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THE POLITICIZATION OF CLIMATE CHANGE GOVERNANCE
BUILDING BLOCKS FOR A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH
AGENDA

CSS WORKING PAPER SERIES
Working Paper No.6 – September 2022

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Center for Sustainable Society Research

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Website	http://uhh.de/wiso-css
ISSN	2699-8327
DOI	https://doi.org/10.25592/css-wp-006
Image Credits	unsplash

To cite this paper:

Wendler, Frank (2022): The politicization of climate change governance. Building blocks for a theoretical framework and research agenda. CSS Working Paper Series No 6, Hamburg, <https://doi.org/10.25592/css-wp-006>.

Abstract

Climate change prompts political controversies of increasing reach, political salience and contentiousness, creating a dynamic of public contestation captured by the term politicization. The implications of this dynamic for policy-making remain unknown, with extant research struggling to establish theoretical concepts and hypotheses in this regard. How can observable and anticipated effects of politicization on climate policy-making be theorized? The paper seeks to advance the debate on this question by proposing four building blocks for a theoretical framework and future research agenda: first, the *scope* of political agendas and policy programs that frame political controversies on climate change; second, relevant *arenas* of public debate and their effect on structuring dynamics of interaction between policy-making agents and broader political publics; third, *issue dimensions* emerging from controversy on climate change involving questions of problem definition, assignment of political authority and policy evaluation; and finally, *interfaces* between institutional nodes of climate governance networks and their interaction with each other. The central hypothesis of this framework – namely, that the effects of politicization are mediated by the escalating or accommodating quality of these four factors – is illustrated by a comparison of climate change politics in the EU and US since the Paris Agreement.

Acknowledgment

The working paper is the result of research supported by an individual, 36-month research grant by the German Science Foundation (DFG), entitled “How Ideas Frame the Politics of Climate Change” (grant number WE 5071/4-1). This support is gratefully acknowledged.

The politicization of climate change governance:

Building blocks for a theoretical framework and research agenda

Frank Wendler

1. The politicization of climate governance: Challenges of an emerging research agenda

Climate change has become a defining issue of political controversy across Western democracies, not just as a response to governance processes at the global and supranational level but also concerning questions of domestic policy-making related to the reduction of GHG emissions. Examples for an increased presence of controversy on climate change in political publics include: the proclamation of carbon neutrality targets and a climate emergency at the EU level, in several EU Member States and the United Kingdom (McHugh et al. 2021); the increasing salience of meetings by the Conference of the Parties (COPs) as a high-level political event (Aykut et al. 2022, Thakur 2021, Best/Gheciu 2015, Ciplet 2014, Ciplet et al. 2015); the mobilization of civil society groups and protest movements such as FFF and Extinction Rebellion (Corry/Reiner 2021, Berglund/Schmidt 2020, Blühdorn/Deflorian 2021, Doherty et al. 2018); an increased level of media communication and individual perception of climate change (Chinn et al. 2020, Dietz 2020, Carvalho et al. 2017, Davidson/Kecinski 2022, McCright/Dunlap 2011); the contribution of courts and climate litigation to political debate (Vanhala 2013); voter responses to climate policy (Stokes 2016); and the sharp polarization between (and within) both major political parties on climate change in the US and related controversy within both chambers of Congress (Guber et al. 2021, Dunlap et al. 2016, Gustafson 2019, Linde 2020). In the light of these events, recent additions to the literature raise the question whether a ‘new politics’ of climate change is emerging (Davies 2021, Newell et al. 2021, Tosun/Peters 2021, Harrison 2015; for previous accounts of climate politics, cp. Geels 2014, Giddens 2015, Bernauer 2013, Mitchell 2011, Scrase/Smith 2009, Harrison/Sundstrom 2007).

The controversies summarized here vary widely in thematic scope, intensity, involved political agents and political publics, and evolve in cycles that do not necessarily confirm a linear trend towards more intense contestation. Nevertheless, they demonstrate the relevance of a research agenda investigating the political conflict dimension of climate governance, against the

background of a literature that still appears dominated by a focus on the design, enactment and implementation of particular policies to reduce GHG emissions. A suitable concept to capture the broad variety of dynamics summarized here is politicization, defined as an expansion in the scope, political salience and contentiousness of public controversy, and increasingly adopted in the literature on climate change governance (Marquardt/Lederer 2022, Kenis/Mathijs 2014, Kuzemko 2016). A possible criticism of this concept is that it conflates very different observations about the evolution of political conflict, particularly by merging the three above-mentioned aspects related to the public resonance, thematic scope and quality of discursive controversy on a broad range of issues related to climate change. Following from this point, the introduction of this term invites rather different observations whether political challenges arising from global warming have become more intensely debated, or remain generally de-politicized (cp., e.g., Swyngedouw 2022, Machin 2022). The main value added of applying this term, therefore, lies in directing the focus of research to the politics-dimension of climate governance, and to serve as a conceptual roof under which a broader variety of approaches and observations can be contrasted and compared. In a broader context, the concept has gained prominence particularly in research on EU multi-level governance, whose increasing relevance as a topic of political contestation and party competition within national political systems has been discussed at length in the literature, especially with regard to its potential consequences for supranational decision-making (Schimmelfennig 2020, Börzel/Risse 2018, Hooghe/Marks 2019, Hutter et al. 2016). The approach followed here adopts a similar perspective: While a politicization of climate change as defined above appears to be emerging as a general trend, its consequences for further policy progress towards the goal of decarbonization are anything but clear.

The present paper seeks to take stock of research concerning this question, and to propose building blocks for a theoretical framework to organize and advance contributions in this emerging field. While the research agenda covered here is both multi-faceted and complex, the main argument to be made here is that several factors can be identified that seem relevant for mediating the impacts of increased political controversy on the governance of climate change. The subsequent discussion is organized in three parts: The following chapter reviews the state of relevant research (ch. 2), before the building blocks for our theoretical framework are presented (ch. 3). A brief illustration of its plausibility is then given using insights from a comparison of climate politics in the EU and US (ch. 4), before the final chapter concludes (ch. 5).

2. Taking stock: State of research on the politics of climate change

As described above, the concept of politicization is familiar primarily from literatures about global and particularly European governance (Zürn 2014, 2019, Börzel/Risse 2018, Hutter et al. 2016). Concerning the specific field of climate governance, extant research related to this concept has emerged mainly in four areas.

