Understanding the Connection between Democracy and Climate Change

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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

William G. Nomikos, assistant professor of political science at UC Santa Barbara, analyzes how green backlash comes about and how it and climate impacts are influencing the trajectory of democratic politics.

Suggested Citation

1. Green Backlash Triggers

1.1 Conditions Under Which Climate Change and Climate Policies Trigger Green Backlash

I understand "green backlash" as resistance or opposition to environmental policies, climate initiatives, or broader sustainability efforts. There are at least five structural conditions under which I would argue we would see an increase in green backlash.

First, green backlash arises when climate policies are perceived as threats to economic, cultural, or political interests. For example, the imposition of carbon taxes in France, which disproportionately affected commuters and rural residents, sparked the Yellow Vest protests, highlighting concerns about job security and rising living costs. Second, initiatives that challenge local traditions or cultural practices can provoke opposition, particularly in communities where such practices are deeply ingrained. Third, inequitable implementation of climate policies, where certain groups such as rural populations or low-income households bear a disproportionate burden, further exacerbates resistance. Fourth, political polarization also plays a significant role; in polarized societies, climate change often becomes a partisan issue, and opposition arises based more on political identity than on the policies themselves. In the United States, the Green New Deal has faced significant opposition from conservative politicians and voters, not necessarily because of its specific proposals, but because it is perceived as a liberal or progressive agenda. Lastly, distrust in institutions—whether governmental or international—undermines support for climate policies, as skepticism about their intentions or effectiveness dominates public opinion.

1.2 Factors Increasing the Likelihood of Green Backlash

The likelihood of green backlash is shaped by factors at local, national, and global levels.

At the local level, communities dependent on fossil fuels or natural resources often feel directly threatened by climate policies. Exclusion from decision-making processes alienates these communities. In Green Charter Township, Michigan, the proposal to establish a $2.4 billion electric vehicle battery plant by a Chinese company faced significant backlash. Local residents, concerned about potential environmental impacts and national security issues, felt excluded from the decision-making process, intensifying their resistance. Moreover, policies that disrupt traditional practices, such as farming or fishing, create cultural friction and opposition.

At the national level, poorly designed or communicated policies, such as regressive carbon taxes, amplify resistance. Media narratives also influence public perception; sensationalist or polarized coverage often frames climate policies as authoritarian or

harmful. Additionally, elite opposition from politicians and corporations with vested interests in maintaining the status quo magnifies skepticism and fuels resistance.

At the global level, perceived imbalances in climate agreements create tension. Developing nations, for example, may view climate commitments as unfair, given the historical emissions of developed countries. At the COP29 climate summit in Baku, Azerbaijan, developing nations expressed frustration over the reluctance of wealthy countries to increase financial commitments for climate adaptation and mitigation. This perceived inequity led to tensions and protests during the negotiations. Geopolitical tensions further complicate international efforts, as global initiatives can be perceived as extensions of economic or political pressures exerted by dominant nations.

1.3 Actors Driving the Green Backlash

Several key actors drive the green backlash. Industry stakeholders, particularly fossil fuel companies and high-emission industries, actively lobby against climate policies that threaten their operations. Populist politicians also play a significant role by framing environmental initiatives as elite projects or as threats to traditional lifestyles. In France, Marine Le Pen and the far-right National Rally (RN) have strategically incorporated environmental policy into their rhetoric, criticizing the European Green Deal and related regulations. Le Pen presents these policies as oppressive measures imposed by elites, resonating with public sentiments that perceive green measures as out of touch with everyday concerns. Grassroots movements, such as farmers' unions or workers' associations, often oppose policies they perceive as harmful to their livelihoods. Finally, misinformation networks, including think tanks, biased media outlets, and social media platforms, amplify climate skepticism, spreading narratives that undermine support for climate policies.

1.4 Consequences of the Green Backlash

Green backlash has profound consequences for climate policies, voting behavior, and climate outcomes. Resistance weakens the ambition of climate policies, as politicians often dilute or abandon measures to appease opposition. Policy instability hinders long-term planning and investment in green initiatives. Backlash also polarizes voting behavior, turning climate issues into partisan debates that influence electoral outcomes and make compromise increasingly difficult. Populist parties often gain traction by opposing climate policies framed as harmful to ordinary people.

The consequences for climate outcomes are similarly significant. Delayed adoption of necessary measures exacerbates environmental degradation, while backlash-driven compromises often result in less effective policies. In essence, green backlash undermines both the scope and effectiveness of climate action, prolonging the path to sustainability.

