











SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

Politicians and climate change: A systematic review of the literature

Brendan Moore¹  | Lucas Geese²  | John Kenny²  | Harriet Dudley²  |
 Andrew Jordan²  | Alba Prados Pascual²  | Irene Lorenzoni²  |
 Simon Schaub³  | Joan Enguer³  | Jale Tosun^{3,4} 

¹Brussels School of Governance, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Brussel, Belgium

²School of Environmental Sciences/Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK

³Institute of Political Science, Heidelberg University, Heidelberg, Germany

⁴Department of Political Science, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

Correspondence

John Kenny, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK.

Email: john.kenny@uea.ac.uk

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Abstract

Politicians' engagement with climate change is the focus of an emerging literature, but this research has not been subjected to systematic analysis. To address this important gap, we perform a systematic review of 141 articles on politicians and climate change published between 1985 and 2021. We find a growing research area; almost half of the articles were published after 2018. Existing research is fragmented and focused on a small number of democracies in the Global North, with the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Norway and Australia being the most-heavily studied. Substantively, we analyze politicians' motivations, the incentives and barriers they face, and the strategies they employ to block/enable climate action. We find evidence of politicians being both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated. Intrinsic motivations often derive from formative experiences occurring prior to entering politics. Extrinsic motivations most commonly include publics/voters and external events. Importantly, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations vary in different political contexts, and indeed these two motivations may pull politicians in different directions. Politicians may employ various strategies—such as reframing—to achieve their desired policy outcomes. Moreover, politicians' motivations and strategies in relation to climate change are not static, but often vary. We conclude that there is an urgent need for research on how politicians are enabled and/or constrained by political system characteristics. Research is especially called for in the Global South and/or less democratic systems, as well as on investigating how politicians are (not) decarbonizing difficult-to-abate sectors

Brendan Moore, Lucas Geese and John Kenny contributed equally to the paper and are to be considered joint lead authors. The order of these three authors was decided through randomization.

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and how they reconcile the sometimes-competing demands for climate change mitigation and adaptation.

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KEYWORDS

climate change, climate policy, policy makers, politicians, systematic review

1 | INTRODUCTION

The main barriers to rapid and wide-ranging climate action are not simply scientific or technological, but also social and hence inescapably political (Boasson & Tatham, 2023; Compston & Bailey, 2008; Falzon et al., 2021; Hulme, 2009; Jordan et al., 2022; Paterson, 2021; Stoddard et al., 2021). Hence, politicians have an important part to play in the grand challenge of deep, rapid and sustained societal decarbonization (for a definition of politicians, see Box 1). In their wider role, politicians exert a decisive influence on the “continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens” (Dahl, 1971, p. 1). As specialized policy actors who (individually or collectively) take authoritative decisions on behalf of voters (Strom, 2000, pp. 266/267), their functions may include: representing, aggregating and reconciling the various concerns of the public; providing compelling visions of the future; deliberating over and deciding on competing policy proposals; and overseeing policy implementation (Mansbridge, 2003; Pitkin, 1967; Skocpol, 2012, p. 36).

In recognition of the vital role that they will need to play in responding to the climate crisis, politicians have become the subject of an emerging literature. Notwithstanding this increased scholarly attention, this literature has not yet been subjected to systematic analysis. Indeed politicians barely feature in existing reviews of climate politics (e.g., Bernauer, 2013; Keohane, 2015; Meyer & Chang, 2021). They are also not a significant focus of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s (IPCC) work, where they are largely treated as recipients of advice, not objects of study (IPCC, 2022).

To address this important gap, we perform a novel systematic review of articles on politicians and climate change. Systematic reviews have traditionally been neglected by political researchers despite their ability to reduce bias, offer methodological transparency and provide greater certainty on what existing research has found (Dacombe, 2018). Our review thus enables us to examine common findings as well as identify gaps in existing research on politicians and climate change. It also lessens the risk that researchers unnecessarily replicate existing findings.

Informed by the following widely utilized concepts from the political science literature on politicians (e.g., Corbett, 2014; Diermeier & Krehbiel, 2003; Kam, 2009; Strom, 2000), we address the following research questions. First, what are the *motivations* of politicians in relation to climate action? Second, what are the most notable *incentives and barriers* that they encounter? And third, what *strategies* do they pursue to navigate the challenges they face? As well as being of academic interest, our review should also be of value to policymakers, given that politics is often considered to be a key starting point for achieving climate change mitigation and adaptation goals (Green & Reyes, 2023; Javeline, 2014; Kehler & Jeff Birchall, 2023).

In the next section, we present our methodology, detailing the identification, screening, and eligibility strategy we employed to identify the relevant corpus of articles, as well as our approach to analyzing it. In the subsequent section, we summarize the main findings (full descriptive statistics for each coding category can be found in the Supplementary Material, Tables S5–S18). The final section offers conclusions and identifies new research priorities.

2 | METHODOLOGY

To investigate and synthesize the literature, we undertook a systematic review of peer-reviewed academic articles covering both topics (see Box 1 for how we define a politician).

BOX 1 What is a politician?

In undertaking our review, we drew upon the following understanding of what constitutes a politician. Politicians are political office- and mandate-holders who have formal influence over the law-making process in the executive and legislative branches of government at different governance levels (i.e., subnational, national and supranational/international), or those that seek to achieve that status. This excludes bureaucrats/public servants, who are typically considered to be “agents” of politicians (Macedo De Medeiros Albrecht, 2023, p. 6) and have the further distinction in democracies of being accountable to their professional peers rather than voters (Alesina & Tabellini, 2007). We consider politicians as individuals in addition to as collective groups of actors (see Section 3.1 for further discussion).

