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THE POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE: POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS, POLICY RESPONSES, AND ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

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Abstract

Climate change is becoming a challenge of politics and institutions, with national climate performance being not only about the formal policy ambition, but also about the institutional landscape creating a conducive climate action. The study follows a quantitative design taking a comparative, cross-sectional approach to examine the correlates of the relationship between liberal-democratic institutional quality, climate-policy performance, and overall climate performance for 63 countries. Political institutional quality indicators include V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index, while climate performance indicators include Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI) 2026. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, ordinary least-squares regressions, and heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors (HC3 var) and spearman rank-order correlations were used. The results show that liberal democracy showed a positive but weak and statistically not significant relation to CCPI Climate Policy score ($r = .164$, $p = .199$; $B = 2.61$, $p = .252$); with liberal democracy explaining 2.7% of the variance. Liberal democracy, on the other hand, was statistically modestly and positively correlated with overall CCPI performance ($r = .397$, $p = .001$) and it was a statistically meaningful predictor in eventual regression analysis ($B = 20.96$, $p = .004$), accounting for 15.8% of the variance. Against this backdrop, the substantive pattern was reproduced using the robustness analyses of Spearman. Other scores (modes) were mostly correlated with the overall CCPI score, e.g. scores for Climate Policy being $r = .696$, $p < .001$; however, this correlation needs to be interpreted with caution as scores for Climate Policy also form part of the overall CCPI score. The results indicate that liberal-democratic institutional quality has a stronger link to the climate performance overall than to the actual climate-policy performance assessment of experts.

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INTRODUCTION

Today Climate Change is not only an environmental and technological question but is a fundamental problem of political governance. This implies that governments must set long-term goals, and integrate policies across all sectors of the economy, implement policies to curb carbon emissions, collect public and private money, and retain political backing for policies that have uneven cost and benefit profiles. These demands maintain political institutions as key facilitators of climate action because the distribution of authority, mediation of policy conflicts, and translation of formal commitments to implementation are all mediated through institutional arrangements. This has led to a wide divergence in the mandates, committees and coordination arrangements, as well as political longevity of national climate institutions (Dubash, 2021). Moreover, climate politics doesn't just include an international collective-action problem: the domestic distributive conflict between economic sectors, political constituencies and organized interests are key for policy adoption and maintenance of solutions (Aklin & Mildenberger, 2020).

Political institutions can affect climate performance by mechanisms including electoral accountability, institutional constraints, representation and interest-group mediation—or by having a capacity to maintain long-term commitments to policy. Liberal-democratic systems provide opportunities for citizens, civil society organizations, courts, legislatures and opposition parties to exercise checks and balances on governments regarding environmental decisions. But there is nothing intrinsic in democracy that creates ambitious climate policy. Actions taken to mitigate climate change may have very visible costs in the short term and benefits over very long time horizons. Finnegan (2022) demonstrates that the procedures associated with institutions such as electoral systems and interest-group intermediation influence governments' readiness to invest in climate-policy initiatives that are often costly and in the long-term. Political competition, while good for accountability, can also increase susceptibility to electoral pressures and organised resistance. Cross-national evidence suggests that polarization within political parties on climate-policy attitudes has strongly increased in several country political systems, particularly in Anglophone countries and in parts of Western Europe, which has made it harder to achieve long-term climate action in some democratic systems (Caldwell et al., 2025).

The effective functioning of political institutions relies on the ability of the governments to execute political decisions. Climate policy has repercussions on existing strong incumbent industries, the workforce, consumers and regional economies, which can engender political resistance, and which need to be managed to maintain the policy goals. Meckling and Nahm (2022) think of this ability strategically in terms of how to mobilize aligned supportive coalitions, adjust economic interests, minimize opposing influence, and manage organized opposition to climate reforms. This view is that formal democratic institutions themselves may enable climate action, however, they do not ensure the effective implementation of policy. Furthermore, the fiscal and institutional capabilities and capacity of government affect regulatory and finance tools. Consequently, countries may have different configurations of regulatory measures and economic incentives, yet strive for the same climate-related goals (Meckling & Benkler, 2024). Very simply put, democratic institutions do not necessarily have a positive effect on climate outcomes; it is more a case of conditional and institutionally complex relationships.

The next temporal challenge – policy durability – also affects climate governance. The decarbonization requires policy push over longer time scale than individual electoral cycles, and such existing policy can be changed in the light of variation of political leaders, economic situation, new technology and public preference. Policies can also affect the political consequences if there

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are either new beneficiaries or those constituencies are mobilized around them or the policies generate opposition. Lockwood (2022) shows that policy feedbacks are also influenced by overarching institutional environments and can find different forms of political expression at the national level for seemingly identical energy-transition policies. Stability and adaptability of policies are needed for effective longterm climate governance. They refer to this as a duality between durability (making robust and durable climate commitments) and flexibility (iteratively adjusting policies according to new technology, economics, and politics). If political institutions differ, then these might react differently to policy ambition and to the stock of climate performance.

Political legitimacy is another challenge to climate governance. Concentrated economic losses can occur as a result of policies, including carbon pricing, fossil-fuel restrictions, energy-market reform and industrial restructuring, even though their environmental gains can be substantial. Social acceptability of climate policies could potentially grow into policy backlash if the procedure is seen as unfair and/or the costs are considered excessive and/or, if policy is seen as illegitimate, unnecessary. Contested legitimacy is a primary mechanism for backlash to the climate policy, which helps to clarify why formally adopted policies are weakened, diluted, or overturned (Patterson, 2023). Political polarization can worsen these challenges, creating polarizing demands on how citizens might frame climate policies and the political actors' positioning. In recent years, research has indicated that, as polarization comes to the forefront of perceptions, they impact the public's estimation of mitigation policies, consequently making it harder to consolidate broad political support for climate action (Linde, 2026). Democratic openness can therefore lead to institutional assets and liabilities: to increased participation and accountability on the one hand, but also to new possibilities for organized contestation of the distributional effects of decarbonisation.

There must be co-ordinated action across the various sectors and levels of government in the field of climate change policy. The emissions reduction is not under the sole jurisdiction of an environmental ministry, but overlaps with energy, transport, agriculture, industrial development, public finance, infrastructure, housing and social policy. Even with hopes of heads of state for ambitious national goals, fragmented authority can create challenges for implementation. Skagen and Boasson (2024) call for shifting the focus from a simplified coordination to an increased climate-policy integration into sectoral policy processes, policy instruments, and the institutional routines of various actors. Moreover, modern climate governance has many points of power, ranging from national and subnational governments, to cities, businesses, to civil-society organizations, as well as to transnational networks. Polycentric climate governance offers opportunities for local experimentation, the spread of knowledge and involvement, yet it also introduces the challenge of coordinating, being democratically responsive, ensuring power and accountability (Kellner et al. 2024). Together, these findings highlight that, although national political institutions can explain some of the differences in climate performance, they can't do so comprehensively.

