3

Conceptualising Climate Change Mitigation Politics

3.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 argued that a wide spectrum of views on mitigation politics persists, and that those that seek to depoliticise it, by reducing political choice, agency, and/or deliberation, have long had policy influence at global and many national, and subnational, governance scales. Here I offer a broad and inclusive conceptualisation of the politics of mitigation, which accepts and works with differences in approaches, and also incorporates societal and material factors, and better accounts for varied temporalities of climate mitigation and non-emissions policy outcomes. This conceptualisation frames how I approach the analysis of mitigation politics over time to reveal nuance and detail about political processes of negotiation, compromise, and agreement amongst competing groups; complex mitigation choices and relationships to other policy areas; and types of outcomes and how to account for them in subsequent rounds of policy design.

By the end of the book, I want to be able to think more politically about climate mitigation policymaking, and answer questions about how politicised it has become, and in what ways, but to do so I need to better define what politicised mitigation might look like. Here, I engage the work of Colin Hay, in particular his 2007 book on depoliticisation. He argues that, in the absence of a clear definition of politics, the applications of notions such as politicisation and depoliticisation are likely to obscure as much as they illuminate (2007: 71). Hay conceptualises politics as the realm of contingency and as consisting of four closely interrelated features: collective choice, capacity for agency, deliberation, and social interaction. Taken together these four features can deliver a more inclusive understanding of politics, as a part corrective to depoliticising perspectives reviewed in Chapter 2. His thinking is drawn from a rich and reasonably varied history of thinking about the nature of politics (ibid.: 65–70). Although this definition recognises that politics can take place in different realms, from the private to the governmental, it starts from the observation that politics responds

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to the need in complex and differentiated societies for collective and ultimately binding policy decision-making.

From this flows Hay's fundamental account of politicisation – an issue becomes politicised if and when it is recognised that there is a possibility for choices to be made and when it becomes the subject of collective deliberation, decision-making, and human agency (2007: 81). The issue becomes further politicised when it is taken up within formal legislative processes. Defining politicisation in this way links back to observations, in Chapters 1 and 2, that reducing emissions requires government actions. It also supports Matthew Paterson's conceptualisation of climate politics partly as 'arena', that is sites of collective and authoritative decision-making designed to deliver public goods, such as reduced emissions (2021). This understanding of politicisation provides a strong corrective to perspectives that view climate change as a physical phenomenon requiring technical solutions that can be implemented without social contestations, conflict, or engagement. Indeed, from Hay's understanding of politics, collective choice exists *because* there are differences in viewpoints about how to proceed, whilst capacity for agency includes the ability to resolve some differences.

The conceptualisation of climate politics that I set out below is structured according to Hay's four features but builds considerably from this starting position. Hay uses his conceptualisation of politics as a basis for exploring processes of depoliticisation but has little to say about processes of politicisation – beyond as an issue becoming subject to choice and entering the realm of government. To reflect my interest in thinking more politically about mitigation over time, I deepen and extend Hay's account of politicisation by suggesting a broader array of types. This moves beyond Hay's understanding of politicisation as making an issue subject to formal legislative processes to consider what politicisation looks like once it is there. The types of politicisation I suggest build from Hay's four features of politics and are summarised in Table 3.1.

Further, Hay's articulation of politics is neither specific to climate change mitigation nor particularly sensitive to the passage of time. Below I weave in a wide range of more climate mitigation-specific insights from public policy, the political economy of sustainable transformations, and sociotechnical transitions (STT) research. This includes insights from the 'politicising' perspectives reviewed in Chapter 2, but with some emphasis on the 'institutionalise climate mitigation' perspective given its interest in interconnections between policy and politics through time.

I also draw on STT scholarship and research on the politics of transformations, both to expand relevant institutions beyond the social to include *material* aspects, such as technologies and infrastructures, and to develop the conceptualisation of phases in the constructions of mitigation politics. Technological and infrastructural

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Table 3.1 *Features of climate mitigation politics and types of politicisation*

Feature	Summary	Types of possible politicisation
Collective choice	Politics as collective public choice and human agency. An issue gains in salience and is taken up and incorporated into formal legislative processes. Making and maintaining an issue as subject to collective, governmental agency can include conflict and compromise.	Politicise by: • Raising salience of climate change as an issue to get it onto or raise it up political agendas. • Reaching agreement between interests and ideas on how to proceed in policy terms, including setting formal targets. • Maintaining climate mitigation as an area of public policy.
Capacity for agency	Politics as formal (and informal) agency. For governing bodies, this includes having the capacity to: make and implement policy; hold actors to account; set and meet policy goals. This is, in turn, based on the capacity to understand the issue at stake and how it can be resolved via policy.	Politicise by: • Establishing governing bodies and capacities for climate mitigation policymaking. • Ensuring that policymakers have required (personnel, financial, and knowledge) capacities to make and implement mitigation policy. • Ability to meet mitigation policy goals. • Capacity to adjudicate between competing interests.
Deliberation	Politics as knowledge, ideational, and discursive processes through which policymakers, stakeholders, and publics make sense of climate change – and how to mitigate it via public policy over time.	Politicise by: • Dedicate governmental and public spaces to deliberation of climate mitigation and its relation to other policy areas. • Develop capacities to consider a range of public policy approaches. • Collating information and using it to revisit policies and options as material, economic, and social institutions change. • Understand socio-economic outcomes of mitigation policy, and contestations, as basis for improved policy design.
Social interaction	Politics as social interaction recognises social aspects of public policy. These include outcomes of policy; whether social goals are met or not; engaging 'publics' in processes of sustainable change; and social inclusion within policymaking debates.	Politicise by: • Deliver on the social goal of climate mitigation, whilst balancing with other public policy goals. • Engender social inclusion through more participatory forms of democracy. • Improve policy understandings of social aspects of high-emissions services, products, and goods to better understand contestation. • Improve education and communication on climate change, policy and technical solutions, and outcomes of different policies.

change is often a desired outcome of mitigation policies, whilst embedded materialities shape policy options and choices. At the same time, technical system changes also often infer a need for further rounds of policy change and engender their own sets of political and social responses. As set out in Chapter 1, Figure 1.1, each phase in the construction of mitigation policy and politics has involved varied types of political work – from raising salience and getting mitigation on agendas, to considering policy (non-)outcomes and their social and political implications. Lastly, I engage climate and energy policy literatures to set out and explore complex and dynamic interrelationships between climate mitigation and longer-standing policy areas, the kinds of opportunities and tensions that arise in practice, and how these also shape choices and mitigation politics over time.

3.2 Collective Choice: Conflict, Compromise, and Contexts

One of the most fundamental features of politics is that it occurs in situations of choice (Hay 2007: 65; cf. Gamble 2000; Weale 2004). This involves recognition both that things can be different and that there is a choice in how to make change happen. An issue, like climate change, might be viewed as problematic, but if it is perceived that nothing can be done about it, then it is not treated as political in this sense. For example, to view a subject as a-political would be to suggest, as inferred in some of the depoliticising perspectives in Chapter 2, that there are no alternative choices regarding how to address it. From this position, an issue becomes politicised when it moves from the realm of 'fate', where nothing can be done, to consideration in private and public spheres, but is fully politicised when it becomes subject to collective choice, and deliberation, within the sphere of government (Hay 2007: 80; see also Gamble 2000). Or, in other words, placed on the public policy agenda – "the arrival of an issue on the agenda of policymakers is arguably the most important step in the policy cycle because, without it, no new policy can be enacted" (Andrews-Speed & Zhang 2019: 48).

