# 17

# Conclusions for Stability and Re/politicization in Climate Governance

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Contemporary political life is bewilderingly contradictory. In 2022, the six biggest oil companies doubled their annual profits to just over USD 200 billion. Meanwhile, December 2023 saw the conclusion of the 28th Conference of the Parties (COP) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). For the first time at the COPs, there was recognition of the need for "transitioning away from fossil fuels in energy systems." This statement was not as ambitious as many wanted: "recognition of" is not as ambitious as a "commitment to," while "transitioning away" does not equate to "phasing out." Indeed, the winding path to securing this latest and underwhelming "landmark" document in December 2023 epitomizes the rationale behind this book. To date, humanity has struggled with how to navigate toward a transformation in our relationship with greenhouse gas (GHG) production over a multi-decade time period. Meanwhile, numerous assessments concluded that 2023 was, by far, the hottest year on record, with many significant climate "anomalies" (NOAA 2023; Schmidt 2024). The year 2023 also saw record-high global GHG emissions (IEA 2024). Frankly, contemporary political life is extremely worrying, as well as bewilderingly contradictory.

The motivations for this book arose from a simple observation with complex and dynamic implications: As a political and policymaking issue, climate change requires long-term action and significant institutional change to transform our current environmental, economic, and governance systems yet faces a wide array of powerful and influential vested interests that are opposed to many of the changes required. Exactly how we achieve significant and transformational change remains deeply contested.

Within academic scholarship on securing long-term action, we see a clear antagonism between two persuasive yet seemingly mutually exclusive schools of thought (Paterson et al. 2022). On the one hand, the pursuit of *stability* in policymaking and governance appears intuitive for addressing a decades-long challenge: maintain, or even lock in, patterns of action that may, for example, constrain future



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behavior or self-reinforce to create coalitions of facilitators that continue activity (see Roberts et al. 2018; Rosenbloom et al. 2019). Yet scholars and practitioners have warned that such approaches bring their own difficulties, given the considerable influence of agents and institutions that wield the most power. At its most stark, opponents to climate action have funded lobbyists to oppose basic science, obstruct new proposals, and dismantle those that make it into law (Dunlap and Brulle 2020; Stokes 2020). Critics warn that an emphasis on stability that does not, or cannot, counteract these influences simply perpetuates them. In response, calls for *re/politicization* have placed conflict and disruption at the heart of their strategies (Allan 2020; Kenis and Mathijs 2014), such that the vested interests opposing climate action over recent decades, particularly the highly resourced fossil fuel companies, are explicitly opposed. From this perspective, any approach that pursues stability while such influential actors hold the means to block ambition to protect their profits will, by definition, be inadequate.

In response to this antagonism between stability and re/politicization, we brought together twenty-six scholars to explore eleven country cases, and multiple policy areas, across governance contexts ranging from the local to global scale. We began, in Part I, by examining *movement politics*, as this is where much of the discussion around the need for re/politicization has arisen. In Part II, we turned our attention to the importance of *political economy*, as the industries we analyze have often been the subject of opposition for social movements, as well as commonly being well-funded centers of resistance and opposition to the political and economic changes needed to meet the challenges posed by climate change. In Part III, contributors' chapters focused on *comparative political dynamics*, to see how these tensions play out in different countries across the world. Part IV shifted our attention to how the tensions play out in *global politics*, specifically with the UNFCCC and global trade governance. Finally, in Part V, our *reflections*, we critiqued the binary portrayal of stability and re/politicization.

We begin this concluding chapter by outlining what we have learned regarding stability from our chapters. We then do likewise for re/politicization. Third, we reflect on the importance of temporality for our analyses. Next, we turn to depoliticizing strategies and discourses. We then emphasize the importance of justice before finally offering concluding remarks and suggesting future avenues for research.

## 17.1 Understanding Stability

In Chapter 1, we identified four forms of stability: stability as the *status quo*, stability as engineering lock-in, stability as policy lock-in, and stability as long-term emissions reduction pathways. What have the chapters in between taught us about these forms of stability in climate politics?