Within this theoretical perspective, an important empirical issue is whether the performance of countries with better developed liberal-democratic institutions is consistently climate superior. Past studies have identified a plethora of institutional pathways via which political systems can support or obstruct the course of climate actions, yet they make no predictions about the relationship between liberal democracy and each one of the elements of climate performance. These mechanisms include competitive elections, civil liberties, judicial constraints, and institutional accountability, but do not necessarily exclude the presence of partisan conflict, administrative constraints, entrenched economic interests, or difficulties in implementing commitments in a country. However, alternative political setups can

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deliver good climate-policy results at the institutional level that are not just reflected in liberal-democratic quality.

This paper explores the cross-national correlation among liberal-democratic institutional quality and climate performance of 63 countries. The Political institutional quality is based on the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index, and the climate performance is based on Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI) 2026. Two results are presented separately: the CCPI Climate Policy score (based on expert evaluations of national and international climate-policy performance) and the overall CCPI score (based on GHG emissions, renewables, energy use and climate policy). The analysis considers if there is an association between more robust liberal-democratic institutions and higher Climate Policy scores and overall better CCPI scores. The link between the Climate Policy margin and the climate policy score should be interpreted with caution since the Climate Policy margin is part of the overall score in the CCPI. This study provides a more nuanced picture of the relationship between liberal-democratic institutional quality and multiple aspects of current climate governance, making a more precise assessment than that of a general composite climate performance.

Literature Review

A new research agenda on climate politics has emerged that does not rely on giving only scientific, technological and/or international cooperative explanations. This growing understanding is reflected in how climate outcomes are currently viewed as being a product of the governance systems in which institutions of government, markets, organized interests, civil society and other actors engage in multi-level activities within and across specific levels of government. In its detailed analysis, Lemos and Agrawal (2006) demonstrated that environmental governance is a mode of interaction shaped through hybrid modes of governance which frequently go beyond the boundaries of states, markets and communities. Their research shows that these environmental challenges can often be tackled in the most effective way not by one institutional tool but a combination of them. Within the context of climate change, this view suggests that in a country, it is not only important that government recognizes environmental risks, but it is equally important to institutionalize how performance is structured in terms of authority, coordination, accountability and implementation. Political institutions thereby create an over-arching context of where climate commitments take actually meaning.

But getting institutional development is important, since climate governance efforts need ongoing commitment over long period of time. Administrative structures, laws, regulations, and power-sharing arrangements are all inherited by new political systems and will shape the development of new climate institutions. In his United States analysis of climate institution development, Mildenberger (2021) shows that, at a minimum, climate-governance capacity can be built up by adding new mandates to, and in administrative fashion onto existing political institutions. This kind of capability to make better policy can improve even fragmented policy systems, but can also remain vulnerable to partisan ideological changes of trusteeships and/or change of government's priorities. As evidenced in this analysis, formal political institutions cannot be simply taken for granted as background factors that influence policy progress; they are themselves shaped by and part of opportunities for policy action as well as vulnerabilities that can undermine long-term continuity.

The institutional landscape within the state plays a major role with regard to the effective implementation of climate policies. In their work, Meckling and Nahm (2018) recognize the delegation of policymaking authority from legislatures to bureaucracies as a critical factor in state capacity. They compare the processes of climate policymaking and show how institutional settings can affect how governments succumb to

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vested interests and regulatory capture. The delegation of technically complex policy design, to relatively independent bureaucracies in particular, can improve governmental capacity to take technically sound action towards the goal of long-term climate policy. On the other hand, procedures that funnel regulatory design into a techno-political agenda are conducive to blocking or diluting the policy. This viewpoint is especially pertinent for cross-national climate analysis since it indicates that general regime features like democracy can not fully reflect institutional mechanisms for climate policy making and implementation.

Climate policy changes economic interests and potentially even the political context for future climate policy. Energy transitions bring new industries, new companies, and new economic benefits to those companies, but they also come with certain "adjustment costs" for industries that are affected by the energy transition. Breetz et al. (2018) demonstrate how politics can vary at various points in clean-energy-technologies development. Political coalitions are needed for the early stage technologies that support experimentation and initial deployment. Political conflicts become more severe when technologies reach maturity and are economically competitive, and the potential for large scale deployment becomes a threat to incumbent producers and existing infrastructure. As such, while technological development does not necessarily render political dynamics irrelevant to energy transitions, it does influence the composition of political winners, losers and coalitions. This is because countries can pursue different transition pathways, even though they have access to the same clean technologies.

State capacity is a recent field of research that further substantiates an institutional perspective on decarbonisation. Collington (2026) argues that there are several types of state capacity that fit together - planning, disciplinary, strategic, legitimation and adaptive capacities - that are needed to achieve comprehensive decarbonisation. To achieve transition, governments need to mobilize investment, coordinate economic transformation, discipline the actors that have behaviours that are inconsistent with transition goals, establish political legitimacy, and adjust the policy measures to changing technologic and economic conditions. This multi-dimensional perspective reminds that there is no single panacea for effective climate action: Political openness is not necessarily sufficient for democratic climate accountability. Democracy can help facilitate more participation, more scrutiny and more institutional checks, but actual results require governments to have the organizational capacities to implement and sustain climate policy.

There is inconclusive empirical research on the connection between democracy and environmental outcomes. In an analysis of the period 1996-2018, Falcone and Barra (2026) find that higher institutional quality is generally associated with better environmental outcomes, but the association between democracy and environmental outcomes varies with institutional characteristics. They find that good governance is more effective in the context of high quality institutions, and that they are best suited to a democratic form of governance. This opposing argument to the simplistic regime-based explanations that assume a rise in democracy will result in a better environment. Rather, the relative institutional complementarities seem to be more important in determining the contribution of democratic governance to the state of the environment.

Further recent evidence also warns against determinist views of liberal democracy. In light of the study of Gündoğdu and Çakır Gündoğdu (2026) which is based on longitudinal panel analysis method and includes OECD countries, an increase in liberal democracy in the long-run is found to be associated with higher carbon emissions, and an increase in climate performance is found to be associated with lower carbon emissions. These results suggest that a system of

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liberal democracy is compatible with a framework of consumption-oriented economies, fossil-fuel reliance, and structures that do create high emissions. So the results emphasize the important differences between environmental outcomes measures. The relationship between democracy and, say some aspects of environmental governance may be weak or conditional or even negative. The seemingly contrasting findings in the democracy–environment literature may consequently be attributed to differences in measurements, country samples, institutional context, changing economic development, or differences in temporal design.

