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Contentious Politics and Democratic Renewal
in Sustainability Transitions

Democratic Politics, Radical Right Populism, and Climate Policy in Sustainability Transitions

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4 Executive Summary

The rapid rise of populist radical right parties has intensified concerns about the future of climate policy. While extant literature documents the climate-skeptical orientations of populist actors and separately examines the relationship between democracy and climate action, no study has systematically tested how democracy, populist radical right electoral strength, and climate policy interact across a large set of countries and regime types. This article addresses this gap using a novel panel dataset covering 60 countries over 17 years across six continents, representing approximately half of the global population. We show that greater electoral success of populist radical right parties is associated with weaker climate policy. However, this negative relationship is conditional on regime type: it holds in hybrid regimes but not in full democracies. In highly democratic systems, institutional constraints, accountability mechanisms, and policy continuity appear to shield climate policy from populist pressures. At the same time, democracies are not fully immune. Where political corruption is high, even full democracies fail to protect climate policy from the adverse effects of populist strength. Conversely, in hybrid regimes, the negative impact of populism on climate policy is significantly attenuated in countries that are highly exposed to climate risks, suggesting that climate vulnerability constrains political discretion. The findings highlight the importance of democratic quality, institutional integrity, and climate exposure in shaping how populism translates into climate policy outcomes. The article advances comparative research by demonstrating that the populism-climate policy nexus is deeply conditioned by political and structural context.

5 Introduction

The rapid rise of populist radical right parties (PRRPs) has become one of the most significant political challenges to climate governance. Across Europe and beyond, these parties have framed climate policy as an elite-driven project imposed on “ordinary people,” frequently combining climate skepticism with nationalist and anti-cosmopolitan rhetoric (Lockwood 2018; Forchtner 2019; Tal and Paz 2025). As populist actors have gained electoral strength, climate initiatives have increasingly faced political resistance, dilution, or reversal, most prominently under populist governments such as the Trump administration in the United States (Huber et al. 2021; Lockwood and Lockwood 2022). These developments have fueled widespread concern that populism poses a structural threat to the adoption and durability of ambitious climate policy at a moment when scientific urgency is unmistakable (Bosetti et al. 2025).

While existing research documents the skeptical climate orientations of populist radical right actors (Dickson and Hobolt 2024; Patterson 2023), it remains unclear under what political conditions populist electoral success translates into weaker climate policy outcomes. The policy impact of populism is unlikely to be uniform across countries. In particular, the role of democratic institutions in shaping the populism-climate nexus remains poorly understood. Democratic systems may amplify populist pressures through electoral responsiveness, but they may also constrain them through checks and balances, bureaucratic insulation, judicial oversight, and international commitments (Ćetković and Hagemann 2020; Lindvall and Karlsson 2024). Whether democracy shields climate policy from populist influence or instead enables it, remains an open empirical question.

This question has become especially salient in the context of widespread democratic backsliding. Across regions, democratic quality has eroded without a full transition to authoritarianism, producing a growing number of hybrid regimes in which elections coexist with weakened accountability and institutional constraints (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019). In such political systems, populist electoral gains may translate more directly into executive discretion and policy retrenchment than in consolidated democracies. At the same time, democratic resilience varies even among full democracies: high levels of political corruption can undermine institutional safeguards, weakening the capacity of democratic systems to constrain populist pressures.

We argue that the effect of populist radical right electoral strength on climate policy is fundamentally conditional on political and structural context. Democratic institutions can constrain populist pressures by limiting executive discretion, sustaining policy continuity, and increasing accountability. However, this protective effect depends on institutional integrity. Where political corruption is high, democratic checks and balances weaken, reducing transparency and enforcement and allowing populist actors to translate electoral gains into climate policy retrenchment even in formally democratic systems. In contrast, in hybrid

regimes, where institutional constraints are weaker and populism is, on average, most damaging, the scope for populist-driven climate policy reversal is shaped by material exposure to climate risks. High exposure to climate impacts raises the costs of sustained climate inaction, constraining political discretion and attenuating the negative effect of populism on climate policy. In short, populism undermines climate policy most strongly where institutions are weak, but climate risks remain politically manageable; where either institutional integrity or climate exposure is high, the policy impact of populism is significantly reduced.

This article addresses a central gap in the literature by systematically examining how populist radical right electoral strength affects climate policy across political regimes. Using a novel panel dataset covering 60 countries between 2007 and 2023, spanning full democracies, hybrid regimes, and authoritarian systems, we test how the relationship between populism and climate policy is conditioned by democratic quality, corruption, and climate exposure. We show that greater populist electoral success is associated with weaker climate policy only in hybrid regimes. In full democracies, no systematic negative relationship emerges unless corruption levels are high. Conversely, in hybrid regimes, high exposure to climate risks significantly dampens the negative effect of populism on climate policy.

The article makes three contributions. First, it advances research on populism and climate policy by providing the first large-N comparative analysis of how populist electoral strength translates into climate policy outcomes across regime types. Second, it refines debates on democracy and climate action by demonstrating that democratic institutions shield climate policy from populist pressures only when institutional integrity is high. Third, it connects the green-backlash literature to comparative climate politics by showing how exposure to climate risks can constrain populist discretion even in politically fragile systems.

To develop our argument, the article proceeds in four steps. We first review the literature on populist radical right parties and climate policy, establishing why populism is generally expected to undermine climate ambition. We then examine research on democracy and climate policy, highlighting the institutional mechanisms through which democratic systems can sustain long-term climate action, and the conditions under which this protection weakens. Next, we turn to the relationship between populism and democracy, showing how populist success reshapes democratic institutions and produces variation across regime types. Bringing these literatures together, we then develop a framework that explains when and where populist electoral strength translates into weaker climate policy, and derive testable hypotheses.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. Sections 6 review the literatures on populism, democracy, and climate policy and develop the theoretical foundations of the analysis. Section 7 presents the argument. Section 8 describes the data and empirical strategy. Section 9 presents the results and section 10 concludes.

6 Literature review

6.1 How Populist Radical Right Parties Undermine Climate Policy

Populism's rise in the last few decades has triggered serious concern for climate policy. Across democracies, leaders claiming to defend "the people" against "corrupt elites" have often resisted ambitious climate action (Huber et al., 2021). The Trump administration's rollback in the United States exemplifies this: President Trump withdrew from the Paris Agreement and framed mitigation as an elite project imposed on ordinary Americans (Lockwood & Lockwood, 2022; Bosetti et al., 2025). This reflects a broader pattern where PRRPs undermine effective climate policy through anti-elitist rhetoric, nationalist appeals, and the reframing of climate change as a polarizing culture war (Lockwood 2018; Marquardt et al. 2022). As populists gain influence, these narratives often translate into stalled, diluted, or even reversed climate measures in practice (Lockwood 2018; Marquardt et al. 2022).

Populist politics weakens climate action through storylines portraying governance as an elite-driven project harming ordinary people. Anti-elite framing casts climate policy as a cosmopolitan agenda that burdens hard-working citizens while benefiting urban liberals and "globalist" bureaucrats (Bosetti et al., 2025; Lockwood, 2018;) which fosters distrust of expert-driven policy and saps the legitimacy of the institutions and knowledge communities that climate governance depends on (Lockwood, 2018). A complementary "people versus policy" narrative mobilizes groups feeling left behind by decarbonization, arguing that regulations destroy jobs and raise household costs while benefits remain distant or accrue to elites (Bosetti et al., 2025; Colantone et al 2024; Stefes & Gabehart, 2025). Empirical studies show that people who perceive themselves as economically threatened by climate policy are more likely to support PRRPs and oppose stringent mitigation, which in turn both slows new policy adoption and pressures mainstream parties to dilute proposals to avoid backlash (Bosetti et al., 2025).

Populist anti-elitism is also tightly linked to climate science skepticism and conspiracy thinking. Many populist leaders reject the scientific consensus on anthropogenic climate change, advancing "common sense" counterclaims or alleging outright fraud by depicting climate change as a hoax devised to justify regulation or enrich researchers (Lockwood, 2018; Marquardt et al., 2022). This stance undermines the factual basis for urgent action and gives voters an ideological justification for opposing mitigation (Stefes & Gabehart, 2025). Comparative studies show that PRRPs are more likely to doubt climate science and dismiss environmental measures, exploiting the technical complexity of climate research to amplify misinformation and turn residual uncertainty into a political resource (Bosetti et al., 2025; Hochachka et al., 2025). A further mechanism is nationalist and sovereigntist rhetoric that frames global climate cooperation as a threat to national autonomy and economic welfare, portraying international agreements

as unfair constraints imposed by transnational elites that limit the nation's right to develop, protect its industries, or control its energy mix (Forchtner and Kølvrå 2015; Marquardt and Lederer 2022). Trump justified leaving Paris by claiming that it harmed United States workers and allowed other countries to free-ride, a line echoed by nationalist politicians; this framing encourages withdrawal from treaties, obstruction of multilateral initiatives, and explicit defense of fossil-fuel interests as patriotic (Marquardt et al. 2022).

Across comparative and case-based studies, PRRPs in power are generally associated with weakened climate governance, although their effects vary across policy domains and national contexts. Empirically, PRRPs in government are associated with weakened climate policy (Ćetković and Hagemann 2020; Huber et al. 2021). Lockwood and Lockwood (2022) link their governance to significant declines in broad climate frameworks and carbon pricing in OECD countries, though renewable energy policies often remain insulated due to their economic viability. Administrative capacities also suffer; leaders in Brazil and the U.S. have cut budgets and reversed regulations, leading to measurable declines in enforcement and stalled progress (Marquardt et al. 2022). In the EU, participation of PRRPs in government increases per capita greenhouse gas emissions, with PRRPs playing a particularly important role in undermining climate ambition and implementation (Huber et al. 2021).

However, a strong populist presence does not invariably produce weaker outcomes (Ćetković and Hagemann 2020; Lockwood and Lockwood 2022). It can inadvertently spur ambitious action by prompting mainstream parties to form progressive coalitions (Ćetković and Hagemann 2020). Additionally, PRRPs in countries like Poland and Hungary occasionally adopt an "opportunistic environmentalism" when it aligns with national interests (Caiani and Lubarda 2023).

6.2 Democratic Institutions as Buffers for Climate Policy

While populist actors tend to oppose ambitious climate policy, their ability to translate preferences into policy outcomes depends critically on political institutions. This section therefore examines the relationship between democracy and climate policy, focusing on the institutional mechanisms that can buffer climate policy from political pressures. Rather than treating democracy as an alternative explanation, we conceptualize democratic institutions as a potential constraint on populist influence. Building on policy mix feedback research, such institutional constraints also matter because climate policies generate feedback effects that reshape socio-technical systems and, in turn, the political resources, expectations, and coalitions that sustain or contest subsequent policy change (Edmondson et al., 2018). In democracies, the durability of climate policy therefore hinges on how visible and unevenly distributed its near-term costs and benefits are, since these feedback condition public interpretation, mobilization, and coalition support, thereby reinforcing or weakening future policy trajectories (Edmondson et al., 2018).

As the urgency of the climate crisis intensifies, scholars increasingly ask whether the procedural norms of democracy facilitate sustainability or whether intrinsic institutional features hinder the rapid decarbonization that science now regards as indispensable. The literature on the democracy climate nexus suggests that democracy often supports more ambitious climate policy, although this effect is conditional and does not automatically deliver rapid emission cuts. Early work on environmental degradation shows that democracies tend to experience lower levels of pollution because democratic institutions open channels for societal pressure and constrain arbitrary state action (Li and Reuveny 2006; Payne 1995). More recent studies similarly find that, compared to autocracies, democracies are more likely to adopt climate legislation, set ambitious mitigation targets, and participate actively in international climate agreements (Lindvall 2021; Lindvall and Karlsson 2024; Neumayer 2002). A review of 72 correlation studies concludes that, although the evidence is mixed on emissions outcomes, democracies systematically score higher on indicators of climate policy output and renewable energy deployment (Lindvall and Karlsson 2024).

