



When, how, and why do politicians engage with climate change?

A systematic review

Key messages:

- **Politicians are motivated by internal (intrinsic) factors, such as personal experiences and political ideology), as well as external (extrinsic) factors, such as voter attitudes, elections and views within their political party.** Politicians use a variety of strategies to accomplish their climate-related policy goals.
- **We recommend that people working in the policy system foster interest in climate issues and support for climate policies within political parties.** Educating and empowering the public could also increase policy acceptability, which is important given how sensitive many politicians are to public opinion.
- **We recommend that politicians be ready to seize windows of opportunity,** such as changes in party leadership or ministers, that are conducive to passing climate policy.
- **We recommend that policy advisors tailor recommendations to politicians,** considering their motivations and challenges related to climate change.
- **Finally, we call for further research into this area, especially outside of Europe and North America;** beyond mitigation and national-level systems (i.e. including adaptation and multi-level governance); and on political system characteristics (e.g. the influence of presidential vs. parliamentary systems).



Introduction

This briefing is for politicians and other policymakers working on climate policy, as well as academics studying climate politics and policy making.

Politicians play a central role in political systems and thus in society's response to climate change. They carry out a variety of functions in the political system by representing constituents, aggregating and reconciling the various concerns of the public, providing compelling visions of the future, deliberating over and deciding on competing policy proposals, and overseeing policy implementation.

Politicians' important role in climate policy has led to a growing academic literature that examines their personal and policy motivations related to climate change, the incentives and barriers they face when addressing climate issues, and the strategies they use to accomplish their policy goals.

The speed at which this body of research is growing calls for a broad, systematic review to pull out key findings and recommendations that can support more and better climate policy.

Reviewing the literature

We carried out an extensive search of academic literature. We screened more than 5,500 articles and identified 141 with a core focus on both politicians and climate change (see [Figure 1](#)).

The articles largely discuss:

- Climate mitigation (action to avoid the release of planet-warming emissions)
- Politicians at the national and subnational level
- The legislative and executive branches of the policy system (in the UK, Parliament and Government, respectively)

There is an overwhelming focus on politicians in North America, Europe, and Australasia. The articles cover a wide range of topics, including politician rhetoric, their role in policymaking, their policy positions, and their understanding of climate change (see [Figure 2](#)).

