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POLITICAL SPACES OF CLIMATE GOVERNANCE

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH PROGRAM

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Abstract

Climate policy-making is currently being transformed by two main dynamics: an expansion of governance frameworks through the proclamation of Green Deal agendas; and a shift and re-framing of climate action as a defining component of green industrial programs linking public investment with zero-carbon conditionality. These dynamics foreground ongoing research debates about the interaction between vectors of policy stability and punctuation as a factor of climate policy: rather than occurring within fixed and clearly identifiable settings and actor networks, dynamics of political conflict and change evolve within and through shifts of the boundaries and rationales of governance processes associated with action against climate change. Implications are felt both within the policy- and politics-dimension: In addition to the impact that dynamics of expansion and re-direction have on the definition of policy goals and choice of policy instruments, they also affect the perception and contestation of climate change as a political issue and perspectives on its politicization. How can a research program be devised that evaluates dynamics of stability and change in the evolution of climate governance frameworks in relation to these developments in a comparative perspective? Addressing this question, the paper proposes a theoretical framework based on the concept of political space as a heuristic analytical device to discuss and relate three components of climate governance that include aspects of scope and dimensionality: namely, its policy space as the evolution of political agendas proposed to deal with the climate crisis; the institutional space as the format of institutional venues that are involved in the negotiation of relevant policy issues; and the discursive space evolving from the depth and issue dimensions of controversy between involved policy-making agents and coalitions. A brief empirical part illustrates the application of this model by reviewing the evolution of climate governance frameworks in the EU and US as contrasting cases of policy stability and disruptive policy change associated with political conflict and contestation.

Key Words

Climate governance; Green Deal; green industrial policy; exogenous shock; European Union; United States; policy stability; politicization.

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of Workshops in Toulouse (Workshop 26: ‘Towards a New Era of Environmental Risk Regulation in the EU’). The project was granted by the German Science Foundation (DFG) in early 2023 and launched on 1 July 2023 (grant number 441493451). This support is gratefully acknowledged. The author would also like to thank the Center for Sustainable Society Research (CSS) for hosting the project and agreeing to publish the present manuscript in its Working Paper Series. Any comments and input are highly welcome.

Political Spaces of Climate Governance

Theoretical Framework and Research Program

Frank Wendler

1. Policy stability and disruption as vectors of climate governance

Climate policy-making is going through a process of change through the expansion and re-framing of governance frameworks, agendas, and decision-making processes. One major driver of this dynamic is the proclamation of Green Deal agendas and subsequent adoption of climate laws particularly in the EU and many of its Member States that define climate action as a cross-government rather than sectoral issue (Oberthür & Homeyer 2023, Eckert 2021, Ossewaarde 2020, Aji 2021). Another aspect is the adoption of green recovery and industrial policy programs that link substantial public investment in infrastructure and technologies to criteria of zero-carbon conditionality, often in response to economic and security crises. Prominent examples include EU programs such as NextGenEU or the RePowerEU program adopted in response to the exogenous shocks of the Covid pandemic and war in Ukraine; for the US, particularly the passage of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) is recognized as a re-launch of climate action through goals and instruments of industrial policy (Nilsson et al. 2021, Meckling 2021, Lewis 2021). A common denominator of both dynamics is that climate policy has left behind its perception as a subfield of environmental policy (Kraft 2018) and is expanded to broader and more variegated fields of policy-making. This dynamic is not entirely new and reflected in literatures about climate policy integration (Tosun & Lang 2016) particularly in energy policy (Dupont 2016) or trade (Laurens et al. 2022, Blümer et al. 2020). However, recent developments have brought about a new quality of this expansion of climate policy-making.

The dynamics of change identified here have implications for the policy-making dimension of climate governance but also affect the contestation of climate change as a political issue (Newell et al. 2021). In this regard, exogenous shocks such as the pandemic and Russian attack on Ukraine affect the general salience and priority assigned to climate change as an issue. Moreover, new linkages are created between zero-carbon targets and issues of economic recovery and growth, energy prices and security, and technological competitiveness and geoeconomic autonomy. Rather than relegating climate issues in favor of more traditional policy targets such as growth and security, however, a major result of these shocks has been the amalgamation of climate targets with other policy issues and proclamation of synergy effects between these issues within

agendas and policy programs that have emerged as a response to crisis in the EU (Wendler 2023, Anghel 2023, Dupont & Torney 2021). It is unclear how the re-framing of climate action as a more sustainable variant of crisis management and recovery affects its politicization, defined as a dynamic towards more salient and contested responses to the topic of climate change in public political debate (Zürn 2019, Hutter & Kriesi 2019).

These political dynamics of expansion and change of climate politics take place against the backdrop of an academic literature debating the role of policy stability as opposed to dynamics of disruption and conflict as competing vectors for the evolution and success of climate governance (Paterson et al. 2022). In this sense, both the long-term stability of governance processes and relative remoteness from politicized debate, but also the achievement of political breakthroughs through political conflict and exogenous shocks have been discussed as factors for progress towards net-zero carbon targets. While this debate remains inconclusive with regard to generalizable conclusions, the approach of the research program discussed in this paper is that a key factor affecting this dualism has not received sufficient attention: namely, the disruptive shift or relative stability of the boundaries and rationales of climate governance frameworks and how they are affected by exogenous shocks and increasing political contestation. Put differently, a key argument of this program is that rather than evaluating degrees of political conflict within assumed settings of climate policy, tracing vectors of stability and disruption concerning the contested definition of their boundaries and relation to broader political agendas leads towards insights about the role of political conflict for climate policy-making.

