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The Climate Crisis & Democracy

From Democratic Debilitation to Innovation

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Summary

Key Points

This Policy Brief makes the following key points:

- (a) The climate crisis is also a crisis for democracy. Democracies worldwide are failing to prevent dangerous climate change, as underlined by the latest report from the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). This failure constitutes a fundamental breach of a key obligation of legitimate government: to ensure the safety and survival of the people to whom democracies owe their allegiance. For some, '(d)emocracy is the planet's biggest enemy'.
- (b) There are four circumstances of democratic debilitation impeding democracies in effectively addressing climate change:
 - a. Short-termism;
 - b. Self-referring mechanisms (including elections);
 - c. Weak multilateralism; and
 - d. Capture by vested interests, particularly fossil-fuel interests.
- (c) These factors indict a particular kind of democracy: one that is individualistic, nationalistic, works on truncated time horizons, and sanctions corporate dominance of politics.
- (d) However, it is possible to renew and re-imagine democracy to achieve a more effective response to the climate crisis by building on existing features and advantages of democracy as a political system. This new vision should be based on four pillars: a planning state; a solidaristic ethos; an invigorated multilateralism; and fair and inclusive politics.

Recommendations

This Policy Brief makes the following recommendations, which focus on renewing democracy based on four pillars to address the climate crisis (and, in parallel, the Covid-19 crisis):

- (a) **A planning state:** Effectively addressing climate change should involve significant changes to the role of the state – including to counter short-termism – through planning, regulation of the economy, coordination and integration, and holistic risk mitigation.
- (b) **A solidaristic ethos:** A politics of self-interest should be countered by a broad and inclusive solidaristic ethos encompassing both intra- and inter-generational solidarity. This should rest on recognizing solidarity itself as a democratic principle and on enhanced social dialogue.
- (c) **An invigorated multilateralism:** This could be achieved by giving fuller effect to the principles of deliberative democracy in global climate governance, including deliberative multilateral forums and mechanisms of deliberative accountability e.g. through empowered civil society organisations.
- (d) **Fair and inclusive politics:** The disproportionate influence of vested interests can be countered through regulation of political finance and lobbying, as well as providing adequate resources and robust freedoms for civil society.

The Climate Crisis & Democracy

From Democratic Debilitation to Innovation

1. Introduction

Has democracy failed in the climate crisis? There is certainly reason to believe so. Countries across the world, the majority of which are democracies, have failed – and are continuing to fail – to prevent dangerous climate change, as underlined by the latest report from the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued 9 August 2021. This failure constitutes a fundamental breach of a key obligation of legitimate government: to ensure the safety and survival of the people to whom democracies owe their allegiance.

Worse, these failures are being attributed to congenital defects of democracy. Democracy is damned as a fair-weather regime unable to navigate crises – particularly existential crises such as climate change. For some, ‘(d)emocracy is the planet’s biggest enemy’.

The climate crisis is also a crisis for democracy.

A crisis, however, is a turning point, a moment of truth, with extreme danger, and also a significant opportunity. What is then called for is not pessimism, lest fatalism, about democracy but rather the deepening of the democratic impulse, specifically a grounded affirmation of the strengths of democratic institutions framed within a clear-eyed view of the enormity and complexity

of the challenges posed by the climate crisis. All the more so as this is clearly not a short-term crisis, the climate crisis will be a defining – perhaps *the* defining – challenge to democracy for decades to come. As Figueres and Rivett-Carnac argued, ‘(i)f democracy is to survive and thrive into the twenty-first century, climate change is the one big test that it cannot fail’.

With these sentiments in mind, this Policy Brief explores how democracy can effectively address the climate crisis. It begins by mapping the key circumstances said to impede democracies in dealing with climate change. It follows with an account of how these circumstances of democratic debilitation can be transformed into democratic innovation.

2. Democracy Against a Safe Climate?

Climate change is a particularly devilish problem for humanity because of its:

- *Long time-frames*: temporal distance between greenhouse gas emissions and climate change as well as between measures taken and their effects, together with its *urgency*, given dangerous climate change is already occurring and will intensify if sufficient action not taken;

Countries across the world, the majority of which are democracies, are failing to prevent dangerous climate change. This failure constitutes a fundamental breach of a key obligation of legitimate government: to ensure the safety and survival of the people to whom democracies owe their allegiance.

