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Green Backlash and Democracy

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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

Dustin Tingley, Thomas D. Cabot professor of public policy at the Kennedy School of Public Policy and the Department of Government at Harvard University, examines the origins of green backlash and its effects on democracy.

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Human-induced climate change is changing human society by creating and amplifying threats in many areas of the world while at the same time creating new opportunities in other areas. In response, many governments are pursuing policies that seek to slow down climate change while at the same time continuing to support policies that lead to climate-changing emissions.

The questions at hand for this memo are first, whether and how these changes are stoking "green backlash," which I consider to include a range of formal and informal activities that respond to green policies, green investments, or any number of their downstream implications including affordability and aesthetics; and second, whether climate change itself or climate policies are impacting the viability and quality of demographic governance.

The theoretical and empirical literature is relatively thin on both of these questions. Ample opportunities exist to explore these questions, but care needs to be taken to ensure that a) lessons are learned from reactions to other phenomena (such as localized environmental problems separate from climate change per se) and b) the sources of backlash are isolated and not overdetermined by broader characterizations of political "voice" attributed to populist and far-right party movements.

A helpful starting point is recognizing that climate change and policies have distributional consequences. As such, both adaptation and mitigation policies will be politically contested. This political contestation will take various forms, each of which has implications for green backlash and democratic institutions.

Mis- and Disinformation and the Epistemic Foundations of Democracy

Entrenched fossil fuel interests will distort, hide, and fabricate information about the drivers and consequences of climate change. A large literature documents this (see Oreskes and Conway 2011, Farrell 2016) and institutionalized research efforts are facilitated by the Climate Social Science Network. The broader impact of these efforts is potentially to undermine the epistemic foundations of democracy (Goodin and Spiekermann 2018), wherein evidence and knowledge underlie decisions that are more likely to yield better outcomes.

Interestingly, this literature, in my view, tends to paint all fossil fuel interests as inherently opposed to climate policy and portrays attempts to cast them in a greener light as greenwashing. However, this ignores the fact that a number of these companies have investments in the broader energy sector, including renewable energy.

While oil might be driving concerns about future stranded assets—which is an existential crisis at some level (Colgan, Green, and Hale 2021) —profit maximization is the guiding principle and there are and will be successful business models that involve energy beyond fossil fuels. Nevertheless, mis- and disinformation can undermine democratic systems (Lewandowsky 2024, Druckman 2024) as well as other related institutions such as scientific expertise and higher education. Indeed, this is one source of calls to prevent universities from using funds from fossil fuel companies.

Organized Green Backlash Movements

Some work documents how far-right and populist parties have exploited discontent with environmental policies to undermine progress on climate change and endanger democracy (Benson et al. 2024, Buzogány and Mohamad-Klotzbach 2021, Fisher 2019, Fernandez-Gonzalez et al. 2024). There is some evidence that governments are responsive to this pushback (Jones 2023). Populist governments undermine environmental performance more generally (Böhmelt 2021). These efforts highlight the direct or indirect costs of climate policies, of course ignoring the negative externalities of climate and environment-forcing activities. However, the focus on far right or populist parties is almost certainly misplaced. Stokes et al. (2023) document how opposition to wind energy is salient in wealthier, liberal areas as well. And while the reelection of Donald Trump has been held up in popular accounts of a backlash against environmental policies, there is slim evidence that his election was driven by this topic rather than other, much more salient considerations like inflation and immigration. Understanding how green backlash is bundled in with other issues, versus being separated out and salient on its own, seems a worthy cause. For example, Colantone et al. (2024) provide causally well-identified effects of car pollution controls.

One area of backlash that has received sustained attention considers various land use issues. The desire to unlock renewable energy production and transmission is littered with scuttled projects including from on- and offshore wind, solar, and critical mineral mining (Susskind et al. 2022). An example of this is literature on grid development and infrastructure siting (e.g., Ansolabehere et al. 2024). This builds on older literature about economic development and environmental protection. It also connects with literature about the usage of eminent domain-type policies that essentially contend with the tyranny of the minority when dealing with linear infrastructure projects, for which grid construction is a prime example. However, while such policies can help move projects ahead that will provide broader positive externalities, they dramatically stoke local opposition. Indeed, some companies, like GridUnited, explicitly adopt “stakeholder first” type approaches in order to sidestep these issues (Tingley, Schwarz, and Moudgalya

2025). Furthermore, there are a variety of landowner compensation models that could be further explored in the grid sector, including "electron-based tolling." More broadly, there has long been an interest in whether different forms of "deliberative democracy" can yield more socially efficient outcomes (see Bidwell 2016).

Risk and Government Performance

Another way climate effects and policies are politically contested deals with locking in or subsidizing protection from risk, such as in disaster or flood insurance programs (Michel-Kerjan 2010). The rising costs of climate change will have significant impacts on the cost of doing business, issuing bonds (Painter 2020), and insuring against risk.