In order to address these puzzles, the subsequent paper proposes the concept of political space as a heuristic analytical tool to emphasize the variability, asymmetries and dynamic change of different dimensions of governance processes related to action against climate change. This concept arguably requires specification and operationalization to be applied to specific research questions and designs. However, it is discussed here to propose building blocks and relevant components for a research agenda interested in tracing the evolution of climate governance frameworks and their effect on policy-making results in a comparative perspective. By relating a range of analytical concepts of relevant research literatures based on perception of space - such as scope, expansion, shift, dimension, position, venue, vector, field or level - this concept intends to relate two sets of literatures: on the one hand, those approaching climate policy as a 'sui generis' field of governance with regard to conditions of policy stability or change; and more general concepts and theories of the policy process that link sources of disruption such as exogenous shock and political contestation to dynamics of policy change.

The main ideas of this research program are presented in three steps: First, the subsequent section presents a brief survey of the relevant literature addressing the interaction between factors of policy stability and disruption (ch. 2); in its main part, the paper then presents a theoretical framework for the evaluation of these dynamics and its foundation in the concept of political space (ch.3). A brief survey of recent developments in the EU and US is then presented to illustrate the application of this framework (ch.4). The conclusion summarizes the main arguments and gives an outlook on next steps and main components of a future research agenda (ch.5).

2. State of research: Policy stability and disruption in climate governance

In general terms, the research program described in this paper engages with a research debate succinctly summarized in a recent forum article in *Global Environmental Politics* and raising the question of how to relate two vectors of climate change governance: namely, the pursuit of *policy stability* as an expression for stable governance frameworks aiming at continuous and ideally irreversible policy results to achieve decarbonization; and sources of *political conflict* and disruption resulting from exogenous shocks and increased contestation of policies associated with climate change (Paterson et al. 2022). Opening up a multi-faceted field of research, this contribution points to an important gap in extant research: namely, an evident disconnect between literatures engaging with the politics- and policy-dimension of climate governance, and a resulting question of both academic and political importance: How do sources of political stability and disruption affect the progress of policies urgently needed to promote action against climate change?

The research literatures associated with this question are wide-ranging and can be reviewed only very briefly in the scope of this paper. Policy-making stability, effects of lock-in, positive feedback and path dependence are familiar concepts of mainstream policy theories that have been applied to reconstruct the development of longer-term trajectories of policy-making, and to achieve a transition to a zero-carbon society, both at the level of explanatory approaches (Lockwood 2013, Rosenbloom et al. 2019, Stokes 2020) but also more practical reconstructions of the policy process (Delbeke & Vis 2019). In addition to general perspectives on stability as a vector of policy processes, a more 'sui generis' argument made about climate change is that it requires particularly high degrees of stability and predictability because of the scope and necessary duration of investments, and the long-term and systemic character of impacts

associated with climate change. In this context, it is suggested that the only adequate response to the challenge of climate change are policies that create long-term credible commitments to decarbonization and frameworks that are 'durable by design' (Jordan & Moore 2021, Jordan & Matt 2014). Other contributions have discussed scope conditions described as policy stability as a factor for progress of climate policy, particularly through the absence of political dispute contesting scientific findings, long-term stability of coalitions and predictability of decision-making (Kuzemko 2016, Paterson et al. 2022: 3f.). Within this literature, policy stability is used in different meanings, often referring to relatively stable political and institutional context factors of governance processes (or primarily, the 'politics' dimension of the term); and the discussion of policy-making results in terms of their capacity of creating lock-in, positive feedback, and path dependence, and the degree to which adopted decisions contain aspects of irreversibility (the 'policy' dimension).

Contrasting with this first literature, a second strand of research has emerged that associates progress of policy-making against climate change with political conflict and disruption rather than conditions of stability and continuity. From the outset, it seems clear that disruption as the opposite term of policy stability merges several distinct dynamics that require further clarification. In this context, the concept of politicization as an expression for more broadly visible and contentious public debate on policies has received attention as a potentially disruptive factor for climate policy, as reflected in several strands of the research debate.

A first component of this literature adopts a critical perspective to address what is perceived as a technocratic or 'post-political' approach to one of the most transformative challenges of society. Here, arguments are raised in favor of a more resonant and contentious debate on the ethical and moral choices required by society to address and mitigate the sources of global warming (Blühdorn & Deflorian 2021, Swyngedouw 2022, Kenis & Mathijs 2014, Fiorino 2018). A more clearly normative strand in the literature raises arguments for a wider democratic debate and new forms of participation and deliberation about issues of climate change (Stevenson & Dryzek 2014, Willis 2020).

