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The new international politics of decarbonisation and climate preservation

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Abstract

This paper explores evolving international climate politics from a historical and comparative perspective. It argues that a core challenge in the new era of uncertain climate relations lies not in technical solutions but in the politicisation of climate policy coordination. The paper traces assumptions and limitations of international cooperation until the mid-2010s and the shift towards the more flexible Paris Agreement framework in 2015. It argues that this shift led countries to confront their political economies of climate action, with associated opportunities but also perils that have led to heightening politics against the Paris Agreement. To counter this backlash and support decarbonisation and adaptation efforts, the paper advocates for investing in state capacity to manage the social and economic disruption that the lack of climate policy – or, alternatively, an unregulated type of energy transition – will cause. The paper concludes by noting that the future of climate cooperation depends on navigating national political battles, which are unlikely to dissipate, and further linking the climate agenda with justice, growth, and democratic renewal.

Introduction

The largest and most existential issue confronting society today is climate change. The implications of excessive greenhouse gas emissions on the stability of the global climate have been known since the early 20th century, and the scientific literature agrees that climate change today is a direct consequence of the anthropogenic accumulation of these gases in the atmosphere. Indeed, climate change is a problem that stems from centuries of industrialised growth (notably in the Global North) and is boosted by sustained global fossil fuel production and consumption. As predicted by 20th-century scientists, accumulation of emissions has accelerated the occurrence of extreme natural events that affect ecological welfare, and thus generated what some now refer to as a climate crisis.

While the historical responsibility for climate change is not equally distributed among countries, the emergency is now so advanced that climate action requires increasingly coordinated institutional responses from all nations. According to the International Panel for Climate Change, these responses broadly fall into two categories: mitigation of climate change by reducing greenhouse emissions, and adaptation to climatic disasters by building ecological resilience.

Thankfully, technical solutions to climate change mitigation and adaptation have existed for a while. Mitigation requires decarbonisation, and at this point in history, this can be amply facilitated by large-scale electrification and renewable energy adoption, in addition to technologies currently in R&D and early implementation (e.g. hydrogen production). Adaptation requires large investments in infrastructure projects, such as smart irrigation systems and sea walls, which can help prevent the most dangerous aspects of climatic volatility.

But if the technical fixes exist, a significant problem remains: political capture – that is, the disproportionate influence that some interests exert against the fair distribution of responsibilities and gains from climate action.[1] Indeed, the trickiness of climate change is that no country will be able to lead climate solutions all alone, as the causes that magnify the

1 In this paper the concept of political capture is purposefully broad and includes various forms of decisions that steer gains towards private benefit at the expense of democratic accountability, including, for example, regulatory capture.

issue are rooted in the fossil fuel-driven world economy. Notably, the costs of action are very concentrated among fossil fuel producers, which further distribute them across consumption chains (Bechtel et al. 2019; Cory et al. 2021; Hovi et al. 2019). Fossil fuel producers either pass down the costs of a green transition to individual consumers or prevent it a priori by lobbying against policy action (Mildenberger 2020; Stokes 2020). In essence, this makes climate change a global collective-action problem dominated by what game theorists call a defection outcome (Barrett 2016).

Additionally, even among the countries that credibly want to act on climate change – namely, states that lack significant indigenous fossil fuel production (such as many parts of Europe, various small nations in the Pacific, and most of the Caribbean islands) or that have started the derisking from fossil fuels (such as other European nations and increasingly China) – there is a significant level of cross-national disagreement on how to act, when to act, and for what purpose.

Countries in Europe started experimenting with incremental market policies in the form of carbon pricing in the 1990s, and the European Union tried to consolidate those in the 2000s. Following Europe, other parts of the world attempted similar policies in the past decades (Lerner et al. 2024). However, the results have been only marginally meaningful to the extent that even European countries are now pushing for alternatives. For example, the European Commission is now spearheading trade-oriented climate policy instruments such as the European Carbon Border Market Adjustment (an import tax on carbon-intensive goods from abroad). And in the wake of China's 'big green state' in the 2010s, the EU and, during the Biden administration, the United States (US) oversaw new forms of green industrial policy. Helas, as of 2025 these approaches are increasingly braking. The cost-of-living crisis, new trade wars, and financial competition with other areas of technological investments such as artificial intelligence are challenging climate policy. In the meantime, most countries are still pursuing extraction and refining of fossil fuels, and the timelines of disinvestment from these sources of energy are, in many cases, highly uncertain. Moreover and critically, very few countries are properly investing in the level of adaptation planning that the state of the crisis requires.