This evokes historical institutionalist arguments about the political importance of policy goals, or objectives (Hall 1993). If an issue is not on the policy agenda, then it is problematic to mobilise public resources and policymaking in resolving it. Public policy goals, and targets, are also important in politicisation terms because governments, at least in theory, are the bodies tasked with making decisions that deliver public rather than private goods and services. It follows that processes of collective choice are undertaken on behalf of others (Weale 2004), with social goals in mind, whilst they have (often varied) outcomes for groups beyond those making the decisions. For some, making an issue subject to public choice and devising policy objectives to aim for is partly about avoiding passivity (Hay 2007; Beveridge & Naumann 2014). This move from political

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passivity to collective choice by getting an issue onto public policy agendas can be considered as a first 'phase' in constructing it as a political issue.

Importantly, by opening an issue up to collective choice and deliberation, it can also become more exposed to differences in opinion – especially if new policy goals infer changes to the status quo. As a result, processes of getting issues onto policy agendas can be difficult and lengthy – as was the case with climate change. In the mid part of last century, climate change and rising GHG emissions were a-political in this fundamental sense of being recognised as an issue. Quite the opposite, high-emissions energy use was seen as a distinct positive in economic and social development terms. As explored in detail in Chapter 4, during the 1970s and 1980s environmental science and social movements developed and expanded – articulating arguments about climate change and its anthropogenic nature – framing it as a significant global and social problem. As a new area for public policy, advocates for climate mitigation needed to frame climate change in ways that were both credible and that could gain wider salience (Bernstein 2001; Carter & Jacobs 2014; Lockwood 2021). Climate arguments were, however, vociferously countered by powerful incumbent groups that wanted to prevent GHG emissions limits from becoming public policy goals.

Agreement amongst competing sets of ideas and interests needs, then, to be established before new public policy areas can be agreed upon. According to Gamble, politics as centralised decision-making will always be 'noisy' and 'rough' (2000: 101). This is especially true for climate mitigation as a new policy area seeking to drive high degrees of change to existing institutions, practices, and behaviours – which is why some conceptualise sustainable change as political struggle (Meadowcroft 2005; Burke & Stephens 2018; Stokes 2020; Patterson & Paterson 2024). However, Hay's conceptualisation also allows us to see politics as an arena within which competing ideas and interests can be deliberated, conflict resolved through various 'stakeholders' giving ground, and decisions about goals and policies made (see also Paterson 2021). As such, it is misleading to mistake conflict and contestation as constituting the whole of politics (Gamble 2000: 101). Indeed, post-politics scholars have argued that to not recognise conflict as a part of political processes is a form of depoliticisation (Swyngedouw 2010). Others point out that conflict and contestation are integral to processes of reducing emissions and to politicising existing high-emissions practices and inadequate policies as a basis for further policy change (Kuzemko 2013; Bickerstaff et al. 2024). Hay's understanding of political processes, then, sees them as involving conflict but also as venues within which competing ideas and interests can be debated and reconciled – at least for long enough for policies to be agreed and progressed.

Often processes of compromise, which have both power and ideational components, are central to reaching sufficient agreement that policy can be agreed

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(Bernstein 2001 and 2011; Bellamy et al. 2011). As such, compromise is also omnipresent in political processes (Bellamy et al. 2011: 277). Hard-fought compromises between pro- and anti-mitigation coalitions were core to progressing climate mitigation within United Nations (UN) negotiations. These compromises took some account of the breadth of ideas and interests articulated in negotiation debates (Bernstein 2011). The central compromise struck as part of the 1997 UN Kyoto agreement was to limit GHG emissions. The agreement both recognised them as a problem and politicised emissions by making them subject to formal, political agreement and targets. This was a considerable achievement – given the degree and range of objections to accepting it as a policy area. Of course, the early mitigation choice was between reaching a compromise and no mitigation policy (Bellamy et al. 2011). However, as different parties to an agreement must give ground there will often be lingering doubts about the efficacy of compromise positions which can, and did, mount over time.

As set out in Chapter 1, Figure 1.1, once emissions reduction targets had been agreed the highly inter-related phase of making collective choices about mitigation policy emerged. It may have taken many decades to initially raise the salience of climate as an issue and agree to limit emissions, but this opened up new and complex political processes aimed at delivering climate mitigation in practice. Policy choices are vital given that public policy goals tend to be superficial without effective policies in place to meet them – as exemplified in recent research on the 'implementation gap' (Fransen et al. 2023). Here we return to new institutionalist insights about how political institutions shape policy choices. By the time of the 1997 Kyoto agreement, early arguments about the need to limit growth and for carbon pricing through taxation and regulation, which had dominated environmental debates in the 1970s, had given way to preferences for more growth-oriented, market-friendly approaches (Bernstein 2001; Newell & Paterson 2010; Vogler 2016). Policy choices, at the UN level, favoured solutions based on increasingly influential ideas about economic growth, free and competitive markets, and private sector involvement (Bernstein 2001; Vogler 2016: 14). This partly also reflected the pragmatic view that incentivising powerful corporations to adopt business decisions supportive of mitigation was preferable to taxation and regulation (Newell & Paterson 2010). This narrow range of policy options, essentially emissions trading and offsetting schemes, drew some early boundaries around policy choices and can be considered depoliticising in this sense (Kuzemko 2015; Felli 2015).

As explored in more detail in Chapter 5, a far wider range of policy choices emerged over time as governments sought to reduce emissions via policy. Choices often started with questions of types of further targets – that is, at which level and in which sectors. But there were also extensive further choices to be

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made: between political approaches to mitigation and types of policy instruments; around meeting mitigation goals and those of other policy areas; and even which department(s) of government should make mitigation choices. Domestic political contexts shaped the nature of choices made and of ensuing low-emissions transitions – including who pays their costs and who benefits (Bulkeley & Newell 2015; Kuzemko et al. 2016a; Lockwood et al. 2017; Harrison 2020; Lamb & Minx 2020; Dubash 2021). Indeed, although mitigation policy instruments have emissions reduction in mind, choices infer very different distributional outcomes. Choices regarding the means of meeting goals are, then, highly political in distributional terms (Felli 2015).

Mitigation policy choices are also shaped by global, domestic, and local materialities.[1] We can draw on analyses of mitigation policymaking in the energy sector, which have integrated insights from STTs and/or political geography, to better understand links between technological systems and the politics of attempting to change them (Kern 2011; Bridge et al. 2018; Rosenbloom et al. 2019; Newell 2021; Kivimaa & Sivonen 2023). These can be seen as attempts to reveal a 'material politics' of mitigation policy choices (Stripple & Bulkeley 2019; cf. Kuzemko et al. 2024). These approaches situate mitigation policymaking within the wider context of sociotechnical relations, highlighting the degree to which the embedded infrastructures that facilitate everyday needs, such as heating, light, battery recharging, cooking, transport, and communications, are intertwined with societal choices, behaviours, norms, and power relations. This is partly because many of those that have long delivered the energy that facilitates such needs have been reluctant to change and are powerful, whilst societally embedded high-emissions norms mean that change is difficult for all concerned (see Unruh 2000; Paterson 2007). Mitigation policy, of course, is about driving change to these high-emissions systems – inferring that high degrees of technological change can reduce emissions – whilst initial choices are also subject to material contexts (Kuzemko et al. 2016a). For example, whether a country is a fossil fuel producer or not or whether it has access to solar or wind resources can have significant implications for the kinds of policy choices it makes.

