8

Politicising Climate Change Mitigation Policy

> … climate change is intrinsically political … thinking more carefully about climate change's political qualities will be helpful in advancing responses (Paterson 2021)

8.1 Introduction

This book has analysed climate mitigation politics over the past decades, structured by a reframing of climate politics that takes time more seriously, foregrounds deliberation and social interaction, allows for dynamic interrelations between policy and politics, and recognises conflict as part of politics. Just as framings of policy, growth, equity, and justice in relation to climate change have changed over time, so too has mitigation, as a relatively new policy area, become more deeply politicised. Chapter 3 applied Colin Hay's conceptualisation of politics as collective choice, agency and capacity, deliberation, and social interaction as a loose container within which to organise thinking about climate change politics. Here I return to each of those areas of politics to assess degrees and types of climate mitigation politicisation as of early 2025 – partly to better understand the politics of acting to mitigate in this current phase and partly to identify important tensions that need to be recognised when thinking politically about mitigation. In sum, as reflected in Table 8.1, based on the conceptualisation of politicisation used to frame this book, climate mitigation has, particularly when compared to the 1980s, become deeply politicised in a wide variety of ways. What the analysis over the course of the book, and particularly in Chapter 7, has suggested is that politicisation, although generally under-researched including in relation to climate mitigation, is vital to understand if public policy is to continue to act as one of the main drivers of low-emissions change.

The work of Matthew Paterson, Paul Tobin, and Stacy VanDeveer on (de-)politicising climate change has suggested that maintaining relatively stable mitigation policy whilst also recognising the value of politicised processes need not necessarily be mutually exclusive (2022). Whilst I agree with the overall

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Table 8.1 *Politicisations of mitigation: 1980s to 2020s*

	Politicisations in the 1980s	Politicisations by 2020s
Collective choice	• Climate mitigation a subject of public policy in a handful of jurisdictions: Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands commit to stabilising emissions. • Emerging salience of climate change as an issue, supported by scientific knowledge.	• Salience of climate change as an electoral and political issue mostly established. • Mitigation on policy agendas in most countries and some cities and corporations. • Established policy norms: net zero emissions, carbon pricing, offsetting, renewable support, green industrial strategy. • Some policies more open to contestation and change: especially subsidies, carbon taxes, and fossil fuel phase out.
Agency	• No dedicated climate change governing bodies • Some states emerging as leaders in advocating for climate mitigation policies.	• Governing bodies for climate mitigation established at global, transnational, national, sub-national, and corporate scales. • Developed capacities to deliver some mitigation goals (emissions reduction, renewables, energy efficiency) in a limited number of countries. • Limited capacities to adjudicate between competing interests – varies temporally and according to jurisdiction.
Deliberation	• Growth in scientific knowledge about climate change. • Growth in deliberative spaces for climate science: IPCC established 1989. • Emerging spaces to deliberate climate change politically: World Climate Conferences 1979, 1985, 1987, and 1988. • Emerging social spaces: Transnational Climate Action Network Founded 1989.	• Considerable increase over time in deliberative spaces for science, technology, and policy – including UNFCCC; IPCC; IRENA; C40; IEA. • Growth in deliberative space re: how to design policies based on an understanding of social and corporate incumbencies and of non-emissions policy outcomes. • Greater public understanding of climate change, more awareness of different mitigation policies but, at the same time, continued misinformation.

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Table 8.1 (*cont.*)

	Politicisations in the 1980s	Politicisations by 2020s
		• Relative growth in deliberative capacities as mitigation policy outcomes become more apparent and evidence base grows of need for further policy adjustment. • Development of deliberative capacities in wider array of policies, including green industrial strategy esp. in Asian countries but emerging in Europe.
Social interaction	• Societal engagement largely limited to (growing) environmental movements. • Some growth in public communication about climate change as an issue: via environmental movements, protests, and books that inspired action, like 'A Silent Spring'.	• Limited but growing societal participation in decision-making. Notable exceptions – Citizen's Assemblies; EU Clean Energy for All; fossil fuel phase-out processes in Germany, Canada, and Spain that include non-elite stakeholder participation. • Growing emphasis on co-benefits and/or seeking to meet other policy goals: security, growth, jobs, and welfare. • Widespread media (print, television, and social) coverage: for and against mitigation. Limited communication of mitigation successes. • Climate surveys show relatively greater degrees of support for mitigation.

sentiment, below I suggest some amendments and further nuances. In considering this question, their understanding of depoliticisation is wound up with arguments that shielding mitigation from debate can lead to policy stability and, conversely, that politicisation is about opening hard-earned mitigation policies up to debate and contestation. Thinking about phases of mitigation through time opens this question up a bit.

Firstly, from the temporal perspective taken in this book, each mitigation policy instrument does not need to be durable over the decades required to reduce

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emissions, rather for long enough to take effect. Once taking effect, it will probably also be unavoidable that there will be societal responses, of varying kinds. The trick, of course, is to ensure that these are as broadly positive as possible. Some mitigation policy instruments should be flexible enough with time to allow for those instances when specific policy goals have been met, for example cost reductions in and diffusion of low-emissions technologies. This is also because, at such times as specific goals are met, much-needed political resources should be distributed to the next mitigation-related issues that require public policy action, thereby avoiding harmful and unnecessary policy lock-ins. Policy stability, here then, applies to questions of how to maintain climate mitigation as a public policy area across the decades required to meet, as currently, net zero goals (see also Rosenbloom et al. 2019 here), whilst ensuring that there are sufficient numbers and types of policies to ensure targets are met.

