Democratic Theory (2026), **13**, 137–144
doi:10.1017/S2332889425000053

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Climate Turbulence and Experiments in Ecological Democracy

David Schlosberg

Sydney Environment Institute, University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW, Australia
Email: david.schlosberg@sydney.edu.au

Hope with teeth

There has been much focus on climate imaginaries of late, and of the crucial nature of storytelling as an avenue to a more responsive and ecological democracy (Aslam et al. 2024). I am not opposed to this focus on making new imaginaries or mythologies, especially those that counter anthropocentric or antidemocratic thinking and practice. However, I am also not willing to say that the current failure of institutions in the face of the climate crisis is primarily because of the lack of imagination alone. On the one hand, of course, there is the issue of power, in particular the power of the fossil fuel industry and the capture of political systems (Mann and Hotez 2025). But on the other, I am hesitant to focus on *new* imaginaries when there are *already* so many imaginative, engaged, innovative, and experimental practices of ecological democracy happening in the world.

The author China Miéville (2015) argues, in an essay on the limits of utopian thinking, that we can't just *say* "this is the future we want to build"—and then hope for it. For Miéville, "It's the *process of making it* that will allow us to do so," and argues that we need to "learn to hope with teeth." Similarly, as Aslam et al (ibid., 114) note "It is one thing to engage in conscious mythmaking about democracy in light of earthly entanglement; it is another thing entirely to show the ways in which myths are being lived out in disparate attempts to create more democratic forms of life."

The focus of this essay, then, is not simply climate imaginaries or democratic imaginaries, but what colleagues and I have been calling *grounded imaginaries* of democratic practice in the present (Celermajer et al. 2024), or the actual doing of democratic response. In the wake of climate change and related turbulence (Schlosberg 2023), there have been growing community-based and democratic responses and experiments. These are existing, replicable everyday democratic practices and forms which are motivated not only by a reaction to climate and environmental turbulence, but also by a mix of counter-power, justice, and ecological reconnection (Schlosberg and Craven 2019). The point is that "visionary pragmatism" (Coles 2016) is not just imaginary—it's active, practiced, prefigurative politics. I have made this argument using examples of materially focused sustainability activism (Schlosberg and Coles 2016; Schlosberg and Craven

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Jean-Paul Gagnon and Mark Chou. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2332889425000053 Published online by Cambridge University Press

2019), but such grounded experiments in what we could call ecological democracy are increasing in the face of environmental and climate turbulence.

The main question here is how communities are beginning to respond to the reality of climate turbulence and climate injustice in experimental ways. How are they attempting to resist or respond to the increasing material impacts on bodies—individual and community? How are they using democratic processes to reclaim or rebuild or transform attachments and relations to place, and the functioning of communities? What forms of democracy are fit for the new and ongoing reality of climate turbulence? Again, the point is not simply the development of imaginaries and theories of ecological democracy, but rather more examples, more illustration, more discussion of practices from the reality and the inspiration of the now: current lives and entangled livelihoods of ecological democracy on the ground.

I will discuss four different types or forms of democratic experimentation growing in the wake of climate turbulence: democratic deliberation, community disaster response and resilience, movements around "material participation," and, finally, experiments in multispecies urban design. I offer these here as categories or types of democratic experimentation, with examples, but without a deep dive into empirical analysis of impact, success, or failure. The point is to illustrate a range of existing, grounded, experiments in democratic response to ecological crises.

Institutions built for stability cannot hold

In designing such experimental responses to climate change, one of the problems, and so motivations, is that climate turbulence makes more traditional forms of democratic governance difficult or incomplete. The institutions we have, organised around the usual state apparatus and differentiated bureaucracies, were designed for stability, and for top-down, command and control processes fit for a slow-moving Holocene. However, as Hulme (2009) has said, climate change isn't a problem to solve, it's a condition to live within—and one that will be with us for a long time. When it comes to the basic need for governance that addresses energy transition on the one hand, and disaster response and adaptation on the other, we have learned that many forms of governance cannot respond reflexively, in real time, to the quickly shifting challenges and grounded conditions of climate change turbulence. As Wakefield (2021) has written, growing catastrophic risks "have led to a search for new technologies of government" that can deal with the mess and entanglements of the age.