A first strand of the literature takes an evaluative or critical perspective, focusing on the question whether an increase of contentious politics is a problem or solution for action against climate change (Pepermans/Maesele 2016). This literature includes case studies contrasting a science-based approach to the appraisal of global warming with more conflictual political messaging about its severity, consequences and mitigation (Bolsen et al. 2019, Linde 2020). Parts of this literature suggest that partisan messages and cues are detrimental to the individual recognition and acceptance of action against climate change. On a more general level, several authors have addressed the question whether mechanisms of democratic politics are suitable to deal with the challenge of climate change, both from an academic perspective (Fiorino 2018) and adopting ideas of deliberative and participatory decision-making (Perlaviciute 2022, Sandover et al. 2021), but also from a more political and activist perspective (Willis 2020). A flip side of this position arguing in favor of more democratic politics in debates on climate change are critical accounts of the concept of climate emergency, and its de-politicizing effect of moving aside questions about the causes and effects of the climate crisis in open democratic debate (Hulme 2019, McHugh et al. 2021, cp. also Swyngedouw 2010). Other perspectives deplore what they identify as a lack of politicization of choices concerning fundamental principles of economic and social order giving rise to climate change, based on criticism of a post-political consensus on a variant of eco-modernism seen to claim a compatibility between climate action and a capitalist model of growth (Machin 2022, Swyngedouw 2022).

Second, and in a more strictly empirical perspective, some research has emerged on the party-political dimension of climate politics. This literature covers case studies and small-n comparisons (Batstrand 2014), concerning voting behavior by MEPs on climate and energy policies in the European Parliament (Buzogany/Cetkovic 2021) and evaluating manifesto data in a comparative perspective (Farstad 2018, Carter/Little 2020, Carter et al. 2017). As in research about European integration, considerable attention is dedicated to right-wing nationalist parties and positions associated with climate scepticism and denial (Marquardt/Lederer 2022), covering currents of the Republican Party in the US and comparative perspectives on parties and movements in Europe (Almiron/Xifra 2019, Cann/Leigh 2018, Fischer 2019, Norgaard 2011). Less

literature exists on left-wing or green parties (Bomberg 1998, Richardson/Rootes 2006, Spoon 2009). Broader comparative approaches to the analysis of party positions exist considering climate change as a subset of environmental policy without, however, going into the specificity of it as a cross-sectoral, expanding and relatively new issue (Spoon et al. 2014).

A third current of research has emerged from the literature on discourse and variants of framing climate change, considered relevant for the present topic particularly as politicization is essentially a discursive phenomenon. A myriad of contributions has been published on different variants of climate discourse (Paterson 2021b, Newell et al. 2015, Anshelm/Hultman 2015, Pepermans/Maesele 2014, Dirikx/Gelders 2010). An interesting facet of this debate are observations on how aspects of global governance have become 'climatized' by being discursively related to agendas of decarbonization (Aykut et al. 2016), relevant for issues such as trade agreements (Blümer et al. 2020). However, we know little about how to derive broader patterns of contestation such as left/right or 'Galtan' polarization (Hooghe/Marks 2019) from the clash of different forms of framing and discourse. In this sense, analyses of discourse appear as a 'sui generis' characterization of climate politics but remain difficult to relate to broader approaches of comparative politics. Advances in this regard include efforts to identify issue dimensions and the shaping of political space from the interaction of competing discourses about climate change (cp. Wendler 2022). Other contributions discuss the clash of different variants of discourse on ideas of climate change and the Green New Deal from a critical perspective (Ajl 2020).

Finally, attempts have been made to develop theoretical concepts and models to capture dynamics of politicization and discuss their potential implications for decision-making, even if no generally recognized or widely applied framework has been published so far. One such model is the conceptualization of climate politics by Matthew Paterson (2021a), who proposes a framework combining different accounts of what is political, dynamics of purification versus complexity and resulting shifts towards de- or repoliticization (ibid: 29). While this account offers insights about the dynamic and versatile forms of political controversy on climate, a limitation is that it hardly allows any test of specific hypotheses or causal assumptions. Other contributions to the theoretical debate include Gramscian approaches (Ciplet et al. 2015), accounts based on a political economy perspective (Lachapelle et al. 2017, Paterson/Laberge 2018) and the more specific variant of cultural political economy and its discussion of the interaction between devices, desires and dissent (Bulkeley et al. 2016, Best/Paterson 2010). Beyond specific models tailored to climate change governance, only few attempts have emerged so far to connect the study of climate politics to broader theoretical concepts of trans- and

supranational governance. In this regard, a relevant question is how to conceptualize the governance frameworks within which climate action is proposed, debated and negotiated. An important conceptual contribution in this regard is the literature highlighting the dispersed, multi-level and polycentric structure of climate governance, such as in the Earth Systems Governance approach (Biermann et al. 2020). The literature on polycentric and multi-level governance, however, only rarely focuses on questions of political contestation (Heinen et al. 2021, Jordan 2018). In a broader view, beyond climate governance and particularly concerning the politicization of EU multi-level governance, the discussion on theoretical models has been dominated by the approach of post-functionalism, whose central assumption is to claim the emergence of a constraining dissensus caused by politicization (Hooghe/Marks 2019), even if critical accounts and additions to this model have been published (Schimmelfennig 2019, Wendler/Hurrelmann 2022).

This review shows that the literature on climate governance has acknowledged the term politicization and moved beyond its initial negative evaluation as a dynamic with primarily destructive effects for climate change as a mainly science-based issue: how aspects of policy stability and dynamics of politicization interact, and what effect they have for policy change is simply not clear (Paterson et al. 2022). However, the debate remains in its early stages concerning theoretical concepts for the evaluation of political conflict and particularly its effects on policy-making. As in previous research debates on EU governance, we lack sufficient answers to two questions: first, whether the politicization of climate change is absorbed by or transforms existing patterns and dynamics of political contestation; and second, whether it creates a positive dynamic for the advocacy of policies aiming at decarbonization, or tends to create additional obstacles in this regard. Against this background, the subsequent discussion seeks to present building blocks for a theoretical framework that (1) considers the variable and dynamic thematic points of reference and issue dimensions of controversy on climate change, (2) reflects the multi-level structure of its governance frameworks and (3) can be used to test hypotheses on the effects of politicization on policy-making in comparative perspective.