As discussed in Chapter 1, time matters deeply to the material politics of mitigation. This insight forms the basis of Rosenbloom et al.'s conceptualisation of the iterative interrelationships between politics, policy, and technological change over time (2019). For example, renewable energy policies can help to facilitate

[1] Following Balmaceda et al. (2019) and Kuzemko et al. (2024) I use the term material – denoting something physical, measurable, or visible – rather than 'socio-technical', given that there are physical aspects, not least natural resources, infrastructures, emissions and capital, that can also shape processes of making mitigation choices.

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significant changes in electricity systems that, in turn, require further policies to support new infrastructural changes – to include new transmission and distribution infrastructures and new grid balancing methods, models, and rules. This can, in turn, infer iterative relationships and a need for continual deliberation about what policy changes might be needed as sociotechnical systems change. For example, policies designed to support the creation of renewable energy systems may need to give way with time to policy strategies to better support their integration and maintenance (Breetz et al. 2018). This suggests a need for flexible, rather than stable mitigation policies.

Making collective choices, importantly, also takes place within the context of limited resources – such that choices can often come down to questions of how to allocate those resources (Lasswell 1958 in Hay 2007: 66; David Easton 1960s in Gamble 2000). Climate mitigation policy, then, must compete for public, and private, attention and funding with other policy areas. This raises questions of the relationship between climate mitigation, as a new policy area, and other more established and widely understood areas, like security, transport, and financial or economic policy. It will matter how important mitigation is seen in a comparative sense – often reflected in hierarchies within horizontal government relationships and between departments of government. Research points to occasions, in a range of jurisdictions, when environmental policymaking has received less resource at the national and local government level than other, more established, policy areas (Willis 2020; Newell 2021). Comparative salience, and limited resources, are especially pertinent to mitigation policy choices under political conditions of austerity and associated ideological commitments to limiting public spending. Historically, meeting longer-standing policy goals, like economic growth, ensuring energy and food security, or sufficient road infrastructure, will have been closely tied into high emissions practices. This has created perceptions of 'trade-offs' between climate mitigation and other goals. The most researched sets of trade-offs, thus far, have been in energy – between ensuring energy security, affordability and development, and reducing emissions (Bridge et al. 2018; Heubaum 2021; Newell 2021). When emissions reduction policy is perceived, or indeed framed for political purposes, as running counter to more established policy goals, the struggle to maintain, or implement new, mitigation policies intensifies. In relative policy battles between mitigation and, for example, energy security, the latter has often been prioritised historically.

Collective climate mitigation choices, as shaped by this wide range of existing institutions, have resulted in a considerable amount of change but, at the same time, not enough. Today's politics of mitigation is partly underpinned by scientific

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arguments that a significant amount of further collective policy choices still need to be made (IPCC 2023). The conditions are, however, difficult. Although public support for climate mitigation has grown over time, significant contestation remains – and not just regarding policy choices. Growing populism in some parts of the world has meant that scientific ideas about anthropogenic climate change are still contested and that narratives supporting the depoliticisation of climate mitigation through removing, or severely downgrading, it as a public policy still have widespread exposure. Compromises, although often necessary for decisions to be reached, can also lead to further conflict when the issue at stake, mitigating for climate change, is not sufficiently resolved – leading to attempts to politicise those aspects of policy most perceived as failing. Which aspects of collective climate compromises are, and are not, contested and with what levels of credibility and success, form an important part of today's mitigation politics, as explored in detail in Chapter 7.

3.3 Capacity for Agency: Authority, Responsibility, and Influence

The second feature of politics, the capacity for agency, is a logical extension of politics as collective choice. Associating politics with situations in which actors possess the capacity for agency acts as a counterpoint to the notion of politics as fate and passivity, where issues are considered unamenable to change (Hay 2007: 67). In this way, politics is a realm of contingency where groups of actors can, and do, actively make strategic choices about what can be done to address climate change. Importantly, capacity for agency in relation to climate change also includes the ability to influence and shape the political and social structures within which policymaking takes place and to engender change in high-emissions systems. The capacity for political agency, in turn, raises the chances that collective mitigation choices will have consequences.

Having formal authority to make collective choices and implement public policy makes states, and their governments, pivotal actors (Gamble 2000; Eckersley 2004; Hay 2007). This brings us back to research, reviewed in Chapter 2, which makes attempts to deliberatively repoliticise the state as an actor with varied roles in mitigation. The state remains, despite decades of relative 'retreat' in many jurisdictions, the most important form of political organisation – not least as the site of 'social and political power' (Eckersley 2004). In turn, international climate treaties and organisations have both been created by states and are dependent on them for their continued existence (Duit et al. 2016 in Garner 2019: 95). In these ways the state has convening powers, to catalyse collective

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action in pursuit of social goals, that others do not (Roberts et al. 2018). On the domestic level, state legislatures have the constitutional and/or legal authority to decide on policy and regulations, the allocation of limited resources, on how the costs and benefits of policies are distributed within society, as well as legal powers to apply fines, prison sentences, and force, if necessary, to uphold regulations and laws.

In more practical terms, governments assign different roles and resources to formal policymaking bodies, that is, choose which departments and/or ministries will have responsibility for mitigation policymaking and ensure access to resources and relevant expertise (Newell 2021: 143). To increase mitigation climate policy capacities, initially from scratch, it has been necessary to assign new personnel, training, knowledge, and financial resources. Governments can employ varied ranges of policy tools and economic instruments to tax, support, protect, create, and regulate industries – and thereby shape markets and private authority. The machinery of government can promote and safeguard spaces of formal deliberation over competing futures, whilst various state interventions are pivotal to the pursuit of 'green' industrial policy (Ban & Hasselbalch 2024). In addition, national, and some local, governments have access to relatively low cost, 'patient', long-term capital, which can be useful in innovation and developing low-emission alternatives (Mazzucato 2013). Capacity for agency is also associated with the question of who has responsibility for delivering public policy goals (Kuzemko & Britton 2019). In terms of distributional policies states, as the main site of collective social power, are central actors – this relates authority directly with the responsibility to protect, with public policy as serving publics. Carlotta Perez's history of STTs emphasises governments as pivotal to ensuring that the benefits of technical changes were redistributed socially (2002).

In the case of UNFCCC agreements on mitigation, national governments are held responsible for meeting nationally determined contributions (NDCs), whilst they are also responsible for setting and meeting net zero-emissions targets. They can be held to account by domestic rules and publics in the instance that such goals are missed and can fall foul of transnational civil society, climate benchmarking exercises, and of the UNFCCC process. Importantly, government responsibility takes on a new level of importance when emissions reduction targets are of a legally binding nature – as is the case now in the EU, Canada, Denmark, France, Luxembourg, New Zealand, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Hungary, and the UK. Binding targets legally may serve to depoliticise the question of whether to have targets, and their level, but by assigning responsibility to governments for meeting targets this heightens the need for policies to deliver, whilst also keeping mitigation on political agendas. In this sense, legally binding targets also have politicising effects.

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In addition to formal capacities to govern and associated questions of responsibility, there is also the important question of having the capacity to devise effective mitigation policy. State capacity here can be understood as the ability both to implement official goals and to meet them (Skocpol 1985: 9). There is widespread evidence of mitigation policies contributing towards changes associated with emissions reduction, like the development and deployment of renewables and improvements in energy efficiency, as well as of relative reductions in emissions (IEA 2016; Pitelis 2018; Newell & Simms 2020; IPCC 2023; Hoppe et al. 2023). These outcomes have taken some time to achieve, which is partly why the world remains off track in terms of UNFCCC aims, but the evidence also suggests that some states have capacities to create low-emissions alternatives, phase out fossil fuels, and reduce GHG emissions.

