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Ramona Coman · Claudia Bădulescu

Thomas Christiansen · Marta Simoncini

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The European Green Deal and Dissensus over Liberal Democracy

Jeffrey Rosamond and Amandine Orsini

1 INTRODUCTION

Ursula von der Leyen's first term as President of the European Commission (hereafter: Commission) was, on paper, more ambitious for climate action than her predecessors (Pollex & Lenschow, 2024). Empowered by the "green wave" in the European Parliament (hereafter: the Parliament) in which the Greens political group increased their seat count following the 2019 European elections, von der Leyen unveiled her European Green Deal (EGD, 2019) strategy, a flagship priority of her Commission (Bäckstrand, 2022; Bocquillon, 2024). The EGD framework sets out to put the European Union (EU) on course to tackle the "triple planetary crisis"—achieving climate neutrality by 2050, protecting biodiversity and conserving nature, and eliminating pollution—all while continuing to grow the bloc's economy and protect competitiveness (Domorenok & Graziano, 2023; Rosamond & Dupont, 2021). Under the wider umbrella of the EGD, the von der Leyen I Commission proposed and concluded negotiations on no less than 100 legislative acts. Notably these include, among others, the European Climate Law (2021), the "Fit for 55" Package (first communication: 2021)—a set of laws aiming to reduce EU greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030

J. Rosamond (✉)
Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium
e-mail: jeffrey.rosamond@ugent.be

A. Orsini
UCLouvain Saint-Louis Bruxelles, Brussels, Belgium
e-mail: amandine.orsini@uclouvain.be

and put the EU to the path to achieve climate neutrality by 2050 (see also below)—the Nature Restoration Law (2024), the Deforestation Regulation (2023), and a Net-Zero Industry Act (2024). Fascinatingly, such climate and environmental legislative progress was made despite the EU being rocked by multiple crises, including responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and the resulting energy crisis (Bäckstrand, 2022; Kuzemko et al., 2022; Rosamond, 2023a; von Homeyer et al., 2022).

Following the Parliament's 2024 elections and the re-election of Ursula von der Leyen for her second term as Commission President, there is some evidence suggesting that the von der Leyen II Commission will not prioritise climate action to the same degree as the first. Upon the presentation of her political priorities for her second term as Commission President, the EGD is notably missing. As will be elaborated in the following sections, the von der Leyen II Commission appears to give political focus (and policymaking priority) to competitiveness and regulatory simplification over climate ambition and environmental protection. An executive branch that seems to be off to a less "green" start can be explained by several political factors, and especially political dissensus following new elections. The results of both the 2024 European Parliament elections and elections held in the EU's member states from 2022 to 2024 have seen a general shift to the right; changes in political representation in EU and national legislatures bear consequences which are playing out in each of the other EU institutions—the European Council, the Council of the European Union (hereafter: the Council), the Parliament, and the Commission—as well as in the global climate negotiations context. Election results are compounded by the fact that geopolitical and geoeconomic priorities are shifting, with defense capabilities and industrial development becoming increasingly salient portfolios, perhaps at the expense of climate change.

In this chapter, we ask: To what extent does dissensus over liberal democracy in the EU affect the EU's climate agenda? Through a literature review of up-to-date research on EU climate change politics and policymaking, as well as an analysis of policy and media sources, we show that a growing dissensus towards liberal democracy seems to correspond to dissensus towards the need for rapid decarbonisation; a dissensus playing out more clearly for the EU internal political agenda than for its external agenda during international climate negotiations. Research shows that populist parties tend to deprioritise or even demonise increases in climate ambition (Huber et al., 2021; Yazar & Haarstad, 2023), and as such, increases in support for populist parties in the EU institutions are expected to make it more difficult for the mainstream political groups to govern towards the goal of decarbonisation by 2050. Our article proceeds as follows. First, we provide an overview of the climate policy achievements of the von der Leyen I Commission, a moment of relative consensus towards climate action (Sect. 1). We then show how growing dissensus towards liberal democracy, following new elections, may be contributing towards a parallel dissensus towards the EU's climate goals in

the Parliament, European Council/Council, the Commission and in the international context (Sects. 2–5). In conclusion, we argue that an expansion of democracy—through greater civil society engagement and youth involvement in policymaking processes—is required to safeguard the goals of the EGD in turbulent contexts.