Political institutions have an impact on climate governance via citizens' attachment to institutions, ideological divides, and the issue of policy conflict. Having a formal legislative authority to think about and make a decision about climate policy, a Government, does not necessarily imply actually delivering that policy; however, the extent to which a Government can deliver climate policy may hinge on how climate policy is viewed by political constituencies in terms of legitimacy and acceptability. Huddart, Breitschmid and others (2026) explore the affective and overall political polarization as well as identity and ideological polarization, showing how close normative and dispositional polarization regarding climate policy are linked to these more general forms of polarization. The results do justify the line of thought that democratic competition may have mixed impacts on climate governance. Competitive political processes can both make government more accountable to the public interest and more responsive to citizens' needs, and prompt government to take action on climate change, but can also allow for ideological polarization to spill over into policy instability if climate action is linked to party identities. This means that the relationship between institutional characteristics and climate performance can differ from one-case to another and can be only indirect via political mobilisation, coalition-building and public acceptance.

Relations of this sort are further complicated by the nature of various 'climate-governance' configurations in contemporary research. In fact, there is a variety of ways to structure climate-mitigation and adaptation, as Krawchenko et al. (2026) show in their typology of climate-governance arrangements. Modern governance can include both national and sub national governments, businesses, community groups, networks of experts and transnational actors all of which may exist and function in overlapping ways. This institutional complexity makes it difficult to come to conclusions about climate performance by only examining national regime characteristics. An index of liberal democracy may capture electoral competition, civil liberties, institutional constraints, and rule of law but it does not necessarily take into account all the mechanisms for balancing climate governance. National democratic quality must therefore be seen as a crucial institutional aspect—rather than a direct measurement of climate-governance capacity.

A major strand of research has also included arguments that climate policies have the ability to shape political dynamics in the future. If it is implemented, it can establish the economic winners, change public expectations, develop administrative skills, and cultivate constituencies who will want to maintain it. At the same time, they can trigger resistance from "concentrated cost" actors. Logg-Scarvell and Patterson (2026) provide a comparative analysis of contested carbon-pricing architectures in Australia and Canada, and show that reinforcing and undermining feedback mechanisms can coexist. They report that the initial (political) conditions at adoption do not always yield the stability of policies. Policies that seem "temporary" can become permanent and policies that seem permanent can become less disturbing or even reversed. This means that climate-policy performance is a dynamic political process and not just a State decision.

The justice dimensions of decarbonisation also have an impact on policy legitimacy and longevity.

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The process of climate transition implies re-distributing jobs, energy prices, investments and economic risks between regions and/or social groups. Operationalisation of just-transitions commitment can be done through several institutional changes, such as formal definitions, planning and reporting responsibilities, and advisory institutions (Johansson, 2025). The study shows how by integrating justice into climate law one can create procedural expectations and responsibilities for institutional bodies. But legal recognition is not enough to guarantee that the focus on substantive implementation is constantly met, in particular, if there is lacking accountability or administrative capacity. This distinction between formal commitment and effective delivery is important for assessing climate policy at the national level because it can be possible for a government to have ambitious policy frameworks and also have serious limitations in terms of effective delivery.

There is a difference between a climate policy ambition and its implementation and the difference becomes particularly important when considering climate-performance indicators at the national level. In cases where it is politically and/or administratively impossible to implement what has been announced by governments as potential targets, strategies or climate plans, this will have to be acknowledged. Drawing on a detailed study of climate governance in the city of Los Angeles, Kaplan Weinger (2026) suggests that there are multiple entanglements that shape the problem of implementation, such as institutional, bureaucratic, political and legal, financial, infrastructural, epistemic, scalar, and social barriers. The analysis indicates that implementation failures are not necessarily due to a lack of a single institution but rather to interwoven institutional obstacles in administrative and political sectors, putting strain on officials tasked with managing a divided jurisdiction, conflicting competencies and insufficient resources. The study focuses on the governance of cities, yet it has implications for national climate politics as a way of showing how ambition for formal policy is not always translated into actual outcomes.

Combined, the literature illustrates that the linkage between a country's political institutions and its climate performance is potentially feasible but at the same time still empirically intricate. Political institutions structure authority, accountability, bureaucratic autonomy, policy continuity, and opportunities for participation. Implementation is mediated by state capacity, technological transitions mold political coalitions, polarization impacts policy support and policy feedback impacts long-term durability. Contemporary governance of climate change can encompass a range of governmental and non-governmental actors, and even formally agreed-upon climate policies can result in considerable differences between the intended and substantive environmental impact.

Although there are many studies on this subject, one analytical problem remains. Democracy, institutional quality, or state capacity is typically measured in a variety of ways and with different research designs in studies of the adoption, implementation, or environmental performance of emissions policies. Hence, the evidence of a correlation between liberal democracy and climate performance is conflicted. In particular, relationships between expert judgments of climate-policy performance and measures of liberal-democratic institutions may differ from those relating to the overall national climate performance measures. The policy assessments mostly represent the perceived strength and direction of climate-policy frameworks, while broader performance indicators include those on emissions, energy use, renewables, and policy. These are important distinctions to make to prevent that equating climate governance with one simple result.

This study, which seeks to fill this gap, examines the relationship between liberal-democratic regime quality and two different climate aspects in 63 countries. Using the V-Dem Liberal Democracy

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Index and Climate Change Performance Index 2026, the analysis explores the association between liberal democracy and CCPI Climate Policy score as well as the association between liberal democracy and CCPI overall score. This separation allows for a more informed judgement about whether there are similarly strong relationships between liberal-democratic institutional strength and policy assessment and national climate performance more generally. Due to the cross-sectional nature of the design, the study cannot make causal inferences, but it offers comparative insights for a subject matter that is still a topic of debate with strong theoretical views but an uncertain empirical body of evidence.

Methodology

Research Design

A cross-sectional comparative quantitative design was employed to examine the relationship between political institutional quality and national climate performance across countries. The country served as the unit of analysis. The analysis relied exclusively on secondary country-level data obtained from internationally recognized datasets, rather than primary survey or interview data.

The analytical design was associational rather than causal. Statistical estimates were interpreted as cross-national relationships between liberal-democratic institutional quality and climate-performance indicators, not as evidence of causal effects. The comparative approach was appropriate because countries exhibit substantial variation in both political institutional structures and climate performance, which allows systematic examination of whether stronger liberal-democratic institutions are associated with differences in national climate outcomes.

Study Population and Analytical Sample

The study population consisted of countries included in the Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI) 2026. The CCPI evaluates 63 countries and the European Union and covers economies responsible for more than 90% of global greenhouse-gas emissions. Because the European Union represents a supranational political entity rather than an individual country, it was excluded from the country-level analysis.

The final analytical sample consisted of 63 countries for which both CCPI 2026 and V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index data were available. Countries were matched across datasets using standardized country identifiers to ensure consistency between political-institutional and climate-performance observations.

Data Sources

Data were sourced from two principal international datasets: the Climate Change Performance Index and the Varieties of Democracy project.

The Climate Change Performance Index 2026 provided the measures of climate performance. The CCPI evaluates countries across four major dimensions: greenhouse-gas emissions, renewable energy, energy use, and climate policy. The Climate Policy component accounts for 20% of the overall CCPI assessment and is based on structured evaluations of national and international climate-policy performance by climate and energy experts. Higher scores indicate more favorable climate-policy assessments and stronger overall climate performance.