Secondly, having based the conceptualisation of politicisation on a broad and inclusive notion of politics, this book has revealed mitigation politicisation as varied and as having, often in non-linear ways, accumulated since the 1980s. Table 8.1 compares degrees and types of politicisation between the 1980s and 2020s structured according to each of Hay's 'features' of politics. Disaggregating politicisation has helped to reveal both variety and how interconnected politicisations are to one another. For example, politicisation as the ability to maintain mitigation as a public policy area is closely related to other forms of politicisation – in particular to growth in deliberative capacities and in capacities to meet emissions reduction targets in ways that benefit the delivery of other social goals. By foregrounding and exploring social interaction in more depth, this approach has revealed a further important insight. Politicisations to include more citizens in mitigation policy are not only, as is often suggested, about improved public participation, but also about education, communication, and delivering on emissions reduction and other social goals.

As outcomes of mitigation policies become more widespread through time, it suggests that depoliticising strategies become both less possible and less useful. In the acceleration phase, with greater conflict and more widespread experiences of climate change, meeting contestations with deliberative silence boosts the space for anti-mitigation policy rhetoric to thrive and suggests that governments do not have tools at hand to act. Thinking politically, then infers reclaiming that space and utilising all available tools.

Lastly, thinking about climate politics across global, national, and sub-national scales allows for the fact that even as climate mitigation may become subject to forms of depoliticisation, as was the case at the Federal level in the US under the first Trump administration, other forms of politicisation can also persist. This might be at different scales, again as in the US, when a range of states stepped

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up their climate action, whilst as mitigation decelerates in some jurisdictions, it can accelerate elsewhere. This suggests a certain duality in occurrences of (de-)politicisation – depoliticisations can occur at the same time as politicisations. Simultaneous depoliticisation and politicisation can also be about growing politicisation in social interaction terms, as citizens not previously supportive of climate action become more so through personal experiences (Yun Chen et al. 2024; Reny et al. 2025), even as governments decelerate action and reduce levels of state agency.

On one level, the approach taken in this book suggests that multiple politicisations that have built public policy capacities, improved deliberative capacities and available information, and widened social engagement continue to outweigh individual attempts to depoliticise. What matters, then, is how to continue to build on previous politicisations as a basis for thinking more politically and proactively about how to accelerate emissions reduction in a just manner. What also matters is to not retreat from climate politics in at moments of heightened contestation but to lean into conflict as an inevitable aspect of the politics of mitigation over time. Given increases in fossil fuel phase-out policy, the fourth 'acceleration' phase is going to be more conflictual – but information about counter-mitigation narratives, strategies, and successes is also more readily available to sharpen pro-mitigation responses.

8.2 Politicisations in Politics as Collective Choice

There is widespread recognition in most of the world, including at the international level and in most high-emissions countries, that climate change is an issue and that emissions can and should be controlled and not left to the realm of 'fate'. Climate mitigation, as a political goal, has largely remained on political agendas over time even in countries, like the US and Brazil, where it is still a partisan issue. Interestingly, even in countries where governments have come to power that used anti-climate rhetoric as part of their campaigns, negative effects on mitigation policy and outcomes are highly context specific (Marquardt et al. 2022). That is to say that election rhetoric did not always match up to the realities of mitigation policy change, albeit emerging events in the US suggest that this is not the case for Trump's second term in office.

Mitigation has become politicised in the most fundamental of senses – it has been made subject to ongoing and collective political choices. It has become part of the policy landscape (Jordan & Matt 2014). This is no mean feat considering persistent contestations from those that have sought to deny or delay mitigation as well as from those that do not believe in political institutions and, thus, try to avoid them by framing mitigation as achievable primarily through

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market and/or technological innovations. That governments at national and sub-national scales, and corporations, have agreed to emissions reduction targets suggests a good degree of institutionalisation of mitigation goals (Hajer & Pelzer 2018; Dubash 2021).

To return again to the question of the durability of climate mitigation policy, raised in Chapters 1 and 2 and discussed above, it is worth more explicitly distinguishing between 'stable' public policy goals and political strategies and instruments. Decisions in many countries, and some cities, to make net zero targets legally binding reflect a desire for stability of the overall direction of policy in open recognition of the embryonic nature of this policy area, the degree of change needed, and the relative power and influence of some of the actor groups ranged against it. It also reflects a desire for societal certainty regarding direction of change – for policymakers, companies, and citizens. The first political choice of legally binding mitigation targets, as part of the UK's 2008 Climate Change Act, was underpinned by an explicit political desire to ensure that there would be an emissions reduction goal in place as political parties in power changed (Lockwood 2021). As outlined in Chapters 6 and 7, legally binding targets have provided a basis for citizens and civil society to hold powerful actors to account and are actively used as a lever to politicise the actions of governments and energy companies that take insufficient action (Stokes 2020; Higham et al. 2023). The ability for legal challenge, then, opens up possibilities to contest authoritative actors within a wider socio-economic context that has long be skewed towards high-emissions actors and systems (Paterson 2021). Targets have also provided a focal point around which sustainability coalitions can construct arguments that existing policies are insufficient and that new mitigation policies are required.