Until the mid-2010s, the politics of climate change were siloed to international cooperation debates with technocratic language and little public appeal. By contrast, in the past decade climate politics has entered mass politics, taking on a new shape and becoming a manifestation of domestic political battles.

This paper takes stock of history and present of global climate politics in order to point at its systematic weaknesses and opportunities. It claims that vague and unclear national commitments have plagued international climate change agreements for decades, and this obfuscation has always been the product of political processes. Indeed, it is not that domestic politics did not play a fundamental role in international climate politics until recently – of course they have. Yet, until the mid-2010s, the politics of climate change were siloed to international cooperation debates with technocratic language and little public appeal. By contrast, in the past decade climate politics has entered mass politics, taking on a new shape and becoming a manifestation of domestic political battles. Consequently, this paper maintains that we must figure out the roots of the increasing disenchantment with international climate agreements and the past decade's domestic politicisation of climate change if global climate action is to have a serious chance in an emerging era of global disorder.

In sum, this paper argues that, to credibly prepare for future political battles around climate change, proponents of climate cooperation need to first recognise the past problems of climate multilateralism and then recognise the new premises (and promises) of politicised domestic climate action going forward. The paper unpacks these steps in order. It first examines the history of international climate cooperation, highlighting the shift from top-down enforcement (the Kyoto Protocol) to the more flexible but universally binding Paris Agreement. The next section focuses on national-level climate policies, especially the political obstacles and failures of carbon pricing, and the emerging emphasis on compensatory, state-led green

industrial policies. The final section concludes by assessing the challenges of climate policy as of 2025 and evaluating how to make climate policy more resilient in the years to come. Specifically, I emphasize the need for democratic states to build the administrative and legal capacity to act effectively on climate issues, and democratic governance to sustain credible, equitable climate action in a politically fragmented global landscape.

Promises and pitfalls of international cooperation: from Kyoto to Paris

As a global public good problem, climate change is a direct externality of collective human behaviour. Because fossil fuels are embedded in many interconnected aspects of human society, as are the ecological externalities of climate change, unilateral climate action by single countries is unlikely to meaningfully dent the problem. Against this light, international cooperation – the coordination of carbon regulations and environmental safety standards through international organisation – is considered the most efficient way to tackle the causes and consequences of climate change.

International lawyers and economists have long acclaimed the potential benefits of international cooperation. The argument goes that cooperation in international institutions (most notably the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, UNFCCC) can significantly cut countries' transaction costs and welfare losses when dealing with climate change. For example, international programmes can break technological barriers and decrease the costs of policy adoption and diffusion across countries. Similarly, through the trust that comes with repeated meetings and negotiations, countries may initiate productive exchanges. For example, through international agreements wealthy countries are more likely to distribute funds for effective infrastructural protection and investments to developing countries, which may then reciprocate by changing their development paths towards cleaner technologies (Aldy and Stavins 2009; Gaikwad et al. 2025).

From this perspective, international cooperation can fruitfully provide successful coordinated climate action. At the same time, it demands some necessary conditions that could lead to self-enforcing cooperation and high potential gains (Keohane & Victor 2016). Notably, policymakers spent most of the early years of international climate politics paying attention to the legal facets of sustained enforcement of international agreements. The first years of international negotiations on climate change, from the 1992 Rio Convention to the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol (signed in 1997, enforced in 2005), were based on this premise; the entire goal was to strike agreements that would stabilise emissions by the 2010s. The anchoring paradigm for this approach was basic collective action theory: because free riding in international relations is overpowering and uncertainty is deep, international institutions must increase the power of their mandates. In a similar vein, several scientists advocated for agreements in the form of 'clubs' that could demand more loyalty and compliance from their member countries (Hovi et al. 2019).

