

SYMPOSIUM: What Scholars Know (and Need to Know) about the Politics of Climate Change

Introduction: What Scholars Know (and Need to Know) about the Politics of Climate Change

Jennifer Hadden, *University of Maryland, College Park, USA*
Aseem Prakash, *University of Washington, Seattle, USA*

Climate change is fundamentally a political problem; it is not merely a technical or economic challenge but rather an arena for sharp conflicts over the distribution of gains and losses and the associated ethical challenges. However, as Keohane (2015), Javeline (2014), and Green and Hale (2017) noted in *PS: Political Science & Politics* and *Perspectives on Politics*, research on climate change has not been traditionally central to mainstream political science. Field journals including *Global Environmental Politics* and *Environmental Politics* have made important contributions in this regard, and leading university presses have published important books on climate issues. However, the neglect of climate politics by mainstream journals is surprising—although we note the recent *Perspective on Politics* symposium on Green Political Science—because political scientists have devoted considerable attention to studying environmental politics at the community (Ostrom 1990), national (Kelemen and Vogel 2010), and international (Young 1994) levels. Indeed, there is robust literature on the management of common pool resources, national styles of environmental regulation, and environmental social movements, as well as global environmental regimes. Yet, the topic of climate change—an important subject in the study of

environmental politics—too often has been neglected by mainstream political science.

The good news is that research on climate change has expanded in recent years, calling for an updated assessment. The first goal of this symposium is to review important recent research on this topic, thereby stimulating more attention to existing climate-change research and outstanding questions with relevance to the discipline. By highlighting research frontiers, we hope this symposium becomes a starting place for interested scholars to further explore these topics.

Whereas politics is the core of the climate problem, Peng et al. (2021) noted that the interdisciplinary climate community has focused largely on the economic and technical aspects of the problem and has been slow to recognize and adopt the insights generated by political science. Thus, we chose a range of topics for the symposium about which we think political scientists can inform the interdisciplinary community. Moreover, an additional contribution of this symposium is the distillation of the key lessons regarding how to navigate the polarized political system, including by infusing new norms; responding to issues of equity; and thinking strategically about mobilization, policy instruments, and venue choices.

We assembled our team of authors with several goals in mind. We invited contributions from well-known scholars who can provide insight into the state of the literature and key research frontiers. We also sought scholars with differing methodological and epistemological orientations toward the topic of study, seeking to examine the climate issue from multiple perspectives. We first invited contributions to the symposium in Spring 2022. We held a well-attended online public workshop on the article drafts in Fall 2022, where authors received comments from other contributors and the participants. Contributions to the symposium were reviewed and accepted throughout Spring 2023.

As with any symposium with limited journal space, we could not include some important topics. We want to highlight four of them. First, climate justice (CJ) is now in the forefront of climate-policy discussions regarding both mitigation and adaptation. As an outgrowth of broader concerns about environmental justice (Bullard 1990), CJ has local,

national, and international dimensions with associated procedural and substantive components. Procedurally, CJ processes incorporate informed consent through inclusive public participation and provide access to remedies to address the harms that policies might impose on different stakeholders. It is not clear the extent to which climate-policy decisions satisfy the tenets of procedural justice, given the technocratic nature of the climate discourse, perceptions of urban bias, and highly contentious debates in many countries (Hadden 2015). Indeed, perceptions of procedural inequity may be fueling the pushback against climate change.

Substantively, we suggest that CJ has three dimensions (Dolsak and Prakash 2022). The first dimension pertains to climate inactions, which disproportionately expose underprivileged communities to climate-change impacts, often reproducing existing inequalities. To address these impacts, governments enact policies. The problem is that policies often inequitably distribute costs and benefits: imposing costs on those who have contributed least to the climate crisis. The second dimension pertains to the costs imposed by climate policies especially on vulnerable communities. Carbon pricing and electrification of the automobile sector impose costs on communities that are disproportionately exposed to high energy costs (e.g., Latinos) or that reside in areas where critical minerals required for the climate transition will be mined. The third CJ issue is that even when climate policies create benefits, they tend to direct them toward the affluent. In part, there are structural factors that focus benefits on the privileged communities: rooftop solar subsidies are useful only for those living in a single-family home; electric-vehicle subsidies help those who can afford to buy these vehicles. Going forward, different CJ dimensions will need to be among the central themes in the study of climate politics.