2. Consequences of Climate Disruptions and Green Backlash for Democracy

2.1 How Climate-Induced Disruptions Affect Democracy

Climate-induced disruptions—including migration, food insecurity, economic crises, and rising inequality—have profound consequences for democratic governance. I begin by laying out in general terms how climate change can affect the quality of democracy before moving to a discussion of political violence, an increasingly important threat to the stability and endurance of democratic institutions around the world.

These disruptions often erode public trust in democratic institutions as governments struggle to address the cascading effects of climate change. When state responses are perceived as inadequate, citizens lose confidence in democratic mechanisms, leading to protests, social unrest, and electoral volatility (Mach et al. 2019; Koubi 2019). Moreover, climate policies themselves frequently exacerbate political polarization. By framing these policies as elite driven and disconnected from everyday realities, opponents deepen societal divisions, making consensus building—a cornerstone of democracy— more challenging (Hendrix and Salehyan 2012; Burke et al. 2009). In extreme cases, governments may respond to these disruptions with authoritarian tendencies, such as restricting freedoms or increasing surveillance, particularly in managing migration or resource scarcity. These measures, while aimed at maintaining order, can undermine democratic norms and weaken institutional accountability (Koubi et al. 2018).

Climate change is increasingly recognized as a driver of political violence, operating through several interconnected pathways. One key mechanism is resource competition. Climate shocks, such as droughts or heatwaves, exacerbate competition over scarce resources like water and arable land, particularly in regions where these resources are already limited. For instance, in the Sahel region of Africa, farmer-herder conflicts are often triggered by disputes over grazing land and water access, which become more intense during periods of climatic stress (Eberle et al. 2020). Another pathway involves economic decline. Climate-induced economic shocks, such as reduced agricultural productivity, lower livelihoods and increase grievances. These conditions often lead to a reduction in the opportunity cost of rebellion, making violent conflict more likely (Miguel et al. 2004). Additionally, migration pressures caused by environmental factors can disrupt social cohesion in receiving areas, particularly in regions with preexisting ethnic or economic tensions. Migrants are frequently perceived as competitors for jobs and resources, leading to localized conflicts that can escalate if left unaddressed (Koubi et al. 2018).

Empirical evidence highlights the multifaceted nature of the climate-conflict nexus. For example, deviations in rainfall patterns, whether in the form of droughts or floods, have been shown to increase the likelihood of unrest and violence, particularly in rain-dependent agricultural regions (Hendrix and Salehyan 2012; Burke et al. 2009). Similarly, studies on temperature increases in sub-Saharan Africa indicate a significant relationship between rising temperatures and civil conflict. A 1 degree Celsius temperature rise has been linked to substantial increases in the probability of civil war, highlighting the sensitivity of vulnerable regions to climatic variability (Burke et al. 2009; Eberle et al. 2020). The issue is further compounded in areas like the Sahel, where mixed-use territories populated by both farmers and herders frequently witness violent clashes over diminishing resources (Eberle et al. 2020).

2.2 Resilience to Climate-Induced Disruptions

Resilience to these challenges depends significantly on the strength of institutions and their ability to adapt. Countries with robust democratic institutions that encourage participatory governance are better equipped to address climate-induced crises without undermining democratic principles. Such institutions facilitate equitable resource distribution, reduce social grievances, and foster trust between governments and citizens (Eberle et al. 2020; Miguel et al. 2004). Furthermore, investments in adaptive capacity—such as resilient infrastructure, early warning systems, and climate adaptation programs—play a crucial role in mitigating the socioeconomic impacts of climate shocks. By reducing vulnerabilities and ensuring a swift response to crises, these measures help prevent the escalation of disruptions into destabilizing events that threaten democratic stability (Hendrix and Salehyan 2012).

Addressing these challenges requires a combination of innovative policies, international cooperation, and local empowerment. Equitable and transparent climate policies that involve vulnerable populations in their design and implementation can reduce green backlash and foster greater public support for environmental initiatives (Hendrix and Salehyan 2012). At the international level, frameworks for managing environmental migration and sharing resources equitably can alleviate tensions and prevent conflict escalation (Koubi et al. 2018). International interventions, including the deployment of United Nations peacekeepers, may further help build resilience, especially in fragile and conflict-affecting settings where democracy is at its weakest (Hunnicutt and Nomikos 2025; Nomikos 2025). Finally, empowering local communities through governance reforms, such as improved dispute resolution mechanisms and stronger property rights, enhances resilience to climate shocks and reduces the potential for conflict (Eberle et al. 2020).

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