Several mechanisms help explain why democracy can have a positive impact on climate policy. Civil and political rights, such as freedoms of expression, association, and media, facilitate the emergence of environmental movements, green parties, and advocacy groups that can articulate climate risks and press for stronger regulation (Li and Reuveny 2006; Lindvall and Karlsson 2024; Willis et al. 2022). Electoral competition and open public debate make it possible for climate concerned voters to sanction governments that ignore scientific warnings, especially where climate impacts or social movements increase issue salience (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2019; Lindvall, 2021). Democratic systems also tend to foster transparent knowledge production and innovation systems, which can lower the political and economic costs of ambitious mitigation by enabling renewable energy and other low carbon technologies (Goetz et al. 2020; Markard 2018). Another mechanism runs through international cooperation and norms, as democracies are more likely to sign and comply with multilateral environmental agreements that set mitigation commitments and benchmark national climate performance (Lindvall 2021; Neumayer 2002).

The strength of this positive relationship depends, however, on the quality and capacity of democratic governance. Research shows that the beneficial effect of democracy is contingent on effective state institutions and low levels of corruption. Povitkina (2018) finds that democracy is associated with lower CO₂ emissions only in low corruption contexts. Where corruption is high, environmental regulations may be adopted but then undermined in implementation through bribery and rent seeking, which weakens democratic checks and balances and limits climate effectiveness. This pattern resonates with broader work on the democracy sustainability nexus, which emphasizes how democratic procedures, state capacity, and power distributions jointly shape environmental performance (Dietz et al. 2023; Marquardt et al. 2025). Many established democracies remain high income, carbon intensive societies, and no democracy has yet reduced emissions fully in line with Paris pathways (Lindvall 2021; Lindvall and Karlsson 2024). Democratic decision making can be slow and consensus oriented, which risks delaying measures at a time when science

calls for immediate and far-reaching emissions cuts (Dietz et al. 2023; Fiorino 2018; Lindvall 2021). Yet the literature converges on the view that democracy is a crucial asset for confronting the climate crisis.

6.3 Populism, Democratic Backsliding, and Institutional Erosion

Understanding whether democracy can constrain populist pressures requires examining how populism itself reshapes democratic institutions. This section reviews the literature on the relationship between populism and democracy, showing how populist success tends to erode checks and balances, weaken accountability, and concentrate executive power. These dynamics are central to explaining why the institutional capacity to protect climate policy varies across regime types.

Populism is frequently conceptualized not merely as an external threat but as an internal "pathology" or symptom of democratic dysfunction, emerging when the representative link between citizens and the state is broken (Abts and Rummens 2007). Because populism fundamentally relies on the tension between democratic ideals and their practical application, it is unlikely to flourish in autocratic countries. Instead, it tends to thrive in democracies marked by deep political discontent, where segments of the electorate feel alienated from the political establishment (Rooduijn et al. 2016). This phenomenon often arises when mainstream parties converge on policy, narrowing the political spectrum and creating a representation gap that populists exploit by politicizing previously ignored issues (Roberts 2022). Consequently, populism presents itself as a corrective response to the ailments of liberal democracy, promising to restore the "sovereignty of the people" against a closed and unresponsive elite (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017). Abts and Rummens (2007) argue that populism exploits the tension within the "two-strand model" of democracy, prioritizing the democratic pillar (popular will) over the liberal one (constitutional protections) when citizens feel the latter has stifled the former.

Despite its democratic rhetoric, the literature emphasizes that populism negatively impacts the liberal and procedural components of democracy. By framing politics as a struggle between a homogeneous "people" and a corrupt elite, populist logic justifies the erosion of horizontal accountability and checks and balances (Abts and Rummens 2007). When in positions of influence, populists frequently attack unelected bodies such as the judiciary and media, viewing them as obstacles to the general will (Kaufman and Haggard 2019). This results in a centralization of executive power and a weakening of the decentralization necessary for a pluralistic society. Furthermore, populism harms party competition; by delegitimizing opponents as enemies of the state, it shrinks the space for fair contestation, moving systems toward "competitive authoritarianism" where the playing field is skewed in favor of incumbents (Levitsky and Loxton 2013). Empirical studies confirm that populist rule is consistently associated with significant declines in indices of electoral and liberal democracy (Hawkins and Mitchell 2025; Ruth-Lovell et al. 2019).

The impact of populism is not, however, unequivocally negative; scholars suggest it can strengthen certain democratic elements under specific conditions. Populism may serve as a corrective by increasing political participation and giving voice to marginalized groups (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017). Roberts (2022) notes that by challenging elite cartels, populism can reinvigorate political competition and realign party systems to better reflect societal cleavages. Specifically, Huber and Schimpf (2016) find that while populist parties in government tend to lower democratic quality, their presence in opposition can have a positive effect by mobilizing voters and articulating the demands of the disenfranchised. Thus, in the short term or when constrained by opposition status, populism can enhance the representativeness of the democratic system.

Once populist actors attain executive power, however, any earlier ambivalence is resolved and their impact tilts decisively toward democratic erosion. Levitsky and Loxton (2013) argue that populist leaders use their electoral victories as a mandate to "bury" the existing elite and to rewrite the rules of the game in their own favor, converting fragile democracies into "competitive authoritarian" regimes. The trajectory of Hungary under Fidesz illustrates this pattern: legislative supermajorities were used to recast the constitution, dismantle checks and balances, curtail media freedom, and entrench executive dominance (Bartha et al. 2020). Kaufman and Haggard (2019) observe similar processes in Hungary and Venezuela, where legal and constitutional engineering served to neutralize rivals and insulate incumbents from accountability. In other words, while populism can arise as a response to real democratic deficits and may have mixed effects when it operates from the margins, its tenure in power clarifies its character as a project that actively weakens and remodels democratic institutions (Ruth-Lovell et al. 2019).

7 Integrating Populism, Democracy, and Climate Constraints

Our Argument

The previous sections have examined three relationships in isolation: how populist radical right parties tend to undermine climate policy, how democratic institutions can support climate action, and how populism reshapes democratic governance. This section integrates these literatures to show why the effect of populism on climate policy cannot be understood without considering both institutional integrity and material constraints. We argue that democratic quality conditions the extent to which populist preferences translate into policy outcomes, while exposure to climate risks constrains political discretion, particularly in institutionally weaker regimes. We advance a conditional argument about how PRRPs shape climate policy across political regimes. While prior research suggests that democracy generally supports more ambitious climate policies and that populism often undermines them, we argue that the policy consequences of populist electoral success depend on institutional integrity and material constraints.

We begin with the baseline expectation that democratic regimes are better equipped to adopt and sustain ambitious climate policies. Democratic institutions provide accountability mechanisms, transparency, and channels for societal pressure that facilitate long-term policymaking despite short-term political costs. As a result, democracies should, on average, exhibit higher levels of climate policy ambition than less democratic regimes (H1).

The influence of populism, however, varies across regime types. In hybrid regimes, where democratic institutions are weaker and executive authority is less constrained, populist electoral gains are more likely to translate directly into policy outcomes. In such contexts, PRRPs' anti-elitist rhetoric, climate skepticism, and nationalist opposition to international cooperation face fewer institutional obstacles, making populism particularly damaging to climate policy (H2). In full, consolidated democracies, on the other hand, institutional safeguards can buffer climate policy from populist pressures, but only when those institutions function effectively. Political corruption erodes democratic insulation by weakening checks and balances, politicizing public administration, and facilitating capture by vested interests. Defined as deviant behavior that involves self-interested abuse of government power by public officeholders (Gardiner 2008; Shleifer and Vishny 1993), it has shown to produce a range of politically, socially, and economically detrimental consequences (see, e.g., Solaz, De Vries, and De Geus 2019; Yair, Sulitzeanu-Kenan, and Dotan 2020). We submit that under high corruption, democratic procedures persist formally but lose their capacity to protect long-term climate commitments, allowing populist electoral strength to translate into weaker climate policies even in consolidated democracies (H3).

Finally, we argue that exposure to climate risks constrains populist discretion, especially in hybrid regimes. High exposure to extreme weather events, environmental degradation, or climate-related economic losses raises the political and economic costs of sustained climate inaction. As climate impacts become more visible and salient, governments face mounting pressure to respond, limiting their ability to fully realize populist opposition to climate policy in practice. We hypothesize that while exposure does not reverse populist preferences, it attenuates their negative policy effects in institutionally weaker systems (H4).

Taken together, this framework highlights that populism's impact on climate policy is conditional rather than uniform. Democratic resilience depends on institutional integrity, while the influence of populism in hybrid regimes is bounded by material exposure to climate risks.

8 Data and Methodology

Building on the theoretical framework developed above, we proceed to an empirical assessment of the relationship between populist radical right parties (PRRPs) electoral power and climate policy across regime types. This section first describes the data and measurement strategy and then outlines the empirical approach. We compile an original country-year panel covering 60 countries over a 17-year period and spanning six continents, together representing approximately half of the global population. The dataset is constructed by merging information from the Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI), Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative (ND-GAIN) dataset, Freedom House, The Varieties of Democracy dataset (V-Dem), the World Bank, and ParlGov.

Dependent Variable

To assess the strength of national **climate policy**, we draw on the Climate Policy Score (CPS) from the Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI)¹, an annual benchmark developed by Germanwatch, the New Climate Institute, and the Climate Action Network. The CCPI has been published since 2005 and covers more than sixty countries and the European Union, together accounting for over 90 percent of global greenhouse-gas emissions. The index aggregates fourteen indicators across four dimensions: greenhouse-gas emissions, energy use, renewable energy, and climate policy. In this study, we focus specifically on the climate policy component, which captures the ambition, scope, and implementation of domestic and international climate policy commitments, rather than policy outcomes such as emissions levels or renewable energy capacity.

We prefer the CPS over more objective and quantitative indicators because our research question centers on how policy responds to political change. Outcome-based measures are shaped by structural economic conditions, legacy infrastructure, and technological constraints, and may therefore lag behind or obscure shifts in policy intent and direction. By contrast, the CPS directly captures changes in policy orientation and commitment, making it better aligned with our theoretical focus on political dynamics and climate policy change. While the expert-based nature of the measure introduces some subjectivity, this concern is mitigated by the use of multiple country-level experts and by our empirical strategy, which absorbs time-invariant country-specific biases. In our sample of 60 countries between 2007 and 2023 (N = 964), the CPS ranges from 0 to 20, with a mean of 9.7 and a standard deviation of 4.2, and displays an approximately symmetric distribution. This level of variation makes the indicator well suited for capturing meaningful cross-national and temporal differences in climate policy ambition.

¹ <https://ccpi.org/>

Main predictors

To measure the **electoral strength of populist radical right parties**, we use ParlGov to construct, for each country-year (2007-2023), the total vote share of all parties coded as Radical Right populists; when multiple such parties compete in a given year, their vote shares are summed. Because policy typically responds with a delay, we use the one-year lag of this measure ($t-1$) in the analyses. In a small number of cases, ParlGov classifies parties as conservative that are widely recognized as PRRPs; we recode these parties accordingly, with all decisions documented in the replication materials (see a list of all PRRPs in the Online Appendix).

Democracy is measured using multiple indicators; Freedom House's civil-liberties and political-rights scores as well as the average score of the two (for each country-year we average the two indicators to form a democracy index, Table 1, demo). After reverse-coding, the two indicators and the democracy index range from 1 to 7, with higher values indicating greater democracy (7 denotes full democracy). The distribution is concentrated near the upper bound (mean = 5.7), indicating that the sample is dominated by highly democratic cases.

In addition to the three democracy measures, the analysis incorporates several indicators for democracy from the V-Dem v15 data. Liberal democracy index, Participatory democracy index Egalitarian democracy index and Deliberative democracy index, which capture a more nuanced conception of democratic quality by emphasizing different aspects of democratic regimes. Unlike the Freedom House scales, these measures exhibit substantially greater variance ($SD = 0.22-0.27$) and less pronounced ceiling effect, despite a mild negative skew ($-0.82- -0.90$). It is therefore used for triangulation, allowing us to demonstrate that our results are not driven by measurement choice and hold across conceptually distinct indicators of democracy.

To introduce additional variation, we also employ proxies for democratic institutionalization: whether a country is an EU member and for EU member States, the cumulative years of EU membership for each country-year. Longer EU tenure is interpreted as signaling longer-standing democratic commitments. This measure is defined only for EU members and therefore excludes all those countries that are not. Because Norway and Switzerland are deeply integrated with the EU's single market: Norway via the European Economic Area (EEA), in force since 1 January 1994, and Switzerland via the Bilateral Agreements I (notably the Free Movement of Persons agreement) in force since 1 June 2002, we code our EU_membership variable to count years under these arrangements as well (for Norway: years since 1994; for Switzerland: years since 2002). This choice reflects their de facto participation in core single-market rules (the "four freedoms" for the EEA, and sectoral market access under the Swiss bilateral path), while still distinguishing them from full EU members. All in all, using the EU membership variable as a proxy for democracy reduces the sample but increases both cross-sectional and temporal variation among high-democracy case.