Regarding the second topic, we believe the evolution of business responses to climate politics constitutes an important area for future research. Since the 2015 Paris Agreement, many businesses have embraced net-zero emission goals—a movement that now is subsumed under the umbrella of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) metrics. Unlike previous episodes of environmental regulations in which most business groups opposed them, mainstream business organizations—including financial, high-tech, and even energy companies—often support climate goals, notwithstanding concerns about greenwashing. Climate issues figure prominently in the Annual Meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. This type of active involvement and pro-regulation position of business leaders in climate policy is unprecedented and constitutes an important discontinuity in environmental politics. It is important that this active involvement predates the enactment of the Inflation Reduction Act, in which massive governmental funding is creating new pro-climate economic coalitions. On climate, many business leaders assumed pro-climate positions even during the Trump administration, as well as amid the ongoing backlash in some states against ESG. Thus, future research should explore why the business–government

relationship at times is less adversarial and more cooperative on climate issues and whether this might spill over to other issue areas.

Third, judicial politics constitutes an important area for future research. According to a recent report by United Nations Environmental Programme (2023), the number of climate-change cases increased from 884 in 2017 to 2,180 in 2022. In many countries, litigation has been an important tool employed by nongovernmental organizations to support environmental goals. This was due in part to expansive environmental laws that required projects to undergo detailed assessment about their environmental impact and gave standing to a range of actors to provide input (and perhaps even veto power) in the project-approval process. Environmental groups often used courts to challenge both governments and companies under different statutes. In recent years, climate litigation has taken off across the world, drawing on constitutional issues (e.g., the recent Montana case) as well as suing for damages under common law. Climate youth groups have sought relief from courts. In some cases, cities are suing corporations—especially the oil majors—for damages inflicted in their communities from fossil fuel activities. In other cases, courts have ruled against what they consider to be relative inaction by a state. Between 1986 and 2014, 800 cases were filed; more than 1,200 cases were filed between 2014 and 2022 (Setzer and Higham 2022). Global South countries have been active in litigation as well. Future research should examine issues such as who sues whom, why, and with what effect? Is litigation replacing public policy or is it compelling governments to implement laws and frameworks to which they have signed on? If populism is rooted in democratic deficit, might litigation fuel populist backlash against the climate movement? Broadly, how does litigation figure in the strategic portfolio of the climate movement?

Fourth, across the world, the impediments to climate progress have now moved to the implementation phase. Key issues such as backlash to renewable energy facilities and critical mineral mining have not received adequate attention. Similarly, there is pushback in liberal areas of the United States to new electricity transmission lines and clean-energy infrastructure. This new opposition to climate projects often does not stem from climate skepticism but instead from perceptions that rural areas are bearing the cost of energy transition whereas much of the electricity will be consumed in urban areas. Thus, future research should explore whether this new climate politics reflects NIMBYism (i.e., “not in my backyard”) or a new phase of rural–urban divide. Moreover, political scientists can provide important insight into the political conditions that make such opposition more likely and more impactful.

A ROADMAP TO THE SYMPOSIUM

Tackling climate change requires adopting policies that carry significant costs. In his contribution, David M. Konisky reviews recent political science scholarship around climate-policy instrument choice, focusing on both regulatory and market-based approaches to climate mitigation. He demonstrates that political scientists have made important

contributions toward understanding the choices that governments make regarding climate-policy instruments as well as public attitudes toward different approaches. He highlights important research frontiers related to the study of subsidies as policy instruments, the politics of implementation, and the intersection of climate-policy choices and social-justice concerns.

Climate policy often is contentious because it carries significant distributional consequences. Drawing on original public opinion data, Gary M. Segura demonstrates that Latinos strongly support policies designed to combat climate change, even as those policies may not intuitively appear immediate or proximate to this constituency and may adversely distribute costs and benefits. In contrast to polling from 20 years ago, Latinos are now strongly supportive of climate action, with immigrants and young and educated Latinos leading. This suggests that education and the political influence of immigrants have combined to raise climate awareness, with implications for public opinion scholars and for mobilization of this constituency.

Partisan polarization is a signature element of the US political system, and the politics of climate change is no exception. Patrick J. Egan and Megan Mullin document how polarization is a crucial barrier to meaningful political action on climate change. They also highlight three important recent developments that may generate future opportunities for meaningful action on mitigation and adaptation. They focus on growing cohesion among Democrats under polarization and the growth of climate risk and clean-energy opportunities in Republican districts.

Kathryn Sikkink argues that to confront the climate crisis, we need not only changes in policy and technology but also a dramatic shift in domestic and transnational norms about individual, corporate, governmental, and international institutional behavior. Illustrating the argument with examples from the campaign around divestment from fossil fuels, she considers how some collective behavior on climate issues may

be subject to the dynamics of a threshold model. This contrasts with traditional approaches that emphasize the importance of collective action and free riding.