2 THE EUROPEAN GREEN DEAL AND THE VON DER LEYEN I COMMISSION: A “UNIFYING STORY”

The first von der Leyen Commission was marked by strides in climate policy that surpassed the preceding Juncker and Barroso Commissions (Dupont et al., 2023; Oberthür & von Homeyer, 2022; Pollex & Lenschow, 2024). Under the umbrella of the EGD, von der Leyen passed the European Climate Law which both made the goal of net-zero emissions by 2050 legally binding while also upgrading the EU’s emissions reduction target for 2030 from 40 to 55% (Bäckstrand, 2022). Furthermore, the EU’s institutions were successful in coming to an agreement on the majority of the “Fit for 55” Package; the most comprehensive climate and energy policy package passed by the EU to date (Rosamond & Dupont, 2025). “Fit for 55” contains revisions of existing policy mechanisms such as the Emissions Trading System (ETS), the Effort Sharing Regulation to decarbonise sectors not covered by the ETS, energy efficiency and renewable energy directives, and the Land Use, Land Use Change, and Forestry (LULUCF) Regulation. Furthermore, “Fit for 55” contains new pieces of climate policy architecture supplementing revisions of those rolled out in the original 2020 and 2030 Climate and Energy Packages, including a Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) to impose a carbon tax on products imported into the EU (and therefore acting as an instrument to incentivise EU trading partners to adopt their own ETS systems), a Social Climate Fund (drawn from revenues generated by the ETS), and a new ETS covering the road transport and building sectors (Dupont et al., 2023; Oberthür & von Homeyer, 2022). While “Fit for 55” served as the cornerstone package facilitating the EU’s journey towards reaching its 55% emissions reduction target for 2030, the bloc also passed a number of complementary pieces of climate policy legislation. This includes the Net-Zero Industry Act (2023)—with the goal of attracting investment into the EU renewable energy and clean tech sector—and the Nature Restoration Law (2024) and Deforestation Regulation (2023), which both highlight the co-benefit that protecting nature has for mitigating the impacts of climate change.

Besides concrete policy output, the von der Leyen I Commission ultimately succeeded in reframing how climate policy is understood in mainstream political discourse. The EGD is, at its essence, a green growth strategy, promoting the idea that the EU can continue to develop new technologies, enhance competitiveness, and ultimately grow the economy all while reducing emissions, eliminating pollution, and protecting nature (Domorenok & Graziano, 2023; Rosamond, 2023b). However, a novel idea (at the EU-level) that has

become particularly salient with the EGD is the “just transition” in which “no one is left behind”. This idea, drawn from the trade unions’ labour movements, asserts that the EU must ensure that vulnerable sectors of the economy and members of society (including member states with less robust energy infrastructures and diversified economies) are given the support they need in order to reap the benefits of the transition (Harry et al., 2024; Kyriazi & Miró, 2022). The political saliency of the just transition discourse laid the foundation for new financial instruments, including the Just Transition Fund, the Just Transition Mechanism, and the Social Climate Fund, which are all designed to provide financial support to Member States for their national decarbonisation plans. Ideas of green growth and just transition have complemented the existing climate policy discursive landscape, including securitisation frames (positing climate change as an urgent threat) (Dupont, 2019) and the need for the EU to serve as a climate “leader” (Rosamond, 2023b).

Progress in climate mitigation policy during the von der Leyen I Commission advanced despite the EU facing multiple crises (Bäckstrand, 2022; Kuzemko et al., 2022; Rosamond, 2023a; von Homeyer et al., 2022). Indeed, even amidst the lockdowns of COVID-19 and the turbulence generated by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the resulting energy crisis, the EU doubled down on its EGD agenda. Unlike during the financial crisis of 2007/2008 when Member State divisions on climate policy ambition delayed and diluted progress (Skovgaard, 2014), the EU was able to increase funding for net-zero policy programs and increase energy efficiency and renewable energy targets within crisis contexts (Bäckstrand, 2022; Kuzemko et al., 2022). The Commission, Parliament, and Council managed to overcome internal ambitions and come to an agreement on over 100 policy files under the EGD umbrella. As such, the von der Leyen I Commission could be conceived as a “unifying story” when it comes to the EU’s climate policy progress (Rosamond, 2023b).

