

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

Democracy and the Challenges of Climate Change

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Climate change is one of the most pressing issues facing the world today. However, after decades of warnings from scientists, there is still a wide gap between the recommendations made by the scientific community, global and national commitments, and actual implementation. This can be partly explained by the fact that climate change constitutes what is described as a “wicked problem” - a problem that is difficult or impossible to solve due to its complex and interconnected nature. This becomes evident from the plethora of climate impacts such as more frequent and intense weather events, food insecurity, financial instability and worsened conflicts (Lindvall, 2021). These consequences pose new challenges to democracies and to the stability of democratic institutions and systems, which in many cases were already under strain (International IDEA, 2021).

However, democracies are making significant efforts to tackle climate change. Countries are working through multilateral initiatives spearheaded in the Conference of the Parties (COP), the latest iteration of which was held in Glasgow in November 2021. Despite the COP26 keeping the 1.5 degrees Celsius target alive, the need for rapid and far-reaching actions is more pressing than ever. The disproportionate power relations between the Global North and South became visible in the global negotiations and debates around climate change. The Director of the think tank Power Shift Africa noted that “the needs of the world’s vulnerable people have been sacrificed on the altar of the rich world’s selfishness” (Harvey, Carrington, and Brooks, 2021). The inherently unequal consequences of climate change call for climate justice to be adequately addressed. In this context, citizens are growing increasingly skeptical of democracies’ ability to address the crisis and whether governments are equipped to deal with it. This issue briefing addresses the challenges, strengths and opportunities that democracy faces in tackling climate change.

The Potential Challenges for a Democracy’s Response to Climate Change

Democracy faces many obstacles to protect the environment and mitigate climate change. Scholars have identified short-termism, self-referring mechanisms, governing capacities elements such as policy capture or corruption, and weak multilateralism as key barriers to effective action (Held, Harvey and Theros, 2011. Lindvall, 2021; Tham, 2021).

Short-termism refers to the tendency of agenda-setting in democracies being highly

influenced by political and electoral cycles as well as the tendency to focus more on day-to-day and short-term issues instead of long-term ones such as climate change. One reason for this is the imperative of governments to be reelected. Political actors in democracies face weak institutional incentives to consider the rights and needs of future generations and may be reluctant to implement strong climate policies such as a carbon tax, bearing in mind possible electoral repercussions. Similarly, self-referring mechanisms are linked to the accountability which governments face towards current voters and to political debates focusing on the national level. This mode of operating in democratic politics risks disregarding inter-generational justice, the planet's ecological boundaries and the link between humanity and life-supporting ecosystems (Tham, 2021). Such incentives to prioritize immediate political gains might put democracies at a disadvantage in starting the inclusive discussions needed to find more sustainable models of economic growth.

In addition, democratic politics is frequently permeated by the powerful lobbyist sector and the challenges of corruption which impede the capacity of democratic administrations to effectively and inclusively take the required climate actions. Democracies, as well as non-democracies, often remain economically dependent on fossil fuels. Decarbonizing society is a challenge with large societal and industrial implications, including citizens' resistance to drastic changes to their way of life, or strong interests from the fossil fuel sector to preserve the status quo. The fossil fuel industry, which has been aware of the dangers of climate change for many decades, has been working to delay and prevent climate policies and used its privileged business status to its advantage (Banerjee, Song, and Hasemyer 2015; Supran and Oreskes, 2017). Such policy capture can at times also be accompanied by an undermining of the democratic political arenas and institutions. Democracy's ability to mitigate the crisis is also limited by corruption as it weakens the capacity to properly reach targets, implement policies, and conduct inspections (Povitkina, 2018). The presence of lobbying and corruption undermine the performance of democracies in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Not a single country is currently on track to reach its commitments under the 2015 Paris Agreement (Lindvall, 2021), which reflects both the gap between commitments and implementation and constitutes a sign of weak multilateralism. Not only are countries unable to deliver on agreed national commitments but there are also tensions between countries with different socioeconomic development levels and between countries that are more or less dependent on fossil fuels.

These factors jeopardize democracies' ability to efficiently fight climate change. However, democracies are equipped with their unique strengths and institutional mechanisms that enable rapid mobilization of the political will and adequate decisions required for effective climate action.