Political institutional quality was measured using the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Dataset, Version 16, released in 2026. The analysis used the 2025 country-year observations from the Liberal Democracy Index (v2x_libdem). The index ranges from 0 to 1, with higher values representing stronger liberal-democratic institutions. It incorporates dimensions of electoral democracy, civil liberties, judicial independence, the rule of law, and institutional constraints on executive authority.

The use of 2025 V-Dem observations alongside the CCPI 2026 assessment ensured close temporal correspondence between political institutional

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conditions and the climate-performance measures examined.

Operationalization

Political institutional quality served as the principal independent variable, operationalized using the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index. Higher index values indicated stronger liberal-democratic institutional arrangements.

We analyzed two climate-performance measures as dependent variables.

The first dependent variable was the CCPI Climate Policy score. This measure represents expert assessments of countries' national and international climate-policy frameworks and their implementation. Higher scores indicate stronger evaluated climate-policy performance.

The second dependent variable was the overall CCPI score. This measure reflects broader climate performance across greenhouse-gas emissions, renewable energy, energy use, and climate policy. Higher values represent stronger relative national climate performance.

Because the Climate Policy score is a component of the overall CCPI score, correlations between these measures were interpreted cautiously as part–whole associations, rather than as evidence of an independent causal relationship between climate policy and overall climate outcomes.

Data Preparation

The CCPI and V-Dem datasets were merged at the country level using consistent country names and identifiers. Data screening identified duplicate observations, unmatched countries, missing values, and implausible values before statistical analysis.

Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, minimum values, and maximum values, were calculated for the Liberal Democracy Index, Climate Policy score, and overall CCPI score. These statistics assessed cross-national variation in the principal variables.

Statistical Analysis

Statistical analysis was conducted in three stages.

First, descriptive statistics summarized the distribution and cross-national variation of the study variables.

Second, Pearson product–moment correlation coefficients were estimated to examine the direction and magnitude of bivariate relationships among the Liberal Democracy Index, CCPI Climate Policy score, and overall CCPI score. Statistical significance was evaluated using two-tailed tests with a threshold of $p < .05$.

Third, separate ordinary least-squares regression models were estimated to determine whether the Liberal Democracy Index statistically predicted variation in the two climate-performance outcomes.

The first model was specified as:

$$Climate\ Policy_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1(Liberal\ Democracy_i) + \varepsilon_i$$

where Climate Policy represented the CCPI Climate Policy score for country Liberal Democracy, and I represented the country's V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index score.

The second model was specified as:

$$Overall\ CCPI_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1(Liberal\ Democracy_i) + \varepsilon_i$$

In this model, Overall CCPI represented the country's total Climate Change Performance Index score. Because cross-national regression data may exhibit heteroskedastic residual variance, heteroskedasticity-consistent HC3 robust standard errors were used for coefficient inference. Unstandardized regression coefficients, robust standard errors, 95% confidence intervals, p-values, and coefficients of determination (R^2) were reported. Statistical significance was evaluated using a two-tailed criterion of $p < .05$.

Because the study used a cross-sectional observational design, the estimated coefficients

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were interpreted as statistical associations rather than causal effects

Spearman rank-order correlations were calculated as a robustness analysis to determine whether the principal relationships remained evident when using a nonparametric measure of association. This procedure reduced dependence on the assumption of linear relationships and limited the influence of extreme observations and distributional characteristics.

Spearman correlations were estimated between the Liberal Democracy Index and the Climate Policy score, between the Liberal Democracy Index and overall CCPI performance, and between the Climate Policy score and overall CCPI performance. Results from the Pearson and Spearman analyses were compared to assess the consistency of the observed relationships.

Reliability, Validity, and Ethical Considerations

Construct validity was enhanced through the use of established international indices rather than researcher-developed measures. The V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index is based on multiple indicators and expert assessments combined through established measurement procedures, while the CCPI integrates quantitative environmental indicators with structured expert evaluations of climate policy.

Using independent sources for political institutions and climate performance reduced the risk of common-source measurement bias. Nevertheless, both indices represent complex multidimensional constructs and should be interpreted as operational indicators rather than as perfect measures of democracy or climate governance.

The study relied exclusively on publicly available aggregate country-level secondary data and did not involve direct recruitment of human participants, collection of personally identifiable information, or intervention with individuals. Consequently, informed consent from participants was not applicable. Any formal requirement for institutional ethical review or exemption should be determined in accordance with the policies of the authors' institution and the target journal.

Results

Descriptive Statistical Analysis

Sixty-three countries were included in the final analytical sample where data on the Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI) 2026 and V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index were available. The EU aggregate was not included because countries were the focus of this analysis.

Descriptive statistics of the main study variables are given in Table 1. The mean CCPI Climate Policy score was 9.40 (SD = 4.43), with a range from 0.67 to 20.00. The mean overall CCPI score was 52.18 (SD = 14.69), with observed values between 11.90 and 80.52. The mean for the Liberal Democracy Index was 0.52 (SD = 0.28) and the range from 0.04 to 0.88. The distributions show large variation across the nations in terms of Liberal-Democratic institutional quality, as well as climate performance.

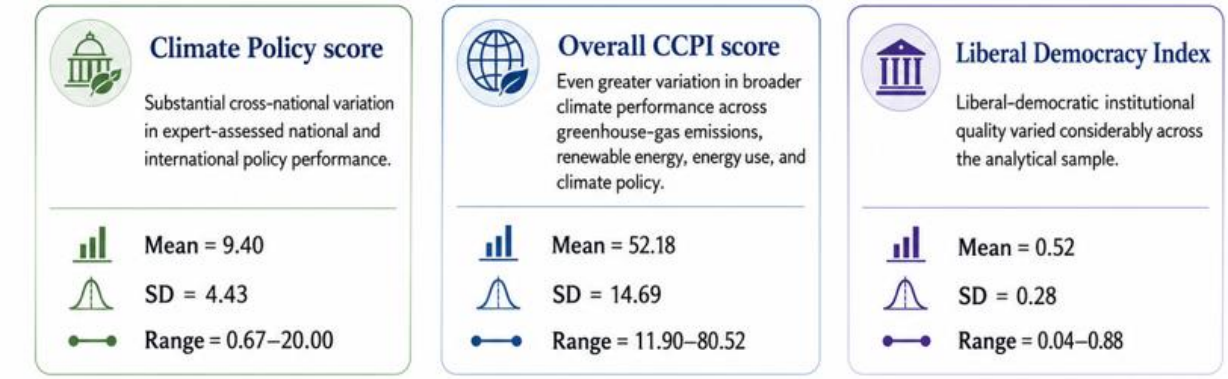
Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for the Main Study Variables (N = 63)

Variable	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Climate Policy score	9.40	4.43	0.67	20.00
Overall CCPI score	52.18	14.69	11.90	80.52
Liberal Democracy Index	0.52	0.28	0.04	0.88

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The descriptive results indicate that there is a high variation between the countries in this study. In addition to differences in expert-assessed national and international policy performance, the scores on Climate Policy indicated apparent level of interest among stakeholders. Moreover, the overall Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI) scores showed even larger differences in each of the four Climate Change Performance Index pillars (greenhouse-gas emissions, renewables, energy use, climate policy). There was also a wide range of quality of liberal-democratic institutions within the analytic sample.