One lurking area for more work is around insurance. The cost of insurance is going up for all parties, and it isn't clear how governments will handle this. Governments need to take out insurance too, so the cost of governance will go up. Rising costs will not be the only challenge.[1] Will new forms of risk pooling emerge? Political science has contributed little to this literature, perhaps because the insurance industry is seen as too in the background or technocratic? Furthermore, I've conjectured to several economics colleagues that existing social costs of carbon (SCCs), which leave out expected changes in insurance markets (including the effects of market exit on insurance cost), dramatically underestimate SCC.

In the end, and for the purposes of this conference, the implication is that the effects of climate change will drive up costs of living, doing business, and governing. This seems like the sort of environment where short-term populist appeals will prove popular. Unfortunately, this is just likely to again move the "bill" into the future. Whether this creates long-term democratic backsliding or something different, like fragmentation of existing democracies along risk exposure fault lines, remains unclear.

What are the implications of higher costs of governing and lower government capacity for democracy? I do not think we really know. It could well be that the alternative (non- or less democratic) would still be worse, but this might not matter to short-term voters with anti-incumbent impulses.

[1] Government performance will also be impacted. Obradovich, Tingley, and Rahwan (2018) provide causal evidence that local government services suffer under extreme temperatures.

Downstream Climate Impacts: Immigration

A common theme raised by recent far-right and populist parties is that immigration is bad and costs countries dearly. This ranges from identity politics to more public finance-type considerations (see Hason, Scheve, and Slaughter 2007, Tingley 2013) that political scientists and economists have studied. There are concerns that climate-induced migration will expand these impacts and pressures, leading to greater anti-immigrant salience. Whether or when this happens is a bit to be determined, as many factors drive cross-border climate migration. Indeed, most climate migration is within the country to date, and models predict that lower-income migrants will be especially unlikely to migrate internationally (Beneviste et al. 2022).

Brown and Green Benefits?

The provision of benefits, not just dealing with the distribution of costs, also generates complicated institutional effects. For example, fossil fuel companies in some places provide local public goods in the form of taxes, funds for local infrastructure, and other benefits. The extreme version of this is the resource curse, which Michael Ross famously argues can, in fact, reduce democratic accountability (Ross 2015, James and Aadland 2011). Indeed, states like Wyoming have minimal taxes (no income tax and a low sales tax) which then leads to extraordinary reliance on fossil fuel rents (Newell and Raimi 2018). This, in turn, helps to solidify the control of the fossil industry over government.

Interestingly, there is very little work on how greener forms of energy production could provide similar resources (Godby et al. 2018, Godby et al. 2024). One recent working paper in political science studies county and state fair sponsorship patterns by the energy industry, and shows that renewable energy companies are minimally active compared to their fossil counterparts (Martinez, Moudgalya, and Tingley 2025). They further show that large renewable energy companies pale in comparison to their fossil counterparts when it comes to promoting broader local public benefit investments.

At a high level, understanding green backlash requires understanding how communities benefit from “green” economic activity (Gazmararian and Tingley 2023). A common refrain is that many green jobs are not that great—they aren’t well paid, do not last long, and are served by nonlocals. There is a grain of truth to this. There is an inherent tension that this raises, wherein governments can try to change this (such as with domestic content requirements, prevailing wages, and other regulations) but, in doing so, introduce other market problems and inefficiencies (Gazmararian, Jensen, and Tingley 2026). None of this is helped in the eyes of the public when green transition

cheerleaders deny or obfuscate these realities. Of course, the temptation to point to fossil jobs as somehow "better" on various metrics obfuscates the localized harms of extractive industries (amongst other things).

It's Coming

To close, I raise a couple of issues that I am interested in and suspect will become relevant at some point in the future:

Overshoot: I am not optimistic that we will limit global temperature change to anywhere close to the Paris targets. I am optimistic that society and governments will try to adapt. But I am not optimistic that this will happen in an orderly, liberal, and rights-respecting way. It is not at all clear that governance over technologies like geoengineering will be democratically informed. It will probably be used initially in a highly reactive manner (for example, Lahore experiencing more than 30 days of 115 degree-plus weather and a hack effort at geoengineering that will be fraught politically and perhaps ecologically). Furthermore, existing trends that shut down research on geoengineering due to vocal opposition represent a tension between democratic input (perhaps from a tyrannous minority) and actual knowledge generation that could lead to safer deployment of technologies that nobody wants to use but might become necessary.

Distributed energy generation: The underlying technologies for taking large population segments somewhat "off the grid" are being developed. In a world where control over energy production and consumption (not just electricity, but also things like fertilizer) becomes decentralized and unreliant on state structures and governance, what will this do to extant political systems, especially those in developing regions like Africa? Will this enhance democratic systems or autocratic ones? Will it change the scope of governance generally?

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