Having a stable mitigation goal might also, however, be viewed as depoliticising to the extent that it reduces opportunities for contestation of that goal. Indeed, for some anti-mitigation groups, the fact that climate goals have been embedded legally can be seen as highly depoliticising, as this distances the question of *whether* to reduce emission from social interaction. It is on the basis that anti-mitigation coalitions, and populist groups, have been able to quite successfully frame mitigation targets as being in the interests of established political élites. On the other hand, legally binding mitigation goals also represent an active form of politicisation to the extent that they retain mitigation as a public policy area and that they drive politicians and civil servants to engage with the issue of how to meet those goals, like net zero, and discourage mitigation from slipping down political agendas. This is an example of politicisation in terms of maintaining mitigation as an active collective choice, as opposed to seeing this as just favouring the normative quality of stability over conflict (Paterson et al. 2022). Put

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another way, from accepting and maintaining mitigation goals flows the ability to make policy (instrument) choices, build public policy capacity, deliberate, and socially interact over the decades required to meet those goals. Like Rosenbloom et al. (2019), then, I suggest that maintaining the overall direction as one of lower emissions can be understood as, overall, politicising.

That emission reduction goals have become a new policy norm has often engendered politicisation in terms of reaching agreement on how to proceed in policy terms. With targets in place, the politics of climate mitigation has increasingly become about how to shape sustainable transformations through policy (see Hajer & Pelzer 2018 for a similar argument). Agreement here has been more problematic, policies have been delayed or dropped at points in time, whilst choices have been structured by ideas, interests, and materialities and interactions with other policy areas. As such, some have made claims about the need for more 'stable' policy. I, again like Rosenbloom et al. (2019), have argued that 'stable' policies are not necessary to ensure lasting mitigation. Indeed, from the perspective of politics adopted here, policies should be subject to contestation and change with time as contexts change.

For example, in practical terms, given limited resources, it is important to lower subsidies when low-emissions technology costs fall, ultimately deploying public funds to support other niche technologies and to improve renewable integration and grid functionality as the percentage of renewables in electricity systems rises. In political terms, once new technologies, like renewables, can compete with existing high-emissions technologies, it no longer makes sense to maintain that policy cost burden on citizens. The suggestion here, then, is that an active policymaking focus on technical practicalities and distributional outcomes is required as a basis for revisiting policies over time. This suggests flexibility in terms of policy choices about which technologies, industries, or social groups might be supported and when. There is an associated need for policymakers to have the capacity to make such complex technical and social decisions, relying, in turn, on politicisations in terms of improvements in deliberative capacities. Ironically, then, the drive amongst those that seek to depoliticise climate in order to engender 'stable' policy might, in fact, create the conditions for contestations as policies that are no longer required, but support certain constituents whilst costing others, continue.

Lastly, on politicisations in terms of active collective choice – it is worth touching briefly on the question of political perspectives. We have seen that it is possible to have an embedded mitigation goal that is pursued via policies that emphasise the agency of market actors over state interventions, which suggests mitigation as at once politicised, subject to collective choice, and depoliticised to the extent that the range of policy choices and actors is limited (Kuzemko 2015).

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As discussed above, this was the dominant approach at the UN level and in certain countries in the 1990s and early 2000s. The analysis in Chapter 7, however, has suggested that in the last decade a far wider choice of approaches to mitigation policy, and of policy instruments, has emerged – even in erstwhile LMEs. This infers politicisation to the extent that such approaches recognise the need for mitigation to be allocated higher degrees of political personnel and public finance capacities. Significant bodies of legislation, such as the EU Green Deal and the US Inflation Reduction Act, have been put in place in regions previously more committed to market actors delivering change. To some extent, these can be read as responses to, and learnings from, the economic successes associated with China's much longer standing preference for developmental state policies to underpin their significant cleantech industrial development (Meckling 2018). If the 1990s and early 2000s emphasis was more on flexibility for corporations under conditions of lower targets, later more ambitious targets have both produced opportunities for low-emissions actors and made conditions more stringent for some high emissions actors – particularly in coal and car manufacturing industries (see Jordan & Matt 2014).

8.3 Politicisation as Capacity for State Agency

Turning to politics as capacity for agency, including the establishment of governing bodies, setting and meeting mitigation policy goals, and the allocation of public resources, there have been significant politicisations. As each chapter of this book has documented, and others have observed, a system of climate change public policy, knowledge, and data bodies has been established, sometimes referred to as an ecosystem of climate institutions (Rosenbloom et al. 2019; Dubash 2021; Hochstetler 2021). This has taken a wide variety of forms – from layering of new goals onto existing policymaking departments to the establishment of climate-specific bodies. These include transnational groups focused on specific areas like renewable policy advice, divestment, fossil fuel phase-out, emissions reduction measurements and assessments, and climate legal campaigns.