This emphasis on the sustained enforcement of international cooperation motivated the outlook of international climate politics from the 1990s until the 2010s. Effectively, this paradigm generated an expectation that international institutions would pursue a top-down approach to climate lawmaking. However, the results of this approach have been disappointing. Binding countries and setting abatement targets for developed countries (as enshrined in the Kyoto Protocol) generated a deep division between Global North and

South that intoxicated the meetings of the UNFCCC's Conference of the Parties (COPs). The emphasis on participation and membership rather than genuine commitments also diluted the meaningfulness of the COP negotiations. Unanimity-based voting further complicated the effectiveness of the UNFCCC to get at bold action points, since consensus procedures tended to complicate and slow down negotiations (Genovese 2020; Genovese et al. 2023).

These pitfalls and failed promises of international cooperation terribly affected the credibility of the UNFCCC process in the eyes of the public. It seeded the mood that later led to the rise of various civil movements, such as Fridays for Future and the Sunrise Movement. Following these waves of civil action, the negotiations from 2008–12 were meant to define the post-Kyoto Protocol framework but resulted in various failures (Green 2025). It was only in 2015 that international climate politics found breakthrough. At the Paris COP, diplomats finally decided to try a new approach and formulate a different design of climate policy coordination.

The agreement struck in Paris (the so-called Paris Agreement) was different from anything else in the international climate politics domain because it focused less on prescribing top-down targets and more on mobilising national coalitions of climate policy winners. Essentially, the agreement proposed an international law framework explicitly designed to allow nations to choose their bottom-up approach to climate mitigation and adaptation. Through the initiatives of nationally-determined pledges (NDPs), it moves away from the system established in the 1990s in which countries were either legally bound or not. It reinvents the duties of decarbonisation and climate adaptation by universally giving weight to domestic commitments and recognising national capabilities. Importantly, it instates the political needs of countries as the starting point for designing their actions on the climate crisis. Many agree that this has constituted a paradigm shift in climate cooperation (Hale 2016; Hermwille 2016).[2]

It is up to national governments to identify and appease the domestic actors who oppose ambitious action and champion those who support it.

Implicitly, this paradigm shift means that, today, international climate policy is intrinsically embedded in the domestic political economy of every single country. It is up to national governments to identify and appease the domestic actors who oppose ambitious action and champion those who support it. In the eyes of several scholars (Aklin & Mildenberger, 2020; Colgan, Green, & Hale, 2021), the international community has effectively transitioned towards a new logic of policymaking that is less driven by seeking solutions to the global collective action problem and truer to the political root of the problem: distributive conflict. Zooming in on distributive conflict implies focusing on the material winners and losers of the climate transition. It means shifting attention to the domestic political economy of each country to assess which actors will accept the dramatic renegotiation of institutions required by climate action and which will push back – and how they can be appeased.[3]

As of 2025, it is still up for debate whether the paradigm of international coordination crystallised by the Paris Agreement, so reliant on the domestic political mobilisation of the 'will' for climate policy, is working and will indeed work in the long run. In 2015 diplomats effectively designed an international framework that, on the one hand, gives more flexibility to national plans but, on the other hand, puts a lot of trust in societies to identify and support their

2 The paradigm shift in Paris was less technical than substantive. Technically, the Paris Agreement still relies on implementation of international agreement into domestic law and domestic compliance with the terms of agreement. Also, as scholars of the UNFCCC have pointed out, the agreement still technically relies on types of incrementalism seen in other climate agreements (Allan 2019). However, substantively the Paris Agreement changed climate action into a transformative process led by coalitions of the willing within the agreeing countries. Changing the spotlight from top-down international targets to domestic targets generated through internal coalition-building processes was unprecedented and spurred a new momentum for climate civil movements.