3. Building blocks for a theoretical framework on effects of politicization for climate governance

The primary task of the theoretical model presented here is to trace the progression of politicized debate through institutional settings relevant for the politics and policy-making of climate change, and to establish assumptions about the potential impacts of increased political conflict for decision-making. As such, it is focused on political dynamics within key representative institutions of the political system such as executives and legislatures, while excluding triggers of politicization at a societal level for reasons of simplicity and space. In this sense, the emergence of dynamics leading to a politicization of climate change – particularly, through media coverage, civil society mobilization and party politics – is identified as a point of departure of our theoretical model. In accordance with the literature cited above, it is defined as the concurrence of salience, reach and contentiousness as commonly adopted in the literature (e.g., Hutter et al, 2016: 10). The triggers for its emergence, however, are not further theorized within this present approach. An important conceptual clarification is that by referring to processes of ‘climate governance’, this contribution seeks to broadly capture policy-making processes that involve efforts of decarbonization and adaptation to climate change, but are not necessarily labelled as climate change policy (such as initiatives related to the energy transition, green investment or concepts of international security adapted to climate change). Our approach therefore is to go beyond the explicit negotiation of climate targets primarily at the global and supranational level, and to develop tools for evaluating policy linkages between climate and related policy-making fields such as energy, transport or fiscal and economic policy.

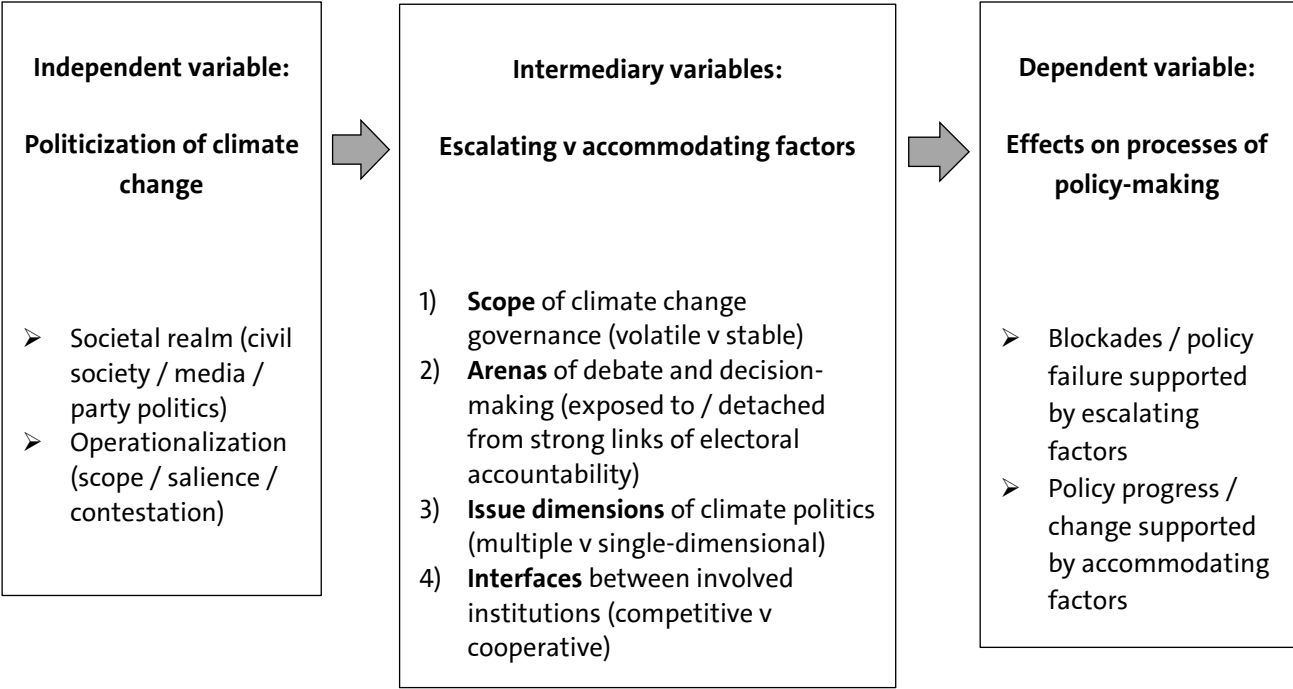
From this point of departure, the central assumption of the present theoretical model is that the effects of increased political conflict on decision-making are mediated by four factors that can be traced in association with different stages of the policy cycle, and that assume an escalating or accommodating quality that mediate the impacts of politicization:

- (1) The scope and boundaries of climate governance and their conflictual negotiation;
- (2) The choice of arenas for debate and decision-making and their electoral accountability;
- (3) The emergence of issue dimensions shaping the negotiation of climate policy; and
- (4) The structure of interfaces between arenas of public controversy and decision-making.

Distinguishing these four analytical stages does not prescribe that they always follow on each other in a sequential manner in political reality; as in other heuristic models of the policy process, it is possible and indeed likely that feedback cycles will occur between these stages. The main

rationale of distinguishing these stages is analytical: to focus on specific stages of policy-making processes to identify escalating or accommodating factors for emerging politicization. While these four factors can be understood as mediating variables, the dependent variable envisaged by this model are the effects on governance, reaching from policy-making blockades to breakthroughs for policy initiatives and resulting policy change. Building on the literature on politicization and party politics in multi-level governance as summarized above, this framework adopts ideas of the novel approach of discursive post-functionalism (Wendler/Hurrelmann 2022) and its two main parent theories, discursive institutionalism and post-functionalism (Schmidt 2010, 2012, Hooghe/Marks 2019). Each of the four stages is discussed in detail in the following four sections (3.1. – 3.4.), before a final section summarizes the main assumptions and hypotheses (3.5.). The key components of this model are also summarized in the diagram below.

FIGURE 1 Overview of the theoretical model



3.1. Scope: Contesting the variable boundaries of climate change governance

Climate change governance is rarely ‘just’ about the environment and mostly about much more. Any approach to mapping and evaluating the political contestation of climate governance therefore needs to start by defining the boundaries of the agenda and policy programs that are raised as relevant for this field. This first analytical step is important particularly because the scope of climate governance – or the field of action and decision-making that is included in defining the challenge of dealing with global warming – is variable and subject to acts of problem definition and agenda-setting. Defining these flexible boundaries can range from narrow definitions of climate action as a subset of environmental policy to a broader understanding as a new frame for economic and energy policy. It can also expand to a comprehensive approach in which climate change is defined as a cross-cutting policy challenge requiring the adjustment of political agendas across the board, reaching from domestic policies to foreign, trade and security policy. This latter, very broad approach to climate governance is epitomized by the politics of the Anthropocene as a term for the transition into a new era of Earth History where all aspects of human society need to be re-adjusted to the reality and consequences of anthropogenic carbon emissions (Pickering/ Dryzek 2019, Biermann 2021).

