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Research Workshop on Climate Change, 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

Austin Beacham, postdoctoral fellow at the Sam Nunn School of International Affairs at the Georgia Institute of Technology and a 2023–24 IGCC dissertation fellow, ponders how climate change creates conflict within the economy, politics, and society, and what that may mean for democracy.

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In this memo I will respond to both questions posed by the organizers of this workshop. In brief, I see climate change along the lines of several other attendees of this workshop, based on their work—that is, as an existentially distributive conflict that creates new winners and losers, perhaps on a scale unprecedented in human history. We are only beginning to see the consequences of this conflict economically, politically, and socially, and there is a lot that we (or at least I) do not know about current dynamics and especially how these dynamics will shift as climate change intensifies.

Climate Policies and Green Backlash

Fundamentally, green backlash (taken to mean political or social opposition to climate mitigation or adaptation policies and/or the policymakers that propose or enact them) is triggered because there are losers from climate policies. The necessary economic and social changes from climate policies are distributive (Aklin and Mildenberger 2020). Shifting the global diet away from greenhouse gas-intensive red meat creates an existential risk for the beef industry, and transforming the energy sector obviously creates existential risk for fossil fuel firms (Colgan, Green, and Hale 2021). Some work has pointed out how, beyond fossil fuel interests, agribusiness is a key group in fomenting this backlash (Ofstehage, Wolford, and Borras 2022; van der Ploeg 2020), and it can extend much more broadly to other losers from shifting policies (Gaikwad, Genovese, and Tingley 2022).

It is a feature of highly capitalist systems that time horizons often tend to be relatively short, especially around "costly" (in the short term) long-term public goods such as a healthy environment (Hale 2024).[1] People (in general) are unwilling to suffer upfront costs for long-term benefits. This causes backlash, or the threat of it, especially when the policy is turned into an identity politics or culture war issue, such as with changes in diet, electric cars, or the infamous U.S. gas stove controversy in 2023. It is also especially true when a salient or symbolic industry is threatened by climate policies, like coal mining, which makes up a small percentage of employment, contribution to the economy, and economic welfare for the United States and even for the regions with which it is most heavily identified. In my reading, the backlash can both stem from individuals reaching a conclusion about the likely costs of the policy themselves and from political elites who demagogue the issue for political purposes (see the gas stove

[1] Politicians are concerned with remaining in power or allowing their party future success; publicly traded corporations are beholden to shareholders who are more concerned about quarterly earnings reports than the long-term viability of the industry in which the company operates, which incentivizes short-term planning and strategy. From my view of the literature, explicitly applying this time horizon concept to climate policy as a potential microfoundation is a place where new work could focus, building on Hale's work. Exploring variation in time horizons across regimes, rather than assuming non-democratic regimes have longer horizons, may also be worth exploring in more depth.

controversy). However, which of these moves first or is more important is an open question that research could unpack. Are political entrepreneurs pushing this information and politicizing it (in combination with misinformation from the relevant industries)? Or are they responding to what they see as a salient issue in society? A related potential area of exploration is the extent to which perception of direct economic cost (such as job loss) or perception of social status threat (like messaging to not drive a truck or eat less meat) is more important as a microfoundation and whether or not that depends on the local conditions in which a person lives. Finally, I would note that much of the survey-based work on (un)willingness to support climate policies has focused on rich, Western states (with some exceptions). It is likely that perceptions of the fairness of climate policies as well as their importance are different in developing democracies where citizens rightfully see other countries as primarily to blame for climate change, but also where they are experiencing the effects more severely.

On the international level, the outsized presence and influence of fossil fuel interests at recent COP meetings is also an example of (preemptive) green backlash. These industries understand the consequences of meaningful international agreements that would necessitate needed shifts in the global economy, so they involve themselves in the negotiation process to prevent these agreements from being as forceful as they need to be. International green backlash and forum hijacking is another area of the literature where we could know more.

Consequences for Policy

I posit that the consequence of this dynamic is that fear of backlash has been the primary obstacle to progress in climate policy. As others have noted, climate policies have not even been implemented to the point that a broad backlash movement has really metastasized. I believe that this is because politicians are anticipating backlash in response to deeper climate policy, and decline to pass it as a consequence. Because of the current structure of the global economic order, most parties and politicians that are in power in democracies (and, perhaps especially, in non-democracies) enjoy the support of groups and individuals whose interests would be existentially threatened by the adoption of serious climate policies. To differing degrees, these actors were part of the economic and social status quo that allowed the parties and politicians to win power in the first place. I hypothesize this is one of the reasons emergent industries like green energy have a harder time wielding influence. They are smaller economically and too new to have relationships with enough policymakers to seriously influence outcomes. At the same time, not enough people within democracies see climate policy as the number one issue because of the time horizon issue discussed above as well as genuinely having other long-term concerns.

The consequence of this combination of factors is the stark reality that we face: underprovision of the global (and local) good of climate policies, leading to unchecked warming and (on current trajectories) economic, social, and environmental catastrophe. A potential area for focus could be places where political and norm entrepreneurs have attempted to shift this status quo by forging new "green cross-cutting coalitions" with green industry and green activists. What helps explain whether or not this happens and whether or not it succeeds?