3 Domestic political economies are of course nested in international ones, but they have different effects. Domestic political economies can be appeased, muted, or catalysed to swing voters before an election, while international political economies are much harder to reign in as they operate across national borders and legislations. Importantly, countries can have different geographic constituencies with different political economies. Aligning these may be key for climate advocates who seek to have climate champions win elections.

climate 'champions'. By reframing climate action as an economic transformation project and providing a reference point of ambition, the Paris Agreement bet on coalitions of climate-policy supporters to emerge within many countries. This was effectively a new avenue for progress by accommodating - rather than ignoring - hard domestic political realities.

But there are, of course, reasons to worry about the Paris model and the resilience of its approach in the future. Since 2016, we have seen significant pushback from interest groups, institutional actors, and the public to the idea of climate policy progress. Fossil fuel producers have notably mobilised against climate ambition (Baehr et al. 2025), systematically trying to dilute climate agreements and avoid commitments to limiting warming to 1.5°C (Genovese 2019), especially when confronted with higher regulatory costs than their competitors (Kennard 2020). Voters in vulnerable economic regions have shown increasing unease with the terms of international cooperation for climate change (Bayer & Genovese 2025). Similarly, populist leaders have attempted to sabotage the entire negotiation effort with threatened or effective withdrawals (Urpelainen & Van de Graaf 2018). These threats to the international climate order have accelerated especially with the return of President Trump at the White House and the various anti-climate decisions that the administration has unleashed, not least the (second) withdrawal from the Paris Agreement (Colgan & Genovese 2025).

That said, the recent period has also shown significant international participation and, overall, some sustained salience of multilateralism. The 2022 deal on a 'Loss and Damage Fund' struck by alliances of Global North and Global South countries (Vanhala & Calliari 2025) and the COP30 agreement to strengthen adaptation finance are noteworthy examples of international policy progress. And on a more basic political level, various constituencies have manifested their belief that the Paris Agreement is worth fighting for, in part because of its economic efficiency and not least because there is no other framework on the horizon (Gaikwad et al. 2025).

But if the Paris Agreement remains a significant toolkit for managing climate change in the next decade, we should better understand what climate agendas within countries can look like, and what reasons there are for concern and hope in handing the responsibility for international climate action to domestic stakeholders. The rest of the paper unpacks these questions.

The rise of nationally driven climate agendas and the mass politicisation of climate action

National policies focused on mitigation (emissions abatement) and, to a lesser extent, adaptation (protection of people, ecosystems, and infrastructure) have existed for about three decades. In the late 1990s, in part because of the UNFCCC goals and in part due to the strong leadership of the European Union (EU), some Northern European countries (Denmark, Finland, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Norway) became early adopters of forms of carbon pricing aimed first and foremost at greenhouse gas emissions.

During this period, the most dominant form of policy in this realm was (gas/petrol-related) carbon taxation. Additionally, some countries started experimenting with the idea of emissions trading (cap-and-trade), compatible with an expanded liberal market ideology. The early attempts at these instruments were credible and, in many ways, courageous. However, there is now abundant evidence showing that none of these mechanisms provided the promised policy

outputs due to political infeasibility (Finnegan 2023). In fact, many carbon pricing targets have repeatedly become vulnerable to changes, exceptions, and, effectively, political U-turns.

Notably, gasoline-based taxes in Europe are higher than in other developed countries but rarely above levels able to make a meaningful impact (e.g. 0.6 EUR of duties per litre). Similarly, carbon taxes exist in only a few European countries, and proposals have been dismantled at various stages in states such as Italy and Switzerland. As for emissions trading, the EU established its emissions trading scheme (the EU ETS) in 2005, against the backdrop of high expectations for the Kyoto Protocol's emissions market. However, until recent reforms, the system was flawed with an oversupply of offset credits and links to non-verified projects in developing countries (Genovese and Tvinnereim 2019; Green 2021).