On a more empirical level, the concept of politicization is familiar from research debates on global governance and European integration, where it has been used for evaluating degrees of political conflict about given policy issues in arenas of representative democratic politics (cp. Zürn 2019, Hutter & Kriesi 2019; for a literature review cp. Wendler 2022b). Applied to the issue of climate change, one of the first questions debated in the literature was whether politicization is 'good or bad' for policy progress in a field that is based on scientific input and depends on long-

term and consequent action (Pepermans & Maesele 2016, Boasson & Tatham 2023). Subsequently, the ‘new politics’ of climate change has become a subject of research in its own right (Davies et al. 2021, Tosun & Peters 2021), covering civil society movements (Doherty et al. 2018), new and traditional media (Chinn et al. 2020), political parties (Carter et al. 2018, Carter & Little 2020), individual attitudes (McCright & Dunlap 2011, Gustafson 2019), and climate policy as a subject of public discourse by policy-makers within parliamentary settings (Kinski & Ripoll Servent 2022, Wendler 2019). Linking political contestation with the explanation of policy change, research with a background in political economy has inquired into the mobilization of competing interests and emphasized the degree of political conflict involved in efforts to overcome vested interests opposed to action against climate change (Mildenberger 2020, Aklin & Mildenberger 2020).

As in research debates about the politicization of global and supranational governance, a large portion of the literature focuses on populist-right and nationalist parties. From this perspective, the politics of climate change appears as a likely case for the mobilization of sentiments rejecting scientific expertise and global cooperation (Cann et al. 2018, Fiorino et al. 2022, Marquardt & Lederer 2022). In a broader perspective, only a few contributions to the literature have presented more complete comparative accounts of party positions towards climate change (Carter et al. 2018, Farstad 2018, Spoon 2014), while party politics and decision-making in the EP is better researched (Buzogany & Cetkovic 2021, Wendler 2019, Burns 2017), including contributions that discuss contestation arising from competing forms of framing and discourse (Wendler 2022a: 82ff., Kinski & Ripoll Servent 2022).

A second strand of research covering sources of disruption that potentially affect climate governance frameworks has emerged from the literature on exogenous shocks, particularly those arising from the Covid pandemic and the Russian attack on Ukraine (Wendler 2023). In this context, recent contributions have discussed the evolution of EU energy and climate governance under conditions of turbulence (Dupont & Torney 2021) and against the backdrop of current crises (Massetti et al. 2022, von Homeyer et al. 2021, 2022, Rietig 2021, Siddi 2021), embedded in broader debates about the EU ‘polycrisis’ (Zeitlin et al. 2019, Anghel & Jones 2023, Massetti & Exadaktylos 2022). While many of these contributions find relatively strong degrees of resilience of EU climate policy in relation to external shocks, it remains unclear to what degree this finding can be transferred to other settings.

On a theoretical level, few approaches exist to link sources of political disruption and conflict on the one hand, and policy development in the specific field of climate change on the other

(although preliminary accounts are presented by Paterson 2021 or Mildenerger 2020). Extant theories offer different approaches: General theories of policy-making such as Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (Baumgartner & Jones 2009, cp. Wendler 2023, 2024a) or the Advocacy Coalition Framework (Henry et al. 2022, Workman et al. 2022) would predict breakthroughs for policy change particularly from the onset of exogenous shocks; resulting in shifts of political attention, such shocks are expected to affect agenda-setting and create disruption for established policy subsystems and their embedded constellations of agents and interest coalitions. A contrary perspective of the effects of politicization, however, is established by postfunctionalist theory: From this vantage point, we would expect constraining effects on on policy-making from a shift of climate politics to arenas of mass politics and increased party political contestation, especially if it creates a mobilization of arguments against inter- or supranational cooperation based on cultural-identitarian grounds (cp. Hooghe & Marks 2019).

Bringing these research literatures into conversation with each other is complicated by the variability of climate governance frameworks and their dynamic change as described at the outset. A common point of reference in this regard is the recent launch of climate action programs subsumed as green industrial policy (Lewis 2021, Meckling 2021). In a comparison between the EU and US, a broad similarity between these programs is that climate targets are combined and amalgamated with issues of economic growth, social cohesion and geoeconomic autonomy and pursued through an incentive- and market-based approach rather than restrictive regulation (Meckling & Strecker 2023). A key difference concerning the dualism of stability and conflict is that green industrial policies have emerged in the EU primarily as a result of exogenous shock (Wendler 2023) rather than as a result from intense party political contestation and legislative negotiation as in the US; furthermore, green industrial programs are more firmly embedded in a regulatory framework for a reduction of carbon emissions in the EU than in its US counterpart (Oberthür & Homeyer 2023). The new approach of decarbonization through active industrial policies is therefore related to dynamics of policy stability and disruption in quite different ways in the two contrasting cases of the EU and US (cp. Wendler 2024a).

Considering these developments, one of the major challenges of current research is how factors of political disruption and conflict contribute to shifting boundaries of climate governance frameworks, and what effects they on political agendas, institutional venues, actor constellations, and decision-making. To some degree, aspects of this question have been addressed in the literature on climate policy integration as a term for dynamics working towards broadening the scope of climate targets in a wider range of policy-making fields (Rietig 2019,

Adelle & Russell 2013, Dupont 2016, Tosun & Lang 2016). In this vein, contributions to the literature on policy integration have emphasized its dynamic, process-based character across various stages of the policy process (Candel & Biesbroek 2016); the most recent accounts focus on political conflict arising from asymmetries and incoherent policy integration between the macro-political framing of political issues at the stage of agenda-setting and subsequent decision-making at the level of subsystems (Cejudo & Trein 2023b). This perspective on policy integration as a political process (Cejudo & Trein 2023a) resonates with the approach taken here by focusing on dynamics of agency and political conflict arising from the shift and expansion of the political boundaries of climate governance (cp. Wendler 2024b).