In response to the Anthropocene, there have been more specific calls for further democratization. In his discussion of politics "after nature," Purdy (2015) calls for "a more fortified democracy," or a more universally democratic politics, to survive, adapt to, and thrive in the Anthropocene. More recently, Tonder (2025) insists in a straightforward way that political theorists and social scientists can no longer pretend that ecological systems and shifts do not contribute to how social and governmental systems must organize. Tonder argues that the growth of climate and affect-induced tipping points may enable a more ecological democracy, what he calls a more zoecentric demos, a comingling of human and more-than-human, an openness to the world around.

Bulkeley (2023, 12) argues that democratic experimentation suspends rules and norms, creates new ways of relating to the natural world, and generates productive

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2332889425000053 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"forms of dissonance" in the midst of the kind of turbulence being increasingly experienced. And, of course, we may not have a choice; Bulkeley says that we may now be in a "condition of permanent experimentation" (ibid.). Similarly, Meyer (2023) makes a link to the history of democratic pragmatism in his argument that experimentalism is integral to the democratic project itself—that it is disruptive and pluralistic and regenerative. That's what democracy should be. Like Bulkeley, Meyer notes the importance of reflexivity in such experimentation, a learning and openness to revision in light of outcomes. Their understanding of such democratic experimentation is that it allows a form of adaptive management in the face of climate turbulence.

What we're seeing now is the development of a range of alternative practices, innovations, and experiments more fit for a more turbulent reality and a desire for more ecological democracy. I want to illustrate a range of democratic experimentation with a focus on four different types, embodied in specific, real, living examples of experimental practice. All four are not only responses to the reality of climate turbulence and ecological instability, but they also embody some of the basic principles and practices of ecological democracy long advocated (Pickering et al. 2020): ecological reflexivity, relationality, and inclusion. The point is to build connection across both social and ecological lines, and especially now, to do so in reaction to the ongoing decimations of both environmental and democratic stability.

Deliberative innovations for environmental/ecological democracy

First, there have obviously been a range of examples of democratic innovation and experimentation in the form of *deliberative processes*, especially around climate assemblies. Clearly, there is a growth in the use of deliberative democracy to embed some ecological reflexivity in climate policy development. The rapid growth of climate assemblies, notwithstanding the lack of governmental implementation, is a key development (KNOCA 2024). As a deliberative theorist and practitioner, Graham Smith (2009: 1) argues, these processes "have been specifically designed to increase and deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making process" beyond voting. We've seen a significant growth in such innovations at a number of levels, including national climate assemblies in Denmark, France, and Sweden, as well as many more at the local level. There have also been examples of such innovation at broader scale. A team based at the Centre for Deliberative Democracy at the University of Canberra directed a truly global, virtual, deliberative process on the climate and ecological crisis—aiming to be inclusive of those normally excluded, especially from the Global South (Curato et al. 2025).

Further, there is the potential for expanding deliberative systems and processes to the more-than-human; we are seeing the beginnings of deliberative experiments that include both animals and broader environments, such as the Animals in the Room project and many others (Chwalisz and Reid 2024). This is a particularly expansive but important application of the all affected principle beyond the human—crucial for a response to turbulence in more-than-human worlds. There is a growing range of deliberative examples of applications of ecological reflexivity and the representation of MtH interests—in response to the recognition of both turbulence and damage done to human relations with and immersion in environments. These deliberative

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2332889425000053 Published online by Cambridge University Press

processes address both that turbulence and the dis-placement and discomfort discussed earlier.

This deliberative turn is crucial and growing.[1] But in terms of the democratic responses to climate turbulence, a lot of scholars stop there, with democratic innovation as the expansion of deliberative processes alone. I believe this focus is incomplete, and crucially, it's just not fully reflective of the experimentation happening in civil society, and in a number of governmental contexts.

Community-based disaster and resilience organization

A second type of democratic experimentation is much more directly in response to the experience of climate turbulence—direct community-based response and experimentation in the face of climate disasters. In Australia, a team at the Sydney Environment Institute recently completed a large project looking at community responses to repeated heatwaves, bushfires, and flooding—the work done by civil society organizations, often in the absence of state-based emergency services (Webster et al. 2024a).