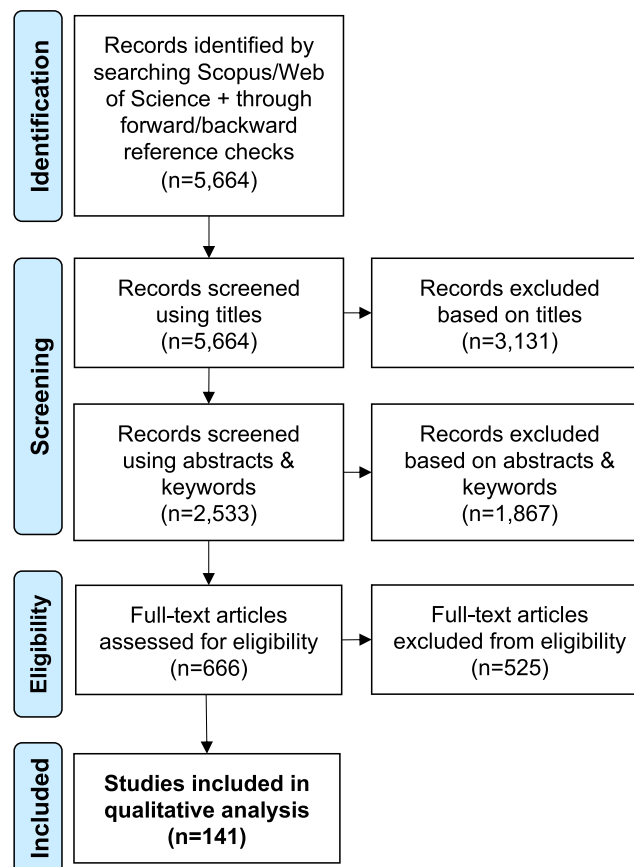


FIGURE 1 Search and screening procedure, adapted from the PRISMA flow chart (Moher et al., 2009).

2.1 | Identification, screening, and eligibility

Our approach consisted of three stages, following Moher et al. (2009): identification; screening; and eligibility (see Figure 1).

2.1.1 | Identification

In this stage, we searched the titles, abstracts, and keywords of peer-reviewed articles in Scopus and Web of Science for those that contained at least one of 15 terms relating to climate change in combination with at least one of 23 terms

relating to politicians (see Table S1 for a complete list of search terms). Our search was limited to articles written in English, including those published online-first. It was carried out on 22 June 2021, resulting in 6369 articles: 3828 from Scopus and 2541 from Web of Science. After merging duplicate results from the two databases, we were left with 4380 articles in total. We then excluded articles published prior to 1985 ($n = 144$) because public and political attention to climate change was limited before that date (Anderson, 2009). After this year-based filtering, we were left with 4236 articles.

We then undertook a second identification stage in November 2021 by firstly repeating the steps outlined in the previous paragraph. This second stage was based on the 110 articles that we had already included in the corpus for qualitative analysis as of November 2021 based on the original database searches (outlined in the previous paragraph). We searched Scopus for documents that cited these articles (forward reference check), as well as their reference lists (backward reference check) (Biesbroek et al., 2018; Siddaway et al., 2019). These checks yielded an additional 1428 articles. In total, the initial searches of Scopus and Web of Science, combined with these additional reference checks, resulted in 5664 articles (see Figure 1).

2.1.2 | Screening

In the screening stage, we analyzed the 5664 articles to identify those that focused on both climate change and politicians. We initially screened article titles to exclude those that addressed neither of these topics (e.g., Kharouba et al., 2018; Reid, 1989). All articles designated for exclusion by a first coder were reviewed by a second coder. This process excluded 55% of the initial results, leaving 2533 articles.

We then screened the abstracts and keywords of these remaining articles, using a classification system based on each article's level of focus on climate change and politicians (see Tables S2 and S3). This process excluded a further 34% of the initial results (1867 articles), leaving 666 articles (12% of the original search results).

2.1.3 | Eligibility

At the eligibility stage, we first surveyed the full text of the remaining 666 articles to identify and include those focusing on politicians as individuals or political parties. We excluded articles focusing on other topics, e.g., nation-states, policy processes or individual public policies. This created a final corpus of 141 articles focusing on both climate change and politicians. The authors, title, publication year, and journal for each article in this corpus can be found in the Supplementary Material (Table S19).

2.2 | Analysis of articles

In developing an appropriate coding framework, it is important to determine the significant concepts to code, to pilot the codes, and to ensure that they can be accurately and reliably applied (Gough et al., 2017, pp. 139–142). We structured our review according to four widely utilized concepts from the political science literature on politicians: motivations, incentives, barriers, and strategies.

In brief, each of these aspects, and their interrelations, can be described as follows. First, politicians' *motivations* include maximizing their policy influence (policy-seeking), gaining votes in democratic systems (vote-seeking), and achieving higher political office, such as parliamentary mandates or government office (office-seeking) (e.g., Kam, 2009). These motivations are not mutually exclusive, and are often interconnected. Second, politicians face a wide range of *incentives* and *barriers* when acting in certain institutional contexts (e.g., electoral systems) or political contexts (e.g., government versus opposition) (Diermeier & Krehbiel, 2003). Finally, when navigating such contexts, politicians have a number of potential *strategies* at their disposal (Diermeier & Krehbiel, 2003) which they can deploy in order to attain their goals and thereby ultimately fulfill their functions in modern societies (Corbett, 2014).

We primarily opted for closed forms of coding. Following an initial formulation of our coding categories and response options, three articles were coded by all coders ($n = 10$). This enabled us to ensure that the coders interpreted the codes and categorisations in the same way. Drawing on this process, we revised the codebook to increase reliability, amended the order of certain questions, and removed excess categories.

In total, we analyzed and coded 141 articles. The coding categories included high-level information on each article, such as its geographical focus, the types of politicians studied and the methodological approach used (see Supplementary Material Table S4 for a detailed list). We also coded each article according to how it described politicians' motivations, incentives, barriers, and strategies in relation to climate change, as well as the relationship between publics/voters and politicians.

For most categories, coders could code multiple response options. Aggregate percentages shown in the supplementary material (Tables S5–S18)—and in Figures 2, 4 and 5 below—can thus sum up to more than 100%. If coders wished to include a response option that was not pre-specified, they could detail it under an “other” category. At the analysis stage, all “other” responses were examined and reallocated to a new response category if they appeared in 5% of articles. Full descriptive results for each coding category can be found in the supplementary material (Tables S5–S18).