Correlation Analysis

Pearson product–moment correlations were calculated to evaluate the bivariate relationships among liberal-democratic institutional quality, climate-policy performance, and overall climate performance. Table 2 presents the results.

Table 2 Pearson Correlations Among Political Institutions and Climate-Performance Measures

Variable	1	2	3
1. Liberal Democracy Index	–		
2. Climate Policy score	.164	–	
3. Overall CCPI score	.397**	.696***	–

Note. N = 63. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

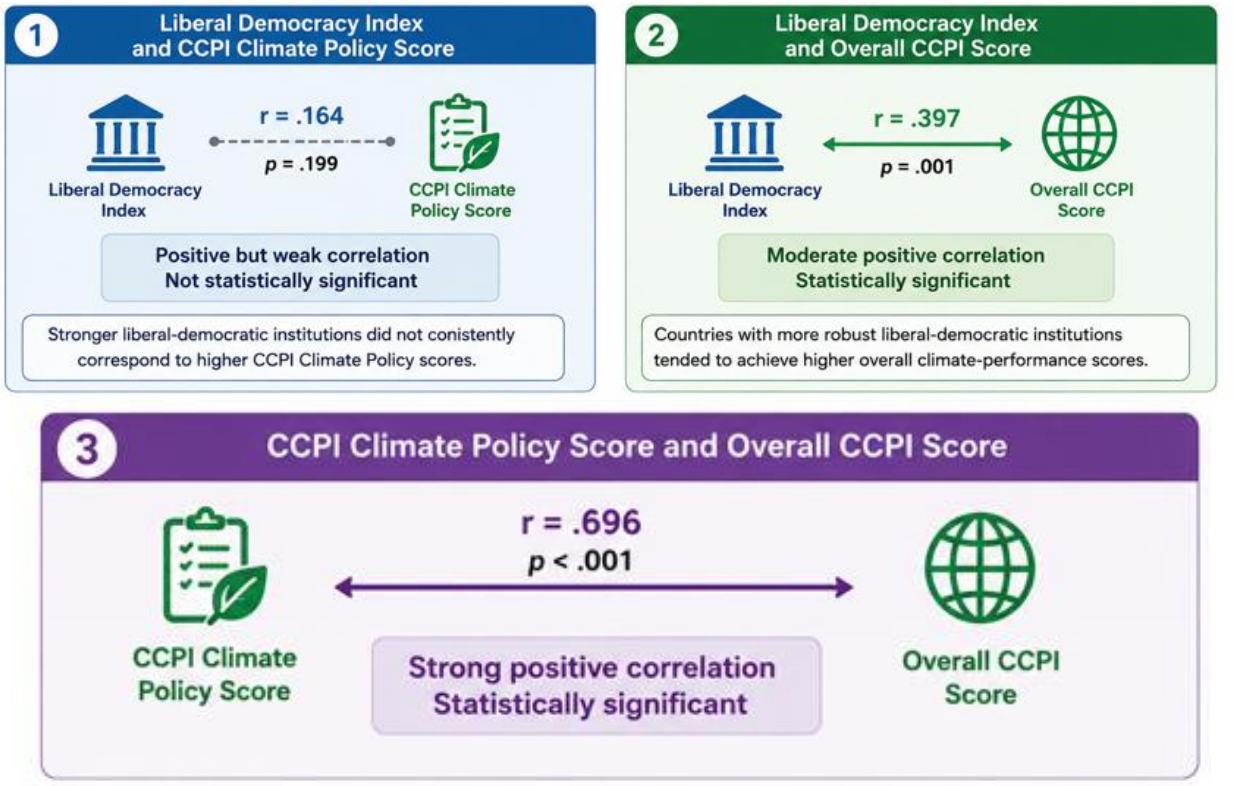
Thus, the Liberal Democracy Index showed marginally positive but low correlation with CCPI Climate Policy score (r = .164, p = .199). No significant relationship was found between this association, meaning that there were not necessarily positive correlations between stronger liberal-democratic institutions and higher Climate Policy scores. The Liberal Democracy Index, in contrast, was moderately positively correlated with overall CCPI scores (r = .397, p = .001); in other words, countries with more robust liberaldemocratic scores tended to have higher overall climate-performance scores.

This Climate Policy score was positively and significantly correlated to the overall CCPI score (r = .696, p < .001). But careful interpretation has to be made of this relationship since the Climate Policy component is part of the overall CCPI score. Therefore, to some extent this association simply reflects the mathematical overlap between the two measures and cannot be interpreted as

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evidence that there is an independent causal link between



impact on climate policy and overall climate outcomes.

Regression Analysis

To test for statistical significance in liberal-democratic institutional quality predicting two climate-performance outcomes, ordinary least-squares regressions with HC3 heteroscedasticity-robust standard errors were estimated. The two models used included the CCPI Climate Policy score (first model) and the overall score in CCPI (second model). These results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3 HC3 Robust Regression Models Predicting Climate Performance

Predictor	B	Robust SE	95% CI	p
Model 1: Climate Policy score				
Constant	8.04	1.42	[5.19, 10.88]	<.001
Liberal Democracy Index	2.61	2.26	[−1.90, 7.12]	.252
Model statistics				
N	63			
R^2	.027			