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First, there are many situations where the pursuit of stability in terms of engineering lock-in to generate long-term emissions reductions, or simply as stable policy environments, in practice generates stability as the *status quo*. While focusing on the Fridays for Future movement in Germany, Tosun and Debus (Chapter 2) argue that the steady growth of climate policies may face dismantling strategies, unless some degree of stability is pursued. Méndez (Chapter 3) shows how climate policy framed in terms of what he calls "carbon reductionism" narrows the scope of governance to one that is manageable within existing power arrangements at the expense of climate justice. And Tobin, Ali, MacGregor, and Ahmad (Chapter 4) show that stable policy environments can entrench existing racialized power hierarchies but also that the existence already of such hierarchies necessarily makes marginalized communities wish to avoid conflict and contestation for fear of greater repercussions. Using the case of peatland restoration, Paterson (Chapter 6) shows that as climate policy expands into new domains, the existing power relations within those domains limit the ability of climate policy to reshape them effectively. Chapter 7 by Stephens and Sokol and Chapter 8 by Haufler both show that in relation to the financial sector, actors tend to get "captured," resulting in the pursuit of financial stability as opposed to aggressive emissions reductions.

The chapters show that a key question that arises is "stability for whom?" A stable policy environment inevitably works to the advantage of some and the disadvantage of others. Stephens and Sokol make this point most forcefully in the context of central bank climate activity, but it applies similarly to questions of climate justice (Méndez) and the participation of Muslim communities, as well as, by extension, other marginalized groups (Tobin, Ali, MacGregor, and Ahmad).

But other chapters complicate this picture somewhat. VanDeveer (Chapter 5) suggests that politicizing actors seek a form of stable, policy lock-in, as they work to phase out and permanently ban coal burning via universalizing anti-coal burning and anti-coal financing policy norms. Even when climate policy is depoliticized, and focuses on stable climate policy over time, there are important contexts where it is able, in practice, to generate fairly ambitious climate action. For example, Hochstetler's contribution (Chapter 9) demonstrates this situation powerfully in her comparison of Brazil and South Africa, where depoliticized contexts and policy frameworks in Brazil are able to ramp up wind energy considerably, whereas highly politicized energy politics in South Africa works to impede energy transitions there. Sun, Shen, and Lewis (Chapter 10) find that the Chinese state is able to develop climate policy in ways that appear oriented toward stable policy environments, but at various points in time, this entails strategically organizing conflicts with incumbent interests to undermine their ability to block climate action. Farstad, Hermansen, and Lahn (Chapter 11) identify several important successes of depoliticized climate policy interventions in Norway, underscoring their emphasis

on the need for agnosticism regarding the antagonism between stability and conflict. Torney (Chapter 12) shows that even while policymakers seek to generate stable policy over time, the framework climate laws they generate do so in ways that seek to undermine the status quo, destabilizing existing power relations to generate more aggressive climate action. Similarly, Mildenberger and Lockwood (Chapter 13) argue that the "depoliticized" character of prominent climate institutions is often misunderstood, as they arise out of political contestation and have been designed in recognition of the political conflicts inherent to climate action.

Our latter chapters provide a critical lens for reflecting on stability. Allan (Chapter 14) builds on her previous work outlining the "dangerous incrementalism" of the UNFCCC system (see Allan 2019) through her analysis of climate action at the global level, in which she finds stability to be fragile and difficult to maintain. Nahm's chapter on US-China relations and green industrial policy (Chapter 15) explores how politicization could be used *in order to achieve* stability but that in doing so it risks undermining the existing global economic order and the foundations for long-term climate collaboration. Building neatly on this interlinked relationship between politicization and stability, Bernstein and Hoffmann (Chapter 16) argue – and consolidate the points made by Farstad, Hermansen, and Lahn and Mildenberger and Lockwood, via their analysis of the "carbon trap" – that these two concepts are not dichotomous, and instead that pursuing stability is an inherently political process.