3 | RESULTS

We begin by presenting key descriptive statistics about the 141 articles. We then provide the results of our substantive analysis of politicians' motivations, the incentives and barriers they encounter, and the strategies they employ to address them.

3.1 | Overview of key article statistics

The articles were published relatively recently: only eight were published before 2010, with nearly half published between 2019 and 2021 (Figure 2). The years between 2007 and 2015 were the most intensively studied (i.e., “year of observation” in Figure 2); each of those years were addressed by at least 50 articles. This time period was, of course, marked by relatively active international climate diplomacy that resulted in the 2009 Copenhagen Accord and the 2015 Paris Agreement. That the most recent years, in particular following the Paris Agreement, are not the most studied corresponds to a well-known pattern in academic scholarship whereby research typically reports on extant fieldwork and/or observational data in combination with often lengthy peer-review processes.

Furthermore, about a third of the articles have a first author working in a political science department; the remainder were mostly led by authors in departments of environmental/climate studies, sociology, communication, geography/regional studies and economics/business (see Figure 5). Those in the “other” category are spread thinly across various disciplines including anthropology, history, law, linguistics, philosophy and psychology. This underscores the disciplinary diversity of the corpus.

The articles focus heavily on mitigation and climate change in general (meaning they examine climate change without referring specifically to mitigation or adaptation), with significantly less emphasis on adaptation (see Figure 3). The

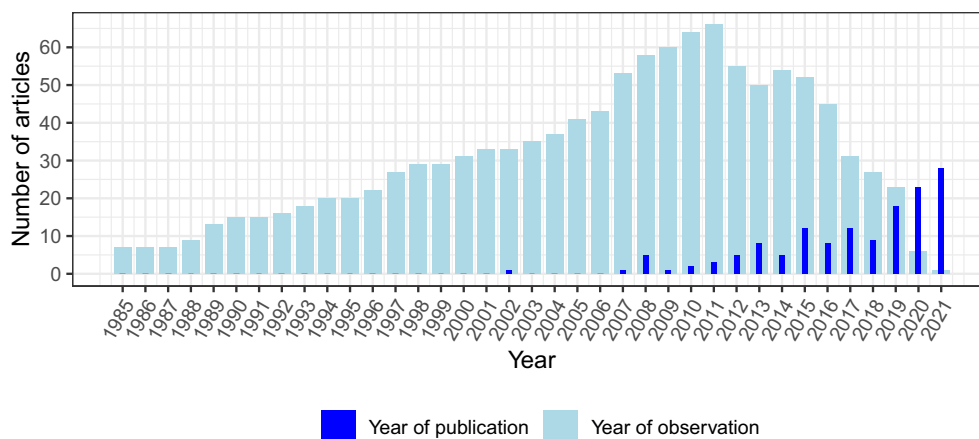


FIGURE 2 Year of publication and year of observation of articles in the corpus. The narrower dark-blue bars display the number of articles published on politicians and climate change per year. The wider light-blue bars show which years were included in the articles' analysis. As articles often study more than one year, the total number of years of observation exceeds the years of publication.

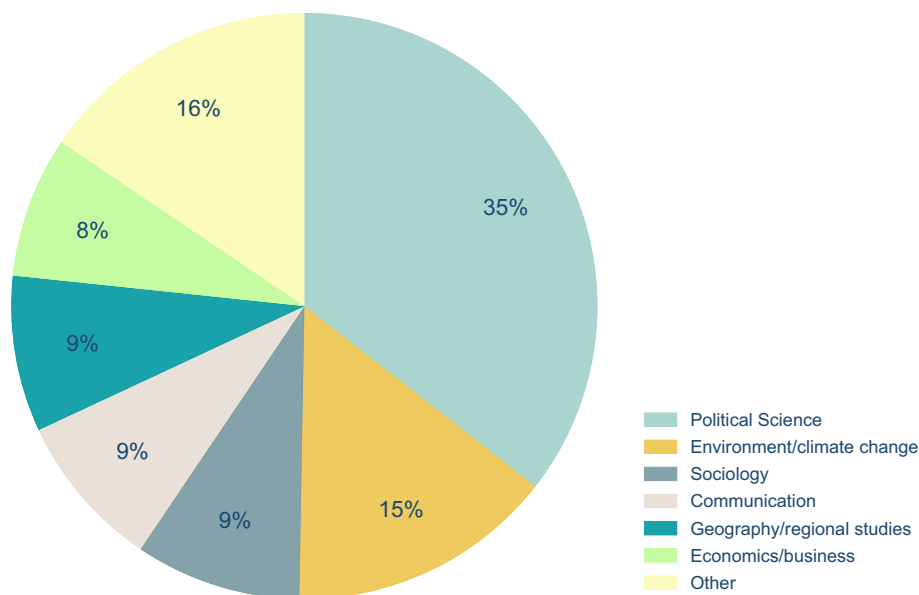


FIGURE 3 Climate change issues. The number of articles in the corpus that cover different types of climate-related issues. The upper section distinguishes between those that cover mitigation, adaptation, or climate change in general (i.e., they examined climate change without referring specifically to mitigation or adaptation). The lower section distinguishes between different policy sectors.