Climate Change and Green Backlash

A potentially (even) more worrying point is that we have only begun experiencing the more dramatic consequences of climate change in the past couple of decades. If (and as) climate change continues relatively unabated because of the fear of backlash described above, people will become more and more dissatisfied with their quality of life and government's ineffectiveness. This could take many forms, but I highlight two: optimistically, it could result in voting in "climate hawks" that are willing to undertake needed, drastic reforms that create short-term costs. It is unclear whether or not these climate hawks would be pluralist, "good democrats," but the platforms of most parties across the democratic world suggest that pro-democracy and pro-climate tend to move together, at least within democracies.

Pessimistically (and what seems to match more with empirical reality to date), people will double down on "drawbridges up" politics, focusing on adaptation within their own countries and trying to make domestic constituencies as "whole" as possible while weathering the storm (Di Paola and Jamieson 2017). This would not be green backlash per se, but rather climate backlash.

Consequences for Democracy

I am not optimistic about the prospects for democracy or for the global order. This section is mostly forward looking, but it seems like an area ripe for more direct study by political scientists, data difficulties granted. If green backlash goes down the latter path I describe in the preceding section, the most likely type of leader that would appeal to "drawbridges up" politics is a right-wing populist strongman (M. Lockwood 2018). This type of leader within a democracy poses a threat to democratic institutions and is often identified as a driver of both democratic backsliding and anti-climate policies (see Trump, Orbán, Erdoğan, Modi, Bolsonaro, and Duterte). Granted, it is not only far-right

populists that oppose green policies, and they are far from the only barrier to implementing them, but they seem one of the more systematically climate-opposed groups of political actors (B. Lockwood and Lockwood 2022).

In terms of climate change disruptions directly, I am even less optimistic. We are almost certainly going to blow past the 1.5 degree Celsius goal set out in the Paris Agreement. Current trajectories (which have so far almost always been overly optimistic even as they paint a dire picture) would lead to the largest human migration in the history of the planet as people leave no-longer-livable places,[2] the collapse of the global economic system as ocean acidification leads to collapse of fisheries and shifting weather patterns cause massive crop failure, and significant disruptions to life even in the most climate-resilient places. Richer countries will need to spend more and more money domestically to adapt to the changing climate, leaving less money in an already woefully underfunded global effort to help developing countries adapt. This is likely to spark security crises within those developing countries, exacerbating climate refugee flows to richer states and, based on past decade-plus of evidence, lead to more backlash in receiving states. While a fundamental difficulty in prognosticating the effects of climate change is that disruption on this scale is unprecedented, climate scholars could potentially draw on historical experience with localized massive famines or extreme disasters to prognosticate future impacts both in highly affected nations and third countries, as some work to date has done (Carlin, Love, and Zechmeister 2014; Rahman, Anbarci, and Ulubaşoğlu 2022).

This circular dynamic of climate disruption to instability; instability to political retrenchment (green or climate backlash); political retrenchment to insufficient climate policies; is unlikely to prove beneficial for the quality of democracy. While I do not wish to espouse the "climate authoritarianism" that has been discussed in recent work (Abadi 2022; Beeson 2010; Mittiga 2024),[3] it is my view that democratic systems as they are currently constructed are not well suited to addressing seismic, existential challenges of the type that climate change poses in a democratic way (Mert 2021). Or perhaps put better, the values of the people being represented by democratic systems are not currently well suited to addressing these challenges (Hale 2024).

[2] Admittedly, the majority of this is likely to be within countries (Benveniste, Oppenheimer, and Fleurbaey 2022), but I suspect that environmental and economic factors will combine to drive mass international migration as well (Abel et al. 2019).

[3] Indeed, other research points out that authoritarian countries might not be any better at addressing these issues (Kakenmaster 2024; Shahar 2015).

This seems especially true because, while the effects of climate change can be shocking, its influence on individuals' experience of disasters and negative consequences can feel distant, making it not clearly the root cause that needs to be addressed. As its effects accelerate (slowly to human perception, but rapidly from a planetary perspective), it is a form of "slow harm" that is difficult to pinpoint and effectively mobilize around (Herrera 2024).

In summary, the dynamics described above are likely to lead to a decline in the quality of democratic governance. In my view, the most likely actors to benefit from green backlash are right-wing populists that are known drivers of democratic backsliding, even if they are not elected explicitly because of a "green" backlash. Climate disruptions—especially mass migration and economic dislocation—pose the sort of threat that often leads to strongman politics. This is a plausible outcome, but is by no means settled based on either the literature or historical record.

An Alternative View

To provide a counterargument for the gloomy picture that I have painted, it is within the realm of possibility that climate disruptions will lead to greater solidarity and broad change in social values (Diamond 2011). I have described a path that leads to retrenchment and a vicious circle of inaction, but this is not inevitable. Environmental movements around the world are growing and becoming normalized. Green parties have begun to form parts of governing coalitions in advanced democracies (Germany), and right-wing, climate-skeptic leaders have lost to relatively pro-environment candidates (Brazil). As the consequences of climate change become more obvious, the "slow harm" dynamic mentioned above may become less pervasive.[4] Politicians may begin to see it as in their interest to take greener positions. Companies may stop undermining the information environment around climate change and make meaningful shifts in their operations to reduce carbon emissions. This would help build resilience in both the democratic system and in our planet. Exploring the determinants of past examples of this resilience seems like an urgent area of inquiry.

[4] A review has found mixed evidence that experiences of weather shape climate opinion (Howe et al. 2019), but perhaps this will change as climate change becomes a less avoidable "meta cause."

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