- *Spatial scale*: disjuncture between a global problem transcending national boundaries and international system based on nation-states and also between causes (responsibility) and effects (vulnerability) of climate change;
- *Limits to human activity*: recognition of planetary boundaries placing limits on economic and demographic growth;
- *Connectivity and complexity*: due to the interaction and interdependence within and between natural and human systems, as well as the imperative and difficulty of global collective action; and
- *Moral and ethical issues*: including inter-generational equity, equity between developed and developing countries, and also equity within countries.

Understood as a political system where 'the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government', can democracy address climate change in its full complexity?

Such processes militate against properly considering interdependence between natural and human systems; equity between countries; and inter-generational equity; it may also run counter to fully recognising limits to human activity; and is linked to weak multilateralism (due to a strong reference to national interests). In some contexts, populism will worsen these effects, given that populists treat the views of the public as self-vindicating, regardless of their merit, and as opposed to those of the elite (including scientific experts).

Third, *weak multilateralism* is traced to self-referring decision-making of states based on national interest as well as disagreements between developed and developing countries and opposition from fossil-fuel dependent nations. Weak multilateralism most obviously undermines the effectiveness of necessary global action. This dismal fact is reflected in the current level of commitments made under the 2015 Paris

Four structural characteristics are viewed as impeding democracies from effectively addressing climate change: short-termism; self-referring decision-making; weak multilateralism; and capture by vested interests.

Held and Hervey argue that four structural characteristics impede (liberal) democratic nation-states from effectively addressing climate change. These circumstances of democratic debilitation, firstly, include *short-termism*. This is attributed to the electoral cycle, with political parties seeking election every few years; competitive party politics producing a focus on short-term electoral gain and immediate interests of voters; and political processes being (too) responsive to the media cycle. Short-termism works against the long time-frames necessary to address the crisis and provides a moral outlook too narrow to capture inter-generational equity.

Second, *self-referring decision-making* is said to arise from democratic mechanisms, particularly elections, which are underpinned by accountability to constituents of a nation-state and accountability to current voters (a section of the present generation). To this we can also add the politics of self-interest (sectional and individual).

Agreement (a binding treaty agreed under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)) falling far short of its goals to limit global warming to well below 2°C, preferably to 1.5°C, compared to pre-industrial levels.

Finally, there is *capture by vested interests* (described by Held and Hervey as interest group concentration), specifically commercial interests. Capture of the policymaking process is enabled by the structural dependence of governments on business for economic growth; what Lindblom famously characterised as 'the privileged position of business'. Policy capture is also directly effected through lobbying by business interests and their funding of political parties and election campaigns.

Such capture by fossil fuel businesses will invariably mean delay, at times defeat, of measures necessary in the crisis, including uncoupling economic growth from increases in greenhouse gases and use of fossil fuels.

Without doubt, there has been a concerted effort by fossil fuel companies to effect such capture. Building upon their already considerable economic (political) power, in many states worldwide these companies have significantly funded key political parties and organisations in order to obstruct climate action. A central strategy has been a decades-long campaign by these companies to deny climate change, principally by sowing doubt as to the underlying science – all whilst their internal research, since at least the 1970s, has demonstrated the seriously damaging effects of using fossil fuels. Such disinformation may have, in fact, undermined the integrity of elections. Michael Mann, for instance, argues that the Russian Government’s interference in recent Canadian and US Presidential elections was likely motivated by ‘an agenda of fossil fuel extraction’.

Not surprisingly, David Attenborough has suggested that vested interests are ‘the most formidable obstacle’ to switching to clean energy.

These circumstances of democratic debilitation are compounded by the speed and scale of changes necessary to effectively address the climate crisis. According to the latest (2018) Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, what is required are ‘rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society’. Critical here is moving beyond the predominant view of societal progress being based on continuous economic growth (as measured by Gross Domestic Product). A view which treats the economy as an open system with limitless resources (e.g., capitalism with perpetual growth) will inevitably collide with a global ecosystem enclosed by planetary boundaries. In the words of the UNFCCC secretariat (UN Climate Change), ‘a growth-oriented economy may not be compatible with a climate-safe economy’.