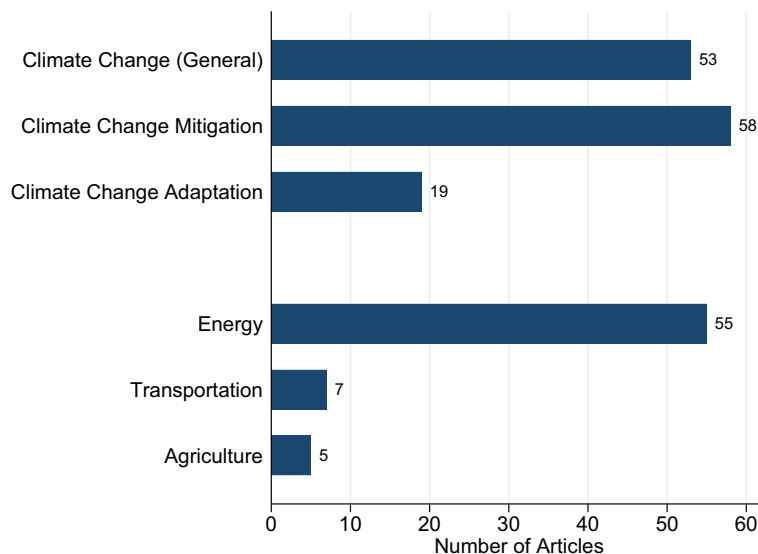


FIGURE 4 Main topic(s) of the article. This figure summarizes the main topic(s) addressed by articles in the corpus.

data reveals a strong focus on the energy sector relative to transportation and agriculture, echoing the findings of a recent review of research on net zero which found that it mainly focuses on energy rather than the more difficult-to-abate sectors (Green & Reyes, 2023).

Most of the corpus focuses on politicians operating at the national level (addressed by two-thirds of the articles) and the subnational level (addressed by one-third). Given the international nature of climate change, it is surprising that only a few articles focus on activities at the supranational (e.g., European Union) or international levels. However, some articles do examine how politicians interact with decisions taken at the international level, such as how national parliaments debated the 2015 Paris Agreement (Laar & Krabbe, 2019) or the 1992 Rio Summit (Kaarkoski, 2019). Furthermore, 67% of the articles addressing climate mitigation analyze the national level, while 79% of those that address climate adaptation focus on the subnational level. This pattern may reflect the fact that the implementation of

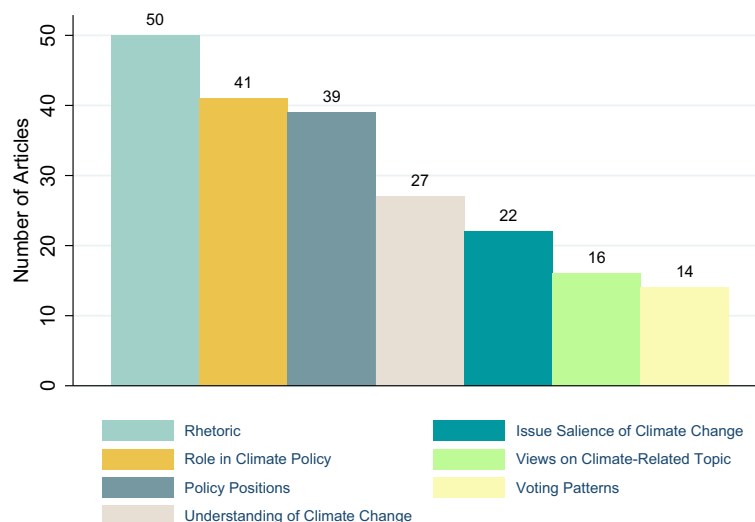


FIGURE 5 Discipline of first author. This figure provides information on the first authors' discipline, with one discipline assigned per article. In most cases, a discipline was assigned according to the departmental/institutional affiliation indicated on the cover page of the article. Where only a university and not a departmental affiliation was listed in the publication, information was obtained through a web search. On occasion (e.g., when a departmental affiliation contained multiple disciplines), ancillary information such as the discipline listed in the author's job title was used.

adaptation measures is predominantly a subnational effort, even if much of its planning takes place at a national level (Dolšak & Prakash, 2018, p. 324).

Politicians were studied as individual actors or as groups of actors. With respect to individual actors, studies commonly focus on a particular politicians' engagement with climate change over time—such as US Vice-Presidential candidate Sarah Palin's journey toward climate denialism and conspiratorial thinking (Hatzisavvidou, 2021) or Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's difficulties in matching his climate change rhetoric with policy action (Widmaier & Grube, 2015). In other cases, articles focus on the various climate views of (frequently pseudonymised/anonymized) politicians (Pasquini et al., 2013; Willis, 2018). Regarding politicians as a collective group of actors, in our corpus relevant articles may take account of the individual votes of politicians in legislatures or responses to surveys, but analyze them based on shared characteristics such as political party affiliation or sociodemographic characteristics (Einstein et al., 2020; Kono, 2020; Zapletalová & Komínková, 2020). While inter-party policy differences are apparent in studies of politicians across a range of policy areas, the focus on individual politicians in our corpus is important because it is by no means a given that politicians within a party share the same policy preferences (Carroll & Kubo, 2019; Imre, 2023). Indeed, as will be seen in the next section, individual politicians have aired views on climate change that are at odds with wider opinion within their respective parties (Leipprand et al., 2017, p. 290). This observation connects to the important point made by Schumacher and Elmelund-Præstekær (2018) that while we often treat parties as unitary actors, they are sites of important intra-party contestation that should be accounted for in order to understand why parties change their policy positions.

The most-studied types of individual politicians in our corpus are in the legislative branch, including members of parliaments (MPs), congresses, and other legislative assemblies (Kirk-Browne, 2021; Willis, 2018). The second most common types are members of the executive such as ministers, prime ministers, or presidents (Torres et al., 2020), followed by local politicians such as mayors or councillors (Orderud & Kelman, 2011). The most common topics studied (Figure 4) are politician rhetoric (Willis, 2017), politicians' roles in the policy process (Kronlund, 2021), their policy positions (Hess & Renner, 2019), and their level of understanding of climate change (Sundblad et al., 2009). As an example of the latter topic, all three studies examining climate change understanding within Africa focus on the subnational level; understanding was reported as poor in Western Cape, South Africa (Pasquini et al., 2013; Pasquini & Cowling, 2015) but relatively strong in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and Karonga, Malawi (Pasquini, 2020). Just under half of the articles study how politicians are influenced by other factors (i.e., as the dependent variable), while a third study them in terms of their influence on other actors or processes (i.e., as the independent variable).

The articles employ a range of qualitative and quantitative research methods. Qualitative content analysis and interviews dominate the qualitative approaches, and statistical analyses of political behavior and elite surveys the quantitative approaches. Only 14% combine the two types of method. In terms of research design, comparative and single-country studies are the norm.