Despite these concerns and the volatilities of carbon pricing, until the 2010s most economists argued that these tools were necessary and sufficient to combat climate change. After all, economic textbooks teach that taxes (including carbon pricing regulations) can effectively let people internalise externalities and efficiently change polluting behaviour. However, this view disregards once again the political capture behind carbon pricing and its implications. As many political scientists agree, abstracting these policy tools from the distributional conflict between carbon-producing actors (e.g. fossil fuel producers) and climate-vulnerable actors (e.g. wildfire and flooding exposed communities) is a recipe for failure, not success (Colgan et al. 2021; Ross 2025). This point is especially important in view of the new inward look that international climate action is going through after the return of President Trump at the White House. While carbon pricing (carbon taxes and cap-and-trade) should remain in the toolkit of instruments to fight climate change, it is crucial to assess their political perils and pitfalls in an era of democratic and geopolitical change.

To start off, carbon taxation has the advantage of generating immediate welfare benefits. It creates government revenues that can be further distributed and invested for climate protection purposes. It is also beneficially straightforward (at least nominally, notwithstanding the complications of tax collection). However, the intrinsically political problem with carbon taxes is that new taxes are never seen favourably, either by companies or the public. Consequently, carbon taxation is likely to threaten governments, regardless of ideological orientation and institutional make-up. Perhaps paradoxically, it is especially unlikely to manifest in electorally competitive democracies, where voters tend to be more myopic and less interested in the intertemporal payoffs of high carbon taxes (Finnegan 2023). Not surprisingly, the few recorded attempts to ramp up carbon taxation in the past decade have caused significant backlash, as evidenced by major demonstrations in France and protests in Latin America (Lerner et al. 2024).

However, history shows that emissions trading, like taxes, is also likely to become a victim of political capture.

As for emissions trading, capping carbon and trading pollution credits has the advantage of being a more flexible system that relies on market signals. This allows the emission producers (i.e. companies) to more smoothly adjust to the associated costs of regulation. Cap-and-trade can also be an economic 'leveller' as it may reward first-movers and small companies (Bayer & Aklin 2020). However, history shows that emissions trading like taxes, is likely to become a victim of political capture. The EU ETS, for example, was quickly the target of industrial lobbying and, at least in its first two regulatory phases (2005–07 and 2008–12), its scope was heavily diluted by the massive number of cheap credits allocated among the regulated companies (Genovese 2021).

Against this background, the reason why carbon pricing – in Europe, North America, Australia, and many other continents – has not been able to deliver its ambitious promises is simple: these policies were designed without consideration of the political implications of their cost

distributions. The policymakers chose not to consider the inevitable political fight that would occur in response, by companies as well as the public. Arguably, carbon pricing's implicit emphasis on constraints, which reinforce the incapacity of politicians to redress distributional concerns, constitutes a major peril for climate action, at home and internationally.

Thanks to the mobilisation of various groups in civil society and the political contention around carbon pricing, the policy agenda of the past ten years has started to change. Crucially, it has become evident that the climate crisis requires building larger coalitions of supporters than previously envisaged (Bergquist et al. 2020). In policy terms, this means that the 'stick and carrot' sides of regulations, which have heavily been focused on the stick part, need to be rebalanced. Essentially, policymakers need to find new carrots for people and companies to buy in to climate action.

Political scientists have stepped up to this task, trying to elaborate what climate-policy carrots can look like. It turns out that they can take different forms to appeal to different sections of society. These include, for example: income compensation and retraining of individuals employed in carbon sectors; targeted investments to protect vulnerable ecosystems; and investments to scale up renewable energy. All these instruments can be embedded in climate policy and can effectively address some of the distributional aspects of climate action.

This is not to say that agreement is impossible: American and Indian citizens are on average more willing to support climate policy if any form of compensation is included.

It has also been shown that the public is more likely to support climate policy that explicitly highlights such compensatory mechanisms, although some divergence remains. For example, Gaikwad, Genovese & Tingley (2022) illustrate through original surveys in the US and India that many voters are willing to raise national contributions for climate change actions if broad-scale investments are included in a policy; alternatively, voters living near coal mines and oil drilling stations are more supportive of such a policy if it embeds cash transfers to fossil-fuel communities. This is not to say that agreement is impossible: American and Indian citizens are on average more willing to support climate policy if any form of compensation is included. Nevertheless, striking the exact balance of compensatory goals within a climate policy package is a challenge for future policymakers.

