Improving Democracy for the Future: Why Democracy Can Handle Climate Change

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The world seems to be following a pattern in which the more we learn about the rate and effects of climate change, the more there is to worry about. With every new scientific assessment, it appears that sea levels are rising more than anticipated, more species are being lost, glaciers are melting at surprising rates, droughts and floods are more severe, and extreme weather is on the rise. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warned that limiting average global temperatures to 1.5°C, as governments agreed to aim for in the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement, "would require rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society" (IPCC 2018). The expert consensus in these reports is that emissions must fall dramatically by 2030 and the world should achieve a version of carbon neutrality by 2050.

The existential magnitude of the effects of a changing climate and modest progress in dealing with the causes (largely related to energy, transportation, agriculture, and forestry) so far leads critics to call for dramatic changes in governance. James Lovelock, prominent scientist and founder of the Gaia theory, argues, "Even the best democracies agree that when a major war approaches, democracy must be put on hold for the time being. I have a feeling that climate change may be an issue as severe as a war. It may be necessary to put democracy on hold for a while" (Hickman 2010). Other critics go even further, arguing that "humanity will have to trade its liberty to live as it wishes in favor of a system where survival is paramount" (Shearman and Smith 2007). Even restrained critics have concluded "it is not entirely clear that democracy is up to the challenge of climate change" (Jamieson 2014, 100).

Is democracy a barrier to acting on the causes and eventually the consequences of climate change? Is it time to toss the practical and normative benefits of democratic institutions, rights, and processes to meet an existential challenge? Is there any merit to the case against democracy? These are the issues I consider in my recent book *Can Democracy Handle Climate Change* (Polity 2018).

The Cases for and against Democracy

The case made by critics of democracy goes something like this: Democracies exist to serve the needs and preferences of their citizens. They are built on notions of individual freedom and private property rights. Voters lack the needed scientific literacy to be able to understand the causes and consequences of climate change, and they are too focused on enjoying and expanding their affluence. Handling climate change calls for drastic action, perhaps a suspension of individual rights, hard controls on population and economic growth, and more modest lifestyles.

Given these flaws, critics argue that what is needed is top-down, centralized, and authoritarian governance by scientific (or at least scientifically enlightened) elites. With the appropriate concentrations of authority and ability to set aside constraints like private property rights and economic freedoms, enlightened autocrats can make hard choices and overcome vested interests. Only more authoritarian systems can take long view and force needed changes in societies and economics, a view that goes back to the early days of the modern environmental movement (e.g. Ophuls 1977).

There are many problems with this conception. The first is that no such benign ecological autocracy has ever existed.

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Although many critics hold out hope that an authoritarian China will lead the way, there are many reasons to doubt that scenario. Another is that the research does not support the view that democracies are less suited to handling climate change than authoritarian regimes. Although democracies appear to be better at devising policies than actually carrying them out, there is no evidence that they are inherently less capable of handling climate change than their authoritarian counterparts. Indeed, the reverse is more likely. It also is hard to imagine how these enlightened ecological autocrats will establish legitimacy and be able to make and carry out the tough decisions that have to be made. Why should we assume that political systems that cannot agree on a carbon tax will magically transform themselves into climate-action-above-all regimes?

Finally, the emergence of authoritarian populism in countries like Hungary, Poland, Venezuela, and even the United States do not bode well for a climate action agenda (Schaller and Carius 2019). As the quality of democracy and governance decline, so will capacities for dealing with climate change. Climate policy has suffered in regimes that reject scientific evidence, focus narrowly on the short term, assert extreme nationalism, and ally themselves strongly with established economic interests. If brief, the central flaw with visions climate-friendly autocracy that that no such system has ever existed. With liberal democracy breaking down in many places, these barriers to action will only increase. The quality as well as existence of democracy will matter for tackling climate change.

Comparing Democratic and Authoritarian Systems

Climate change is a complex challenge, the largest collective action problem in history, and a classic illustration of the concept of a wicked problem. It is distinctive in many ways: unlike most forms of air or water pollution, the effects are not immediately obvious; harms occur mostly in the future, with a perceived temporal mismatch of costs and benefits. Scientific uncertainty allows opponents of action at least to raise doubt. Further, acting on the causes of the problem require basic changes in economic and social systems, not just incremental fine-tuning.