The stories told after such events are not just imaginaries, but real, material, grounded examples of entangled communities, environments, and democratic achievements. In research, interviews, and community workshops done after disasters, for example, people simply wanted to share their stories of mutual aid—they saw such stories as the toolkit for other communities (Webster et al. 2024b). All of these communities—after enduring fires and/or epic flooding, which led to a cascade of impacts and turbulence—illustrate the potential of democratic organizing in immediate response to disaster, and for ongoing resilience in place and with immense knowledge of place. They offer real, grounded, current illustrations of democratic responses to climate turbulence in practice.

Network analyses show how these democratic responses were enabled through a range of pre-existing social, cultural, material, and economic practices (Pittaway et al. 2025). These conditions or tools are usually referred to as "social capital", or "social infrastructure," but they are also about existing democratic relationships and processes that create social cohesion and knowledge, and that represent and elevate community-based knowledges. As these knowledges demonstrate and encompass ecological reflexivity, they illustrate how ongoing connection to, and knowledge of, place continues and builds community in the midst of climate turbulence—they know how forests respond to fire, how rivers behave in flood events, how human and nonhuman communities react to heatwaves. Many community organizations in Australia have now expanded their efforts at creating such social infrastructure based on such embedded knowledges and knowledge networks. They build community around response and preparedness for disasters and climate turbulence through knowledge sharing, tool sharing, volunteer and leadership training.

These community organizations want much more recognition of the crucial nature of community-based knowledges, of place, environments, forests, fires, rivers, animals, and human people. They want such knowledge to be incorporated into governmental decision-making, and they want more flexibility in the midst of climate turbulence than current and static forms of state governance currently allow.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2332889425000053 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Of course the point here is to counter the potential of climate turbulence and injustice—displacement on the one hand, but also the lack of attention to, and inclusion of, the breadth of localized knowledges about place and the impacts of turbulence. A key need here is to develop a form of communication between such democratic, grounded, responsive community organizations and the more formal resilience and adaptation processes of the state. There are a lot of lessons to be learned about this kind of community action in the face of climate turbulence, action focused on building democracy while preparing for the worst impacts of climate change.

Material participation

A third form of democratic experimentation is something I have been calling *sustainable materialism*, or *material participation* (Marquardt et al. 2025; Schlosberg and Craven 2019).

In many, many communities there is a clear recognition of turbulence and about the breakdown of a variety of relationships that sustain lives. But there is also action, on the ground, in multiple ways: a collective turn to caring for, restoring, and transforming those relationships. Movements focused on *sustainable materialism* address the motivations of community food, energy, and sustainable fashion organizations dedicated to not just individual ethical action, but to changing the nature of material *systems* that supply basic needs. The democratic experimentation here is motivated by an attentiveness to, a reflexivity about, ecological sustainability, social justice, and expanded democratic participation. This democratic and *material* participation includes keen attention to the physical, social, and environmental impacts of supply chains.

On food systems alone, we know there are hundreds, if not thousands, of communities attempting to reconfigure food systems in the face of the rapaciousness of conventional agriculture, the greediness of existing supply chains, and the impacts on climate and biodiversity. The focus is more sustainability, more food security, more connection, and more justice.

Of course, we can call this democratic experimentation, but the reality is that many more communities, especially Indigenous and global south communities, have been practicing sustainable materialism for generations. For many, those practices have been colonized, undermined, extracted, or enclosed for more corporatized and ecologically destructive systems that have caused both turbulence and injustice. But many remain, of course, as does the knowledge of such practices.

This more materialist approach is a form of ecological democracy—democratic, community action based on ecological reflexivity and relationality, on a desire to reconnect both socially and ecologically to community. These community-based redesigns of systems that supply basic needs like food, energy, and clothing are a clear and present form of democratic experimentation. While not as institutionalized as deliberative processes, these experiments also find ways to represent interests of more-than-human and future generations and, again, to re-anchor communities in place, in seasons, in ecological flows even in the face of climate turbulence.