At the same time, it is abundantly clear that there are widely varied capabilities to enact and implement successful climate mitigation policies. The UNFCCC Kyoto agreement recognised differences in institutional mitigation policymaking capacities when assigning national emissions reduction responsibilities, but there are a range of other limitations. Whilst all countries can produce some form of renewable energy, there are big differences in material capacities for different types – hydro- and geothermal electricity require quite specific geographies, reforestation, solar, and wind require land, some countries have low possibilities for solar-powered electricity, whilst all require access to affordable capital to deliver. Further, within conditions of limited resources, and if climate mitigation is not high on policy agendas, mitigation policymaking can be under-resourced. This can be exacerbated at times of fiscal austerity and/or by the influence of policy ideas about limiting the state that can result in reductions in capacities, like personnel and financial resources, dedicated to public policy (Kuzemko 2015; Felli 2015; Stripple & Bulkeley 2019; Durand 2023). Whilst there has, overall, been clear growth in state capacities dedicated to climate mitigation (Dubash 2021; Mildenberger 2021), this has not been sufficient in relation to the size of the task at hand. Hence, recommendations to continue to build supportive ecosystems of mitigation governing institutions (Rosenbloom et al. 2019) and to think politically about how to maintain mitigation policy capacities within partisan party-political contexts (Mildenberger 2021). It is also interesting to note recent evidence of a 'return' of the state in climate mitigation, particularly in developing low-emissions energy – examples include the turn towards green industrial strategy in many parts of the world and recent EU responses to Russia's invasion of the Ukraine (Goldthau & Sitter 2022; Kuzemko et al. 2022; White & Chase 2023).

Of course, a wide range of actors have climate mitigation agency – to shape debates about whether to have mitigation policy, to influence policy choices once

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on agendas, and later to push for greater ambition (Hormio 2023). Whilst coalitions of climate science and activists were central to getting climate onto the global agenda in the first phase of constructing climate politics, here I turn to capacities of corporate actors. As observed by Andy Stirling, it is through various kinds of power dynamics that processes of transformation come to be realised or suppressed (Stirling 2014b: 84), whilst there have been some very uneven power relations at play. Notions of incumbency and approaches, reviewed in Chapter 2, that place corporate influence within wider fossil fuel capitalist structures both help to explain corporate capacities to influence mitigation policymaking and public debates (Unruh 2000; Geels 2014; Paterson 2014; Newell 2021; Böhler et al. 2022). High-emissions incumbents are actors that have directly or indirectly benefitted financially from high-emissions economies and who often have significant resources at their disposal and associated abilities to wield political influence.[2] Low-emissions companies, conversely, have started small, needed financial support to compete, often taking many decades to successfully establish (Geels 2002). Over the past decade or so, low-emissions corporate interests have, largely through policy support, become more established in many parts of the world thereby starting to create a lower emissions version of energy capitalism and new voices in support of mitigation policy.

On one level, as discussed in Chapter 7, capacities to influence low-emissions policy have been shifting in terms of power relations, but the far harder question is how to phase out high-emissions industries and practices. Given that fossil fuel phase out has become increasingly central to mitigation, one can also consider capacity for agency as the "state's ability to overcome opposition from vested interests in policy formulation" (Skocpol 1985). High emissions vested interests can have considerable agency – explored here in two ways. First, the historic, and current, ability of high-emissions incumbents to deliver vital services, reflected in close access to policymaking communities, further underpins their capacity to influence mitigation and other policy decisions. Within high emissions, increasingly technology-based societies, most people remain reliant on continuity in access to basic services. This makes disruption socially difficult – invoking the spectre of energy, food, or transport 'insecurity'. The European gas lobby's attempts to project gas as the solution to recent energy security crises was, like many campaigns before it, a clear articulation of this argument to prolong gas's role as a transition fuel (Levantesi & Lewton 2023). Incumbent capacities for influence form one aspect of why there has been an emphasis, in

[2] High emissions incumbents include not just fossil fuel companies – but any company that directly or indirectly benefits from high emissions actions and behaviours.

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most countries thus far, on producing low-emissions alternatives rather than on phasing out fossil fuels.

The second takes us back to the observation that many current approaches to mitigation have emphasised the role of non-state actors in delivering climate solutions. As such, many of those that have caused high emissions, and whose profit-related interests lie in maintaining them, are tasked to some extent with fixing it (Paterson 2014: 152–153). Incumbent companies, often because they have considerable assets, are seen as having the potential to invest significant amounts in low-emission alternatives, within the context of considerable global investment requirement (IRENA 2023). Some incumbents, such as Ørsted, which was an oil and gas company but is now focused mainly on wind energy, have delivered in this regard (Geels 2014; Irene et al. 2023). Generally, however, incumbent behaviours and embedded infrastructures are that which mitigation seeks to change (Stirling 2014a: 54), whilst many remain highly active in shaping the direction, and types, of transition processes to suit their interests (Stokes 2020; Franta 2021; Newell 2021; Buller 2022; Irene et al. 2023). High-emissions incumbents have organised into global lobby groups, developed policy departments with considerable personnel and knowledge capacities, whilst some governments rely on corporations for information, data, and advice important to making mitigation policy decisions (Kuzemko 2015; Stokes 2020). Deep pockets also fund donations to political parties, extensive greenwashing, directed newspaper and social media coverage, and organised resistance to policy implementation (Carmichael et al. 2017; Stokes 2020; Buller 2022; Böhler et al. 2022).

Importantly, both these aspects of incumbent agency complicate the capacities of state bureaucracies to reconcile competing interests (cf. Pegels et al. 2018). It is not enough that climate change mitigation has reached relatively higher levels of salience and legitimacy over time if governments do not have the capacity to agree, design, and implement policies to (further) reduce emissions. This exploration of politics as capacity for state agency and of the relative power of corporate incumbency suggests that state governing bodies interested in driving more ambitious change should directly invest in improving in-house knowledge capacities. This could facilitate some redressing of state-incumbent capacity imbalances, partly by reducing the need to rely on high-emissions corporations for data and other forms of market and technical knowledge. Creating and augmenting government mitigation capacities is, then, one variant of politicisation. Foregrounding agency as a feature of politics, then, both highlights the importance of capacities within power relations, and questions who has influence in different phases of the constructions of mitigation policy, and how power relations can be reshaped towards lower emissions and more just outcomes.

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3.4 Deliberation: Salience, Knowledge, and Learning

Deliberation, Hay's third feature of politics, is relatively under-considered within climate politics and sustainable transformations research. In Hay's words, "that an issue be seen as political would seem to entail … the capacity to highlight … and draw attention to that issue, and to dissect the choices available to those charged with … fashioning a response" (Hay 2007: 68; see also Breetz et al. 2018). Following discursive and ideational institutionalists, deliberation is one process through which policymakers and others come to understand, explore, and otherwise make sense of climate change as a basis for constructing it as a subject for public policy (Hay 2007: 69; see also Eckersley 2004; Dryzek 2009; Willis 2020). The discursive aspect of politicisation is also in evidence in arguments that accepted interpretations of key technology or policy ideas can be problematised and rethought – particularly as new research or ideas come to light (Asara et al. 2015). Given that climate mitigation is a relatively new public policy area designed to deliver deep, wide-scale, and complex systemic changes, deliberation is vital to attempts to end high-emissions capitalism (Stirling 2014a: 55).