3 THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT: STILL THE CLIMATE CHAMPION?

While the Parliament has previously been dubbed the climate “champion” of the EU’s institutions (Burns, 2019; Pollex & Berker, 2024), there appears to be growing dissensus towards climate action within the institution in the context of the von der Leyen II Commission. The Parliament is a co-legislator alongside the Council on all policies that pass through the EU’s Ordinary Legislative Procedure (OLP). Climate policy is a shared competence between the EU and its member states, meaning that the fundamental legislation comprising the EU’s climate programme pass through the co-decision channels of the OLP. There are some important exceptions however such as the setting of the overall emissions reduction targets (which must also be approved by the heads of state and government who sit in the European Council) and climate diplomacy decisions which are taken by unanimity in the Council (Rosamond & Dupont, 2025). As one of the co-legislative

branches of the EU, the Parliament also plays an important role in approving the new Commission. Both the Commission President and the College of Commissioners are subject to a vote in Parliament.

The Parliament has almost exclusively advanced the most ambitious targets on climate policy proposals, being a motor of EU climate policy ambition (Buzogány & Četković, 2021). In the von der Leyen I Commission, the largest political groups in the Parliament—the European People’s Party (the EPP), the Socialists and Democrats (S&D), Renew Europe, and the Greens—enjoyed a spirit of cooperation or “cordial parliamentarianism” (Rosamond & Dupont, 2025). They voted together on climate policy files proposed by the Commission, thus contributing to the successful passage of the European Climate Law and “Fit for 55”. The Parliament stood firmly in support of climate action movements like Fridays for Future (Pollex & Berker, 2024; see also Becker in this Handbook) and voted through EGD-related acts on the tails of the “Green Wave”, in which the Greens secured more political support than in previous political terms (Petri & Biedenkopf, 2021). Inter-group cooperation in Parliament was facilitated by horizontal working groups on all “Fit for 55” files and by the maintenance of open communication channels between the groups in Parliament and their corresponding political representatives in the Council (Rosamond & Dupont, 2025).

Following the 2024 European elections, the composition of the Parliament has changed: the seat composition for the 2024–2029 political term leans much more to the right, thereby giving less support to the green agenda. For example, the far-right Patriots for Europe (PfE) and Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) political groups won 84 and 25 seats, respectively, while in the 2019–2024 term, the sole far-right political group—Identity and Democracy (ID)—had only 49 seats. The far-right thus increased its seats by 60 for the 2024 term. The 2024 elections also saw the right-wing European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group increase its seats by 9, while the Greens lost 17 seats and the liberal Renew Europe Group saw its presence in Parliament tumble by 21 seats. Table 1 presents a full overview of seat changes between the outgoing 2019–2024 Parliament and the incoming Parliament following the June 2024 elections.

The right-leaning, less green Parliament at the outset of von der Leyen’s second term in office sent a powerful signal to the Commission: by giving more support to right-wing political parties, the EU electorate has provided an impetus for a less green agenda. The 2024 election results have borne political implications for the negotiating dynamics among the political groups; this includes an amplification of dissensus towards climate ambition. The largest political group—the EPP—has already broken with the other mainstream pro-Europe political groups—the S&D and Renew Europe—to align with the far-right and form a right-wing majority on some issues. For example, in October 2024, the EPP aligned with the ECR and the PfE in a vote that recognised opposition leader Edmundo González as Venezuelan President in a non-binding resolution (Genovese, 2024a; Wax et al., 2024). This instance

Table 1 European Parliament seat changes following the 2024 election

	<i>Outgoing 2019 Parliament</i>	<i>Incoming 2024 Parliament</i>	<i>Seat change</i>
Total seats	703	720	+ 17
The left	37	46	+ 9
S&D	138	136	−2
Greens/European Free Alliance	70	53	−17
Renew Europe	98	77	−21
EPP	179	188	+ 9
ECR	69	78	+ 9
PfE	N/A	84	+ 60 (total far-right gain following fracture of ID into PfE and ECN)
ESN	N/A	25	+ 60 (total far-right gain following fracture of ID into PfE and ECN)
ID	41	N/A	N/A
Non-Inscrits	63	33	−30

was the first example in which the cordon sanitaire was broken and a main-stream political group voted with a far-right Eurosceptic political group in order to see a resolution passed. This new faction in the Parliament dubbed “the Venezuelan majority” signals a potential shift in voting patterns whereby the right-leaning groups in Parliament may sometimes vote together, thereby fracturing the consensus of the mainstream pro-Europe block (ibid.).