Climate science has gained, partly through the efforts of a more developed and vocal IPCC, new levels of knowledge about human–climate interactions and their outcomes – whilst time has proven that they were right on many counts. In the US, which has seen build-ups and reductions in climate policymaking capacity at the Federal level, as parties in government change, the Biden administration worked to build mitigation capacity explicitly with previous eras of erosion in mind (Mildenberger 2021). It remains to be seen just how successful this strategy has been – certainly Federal level climate institutions are being severely tested during the second Trump administration. For those seeking to

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hold countries and/or corporations to account, there is now a far wider range of accessible information available to do so – from IEA country and sector reports to Carbon Tracker to the European Environment Agency databases. Access to data is useful also for those groups, like ClientEarth, that fund and coordinate climate lawsuits. The ability to contest, to prove that existing policy is inadequate in relation to targets, is central to the capacity of pro-mitigation acceleration coalitions to argue that further changes are needed.

Running alongside capacities to contest the efficacy of existing policy, there remain questions over capacities to keep climate mitigation on political agendas as contestation rises but also about how the growth of clean alternatives affects political power relations. Politicisations here include the growth in influence of groups that support low-emissions sectors, businesses, and practices; growing capacities to design policies that avoid backlash that have their roots in the lived experiences of policy outcomes; and rebalancing the conditions for low and high emissions industries. Transnational organisations like the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) and C40 Cities, both now at the forefront of knowledge sharing, data gathering, and lobbying on clean transitions, are evidence of the growing agency of low-emissions constituents. As outlined in Chapter 7, global low-emissions business groups now represent noticeably significant proportions of energy markets and of economic growth for some countries. For example, the world's largest renewable energy company, Spain's Iberdrola, had $50 billion in revenue in 2023; the value of the sector is expected to reach $1.2 trillion in 2024; whilst, as of 2023, clean energy sectors employed more people than fossil fuel energy sectors.

This is not to argue that global fossil fuel companies have relatively less capacity to argue for further delays to mitigation policies – they remain, as of early 2025, well-resourced and influential – but that they are no longer the only energy game in town in terms of underpinning economic growth, energy security, energy tax income, and employment. At the same time, the outlook for fossil fuel demand has started to change given mitigation policies that have contributed to the increased affordability and availability of renewable energy, the electrification of heat and transport, and increasing the cost of carbon. Although estimates vary, with fossil fuel corporations predicting the most growth, the IEA now predicts a peak in global oil and gas demand by 2030 (IEA 2024e), whilst it has become relevant to also think about fossil fuel corporations in terms of transition risks and stranded assets (Colgan et al. 2021).

Turning to the question of policy design to avoid social backlash, the capacity of policymakers to design policies that avoid backlash is diminished if they fail to account for non-emissions outcomes and expose mitigation policy to contestations from established anti-mitigation groups. The need to improve on this aspect

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of policy is particularly great during this fossil fuel phase-down phase – where one of the main tasks is to delink contestation from fossil fuels companies facing relatively more bleak futures from wider societal concerns. One of the central arguments in Chapter 7 was that time, increased availability of data, growing domestic policy experience, and information about policy in other countries, could put policymakers in a position where they can better understand non-emissions implications and use this knowledge as a basis for improving policy design.

This kind of thinking politically about the relationship between mitigation outcomes and potential distributional roles for public policy has been incorporated into policy thinking in the EU, in terms of seeking to balance outcomes between and within member states. We also saw examples at the sub-national level in Canada, Spain, and Germany focused on ameliorating opposition from workers in affected industries. In politicisation terms, these moves are important as public policy is central to just forms of change, not least as governments have primary responsibility for delivering *social* goals. Historically public policy has played a key role in distributing the benefits of new sociotechnical systems (Perez 2002), that is, through state-led infrastructure build out in electricity, telecommunications, and broadband roll-out. More recently, EU states stepped in to redistribute energy system costs at times of crisis by placing windfall taxes on energy corporations and using the income to protect those most vulnerable to price hikes (Kuzemko et al. 2022).

There are direct links, here, between capacities to improve policy design, and better adjudicate between pro- and anti-mitigation interests, and politics as social inclusion. Whilst some groups in society most effected by a phase-out policy, including workers, unions, but also corporations, may participate in its design and receive resources to ameliorate the negative effects of that policy, others in society have less say about whether they want to fund compensation for, for example, affected fossil fuel companies. At the same time, the capacity of policymakers to adjudicate between the interests of groups that might otherwise wish to slow change and those that seek faster change is altered through such just transition policies. Those that might oppose sustainable change are brought onside through compromises and bargaining as part of the policymaking process. At the same time, power relations can shift as interests become less aligned with high-emissions businesses through phase-out. In a limited sense, then, there have been politicisations in terms of improved policymaking capacities to design more socially just mitigation measures – limited to specific instances in certain jurisdictions. This capacity is also limited to the extent that account is taken of community or national redistributions, but not of international transitions justice questions.