Living in the safe and just space of the ‘doughnut’ between a social foundation that meets the needs of humanity and ecological limits will require a different – more holistic – understanding of

societal progress, like the one embodied in the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals.

3. Innovation Borne of Crisis

These circumstances of democratic debilitation are best understood as institutional tendencies – not as inevitabilities. Put differently, they indict a particular *kind* of democracy – one that is individualistic, nationalistic, works on truncated time horizons and sanctions corporate dominance of politics (a ‘free market democracy’ in the model of the United States).

A key challenge and opportunity for democracy is to innovate by imagining and implementing a vision of democracy for a safe climate that deepens democracy by disavowing these corrosive tendencies. This vision should be based on four pillars: a planning state; a solidaristic ethos; an invigorated multilateralism; and fair and inclusive politics.

Pillar 1: A Planning State

Short-termism does not necessarily have to result from the periodic mechanisms of accountability provided by elections – there is no (democratic) reason why those standing for office cannot be judged on their ability to attend to the long-term goals of the country including addressing climate change. A solidaristic ethos amongst the public (discussed below), for instance, could anchor electoral accountability in the needs of future generations.

Effectively addressing climate change should also involve significant changes to the role of the state – including to counter short-termism. The nation-state will be a critical actor and, in many respects, *the* critical actor with the necessary (unprecedented) transitions in the climate crisis. As the International Energy Agency has noted, ‘(u)nderpinning all of these changes (to net zero emissions) are decisions taken by governments’.

A key challenge and opportunity for democracy is to innovate by imagining and effecting a vision of democracy for a safe climate that deepens democracy by disavowing these corrosive tendencies.

Short-termism can, as Giddens has convincingly argued, be addressed by a nation-state that takes the lead responsibility in:

- *Planning*: both in terms of mitigation and adaptation;
- *Regulation of the economy*: including instituting the ‘polluters pay’ principle; establishing the economic framework for a low-carbon economy;
- *Coordination and integration*: between government, private sector and citizens; as well as different levels of government; and
- *Holistic risk mitigation*: Addressing the risks of the climate crisis together with other risks experienced by contemporary societies (including through social protection).

As Giddens has stressed, a planning state understood in this way (a Green State as characterised by Eckersley) will call for more democracy not less. Whilst informed by expert opinion, it will not be a technocratic state but one based on a vision of a climate-safe society and which engages with the complex dimensions of the climate crisis (including its moral complexity). It will be neither centralised nor ‘top-down’ in its processes: it will involve various levels of government and different sectors of society; and the setting of targets, determination of means, implementation and review in all these aspects will be strongly based on popular involvement. As the International Energy Agency has stated, ‘(c)itizens must be active participants in the entire process, making them feel part of the transition and not simply subject to it’.

Pillar 2: A Solidaristic Ethos

Democratic accountability, including elections, do not necessarily have to produce a politics based mainly on the interests of voters, let alone their interests conceived individualistically. Much depends upon the moral and political outlook of voters - a politics of self-interest can be countered by a solidaristic ethos.

Such an ethos should be broad and inclusive, encompassing, as Pope Francis has reasoned, both inter-generational and intra-generational solidarity. And it is vital to recognise that solidarity is a democratic principle. As International IDEA has explained, solidarity ‘refers to the ties in a society that bind different people to one another, expressing social bonds rather than autonomous individual ties’. With such a perspective, voters are not just protectors of their own interest but also trustees for the public interest (broadly conceived).

This stems from a fundamental truth — democracies are, by nature, communities. They are not random collections of individuals, but a ‘we’ that considers itself ‘a people’. Democracy is the process of *collective* self-determination. It is through solidarity that fuller meaning is given to the third (neglected) principle of the French Revolution – fraternity. And as the Dalai Lama has stressed, fraternity should be at the heart of our response to the climate crisis.