To summarize, the theoretical framework and research program outlined here engage with the research debate on policy stability and disruption as two opposed vectors of climate governance; their relevance has increased in recent stages through the expansion and shift of the boundaries and proclaimed rationales of climate governance frameworks. From this point of departure, it is evident that the dualism of stability versus conflict is a rough one that requires further specification in both directions. In this sense, the concept of policy stability has a dual meaning both as a term for conditions of policy-making concerning the political and institutional setting of decision-making, but also as a form of policy change that occurs through incremental, gradually increasing and ideally irreversible commitments to a reduction of GHG emissions. Similarly, the opposing concept of disruption includes sources of political conflict from exogenous shocks but also more endogenous political contestation arising from the politicization of climate change as a political issue. As these different dynamics require further distinction and clarification for more specific research questions and designs, the dualism is referred to here mainly to summarize different dynamics of change that affect the evolution of climate governance frameworks in current settings.

3. Theoretical framework: Political spaces of climate change governance

Based on the discussion in the previous chapter, the theoretical framework presented in the subsequent sections pursues the following rationales:

- (1) First, to identify vectors of policy stability as opposed to disruption within the evolution of discursive, institutional and actor-related dimensions of climate change policy;
- (2) Second, to integrate assumptions of theories on the policy process to explain linkages between ideational factors expressed through policy beliefs and images, institutional venues and their interaction, contestation between involved agents and subsequent policy-making results; and
- (3) Finally, to create a point of departure for comparative analyses of the dynamics of change affecting the boundaries, rationales and decision-making modes of climate governance frameworks.

The key concept proposed here to relate vectors of policy stability and change is the political space of climate governance, defined as the variable and politically contested set of institutional, political and discursive boundaries within which climate change is addressed and negotiated as a policy issue (Wendler 2022a: 35ff.; for alternative accounts of political space cp. Lövbrand & Stripple 2006, Benoit & Laver 2012, Gabel & Hix 2002). The three dimensions of climate governance are reflected in the theoretical model as vectors of expansion or limitation of

- (1) its *policy space*, as defined through agendas that present policy images and forms of framing climate action, particularly by executive agents at the macro-political level;
- (2) its *institutional space* as relevant administrative and legislative arenas involved in the negotiation and adoption of climate policies, primarily at the level of more specific policy subsystems; and finally,
- (3) its *discursive space* as the depth and logics of contestation between relevant actor coalitions involved in these processes of negotiation within and between these policy subsystems.

Relating these three dimensions of political space to one another, it is assumed that each of these dimensions can expand or contract as a result of political agency or in response to dynamics of change in a related dimension. As the visualization of the model shown below and

subsequent discussion proceeds through a sequence from agenda-setting to institutional settings and contestation, it is clear that these dimensions are interrelated through interactive feedback cycles (figure 1 below).

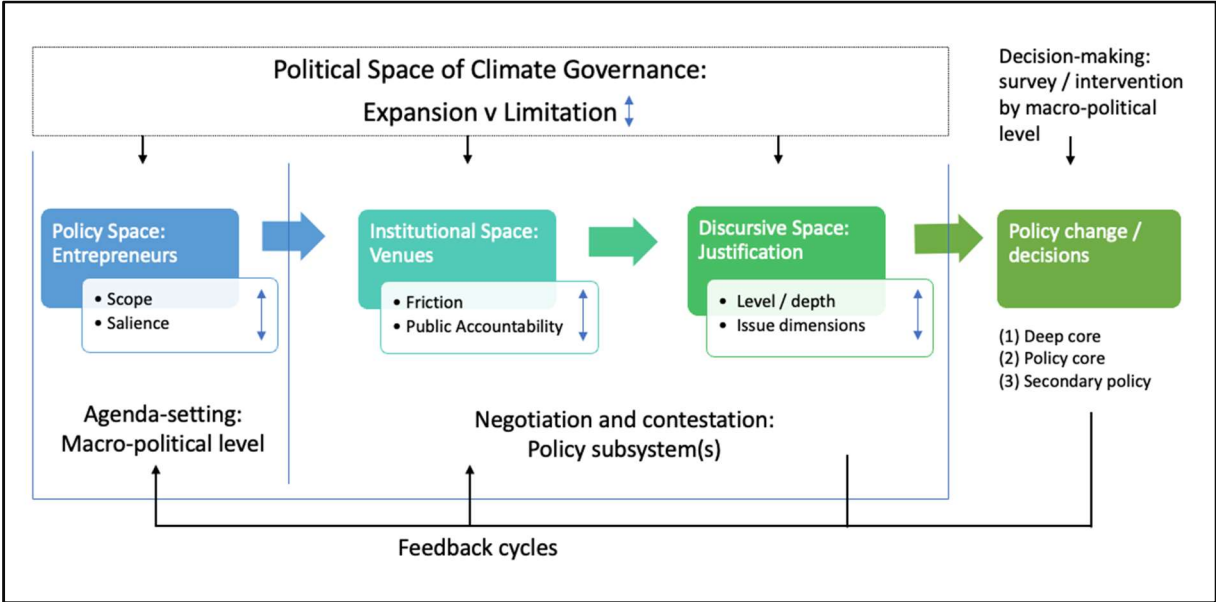


FIGURE 1 Overview of the theoretical model.