There are two further points on politics as capacity, that relate back to insights above about political perspectives and policy choice and design. It is arguably

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harder to pursue goal-driven public policy that seeks to redistribute transition, and/or system costs, if the party, or parties, in government is ideologically disposed towards low taxes, limited government, and against distributive policies. Here, then, party politics and perspectives matter not just in terms of keeping climate on agendas, that is, pro-climate or not, but to whether, and the degree to which, particular governments have the capacity to choose the kinds of policies required to build long-term benefit from change. Links between climate mitigation and other policy areas, discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, with some emphasis on possible co-benefits, become relevant again here. Research has identified instances in which welfare policies have been useful in supporting more vulnerable groups through periods of sustainable change – that is, older citizens in Poland and Germany (Szulecki et al. 2024) and those vulnerable to high energy prices in a wide range of European countries (Kuzemko et al. 2017; Maltby & Misik 2024). It is here, however, that the second Trump, 'anti-government' administration in the US might do the most damage – particularly if mitigation continues at the state level but there are no attempts to distribute the costs and benefits.

In other parts of the world, however, the need for active state capacity, planning and co-ordination in driving clean industrial development has already been accepted. As discussed in Chapters 6 and 7, the economic success, if not success yet in territorial emissions reduction, of China's state-led, long-term green industrial strategy has served as an example to a wide range of other countries. Indonesia, South Korea, India, and Japan have all taken note and launched their own strategies designed to support new, cleantech industries and improve competitiveness in this now-established global market. For parts of the world that have been less used to pursuing active industrial policy, like the EU, the UK, and the US, there has been a re-consideration the role of state-led industrial policy in engendering clean energy, transport, and buildings. Whilst clean-tech has its own environmental problematics, and economic developmentalism can also support status-quo distributional relations, this does suggest that the scale of the task of mitigation is increasingly perceived as requiring greater levels of state agency. Jonas Meckling's research on the developmental state and industrial policy concludes that state-led support for low-emissions industries in certain domestic settings, not least China, both creates new global economic interests and drives down the cost of global low-emissions cooperation for other states (2018).

Taken together, then, mitigation policies and clean transitions have already caused policymakers, and researchers, to think more about the variety of roles that the state, as a particular actor, can play. Research on the role of the state, discussed in Chapter 2, made a number of normative claims about state agency within complex processes of mitigation, often based on historical analysis and

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conceptual thinking. This book, across the empirical chapters, has included examples of a wide range of state roles that have been assumed over time. This include: in distributing the costs and benefits of clean transitions; enabling and distributing clean-tech innovations and manufactured goods; lowering the economic and political costs of expanding renewables and associated low-emissions technologies; creating new pro-emissions reduction constituencies; and making business conditions relatively more difficult for fossil fuel corporations.

8.4 Politicisation and Deliberation

This book has taken a position that politics is also a deliberative process wherein conflictual positions compete, and the compromises that shape policies are reached (Barry 2002; Hay 2007; Paterson 2021). This aspect of politics is often overlooked in (de-)politicisation literatures. Paterson et al. view attempts to implement positive policy feedback loops as depoliticising, on the basis of a lack of public deliberation and transparency around that particular intent (2021). This book engages a wider notion of deliberation based in politics as knowledge and critical thinking – seeing it as central to the shape of climate politics. Beyond stakeholder and public engagement, it also includes the furthering of climate mitigation knowledge, considerations of different public policy approaches to mitigation, and improved understandings of mitigation policy outcomes and how they feed back into new policymaking processes. On the latter point, it is only through deliberating the actual effects of mitigation policies that policymakers can come to know whether and/or how to adjust policy – that is, as technologies and systems change or as publics experience sub-optimal socio-economic outcomes.

In many parts of the world, related in turn to the capacity politicisations discussed above, possibilities for climate politics as deliberation have grown – particularly in elite circles – as experiences have grown and knowledge and information have become more available. Zaki & Dupont (2023) make a compelling case for the role of policy learning as a pre-condition to climate policy change in EU institutions. They provide evidence of learning about climate change, mitigation policy, and use of scientific knowledge as key to the ability of policymakers to substantiate the need for change and/or establish positions in relation to mitigation. This is most particularly within circles where evidence-based policymaking is prioritised. In terms of the broader contours of elite debates, opposition groups seeking to influence mitigation policy are relatively less focused on denial and more on tactics of delay, whilst those arguing for change are more focused on increasing policy speed, ambition, and justice (Newell 2021; Paterson 2021; Buller 2022; Westlake & Willis 2023; Harry et al. 2024). Interestingly, the rise in green or clean industrial strategies and experiences of growth from clean-energy

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sectors increasingly underpin deliberative abilities to re-calculate net policy costs of net zero. For example, the UK's Committee on Climate Change in 2025 revised down the net cost of reaching net zero by 73% to account for saved costs from lower fossil fuel imports and contributions from cleantech sectors to the UK economy (CCC 2025). This is without considering the value of avoided costs.