Arguably, a positive-sum orientation is integral to a solidaristic ethos in the climate crisis. This entails framing issues in a way that promotes ‘win-win’ solutions in relation to addressing the climate crisis alongside other different policy goals; the needs of the present generation and future generations; and for the various groups within the current generation especially for those particularly affected by climate change and climate action. Such an orientation will be a launch-pad for puzzling out policies that provide synergies between the complex dimensions of the climate crisis (e.g. creation of ‘green’ jobs for those employed in fossil-fuel industries).

Mechanisms that institutionalise solidarity are essential. Central is a nation-state that plans democratically for the future (including the needs of coming generations) and addresses the risks of the climate crisis together with other risks experienced by contemporary societies (see above). Deliberative democracy mechanisms – both in terms of specific initiatives such as citizens’

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assemblies and in terms of the political system as a whole (including elections) – are also likely to assist in cultivating a solidaristic ethos. By emphasising deliberation of matters of common concern based on reason-giving, reciprocity (mutually justifiable reasons) as well as equality in recognition and voice, deliberative democracy is centrally based on the recognition of other affected interests, including those of future generations.

Also vital in terms of solidarity is social dialogue, one of the four pillars of Decent Work Agenda promulgated by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). Such dialogue is integral to ‘the imperatives of a just transition of the workforce’ as stipulated by the 2015 Paris Agreement under the United Nations Framework Agreement on Climate Change. As the ILO’s Guidelines for a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all makes clear, ‘(s)ocial dialogue has to be an integral part of the

join with them in free discussion and *democratic* decision with a view to the promotion of the common welfare’ (emphasis added). In doing so, it connects with long-standing arguments for economic democracy as well as research that consensus-based (corporatist) democracies are more effective in shifting to cleaner forms of energy due to their ability to integrate various policy goals and interests.

A particular imperative too should be to ensure that communities vulnerable to climate change and action are given a voice. The US Green New Deal Bill, for one, mandates that a Green New Deal ‘be developed through transparent and inclusive consultation, collaboration, and partnership with frontline and vulnerable communities’. Such emphasis dovetails with recent research that more egalitarian democracies show higher levels of climate ambition compared to other democratic types.

A particular imperative too should be to ensure voice for communities vulnerable to climate change and action. The US Green New Deal Bill, for one, mandates that a Green New Deal ‘be developed through transparent and inclusive consultation, collaboration, and partnership with frontline and vulnerable communities’.

institutional framework for policymaking and implementation at all levels’ and that ‘(a)dequate, informed and ongoing consultation should take place with all relevant stakeholders’. The European Commission’s European Green Deal similarly emphasises that ‘(f)or companies and their workers, an active social dialogue helps to anticipate and successfully manage change’, underlining ‘the role of social dialogue committees’; and further stating that ‘(i)t will continue to work to empower regional and local communities, including energy communities’.

Social dialogue in this context is emphatically democratic. It seeks to give effect to a fundamental principle of the ILO’s Declaration of Philadelphia which calls for processes where ‘the representatives of workers and employers, enjoying *equal status* with those of governments,

Pillar 3: Invigorated Multilateralism

The obstacles to stronger multilateralism are certainly formidable, as evidenced by the grievously inadequate global action to date. But all is not lost.

The United States Biden Administration’s climate diplomacy brings hope of a breakthrough agreement at the 26th Conference of Parties (COP26) of UNFCCC to be held at Glasgow in November 2021. Whilst the level of commitments made under the 2015 Paris Agreement has fallen far short of what is necessary to address the climate crisis, it does provide a set of principles that could underpin an invigorated multilateralism, including: acknowledgment that ‘climate change is a common concern of humankind’; the principle of equity and common but differentiated respons-

ibilities; and the need to support developing countries. These principles could form the bedrock of a global covenant on climate change.

Democracy has a role to play here. Countering the self-referring mechanisms of nation-state democracy facilitates stronger multilateralism. Whilst electoral accountability does not (presently) apply to global institutions, there can be democratisation by giving fuller effect to the principles of deliberative democracy in global climate governance, including: deliberative multilateral forums and mechanisms of deliberative accountability (including through empowered civil society organisations).