The United States (US) is the most intensively examined country (addressed by just under a third of the articles), followed (in order) by the United Kingdom (UK), Germany, Norway, and Australia (Figure 6a). The 20 most-studied countries are in North America, Europe, and Australasia. This pattern resembles the most studied countries within political science more generally where countries within North America and Western Europe consistently dominate. Indeed, there is a correspondence between the top three most studied countries in our corpus and those covered in the top political science journals. Interestingly, neither Norway nor Australia appear in the top-15 most studied countries in the political science literature (Wilson & Knutsen, 2022), despite their prominence in our corpus. Democracies also feature notably. The Varieties of Democracy project (Coppedge et al., 2022; Pemstein et al., 2022) scores countries on a Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) between values of 0 (least democratic) and 1 (most democratic). In 2021, the average LDI score across all countries in the world was 0.39, compared to an average of 0.63 for the countries studied in our corpus, that is, they are considerably more democratic than the global average.

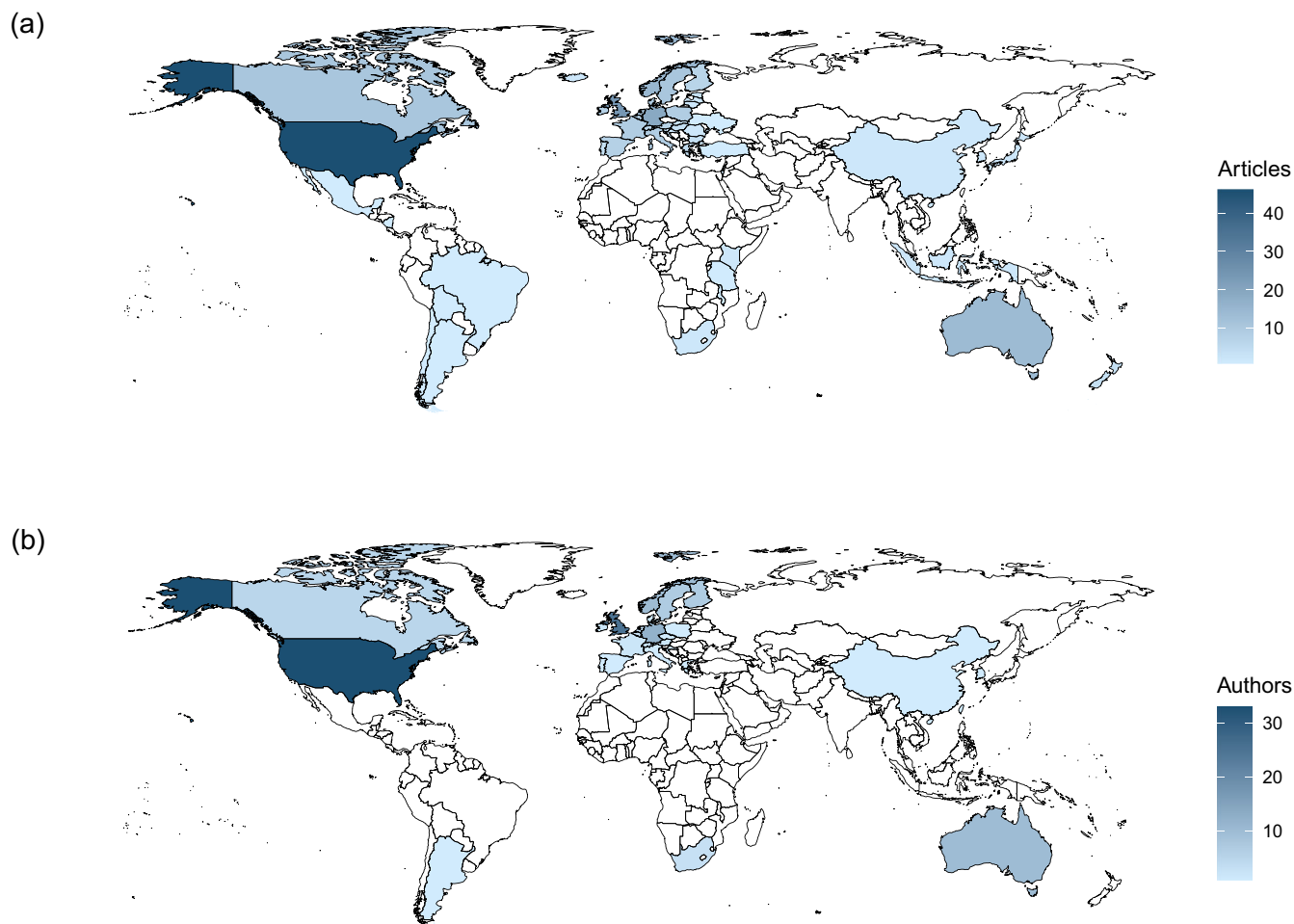


FIGURE 6 Geographic location of research on politicians and climate change. Plot 6a displays the frequency with which different countries are addressed as objects of study. Plot 6b shows the countries where the first author's academic institutions are located. Countries not addressed by articles or without any lead author are color-coded "white." Darker blue shades indicate higher frequencies of articles/first authors.

The most-studied countries mirror the political parties covered. Although no less than 225 political parties are analyzed by at least one article, those of the five most-studied countries account for 43% of all references to parties. Meanwhile, only half of the featured parties appear in more than one article. The countries where the first author is based largely correspond with the countries that are the most studied empirically (Figure 6b).

3.2 | Politicians' intrinsic motivation to act

Making or resisting changes to the policy status quo is a key function of politicians in modern societies. Research from our corpus suggests that politicians are often intrinsically motivated to support/frustrate (more) ambitious climate policymaking. For example, Swiss politicians' beliefs about anthropogenic climate change not only influenced their level of support for a clean energy transition, but their level of support in itself shaped the policy views of their voters on such matters (Kammermann & Dermont, 2018). In Germany, one local mayor was partly motivated by their climate concern to advocate for a local renewable energy transition (Busch & McCormick, 2014). Moving to the Global South, in Tanzania and Malawi, local councilors' climate concern arose from their personal experiences of severe weather events, thus raising their awareness of the need for climate adaptation governance (Pasquini, 2020).