The following sections describe how this framework can be used to identify relevant components of stability and disruption in extant climate governance frameworks. To this end, the subsequent discussion discusses two main indicators for each of the three dimensions of political space and identifies scales of their gradual expansion towards greater degrees of expansion and political conflict. The summarizing discussion draws connections to theories of the policy process by identifying linkages between the dimensions and possible effects on policy-making results.

3.1 Agendas: Defining the policy space of climate action

Processes of agenda-setting are a classical element of theories of the policy process, particularly through policy images that define complex political issues (Baumgartner & Jones 2009, Baumgartner & Jones 2009, Weible et al. 2018). For the particular field of climate change, the definition of agendas assumes a particular quality by setting targets within given parameters and frameworks of policy-making, but also defining the boundaries and rationales for which policy change is proclaimed. In order to evaluate the degree of change brought about through the proclamation of climate action targets, our framework proposes two criteria to assess the

policy space established through these agendas: namely, the scope of climate agendas and salience of climate priorities, based on the relative density of instruments proposed to promote goals of decarbonization. More specifically, vectors of expansion or stability can be specified as follows in terms of more concrete operationalization:

1a. Scope of climate action: A provisional scale for measuring the scope of action envisaged through climate action agendas should consider the following areas of policy-making directly and more indirectly associated with climate change (cp. Wendler 2022b: 8-11): (a) core areas relevant for the regulation of GHG emissions, particularly from the sectors of energy, industry, transport and buildings; (b) the wider range of fields relevant for carbon cycles through the provision of sinks, particularly concerning agriculture, land use and forestry, and protection of habitats; (c) policy measures addressing the impacts of climate action in terms of compensation and adjustment, particularly in the form of transfers and subsidies, but also measures aiming at strengthening the resilience of communities affected by transitions towards cleaner technologies; and finally (d) an encompassing definition of climate action as a universal and cross-cutting mandate of transformative change,.

1b. Salience of climate policy priorities: As discussed at the outset, a broadening of the range of policy fields to which climate targets are applied does not necessarily create a more stringent framework of policy-making to achieve decarbonization: Even a universal application of green targets across the board can create a diffusion or even greenwashing of policies without backup of credible instruments and mechanisms suitable to introduce desired forms of policy change. A summary term for the relative importance of policy targets genuinely related to climate change mitigation relative to other priorities is their salience, as realized both through their prominence in agendas but also the density of associated governance mechanisms and mix of policy instruments (cp. Oberthür & Homeyer 2022). In this sense, a suggested way of evaluating the 'climateness' of governance frameworks is to evaluate the presence of (a) 'soft governance' mechanisms based on methods of reporting, evaluating, and comparison; (b) the creation of market-based incentives to adopt more carbon-neutral technologies, including through subsidies, tax breaks or direct transfers; (c) more direct regulatory interventions into market processes through prescriptive rules, carbon pricing or the setting of caps for GHG emissions; and finally (d) the adoption of legally binding and enforceable commitments to specified targets of decarbonization, particularly in the form of cross-cutting climate laws or other forms of framework legislation. As these policy instruments are presented in an order of increasing stringency, an expansion of the regulatory intervention is created through a progression of proposed policy-making instruments from those listed first to those discussed later.

3.2 Arenas: Mapping the institutional space of climate change politics

The interaction between policy images proclaimed through agendas and relevant venues of decision-making is central to theories of the policy process, particularly Advocacy Coalition and Punctuated Equilibrium approaches (Workman et al. 2022, Henry et al. 2022). From this point of departure, two variables are proposed to evaluate how shifts of relevant institutional arenas introduce sources of disruption to governance processes between involved institutional settings and towards external publics:

2a. Institutional friction: The interaction between involved institutional settings can vary in relation to their relative degree of friction (cp. Baumgartner et al. 2009). It is understood here as a term for the degree of conflict emerging from their interaction within a scale between cooperation and adversarial conflict and competition. As degrees on this scale, we distinguish (a) forms of delegation of executive mandates to independent agencies or other regulatory bodies, as familiar particularly from the role of the EPA based on framework legislation in the Clean Air Act and executive mandates in the United States; (b) co-regulation based on interaction between several independent bodies or entities without formal requirements for cooperation or mutual veto, such as decisions adopted by central banks or independent regulatory bodies to support moves towards decarbonization without arms-length control by executive bodies; (c) mutual coordination between departments or involved legislative committees with different policy-specific portfolios and mandates; (d) coordination between representative or intergovernmental bodies under requirements of consensus and respective rights of decision-making veto; and (e) political conflict between institutional entities with competing party political majorities under requirements of cooperation and respective veto.

2b. Public accountability: The public exposure of institutional settings in which policy issues are negotiated and their degree of political accountability to external publics are a familiar component across approaches reaching from theories of the policy process to postfunctionalist analysis of EU governance (Baumgartner & Jones 2009, Workman et al. 2022, Hooghe & Marks 2019). A critical aspect in this regard is to what degree arenas involved in governance processes introduce aspects of contentious politics through forms of competitive democratic representation and public debate. In this respect we propose to distinguish institutional settings with increasing links of accountability to external publics, proceeding from (a) technocratic bodies, (b) executive bodies that are subject to regular procedures of parliamentary accountability and sanctioning, (c) representative bodies and legislative decision-making procedures with indirect or weak accountability mechanisms to external publics and voting

mechanisms; to (d) representative bodies with strong external accountability mechanisms to publics and electoral control, particularly based on territorially defined mandates.