## 17.2 Understanding Politicization and Repoliticization

What do our contributors have to say about the four forms of re/politicization we identified in Chapter 1? We name these forms: politicization as pursuit of broader sociopolitical change; politicization as pursuit of partisan competition; politicization as rhetoric; and politicization as scholarly praxis. First, and perhaps most obviously, considering the origins of politicization activities, we see multiple examples of politicization emerging from explicit contestations by social movements. Indeed, the opening three-chapter Part I of our book, on *movement politics*, analyzes that topic directly. Our chapters in Part I assess this pursuit of politicization via the impacts of the Fridays for Future movement on the coal phaseout in Germany (Tosun and Debus), the ability of climate justice movements in California to contest "carbon reductionism" and broaden the scope of climate action in the state (Méndez), and Muslim communities' challenging dilemma as to whether the pursuit of politicization creates risks for campaigners. Subsequent chapters build on these themes – for example, the chapter by Farstad, Hermansen, and Lahn, which discusses how various NGOs have effectively targeted particular tensions within Norwegian policy, notably over gas-fired power plants and carbon capture

and storage (CCS), and the efforts of NGO campaigners to generate more ambitious climate action by insurers, in Haufler's chapter. VanDeveer's chapter draws attention to domestic and transnational activists – along with self-declared lead states – that are seeking to expand the list of states, subnational public sector units, and financial institutions declaring fossil fuel phaseout deadlines, or opposing the financing of new coal infrastructure. In some contexts, these activities entail the pursuit of broader sociopolitical change, while in others it is to effect more narrow gains in climate policy action. Sometimes, the logic of movement activism is more complex, with competing focuses of campaign activity across environmentalists, as in Paterson's chapter on the differing uses and values of peatlands around which campaigns are organized.

But some chapters show that politicization comes from less obvious sources. In both Allan's and Nahm's chapters, highly powerful actors – states, especially dominant ones in global politics – repoliticize existing international agreements to pursue their interests (i.e. the United States regarding the Kyoto Protocol), or politicize the domestic climate policy of other states within other international fora, such as the World Trade Organization. Sun, Shen, and Lewis similarly show that politicization is sometimes pursued by the Chinese state (even within a broadly depoliticized policy regime) in order to secure compliance from particular companies or other actors. Conversely, other chapters show that politicization can generate dangers for marginalized actors, such as Muslim climate actors in the UK (Tobin, Ali, MacGregor, and Ahmad), for reasons such as unequal treatment via the justice system. But politicization can also generate dangers for undermining climate policy itself: As Nahm argues, seeking to onshore manufacturing in the United States for renewable energy technologies might build coalitions for climate policy in the United States, but it also raises costs and could slow down the rate of US solar installation. VanDeveer's contribution argues that the movement to universalize coal phaseout policies has met, and sometimes engendered, politicized distributional and procedural justice debates at the local and global scale.

Many of our chapters entail politicization as an academic activity as well as an empirical focus. This scholarly praxis is usually pursued through normative arguments that propose the politicization of various aspects of climate policy – for example, politicizing central banks (Stephens and Sokol), the financial sector in general (Haufler), fossil fuel incumbents (Hochstetler; VanDeveer), or through rhetorical strategies such as just transitions (Bernstein and Hoffmann). Other chapters are less immediately normative but nevertheless assume that even if we do not *yet* see much politicization of a given aspect of climate policy, it is immanent to the logic of that policy domain (see, e.g., Paterson on peatlands). Indeed, as discourses and activism associated with justice, injustice, and anti-fossil fuel norms (Blondeel

et al. 2019; Mitchell and Carpenter 2019) are globalized, it is difficult to imagine what a related un-politicized or normatively stable climate change politics might look like.

## 17.3 Combining Stability and Politicization

A running thread through the book is that stability and politicization are not dichotomous strategies for policymakers or others to pursue, even if they appear to be competing approaches to climate action. In practice, they interact considerably in ways that are irreducible to the overall logic of "accomplishing" climate governance (Bulkeley 2015). Both Torney's analysis of framework climate laws and Mildenberger and Lockwood's of climate policy institution-building show that, contrary to the assumption that these processes are intended to be depoliticizing, they have the possibility of repoliticization built into them. Bernstein and Hoffmann complement this argument about how we understand climate policy and institutional design with a model of decarbonization over time, showing that the logics of capture we have seen already (how stability in policy design can become stability as the *status quo*) can generate semi-transitions to situations they call "improvement," but this situation then is likely to generate additional politicizations that renew pressure for additional action. VanDeveer's chapter demonstrates that politicizing coal burning, in pursuit of more significant and faster climate change mitigation via permanently banning coal burning and coal sector financing, can itself be repoliticized via justice and decolonial concerns at the local and global scale.