Multispecies urban design

The fourth example of democratic experimentation I want to note is a growing focus on *multispecies urban design*. There is an increasing set of examples of urban interventions

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2332889425000053 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that combine climate adaptation, nature-based solutions (NBS), multispecies justice, and democratic experimentation (Raymond et al. 2025). For example, the MUST program (Multispecies Urban Sustainability Transitions), run by Chris Raymond at the University of Helsinki, is working in three urban areas in Finland to design and implement a combination of NBS, with an ethic of multispecies justice, for adapting to climate change in more-than-human worlds. It's about innovative rebuilding of multispecies places for climate resilience—adaptation in the face of turbulence. MUST is an example of how to do community-based adaptation that is not just about human resilience, but also an attentiveness to biodiversity and more-than-human habitats in urban spaces. The work entails expanding the usual adaptation pathway planning, and NBS, to more fully engage populations with a specific attentiveness to ecological relationality in the city. Similarly, researchers in Sweden have developed a "We Live Here Too" workshop for children to explore urban ecology, multispecies storytelling, and urban design (Naturescapes 2025).

This ecological reflexivity, or attention to multispecies impacts of climate change and human responsibility in designing responses, is often part of community resilience and adaptation as well. As part of the City of Sydney's adaptation planning process, residents noted the complete absence of more-than-human residents of the city in the initial plan, and expressed a desire to incorporate flora and fauna, bats, trees, birds, parks, pets, and more into the City's adaptation policy and practice (Schlosberg et al. 2017). There is keen interest by residents in many places to expand the democratic circle in this way, in urban design and adaptation.

This approach illustrates an experimental democratic politics that expands the representation and inclusion of MtH interests, it engages ecological reflexivity, and it encompasses relationality by examining the impacts of potential policies and urban designs for everyday life on both human and MtH residents and working through ways of providing for both. Again, it responds to climate turbulence and the seeming inevitability of dis-placement with a dedication to place, a recognition of multispecies relations and responsibilities, and visions of climate-impacted democratic futures that stress place and relationality. This is ecological democracy in practice.

End

These examples illustrate not some kind of future imaginary, or climate fiction—they are designed, developed, grounded, and material experiments and practices happening now, on the ground, across the globe. And I have laid out just a few examples of the kind of democratic experimentation being developed in the face of climate turbulence—an increase in deliberative processes, the design of more sustainable material systems and supply chains, more community-based expansion of social infrastructure in the face of disasters, and some purposeful multispecies urban transition. Again, and crucially, all of this is done in response to the kind of loss and threatened detachments—to human and more-than-human relations—experienced by these communities. They illustrate an attentiveness to the kind of ecological reflexivity and relationality at the heart of theories of ecological democracy and justice. And they represent the reality, and the potential, of hoping with teeth.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2332889425000053 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Note

1. Full disclosure: I have organized such experiments myself; see Schlosberg et al. (2017).

References

Aslam, A., D. McIvor, and J. Schlosser. 2024. *Earthborn Democracy: A Political Theory of Entangled Life*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Bulkeley, H. 2023. "The Condition of Urban Climate Experimentation." *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Politics* 19 (1): 2188726.

Celermajer, D., M. Cardoso, J. Gowers, D. Indukuri, P. Khanna, R. Nair, J. Orlene, V.P.I. Sambhavi, D. Schlosberg, M. Shah, S. Shaw, A. Singh, G. Spoor, G. Wright et al. 2024. "Climate Imaginaries as Praxis." *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 7 (3): 1015–1033.

Chwalisz, C. and L. Reid. 2024. *More-than-human Governance Experiments in Europe*. DemocracyNext.

Coles, R. 2016. *Visionary Pragmatism: Radical and Ecological Democracy in Neoliberal Times*. Duke UP.

Curato, N., J. Dryzek, D. Levai, C. Mellier, M. Ross, and R. Wilson. 2025. "Where Next for Global Climate Deliberation: From Proof of Concept to a Role in Transformation." *Earth System Governance* 25: 1–3. https://doi.org/ 10.1016/j.esg.2025.100280.

Hulme, M. 2009. *Why We Disagree about Climate Change*. Cambridge UP.

KNOCA. 2024. *Climate Assemblies: Emerging Trends, Challenges, and Opportunities*. London: KNOCA.

Mann, M. and P. Hotez. 2025. *Science Under Siege*. PublicAffairs Books.

Marquardt, J., F. Pfeiffer, M. Blum, T. Daw, F. A. Dugasseh, J. Heitzig, E. Hysing, I H Brandt. Jensen, K. Kulha, F. Langkjær, D. Lindvall, N. Nasiritousi, D. Schlosberg, A. Toikka, and L. Tønder. 2025. "Reconciling Democracy and Sustainability: Three Political Challenges and the Role of Democratic Innovations." *Sustainability: Science, Practice, & Policy* 21. https://doi.org/ 10.1080/15487733.2025.2504239.