More broadly, social science research is increasingly indicating that people in Global North and Global South countries are willing to act on climate change and are ready for new forms of climate policy focused on incentives. This implies, inevitably, more public spending and a bigger role for the state, either as a central catalyst of the energy transition or a broker of the private capital that needs to shift towards greener assets. But this is not easy politics. Voters are concerned with debt and fiscal prudency, and while it is increasingly recognised that the costs of climate change will outweigh the solutions and that therefore investments in this area are highly needed, it is unclear how much appetite there is for decoupling economies from greenhouse gas emissions vis-à-vis a derisking model in which private interests are given more and more carrots.

In a nutshell, electoral polls and public opinion studies– through certainly not conclusive – tend to support the logic of climate policy attempts across various countries between the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian attack of Ukraine. These policy attempts included green industrial projects and just-energy-transition experiments such as the Inflation Reduction Act (under the US Biden administration, later dismantled by the Trump administration) and the Green New Deal (especially during the first von der Leyen EU Commission), in addition to the large-scale renewable energy planning that countries such as China have spearheaded for 20 years.

These political projects, which explicitly focused on a new phase of 'large government' action, are at least partly in tension with the neoliberal order upon which climate policy was founded in

the 1990s and fine-tuned in the 2000s. Yet, this policy shift promised a more successful path for the credible advancement of mitigation and adaptation, because climate policy is doomed to fail unless authorities and big capital get involved to guarantee a redistribution of costs. However, this would have inevitably required a willingness to actively and explicitly fight for climate agendas that is regressing as of 2025, to which the paper turns in the next and last section.

Climate change and the political battles we will fight

Catastrophic climate change is not inevitable, and the technologies to fight climate change are known and increasingly accessible. What stands between the causes of and solutions to the climate crisis is a new wave of disintegration politics, of which the return of President Trump and the rise of far-rights in Europe are most prominent examples. On the climate issue, this politics is manifesting as a populist backlash against recent climate actions; however, the spirit of this backlash is essentially rooted in the old political problem of 'carbon capture' (Mildenberger 2020), which takes issue with various aspects of public good provision, including the progressive incrementalism of international climate cooperation. Giving in to this new political mindset, politicians risk short-changing the domestic political economies that the Paris Agreement has sought to champion, i.e. groups that boost growth based on green assets instead of fossil fuels.

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Against this background, domestic coalitions of resilient supporters of climate policy are struggling to solidify, in part because coalition-making processes require time but also because institutions and stakeholders have not ambitiously internalised the benefits of international climate cooperation. With the aggressiveness shown by the 2025 Trump administration and the potential onset of new trade and technology wars, the international community may be lured into setting aside climate change priorities. Indeed, in a world with increased global economic uncertainty, we may be facing a dire future for climate politics for the immediate future.[4]

Yet it is worth remembering that relatively recent policy turns – internationally, the adoption of the more flexible Paris Agreement; domestically, the new emphasis on compensatory national policies and investments in green industrial policies – may well offer a less pessimistic outlook of climate politics than if we had continued with the paradigm of the past century. This is not to say that the climate problem will be easier to solve now that climate change has reached mass politicisation; the 'losers' of climate action – or rather, their appointed political entrepreneurs –will continue putting up a strong fight. But the salience of climate change in this moment does point to the fact that choosing to fight a political battle for climate change is possible. Its success will depend closely on two factors.

First, society will only have a chance at battling climate change if we rethink the role of the state and the importance of state capacity to take decisive action in the global economy (Meckling & Nahm 2021). Without a strategic rethinking of states' roles, there is no accountable actor that can push forward the battles against climate change. The state needs to step in to

4 According to some observers, this moment can only be met with so-called 'climate realism', which some proponents are championing as a sober way to keep the idea of climate action alive during the second Trump administration (Council on Foreign Relations 2025). But as many have pointed out (Colgan and Genovese 2025), climate realism is incompatible with multilateralism as it is predicated on the assumption that countries will first and foremost pursue their own self-interest and so climate action can only work to the extent that it protects this self-interest – even if at the expense of the global public good.