These shifting political alliances have already appeared in climate negotiations: in November 2024, the EPP voted alongside the ECR, the PfE, and the ESN to delay the entry into force of the Deforestation Regulation while also watering down its reporting requirements (Genovese, 2024b). This represents another breakdown of the cordon sanitaire and illustrates the EPP’s possible move towards climate and environmental scepticism by voting against the Greens, S&D, and the majority of the Renew Europe group. Besides shifts in voting patterns, several EPP elected officials have also spoken out in favour of a pause on further climate and environmental regulation, including the leader of the EPP Manfred Weber (Wax, 2023). Should the largest party in the Parliament further break ties with its pro-European allies, dissensus towards climate ambition could result in further delays or even dismantling of the EGD agenda. With prominent far-right Members of Parliament like Jordan Bardella calling for a broad right-wing coalition to halt further progress on the EGD, growing dissensus towards climate action in the Parliament risks deteriorating

the institution's status as climate champion in the 2024–2029 political term (Weise & Camut, 2025).

4 THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL AND THE COUNCIL: INTERGOVERNMENTAL SUPPORT OR RESISTANCE?

The European Council and the Council have been no strangers to dissensus towards the level of climate ambition pursued in successive legislative terms. As the “intergovernmental” arm of the EU, the European Council and Council represent the interests of elected Member State governments in EU policy-making. All climate policies passing through the OLP can be amended and must also be approved by the Council (meetings of the Ministers of the EU's member states). The European Council (composed of the heads of state and government of the EU's member states), on the other hand, sets the overall strategic objectives and political priorities of the EU. The overarching emissions reduction target must be approved by the European Council, as this is regarded as a political decision. Historically, the intergovernmental institutions of the EU have been the most reticent and least ambitious towards climate action (Rosamond & Dupont, 2021; Skovgaard, 2014). Member states have different positions on the level of climate ambition that they are comfortable pursuing as a result of differing economic starting points and existing energy infrastructures. Climate politics have traditionally operated along an East/West cleavage in the intergovernmental fora, with Western and Northern European member states pushing for more climate action compared to Central and Eastern member states (Rosamond, 2023a; Rosamond & Dupont, 2021). This cleavage became particularly pronounced following the financial crisis of 2007/08, where Member State divisions on climate ambition came to the fore and persisted at least until the von der Leyen I Commission (Skovgaard, 2014).

Just as for the Parliament, the 2019–2024 EU political term seems to have represented a moment of (relative) consensus in the Council and European Council. While in previous political terms, the diplomats and politicians serving in the multiple layers of the Council may have held climate ambition back, they played an instrumental role in seeing the Climate Law and “Fit for 55” to fruition. Internal mechanisms, including a pronounced role of Council working groups in fleshing out technical details (Rosamond & Dupont, 2025), flexible coalitions evolving per dossier (Rosamond, 2023b), and presidency leadership like the French presidency choosing to negotiate all “Fit for 55” files as one single package, contributed to the legislative success seen during the von der Leyen I Commission (*ibid.*; Leenders et al., 2024). Furthermore, both the European Council and the Council provided discursive support to the level of ambition enshrined within both the Climate Law and “Fit for 55”. Political ideas of the von der Leyen I Commission—the just transition, green growth, and EU climate leadership—all received significant discursive space in Council and European Council Conclusions (Rosamond, 2023b).