Within public debates there has been relatively more attention paid to climate change over the past decades, and understanding and acceptance of it as an issue. Importantly, however, debate about specific policies has also grown, whilst the nature of such debates has been contingent on the broader mood of the time. In the 2018–2019 period there was a lot of coverage of action by climate action groups that highlighted reasons for further action, but more recently, in the era of cost-of-living crisis, opposition to mitigation policies has grown, amidst a wider shift (again) towards right-wing Populism in Europe (Dennison 2024). Within the wider context of an increased focus on security, geopolitical competition, and mitigation policy costs (incumbent) groups opposing change are again emphasising their role as employers and producers of economic growth and energy security. These narratives are extended attempts to "reify" the high-emissions status quo (Lamb et al. 2020). See, for example, the 'back to the stone age' framings of sustainable re-assessments of new road projects in Germany (Pearson 2023); or framings of heat pumps as unworkable by gas companies, trade unions, and lobby groups. Such narratives make sense to specific sections of the public, whilst posing questions about specific low-emissions alternatives can make households and companies feel uncertain about change.

On a related note, some voters remain dis- or misinformed on climate change and mitigation solutions (Office for Science 2023), not surprising given policies by incumbent energy firms to extol the virtues of fossil fuels. At the same time, recent media coverage continues to cast doubt on low-emissions technologies, including EVs and heat pumps, whilst just transition narratives, that focus on loss of livelihood, are vulnerable to active capture by forces of climate delay (Harry et al. 2024). Perga et al. (2023) show that journal articles about social and political aspects of climate change, including solutions and their efficacy, are not widely dispersed – again contributing towards important gaps in knowledge. Whilst there is a high media coverage of climate science and existential threats, these need to be accompanied by solutions to avoid feelings of helplessness, anxiety, and lack of response (ibid.). This is a form of deliberative depoliticisation, as it limits the ability of some societal groups to understand fully what is at stake, what solutions are, and what their other beneficial outcomes might be – creating less informed voters in relation to climate mitigation.

These aspects of climate mitigation debates can support depoliticising instincts, especially during times of economic crisis and rising inequalities, to

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protect hard-won mitigation policy by reducing possibilities for deliberation and/or keeping decision-making processes technocratic. At the same time, tendencies towards climate modelling, IAMs and scenarios, also downplay the politics of mitigation, and importance of making decisions today, by relying heavily on technical and economic ideas (Clift & Kuzemko 2024). However, just as it becomes harder, over time, to hide climate change impacts, so too have the positive socio-economic outcomes associated with mitigation policies, discussed above, become more apparent. This can make representations of (only) negative socio-economic outcomes of mitigation policy relatively harder to sustain deliberatively – especially if benefits are actively recognised and more widely communicated (Stokes 2020).

At the same time, in a broader deliberative sense, not all opposition is necessarily bad for mitigation policy – it can bring a wider range of social ideas into processes that might otherwise be technocratic. This is evidenced in phase-out strategies that take a more participatory approach to policymaking but also in political choices to design just transition strategies to account for differential outcomes of mitigation policies. Examples include Spain's Just Transition Strategy (2019) and Ireland's Climate Action Plan (2021), which both overtly recognise those most vulnerable to low-emissions change and include policies to address those vulnerabilities. Arguably, more widely informed deliberation, that takes account of socio-economic outcomes, has been an important element of the capacity of policymakers to make more socially acceptable choices. As such, deliberative depoliticisation – that seeks to shield policymaking processes from public deliberation – can fail as a long-term approach to engendering mitigation policy (see Barry 2002 in Paterson 2021). Any deliberative assessments of a policy's track record, however, may well vary according to whether only climate policy goals are prioritised or whether low electricity prices, job creation, distributive justice, and/or citizen participation are also explicitly recognised as related goals (Steinbacher 2015).

8.5 Politicisations and Social Interaction

Last, but by no means least, we return to politics understood as social interaction to assess degrees and types of politicisations and to explore what the attempts undertaken in this book to better centre the social in analysis of mitigation politics have revealed. Social interaction is also, of course, about whose voices are heard, who makes policy (and on behalf of whom), societal distributions associated with political choices and policies, and who acts when mitigating (Bridge et al. 2013), and how these change with time. There has been some emphasis in policy approaches to mitigation, particularly in developed countries

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and from market-oriented viewpoints on societal roles in mitigation as being essentially about 'behaviour change' and clean 'choices' (Newell 2021). Here, however, I have explicitly focused on citizens as voters, members of civil society, as embedded within high-emissions institutions, and on the importance of policy outcomes and how they are distributed to how social groups experience climate mitigation. Social interaction is important as a means of feeding back views on and experiences of mitigation policy into policymaking processes via civil society activism; voting and opinion polls; legal action; and elite political influence and lobbying. Bringing social interaction into considerations of politicisation also highlights the importance of meeting policy goals – in particular, reducing emissions in a socially just and sustainable manner.

By thinking in terms of scale and breadth of social interaction, we can climate mitigation has become more politicised over time. More people are actively aware of different policies and issues associated with climate mitigation; that certain consumption choices and behaviours are higher emissions than others; whilst wider processes of engendering change through lobbying and activism have expanded. The numbers of people making lower emissions choices, like vegan, vegetarian or low meat diets, or only buying second-hand clothes, or choosing an EV over an ICE car, have risen in OECD countries. Whilst EV cars in China are predicted to outsell ICE cars by 2025. Likewise, numbers of 'prosumers', that produce their own electricity from distributed renewables, groups bringing companies and governments to court for not mitigating, and people directly employed in low-emissions businesses are also growing. This extends social engagements with climate mitigation into new realms – in line with arguments about growing constituencies with material interests in, but also lived experiences of, mitigation (Rosenbloom et al. 2019).