Climate policy is shaped not only by political dynamics but also by countries' exposure and vulnerability to climate change. To account for these structural constraints, we draw on the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative (ND-GAIN) dataset, which provides a widely used and theoretically grounded measure of **climate vulnerability**. ND-GAIN conceptualizes vulnerability as a country's susceptibility to the adverse effects of climate change, encompassing three core dimensions: **exposure** to climate hazards, **sensitivity** of populations and critical sectors to those hazards, and **adaptive capacity** of societies and institutions to mitigate and adapt to climate impacts. These dimensions span key life-supporting sectors, including food, water, health, ecosystem services, human habitat, and infrastructure. Because these factors can independently influence governments' incentives and constraints in shaping climate policy, we include them as controls in our regression models.

Among these components, Exposure captures the extent to which countries are physically exposed to climate-related hazards such as floods, droughts, storms, and rising temperatures. Unlike sensitivity and adaptive capacity, exposure reflects long-term, projected climatic conditions and is thus time-invariant in the ND-GAIN dataset, capturing exogenous physical risks largely independent of short-term political or economic change. Beyond serving as a control variable, exposure plays a central role in our subsequent analyses. We show that climate exposure moderates the negative relationship between the electoral strength of populist parties and climate policy in hybrid democracies. While populist strength is generally associated with weaker climate policy in these regimes, this relationship is attenuated in highly exposed countries. In other words, even governments supported by strong populist parties appear less able to ignore climate policy when physical exposure to climate risks is high. This finding suggests that material vulnerability can limit the extent to which populist actors can deprioritize climate policy in contexts where climate impacts are difficult to disregard.

To capture the quality of political governance, we draw on V-Dem's **political corruption index** (v2x_corr), which measures the extent to which corruption is pervasive within the political system. The index captures multiple forms of corruption, including both petty and grand corruption, bribery and theft, and corruption that affects both lawmaking and policy implementation. It is constructed as an unweighted average of four components assessing corruption in the executive, legislature, judiciary, and public administration. Compared to alternative measures such as Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index or the World Bank's Control of Corruption indicator, the V-Dem index offers superior temporal coverage and is therefore particularly well suited for longitudinal analyses.

In our sample (N = 970 country-years), political corruption varies substantially across cases and over time. The distribution is right-skewed (skewness = 0.66), with a mean of 0.29 and a median of 0.17, indicating that most observations cluster at relatively low levels of corruption while a smaller number of cases exhibit very high corruption. Values range from 0 to 0.93, with considerable dispersion (SD = 0.28), suggesting meaningful cross-national and temporal variation. Because corruption may independently affect

governments' capacity and willingness to adopt and implement climate policy, we include this measure as a control variable in all regression models.

Beyond its role as a control, corruption also plays a key conditional role in our analysis. In subsequent models, we show that democracy shields climate policy from the negative effect of populist electoral strength only when corruption levels are low. Where corruption is high, democratic institutions appear less capable of constraining populist pressures, and the protective effect of democracy on climate policy weakens substantially. This finding highlights the importance of institutional quality in shaping how political systems respond to populist challenges in the climate domain.

We also control for Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita and Gini coefficient for inequality. All regression models are OLS with country and year Fixed Effects.

9 Results

9.1 Descriptive results

We begin with Figure 1 documenting country-specific trajectories of democracy scores from 2007 to 2023. Blue lines indicate countries whose democracy scores remained unchanged between 2007 and 2023. Among EU member states (Figure 1a), 23 of 28 countries (including the UK) fall into this category. Red lines denote countries that experienced a decline in democracy over the period. Within the EU, Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Malta, and Poland show democratic decline, while among non-EU countries Iran, Mexico, Kazakhstan, South Korea, Turkey, and the United States exhibit downward trends. These declines range from episodic fluctuations, as in Greece, to sustained and pronounced deterioration, as in Hungary. The third group, shown in green, consists of a small number of countries that experienced improvements in democracy scores during the period, most notably Croatia.

Figure 1a. Democracy scores over time 2007-2023 (EU countries)

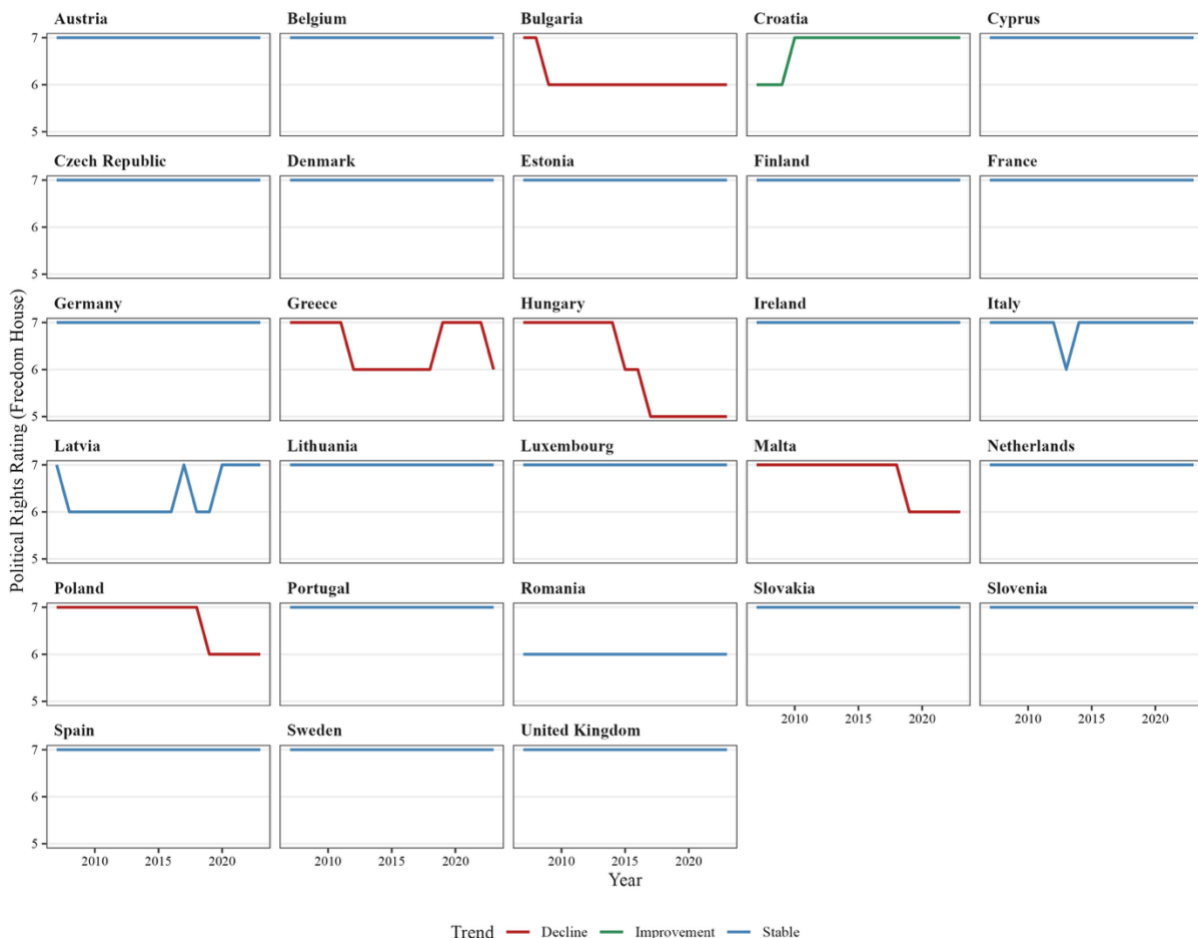
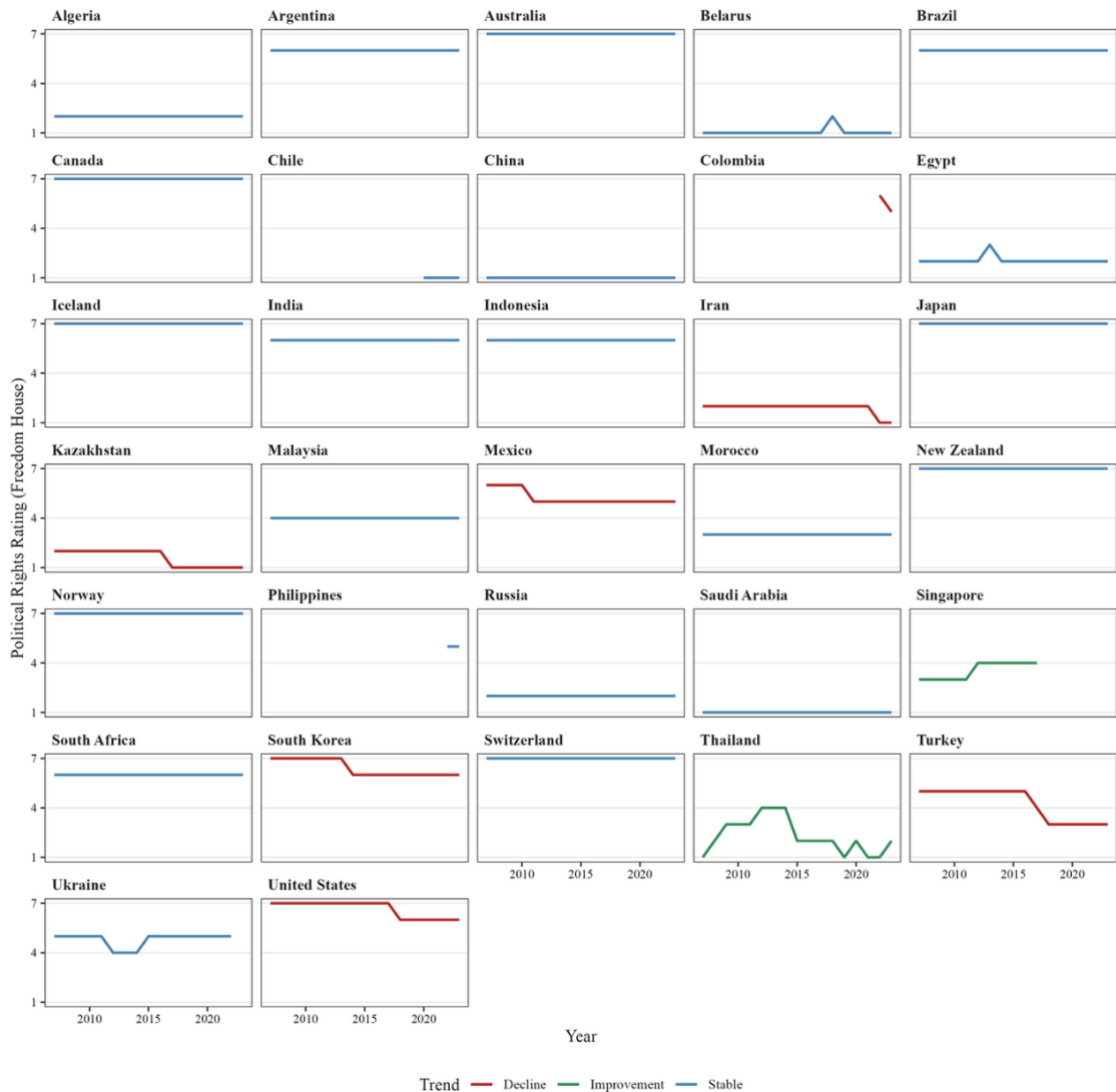


Figure 1b. Democracy scores over time 2007-2023 (non-EU countries)



Note. Figures 1a and 1b display democracy scores (political right ratings based on the Freedom House data) for EU countries and non-Eu countries respectively.