Table 2 European Council membership by political group as of April 2025

<i>Political group</i>	<i>European Council membership by political group (Including European Council President and European Commission President)</i>
EPP	12
ECR	3
PfE	1
Renew Europe	4
S&D	5
NI	4

Despite the support given to climate action by the European Council and Council during the von der Leyen I Commission, the 2024–2029 political term brings change. The Council and European Council entering von der Leyen II Commission are more right-leaning. Several elections in the EU’s member states resulted in new governments which are likely to deprioritise climate action. For example, the Dutch election of 22 November 2023 saw the far-right Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV) led by Geert Wilders win the most seats. The resulting Dutch government is a right-wing coalition government led by Dick Schoof (independent), composed of the PVV, the centre-right Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie, the centrist Nieuw Sociaal Contract, and the farmers’ interest party, the Boer Burger Beweging. The Dutch government joins several other member states with a populist party forming (at least part of) the government, including Hungary, Slovakia, and Italy. Other national elections which resulted in far-right increases in seat count included the Belgian elections, the German elections, and the Austrian elections, making it increasingly difficult for governments in power to advance the climate agenda. Table 2 presents an overview of the political groups of coalition leaders serving as heads of state/government in the European Council as of April 2025. This trend of a rightward shift in EU member state politics may indeed result in the European Council calling for a halt or even dismantling of policies under the EGD umbrella. These concerns become even more pronounced given that even liberal leaders including French President Emmanuel Macron (Messad, 2023) and former Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo have proposed the idea of pausing the EGD agenda (Gijs et al., 2023).

5 THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION:
A LESS GREEN VON DER LEYEN II?

Patterns of dissensus observed among the Parliament and Council are expected to dilute the “green” political focus held by the previous Commission. Indeed, the Commission, as the EU’s executive branch, is directly accountable to both “legislative branches”. The President of the Commission is nominated by the

heads of state and government who sit in the European Council and is then voted in by the Parliament. Furthermore, the Commission itself is made up of one Commissioner per member state, who is nominated by each of the member state governments. The entirety of the Commission must then also be approved by a vote in the European Parliament. With the EU electorate seemingly entrusting the power to govern to right-wing political parties at the expense of the greens at both the European and national level, the von der Leyen II Commission may feel less compelled to act in the interest of climate neutrality.

The effects of the 2024 Parliament elections and member state elections over the course of 2023–2024 show that the Commission may already be pursuing a programme where the EGD receives less legislative attention. The EGD is no longer one of the Commission's priorities for von der Leyen II, and the Commission could possibly adopt new legislation and amendments to water down the stringency of the EGD. The current Commission's climate and environment agenda has been split into two priorities, which are not as explicit in tackling the three elements of the triple planetary crisis: one being "A new plan for Europe's sustainable prosperity and competitiveness" and the other being "Sustaining our quality of life: food security, water, and nature". In the first, the Commission appears to be prioritising competitiveness and economic growth, rather than environmental sustainability. This shift is also apparent in the labels of the portfolios held by the new Commissioners. For example, the portfolio of "Executive Vice President for the EGD" which was held by Frans Timmermans during the 2019–2024 political term has disappeared. Rather, a portfolio of "Executive Vice President for Clean, Just and Competitive Transition" is now held by Spain's Teresa Ribera Rodríguez. The other portfolios' labels similarly have discursive elements emphasising the Commission's prioritisation of competitiveness (see Table 3).

Policy output in the initial year of the von der Leyen II Commission seems to spell further trouble for the ambitions of the EGD as it was previously conceived. One of the flagships of the first year of the von der Leyen II Commission is the so-called omnibus package designed to cut unnecessary regulation in order to jumpstart EU competitiveness (Gros, 2025). De-regulation can certainly be beneficial for businesses and the private sector; however, it may fall at odds with the climate and environmental objectives of the EGD, which require clear regulatory frameworks. Moreover, the early months of von der Leyen II emphasise economic and defense policy rather than further advancing the work done under the EGD umbrella during the von der Leyen I Commission. Another important dimension of the Commission's new term will also be related to international climate policymaking.