Pillar 4: Fair and Inclusive Politics

While a stark feature of contemporary democracies, capture by vested interests is a distortion of democracy, not a result of it. This is most clearly the case with use of money by such interests to disproportionately influence politics. As the Global Commission on Elections, Democracy & Security (chaired by the late Kofi Annan) put it, '(t)he rise of uncontrolled political finance threatens to hollow out democracy everywhere in the world, and rob democracy of its unique strengths – political equality, the empowerment of the disenfranchised, and the ability to manage societal conflicts peacefully'.

There are established menus of policy options to deal with capture by vested interests. The Council of Europe has recommended a whole series of measures in terms of the regulation of funding of political parties and election campaigns. The OECD has issued a list of recommendations to prevent policy capture including through regulation of political finance and lobbying. Providing adequate resources and robust freedoms for civil society are also essential to raise awareness regarding the urgency of climate action and to reduce the disproportionate influence of vested interests as powerfully illustrated by the youth climate strikes.

4. Conclusion

As United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has warned, 'time is fast running out' to meet the goal of net-zero emissions by 2050. Given this, some may question the feasibility of the reform agenda argued in this Brief especially in the context of a pandemic that has claimed more than four million lives.

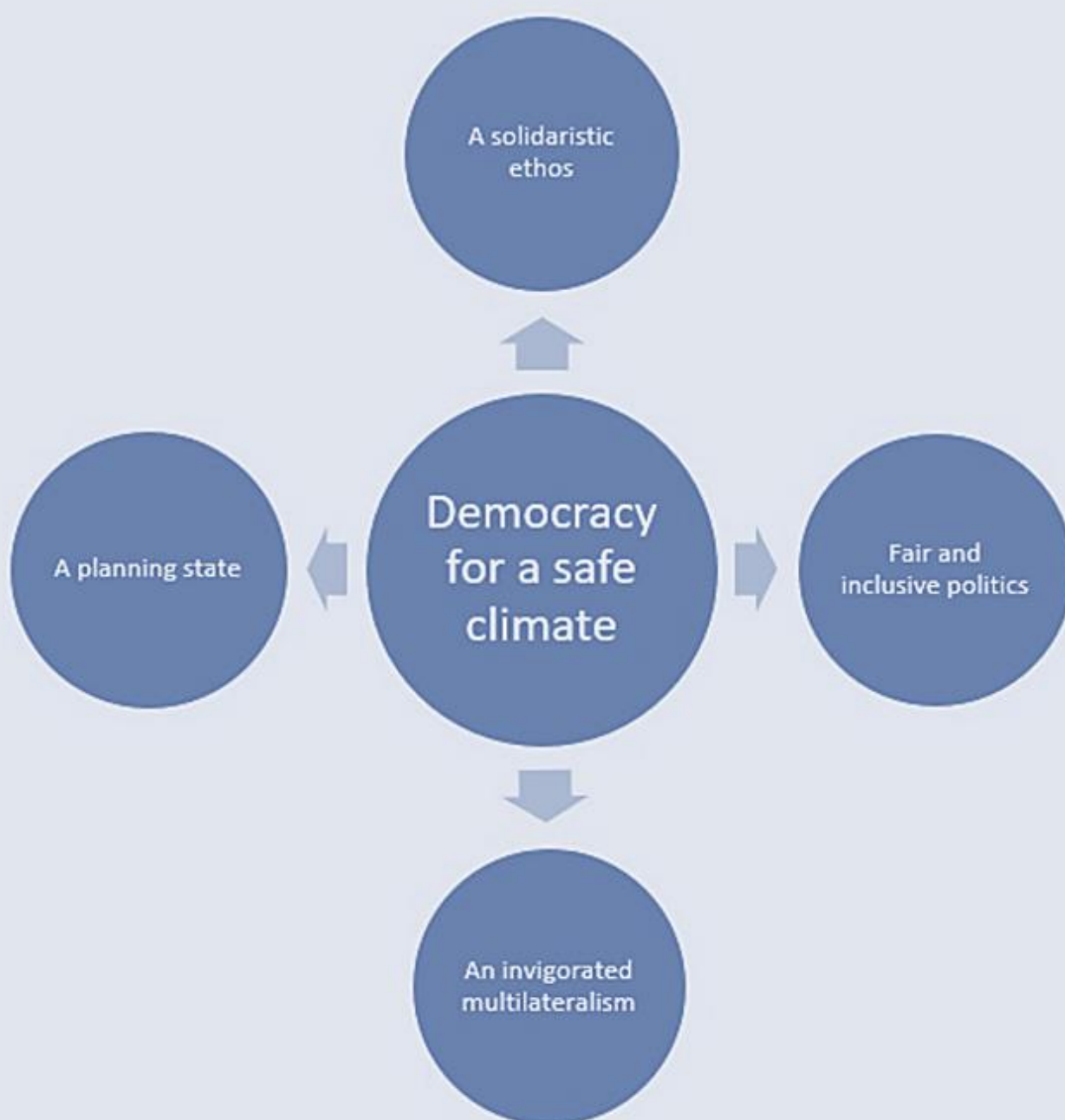
Such concern is understandable but mistaken. The four pillars argued for build upon existing features of contemporary democracies. They do not require a reinvention of democracy but its renewal, by holding it true to its ideals. Moreover, they are central to democratic efficacy in addressing the climate crisis. Failure to address the circumstances of democratic debilitation, specifically capture by vested interests, will hinder effective climate action. It is not just that the climate crisis is a crisis for democracy; the crisis of democracy is also a crisis for the climate.