To know how to proceed on climate change, policymakers must first have developed some degree of knowledge about the issue and about the different choices available for taking action – and this also involves ideas (Kuzemko 2019). Ideas, and how they are narrated and framed, are central components of processes of deliberation and discourse (Hay & Marsh 1999; Schmidt 2011; Kern 2011; Kuzemko 2013; Kern & Rogge 2018). From a normative standpoint, deliberation is seen as an essential element in well-functioning, democratic politics. In Chapter 2, we analysed views of politics which argued that deliberation is either too difficult to achieve or opens climate change up to uninformed and dangerous attacks. Hay's argument, however, is that if we assume capacity for deliberation away, we are in danger of "confining our modes of expression to those consistent with our most pessimistic of assumptions" (2007: 69). As such, at times when contestations of mitigation policy are particularly loud, this view of politics suggests that leaning into the debate to take learnings from it is preferential to pursuing deliberative forms of depoliticisation by 'sheltering' mitigation policy from debate.

The advancement of climate change knowledge, as also deliberated by environmental movements, did much to draw attention to and raise the salience of climate change by presenting it as problematic and as requiring action. That an issue has salience is important to it being taken up by and incorporated into formal legislative processes (Hay 2007: 82; see also Carter & Jacobs 2014). At times, securitising narratives were also utilised in raising the profile of change action (Vogler 2016). Securitising narratives reached broader audiences partly

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because the language of security is emotive and understood by wider sections of society. Importantly, security is also seen as the language of urgency and the need for state action (Kuzemko 2014). In turn, it was because policymakers and voting publics started to accept climate change as important and/or urgent that it became possible to commit bureaucratic capacities to deliberating and formulating mitigation policy (Kuzemko 2013; Vogler 2016; Zaki & Dupont 2023). Others have noted that salience within public and formal political debates is also a key step in raising climate back up political agendas at times of high issue competition and/or crises that might divert governing capacities away from mitigation (Dupont et al. 2020).

Processes of deliberation are also important in understanding, assessing, and making collective choices (Hay 2007; Schmidt 2011; Kuzemko 2015). Policymakers are expected to deliberate over and decide between competing policy proposals, to build coalitions around certain policies, and to scrutinise policy implementation (Willis 2017 in Jordan et al. 2022). The exchange of ideas, particularly if a full range of alternatives is considered, can provide policymakers with abilities to reflect on policies, be critical of and to contest governing institutions, and take action to *change* them if they fail to deliver (Dryzek 2009; Schmidt 2011; Kuzemko 2019). To deliberate, then, infers consideration, thought, and discussion, and this, in turn, requires capacities to do so – sometimes referred to as deliberative capacities (Bulkeley 2016). Improving deliberative capacities can involve setting up spaces wherein climate change solutions can be debated and discussed, thereby augmenting politicisation as creating new mitigation governing institutions.

It can also be about developing societal learning and knowledge – to include education about causes of climate change but also about how to understand and choose between potential solutions. Relevant here too are Citizen Assemblies which have afforded limited numbers of citizens the time and space to engage on a deeper level with up-to-date debates about climate change and a variety of solutions. Learning and deliberation can be seen as a pre-condition to policy development – both in getting an issue onto political agendas and making sustained and informed decisions once there (Pierson 1993; Kuzemko 2019; Zaki & Dupont 2023: 5). The development of deliberative capacities is particularly important for societal and political learning about how to address novel and complex phenomena like climate change (Stirling 2014a).

Capacities to deliberate new issues tend to emerge over phases. There has been some proliferation of spaces for the deliberation of climate change, expansions of collective climate knowledge, and growth in deliberations over solutions (Keohane & Victor 2011; Bulkeley 2016; Tosun & Peters 2021). In global governance terms, the UNFCCC, International Renewable Energy Association

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(IRENA), International Energy Agency (IEA), World Bank, and IMF have all added deliberative and knowledge exchange capacities over the past decades. The IPCC is a standout body in terms of collecting and communicating scientific knowledge about climate change, and its social implications, whilst its insights have been fundamental to UN conference of the parties (COP) negotiations and underpin the case for accelerations in mitigation (IPCC 2018). Even in an environment of 'post truth', insights from the IPCC, supported by human experience, retain good levels of credibility and salience amongst citizens of a wide range of countries. There is considerable evidence of scientific knowledge being used by policymakers to substantiate and/or establish positions in relation to mitigation, as part of 'teaching', and as sources of information and/or data in evidence-based policymaking (Zaki & Dupont 2023). At the national level, most countries with net zero targets now have some civil service capacity dedicated to deliberating how to meet targets in ways that are politically feasible and/or actionable within domestic social and material contexts. Indeed, from where climate change started, basically unheard of outside limited communities, climate change salience, knowledge, and ability to deliberate solutions have become relatively more detailed and granular.

Dedicated deliberative capacity is only, of course, as good as the ideas, narratives, and knowledge bases that inform it – whilst changes in the ways we think about and express the relationship between social actions and nature matter just as much as how we understand climate change as a physical phenomenon (Hulme 2013; Marquardt & Lederer 2022). Deliberations take place within and are informed by wider institutional contexts, which often also delineate what is considered expert or relevant knowledge (Schmidt 2011 in Kern & Rogge 2018). To gain political acceptance at the global level, climate change and mitigation were consistently discursively narrowed down (Dryzek 2022), to fit wider ideational and interest-based contexts. Above I pointed to early knowledge about climate change emerging from scientific communities, but this framing of climate as an issue had little to offer in relation to how it should be governed or about the wider societal implications of reducing emissions, beyond avoiding catastrophic climate change. It is important to understand, then, that deliberating climate change for the purposes of raising salience is different from deliberating how we might go about designing and implementing effective and socially beneficial solutions.

In terms of deliberating solutions, if policymakers are exposed to limited sets of ideas and interests, then this minimises their exposure to other, potentially more transformative and/or just, ideas about how to engender emissions reduction. This is, then, not just about who gets to make (and inform) climate policy choices but also about which ideas and solutions are included within or excluded

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from policy debates. Deliberative capacities, at least for some decades (1990s, 2000s, 2010s), were informed by a combination of scientific and economic ideas, discussed above in relation to capacity for agency, that favoured a narrow set of solutions. This form of deliberative depoliticisation, as is the case with not dedicating state resources to improve capacities for state agency, can have the effect of over-representing the very interests (and systems) that mitigation policies need to change. Stirling encapsulates this problematic in his analysis of battles between embedded knowledge and those seeking to inform policy differently, where the powers wielded by incumbents often conditions political and wider social expectations over what is 'realistic' or 'unrealistic' as directions for low emissions change (Stirling 2014b: 86). Further, to the extent that policymakers and publics become convinced that climate *is* being resolved through limited sets of approaches to mitigation, mitigation can become vulnerable to demotion within political agendas (Green 2022; Dupont et al. 2024).

Returning to the question of temporal phases in the construction of mitigation policy and politics, we can also think about how experience of and knowledge about mitigation policy changes as wider contexts change. Climate mitigation policies need to engender emissions reductions over sustained periods, whilst climate and other institutional contexts change, sometimes radically (Lockwood 2015a). At the same time, mitigation policies, given their novelty, are rarely developed fully formed but need adjustments (Paterson 2021). In the early days of designing and implementing mitigation policy, then, finding appropriate responses should ideally include a constantly reflexive experiment with novel ideas and practices (Paterson 2014). Adjustments in policy thinking might be needed to account for: failures to meet targets that generate pressures for policy reform, and contestations from those that lose out because of mitigation policies, as well as new scientific knowledge and material and technological changes. Deliberation in changing temporal and political contexts, then, entails capacities to reflect on how policies relate to new knowledge and/or system changes – as explored in more detail in Chapter 7.