But for Mildenberger and Lockwood, and for Torney, it is not only academics who argue that the logic of climate policy means that stability-oriented policy regimes cannot be sustained over time. Certainly decolonial scholarship is often rather explicit about the need to politicize scholarship as well as broader political and social institutions. Beyond this "politicization as scholarly practice," policymakers themselves have also designed institutions that enable future political conflict over climate change, recognizing the need for both elements in our framework to be integral to future climate strategy.

## 17.4 Depoliticizing Strategies and Discourses

Many of our chapters show that attempts to pursue stable policy regimes are very difficult to sustain over time, and that such attempts periodically unravel. They also show that in practice many such policy regimes are less *depoliticized* (Feindt et al. 2021; Wood 2016) than often assumed, containing political bargains within them and at times designed to reshape power relations in favor of further

decarbonization. Nevertheless, the urge for policymakers and many researchers to engage in depoliticizing strategies and discourses is powerful. Pursuit of depoliticization often arises out of the identification by policymakers with particular incumbent interests, which makes them seek to elide or obscure the contradictions in climate policy that result from these identifications. But it can also arise more simply because the normative rhetoric of "we are all in this crisis together" can be an effective discursive strategy for bringing diverse actors together around climate policy, including actors who may not otherwise choose to participate if engagement is – or appears to be – more "political" than they would wish. In our introductory chapter, we unpacked the term "politics" into its different elements. We deployed three such elements – politics as a site of collective decision-making, politics as power, and politics as conflict (see Paterson 2021). Resultantly, we can understand these depoliticizing urges precisely as the effects of power and conflict on how collective decision-making is made. Depoliticization strategies are therefore deeply political in their origins and effects.

We see the urge to present climate policy as depoliticized in various ways in our chapters. Tosun and Debus show that the politicization of climate change by Fridays for Future, and with the Green Party as a government coalition partner, threatened to undermine long-term climate policy and generated incentives for governing actors to depoliticize it in response. This effect has in part been generated by the nature of the German institutional framework, an effect that is even more obvious in Norway (see Dryzek et al. 2002), where Farstad, Hermansen, and Lahn show that deeply institutionalized norms about consensual decision-making produce these incentives for depoliticizing strategies. And while analyzing four countries (the UK, Australia, Norway, and Denmark), Mildenberger and Lockwood unpack neatly the political bargains involved in generating "stability-oriented" climate institutions. Yet they nevertheless show that such institutions are routinely presented rhetorically by policymakers and politicians as being "outside" partisan politics.

Stephens and Sokol, as well as Haufler, show the core rationale for depoliticization even more starkly. The powerful financial sector not only organizes and frames climate governance in depoliticized ways to avoid scrutiny of its activities in relation to climate change but also uses climate policy to advance its interests directly. Similar dynamics are detailed in Hochstetler's chapter, whereby the complex and contentious politics around forests in Brazil incentivizes governments to avoid conflicts and focus on less conflictual areas of climate action, notably wind energy.

But while the incentives for *dominant* actors to engage in depoliticizing strategies are increasingly acknowledged and understood, Tobin, Ali, MacGregor, and Ahmad show that this can also be the case for marginalized actors. In their chapter, they show that many Muslim climate actors in the UK feel unable to

participate in more contentious climate action because of the dynamics of structural or institutional racism, and hence often pursue more depoliticized strategies for reasons of personal security. In other contexts, depoliticization strategies arise out of the habitus of the more technically focused actors in many parts of climate governance. For example, the scientists who are involved in peatland management (Paterson) often focused on how to restore peatlands to minimize carbon losses (and even absorb carbon), rather than political questions around land ownership. Indeed, spending time on such topics would feel like a dangerous distraction.