There have been other forms of politicisation in social interaction terms, to the extent that some mitigation policies have delivered on the policy goals of territorial emissions reductions, and relatively lower global emissions. Still more so when policies, like home insulation, deliver goals like affordable energy and improved health outcomes in addition to downward pressure on emissions. This aspect of social interaction, that is, contributing towards social goals, is insufficient when compared with what is required to meet Paris accord aims. At the same time, highlighting failures, especially if successes are not acknowledged, can both undermine overall trust in governments to reduce emissions as well as fuel anti-mitigation arguments. This, for those interested in advancing mitigation politics, is about better balancing communications about benefits of mitigation policy with evidence of the types of changes needed to improve social outcomes.

There remains, however, a wide range of groups globally that are either not motivated to, are not aware of, or cannot afford to make sustainable lifestyle

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changes – with preferences often attuned to access to and affordability of technologies which, historically, have been powered by fossil fuels. Sociology of systems research, in turn, highlights the importance of understanding such social responses to technologies. Much as modern societies have demanded technologies, so too have technologies shaped social preferences and practices – from expectations about how often we wash ourselves, to expected household temperatures, to being able to cover long distances with cars, trains, and planes (Shove & Walker 2010). This suggests that social norms and demands for technologies are mutable, something that is often forgotten in more technocratic approaches to mitigation.

Policy design matters deeply to how different societal groups interact with attempts to deliver similar living standards using lower emissions, particularly if policies involve disruptions to everyday lives. Unfortunately, as discussed in Chapter 6, despite growing examples of policy design that better improve distributional outcomes of mitigation policies, there remain examples of poor (or rushed) policy design. Two examples from the early 2020s spring to mind – the heat pump ban in Germany and high-emissions travel zoning in London – both of which resulted in significant political backlash. In each case proposed policies left too little time for households to adjust (Pitel 2023), whilst in the London case the scrappage scheme for high-emissions vehicles was insufficient and lower than other London schemes (Donovan 2024). This is a reminder that households on lower incomes, or are particularly reliant on lower cost, high-emissions equipment for their livelihoods, for example van drivers in affected areas of London, experience direct economic effects of badly designed policy. Better-designed policy tends to engage most-affected groups in society at an earlier stage to agree on a strategy (Bolet et al. 2023), whilst also considering societal engagement in low-emissions sectors through education, skills, and associated opportunities (Pavlova 2018).

This, of course, also serves as a salutary reminder that structural change, as well as good policy design, is needed if citizens are being asked to face economic hurdles, break everyday practices, and social attachments to high-emissions technologies and behaviours. As argued in Chapter 7, altering the everyday structures within which choices are made is vital in every high-emissions sector. Some behaviour change scholars have recently moved towards this position, whilst research is now available on structural barriers to, and contexts within which, social change takes place (Whitmarsh et al. 2021; Albarracin et al. 2024). For example, cycling is a hard choice to make if *safe* cycle routes are not available – generating continued demand, in turn, for car infrastructures. On the other hand, cities that have made sufficient investment in cycling infrastructure – like Amsterdam and Paris – have seen considerable growth in cycling and reductions in car usage (Readfearn 2024). Not forgetting, of course, that not acting to reduce emissions also has significant social consequences.

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In terms of whose voices are heard in policymaking debates – although there has been growth in groups engaging with climate policy – including younger voices through various transnational climate movements, more diverse groups via Citizens Assemblies, and backlash against regressive mitigation policies – some groups remain significantly un-represented. These include, at the national or subnational level, voices of groups already affected by climate change, those that do not have access to communication channels, or that might be affected by specific mitigation policies but are based in different jurisdictions. Recent research tends to support the claim that including more varied, non-elite, groups in climate deliberation and policymaking processes contributes towards more informed citizens as well as higher levels of engagement with and support for climate mitigation policy (Willis 2020). This is partly because, within participatory and deliberative processes, citizens are exposed to, and engage in more detail with, a wider range of research on climate change and solutions than might otherwise be the case. Robyn Eckersley has emphasised the importance of deliberative democracy in producing green outcomes (2004) – whilst the argument here is that citizens need access to channels of deliberation and representation as well as access to a wider range of accurate information.

The social interaction variants of politicisation have expanded, but more societal politicisations are needed. Too often, still, mitigation policies are measured according to potential to reduce emissions but not according to non-emission outcomes. The argument in this book is that, over the medium to long term, depoliticised approaches become harder to sustain and, particularly if policies produce negative feedback effects, endanger social support for the political project of mitigation. In line with Aklin and Mildenberger, the research undertaken in this book suggests that distributional issues are becoming increasingly central to climate politics (2020). As such, designing policies that both lower the social, political, and economic costs of mitigation and more widely distribute socio-economic benefits of low-emissions transformations is essential. Doing so, in turn, is more difficult without the participation of those affected by policies.