We highlight that climate scholars have made important contributions in political behavior, political institutions, policy instruments, and policy outcomes. In terms of theoretical approaches, the field's long-standing dialogue about the relative weight of collective action versus distribution politics in explaining climate outcomes also now must contend with a new debate regarding the relative weight of norms versus material interests in guiding climate action.

employed in climate-forcing industries. Thus, one research frontier would be to examine more explicitly the role of norms and ideational factors in areas of climate politics that previously focused on institutional and behavioral explanations.

Symposium contributors also raise interesting questions about the ways in which the contributions of political scientists are limited by our field's dominant methods. For

suiting for tackling the political-economic challenges of obstructionism. In turn, she argues for more scholarship and policy focusing on leveraging trade, taxation, and financial institutions to promote economic restructuring that is consistent with decarbonization.

Some of the most significant impacts of climate change are expected to take place during the last half of this century. Joshua Busby considers how political scientists can understand the future security implications of global climate change. His article reviews recent political science research on the topic, demonstrating that political science methods are better suited to surface the causal impact of discrete climate-related weather events than to understand what long-run changes will result from a transformation in underlying environmental conditions. He also covers the uses and limitations of future-oriented methods such as deep historical analysis, scenarios, and expert judgment and makes recommendations for future methodological experimentation.

KEY THEMES AND RESEARCH FRONTIERS

The symposium contributions encompass a diverse range of topics. Nevertheless, there are important cross-cutting themes across the individual contributions. One theme that impressed us was the extent to which non-rationalist approaches to climate politics have been relatively underdeveloped in the field of political science. This is revealed most clearly in Kathryn Sikkink's contribution, which sets an agenda for exploring the role of norm cascades and threshold models of collective behavior. However, these themes are implicit in other contributions as well. For example, Segura's examination of Latino politics highlights the importance of "education and political influence of immigrants" in creating climate-supportive public opinion in a constituency that objectively pays relatively more costs and realizes comparatively fewer benefits from climate action. Green highlights how any rollout of green industrial policy must contend with policy discourses around "just transition" for labor currently

example, Konisky documents how political scientists have used both large-N and case-study research designs to examine the determinants of climate-policy adoption and instrument choice. This research is vitally important. At the same time, however, our field has comparatively underexamined the messy politics of policy implementation, which involves a wider scope of actors and a longer time span for action. Busby explicitly considers how our field is methodologically ill equipped to examine how current politics will affect future outcomes. By examining the field of security, he identifies some interdisciplinary approaches with promise. In a similar vein, Egan and Mullin identify two fascinating trends—increasing clean-energy production and climate risk in Republican districts—that could influence the trajectory of future climate politics in the United States. Nevertheless, empirically evaluating the impact of these two trends remains a task for future scholars.

In conclusion, the articles in this symposium raise important questions for future research. We highlight that climate scholars have made important contributions in political behavior, political institutions, policy instruments, and policy outcomes. In terms of theoretical approaches, the field's long-standing dialogue about the relative weight of collective action versus distributive politics in explaining climate outcomes also now must contend with a new debate regarding the relative weight of norms versus material interests in guiding climate action. Given the powerful role of climate norms in the unprecedented mobilization of Gen Z, climate change offers a useful terrain to study a future of politics that transcends the materialism and postmaterialism divide. These articles also show that climate scholarship is rich in methodological diversity; it truly is multimethod and multidisciplinary. This creates unique opportunities for political science to highlight the issues that are central to our discipline—who gets what, when, and how (Laswell 1936)—and to communicate them to broader audiences.


CONFLICTS OF INTEREST


The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■


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SYMPOSIUM CONTRIBUTORS


Jennifer Hadden  is associate professor of government and politics at the University of Maryland, College Park. She can be reached at jhadden1@umd.edu.


Aseem Prakash  is professor of political science and Walker Family Professor for the Arts and Sciences at the University of Washington, Seattle. He can be reached at aseem@uw.edu.


Joshua W. Busby  is professor of public affairs at the University of Texas at Austin. He can be reached at busbyj@utexas.edu.


Patrick J. Egan  is associate professor of politics and public policy at the New York University Wilf Family Department of Politics. He can be reached at patrick.egan@nyu.edu.

Jessica F. Green  is professor of political science at the University of Toronto and is cross appointed at the School of Environment. She can be reached at jf.green@utoronto.ca.

David M. Konisky  is Lynton K. Caldwell Professor at the O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs at Indiana University, Bloomington. He can be reached at dkonisky@indiana.edu.

Megan Mullin  is professor and Meyer and Renee Luskin Endowed Chair at the University of California, Los Angeles, Department of Public Policy. She can be reached at mullin@ucla.edu.

Gary M. Segura  is professor of public policy and, by courtesy, political science and Chicana and Central American Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. He can be reached at segura@luskin.ucla.edu.

Kathryn Sikkink  is the Ryan Family Professor of Human Rights Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School. She can be reached at kathryn_sikkink@hks.harvard.edu.