Table 3 Commissioners with climate-related portfolios in the 2024–2029 political term highlighting discursive links to economic competitiveness

<i>Commission portfolio</i>	<i>Name of holder</i>	<i>Political group origins</i>	<i>Country</i>
Executive Vice President for Clean, Just, and Competitive Transition	Teresa Ribera Rodríguez	S&D	Spain
Executive Vice-President for Prosperity and Industrial Strategy	Stéphane Séjourné	Renew Europe	France
Commissioner for Environment, Water Resilience, and a Competitive Circular Economy	Jessika Roswall	EPP	Sweden
Commissioner for Climate, Net-Zero, and Clean Growth	Wopke Hoekstra	EPP	Netherlands

6 THE EUROPEAN UNION ON THE GLOBAL STAGE

The EU has long been recognised as a key actor for climate and environmental policy on the global stage (Delreux & Crellin, 2025). Interestingly, a key driver of its climate ambition for its internal legislative and policy agenda comes from its interactions with other key players, including the United States (US) and developing countries, on the international scene (Adelle et al., 2018). For example, some market mechanisms such as the EU ETS were meant to satisfy the US request for market-based governance within the 1997 Kyoto Protocol (even if the US never joined the Protocol). Another recent example is the adoption of instruments that have effects beyond the EU borders, such as the CBAM as part of the EGD, in order to take other players on board for global climate ambition. Following the CBAM, products imported into the EU have a carbon tariff or price imposed upon them, depending on the carbon intensity of their production process abroad.

Compared to what happens for internal policies, the ambition of the EU at the global level is less likely to be impacted by political dissensus among the member states for two main reasons. First, the EU has tended to act as a unified actor in external climate governance (Biedenkopf & Petri, 2021; Delreux & Kerremans, 2010). This means that European institutions, and in particular the European External Action Service, have played the roles of agents in deciding upon the member states. As a result, European diplomats attending climate negotiations have always had a certain level of autonomy with regards to political dissensus among the member states (Earsom & Delreux, 2023). Second, the EU faces major climate laggards in global politics, who, to some extent, push the Union towards greater unity and stronger climate commitments. Indeed, radical external players tend to reinforce the

“grand climate strategy” of the EU by rendering ambition and efforts even more necessary (Oberthür & Dupont, 2021).

Rather than dissensus among the EU member states, at the global scale, it is dissensus about multilateralism among important governmental players that has recently mattered. In particular, new electoral cycles in several key states worldwide have led to the election of political parties relying on a populist ideology oriented towards nationalism as a political priority, at the detriment of multilateralism. This has potentially threatened the ambition of global climate negotiations, which are traditionally an important source of climate ambition, as detailed in the Paris Agreement (2015). Among others, in an international context marked by the recent re-election of Donald Trump as American President, the question of the internal dissensus within the EU appears to some extent secondary. Indeed, the American election was followed by the quasi-immediate adoption of a Presidential Action entitled “putting America first in international environmental agreements”,¹ which indicates that the US is withdrawing (again) from the Paris Agreement. The US also refuses any international commitment, or financial contribution, that could go against the economic interests of the American people. These declarations represent a major shock for climate multilateralism. In the same line, the government of Argentina, led by right-wing populist Javier Milei since December 2023, decided to withdraw its delegation from the 2024 international climate conference in Baku. These examples are extreme. In any case, quantitative research on right-wing populist parties around the world and their impact on global environmental agreements shows that they are more likely to ask for more flexibility with regards to international environmental policy rather than withdrawing from it: “unlike conventional wisdom—which suggests that right-wing parties renege from international treaties—my theory suggests that right-wing parties remain *committed* to international environmental agreements. Indeed, they obtain more flexibility provisions to *remain* in these agreements” (Huynh, 2025, p. 41).

Moreover, in trying to convince laggards, the EU rests on two important complementary dynamics: 1) its participation in the regular Conferences of the Parties (COPs) meetings in the framework of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC); and 2) the broader transnational movements for climate change, including the worldwide climate marches initiated by the Swedish activist Greta Thunberg in December 2018.

Regarding the first dynamic, the UNFCCC COPs are annual international meetings discussing the advancements of global climate governance, currently in the framework of the Paris Agreement. In addition to coming with a harmonised voice at such meetings, the EU in itself is a party to the Paris Agreement, in addition to the Member States. Democracy is not a standard on the international scene: out of 193 United Nations Member States, only

¹ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/putting-america-first-in-international-environmental-agreements/>

45% are considered democracies (71 are full or flawed democracies according to the democracy index of *The Economist* in 2024).² In such a heterogeneous context, decisions at COPs are based on consensus, not a vote, to ensure adherence of the parties and accommodate different political systems. Because of their frequency, as a constant proof that multilateralism exists and is possible, COPs are actually considered important barriers to populism, as stated by the expert Stefan Aykut during the last climate COP: “COPs are part of the barrier against the populist storm that is sweeping the planet”.³