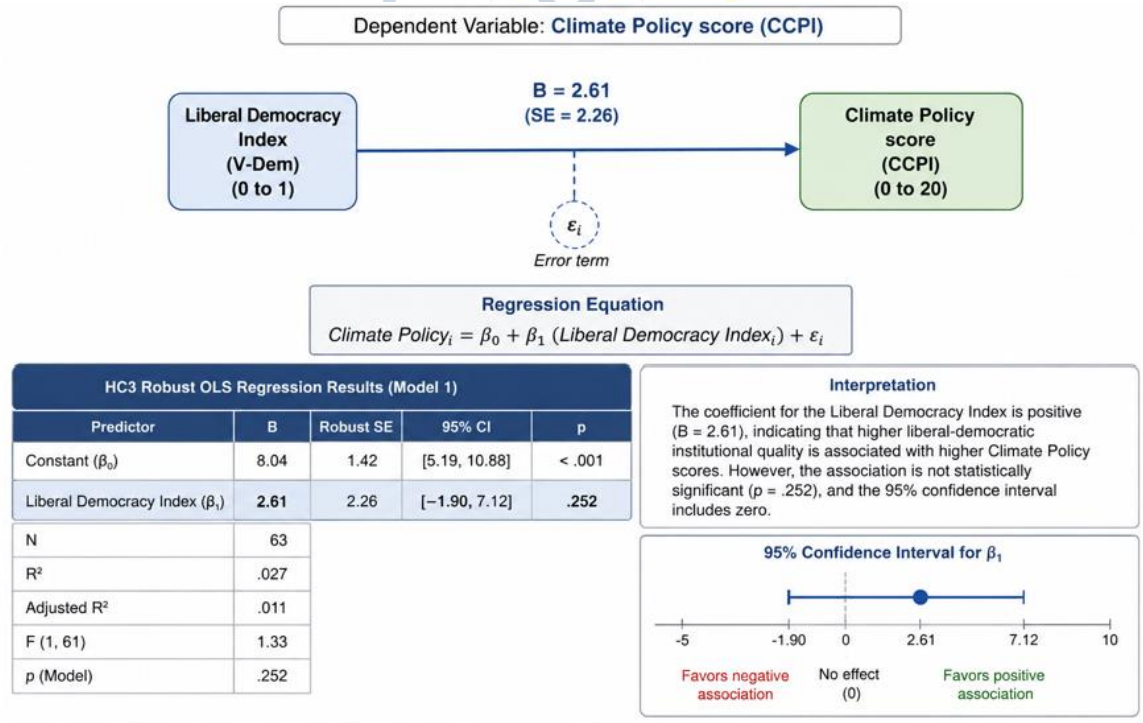
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Predictor	B	Robust SE	95% CI	p
Model 2: Overall CCPI score				
Constant	41.23	4.39	[32.46, 50.01]	<.001
Liberal Democracy Index	20.96	6.95	[7.07, 34.85]	.004
Model statistics				
N	63			
R^2	.158			

Model 1: Climate Policy Performance

A positive association between the Liberal Democracy Index and the Climate Policy score was found for Model 1, but the coefficient for this indicator was not statistically significant, B = 2.61, robust SE = 2.26, 95% CI [−1.90, 7.12], p = .252. The model explained around 2.7% of the diversity of Climate Policy scores (R^2 = .027) across nations. However, the analysis did not detect a significant correlation between more stringent liberal-democratic institutions and better actual performance of the climate policies, as the 95% confidence interval for the coefficient on Liberal Democracy overlapped the zero value.



Model 2: Overall Climate Performance

A clear trend could be seen in the overall CCPI performance. The Liberal Democracy Index had a positive and statistically significant correlation with the Overall CCPI score, B = 20.96, SE = 6.95 (95% CI [7.07, 34.85]), and p = .004.

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The R2 value of the model was .158, suggesting that the model accounted for the cross-national variation in overall climate performance with approximately 15.8%. In the scale of the Liberal Democracy Index, an increase in one index point (0.10) led to an estimated one index point (1.10) more in the overall (predicted) CCPI score.

The results indicate that liberal-democratic institutional quality had a more significant impact on overall national climate performance than on the CCPI Climate Policy category alone. The analysis was, however, a cross-sectional study and the regression coefficients therefore show a statistical association, but not necessarily causal effects.

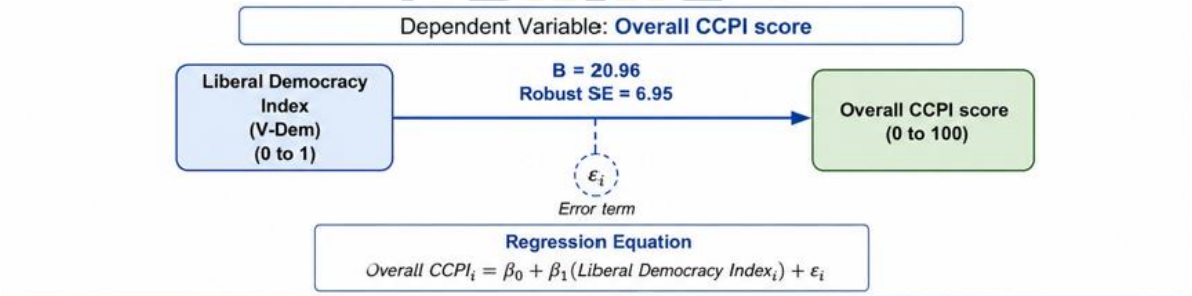
Robustness Analysis

Spearman rank-order correlations were done to check if the main relationships remained the same with a different measure of association that was non-parametric.

There was still a low, but statistically nonsignificant correlation between Liberal Democracy Index and Climate Policy score, Spearman's ρ = .151, p = .237. This was the finding for both the Pearson correlation and HC3 regression model.

Associations with overall CCPI performance, by contrast, remained positive and statistically significant for liberal democracy, ρ = .418, p < .001. Both the direction and the strength of this relation were found to be largely consistent with the Pearson correlation.

The link between the Climate Policy score and the overall score on CCPI was also robust (ρ = .706, p < .001). As in the case of the Pearson correlation, care should be taken when interpreting this association d, given that this is only one of the Climate Policy values contributing to the CCPI score.



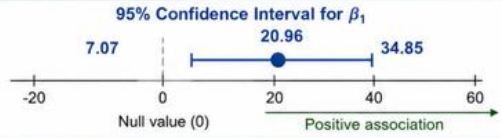
HC3 Robust OLS Regression Results (Model 2)

Predictor	B	Robust SE	95% CI	p
Constant	41.23	4.39	[32.46, 50.01]	< .001
Liberal Democracy Index	**20.96**	6.95	[7.07, 34.85]	**.004**

N	63
R^2	.158

Interpretation

The Liberal Democracy Index was positively and statistically significantly associated with the overall CCPI score (*B* = 20.96, *p* = .004). The model explained 15.8% of the cross-national variation in overall climate performance. A 0.10-point increase in the Liberal Democracy Index was associated with an estimated 2.10-point increase in the predicted overall CCPI score.



Robustness Analysis

Spearman rank-order correlations		
1. Liberal Democracy Index ↔ Climate Policy score	$\rho = .151, p = .237$	weak, positive, not statistically significant.
2. Liberal Democracy Index ↔ Overall CCPI performance	$\rho = .418, p < .001$	moderate, positive, statistically significant.
3. Climate Policy score ↔ Overall CCPI performance	$\rho = .706, p < .001$	strong, positive; interpret with caution because Climate Policy is one component of the overall CCPI score.

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Overall Results

All of these analyses show a coherent difference between assessments of climate policy and climate performance in general. The Climate Policy score was, however, only marginally and not significantly related to liberal-democratic institutional quality. In contrast, liberal-democratic institutions were moderately and significantly associated with performance in CCPI overall. Overall, it seems that the principal conclusions would not have been a consequence of the parametric use of a correlation coefficient since the Pearson and Spearman results were similar. However, the cross-sectional nature of the study precludes causality, and the found relationship between Climate Policy and overall CCPI performance needs to be regarded as a not-entirely-orthogonal policy–outcome association, as the two are mathematically linked.