Intrinsic climate change concern is often related to formative experiences before politicians commence their political careers. For example, George W. Bush's climate change skepticism associated with his repudiation of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol has been linked to his professional socialization in the oil and gas industry (Below, 2008; Lisowski, 2002). Similarly, female politicians' tendency to be stronger advocates of climate action than male politicians has been traced back to socially constructed gender roles which, through processes of socialization, render them more likely to consider environmental consequences for "people," whereas male politicians are more concerned with "things" (Fraune, 2016). Ideological priors which are formed during processes of socialization may also be crucial. For example, political conservatism as an ideological mindset may justify the existing system and dampen support for the type of rapid societal transformation that climate scientists argue is necessary to decarbonize society (Fielding et al., 2012).

However, articles in the corpus suggest that political ideologies may work in more subtle ways to influence the type of climate policies that politicians prefer. Republican state legislators in the US, for example, did not oppose renewable energy policies in principle, but only opposed those that increased the size of the state budget; thus, Democrats and Republicans agreed on bills that used tax reductions and credits to promote renewables (Hess et al., 2016). Relatedly, Båtstrand (2015, p. 542) proposed that climate politics be viewed on a continuum spanning "government bans or the nationalization of businesses on the far left, through government regulation and taxation, to market-based solutions (like emissions trading schemes) on the right, with resistance against interference with free markets at the far right." However, sometimes politicians' personal pro-climate beliefs trump their party ideology. This is exemplified by Arnold Schwarzenegger, who, as Republican Governor of California, supported ambitious climate policy; this support continued even after his tenure ended, thus emphasizing the relevance of intrinsic convictions as an important motive for action (Biedenkopf, 2021).

3.3 | Extrinsic motivations to act and the role of incentives and barriers

Intrinsic motivations are not the only motivations that politicians have. Politicians may be alternatively driven by the desire to secure their political survival (Jordan et al., 2022; Mayhew, 1974). Consequently, in democracies, election cycles are widely assumed to introduce short-termism into the professional lives of politicians, standing in sharp contrast to the long-term nature of climate change (Giddens, 2009). Listening to public demands and representing the interests of their constituents is an important function of politicians in modern societies (Pitkin, 1967). Public support—or the lack thereof—has thus been identified as a key extrinsic motivating factor for policymakers when deciding whether to support or oppose climate policies (Drews, 2021).

In our corpus, which is strongly tilted toward democratic systems, taking into account the needs of publics and/or voters is the most common extrinsic motivation. Its influence appears in various ways. One of these is reacting to prominent social movements such as pro-climate communication on social media by Canadian party leaders and UK MPs increasing in the aftermath of the 2019 climate youth strikes (Boulianne et al., 2021; Ebrey et al., 2020), and the UK fuel protests in 2000 leading Chancellor Gordon Brown to rule out new eco-taxes (Carter, 2014). Apathy from constituents can also reduce politicians' motivation to act on climate change. Even during the period of high climate salience in

2019, many Canadian MP offices reported surprise at receiving less climate communication from their constituents than they expected (Wynes et al., 2021).

Representing areas that are more vulnerable to severe weather events may increase engagement. Instances of this include Democratic legislators in US states representing districts experiencing higher than usual temperatures being more likely to sponsor climate bills (Bromley-Trujillo et al., 2019), and a Chilean MP representing a drought-affected region defecting from their alliance to sponsor water reform adaptation measures to protect the interests of her pro-farming constituency (Struthers, 2020). Conversely research in the US (Kono, 2020; Skodvin, 2010), Norway (Finseraas et al., 2021) and Australia (Farstad, 2019) indicate that politicians representing fossil fuel producing or dependent regions—where publics tend to be less supportive of ambitious climate action—are more likely to oppose various climate measures due to the perceived economic interests of their constituents. Indeed, in Poland, the desire amongst MPs across the political spectrum to protect the national coal industry during the 2011–2015 parliamentary term led the vast majority to overwhelmingly oppose EU plans to reduce carbon emissions (Marcinkiewicz & Tosun, 2015).

Politicians can also be intrinsically concerned about climate change, but still vote against legislation if they fear backlash from or negative impacts on their constituents (Lundqvist & von Borgstede, 2008; Willis, 2018). As Democratic Senator Lincoln (in Besel, 2012, p. 246) articulated:

“although I am extremely concerned about global warming I voted against Mr. McCain and Lieberman's Climate Stewardship Act. My chief concern was that this bill would raise gas and electric prices at a time when Arkansas's economy is struggling to recover and many residents from my state are finding it difficult to make ends meet.”

Such rationales help explain why politicians may support some climate policies but oppose others. For example, state legislators in more politically conservative US states were unwilling to consider carbon taxes, but supported energy efficiency standards for government buildings (Hess et al., 2016).

Moreover, in line with politicians having a finite amount of attention to devote to individual policy issues (Green-Pedersen, 2019), other salient issues can easily divert them from supporting climate action. Rietig and Dupont (2021) note that Jean-Claude Juncker faced difficulties in sustaining his commitment to climate change when President of the European Commission (2014–2019) as his attention was absorbed by other turbulent situations such as the 2015 European refugee crisis and implications of the Brexit referendum. In the aftermath of the 2008/2009 Financial Crisis, a legislative speech analysis found that US Democrats were notably absent in their advocacy of various climate measures in Congress in line with falling public concern in the polls (Guber et al., 2021). Sometimes however, economic challenges can motivate climate measures. The Irish Taoiseach Brian Cowen was initially unwilling to permit his Green Party coalition partners to introduce a carbon tax due to fears of a public backlash. However, upon Ireland entering into severe financial difficulties following the 2008/2009 Financial Crisis its revenue raising potential led to a change of heart (Ladrech & Little, 2019).