The difference between these approaches is, of course, highly political and associated particularly with competing positions about whether the climate crisis can be solved within a capitalist system (a position labelled as ‘eco-modernism’, cp. Aji 2020, or ‘ecological modernisation’, Machin 2022), or whether it challenges its very foundations (Klein 2014, Latour 2018). Beyond the political disagreement between these positions, however, the theoretical argument to be made here is that the framing of climate action by relevant executive agents can reach very different conclusions on the scope and depth of climate action, with consequences for subsequent processes of political contestation that remain insufficiently integrated into models of politicization. The fact that climate governance evolves in networks with flexible boundaries is reflected particularly in the discussion of governance architectures and how various regime complexes are related and embedded in each other (Biermann et al. 2020). Reflections of it are also found in perspectives on how climate governance is framed through dominant discourse, especially in the literatures on climatization (Aykut et al. 2016) and securitization (Oels 2012).

Furthermore, in empirical terms especially the EU provides an informative example of how climate action has gradually expanded from environmental policy to energy and climate action and broader overall agenda as defined in the European Green Deal (Wendler 2022, Wurzel et al.

2021). In order to integrate these observations and create a more systematic conceptualization of how boundaries of climate governance are defined, we suggest the following sequence of formats to delineate the challenges, priorities and agendas identified with climate change:

(1a) First, a relatively narrow understanding of policy responses to climate change is to envisage forms of preparatory action and crisis management to deal with its most direct, material consequences. These include efforts towards the adaptation to extreme weather events, natural disasters and increased threats to human assets and infrastructure. Denominating this definition as the narrowest one is not to deny that it potentially involves an investment of massive resources, particularly in more remote future scenarios and covering more vulnerable regions and parts of society. The point to be made here is that the political space of climate – its scope in terms of relevant challenges, political priorities and principles of action – assumes its most narrow conceivable definition when its problem dimension is defined exclusively in terms of security against direct material threats, and therefore as a common good beyond more clearly polarizing conflicts of interest between social groups.

(1b) Going further, a wider scope of climate action is identified when the more indirect effects of global warming on society – particularly in terms of public health and quality of life, but also regional stability, migration and conflict resolution as resulting from the effects of climate change on vulnerable regions – are considered. While this perspective is still adequately subsumed under the category of adaptation policies and a security frame remains dominant, a wider range of agents, interests and policy domains is included in the realm of climate action, raising the potential for political conflict. In this sense, particularly claims about the effects of the climate crisis on migration and regional stability are likely to set off political controversy relating to questions of identity, control and political authority.

(2a) Proceeding to a second stage and implying a considerable expansion of the scope and policy linkages encompassed by climate governance, decarbonization denotes the realm of action most commonly associated with the mitigation of climate change, particularly through the reduction of carbon emissions by industry, the energy sector, buildings and transport. Compared to the previous stage, this perspective on climate action appears more contentious by involving questions of economic management: These include the balance between state intervention and free market dynamics as exemplified through the introduction of carbon prices and emission caps, but also questions of investment, infrastructure and technologies, and the regulation of energy production and markets. This stage includes distributive conflict more than the previous one (Aklin/Mildenberger 2020).

(2b) Furthermore, the mitigation of climate change involves not just the emission but also the absorption of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, both through natural but also potentially through technical carbon sinks. Including the question of land use, deforestation and carbon capture and storage (CCS) further extends the scope of climate action both in territorial and political terms to include global supply chains of food and agricultural products. The potential for political conflict of this approach for defining the scope of climate governance increases particularly through the global implications of measures in this field, both through the highly globalized exchanges of goods, but also the use of global mechanisms established particularly under the CDM and REDD+ regulations.

(3) A further expansion of the scope of climate politics is to consider and negotiate its impacts on questions of social cohesion, equity and justice, both within a domestic setting and a wider global perspective. This understanding of climate politics almost necessarily implies that it requires a re-negotiation of social relations and resources, as epitomized by the idea of a Green New Deal in its different variants (Ajl 2020). A key aspect of this variant is that the cause of political contestation assumes a dual character, by no longer referring to the impacts of climate change but at least in equal measure to the consequences of climate policy, particularly with regard to the distributive effects of decarbonization policies and resulting demands for compensation. A major implication of adopting this approach is to add a strong cultural dimension, by including societal relations and hierarchies concerning gender, minorities and indigenous groups.

(4) Finally, the widest possible definition of climate action is to evaluate it as a transformative challenge to society, and as a catalytic vector that should prompt society to turn away from established doctrines of economic competition and growth. This stage is assumed to establish the most fundamental form of politicization as it assumes a scope and depth questioning paradigms of economic management, consumption, lifestyles, and affecting aspects of potentially highly divisive political claims based on ideas of tradition, culture and identity.

The sequence of different scopes of climate governance as presented above does not seek to suggest that measures of adaptation or decarbonization are easy or cheap. However, the argument proposed here is that the scope and quality of political conflict gradually increases from one stage to the next: namely, by starting with underlying concepts of security used to refer to de-politicized claims of following interest in the common good, going on through more contentious questions of economic management and distributive justice, and culminating in more fundamental questions related to the transformation of lifestyles, societal identity and

culture. The various stages in this sequence are neither mutually exclusive nor hierarchical but occur in different combinations and priorities in given political agendas. The boundaries of policy packages that are defined to address the problem complex of climate change can therefore change and adjust over time, including through exogenous shocks such as natural disasters, economic downturns, or security crises and war as witnessed through recent events in Ukraine.

Concerning dynamics of politicization, reflecting on these boundaries is relevant for delineating relevant agents, venues and policy programs, but also because these boundaries can be raised as an object of contestation in their own right. In this sense, both efforts to expand the scope of policies promoted as climate action, and their roll-back in favor of economic deregulation and fossil fuel use can become major sources of political contestation. To cite just one major example, the polarization between proponents of a Green New Deal agenda, those arguing for an approach focused on investment in 'green' infrastructure is primarily based on differences in the scope of policies envisaged to tackle climate change. To summarize, we conclude that controversy associated with the boundaries of climate change governance – resulting from volatility of these boundaries or even their explicit political contestation – creates a dynamic of politicization that creates more disruptive political conflict with more problematic effects for policy change.

3.2. Arenas: Climate change governance and democratic politics

The first component of the theoretical model is primarily focused on executive institutions and the agenda-setting stage of policy-making cycles. A second step is reached when policy initiatives are entered into or raised by representative institutions, particularly legislatures, and publicly negotiated by agents with party political and territorially defined mandates. It is particularly at this stage that political issues related to climate change increase in visibility as a matter of political decision-making, and that involved political agents are compelled to articulate and justify their positions, thereby spelling out the sources and quality of political contestation as a key component of politicization.