Figure 2a. Democracy scores and populist radical right vote share by country over time, EU countries (2007-2023)

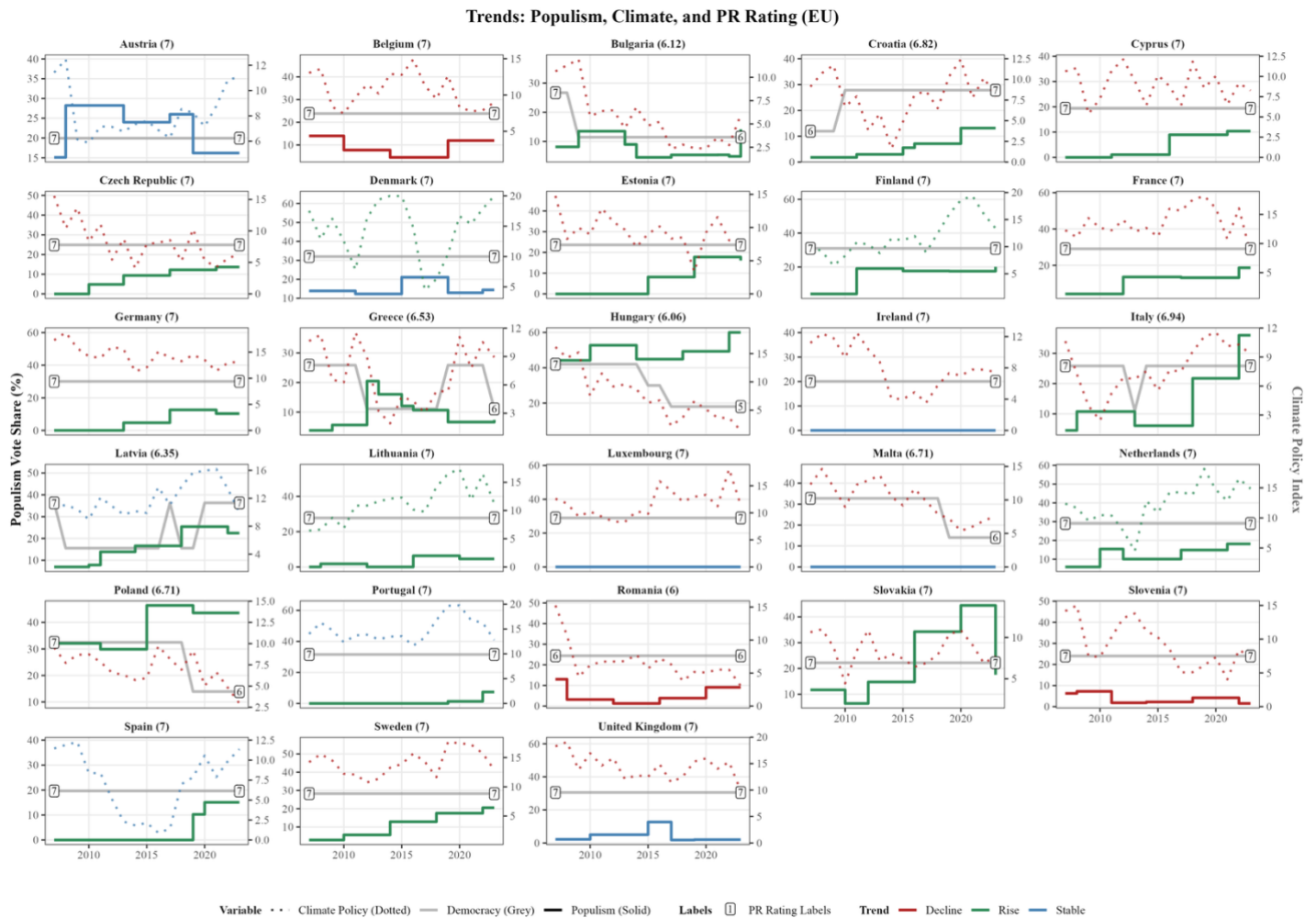


Figure 2b. Democracy scores and populist radical right vote share by country over time, non EU countries (2007-2023)

Trends: Populism, Climate, and PR Rating (Non-EU)

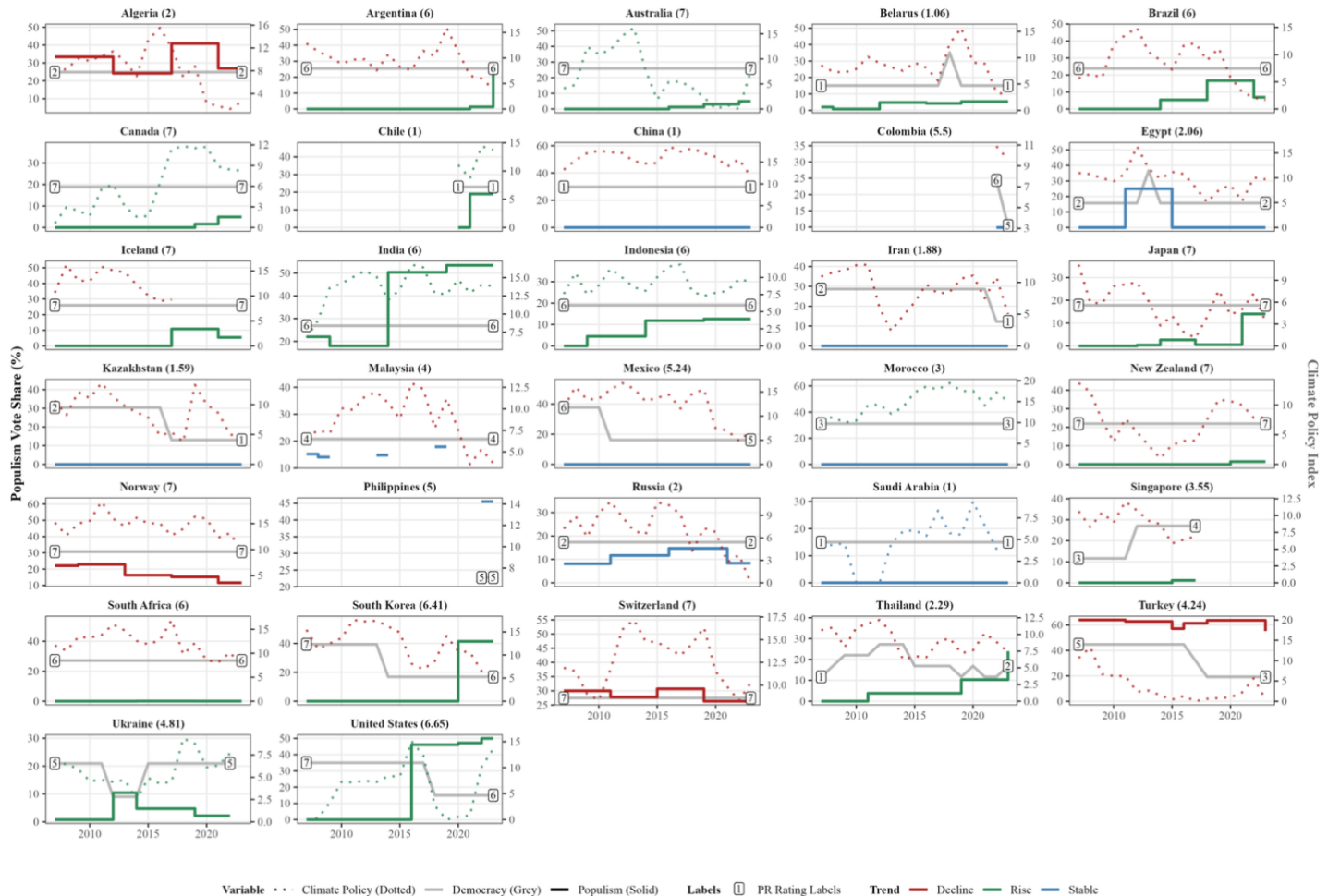


Figure 2 parallels Figure 1 but adds to each country-panel (1) the vote share of PRRPs, shown as a solid line (decline - red, rise - green, stable - blue) and (2) democracy scores trend (grey solid line). In many cases, such as in Germany, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Sweden, and Latvia, the figures show a clear upward trend in the electoral success of PRRPs. These country-level trajectories reflect a broader global pattern marked by the growing electoral strength and political normalization of PRRPs across diverse political systems (Oshri et al, 2023; Valentim 2025). Together, they underscore the increasing ability of these parties to translate populist and exclusionary appeals into sustained electoral gains, reshaping party competition and policy debates in many democracies worldwide.

In other countries, PRRPs either do not contest elections or receive only negligible electoral support, as in the cases of Luxembourg, Iceland, and Ireland. In many hybrid or authoritarian regimes, such parties do

not exist at all or are institutionally constrained, as in China, Morocco, and Iran. This pattern underscores that populism, particularly in its party-based form, is fundamentally a phenomenon of democratic or semi-democratic political systems, where competitive elections, political pluralism, and opportunities for mass mobilization provide the conditions under which populist actors can emerge and gain electoral traction. A smaller set shows a downward trajectory (e.g., Norway, Slovenia, Switzerland). Notably, in most countries exhibiting democratic decline (red line), radical-right vote share tends to rise, suggesting a broad, though not universal, co-movement between eroding democratic quality and the electoral fortunes of the populist radical right.

Figure 3 zooms in on six country cases that illustrate distinct configurations of the relationship between PRRPs strength, democratic institutions, and climate policy over time. Rather than treating these cases individually, the figure reveals recurring patterns that can be grouped into ideal-typical trajectories. We discuss the cases in clusters that reflect similar underlying logics.

Type I: Populist entrenchment with weak democratic insulation (Populism dominates, policy constrained)

Hungary and Poland exemplify a trajectory in which rising PRRPs power coincides with democratic backsliding and sustained weakness in climate policy. In both cases, populist governments consolidated executive power, weakened institutional checks, and framed climate action, particularly at the EU level, as an external imposition and economic burden.

After joining the EU, Hungary initially adopted a national climate strategy in 2008, but the 2010 change in government marked a decisive break. The abolition of the environment ministry and the downgrading of climate governance halted systematic policy development (European Commission, 2018). Although external EU pressure prompted renewed formal commitments in the late 2010s, including the 2020 Climate Protection Law committing to climate neutrality by 2050, implementation has remained weak, with experts emphasizing the gap between legislative ambition and actual policy delivery (Clean Energy Wire, 2024; European Parliament, 2025).

Poland follows a closely related pattern. While initially it has been engaged with EU climate governance after accession in 2004, Poland increasingly resisted deeper decarbonization commitments, opposing the EU's 2050 climate-neutrality pathway as early as 2011 (Szulecki et al., 2024). The election of Law and Justice (PiS) in 2015 reinforced this stance, slowing renewable deployment and openly contesting EU climate initiatives. Periodic peaks in activity reflect bargaining around EU frameworks rather than domestic ambition, and by 2019-2020 Poland again withheld full endorsement of EU-wide climate neutrality, reinforcing a pattern of conditional and reluctant alignment through 2023 (Zulinski, 2018; Szulecki et al., 2024).

Type II: Institutional resilience under populist pressure (Populism contained, policy continuity)

The Netherlands (and also Slovenia, Sweden, Portugal, Italy, Lithuania and Finland) represents a contrasting trajectory in which democratic institutions and legal mechanisms preserve and gradually strengthen climate policy despite political contestation and the presence of populist actors. Dutch climate policy weakened in the mid-2000s as political priority declined but strengthened again from 2007 onward through clearer targets and EU obligations (Groen and Huitema, 2025). Following a temporary easing after the 2008-2009 financial crisis, climate ambition consolidated during the 2010s through the 2013 Energy Agreement, the Climate Law, and the 2019 Climate Agreement.

A defining feature of the Dutch case is the role of institutionalized accountability. The Urgenda litigation, culminating in a 2019 Supreme Court ruling mandating emissions reductions of at least 25% by 2020 relative to 1990, anchored climate policy against political fluctuation (Mayer, 2023). Subsequent policy strengthening, including the decision in 2021 to raise the 2030 emissions-reduction target to at least 55% and the creation of a €35 billion climate transition fund, illustrates how strong democratic and legal institutions can shield climate policy from populist pressures.

Type III: Hybrid regimes and externally driven climate engagement (Populism constrained by external pressure)

Turkey illustrates a trajectory in which weak democratic institutions and populist governance initially coincide with climate policy stagnation, but where external economic and geopolitical pressures induce episodic policy shifts. Turkey's relatively high initial climate engagement reflects early alignment with EU accession processes, followed by a prolonged period of stagnation from roughly 2013 to 2020 as energy security and coal expansion took precedence (Adaman and Arsel, 2017).