The Strengths of Democratic System in Solving Climate Change

Democracies possess several characteristics that set them apart from other regime types in their ability to address the climate crisis. Several scholars suggest that democracy is better at responding to climate change than authoritarian regimes (Li and Reuveny 2006, Bättig and Bernauer 2009). Similarly, democracies tend to emit less carbon than their non-democratic counterparts (Povitkina, 2018). In an open democratic society, civil and political rights enable citizens to cooperate, join organizations, engage in peaceful protest, voice their interests and articulate their views. Greta Thunberg and the Fridays for Future movement, originating in one of the world's leading democracies, shows the impact that youth-led mobilization and young people's movements can

have on a global scale. Moreover, it is only in democracies that citizens enjoy freedom of expression and can exchange information without censorship measures aimed at protecting an incumbent regime or the interests of a ruling elite. A free flow of information enables policymakers to debate and identify adequate solutions, just like it enables citizens and civil society to use their creativity and knowledge to participate in the discussion and come up with new ideas (Lindvall, 2021). Democracy can generate social consensus on the difficult policy decisions such as how the costs of the climate change mitigation should be distributed. Such collective policy-making is less likely in authoritarian regimes in which the opposing and divergent voices are suppressed, creating a stagnant and curtailed public debate. The citizens living under such regimes also cannot scrutinize the activities of authorities and businesses due to a lack of transparency where the mechanisms to hold the government accountable are out of the citizens' reach. The democracies' unique system of checks and balances increases accountability and the likelihood that crises will be resolved.

The research on climate change and democracy has identified many viable options for democracies to pursue in tackling the climate crisis. According to Willis (2020), the answer to climate change is “more democracy”. Democracies need inclusive politics, stronger engagement from civil society and youth, and the creation of intra- and inter-generational solidarity to ensure climate justice. In this discussion, solidarity refers to societal ties that bind different people together and which prioritizes collective well-being.

Constitutions have a unique role to address climate change by creating and embedding robust institutional structures that transcend political cycles and safeguarding the rights of future generations. Constitutions can create limits to short-termism, preserve inter-generational rights, and give power to the citizens by acknowledging the environment as a fundamental right. The right to a healthy environment is widely recognized and accepted, and more than one hundred countries such as Thailand, South Korea, and Indonesia have included it in their constitutions (Boyd, 2012). It creates a dimension where citizens are the rights-holders and can legally hold their governments accountable for delivering basic environmental rights. In a report from the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment (2018), it was concluded that such rights would lead to stronger environmental laws and policies and improved implementation, increased citizens involvement, reduced climate injustice, and better environmental performances. The right to a healthy environment which was recently declared a human right by the UN Human Rights Council (UN News, 2021), can present an opportunity to act boldly and generate meaningful transformations to protect the climate and citizens. By integrating the newly adopted right into their constitutions, democracies can showcase their will and seriousness in addressing the climate crisis.

Deliberative democracy research also presents innovative forms of participation for representative democracies to give citizens a voice in transitions towards net-zero societies. Citizen assemblies and participatory budgeting are solutions that can lead to more legitimate and sustainable outcomes. The idea of citizen assemblies has gained in popularity in recent years and allows randomly chosen citizens to make informed decisions on topics such as climate change. It can ensure high-quality decisions, a high level of consent, innovative solutions, and transparency (Gerwin, 2018). In the United Kingdom, the Climate Assembly published a report on how to reach the net-zero target and provided detailed recommendations such as transparency, transitioning to green energy sources, or avoiding that emissions are transferred to a different nation (Climate Assembly UK, 2020). This represents a concrete way for democracies to engage in a dialogue with

their citizens on concrete actions. Citizen assemblies can be implemented at various levels of governance, from cities up to the supranational level.

Participatory budgeting presents another innovative avenue for citizens to engage and potentially create stronger communities, reduce inequalities, and improve climate justice by giving control over financial planning to citizens. Proponents of this democratic practice claim that it may increase civic engagement, build better relations between citizens and their governments, and lead to more effective spending (Participatory budgeting, n.d.). In the case of climate change, participatory budgeting can be implemented to discuss and collectively move forward on complex challenges such as disaster risk management in vulnerable communities or environmental and social resilience of cities.

Other solutions that could have an impact on how democracies can address climate change include the regulation of money in politics, adopting climate laws, increasing the reliance on science-based evidence in policymaking, the creation of climate change advisory boards, improving citizens' knowledge by protecting public debates from disinformation campaigns, reforming public institutions, and tackling corruption.

The Way Forward for Democratic Climate Action

As highlighted above, the main challenges of democratic systems include short-termism, self-referring mechanisms, governing capacities, and weak multilateralism. Yet, democracy has considerable strengths as a system of governance that allows for a strong civil society, free flow of information, societal consensus, and peaceful transformations of conflicts. The democratic innovations and possibilities outlined in this issue brief cover only some of the future paths that democracies need to explore. Several important fields of research could contribute to strengthening the actions taken by democracies in addressing the climate challenge, with further research on climate litigation and climate justice needed. Further studies could deepen the existing knowledge about how climate policies can better redistribute resources, reduce inequality, and involve communities and marginalized groups in the comprehensive social and economic transitions that an effective response to climate change needs. ■

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