Politicians' support for climate action may also interact with other contextual conditions, such as whether their party is in a majority government. In the US, Democratic Party state legislators are more likely to support climate policies in states with Republican majorities compared to those in which they themselves hold the majority (Hopper & Swift, 2022). And while Renewable Portfolio Standards are more likely to be adopted in states with more Democratic representatives, such standards have had lower policy stringency than those elsewhere (Jenner et al., 2013). These findings point to a potential conflict that politicians may wrestle with; that is between the benefits of being seen to do “something,” versus actually fully committing to ambitious, long-term actions.

Similarly, the corpus also indicates that politicians' (in)action can be influenced by the political culture and the politics happening within their parties. Even politicians who are intrinsically motivated to make a case for stronger climate action may struggle to do so when it conflicts with the views of their (parliamentary) party. This was the case when Irish Minister Noel Dempsey attempted to introduce a carbon tax on moral grounds (Little, 2017) or when John McCain attempted as US Republican Presidential candidate to reverse the ingrained Republican climate skepticism from the Bush era (Brewer, 2012). However, individual politicians can also succeed in changing their party's position. For example, while in opposition, UK Conservative party leader David Cameron played a key role in changing his party's climate commitments to present a more progressive, modern face to the electorate. However, even as Prime Minister he was unable (or unwilling) to sustain this shift in the face of organized opposition from the right wing of the Conservative party during a period of austerity (Carter, 2014). Indeed, one UK MP recalled that—during this period—one risked being “laughed out of the [cabinet] room” if one even raised the topic of climate action (Willis, 2020, 895).

Furthermore, interest groups can act as either barriers to or facilitators of stronger climate action. Literature on US politicians is dominated by the strong influence that fossil fuel companies have in persuading representatives—principally those of the Republican Party—not to act (Guber et al., 2021; Hatzisavvidou, 2021; Lisowski, 2002). Similar dynamics have been reported in Australia (Farstad, 2019; Lucas, 2021) and Poland (Biedenkopf, 2021). However, fossil fuel companies are not the only economic sector lobbying against action: in Ireland, agricultural groups have been the most influential sector attempting to slow climate legislation (Carter & Little, 2021; Little, 2017). In other cases, industrial support for stronger climate policies has facilitated action, such as in the UK when the business community pushed for more ambitious climate legislation following the 2006 Stern Report (Carter & Little, 2021). The presence of strong environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can be particularly effective at convincing politicians to take action as seen in the UK and Norway. By contrast, weak or underfunded environmental NGOs—as in Ireland and Australia—have struggled to make a strong impact (Carter, 2014; Farstad, 2019; Little, 2017). Other noteworthy barriers evident in the corpus include the level of climate awareness and literacy amongst local communities and politicians (Amundsen et al., 2010; Sundblad et al., 2009), and insufficient financial resources (for example in the case of local politicians' attempts to advance adaptation in Sweden and South Africa (Hjerpe et al., 2015; Pasquini et al., 2013). Sub-national politicians may also not have the capacity or autonomy to act (Hopper & Swift, 2022, p. 972).

3.4 | Politicians' strategies to navigate barriers and respond to incentives

How, where and when politicians exert their agency depends on the political strategies they pursue. Not surprisingly, strategies are a prominent focus of the articles in the corpus. For example, politicians have reframed the issue by arguing that climate action supports/undermines economic prosperity or addresses/worsens inequality depending on whether they wish to progress or stall action (Busch & McCormick, 2014; Zapletalová & Komínková, 2020). In Norway for instance, the 2015 collapse in oil prices provided a window of opportunity for MPs to frame a green transition as a viable solution to the country's economic problems (Finseraas et al., 2021). If such (re)framing is successful, it may have important impacts on wider public opinion given that publics have been found to be more likely to prioritize climate policies when primed with their own positive economic evaluations (Kenny, 2018) and when they perceive that the costs will be fairly distributed (Maestre-Andrés et al., 2019).

Politicians can also be strategic in the way they take particular policy positions or create alliances with actors such as interest groups, fossil fuel industries or other elites. In Finland, politicians of the Green League and Left Alliance parties formed an electoral collaboration with climate change social movements before the 2019 election which proved mutually beneficial for both sides (Savolainen & Ylä-Anttila, 2021). Politicians have also sought to delay and/or weaken climate action by attempting to decrease public attention. Members of the US Republican Party and populist-right politicians elsewhere have often denied the scientific case to act and/or described it as an elite conspiracy (Forchtner, 2019; Huber et al., 2021; Lockwood, 2018). By contrast, pro-climate politicians have sought to increase the overall level of political attention to climate change by employing strategies that emphasize the value of international policy cooperation (Kincaid & Timmons Roberts, 2013). At times, they have advocated for climate policies without explicitly labelling them as such—instead framing them through an economic or social lens—to maximize their political appeal and thus ensure greater policy success (Willis, 2018).

4 | CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Through a systematic review, our article provides fresh insights into politicians' motivations, incentives, barriers and strategies in relation to climate change. It has confirmed that there is indeed a considerable literature on politicians and climate change, largely published after 2010. This literature is detailed and nuanced: for example, politicians have been studied not as a single, monolithic group, but as a mixture of different sub-types (members of executives vs. members of parliaments, national vs local politicians etc.). The articles employ both qualitative and quantitative methods and are strongly focused on activities at the national level. In general, they are relatively problem-focused, in the sense that the most heavily studied countries together account for a significant share of global emissions. Nevertheless, the largest current emitter (China) barely features in the corpus. A third of first authors are political scientists but the majority are from other social science disciplines (Figure 5), and the articles tend to be published in interdisciplinary journals. However, the more political science-oriented articles are rarely published in high ranking political science

journals, echoing earlier observations about the discipline (Bernauer, 2013). A similar point has been made about climate change research in sociology journals (Koehrsen et al., 2020).