This flatlining corresponds to Turkey's refusal to ratify the Paris Agreement, often described as a strategic "waiting game" tied to disputes over its status as a developed country (Şahin et al., 2021). The sharp increase in the early 2020s reflects Turkey's eventual ratification of the Paris Agreement in 2021 and the announcement of a 2053 net-zero target, driven largely by external pressure from the European Green Deal (Türkiye Country Climate and Development Report, 2022). However, subsequent assessments note that these commitments have not translated into meaningful emissions reductions, highlighting the limits of externally induced ambition in the absence of institutional accountability (Climate Action Tracker, 2023).

Type IV: Cyclical populism within a consolidated democracy (Populism swings, institutions absorb)

The United States represents a more complex trajectory that combines elements of both insulation and vulnerability. Rather than a single trend, the U.S. case exhibits three distinct phases corresponding to presidential administrations. Climate policy strengthened through the mid-2010s under the Obama administration, reflecting regulatory expansion and international engagement, including the Clean Power Plan and U.S. participation in the Paris Agreement.

This trajectory reversed sharply after 2017, as the Trump administration withdrew from Paris and rolled back federal climate regulations, producing a pronounced decline in climate policy ambition. The subsequent rebound from 2021 onward reflects renewed institutional engagement under the Biden administration, including re-entry into the Paris Agreement and the passage of the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act, the largest legislative investment in climate mitigation in U.S. history. The U.S. case thus illustrates how strong democratic institutions can enable recovery after populist retrenchment, while also underscoring the vulnerability of climate policy to electoral turnover in polarized systems.

Figure 3. Illustrative Trajectories of Populism, Democracy, and Climate Policy

Trends: Populism, Climate, and PR Rating (Selected Countries)

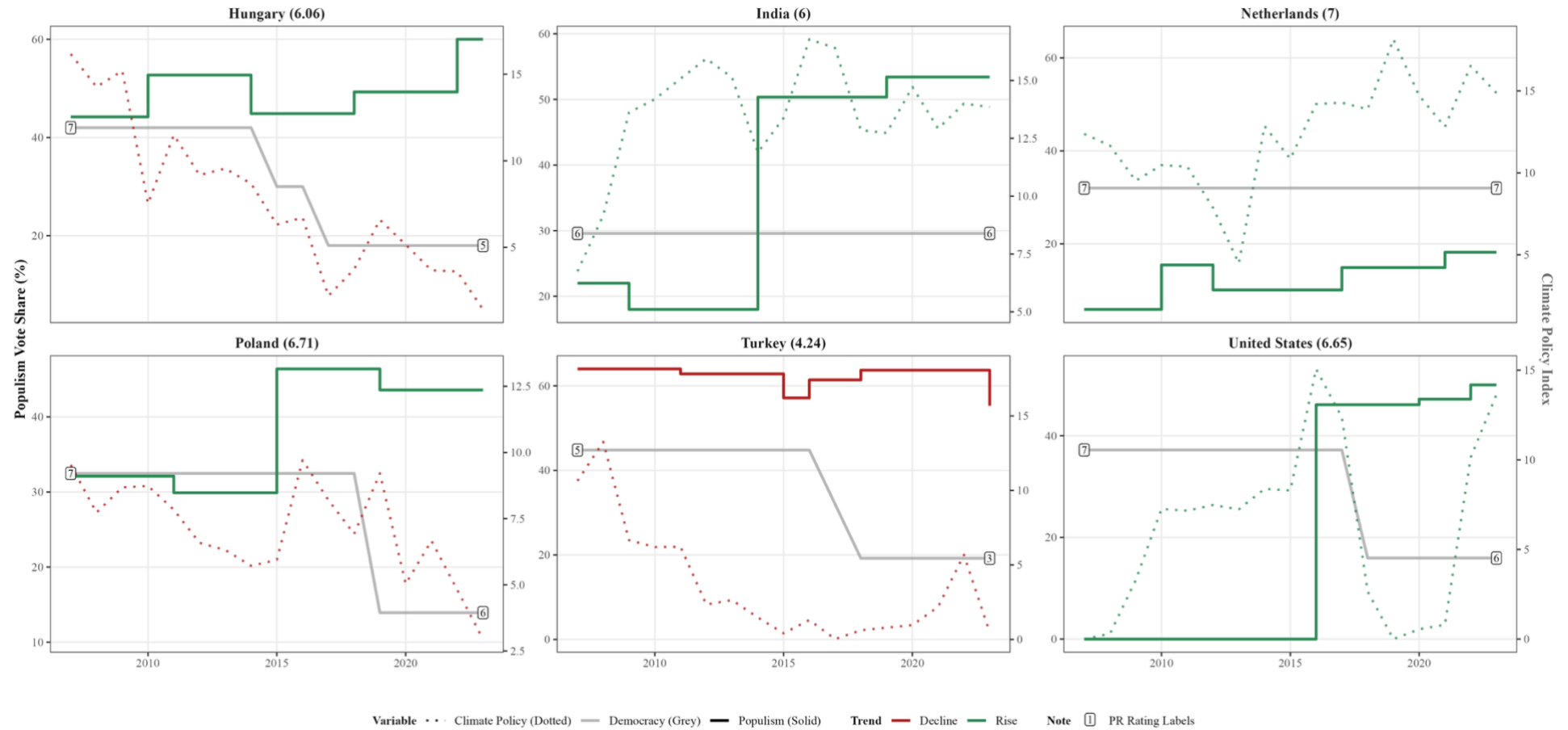
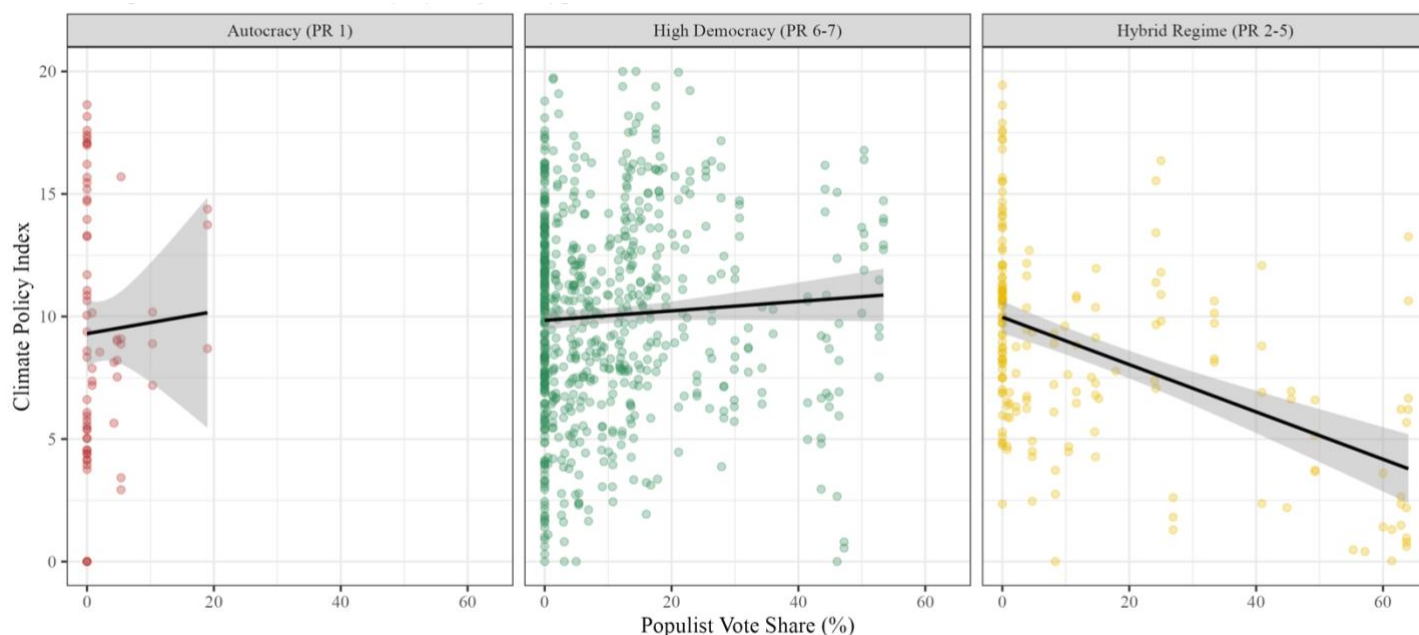


Figure 4. Populism, Regime Type, and Climate Policy: Descriptive Patterns Across Political Systems



Before turning to the regression analyses, Figure 4 provides a bird's-eye view of the tripartite relationship between regime type, the electoral strength of PRRPs, and climate policy. Starting with the right-hand panel, the figure shows a clear negative relationship between PRRP electoral strength and climate policy: as PRRPs gain vote share, climate policy weakens. This pattern is evident in what we term hybrid regimes, defined as country-years scoring between 2 and 5 on the 1-7 democracy scale.

Moving to the middle panel, which displays full democracies (scores of 6-7), the fitted trendline is nearly parallel to the x-axis, indicating no systematic relationship between PRRP electoral strength and climate policy in these regimes. In other words, in full democracies, increased populist electoral success does not appear to translate into weaker climate policy.

The left-hand panel presents the relationship for autocratic regimes. The number of country-years in this category is small, and no clear or consistent pattern emerges. Given both the limited number of cases and the fact that populism is primarily a phenomenon of democratic and semi-democratic systems, we focus the remainder of the analysis on full democracies and hybrid regimes. Before closing the discussion of autocracies, it is worth noting that the figure illustrates substantial heterogeneity within this group: some autocratic countries, most notably China during the period between 2009 and 2017, score relatively high on climate policy, while others, such as Russia, Iran, and Belarus, consistently exhibit very low levels of climate policy ambition. These merely descriptive empirical pieces suggest that there is possibly a negative

link between PRRPs power and climate policies in hybrid regimes, and that democracies might act as a buffer against this negative effect of the populist radical right.

9.2 Regression results

To better test our hypotheses, we next turn to the regression models estimating climate policies as a function of PRRPs electoral power and democracy, controlling for important confounders such as GDP, inequality, and climate vulnerability measures. Table 1 presents the regression results. Model 1 is an additive specification that includes the main predictors and controls on the right-hand side. The positive and statistically significant coefficient for democracy confirms our first hypothesis, namely that democracies are better equipped to promote long-term climate policies than hybrid regimes or autocracies. Using pooled data, Model 1 shows neither a substantively meaningful nor a statistically significant effect of populist radical right parties (PRRPs) on climate policies. This picture changes in subsequent models, which estimate a differentiated effect of PRRPs on climate policies. In Model 2, this differentiated effect is captured by the interaction between democracy and PRRPs' electoral power. Figure 5, based on the results of Model 2, displays predicted values of climate policy in full democracies and hybrid regimes as a function of PRRPs' electoral power. The solid line represents predicted climate policies in hybrid regimes, while the dotted line represents those in full democracies.

The opposing slopes of the two lines indicate that populism affects climate policies differently across regime types. In hybrid regimes, increases in PRRPs' electoral power are associated with weaker climate policies, as reflected in the negative trend. In contrast, in full democracies the trend line is nearly flat and even slightly positive. As PRRPs gain electoral power (moving rightward along the horizontal axis), the gap between predicted climate policy outcomes in democracies and hybrid regimes widens. Put differently, climate policies in hybrid regimes are sensitive to the strength of PRRPs, whereas climate policies in full democracies are largely unaffected. Taken together, these findings demonstrate not only regime-level differences in climate policies (as indicated by the positive democracy coefficient in Model 1), but also the greater resilience of democracies to the negative effects of populism. In the Online Appendix, we show that using other measures for democracy does not change the results. Our results therefore support Hypothesis 2.

Under what conditions is the negative effect of populism on climate policies, observed in hybrid regimes, attenuated? Conversely, can full democracies lose their protective capacity under certain circumstances, allowing the electoral strength of PRRPs to undermine climate policy commitments? Models 3 through 6 address these questions by introducing conditional relationships between PRRPs' electoral power and climate policy outcomes.

To do so, the analysis partitions the sample by regime type, estimating separate models for full democracies (Models 3 and 5) and hybrid regimes (Models 4 and 6). This strategy allows us to assess whether the political and institutional context in which populist actors operate conditions their policy impact. In Models 3 and 4, we interact PRRPs' electoral power with countries' exposure to climate change, testing whether material vulnerability to climate risks constrains populist opposition to climate policy. In Models 5 and 6, we interact PRRPs' electoral power with levels of political corruption, examining whether institutional integrity -- or its erosion, modulates the ability of democratic systems to buffer climate policymaking from populist pressures.