Literature review

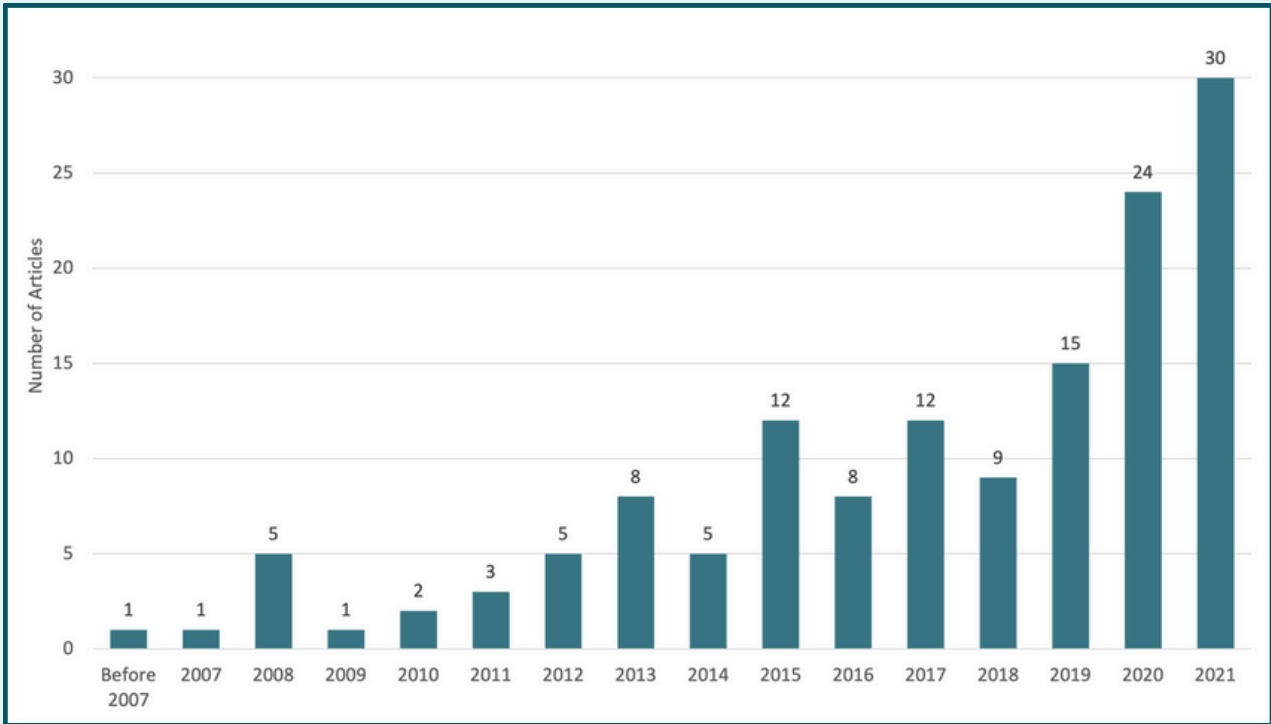


Figure 1: Number of academic articles on politicians and climate change published per year (2002–2021).

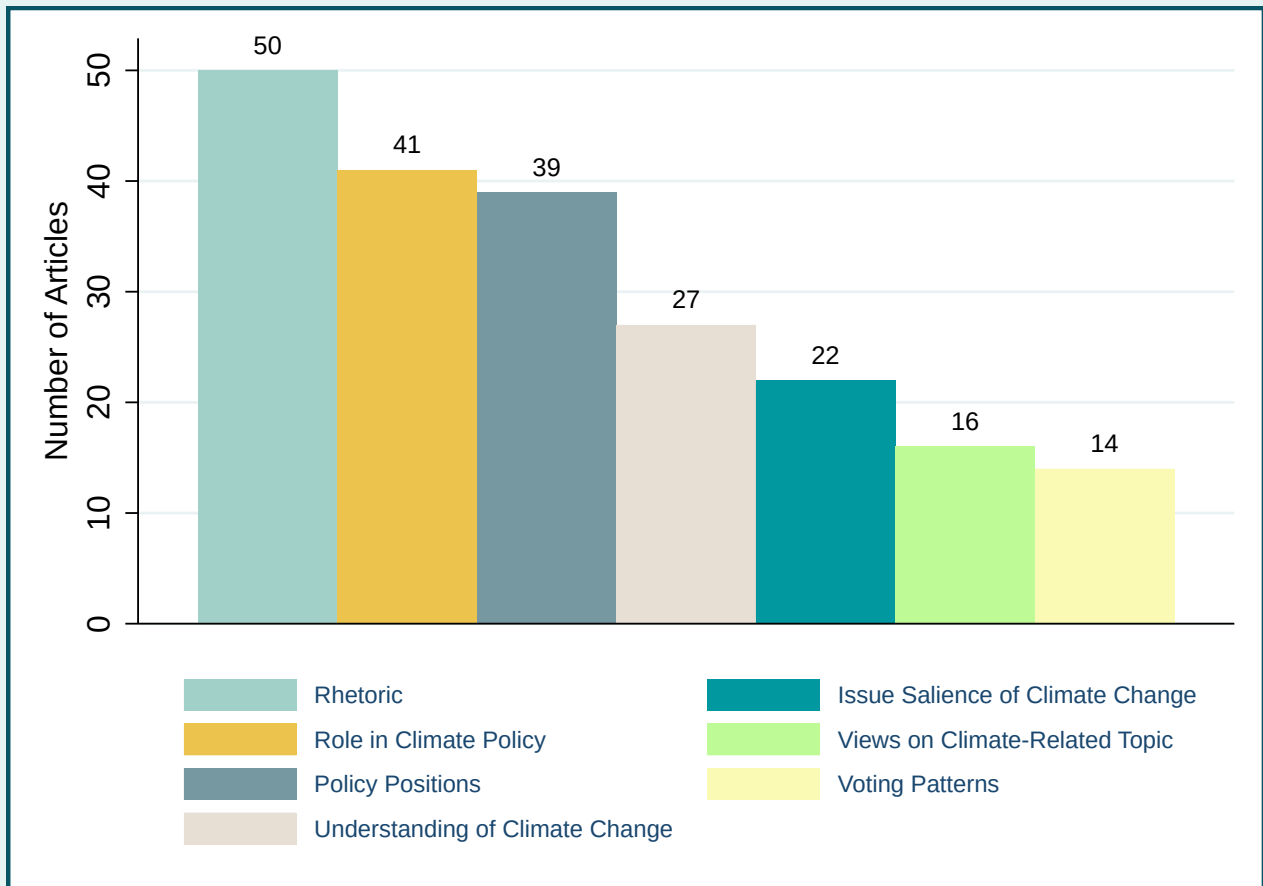


Figure 2: Main topic(s) addressed by the academic articles on politicians and climate change.