Applied to the field of climate governance, it stands to reason that the issue has expanded from an initial set of intergovernmental institutions and executive agencies with science-based mandates such as the IPCC, UNEP or EPA to settings and institutions of democratic representation and accountability. Examples include the increasing frequency of resolutions and policy-making decisions in the European Parliament (Burns 2017, Wendler 2019), but also a growing involvement of domestic legislatures in debates and decision-making on issues such as

the adoption of climate laws or legislation (Debus/Tosun 2021, Wendler 2022, Hogan 2021). Considering the case of the US, the highly publicized controversy on the Green Deal agenda appears just as the tip of the iceberg of a much broader and variegated controversy, considering the number of proposals for carbon pricing and other climate-related measures entered into the US House of Representatives (Wendler 2022b, Guber et al. 2021).

On a theoretical level, contributions to the literature on EU-related politicization refer to representative institutions as arenas of mass politics that both amplify dynamics of politicization and contribute to its disruptive effects on policy-making. In this regard, particularly postfunctionalism stresses how the entry of politicizing issues into arenas of mass politics increases pressures on policy-makers to respond to critical challenges against supranational governance, resulting in a constraining dissensus limiting their discretion in processes of European governance (Hooghe/ Marks 2009, 2018, 2019). While the postfunctionalist thesis of constraints arising from politicization has achieved wide prominence in the research literature, it has not remained unchallenged, as several publications have indicated the relative resilience of European governance processes and apparent ability of executives to circumvent pressures of politicization (Börzel/Risse 2018, Schimmelfennig 2020, Wendler/Hurrelmann 2022).

Applied to empirical cases, a main challenge of theoretical accounts therefore appears to identify causes for the variation between the forms of involvement of legislatures in climate policy-making processes, as evident, *inter alia*, from a comparison between the EP and US Congress (Wendler 2022b). In this regard, a helpful conceptual distinction introduced by discursive institutionalism is their involvement in two separate but interrelated functions: namely, the representation of competing political interests and agents, and their engagement in a process of justification and contestation towards general political publics identified with the concept of communicative discourse (CMD); and the involvement of parliamentarians in processes of policy-making, usually requiring cooperation with executive agents and / or second chambers and often involving informal and non-public mechanisms of negotiation and conciliation, designated as coordinative discourse (CRD; cp. Schmidt 2010, 2012). While several institutions of a political system, including executive bodies and agencies are involved in both of these two types of discourse, legislatures stand out as relevant for evaluating the effects of politicization on policy-making in one important regard: namely, by mediating between controversial public debates and decision-making on policy, simply because of their role as legitimizing institutions for passing policy programs into legislation. The effect of more politicized agendas and controversies on policy-making, therefore centrally depends on legislatures, and particularly

how they mediate between these two spheres by either moderating or transmitting pressures of competitive politics into procedures of policy-specific legislative negotiation.

How much a legislature is influenced in its operation by public and often adversarial communication to a political public on the one hand, and to more issue-specific and cooperative processes of policy-making on the other, varies widely in empirical cases and is reflected in the (conceptually rough) distinction between arena and transformative legislatures (Kreppel 2014, Arter 2006). Our approach suggests, however, that particularly one institutional mechanism is very likely to increase pressure on parliamentarians to respond to dynamics of polarized debate within the general public: namely, highly visible and direct electoral accountability mechanisms with potential sanctioning power by constituencies affected by decarbonization policies, as institutionalized especially through mechanisms of territorial (rather than party political) representation. Therefore, we suggest that the effect of politicization on climate governance is mediated by the strength of political and electoral accountability mechanisms established on legislative policy-makers within relevant legislatures. Strong accountability mechanisms that appear more likely to constrain parliamentarians result from a high degree of visibility of parliamentary procedure, shorter electoral cycles and particularly forms of territorial representation and sanctioning mechanisms by voters through direct recall of representatives.

3.3. Issue dimensions: Mapping the political space of climate politics

While the previous two steps primarily reflect on the setting and framework for the negotiation of political issues related to climate change, our third analytical stage delves into the content of debate, evaluating the quality of controversy between competing positions and arguments. It is at this point that political agents, their interests and particularly their respective strategies of discursive advocacy comes into play. Moreover, policy ideas and discourse move to the foreground as evolving contestation of climate change policies is essentially a discursive phenomenon that results from the clash of competing claims and forms of justification. An important aspect of operationalizing this stage is quantitative: namely, to establish indicators and typologies to map positions towards climate governance in given empirical settings, and find measurements for their relative degree of contentiousness, particularly by establishing indicators for salience and positioning of political parties and agents. However, measurements in this regard appear futile without careful consideration of an underlying aspect of exploring the evolving political space of climate policy: namely, the identification of relevant issue dimensions.

The term is familiar mainly from the comparative politics literature (Hoeglinger 2016: 19ff.), but often used without a clear definition. It is used here as a term for sets of thematic issues and related logics of controversy between opposed positions that are founded in the advocacy of competing ideological principles and result in longer-term, relatively stable organizing logics of political polarization (cp. Green Pedersen 2019: 26ff.). For the purposes of our present analysis, the term of political space is used for the entity of relevant issue dimensions that are discovered as relevant within a given setting of debate on climate change such as legislatures, party systems, or public responses to executive policy programs. The core question for applying these concepts to given empirical cases and within comparative research designs is twofold: namely, if one or several issue dimensions and resulting logics of political contestation are observed in a given case of controversy; and how resulting patterns of political conflict and contestation relate to established fault lines of political polarization as evaluated in the comparative politics literature. Answers to these two questions are far from evident: As the previous discussion of the boundaries of climate governance has made clear, the scope of political issues involved in climate policy is variable; as a consequence, the jury is still out on whether controversies over climate policy are another case of ‘politics as usual’ between left and right, as suggested in some parts of the literature (Buzogany/Cetkovic 2021, Farstad 2018, Carter et al. 2017). Beyond the evaluation of issue dimensions formed by ideologically founded disagreement, a further open question concerns the logic of political competition over issues related to climate change: namely, whether it should be considered as a valence issue – i.e., one defined primarily by varying degrees of emphasis on policy solutions to a consensually defined problem – as often assumed for questions of environmental politics (cp. Spoon et al. 2014, Abou Chadi 2016, 2020, Green Pedersen 2019), or whether it establishes a positional issue that prompts ideologically distinct responses from political parties. Due to its linkage with policy fields such as energy and economic governance, it seems plausible to assume that climate change involves positional issues between parties along ideological dimensions (Farstad 2018), an assumption further supported by the characterization of climate change as a complex (or ‘wicked’) policy challenge involving several intractable ethical and moral challenges (Grasso/Markowitz 2015, Levin et al. 2012). Against this background, an important challenge for empirical research is to account for different thematic layers: Parts of the debate about climate change revolve around the question whether it exists, what its causes are, and whether it has severe consequences; at a different level, controversies emerge between agents sharing a common outlook on the existence of climate change concerning issues such as questions of economic management, regulation, compensation, and distributive justice. In this sense, we distinguish three issue categories expected to create different objects of debate and logics of controversy (cp. Wendler 2022):