On the second dynamic, international processes have always been developed towards the idea of including civil society as much as possible to come closer to a democratic system, even if not the norm on the international scene. Non-state actors have been recognised as soon as 1992 as major groups for international negotiations, including on climate change. If populism is a key discourse basis—see above the American President speaking in the name of the American people—research has shown that youth, one of the UN major groups, have been able to develop a counter-discourse for climate change, that is also resting on the objective to speak to the most vulnerable and marginalised (Nordensvard & Ketola, 2022). As a result, across Europe and in different countries, “populist voices on the left and the right have led to a re-politicization of climate change in countries around the world and (that) this re-politicization is here to stay” (Marquardt & Lederer, 2022, p. 753).

Both dynamics are complementary. COP meetings are regularly organised in countries where democracy is not fully implemented, raising voices in favor of more transparency and debate, as explained by one COP27 youth participant: “I think democracy definitely, is necessary (...) to put so much pressure on those people in power will implement greener solutions. And I think transparency, is like a huge thing as you can see right now in Egypt...”.⁴ For several youth, the global level is actually seen as a level of opportunity, to express progressive views: “We are a lot more progressive in terms of what we are asking for globally. I think locally and nationally it is a bit different. I know that in lots of states there is a rise of very conservative values and I think there is kind of a polarization of ideologies at the moment. But I think globally, what we are asking for is progressive in terms of actually wanting change in terms of just not accepting the world the way it is”.⁵ Some precisely use the international level to put pressure back home on governments: “As the movement gets bigger, politicians and conservative parties will inevitably address

² <https://www.economist.com/interactive/democracy-index-2024>.

³ https://www.lemonde.fr/en/environment/article/2024/11/25/cops-are-part-of-the-barrier-against-the-populist-storm-that-is-sweeping-the-planet_6734100_114.html.

⁴ Interview with Philipp Steininger, Climates youth delegate, COP27, 11/11/2022, conducted by Yi hyun Kang.

⁵ Interview with Diandra Ni Bhuachalli, New York, 11/07/2023, conducted by Yi hyun Kang.

climate issues. Especially since this is an international commitment, and we cannot ignore it”.⁶

The transnational youth movement has moreover played a role in strengthening the EU agenda at the European level of policymaking, by creating a context favorable to climate action (Dupont et al., 2020). Children and youth assemblies have been organised and present great potential for improving the inclusivity and relevance of the adopted policies (Mallong et al., 2025). These inclusive mechanisms are essential to leave no one behind, as, in the end, the threat posed by climate change to democracy is mostly related to its tendency to exacerbate social inequalities: “Instead, different groups with different experiences of injustice might be pitted against each other, leading to social tensions. There is in these regards a risk that climate shocks will stimulate movements that align with populist and nationalistic authoritarian ideologies” (Lindvall, 2025, p. 129).

7 CONCLUSION

While the von der Leyen I Commission has been particularly ambitious regarding climate policy, our chapter develops the potential threats to the climate agenda under the von der Leyen II Commission. Dissensus towards liberal democracy in the EU institutions appears to bear greater impact on internal EU climate change politics and policymaking than on European diplomatic representation abroad during international climate negotiations. Far-right victories in the Parliament and member state elections seem to have weakened the appetite for strong climate action in the EU’s legislature; this in turn may be contributing to a less green executive branch as the Commission simultaneously shifts political focus to other domains like defense and industry. With the far-right gaining momentum across the EU27 and certain sectoral actors like farmers and the auto industry critiquing the pace and scope of the EU’s journey to net-zero emissions, the need is greater than ever to broaden democracy. This chapter shows that civil society, including youth movements, matters both at home and abroad to reinforce climate ambition. Despite the political evolution of its institutions and governments, the EU must ensure the voices of all segments of society are heard to build consensus towards a just decarbonisation process in an era of increasing political dissensus.

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⁶ Interview with Scorin Kwak, Extension Rebellion South Korea, online, 27/02/2022, conducted by Yi hyun Kang.

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