8.6 Final Reflections

From the start of this book, I have discouraged depoliticisation as a sustained political strategy – arguing, instead, for a more actively politicised approach that takes political science and sociology insights into mitigation into account. This is partly because mitigating for climate change is a long-term project that affects increasingly wider sections of societies – both when successful in reducing emissions and when not – and because it has been and remains contested by powerful

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élite actors with high levels of influence in public and policymaking circles. Ignoring such contestations – of the project of mitigation and of different types of policy – leaves a political space that anti-mitigation coalitions are well versed in filling with their own narratives. It is, no doubt, tempting whilst the climate clock is rapidly ticking and mitigation is being hotly contested, to want to turn away from certain features of politics. This, however, is a short-term strategy for a long-term project, based on too narrow an understanding of politics.

By using Colin Hay's conceptualisation of politics as a basis, I have been able to extend and deepen understandings of politicisation. This was in part an attempt to move away from negative connotations often associated with politicising mitigation, but also in recognition that over time mitigating for climate change via public policy is fundamentally political in nature. Identifying varied forms of politicisation has made it possible to suggest a range of ways to understand the conflictual nature of mitigation politics and find ways of addressing certain contestations. It also reveals the many ways in which policymakers can learn from experiences of designing mitigation policies that are more inclusive, just, and flexible.

Instead, then, of sheltering policy from contestations, this book has recommended using the political nature of mitigation, and decades of experience and learning, to design better policy and communicate the value of mitigation as an alternative means of sheltering it from attacks. Improving policy design is also about enhancing justice outcomes and creating new constituents in support of mitigation. It is, anyway, less tempting to hide mitigation policies if they deliver wider positive societal outcomes and, as was the case by the mid-2020s, the evidence base for those outcomes had started to build.

Considering variants of politicisation has also suggested routes towards, and possibilities for, public agency in mitigation (Beveridge & Nauman 2014). States, as discussed in Chapter 2, have possibilities for agency – but in climate mitigation this agency has had to be constructed over decades, often against significant opposition. This is why it has been important to consider how politicised mitigation has become and what the opportunities are for further improving capacities. It also becomes important not to just assume state agency, or dismiss governments and policymakers as not having sufficient mitigation capacities, but to actively think through how capacities to mitigate justly can be improved from current levels and variants of politicisation. In terms of further increasing the salience of climate mitigation, in the 2020s there is far more evidence of the costs of not mitigating, which should be incorporated in policy and integrated assessment models and scenarios to balance up the hitherto overemphasis on the costs of mitigation policy. In the 2020s more evidence also exists about the co-benefits that can be associated with well-designed mitigation policy, which emphasises the possible wider values of mitigation policy.

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Whilst compromises have underpinned the politicisation of climate mitigation in the fundamental sense of emissions reduction remaining on agendas other, often environmental and distributional, issues have been relatively less well addressed. This book has made a central claim that insufficient recognition of distributional issues within mitigation policy has been a core weakness in terms of politicisation as social interaction. The book has not, however, been about exploring the environmental effects of mitigation policy, although it has pointed to a variety of tensions. Most 'clean' energy companies, that earn this label because of their low GHG *emissions* status, could not be called 'clean' in a broader environmental sense. For example, nuclear energy has had considerable environmental and social repercussions historically, whilst renewable energy is based on systems of extraction with negative environmental consequences, albeit this is particularly in the 'build-out' phase when reliance on critical material extraction, manufactured goods, and supply chains are at their highest. What this means, however, is that these 'clean' companies may become the 'dirty' companies of the future, in the way that fossil fuel corporations are today. Another danger is that the centrality of growth underpins continued preferences for policies, not least offsetting and carbon removal, that continue to lead us down the path of putting off difficult decisions and missing targets. The approach taken in this book not only advocates facing tricky political decisions, particularly around fossil fuel phase out, in a strategic and planned manner but also explicitly sets out the value of doing so.

Further, in terms of the limitations of this book, there has been relatively less exploration of the complex politics of mitigation in sectors beyond energy – albeit it has touched regularly on connections to transport, and heat sectors. Of course, in all sectors of the economy, including increasingly agriculture (Newell 2018; Clapp 2018), similar contestations persist. Large scale, often national or global, corporations and associated political interests narrate mitigation as costly, élite, and against the interests of businesses and citizens associated with those industries. Albeit, in agriculture, the dangers of not mitigating can become all too apparent to farmers in areas already affected by floods, droughts, and shifting weather patterns. The more politically nuanced approach suggested here, that recommends identifying, understanding and addressing contestations, might well also apply in these sectors.

There is also an extent to which the recommendations of this book might sit uncomfortably with policymakers keen to reduce emissions in a more just manner but find themselves stuck within decision-making systems that prioritise least-cost policy – making it much harder to consider how policies relate to one another or to weave in wider social and distributional considerations. This brings us back to the question of ideas as institutions, and politicisation as one

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route towards revealing the inadequacies of policies and overall approaches to policymaking as a basis for change. Indeed, if a government in power, as is the case under the second Trump administration in the US, does not believe in public policy, then it becomes extremely difficult to politicise by assigning capacity. From the perspective of the approach taken in this book, this can lead to poor policy design, at best, and a self-fulfilling prophesy – by proving the inadequacy of government. At the same time, concentrating on the possible roles of public policy does not mean that the private sector is not part of the solution – but it does offer far more scope for better distributions of costs and benefits at times of significant system change.

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