- First, the most fundamental form of debating climate change is to raise claims about its definition as a problem for society, including statements about its existence, causes and consequences but perhaps more importantly, proposing evaluative norms and standards about why it creates pressures to act. Concerning this latter point, even supporters of the scientific consensus on climate change can strongly disagree on how and why a changing climate is a problem, depending on temporal and geographical frames of perception and material, ethical and moral criteria that are chosen as relevant.
- Second, and following on the appraisal of climate change as a problem, a relevant thematic category of debates is to define and justify appropriate political frameworks of action, particularly concerning the allocation of political authority between the state, markets and society, and within the vertical dimension of institutional layers between the global, regional, national and local level. Both aspects can prompt fundamental forms of political controversy, as political agendas to deal with climate change such as variants of the Green Deal or 'Build Back Better' programs are proposed and contested as shifting and expanding the intervention of the state into markets and society; furthermore, the question of vertical allocation of authority through global frameworks such as the Paris Agreement or supranational institutions within the EU can be seen to prompt both expressions of support for supranationalism and defences of national sovereignty.
- Finally, a third layer of debate evolves in relation to specific approaches and instruments of policy-making, particularly its regulatory approach and distributive effects including forms of compensation and investment. This aspect reaches into more specific detail by zooming in on how regulatory instruments are designed and applied within given frameworks of governance, such as the prolonged negotiation of how to design the European emissions trading system and its Market Stabilization Reserve, or how to design and apply forms of carbon pricing.

While this distinction of relevant issue categories helps to distinguish between different layers of political controversy, it does not prescribe their respective logic of political contestation, as resulting from the promotion of competing ideological principles promoted by political agents. A challenge for identifying such logics through empirical research is to deal with the trade-off between an inductive approach aiming to explore highlighted topics, positions and underlying ideological disputes on the one hand; and a deductive method of applying pre-existing concepts

for relevant issue dimensions as discussed in the comparative party politics literature (cp. Benoit/Laver 2012, Elias et al. 2015, Lefevere et al. 2019). Handling this trade-off depends on assumptions on whether climate politics appears likely to be identified as a case of ‘new politics’ or another instance of established fault lines of political conflict. For the sake of comparability, however, it seems recommendable to apply fault lines of political conflict discussed in the broader comparative politics literature at least tentatively as empirical benchmarks to controversy on climate change, and potentially extend or revise this approach where it seems necessary. Considering relevant contributions to the literature, particular four such dimensions can be identified that create different thematic debates and prompt distinct ideological principles for their evaluation as subjects of political controversy:

- (1) An *epistemic* dimension of deep-seated beliefs relating to the recognition of climate change, based on broader attitudes towards science, concepts of risk and uncertainty, and the relation of humans to nature;
- (2) A *socio-economic* dimension engaging with the effects of policy-making, based on the perceived degree of public intervention in markets and subsequent distributive effects, and evaluated through ideological beliefs about market freedom and state regulation;
- (3) A *cultural dimension* created by perceptions of how issues of climate governance matter for individual lifestyles and perceptions of identity and community, formed particularly on the basis of postmaterial and more traditional-authoritarian attitudes; and finally,
- (4) A *political authority* dimension, relating to whether the concept of global and supranational governance is accepted as an adequate political framework to deal with climate change, or whether such an approach is rejected based on a defence of principles of national sovereignty, or even the autonomy of sub-state entities or local communities.

Considering the variable and dynamic boundaries of climate governance, it can be expected that the issue dimensions considered here are shaped to a considerable degree by political agents according to the issues involved. An interesting point in this context is Matthew Paterson’s discussion of efforts by political agents to either ‘purify’ issues related to climate change, particularly by introducing simplifying and polarizing narratives, or to acknowledge their complexity (Paterson 2021: 25ff.). Examples of ‘purification’ include the identification of simple dichotomies between heroes and villains (such as climate activists versus the fossil fuel

industry), and the reduction of climate politics to a simple antagonism or conflict, while complexity involves the recognition of the multiple specific, sometimes technical, and policy-related challenges and dilemmas involved in climate governance. This account fits our discussion in two ways: first, by distinguishing between relatively fundamental and more policy-specific and even technical aspects of the debate; and second, by engaging with the questions how climate politics can either be reduced to a single dimension of opposed ideological principles, or be approached as a more complex issue involving several such dimensions.

To summarize, we assume that politicization is rendered more problematic – or strengthened in its effect as a disruptive factor for the progress of climate governance – when relevant issue dimensions shift and multiply, particularly in a comparison between involved arenas. In this sense, political conflict arising from issues of climate change appear particularly difficult to negotiate if they affect more than one issue dimension, as resulting from controversies over forms of carbon pricing and simultaneous dispute on competence of federal or supranational institutions. Moreover, sudden shifts in the dimensionality of climate politics, as effected through changes of majority control between political parties with salient positions in different issue dimensions, can be expected to exacerbate disruptive effects of politicization.

3.4. Interfaces: Contestation and policy-making in multi-level systems

While the literature on the politicization has greatly advanced in terms of measuring qualities and degrees of contestation especially of EU governance, a remaining challenge is how to theorize and evaluate linkages between different institutional settings of politicized debate (Wendler/Hurrelmann 2022). It is, however, precisely this point that moves to the foreground if our focus is on the effects of politicization on policy-making. Moreover, a defining feature of climate change governance is that it is not decided and implemented in a single institutional setting but evolves in a highly decentralized, multi-level arrangement with multiple relevant nodes of decision-making, often characterized as a new form of polycentric governance (Jordan et al. 2018, Dorsch/Flachsland 2017). A contrary view to this emphasis on broad, dispersed networks is that identifiable settings of specific institutions, particularly nation states, still exercise considerable political authority and continue to matter as a primary unit of analysis for the evaluation of policy-making processes related to climate change. However, even this point does not challenge the fact that climate policies are mostly proclaimed, decided and implemented at different levels. A question of critical importance is therefore not what intensity or quality of politicization can be observed in a given institutional setting, but how different arenas of politicized debate relate to each other in given governance settings, an aspect

highlighted in the theoretical approach of discursive postfunctionalism (Wendler/Hurrelmann 2022).