The results indicate that while structural exposure to climate risks constrains the effects of populist electoral strength in hybrid regimes, corruption fundamentally alters how populism translates into climate policy outcomes in full democracies.

Table 1. Climate Policy, Support for far-right populist parties and Democracy

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Additive Model	Democracy X Populism	Exposure X Populism		Corruption X Populism	
			Full democracies	Hybrid democracies	Full democracies	Hybrid democracies
RR vote share t-1	0.00 (0.02)	-0.14** (0.05)	0.11 (0.14)	-0.62* (0.25)	0.06* (0.03)	0.17 (0.48)
Democracy scores	1.90*** (0.37)	5.29* (2.48)				
Gini	-0.03 (0.08)	-0.15+ (0.08)	-0.10 (0.10)	0.06 (0.13)	-0.15 (0.10)	0.16 (0.21)
Vulnerability	7.51 (50.83)	23.82 (51.31)				
Exposure	-11.21 (33.11)	13.82 (32.82)	41.09 (219.31)	-152.41** (52.26)	259.98 (223.68)	-64.34 (60.38)
Capacity	21.77 (19.04)	6.05 (19.45)				
GDP	-0.00* (0.00)	-0.00* (0.00)	-0.00* (0.00)	-0.00** (0.00)	-0.00** (0.00)	-0.00* (0.00)
Corruption	0.01 (3.07)	4.66 (3.48)	1.20 (3.66)	-15.07** (5.56)	6.74+ (3.95)	-11.63 (8.89)
RR vote share x Democracy		0.23** (0.07)				
RR vote share x Exposure			-0.24 (0.32)	1.03+ (0.58)		
RR vote share x Corruption					-0.41*** (0.11)	-0.46 (0.60)
Constant	-2.32 (15.75)	-1.81 (16.37)	-3.25 (103.99)	86.41*** (21.48)	-106.78 (106.00)	47.56+ (26.92)
Country FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	704	704	585	137	585	83
Adjusted R ²	0.561	0.557	0.504	0.726	0.516	0.616

Notes. Entries are OLS estimates for the marginal effect of populism climate policies. Unit of analysis is country-year. Each column represents a separate regression model. While Model 1 is additive, the other models are interactive, where populism is interacted with Democracy (Model 2) with Exposure (Models 3 and 4) and with Corruption (Models 5 and 6). All models control for Gini Coefficient, GDP and measures for climate vulnerability. All models include country and year Fixed Effects. Robust standard errors in parentheses; + p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Figure 5. Predicted climate policy by regime type

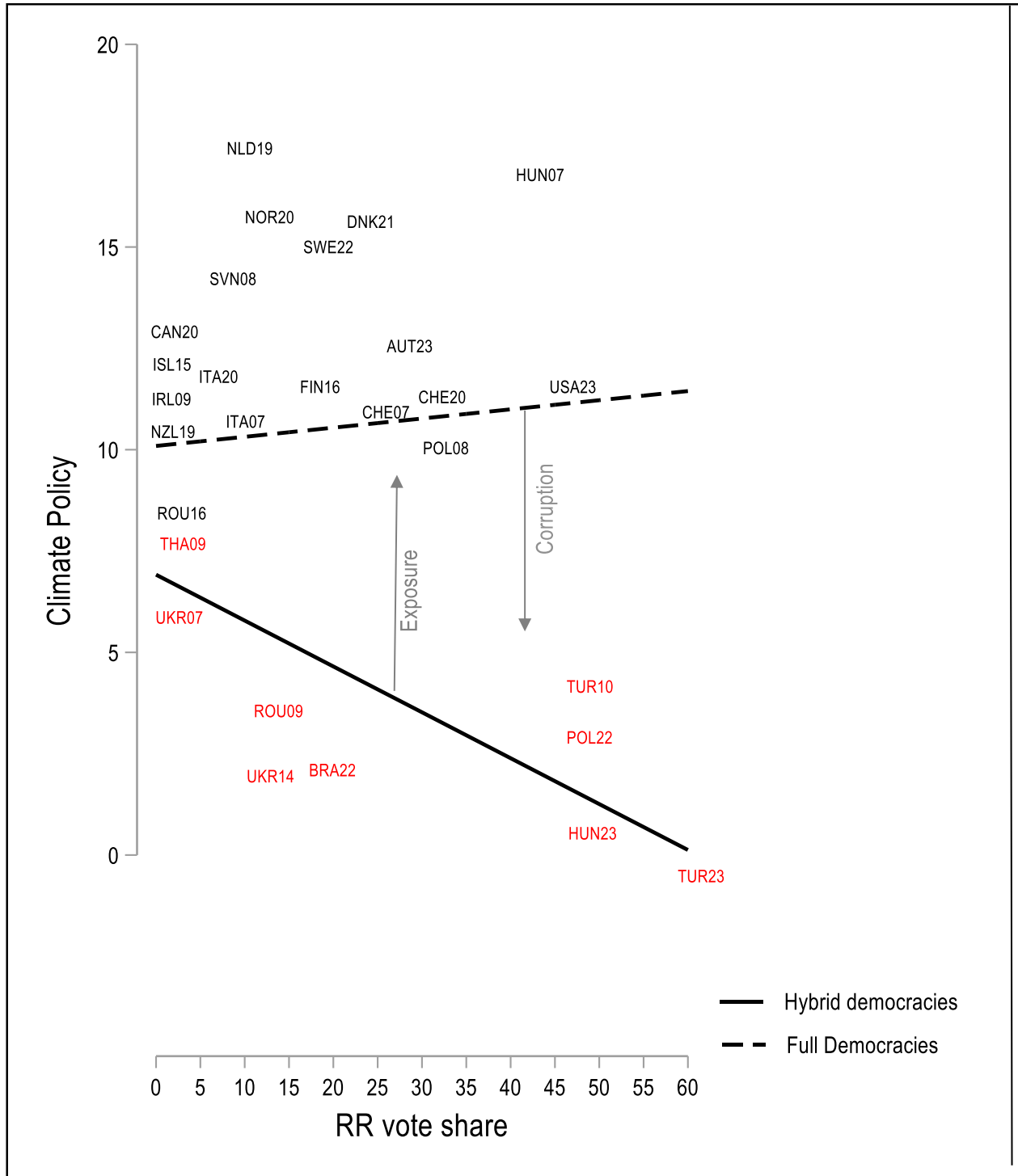


Figure 6. Estimated effect of PRRPs on the climate policy, moderated by exposure

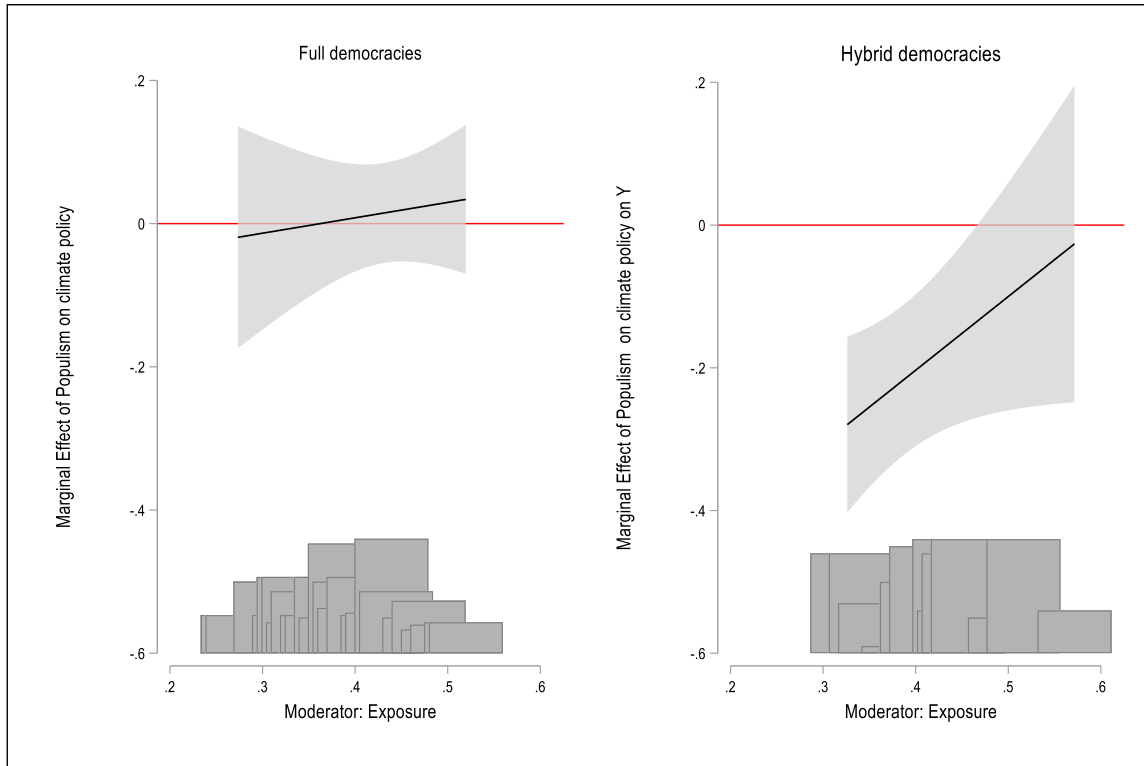
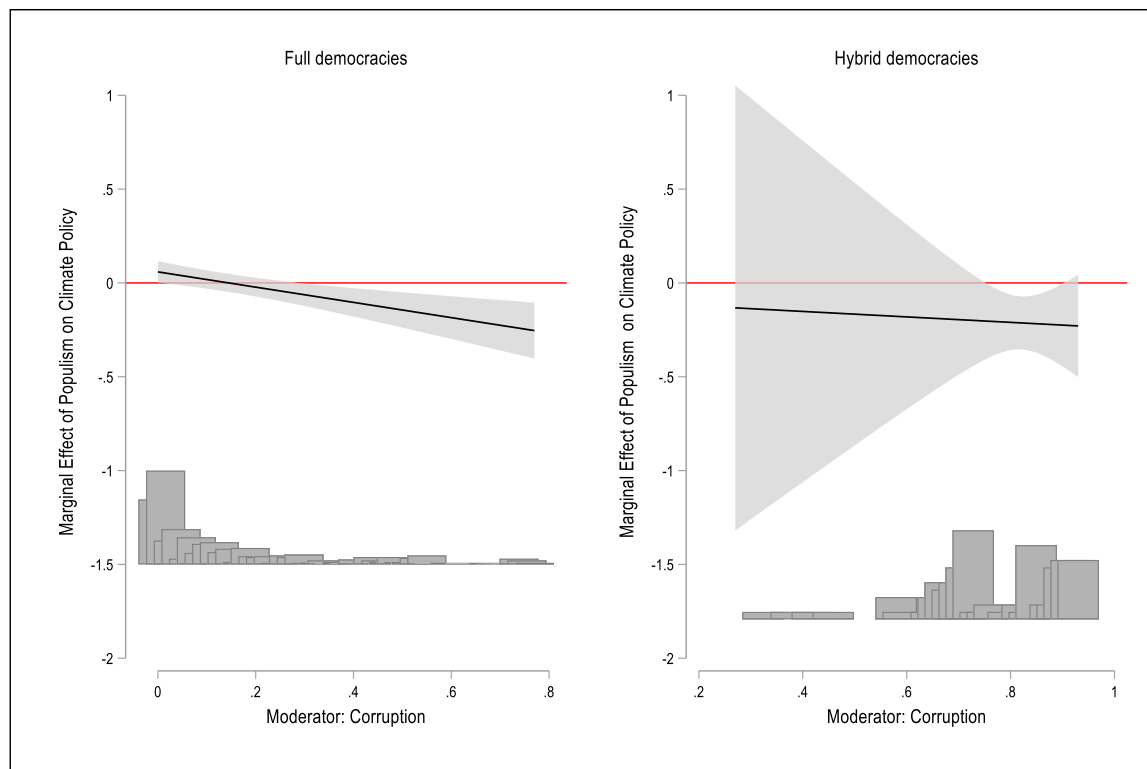


Figure 7. Estimated effect of PRRPs on the climate policy, moderated by corruption



Notes: 95% confidence intervals are marked. Results are based on the estimation reported in Table 1, Models 3 (H3) and 6 (H4).