There is good reason to believe, however, that democracies overall are more suited to handling climate change than their authoritarian counterparts. Among the reasons studied in the literature are the relatively free flows of information on problems and solutions in democracies; their administrative capacities and lower levels of corruption; their more active engagement in global problem-solving; multiple points of access in policy making (pluralism); superior scientific and technical capacity; and dynamic, innovative economies. Overall better governance capacities, such as less corruption, are part of their advantage (Dasgupta and De Cian 2018; Povitkina 2018).

The research on the climate capacities of democracies (almost all on mitigation) strongly suggests they are no less and probably more capable then authoritarian regimes (Fiorino 2018a). A 2013 study of national policies found that a history of and experience with democracy mattered; countries with "accumulated stock of civic and social assets built by experience with democracy" generally have better climate mitigation laws and policies (Fredriksson and Neumayer 2013, 11). In another study of climate policy, authoritarian regimes did not perform better than established democracies: "countries representing the capitalistic autocratic model like Russia, China, and in some measure Singapore lag far behind the democracies" (Kneuer 2012, 871).

Two recent studies find generally positive but mixed effects from democracy. A review of 60 econometric studies concluded "greater democracy, more civil liberties, experience with democratic systems of government lead to greater environmental protection policies" with more participation in international environmental agreements and better outcomes (Dasgupta and De Cian 2018, 78). Another study finds that "democratization likely reduces emissions" but not in all cases, and that the specific characteristics of institutions and political subsystems will matter (Mayer 2018, 91). Democracy is associated with lower emissions in some cases but not always.

Still, in translating policy into actual emission cuts, democracies my not always deliver. Another study of climate policy commitments in 185 countries from 1990 and 2004 found that while democracies were more likely to commit to mitigation, they were not necessarily better at actual emission cuts (Bättig and Bernauer 2009). The prospect is that no form of governance may be up to mitigating the consequences of a changing climate, although some are better than others.

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Democracy critics often point to recent experience in the United States, where the Trump administration has reversed nearly every climate initiative of the Obama administration and announced its intent to withdraw from the 2015 Paris agreement. Here is a long-standing, highly consolidated democracy moving, at least nationally, in an entirely wrong direction. To be sure, these policy reversals do not bode well for democratic arguments about climate change. Yet the United States also illustrates the strengths of democracies: pluralism, innovation, open flows of information, and political accountability. In particular, federalism enables states—California, New York, Washington, and Hawaii, among them—to act as innovative clean energy and climate leaders (Roberts 2019).

Why the Democracy Issue Matters

Lovelock has said that surviving climate change "may require, as in a war, the suspension of democratic government for the duration of the survival emergency" (2009, 95). The problem is that this will be a perpetual war. Climate change is not something one just solves. Mitigating its causes and adapting to its effects is a constant struggle. And democracy is not something we can put on the shelf and revive when a crisis passes, if it does. Politics does not work in that way. The heart of sustainability is that the current generation should not close off options for future generations. A manageable climate is only part of what is left to future generations. Also handed down are systems of governance and such values as dignity, equity, and rights (Beckman 2008).

In practical terms, calls for a transition to an ecological authoritarianism imply three goals. One is to convert existing democracies into something very different for the duration of the climate emergency. The second is to abandon support for emerging democracies. The third is to anoint existing authoritarians as climate leaders and expand their influence in global action. The first is a high-risk strategy that sacrifices the practical and normative benefits of democracy for unknown and unpredictable alternatives. The second will undermine democratic transitions in countries whose political development will better equip them for effective action. The third legitimizes the very regimes whose commitment to climate mitigation is highly uncertain. All of these involve risks not only to the climate but to global stability and sustainable development.

Of course, we can hope that authoritarian as well as democratic political systems make the transition to zero-carbon, climate-friendly economies and societies. Indeed, it is essential; authoritarian and hybrid systems in the Economist Intelligence Unit's *Democracy Index* account for about one-half of global greenhouse gas emissions (Fiorino 2018a, 22). But to argue they are inherently superior or we should transform political systems to pursue an idealized ecological autocracy is dangerous, not only for the climate but for human well-being more generally.

The path lies not in suspending democracy but improving it: create better democracies with the capacity for collective action and a commitment to ecological values. The most effective strategy lies in fostering the political, social, and economic conditions in which democracies will flourish, not only for the sake of the planet but for the dignity and welfare of future generations.

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