For the development of specific research designs investigating the effects of politicization, it seems inevitable to identify a given set of institutions or governance arrangement such as the European Union or interaction of individual states with the US federal government. Within such specified settings, interfaces between arenas of politicized debate emerge in two dimensions: first, on a horizontal level, between legislative, executive, administrative and potentially judicial institutions; and second, within a vertical dimension, between supranational and domestic institutions, and between different levels of federal polities where responsibility for climate governance may be dispersed between the federal, state and local level. The range of possible interaction between different institutions can involve different dynamics including synergy, mutual decision-making blockades, accommodation or competition. To operationalize these interactions, a useful term from the policy analysis literature is the concept of institutional friction, as discussed particularly by the punctuated equilibrium (PET) approach to evaluate interactions of institutions as barriers for policy change (Workman et al. 2022: 69ff., Jones et al. 2018: 69). While helpful, however, the term has also remained underspecified in the relevant literature; what we propose, therefore, is a closer conceptualization of institutional interfaces and the respective probability of their creating frictions obstructing pressures for policy change.

For the purposes of our theoretical model, we define the ‘interface’ between institutions involved in climate governance arrangements as the realm in which competing positions of involved political agents can be negotiated and mutually accommodated through mechanisms of negotiation. This interface can range between no structures at all, leaving involved institutions in a mode of competition, to strongly developed and highly formalized negotiation and conciliation mechanisms. More specific variables to assess variants of this interface are:

- (1) The availability of informally prescribed or formal mechanisms of negotiation;
- (2) The absence of external influence through interest groups, courts and the public; and
- (3) The absence of strong and short-term electoral and accountability mechanisms on agents.

Applying these criteria, we propose to distinguish between “thick” institutional interfaces with strongly embedded procedures of negotiating policy disagreements from “thinner” ones where such components are absent and institutional friction is therefore assumed to be higher. We posit that effects of politicization will be stronger and more problematic between institutions

with a thin interface than those that are embedded in stronger structures of inter-institutional negotiation.

3.5. Hypotheses and questions for future research agendas

To summarize the theoretical framework presented here, we posit that dynamics of politicization can be traced through several analytical stages associated with different stages of the policy-making process, and that each of these can vary as a mediating factor to either assume an escalating or more accommodating quality for channelling pressures of politicization. In this sense, investigating the four stages distinguished can be specified through hypotheses on the effects of politicization in the following ways:

- (1) Scope: The politics of climate change assumes a more escalating quality if it involves within volatile boundaries of what is defined as its policy-making framework, or these boundaries are openly contested (H1a); by contrast, it is more constructively mediated if it evolves within stable and uncontested boundaries (H1b);
- (2) Arenas: When entering into public deliberation of representative institutions, political issues related to climate change are more likely to be escalated when involved political agents are subject to strong mechanisms of electoral accountability, particularly those based on territorial representation (H2a), while more mediated and distant mechanisms of accountability work to accommodate pressures of politicization (H2b);
- (3) Issue dimensions: Within evolving controversies on political programs and policy-making proposals, an escalating dynamic is created when several issue dimensions emerge as relevant as a source of polarization (H3a), while single-dimensional controversies work to accommodate dynamics of politicization (H3b); and finally,
- (4) Interfaces: When several representative institutions and / or political entities are involved in negotiating policy programs to tackle climate change, an escalating dynamic is created through politicization when inter-institutional relations are characterized by high levels of friction (H4a), while accommodation is easier in the presence mechanisms of inter-institutional relations reducing friction effects and allowing gradual policy change (H4b).

As this survey makes clear, each of the four stages covered by our model can assume a more escalating or more accommodating quality when exposed to dynamics of politicization. Each of the four pairs of hypotheses identified above can in principle be adopted for empirical research programs and tested individually with regard to their plausibility. When reconstructing the effect of pressures resulting from politicization on the entire policy process, however, the four stages can also be combined to create a perspective on how escalating and more accommodating factors combine within a given political and institutional setting. Within such a

cross-cutting perspective, our main hypothesis is that a shift towards conditions identified as escalating will increase disruptive effects of politicization, while the presence of accommodating factors will work to defuse its constraining effects, and even potentially work to support processes leading to policy change. This implies that several potential combinations of escalating and benign factors can be present in a given empirical setting, resulting in a range of variants that cannot be fully spelled out in the present paper. The main argument, however, remains that it is the relative balance and shifts of these opposing factors that will mediate the effects of politicization on climate change governance. It follows from this that a benign, or even supporting effect of politicization for policy-making progress is possible but relatively unlikely by depending on a rare set of circumstances: namely, that all four of the analytical stages identified here assume a form that translates increased salience and visibility into a progressive push for policy change. With one or more of these stages turning towards a more escalating form, however, we would expect more problematic or even disruptive effects of politicization on climate governance. Blockades of policy-making, however, are considered most likely across all possible scenarios when all four of those factors emerge in their respective form as escalating variants of political contestation.

Assuming a causal relationship between benign variants of politicization and policy change, as suggested in the above discussion, remains a critical aspect of the overall model to be further investigated. A possible extension of the model in this regard, whose implications go beyond the scope of this paper, would be to distinguish further between different types of policy change resulting from politicization, as identified in Peter Hall's distinction between 1st-, 2nd- and 3rd order change and discussed in conceptually similar threefold categories in the policy analysis literature (such as change related to deep core, policy core, and secondary beliefs; cp. Henry et al. 2022: 134). From this perspective, approaches such as punctuated equilibrium theory (PET) would suggest that far-reaching policy change involving shifts in policy paradigms is linked to relatively rare, but longitudinally observable tectonic shifts resulting from the build-up of pressures related to politicization that prompt changes in dominant policy images, venues and involved agents (Baumgartner et al. 2019, Baumgartner/Jones 2009). From this perspective, it is possible that gradual, small-scale policy change is facilitated by benign conditions of politicization, whereas more fundamental shifts occur from the build-up of larger pressures. In this sense, evaluations of effects of politicization on policy-making could potentially vary with the choice of time frames and analytical foci on paradigmatic versus more policy-specific change. Whether both perspectives can be linked by relating factors identified as benign to gradual and

more small-scale policy change versus more far-reaching and sudden changes resulting from disruptive politicization is a question for future research. In this context, it seems fitting to highlight that the ambivalent causal relationship between policy stability and (re-)politicization for policy change has been identified as one of the major challenges for future research agendas on climate politics (Paterson et al. 2022).