Based on the reported coefficients in Table 1 (Models 3-6), Figures 6 and 7 present substantive effects: the marginal effect of PRRPs electoral power on climate policies (on the vertical axis), modified by exposure to climate change (Figure 6) and levels of political corruption (Figure 7), on the horizontal axis. Each Figure is divided into full democracies (on the left-hand panel) and hybrid regimes (on the right-hand panel). All other variables are held constant at their respective mean.

Starting with Figure 6, the left-hand panel shows no clear direction (the line is equivalent to the x axis, and CIs are large), which substantially means that in full democracies, the electoral power of PRRPs does not have an effect on climate policies, no matter the levels of countries' exposure to climate change. On the other hand, in hybrid regimes (right-hand panel), in cases where countries are less exposed to climate change (on the left side of the figure), the more electoral power PRRPs gain, the less climate policies are promoted. This negative correlation implies that where PRRPs are strong, they are able to negatively affect policies related to climate. But, as we move to the right on the horizontal axis and exposure is high, this relationship fades away: greater PRRPs electoral power does not translate to fewer climate policies. The magnitude of the effect is substantial. Increasing populist radical right vote share from one standard

deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean is associated with a 18-points decrease (on a 0-20 scale of the policy index) in the climate policy score in low-exposure contexts. The same increase in populist vote share is associated with a 14-point decrease in the climate policy score in high-exposure contexts. Importantly, climate exposure conditions, but does not reverse, the relationship between populist electoral strength and climate policy in hybrid regimes. Even in highly exposed contexts, increases in populist radical right vote share are associated with pronounced declines in climate policy ambition. This finding suggests that while exposure constrains governments' room for maneuver, it does not fully shield climate policy from populist pressures in hybrid political systems.

Moving to Figure 7, in full democracies, the effect of populist radical right electoral strength on climate policy depends critically on the level of political corruption. When corruption is low (one standard deviation below the mean), increasing PRRP vote share from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean is associated with a 1.5-point increase in the climate policy score ($p = 0.026$). This suggests that in low-corruption democratic contexts, populist electoral gains do not undermine, and may even modestly coincide with stronger climate policy. By contrast, when corruption is high (one standard deviation above the mean), the same increase in PRRP vote share is associated with a 1.8-point decline in the climate policy score ($p = 0.017$). This reversal indicates that corruption erodes the capacity of democratic institutions to shield climate policy from populist pressures. In other words, full democracies appear resilient to the climate-policy consequences of populism only when institutional integrity is high; where corruption is elevated, populist electoral success translates into substantively meaningful declines in climate policy ambition.

Figure 8. Exposure distribution by regime types

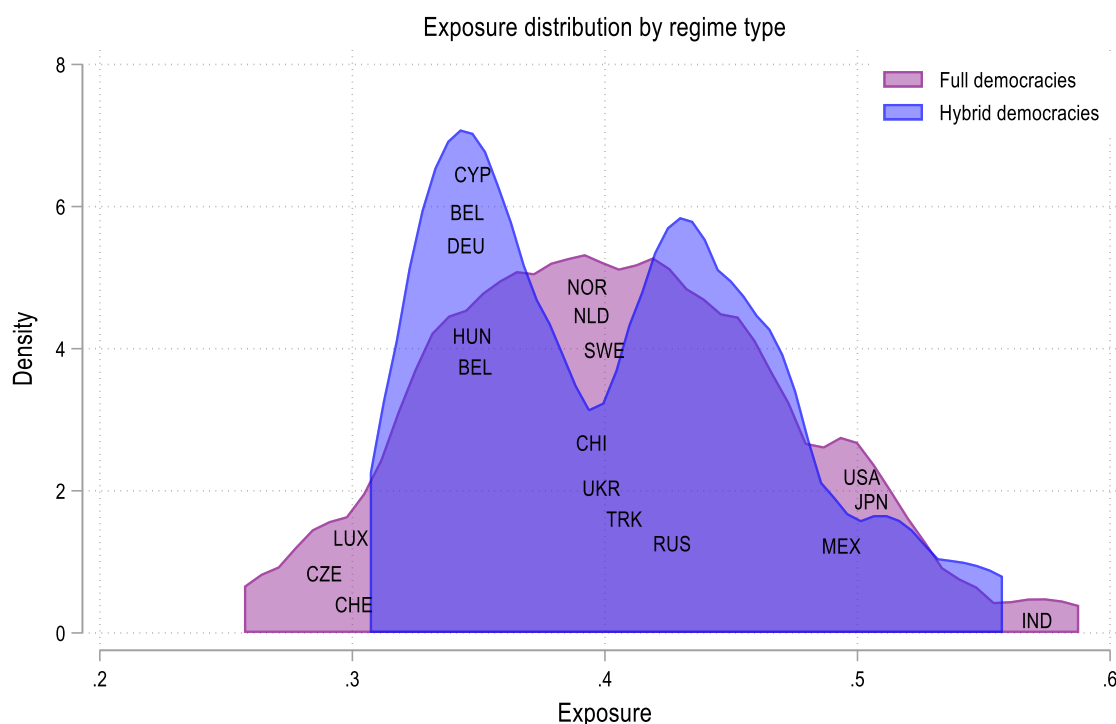
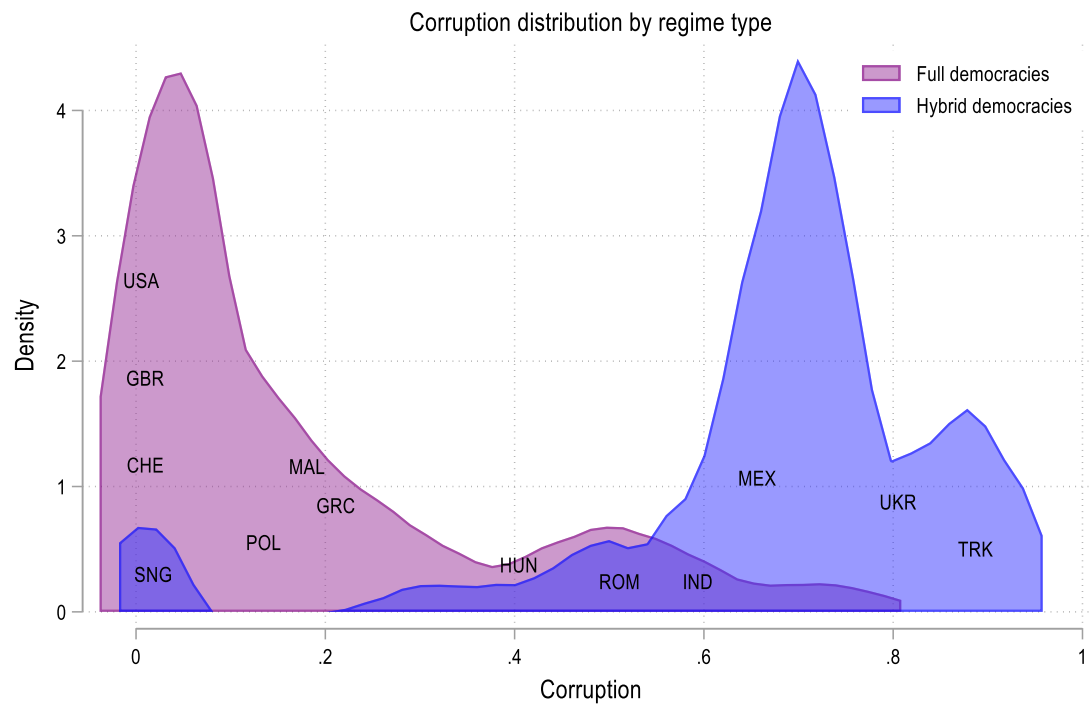


Figure 9. Corruption distribution by regime types



10 Discussion and conclusion

This article set out to clarify how populist radical right electoral strength translates into climate policy outcomes across different political regimes. By bringing together literatures that have largely evolved in parallel, we offer the first large-N comparative analysis of the tripartite relationship between populism, democracy, and climate policy across a broad set of countries and regime types. Our findings demonstrate that populism's relationship with climate policy is neither uniform nor unconditional. PRRPs are associated with weaker climate policy, but only in specific institutional contexts. In hybrid regimes, where democratic safeguards are weakened yet elections remain meaningful, greater populist electoral strength systematically coincides with climate policy retrenchment. In contrast, full democracies display a notable degree of resilience: populist electoral success does not, on average, translate into weaker climate policy unless institutional integrity is compromised.

A central contribution of the article lies in showing that democratic institutions do not automatically shield climate policy from populist pressures; rather, their protective capacity is contingent on institutional quality. Where corruption is low, democratic checks and balances, bureaucratic insulation, and accountability mechanisms appear capable of containing populist challenges to climate policy. Where corruption is high, however, these same institutions lose their constraining force, allowing populist electoral gains to erode climate commitments even in formally consolidated democracies. At the same time, the analysis highlights that material constraints matter alongside political ones. In hybrid regimes, high exposure to climate risks attenuates the negative association between populism and climate policy, suggesting that physical vulnerability can limit political discretion even in institutionally fragile systems. Together, these findings refine existing debates by demonstrating that both democratic resilience and populist influence are deeply conditional rather than absolute.

The article also contributes methodologically by combining cross-national panel analyses with within-country trajectories that illuminate how these dynamics unfold over time. In cases such as Hungary, rising populist dominance coincides with democratic backsliding and sustained weakening of climate policy, whereas in countries like the Netherlands, strong institutional safeguards preserve policy continuity despite populist contestation. These within-case patterns lend plausibility to a causal interpretation in which populism undermines climate policy by eroding institutional constraints. At the same time, the analysis remains cautious: the results establish robust associations rather than definitive causal effects. While our fixed effects models and temporal ordering reduce concerns about omitted variable bias, future research should further strengthen causal identification through complementary approaches, such as quasi-experimental designs exploiting narrow electoral victories or thresholds, instrumental-variable strategies leveraging exogenous shocks to populist support, and in-depth process tracing of policy change.

Future research could also deepen and triangulate our findings by moving beyond electoral vote share as the sole proxy for populist influence. In particular, distinguishing between populist parties in opposition and those participating in government coalitions would provide important leverage on the mechanisms through which populism affects climate policy. Whether populist parties hold executive office, act as junior coalition partners, or remain in opposition, and for how long, likely shapes both their capacity to influence policy and the institutional constraints they face. Incorporating measures of coalition status and duration in power would allow scholars to assess whether the climate-policy effects of populism intensify with governing responsibility or are mitigated by coalition bargaining and policy compromise. Such extensions would add analytical depth and further clarify when populist preferences translate into concrete policy outcomes.

More broadly, the findings underscore that the politics of climate change cannot be understood independently of the quality of democratic governance. As populist forces continue to reshape political competition worldwide, climate policy outcomes will depend not only on the strength of these actors but on the integrity of the institutions they confront, and, in some contexts, on the material pressures imposed by climate change itself. By situating populism within a conditional framework that integrates democracy, institutional quality, and climate exposure and vulnerability, this article offers a more nuanced understanding of when climate policy is most at risk, and when it is most resilient, in an era of democratic stress and environmental urgency.

Addressing the intersection of democratic and sustainability challenges, this deliverable contributes to the objectives of Trans4Demo by providing an empirical analysis of how the electoral strength of PRRPs interacts with the quality of democratic institutions and systemic vulnerabilities to shape climate policies. Presented findings indicate that the resilience of democratic systems to populists who effectively exploit the climate crisis cannot be taken for granted. It depends on factors such as institutional integrity, the strength of legal frameworks, and specific contextual conditions. The following policy directions may be considered to address both the democratic erosion and safeguard climate governance:

- **Enhance institutional integrity**

The deliverable demonstrates that low levels of corruption are essential to a democracy's ability to withstand populist pressures.

Measure: Invest in anti-corruption agencies, judicial independence, and transparent procurement processes, particularly in the climate and environmental sectors.

- **Rule of law and accountability**

Evidence shows that legal insulation of climate policy can be effective.

Measure: Embed climate objectives within binding legal frameworks that are resilient to partisan reversal or executive overreach.

- **Democracy quality monitoring**

Hybrid regimes are especially vulnerable to climate policy retrenchment under populist influence.