Meyer, J. 2023. "Experimentalism and Its Alternatives: Toward Viable Strategies for Transformative Change and Sustainability." *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Politics* 19(1): 2166217.

Miéville, C. 2015. "Limits of Utopia". *Salvage*, http://salvage.zone/in-print/the-limits-of-utopia/ (accessed 1 November 2025).

Naturescapes. 2025. "We Live Here Too: Imagining Cities for Bats, Moths, and Wildflowers". *Medium*, 31 October.

Pickering, J., K. Backstrand, and D. Schlosberg. 2020. "Between Environmental and Ecological Democracy." *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planing* 22: 1–15. https://doi.org/ 10.1080/1523908X.2020.1703276

Pittaway, E., J. Longman, S. Webster, A. Howard, M. Rawsthorne, P. Matous, D. Schlosberg, J. Bailie, Z. Gillies-Palmer, N. Naderpajouh, and M. Braddon. 2025. "Recognition and Relationship-building: Key Ingredients for Effective Collaboration between Disaster Management Agencies and Community." *Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 131. https://doi.org/ 10.1016/j.ijdrr.2025.105858.

Purdy, J. 2015. *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene*. Harvard UP.

Raymond, C.M., P. Rautio, N. Fagerholm, V.A. Aaltonen, E. Andersson, D. Celermajer, M. Christie, M. Hällfors, M.H. Saari, H.S. Mishra, A.M. Lechner, M. Pineda-Pinto, and D. Schlosberg. 2025. "Applying Multispecies Justice in Nature-based Solutions and Urban Sustainability Planning: Tensions and Prospects." *NPJ Urban Sustainability* 5. https://doi.org/ 10.1038/s42949-025-00191-2.

Schlosberg, D. 2023. "Turbulence, Converging Crises, and Environmental Justice." In *Global Environmental Politics in a Turbulent Era*, ed. P. Dauvergne and L. Shipton, Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.

Schlosberg, D. and R. Coles. 2016. "The New Environmentalism of Everyday Life: Sustainability, Material Flows, and Movements." *Contemporary Political Theory* 15: 160–181. https://doi.org/ 10.1057/cpt.2015.34

Schlosberg, D., L. B. Collins, and S. Niemeyer. 2017. "Adaptation Policy and Community Discourse: Risk, Vulnerability, and Just Transformation." *Environmental Politics* 26: 423–437. https://doi.org/ 10.1080/09644016.2017.1287628

Schlosberg, D. and L. Craven. 2019. *Sustainable Materialism: Environmental Movements and the Politics of Everyday Life*. Oxford UP.

Smith, G. 2009. *Democratic Innovations*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press.

Tonder, L. 2025. *Power in the Anthropocene*. Edinburgh UP.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2332889425000053 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Wakefield, S. 2021. "Experimental Government in the Anthropocene." In *International Relations in the Anthropocene*, ed. D. Chandler, et al, London: Springer Nature

Webster, S., E. Pittaway, Z. Gillies-Palmer, D. Schlosberg, J. Longman, A. Howard, M. Rawsthorne, G. Viney, B. Verlie, D. Celermajer, J. Bailie, P. Matous, N. Naderpajouh, P. Joseph, K. Iveson, and J. Troy. 2024b. *Stories are the Toolkit: Community-led Disaster Response, Recovery and Adaptation*. Sydney Environment Institute.

Webster, S., E. Pittaway, Z. Gillies-Palmer, D. Schlosberg, P. Matous, J. Longman, A. Howard, J. Bailie, G. Viney, B. Verlie, D. Celermajer, N. Naderpajouh, M. Rawsthorne, P. Joseph, K. Iveson, and J. Troy (2024a). Self-Organising Systems to Minimise Future Disaster Risk - Findings Report. Sydney Environment Institute.

Cite this article: Schlosberg, David. 2026. "Climate Turbulence and Experiments in Ecological Democracy." Democratic Theory 13 (1): 137–144. https://doi.org/10.1017/S2332889425000053

https://doi.org/10.1017/S2332889425000053 Published online by Cambridge University Press