

Policy Brief 7:

Dealing with climate change in representative democracies



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SUMMARY

As one of the greatest global challenges of our time, climate change is also one of the greatest challenges facing democracies today. There are tensions in the relationship between representative democracy and climate change, including a lack of public support and government action, and the short-term horizon of electoral politics when facing the long-term climate crisis. There is a pressing need for climate action, while at the same time maintaining democratic ideals and functions, such as equal representation and responsiveness. Research on and discussions about how well-equipped representative democracy is to tackle the climate crisis are necessary going forward.

THE ISSUE

There is a tension between democracy and climate change in the sense that something needs to be done to tackle this global challenge, but there is a lack of public support and government action. Some argue that policy makers are reluctant to implement climate policies if they expect public opposition. Policies are implemented by governments who need the trust of their citizens. In addition, it has become increasingly difficult for governments to balance international commitments and promises to the electorate. In the context of climate change this is apparent in terms of nation states' commitments through the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the current Paris Agreement, as well as EU climate policies and agreements, such as the EU Emissions Trading System (EU ETS).

Another major challenge to necessary climate policy implementation is the short horizon of elected representatives and parties, operating in short electoral cycles. In limiting climate change and reducing emissions, democracy can by nature be moving too slowly and not be sufficiently efficient. Major effective policies are costly in the short-term, but its benefits will mostly be proven in a long-term.

Furthermore, climate change is inherently long termed. Mitigation measures that will have the most effect will likely be costly. These more visible policies are difficult to get both citizens and policy makers behind. Still, research has shown that democracies do perform better than other regimes in terms of climate mitigation through cooperation in international environmental treaties, adopting stricter environmental policies, and curbing their CO2 emissions.

When it comes to climate change, nation states alone will fall short – because the climate has no national borders. But democratic representation takes place within these national borders. This makes the relationship between states, on the one hand, and transnational and supranational organizations, on the other hand, in climate policy more complicated. At the same time, impatience from the general public and activist, communicated through protests, campaigns, and strikes, is directed both at national governments and the global community, for example the IPCC and yearly negotiation meetings between states (COP).

Civil society is a vibrant and important part of democracy, and the relationship between organisations and protest activities and those in power can be beneficial. This way, people can be heard in different ways, and more often than just during elections. It is possible for citizens to put pressure on governments to act. We have witnessed multiple examples of this in recent years related to climate change, including Greta Thunberg and the Fridays for Future movement. There are also groups that take things even further with civil disobedience, such as Extinction Rebellion.

MY RESEARCH

In my research on climate change perceptions and policy preferences, I utilize survey data from the Norwegian Citizen Panel and the Panel of Elected Representatives, with representatives at the local, regional, and national levels in Norway. This allows me both to compare responses from citizens and representatives on the same climate policy issues as well as to ask representatives directly about their views on dealing with climate change in a representative democracy.

KEY FINDINGS

In a recently published article, I examined whether descriptively underrepresented groups also are substantively underrepresented on climate issues in Norway (Helliesen, 2023a). I found that the climate policy preferences of women and, especially, young are underrepresented by elected representatives. This is the case even in the Norwegian context, with comparatively high levels of equality. Simultaneously, these two groups consistently support climate policies and call for climate action to a larger extent than their male and older counterparts.

In an ongoing study (Helliesen, 2023b), I ask elected representatives about their perceptions of dealing with the climate crisis within democracies. Preliminary results show that a majority of the Norwegian representatives in the Panel of Elected Representatives believe that the climate crisis can be solved through regular decision making. This belief is stronger for men than women, and less strong for politicians in the radical right Progress Party (FrP) than other parties. The belief also increases when politicians worry more about climate change and place themselves more to the left on the political left-right scale.

A majority of the surveyed politicians oppose people engaging in civil disobedience to pressure governments for climate action. Support for civil disobedience is higher for women than men, and for representatives in the Green (MDG), Red (Rødt), and Socialist Left (SV) parties. Support for civil disobedience among elected representatives also increases with higher education, climate worry, and placement to the left on the political spectrum (Helliesen, 2023b).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ensure that women and young people are better represented in formal politics. Especially youth, who participate less in formal political channels such as voting and running for office, but more so in unconventional forms such as protests and civil disobedience. There is need for more research and discussions on how well-equipped representative democracy is to tackle the climate crisis.

REFERENCES

- Helliesen, M. S. (2023a). Unequal Representation of Women and Youth on Climate Policy Issues. *Representation*, 59(4), 615-632.
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