Fergus Green
doi:10.1017/S1537592726105477

Depictions of climate change often emphasize future catastrophic risks. R. Jisung Park advocates a complementary narrative: climate change as a "slow and unequal burn" that is already causing widespread misery and death, with worse in store (p. 14). An economist who studies the human effects of environmental changes, Park masterfully synthesizes a wealth of economic findings—mostly quasi-experiments based on large data sets—to reveal the hidden impacts of storms, smoke, and heat on everything from student test scores to workplace accidents to even violent crime.

Park argues that this evidence justifies stronger government climate action. He's clearly right about this, but as anyone who pays attention to climate politics knows, better evidence rarely leads to better climate policy. So how might the proliferation of the "slow burn" narrative affect the politics of climate action?

At the individual level, Park thinks this narrative could make more people more concerned about climate change. I'm less optimistic. It's long been known that climate change is already harming people in myriad ways, yet it remains a low-salience, low-priority issue for majorities in most high-emitting countries, as demonstrated by studies like Jennifer Carman et al.'s 2024 international update to their study, *Global Warming's Six Audiences*, and work by Sam Crawley and colleagues. While Park uses statistics to reveal how climate change is causing wider and deeper impacts than previously thought, appreciating these impacts requires "a willingness to check our gut impulses and to think statistically" (p. 62). Yet, Park himself catalogues the many cognitive biases that prevent us from thinking statistically most of the time.

Carefully weighing the evidence and acting on it to keep us safe is what we fund governments for. So can we expect governments to parlay this new information into stronger climate action? Park thinks so. But again, at least when it comes to climate mitigation policy, the political science literature suggests grounds for doubt.

In Chapter 11, Park employs the well-worn neoclassical environmental economics framework to explore the policy implications of the evidence presented in the earlier chapters. The basic logic of his argument is as follows:

Premise 1: The evidence shows that the economic costs of climate change are much greater than previously thought;
Premise 2: These higher economic cost estimates can be plugged into the integrated assessment models that generate estimates of the Social Cost of Carbon (SCC), implying a higher SCC (and hence greater economic benefits from climate mitigation); and,
Premise 3: The SCC plays an "important" and "growing" role in government decision-making (p. 226).
Conclusion: Government decision-making will be more ambitious with respect to mitigating climate change than it would have been absent this new evidence.

But Premise 3 overstates the role of the SCC in climate mitigation policy. True, the US federal government used SCC estimates for regulatory cost–benefit analyses, so a higher SCC would, all else equal, justify more stringent climate regulations. But the second Trump administration dismantled the institutional infrastructure that operationalized the use of the SCC in regulatory governance during its first days in office. Moreover, only a handful of other national and subnational jurisdictions use the SCC—and often for much narrower purposes, as Kevin Rennert, Cora Kingdon, and Brian C. Prest note in their 2025 Resources for the Future primer, "Social Costs of Carbon 101."

The dominant view in contemporary political science understands domestic climate policy as a function not of evidence-based cost–benefit analysis, but of the policy preferences of industrial interest groups (business and labor). (See, e.g., Michael Ross's 2025 article, "The New Political Economy of Climate Change.") For instance, within this "distributive politics" paradigm, scholars Jeff Colgan, Jessica Green, and Tom Hale posit an existential battle between *climate-forcing asset-holders* (like fossil fuel companies) and *climate-vulnerable asset-holders* (like coastal tourism businesses) in their 2021 study in *International Organization*. Effectively, what Park's book tells us is that we need to (i) enlarge our understanding of who is a climate-vulnerable asset holder to encompass pretty much anyone who works outdoors (or indoors without air-conditioning); and (ii) appreciate the greater aggregate harm that these groups will suffer. On the asset-holder distributive politics view, then, the evidence Park marshals might incentivize more groups to fight harder for stronger climate mitigation policy.

There is real potential for such an effect, but I'm doubtful that it will be large. The asset-holder theory overstates the incentives of climate-vulnerable asset-holders to mobilize for stronger national climate mitigation: national governments have only partial influence over climate outcomes (because it is a global problem), so the potential benefits of such mobilization within nation states are attenuated. By contrast, when climate-forcing asset holders successfully mobilize *against* climate policies, they enjoy the full benefits in the form of avoided compliance costs.

Climate-vulnerable asset-holders *are*, however, incentivized to mobilize for climate *adaptation* policy, since this is something that a (sub-)national government alone can provide. Park makes a compelling case for the book's relevance to adaptation policy in Chapter 12. The addition of a distributive politics lens suggests that the route from better evidence

University College London, UK, fergus.green@ucl.ac.uk

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of American Political Science Association.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 07:35:06, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592726105477

to better adaptation policy will likely run not through individual citizens or cost-optimizing governments, but through powerful groups representing the interests of heat-stressed construction workers and smoke-affected students. Unions, though barely mentioned in the book, should also loom large in Princeton University Press' marketing plan.

Yet, as Park documents, the people most vulnerable to global warming's slow burn are disproportionately informal workers and those in the global south—precisely the groups least likely to be represented by a union anytime soon. Retarding the inequality-amplifying effects of climate change will therefore seemingly require a politics of global and domestic solidarity that transcends interest-group struggle. *Slow Burn* certainly helps to motivate such solidaristic sentiment. For that reason, among many others, it deserves to be widely read.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 07:35:06, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592726105477