3.3 Political agents: the discursive space of justification and contestation

The third component of the proposed model engages with the discursive dimension of climate change politics: the range of justifications presented for the advocacy of programs and initiatives related to action against climate change, and the depth and logic of their contestation. This component of the model engages with research approaching politicization as a discursive phenomenon (cp. Wendler & Hurrelmann 2022). The depth and contentiousness of debate can depend on the political, temporal and institutional scope of measures adopted to address climate change, but also the justificatory frames for its mitigation, as evident from a comparison of economic, ethical, security or justice-related approaches to justifications for action against climate change (cp. Wendler 2022a: 35-50).

Two variables are proposed to evaluate vectors of change in this regard, again proceeding from relatively limiting to more escalating and fundamental stages of discursive contestation:

3a. Depth of contestation: The first variable plots at what level policy change related to climate targets is proposed and debated, applying a three-step distinction of policy beliefs familiar from the policy-making literature (cp. Henry et al. 2022: 109, Wendler 2022: 47f.): whether (a) discursive advocacy and contestation remains limited to secondary beliefs relating to policy-specific questions concerning the design, application and operation of policy-making mechanisms and instruments; whether (b) it relates to programmatic demands for change at the policy core level, requiring significant adjustments in the overall targets, priorities, and logics of policy-making; or (c) if contestation occurs at the paradigmatic level of deep core beliefs concerning the ontological and normative foundations of climate action, covering issues such as conceptions of sustainability or relating to paradigms of economic growth.

3b. Discursive issue dimensions: With this second variable, the theoretical model proposed engages with terminology of political spatiality as used in the research literature on party politics and polarization (Benoit & Laver 2012, Hutter & Kriesi 2019, Hooghe & Marks 2019). In this context, issue dimensions are conceptualized as the result of discursive interactions of agents and understood as relatively stable and recurring categories of thematic issues that are substantially contested by involved agents based on an identifiable set of shared evaluative criteria. An expansion of the discursive space is observed both through the intensification of polarized debate around a given issue dimension, but also the reinforcement of several such

dimensions. Extant research on the political contestation of multi-level governance refers to different issue dimensions by distinguishing (a) the emergence of a single, primarily socio-economic form of contestation around issues of market freedom versus regulatory intervention, (b) contestation around cultural and identity-related issues based on the appraisal of nature, the role of science, tradition and ideas of community; and finally, (c) debate arising from questions about boundaries of sovereignty and legitimacy, particularly in relation to the acceptance of global agreements and mechanism as opposed to regional, national and local frameworks of political authority.

In summation, the theoretical framework proposed here seeks to capture the variants of climate governance frameworks and their dynamic evolution by evaluating the degree of continuity or change of its political space and its three main dimensions of agendas (policy space), arenas of decision-making (institutional space) and involved political agents and their interaction through coalition-building and contestation (discursive space). Specifying each of these three dimensions through two variables serves a dual analytical purpose: first, to identify and plot dynamics of expansion, contraction or continuity through different sequences of policy-making processes and related agendas; and second, to map variants of policy-making processes on climate change and set their respective spatial configuration in comparative perspective.

4. Case studies: Political spaces of climate governance in the EU and US

In its empirical part, the research program envisaged in this project focuses on a comparison between the EU and US as key actors in global efforts to combat GHG emissions. While a full exploration of these two cases and their respective trajectories in policy-making on climate change would deserve a full separate paper or monograph (for a more complete account, cp. Wendler 2024a), the purpose of the brief sketch presented in this section is to outline the main rationales guiding their comparison in the present project.

A key assumption for selecting these two cases is that considering their respective records of political action against climate change, the EU and US appear as strongly contrasting, almost ideal typical examples for policy stability on one hand, and frequent disruption and fragmentation of policy-making, on the other. In this sense, the EU has been appraised as a progressive leader of climate action (Wurzel et al. 2021, Delbeke & Vis 2019) based on a longer-term commitment to international agreements and a gradually expanding and relatively continuous trajectory of policy-making (Machin 2019) leading up to the proclamation of the

European Green Deal (EGD) in late 2019 and subsequent adoption of a European climate law (Wendler 2022: 65ff.). By contrast, climate change policy has been disrupted by changes in the presidency and political majorities in the US, resulting in a more volatile adherence to agreements at the global level and a more fragmented and unstable set of policies promoting GHG emission reductions, primarily through executive action and at the state level rather than a comprehensive framework based on federal legislation (Wendler 2022: 119ff.).

Against this background, it is intriguing that the onset of exogenous shocks caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and energy crisis prompted by the outbreak of war in Ukraine have led to the adoption of 'green' recovery and investment programs in both systems, with some similarities and several defining differences. For both entities, however, it appears that new spaces for climate change policies have been established whose creation contribute both to a disruption of existing boundaries and policy-making networks, and the reinforcement of vectors supporting effects of policy stability. In a brief and preliminary form, recent shifts of climate governance frameworks in the EU and US can be described as follows based on the previously discussed theoretical framework:

- (1) Policy space: As a response to external crisis, both the EU and US have adopted agendas that considerably broaden agendas of action against climate change but also introduce more variegated policy linkages that do not necessarily increase the salience of decarbonization targets. The dominant policy image of climate action has been shifted from the necessity of regulatory restrictions on carbon emissions to a provision of positive incentives, which are used as a lever to prompt investment and behavioral changes towards 'greener' forms of production and consumption. Particularly a range of policy packages subsumed under the heading of 'green recovery' are relevant in this regard, as promoted by the EU through its NextGenEU and REPowerEU programs (Buti & Fabbrini 2023, Schramm et al. 2022, Quaglia & Verdun 2023, Wendler 2023) and pursued in the US through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (subsequently BIL) and Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), the two legislative packages derived from the previous 'Build Back Better' agenda (Cha et al. 2022, Fraser et al. 2021, Michie & Sheehan 2021). Through its framing as a conditionality factor for a more sustainable economic recovery and step towards energy security, the scope of climate action is broadened to include regulatory and financial incentives for investment and production, energy grids, mobility and compensation programs for affected regions and industries. As the policy space is expanded, the density of climate policy instruments is increased but also diversified, particularly as a range of positive incentive measures in the form of tax breaks, subsidies,

grants and loans are launched for a range of public and private investment based on criteria of green conditionality. This development is particularly relevant for the case of the United States, where the IRA has introduced a variety of production and investment tax credits, direct subsidies for consumers and support programs local communities. An intriguing detail in this context is that a substantial portion of subsidies is tied not just to green but also social criteria, such as the fulfilment of labor, wage and apprenticeship standards by enterprises (Cha et al. 2022); a highly salient and more geoeconomic aspect has been added through criteria established for production of components and technology within the United States. While the density of policy instruments is increased, these are also tied more directly to policy targets and priorities outside of the field of climate or environmental politics, further widening the scope of policy developments relevant for the progress towards decarbonization.

- (2) Institutional space: As a result of agenda changes described above, the institutional framework of climate governance is expanded and rendered more diverse in both entities. This applies particularly to its multi-level dimension and concerning interactions between federal / supranational institutions and those at the (Member) State level but also regions and communities; a resulting effect is an increase of institutional friction between involved entities and institutional layers. This change is very notable in the case of the US, where the central role of EPA for previous stages of climate and energy policies is both reinforced and changed through considerable allocation of funds administered under the heading of both the BIL and IRA legislative framework; these include the rollout of initiatives for cleanup of brownsites and cooperation with regions targeted under the headings of energy poverty and Justice40 programs. In addition, however, the enactment of clean energy and technology programs creates a new governance framework with involvement of the Departments of Energy and the Interior, the US Treasury, and a strong leadership and coordination role exerted by the Climate Policy Office and Special Advisor for the Clean Energy Transition in the White House. While both the BIL and IRA acts have entered the implementation phase and are therefore primarily governed through executive institutions, initiatives by US Congress remain relevant particularly for the specification of policy details, particularly concerning the development of grids, infrastructure and responses to the wider geopolitical context of energy security and trade cooperation (Blümer et al. 2020). Public accountability in this context is further increased through the salient role of particular legislators with territorially defined mandates, especially in the US Senate. In the European Union, the adoption of investment and recovery programs through NextGen and REPowerEU have

also expanded the governance framework comprised under the EGD governance process to institutions identified with economic governance and shift investment through the RRF to Member States. A strong component of policy stability is, however, added by decision-making within the climate policy subsystem in charge of adjusting EU regulation to the more stringent decarbonization targets required by the EGD agenda and European climate law ('Fit for 55'). Here, a continuous adjustment of regulatory legislation covering key instruments such as emissions trading, renewable energy and efficiency standards has resulted in incremental increase in the stringency of regulation and decarbonization targets. Trilogue between EP, Commission and Council as the primary mode of decision-making adopted for these legislative revisions has so far been effective in reducing friction between involved institutions and limiting external accountability of decision-making.

- (3) Discursive space: The broadening of governance frameworks has had ambiguous and perhaps counter-intuitive effects on the discursive space of climate politics: As a consequence of the closer association of climate targets with issues of economic recovery and energy security, topics related to the target of decarbonization have become more salient but also amalgamated with other policy priorities. In comparison to previous stages, the justification and contestation of climate policies therefore moves away from direct debate on the effects of global warming to linkages established with a range of other policy issues primarily in the fields of energy, buildings and transport, but also covering trade, finance, security and a range of issues subsumed under geopolitical challenges. This aspect is observable particularly in the policy debate of the US, where public investment in green technologies and infrastructure is has been integrated into a policy discourse emphasizing economic competitiveness, middle class recovery and social rights, but also a more protectionist stance in trade policy to a degree that reduces the recognition and validation of climate change as a political issue in its own right. Rather than reinforcing climate change as a polarizing issue between the two major parties, aspects of the green transition are attached to economic, social and foreign policy paradigms that partly give rise to bipartisan coalition-building, but also create new rifts within the Democratic camp based on constituency interests and positions on fiscal policy and approaches to trade. At least in part, this effect is also observed in the EU, where the attachment of the EGD agenda to crisis responses removes carbon neutrality policies from the focus of political controversy while also shifting a considerable part of its enactment through conditionality to the Member State level and domestic agents and controversies. A contrast to the US, however, is created through the fact that the ongoing

revision and adjustment of regulatory policies in place to achieve the EU's target of carbon neutrality continues to be negotiated and contested within the established climate policy subsystem of the EU, however relatively removed from the larger resonance of public contestation effected by debate on responses to the energy and security crisis. A key insight from both cases, therefore, is that the evolution of discourse on climate policy and its contestation is not adequately captured when measured as a simple increase or stability of conflict arising within an otherwise unchanged framework of parameters defining it as a political issue. Instead, it is primarily the relation and attachment to other and potentially competing policy paradigms that has shifted the debate and possible perspectives for coalition-building and political conflict.