Lastly, several chapters demonstrate that what depoliticizing actors are trying to avoid – and/or what they perceive as problematic about "politics" – also various substantially. For Stephens and Sokol, regarding the treatment of central banks, and for Haufler's contribution on the insurance and reinsurance sector, we see actors who generally seek to keep contentious noneconomic politics "out" of their economic governance discourses. Paterson's chapter on "peaty politics" similarly argues that many actors want to keep contentious areas of climate change politics out of peat governance. In all three of these contributions, highly technical discourses and bodies of knowledge are deployed to insulate or protect governance decision-making process from contentious or more explicitly normative aspects of politics. Certainly, there is a long tradition of such uses of science and technology in many areas of environmental politics (see, e.g., Jasanoff 1994). Meanwhile, for Farstad, Hermansen, and Lahn, depoliticizing Norwegian climate policy was, for many years, accomplished through the invocation and maintenance of societal and cross-political-party consensus that shows more recent signs of fraying.

## 17.5 Understanding Antagonisms and Iterated Politics over Time

If the urge to *de*politicize climate policy in the pursuit of stable climate policy regimes is strong for many actors, so too is the desire in others to *re*politicize. In part, this desire is integral to the logic of climate change itself: For many, there is a deep sense that attempts to depoliticize climate change – in the sense of presenting it as outside or beyond power relations and conflicts in society – is simply mistaken as both a strategy and an understanding of societal dynamics. From this perspective, depoliticizing strategies in climate policy are always in some sense merely tactical rather than coherent intellectually. However, this point means that the urge to repoliticize arises out of direct awareness of those broader power relations and conflicts in society. Particular groups of people have reasons to mobilize over climate change. Our chapters illustrate these actors in various ways – from youth-centered movements (Fridays for Future – see Tosun

and Debus) or other climate justice groups (Bernstein and Hoffmann) to those affected negatively by either climate policy or climate change itself (see chapters variously by Méndez; Farstad, Hermansen, and Lahn; or Tobin, Ali, MacGregor, and Ahmad). Academics are of course actors in climate politics too, and several of our chapters (Bernstein and Hoffmann's argument for just transitions, Méndez's arguments about "climate change from the streets," and Stephens and Sokol's call to politicize central banking) can be read as repoliticizing interventions, as indeed can the book as a whole.

We need to see the relationships between stability and repoliticization as iterated over time. Each contains logics that arise out of the urges of some sets of political actors to frame and act on climate in specific ways, which then provoke reactions from other actors to frame and act on these differently. The institutionalization of stability-oriented climate policy also contains contradictory logics that tend to falter and create repoliticizing moments. Conversely, opening up new lines of political conflict risks opening up climate action to interventions by those pursuing a backlash to, or dismantling of, climate policy (Patterson 2023; Paterson et al. 2024), generating new rounds of attempts to "lock in" climate policy to prevent such backsliding.

How you – a particular reader of this book – respond to these dynamics depends on your positionality within the various processes we analyze here. For many, activism that repoliticizes climate seems like the obvious option due to lack of influence within the current structures. This obviousness results from one's own standpoint. For example, from a generational perspective, as many readers of the book will be students (and thus commonly young adults), activism is one of the few available opportunities for action and feeds off intergenerational resentments and conflicts that are intrinsic to the temporal dynamics of climate change. Climate change is indeed a phenomenon created by older, richer (white) people in the Global North, and imposed on the young everywhere, albeit highly unequally young people across the world. There is also a sense among many young students and activists that we are all running out of time to avoid catastrophic impacts (de Moor 2023), and that these will occur over the expected lifespans of today's younger generations.

But for other readers, those with perhaps more of a sense of access – if mediated – to political decision-making, and perhaps also more to lose having established careers and families, or indeed, those with concern for unfair treatment in justice systems, such activism may seem inaccessible or unappealing. For these readers, the pursuit of climate action via political parties, lobbying, organized interest groups, or professional networks, which favor less conflictual action, may be more in line with their situation. This approach is not necessarily depoliticized – it would include partisan competition among political parties – but it is nevertheless

not "climate change from the streets," in Méndez's words. Hence, it does contain the seeds of a more stability-oriented approach to climate change, seeking consensus where possible.

