

Climate Policy, Political Parties, and the Quality of 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

Anna M. Meyerrose, assistant professor of politics and global studies at Arizona State University, looks at how climate change and climate policies impact electoral politics with a focus on right-wing and green parties.

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Climate change—and the economic and societal disruptions it causes—are yet one more factor in the growing list of challenges confronting contemporary liberal democracies. Human responses to climate change can undermine democracy by creating opportunities for (would-be) autocrats to curtail rights and freedoms in the name of addressing climate-induced crises; creating critical junctures wherein society contests the incumbent (democratic) regime; generating food insecurity and greater economic inequality; fueling further societal polarization with respect to attitudes regarding climate change; and increasing migration flows, which can fuel support for populist, anti-liberal far-right parties that are often at the forefront of democratic backsliding (Lindvall 2024).

Nevertheless, many questions remain, both empirically and theoretically, about the specific mechanisms and institutional factors linking the effects of climate change and climate policies to democratic erosion or resilience. To this end, political parties and party systems—the strength of which are a critical factor in determining long-term democratic success and survival—deserve greater attention. Below, I outline existing work on the interaction between democracy and climate change, with particular attention to research on the role of far-right populist and green parties, and then conclude with a brief discussion of possible research agendas at the intersection of climate policy, political parties, and the quality of democracy.

The Electoral Consequences of Climate Policy

Scholarship at the intersection of climate politics and democracy has long debated which form of government—democracy or autocracy—is best equipped to address the environmental problems facing the world. On the one hand, the democracy literature argues democracies are the best regime for enacting socially desirable policies since they require politicians to be responsive to citizens' demands (Lake and Baum 2001; De Mesquita et al. 2005). With respect to environmental policy specifically, we might then expect that citizens will demand that their politicians enact policies to address worsening air quality, extreme weather events, or the other tangible effects of a changing climate (Looney 2016). Furthermore, by protecting civil liberties, democracy makes it possible for citizens to gather and share information about climate change, and also form associations that engage in environmental activism (Bernauer et al. 2016; Böhmelt, Böker, and Ward 2016).

However, the positive association between democracy and environmentally friendly policies requires several assumptions. First, the electoral accountability mechanism linking free and fair elections to pro-environmental policy outcomes assumes that a winning coalition of voters are in favor of pro-environmental policies. If there is indeed a

backlash to green policies, or if voters simply do not view climate-friendly policies as a priority, then democracy is unlikely to result in green policies (Von Stein 2022). On this front, the findings are mixed. Climate-friendly policies or facilities—such as those associated with renewable energy infrastructure—are broadly supported by voters in advanced democracies (Ansolabehere and Konisky 2014), but can face fierce opposition from local populations or other subsets of citizens that are required to shoulder the costs of these initiatives (Stokes 2016; Colantone et al. 2024). As such, both geographically concentrated and more diffuse green policies can hurt incumbent parties and push voters toward parties and candidates that oppose climate-friendly initiatives, though there is some evidence that targeted government subsidies may help to avoid this electoral backlash (Urpelainen and Zhang 2022).

Citing the economic costs and resultant perverse electoral incentives associated with climate mitigation policies, as well as the inherently slow and deliberative nature of democratic politics, some have argued that adequately addressing the challenges posed by climate change requires a form of technocracy or even “authoritarian environmentalism” (Gilley 2012; Beeson 2018) that would empower a small set of climate experts to act more quickly and efficiently. Advocates of a more strong-handed approach to addressing climate change often invoke China as a model, though critics find little empirical evidence that China or other autocracies have been more successful at addressing climate change than democracies (Fiorino 2018). Indeed, advanced democracies have, by many accounts, made the most progress on this front to date, though no single liberal democracy is on track to fulfill the Paris Agreement (Lindvall 2024).

The Green Backlash and Far-Right Populist Parties

As the above discussion on electoral accountability suggests, there is some evidence that climate-related policies can lead to a green backlash among certain subsets of voters, thereby creating perverse incentives for (responsive) politicians to abandon climate-friendly policies. But what effect does this backlash have on political parties and, relatedly, the types of governments that come to power? On the one hand, voters may simply vote out incumbents that implement green policies, regardless of the candidate’s party affiliation and without punishing the party as a whole. But since these climate-oriented initiatives are often undertaken by left-of-center politicians and parties,¹ the backlash likely disproportionately hurts center-left parties and favors center-right and especially far-right candidates.

¹ Such as social democrats, greens, and liberals.

Ideologically, far-right populists across Western democracies have, to varying degrees, been hostile to policies associated with climate change and, indeed, have been the primary drivers of any green backlash, while other parties have remained largely supportive of climate-related policy (Abou-Chadi et al. 2024). When in power, far-right parties such as Fidesz in Hungary (2010–present) and Law in Justice in Poland (2015–23) took steps to scale back climate policies. Similarly, each Trump administration has reversed Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regulations and withdrawn the United States from the Paris Agreement. Even when not in government, far-right parties have been able to use their influence to weaken climate-related policies; here, Denmark is a salient example.²

This hostility toward climate-related policy, while not the primary component of the far-right agenda, aligns with the broader right-wing populist worldview. Increasingly, green policies have been associated with scientific expertise, technocratic management, and cooperation through multilateral international institutions—which are some of the primary targets of populist rhetoric and opposition (Colantone et al. 2024).