Discussion

This relationship was investigated for liberal-democratic institutional quality (ordered by the CCPI Climate Policy score) for a total of 63 countries, including both the Climate Policy score and the overall Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI). The findings reveal a significant gap between the two aspects of doing the climate. Liberal democracy showed a positive, although weak, relationship with the Climate Policy score, but this association was not statistically significant ($r = .164$, $p = .199$; ($B = 2.61$, $p = .252$). The relevant cross-national variance in Climate Policy scores explained by the corresponding regression model was quite small ($R^2 = .027$). However, liberal democracy had a moderately positive relationship with overall CCPI performance ($r = .397$, $p = .001$), and this relationship was statistically significant in the HC3 regression model ($B = 20.96$, $p = .004$). The amount of variance explained by this model was 15.8% ($R^2 = .158$) for the overall CCPI scores. The Spearman robustness analysis confirmed the same substantive pattern, and thus gave confidence that the key findings were not entirely a product of Pearson correlation, or linear association.

Failing to find a statistically significant link between liberal democracy and the Climate Policy score would indicate that more powerful liberal-democratic institutions do not systematically reflect better national climate-policy assessment (more favorable scores) on average. This may seem a theoretical possibility, because liberal democratic traits are actually a broad set of institutional dimensions associated with electoral competition, civil liberties, rule of law, judicial constraints and political accountability, but do not directly measure capacity for climate-policy. Even within the institutional context of existing democracies, however, differences in electoral and institutional arrangements and the role of intermediating interest groups affect the extent to which governments can engage in long-term investments into climate policies (Finnegan 2022). This means that democratic system cannot be taken for granted to produce a consistent environmental policy response to climate change. Even in democracies that appear to be equally developed there can be huge disparities in the level of ambition for climate-policy action among the countries involved, due to electoral incentives, organized economic interests, institutional veto points, and competing distributive demands.

Model 1's explanatory power is limited which reinforces this interpretation. The score for liberal democracy had a low variance of .027, indicating that it explained only a small proportion of the variance observed in the Climate Policy score. This is not to infer that political institutions are without relevance for climate governance, but to suggest that a broad democracy index represents only part of any political institutional context for climate governance. Dubash (2021) argues that national climate institutions arise through country-specific political, bureaucratic, policy, international and domestic (climate) processes. Consequently, the institutional structures of liberal democracy, specifically used for formulating and implementing climate goals, can

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vary significantly across countries at a similar level of liberal democracy. Some may have a specialized climate agency, put legally binding targets, have effective interministerial collaboration, or adequate regulations bodies, and others may have diffuse authority or poor implementation mechanisms. The results suggest that the extent of cross-national variations in climate-policy performance cannot solely be explained by the presence of democratic features at the regime level, corresponding with the proposition that such democratic features need to be complemented with additional factors.

We can add an additional explanation for the limited association from Model 1 through state capacity. Administrative, regulatory, financial, monitoring, and political capacity is needed to design and implement a climate policy. Meckling and Benkler (2024) show that the range of regulatory "sticks" and financial "carrots" potentially available to governments varies based on differences in institutional capacity and fiscal space. This means that strong democratic accountability cannot be matched by robust administrative or fiscal capabilities for ambitious climate action. However, countries that do not have as strong liberal-democratic institutions as others may also have centralized administrative and decision-making environments that support a set of specific climate-policy measures. While it is not explicitly measured in the current models, the literature suggests that if incorporated, it could explain a great deal of the unexplained variance in Climate Policy scores and be an important institutional mechanism omitted from the models.

The greater relation of liberal democracy to overall performance for the CCPI points to a pattern. The Liberal Democracy Index had a positive relationship with overall climate performance and accounted for 15.8% of cross-national overall CCPI score variance. This indicates a substantial increase in explanatory power as compared to the corresponding Climate Policy category, though still a significant amount of variance was not explained. The cross-national evidence suggests that democratic governance is effective when present in strong institutional contexts. Using data from 127 economies, Falcone and Barra (2026) find that, in general, institutional quality improves environmental performance and that the link between institutional quality and environmental outcomes depends on the quality of the institutional environment. Their results indicate that democracy and the quality of institutions might act in a complementary manner instead of being independent. The association between the positive factors found in this study and democracy would thus appear to be linked more to the broader characteristics of institutions associated with liberal democracy, such as accountability, transparency, institutional constraints, and rule-governed construction of policies, than to democracy per se.

The overall relationship between liberal democracy and the CCPI score should not, however, be interpreted as a supposed automatic connection between democratization and better climate outcomes. The research findings of other empirical studies suggest the democracy–climate connection is contingent and approach-dependent. In their study of the OECD countries using a panel ARDL specification, Gündoğdu and Çakır Gündoğdu (2026) discovered that liberal democracy brought about higher carbon emissions in the long run, and climate performance higher emissions in the short run. Their findings were somewhat different than the positive cross-sectional relationship found in this study, but they are not mutually exclusive. The two analyses apply different dependent variables, country samples, time structures, and econometric specifications. As illustrated by the comparison, conclusions on democracy and climate governance are heavily dependent on the metric used to assess the outcome, be it direct emissions, composite environmental indicators, climate governance scores based on policy responses, or any of the other indices broadly measuring climate performance.

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Another aspect is that of the correlation between the CCPI Climate Policy score and the overall CCPI score. The two measures were strongly correlated in both the Pearson ($r = .696$, $p < .001$) and Spearman ($\rho = .706$, $p < .001$) analyses. This correlation should not be considered as empirical evidence by itself that better policy evaluations lead to better overall climate effects. Climate Policy content is part of the overall content of the CCPI score, so the mathematical content is the same. Such correlation is, therefore, is a part–whole correlation and should be moderately strong compared to one between completely independent measures. The presence of this correlation cannot demonstrate that climate-policy performance causes the wider CCPI performance, while there is general agreement in the literature about the substantive importance of climate policies. The strengths of the CCPI could be mirrored in a policy-excludable climate-performance measure by integrating the greenhouse-gas emissions, renewable energy, and energy-use projections in the CCPI's analysis.

Similar policy vs. performance assessment effects can be understood as a policy feedback process as well. Climate action targets take time to affect investment decisions, infrastructure, technologies, energy systems and political constituencies. As Lockwood (2022) shows, the political feedback triggered by energy transition policies is conditional on the institutional setting and different policy instruments can lead to different political feedback under different institutional settings. This temporal dimension could be an important factor to explain the weak relation between liberal democracy and this current Climate Policy score and the stronger relation of liberal democracy to the broader CCPI measure. Across-the-board climate performance could be a partial reflection of past institutional and policy processes that may not be completely calculated at one specific point in time in the policies being evaluated.

Another explanation is policy durability. Effective climate mitigation not only demands policy continuity across electoral cycles but also a certain flexibility from governments to react to new technological solutions, shifts of preferences, economic shocks and new scientific findings. Jordan and Moore (2023) would label this challenge as a "durability–flexibility dialectic": the need to be flexible and stable at the same time. Predictable legal procedures, institutionalized accountability, and policy continuity can be seen as factors that rationalize climate policy and, as a result, foster wider climate action. But, at the same time, democratic competition can lead to electoral reversals on climate action. The positive relationship then observed with overall CCPI performance should therefore not be understood as a universal pattern of how democratic institutional mechanisms work to achieve climate targets but rather as a cross-national pattern on the aggregate level.