## 17.6 Concluding Remarks and Future Research

Our aim in this book was to provide an analytical framework based around the antagonisms between "stability" and "politicization" as a means for thinking about the political dynamics of long-term climate policy. We think the framework is useful empirically in that it captures common empirical phenomena within climate policy – both the urge to seek to "lock in" climate policy to pursue decarbonization in a way that prevents backsliding and the urge to open up political conflict that can destabilize existing power relations blocking ambitious climate policy action. And our framework is also useful normatively – both poles in our framework contain powerful arguments that motivate actors to act on climate change in specific ways, and hence clarifying what is at stake in these two approaches proffers analytical benefits. Moreover, it is important to recognize the normative value of both logics, and especially the value of the empirical relationships between them.

We have presented the framework in a deliberately open and flexible manner, and we hope others will find it useful in developing their own analyses. We particularly hope the four forms of stability and the four forms of politicization that we identify through this volume can serve to make future research in these fields even more nuanced. Indeed, these forms can be employed in myriad ways. Some may simply see our antagonist framework, and its attendant eight forms, as useful means to organize their own case study or comparative research. Others may prefer to develop the approach into a more formal model that might be constructed and tested.

While we have sought to maximize the diversity of empirical contexts in which the arguments have been developed, there are nevertheless many ways they could be evaluated and developed in other empirical contexts. For example, how does this antagonism play out in cities? The chapters by Allan and by Nahm extend the argument beyond the national policy level that dominates existing literature, but there is much more to be said about stability and repoliticization at inter-state and transnational spaces, where relationship dynamics are necessarily orchestrated differently than in national, subnational, and non-state arenas. Cities hold the potential to play a unique role in climate governance yet possess unique dynamics compared to other levels (van der Heijden 2019) and have not been analyzed in this volume. Similarly, what about the important sectors that we lacked the space to explore here? For instance, we have only one chapter here dealing with transport as part of its analysis, and which pertains to electric vehicle (EV) transitions, while there

is nothing on agriculture and food or aviation and very little on buildings. Each of these sectors likely possess their own actor coalitions, priorities, conflicts, and focal issues (see Schmidt et al. 2022). It would be useful to test the arguments proposed in this book in various contexts to see how they hold up or need adapting according to their context. Furthermore, as we note in our introductory chapter, the bulk of our analyses pertain to climate mitigation rather than adaptation, yet the pursuit of long-term and effective policy, and the dynamics around how to do so, pertain as much to responding to the impacts of climate change as to its prevention. Further research into the antagonisms that underpin adaptation policy, and the inequalities of power that influence decision-making in this regard, is of the utmost importance and urgency to those regions already facing the harshest effects of climate change, often despite playing a limited role in their creation.

There is a lot at stake in getting our understanding of these dynamics right. We are finalizing this book in 2024, which is a year of a huge number of elections around the world: Amy Davidson Sorkin, writing in the *New Yorker*, dubbed it "the biggest election year in history" (Sorkin 2024), with perhaps seventy-six countries with universal suffrage going to the polls, comprising more than 40 percent of the world's population. The United States, the UK, Mexico, South Africa, India, Russia, Pakistan, and Iran are just some of the most prominent national elections for presidencies and/or parliaments to come during the year – a year that also includes European Parliamentary elections. Climate change is once again a partisan issue in many contexts, including those, like the UK, where it has until recently enjoyed bipartisan support (Carter and Pearson 2024). Many of these elections could destabilize the political conditions for climate policy in dramatic ways. And beyond electoral politics, there remains ongoing mobilization both to accelerate climate policy action and to undermine – or even dismantle – it. These activities are likely to put considerable pressure on existing climate initiatives around the world, and in particular on the institutionalized forms through which a previous round of climate policymaking has sought to "lock in" climate action over time. How these challenges play out empirically, and how different actors are able to use them not only to withstand the pressure for climate policymaking but perhaps also to intensify and accelerate climate action, is crucial for the future of the global response to the climate crisis.

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