Capacity to deliberate mitigation policy also changes over time as policy experience grows and through trial and error. For example, decisions taken to make emissions reduction targets legally binding result from political learning about the dangers of mitigation falling down, or off, political agendas (Lockwood 2021; Mildenberger 2021). There has been considerable policy learning about technical innovations, which policies are effective and in which ways, and about mitigation policy outcomes and their wider co-benefits. Insights into the latter have, in part, informed the reframing of mitigation policy as 'green' industrial strategy – in China, Japan, South Korea, India, Indonesia, New Zealand, Europe, and the United States. These strategies explicitly link clean technological development

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and infrastructures to growth, employment, investment opportunities, and other societal benefits. This reflects notions about changes in political approaches and in learning as ongoing and, therefore, about the importance of building flexibility into the design of governance bodies (Haas & Haas 1995).

There are also material and technological changes to which policies need to respond in different temporal phases (Geels & Turnheim 2022). For example, as the costs of renewable energy come down, high levels of government subsidy are no longer needed to support deployment. It becomes politically preferable, under conditions of limited resources, to ensure that those public funds are spent where they are most needed – for example, in supporting the balancing of higher renewable-based electric grids through storage and/or flexibility. Time has also revealed other aspects of renewable transitions that require further policy action – not least the need to ensure access to critical materials and to improve knowledge about and policies to engender circular economies to avoid over-extraction and geopolitical rivalry (European Commission 2025a). Colgan et al. put forward an argument that the material bases that underpin the power of high-emissions incumbents is also likely to fall with time (2021). Mitigation policy, then, requires constant learning and reflection over time, that accounts for experience as well as new ideas and contestations, to underpin a flexible approach to policies within overarching mitigation goals (Unruh 2000; Rosenbloom et al. 2019; Jordan & Moore 2020).

This is not, of course, to suggest that we are yet in a position of knowing how to engender just and sustainable transformations – far from it – but to make a plea for recognition of accumulated experiences and deliberations from a wide range of perspectives. Here, deliberative politicisation can be understood as openness to reflection, learning, and critical engagement at the policymaking level. Whilst the conditions for this can be relatively harder to achieve within power relations that concentrate deliberative resources outside of state bureaucracies, the building blocks for greater critical reflection – accumulations of experience in mitigation policymaking – have become more available with time. Deliberation has been an essential political feature of each phase of constructing climate politics – including getting mitigation onto agendas, making choices between approaches and policies, and in how the outcomes of mitigation policies are understood.

3.5 Social Interaction: Democracy, Culture, and Public Feedback

The various roles of societal actors, and the relationship between public policy and the publics they are designed to serve, are also under-explored in research on the politics of climate change. One of the advantages of adopting a broader lens on politics is to be able to understand it as explicitly involving wider ranges of social interactions – taking more account of democratic links between policymaking,

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questions of culture and identity, and public experiences of climate mitigation policy. Section 3.4 was relatively focused on ongoing interactions within élite processes of policy deliberation, but here I am interested in extending how we understand mitigation politics beyond expert and other insider circles. The notion of the public extends social spaces, characterised above partly in terms of deliberation, whilst the character of that deliberation, and thus the kinds of spaces produced, are shaped by climate change's complexity and the need to mitigate (Paterson 2014: 150). No previous transformations have been as rapid or socially pervasive as climate mitigation processes, nor have they "aspired to the same depth or extent of explicitly shared social intentionality or assertively coordinated political control" (Stirling 2014b: 85). How different societal groups experience climate change and mitigation policies varies significantly, whilst the degree of cultural embeddedness of high-emissions lifestyles is an important factor in willingness and capacities to change. As such, the social nature of the politics of mitigation is particularly important to understand.

One, somewhat novel, way of thinking about social interactions is to consider the relationship between policies and societal outcomes. Put simply, policies and other political decisions are social to the extent "… they have, or are likely to have, direct or indirect consequences for others" (Hay 2007: 70). Social goals are established based on public recognition that change is needed, whilst voter support and trust can be gained by meeting those goals. Here, importantly, social inclusion can extend beyond questions of whose voices are heard in policymaking debates to also mean that citizens should benefit from policies via the changes they make, goals they meet, or services they deliver. Relevant here is the public policy notion that climate politics has a problem-solving role (Kristensen et al. 2023). Such observations shine a new light on the importance of Theda Skocpol's insights, above, about state capacity being about abilities to deliver formal objectives (1985).

Meeting goals is, of course, complex in the realm of climate mitigation. On the one hand, the primary goal of mitigation is to engender sufficient change to enable global warming targets to be met. Not implementing successful mitigation policies, then, has major social consequences – for future generations and for people already caught up in, and particularly vulnerable to, changing climates and related outcomes. On the other hand, mitigation policies themselves have varied socio-economic and distributional outcomes and are experienced differently by different societal groups. Emissions reduction and other policy (non-)outcomes, then, are vital to how we understand dynamic links between politics and public policy over time. Foregrounding outcomes as an aspect of social interaction between policy and publics, as in Chapter 6, also raises important questions about possibilities for, and failures in, improving distributional and generational justice.

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A related way of understanding politics as social interaction is through the prism of electoral and party politics and voting behaviours (Skocpol 1985; Jordan et al. 2022). Voting, of course, provides one of the most obvious connections between public policy, policy outcomes, and society in democracies – experiences of policies can affect future voting behaviours, whilst voting is also key to the ability of publics to hold governments to account. This is what Hay refers to as the 'demand side' of public policy (2007). For example, growth in public demands to address certain issues not only infers political salience but also can encourage political parties to compete over addressing the issue. There is some evidence that growth in green party votes can cause other parties to commit to mitigation policies (Garner 2011; Carter & Little 2021), whilst in some countries mitigation has become a valence rather than a partisan issue. Recent scholarship has also shown that public salience of climate change influences political parties' preferences (Spoon et al. 2024; Schwörer 2024).

Recognition that climate change is an issue, then, can be fundamental to giving social licence, legitimacy, and electoral motivation for policy action. It was not, however, an issue for widespread public debate until the late 1980s (Hulme 2013: 3), when social actors within science and civil society communities explicitly sought to raise its profile. In the decades since there has been considerable change in public support in most democracies of the Global North, but to a lesser extent in the US (Stokes 2016; Jordan et al. 2022; Stokols 2023). Global surveys on climate change reflect similar movements towards recognising it as anthropogenic and the need for action, but with a few exceptions in countries like Indonesia and Yemen (Leiserowitz et al. 2022; Ritchie et al. 2024; UNDP 2024; Vlasceanu et al. 2024). This may provide some explanation as to why 147 countries had, by 2024, felt it to be politically possible to commit to net zero emissions. Public salience of climate change and licence to address it may also be underpinned by growth in personal experiences of changes in climate – from the increased severity of wildfires in Canada, California, and Australia, to droughts in India, Germany, and France, to floods in Pakistan, Dubai, and Germany (Spiers 2023).