Our review also confirms that politicians' *motivations* are both intrinsic and extrinsic. Characteristics of individual politicians may matter, such as their party ideology, belief structures and socialization experiences, with politicians sometimes being true to their own core values even when it comes at a political cost to themselves (see Stiers et al., 2021 for a further discussion of this phenomenon). At other times, they respond to external factors including constituents' needs, economic shocks or institutional constraints. Crucially, these individual and external factors have been shown to interact with each other. However, politicians can and do employ various strategies to overcome the barriers they face, including attempts to reframe the debate and/or change the salience of the issue.

Given these patterns that we have uncovered in the existing literature, we recommend that future research should address the following points:

1. The low number of studies. In light of the scale of the problem, and the recognition that urgent political action is required to effectively address it (Bernauer, 2013; Jordan et al., 2022), it is remarkable—notwithstanding recent relative proliferation—how small the body of literature is across various disciplines. An increase in the quantity of research would open up various avenues to both broaden and deepen current understandings. Indeed, the sheer diversity of topics addressed in this corpus point to various research areas that have the potential to flourish into sub-literatures of their own. In that respect, it is important that future studies focus on both politicians at the national and subnational levels and how these levels relate to each other - given that both will play a vital role in the coming decades. Other pertinent levels (international and the supranational activities of the EU) have attracted less attention; future studies should further examine how politicians navigate between different levels of governance in relation to both mitigation and adaptation.
2. The geographical imbalance. A relatively small subset of high-income democratic countries, most of them in the Global North, have captured a disproportionate amount of research effort. There is undoubtedly a notable pro-democracy bias in the corpus. Even within more democratic countries, the US, the UK, and Germany are overrepresented, whereas others receive hardly any attention. These imbalances raise questions about how much findings can be generalized to other contexts. There is certainly an immediate need for a better understanding of the role of politicians in the Global South as well as countries characterized as either partial democracies and/or autocracies. For example, China is the world's largest carbon emitter yet was the focus of only two articles in our corpus; India recently surpassed the EU as the world's third largest emitter and yet did not feature at all (France 24, 2023; Liu et al., 2023). And many low-emitting countries in the Global South that are at the frontline of adaptation efforts or play key roles at the international level by supporting urgent mitigation, have also been much less studied in our corpus of English-language articles. Such contexts should be foci of future research efforts.
3. The tendency to concentrate on some types of climate action rather than others. The articles tend to address mitigation rather than adaptation (a point which has been made before; Javeline, 2014), particularly when focused at the national level. Given the urgency with which adaptation measures need to be implemented in a rapidly warming world (Pisor et al., 2023), it is imperative that this research deficit is addressed. Studies of local-level politicians predominantly focus on climate change adaptation, yet their role in local-level mitigation efforts should not be neglected either given the polycentric nature of much climate governance (see Jordan et al., 2018). We also show that the energy sector receives notably more attention than the more difficult-to-abate sectors such as transport and agriculture. Moreover, the focus on national and subnational levels has also resulted in the literature having less to say about how politicians navigate adaptation/mitigation trade-offs across multi-level systems. For instance, a common finding in the existing literature is that local politicians often feel they have insufficient autonomy or resources to act on climate change, but national politicians' perspectives on this are rarely considered. Thus, a stronger focus on the many *types* of climate action politicians decide to engage with (or avoid) would be extremely useful.
4. The relative inattention to political system characteristics. While some characteristics receive limited attention in the corpus, others do not feature strongly, such as the distinction between federalist and unitary, plebiscitary and representative, proportional and majoritarian; or parliamentary and presidential political systems. Understanding the relevance of these for climate action is potentially crucial, not only because they affect politicians' motivations and strategies (Keohane, 2015; Müller & Strom, 1999), but also because the characteristics can in theory be redesigned to improve the chances of desirable societal outcomes, such as ethnic minority and gender representation (Geese & Schacht, 2019) or, of course, rapid, deep and sustained decarbonization. Thus, there is great potential in

building on the comparative politics literature with more specific country-comparative research designs when studying the role of politicians in climate change.

Many of our recommendations amount to another call for political scientists to intensify their engagement with the politics of climate change, in response to the UN's call to “accelerate” climate action (Hermansen et al., 2023). Politics is central to climate change's causes, consequences and policy solutions (Falzon et al., 2021; Green & Reyes, 2023). Political scientists have significant expertise that—when allied with complementary skills in other social sciences such as sociology and economics—could further advance our collective understanding of climate action.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Brendan Moore: Conceptualization (lead); investigation (lead); methodology (lead); project administration (lead); writing – original draft (lead); writing – review and editing (supporting). **Lucas Geese:** Conceptualization (supporting); investigation (supporting); methodology (supporting); visualization (equal); writing – original draft (supporting); writing – review and editing (supporting). **John Kenny:** Conceptualization (supporting); investigation (supporting); visualization (equal); writing – original draft (supporting); writing – review and editing (lead). **Harriet Dudley:** Conceptualization (supporting); investigation (supporting); methodology (supporting); writing – original draft (supporting); writing – review and editing (supporting). **Andrew Jordan:** Conceptualization (supporting); funding acquisition (equal); investigation (supporting); writing – original draft (supporting); writing – review and editing (supporting). **Alba Prados Pascual:** Conceptualization (supporting); investigation (supporting); writing – original draft (supporting); writing – review and editing (supporting). **Irene Lorenzoni:** Funding acquisition (equal); investigation (supporting); writing – original draft (supporting); writing – review and editing (supporting). **Simon Schaub:** Investigation (supporting); writing – original draft (supporting); writing – review and editing (supporting). **Joan Enguer:** Investigation (supporting); writing – original draft (supporting); writing – review and editing (supporting). **Jale Tosun:** Funding acquisition (equal); writing – original draft (supporting); writing – review and editing (supporting).

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ORCID

Brendan Moore  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2319-5202>

Lucas Geese  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5085-5029>

John Kenny  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9401-3555>

Harriet Dudley  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7726-9388>

Andrew Jordan  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7678-1024>

Alba Prados Pascual  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7164-0679>

Irene Lorenzoni  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8226-5755>

Simon Schaub  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5377-8826>

Joan Enguer  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7445-0408>

Jale Tosun  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9367-5039>

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