Another source of complexity regarding democracy and climate policies is that of political legitimacy. There are heavy costs on certain households, industries, workers, and regions as associated with decarbonization measures like carbon pricing, fossil fuel restrictions, energy-market reforms, and industrial restructuring. Contested legitimacy is identified as an important mechanism in the process of climate-policy backlash by Patterson (2023). Where policies are seen as unfair, overly onerous, or otherwise procedurally illegitimate, this can trigger organized campaigns to slow down, weaken or reverse the policy. Liberal democracies can hence find themselves faced with a particular governance dilemma. Political openness and accountability may strengthen public involvement and responsiveness to environmental demands, but it also offers many opportunities for those involved to challenge climate policies. The dynamic can be interpreted as one of possible reasons why liberal democracy is not significantly associated with the Climate Policy score, but there is a stronger relationship with overall climate performance.

When it comes to climate governance, we don't yet have a holistic picture of the situation at the

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national level. The importance of the role of subnational governments, cities, businesses, civil-society organizations, transnational networks and other non-state actors in climate action is growing. Kellner et al. (2024) refer to polycentric climate governance, where there are many places where decisions are made and where authority lies. This may give room for policy innovation and climate action even if the national policy is fairly weak. In contrast, despite national ambitions, fragmentation of different levels of authority can pose implementation challenges. The V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index measures important aspects of national political traits but not these wider constellations of governance actors. For this reason, some of this residual variation in climate-policy and climate performance could be due to other institutional processes, which lie beyond the scope of the national regime properties assessed in this study.

Climate-policy integration (CPI) is another applicable mechanism that might lead formally similar political systems to generate divergent results. Climate goals are linked with energy, transport, agriculture, industrial policy, finance, infrastructure and social policy, and require policy coordination between ministries and sectoral policies. Climate-policy integration can include shallow forms of coordination as well as stronger forms of institutional embedding that will also shape climate policy frames, objectives, instruments, and participation in the different sectors (Skagen and Boasson, 2024). Hence, countries may have ambitious national climate commitments but do not necessarily take into the fragmented state apparatus. This separation is especially important with regard to the nonsignificant Model 1 result, because liberal-democratic quality does not necessarily reflect the degree of integration of climate goals into sectoral policy.

There are a number of methodological issues that need to be taken into account when understanding these results. First, the study adopted a cross-sectional design so it does not allow for determination of the temporal order or causal direction. The regression coefficients reveal statistical associations between liberal democracy and climate performance, but they do not determine causality for the differences and account for the CCPI scores. Second, the regression models were deliberately kept very simple, with the Liberal Democracy Index serving as the key independent variable, and no other factors (like economic development, fossil-fuel dependence, energy structure, state capacity, or other potential factors) were taken into account. Consequently, the estimated values of the coefficients may reflect the nature of institutions or structures associated with liberal democracy, in part. Thirdly, the overall CCPI score is a composite indicator, with the Climate Policy component being identical to the composite indicator Climate Policy. Fourthly, the sample consists of 63 countries, which are those covered by the CCPI and not a random sample of all the countries in the world; the findings are therefore not generalizable beyond CCPI coverage.

This study, despite these limitations, has a contribution to the climate-politics literature, by demonstrating how the liberal-democratic institutional quality - climate performance nexus depends on the dimension of climate performance being analyzed. No significant modes of correlation between the Climate Policy score and the measure of liberal democracy suggests that variation across countries in expert-assessed climate-policy performance is not possible to explain solely based on liberal democracy. The strong positive relationship for overall CCPI performance, by contrast, indicates that liberal-democratic institutional attributes might have connections to the more general performance trends on climate. Amongst these, results argue in favor of an institutional understanding of the political dimension of climate change and sustain a rejection of a one-sided, deterministic relationship between democracy and climate. Further analyses should be conducted and include state capacity, economic development, fossil-fuel

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dependency, energy structure, policy integration, and other governance aspects in a more precise way to answer the question of what institutional mechanisms explain the cross-national differences in climate performance in a longitudinal analysis.

Conclusion

This study examines the relationship between Liberal Democratic institutional quality and the performance of countries on Climate change and examines the study by using the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index (V-Dem Democracy Index) and the Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI) 2026. Hence, the analysis distinguished between CCPI Climate Policy score and CCPI score (taking into account other areas of climate governance) and found that the correlation of climate policy and political institutions varies depending on the dimension of the climate governance area being observed.

The results showed weak, not statistically significant but positive correlation between Liberal democracy and the Climate Policy score (CCPI). With regard to the cross-national variance in the performance of climate-policy, a small part is explained by liberal-democratic institutional quality. The results suggest that the characteristics of democratic institutions cannot account for variations in country climate-policy assessments on its own. The quality of climate-policy performance may be influenced by a more general institutional and political landscape – administrative capacity, regulatory efficacy, policy coordination, the economic structure, political competition, influence of interest groups, and policy implementation capacity.

Instead, liberal democracy was found to be positively and significantly linked to the overall CCPI scores. The overall climate performance scores tended to be higher in countries with higher Liberal Democracy Index scores, and liberal democracy accounted for a significant but still moderate share of the cross-national variance in this overall score. This discovery shows that whether or not observed institutional characteristics of liberal and democratic governments affect overall patterns of climate performance is more straightforward to answer than whether they affect climate-policy performance alone, as assessed by experts. However, this association should not be seen as causal, as the study was a cross-sectional observational study and potentially important economic, structural, and governance confounders were not controlled for.

Similarly, a correlation between the Climate Policy score and overall CCPI performance should also be interpreted with caution based on the strong observed association. This relation is not an independent assessment of whether more ambitious Climate Policy would translate into better overall climate outcomes, but a part–whole association, since it is part of the overall CCPI score. Based on the above, there is a need to develop climate-performance measures that do not take the policy action itself into account when analyzing the link between policy assessments and environmental outcomes.

To sum up, the results point to the need to also think of climate change as a governance challenge of political and institutional processes, not of environmental or technological. Liberal democratic institutions are relevant for a country's overall climate performance, but have no direct impact on the nature of its climate policy. Political accountability, administrative capacity, institutions of regulation, economic conditions, policy integration, and implementation mechanisms are likely to play a vital role in effective climate governance.

Future research needs to expand on the current analysis by conducting a multi-variable analysis including Government Effectiveness, Regulatory Quality, economic development and fossil-fuel dependence, energy structure, and increasing additional institutional controls. It would be beneficial to use longitudinal or panel data designs that would allow researchers to examine more directly whether shifts in democratic institutions lead to shifts in climate performance, and whether

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shorter-term measures to improve policy correlate more clearly with longer-term changes in the environment. These methodological extensions would provide a deeper and broader picture of what kind of institutional settings enable political systems to move from climate commitments to tangible, enduring, and measurable climate results.

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