The electoral relationship between politicians, policymakers, and voters has become yet more complex and varied (Jordan et al. 2022). This is because there is an increasing need to differentiate between support for climate action and that for specific policies. Views on, and support for, specific policies tend to vary even in countries committed to climate change (Bernauer & McGrath 2016 in Jordan et al. 2022). Recent polling in seven European countries showed support for energy efficiency, tree planting, and renewables, but less so for policies, particularly in transport and diet, that citizens feel will impact more on their lifestyle (Henley 2023). Anti-mitigation groups keen to slow the rate of low-emissions

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change, or reverse mitigation commitments, can seize on lack of support for individual policies to undermine mitigation more broadly. Lack of support can also be relative to that for other policy goals, all the more relevant in relation to capacity for agency questions, explored above, around limited policy resources and competition between policy areas.

Party politics presents a further significant complicating factor when considering social interaction in relation to voting in democracies (Lockwood 2018; Zuk & Szulecki 2020). Here, differences between electoral cycle lengths and the extended temporalities of reducing emissions through policy action really matter. Indeed, the four/five-year electoral cycles of most democracies are one of the key political issues for eco-authoritarians and other scientists advocating for democratic depoliticisation (Giddens 2009; Jordan et al. 2022). In those countries where climate change remains a partisan issue, like the US, Brazil, Poland, the Philippines, and Argentina, when political parties not supportive of climate mitigation are voted in, this can result in some policy delays at times when action is urgent, as well as more harmful reversals of climate policies (Marquardt et al. 2022).

This brings us to important questions of how publics become informed about climate change and particular policies. Voting publics can hear about climate change through a wide range of channels: education, social movements, social media, national and local government reporting on climate science, films and documentaries, and within family and other social groups. Historically, as already mentioned, publics received climate information via the communication strategies of civil society groups and activist communities. Some analysis suggests that climate change was adopted by global, and later national, governance actors partly as a result of protracted, challenging, and overtly political struggles led by social movements (Dryzek et al. 2003 in Stirling 2014b: 88; Ciplet et al. 2015; Newell 2021). Since then, climate change has become part of school and university curriculums in some countries, whilst research suggests that climate education can improve the quality of deliberation and result in new skills needed to produce and maintain low-emissions goods and services (Domorenok & Trein 2024). Perhaps relatedly, the active mobilisation of climate civil society, and their role in informing public debate, has been more recently reappraised and led by various youth climate movements and media coverage of their activities (Newell 2021: 170). Growing personal experiences of environmental damage is also understood as having fuelled rapid growth in environmental activism in the 1960s and early 1970s, just as it has contributed towards more recent rises in public awareness and support (Schreurs 2004; Vogler 2016: 13).

Importantly, however, high-emissions incumbency can also have social aspects, whilst views on climate change are also mediated culturally. There have been

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plenty of anti-mitigation groups keen to fund and disseminate less supportive narratives in a bid to exert control over public perceptions and support. In some countries denial stories regularly appear in the media (Tosun & Peters 2021; Yagodin 2021), whilst it is also common for incumbent, high-emissions corporations to invest heavily on capturing the narrative on solutions (Franta 2021; Newell 2021; Buller 2022). The latter can include advertisements of 'greenwashing' products as solving climate problems, sponsored articles that undermine low-emissions technologies and/or solutions, and pro-fossil fuel messages in video games targeted at younger demographics.[3] Generally speaking, as discussed above, those most involved in deliberating mitigation have been experts. It is easy to understand why experts should be involved – climate science, technological innovations, and the inner workings of energy and other industries that need to be radically decarbonised are often highly complex (Kuzemko 2013; Paterson 2014). It is partly, however, this complexity that can alienate publics and leave generalist politicians not understanding mitigation themselves and less able to articulate explanations of what needs to happen to wider audiences (Willis 2020).

Narratives against mitigation are carefully crafted and often have some cultural legitimacy (Roberts et al. 2018; Newell et al. 2022). Narratives are usually more successful when they attach themselves to existing identities, knowledge, norms, and/or experiences. Hence the importance of material and lived aspects of culture, identity, community cohesion, and sense of place (Adger et al. 2013; Bridge et al. 2018; Lewin 2019), and of the personal attachments to fossil fuel based energy discussed in Chapter 2 (Daggett 2018). In areas where high-emissions practices are deeply socially embedded, they can attain their own identities. The US and Poland, for example, have 'national miners' days, whilst internal combustion engine (ICE) cars have become aspirational and tied to individual identities and achievement in many cultures (Paterson 2007); petro-masculinities tied into techno cultures (Daggett 2018); or the popularity of disposable fashion practices. Shifting citizens embedded within such high-emissions cultures towards low-emissions practices and alternatives can be a psychological as well as cultural task.

Insufficient social spaces for public deliberation about mitigation solutions, keeping publics ignorant of certain facts and/or alternative approaches, tend to have alienating effects (Willis 2020: 69; Paterson et al. 2022). Losses of democratic connection to any issue, including climate mitigation policy, lead to lower levels of social engagement and interaction with policy choices and less ability to hold government to account for their actions (see Hay 2007). Processes of depoliticisation that pass responsibility for policymaking to unelected groups in

[3] A recent example of a fossil fuel corporation seeking to warm up younger audiences to fossil fuels are Shell's strategies to create customised online racecourses, 'The Ultimate Roadtrips', and embed positive messaging in computer games, like Fortnite: Shell taps gamers and influencers to boost image among the young (ft.com).

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society, including incumbent corporations, further contribute towards obscuring policy decisions from public deliberation (Paterson et al. 2022) and to widening the gulf between policy choices and the ability of publics to hold governments to account (Kuzemko 2013 & 2015). It is precisely a lack of public engagement with solutions to climate change that anti-mitigation groups capitalise on when sowing doubt about specific policies. In turn, it is partly because coalitions against mitigation have had such successes in reaching publics that preferences for depoliticisation, such as lowering levels of social interaction, arise.

In this sense greater quality and quantity of societal interaction would serve to make climate change more political – by bringing it "explicitly within the realm of fully democratic deliberation, contestation, and decision-making" (Paterson 2021). Here the public space on mitigation and quality of democracy is shaped by the quality of social interaction – both in terms of how inclusive it is and the degree to which accurate information, and the ability to make sense of it, are freely available and comprehendible to most people. At the same time, more directly engaging with why different societal groups contest mitigation, and particular policies, can be an important element of policy learning, whilst, see Chapter 7, it can also become a useful tool in improving policy design. Hence arguments to engage with conflict rather than seek to avoid it (Paterson 2021; Marquardt & Lederer 2022).

Moving beyond an emphasis on the quality of social engagement with climate mitigation, we return here to the argument that publics also develop views via their experience of policy outcomes. Studies of policy feedback have much to say about links between how policies are experienced and the future politics of that issue area (Skocpol 1992; Lockwood et al. 2017; Schmidt & Sewerin 2017; Beland & Schlager 2019; Jordan & Moore 2020; Sewerin et al. 2022). Whilst mitigation policies are designed to have positive outcomes for society by avoiding high levels of global warming, socio-economic outcomes can be both positive and negative – and often felt in more tangible and immediate ways. Policy feedback onto subsequent policymaking debates can, like experiences of policy outcomes, be positive or negative (Stokes 2020), whilst there are differences in routes through which feedback flows. 'Mass' feedbacks connect to policymaking often via electoral institutions and public surveys, whilst 'elite' feedbacks can be more direct given privileged access to public policymakers (Stokes 2020: 39). Policies with positive outcomes can nurture virtuous cycles of mutually reinforcing feedback (Roberts et al. 2018).

There is a wide range of possible positive socio-economic outcomes – these have been summed up in various analyses of the co-benefits of climate mitigation.[4]

[4] For a comprehensive discussion on the positive co-benefits of climate mitigation policies, and energy transitions more broadly, see: Sovacool et al. 2020a.