4. Empirical illustration: Politicization of climate governance in the EU and US

The European Union (EU) and United States (US) establish contrasting cases of climate change governance in many respects, even though both have been signatories of the Paris Agreement since its conclusion in 2015 (Wendler 2022, Wurzel et al. 2021). While a politicization of debates on climate change is present in both entities, controversy on concepts such as a Green New Deal or energy transition have prompted clearly different policy-making responses. Applying the theoretical model outlined above, it can be used to highlight the following differences in how pressures of politicization affected decision-making about policy:

- **Scope:** The approach and boundaries of climate governance are volatile and contested in the US case, having been established as a field of executive agency in energy policy under the Obama but subsequently been rolled back during the Trump administration. Within the political current of proponents of more climate action, its scope is contested between proponents of a comprehensive approach promoted through the Green New Deal agenda, and the more limited approach focused on investment and economic modernization advocated through legislation derived from the original, more encompassing Build Back Better agenda. By comparison, the EU has developed a gradually expanding but stable approach first based on the energy and climate packages and recently expanded to economic, cohesion and external policy under the European Green Deal approach.
- **Arenas:** At first sight, the EU and US appear institutionally similar as multi-level systems with a bicameral legislature, high consensus requirements for decision-making and political separation between the executive and legislative branch. In fact, members of US Congress have been very active in proposing pieces of climate legislation but never achieved major breakthroughs in fields such as emissions trading, carbon pricing, or legislation on a green energy transition. By contrast, the European Parliament (EP) and Council of the EU have negotiated various rounds of such legislation in the past 20 years. A major reason for this difference highlighted by our model is the higher visibility and stronger electoral accountability of law-makers in Congress, particularly through their local constituencies and biennial elections for the House and parts of the Senate.
- **Issue Dimensions:** Extant analyses of legislative decision-making on climate policy in the EP suggest that it evolves primarily within a socio-economic and distributive dimension

but is successfully accommodated through informal negotiation mechanisms between both legislative chambers as established through the trilogue. By contrast, political controversy on climate politics in the US seems characterized not just by more intense partisan polarization between Democrats and Republicans, but also by a more multi-dimensional space of political contestation involving a socio-economic, but also a cultural and sovereignty-globalism and epistemic dimension. This can be seen to prompt political controversy to be far more difficult to accommodate within legislative procedures and between both legislative chambers (US House and Senate) and the federal executive.

- **Interfaces:** As in the discussion of legislative arenas, the EU and US appear broadly similar within a vertical institutional dimension as multi-level systems with dispersed policy-making competences and strong autonomy of constituent units within a (quasi-)federal political system. In both cases, the federal / supranational set of institutions is confined to adopting framework legislation concerning issues such as energy policy, and requires cooperation of agents at the (member) state level to implement policy. However, a critical difference between both systems is the highly adversarial and competitive character of relations between US states and the federal government involving political antagonisms and a strong role of climate- and energy policy-related litigation on the one hand, and more cooperative and less politically adversarial relations between EU Member States and supranational institutions. The latter was challenged recently through a Polish opt-out from the endorsement of the European Green Deal, but remains more successful in implementing legislation at the domestic level and coordinating efforts towards the achievement of decarbonization.

While this illustration of our theoretical model using the two cases of the EU and US is obviously very brief in the present format of this paper, their comparison nevertheless commend it to be further refined and applied through comparative tests in a wider selection of cases. The results discussed here are summarized once more in the table below.

FIGURE 2 Overview of comparison between EU and US climate change policy

	European Union	United States
Scope of climate governance	Broad and expanding but stable: EGD agenda	Narrow but contested and volatile: GND & BBB vs ‘America First’
Arenas of controversy and decision-making	Relatively remote from electoral accountability, mixed representation	Highly exposed with strong territorial representation and electoral accountability
Relevant issue dimensions on climate change	Primarily socio-economic: regulatory approach and distributive effects	Strong in several dimensions: Socio-economic, relating to political authority and epistemic dimension
Interfaces between levels of decision-making	Compound and mostly cooperative relations across horizontal and vertical separation of powers	Competitive and adversarial relations across horizontal and vertical separation of powers
SUMMARY: Effects of politicization	Relatively benign and channelled through legislative representation	Highly disruptive effect of politicization especially through adversarial inter-institutional relations

5. Conclusion

This paper has engaged with an emerging research agenda that appears increasingly urgent when set against the background of ongoing political events: While the politics of climate change is expanding by moving to the forefront of political debates and prompting more strongly polarized views and controversies, much of the literature on climate governance is still focused on its policy dimension. Harnessing the concept of politicization, this paper seeks to propose building blocks for theoretical models linking the politics- and policy-dimension of climate change governance. A limitation of the framework presented here is that it does not offer a full-fledged explanation of why climate change becomes more politicized and through what forms of mobilization, protest and party-political representation it becomes manifest. Our principal theoretical aim here is more modest: namely, to identify assumptions about how dynamics of observed politicization can become problematic or remain more constructive for processes of policy-making, and to propose them as ideas for more specific hypotheses for future research agendas. The main overarching argument of this framework is that politicization is neither good nor bad per se for advancing climate action agendas, but that its effects can range between benign and more disruptive effects mediated by the four sets of factors identified above.

Turning to current events and attempting an outlook on future developments, it seems safe to say that the politicization of climate change is here to stay. The global Covid-19 pandemic and the military aggression unleashed by Russia against Ukraine have introduced a considerable degree of instability into existing agendas of climate action and prompted new controversy on the current relevance and feasibility of decarbonization targets. From a pessimistic point of view, these events are seen to relegate targets of carbon neutrality particularly by shifting public attention and public spending to other fields, or to reverse previously consensual views on exit strategies from fossil fuel (and nuclear energy) use. A contrary view on those developments is that both crises create windows of opportunity for pushing more stringent climate action, as the expansion of renewable energies gains in support through concerns about the energy security and independence particularly of EU countries, and the global pandemic has prompted economic recovery packages that often emphasize a turn towards more sustainable technologies and infrastructure (as emphasized in the NextGenEU and 'Build Back Better' agendas).

The full implications of these developments for the range of policies subsumed here under the concept of climate governance remain ambivalent and cannot be assessed within the scope of this paper. What they demonstrate, however, is the variety of ways through which components

of action against climate change – particularly the investment in renewable energies – can become connected to previously unrelated agendas and be re-framed to accommodate new situations. Especially two aspects of the theoretical framework discussed above – namely, the definition of boundaries of climate governance and relevant issue dimensions – therefore appear relevant for tracing current and future changes of policy linkages, and for evaluating how exogenous shocks such as the pandemic and war in Ukraine change existing formats, coalitions and fault lines of the debate on climate change. Within this context, it seems even more evident than before that at the level political discourse, there is not one but multiple perceptions of climate change and its significance for policy-making, as it can become attached to virtually any other issue and be (re-)interpreted in multiple ways.

All of these observations imply that in the context of ongoing politicization considered here, there is no simple ‘more’ or ‘less’ of climate politics, but a number of variants of discursive advocacy that political agents adopt to push for or against decarbonization. Whether framing an issue in terms of climate action becomes one of the most salient validating argument for pursuing a certain course of action, or its most contentious aspect remains an important question for the future.

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