Despite the far right’s position on climate-related policy, to date, research on the far-right, climate skepticism, and climate policy outcomes has remained largely disconnected (Lockwood 2018). In the context of exploring the consequences of the green backlash for democracy, the dynamics of the far right—and in particular, factors that make them more likely to perform well in elections—are undoubtedly a critical component. Populism and related political and societal polarization have been widely cited as a core feature of contemporary democratic backsliding (Vachudova 2019; Haggard and Kaufman 2021; Norris 2021). Research to date has attributed the rise of far-right populism to a general backlash toward the economic and cultural effects of globalization (Milner 2021). The 2008 financial crisis, wage stagnation and rising inequality (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016; Autor et al. 2020), and rising immigration levels have triggered economic and cultural anxieties that the far right has effectively exploited (Mudde 2019). National and especially international efforts to address climate change may be yet another aspect of globalization driving increased voter support and demand for far-right populism which, in turn, can be detrimental for liberal democracy.

² It is important to note that, unlike right-wing populists in the US, most far-right parties in Europe do not deny climate science outright, but rather seek to marginalize the climate agenda in favor of focusing on immigration and border control (Jeffries 2017).

What Role for Green Parties?

While the effects of climate-related policies on support for the far right are important for understanding the connections between climate change and democratic quality and survival, it is insufficient to study these parties in isolation. Rather, studying the far right also requires considering the larger party system and institutional context³ in which these parties exist. Even if climate policies increase voter support for far-right populists, the extent to which this translates to electoral success or brings far-right populist parties to power depends, in part, on the relative strength of other political parties.

Extensive work from comparative politics has studied the relative decline of mainstream parties, and in particular the demise of center-left parties (Berman 2019). Their decline has been attributed alternatively to the rise of niche parties (especially the far right) as well as the left's ideological shift away from working-class voters and toward highly educated white-collar constituents, and its failure or inability to address voters' economic and cultural concerns related to globalization. The demise of the center left—and of mainstream parties more generally—has, in turn, been linked to democratic backsliding (Meyerrose 2025).

In this context, most attention has been on the rise of alternative (niche) parties—the radical left and especially the radical right—and how and under what conditions they pull voters away from or impact the ideology of mainstream political parties (Meyerrose and Watson 2024). However, green parties—which define themselves primarily with respect to their position on climate-related issues—have been the most electorally successful new party family in Europe since the social democrats,⁴ yet have remained relatively understudied.

First, we know relatively little about what determines green party success or failure. While green parties have increasingly been represented in governing coalitions in Europe, their success has not been universal. In certain European countries—including Norway, Spain, and Poland—green parties have been largely inconsequential (Grant and Tilley 2019). Furthermore, despite emerging as the fourth-most-popular party in the 2019 European Parliament elections, green members of the European Parliament (MEPs) came primarily from Germany, Finland, Lithuania, Denmark, France, and Czechia; in most Southern and Central European countries, not a single green MEP was elected (Biedenkopf, Vanderschueren, and Petri 2022). What explains this variation in green party success?

³ Such as the electoral system type.

⁴ Indeed, the Green Party emerged as the fourth-largest party in the 2019 European Parliament.

Existing research on the electoral fortunes of green parties has largely focused on the interactions between green and mainstream political parties. One strand of work asks what role green parties play in changing the (environmental) policy positions of mainstream parties. Spoon, Hobolt, and De Vries (2014) find that mainstream parties—and especially center-left parties that are ideologically proximate to greens—will adopt environmental issues in response to perceived electoral threats from green parties. Curing and Pinto (2025) shows that the more that any party—irrespective of party family—emphasizes environmental issues, the more rival parties in the same system do the same; however, the presence of a green party that can “own” the environmental issue reduces this contagion effect. Abou-Chadi (2016), on the other hand, finds no link between green party success and the environmental positions of mainstream parties; instead, it may be that mainstream parties respond to public opinion regard climate protection stances, rather than to green party success (Schwörer 2024). Focusing instead on the determinants of green party support, Grant and Tilley (2019) find that green parties do well in post-materialist societies with high levels of wealth or in ones with tangible environmental disputes; they also find that (mature) green parties benefit electorally when mainstream parties adopt environmental issues, thereby increasing the salience of the climate-related issues on which green party platforms are based.

Focusing on cross-national variation is important to explore when considering questions at the intersection of climate change and democratic quality. Do climate-related policies and initiatives impact the strength of green parties? What role, if any, does green party success or failure play in influencing liberal-democratic success? Have green parties emerged as a (relatively) mainstream alternative to the new niche parties that have been the focus of recent comparative research? If so, are these green parties able to act as an effective counterweight against the far right? What interactions, if any, are there between climate policies and voter support for green versus radical right parties?

Outstanding Questions

Exploring how climate change policies and disruptions impact the structure of party systems, and in particular the fortunes of green and far-right parties, is a critical step toward better understanding how climate-related considerations impact democratic outcomes. Far-right parties are the ones most closely associated with the green backlash, and with democratic backsliding, while green parties are the primary political parties advocating climate-friendly measures. The rise of both green and far-right parties across Western democracies is playing out against a backdrop where traditional, mainstream parties are on the decline and party systems are realigning. This raises

multiple questions. For example, does the presence of a strong green party help to offset the negative effects of the far right for liberal democracy? And can green parties serve as a viable alternative to mainstream political parties?

In studying the effects of climate change and climate policy on domestic party systems, it will also be critical to incorporate the role of international factors. Any attempts to address climate change are at least indirectly tied to agreements or interactions at the international level, often in the context of international organizations. What effect do climate policies being pursued domestically have on green parties and on domestic party systems more broadly? Are these effects different when the climate policies are determined by an international actor? In the latter case, do we see a greater backlash from far-right parties, who define themselves in opposition to both multilateralism and environmental policies?

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