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One example is Ontario's coal phase-out policy. It resulted in important public health gains – saving $4.4 billion p.a. in health, environmental, and financial damages, and $95 million in displaced operating and maintenance costs (Newell & Simms 2020: 9). Wider benefits, in turn, also depend heavily upon how policy is designed, whilst the political benefits of positive policy outcomes depend on whether policies are understood, and benefits communicated. It is also important to design policies that make it structurally – financially and culturally – easier for individual actors to make low-emissions choices. Such policies include subsidising and/or providing grants for clean technologies, such as solar photovoltaics (PV), electric vehicles (EVs), or home insulation. This better enables actors to become members of clean energy communities and/or to become active prosumers with a stake in clean energy.

Arguably, however, it is the (real or perceived) negative socio-economic outcomes of mitigation policy that receive higher levels of media attention (Perga et al. 2023; Spiers 2023), as seen in the latest 'politics of acceleration' phase. Opposition can become more fevered when existing jobs, income sources, and/or ways of living are threatened (Bretz et al. 2018; Geels & Turnheim 2022), without compensation or other ameliorations. That there can and will be negative socio-economic outcomes should come as no surprise when considering how deeply embedded, often subsidised, high-emissions industries, behaviours, and practices are within high- and middle-income economies. This makes any proposed interruption of embedded high-emissions norms potentially highly visible and tangible to voters. Countries, and companies, highly exposed to high-emissions sources of income stand to lose out economically – through lower taxes, exports, and foreign exchange income and through the growing risk of stranded assets (Colgan et al. 2021; Kuzemko et al. 2024). Societal backlash against mitigation policies, see for example 'les gilets jaunes' in France (Jordan et al. 2022), labour union objections to solar and wind feed-in-tariffs (FiTs) in Austria (Tobin 2017), or widespread objection to banning ICE cars in Germany (Von der Burchard et al. 2023), is closely related to fears of social and economic disadvantage.

It follows, then, that whether mitigation policy is designed in consideration of distributional outcomes really matters in social interaction terms. Following the lead of subnational governments, in Canada, Germany, and Spain, it is possible to use policy to ensure that those most vulnerable to negative mitigation policy outcomes are protected. Through including directly affected communities in coal phase-out decision-making processes, policies were designed to ameliorate negative effects by reskilling, new job creation, and/or direct compensation (Bolet et al. 2023; Cantoni & Brisbois 2024). As such, policy design that explicitly incorporates non-élite views, and considers distributional outcomes, can assist in

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avoiding some of the social disengagement with politics and voting outcomes of poorly designed policy (Hay 2007). Studies of previous society-wide transitions place great emphasis on the role of the state in ensuring that the benefits of change are widely distributed (Perez 2002). These types of approaches to mitigation policy design can be viewed as politicising to the extent that they balance delivering mitigation and other social goals. Focusing more on social, cultural, and distributive elements of public policy design in order to improve societal policy outcomes, then, represents an important way of thinking politically about mitigating over extended timeframes. If policy debates about designing policy with this political goal in mind were to be made more public, then they could be considered as politicising in a deliberative sense also. At the same time, political decisions to slow, delay, or withdraw climate policies, framed in terms of delivering on social demands for jobs and growth, fail to balance delivering on these near-term policy goals with politicisation understood as delivering on global climate goals.

3.6 Conclusions

Structuring the framework of this book according to four, highly interrelated, features of politics has allowed for a broader account of the variety of ways in which we can think politically about climate mitigation policy. This approach has built on Hay's account of politics with the intention of extending and defining what can be meant by politicisation. Table 3.1, above, summarises each feature of the politics of mitigation and provides examples of different types of politicisation that we might see in relation to climate change mitigation. These are, of course, ideal types but give an indication of the many routes towards politicising mitigation. There is some emphasis on ways of being more socially inclusive than much of the scholarship reviewed in Chapter 2, but also on outlining practical steps that policymakers could consider to improve the quality of mitigation policy.

By doing so, I also suggest some reasonably novel ways of understanding politicisation. For example, by suggesting that delivering on stated social goals can be politicising to the extent that society becomes, in this way, included in policy. This in turn can be understood as one corrective for lower levels of trust in government and/or lack of support for mitigation policies. By suggesting multiple ways in which it is possible to be political, including wider ranges of stakeholders and greater knowledge capacities, this approach can also be seen as a corrective to analyses that consider climate mitigation politics narrowly.

It is also the case that many variants of politicisation are closely interrelated to others. For example, ensuring that governing bodies have sufficient capacities to design socially optimal policies will depend in great part upon whether there are more spaces dedicated to expanding deliberative capacities. At the same

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time, politicisation understood as keeping mitigation alive as a policy issue is closely related to the capacity to design policies that can meet mitigation and other social needs. Paterson et al. have observed politicisations and depoliticisations of climate mitigation over the years, whilst this table suggests greater variety (2022). This approach suggests that mitigation is not necessarily depoliticised when agreement is reached and policy decided. This is because, although the range of choices is narrowed down, mitigation remains politicised in other ways: it remains an area of public policy, it has outcomes socially, and it can still be contested. As such, mitigation can be at once politicised in these ways but depoliticised in others at specific moments in time – making politicisation a plural concept.

This framing also foregrounds iterative relationships between politics, policy, and outcomes, which provides some basis for how I think about the phases of constructing climate mitigation policy and politics. As a new policy area, the early phase of politicisation was concentrated on raising the salience of climate change, reaching sufficient agreement between differing ideas and interests to accept mitigation as a policy area, and establishing early governing capacities. From Hay's conceptualisation of politics, it could be argued that this phase of politicisation, making climate subject to collective choice, is a primary step. If it is not on legislative agendas, then other types of politicisation can become less relevant, except politicising in terms of raising its salience. Chapter 4 is dedicated to exploring the specific processes of politicisation involved in making mitigation subject to collective choice as a particular phase of mitigation politics.

The following chapters are also structured according to the inter-related phases of constructing climate politics. In Chapter 5, which explores the phase of making choices between different approaches to mitigation policy we can see different types of politicisation emerge. Once a new public policy area has been created, the complex task of constructing, and over time improving, sufficient abilities to design policies that meet relevant goals and to continue to adjudicate between different ideas and interests. The importance of developing the latter ability is especially pertinent because, once on agendas (particularly at the national level) mitigation entered into a dynamic interrelationship with other policy areas. Longer-standing public policy goals, in turn, reflected the priorities of societies already deeply embedded within high-emissions businesses, infrastructures, practices, and lifestyles.

Chapter 6, on climate mitigation as outcomes and social experiences and responses, helps us to think about how social and material changes in emissions systems, practices, and behaviours require further rounds of mitigation policy change – often in justice and equity terms – to reduce the risk of undermining public support for mitigation. Politicisations here can include improving abilities

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to recognise, understand, and consider social experiences of the non-emissions outcomes of mitigation policy.

Chapter 7 foregrounds questions of how to ensure more rapid emissions reduction through policy. Politicisation as recognising the scale and complexities of reducing emissions through public policy and better understanding how high-emissions incumbency, political, economic and social, becomes a crucial feature of creating sustainable policy processes. The ability to maintain this form of politicisation over time is highly dependent upon politicisation in, especially, deliberation and social interaction terms. Here the outcomes of mitigation policy, and how they are experienced and communicated, continue to form a central feature of low emissions policymaking capacities – not least as a basis for improved mitigation policy design.

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