To summarize, a major effect of recent developments is that the political spaces within which policies relevant for action against climate change are negotiated has generally expanded but also been rendered more heterogenous and multi-layered. In terms of envisaged policy-making results, some aspects of policies currently pursued by both the EU and US aim at effects discussed under the heading of policy stability: particularly, the reinforced commitment to mid- and long-term targets of decarbonization but also the approach of incentivizing the adoption of technology and infrastructure with a potential of creating future positive feedbacks and lock-in effects. This intended effect, however, contrasts with the much more disruptive dynamics through which new formats of climate change policy are introduced and linked with other policy-making priorities and agendas. Applied to the two cases of the EU and US, factors of disruption and exogenous shock are identifiable through the adoption of new agendas and creation of new governance frameworks; on balance, however, even these innovations tend to continue within an established trajectory of policy stability in the EU but evolve in more disruptive, contested and open-ended ways in the case of the US.

An overview of these preliminary observations is summarized in the table below; color codings of cells in this table are used to identify vectors of policy stability in blue as opposed to dynamics of political disruption and conflict marked in red (table 1 below).

	European Union: EU Green Deal and 'green recovery'	United States: Green industrial policy (BIL, IRA)
Policy space: Agendas	Gradual expansion of EGD in scope and re-direction towards investment and geopolitical / - economic objectives	Disruptive expansion in scope of climate action but ambiguous and contested salience and linkages
Institutional space: Policy venues	Addition of RRF mechanism and external instruments but remaining core function of regulatory subsystem	Creation of new governance framework and central executive coordination; high friction and accountability
Discursive space: Justification	Broader linkages through recovery mechanism and increased contestation but stable overall framing of EGD	Depth of contestation as signature bills but attachment of climate issues to economic and geopolitical issues
Policy-making results: Evaluation	Relative policy stability: Gradual adjustment of regulation and stepwise reinforcement through RRF	Disruptive but open-ended policy breakthrough towards GHG reduction goals; risk of slowdown and reversal

TABLE 1 Preliminary results of comparative analysis of the EU and US.

From this comparison of cases, some insights can be drawn for the evaluation of hypotheses concerning the linkage between dimensions of political space and their effect on policy-making results. While policy stability and dynamics of more disruptive political conflict and breakthrough are observed to different degrees in the EU and US, the three dimensions of political space appear to be tied to one another with regard to what respective dynamic prevails. Greater ambiguity, however, remains concerning the linkage between both dynamics and policy-making results, as both entities have produced significant policy change and progress towards decarbonization as a result of contrasting policy-making dynamics. A critical distinction to be developed further in this regard concerns the creation of climate governance frameworks, where disruptive breakthroughs play an important role for policy-making progress, and their longer-term operation, where stability and continuity is more decisive. In this sense, a key rationale of policies launched through the IRA in the United States clearly is to create lock-in effects and

political barriers against future repeal through positive returns from investment and shifts of policy-making trajectories particularly in the fields of energy and mobility.

5. Conclusion: Political spaces of climate governance

As the politics of climate change gains in visibility both politically and as a topic of research, a debate is emerging between positions emphasizing effects associated with policy stability such as positive feedback mechanisms, lock-in and path dependence, and others focusing on disruptive effects of exogenous shock and politicization as factors of success for policy progress. An implicit assumption underlying this debate, however, seems to be that climate change can be approached as a field of policy-making with relatively clear and evident boundaries within which factors of stability and conflict can be evaluated and compared. The present paper challenges this assumption by arguing that governance processes labelled as climate action are variable in their scope and decision-making mechanisms, and have been rendered even broader and more variegated through the recent launch of green industrial policy and recovery packages.

From this point of departure, the paper proposes the concept of political space to evaluate governance processes in a context of shifting boundaries and linkages between policy-making fields subsumed under headings of climate change governance. We argue that pressures for policy change emerge from agendas that project new policy images by calibrating the scope and density of measures aiming at decarbonization, causing shifts in relevant institutional settings and actor coalitions within these venues involved in the negotiation of specific policy measures. In this context, the main purpose of the present paper is to present building blocks for a theoretical framework that identifies relevant aspects of related dimensions of policy-making and possible criteria for their operationalization, as reflected in the scales of expansion and limitation proposed for each of the six indicators discussed across the three dimensions. Considering scope conditions, it is clear that the theoretical model proposed here is developed primarily to analyze changes of climate governance frameworks that emerge from shifts at the level of agenda-setting and proceed through the institutional and discursive dimensions discussed here; other possible aspects and theoretical approaches towards policy change in climate governance such as learning or diffusion, and the entire aspect of implementation are left out of the present model due to limitations of space and for the sake of clarity and brevity.

The relevance of this focus on changes concerning the boundaries and linkages of climate policy is demonstrated in a comparison of recent developments within the EU and US. The launch of green industrial policies in these cases is only one facet in a broader dynamic through which

climate action is expanded to a broader range of policy-making fields such as trade, agriculture or public health. Each of these create distinct political spaces for the advocacy and negotiation of demands for a reduction of carbon emissions, providing different sets of policy images, institutional venues and relevant agents. Systematic comparative research is required to investigate how demands for policy change resulting from climate-based agendas work to disrupt or destabilize previous policy-making logics and trajectories.

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