What motivates politicians to act?

One of the key questions we explored was: “What motivates politicians to engage with climate change?”. Motivation can come from the politicians themselves (intrinsic motivation) or from the contextual conditions in which they act (extrinsic motivation).

Our research found that one common intrinsic motivation is a politician’s **personal experience** (for example, of extreme weather events), which includes formative events before their political career. Another is **political ideology**, which influences politicians’ approach to climate change in important and sometimes complex ways.

The most common extrinsic motivations are related to the **needs and views of the public** and/or voters, politicians’ **capacity** (time and resources), whether their **party** is in government or not, various aspects of **political culture**, and the influence of **interest groups**.

What strategies do politicians employ?

Politicians use a multitude of strategies to manoeuvre around political obstacles and reach their policy goals (i.e. to advance or oppose climate policy). Key strategies include framing climate issues in a particular way (e.g. relating them to the economy or public health) and raising or lowering the salience of the topic in legislative processes.



Policy and research recommendations

Below we make four recommendations that aim to improve politicians' engagement in climate change and contribute to further academic research, based on the findings of our literature review.

PEOPLE ADVISING ON POLICY SHOULD:

- **Create a supportive external context that enables politicians to seize windows of opportunity.** External factors – including climate-related views within a politician's own political party – play an important role in shaping how much, and how effectively, politicians engage with climate change. Therefore, political parties wanting to promote more and better climate policy should foster interest in and support for climate action among their members –for example, by sponsoring education campaigns or creating more high-salience climate-related political posts. That said, given that many external factors are out of politicians' direct control, it is also important for them to act when the external context is supportive, i.e. to seize windows of opportunity (such as a change of party leadership) when they arise.
- **Be mindful that although politicians are important actors, the public and other stakeholders also have a key role.** Especially in democracies, which are over-represented in the articles we reviewed, politicians are highly sensitive to the views of voters and constituents. Therefore, public engagement and education initiatives – for example, those that highlight the health-related co-benefits of climate action – could be helpful in boosting policy acceptance and encouraging politicians to act on climate.

PEOPLE WORKING IN THE POLICY SYSTEM SHOULD:

- **Tailor policy recommendations to politicians,** being mindful of the incentives and constraints they face. Institutional and political contexts (e.g. electoral systems, internal party dynamics and public opinion) have a strong influence on how and when politicians engage with climate politics.

ACADEMICS AND RESEARCHERS SHOULD:

- **Work to promote a more diverse/inclusive research focus.** First, although the literature on politicians and climate change is expanding, such an important topic deserves greater focus in political science and other disciplines. Second, the existing literature is heavily focused on Europe and North America (especially the United States); there is a need for a better understanding of the role of politicians in the Global South as well as countries characterized as either partial democracies and/or autocracies. Third, there is a need for greater focus on climate adaptation and multi-level governance, in contrast to the heavy current emphasis on climate mitigation and/or the national level. Fourth, a greater focus on political system characteristics (presidential vs. parliamentary systems, consensual vs. majoritarian) is warranted as it impacts politicians and their role in climate action.

Further reading

- Moore, B., Geese, L., Kenny, J., Dudley, H., Jordan, A., Prados Pascual, A., Lorenzoni, I., Schaub, S., Enguer, J., & Tosun, J. (2024). Politicians and climate change: A systematic review of the literature. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, e908. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.908>
- Jordan, A., Lorenzoni, I., Tosun, J., i Saus, J. E., Geese, L., Kenny, J., Saad, E. L., Moore, B., & Schaub, S. G. (2022). The political challenges of deep decarbonisation: Towards a more integrated agenda. *Climate Action*, 1(1), 6. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44168-022-00004-7>
- Pasquini, L., Cowling, R. M., & Ziervogel, G. (2013). Facing the heat: Barriers to mainstreaming climate change adaptation in local government in the Western Cape Province, South Africa. *Habitat International*, 40, 225–232. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2013.05.003>
- Carter, N., & Little, C. (2021). Party competition on climate policy: The roles of interest groups, ideology and challenger parties in the UK and Ireland. *International Political Science Review*, 42(1), 16–32. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512120972582>

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