These pillars also have a double-dividend in terms of helping to address the Covid-19 pandemic. A green Covid recovery, as urged by the UN Secretary-General, would draw upon elements of a planning state. An invigorated multilateralism is also key in this context with the World Health Organisation Director-General saying here that 'our best chance to change the world for the better is to strengthen multilateral institutions'. International solidarity is also foremost in overcoming the pandemic. In the words of the Director-General, 'either we get through this pandemic together, or we fail', '(e)ither we stand together, or we fall apart'.

As United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has warned, 'time is fast running out' to meet the goal of net-zero emissions by 2050. Failure to address the circumstances of democratic debilitation will hinder effective climate action. The crisis of democracy is also a crisis for the climate.

Renewing Democracy to Meet the Climate Crisis

A key challenge and opportunity for democracy is to innovate by imagining and effecting a vision of democracy for a safe climate that deepens democracy by disavowing the corrosive tendencies of contemporary democratic governance: short-termism; self-referring decision-making; weak multilateralism; and capture by vested interests. This vision should be based on four pillars: a planning state; a solidaristic ethos; an invigorated multilateralism; and fair and inclusive politics.



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Latest IPCC Report

On 9 August 2021 the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued the first part of its Sixth Assessment report, *Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis* – link [here](#).

This report is the most up-to-date understanding of the climate crisis, based on the latest advances in climate science and combining evidence from a range of sources including global and regional simulations, process understanding, observations and paleoclimate.

The report finds:

“It is unequivocal that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean and land.

Widespread and rapid changes in the atmosphere, ocean, cryosphere and biosphere have occurred.

Human-induced climate change is already affecting many weather and climate extremes in every region across the globe.”



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Governing During Crises is a research theme established by the School of Government at the University of Melbourne. The series seeks to develop our understanding of governing in the face of different types of crisis, at a time when Australia has recently faced the bushfire crisis, is currently addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, and faces even larger and longer-term challenges including climate change.

This Policy Brief series aims to distil academic research into policy analysis and clear recommendations, drawing on the cutting-edge research taking place at the School of Government and the University of Melbourne more broadly, as well as the School of Government's extensive global networks. Selected briefs will be produced in collaboration with the COVID-DEM project (www.democratic-decay.org), which examines how the pandemic is affecting democracy in Australia and worldwide.



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This brief draws on draft text of a forthcoming report for [International IDEA](#) (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance) entitled *Democracy and the Climate Crisis: Lessons from the Asia and Pacific region*. Many thanks to Colin Long and Jeremy Moss for their insightful comments on an earlier draft.

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