (Beacham, Hafner-Burton, and Schneider 2024). Future research can explore these mechanisms to uncover how backlash by fossil fuel actors impacts democracy in the following ways:

- Does industry capture of politicians weaken the accountability mechanism between representatives and voters?
- How do fossil fuel interest groups influence elections? Does this undermine trust in electoral systems?

- How do fossil fuel actors use the judicial system to drive green backlash? To what extent does this affect individual confidence in the independence of the judicial process?
- Does the perceived power of fossil fuel actors in politics affect individual enthusiasm for political participation?

Future work could also engage with how different types of policies spark more or less backlash that could impact democracy. For instance, is there a meaningful distinction between backlash against *moving away* from fossil fuels, versus *transitioning towards* renewable energy? Building off Bergquist, Mildenberger, and Stokes (2020), are policies that bundle climate and non-climate issues together less likely to trigger backlash than unbundled policies? Following Rabe (2004), are policies that emphasize co-benefits of climate issues, such as reduced air pollution and improved water quality, more durable? In general, how do the kinds of policies that foster lasting support (and subsequently, less backlash) affect trust in policymakers, institutions, and the rule of law? This last question seeks to fuse backlash to democracy by identifying the connections between policy backlash and the drivers of democratic backsliding.

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