Measure: Establish early-warning mechanisms based on democracy indices, corruption indicators, and media freedom assessments, linked to conditional funding or external support.

- **Democratic milieu and diplomacy**

The example of Turkey suggests that external economic and geopolitical pressures can constrain populist obstruction.

Measure: International agreements and climate diplomacy - including EU accession frameworks or trade conditionality - to reinforce democratic norms and climate commitments.

- **Resilient climate narratives**

PRRPs often exploit nationalist and anti-elitist rhetoric to undermine climate action by framing it as an elite-driven agenda.

Measure: Support inclusive, locally grounded climate communication that highlights social and economic co-benefits, countering populist framings with messages related to community everyday experience.

- **Policy feedback loops**

Climate policy can generate positive feedback effects that meet public expectations.

Measure: Offer climate measures that produce visible, equitable, and short-term benefits - such as clean energy employment, cost savings, or local investment - to reinforce democratic legitimacy.

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Democracy, Radical Right Populism and Climate Change Performance

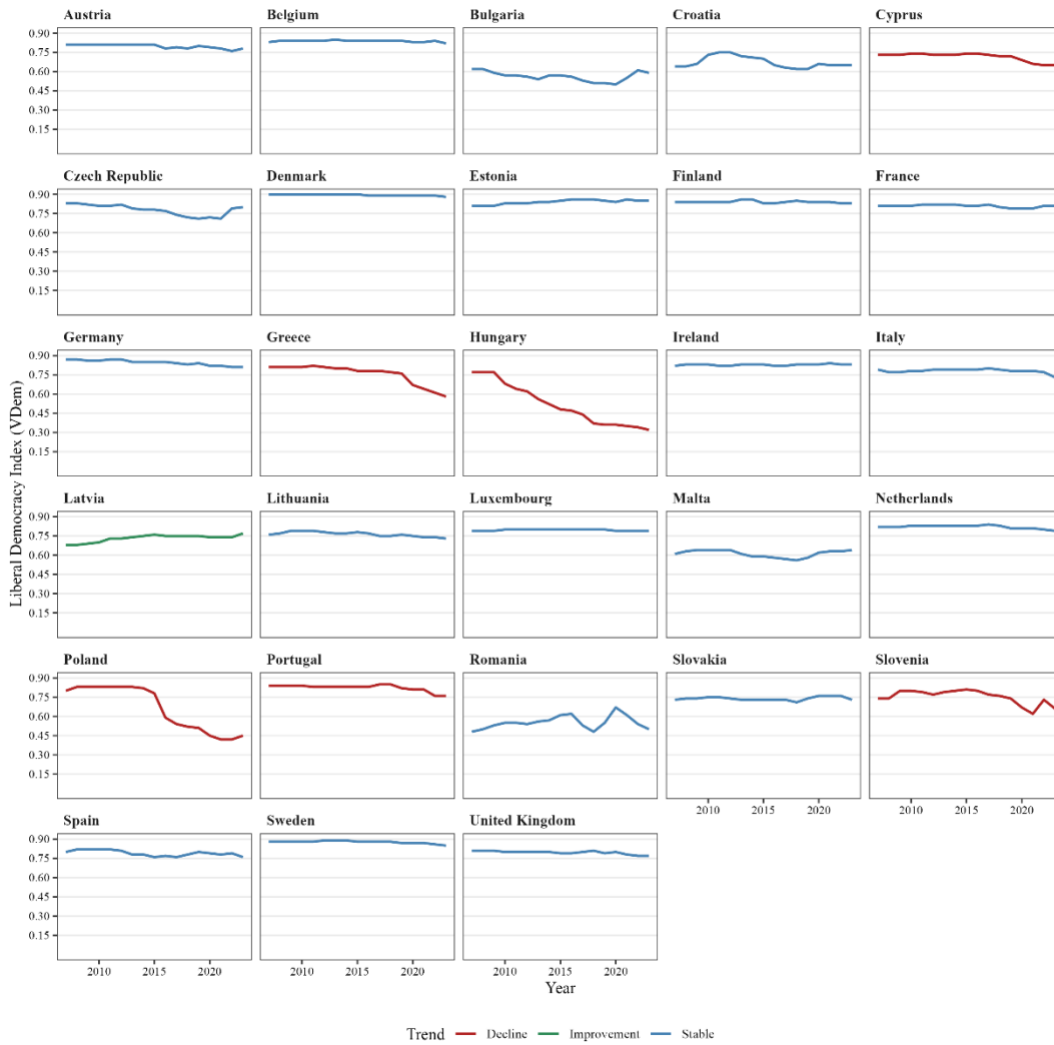
Supporting Information

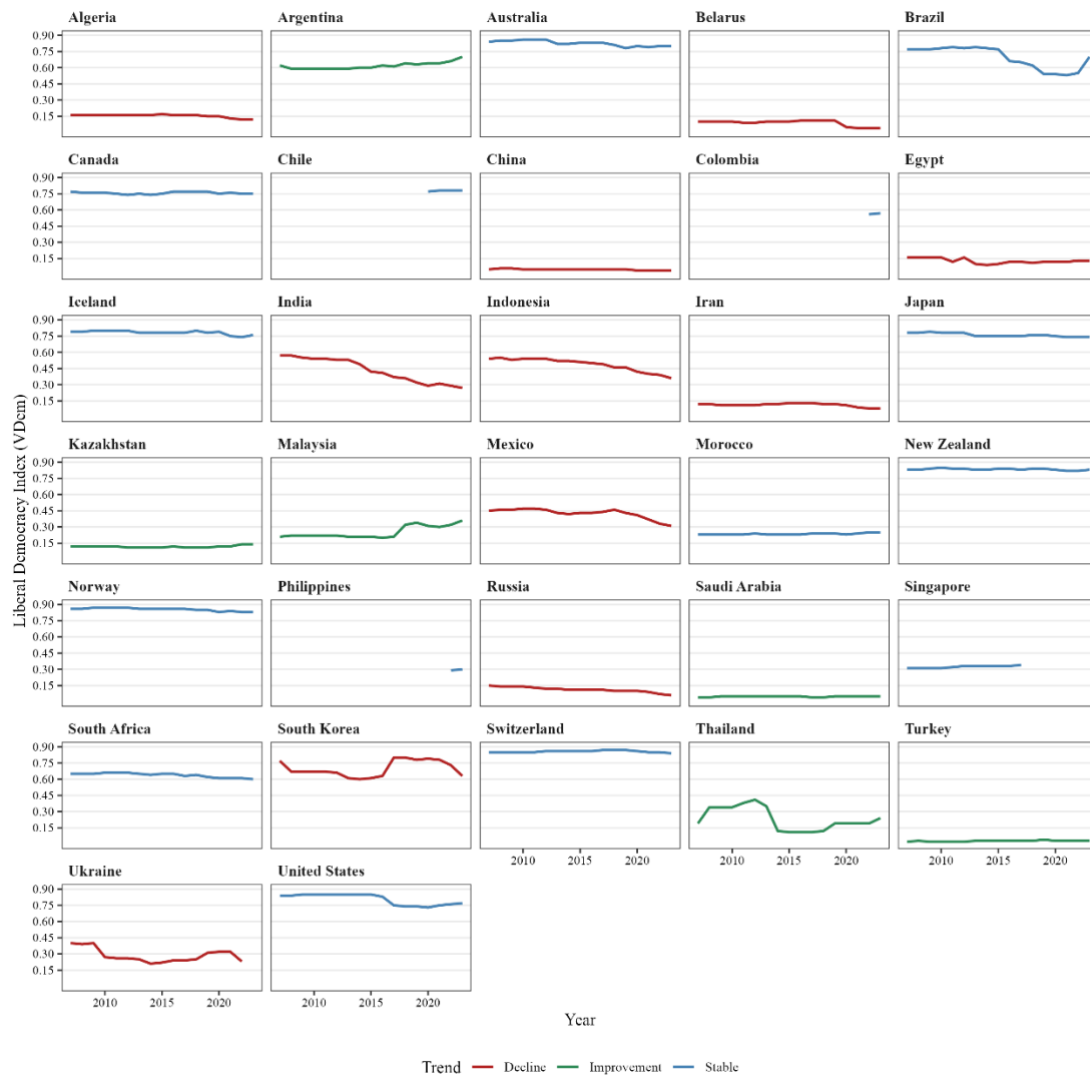
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Table A. Descriptive statistics

VARIABLES	(1) N	(2) mean	(3) sd	(4) min	(5) max
year	970			2,007	2,023
RR vote share	958	10.47	14.50	0	64
Climate Policy	964	9.716	4.232	0	20
RR vote share (lagged)	897	9.475	13.61	0	64
EU years	936	13.60	19.36	0	65
Democracy scores (prating, source: FreedomHomuse)	970	5.660	2.002	1	7
Democracy scores (clrating, source: FreedomHomuse)	970	5.686	1.759	1	7
GDP	970	41,601	23,722	4,380	138,678
GINI	731	33.23	6.117	23.20	63.40
Vulnerability	970	0.349	0.0492	0.251	0.529
Exposure	970	0.403	0.0654	0.273	0.572
Capacity	970	0.374	0.110	0.184	0.700
Sensitivity	970	0.272	0.0621	0.142	0.476
Corruption	970	0.290	0.282	0	0.930
Liberal Democracy Index	970	0.596	0.278	0.0200	0.900
Participatory Democracy Index	970	0.476	0.222	0.0200	0.810
Deliberative Democracy Index	970	0.584	0.264	0.0200	0.880
Egalitarian Democracy Index	970	0.581	0.252	0.0800	0.890
Party System Democracy Index	192	0.713	0.293	0	1
Electoral Democracy Index	970	0.684	0.269	0.0200	0.920
Neopatrimonial Rule Index	970	0.269	0.290	0.01000	0.980
Exclusion by Social Group Index	970	0.190	0.200	0.01000	0.790
Exclusion by Gender Index	970	0.173	0.197	0.01000	0.920
country_num	970	30.75	17.32	1	60

Figure A. Democracy scores over time 2007-2023





Note: Figure A replicates Figure 1 using an alternative measure of democracy. While Figure 1 in the main text relies on the Freedom House democracy score, Figure A employs the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index, which ranges from 0 to 1.

Table B. Climate Policy, Support for far-right populist parties and Democracy

	(1) Civil Liberties index	(2) Liberal democracy index	(3) Deliberative democracy index	(5) Participatory democracy index	(6) Egalitarian democracy index	(7) EU member state
PRRPs vote share	-0.22** (0.08)	-0.14* (0.06)	-0.14** (0.05)	-0.18** (0.06)	-0.17** (0.06)	-0.07* (0.03)
Democracy scores	-0.34 (0.56)	4.38 (3.37)	5.29* (2.48)	2.61 (4.30)	5.48 (3.91)	-0.21 (1.55)
PRRPs x Democracy	0.03** (0.01)	0.21** (0.08)	0.23** (0.07)	0.34*** (0.10)	0.29** (0.09)	0.12** (0.04)
Gini	-0.03 (0.08)	-0.13 (0.09)	-0.15* (0.08)	-0.11 (0.08)	-0.12 (0.08)	-0.07 (0.08)
Vulnerability	5.71 (51.42)	24.90 (51.61)	23.82 (51.31)	19.30 (51.46)	18.53 (51.43)	-18.41 (52.17)
Exposure	4.72 (33.85)	-2.64 (33.67)	13.82 (32.82)	-4.07 (33.69)	1.98 (32.98)	24.01 (32.50)
Capacity	14.75 (19.31)	4.43 (19.62)	6.05 (19.45)	7.11 (19.52)	4.95 (19.51)	24.39 (19.43)
GDP	-0.00* (0.00)	-0.00* (0.00)	-0.00** (0.00)	-0.00* (0.00)	-0.00* (0.00)	-0.00* (0.00)
Corruption	-1.16 (3.08)	3.67 (3.61)	4.66 (3.48)	2.35 (3.52)	3.62 (3.51)	-1.99 (3.09)
Country FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Constant	7.64 (16.48)	5.84 (16.76)	-1.81 (16.37)	8.71 (16.66)	4.86 (16.61)	3.97 (16.49)
Observations	704	704	704	704	704	704
Adjusted R^2	0.552	0.553	0.557	0.553	0.556	0.548

Standard errors in parentheses

+ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$