reassure citizens for any welfare loss caused by climate action. Similarly, the state will need to domesticate private interests for the public good. This will bring up conversations about the position of the state in people's lives, the implications of green fiscal reach, and the importance of devolution and federalism to enhance just, place-based climate policies (Bayer & Genovese 2025). It will also require interrogation of how states relate to their own pasts. For Global North countries currently struggling with the unpreparedness to the challenges of the 21st century (from energy scarcity to technology disruption to a second "China shock"), institutions will need to find willing to seek internal reforms that make the state more lean, flexible, and adaptable. The current discrediting of the neoliberal economic model by populist movements could interact with a demand for a stronger role of the state. For Global South countries, the effort of building state capacity will also include reflecting upon the legacies of colonial states and unpacking questions around climate (neo)colonialism and intergenerational justice (Dolšak & Prakash 2022).

Second, fighting climate change will require a renewed commitment to democracy. Some commentary suggests the opposite, pointing to the current US quest for rare materials despite the step-back on climate policy and China's current energy leadership. This view confounds energy politics with climate politics, which have clear overlaps but also separate logics. For example, while the Chinese case shows that autocracies can lead the race-to-the-top in mitigation efforts, there are reasons to doubt China's genuine investment to the global public good (Wallace 2025). This is evidenced by the continued amounts of fossil fuel consumption in Chinese territory (with significant electricity generation in China still based on coal) and its limited ambition in international climate finance and aid to date (making less of a contribution than smaller economies such as France and Japan). A more systematic and fairer transition towards a more stable climate needs to be centred on democracy (Lazar & Wallace 2025) because this is the only political system that gets close to guaranteeing the needs of the people rather than a small circle of powerful interests.

But for democracies to take the lead on climate action and for the battle against climate change to be purposeful, citizens must have renewed faith in the basic elements of democratic life, in both the short and the long run.

In the short run, as far-right climate-delay movements rise across the world, it is sensible to ask how realistic the global commitment to democracy will be in the years to come. Far-right political parties may come to power by democratic means (i.e. free and fair elections), but there is consensus in the political science community that they tend to be harmful to public good provision if they excessively concentrate political powers in the ruling party at the advantage of a small elite (Przeworski 2024). Will far-right movements halt climate policy progress by eroding democratic norms and goals?

The evidence from 2025 suggests far-right parties are not invincible, as shown by recent electoral victories of moderate parties in Australia, Canada, and Romania, among others. This suggests that there is a significant part of the global electorate still willing to vote for democratic forces instead of choosing to slide into authoritarianism. Feeding the climate policy aspirations of moderate voters is possible and, indeed, requires the opposite of dismantling climate action. Concrete short-term policy actions that can help boost climate policy appetite include better regulating the media environment that steers public discussion and feeds climate change perceptions, and more forcefully regulating some external communications, such as those of publicly-owned energy companies. At the same time, this vision of public policy will require balancing climate ambition with efficient regulation, considering the significant amount of red tape that democracies often entail (Klein & Thompson 2025).

In the long run, meaningful climate action will rely on accurate media reporting and verified information. It will also require a renewed belief in political and institutional representation, and for elites to be accountable to the people. Climate inaction is ultimately fuelled by misinformation, mistrust, disenfranchisement, and inequality, and action will require a critical analysis of the types of power politics that have led us here and the sort of political economies we want to design going forward.

In sum, the future battle for the preservation of the planet is intrinsically tied to democratic leaders willing to link the energy transition to political redistribution, social justice, and human rights, and to put this vision at the forefront of a credible political agenda that can gain coalitions of voters among citizens, interest groups, and civil society organizations. Other evolving crises will threaten to divert attention away from the climate battle over time. However, this will not make climate change go away – if anything, it will amplify its effects. A visible and bold agenda that is based on a strong (and just) state and that finds complementarities between climate action, on the one hand, and short-term economic interests, on the other, is more likely to not only be resilient to the new political cleavages that have emerged in recent crises, but also to draw from the distributional solutions that the management of the other crises will potentially unveil, strengthening itself.

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