

*Authoritarian Horizons
and Adaptation Pathways:*

Political Regimes and
Climate Governance

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Participation as Principle



- Participation in climate change adaptation policy design and practice is widely considered a necessity for equitable, just, and more sustainable decisions.
- Practitioners, researchers, and policy makers understand that enhancing adaptive capacity and closing the implementation gap requires inclusive action that allows for communities and publics to be involved in decisions that govern their lives and livelihoods.
- But how do political regimes frame the nature and potential avenues of citizen inclusion in climate adaptation decisions? How are we treating the political context that shapes climate governance?

Living in the Era of Autocrats

Democratic Backsliding

- Global freedoms have declined for the 19th consecutive year in 2024, and 60 countries saw deteriorating conditions for civil liberties
- 7 in every 10 people on the planet now live in closed or repressive states
- An “epidemic of repression” and a rapidly shifting global landscape for civil society groups to organize, advocate, and influence policy change
- Even though some of the world’s most vulnerable nations to climate change cluster on the authoritarian end of any spectrum or can be described as ‘democracies with adjectives’ or ‘autocracies with adjectives’, the investigation of participatory climate adaptation has not explicitly engaged with regime scholarship





Is adaptation politics-agnostic?

Absolutely not.

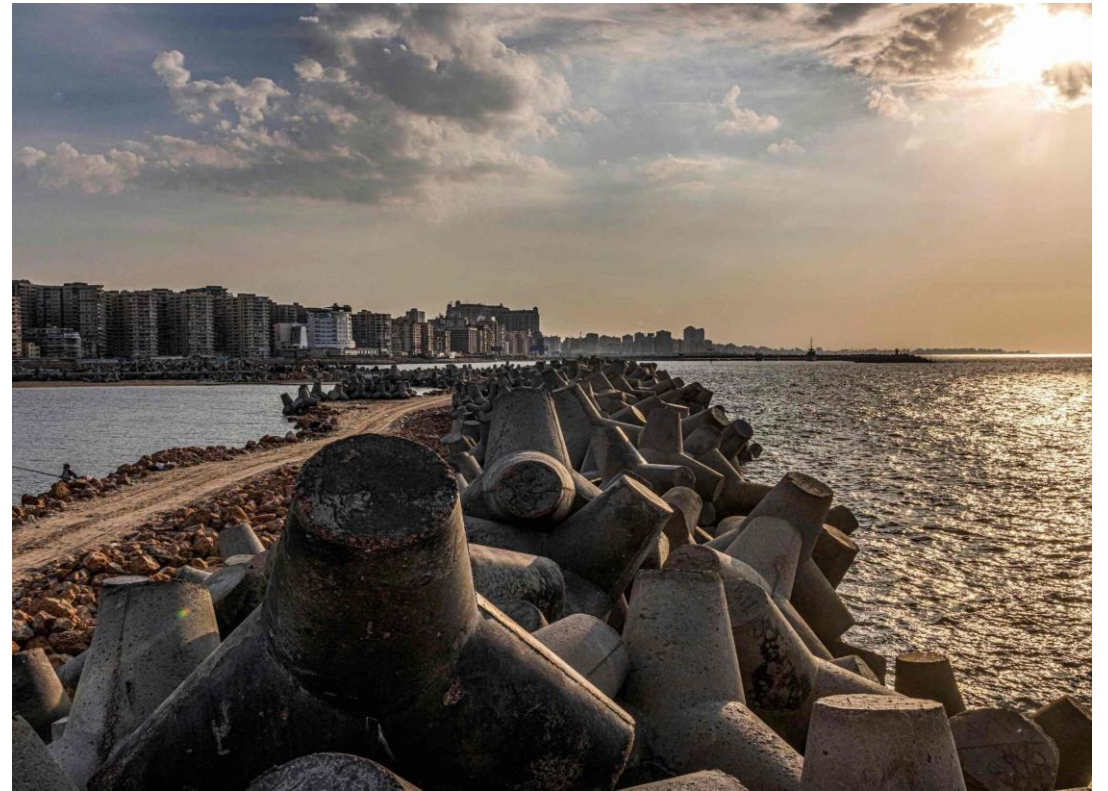
Authority, Agency, and Context



- It is widely taken as a truism that adaptation is about fundamental trade-offs - spatially, demographically, and temporally. It is politics.
- Unless questions of inclusion are considered in adaptation processes, a reinforcement of the status quo or a worsening of conditions - ‘maladaptation’ - could be the consequence. Simply, climate adaptation is not politically neutral (Pelling 2010; Brown 2016; Taylor 2013; Eriksen et al. 2015; Nightingale 2017).
- We’ve also seen many debates across the literature on whether democracies or authoritarian systems fare better in delivering environmental goods, with calls for “environmental authoritarianism” facing against calls for deeper deliberative democratic governance.

Bringing in Political Science

- Javeline (2014) finds a disciplinary emphasis on adaptation is virtually non-existent: asking, has an interdisciplinary field evolved “minus political science” (Javeline 2014, 424)?
- As Struthers (2019) also indicates, the lag in research around national institutions and how those impact climate adaptation policy has almost systematically overlooked the empirical application of comparative political theory
- “The notable gap in research at the intersection of climate-change politics and authoritarianism becomes particularly concerning when considering the increasingly significant role of authoritarian regimes in global carbon emissions” – Shen (2025)



Convergence & Change

An acknowledgment within political science informs us that regimes can be hybrid, mixing features of democratic governance with authoritarian characteristics.

It is now accepted that even within democratic states, the depth and degree to which citizens are involved, especially at subnational levels, vary. Democratic systems are not immune from illiberal practices nor are they lacking 'autocratic pockets', just like authoritarian systems may have 'democratic enclaves'

It is more relevant to explore convergence of governance patterns.

“The lesson is that it is not a zero-sum game; autocratic and democratic regimes exist on a spectrum where grey areas persist” (O’Brien 2017, 312)



Thank you for your attention
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